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The Book and the Screen: The Relationship between Fiction and Information Technology

Élie Robert-Nicoud

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Université d'Avignon et des Pays de Vaucluse
École doctorale 537 : « Culture et patrimoine »

THÈSE

présentée par
Elie Robert-Nicoud

en vue de l'obtention du grade de docteur
en langues et littératures anglaises et anglo-saxonnes.

**The Book and the Screen:
The Relationship between Fiction and Information Technology**

Sous la direction de :

Madame le Professeur Madelena Gonzalez

Membres du jury:

Eitan Altman, Professor, Directeur de Recherches CNRS.INRIA

Véronique Aubergé, Chargée de recherche CNRS INHSH

Richard Bradford, Professor, Ulster University

Madelena Gonzalez, Professor, Avignon University

Paul Perry, Associate Professor, University College Dublin

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Introduction

Has the Internet changed the way we read? And having changed the way we read, has it changed the way we write? And consequently has it changed our appreciation of literature? These are the three questions which the present dissertation will try to answer to determine what kind of influence the Internet, electronic technology, has had on the written word and more specifically, on literature, from an aesthetic, moral perhaps, political perhaps, and, economic point of view.

Is there a literature of the Internet, can Internet produce any form of literature, can the Internet be a literary subject?

These questions are prompted partly by the simple realisation, often repeated by publishers of printed material that reading matter on paper occupies an ever smaller place, at least economically, in the cultural landscape. The distribution of newspapers and magazines has been considerably reduced, many of them have disappeared, publishers keep reminding the public that the sales of books are ever smaller.¹

At the same time, “successes” by which one must understand primarily “commercial successes” coming out of the Internet, generally self-published, are regularly brought forward to stress the literary value of the Internet and its contribution to a new form of literary creativity constituted of readily available works in a more “democratic” context.

Has the Internet offered an alternative to the way of reading which came into existence with the advent of the printing press? Is the Internet continuing the reading process started with Gutenberg technology and adding its own specificity to literary production, especially fiction?

In the first part of this study we will try to give a picture of what Internet literature is at present, meaning by this literature which has been written on computers, for readers on line.

¹ Articles in the press and on line tend to be reassuring as to the number of books published and sold each year. Yet my conversations with various publishers at Stock, Rivages, Gallimard, Joëlle Losfeld, together with my own professional experience have taught me otherwise. The ever smaller size of daily newspapers and the disappearance of magazines such as *Newsweek* in its paper format confirm this tendency. Very often, one commercial success such as the Harry Potter series or *Fifty Shades of Grey* tends to hide the fact that the sales figure of other less commercial books are down.

In their studies *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014) have stressed the absence of analytical work on this type of literature or fiction. In the last part of the dissertation after studying the various ways of relating to the internet as a tool or a subject in a literary context, we'll try to determine why attempts at analyzing this form of fiction have been so rare.

We'll try to retrace the evolution of Internet Fiction, or hypertext through what analysts describe as the four generations of Internet fiction.

The first question to ask to embark on such an enterprise is: what is the Internet? How can it be defined? What are its qualities and what is its content?

This is what the Internet itself can tell us amongst 7 690 000 000 answers. Let's start with Google which is the first search engine on the Internet: "a global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities consisting of interconnected networks using standardized communication protocols."² And second, Wikipedia which is the Internet's home grown encyclopedia, and, as we'll see one its most representative products: "The Internet (portmanteau of Interconnected Networks) is the global system of interconnected computer networks that uses the Internet Protocol suite (TCP/IP)" to link devices worldwide. It is a *network of networks* that consists of private, public, academic, business and government networks of local to global scope, linked by a broad array of electronic wireless, and optical networking technologies. The internet carries a vast range of information resources and servers, such as the inter-linked hypertext documents and applications of the World Wide Web (WWW), electronic mail, telephony and file sharing.

The origins of the Internet date back to research commissioned by the federal government of the United States in the 1960s to build robust fault-tolerant communication with computer networks. The primary precursor network, the ARPANET, initially served as a backbone for interconnection of regional academic and military networks in the 1980s. The funding of the National Science Foundation Network as a new backbone, led to worldwide participation in the development of new networking technologies and the merger of many networks. The linking of commercial networks and enterprises by the early 1990s marked the beginning of the transition to the modern Internet, and generated a sustained exponential

² Wikipedia. 2021. "Internet". [Accessed October 24, 2021]. <https://psu.pb.unizin.org/ist110/chapter/1-3-the-internet/#:~:text=The%20Internet%20is%20the%20global,link%20billions%20of%20devices%20worldwide.&text=The%20primary%20precursor%20network%2C%20the,military%20networks%20in%20the%201980s.>

growth as generations of institutional, personal and mobile computers were connected to the network. Although the Internet has been widely used by academia since the 1980s *commercialization incorporated its services and technologies into virtually every aspect of modern life* (my stress). We can draw a parallel with the printing press and the evolution of the book going from academia, institutionalized knowledge to “every aspect of modern life” especially if we include as consequences of the invention of the printing press, newspapers and user’s manuals for every commercialized tool or medicine, or advertising.

Most traditional communication media, including telephony, radio, television, paper mail and newspapers are reshaped, redefined, or even bypassed by the Internet giving birth to new services such as email, internet telephony, internet television, online music appropriation of cultural production, digital newspapers and video streaming websites. Newspaper, book, and the print publishing are adapting to website technology or are reshaped into blogging, web feeds and online new aggregators. The internet has enabled and accelerated new forms of personal interactions through instant messaging, internet forums, and social networking³. Online shopping has grown exponentially both for major retailers and small businesses and entrepreneurs as it enables firms to extend their ‘brick and mortar presence’ to serve a larger market or even sell goods and services entirely online. Business-to-business and financial services on the Internet affect supply chains across entire industries.

The Internet has no single centralized governance in either technological implementation or policies for access and usage, each constituent network sets its own policies. The overreaching definitions of the two principal name spaces in the Internet, the Internet Protocol Address (IP address) space and the Domain Name System (DNS) are directed by a maintainer organization, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). The technical underpinning and standardization of the core protocols is an activity of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) a non-profit organization of loosely affiliated international participants that anyone may associate with by contributing technical expertise. In November 2006, the Internet this ‘network of networks’ was included on *USA Today’s* list of New Seven Wonders. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet>)⁴

The first striking aspect in this definition of the Internet by Wikipedia which will become one of its flagships, as we’ll see in the course of this dissertation, is that it sings the praise of the Internet and stresses all its benefits to mankind and trade, whereas it is not the role of an encyclopedia to make a judgement on the subjects it describes or defines. No encyclopedia on paper would describe the benefits to mankind of the printing press in its “printing press” article. It certainly wouldn’t end up with an almost comical touch, referring to *USA Today* to establish the subject of the article as one of the “New Seven Wonders” (we are left to wonder what the other six are).

³ Wikipedia’s definition definitely stresses the benefits of the Internet for its user, rather than giving a neutral definition or description.

⁴ Wikipedia. 2021. “Internet”. [Date accessed October 24, 2021]. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet>. Wikipedia gives many definitions of what an aggregator is. But mostly it tends to list various types of aggregators, News, poll, review, search, social network, etc. and generally describes or defines each type of aggregator as something “that aggregates”. We’ll see that this form of absurdity makes sense in relation to the Internet, since the Internet mixes accumulation with imprecision at best and meaninglessness at worst.

The language used in this definition of the Internet by the Internet already reveals a first aspect of electronic technology which we will develop and analyse at length in the first part of this dissertation: its messianic nature and calling.

There is no need to reference any study to point out the ubiquitous quality of the Internet in modern living and in our present day. It is self-evident that the Internet does a lot more today than carry “a vast range of information resources”. This ubiquitous quality of the Internet and electronic technology, be it to access academic texts, buy a train ticket, pay your tax and communicate with individuals worldwide, access to newspapers, films etc. points to the fact that these definitions are insufficient. They are the equivalent of a definition of “printing” which would consist solely in a description of the parts of a printing press and the chemical composition of ink.

These definitions naturally eschew a description of the essence of the Internet and how could it be otherwise, “so varied” is its content so as to evade the possibility of any form of catalogue or analysis.

Yet this definition of the Internet in its language is revealing as to what the Internet wants to be, and it is significant that one of its most conspicuous creations, Wikipedia, should establish it. First, it stresses the “global scope” of the Internet then its “exponential growth.” The exponential quality of the Internet is a characteristic which is regularly brought forward by its “apostles” (for, as we’ll see later in the course of this dissertation they *are* apostles) and its ambition, as it is pointed out later, to cover “every aspect of modern life”. The word “exponential” already appears twice in this definition. Thus Wikipedia assesses the Internet’s and electronic technology’s ambition to cover and conquer every aspect of “economic”, cultural life and more, as we’ll see, by which we mean spiritual life.

And the Internet positions itself first as a counterpart and then as a form of opposition or antithesis to the products of the printing press, to print, in a word. This is expressed clearly in the definition above, the Internet reshapes, redefines or even bypasses “most traditional communication media” which includes, by Wikipedia’s own admittance, “paper mail and newspapers”, we’ll see that we can also add books and literature to that list because we can already sense that the Internet will appropriate in its first stage the distribution of cultural products, “online music” for example, before actually producing them: “blogging”, “webfeeds”, “new aggregators.”

From this point on, it will appear logical that the Internet and the products of electronic technology, such as Amazon, will aspire to hegemony: “The Internet affects supply chains

across entire industries” while at the same time presenting itself as a libertarian space or world. “The Internet has no centralized governance”,⁵ which as we will see is not entirely true. To be more precise, the Internet and its mode of functioning will become the “centralized governance”, where economics, politics, spirituality and literature are concerned. To see the influence of the Internet on modern day literature (be it in English or any other language for that matter), it is essential to see how the Internet functions globally. Here again we are reminded of the invention of print and the Gutenberg technology because we cannot study the impact of the printing press on literature without studying its impact on everything else, from the economics of book distribution to the propagation of Protestant ideas in the wake of the advent of the Gutenberg technology. As Elizabeth Eisenstein has pointed out in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979) when stressing the difficulty of studying the consequences of the “unacknowledged revolution” *i.e.* the invention of the printing press:

The prospect of tackling a subject that is ‘far too vast’ to be assessed by any present or future assemblage is apt to daunt even the most audacious individual. If it is too vast to be handled by any single scholar, however, it is by the same token, also too vast to be avoided by any single scholar. Given its almost limitless dimensions, the cumulative effect of the ‘continuing revolution’ is bound to impinge one way or another, on all fields of inquiry, even highly specialized one. Hence individual specialists, who are careful and cautious about their work, must sooner or later, come to terms with it (Eisenstein 1979, 42).

As the Internet itself claims, through its aspirations to hegemony and its exponential character, the electronic technology and its spiritual, cultural and economic expression, the Internet is undoubtedly a “continuing revolution” (Eisenstein 1979, 42). Just as dealing with the revolution of the printing press entails forays into “very diversified fields of inquiry”, it is impossible to assess the influence of the Internet on contemporary literary writing without studying its economic impact on the world of publishing, on modes of distribution, on ways to choose a text in view of commercializing it and on the spiritual revolution which the Internet has created by redefining the relationship between the individual and his surroundings, inside and outside the computer screen, even if, to use Elizabeth Eisenstein’s expression, the subject may at first seem “far too vast”.

Similarly it is impossible to study the impact of the Internet on literature without comparing and making a parallel with the impact of the printing press on literature, as well as its economics and spiritual influence. Just as the printing press has spread Protestantism and

⁵ *Ibid.*

the cassette has spread radical Islam,⁶ the Internet is spreading a new form of spirituality, which will be the subject of our first part. All literature deriving from the Internet will have to refer to this new spirituality which has several guises, one of which, probably the most important, is “the Singularity”, a redefinition of the soul inspired by electronic technology and the life of the computer.

In the first part of the dissertation we will analyse the type of messianic message which is born out of the Internet and has spread from Silicon Valley, acting as a new Jerusalem and the birthplace of a new covenant. Just as the printing press allowed a wider reading of the Bible and contributed to the development and dissemination of the Reformation, electronic technology has developed a new form of spirituality which, as we’ll see, is not as new as it seems and corresponds to a pre-Lateran and medieval conception of the soul, less individualistic and based on the notion of the community of the faithful.

As Elizabeth Eisenstein points out in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* we should “consider more concretely how specific forms of book learning may be related to specific techniques for producing and distributing books” (Eisenstein 1979, 25).

The other question here for us is: is there any relationship, any link or existing bridge between the Internet and book learning. Is the Internet compatible at all with book learning? This is one of the questions we will try to answer in the course of this dissertation.

What we know with certainty about the Internet is that it is born out of the computer, fed by the computer, and lives inside the computer, behind a glass screen. What these definitions don’t give us is the impact of what happens behind that screen on what lives outside it. For, our main concern here is what impact the life behind the screen, the Internet, has had on literature born out of paper (as opposed to an oral tradition) and transported from paper to paper, from manuscript to typescript, to galley proof to book form.

To assess the influence and consequences of this context on literature we have distinguished between several types of writers: first, the non-digital writers, i.e. writers who were born before the appearance of the Internet on the literary scene and certainly before the domination of the Internet on economic and cultural life, writers such as Jeanette Winterson, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Franzen or Don De Lillo, who each, in a different way, has tried to tackle, understand, perhaps “sort out”, generally by imitation, the puzzle

⁶ On this subject see Gregory Kent. 2005. « L’Islam, les médias et la guerre », *Questions de communication* n° 8, (December 2005). <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/3842> and Bernard Cottret, *Histoire de la réforme protestante*. (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

which the Internet suddenly presented them with, having been raised entirely on paper and having known before, only one glass screen, their television set. I have not studied extensively the works of each of these writers but picked particular novels which aim at dealing directly with the Internet, like Janet Winterson's *Power.Book* or indirectly, like Salman Rushdie's *Fury*. And again, I haven't studied extensively each of these works from a stylistic point of view but I have used them, as it were, to stress the incompatibility between print culture and the Internet and the misunderstanding at the root of these works of fiction which have given themselves the aim of "tackling" the modern world through a representation of, or an attempt at, "taming" electronic culture.

The second group of writers is that of digital-natives, that is to say, writers belonging to a generation which has always known the Internet, for which the Internet did not "appear" and for which its presence goes without saying, just as the presence of paper went without saying for the previous generation. Those digital natives go naturally to the glass screen before they consult paper for their purchases, entertainment, information, or for finding references. Yet these digital natives have chosen to publish their books on paper and to enter the field of traditional publishing, implying the presence of an editor, a distributor, a bookseller. As examples of such writers, we will study Jonathan Cohen's *Book of Numbers* (2015) and Neal Stephenson's, *Snow Crash* (1992).

To assess the influence of the Internet on contemporary literature I have had to refer extensively to works which by their literary qualities would normally not warrant close analysis, certainly not from an aesthetic point of view. But as I will try to demonstrate, the Internet, because of the type of reading it creates, is very often akin to a video game. Thus, I have had to refer to what could be called sub-cultural texts or at least texts belonging to genre literature and obeying more or less slavishly a set of pre-established rules on the one hand and, on the other hand, aiming at puzzling, surprising, exciting the reader rather than producing an aesthetic response.

