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The Phenomenology of Space in Writing Online

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the phenomenon of writing online. We ask, 'Is writing by means of online technologies affected in a manner that differs significantly from the older technologies of pen on paper, typewriter, or even the word processor in an off-line environment?' In writing online, the author is engaged in a spatial complexity of physical, temporal, imaginal, and virtual experience: the writing space, the space of the text, cyber space, etc. At times, these may provide a conduit to a writerly understanding of human phenomena. We propose that an examination of the phenomenological features of online writing may contribute to a more pedagogically sensitive understanding of the experiences of online seminars, teaching and learning.

Keywords: online writing, space, Maurice Blanchot, phenomenology

In recent years, college and university teachers have been increasingly required to integrate technology in their teaching, and institutions schedule ever more courses online. Especially in postgraduate programs there is a preponderance of alternative online offerings whereby much of the interaction is through reading and writing texts. Students encounter their teacher, other students, and their subject matter through words on the screen. Literally, the text and the computer screen are the media that mediate the pedagogical relations and educational experiences. In this paper, the phenomenology of writing is explored to study the phenomenon of space: nearness and distance, proximity and relationality in online writing.

Are the changes of the new writing technologies significant for the text itself? Over a century ago, Nietzsche, inspired by his new typewriter, wrote, 'Our writing instruments contribute to our thoughts'.¹ Typewriting, and more particularly writing with keyboard and mouse, changes how we write, and the way our words look as we write. But how do the writing instruments contribute to our (writing) thoughts? Jacques Derrida, the philosopher of writing, was hesitant: 'People often ask me, "Has your writing changed since you have been writing on the computer?" I'm incapable of replying. I don't know what criteria to measure it by. There's certainly a change but I'm not sure that it affects what is written ...' (2005, p. 25). Indeed, it would be difficult to measure how a text might have looked differently if the

handwritten manuscript was compared to the version prepared by means of digital keyboard. Of course, the pen or pencil is also a writing technology though much 'simpler' than the black box of the computer. And the keyboard involves the hands and fingers no less intensely (but much differently) than writing a text with ballpoint or pen and ink. Here we want to examine what may be observed about the new technologies of writing and especially how temporal and dimensional place and space are experienced differently in writing online.

Probably few authors (in countries rich with modern technological resources) still write exclusively with pen and paper. People who regularly engage in narrative, poetic, or reflective writing tend to use the computer. Further, the once stand-alone computer with word processor is increasingly 'wired', and thus maintains a virtually unbroken connection to the global network. In other words, contemporary writing may be described as 'writing online.' This does not necessarily mean that writers are immediately sharing their work on the Internet, but the place shaped by the networked computer is now only a click away from the publishing space of the Web. In fact, some varieties of word processing software are now supported online while writing in the private space of one's personal computer.

Thus arises the question: Is this new kind of writing by means of online technologies affected in a manner that differs significantly from the technology of the pen on paper, the typewriter, or the word processor in an off-line environment? To be sure many of us still partake in handwriting, such as when we take notes, try out some thoughts, or keep track of ideas that occur to us while we do not have a keyboard at hand. And, therefore, we can measure our own experiences against the reflections on the question of the phenomenology of writing online. In this paper, we first evoke some general features of the experience of writing. Next we turn to the question of writing online and the space of writing. Does writing online open up a different sense of space from earlier forms of writing. We examine the phenomenon of online writing, not only to contribute to our understanding of online writing, but ultimately to contribute to a more pedagogically sensitive understanding of teaching and learning online.

Where Are We When We Write?

Where are we when we write? We may look at our present space: this office space in the home, this coffee shop, this desk, this kitchen table. This is where we may feel we work best. 'This is where I write.' So is this then the space of writing? Yes and no. When we are actually writing, scribbling on a piece of paper, typing on a keyboard, or writing mentally while staring into space, then we seem to be somewhere else. So, where are we then? We might answer: 'Inside my thoughts.' The writer dwells in an inner space, inside the self. Indeed this is a popular way of spatially envisioning the self: an inner self and an outer self. But phenomenologically it is just as plausible to say that the writer dwells in the space that the words open up.

