

INTRODUCTION

Towards Ergodic Maturity

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“Between 1982 and 1983 I was very unsatisfied by what I then considered as a blind alley of visual poetry. Aware of the multiple directions the genre had taken in the twentieth century, I experimented with different media (...) billboards, Polaroid cameras, artists’ books, fine graffiti, electronic signboards, video, mail art, photocopiers, videotex, and finally holography.”

Eduardo Kac, interviewed by Simone Osthoff for *Xenia 2*

Welcome to the third volume in the Cybertext Yearbook Series – this time we ended up putting together a double issue, and decided to give you both thematic unity and diversity in the same package. Once again we made slight alterations to our editorial policy and the main ingredient in that was outside expertise in the form of distinguished poets John Cayley and Loss Pequeño Glazier, who had complete freedom to guest edit the section on ergodic poetry. We are not ashamed to admit our unreasonably high expectations were fulfilled.

The second part of the yearbook is a series of supplements to previous yearbooks and continues their strategy of showing diversity within diversity from muds, vogs, and generators to biopoetry, élekcriture, and hermenutia. From our viewpoint ergodic, electronic and digital literatures (all denoting slightly different clusters of specimen) are best handled with care and without reducing the legion of practices to the jurisdiction of any orthodoxy. As traditions, institutions, texts, contexts and technologies intersect, multiply, and transform each other, and it’s not just the word that does not stand still, it’s very hard and sometimes even futile to nail your gaze to only one trend whatever its strange or not so strange attractors.

It was relatively easy to choose to focus on ergodic poetry. First of all,

such poetry seems to be seriously, curiously and undeservedly underrepresented in current discussions on new media and literature. Secondly, its transition to the digital realm or era was much less dramatic and hype-ridden than what was the case with prose (and especially so with the hypertext *history* and its predictable cycles of denial, projection, accusation and blame that could be summed up in a mock-derridean slogan “there should be nothing outside the hypertext”). Consequently, the discussions and developments of digital poetics were not conceived, constrained and distributed, or placed and misplaced, along the axis of print versus digital, nor were they stuck with the average simplifications of interactivity and non-linearity, and last but not least their chief theorist-advocators were not clueless educators only slightly past their equally but pardonably clueless Aristotle. In other words, what we have here on ergodic poetry is for the most part a mature discourse, which is, to invoke or paraphrase the classic defense of the Russian Formalists, a discourse of specifiers. So, thirdly, this move gives us the freedom to be what and where we want to be with this series of yearbooks.

In the company of specifiers the arrival of a new medium is not very dramatic, or at least it is not welcome with overblown and dichotomising hysteria both advocating and excising zero tolerance towards overlaps. Consequently, in poetry anything goes in what comes to the medium, and it is still poetry. This, in turn, has many beneficial consequences. Theorists are less likely to get stuck with and paralysed by no-win debates over territory and are more likely to focus on much more detailed argumentation. In this kind of doubly creative environment theorist-practitioners flourish and produce first-class poetry and poetics to go with it. In short, poetry continues to be in the only stage of progress literary history knows: undecidable yet active. To remind us of an all-too obvious and painful alternative, the debates around narrative issues still suffer from astonishing non-sophistication (in the form of story-arcs, Aristotle and pre-narratological theories in general) the missing link consisting of the most advanced approaches 20th century literary theory could offer. This blocks and undermines the way to the necessary renegotiations between texts, traditions, and theories on the one hand, and even more importantly between texts and readers (and the adjustments of their expectations) on the other.

If we take a quick tour through Aarseth’s *Cybertext* and especially the chapters on hypertext fiction, text generators, textual adventure games, and MUDs, it is easy to see certain advances (and survival strategies) stemming

from well-established expectations and scholarly interests. The main attractions in the last two genres are or were gameplay and community-building sociality, and they are still there even though most action has moved into graphic adventure games and Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing Games. Story generators still form a challenge to AI research (chess is easy as Selmer Bringsjord put it) and that motivation is not very likely to go away for quite a while.

The case is very different with the post-twilight hypertext fiction. The best part of it obviously continues the traditions of experimental prose and seems to have inherited all the problems that used to go with the territory, but sadly there's still an alarming lack of educated hordes of readers and theorists familiar with the inheritance. The SimCity type of ghetto is still there, but crack dealers with their quick fixes seem to have replaced the Black Panthers. One may wonder how this could happen to the magic formula of splitting called hypertext that was once thought to be so native to the human mind not to mention the most intuitive way of thinking known to it.

One more reason why taking up ergodic poetry as a topic is so important is that it shows us how there is, and has been, a rather long and very lively tradition of e-lit quite distinctive, if not totally separate, from the Nelsonian hypertext tradition. Beiguelman, Bootz, and Kac of the authors presented here could be referred to as examples. Newer e-poets today unashamedly draw on both traditions, and, always already free from the prison-house of the narrative, show what Maria Damon describes "exuberant happiness". It is a wholly another world, moving from ergodic prose to ergodic poetry, and the peculiar flavour of e-poetry is well caught in Damon's notion – although here the reference point is totally different – of "a kind of serenity born of aesthetic certainty" (142).

Naturally, to make a clear distinction between ergodic prose and poetry is highly artificial. There is the grey area between prose and poetry in general, but digital textuality and ergodics seem to be especially inclined to dwell on this very grey area. Talan Memmott's article in this volume, and especially his highly acclaimed work "Lexia to Perplexia", serve well to illustrate this point. But since we are now giving it over to our guest poets, let's just remind ourselves (without plunging too deep into the German philosophy) of the usage of the concept of poetry, where all literature (or at least all literature worth reading) is seen as 'poetry'; we think it might be appropriate to understand poetry this widely, when reading in the

Diaductory Intrologue “when they [countercultural communities] make literary objects in new media that allow them to be silly, sillious, serious and exquisite, that is poetry”.

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This double yearbook marks the halfway point of our initial five-year’s plan for five or six yearbooks. The next two issues are both under way already. The first of them will focus on games and ludology, and it will be guest co-edited by Gonzalo Frasca, one of the contributors to the first *Cybertext Yearbook* back in 2000. With the generous help of dedicated specialists in Arabic, Chinese, Ibero-American, Russian, and Sanskrit literatures (and many others), the second cybertext yearbook-in-progress will take you through the international history and pre-history of ergodic literature.

After the current double-issue we intend to have a little break. Thus, from now on, this series will loosen its annual schedule to something closer to a book every two years. With this we want to guarantee enough time for the preparation of the forthcoming special issues, as we are expecting nothing less than groundbreaking work, well worth the wait.

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