What appears as a thread in the study of the influence of the Internet on literature is the "question of criticism", and how to assess the literary legitimacy of the production we are faced with, either on paper or on our glass screen.

Similarly, and taking the process further, I have analysed from a critical point of view "successes" coming out of the body of Internet literature, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* to try and assess what electronic literature considers "quality" and what is the place of "quality" in the production of such works, which, as we'll see, one hesitates to qualify as "literary".

The example of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, is particularly important and significant, for two reasons, first because it has reversed the traditional process of publishing, in the sense that traditional publishers assessing its commercial success have decided to transform the self-published text into a book, by which I mean a paper book, printed, bound, distributed, etc. and second because the content of the text is pornographic and in that sense in keeping with the very nature of the Internet. The Internet, being in its essence pornographic, as I will try to demonstrate, it has transformed what was the ultimately, illicit genre, classified in *the Bibliothèque nationale* in a section called “L’Enfer” into a successful genre, its biggest commercial success, taking it from l’Enfer to a commercial Paradise. The question will be to see if electronic literature can be anything else than “genre literature” which is most akin to a type of game.

Thus, we will consider works which come directly out of the Internet, generally produced by digital-natives, although not always. They branch out in two categories, a fairly traditional narrative on the one hand, often related to genre literature again such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its phenomenal commercial success, to give but one example, and we will try to assess the quality of these works. We will try to see how the Internet has changed “Vanity Publishing” into “self-publishing” and what it entails. On the other hand, we’ll try to assess the literary quality of works, created by and for the computer but which don’t necessarily come out of the computer, and we will try to assess if these works can actually be assimilated to any form of literature. Is the glass screen compatible with the page?

And in asking this question we have to take into consideration how new technologies affect new modes of reading to understand their influence on literature and fiction writing. It is impossible to try to assess the influence of the Internet on literary creation without referring to the historical analysis of the evolution of reading. In other words, can literature be anything else than a book? Can it be made in its materiality of anything other than paper and ink? We have now to define the “materiality of literature” and we cannot be content with trying to define literature along the line of abstract philosophical concepts. Such a question would have seemed absurd to a Victorian or Edwardian writer, but the ubiquitous presence of glass screens in our present world, have made this question unavoidable.

By extension, this question raises implicitly several other questions, such as, what is literature and how do we evaluate it? A question which has had so many answers as to appear unanswerable but which has the advantage of helping define what is *not* literature and what

doesn't have any literary legitimacy because the question what is literature implies that we define, or at least try to define, what is literary quality or "good literature".

To do that, we will also have to evaluate the capability of traditional tools of literary criticism to be applied to electronic literature as it calls itself, and we will ask ourselves whether it is necessary to "invent" a new form of literary criticism to approach this body of works.

I. What Does Internet Literature Look Like and How Old Is It

In their Book, *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, published in 2014, Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad date the publication of the first hypertext fictions twenty-five years before that, in about 1989. I will quote their definition of digital fiction, as members of the Digital Fiction International Network.

Digital Fiction, as defined by the Digital Fiction International Network is ‘fiction [that is] written for and read on a computer screen [and] that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from the medium’ (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2010). It is fiction whose structure, form and meaning are dictated by, and in dialogue with the digital context in which it is produced and received.

The root of digital fiction can be seen in the Interactive fictions (Ifs) of the 1980s. Ifs as Infocom’s (1980) *Zork* and Adam Cadre’s (1999) *Varicella* require the reader to type text commands in order to navigate the fiction, with the story world changing in response to their input. Later digital fiction which were produced pre-web, in software such as HyperCard and Storyspace and then in web technologies such as HTML and Flash take a range of forms but like Ifs require that the reader engages with the digital technology either corporeally and cybernetically through mouse clicks or cognitively by making decisions about her or his journey through the text.

Aarseth (1997) defines digital fiction as ‘ergodic literature’. In such texts he argues, ‘nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text’ (1). While Aarseth’s definition does not explicitly exclude print texts, his concept of nonergodic literature shows why a linear and bound print text does not satisfy the criteria associated with ergodic literature. In nonergodic literature, he states, ‘no extraneous responsibilities [are] laced on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages’ (1-2). The nontrivial effort that Aarseth identifies in ergodic literature generally is characterized in digital fiction by the role that readers have to play in its navigation so that their reading experience is much more active or ‘nontrivial’ than that associated with their print counterparts. Some demand that the reader follows hyperlinks in order to navigate the text. In Michael Joyce’s (1987) Storyspace fiction, *afternoon, a story*, the chances that are granted to the reader result in different and sometimes contradictory narrative outcomes. In Lance Olsen and Tim Guthrie’s (2005) Web-based fiction *10:01* the reader can navigate the text using either a chronological timeline along the bottom of the screen or by clicking on an image of a particular character. Readers can also choose internal and/or external links as their curiosity dictates. *10:11* does not contain the narrative contradictions of *afternoon*, but the navigational choices mean that that it is different each time it is read either by the same or a different reader. Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph’s (2007) *Inanimate Alice* does not permit the same level of choice as *afternoon* or *10:01* insofar as the reader is only offered one pathway through the text. However readers are required to interact with the narrative by clicking on moving images, completing puzzles or selecting icons. Other digital fiction such as geniwate and Deena Larsen’s (2003) flash fiction *The Princess Murderer*, require that readers choose their own path through the text but also verge on literary games as they reflect subtextually on stereotypical ludic semantics, such as misogynist teleology (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2012). Indeed creative new media are increasingly blurring conventional generic boundaries, thus

becoming hybrid forms of experimental literary and media art. Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph's (2010) *Flight Paths* is a prime example of digital fiction in participatory Web culture, as it integrates readers' story versions in its collaborative paratextual website. Each reading of a digital fiction is different, either because the reader takes a different pathway through the text or because the text offers a different version of itself" (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad, 2014, 4-5).

In the last chapter of this dissertation we will study the implications of such notions as "stereotypical ludic semantics", "hybrid forms of experimental literary and media art" (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2012) when we come to evaluate this type of literature and when we try to analyse the compatibility of such notions with literature as we've known it. We will necessarily have to question the possibility of applying literary criticism as we've known it when dealing with "paper fiction" to this kind of literary production. R.E Higgason in "A Scholar's Nightmare" in the *Journal of Digital Information* warns that the old concepts of criticism could be challenged by this new type of text. Although, following the first wave of hypertext fiction, as described above, critics such as Bolter (2001), Burnett (1993) and Delany (1991) have seen it as an extension of the criticism of Barthes and Derrida's deconstruction because of its participatory nature and because the reader plays a part in constructing the text.

But the possibility of linking hypertext and web fiction or Internet fiction to "classical" or modern forms of criticisms become even more difficult with the evolution represented by the later generations of Internet fiction.

Katherine Hayles (2002, 2008) whom we'll quote extensively in the last part of this dissertation and David Ciccoricco (2007) have identified a second generation of digital fiction linked to the development of multimedia software such as Flash Dreamwater and Quicktime, leading to a wave of digital fiction combining texts with graphics music pictures, animations. The question will be to determine if it is literature or if we are faced here with an art form specific to the computer and which differs in its essence from literature.

Yet according to Bell, Ensslin and Rustad digital fiction is a part of a continuum finding ancestry in print hypertext:

Over the last fifteen years, new forms of digital fiction have emerged, seeking to explore, transcend and deconstruct the default functions and uses of new digital technologies. As a result of the continuous development of digital fiction software has quickly followed. While early versions of Storyspace, for example, were limited in terms of its colour and sound capabilities, the Web and its ensuing technological developments offer authors a wider variety of modes of representation. The development of multimedia and hypermedia software such as Flash, Dreamweaver and Quicktime authors a wider variety of modes of representation. The development of multimedia and hypermedia software such as Flash, Dreamweaver and

Quicktime (as well as standalone applications such as recent versions of Storyspace) has led to a wave of digital fiction that combines verbal text with graphics, pictures, animations and music in increasingly dexterous ways. Hayles (2002, 208) defines this in terms of a shift between a first and second generation of digital fiction. While the first generation can be identified largely in terms of the link-lexia structure (Landow 2006) as epitomized by early Storyspace fiction, the second generation of digital fiction has evolved with technology to contain more sophisticated and semiotically varied navigational interfaces.

Art and literature have always explored and transcended media borders, and the development of all forms of digital fiction can also be seen as both aesthetically and technologically motivated. For example, hypertext existed both as a phenomenon and as a concept long before the computer became a literary medium or commercialized and a number of print works, retrospectively collected under the term 'proto-hypertext' are often seen as the print precursor of hypertext fiction (Bolter 2001). B.S Johnson's (1999 [1969]) *The Unfortunates* comprises a box containing twenty-seven chapters – each acting as an individual chapter. The reader must begin with the prescribed first and last pamphlet but he or she can then choose to read in any order. Also packaged in a box, Marc Saporta's (2011 [1963]) fragmented novel *Composition N°1* is comprised of unbound pages that the reader can read in any order she or he chooses. In both cases, different reading orders deliver or imply different narrative outcomes so that the reader is assigned some responsibility as in a hypertext for selecting which path to follow. In this sense we might say that these early print literary hypertexts – or proto-hypertexts – demonstrated the need for a medium that was suitable for and adaptable to multilinear and multimodal storytelling. Likewise, the new generation of multimedia digital fiction has reacted to and developed alongside technological advancements. However they can also be seen to remediate (Bolter and Grusin 2000) the multimodal aesthetic strategies found in well-established modern (and pre-modern) art and literature. Thus while comparisons can be made between non-digital forms of art and literature and digital fiction, in realizing new aesthetics, strategies, multimedia, digital fiction does offer something new and different from earlier forms (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 8).

The question for us here will be what is this “something”, is it a new form or is it an art totally distinct and incompatible with its predecessors, namely with literature? In the same work, *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, the authors, while acknowledging that digital fiction is part of a continuum, insist on the importance of the auditory and visual attributes in what Hayles calls “postmodern” or “contemporary” electronic literature (Hayles, 2008).

It is the very importance of these auditory and visual attributes, but especially auditory, which will lead us to wonder whether digital fiction, or digital literature are part of a literate culture or rather of an audile and oral culture.

The authors also stress the need to analyze the “borders” and “boundaries” (two very important terms and concepts as we'll see in Internet culture) of the established concepts on which literature exists.

From an analytical point of view, while early digital fiction can be said to challenge established concepts such as authors, readers, and literature, more recent digital fiction also investigates the borders between different modalities and art forms such as the borders between literature, music graphics, and photography. In works such as *Flight Paths* (Pullinger *et al.* 2010) *Nightingale's Playground* (Campbell and Alston 2010) and *Loss of Grasp* (Bouchardon and

Volckaert 2012) for example, these different modes are combined to create a multimodal reading experience in which different modes work with and against each other. Accordingly scholars of digital fiction must also be sensitive to the multimodal dimension of the works. Thus not only must each mode be taken into account independently, but the relationship between different modes and art forms is also important for the work's meaning potential (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 9).

According to critics of digital fiction, a third generation has appeared after Hayles' second generation and has been defined as "cybertext", following the definition given by Aarseth (1997). The term designates ergodic textual artifacts that require "playful and exploratory reader activity" for "textual artifacts" both digital and in print. "Ergodic" is a mathematical term designating a process in which every sequence or sample is equally representative of the whole. We will come back to the use of expression like "textual artifacts" which are not quite the equivalent of "text" but which already indicate the need to create a new language new terms to approach digital fiction critically.

Similarly, Ensslin (2012, a) has felt the need to redefine more precisely the term "cybertext" and improve as it were on Aarseth's definition: "Cybertexts, according to Ensslin are designed so as to diminish readerly agency to such an extent that the underlying machine code seems to be either fully or partially in control, while at the same time, deluding readers into expecting which levels of agency."

In the last chapter, we'll try to determine what this notion implies as to the literary quality of these cybertexts and also how far the "delusion" goes. One will be led to wonder whether this delusion applies only to the reader or also to the critic and author. In other terms can there be literature without control of the text, can that control be willfully relinquished to a code or a machine through some sort of conscious delusion or self-delusion as to whether one is reading or not? This is especially relevant since Aarseth and Ensslin include in cybertexts, "art games", heralding a fourth generation of digital fiction.

Simultaneously, Aarseth's and Ensslin's notions of cybertext allow an inclusion of ludic features in the analysis of the ever-growing body of digital fiction as well as the inclusion of poetic and literary-narrative elements in the analysis of the ever-growing body of indie and art games (cf. Ensslin 2012, a). In *Digital Literature* (2012) Rustad further suggests that a fourth generation of digital fiction has emerged, which he defines as "social media literature". This is literature that is created and read in a social media environment, such as Facebook poetry and Twitterfiction. [...] where the platform is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 10).

As we'll see in the next chapter, all domains pertaining to the Internet have an exponential development. It would be obviously impossible to analyse or study in detail all works of fiction which have come out of the Internet and even all types of cybertexts, but we will turn our attention to a certain number of texts and types of narration which have been considered by critics (such as Hayles, Ensslin or Rustad) as "classics" of digital fiction or as merging narrative forms, amongst them Twitterfiction, which, as its name indicates is a form of fiction created on Twitter and destined to Twitter users. In his essay, *140 Characters in Search of a Story*, Bronwen Thomas describes Twitter in the following terms:

Twitter is a social networking and microblogging service set up in 2006 that restricts users to messages or 'tweets' consisting of no more than 140 characters. Despite this seeming limitation, Twitter has become a highly influential means of disseminating news and providing updates on "trending" or hot topics (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 94).

As representative examples of Twitterfiction, Thomas quotes two works, the first being without a title but the author of which is Arjun Basu (@arjunbasu). It is known as a "shorty" or "Twister". The second one, is entitled (@epicretold) by Chindu Sreedharan and retells the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*. In the first case, the tweet is a self-contained narrative, an extremely short story with a beginning an end, generally a crisis and generally more of a twist than an end, as in a short story or even more, as in a joke.

Here are two examples quoted by Thomas: "They entered he car a family. They drove many miles and ate lots of bad food. The were no longer a family" (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 97). And here is a second example: "She shook with a kind of religious fervour at least he had thought so, but in truth she just needed to pee really really badly. Like really" (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 98).

Although Thomas stresses the innovative character of Twitterfiction, particularly by refusing the idea that the reader is motivated by the desire to read an "end" to the narrative, this challenges the notion of reading as a structured, focus, linear activity. In that, as we will see later, it is extremely representative of the Internet and of the mode of reading which a screen offers and even imposes upon the reader. It challenges also basic concepts of order and chronology. In that sense, the text and its context, its tool, namely the screen, perform the same function.

