

New Meanings of Poetry in Eduardo Kac's Poems

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One of the most disputable issues brought up for discussion by the emergence of electronic literature concerns its classification into genres. Considering the great variety of electronic works and of their sources of inspiration (graphical design, cinema, video, computer games etc.), the attempts to categorize them are likely to remain partial, at least for the moment. Early examples of such attempts (Espen Aarseth¹) or more recent ones (N. Katherine Hayles²) seem to confirm the radical novelty of this literary field by identifying genres which could not have appeared in the typographic medium. In this context, the obstinate recurrence of the term “poetry” in Eduardo Kac’s manifestos and theoretical writings becomes all the more conspicuous, even if the preceding adjective (“holo”, “digital”, “bio”, “space”)³ changes frequently so as to mark a new stage of his artistic experiments and to distinguish the new medium of these explorations. Starting from this noticeable aspect, our analysis has set two major aims: the first is to investigate the way in which the term “poetry” changes its meaning with each use of a new pre-determiner and the second is to shift our focus on the pre-determiners themselves in order to check if they point to new genres of what is usually called “e-literature” or if some of them are outside it altogether. The first aspect represents no trivial matter since it can provide some new perspectives regarding the way in which “e-poetry” relates to and at the same time departs from the traditional lyric genre. This part of our subject will be discussed in the light of Laurent Jenny’s theory (2002) concerning the poetic innovations introduced by the modernist and avant-garde movements at the beginning of the 20th century. Despite being

written within the frames of traditional literary criticism, this study provides an open ending which can serve both as a starting point for new explorations and as a link between print literature and the experimental movements which legitimized themselves in contrast with it. The other main topic of our presentation will be elaborated with the help of the communicative model provided by Philippe Bootz in his doctoral thesis (2001) and it will be further explored by means of several definitions of e-literature.

The position of poetry as a genre in the contemporary e-literature field is difficult to establish. The term can generate confusions since it bears all the weight of the traditional use. Nevertheless, its old categories seem to work no more when it comes to applying them to the emergent literary forms. It is true that even in print literature, especially during the 20th century, the boundaries between narrative and poetry were blurred to such an extent that at some point the two genres seemed to have changed places. In spite of this, many contemporary studies on present-day digital production continue to identify poetry as a distinct genre. One of them is Adalaide Morris's introductory essay to *New Media Poetics* (2006), in which media poetry is opposed to hypertext narrative, computer games, and interactive fiction and defined as

an expanded field that is neither poetry nor not-poetry but an active exchange between two forms of discourse: the late romantic print lyric, on the one hand, and the networked and programmable poem, on the other. . . . Inhabiting the ground between these two forms, new media poets . . . “demythify” both the romantic Self and the global Internet, open poetry to its twenty-first-century contexts, and bend these contexts toward the making that is poetics. (Morris 2006, 7)

As Morris further explains, the lyrical “I” which “has served for two centuries to articulate a private interior self” (ibid., 19) has become inhospitable in digital poetics. In fact, the dissolution of the Self is an implicit outcome of the literary ideology developed by the modernist direction and the “traditional” avant-gardes at the

beginning of the 20th century. This is largely due to the fact that the idea of literature itself has never been a stable concept but, as Jenny points out, a “notional nebula”, an imprecise mixture of “distorted philosophical references, of ambiguous and changing theoretical notions” and of “series of metaphors” (2002, 12). Therefore, the starting point and the main purpose of Jenny’s study is to disclose the way in which literature is redefined by the constant negotiation between ideas and literary forms, the object of this demonstration being “the great myth of the subjectivity” which the symbolists inherited from the Romantics together with the equally Romantic idea of “expression”. The author shows by minute and extensive analysis how these overtly promoted ideas were implicitly subverted precisely by the forms which were meant to exemplify them – the two major symbolist innovations: the internal monologue and the free verse. At a closer look, the first proves to be a collage of utterances from various sources presented in an unmediated form, bearing no mark of previous selection, shaping and rearrangement by a clearly identifiable and unitary conscience. The mental flux, which both the Romantic and the symbolist poets aimed to express, is no longer perceived as something private and coherent, but as a miscellany of perceptive, imaginary, external, internal and associative elements. As a result, it is the page that is entrusted with the function of illustrating “the unification in a conscience of the heterogeneous mental contents devoid of personal characteristics” (ibid., 93). The poem becomes a “place of autonomous configuration which does not have to comply with any previous mental reality” (ibid., 94). The free verse, on the other hand, despite being interpreted as a musical and more direct means of unfolding the poetic stream of consciousness, is in fact a purely typographic device. In other words, the two symbolist innovations contradict the ideas which constituted their foundation and become the unacknowledged landmarks of a new literary paradigm. It is Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* that marks a conscious shift to the new model, which is

