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Screen:: Writing a practice-based,
EuroRelative introduction to Electronic
Literature and Poetics
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I write from London, using media, so-called ‘new’ or ‘digital’ media, literally ‘electronic’ media.

1 In an important sense, I am no longer unusual in this. Most of the writers represented here will have drafted and redrafted their work using electronic media: word processors running on programmable, general-purpose computational machines.

2 However, when I write (to include ‘now’ as I write these words), I tend to do so in such a manner that produces in me a fundamental questioning of the process itself, as both cultural and artistic practice. What is it that I am doing? What is it that I desire to do when I write? Typically, even as they arise, most writers leave such questions to one side, at least to some extent. How could we proceed otherwise? How could we even begin to write if we discovered ourselves to be always entirely surrounded with the abyss of uncertain practice? We would be paralysed by confusion and fear. Nonetheless, in my own case, the characteristics and contexts of what is now a conscious choice of media make it impossible to ignore the ever-present paraphernalia and prostheses of writing. Nor now would I ever desire to leave them out of account. In common with other writers, I desire to produce meaning and generate affect in my readers, but by contrast with many who tend to take their media as given or for granted I want to do this using techniques and procedures that are marked by their mediation and in which programmable technology plays a significant and proper part.

To make what I say clearer, especially to other writers who may not have a special interest in the subject, and before directly addressing the practice of writing in electronic media, I think it may be helpful to provide a little more context based on my own personal experience and development. I can try to give some indication of why I turned to programmable machines in order to change the way I write. I also want to try and show how my

particular location and history influenced the way in which my practice became part of a cultural formation -- so-called electronic writing -- and how the manner of this appropriation inflects and distorts some of the more familiar relations of influence and association: a writer's shared history and location in Europe and the world.

I was trained as a specialist in Chinese classical literature. This training ran parallel with a long-standing engagement with poetry and poetics in English. At times, I have translated classical Chinese poetry into English. As a student, influenced by my professor and in the course of linguistic research, I marked up texts and attempted to use computational procedures to analyse classical Chinese prose style. The period during which this work was begun, the late 1970s, corresponded with the first dissemination of affordable personal computers. Coincidentally, correspondence with a literary friend sparked in me the discovery of a potential for varieties of literary composition that are modulated and, to an extent, generated by the kind of regular algorithmic processes -- programs -- which are carried out typically and tirelessly by computational machines. I became fascinated by the relationship between composition (especially literary composition) and rigorous procedure. Initially, for the most part, these interests developed in ignorance of similar engagements that were and are carried out in writing associated, for example, with the theory and practice of Fluxus or the OuLiPo.

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Retrospectively, I became aware of a number of writing traditions and counter-traditions that had been engaged with algorithmic procedure well before I incorporated such practices into my own work.

This brief trajectory brings out a number of points that are vital for our discussion. My literary education is entirely unremarkable as personal artistic history. There is traditional textual scholarship, there is poetry and poetics, and there is a relatively conservative literary practice, translation, that is often down-played as subservient or technical in the western world of letters. If there is anything novel in my story, it is, of course, linked with the advent of personal computing, the coincidence of a particular historical moment, when a developing writer could acquire a relatively powerful programmable machine capable of processing text. The point I would like to emphasise is that, despite the fact that it may seem to do so, this latter technological coincidence did not and does not overdetermine my

literary practice . Generally, in the field of new media as cultural production, readers tend to be dazzled by novelty and so blinded to continuities of artistic poesis. Moreover, as we well know (it is all but a cliché), this usually means that too much infatuated attention is paid to the media and technology themselves while there is a notable lack of critical sensibility applied to either the content or to the compositional form (as distinct from the form of delivery media) that is realised in particular new media works.

4

The continuation of my own story reinforces these points. I went on to make literary works in programmable media, intermittently, from the mid 1980s through 1994/5. During this period the work was all but invisible and remained unconnected with similar practice elsewhere. I mean that it was both invisible to a literary culture which resisted new mediation (this still concerns me) and also invisible to the art world which was soon actively to embrace new media and net art (about which I care slightly less). If anything, the work I produced during this time was perceived as ludic, incidental, trivial by established literary practitioners, including ‘innovative,’ ‘experimental’ poetic practitioners. Only in the mid-1990s, during the short space of time when the Internet suddenly became accessible to first-world culture in general, only then did work such as mine and my colleagues-to-be become visible. When I scratched around for a name to describe what I had been doing and continue to do, I rejected or badly needed to qualify those terms that had begun to circulate -- hypertext, cybertext, hyperpoetry, cyberpoetry, elit(erature), e-poetry, etc. -- as either meaningless or misdirected. I still refer to what I do as ‘writing in networked and programmable media’ and I baulk at shortening this to electronic or digital writing.