At the same time Thomas reminds us that Twitter can be "understood with reference to the increasing prominence of what media theories call micronarratives (Jenkins 2004)"

(Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 97). In that sense, it is again extremely representative of the Internet because of the effect of the screen on the way we read, to which we will come back later in the chapter “What a Screen Can Do for you”.

And yet for all their innovative qualities, Thomas admits that “Basu’s stories offer his followers a predictable pattern, adopting a fairly conventional plot structure but with the emphasis usually on the complication or crisis” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 97).

They adds further: “Basu’s Twisters offer his followers a steady of easily digestible stories” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 98), all the more digestible as they possess yet one more particularity of Internet fiction: it is participatory, they offer the same sense of sharing an ongoing experience, and here Thomas adds that in their structure these stories or “Twisters” “may be compared to jokes or to advertisements” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 99). This aspect will lead us to consider which part literary aesthetics play in that type of creation when we envisage how criticism should approach Internet fiction or Twitterfiction or the Internet novel and even how criticism can differentiate between these “genres”.

In this respect, the further qualities of Twisters will make it even more difficult to classify them as “a literary exercise”, and we can see Thomas struggling to do so, when he adds: “[twisters are] short narrative bursts providing instantaneous entertainment, where repetition and predictability are virtues rather than vice” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 99). Thomas himself notes, quoting a “fan” that the following dwindled, as this form of twitter literature failed to renew itself on one side and to maintain the concentration of the reader on the other.

But the second example provided by Thomas represents a continuity. *Epicretold* by Chindu Sreedharan (@epicretold retells the Indian epic *The Mahabharata* via Twitter. It is interesting to note that in this case too, Thomas mentions a “slowing down” of the following by readers which, as we will see, could be again attributed to the shortened concentration afforded by the screen as a tool. Besides, unlike Basu’s followers, the readers of *Epicretold* have to retain information between tweets and the rhythm of the reading is imposed by the author. Although it is a continuity, it creates in Thomas’s terms “NOW moments intrinsic to the medium” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 100) as Basu had. The question for us will be to determine if “Now moments” are compatible with literature or do they belong to another form of written expression. Because of the notion of the “now moment” and the “specific” context of narration, Thomas acknowledges that *Epicretold* “could also be said to offer users something close to the experience of audiences of the epic in its oral form” (Bell, Ensslin and

Rustad 2014, 101). We will see in a later chapter how Internet literature is closer to orality than literacy due to the nature of the medium. Although it is made (in most cases) of words this “literature” belongs more in its form and in its style to the oral tradition, as it will become apparent when we try to analyse in a later chapter the style of initially self-published novels on the Internet such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

The incompatibility between Twitterfiction and literature because of the means by which it is produced, and its physical context, namely the screen, becomes apparent when this form of fiction is “translated” to fit into paper.

In the case of *Epicretold*, the author is under contract to produce a book based on his tweets but is finding that it is no simple task to try to capture or remediate the experience of Twitter in print form. Attempts have been made to publish books based on tweets – for example the highly successful *Twitterature* (Aciman and Rensin 2009) – but only making the tweets fit the demands of the printed page, removing any sense of a distinctive interface, and presenting the tweets as a linear, chronological stream, making them appear more like short epigrammatic paragraphs, and taking away any sense of “liveness” or dynamism (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 105).

Twitterature reverses to a certain degree the process of Twisters in the sense that he retells in Twitter style “The world’s Greatest Books” according to the subtitle. There are about fifty-nine of these “Greatest Books”. We cannot list them all here but this is how Aciman and Rensin present their project in the introduction.

You may be wondering good sirs, what exactly we intend to do with these great works of art. What one must keep in mind is that the literary canon is not valued for its tens of thousands of dull, dull words but for the raw insight into humanity it provides. While perhaps an unwieldy tome was the best method of digesting this knowledge during a summer spent in the Victorian countryside in the Year of Our Lord, Eighteen Hundred and Seventy-Three, times have changed. Virginité must not be distracted with books, nor damsel chasing pacified with poetry. Instead we must run free into the world and not once look back.

And so, we give you the means to absorb the strong voices, valuable lessons and stylistic innovations of the Greats without the burdensome duty of hours spent reading. We take these Great Works and present their most essential elements, distilled into the voice of Twitter – *the social networking tool that with its limits of 140 characters a post (including spaces) has refined to its purest form the instant-publishing, short-attention-spam, all-digital-all-the-time, self-important age of info-deluge* – and give you everything you need to master the literature of the civilized world (Aciman and Rensin, 2009, XII).

If *Twitterature* is meant as a joke (although one wonders how long an one sustains such a joke) we will encounter in the course of this dissertation writers and apostles of the

Internet who will hold the same theories with seriousness especially that they which, in the text quoted above, affirms “that the literary canon is not valued for its tens of thousands of dull, dull words”.

As an example of these jokes we’ll quote Hamlet in its entirety as it is the work of literature to which it is referred in the introduction by the authors themselves as the best illustration of what they are trying to do in their obviously parodic way:

Perhaps in the eighteenth year of your life you sat on a porch asking yourself: *What is exactly Hamlet trying to tell me, why must he mince words and muse in lyricism, and in short, whack about the shrub?* Such questions are no doubt troubling – and we believe they would have been resolved were the Prince of Denmark a register user on Twitter.com, well versed in the idiosyncrasies and idioms of the modern day. And this in essence, is what we have done. We have liberated poor Hamlet from the rigorous literary constraints of the sixteenth century and made him – without losing an ounce of wisdom, beauty, wit or angst – a happening youngster. Just like you, dear reader (Aciman and Rensin 2009, XIII).

I will quote Twitterature’s rendering of Hamlet in its integrality to give a better idea of the parodic technique of the authors and of the length of each “translation” of the Great Works in twitter language, which is more or less the same for all.

Hamlet
By William Shakespeare
@OedipusGothplex

My royal father gone and nobody seems to care.

Mom says to stop wearing black.

STOP TRYING TO CONTROL ME. I won’t conform! I wish my skin would just...melt
I’m too sad to notice that Ophelia’s so sexy and fine. And mother also looks rather fair despite all her struggles.

AN APPARITION! This shit just got HEAVY. Apparently people don’t accidentally fall on bottles of poison.

Why is Claudius telling me chat to do again? YOU’RE NOT MY REAL DAD! In fact you killed my real dad. :(

2bornt2b? Can one tweet beyond the mortal coil?

I wrote a play. I hope everyone comes tonight! 7pm! Tickets are free w/great sense of irony

Uncle just confessed to Dad’s murder.

I had a knife to that fat asshole but bitched out. Now he’s alive and still taking to bed with that beautiful wo- ... er, my mother.

Gonna try to talk some sense into Mom because boyfriend totally killed Dad. I sense this is the moment of truth, the moment of candour and-

WTF IS POLONIUS DOING BEHIND THE CURTAIN?

I just killed my girlfriend's dad. Does this mean I can't hit that?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are here up to their shenanigans. YAWN.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Anyone miss them? Didn't think so.

The gravedigger's comic speech isn't funny at all. It's heavy and meaningful. I'm so borrrredddd.

Ophelia just pulled a Virginia Woolf. Funeral is on the way.

Laertes is unhappy that I killed his father and sister. What a drama queen! Oh well, fight this evening.

Anybody want a drink? Uh-oh. That went poorly.

@PeopleofDemark: Don't worry Fortinbras will take care of thee. Peace (Aciman and Rensin 2009, 17-18).

“The World Greatest Books” are similarly dumbed down in a typically “twitterish” and minimalistic style as a parody of modern forms of communications. Amongst many others, we find Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Kerouac's *On The Road*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* etc. The glossary at the end of the book underlines the reductive language of that type of communication and “literature”, should one be tempted to call it that. To give an example:

LOL

Literally ‘laughing out loud!’ The Internet is a strange place, and the format of cold text the important things – laughter tears, tone and expression – are often lost. Luckily, quick acronyms such as this remedy the problem by allowing the other party to know that you are truly struck by their wit and are involuntarily screeching in celebration of this fact (Aciman and Rensin 2009, 140).

Beyond the comedy, *Twitterature* reveals certain characteristic traits of the Internet and its relation to literature or orality. As we will see later, when we study how the style of Internet literature reveals or perhaps betrays its orality, it will be confirmed by what the authors explain above about the immediacy of the reader's reaction and the need to express his reaction to the author.

The other perceptive aspect of *Twitterature* is the parallel established between the exercise the authors present, the use of the Internet language and what they call in their introduction, the “revolution of faith and literacy in sixteenth century Europe.

While some may describe the reinvention of our World’s Great Works to suit the ever evolving brain of the modern man as “a triviality”, “a travesty”, or “that sucks”, we prefer to think of ourselves as modern-day Martin Luthers. Herr Luther took the Holy Scripture itself, and seeing that the classic Vulgate no longer spoke to the souls of his contemporaries, he translated it into the vernacular of his time. By doing so, Luther unleashed a revolution of faith and literacy upon sixteenth century Europe that had not been seen before and has not been equaled since. In our own way and in our own time, we hope to do the same (Aciman and Rensin 2009, XII).

Although the tone is deliberately comic through the exaggeration of what is expressed here, two truths remain concerning the Internet, as we will demonstrate in the course of this dissertation: first that the language of the Internet follows a reverse evolution from that of “literacy” and second that the spiritual and religious elements are central to the Internet, in other words the Internet being a return to a pre-Gutenberg form of technology of thinking the comparison between the Renaissance and our present time when it comes to conceptions of literacy and literature, will reappear constantly.

Besides, beyond the comedic aspect, what *Twitterature* stresses is that the language of literature doesn’t translate into the language of the Internet.

Similarly, to understand how the Internet functions in its relation to literature we will have to analyse how literary texts meant to be printed deal with the Internet either as a subject or by imitation, the question being does this incompatibility work both ways. In fact *Twitterature* quoted by Thomas is a parodic illustration of this point.

In other words, Twitterfiction or Internet fictions present themselves as a form of “oral literature”. We already see at this stage the difficulty we’ll have or that any critic will have in establishing the quality of that type of literature because it is flawed in its very conception as we find the confirmation in Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*, in the chapter entitled “Did you say Oral Literature?”:

We (those who read texts such as this) are for the most part so resolutely literate that we seldom feel comfortable with a situation in which verbalization is so little a ‘thing-like’ as it is in oral tradition. As a result – though at a slightly reduced frequency now – scholarship in the past has generated such monstrous concepts as “oral literature”. This strictly preposterous term remains in circulation today even among scholars now more and more acutely aware how embarrassingly it reveals our inability to represent to our own minds a heritage of verbally

organized materials except as some variant of writing, even when they have nothing to do with writing at all (Ong 1982, 11).

With the Internet it seems this process or evolution has been reversed but has yielded the same fruit. Scholars don't seem to recognize that the texts coming out of the Internet are only very superficially linked to writing, they represent more a transcription of works or objects belonging, by their very nature, to orality. It will become even more apparent when in a later chapter we will compare these products of the Internet with the style and contents of products deriving from the oral tradition, although they don't belong, of course, to what Ong defines as "primary orality" by which he means a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print. He adds, regarding the orality of present-day high-technology culture:

It is 'primary' by contrast with the 'second orality' of present day high technology culture in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print. Today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects. Still, to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambiance preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality (Ong 1982, 11).

This description of a secondary orality corresponds perfectly to the Internet especially as the Internet, unlike the other technologies evoked here, doesn't even need print. The word on the Internet is not "thing-like" anymore and the dis-incarnation of the text will become a problem for Internet writers as we'll see later, for the reason that in the case of the Internet the text knows no boundaries as it does with the page.

Besides, the text quoted above was written in 1982, before Ong would have been aware of devices such as Siri, Alexa, Google Home, to which the user addresses himself orally to be given information on the Internet or even to install a form of dialogue with the Internet, totally without the use of the written word.⁷

⁷ On this subject, see Judith Shulevitz, « Alexa how will you change us? », *The Atlantic November*, November 2018, 95-104. The subtitle is particularly telling: "The Voice revolution has only just begun." Today, Alexa is a humble servant, very soon, she could be much more, a teacher, a therapist, a confidant, an informant. Alexa is the vocal assistant launched by Amazon. In this article, Judith Shulevitz writes: "By the end of last year, more than 40 million smart speakers had been installed worldwide, according to Canalys a technology research firm. Based on current sales Canalys estimates that this figure will reach 100 million by the end of this year. [...] by 2021 according to another research firm, Ovum, there will be almost as many voice-activated assistants on the planet as people" (Shulevitz 2018, 96).

We'll see in the last chapter of this dissertation that what has been described as "Internet Literature" follows a similar path, when the use of images, for example, supersedes that of words, printed or otherwise, in that literature.

Walter Ong further adds: "Thinking of oral tradition or a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles an 'oral literature' is rather thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels" (Ong 1982, 12). The reverse process as we witness in Internet literature is also true. Considering the secondary orality of the Internet as literature calls for the comparison Walter Ong uses. The other comparison which can be used and which we will use in the last chapter of this dissertation is that between cars and "horseless carriages" which is the way that the car as a technological innovation was designated when it first appeared.

The challenge for critics will be consequently to find a methodology to apply to their evaluation of the texts created by and for the computer.

The constant question, though, will be: does the work dictate the method or is it possible to apply a set for of criticism to all these works?

We will give various examples of attempts by critics to establish that methodology, mostly Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, Hans Kristian Rustad and Katherine Hyles whom we have all quoted extensively, essentially because they appear as pioneers in this domain.

We'll study their method in texts which have been considered by them as laying the foundation of digital fiction. We'll return to this in the last chapter of this dissertation to decide whether digital fiction is actually literature and what its value as literature might be.

1. "Media-Specific Metalepsis"

In her essay entitled "Media-Specific Metalepsis" in *10:01* (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad, 21), Alice Bell analyzes the work by Lance Olsen and Tim Guthrie to determine whether digital fiction facilitates new types of metalepses, via sound effects, eternal links, and visually via the cursor that the reader uses to select links.

Alice Bell takes up the definition of metalepsis given by Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse" (Genette 1980, 234-5).

Metalepsis is thus a term that describes the movement of fictional entities between diegetic levels, either from the narrating space into the narrated space or from the narrated space into the narrating space (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 22).

It is significant that she resorts to Genette's definition of the metalepsis, as it introduces two questions which are essential to the Internet and consequently to the writing which it produces, be it, "literature", "metatexts" "twitterature" etc. namely transgression and worlds boundaries. These two themes come back almost as an obsession both in the works of the theoretician of the Internet, on the one hand, and of its authors on the other hand.

This in Alice Bell's own words is how Genette's metalepsis functions in regards to these concepts.

