The Literariness
on the Net, and the Functioning of Literariness Online. Perspectives for Research

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Methodological or terminological troubles absorb a sizable part of the attention of literary scholars entangled in studying new forms of internet communication. The word "entangled" here means that literary scholarship, although it has never been impartial, is finally losing, in digital space, its status as objective knowledge [knowledge of an object], becoming a cultural practice. In other words, it is impossible to study literariness online without accepting the rules dictated by the medium.[1] You cannot observe how social media work without opening an account, you cannot learn the specifics of online role-playing games (narrative story games in which the players embody fictional characters and act out a planned scenario) and understand them as literary and cultural phenomena without becoming one of the players, devising your own character and entering fully into the role. We cannot understand what *Second Life* is until we create our avatar and enter the imaginary digital arcade, allowing our digital alter ego to live and communicate with other creatures from other people's imaginations. We all use e-mail, we are registered and can log in to various sites: our bank, the library, internet stores. We come up with our login and our password, we pass a CAPTCHA (*Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart*) test, proving to a machine that we are people and can be trusted. Sometimes we even write comments on blogs we read. Since all of this is true, it means that you cannot simply be a reader and observer on the Internet,

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[1] Obviously, each medium imposes rules and limits on writing practices. In the case of print literature, the role of its medium, which from the time of the printing press's invention was the codex, was overlooked in studies of literariness by literary scholars for a long time. The material nature of the work acquired greater attention with 20th century liberature experiments. Only the appearance of new technological possibilities brought about significant growth in scholars' interest in questions dealing with the medium through which literature is transmitted.

a Barthesian myth-hunter, alienated from the life of his community. Using the Internet forces us to participate. And even if we use false information, setting up an inbox for a fake identity, we still do not remain outside the virtual world. We may protect our privacy, or at least want to believe that we do so, but we cannot fail to involve our body, our intellect and our imagination, as soon as we take concrete steps toward interaction. That is the essence of entanglement in the net. The problems, however, do not stop there.

What exactly is this entity we are looking for, literariness online? Do we mean literary works as traditionally defined, transmitted through the medium of the Internet? Or do we perhaps mean electronic literature, the kind that not only uses the new medium as its vehicle, but which was created and can be read only through the use of digital technology? Works of e-literature cannot simply be transferred to an analog medium; they truly exist only in a digital context, and the computer is the *sine qua non* of their existence. In this respect, they differ from digitized literature. They are literary artifacts that are only available in digital form on the Internet. A portion of them cannot be transferred to any other vehicle (such as a CD or DVD); these are interactive, i.e., their operation depends on decisions made by the user in real time, in interacting with the artifact. The user nevertheless always chooses a path for reading from among the options offered by the author. The reader's freedom and the work's openness are thus deceptive: their actual sphere of operations is bounded by the technical capabilities of the equipment and the concept of their author/designer, who precisely anticipates the user's every possible move in accordance with the governing algorithm.

But what would happen if, going beyond artifacts of e-literature and websites devoted to literary works, we considered the literariness of the entire Internet? If we tried describing its literary potential? Of course, the web not only mediates between and among users, but itself has something to say. From this perspective, the self-referential, self-reflexive potential of the Internet can serve as an object of reflection, not only in its capacity as a tool that brings a turn in culture, structures of perception and interpersonal relations, but as a medium which itself generates aesthetic surplus.

The problems dealt with by scholars of digital writing[2] relate to cultural change that affects the essence of how we function in the world, including our sensitivity, needs, and the ways we fulfill them.

European culture developed through the written word. The invention of print in the fifteenth century caused a model of literary culture to form in which those who could read and write were ascribed the social function of intellectual elites. Initially this definition applied to Renaissance men of letters, i.e., *literati*. Literacy gave people access to knowledge and wisdom,

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[2] We must here mention Ewa Szczęsna and her team of collaborators. This scholar has worked on digital poetics for years, elucidating the social, cultural, and aesthetic consequences of the digital turn for Polish readers. Among Polish literary scholars who have dealt with these problems, we should note at least the following names: Piotr Marecki, Katrzyna Bazarnik, Zenon Fajfer, Mariusz Pisarski, Urszula Pawlicką, and Maciej Maryla. At the same time, we must underscore the foundational work performed by scholars from whom the new medium demanded a radical redefining of their object of study and the development of new descriptive tools. Their invaluable joint initiatives with scholars of culture and media made it possible to look at literature in the context of its technological conditions, and see literary practices, broadly understood, as a form of activity closely linked with its cultural context.

enabling the lettered to exert influence on mass opinion. Writing and reading thus consti-
tuted basic cultural competencies. In the early 1990s, a new term was coined: *digerati*, a con-
tamination of *digital literati*. *Digerati* is a kind of cyber-elite, about which Vilém Flusser has
written: "the new elite thinks in numbers, forms, colors, sounds, but to a lesser and lesser
extent in words [...]."[3] This elite is a group of people who actively participate in creating a new
type of culture, based on the generation, transmission, and management of information.[4]
Thus before our very eyes the traditional model of the well-educated humanist scholar is fad-
ing into oblivion. This (fortunately) does not mean that knowledge of literary culture is now
superfluous. Such knowledge is, however, insufficient, and increasingly requires fusion with
new media literacy. A literary scholar hoping to know and understand the specific nature of
new writing must be well-versed in more than just writing and reading. Both skills are un-
dergoing a profound metamorphosis in the new media environment. The means of commu-
nication, which until now for literature was print, is no longer merely a conveyor of content.
Nowadays, when we observe new writing practices taking shape online, in an ethereal, virtual
and interactive digital environment, we need to rethink the ontological, aesthetic, political,
and social properties of what we have been accustomed to give the enigmatic and circumspect
appellations of literature and literariness.