The physiology of writing is not unlike reading a story. To read a story, we have to find a space that is good for reading this or that book, fictional or nonfictional.

It must be a space that is comfortable for the body, but not too comfortable. It does not need to be quiet as long as the sounds or people do not draw attention to themselves. Some people may be able to read in spaces where others cannot. But many would probably agree that some places are more amenable to reading than others. In a phenomenological sense, we may notice that even this physical space is already multi-aspectival. We have to make the physical space our own by positioning ourselves bodily, and mentally too, claiming a certain privacy. Then we have to claim a certain temporal space as well. We need an undisturbed space of time where we can dwell in the timelessness of the space of reading.

Once we have found this phenomenological space conducive to reading or writing, we are ready, so to speak, to enter that other space, the space opened by the words that transports us away from our everyday reality to the reality of the text. When we have entered this world of the text then we are somewhere else. So it seems that the physical space of reading or writing allows us to pass through it into the world opened up by the words, the space of the text. The actions of picking up a book, opening it, and sitting down to read it, or turning on the computer, opening a blank document, and beginning to type, all involve the body orienting itself in physical space. But this space includes more than bodily movements. The sense of space constantly seems to shift in the transitions of picking up a book to read, or in opening the text document on the screen. There are spatial aspects even to the graphic nature of the letters we produce: letters written with a pen or pencil possess a certain substantiality in terms of the ink or graphite that is deposited on the paper. But digital writing involves a less substantial and more ethereal form of sedimentation.

But is this not a misleading way of speaking? After all, the space opened up by the text is not physical dimensional space. Is the idea of textual space not just a metaphor and therefore a gloss for how we actually experience the process of reading and writing? This seems to be true. We are using a spatial-temporal phenomenology. But the term *space* itself possesses rich semantic meanings. Etymologically space does not just refer to physical extension and perspective. The term *space* also possesses the meaning of lapse or duration in time. It refers both to the time and the three-dimensional field of everyday existence.

Space carries the meaning of temporal and physical expanse as well as the time spent in an experience. When we open up a book or when we open a new page on our word processor and we enter the perspectival space of the text we enjoy a temporal experience of opening ourselves to, and an opening of, the world evoked by the words of the text. Perhaps the experiential meaning of the space of the text lies in this 'opening' that we seek but never quite find.

Writing Public

Some of us still remember how it was when entire papers were written exclusively 'by hand'—scrawled, crossed-out, scribbled, with numbered pages, notes in the margins, pencilled arrows and occasional taped-on sections. Only the final draft would be laboriously and carefully typed (and sometimes retyped). And too, we

may recall the first time we ever used a word-processor to write. Having typed just a few sentences, perhaps using the delete key or even the mouse to make a change, we may have sat back amazed. Suddenly, with these magic tools, the words verily invited us to edit them, to try out new possibilities. At the same time, the text already 'looked' so perfect, so clean, so published.

The handwritten text, littered with the traces and evidence of past editing, preserved a certain intimacy, closeness, and scarred imperfection. We may even remember which of the editing we performed in the coffee shop, on the bus, or late one night. Perhaps only we could decipher some of the illegible insertions and notes needed for the next draft of the text. In contrast, the word-processed text seems to have lost some of this intimacy and the reminders of the time and place where we scrawled some additional sentences or phrases into the text. The text that emerges from writing online constantly looks perfect already (though we may know it needs more editing). At any moment it has already lost the scars of the editing we may have performed only seconds ago. The online written text looks both familiar ('I know I wrote this!') and distant ('Did I write this?').

Too, typing or keyboarding removes the handwritten word of its personal and idiosyncratic qualities, visual uniqueness. It casts text in the presentable type-face of public font. On the screen, authored words stare back at their writer in a new and unexpected way. They are strikingly clean, professional and 'published' but still remain supple, open and unfinished. In this online writing space, words seem to invite rather than resist revision and authorship. At the same time, ambiguously, the words already appear perfect and finished, near ready for publication.