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Here, the point I want to make is that in the 1990s, as a matter of fact, I did not write in or for networked media, I continued to write in programmable media.

6

Nonetheless, my work was only appreciated in the context of cultural effects that were, basically, generated by the exponentially growing internet, and so the two focal aspects of computationally mediated work -- precisely the networking and programmability of compositional media -- were already inextricably linked. Along with everybody else, I was bound to the interwheels of fire. Why tell these stories, as if to personalise what should

be -- always assuming it is of significant culture moment -- a practice that can speak for itself and in its own terms? Because, after so many years, writing that is composed in and for networked and/or programmable media is still relatively unfamiliar and downplayed in the mainstream. It is little understood and appreciated, less so even than the new media work in, for example, the fields of visual, performance and installation art. My story aims to suggest how, despite this, a located writer, with particular cultural and linguistic skills and inclinations might decide to compose using tools and techniques that were, in a certain sense, 'new,' but the use of which implied no major discontinuities of practice or cultural allegiance. I would argue that my decisions entailed no greater discontinuities than those we encounter when, for example, particular writers or groups of writers achieve a critically significant shift of 'style' or 'school,' of rhetorical technique and purpose. Typically, a major shift may be associated with an avant garde, but this is not necessarily the case. Was the Movement in the English poetry, or the New Wave in French cinema and fiction, an avant garde? In the case of new media, the shift of rhetoric, of technique and purpose, is, arguably, historic and paradigm-shifting. Because these changes are major changes in media history, in artistic practice they may, themselves, appear to herald an avant garde. New media artists may be caught up in movements that have nothing to do with the underlying cultural significance of the work that they are making. Moreover, because these changes of technique and purpose are aligned with parallel shifts in economics, politics and culture generally, new media artists are all but inevitably caught up in hype.

Hype. Despite their association with a particular moment in cultural history, the 'new' of new media, the 'hyper-' and 'cyber-', the 'digital-' and 'electronic-' all these prefixes and the characterisations they encourage have the effect of removing history and locatedness. They substitute a fixation with the dehistoricised 'new' and an over-emphasis on delivery media-as-technology that overwhelms the determinations of formal and compositional technique. At times the result for culture is a shallow haunting, the comic-book spectre of a hyper- or cyber-avant garde, a virtual visceral banal, 'jacking-in' to a supercharged networked which amounts, in the final analysis, to a naive and unprogressive deracination, a discontinuity and delocation that itself requires deconstruction.

Apart from any call to critique the hyper- and cyber-naïf, there are constructive and generative reasons to

trouble time and location, because, once the hype has been cleared away, networked and programmable media do enable the instantiation of forms of literal art which represent serious challenges to both these fundamental dimensions of cultural practice. I will get to this, concluding with what I hope will be a pertinent demonstration. But before re-undermining history and location in artistic practice, I do want to make this brief discussion ‘EuroRelative,’ as pretended. Again, I can do this using the continuing story of how my own work found a place in what is now, undoubtedly, the recognized field of digital or electronic literature.

As an Anglophone Canadian permanently resident in England, when, after 1994, my work in programmable media became, as I say, visible, it was, at first, attracted to the gravity of ‘hypertext,’ specifically hypertext fiction. Hypertext, as a writing technology and practice, predates the World Wide Web.

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Although hypertext theorists would largely claim that the Web is (or at least, was) an impoverished realization of hypertextual technologies, the Web version of passages-with-links textuality has swallowed up and overwhelmed any higher ideals in the real-world popularization that is now a part of everyday textual life for millions upon millions of people. In the latter half of the 1990s, this conclusion was not, however, inevitable. Hypertext fiction was a literary and theoretical ideal that seemed to offer great promise for both writers and academics in the English-speaking world, by which we mean the technoglobalised cultural-imperial United States.

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To all intents and purposes, in this monoglot utopia, hypertext fiction was electronic literature, it was writing in networked and programmable media, as I would, paradoxically, have said.