This essay is concerned with ontological metalepses, in which world boundaries are transgressed rather than with rhetorical and/or authorial metalepsis in which communication between narrator and reader takes place but during which no actual boundary crossing occurs. Fludernik and Ryan, following Genette refer to diegetic levels in their typologies, but in ontological metalepses the entities' maneuvers suggest that *world* boundaries are breached. In the real world, authors, readers, narrators and characters cannot really move between ontological domains; this would involve for example, authors physically entering their own texts, characters speaking to readers, or heterodiegetic narrators interacting with the characters to which they have no ontological association. When ontological metalepses occur, however, we are asked to imagine that these interactions of movements take place. Thus, terminology that describes the domains of existence as 'worlds' rather than the more abstract concept of diegetic 'levels' more accurately describes what we are asked to imagine happens during the cause of ontological metalepses. Consequently there has been a general tendency in the scholarship surrounding metalepsis to use 'worlds' as opposed to Genettean 'levels to describe what happens during a metaleptic jump. [...]

The use of 'worlds' as opposed to 'levels' might appear to be a terminological issue only, but also has ramifications for the method of analysis. Adopting the term 'world' as opposed to 'level' allows analysts to utilize tools that are specially designed to analyze the relationship between worlds in fiction [...] In particular, we can utilize established concepts and terminology from possible worlds theory, a systematic and comprehensive framework that is designed specifically to analyze worlds and the interactions between them (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 23).

What is significant in this passage is that although Alice Bell refers to Genettian categories to establish her methodology, she has to rename the categories and redefine them to fit her purpose, in terms which, as we will see, are central to the Internet's conception of itself as "Worlds" or "worlds", "boundaries" and the transgression of these boundaries. Metalepsis being the use of word in place of another, the very fact that this figure of speech is used as a concept at the centre of the critical analysis of digital fiction hints at the difficulty of finding a direct language to do so.

This renaming and redefining of the Genettian category of “levels” into world allows her to use as the foundation for her critical analysis, what she calls “possible worlds theory” which she describes and justifies as the main tool of her criticism in the following terms:

As a theory that is founded on propositional modal logic, possible worlds theory is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between the ‘actual world’ – that is the world we belong to – and ‘possible worlds’ that is worlds that are constructed through imagination, hypothetical situations, dreams, wishes, etc. While possible world theory originates in philosophical logic, it can also be used in a narratological contexts because the worlds described by fictional texts represent a particular type of possible world. In narrative theory [...] concepts of ontology, reference, and modality have been appropriated from possible worlds logic and applied to the worlds built by fictional texts. As a methodological approach it is extremely proficient at elucidating very complex ontological configurations and it provides appropriate terminology for labeling different ontological domains. It is therefore especially effective for analyzing fictions that play with ontological structures in both print and digital texts, but it has also been used to investigate the truth value of fictional narratives; evaluate the ontological statutes of fictional worlds and their inhabitants; and construct taxonomies of fictional possibility relative to genre. More relevant to this study, possible worlds theory can also be used to explain how fictional entities move from one domain to another and thus can be used to explain what happens to entities during the course of different types of metalepsis.

In possible world theory, an individual is said to possess ‘Transworld identities’ when she does from one ontological domain to the other (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 24).

The language used by Alice Bellin in the passages quoted above is one more significant of the type of questions which face Internet writers and conceptors, namely that of the “other world”. The expression she uses here obviously opens into a variety of meanings. The constant question for Internet users and Internet writers will be: is Internet the world, and what is the real world on which side of the screen does the real world.

2. 10:01

The second text which has been considered as a founding text of digital literature is *10:01*, originally published in the *Iowa Review Web* in 2005. It is, in fact, a translation from Olsen’s print novel, bearing the same title. The action or rather the narratives are set in a cinema in Bloomington, Minnesota. We find in other versions, an omniscient narrator describing the thoughts and feelings of the people assembled in the cinema, in the ten minutes before the film starts. The characters “must over their personal circumstances and/or watch and speculate about the other moviegoers as they take their seats” to use Alice Bell’s description (Bell 2013, 26). The narratives end with an explosion although the reader is not

told whether the explosion occurs on screen, in the mall where the cinema is situated or in the mind of one of the characters.

The digital version of the text includes what Alice Bell calls “nonverbal elements”. In the sense that the digital version contains two resulting in two different navigational structures, the literary significance of which is described by Alice Bell in the following terms:

To date, no analyses of the digital *10:01* exist, but in his review of its print predecessor, Martin (2006) writes that the narrative ‘revolves around the ongoing tension between the cinematic time of frames moving in a linear mechanistic sequence and the human time of subjective experience moving freely in many different improvised patterns’. In the digital version of the text, as in the print version, we read the narrative chronologically. Using the timeline, the reader can, as in the print version, read the narrative chronologically but by clicking on the different points on the timeline rather than by turning pages. In addition the reader of the digital version can also select from any point on the timeline and can thus read the narrative in any temporal order that she chooses. Alternatively, the reader can click on the silhouettes in the visual representation of the movie theater and focus on the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and actions as opposed to their place in the overall chronological sequence (Bell 2014, 27).

We’ll see in a later chapter what this navigational device implies from the point of view of the literary quality of the text. What we can already see is that criticism, when it comes to digital literature, attaches itself to the way the text can be read, how it functions, rather than what is read. We can also already acknowledge that Alice Bell herself recognizes the limited impact of this device from a literary point of view or certainly from the point of view of the narrative structure: “Thus while the nonverbal elements in the digital *10:01* certainly play an important role in producing a multisensory experience for the reader, they actually add very little to the narrative structure of the text” (Bell 2014, 29).

As we’ll see later, the great question faced by critics of digital texts will be to establish the literary legitimacy of technical devices which *per se* have very little to do with literature, such as the computer mouse.

3. *The Jew’s Daughter*

Naturally the same question occurs when it comes to analyzing the third important text which is considered as a pioneering text by critics of digital literature, *The Jew’s Daughter*. How does the link become a literary device and what is the potential literary quality of this device? *The Jew’s Daughter* is particularly important in this respect as it is a founding creation

(rather than text) of digital fiction which aims to legitimize the link as a literary device. The narrative in *The Jew's Daughter* is as follows: an unnamed male student who has come back from a trip abroad comes back to his apartment in Chicago which he has lent to his partner without the landlord knowing it. The narrative is the first person, and the narrator is the student in question. He tells of his troubled relationship with his girlfriend Ava and with the landlord, an Italian countess named Josephine, who has a domestic servant, John Austin, who is both obsessive and violent.

David Ciccoricco analyses the narrative process in the following terms: “What we know of the story often comes from the direct thoughts and observations of the student narrator as he walks the city streets as well as well as his recounting of conversations he has with various members of the city’s homeless population” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 44).

He also adds this judgment regarding the way that the narrative functions: “But given the shifting nature of the text and the volatility of the discourse itself that narration can at times belong to more than one character or no one character at all, and a definitive analysis of the narrative situation is ultimately elusive” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 44).

What creates the “elusiveness” of the analysis of the narrative situation is precisely the links and the fact that as Ciccoricco put it in *The Jew's Daughter* attempts to establish “the potential of links beyond that of a glorified navigational device” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 43). Although *The Jew's Daughter* appears on screen as a series of photographed pages, the reading it offers is in mosaic form and shifts in focalization in Genettian terms, that is in zero, internal, and external focalization. Zero focalization is akin to omniscience, internal focalization defines the point of view of the narrator and in external focalization, the narrator simply describes the actions performed by the characters without reporting their thoughts or emotions.

To describe the results of these shifts in focalization, we’ll quote at length the analysis by Ciccoricco of a given passage of *The Jew's Daughter* to see what are the literary and aesthetic results of the use of such a device, the link used to shift focalization:

There are shifts in focalization in turn, some of which occur from sentence to sentence. In one passage (reproduced here in numbered sequence), the student narrator appears to filter not only the point of view but also the speech of a bartender named Annie who is nervous about a belligerent patron:

- 1) And he says to me, he says Annie give me one on the house
- 2) My throat’s dry like sandpaper.
- 3) Can you believe it?

- 4) I told him all I gots just gonna make you thirstier.
- 5) I can't help you thirst, I says
- 6) She pushed her dumb blue gaze first at the man in the brown fedora and then at me, seeking out our approval.

In the first five sentences, we have Annie focalizing the narrative but recounting what we presume is more or less what the bar patron has said at an earlier time, with sentence three momentarily returning to a present tense direct address to what is at this stage, an indeterminate addressee. But in the sixth sentence, we realize that the student narrator, presumably sitting at the bar, has been filtering what Annie has been saying (in her own dialect) about what the bar patron has been saying (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 44).

Although this effect is created here by the link on which the type of literature quoted is created, it is difficult to see a difference between that type of technique and the inclusion of a free indirect style in the middle of a dialogue transcribed by an omniscient narrator. This technique is often used by Elmore Leonard to create a form of oral realism in his dialogue and to give an oral type of dynamics to the text as in the following example in *Touch*:

Bill Hill said, "Christ Almighty"

Maybe the young guy did know what he was doing. Bill Hill walked over to the kitchen doorway to see Elwin getting a broom and dustpan out of the closet. The young guy, Juvenal was picking up Elwin's drink.

Now, he'll pour it out Bill Hill thought. Jesus, help us. And Elwin'll go berserk again.

But the young guy didn't pour it out. He took a good sip of the Jim Beam drink and put it down on the yellow tile counter again.

What the kind of an AA caller was he anyway? (Leonard 1987, 10).

In the passage quoted above, we have all the focalizing we had in the one quoted by Ciccoricco, including some form of dialect or at least spoken language which create a linguistic change of focalization, except that we are in the context of a very traditional chronological narrative printed on a page without the need of links to achieve this effect.

To compensate, and to stress his point, Ciccoricco attracts our attention to the reading of the links itself. The link is not just a device creating a change of focalization it becomes part of the reading experience:

A more detailed reading of the links, however yields an even more comprehensive interpretation of perspective. For example, in the passage where the student describes his dream, the highlighted link on this page is located on the word 'eyes', but only on its final three letters, spelling 'yes'. Even though the toolkit of traditional narrative theory does not account for shifts in focalization that are introduced in such a (visual and hypertextual) manner, it is possible to read this link as part of the story's play of perspective (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 45).

Yet, In the last part of this dissertation, we'll try to establish why "traditional narrative theory" does not account for the type of shifts in focalization described here through a link which would become part of the reading experience. We'll try to assess as well the aesthetic quality of such devices and what they mean to the text.

Ciccoricco also refers to another work entitled *Radio Salience* (2004) by Stuart Moulthrop which in his view presents an even better example of what he calls "the force of cybernetic narration, in the sense that the author demands reader participation, thus engaging in a play of perspective in a more direct sense" (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 48).

Here is the description of *Radio Salience* by Ciccoricco. I refer here to Ciccoricco rather than giving my own analysis of the text because the language of this description, as we'll see, will reveal two aspects of digital literature to which we'll return at length in later chapters: first, that this digital literature can be assimilated to an oral form of expression and second that analysis in this case becomes a form of user's manual:

Graphically the text presents four vertical panes with images that fade in and out. Audibly the text presents fragments of radio channel content from snippet of music to news radio, talk radio and even court or evangelical radio, in at least half a dozen languages. The segments are interrupted by blasts of static, reflecting the experience of a listener cycling through stations. As Moulthrop's 'Rules' for the text indicate 'when two or more of the four panes belong to a single set, click the mouse. You'll see the full image, accompanied by a gloss of reading' (2007). This 'reading' consists of a column of text generated dynamically in tandem with a robotic-sounding voice-over (rendered by various text to speech applications), which gradually occupies the middle two panes of the screen. Verbal material is thus introduced only in response to user action. But if human intervention affects the textual output in *Radio Salience* human error can also suspend it; as the Rules make clear 'if you click while none of the four images match, play is over', and we hear one of many 'game over' messages before being shunted back to the start page.

If we insist on the text's status as a language-driven work, we must confront the paradox that all of the meiotic channels, the textual one is still the most difficult to access, and when we do locate it we are at the mercy of its transience. The text involves 'forced participation' (Walker 2000) or what Bell and Ensslin (2011) in order to emphasize coproduction over coercion have more recently described in the context of 'actualized input/output'. Indeed we can listen to and watch the text unproblematically; but if we want to read it, we have no other choice but to play it (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 48).

"Audibly", "snippet of music", "blasts of static", the whole language of Ciccoricco's presentation (rather than critical analysis) of the work belongs to the oral, audile world, to the point that "reading" has to be put in inverted commas. And we have to "insist" on the "text's status as a language driven work", this language already sowing seeds of doubt as to the literary legitimacy of such works, be it because one has to "insist" on it as a language-driven,

when literature couldn't be anything else. The second aspect of this presentation to which we will return at length is the game-like nature of this type of fiction. The reader has to apply "Rules" or hear that "the game is over".

For the link to become part of fiction, Ciccoricco has to translate the rules of what he himself calls "literary potency in a classical sense", in the conclusion of his chapter,

Both *The Jew's Daughter and Radio Saliency* require a theory of perspective that not only attends to the multimodal quality of digital fiction but also accommodates the phenomenological process of reader intervention in the interface. At the same time, both texts attest to the utility of concepts from extant literary and narrative theory in understanding the vantage point in and on the fictional worlds they project. The notion of cybernetic narration offers one way to explain how the kinetic and multimodal effects of digital fictions cohere with or even motivate their focalizations. More generally, an ongoing challenge for digital fiction is to establish itself beyond the fallacies that denude it of any literary potency in the classical sense (that they are never read the same way twice, or that they never end) and at the same time avoid the equally problematic fallacy that positions 'hypertextual' writing or reading as always already the norm for literary texts. Navigating between foundations an innovation in careful analyses of these literary machines is an ongoing task for readers of digital fiction in turn (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 53).

The only way that the link or that non-textual content can be given any literary role or value is to establish the "classical sense" of literary potency and its criteria as "fallacies". Yet we are not told why they are fallacies as it seems that a literate culture does indeed rely on the repeatability of the text as brought about by the Gutenberg technology, namely printing, which allows a text to be read in the same way twice. The fact that it can't in digital fiction, once again (as we'll see) turns it into a secondary orality.

Our aim in the course of this dissertation will be to demonstrate that what Ciccoricco calls "fallacies" are not, and that the fallacy is in pretending that a return to a form of pre-Gutenberg culture, both from a literary point of view and from a spiritual point of view which feeds it, is the real fallacy.

In digital fiction, the screen, the computer is the tool of "Transworld identity". And of a form of dis-incarnation or transubstantiation, the theological context or metaphysical context of which we will study in the next chapter concerning "Internet thought" and the mysticism of Silicon Valley. We will then try to analyse how this mysticism, this new theology applies to the literature which comes out of the Internet.

The task is made all the more difficult by the fact that the question of what the Internet is cannot find an immediate answer as we'll see in the following chapter.

II. The Internet Saves. Internet and the Spiritual Revolution

It was a long time before I finally perceived that the character of every society, its food, clothing, arts and amusements are ultimately determined by its religion. (Marshall McLuhan, *Diary*, 7 January 1931).

1. Is the Internet a Monster or the New Soul of the World?

In the present chapter, starting with the impossibility of giving a precise and definite definition of the Internet, we will try to demonstrate that this “silence”, this absence of vocabulary or language to accomplish the task leaves enough space for a spiritual conception of the Internet and we will see how that spiritual space is filled by “apostles” and pioneers of the Internet. We will see how this new form of spirituality, born of a new form of technology, redefines the soul and what are the implications of this new definition for literature.

