

Enc0d1ng Poetry

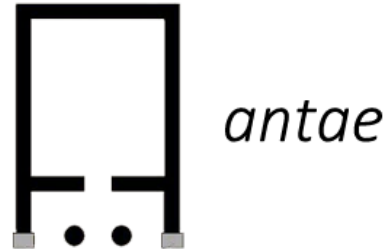
Clara Chetcuti

antae, Vol. 1, No. 3. (Dec., 2014), 166-180

Proposed Creative Commons Copyright Notices

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
- b. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (See [The Effect of Open Access](#)).



antae is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing is also accepted.

Enc0d1ng Poetry

Clara Chetcuti

University of Malta

‘We write in words – but also in the grammar and politics of code [...] Electronic writing, like previous instances of writing, equally engages the ‘double’ mission of writing: that is, writing is about subject—but it is also about the medium through which it is transmitted.’

- Loss Pequeño Glazier¹

In making a case for the doubled aboutness of electronic writing, all-round digital artist Loss Pequeño Glazier has captured the essence of ‘poetry in code’, which is to say the double nature of writing that aspires to fulfil the apparently antithetical conditions of *electronic-ness* and literariness; of poetry that is at least about its materials as it is about its thematic concerns; of poetry that is, in other words, aware of its ‘constructed nature’ and the specificity of its embodying medium.² Pequeño has thus presaged N. Katherine Hayles’s fundamental point that ‘the effects we call literature’ are in fact produced in electronic poetry by a combination of its coded materiality and its investments in ‘linguistic, rhetorical, and literary practices’.³

If ‘poetry in code’ is indebted to the fact of its encoding for half its literariness, then it follows that what the epigraph terms the ‘grammar’ of code deserves no less critical attention than the literary registers traditionally encountered in print-based media. This in turn raises the purely academic question of whether code should be brought under the microscope as a programming language, or as a language suffused with traces of ‘natural’ or ‘human-only language’.⁴ It is indeed a pressing question but one premised on a naïve distinction, so that any answers proffered by two such pertinent codeworks—as shall shortly be addressed here—will inevitably prove inadequate.

¹ Loss Pequeño Glazier, quoted in Janez Stehovec, ‘The Software Word: Digital Poetry as New Media-Based Language Art’, *Digital Creativity*, 15 (2008), 143-158 (p.155).

² Steve Tomasula, ‘Code Poetry and New-Media Literature’, in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p.484.

³ N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Print is Flat, Code is Deep’, *Poetics Today*, 25 (2004), 67-90 (p. 68).

⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Traumas of Code’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33 (2006), 136-157 (p. 136).

Code: Its Grammar and Linguisticity

Thinking of 'code-as-text' in the manner just outlined risks draining code of the potential to produce significance and affect because it confounds the code which functions below the surface of a work (often to produce the work's 'look') with the code that is sometimes presented on the surface.⁵ From this, it follows that code can be made manifest on two levels: (i) the scripting level at which code performs as a lingua franca for human-computer communication by programming illusions of human-only language character sets, through data strings collectively called 'textons'; and (ii) the surface level at which code becomes 'interface text', characterised by 'scriptons' or human-readable screen images.⁶

When the interface text combines characters from programming and natural languages, it has been said to produce a bilingual reader, or alternatively, a reader fluent in this on-screen pidgin or creole.⁷ John Cayley vehemently disagrees with both of these positions, arguing that pidgins are usually made up of hierarchically and functionally commensurate elements and result from interactions between commensurate entities: code and human-only language are not hierarchically or functionally commensurate, and neither are men and machines.⁸ Instead, interface text ought to be thought of in terms of whether or not it is executable text: that is, in terms of whether the code is 'broken' and functions only as a metonymy for the baroque profusion of new media in contemporary art, or whether it is able to change the behaviour of a system in the manner of runnable programming.⁹ Cayley proceeds to clarify that inoperable interface coding is not to be dismissed as worthless because although the address to the machinic user is in these cases a dummy address, the code is important for the aesthetics of the work, at least insofar as it assumes its readers' investment in new media technologies and in allowing them to bring their experience with them to bear on the work.¹⁰

In summary, what has so far been termed a 'poem in code' can legitimately be christened a 'codework' if it satisfies the conditions of this 'Aesthetics of Compilation'.¹¹ That is, if it uses, incorporates or addresses code as: (i) language-generator; (ii) language-animator; (iii) non-executable interface text; or (iv) executable interface text. These are, of course, not the only features by which a codework can be identified, but they are its fundamental preconditions.