Differences in how we approach new developments originate to a great extent in changes that
are social, including generational changes, rather than methodological. Those who remember
the time of analogue culture evaluate the new forms of writing differently from those who
(because of when they were born) have always lived in a world with an expanded ontology.
The reality of the latter group consists of a material reality enlarged by a virtual one, but both
constitute indivisible dimensions of a single life and experience. This generational change is
also visible in the different ways people use cultural assets.[5] Such change must also be reck-
oned with by scholars of the digital word. But literary scholars themselves are not in agree-
ment as to the value and importance of the phenomena they encounter on the Internet. Their
approach spans from deep skepticism based on an attachment to older findings regarding
the specific nature of literary communication, to a belief in the irreversibility of change that
demands the discovery of new methods for describing the dynamic metamorphosis literature
is going through in the age of technological culture. In the past, all scholarly methodologies
adopted for analyzing textual structures were literature-centric in nature, oriented toward
a critical analysis of textual phenomena. The experience of far-reaching reflectiveness in rela-
tion to contact over longer periods of time with static, two-dimensional, invariable literary

[3] V. Flusser, "Alphanumerischerische Gesellschaft. Die Zukunft des Buchstabenlesens" (Alphanumeric Society:
The Future of Reading) in Flusser, *Die Revolution der Bilder: der Flusser-Reader zu Kommunikation, Medien und
Design* (The Revolution of Images: the Flusser Reader on Communication, Media, and Design), Mannheim:
Bollmann, 1995, 38-58.

[4] In the contemporary world, this group of educated intellectuals who have created the theoretical and
philosophical underpinnings of cyberculture, are being displaced by the netocracy, a caste who have replaced
the ideals honored by the *digerati*, i.e., the growth and democratic community of the Internet, with "above
all, a philosophy of profit and increasing their power and the territory under their control." P. Zawojski,
Cyberkultura. Syntopia szuki, nauki i technologii (Cyberculture. The Syntopia of Art, Science and Technology),
Katowice: Poltext, 2010, 36. My data on the formation of media elites are also taken from that book. 7-37.

[5] Sociologists and cultural and media studies scholars have described the phenomenon of this change
exhaustively. The position of Piotr Zawojski, who in his penetrating description of the communicative
breakthrough connected with the rise of the internet community refers outright to a new cultural paradigm,
has something to be said for it. See P. Zawojski, *Cyberkultura*.

texts has formed the model approach to interpretative penetration of texts. The 20th-century humanities, the same body of knowledge that questioned the stability of meanings and transferred the responsibility for their appearance on the horizon of reading to the reader, still privileged the text despite all of its reservations regarding reading. The text was the bit between the reader's teeth, curtailing her freedom of imagination. The text-centered approach also had repercussions for the way other phenomena were defined, since the belief in the textual nature of the world made the act of interpretation the foundation for understanding being in the world. Cognitive activity was linked to the strenuous reading of signs.

Today, however, it is no longer one methodology or another that has a decisive influence on the formation of differences in reception, on what we see and what we understand when we observe the mechanisms of internet communication. Among the participants in cyberculture, one can observe a retreat from theory toward the study of the cultural practices that constitute evidence of understanding. What I have in mind are both communicative strategies conditioned by the medium of the Internet and the ontology of internet texts, which are often not only multimedia artifacts but also a multilayered space of collision and rearrangement of works, genres, forms, discourses in general. We can doubtless speak of a new phenomenology of perception, connected with changes in perception conditioned by the media.[6] Besides the body and speech, fundamental media of experience, communicative technologies, whether understood in McLuhan's terms as "extensions of man"[7] or as a dimension of the post-humanist experience of the diffusion and cyborgization of the subject, a dimension that is both a component and condition of articulation, are becoming an indispensable element in the process of perception and comprehension.

In internet communication, what matters are multimediality, spatiality, and the dynamics of cultural artifacts, increasingly embodied by complex forms of animation. The new media situation does not liberate the user from the work of searching for meanings; on the contrary, it demands much greater intellectual effort, since it is much harder for the reader to get through to the semantic layer of the text, stripping away its media tissue. One-directional reading is being replaced by interactivity, making it possible for reading to be fused with creative writing. From a literature-centric view this dynamic situation is referred to as the re-writing of culture,[8] but neither reading nor writing can exhaust the richness of works created by users. What does this mean for literary scholars?

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[6] Neurobiologists studying the structures of the brain and its functioning and cognitive scientists analyzing cognition processes have accordingly observed changes in the areas of brain activity connected with the transition from the domination of the typographic medium to the multimedia environment. See N. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011. Psychologists and sociologists also link the development of certain cognitive processes and social practices to the specific nature of techniques and tools that mediate between the subject and its environment. (P. Gärdenfors, P. Johannson, eds., *Cognition, Education and Communication Technology*, London: Routledge, 2005). Katherine N. Hayles writes on the influence of new media on thought from a perspective of literary scholarship in *How We Think. Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

[7] See M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994.