thus openly recognized. Developing Valéry's perspective, Jenny describes the novelty of the poem as 'the figuration of thought'. This means the replacement of the *expressive* view with the theory of *representation*, which triggers a change of perspective on what "thought" is – namely not an intimate flow but an initial intentional movement followed by the free play of signs on the page beyond the strict control of the author (ibid., 68). This signals the beginning of a long line of (pre-modernist, modernist, futurist and surrealist) experiments which made their personal contributions to this large enterprise called by Jenny "the spatialization of poetry" (ibid., 95). These contributions were accompanied by corresponding changes of metaphors which served as definitions of poetry: the modernists abandoned the musical analogy of the symbolists and adopted a pictorial model, while the surrealists defined poetry by analogy with the photographic process. What Jenny seems to suggest is that the novelty of this paradigm consists in the departure from the dichotomy *outside* (the object of the mimetic approach to literature) – *inside* (the object of the expressive approach) and the focus on the invisible screen that separates them, on the in-between medium, which is, in this case, the page. Before experimenting with the medium itself, the artists explored it thematically – as shown by the various treatments of the motif of the "window" from Mallarmé to Apollinaire. The "window" is no longer described as a transparent element, clearly separating two areas of reality, but as a particular representational space with its own rules of configuration.

On the whole, *La fin de l'intériorité* demonstrates that the idea of literature (and of poetry), far from being a fixed notion, is actually a contextual and permeable concept, constantly redefined by the perpetual interaction between the artistic programmes and the actual forms, followed by the successive reinterpretation of its results. Such a relativized view on literature easily makes room for more radically experimental movements in the literary field such as the trends which search for new media where poetry can

be “spatialized”, no matter how different these media are: video, holography, computers, the natural environment or the outer space.

Eduardo Kac’s poetic works not only function within this paradigm, but also contribute to its enlargement. The first and most obvious argument is the fact that his poetic experiments do not break away from but in fact enhance the possibilities opened up by the early and mid-century avant-gardes⁴. The common ground is represented by the attempt to accomplish ‘the figuration of thought’. This is a recurrent topic of Kac’s theoretical articles too:

This new holistic perception, source of the fruition of real immaterial objects, volumes without mass, requires *a response in the structure of language: the possibility to transform the instrument of intellectualization – the word – into a sign as fluid and elastic as thought.* (1995, 10; italics mine); In my holograms, I’m less interested in conveying the result of my thought. *I’m more interested in conveying the process of my thought.* That’s why the language in my holograms fluctuates and oscillates and changes, and disappears. (1995, 113; italics mine); When you look at stable three-dimensional works of art, the stability in these works seems to resist the fluctuation, the flow, *the instability we experience in our thought processes, in our environment, in world politics, in our lives. I’m trying to acknowledge that instability and build it in the work itself.* (1995, 126; italics mine); As distinguished from traditional visual poetry, it [his holopoetry] seeks to *express dynamically the discontinuity of thought.* (1996; italics mine)

What distinguishes Kac’s creations from those of his predecessors is that their attempts remained at a more or less metaphorical level, while he accomplished a sort of literalization of their programme. As Jenny pointed out, they borrowed terms from different arts (music, painting) or from other media (radio, photography) in order to define metaphorically their exploration of the less obvious properties of the page. They worked within the limits of a highly conventionalized medium, as opposed to Kac who did not limit himself to the replacement of the metaphor but changed the medium itself and moved poetry in a totally new and unrestricting context, whose rules had not yet been invented. The above-mentioned labels – “holo”,

“digital”, “bio”, and “space” (poetry) – name the new places of “spatialization”.

From an interpretative point of view, such works raise a double difficulty: on the one hand, they are designed as individual, unique experiences which in most cases defy verbalization since instability, discontinuity and the use of para/non-verbal elements are their intrinsic qualities. These works resist interpretation. On the other hand, the difficulty to access them is directly proportional to the difficulty to anthologize them. The two existing anthologies – *Hodibis Potax* and the Son@rt DVD – have a chiefly documentary value; they do not always allow for direct contact with the collected productions. The print page deprives them of movement and the DVD – of interactivity. Sometimes the contact is doubly mediated as in the case of the holopoems. What one actually sees on the DVD is the presentation of a video record of a few such “texts”.