In the paper-and-ink days, the editing evidence of our writing was right there in the waste paper basket filled to the brim with crumpled up paper. Nowadays the messiness of our writing is temporarily saved as a history of undo-redo moves accessible through the edit menu, or is simply removed with a stroke of a button. But finally, when the deadline is upon us, or the text seems done (however incomplete or imperfect) we have to let go of it. From now on it will lead a life of its own. It will constitute a textorium, a space for others to enter—to gaze at what may reveal itself. But what is this life? Online, a text may continue to waver indefinitely, never settling on a final, 'published' state. In a wikispace, for example, a text can change without notice from its original, having been edited, rewritten or even entirely obliterated by another writer. In a journal database, our words persist unchanged, mimicking the constancy of printed text. In yet another online environment, we may suddenly find our words made public in an unexpected, unintended way, and irretrievably lost to our reach or recourse.

Once published, whether online or off-line, a text does seem to have a life of its own in another sense. It is other; it is not dependent on its author or its reader, or even on some external reference to which the text points. This condition is known as the autonomy of the text and an entire hermeneutic of reading and critical semiotics has been built on the notion of textual autonomy and authority (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1977).

As authors, we may feel sometimes that our written text is misinterpreted or over-interpreted. We may regret a thoughtless phrase. We may wish that we had

not sent a letter or email, that we had not published a premature manuscript. Once a text is in the public space, it is often beyond our control. There exist obvious political and personal implications in this autonomous life of the text that we create. Furthermore, a written text can make a plea for its own immortality, in spite of its author's intentions. The ease and speed with which our writing can be emailed or posted online, may deceive us into 'forgetting' that it may never ever be retrievable. The uncomplicated invitation to revise, the already 'done' appearance of digital text, and the immediate access to the online publishing domain, may each serve to subvert the resistance of thoughtful reflection, once experienced in the insistent wait inherent in traditional writing technologies and publishing procedures.

The moment of writing is consequential and differs from the moment of speaking in that we can rewrite while we write. In rewriting we can try to weigh our words: we can check their semantic values, we can clarify their meanings, we can taste their tonalities, we can measure their effects on the imagined reader, we can explicate and then try to bracket our assumptions, and we can compose and recompose our language and come back to the text again and again to get it hopefully 'just right', drawing meaning from the dark.

From an originating point of view, the spoken word is irrevocable in a manner that is rarely true of the written word. In a normal conversation or discussion, what has been said and heard cannot be taken back. Of course, we can apologize for some things that may have slipped our tongue. We may try to deny that we said what has been heard. We may correct ourselves, and say what it is that we 'really meant to say'. We may add meaning through a certain tone of voice or physiognomic expression. We may repeat or paraphrase our earlier points when we feel that we are being misunderstood or when we feel that our words do not seem to have their intended or hoped-for effect. And yet, what has been heard has been heard; and, therefore, what we say can never be completely revoked. Indeed, our spoken words some day may be brought back to us, to remind us of things we may wish forgotten. All this is equally true, but complicated in the absence of the pathic nuances and context of in-person conversation, when our words are electronically recorded and dispersed into the well-greased public information space of the Web.

Cyberwriting

When we talk of cyberspace, digital landscapes, or the electronic frontier, what place or places are we referring to? When we connect to the Internet, are we *in* some space, cyberspace? Consider how Bruce Sterling, a cyberpunk writer and theoretician, describes cyberspace as 'the place between', a vibrant, but insubstantial world sprung out of the thin, dark conversational space of the telephone:

Cyberspace is the 'place' where a telephone conversation appears to occur. Not inside your actual phone, the plastic device on your desk. Not inside the other person's phone, in some other city. *The place between* the phones ... [I]n the past twenty years, this electrical 'space', which was once thin and dark and one-dimensional—little more than a narrow

speaking-tube, stretching from phone to phone—has flung itself open like a gigantic jack-in-the-box. Light has flooded upon it, the eerie light of the glowing computer screen. This dark electric netherworld has become a vast flowering electronic landscape. (1992, ¶2, 4)

But what does it mean to speak of cyberspace in terms of the mythical language of the netherworld? Sterling suggests that cyberspace is a multi-modal technetronic place where computers connect in digital space or the place where telephone conversations occur. Cyberspace elicits images of empty space, other realities, dark regions beyond our sensory reach. But, the nature of the conversational space of face-to-face relations is ultimately as elusive as the conversational space of the telephone. It is neither in the telephone set nor on the tongue or in the mouth, neither in the cables nor in the audible waves of the air separating people involved in a conversation.