[8] I have in mind here the national conference organized in 2014 by the Institute of Polish Culture of Łódź University entitled "Re-writing Literature," whose participants' interest focused on "creative parasitism on the texts of others." See *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* (Problems of Literary Genres) 2014, no. 2. "Literatura prze-pisana" (Re-writing Literature) and "Literatura prze-pisana. Od Hamleta do slashu" (Re-Writing Literature, From Hamlet to Slash), ed. A. Izdebska, D. Szajnert, Łódź: Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2015.

Ewa Szczęsna, who has studied the transformations of literariness in the digital context for many years, underscores the fact that what is happening in digital space is a "reading re-writing of culture," and that "we must recognize either that the ontic nature of reading is being remodeled or, if we stick to the traditional definition of reading, that it does not represent the only possible way of experiencing literariness [...]."[9] This last statement seems crucial to understanding the cultural change that has taken place over the last quarter century. In the sphere of digital communication, due to the dematerialization of codes that made possible the fusion into one whole of discourses previously belonging to separate genres of art, we observe the interpenetration of entities previously ascribed to different forms of media. The visual layer, enhanced by effects of two or three-dimensional animation, is joined by musical compositions and enhances hypertext narratives. Literature is increasingly prone to use devices developed by film, computer games, or videos. At the same time, we can observe the ubiquity of literary structures in new multimedia projects (as for example in the role-playing games mentioned above, which, thanks to digital technology, allow players to bring literary fiction to life in the virtual world). The virtual world is a great conglomerate of represented worlds, with their literary characters, plots, and narratives that can best be described using the language of literary theory. It is hard to claim that the lexicon of descriptive poetics has exhausted the cultural and textual possibilities for processes based – in keeping with Szczęsna's diagnosis – "on the experimental intersection of discursively varied forms, transposing into certain discourses features from others."[10]

From the reader's perspective, all of these phenomena, as they multiply, transform, and paraphrase existing cultural codes, call for a new approach, transcending the previously existing intellectual and perceptual operations performed by readers in the sphere of meaning creation. To a much greater extent than in reading a codex, the somatic is engaged in the interactive process of involvement with a digital artifact. In the case of many multimedia projects, the somatic directly influences the work, not only at the level of interpreting its meanings, which took place in traditional literature, but in the structural and technical layer of the text, what Ewa Szczęsna calls the texture.[11] At the same time, the reader experiences the work as an object that not only affects her body but is dependent on that bodily aspect. An excellent example would be the work *Andromeda* by Cailine Fisher.[12] This work is a dramatization of the act of reading a spatial book for children, dealing with the interdependence of people and machines, whose cooperation makes the existence of the book possible. The user shows a book to a camera attached to a computer, which scans the book, translating the text into a language understandable to a human. The content is displayed on the screen and is read out loud by the computer. The encoded work is unreadable to the user without the help of the machine. In order to collaborate with a person, the machine requires certain behavior from that person. Thus a two-sided dependency us created which is also a metacommentary on the new communication situation.

[9] E. Szczęsna, "Cyfrowe parafrazy. O niedokładnym przepisywaniu kultury" (Digital Paraphrases. On Inexact Re-writing of Culture), in: "Literatura prze-pisana," 15.

[10] E. Szczęsna, "Cyfrowe parafrazy. O niedokładnym przepisywaniu kultury," 13.

[11] E. Szczęsna, "Znak digitalny. U podstaw nowej semiotyki tekstu" (The Digital Sign. The Foundations for the New Semiotics of the Text), in *Przekaz digitalny. Z zagadnień semiotyki, semantyki i komunikacji cyfrowej* (The Digital Utterance. Problems of Semiotics, Semantics, and Digital Communication), ed. Ewa Szczęsna, Kraków: Universitas, 2015.

[12] http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/fisher_andromeda.html (last accessed: 30.01.2016).

Most interactive works use literary discourse as a component in multimedia installations, or – in a particularly interesting twist – as a kind of metanarrative about the status of art, the condition of the human being and the potential of cyberculture. These are often experimental works that test new technological possibilities, self-referentially addressing their own texture. We thus have every reason to believe that despite additional difficulties that complicate the reception situation and demand from the user knowledge of technical procedures and the rules governing the digital construction of such works, the core of the literary experience remains unchanged. The demand for heightened reflection, attention, concentration on the utterance, still figures in every instance of contact with linguistic utterances classified as literary. These works are called e-literature, meaning works created with the participation of computers and requiring the use of those same machines for their reading or performance to take place. A representative aggregate of examples of electronic literature is stored in successive collections published by the Electronic Literature Organization (2006, 2011).[13]

The phenomenon of e-literature represents only a part of the wealth of literary practices and problems relating to their status in relation to the internet. Furthermore, according to Sandy Baldwin, author of the book *Internet Unconscious*,[14] a refreshing contribution to the discussion of digital literature problems, the digital works or objects gathered in collections have little in common with real literature. To understand why the author dismisses what has attracted attention from most scholars of digital literature, we should examine his theoretical proposition.