The digital poems can be accessed more easily since some of them are not interactive and since those which are can be interacted with on the internet. However, at least in the case of the poems created for the Minitel system, a slight change of function, if not of meaning, has occurred, corresponding to the change of medium and of circumstances. They are no longer experiences of (more or less) real time transmissions, as they were initially designed, but some decontextualized outcomes of the early experiences and experiments with computers. From the present-day standpoint they seem to fulfil rather than to move away from the poetics of the visualist trends. E. Kac gives the signs the kinetic quality which in the works of the predecessors could not be but metaphorical. These poems also share the holopoems’ preoccupation with the fluid sign and discontinuity without, nevertheless, reaching the same complexity. The fluidity is created by various means: oscillation between shapes and letters (as in REABRACADABRA, where the triangles assume the shape of letter A; as in TESÃO, where the peculiar shapes of the letters prevent the “reader” from perceiving

them as such from the beginning; as in IO or as in OCO, where the reader can actually perform the back and forth movement between letters and shapes), distortion of letters (as in ACCIDENT), overlap of letters (and sounds) (as in INSECT.DESPERTO), use of barely legible handwriting against an almost similarly coloured background (as in WINE).

Despite the author's attempt to blur the letters' individuality, the choice of words is very important in his work. Far from being randomly chosen, they usually have an already rich semantic and poetic weight. Thus, REABRACADABRA evokes the major poetic theme of the creation of the universe out of the initial nothingness suggested by the blackness of the screen. At first, a triangle appears against this background, an allusion perhaps to the divine spirit moving solely over the waters. This triangle soon assumes the shape of the first letter of the alphabet – another consecrated symbol of the beginning of the world. Around this centre of the universe the letters of the word “abracadabra” form a constellation, a shape implicitly suggested by the symmetrical structure of the word. The first stages of the creation as described in the book of Genesis are easily recognizable: chaos-word-light, yet the grave theme of the poem seems to be treated in a most ironic manner because the chosen word conjures up the image of a magician's tricks and not the vision of the creative power of the Word, which, in the Romantic view, passed on to the poetic language. This theme is further explored in other poems as well. One of them is D/EU/S, another highly ironic piece due to the contrast between the semantic richness of the word and the context of its appearance – the bar-coded label – suggesting a mere coincidence of letters. The “cosmological” theme is also central in IO or RECHAOS. The latter is almost a concrete poem in the sense that its meaning can be almost fully grasped just by watching the still pictures from the printed anthology. The particular spatial distribution is meant to highlight the embedded

word (SOS) – an effective way of showing how signs melt into other signs or take shape within them and create new semantic fields.

Other poems explore a more personal area. For example, the theme of STORMS is that of remembrance. The hypertextual structure evokes the capricious and fragmented “resurface” of past memories and each return of the word “ALL” can be seen as the beginning of a new line according to an anaphoric pattern. A similar theme is developed in LETTERS. The supposed linearity of the text is doubly contradicted: at first, by its spiral distribution and afterwards by the discontinuous references of the reconstructed discourse. Due to the particular shape of the text, the reading process gives the sensation of literally falling into the abyss of memory or of hitting against obstructions which prevent the access to meaning. Another poem which adopts a very intimate tone is WINE – a melancholic piece about loneliness, about sensations and memories difficult to grasp. The old lyrical “I” is a strong presence in all these poems.

Kac’s more recent poetic propositions – biopoetry and space poetry – are at a more or less preliminary stage: the first is only a partially explored area so far, while the second one is just an anticipation of future projects. At this point of Kac’s experiments the term “poetry” seems to be employed in a purely metaphorical manner since there remain very few elements that would connect such works with the corpus of texts traditionally labeled as such. The few accomplished bioprojects – among which GENESIS⁵ and Project 18: Metabolic metaphors (Kac 2007a, 115) – reflect, at the level of word choice, the same preoccupation with heavily connoted texts, words or symbols. The former can be actually described as an intertextual piece, while the latter “grows” around the extremely suggestive words: “MIND” and “WIND”. However, it is not at this level that the artist’s originality is to be distinguished. The words he chooses already have an intrinsic poetic quality in the most traditional sense. What changes them and enhances their poetic

values is the actual “screen” on which they are projected. On the whole, the artist’s main preoccupation consists in the discovery of the syntactic rules which govern each medium, rules which can be revealed only by projecting the text in that medium and watching its evolution⁶. These “syntaxes” are not already prescribed or described by rules. They are uncovered by the word change. By placing the words or the quotations in the new mediums, he equals Mallarmé’s throw of dice in a literal way, leaving the text to be shaped by chance operations depending on numerous factors. Kac’s syntactic explorations may be seen not only as a continuation of the modernist and avant-garde process of disintegration of the strictly coded linguistic syntax (and the abandonment of the rigid control on meaning), but also as a radical breach with it since the syntactic structures he uses are not in the least verbal – they are holographic, digital, biologic and, probably in the near future, “gravimorphic”. It is true that the use of new poetic languages is not the only aim and anticipated outcome of Kac’s complex work. But these other aspects deserve a separate treatment and a different angle of approach.