What then is the space that we enter when we read or write online? This 'dark electric netherworld' of which Sterling writes is strongly reminiscent of the dark Orphean underworld that Maurice Blanchot evokes in his portrayals of the space of literature in which the writer dwells. Whereas, Sterling uses the metaphor of a dark netherworld to arrive at a conceptualization of cyberspace, Blanchot involves us in more serious philosophical reflection of the nature of this dark underworld of the space of the text where writing occurs.

Blanchot, who has reflected perhaps more patiently and more deeply than any other philosopher on the nature and experience of writing, insistently returns to the theme of coming to the realization of the illusionary nature of the real. Blanchot uses the allegory of Orpheus to allude to what happens in the act of writing (1982, pp. 171–176). The story of Orpheus, son of Apollo and the muse Calliope, is well known. It happened that shortly after their marriage Orpheus' wife Eurydice dies from the poison of a snake bite. The grieving Orpheus descends into the dark caverns of the underworld to implore the gods with his songs to reunite him with Eurydice and allow him to take her back to the daylight world of the living. This is a classic story about the power of the artist. Orpheus enchants the ferryman Charon, the hellish three-headed dog Cerberus, and the monstrous Erinyes. His songs are so moving and so stirring of the soul that finally, Hades and Persephone grant his wish to take Eurydice with him from the realm of the dead, but on one condition: that he will not turn around to look at her till they should have reached the upper air of daylight (Bulfinch, 1981).

They proceed in total silence, he leading and she following, through passages dark and steep, till they nearly reach the cheerful and bright upper world. Just then, it is said, in a moment of forgetfulness, as if to assure himself that she was still following him, Orpheus casts a glance behind. At that very instant she is borne away. Eurydice is snatched from him so fast that their stretched-out hands for a last embrace, fail to reach each other. Orpheus grasps only the air, and her last words of farewell recede with such speed that they barely reach his ears. He has lost her for a second time and now this loss is forever. All that Orpheus is left with is the image of that fleeting gaze that he saw of Eurydice. This is the way the story

is usually told: ‘when in fear he might again lose her, and anxious for another look at her, he turned his eyes so he could gaze upon her’ (Ovid, 95–98). But the philosopher Blanchot (1982) suggests a different interpretation: Orpheus was not forgetful at all. He was motivated by a different gaze: the gaze of desire.

According to Blanchot the ambiguous gaze of Orpheus was no accident. He does not subscribe to the romantic view according to which Orpheus tragically forgot the promise he made in a moment of anxious unguardedness. The gaze was motivated by desire, says Blanchot. But it was not the simple desire for the person, Eurydice, in her visible flesh and blood appearance. No, says Blanchot, Orpheus ‘does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but [he] wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face—[he] wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy’ (1982, p. 172).

What Orpheus came to seek in the darkness of the Underworld was not a lost love, but the hidden meaning of love itself. ‘That alone is what Orpheus came to seek in the Underworld,’ says Blanchot. He came ‘to look in the night at what night hides’ (1982, p. 172). It is about a mortal gaining a vision of what is essentially invisible, the perfection of Eurydice—before she resumed her mortal state as they approached the light of day.