Baldwin describes the Internet as a written space. It is constituted in three dimensions, and yet, as he demonstrates, on a daily basis we are barely conscious of even two. The results of this state of affairs are truly far-reaching, since exposing the hidden, unacknowledged dimension makes it possible to present a new concept of online literariness. To grasp it through another set of symbols, the structure of the Net, created by the users who write it, like the psyche of the Freudian subject, is composed of what amounts to its *superego*, the technological layer; its *ego* is the sphere of activity of those writers who act in accordance with the rules of the logic of transparency, openness, and rationality and the rules governing communication; and finally, there is the layer of unconscious desires, the *id*, which seek out their fulfillment in the world of the Internet.

We are thus able to see the Internet as a network of loosely connected transcriptions, beginning with the basic structure of communicative codes and ending with the operating principles of the CAPTCHA test, ASCII code, or chmod (change mode) 777 commands, responsible for changing the access permissions to files and directories, i.e. permitting each user to write freely. It also anchors the hypertext structures of social media such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Baldwin thus draws our attention to the importance of the technical layer of internet writing, which radically limits the freedom of users, who are forced to submit

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[13] http://collection.eliterature.org/. See: N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2008.

[14] S. Baldwin, *The Internet Unconscious On the Subject of Electronic Literature*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

to technology's demands. The automatic functioning of the www system has advanced to the point where most users have no idea how their access to the Internet actually works. In reality, websites are received from servers via browsers and displayed on the screens of our devices. Their appearance is preceded by a complex process of communication between the browser and the www server, which sends the browser a series of questions, after which the site is gradually formed as a series of files received. This communication occurs in a manner determined by HTML, CSS or other script language code. What we see on the screen is thus a purely external, culturally shaped layer, whose fundamental digital level is inaccessible and incomprehensible to the average user. What is more, the act of putting yourself in the hands of technology, which we do when we enter the Internet, does not stir any hesitation in us. We behave as if everything were neatly fixed and clear. As if we were in touch with the entity that imposes rules of conduct on us, as if the decision to entrust ourselves to a nameless system were of our own free will. That "as if" best conveys the state of our fantasies about the Internet as a creation of local community, as an aggregate of stories about life in the great web of being.

That is precisely the second dimension of the written Internet space described by Baldwin, treated as a clear and universally accessible sphere of discursive activities and practices forming themselves into texts. This is where the practices of reading, writing, and archivization of documents take place. This is also where electronic literature takes shape as an institution accessible in the form of closed, ready-to-read works. We will return to this question once more in a moment.

Finally, the third dimension of this written space is the project that results from the actions of embodied writing subjects. This is where Baldwin places the problem of literariness, comprehensively showing how writing is conditioned by technology, as well as the consequences of acknowledging the Internet's level of unconsciousness, in terms of the unusual bond created between the body of the writer, with her concomitant machine, and the longed-for others to whom whatever we write is always addressed. In this sense, the core of the writing experience online is the imaginative status of the existence of the net, the other, and literature.

The Internet – this global system connecting all users with each other – appears to be a literary phenomenon in its very essence. The thesis is not self-evident, but it allows us to look at communicative activity online as a form of activity motivated by a certain predisposition toward creating elaborate meanings.

Baldwin tries to prove that the essence of online communication is our tendency to change what is literal into something literary. Following the path of 20th century literary theory, which transferred the semantic burden of the text to the reader, he also shows that in reality it is not electronic literature, created with the thought of using digital technologies toward aesthetic ends, that constitutes the original element in our literary experience of the Internet (and simultaneously our experience of the Internet's literariness). E-literature is run by administrative logic, is produced by a group of digital artist-writers and followed by an even larger group of its admirers and aficionados, who eagerly institutionalize their interest, organizing

congresses, conferences, and associations.[15] They nonetheless constitute essentially an anonymous crowd gathered around an ideologized institution called Literature on the Internet.

The poetics of communication online represents a cornucopia of new developments on the borderline between literary and social questions. The tools of literary scholarship, with their sensitivity to multiple levels of meaning, complexity, and the ambiguity of sender and receiver roles, seem splendidly suited to describing this new situation. They are reinvigorating and at the same time further complicating problems that have absorbed scholars of literary communication for years. These are revealed to be that much more important in that they cannot be closed off within the autonomous area of literary studies. That is why the phenomenological description of the new literariness and online communication can serve to improve our understanding of the cultural transformation in which we are participating.

Thinking not about real operations but hypostasizing all potential events that might become realities within online communication, we can put together a catalogue of various rhetorical figures which lend their operating and semasiological principles to these intertwining discourses, and also – at different levels – to structural elements such as pages, accounts, and particular words (i.e., tags).

Nicholas C. Burbules observed that links have an effect on the understanding of hypertext, of which hyperlinks constitute a fundamental structural element.[16] Links vary greatly: some establish a range of associations, others define access to information.[17] And, let us add, links also create a rhetorical network that weakens the referential power of content in favor of the aesthetic and persuasive properties of structure. Links become a tool of rhetoric that creates meaning by taking the user from one point to another. Burbules lists the tropes that define the different types of links: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, antistasis, identity, cause and effect, catachresis. The essence of this mechanism is its seeming automatism ("any

[15] The most famous of these is the Electronic Literature Organization, which operates within Massachusetts Institute of Technology (ELO). Established in order to support and facilitate the writing, publishing, and reading of literature in electronic media, it has contributed to the dissemination of the understanding of electronic literature as consisting of projects that in some way perpetuate the traditional view of literature as verbal art transposed into the area of new technologies.