⁵ John Cayley, 'The Code is Not the Text (Unless it is the Text)', *Electronic Book Review: Electropoetics* (2002) <<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/literal>> [accessed 2 December 2014]

⁶ Hayles, 'Traumas of Code', p.139; Espen Aarseth, quoted in Hayles, 'Print is Flat, Code is Deep', p.72; See Cayley.

⁷ Tomasula, p.485; Hayles, 'Print is Flat, Code is Deep', p.73.

⁸ See Cayley.

⁹ Both Cayley and Tomasula demonstrate their reservations as to the degree of meaning that may be gleaned from such texts, stating that although operable, texts of this nature will probably come across as 'ludic' (see Cayley) and will almost certainly not perform any 'pragmatic' function (see Tomasula, p.489).

¹⁰ See Cayley.

¹¹ *ibid.*

Hayles enumerates a number of characteristics by which specimens of electronic writing make themselves recognisable, among them: dynamic imagery, the presentation of time-space as navigable, generation through both analogue resemblance and digital coding, and the sense of depth and three-dimensionality.¹² She is, however, forced to concede that traditional literature has proved capable of achieving most of these effects within the limitations of its medium, and that the essential difference between print-based and electronic execution is that ‘print is flat, code is deep’.¹³ Hayles later goes on to refine this intuition by drawing an analogy with the Freudian conscious (language) and unconscious (code), in order to suggest the manner in which code situates itself below or behind natural language, and like the unconscious occasionally slips through to the surface. She expands this line of thought to suggest that in the same way as the conscious must sometimes cede ground to the desires of the unconscious, language must give way to code, allowing code to inflect it.¹⁴ She therefore reaches the same conclusion as Cayley does about ‘collaged code’: that it both enlivens and contaminates human-only language, achieving the former when it performs at sub-interfacial level and the latter when it emerges as interface text, especially when it is operable.¹⁵

Code has come to penetrate and generate the literary realities of this century, ascribing the ring of truth to the claim: ‘*Il n’y a pas de hors-code*’ [there is no outside-of-code].¹⁶ By juxtaposing analyses of Edward Estling Cummings’s print-poem ‘I Will Be’ and of Brian Kim Stefans’s codework, ‘The Dreamlife of Letters’, this paper will argue that life and literature outside-of-code appears to have been equally unthinkable to poets on either side of the new millennium.¹⁷ The analyses will centre on determining at which level code renders itself manifest in each text, the effects/affects that they succeed in generating and, finally, what implications and issues the two draw out for codework as a genre which, admittedly, begins to look less and less new.

Decoding: ‘I Will Be’

‘I Will Be’ is as much an exploration of physical time and poetic space as it is an expression of erotic desire and sexual dynamism. As such, the piece finds a rather appropriate introduction in the lengthy indentation which renders the first verse a silent reflection on time, first through the blank, silent space which the indentation affords, and then through the eponymous expression of

¹² Hayles, ‘Print is Flat, Code is Deep’, pp. 70-5.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.70.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.157.

¹⁵ See Cayley.

¹⁶ Hayles, ‘Traumas of Code’, p.152.

¹⁷ Edward E. Cummings, ‘I Will be’, *Poetry Archives* (1925) <<http://poetryx.com/poetry/poems/10078/>> [accessed 14 November 2014]; Brian K. Stefans, ‘The Dreamlife of Letters’, *Electronic Literature Collection* (2000) <http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans__the_dreamlife_of_letters.html> [accessed 14 November 2014]

future time: 'I will be'.¹⁸ This kind of bold experimentation with spacing characterizes the entire poem, as exemplified by 'M o v i n g' (v.2) which has its first syllable picked apart as if to represent a lurching, forward movement. Words, or fragments of them, are then clumped together in an almost random fashion in the third verse, where the lover's 'body[fee]' (v.3) clings to the words which succeed it, obliging the reader to decode the verse or parse it syllable by syllable.

Furthering the need to decrypt before reading and understanding, the letter 'l' is substituted for a '1' in 'feeling' (v.3) and later, in '1 o o k' (v.14). It is by no means a coincidence that the digit one, when complemented by its polar opposite, zero, forms the basis of digital code and is evoked in a poem which would seem to allude to, or at least anticipate, code at every turn. The zero position is made conspicuous by its absence in the poem and this is probably symptomatic of the fact that the poet-persona (1) is addressing a female companion (0) who is present but never speaks, and therefore has no function except as a polar opposite/a beloved Other. Once again, the poetry nods to what a latter-day user might call 'computer programming' when the enjambment exhibited by the third line has its run-on effect blocked by the unexpected caesura following 'lovely;' (v.4) in a manner that is reminiscent of a blip in a text-generator's selection principle.