The Internet is a network of communication originally designed to allow researchers to exchange information from one university to another, while its ancestor the ARPANET was originally used for military purposes.⁸

But the sheer mass and volume of information which the Internet has produced has transformed its very nature and the information itself that it provides, becoming a sort of Golem or Hydra, or Chronos devouring its own children. How does one define a network

⁸ For detailed historical accounts on the beginnings of the Internet, see *The Internet Society*: www.Internetsociety.org. Besides giving several accounts by the “pioneers” to use the same terms as the website, the Internet Society is, in the language it used, very representative of the messianic project behind the Internet, as we’ll see in the course of this dissertation. It presents itself as having a “vision”, described in the following manner: “The Internet is for everyone”, and it has a “mission” described in the following terms: “The Internet Society supports and promotes the development of the Internet as a global technical infrastructure, a resource to enrich people’s lives, and a force for good in society.”

“Our work aligns with our goals for the Internet to be open, globally connected, secure and trustworthy. We seek collaboration with all who share these goals.” The language here sums up the essence of the Internet, and of the Internet “followers” or “pioneers”, as we’ll see on several occasions in the course of this dissertation. This short paragraph contains all the elements which will be developed: the Internet is “good”, it is a “force” which means indirectly it is meant to dominate in the name of that “good” which is its moral essence; it is “global” which we will translate as hegemonic and it is participatory. It is also typical of the Internet to qualify what it describes or defines, as we’ll see later in detail.

which provides simultaneous information on demonstrations in Armenia against the price of electricity, sports results in Thailand, (what observers of the Net have described as Infobesity⁹), pornography on tap (so easily available as to have changed the sexuality of post-Internet adolescents), an anonymously written encyclopedia, Wikipedia, all that is necessary to join the Jihad, and which sells anything that can be sold from food to second hand cargo ships to flats, holidays, books and films?

Is the Digisphere a world or is it THE world, easily dematerialized and transportable in one's pocket or handbag thanks to the Ipad or smartphone and other such ever smaller gadgets? Is it a culture in itself? Is it a way of life? "Infobesity" has made the Internet into an absurd, unidentifiable and uncontrollable entity. How to define that monster? Nobody knows, nobody has the words.

In that sense modern man faced with the Internet Technology is reminiscent of the Bedouin listening to the radio as evoked by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media*:

it is electric speed that has revealed the lines of force operating from Western technology in the remotest areas of bush, savannah and desert. One example is the Bedouin with his battery radio on board the camel. Submerging natives with floods of concepts for which nothing has prepared them in the normal action of all our technology. But with electric media, Western man himself experiences exactly the same inundation as the remote native. We are no more prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal world and beaches him in individual isolation. We are as numb in our new electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture.

Electric speed mingles the cultures of prehistory with the dregs of industrial marketeers, the nonliterate with the semiliterate and the postliterate (McLuhan 1964, 16).

The study of literature and literary works in reference to that situation helps explain the lack of understanding and the confusion, the "numbness" to use McLuhan's terminology, which the meeting of electronic and Gutenberg technology has created in our culture.

But if we don't have the words to define and describe the Internet with precision, we know that it is a monster which has developed its own language, its way of life, its generation. As we had B.C. and A.D. we now have after and before the Internet.

⁹ The term "infobesity" derives from the notion of "information overload" first used in Bertram Gross's book *The Managing Organizations*, published in 1964. Originally the term and the concept concerned mostly organizations, corporate societies and the obstacle to decision making which an excess of information represented. More recently with the emergence of the Internet and digital information technology, the term has designated simply an excess of unmanageable information represented by tweets, social media etc. without any connection with the question of decision making. As we'll see later the sheer volume of "information" on the Internet has changed its nature, giving it in the eyes of Internet theorists a life of its own, an organic nature leading them to believe that information is actually alive, a living entity.

The parallel is not surprising as in the pioneering days of Silicon Valley, the project was infused with an idealistic and messianic purpose. The Internet promised a new freedom, a new covenant, if one should wish to call it that, by liberating speech and creativity. Messianic calls, missions, generally lead to a bonfire of the vanities, as when in Florence Savonarola decided to burn pornography, pagan books, the Decameron and Ovid for good measure. This resembles what Internet fundamentalists and fanatical technologists are doing to books, because as Jaron Lanier demonstrates in his book *You are Not a Gadget*, the Internet, by its very nature, aspires to hegemony.

To understand the influence of the Internet on contemporary literature from an economic as well as stylistic point of view it is essential to understand its spiritual content and the metaphysical message it carries. Silicon Valley's metaphysics to use Jaron Lanier's expression (Lanier 2010, 8) are built on this trinity: accelerating change, abundance and singularity.

Abundance is another aspect of the religiosity which imbues the Spirit of Internet, as it is a promise. The promise of abundance will transform the Internet at once into a Cornucopia and as an unchartered land of milk and honey. Abundance is the positive counterpart of infobesity and it is religious because it is here a promise. The Internet becomes an immaterial Promised Land and also the provider of an abundant life as in the New Testament "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10: 10).¹⁰

Seeing a new technology as a manifestation of supernatural or metaphysical beings or powers is not entirely new: just as Raoul Dufy entitled his painting "La Fée électricité" electricity as a "fairy", "la fée électricité", Jules Verne in *Le Château des Carpathes*, reminds us that in the nineteenth century electricity was seen as "the soul of the world" (Verne 1976, 237). We'll come back to this idea when we'll develop the influence that the printing press has had on Western spirituality.

As a technology, a network primarily allowing scientists to exchange information as quickly as possible, the Internet resembled most, at its beginning, the telegraph. If the telegraph improved the speed of communication in its time, allowing first a message to be delivered faster than any messenger could do it, it also developed a new language such as the Morse code with its first message "What hath God wrought?" (Numbers 23:23). Yet, it hasn't

¹⁰ All quotes from the *Bible* are from the Authorised King James Version (London and New York: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1958).

created a way of life or revolutionized culture to the extent that the Internet has. What is interesting about Morse's first message though is that new technology seems to herald its arrival on the human scene with a metaphysical message.

Similarly the first product to come out of the Gutenberg technology was a new translation of the Bible. This was not only because of the piety or religiosity of the time, it was because as we see with the appearance of the telegraph, or with electricity, Dudley's "fée électricité", and as we'll see with the Internet, because every technological advance is hailed as a "miracle", that is a manifestation from above, a gift from above which allows a new relationship or covenant with the immaterial world. Elizabeth Eisenstein confirms the proliferation of religious literature following the invention of the printing press and the advent of the Gutenberg technology: "Catechisms, religious tracts, and Bibles would fill some bookshelves to the exclusion of all other reading matter. The new wide-angled, unfocused scholarship went together with a new single-minded, narrowly focused piety" (Eisenstein 1979, 78).

At the same time, very much like the printing press at its beginnings, the Internet has produced, a considerable number of guides known as "tutorials" to be found on YouTube for example, and it has produced Wikipedia, its own encyclopedia which, as we'll see, is not ruled by any of the rules which govern the writing of other encyclopedias. Internet has replaced the Atlas, with Google Maps, and as information technology has given guidance on almost any subject from medicine to removing stains. The same phenomenon occurred with the appearance of the printing press:

Readers who were helped by access to road maps, phrasebooks conversion tables and other aids were also likely to place confidence in guides to the soul's journey after death. Tracts expounding the Book of Revelation entailed a heavy reliance on mathematical reasoning. The fixing for precise dates for the Creation or for the Second Coming occupied the very same talents that developed new astronomical tables and map projection techniques" (Eisenstein 1979, 79).

She adds further: "There is simply no equivalent in scribal culture for the 'avalanche' of 'how-to books' which poured off the new presses, explaining by 'easy steps' just how to master diverse skills, ranging from playing a musical instrument to keeping accounts" (Eisenstein 1979, 88).

Here again, Elizabeth Eisenstein could be describing YouTube. The exact same shift has occurred with the appearance of the Internet for all: from stains on your clothes to stains

on your soul, and from Michelin maps to maps to redemption and the life of the soul after the computer, the journey of the new soul as defined by electronic technology downloaded into the computer, including the precise date for the Second Coming which is given to us by Ray Kurzweil in his book on the Singularity.¹¹

The advent of the computer and electronic technology has given rise similarly to a rich or maybe not so rich messianic literature, yet we'll focus our attention mostly on *The Singularity* by Kurzweil as it is the most representative and certainly the most influential of these works on Silicon Valley and the spiritual construction of the Internet.

Following this logic, the language which the Internet has created, besides its technical aspect, has very quickly taken on metaphysical connotations, creating a fundamentalist vocabulary and, by extension, a form of fundamentalist thinking as to the mission of the new digital world, as we'll see in the following chapter.

It is important to understand the type of spirituality which the Internet has created in order to understand its influence on literature as it developed from the advent of printing onwards. The implicit theology at the heart of the Internet which we'll try to analyse and put forward in the following chapter will reveal that the Internet represents a pre-Gutenberg and consequently a pre-literary conception of the individual and of the soul which will have a direct bearing on the type of literature which comes out of it.

2. Digital Priests, Heretics and Apostates

From the beginning, work on the web and the Internet inspired Silicon Valley with a messianic fervor, as testifies Jaron Lanier, one of the pilgrim fathers of computation, who writes in *You are Not a Gadget*:

The rise of the web was a rare instant when we learned new positive information about human potential. Who would have guessed (at least at first) that millions of people would put so much effort into a project without the presence of advertising, commercial motive, threat of punishment, charismatic figures, identity politics, exploitation of the fear of death, or any other classic motivators of mankind. In vast numbers, people did something cooperatively, solely because it was a good idea. Some of the more wild-eyed eccentrics in the digital world had guessed that it would happen - but even so it was a shock when it actually did come to pass. It turns out that even an optimistic, idealistic philosophy is realizable. Put a happy philosophy of life in software and it might very well come true (Lanier 2010, 14).

¹¹ Ray Kurzweil. 2006. *The Singularity is Near, When Humans Transcend Biology*. New York: Penguin Books.

Such language is reminiscent of that of political or spiritual utopias, describing a state of humanity freed from its usual shackles and sins, such as greed, thirst for power, injustice, the web was clearly to bring a new human era, and new sense of community, beyond the politics of identity, all in the service of “good”, to create the incarnation of an “idealistic philosophy” which would even free mankind from the fear of death. The biblical overtone of the expression “it did come to pass” should be noted.

In the *Cult of the Amateur* (2007), Andrew Keen, another pioneer of Silicon Valley, “in the first Internet Goldrush” (Keen 2007, 14) as he puts it, starts with a “confession”. He admits to having “peddled the original Internet dream” before becoming an “apostate”. Here again, religious vocabulary infuses the text and the descriptions of the beginnings of Silicon Valley, its post hippie conferences in the form of camping trips. Keen describes himself as “a member of the cult” (Keen 2007, 14). The meeting took place in Sebastopol, California, “the headquarters of O’Reilly’s Media, one of the world’s leading traffickers of books, magazines and trade shows about information technology, an evangelizer of innovation to a worldwide congregation of technophiles. It is both Silicon Valley’s most fervent preacher and its noisiest chorus” (Keen 2007, 14).

The “cult” takes many forms and guises, but at the core of each is what Morozov, yet another Silicon Valley apostate has called Internet centrism and solutionism. Morozov presents himself as a “digital heretic” in his book, *To Save everything, click here*, in which he denounces the technologists’ “mindless pursuit of a Silicon Eden”, this “highly awaited paradise” (Morozov 2013, XIV), blaming an ideology based on two pillars: which he describes as “solutionism” and “Internet Centrism” The most important part of Morozov’s book with which we are concerned is that which describes the religious cum revolutionary fervour which accompanied the appearance of “the Internet”, bringing along a new set of “beliefs” to use Morozov’s own expression “the chief of which is the firm conviction that we are living through unique, revolutionary times, in which the previous truth no longer holds” (Morozov 2013, 15). “The Internet is holy [to the geeks]” (Morozov 2013, 18). He explains Silicon’s Valley attitude to the Internet:

It is a precious gift from the gods that humanity should never abandon or tinker with. Thus, while the Internet might disrupt everything, it itself should never be disrupted. It’s here to stay and we’d better work around it, discover its real nature, accept its features as given, learn its

lessons, and refurbish our world accordingly. If it sounds like a religion, it's because it is (Morozov 2013, 23).

“It's here to stay and we'd better work around it”, “accept its features as given, learn its lessons and refurbish, learn its lessons and refurbish our world accordingly”, this language suggests that the Internet is also a jealous God. We'll see this confirmed in its desire for hegemony and its need to destroy what it is not in order to exist, books for example. As Jeff Gomez will explain to us in *Print is Dead* (2007), the Internet is a jealous God is also apparent in economic terms and in the desire of market domination clearly expressed by Amazon. Culturally, this aspect announces what appears as digital technology's zealots' desire to conquer.

It is in the nature of religion to provide answers and solutions and establish a system. The Internet is such a system, it covers every aspect of the world, and as we'll see later, as a form of information technology and artificial intelligence, even offers life after death. We'll see that according to certain “Internet faithful” one can download oneself into the computer, gaining an eternal life which differs from posterity, the traditional literary way of gaining life after death, and which prolongs life after it has departed from the body. In that sense the Internet redefines the soul once more.

3. Digital Natives, the Chosen Ones, the Community

The same sense of community, largely exaggerated and exacerbated, without any further criticism is to be found in *Print is Dead*. Its author, Gomez, waxes lyrical about the way that the Internet has created for “digital natives”, or “generation upload” (being a natural extension of generation download, as a form of evolution of the species of the digital native) a new sense of oneness, a new community of the faithful:

Not only are they sharing their own lives, but collectively they're creating huge online communities that harness the collective intelligence of the individuals into what's become derisively known as the ‘hive mind’. The best example of this is Wikipedia, the user generated encyclopedia where anyone can add or edit information about practically any or every topic that exists. Disparate single voices which would have – even ten years ago – existed in solitude now join other voices in order to create a kind of online choir, where their multiplied presence adds up to something powerful and new. Now suddenly they belong (Gomez 2008, 82-83).

The language here again is that of religious ecstasy and communion. The other aspects which is worth noting, is the triumphalism in the text, fairly representative of non-literate oral culture (Ong 1982, 49). Triumphalism tends to recede in the style of literate societies. It is a characteristic of Internet text which we'll come across often, especially as the tone becomes more and more messianic as in this instance. The "kids" to use Jeff Gomez's terminology "share their lives" thus becoming new age monks renouncing their individualities to create a new bible of knowledge: Wikipedia. Indeed, as Jaron Lanier points out, Wikipedia and *The Bible* have a lot in common (it is not at all my purpose to put Jeff Gomez and Jaron Lanier on the same plane, quite the contrary. I am just concentrating on demonstrating how the language of religion, mysticism, and metaphysics suffuses that of the Internet when it comes to defining it). And indeed, the language of Internet developers has biblical undertones as we'll find throughout this dissertation. To quote again Jaron Lanier on the similarities between Wikipedia as *The Good Book* to come out of the Internet, and *The Bible*: "Like Wikipedia, the *Bible's* authorship was shared, largely anonymous, and cumulative, and the obscurity of the individual authors served to create an oracle like ambience for the document as 'the literal word of God'" (Lanier 2010, 46). Wikipedia is also representative of the abundance in the Internet's Trinity as pointed out by Jaron Lanier. It presents itself either as a cornucopia of knowledge or the incarnation of the abundant life in terms of information, whether one chooses pagan or Christian references. The idea is the same; Wikipedia is an emanation of the godlike knowledge which is that of the Internet.