What still remains to be discussed is how much of this creation can be described as “digital”. The examination of this aspect should not overlook that part of his work which has already been denominated “digital poetry” for the reason that it can provide significant insights into the artist’s conception of the new literary field. As Philippe Bootz pointed out (2001, 43), Kac’s artistic evolution was in many ways similar to that of the French experimentalist poets who started out as writers of visual poetry and later moved on to computer poetry. Their early experiments influenced their perception of the possibilities opened up by this new artistic tool and the tendency to project their previous expectations on the envisaged results of their computer creation was not something uncommon. The degree of proximity to or departure from a traditional perspective on the author-reader interaction is revealed by the actual way in which these works are designed to function. That is why

the complex theoretical schemas drawn by Bootz in order to illustrate the precise manner in which several different computer works can be performed – the so-called “display machines” – may also serve as means of revealing the literary ideology behind each particular creation. Almost all the digital works of Kac (loosely) fit the description of the elementary “display machines”⁷. Thus, REABRACADABRA, TESÃO, RECHAOS and D/EU/S can be placed in the same class with Develay’s machine (the projector). The text is animated, but the succession of images remains unchanged. ACCIDENT, INSECT.DESPERTO (which incorporate sound as well) and WINE bear a close resemblance to Papp’s and Sérandour’s machines. They are animated poems whose words undergo significant and various transformations: rapid and increasing distortion of the texts, succession of flash words or progressive “evaporation”. The syntactic and semantic instability is increased as a result of this new way of exploiting the peculiarities of the digital medium. OCO, IO, SECRET and LETTER can be treated as either static or dynamic texts depending on the reader’s initiative and vision on how a text is supposed to behave: they can be perceived both as still images (in the manner of Tolsty’s machine) or as changeable objects which can be set in motion in unpredicted ways, as the reader pleases. In spite of this, what the reader controls is the movement of the text and not the text itself. Finally, STORMS adds another functional model to this classification – that of Rosenberg’s machine (or the navigator), which requires more involvement on the part of its readers and this time the resulting text alters in response to their choices. This relative variety indicates a slight yet noticeable evolution of the author’s vision on his own text: from an almost static one to a more fluid one. It is true, however, that his first experiments do not begin with the simplest way of treating the text in an electronic medium – the stationary display on the screen. On the other hand, the sequential treatment of the text is not explored to the ultimate limits. One can still surmise that the dominant archetype of these works is the text

as a kinetic image and less as a process, although the author's theoretical discourse promotes a more dynamic perspective.

A superior degree of textual freedom is reached in a different medium – which the artist explores in parallel with digital poetry proper – the holography – and which takes precedence over it. The question is if this type of creation comes under the umbrella of digital poetry. This question is more or less tacitly answered by the studies concerned with the history of electronic poetry, each of them reserving a separate chapter for holopoetry⁸. A more straight answer can be given by asking first what “e-poetry” is. According to the definition offered by the Electronic Literature Organization, it refers to any “work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer” (Hayles 2008, 3). Similarly, in C. T. Funkhouser's view, the label of “digital poetry” applies to “forms of literary work that are presented on the screens with the assistance of computer and/ or computer programming” (2007, 22). Both definitions highlight the same criteria: the literary value of the text and the use of the computer during the creative and/ or presentation stage. Concerning Kac's holopoems, the first issue has already been discussed. What remains is the second one: do holograms involve the use of a computer? As the author explicitly declares, they do:

As a consequence of my search for a turbulent space that is prone to mutability, I began experimenting in 1987 with a new kind of text I call simply computer holopoetry. . . . The unsettling choreography of my previous texts gains a new motion factor. . . . With computer holopoems I hope to extend the solubility of the sign to the verbal particles of written language, the letters themselves, widening the gamut of rhythms and significations of the text (1995, 47 – 48).