Love had driven Orpheus into the dark. His consuming desire was to ‘see’ and to ‘feel its form.’ But such glance is not permitted to mortals. What lies on the other side belongs to the great silence, to a ‘night’ that is not human. So the gaze of Orpheus expresses a desire that can never be completely fulfilled: to see the true being of something. And yet it is this veil of the dark that every writer tries to penetrate. This is the very nature of writing, Blanchot explains, ‘Writing begins with Orpheus’s gaze’ (1982, p. 176). And one writes only, if one has entered that space under the influence of the gaze. Or perhaps it is the gaze that opens the space of writing. As Blanchot says so eloquently, ‘When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which night opens’ (1982, p. 171).

The writer uses words to uncover a truth that seems almost within reach. And indeed, at first it seems that Orpheus’s words (his poetic songs) bring his love into presence. His words and songs have made her visible, so to speak. He dimly discerns the image of his love in the dark of the Underworld. But this is not enough. He desires to see more clearly. He must bring her back from the dark of night to the light of day. Orpheus is not satisfied with the image evoked by his words. He wants the immediacy of a presence—a presence that is not mediated by words or other means. This is a presence that is not some-thing or some-one evoked, but an evocation nevertheless. Orpheus turns around and gazes at Eurydice. He wants to see the invisible in the visible. And for that reason he must turn around twice—paradoxically he must turn away from her to see her: away from Eurydice (into the dark of the Underworld through which he must find his way) and towards Eurydice (to see her in her immortality). In his desire, Orpheus turns away from his love to see Love. He must turn his gaze toward the image in the space of the text that he tries to grasp in his writing, and he glances towards Eurydice who he desires to see in her perfection of Love itself.

So what does Orpheus see? Love in its primal appearance? A mere image? In this writerly wondering gaze one may hope to see existence in its nude appearance, peer past the veneer of human constructs. How is this possible? Does such realm exist? The writer can find the answer to this question in the experience of writing itself, in the virtuality of the text where one may run up against the human wall of language or where one may be permitted a momentary gaze through its crevices. It is striking how Blanchot's likening of the Orphean underworld with the space of the text is evocative also of the contemporary images of cyberspace.

Blanchot suggests that Orpheus' supposed 'mistake' in looking back was actually a determined deed, just as the writer wilfully peers into the dark of the text to discern a human 'truth' that can be beautiful but also frightening. Orpheus' journey up through the dark passages of the underworld can indeed be likened to the difficult traversing of the shadowy space of the text where we can be confronted with reality realizations that are more real than life itself. But what do we make of mistakes? 'Mistakes' in the more fluid processes of online writing are perhaps less wilful and sometimes more expressive of subterranean and contingent phantoms that make us substitute one word with a more or less fortuitous term, reshape a phrase, or accidentally delete a line, at the whim or measured click of the mouse.

Writing the Distance to the Other

In online text spaces—discussion-boards, email, blogs—we come to know the other through writing alone. Relation is not perturbed or infected by visuality or orality, physical presence or vocal discourse. We do not meet the other's eyes; rather, we read and are read by the other's text. We move and are moved by word alone. Online, we have no access or visceral response to the pre-reflective, tacit understandings of another's bodily being, voice and gesture, smell and presence. We come to know the other through a single modality: text. Here, textuality is the sole interstitial site of meaning, presence, contact, and touch.

Otherness is felt in the particular choice of words, in the style and tone of writerly presence, in the manner participants respond (or not) to others online. All else is left to the imagination. In this way, writing online forces us into a mode of pure relation. We sense the other through their text. We are touched by and desire to touch the other through the text we write. Once we have met a person face-to-face and we know their gestures, we will read their text differently. The text will now be read against the carnal qualities that make up this person. The body is written back onto the text as it were, and the text rewrites the face-to-face relation. And yet author and embodied person may remain strangely incommensurable. Even when online interaction is combined with facial images, text and face may still be difficult to reconcile.

How is responding online (writing on a web discussion board) different from responding orally (speaking up) in a seminar class? We obviously tend to experience the space of speaking differently than the space of writing. In face-to-face situations speaking and hearing are more likely conversationally and relationally intertwined. The speaker speaks in a listening way and the listener listens in a speaking manner.