[16] Here, we should consider several differences between the system of footnotes used in traditional texts and links in hypertext. Firstly, footnotes do not constitute a part of the text on equal footing with the work, but present a commentary on it. Links, on the contrary, connect nodes whose positions are equal to each other. Secondly, links transform a work's linear structure into a web. Each successive node to which the hyperlinks transfer the reader is, at least hypothetically, equivalent to the previous portion of the text. Thirdly, links render the course of reading unpredictable. Each link breaks up the narrative flow of events, taking the reader from the time and space of the represented world. The reader also has no control over where the hyperlink takes her: nor does she know what to expect after clicking on it. That introduces disorientation into each act of reading, disrupts narrative cohesion, taking the reader's attention from the level of the represented world to the level of its representation. Fourthly, a link physicalizes (renders unambiguous) all intertextual references. They thereby become something *other* than blatant intertextuality, however: an additional structural dimension that transforms the nature of the text. Intertextuality is a dimension of hypertext which is actualized, as in analogue literature, as a system of allusions, echoes, and references at the semantic level, dependent on the reader's ability. Intertetextuality thus relates to the semantics of hypertextuality, the ontology of the work. Fifthly, the system of hyperlinks renders each text an inescapably metatextual utterance, demonstrating simultaneously its textual and technological dimension.

[17] N. C. Burbules, "Rhetorics of the Web: Hyperreading and Critical Literacy," in *Page to Screen: Taking Literacy Into the Electronic Era*, I. Snyder, ed., New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 1997. Available online: http://faculty.education.illinois.edu/burbules/papers/rhetorics.html (last accessed: 06.04.2016).

two things can be linked" by the click of a button[18]), allowing the persuasive function to sneak in. When surfing the Net, it is easy to notice that links lead us via free association in such a way as to allow us to repeatedly experience associative freedom and astonishing juxtapositions. This is particularly true of advertisements, which use the surface identity of words to connect completely disparate thematic areas. According to Nicholas Burbules, "the dynamics of the World Wide Web are essentially hyperbolic [...]."[19] This can be seen both in the term "world wide web" itself and in the qualities ascribed to that entity: panoptic omnipotence and universalism. This is how Jakub Z. Lichański describes the phenomenon in relation to contemporary culture:

> When we are producing something that is supposed to persuade somebody else about something or toward something (including works of architecture, music, painting, sculpture, film, radio or TV programs, advertising text, web pages, etc.)– in such cases we are always dealing with rhetoric.[20]

Thus not only word and image, but all codes used in discursive forms, including those subject to the rules of simplified communication, such as the sonic (whether using natural or synthetic sounds) or kinaesthetic code, observe the same rhetorical rules. Whatever is rhetorical is simultaneously political, however, and subject to rules of oversight and control. Is rhetoric, thus defined, not the opposite of literariness? If we consider literature a field of total freedom, as the author of *Internet Unconscious* would have it, including freedom from pragmatic goals imposed from the outset, then we must essentially consider the Internet to be a space of political activity, for which rhetoric is a ubiquitous and universal tool. Sandy Baldwin has undertaken a dizzying attempt to grasp the unacknowledged and unconscious dimension of the Internet, which is constituted *outside* the rules of the rhetorical system: in a system imagined elsewhere, pulsing with a secret, vagabond, subcutaneous literariness that acts on the imagination, stirring emotions, desire, and love.

Writing on the screen, we write ourselves, and at the same time, we are written. Or perhaps rather: the system writes us and writes in our name. That is the essence of the new experience of writing. I also have a screen before me, my fingers are striking a keyboard. On the screen, a series of words are displayed. Every so often, the spellcheck program underscores them with a red line, signifying that I have made a mistake. The machine, using its database, monitors me constantly. I search for the right word in my head. I come up with a neologism. I write it down. The computer's reaction is immediate. It underscores my new word in red. Some words it automatically corrects. I drag the cursor back and correct it to make the text accord with my intention rather than the machine's lexical stock. In vain. Again it corrects me. I am stubborn. I drag the cursor back and write my word in. I don't know why it doesn't care for the words "cybertext" and "semasiological." It underscored them. I throw up my hands. [I wave.] But after a moment I add the words to the computer's dictionary. On the other hand, when I write "worlds" instead of "words," spellcheck has no reaction. To the program, both words

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[18] N. C. Burbules, "Rhetorics of the Web."

[19] N. C. Burbules, "Rhetorics of the Web."

[20] "Wyzwania kultury współczesnej a retoryka" (Rhetoric and the Challenge of Contemporary Culture), here: J. Z. Lichański, *Forum Artis Rhetoricae* 2011, no. 2, 28, http://www.retoryka.edu.pl/files/far2_art2.pdf (last accessed: 30.01.2016)

and worlds represent merely numeric combinations which it transforms into familiar letters for my benefit. I tolerate its indifference because the number of improvements spellcheck offers my work outweighs the number of flaws in it.

My emotions, intentions, and desires must nevertheless submit to the computer's technical demands. My fingers type out on the keyboard the words I want to write, but I adapt the level of pressure to its requirements. Otherwise, mistakes appear. I am therefore not free. That is why, in Baldwin's powerful argument, there is no literature in digital writing, because a fundamental condition of literature is the absolute freedom to write anything whatever. Whereas I am agreeing to submit to the hard rules of digital codes.