Rhythmically, this opening section of verse could not be more at variance with the way in which 'sinke x p i r i n g S' (v.4) is stretched out, as if each letter were being enunciated between gasps for breath; the word 'suddenly' then languishing over three verses until 'totouch' is rapped out as if in mad haste, or more credibly still, as if the poet-persona were dictating, possibly even typing, the piece during intercourse. In keeping with Cummings's dictum that poetry ought to be a window looking out onto the process of its fashioning, the definitive suggestion here is that the act of love-making *is* the poetry, in direct contrast to the alternative assumption that the poem is merely *about* love-making.¹⁹

The tumult of fused words dissolves once again into a prolonged silence, figured, as before, as a lengthy indentation, during which it seems as though the 'i' is groping for a particular word. He finally settles upon the neologism 'curvedship' (v.7), which when enunciated as a dactylic foot agrees beautifully with the extended metaphor of the journey that has been developed so far with 'Street' (v.2) and 'traffic' (v.3). A prolonged pause, the confinement of 'Her' (v.8) to a separate line as if to emphasize the lover's peerlessness, and a back-to-back dash and suspension point, serve to ratchet up the suspense as the reader's imagination inevitably begins to conjure up a number of racy alternatives to complete the phrase. Teasingly, Cummings crowns

¹⁸ See Cummings. As this is a key source, verse numbers will henceforth be inserted in-text for ease of reference.

¹⁹ N. A., 'Biography: E.E. Cummings (1894-1962)', *The Poetry Foundation* (1999)

<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/e-e-cummings>> [accessed 24 November 2014]

‘the curvedship of

Her-’ (v.7-8)

with the euphemistic ‘...kiss’ (v.9) and proceeds to apply long spatial blanks and disruptive instances of caesura as before, with the effect of rendering halting breathing patterns characteristic of resumed love-making.

The harmonious synthesis of the lovers’ bodies is starkly contrasted with the chafing alliteration of ‘t’, ‘d’, ‘v’ and plosive ‘p’ sounds, the stuttering pace of the awkwardly spaced words, and the jarring epithets: ‘Hideous trees’ (v.12) and ‘dead tunes’ (v.11), to match the shrill piping of ‘flutes’ (implicit in the visual pun ‘flut te rin g’ (v.11)) and the grating strumming of ‘Mandolins’ (v.13). This opposition of physical harmony and aural discord is quite aptly captured in ‘OR’ (v.11), which, when capitalised like this, puts one greatly in mind of a term in an algebra function.

Something resembling a volta is reached with the diagrammatic, ‘1 oo k-’ (v.14) whose doubled vowel, set apart as it is from the bookending ‘1’ and ‘k’, resembles peering eyes. The poet-persona’s observation of the pigeons’ flight is however interrupted by a segment of verse in parentheses that could very easily stand on its own. Roi Tartakovsky singles out seven diverse usages of the parenthetical device in the corpus of Cummings’s poetry, and this particular instance corresponds to what Tartakovsky thinks of as a protective marking.²⁰ The parentheses delimit and encircle the intervening verses in a protective embrace, not unlike the one the poet-persona has his lover locked in, creating something of an aside in the manner of a stage production which, typically of Cummings’s versification, is at one and the same time the most valuable and indispensable fragment in the entire poem. The now alternating instances of lower and upper case letters in ‘S p R i N, k, L i N g’ (v.16), as well as the thrusting force of the significantly hyphenated ‘in-stant’ (v.16), capped off by the exclamation point just outside the bracket, accumulate to represent the orgasmic build-up of this precious moment.