Even monologues (lectures, speeches, addresses) tend to have this conversational spatial quality in the sense that speakers may tend to focus on particular individuals in the audience with whom they feel conversationally connected. People who have a talk together tend to be more intimately tied into the relational space than people who are listening to a lecture. Conversations involve the interchange of personal interiors, says Walter Ong (1986, p. 167). That is why it makes such important difference whether a lecture is delivered *ad lib* (retaining a conversational relational quality) or whether it is largely read from prepared script.

Conversational relational space has a certain quality of immediacy. In normal discussions we are physically immediately present to the other person's speaking. The telephone, too, retains a sense of this immediacy. This temporal-spatial immediacy also means that the speaker cannot erase what has been said. One cannot restart a conversation in the way that one can restart a written text. One cannot edit out a phrase and replace it with a more appropriate one. One cannot step back reflectively from one's spoken word to monitor and adjust the effects that selected words and phrases seem to exercise on other words we utter. In contrast, the space of writing has a different and more reflective temporal-spatial quality. Yet this quality may be compromised and transformed through the new technologies of online writing. Compared to handwriting, the temporality of online environments speeds writing up dramatically: as soon as we type it, it is already there, perhaps even corrected. The whole experience of editing, writing, editing follows much closer to our train of thought; it has the immediacy of conversation.

One may begin to write with someone in mind, for whom or to whom one writes. But when one starts to write then other(s) may disappear. As we continue writing we may get caught up in the words and then absorbed in the mood-space of writing and gradually it seems that we are addressing no-one (not one). Or perhaps, the writer is the one, inhabiting a textual space of one. 'I do not think that I have written for anyone at all,' says Helene Cixous. 'This does not mean that I scorn the reader, quite the contrary, ... But I do not know who it is. I only know there is one. (But who?)' (1997, p. 100).

In writing a poem—for example, a love poem—writing seems to somehow destroy and recreate the other person at the same time. In contrast, when we are engaged in a real eye-to-eye conversation with someone then we do not seem to lose ourselves in the space of text in that same way. The other person looks at us, touches us with his or her eyes, and so we experience a certain togetherness that we may not experience when writing.

Some authors have commented on the intensely solitary dimension of writing. In the moment of writing I am here by myself at this writing desk and in this writing space. But I am also with myself, the first reader is the self: the first other is oneself. As one writes it may happen that the space opened by the text becomes charged with a signification that is, in effect, more real than real. As readers, many of us know this phenomenon. Many readers have at one time or another been profoundly moved in the realization of being touched by a human insight. And this insight might not have affected us this deeply if we had undergone the experience in the sober light of day, rather than in the realm of the novel, story, or poem.

‘Reading a text oralizes it,’ says Ong (1982, p. 175). This accounts for the strange sensation of immediacy of presence that a vocative text can induce (see Steiner, 1989).

There is something paradoxical about the un-reality of a powerful text: it can be experienced by the writer or reader as real, as unreally real, as nearer than the nearness that things may have in ordinary reality. This super reality turns the insights we gain in the space of the text essentially virtual, unencumbered by the presence of all the other memories, impressions, and factualities that permeate the affairs of our everyday life.

The moment we at last begin to write, we surrender to the silent space of the text, and allow ourselves to be embraced by time’s absence. But before this timeless, intimate expanse opens, we must in some sense be summoned. Such tyrannical prehension (Blanchot, 1982, p. 25), the insistent demand to write *right now*, is perhaps more rarely than regularly experienced by writers. Yet, can we not see in this wakeful moment the desirous force that opens every piece of writing? To write, to put hands to keyboard and make perceptible the inchoate speech pressing, is to yield to this demand.

Entering the Page: Proximity and Distance

Sometimes the space of writing seems to open with the simple gesture of putting fingers to keyboard and beginning to type. But is it really so easy to begin? For Blanchot (1982), ‘one writes only if one reaches the instant which nevertheless one can only approach in the space opened by the movement of writing. To write, one must write already.’ (p. 176). This impossible contradiction haunts the start of many writing projects. There is no magic beginning, no sure method, no guarantee that entering a fresh page will take us to the other side. Blanchot speaks of the darkness of the space of text since the writer (and the reader) has to leave the ordinary everyday world of daylight and sight to enter it. Phenomenologically the writer faces darkness also in trying to see what cannot really be seen. As Robert Frost once said: writing is ‘like falling forward into the dark.’ Here meanings resonate and reverberate with reflective being.