Sandy Baldwin goes still further, however: he writes about the fact that the body immobilized by the computer changes into a weapon that carries out the machine's orders. A body paired with a keyboard is a biopolitical body, imprisoned and subjected to repression. He also observes that writing on a computer screen connected to the web is writing outside the world, in some strange other place. Writing with a pen, a pencil, or a quill on paper is a concrete material thing. One's hand moves a writerly instrument. The force of pressure finds its reflection in the thickness of the line set down. Paper registers every stumble: deletions, corrections, insertions. It constitutes a record of presence and embodiment. But when I want to touch the words written on the screen, I come up against the shell of the screen, separating my world from that other one. That world, the world of letters, words, messages, is deeper, but inaccessible, unattainable. Communication entrusted to the Net becomes the hypostasis of impossible literariness. Impossible because the fundamental condition of literature is absolute freedom, yet that freedom is realized only in the sphere of the imagination.

The real dynamism of the technological layer of the text read from the screen is heightened by the vocabulary used to describe the mental disposition of the user, suggesting that we perform actual physical activities when we are immobilized before the computer screen. We *enter* the net, we read on after the *jump*, we *surf*, we *go* shopping. But *write*? If I am playing a computer game online, a practically unlimited scope of possible activities is available to me. Here at least, my participation in virtual reality becomes unambiguous: I can say (as the author of a novel might say about its first-person narrator) that I am delegating my avatar, the digital representative who performs successive tasks in my name, to the world of fiction. It is not so obvious, however, when I use the services of an advisor at the website of a shop. In our exchange of remarks, I have no idea whether I am communicating with a person or a computer program developed for customer service purposes. One thing is sure: when I log in to any page or portal, I suspend the principle of reality and materiality and rush into an abyss of indeterminacy. The level of my uncertainty as to the content I find or its providers leads to thoughts of both ontological and epistemological incertitude.

I do not know the ontic condition of the subjects with which I communicate. Am I definitely conversing with a person, or am I treating information automatically generated by a computer program as governed by intentionality? Considering the increasingly popular technology project Semantic Web, which standardizes information on the Internet so that particular data are sought out and conveyed intelligently, i.e., in a form that allows direct connections to be made

with other information and with appropriate context, we might suppose that soon the problem of the personalization of human-machine relations will become even more complicated. Until now, connections between particular documents and sites depended on the decisions of the person who provided them with tags (keywords), allowing the user to access desired content. Now that task is to be taken over by computers. Semantic Web technology enables computers to search rationally (reckoning with the meaning of words) for the information they need. The basic building material for the web may become not files, but meaning. At the same time, however, we may find that we lose the ability to tell a human being from a machine, and we will also witness exchanges of information between machines that take place without any human participation. The relativization of the reading and reception of each text on the Internet is caused by the nature of the medium itself, which allows for the possibility of sending bizarre and incomprehensible content such as spam, and never fully guarantees the legitimacy of the source of a message. We take a risk any time we trust it to be authentic.

On the Internet, the question remains undecidable regarding what amid the available content is true, and what is false; whether the person I converse with is who they say they are or rather a self-creation, a kind of literary character creating a fictional narrative about themselves? Although in the latter case I do not, as happens when reading a literary text, take the whole situation in parentheses, as a phenomenon representing an example of literary transitional objects or meta-realia. A person (probably) is writing to me in the first person, a person who wants me to believe what they are saying about themselves. Why do they do so, how do they want to influence what is in fact my real life? We find ourselves at the boundaries of classical two-way logic. Not, however, because someone is very skilfully tricking us, but because simple solutions are not possible here.

For this reason, Baldwin focuses more on what "literature" means online than on the existing canon of electronic literature. His proposal entails a kind of new phenomenology of perception according to which the boundaries and understanding of the object of study are decided primarily by the reading subject. He thus does not deal with literary texts as traditionally understood, but rather with processes of written communication online. He examines the relations between the immobilized body and the computer screen, between the desire to encounter the other that motivates our actions and the complicated IT mechanisms that only appear to act as an innocent intermediary.

Baldwin claims that the digital codes (ASCII, Unicode) in which all signs are written in the form of binary sequences represent the Internet's unconscious. Exactly as in Lacan's formulation, this unconscious is structured by language and constitutes the foundation of the symbolization process. And, as in Lacan, we are unable to reach this unconscious, though it is what decides what is written. At the same time, what is truly essential cannot be written: that is the relationship to the Other (the addressee), imagined in the course of writing, a relationship that arises and exists only in the writing subject's imagination. That is how the literariness of alphanumeric codes is born. It is not identical with literature as a written artefact, but is an imagined inscription that leaves no trace, the very possibility of an uncontrolled utterance which – let us once again underscore – is purely imaginative in character. All of us share and exchange codes, not bodies. We feel pleasure and suffering sharing with code, not with

another person. At the same time, we dream of another work, in which intimacy and secrets are possible. And that is where we take ourselves in our imagination.

This is why writing online is, in Baldwin's view, primarily a foray into the world of the imagination. Beginning with the fact that we have to imagine what the web itself is, through imagining ourselves as a writing subject, all the way to imagining the Other to whom we are directing our message. The Internet – a post-medium[21] deprived of materiality – is above all a work of the imagination. The status of writing on the web cannot be separated from the web as a hypertextual structure and as an event. The question as to what the Internet represents as an imagined space of communication provokes another regarding the poetics of writing on the web and the literariness of that online writing.