The energy then dissipates into the un-affixed ‘ing’ (v.18) that completes the interrupted ‘wheel- ing’ (v.18) of the pigeons, as the process of life and yearning begins again and the world goes back/‘Black’ (v.18) to twilight after the couple’s sporadic moment of ‘sunLight’ (v.16). With a sigh, the poet-persona realises that for the moment, the hour of passion is ‘oh / ver’ (v.19-20). His little street must once again await her coming (Cummings intends the pun) at the next ‘twi li ght’ (v.25), symbolically stretched out to depict how long the time seems to him. He deceives himself with ‘s(oon’ (v.26), as the disruptive parenthesis, here serving to fragment and suspend the very word denoting the nearness of future time, tacitly suggests. The

²⁰ Roi Tartakovsky, ‘E.E. Cummings’ Parentheses: Punctuation as Poetic Device’, *Style*, 43 (2009), 215-247 (p. 226).

penultimate verse continues to emphasize the poet-persona's languor with the rather large gap between 'a' and the former part of the word 'moon', which straddles the final verse and also finds iconic representation (in a manner that is not completely unrelated to the modern day practice of inserting emoticons) in the half crescent of the closing parenthesis.

It is through the adopted language of mathematical functions and the glyphic implications carved from the set of half-signifiers that are punctuation marks; as well as the standard codes of poetry, such as the conceit of the street-way and even alliterative and assonantal techniques, that Cummings constructs a vision of a liaison he never once explicitly acknowledges.²¹ On the surface, the reader is met with a map of the female body, traced out through the indication of 'muscles' (v.4), 'curvedship' (v.7) and playing 'hands' (v.9), and sculpted from the measured stretches of white space. But it is by dint of the infusion of several specialist codes that the poet's fine message is made clear: that typewriter code 'runs', in the sense of 'plays out', the sexual act which is in turn the lovers' own private code.

Decoding: *The Dreamlife of Letters*

'The Dreamlife of Letters', devised as a contribution to an electronic roundtable discussion on the subject of 'transgressive writing', would appear to share very little in common with Cummings's own transgressive/progressive piece.²² Indeed, Brian Kim Stefans's work has primarily been selected for the purposes of this discussion as an apposite foil to the workings of 'I Will Be'. Having said that, 'The Dreamlife of Letters' does recognize the same thematic and structural links between the concepts of: (i) the word, (ii) the image, and (iii) the body, as Cummings's poet-persona clearly does when he utters/types the verses:

'M o v i n g i n t h e S t r e e t o f h e r

bodyfee 1 i n g a r o u n d M e t h e t r a f f i c o f
lovely ; muscles-' (v.2-4)

In 'I Will Be', the image is rendered in the traditional sense of the conceit of the 'Street' (v.2), which in turn serves to render the lover's body as a thoroughfare to be travelled down or a landscape to be traversed. This manoeuvre is skillfully paralleled by the apparently incidental, but actually carefully plotted distribution of words on the page. As previously discussed, the words populate blankness and weave, many a time paragrammatically, in and out of white

²¹ Tartakovsky, p.215.

²² Kim Knight, 'Research Report', *Transliterations Project in Research in the Technological, Social, and Cultural Practices of Online Reading* (2007) <<http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/post/research-project/research-clearinghouse-individual/research-reports/brian-kim-stefans-the-dreamlife-of-letters-2004-2>> [accessed 20 November 2014]

spaces so that the page surface itself becomes a landscape, or to borrow Strehovec's more fitting term, a 'textscape'.²³

The primary difference in Stefans is the fact that the word and the image have been 'adjusted to the demands of the speed of light, digital morphing and virtual reality', so that twenty-first century reader-viewers are faced with a 'digital word-image-body-movement' brought to them under the auspices of code.²⁴ Consequently, Stefans' textscape is a mobile one which, as Strehovec suggests, has been assimilated with ease into mainstream visual culture because it offers the same degree of interest and attraction 'as a naked, undressed body'.²⁵ Further, this brand of seduction is only made possible because the textscape has been organised with a level of sophistication achieved 'exclusively through the use of computer tools'.²⁶

Perhaps Stefans sensed that his piece was not nearly seductive (or transgressive) enough when he initially configured 'The Dreamlife of Letters' as a series of print-based concrete poems; perhaps it was the feeling of indifference towards this 'antique' aesthetic which spurred him to think of a better (coded) way to showcase the 'chance meeting of words' whilst disallowing them to assume the 'obscene meanings' that words take on 'when they are left to linger on their own'.²⁷ Whatever the case, the exportation of 'The Dreamlife of Letters' to a Flash-based platform is well-documented, while Stefans's decisive choice to make the work non-interactive has attracted much commentary. Strehovec perceptively notes that the eleven-minute 'video' concludes with 'thanks for watching' as opposed to 'thanks for reading', and that this is Stefans's discreet manner of signaling the 'appropriate mode of perception' of the piece.²⁸ The fact of the reader-viewer's watching precludes active input on his part, leaving room for sensory reception only, thereby severing the opportunity for 'interfacial gestures'.²⁹ Instead, the work activates a 'Manipulation Figure' whereby the content which is generated by the program is incongruous with user expectations—because the user has not inputted a request for such content—thereby taking him unawares.³⁰ The code by which the words are animated in such a way as to continually generate surprise therefore provide for a more 'writer-directed experience' than the original page-bound concrete poems would ever have allowed.³¹