While writing on the computer increasingly replaces writing on paper, the page we open on the desktop perfectly mimics the page of a paper or a book. And yet, there are obvious differences. Whereas the paper page occupies physical space, the virtual page of the word processor is like its phantom image: shimmery and somehow untouchable. The new page on a word processor is like a paper page, but even more so: innocent but also treacherous. Margaret Atwood (1998) warns the would-be writer not to approach ‘the page that waits’ too lightly.

If you decide to enter the page, take a knife and some matches, and something that will roar. Take something you can hold onto, and a prism to split the light and a talisman that works, which should be hung on a chain around your neck: that’s for getting back. It doesn’t matter what kind of shoes, but your hands should be bare. You should never go into

the page with gloves on. Such decisions, needless to say, should not be made lightly.

There are those, of course, who enter the page without deciding, without meaning to. Some of these have charmed lives and no difficulty, but most never make it out at all. For them the page appears as a well, a lovely pool in which they catch sight of a face, their own but better. These unfortunates do not jump: rather they fall, and the page closes over their heads without a sound, without a seam, and is immediately as whole and empty, as glassy, as enticing as before. (1998, p. 56)

The virtual page of the computer screen may be even more inviting and dangerously depthful than the paper page that lies in front of us on the desk. Once the writing begins, the words draw us in. Whether we are writing on bright white paper or digitized screen, we are in the dark, in a state of unknowing, a kind of agony. What is familiar has become strange. Yet, in the dark, feeling our way, we may suddenly happen upon something familiar. That something is recognized because it has been ‘seen,’ perhaps without any significance, many times before in the daylight. But in the darkness of the space of the text, it attains new significance for it is now grasped in a very different modality. Like Orpheus traversing the dark underworld in search of his beloved Eurydice, our nocturnal wanderings may reveal truth experiences that daylight is unwilling or unable to yield to us.

Writing Revisited

Writing aims to engage; the writer is charged with using words to draw the reader (and indeed the writer him- or herself) closer and ‘into’ the text itself, to render living experience immediately sensible, near and recognizable. The person who learns to ‘really’ write, gains the experience of being in touch with something. One writes to make contact, to achieve intimacy with a human insight, a ‘truth.’ But the moment when the writer senses that contact (close in-touchness) has been achieved, something strange may happen: it appears that this contact came from the outside. Rather than touching something with words, the writer feels being touched, an invitation as it were. The touch says: ‘Come!’ But the *jouissance* of online writing may draw us into a deeper mystery: we recognize something unrecognizable.

Even as our text seems to draw us nearer to the contact we desire, it inevitably retains its elusive, veiled distance. The text that fascinates touches ‘in immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws [us] close, even though it leaves [us] absolutely at a distance’ (Blanchot, 1982, p. 32). As more and more online courses are mediated by the practice of ‘writing’ online, what we provocatively call ‘real writing’ seems to have become both easier and more difficult. Writing is not the practice of some clever technique or the setting in motion of a word processor; neither is writing restricted to the moment where one sets pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard. Writing has already begun, so to speak, when one has managed to enter the space of the text, the *textorium*. Online computer technologies intensify

the phenomenology of writing—they speed up, accelerate, compel, draw us into the virtual vortex of the experience of writing—while simultaneously raising questions about the potential loss of reflectivity, the unaccustomed yet easy publicness of publishing to the Web, and the uncharted complexity of human relation through text.

Note

1. Kittler (1990), translates this from a footnote of a typed letter from Friedrich Nietzsche to Peter Gast, dated February 1882, found in *Briefwechsel*, ed. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and Peter Gast (Berlin-Leipzig 1902–09), IV, p. 97.

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