As a result, in the course my own and others’ attempts to find and engage with colleagues who were actually practicing literature using these new, i.e. networked and programmable, media, I was cast (I am thinking of the sense of this term as much as in its programming, especially object oriented programming sense as in the sense of role-play) as a hypertext writer, while the network implicitly shifted the ‘location’ of my practice westwards, transatlantically towards the Californian mondo utopia that is every(net)where. I did not change what I did or where I did it. Instead where and how my contribution to culture was appropriated and determined by an emergent hyperhistory and by a hypergeography that

was internet-configured. I was not alone in this predicament. One of the main distinctions in my practice was and is the fact that it is engaged with poetics, as opposed to narrative or other large-scale prose structures for which hypertext technologies may be crucial. Strangely, another of the Anglophone pioneers of electronic literature, Jim Rosenberg, was also a poet. It was difficult to cast his work as passages-with-links hypertext, yet he too was and is active on the hypertext scene.

9

What was happening in Europe? Both Rosenberg and myself were, later, and within the constraints of our linguistic capabilities, to find other and, arguably, greater commonalities of theory and practice with the less well-known creative and critical activities of the writers gravitating around what was the world's first digital periodical publication devoted to digital literature, *alire*.

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Moreover, the French-led and located formation represented by *alire* is explicitly understood in relation to ongoing literary history in France, where the *OuLiPo* in particular still demonstrates serious, recognized and occasionally mainstream literary practice that employs techniques and, latterly, media which are, in a real sense, continuous and sometimes identical with so-called 'new' media. In other worlds, the *OuLiPo* produced and produces work in programmable media, and although the way they do this and their reasons for doing it differ significantly from both the *alire* writers and, for example, writers like myself, they do provide a located context and history for our practices.

In 1997, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* was published. If the best-known practitioners of self-identified hypertext fiction were located in the Anglophonic USA, some of the field's most acute and appreciative critics worked in Europe, especially Scandinavia, where literature was seen as an important aspect of emergent, so-called digital culture.

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Aarseth questioned the overdetermination of electronic literature by hypertext and hypertext theory, offering up a restructured analysis of the field in which cybertext became an overarching term used to describe 'ergodic literature,' that is, literary art which requires the reader's 'non-trivial' effort to engage its media and so realize its rhetorical potential. Hypertext amounted, in

this scheme, to a variety of cybertext. Because Aarseth's 'textonomy' was sensitive to a broad range of distinguishing characteristics of compositional form in all manner of writing for networked and programmable media, writers such as myself welcomed a theory that was able to appreciate the formal and compositional distinctiveness of our work. It no longer had to be seen as 'hypertext with special characteristics.'

The northern European critical engagement with electronic literature continues to develop, branching out into the related territories of mediated online textual interaction and gaming.

12

Germany has also had its own, more 'cybertextual' engagement with writing in networked and programmable literature. This is perhaps best represented by the online periodical *dichtung-digital* and the two *p0e1s* conferences, the latter of which involved a major exhibition of digitally mediated literary work at a national level gallery in Berlin. Here, in the centre of Europe, we see electronic literature being appreciated less in terms of hypertext and hypertext narrative or fiction, and more in terms of a wide-ranging poetics and rhetorics, drawing influence from visual and sound poetry, visual and installation art and also -- importantly in this context -- code and coding as, arguably, itself, artistic practice.

13

How to propose, in summary, a EuroRelativization of electronic literature from what I have said? In a world of letters already resistant to new media and therefore relatively uninvolved (compared to established practice in the visual arts, for example), the final incursion of networked media into, shall we say, 'word processing' during the 1990s gave rise to a hyped miscasting and misdirection of literary practice in networked and programmable media. These hyperliterary historical misshifts centred in the superheated technological and cultural engine of the US-centric English-speaking imperium. Much cultural activity migrated to the hyperempire. In Europe the parallel (not, please note, subsequent) development was relatively located and relatively historicized through what are, chiefly, instruments of cultural resistance. These formations resist because they demand articulation in terms of compositional form. I am (at least provisionally) identifying these resistances under the heading of poetry and poetics, other languages, specific prior artistic practices (including historical avant gardes), and culturally specific technological requirements (what the

computing world actually labels 'localization'). In Europe location and history is complex and elaborated. Complexity inevitably and importantly demands enriched and articulated practice and critique. As a replaced European, explicitly trained to place even these histories in a global context relative to East Asia, my own practice gravitates to the EuroRelative. And I would encourage writers from other places to keep hold of history and location when they enter the arena of the intertextual hypernet. A EuroRelative positioning has more promising prospects for ingress and access, and is likely to allow contributions from a perceived 'outside' to be understood and appreciated rather than simply appropriated or miscast.