But the question is more complex than that and it underlines the shortcomings of the definitions of digital poetry: does the presence of a computer at one stage or another justify the claim that a certain work is a digital one? In a very large sense, it does. But the

answer immediately raises a new question: what is in this case the particularity of electronic literature? And this time the answer is no as simple as the previous one. However, in this particular case, the answer is provided by Kac himself:

For computer graphics, holography is the tool that makes it possible to draw the image out of the monitor and set it free in space. For holography, it is computer graphics that makes it possible to create mathematical shapes of great complexity such as fractals. Finally, for art, the integration of both techniques allows their complementary use, so that one helps to overcome the aesthetic limitations of the other. (1989)

In other words, computer holopoetry is not either computer poetry or holopoetry, it is a combination of the two, a hybrid resulting from the interaction of two different but complementary media. This emphasizes another particularity of Kac's creation – the transition from the one-medium work of art to the inter-medial and inter-lingual conglomerate. The same statement holds true when it comes to placing his biopoetry in an artistic field. GENESIS, for example, requires the use of two computers with very specific roles, but they are only parts of a larger concatenation of technological devices. This fact confirms Hayles's remark in reference to installation pieces and locative narratives: "computers have moved off the desktop and into the environment" (2008, 11). Her statement also certifies that the area of electronic literary genres is expanding. In spite of this, not all the "biopoems" can be listed under this permissive title of "digital poetry". ERRATUM I (Project 18), for instance, seems to be a self-sufficient medium, in which digital processes play no part.

The tendency towards exploring and combining different media, which is made manifest not only in Kac's works but also in the other artists' productions, confirms the fact that the computer and, in a broader sense, the new technologies have not exhausted their resources and continue to reshape the received opinions on poetry and on literature in general and even on digital literature itself.

Notes

- 1 In his 1997 work – *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* – Espen Aarseth dedicates four chapters to the study of the peculiarities of a few typical computer “genres”: hypertext, adventure games, text generators and MUD literature.
- 2 “Hypertext fiction, network fiction, interactive fiction, locative narratives, installation pieces, ‘codework’, generative art, and the Flash poem” (Hayles 2008, 30) represent the new media genres examined in her recent work on electronic literature.
- 3 According to the classification proposed in Eduardo Kac’s printed anthology of poetry: *Hodibis Potax* (2007a).
- 4 In the theoretical articles regarding the tradition to which his holopoems belong, the artist openly acknowledges their affinities with the visual experiments of the artistic movements of the 20th century. Although these discussions do not make reference to other parts of his work, the statements can be extended to his digital poetry (at least).
- 5 In fact, only part of this complex project – namely the “writing” of the Genesis protein – is given as example of “biopoetry” (Kac 2007a, 113). The project as a whole moves beyond the realm of literature into the larger sphere of art. GENESIS is “a transgenic artwork” as Kac himself describes it (2007b, 164).
- 6 Kac’s preoccupation with a new type of syntax is a recurrent topic of his manifestos and self explanatory articles: “The main problem in poetic expression today is not one of compositional unit (from letter to sentence), but one of syntax, which is no longer organized in a line (‘undimensional flow of signs’ – Max Bense), or structured on a flat surface (‘a textual surface’ – Bense). With holopoetry, syntax is organized in discontinuous space” (1995, 10); “In order to perceive each word, the reader must invent his/her own topological code” (1995, 47); “Because language shapes our thoughts which in

turn shape our world, we can surmise that, in poetry, syntax is one of the basic issues at stake. I'm interested in a syntax of disruptive events; in animated language that evades and deflects interpretation" (1995, 50); "My holograms define a linguistic experience that takes place outside syntax and conceptualize instability as a key signifying agent. I use holography and computer holography to blur the frontier between words and images and to create an animated syntax that stretches words beyond their meaning in ordinary discourse" (1995, 57). The most clear statement on this topic is the following: "If visual poetry developed a visual syntax – based on the rejection of traditional syntax and on the elaborate visual treatment of the words on the page, holopoetry develops a perceptual syntax – based on the rejection of the static syntax of print and on the development of complex and dynamic spatiotemporal verbal systems" (1996).

- 7 It should be specified that some of the following divisions may be only approximate in consequence of the possible (and more or less) distorting power of the sources of documentation or of the software which mediated the access to these works. However, the main objective of this classification does not consist in an extensive description of the functional processes, but rather in outlining the general and predominant aspects of Kac's view on the characteristics of digital texts.
- 8 For example: DOC(K)S (3.13/14/15/16)/ALIRE 10 (+ 1 CD-ROM): *Poésie & informatique, poésie animée par ordinateur* (1997); C.T. Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995* (2007).

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