It is notable that in the extract above by Jeff Gomez, the product of that communion, that angelic choir, is somehow seen as beyond language: "something powerful and new" because that "something" is beyond reality. It is common in religious literature or in the literature of the supernatural to use the words "it" or "thing" to inspire the reader with awe when faced with a phenomenon which is far beyond him and far beyond the author's ability to describe it through language. "There was that thing" always suggests the intervention of the supernatural or the metaphysical. When that something is "powerful and new" and heard through the voices of a choir, it belongs at once to the world of miracles and revelation. It is a manifestation of the numen or numinous, as defined by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*. And more particularly, the awe, the rapture felt by either Kurzweil or Gomez in front of their computers is that of creature-feeling, again as defined by Rudolf Otto, the Lutheran theologian, author of *The Idea of the Holy* first published in Germany in 1917, describing the

Holy not as ethical but as a specific category manifesting itself beyond the sphere of ethics and rationality:

All that this new term, 'creature-feeling' can express is the note of submergence into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind; whereas everything turns upon the *character* of this overpowering might, character which cannot be expressed verbally, and can only be suggested indirectly through the tone and content of a man's feeling-response to it. And this response must be directly experienced in oneself to be understood (Otto 1972, 10).

It is also from a literary point of view the mechanism on which the literature of the supernatural is built according to Tzvetan Todorov (*Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1970). In the language of the Internet and the salvation it offers "it was as if" is the language of hope, the mechanism of "hope". In literature of the supernatural, it is the mechanism of fear, the hesitation between one's sense and the manifestation of the supernatural without any certainty which creates a metaphysical anguish, but this void in the language represents in one way or another a gateway to the supernatural, to a metaphysical hope of a metaphysical anguish but in any case to a metaphysical form of existence.

This explains why the language used to describe and define the Internet remains often so vague. This vagueness is the mirror image of the religiosity which the Internet inspires in its converts and missionaries, as we've seen in the language of Jeff Gomez for example. This vagueness, this impossibility of defining, will reappear throughout this study in the words of Internet zealots, or converts, or saints, whichever way we want to name them. Thus the prologue of Vernor Vinge's Internet novel *A Fire upon the Deep* (note again, already in the title, the vocabulary of a fire and brimstone sermon) starts with awe in front of a phenomenon which goes beyond language and knowledge. We will see later that the Internet novel tends to abolish language: "How to explain? How to describe? Even the omniscient viewpoint quails" (Vinge 1992, 1).

It is precisely because, by its nature, it evades definition and places itself beyond language that the content of Internet theory or most Internet writing, including so-called Internet literature, as we'll define it in a later chapter, is theological in its nature, because it translates in words and images a reality beyond language, pretty much as baroque architecture and painting did for Roman Catholic theology.

There are two stages in the evolution of Internet spirituality: the audile and primitive followed by a medieval pre-Gutenberg redefinition of the soul.

4. The Internet as the Spirituality of Primitive Man. The Global Village

Here we follow again McLuhan's demonstration according to which electric technology is the source of a shift from a visual to an auditory orientation. In this McLuhan himself refers to C. J. Carothers "Culture, Psychiatry and the Written Word", in *Psychiatry*, November 1950.

We will summarize here the theories of Carothers and the "breaking apart of the magical world of the ear and the neutral world of the eye", because it has a direct bearing on the incompatibility between literature and the Internet, as the Internet reverses this process. We will see later on that this reversal explains why literary novels by non-digital natives who try to be part of a modern representation of the world in which the Internet is central end up as failures.

Carothers, and McLuhan with him, argue that the electronic-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous "field" in all human affairs, bringing culture back to an aural state and auditory non literate space. Phonetic writing had broken apart the magical world of the ear from the neutral world of the eye, detribalizing the individual with this split. Electric technology reverses this process: "our world shifts from a visual to an auditory orientation in its electric technology" (McLuhan 1962, 26). McLuhan, relying on Carothers, explains the puzzlement of modern society in front of this reversal heralding the same type of incomprehension that we've witnessed from the literary and literate world when faced with the Internet. It is the simultaneity of action and thought in the Internet and the creation of the simultaneous field that makes it an audible tactile world rather than the disappearance of any visual element in it. McLuhan quoting Carothers concludes: "It is our enormous backlog of literate and mechanistic technology that renders us so helpless and inept in handling the new electric technology. The new physics is an auditory domain and long-literate society is not at home in the new physics, nor will it ever be" (McLuhan 1962, 27).

This simultaneity of the "field" of human affairs and the retribalization effected by electronic technology has created that contradiction in terms of which Internet is at once the illustration and the perfect incarnation: The Global Village.

In that sense the Internet represents in one of its phases a perfectly tribalized world ruled by the same fears and reflexes as those of the primitive pre-Gutenberg world.

5. The Internet as the Mirror of Medieval Spirituality. The Singularity

In what we shall term its Medieval Phase the Internet is a pre-Gutenberg form of technology: recreating naturally a pre-Gutenberg form of spirituality and a literature which is rather pre-Renaissance than post-modern, in which language and human conflict count less than invention, revelation and prophecy.

True to its post-Gutenberg and post typographic nature, the Internet redefines spirituality in pre-Renaissance terms, the descriptions of the community of the faithful, particularly by Gomez, “they belong”, “the multiplied presence”, the “online choir” redefine the “soul” in terms that predate 1513. The council of Lateran which was held that year established two distinct forms of heresy regarding the immortality of the soul. Either there is one soul common to the whole of humanity, or the soul dies with the body. In both cases there is no survival of the individual soul. As a consequence, the definition of the individual soul was reaffirmed by the Church, in Platonic terms, precisely at a time when typography as a technology was creating individualism and nationalism.¹²

The Internet recreates a pre-Lateran soul common to the whole of humanity. “They belong” as Jeff Gomez wrote, describing digital natives as a homogenous group, a unity. The Internet and the theory of the Singularity which we’ll describe and analyse at length further on follow the opposite path by merging the individual soul in the “noosphere”, the origin of which is in the philosophy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, as we’ll see later in greater detail, and in the soul of the machine itself.

Again, the language used to describe the Internet is vague because it refers to some form of immensity (Jeff Gomez talks of the Internet having abolished time and space as the coming of the Messiah is supposed to herald the end of times) beyond human measure. The

¹² According to Plato in *The Republic*, as well as in the allegory of the Chariot in *Phaedrus*, and following the teachings of Socrates, the soul has three parts, namely the *logos*, which represents reason, *thymos*, representing emotion and *eros*, representing desire. The soul is the essence of a person and lives after death in its Platonic conception. It is this individualistic conception of the soul which the council of Lateran re-affirmed. Bernard Cottret. *La Renaissance 1492-1598*. Paris: Les éditions de Paris, 2000.

Internet is like the universe ever-expanding, the Internet is uncontrollable. It follows that the Internet has the same attributes as God and that it should control us, as the Singularity defined by Kurtzweil will demonstrate. This uncontrollable quality of the Internet in its infinite power redefines the relationship between man and the computer as similar to that between man and his all-powerful God.

Better still, according to a “philosophy” or creed bearing the name of the Singularity, the Internet can offer Eternal life, life after death. Precisely because electronics as a form of artificial Intelligence is ever expanding, like the universe, its progress is exponential, and thanks to this quality, electronics give us a sense of immensity.

The Singularity is a prophetic theory explaining that the end is nigh, to put it in the words of its founder, Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (2006). The title of his book describes the consequences of artificial intelligence for the rosy future of humanity. This apocalyptic vision is inspired by a Prometheus-like anxiety about the acceleration of artificial intelligence, or digital intelligence, eventually giving birth to a superior being, or supernatural intelligence. Apparently 2045 is the date of the coming of the Singularity. Not surprisingly, many scientists have expressed doubt about the validity of the Singularity. The scientific soundness of this theory or its absurdity doesn't concern us here and we are not in a position to judge. What attracts our attention though is the prophetic, messianic, inverted apocalyptic language in which it is expressed and which heralds, once more, the triumph of the machine over man. The big difference here is that although past works on the subject such as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, or Asimov's *I Robot* and the various science-fiction stories of the revolt of the robots, or of Dr Frankenstein's creature, are expressions of fear and anxiety, and illustrations of human hubris. The disciples of the Singularity see artificial intelligence and the reign of the machine as a second coming, a salvation, and the prolongation of themselves in a machine endowed with conscience, which would give them eternity. The Internet can do all that. It is not a science-fiction scenario; it is a belief, a faith in science and its future. As a theory, it is not to be disdained or brushed aside as a cheaply eccentric phenomenon, because of its widespread influence in the world of computing, the Internet and Silicon Valley. It is as if instead of imitating God by creating a living being, as Dr Frankenstein did, the Internet pioneers have reversed the process and created their God and their immortality. It is the story of Prometheus and Frankenstein upside down.

According to Jaron Lanier: “Singularity books are as common in a computer science department as rapture images are in an evangelical bookstore” (Lanier 2010, 25). The

Singularity promises people that after they die, in the flesh, they will be uploaded into a computer and will remain conscious. In other terms, their souls will live forever in a new super-consciousness. Human beings will become part of an information system. Jaron Lanier to conclude on the consequences of this set of beliefs: “[But] if you want to make the transition from the old religion where you hope God will give you an afterlife, to the new religion, where you hope to become immortal by getting uploaded into a computer, then you have to believe information is real and alive” (Lanier 2010, 25). And we see here how the notion of Infobesity heralded this notion, in the sense that the accumulation of information becomes life itself and in this case even life after death. We’ll see when we come to analyse literature produced by Internet how in the digital worldview quantity alone changes the nature and essence of things. The quantity of information makes it a living entity, and in the case of literature quantity will be equated with quality.

But for infobesity to become life and to become a part of spiritual life, it has to take on a different nature and a different aspect because, as we’ll see in the course of the dissertation, accumulation, which from a literary point of view translates into the figure of the catalogue, is a form of spiritual dryness. Accumulation from the point of view of mystical literature becomes an obstacle to the attainment of a spiritual life. This will become apparent in the contradictions at the heart of a novel like Martin Amis’s *Yellow Dog*. Enumeration, catalogue is the literary expression of meaninglessness. Words and the objects which have been thus enumerated in these lists become pure ornaments. For infobesity to take on a meaning, it has to become “abundance”.

Abundance is the second aspect of the Trinity of the Internet which we mentioned earlier. The Internet and the computer become an electronic cornucopia or rather to remain within the theological domain, the Internet feeds the five thousand. It feeds in abundance by a form of miracle which imitates the multiplication of the loaves.

In this respect it is significant that Ray Kurzweil in his book which he himself describes as “the story of the destiny of the human-machine civilization” (Kurzweil 2006, 5) can’t help measuring the success of this new spirituality and the importance of this destiny in dollars: “Today total revenue in the computer industry is more than one trillion dollars” he states on page 25 as if that sum of money was in itself proof that we are witnessing some form of spiritual progress.

We’ll see later the economic extension of this idea in the concept of crowdsourcing, the long tail and open source which all have direct consequences on the publishing business

and by extension on the contents of books, the nature of literature, and the way it is commercialized. As Jeff Gomez writes: “They share”, and in that sense, the Internet offers a new form of communion.

To illustrate this point and the weight of “abundance” in the Internet religious belief the language used by Kurzweil in *The Singularity is Near* is always hyperbolic. Besides the mention of numerous dollars, we find “billions of nanobots,” (Kurzweil 2006, 27) (we’ll explain later what nanobots are exactly) “vastly more capable” (Kurzweil 2006, 27) “spreading outward toward the rest of the universe” (Kurzweil 2006, 27).

In the bible of the Singularity (always spelt with a capital S and preceded by the article “the”), Ray Kurzweil, the Moses of this new Promised Land in a computerized great Beyond, starts by evoking his spiritual education in a Unitarian Church and reminds the reader of the parallels between the world’s religious beliefs, claiming that the basic truths in each are profound enough to transcend apparent contradictions. These basic spiritual truths are the foundation on which the Singularity is built. In *The Age of Intelligent Machines*, Ray Kurzweil made several predictions for the nineties and the year 2000, promising that machine intelligence would become indistinguishable from that of its progenitors, meaning us, the human species, leading to “a future that transcends biology”. Referring to *Harry Potter* as somehow the ultimate book on magic, Kurtzweil goes on to explain that this transcendent state can be reached by incantation. He establishes a parallel between magic tricks and the “transcendent power of technology”. The incantations here mentioned are the “formulas and algorithms underlying the modern-day magic”. In other terms, this modern day magic, is half way between the cabaret trick and a form of non-Christian miracle.

6. Vile Bodies

As the Singularity is meant to “give meaning to our lives” (Kurzweil 2006, 7) and he who believes and understands that becomes a “Singularitarian”, we are faced no more with a simple theory or philosophy or with an informal mystical revelation, but with an organized religion where the faithful declare themselves as such and experience a form of conversion. The road to Singularity, says Kurzweil is “a progressive awakening” (Kurzweil 2006). In other terms the revelation is part of an initiation, and doesn’t touch the believer in any old brutal way. The road to the Singularity goes through six “epochs”:

1. Physics and Chemistry
2. Biology
3. Brains
4. Technology
5. Merger of technology and Human Intelligence
6. The Universe wakes up.

To explain this evolution, “within several decades information based technologies will encompass all human knowledge and proficiency (...) including emotional and moral intelligence of the human brain itself” (Kurzweil 2006, 8). In other terms, the computer will become a superior being capable of heightened human emotions. If we follow the logic of Kurzweil, a computer will be capable of pity, compassion, mercy, love, but the computer will be free of all negative reprehensible condemnable thoughts originating in the human brain.

While human intelligence is sometimes capable of soaring in its creativity and expressiveness much human thought is derivative, petty and circumscribed. The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains. We will gain power over our fates. Our mortality will be in our own hands (Kurzweil 2006, 8).

There is a passage which bears a strong resemblance to Philippians 3:21, throwing light on the fact that information based technologies have the same powers and characteristics as Salvation brought by Jesus Christ: “Who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like to His glorious body according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things to himself.” The message is the same, except that whereas our citizenship is in Heaven according to the Epistle of Paul, it is, to sum up, in our computers according to Kurzweil and his (numerous) followers in Silicon Valley.