²³ Strehovec, p. 148.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.143

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.154

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.148

²⁷ Brian K. Stefans, 'The Dreamlife of Letters: Author's Preface', *Electronic Literature Collection* <http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans__the_dreamlife_of_letters/the_dream_life_cleaned.html> [accessed 20 November 2014]

²⁸ Janez Strehovec, 'Text as Loop: On Visual and Kinetic Textuality', *After Image*, 31 (2003) <<https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-113683509/text-as-loop-on-visual-and-kinetic-textuality>> [accessed 21 November 2014]

²⁹ Alexandra Saemmer, 'Aesthetics of Surface, Ephemeral, Re-Enchantment and Mimetic Approaches in Digital Literature: How Authors and Readers Deal with the Potential Instability of the Electronic Device', *Neohelicon*, 36:2 (2009), 477-488 (p.481).

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ See Knight.

This is in many ways the same brand of authorial control vis-à-vis the reading-viewing process as Cummings seems to have wanted to achieve through the rigorous deployment of typography and punctuating devices. It is a mark of the enduring desire on the code-poet's part to allow 'the smallest gap possible between the experience [of the poem] and its expression'.³² The use of the specific software suite that Flash pertains to in Stefans's creative endeavour constitutes yet another attempt to constrain users to a specific mode of perception. Software is by no means a 'neutral' tool: it forces users to adjust to 'pre-defined rules and sets of behaviour' according to the make-up and features of the particular program, or, to use a more loaded frame of reference, one class of software will 'entrain' user responses differently to another class.³³ To begin with, Flash allows for the kineticisation of text in a loop-shaped trajectory. A loop in turn presupposes rotation but lacks the necessary symmetry to be thought of as circular; it can have several centres so that when one is disabled, another is activated to perpetuate motion; it makes economical use of space and time, and its main aim is the condensation and concentration of stimuli.³⁴ Consequently, when poetry is subjected to the laws of the loop, it loses its print-based distribution into verses, and substitutes them for conveyer belts of letters and words. These atomistic units of writing jump, skip, glide across the screen and chase each other into the corners of the window, transitioning into anti-words ('b nare es', 'ide'sif', 'de no', 'oi'd'), derivative words ('dear-deer-derive', 'material-maternal', 'oedipal-oedipality-oedipalize', 'sadsans-say'), and even non-words ('errest', 'exudye', 'penies', 'pallas', 'rizzo', 'hipro', 'thirl').³⁵

In short, 'The Dreamlife of Letters' is generated through a rotating process of fragmentation and recombination, which Hayles considers requisite to an electronic text, both at the lower levels where Flash has been scripted, and at the interfacial level where text 'reads' as an ongoing exemplification of the 'theatre of tensions' arising from a 'primary word, now cut into pieces'.³⁶ All of this serves to demonstrate the 'always-implicit instability of language', in a manner which finds its forebears in the traditional poetic tropes (metaphor, analogy, and other rhetorical devices) whose business it has been to estrange signifiers from their signification.³⁷ Furthermore, this project of extending signification beyond an arbitrarily designated signifier via kinetic Flash loops presents itself as a continuation of the project begun in the 1980s by Holographic Poetry. This genre of work, too, dreamt of 'transitory verbal configurations' and 'fluctuating signs', and volunteered to prove the 'impossibility of an absolute textual structure' by producing shape-shifting words composed of letters which could collapse, reconstruct and reshuffle themselves within an 'oscillatory field'.³⁸ The affinities with Stefans's textscape are irrefutable.

³² Theodore Spencer, quoted in Tartakovsky, p.217.

³³ Strehovec, 'The Software Word', p.155; Hayles, 'Traumas of Code', p.139.

³⁴ Strehovec, 'The Software Word', p.150.

³⁵ Stefans, 'The Dreamlife of Letters'.

³⁶ Hayles, 'Print is Flat, Code is Deep', p.71; Strehovec, 'The Software Word', p.147.

³⁷ See Knight.