Immobilized before the computer screen, we weave fantasies about the Other to whom we direct the words we type out on the keyboard. But this mediation is pernicious.[22] The distorted and falsified desire in writing online is altogether virtual and mechanical.[23] Baldwin shows the connection that binds together two people communicating via the Internet, how this imagined web is created. Not at the level of technology, but in the sphere of fantasy, beyond the screen. When I want to send someone a message, part of my writing originates in expectation of the answer. When I send an e-mail, my imagination begins to work: I try to imagine the addressee, experiencing an ersatz form of their presence and our encounter. To write to someone who desires to say something really important means to love the Other, to give oneself to the Other, and simultaneously: to give all of that to an absolutely indifferent screen. This is what the literariness of the Internet consists of, according to Baldwin. The dream of each act of writing is to save traces of presence, a transfer of voice, the continuation of existence in the technology of writing. Reading online, we search for transitiveness and translational motion. We desire something we can brush up against onscreen. We desire for the screen to be a face. We desire real contact, a real body, the real face of the Other. The concept of literariness used by Baldwin explodes cultural norms and systems, placing it on the screen as an impossible phenomenon, though one repeated many times in the sphere of the writing/reading subject's desires. When we look at works of electronic literature, we find this persistence of affect there, but only as a fiction, only as literature.

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[21]On the Internet as a post-medium that unifies in binary code all other media, which thus become forms of existence of the digital technocultural universe, see: P. Celiński, *Postmedia. Cyfrowy kod i bazy danych* (Postmedia. Digital Code and Databases), Lublin: UMCS, 2013.

[22]On problems of writing mediated through technology, especially those relating to the practice and theory of screen writing, see: *Ekrany piśmienności. O przyjemnościach tekstu w epoce nowych mediów* (Screens of Writing. On the Pleasures of the Text in the Age of New Media), ed. A. Gwóźdź, Warszawa: WAiP, 2008.

[23]Andrzej Gwóźdź writes concerning the experience of writing on a screen: "It's something different from carving on paper by means of pen and ink, more a kind of simultaneous thought and writing, thought that is equal to the act of writing itself. [...] In the time of electronic production and reproduction, we no longer associate the letters of the alphabet with the physicality of writing, since that physicality is simply not there [...]. All that remains is a sterile, immaterial infographic of letters that aren't letters, more graphics of letters, since the processor doesn't know what it's doing; for it, a word is a less complicated matrix of an image, a function of an algorithm, no longer a form of writing. And we, writing [on the computer], are only simulating writing, in fact activating the binary structures of the processor. And we are playing on this stage of writing that isn't writing, putting on a play of writing, which is not writing at all, but rather constant management of digital code inspired by the idea of a text, designation of virtuality, so that it can finally simulate the order of alphanumeric signs arranged in a line of writing." (A. Gwóźdź, Afterword in *Ekrany piśmienności*, 338-339.)

Baldwin reaches the paradoxical conclusion that from a political and philosophical standpoint, electronic literature does not exist, because at the point where literalization of the effects of the activity of the imagination takes place, in which we manage well-constructed texts subjected to mechanisms of oversight and the logic of management, there is no intimacy of experience, and hence no literariness. He therefore distinguishes between two categories of online writers. One consists of literary society, which is everywhere. Whole crowds of electronic writers exist who have nothing in common. These masses gather around new technologies. The members of this group use programs and applications. A crowd of admirers also encircles another crowd, i.e. that of artists, the creators of the digital humanities. That crowd is constituted purely by writing on the surface of media, which at the same time is disembodied and dispassionate. Electronic writers do not reveal their bodies, but merely seek out technological tools. They join organizations that support their creative activity. The crowd of electronic writers is well-formed and is organized, but is not a community.

The second category consists of those who do not create institutionalized associations, but a community. In a community, a real connection is possible, with understanding and friendship.

We usually look at a computer hooked up to the internet from a sober, distanced vantage point. We see its interface, we mechanically use the programming as it operates with the cold, mathematical discipline of codes and protocols. We treat every component of the process as perfectly formed and logical. Baldwin has no illusions, however: that secure position of the subject online does not exist. Our gaze into the computer screen connected to the web pushes us immediately to the extreme margins of philosophical logic, where subjectivity is torn out of the symbolic order and objects appear cracked, ontologically impossible. The web is the materialization of impossibility. Here everything is fluid, everything is invented.

In Baldwin's phenomenologico-psychoanalytical reading, the Internet is an imaginative and phantasmatic structure upheld by our commitment to reading and writing. To read the writing on the screen of a computer hooked up to the internet means to repeatedly simulate an encounter with otherness and externality, with someone's inner life which never actually happens and remains an unfulfillable desire. To deal with literature and what is literary online is either to repeat that experience, or to read a work of that repetition, which never touches on the real truth of existence, and is never an encounter with the desired Other, but an act of reading what the Other has left behind. Therefore, when we follow someone's activity on Facebook, when we build up an illusory sense of encountering someone's real life, a living human being, we are trying to do an impossible thing. Because in social media, privacy and intimacy are settings, possible selections among the options for preserving and sharing data. Sharing privacy means sharing files, which provide only a semblance of intimacy and secrets. As we exchange information, we dream about real contact. It is through the work of the imagination that the web exists and is maintained as a space of encounter.