The Singularity is also concerned with the physical aspect of the transformation of a “vile body” into a glorious body. The “vile body” is, in terms of the Singularity, the “biological” body. But artificial intelligence, information technology, can operate the transformation from that state of imperfection to that of the glorious body in its incarnate manifestation.

Biology has inherent limitations. For example every living organism must be built from proteins that are folded from one dimensional strings of amino-acids. Protein based mechanisms are lacking in strength and speed. We will be able to reengineer all of the organs

and systems in our biological bodies and brains to be vastly more capable” (Kurzweil 2006, 27).

It follows that when the Singularity is upon us as the ultimate form of revelation bringing us that state of bliss, there will be no necessity for any literature or art representing any form of human conflict or moral dilemma. In our state of “power and glory” such conflicts cannot possibly take place, thanks to the “culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence resulting in a world that is still human but transcends our biological roots. There will be no distinction, post-singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality” (Kurzweil 2006, 27).

The argument becomes farcical in spite of Kurzweil when he starts explaining that machines can fall in love, can love better than us and can eventually improve our sexual performances. Still, one can’t but be impressed by the promises made by Kurzweil in the name of the Singularity. Cancer will be cured, pollution will be a thing of the past, as well as crow’s feet around the eyes, world hunger will disappear, etc.:

Nanotechnology will enable the design of nanobots: robots designed at the molecular level, measured in microns (millionths of a meter) such as respyrocytes (mechanical red-blood [sic] cells). Nanobots will have myriad roles within the human body, including reversing human aging (to the extent that this task will not already have been completed through biotechnology such as genetic engineering.) (Kurzweil 2006, 28).

Again, allow me to stress that Kurzweil actually believes in what he writes, as does, according to Jaron Lanier quoted earlier, Silicon Valley. As for pollution here is what nanobots promise for the future: “Nanobots will also enhance the environment by reversing pollution from earlier industrialization” (Kurzweil 2006, 29). It is significant that the pollution of the environment should also be mentioned as electronic technology is seen as an overall form of purification, pollution of the soul and of the skies are all one and will be got rid of.

We are not told how this technological and messianic miracle will take place but for our intellectual and physical prowess, here is what nanobots are capable of:

The human ability to understand and respond appropriately to emotion (so-called emotional intelligence is one of the forms of human intelligence that will be understood and mastered by future machine intelligence. Some of our emotional responses are tuned to optimize our intelligence in the context of our limited and frail biological bodies. Future machine intelligence will also have ‘bodies’ (for example, virtual bodies in virtual reality using foglets) in order to interact with the world, but these nanoengineered bodies will be far more capable and durable than biological human bodies (Kurzweil 2006, 29).

The translation of the promise of turning our vile body into a glorious body in a technological context couldn't be clearer than in this passage. Whereas in Paul it was understood in a metaphysical sense, Kurzweil, comically as ever, sees it as well in an erotic context: "In virtual reality, we can be a different person, both physically and emotionally. In fact, other people (such as your romantic partner) will be able to select a different body for you than you might select for yourself (and vice versa)" (Kurzweil 2006, 29).

The general absurdity of these ideas, such as the idea that one can select a body for oneself or for somebody else (or vice versa as Kurzweil puts it rather confusingly) means that they can only be understood within the context of a mystical trance, inspired by the anxiety felt by Internet theoreticians when faced with the idea of dis-incarnation. The idea of the body and the alternative body comes back regularly in literature inspired by technology. Yet again, in spite of the absurdity of such theories we must not underestimate their significance when it comes to understanding the nature of the Internet, especially when it comes to the erotic influence or improvements which electronic technology can bring to our lives because, as we'll see further on in a literary context while studying the significance and meaning of a publishing phenomenon such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the Internet is inherently pornographic in its nature.

In the meantime, Kurzweil's ideas as to the future and human nature mean that they will become very difficult to integrate in a fictional literary context other than science-fiction, a morality play or tale, which, as we will see, also explains the literary failure of a novel such as De Lillo's *Zero K*.

The confusion between biological roots and an extension of the self in the machine feeds the Internet literature, the question: where does the human stop and where does the machine start pervades that literature? We find it in the works of writers such as Vernor Vinge, although we won't dwell on the works of these writers due to their lack of literary quality or even ambition. Their novels can be assimilated to games and prioritize codes of the genre they belong to, namely science-fiction, rather than any form of literary aestheticism.

Whereas prophets, scientific or otherwise, tend to be cautious when giving the exact time for the coming of the Lord or arrival in the Promised land, Kurzweil sets the date for the Singularity at 2045, making it very near indeed and giving us the certain proof that he shows confidence in his own predictions. All will be made possible by a further miracle, that of the nanobots. "Billions of nanobots (nanobots being "robots designed at the molecular level, measured in microns", should one want the definition of these things) (Kurzweil 2006, 28) in

the capillaries of the brain will also vastly extend human intelligence. They will also have the purifying power of clearing the air from pollution due to the industrial age, eventually human intelligence will be mastered by future machine intelligence (Kurzweil 2006, 28).

Again, this is not the scenario of an unfinished early Fritz Lang film, but a belief, widely spread in Silicon Valley, perhaps the utmost form of Internet Centrist. Let us conclude with Kurzweil (the study of the Singularity as a religion could go on forever): “The intelligence of our civilization will continue its expansion in capability by spreading outward toward the rest of the universe” (Kurzweil 2006, 29). Conquest and expansion are thus the two main consequences of this new belief. We’ll see further that the missionary and the conqueror are two recurring figures of the Internet literature and two aspects of Internet identity.

With the invention of the printing press and print, the visual extension of the individual led people and writers in particular, to act as though immortality were inherent to the magic repeatability of print.

The Singularity offers the same psychological symptom: the apparition of a new technology as an extension of the individual extends further into immortality, but here, it is not just by offering posterity, but by the merging of the individual with the technology itself, by becoming one with it.

Singularitarians have their own university to help them spread the word, in Silicon Valley, of course, and it counts Kurzweil as one of its founders. On its website, it presents itself in the following terms: “Singularity University is a benefit corporation that provides educational programs innovative partnership and a startup accelerator, to help individuals businesses, institutions, investors, NGOs, and governments understand cutting-edge technologies, and how to utilize these technologies to positively impact billions of people.” The university offers a “Global solutions program”, and a “Sci-Fi D.I. workshop” amongst other programs, to “co-create the future of home with leading visionaries of our time”.¹³ Here again, the language suggests that rather than a university, we are dealing with a mission and missionaries. Not surprisingly, there is no literature department in the Singularity University. As we’ll see, the drama of choice which is at the centre of literature, dilemmas and conflicts which feed literature and fiction in particular have no place in such a world view.

¹³ Singularity University. 2017. “Own the Future – Singularity”. [Accessed October 26, 2017]. <https://su.org/press-room/press-releases/singularity-university-completes-2017-global-solutions-program/>.

That the Internet should produce a new spirituality and a new language corresponding to this spirituality shouldn't entirely come as a surprise as the Internet offers a new interpretation of the old texts and of the old world. It redefines it, like the New Testament redefined and reinterpreted the Old. In that sense too, the Internet brings a new covenant, and it is an alternative to the Book, it redefines knowledge. It would take too long here to develop the sacredness of books throughout the ages or the Book (as *The Bible*) containing revelation and the word of God, suffice it to say for the time being that the Book and books are a gateway to the sacred.¹⁴ In that sense books have been a gateway to posterity and, at a later stage, immortality. As an alternative to the Book in the form we've known since the advent of the printing press, the Internet had to take on that role as well and to redefine it, the Internet being here, "the Book of new technologies."

7. *Zero K*, De Lillo's literary attempt at representing nanobots and immortality

Technology as a source of immortality, by nanobots or computer science finds its literary illustration in Don De Lillo's *Zero K*. Don De Lillo is a non-digital native, hence, as we'll see when we compare the digital native literature with the non-digital native literature, his developments on technology are adapted and analyzed in a Gutenberg context. They do not reproduce a fragmented model as the one we'll find in the novels of Neal Stephenson.

The technology at the start of the novel is cryonics, a medical or pseudo-medical answer to the Singularity. It is a science, the illustration or the tool to enact the materialization of the idea contained in the first sentence: "Everybody wants to own the end of the world" (De Lillo 2016, 3).

¹⁴ Books are a gateway to the sacred even in their most profane forms or even through blasphemy, as the existence of "L'Enfer" in French libraries testifies, regrouping works of erotic or pornographic literature. Otherwise to see the direct link between books or the book as both an object and an idea, that is a material presence and its abstract sacred context, see Roger Chartier (1997) *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental* which reminds us that reading in the Roman world was reserved to priests and patrician families, see the following chapters: "*Lire, écrire, interpréter le texte. Pratiques monastiques dans le Haut Moyen-Âge*", "*Le modèle scolastique de la lecture*", "*La lecture dans les communautés juives de l'Europe occidentale au Moyen-Âge*", "*Réformes protestantes et lectures*" and "*Lectures et Contre-Réforme*". In the chapter entitled "*Lire pour lire*", Armando Petrucci reminds us that "*les salles de lecture des bibliothèques publiques anglo-saxonnes [étaient] des lieux sacrés de la lecture*". On the book and the Protestant Reformation, see naturally Elizabeth Eisenstein *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* and the chapter "*Le livre, ce ferment*" in *L'Apparition du livre* by Lucien Febvre et Henri-Jean Martin.

In other terms *Zero K* presents itself as a novel of ideas expressed mainly through dialogue. “Owning the end of the world”¹⁵ means here “having control over ones biological death” to use a “singularitarian” language, and making sense of the apocalyptic vision of the world as it is, or as it is represented through various screens accompanying the cryonics patient through his “journey” toward death preservation, resurrection:

“Faith-based technology. That’s what it is. Another god. Not so different, it turns out from some of the earlier ones. Except that it’s real, it’s true, it delivers.”

“Life after death.”

“Eventually yes.”

“The Convergence.”

“Yes” (De Lillo 2016, 9).

The apocalyptic theme is always important if not predominant in the literature of the Internet because it makes it easier to present this new technology as a new beginning and as a phenomenon which rightfully destroys the past or an old order, or it represents the past destroying itself as in Joshua Cohen’s *Book of Numbers*, to which we will return, starting with an evocation of September 11th and the destruction of the Twin Towers. In literary terms, it

¹⁵ The novel of ideas or “theory novel” to use the term coined by Nicholas Dames, in his work *The Physiology of the Novel*, is a work of fiction illustrating a concept either by the evolution of the character or the action itself. This is also the definition given by Sianne Ngai in *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form* (Harvard: The Belknap Press, 2020). She also stresses in this extract the aesthetic problems posed by the very notion of the “novel of ideas” which incidentally become very obvious in *Zero K*:

Arising by most accounts in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the novel of ideas reflects the challenge posed by the integration of externally developed concepts long before the arrival of conceptual art. Although the novel’s verbal medium would seem to make it intrinsically suited to the endeavor, the mission of presenting ‘ideas’ seems to have pushed a genre famous for its versatility toward a surprisingly limited repertoire of techniques. These came to obtrude against a set of generic expectations – nondidactic representation; a dynamic temporally complex relation between events and the representation of events; character development; verisimilitude – established only in the wake of the novel’s separation from history and romance at the start of the nineteenth century. [...]

The techniques that stick out against the generic norms listed above appear across modern and postmodern texts with striking regularity. They are: direct speech by characters in the forms of dramatic dialogues or monologues (*The Magic Mountain, Point Counter Point, Tomorrow’s Eve, Iola Leroy, Elizabeth Costello, Babel-17*); overt narrators prone to didactic, ironic or metafictional commentary (*The Man Without Qualities, Tristram Shandy, Elizabeth Costello*); and flat allegorical characters (*Faith and the Good Thing, The Man without Qualities, Against Nature, Moby-Dick*). Also prevalent to a lesser extent are experimental formatting (*Moby-Dick, Tristram Shandy, Diary of A Bad Year*); sudden unexplained, narratively isolated outbreaks of magic in a predominantly realist frame (*The Magic Mountain, Elizabeth Costello, Artful*); and even a curious thematization of the “device” or gimmick as such (*Tomorrow’s Eve, The Magic Mountain, Clear: A Transparent Novel*). Whether executed as science fiction, bildungsroman, or more recently the satirical form Nicholas Dames calls, “theory novel”, the novel of ideas is “artful” with all the equivocality this term brings. Willingness to court the accusation of relying on overly transparent stylistic devices is a consistent, perhaps even cohering feature of a notoriously unstable genre” (Ngai 2012, 45).

means that the literature of the Internet destroys the products of the Gutenberg technology. An apocalypse (as there are several) always announces a new beginning. A new moral system. A novel like *Zero K*, dealing with eternal life and resurrection through technology rather than the coming of the Messiah or the end of time couldn't avoid the apocalyptic theme, which is so prevalent in science-fiction literature: to create a new world the old one must be erased.

Logically in *Zero K*, the language is reminiscent of Genesis. In particular the flood, as in this passage: "At first the images were all water. There was water racing through the woodlands and surging over riverbanks. There were scenes of rain beating on terraced fields, long moments of nothing but rain, then people everywhere running, other helpless in small boats bouncing over rapids" (De Lillo 2016, 11).

The expression at first is reminiscent of "in the beginning" and the structure of the sentences, the repetition of "there was", "there were", creates a minimal style again, reminiscent of the repetition of "and" in the King James Bible, while the boats can be seen as a distant echo of the Ark in the Flood.

But in keeping with the aesthetics and logic of the digital technology, the apocalypse is here brought to us as it were, through television screens, the television screen being a domestic form of voyeurism, as we'll see in more detail later. Thus the Apocalypse is domesticated through the very size of the screen and is transportable through the computer.

Let us just remark for the time being that the infancy of digital technology corresponds in time to the beginnings of television and the development of a reduced view of the world offered at home, while removed from the world, which explains our notion of domestic voyeurism. We'll develop later at length the system of echoes between television and the Internet or rather what we might call "the inheritance of the glass screen" from the 1950's onwards.

In the following passages, the elements are meant to create an echo of the Book of Genesis, although sometimes rather clumsily. The image of the Tsunami which starts the passage and the book is a modern day version of the Flood, followed by the mention of fire reminiscent of God's warning: "The fire next time." Here are some extracts to illustrate the point: "Fires were burning on screen, and a fleet of air tankers hung a thick haze of chemicals over the scorched treetops.

Then a single figure walking through a town's empty streets with homes imploded by heat and flame and lawn ornaments shriveled to a crisp."¹⁶

"Then a satellite image of twin lines of smoke snaking across a great landscape." The word snaking evocative of the snake in the garden of Eden, and consequently of a form of metaphysical corruption.

Elsewhere now people wearing facemasks, hundreds moving at camera level, walking or being carried by others, and was this a disease, a virus, long ranks of slow moving men and women, and is it something spread by insects or vermin and carried on airborne dust, dead-eyed individuals, in the thousands now, walking at a stricken pace that resembled forever. Then a woman seated on the roof of her car, head in hands, flames – the fire again – moving down the foothills in the near distance.