³⁸ Eduardo Kac, 'Recent Experiments in Holopoetry and Computer Holopoetry', *Display Holography* (1991), 229-236 (p.234).

Despite its somewhat derivative aims and several borrowings from ‘analogue’ poetry (e.g. economy on words, neologisms as marks of poetic license, and a fundamentally anti-mimetic character), digital poetry such as of ‘The Dreamlife of Letters’ has divorced itself sufficiently from the formal constraints of rhyme, metre and even lyricism, to be considered an entirely new expressive medium.³⁹ In moving away from an Aesthetics of the Sublime and veering towards an ‘Aesthetics of the Uncanny’ by attempting to render language ‘in a way that has never been spoken or written’, programmable poetry is taking a stance vis-à-vis the print lyric.⁴⁰ Whether that stance is merely one of ‘antagonism’ or of ‘outright destruction’ remains to be seen—although what is currently being practiced has already been dubbed ‘post-lyrical poetry’.⁴¹ This is significant because it suggests that ‘digital *poetry*’ might be a misnomer if applied to a brand of writing that is past lyricism. Cayley, Strehovec and Tomasula have fended off this line of argumentation, saying that as long as it participates in the act of language-making, that is, the kind of linguistic replenishment which is traditionally poetry’s charge, then digital poetry should earn its generic designation.⁴² Programmable poetry has, after all, broadened readers’ perception of the registers deemed appropriate to poetry, ‘upgrading natural languages’ while interpenetrating them with ‘netspeak and the symbols of programming languages, meaning also [...] the language of zeros and ones and ASCII and HTML characters’.⁴³

Added to this, works such as Stefans’ have succeeded in converting poetry into a textual event. This in turn implies an artificial ‘textual life’, phrasing which puts one greatly to mind of the title of the post-lyrical digital poem under scrutiny here, ‘The Dreamlife of Letters: a poem’.⁴⁴ How can letters dream? This would not only require an animate[d] existence and consciousness, but also an unconscious whose depths can never be sufficiently plumbed by a human reader-viewer. What could a letter possibly dream of? Of fulfilling its signifying intent by slotting into a word, or by contrast, of fulfilling its desire to be free to not mean? More to the point is the following question (rhetorical, of course): how *else* can letters dream if not within the frame of animated digital poetry?

³⁹ Strehovec, ‘The Software Word’, pp. 146-7.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 147, 154.

⁴¹ Rita Rayley, “‘Living Letterforms’: The Ecological Turn in Contemporary Digital Poetics”, *Contemporary Literature*, 52 (2011), 883-913 (p. 888, fn. 6).

⁴² See Cayley; Strehovec, ‘The Software Word’, p.153; Tomasula, p.489.

⁴³ Strehovec, ‘The Software Word’, pp.150, 153.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.148.

The Reveal Code of Aesthetic

Despite significant differences in production date and medium, both Cummings's 'I Will Be' and Stefans's 'The Dreamlife of Letters' emerge from the above analyses as clear-cut examples of codeworks. The former employs code, specifically typewriter code, as a language generator, highlighting the instrumental role of the machine in the poem's creation. Additionally, it includes traces of programming language, primarily by playing on the zero-one binary, so that the poem incorporates a primitive form of interface text which fuses natural and machine language. 'I Will Be' might also tentatively be said to employ code—insofar as punctuation can be thought of as a set of conventionalized symbols, encoded to produce specific effects—to animate the verses, especially when parentheses are employed to depict lovers' embraces and crescent moons.

Of course, the fact that this latter point can only be conceded if accompanied by a stretch of the imagination is to be expected in view of the limitations of Cummings's print medium. These limitations would be overcome some eight decades later when his poetry was set to web-based animated technology by Alison Clifford. The resulting work, 'The Sweet Old Etcetera' (2006), allows the user to uncover five of Cummings's poems by clicking on the opening verse of each, represented as the topmost branches of a swaying word-tree.⁴⁵ This is easier said than done because the branches sway violently, making accurate mouse clicks exceptionally difficult, in much the same way as it is initially difficult to read the more scrambled verses of 'I Will Be'. However, when the user succeeds in selecting a poem, the verses make choreographed entrances, performing their signification as well as signalling it, and generally depart upon clicking the punctuation marks. By the time all five poems have been explored, the word-tree is foregrounded against a complete landscape which looks as though it has been crafted out of coloured newsprint, as if to elaborate on Cummings's notion of poetic space as navigable.⁴⁶