My freedom is an illusion, however, because the Internet has been taken over by hackers, Internet con men, data and identity thieves, as well as merchants, service companies, and state institutions, for whom information is merely merchandise. A computer online is thus like

a life-draining zombie, and bodies connected to the Internet are zombified bodies. Such is the biopolitical position of the subject constituted by the life-sucking screen.

Sandy Baldwin's theory reveals the threat faced by a society of technoculture readers.[24] He also shows that blind faith in technology serves not so much the convergence of literary forms as the destruction of the essence of literariness. But Baldwin also paints an ecstatic picture of the saving, sabotaging omnipotence of technology based on building communication in new media using the oldest rule in the world: the freedom to write and the sincere belief that somebody has something worthwhile to tell me.

That is why, according to Baldwin, everything on the Internet becomes something literary. This applies to every activity involving time spent online: looking into the computer screen, sending and receiving e-mails, logging in, even passing CAPTCHA tests. Each confrontation with digital writing leads to a "double play" of literalization and overinvestment of imagination. The literariness of online writing is situated in this double play. From the lonely explosion of hope and desperation and the hysterical need for manifest contact with the Other to the works that write (weave) the web, that join together Others as friends, lovers, and community.

Baldwin, in his poetic defence strategy against whatever deprives writing of freedom, quote's Claude Shannon's famous cryptographic maxim: "The enemy knows the system." If, therefore, we want to send a message, we need not change the system, but should come up with a code that has a single-use key, and then change the units of open text with coded units. Baldwin finds applications for this rule in internet communication. If we want to make a connection with others, which can give rise to the literariness of our writing, we must trust the addressee and send open text right before the enemy's eyes. If the addressee is our friend, he knows the code. Friendship means the possibility of reading someone's message. That is the intimacy inside me, the habitation we share, brotherhood, familiarity, connection, community.

Where the enemy knows the system, perfect security is defined by the literary secret of the open text. Mystery is the adhesive binding together the community of writers and readers, the guarantee of literature's intimacy. On the Internet, this holds true for permissions, the use of the files we share, providing logins and passwords, receiving spam, sharing files, as well as with piracy and free programs circulated online. The secret is open. Here is the risk: to read messages as literature means to take the risk that they come from friends. That is the only way to become a lover of literature: risking that we might get cheated.

There is such a thing as literary society, whose members share the intimacy of literature. To read and write literature is to enter a secret community of lovers who are capable of sharing reading and writing but are not able to *explain* the secret that brought them together. Because

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[24]One weak spot in this theory is the fact that it overlooks the possibility of using a mobile Internet in a cellular phone or other portable device. Baldwin refers to the paralysis of the body in front of the computer screen as an essential aspect of technology's oppressiveness. He underscores that it is precisely the captivity of the body that liberates the imagination online. Since mobile forms of Internet nevertheless give writers back their freedom, allowing them free movement even when they are spending time online, we should consider whether the mobile Internet also exerts influence on the imagination of a PC user and on the emergence of the literary.

the nature of the secret is that it cannot be grasped. If it could, it would cease to be a secret. All lovers of literature who write the web are like the protagonist of Robert Frost's two-line poem "The Secret":

> We dance round in a ring and suppose,
> But the *Secret* sits in the middle and knows.

Sandy Baldwin's book marvellously illustrates the *entanglement* of literary scholarship in the problems it attempts to draw into the open. In doing so, it testifies to the phantasm of online literariness as a dramatization of the desire for an encounter with the Other. Through his use of psychoanalysis, Baldwin manages to show the invaluable and unappreciated dimension of the Internet: as a sphere of imaginative activity it fulfils a function analogous to that of the work of literature in Freud's theory. Phantasm, as a digital simulacrum, becomes reality for the fantasizers. Hence the deep existential meaning of writing on the Internet: it brings a kind of substitutional satisfaction of desires of which the same medium at first deprived us.

Baldwin's book shows great theoretical and poetic inventiveness, convincingly defining the literariness of the Internet, drawing it out of the unconscious and perhaps even calling it into existence. It is an intriguing proposal for thinking about problems of literature in digital media. Scholarly reflection that treats electronic writing on the Internet as literature has only just begun to develop. We already know with certainty, however, that creating catalogues of the genres of the new literature does not amount to understanding its condition. , Literature must be a problem, or it is not worth creating and studying. The ontic complexity and ambiguity of online literature is the very thing that draws literary scholars into its web.

KEYWORDS

poetics of the web

Sandy Baldwin

literariness of the Internet

literary theory

e-literature

literature on the Internet

Cyberculture

Abstract:

The author of the article presents the current situation and perspectives for future development of literary scholarship relating to the changing media environment and the development of new forms of writing activity on the Internet. She looks for answers to the question of where the borders of literariness online lie and how it is defined. The author further presents the current state of literary scholarship on the subject of the transformation of literature under the influence of digital media and related problems. The author cites a concept developed by Sandy Baldwin, who in the book *Internet Unconsious* (2015) shows new potential areas of study relating to these phenomena, demonstrating conclusively that this new interactive medium not only poses no threat to literature, but constitutes a natural area for its expansion. This calls for readiness on the part of literary scholars to embrace new theoretical and technological solutions.

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