In the letters and literature of new media, the irony we encounter is that any program of deracination and dislocation purveyed by the hyperhistory of hypertextuality proves to have been instantiated in a rhetoric that is, in fact, only mildly subversive of the established, instituted temporal and spatial structures of language. Passages-and-links (for which read texts-and-references of all kinds) have long been familiar to us. Their ordering and reordering is something that we deal with whenever, literally, we read or write. It is in more poetic engagements with language that its temporal and spatial form becomes constitutive and determinative of the composed text. In familiar, print-mediated literature, our established literary cultures recognize these poetics in the special attention we pay to the time and space of the poem -- the way in which its words and lines are arranged and then silent-implicitly or oral-actually realized in temporal rhythms that are borne by these same arrangements. As a matter both of inclination and of recent literary historical fact, it is the European or EuroRelative engagements with electronically mediated writing that we more often find a challenging poetic address to language as time and space.

Something that programmable systems allow us to do is to embody this address to poetics as material process. This makes it possible for us now to experience literary phenomena that are still difficult to talk about critically. This work is poetic in the sense I have described: it arranges words in time and space. By contrast with the print-published poem, programmable compositional and delivery media allow this arrangement and its recital to take place in performance, in real passing time and space rather than in the imaginary space-time of the silently reading mind. Potentially (and always assuming that the significance and affect they offer is of adequate moment) such mediated poems are poetic in a real, material sense, while paradoxically, it

is harder for us to say what it is that they are as cultural objects (are they 'poems'?) because, for example, they pass before our eyes and disappear, like music or film, without the seemingly fixed, print-located traces of poems that are familiar to us.

In order to demonstrate these qualities of, as I claim, a EuroRelative, poetic writing in programmable media, I will close by presenting a demonstration from the series of pieces I call translation.

14

These and related pieces are, in one sense, examples of literal art in programmable media that demonstrate an 'ambient' time-based poetics, a poetics in which temporal phenomena of language cannot be bracketed or deferred because what the work is is precisely an instance of continual change in language over time, a constant algorithmic writing and rewriting. These processes are the work. The writing is not the record of an inscription or prior composition. It is a program running. It is the sum of all the phenomena which occur when a program -- a 'prior writing' in anticipation of performance -- is set in train.

In terms of content, translation investigates iterative, procedural 'movement' from one language to another. Passages from the texts which underlie the piece may be in one of three states -- surfacing, floating or sinking. But they may also be in one of three language states, German, French or English. If a passage 'drowns' in one language it may 'surface' in another. The main source text for translation is extracted from Walter Benjamin's early essay, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.'

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Other texts from Marcel Proust may also, less frequently, surface in the original French, or one or other of the standard German and English translations from *In Search of Lost Time*. The shifts between languages are not preformed at the level of semantics, but at the level of the letter. They are, nonetheless, linguistic and poetic, generating transitional textual forms that pretend (in the strong sense) significance and affect.

Quite apart from whatever meanings translation offers that could be re-rendered as paraphrase, using relatively simple procedures, this piece aims to challenge our conceptions of time and location in language and poetic practice. But it does not do this by pointing towards or pretending to inhabit an everwhen and nowhere. translation, together with all writing, suggests that

time is an integral aspect of language as it is continually made and remade. Through a generative confusion of located linguistic practices, it shows that languages can be iteratively related through their granular, literal, liminal structures. This located, historical, active interrelation of languages is an intimate aspect of poetry and poetics, and it happens daily, hourly in the markets and meeting places of Europe and the world.

Benjamin, Walter. 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.' Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. 1979. London: Verso, 1997. 107-23.

Bolter, Jay David. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1991.

Cayley, John. 'Literal Art: Neither Lines nor Pixels but Letters.' *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 208-17.

---. 'Overboard: An Example of Ambient Time-Based Poetics in Digital Art.' *dichtung-digital* 32 (2004): [Website accessed August 2004 at <http://www.dichtung-digital.com/04/2-Cayley.htm>].

---. 'Time Code Language: New Media Poetics and Programmed Signification.' *New Media Poetry: Aesthetics, Institutions, Audiences*. Eds. Dee Morris and Thomas Swiss. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005 forthcoming.

Fuller, Matthew. 'It Looks Like You're Writing a Letter: Microsoft Word.' *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software*. New York: Autonomedia, 2003. 137-65.

Glazier, Loss Pequeño. *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002.

Glazier, Loss Pequeño, and John Cayley, eds. *Ergodic Poetry: A Special Section of the Cybertext Yearbook 2002-2003*. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2003.

Landow, George P. *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

---. *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Lunenfeld, Peter, ed. *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, and Nick Monfort, eds. *The New Media Reader*. Includes CD-ROM. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

1

The use of the terms 'new' and 'digital' can be problematic and their interrelationships are often discussed in the literature. See, for example: Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); Peter Lunenfeld, ed., *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); John Cayley, 'Literal Art: Neither Lines nor Pixels but Letters,' *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

2

The effects of these applications on practices of writing are still little understood and sometimes, I suspect, disregarded, as if the software is 'neutral' or 'simply a tool.' For an interesting critique of Microsoft Word, see Matthew Fuller, 'It Looks Like You're Writing a Letter: Microsoft Word,' *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003).