'The Dreamlife of Letters' undoubtedly employs code as a language animator, to agitate the words and sometimes to drive them into patterns of movement which capture the meanings of the words. For instance: the sequence involving the word 'many', its constituent letters replicated and piled in a black and white heap, with the last 'y' falling out from the top frame of the window after a short delay to crown the pile as a symbol of excess. Moreover, Stefans

⁴⁵ Alison Clifford, 'The Sweet Old Etcetera', *Electronic Literature Collection*, 2 (2006)

<http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/clifford_the_sweet_old_etcetera.html> [accessed 20 November 2014]

⁴⁶ If Cummings's poetry proves readily translatable into animated codework, then the same can be said for the ease with which it can be rendered as a telescopic image. Using calligraphic art to exploit the grey area of sensation between viewing and reading, Margaret Shepherd renders Cummings's poem 'The little horse is newly' as an image which is nothing 'other than what is created by the letters', executing the verses complete with punctuation in black and ochre inks and arranging them into the image of the horse which one perceives almost before noticing its composite nature. See Margaret Shepherd, 'Horse 2006', *Neatoroma* (2010) <<http://www.neatoroma.com/spotlight/2010/03/11/calligraphy-art-by-margaret-shepherd/>> [accessed 20 November 2014]

employs the code to select words from Du Plessis' original poem (to which his work was designed to respond) and to alphabetise them, prior to modelling and programming them into a filmic representation of the words' many dreams. Interestingly, Stefans refrains from mixing human-only and programming languages and presenting them as interface text. Five years before Hayles draws her famous comparison between code and the unconscious, Stefans seems to have intuited the links between dreams and the deeper levels at which code generally operates, surfacing only in the shape of so-called 'special effects'.

Nonetheless, Stefans's codework pertains to the 'Reveal Code Aesthetic' in the same way as 'I Will Be' does.⁴⁷ Both decline to erase the image in favour of the code, as they equally decline to hide code's operativity from the reader. Ultimately, the image (Cummings's conceits and glyphic punctuation, and Stefans's three-dimensional fonts) and the code (Cummings's one-zero / &-OR binaries, and the appeal of Stefans's animated text to the intrinsically performative function of code) co-exist on the screen.

Code: Its Politics

While the first half of Pequeno's phrase (i.e., the 'grammar' of code) has been discussed at length, the second half (i.e., the 'politics' of code) has been somewhat neglected up to now. As such, the more important political issues raised by code require a more overt and detailed treatment. The first issue arises because both Cummings and Stefans choose to tackle and represent intimate, even secret, relationships between bodies and words, each by applying code in their own distinctive ways. As previously mentioned, Stefans's resort to a coded medium was something of an afterthought, in direct contrast with Cummings's clearly deliberate rejection of the norms of print technology—this in a period which might be considered the golden age of the print form, no less. It would seem that by 1925, Cummings had already deduced the relative depths at which code and natural language could reside and had perceived the links which code has with liminal somatic states, such as the state of coital ecstasy.⁴⁸ It is possible that, for these very reasons, he had judged code to be one of the most viable tools on hand for tapping into and presenting the arcana of life.

This in turn opens out onto the second challenge which texts of this nature pose to code-politics. Once code begins to be perceived as the sole language which allows for the presentation of the formerly unrepresentable and begins to increasingly interpenetrate text, especially as executable interface text, will the human reader remain its primary addressee? It is, after all, already possible to speak of multi-layered addressivity and double articulation in texts which nod to the

⁴⁷ See Cayley.

⁴⁸ Hayles, 'Traumas in Code', p.141. Although Hayles here focuses exclusively on the psycho-somatic state of trauma, her conceptual framework may easily be extended to phenomena which have not been become literary witness precisely because they are unrepresentable in common narrative terms.

Machine-as-Reader. Will the human reader become increasingly marginalized?⁴⁹ Tomasula takes this further and recommends the following dilemma as food for thought: 'if a poem is written and there's no human left to read it, is it still a poem? If a computer plays chess against a human, are they playing the same game?'⁵⁰ If this were not enough to contemplate, the production of 'The Dreamlife of Letters' throws up further issues in this regard. Knight reports that during the alphabetising stage of the project, the programme that Stefans had selected for the job could not do anything with words preceded by dashes, brackets, or slashes. It could not even find a place for words such as 'gender', 'gin' and 'half', which unlike '(and' and '(ewe', were not accompanied by punctuation marks.⁵¹ What might these slippages say about the machine reader as averse to the human reader? If, as in 'I Will Be', the punctuation is essential to the interpretation of a text, what does the machine which discards these elements miss out on, and is its interpretation inferior for it?

Last but not least perplexing is the notion of code as the manipulable 'alphabet of digitally-generated worlds'.⁵² Facilitated as he is by the infinite possibilities of programming, the code-poet's activities are heavily concentrated on the creation of other worlds which resist being conceived of as 'merely a derivative or an imitation of realities-as-we-know-them'.⁵³ As a consequence, the reader-viewers who engage with such codeworks find themselves immersed in a brand of virtual reality that is so sophisticatedly carried out because it is executed in the name of art, that it requires an enormous mental effort to extricate themselves from it. Faced with the unreality of contemporary reality, the compulsion to ask whether there can be life apart from code is irrepressible. Others have been betrayed by the need to know, but as of the early twentieth century, the question has been directed at and asked through texts which, rather counter-intuitively, demonstrate an unswerving belief in the inescapability of code. So that, for the moment at least, there is no outside-of-code: that is all we know on earth and all that we need know.

List of Works Cited

Cayley, John, 'The Code is Not the Text (Unless it is the Text)', *Electronic Book Review: Electropoetics* (2002) <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/literal> [accessed 2 December 2014]

Clifford, Alison, 'The Sweet Old Etcetera', *Electronic Literature Collection*, 2 (2006) http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/clifford_the_sweet_old_etcetera.html [accessed 20 November 2014]

⁴⁹ Hayles, 'Traumas in Code', pp. 139, 143.

⁵⁰ Tomasula, p.491.

⁵¹ See Knight.

⁵² Strehovec, 'The Software Word', p.156.

⁵³ *ibid.*

- Cummings, Edward E., 'I Will be', *Poetry Archives* (1925) <http://poetryx.com/poetry/poems/10078/> [accessed 14 November 2014]
- Hayles, N. Katherine, 'Print is Flat, Code is Deep', *Poetics Today*, 25 (2004), 67-90
- , 'Traumas of Code', *Critical Inquiry*, 33 (2006), 136-157
- Kac, Eduardo, 'Recent Experiments in Holopoetry and Computer Holopoetry', *Display Holography* (1991), 229-236
- Knight, Kim, 'Research Report', *Transliterations Project in Research in the Technological, Social, and Cultural Practices of Online Reading* (2007) <http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/post/research-project/research-clearinghouse-individual/research-reports/brian-kim-stefans-the-dreamlife-of-letters-2004-2> [accessed 20 November 2014]
- N. A., 'Biography: E.E. Cummings (1894-1962)', *The Poetry Foundation* (1999) <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/e-e-cummings> [accessed 24 November 2014]
- Pequeño Glazier, Loss, quoted in Janez Stehovec, 'The Software Word: Digital Poetry as New Media-Based Language Art', *Digital Creativity*, 15 (2008), 143-158
- Rayley, Rita, "'Living Letterforms": The Ecological Turn in Contemporary Digital Poetics', *Contemporary Literature*, 52 (2011), 883-913
- Saemmer, Alexandra, 'Aesthetics of Surface, Ephemeral, Re-Enchantment and Mimetic Approaches in Digital Literature: How Authors and Readers Deal with the Potential Instability of the Electronic Device', *Neohelicon*, 36:2 (2009), 477-488
- Stefans, Brian K., 'The Dreamlife of Letters: Author's Preface', *Electronic Literature Collection* http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters/the_dream_life_cleaned.html [accessed 20 November 2014]
- , 'The Dreamlife of Letters', *Electronic Literature Collection* (2000) http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters.html [accessed 14 November 2014]
- Strehovec, Janez, 'Text as Loop: On Visual and Kinetic Textuality', *After Image*, 31 (2003) <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-113683509/text-as-loop-on-visual-and-kinetic-textuality> [accessed 21 November 2014]
- Tartakovsky, Roi, 'E.E. Cummings' Parentheses: Punctuation as Poetic Device', *Style*, 43 (2009), 215-247
- Tomasula, Steve, 'Code Poetry and New-Media Literature', in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012)

List of Images Cited

Shepherd, Margaret, 'Horse 2006', *Neatoroma* (2010)

<http://www.neatorama.com/spotlight/2010/03/11/calligraphy-art-by-margaret-shepherd/> [accessed 20 November 2014]