3

In the field of poetry and poetics, Emmett Williams, Jackson Mac Low and John Cage are important references explicitly associated with Fluxus. From the OuLiPo, Raymond Queneau is well-known in this context for his *Cent Mille Milliard de Poèmes*, and many members of the OuLiPo wrote highly formal poetry under procedural constraint. However, the OuLiPo seems to have been as much concerned with the mastery (sic) of process as with its poetics per se.

4

The web-based journal *dichtung-digital* provides an important forum which works to correct such tendencies. See <http://www.dichtung-digital.com>.

5

Sometimes I call what I do 'literal art' but that is another story. See Cayley, 'Literal Art.'

6

In writing, programmable media are media that may be configured and/or altered by both authors and readers, in such a way that the significance and potential affect of the work is changed. Programmable media need not be networked. Networked media are distributed using programmable machines on networks, now globalized for us through the Internet. Given that they are, typically, delivered on programmable systems, networked media are

likely to be (at least potentially) programmable, but this is not necessarily the case in practice and the contrary is still (perhaps increasingly) the norm. A piece of music or the pdf version of a poem downloaded from the Net is not programmable in the sense intended here.

7

On the history and development of new media, especially from the perspective of text and literature, see Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Monfort, eds., *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003). On digital poetics, see Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002). There are essays by a number of important practitioners in Loss Pequeño Glazier and John Cayley, eds., *Ergodic Poetry: A Special Section of the Cybertext Yearbook 2002-2003* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2003). Chris Funkhouser of the New Jersey Institute of Technology is working on a book about the early history of digitally mediated poetry.

8

This promise was clearly spelt out in books such as Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1991) (also published on disk as a Storyspace hypertext), and George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) which has been revised and updated as George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

9

This is, of course, an oversimplification. Rosenberg is a very serious hypertext researcher who has been involved with the technical aspects of hypertext implementations from the inception of the field. Nonetheless, he is also a poet and his work in programmable media does not conform to any standard hypertext model. I have written on these issues in relation to Rosenberg's work in John Cayley, 'Time Code Language: New Media Poetics and Programmed Signification,' *New Media Poetry: Aesthetics, Institutions, Audiences*, eds. Dee Morris and Thomas Swiss (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005 forthcoming).

10

For the story of alire, the first issue of which came out on 16 January, 1989, visit <http://motsvoir.free.fr>, and follow the alire links.

11

In the 1990s, Aarseth and others made the University of Bergen a centre for research on digital culture. A Finnish contingent, notably Raine Koskimaa of the University of Jyväskylä and the novelist and independent scholar Markku Eskelinen, were and are often involved. Aarseth is now at the IT University of Copenhagen along with a group of other researchers. Their interests have shifted somewhat to explore the relationship of culture, including literary culture, with such phenomena as digitally mediated gaming and playable media generally. Instrumental and playable textuality will clearly be important areas for literary development, in my opinion.

12

Espen Aarseth is now at the IT University in Copenhagen, in the Department of Digital Aesthetics and

Communications, along with a group of other researchers, including Lisbeth Klastrup, Jesper Juul, Susana Parjes Tosca and Gonzalo Frasca, with shared interests in the field, engaging, in part, with literary concerns.

13 The site for *dichtung-digital* is given in a note above. Friedrich Bloc was the primary organizer of the two p0es1s conferences, for which see: <http://www.p0es1s.net>. An important theorist of code as writing and writing as code is Florian Cramer, some of whose work is accessible via: <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~cantsin/homepage/>. Through Germany also, it seems to me, there are strong links to the Brazilian tradition of visual poetry and its digital mediated descendent practices.

14

translation is accessible on the Web at <http://www.shadoof.net/in?translation.html>. translation was developed from an earlier but still quite recent piece called *overboard* <http://www.shadoof.net/in?translation.html>. An extended explanation of the workings of *overboard* can be found on the *dichtung-digital* site, John Cayley, 'Overboard: An Example of Ambient Time-Based Poetics in Digital Art,' *dichtung-digital* 32 (2004) <http://www.dichtung-digital.com/2004/2-Cayley.htm>. The generative music for the translation pieces was developed in collaboration with Giles Perring who did the composition, sound design, performance and recording of the sung alphabets.

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Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,' trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997).