Then grass fire sweeping across the flatlands and a herd of bison, silhouetted in bright flame, going at a gallop parallel to barb-wire fencing and out of the frame.

There was a cut to enormous ocean waves approaching and then water surging over seawalls and sets of imagery merging, skillfully edited but hard to absorb, towers shaking (De Lillo 2016, 12).

The "tower shaking" in this context is both evocative of the Tower of Babel and of the Twin Towers and September 11th. This highly televised apocalyptic event is at the beginning of Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers*, which is also incidentally named after a biblical book. "Ten years ago this September, 10 Arab Muslims hijacked two airplanes and flew them into the Twin Towers of my life & Book. My book was destroyed – my life has never has never recovered" (Cohen 2015, 110). The failure of the main character's first book is directly linked to the apocalyptic scene which September 11th represents and it establishes the link between the individual and the universal now taking the guise of Internet life. This is Joshua Cohen's version of "In my end is my beginning" (the word embroidered on her clothes by Mary Queen of Scots before her execution and which symbolized the eternity of life after death) and in that sense references to "ends" and apocalyptic or catastrophic endings pervade the text, as in this description of New York: "A pier jutting midway between where the Lusitania departed and the Titanic never arrived" (Cohen 2015, 110). Even New York harbour is seen in terms of past wrecks.

De Lillo's novel goes on with a further accumulation of disasters, again reminiscent of Genesis such as:

¹⁶ The crisp being here a very clumsy image, if a little original, in the middle of this biblical and lyrical vision of apocalypse.

a bridge collapsing, a tremendous close-up view of ash and lava blasting out an opening in the earth's crust and I wanted it to last longer, it was right there, just above the lava, magma, molten rock but a few seconds later a dried lakebed appeared with one bent tree trunk standing and then back to wildfires in forested land and in open country and sweeping down into town and onto highways.

Then long views of wooded hillsides being swallowed in rolling smoke and a crew of firefighters in helmets and backpack vanishing up a mountain trail and reappearing in a forest of splintered pines and bared bronze earth.

Then, up close, screen about to burst with flames that jump a stream and appear to spring into the camera and out toward the hallway where I stand watching (De Lillo 2016, 121).

The end of the passage is again reminiscent of the place of the watcher or “human reader” or “human being” in front of a screen as his privileged point of observation of the world, here of the world at its end. We'll see later the part played by the glass screen in the way the Internet represents the world, and we'll ask ourselves whether this glass screen and the effect it has on the representation of the world is compatible with literature born out of the Gutenberg technology. The repetition of “then” as the only link between the different passages of the text turn it into a catalogue of disasters, an accumulation, without any other form of link or structure. We'll see later that the catalogue is also an expression of moral sterility in works like *À Rebours* (1884) by Huysmans, but it will also appear as a form of literary and aesthetic sterility.

In that sense, *253*, a novel by Geoff Ryman, is a perfect illustration, of McLuhan's self-confessed dictum that the medium is the message, as *253* was created on the web as an Internet novel, born out of a glass screen, later translated into a novel made of pen and ink and paper.

Geoff Ryman explains in the first page the reason for his title which is also the book's *raison d'être*:

Why the Title?

A tube train only has seven cars. Why? It seems an odd number. Eight would be rounder, more comforting. Perhaps it is seven for good luck.

A tube carriage has 36 seats. This means that an ideally filled tube train that was neither overcrowded not disturbingly empty would carry 252 passengers plus the driver... This would make a total of 253 people.

It was the ideally filled tube train. Every seat was occupied. No one was left standing unless they wanted to. Because the universe is not held together by cause and effect alone, but by mysterious patterns, every one of those people reached an important point in their lives. Some made key decisions. Some attained enlightenment. All except for the driver. He fell asleep.

This book is about those 253 people. That is why the title is 253. So that the illusion of an orderly universe can be maintained, each section will consist of 253 words, not counting the headings, page numbers or footnotes” (Ryman 1998, 1-2).

Here is the synopsis. The rest of the book following this project consists entirely in a list of characters, and stage directions. Yet in the “screen” version the setting is described as “tube theatre”. It follows that there is no narrative structure and order, no order when reading the book, in that sense it is a perfect reproduction of an Internet book, except that pages and paper impose an order which doesn’t have to be respected. As the front page says, readapting the notion of space inherent to the Internet: “In cyberspace people become places” (Ryman 1998, 1) which is what we’d seen in *Zero K* and which we’ll see again in Cohen’s *Book of Numbers*, the character becomes a space and is transportable through any form of exotic places, while remaining in the same space. It is the same device that we’ll find again in Franzen’s *Purity*, and which is possible through the mediation of the screen as a gateway to the world and its representation.

The subtitle of the novel in the “screen version” is “a novel for the Internet about London Underground in seven cars and a crash”. Following criteria for the Internet novel it presents itself as cosmopolitan, and indeed, it is the work of a Canadian writer about London, living in London. But it has to be added that a lot of books could follow that description without necessarily being described as “cosmopolitan”. The cosmopolitan aspect, like the exotic aspect is part of the Internet identity of a text and has to be claimed as part of the text or as one of the qualities of the text for it to be considered as belonging properly to the “Internet”, as the subtitle claims here. What we mean by cosmopolitan here is that rather than creating an identity by an accumulation of various identities, the Internet erases specific national identities, to create a “global” identity as part of the “Global Village” to use a McLuhanite expression, as becomes apparent when we compare certain Internet novels with novels by Dickens, for example, which could only be specifically English and of their times.

As befits an Internet literary creation, *253*’s printed version starts with a user’s manual “How to use this book” (Ryman 1998, 1), further developed on page 2 and 3: “All 253 characters have their own page. Each page is divided into the following helpful sections.”

I will not quote *in extenso* the “helpful sections” but be content giving their titles: “Outward appearance”, “Inside information”, “What they are thinking and doing”. It is a series of instructions written in the style (or absence of style) of a manual, for example: “How to find a particular individual? The book works its way from the front of the train towards the

back, one carriage at a time. Each car has a map, showing who is on that car, and where they are sitting. All passengers have their own unique number” (Ryman 1998, 3).

It is not customary for a book to give the reader a user’s manual at its beginning. The reason why *253* needs it is that it was originally conceived as a “spectacle” on a screen rather than a book.

Thus the book is built on a series of links on which one can click to go from one theme or one character to the other. It is not meant to be read in its continuity.

253 is a puzzling work because in the chapters following the introduction come instructions it alternates between a series of facts written voluntarily with a total absence of style, as in the following description of Mr Clive Benton: “Outward appearance: fit, middle-aged man. Grey, short hair. Sharp face. No jowls. Wears new all-black, casual clothes. Fast asleep” (Ryman 1998, 39).

The style here again hesitates between that of the catalogue and the stage direction, which is a form of text outside the text. There is no more difference, as in the logic of the Internet between what is the text and the non-text. Style appears occasionally in the course of the text in the form of a play on words, as in the following example: “inside information: works in Bathroom Paradise, a massive showroom of fixtures and fittings, located in railway arches near Waterloo” (Ryman 1998, 39). Then, Ryman uses the fact that he has called the showroom Paradise to create an ironic and poetic image at the end of the paragraph: “He moved to London and ended up in Paradise” (Ryman 1998, 39). Yet because Ryan actually chose the name of the showroom, which doesn’t exist, in order to create a play on words, the effect seems rather contrived.

When reading *253* one keeps wondering whether there is any point to it from a literary point of view. This is what Charles de Lint expressed in the online magazine *Fantasy and Science-Fiction*.

I don’t quite know where to begin with this book. It’s either an elaborate rather lengthy joke, a piece of serious modern fiction offering insight into the human condition and contemporary social mores, or some odd combination of the two. A joke that turned serious. A piece of serious fiction that discovered it has his tongue firmly in his cheek.¹⁷

¹⁷ Charles de Lint. 1999. “Books to Look For”. [Accessed October 26, 2021]. <https://www.sfsite.com/fsf/1999/cd19903.htm> March 1999 sfsite.com.

This impossibility of deciding whether the text is serious or not and the irony at its core can be detected first in the fact that it presents itself as a game, as most Internet creations do, like *Snow Crash* which we'll consider later. The sentence in the very presentation of the text: "So that the illusion of an orderly universe can be maintained, each section will consist of 253 words..." (Ryman 1988, 1) contains a statement which is obviously self-consciously nonsensical and which will be echoed in a lot of sub-cultural comedic qualities at the heart of the Internet novel which we'll come across, be it Amis's *Yellow Dog* or Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. To sum up, 253 is to literature what a clever construction made of Lego would be to Frank Lloyd Wright.

Still puzzled after reading the book, presumably in its entirety, Charles de Lint concludes:

Is it a novel? Doubtful. Certainly not in the traditional sense. Is it worth reading? Definitely. Is it the fiction of the future? I hope not. As a one off, it's entertaining and even thought provoking but it took me a long time to read, simply because I kept setting it aside after every half-dozen or so entries to read something with a more coherent narrative. Call me old-fashioned by I doubt I'd try another.¹⁸

What 253 demonstrates, as I mentioned earlier, is that the medium is the message, and by doing so it demonstrates the incompatibility between screen and paper. In an interview with *The Guardian* Geoff Ryman declared that although the text is the same in its printed and in its screen version its content changes completely as it goes from one to the other:

Question: Now that 253 exists both on the web and as a book, which format do you think does the novel most justice? I read the book first and then tried the web version – and I found the latter very frustrating. But that might be just me. Great book though...

Answer: The web version is not meant to be read all the way through. You are meant to read, say, 10 characters, until you get the main point... that a London tube train really will be that full of different stories and that range of people. In fact, linking works very slightly against this as links, by definition, are between similarities. So readers can stay trapped in a circle of people who work for the same company or know each other in some way. This can reduce the sensation of variety and difference that is one of the points of the book. My main schtick on this is that the same text has a different meaning. On the web, it's a book about hidden similarities between people, in print it's about how different we all are.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The Guardian. 2001. "Online Q&A Session: Geoff Ryman". [Accessed October 26, 2021]. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/aug/23/fiction>.

(The end of this interview hints at a theme to which we'll return all through this study and which was already present in the idea of a redefinition of the soul by the Internet: print creates individuality and individualism, while electronic media and the Internet destroy it.)

That the screen becomes a gateway to another world, sacred or otherwise, be it through its transformative power, is a recurring theme in science fiction works such as *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. The main character gets in touch with the "other" disembodied world by going through or sitting in front the computer screen in a sort of rehearsal of the transhumanism promised by the Singularity.²⁰ The title itself combines the "apocalyptic" in economic terms with television, and with the notion of corruption from which the apocalyptic stems (an apocalypse being a form of cleansing), as the definitions placed at the opening of the book explain:

Snow: 2a. Anything resembling snow, b. The white specks on a television screen resulting from weak reception.

Crash v. . . . – intr to fail suddenly, as a business or an economy.

- *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

Virus. . . . [L. Virus. Slimy liquid poison, offensive odour, or taste.] Venom, such as is emitted by a poisonous animal 2. Path a. A morbid principle or poisonous substance produces in the body as the result of some disease, esp. one capable of being introduced into other persons or animals by inoculations or otherwise and of developing the same disease in them. . . . 3.fig. A moral or intellectual poison, or poisonous influence.

- *The Oxford English dictionary* (Stephenson 1992, 1).

Similarly, *Zero K* starts with images of a Tsunami, a modern day televised version of the Flood, also made exotic, all the more so as it seen through a screen, the role of the screen being to "exoticise" while at the same time bringing nearer every part of the world and every destruction of these very parts. As a consequence, the Biblical imagery is constantly present and finds an echo in Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* as we'll see in more detail and as the title of the book itself already indicates. Cohen quotes *The Bible* at the opening of the book,

²⁰ Transhumanism is according to the definition of the Encyclopedia Britannica: "a social and philosophical movement devoted to promoting the research and development of robust human-enhancement technologies. Such technologies would augment or increase human sensory reception, emotive ability, or cognitive capacity as well as radically improve human health and extend human life spans. Such modifications resulting from the addition of biological or physical technologies would be more or less permanent and integrated into the human body." Transhumanism is a term coined by Julian Huxley an English biologist and Philosopher in his 1957 essay *Transhumanism*. Available at URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247718617_Transhumanism.

Numbers 14:32-34 (Cohen 1.3) in the King James version and gives the same passage in the translation by TETRANS.TETRATION.COM/ Hebrew/English.²¹

In the King James version, the passage reads as follows: “But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness.”

It becomes in the Tettrans.teration.com version: “And your corpses you will fall in the desert [sic]. And your children will be of shepherds in the desert 40 years and will support your prostitution/adultery until the perfection/destruction of your corpses in the desert.”

What the presence of these two passages signify at the opening of the novel, is that it defines itself as a translation from the language of the Book, *The Bible*, to the language of the Internet as the new vocabulary and expression of metaphysics.

Besides, the passage contains both themes essential to Internet literature, as we’ll see in more detail and as we’ve already seen with *Zero K.*, first, the “whoredoms,” or “prostitution/adultery” which will find an echo in the pornographic nature of the Internet (and not just its content) and second in the apocalyptic theme.

The biblical reference finds regular echoes in the course of the novel as in this self-definition of the author/narrator: “I, like my father before me had been a wandering Aramean, seeking refuge in a distant land in the hopes of surviving the coming drought, the coming famine, only to become enslaved in that land, forced to make mud bricks and arrange them into pyramids for my own tomb?” (Cohen 2015, 139).

Again, we have here the reference to a past Biblical identity with the word “Aramean”, a clear reference to the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt and the evocation of natural and Biblical disasters “drought” and “famine”.

Similarly, to come back to *Zero K*, three aspects are important in the passage quoted above: the apocalyptic vision of the world which takes us back to the first sentence and the images of the Tsunami; second, the exoticism of this apocalypse enhanced by the fact that it is perceived through screens. The exoticism here also answers the consequences of the Singularity which were conquest and expansion; third, the Biblical imagery to describe the modern world. Here the flood, the “fire” as in “the fire next time” are opposed in the following chapters to the imagery of bucolic bliss extended in its metaphysical form to images of the

²¹ Tetration is in Cohen’s book the most powerful tech company in the world capable of translating from any language into English amongst other things and created by the enigmatic billionaire at the centre of the novel.

Garden of Eden. These oppositions are constant in *Zero K* and reappear almost as a musical theme in chapter 9 (although the passage is fairly long I will quote it in its entirety to analyze further the consequences of its very length on the content of and style of the novel):

Fires were burning on screen and a fleet of air tankers hung a thick haze of chemicals over the scorched treetops.

Then a single figure walking through a town's empty streets with homes imploded by heat and flame and lawn ornaments shriveled to a crisp. Then a satellite image of twin lines of white smoke snaking across a gray landscape.

Elsewhere now people wearing facemasks, hundreds moving at camera level, walking or being carried by others, and was this a disease, a virus, long ranks of slow moving men and women, and is it something spread by insects or vermin and carried on airborne dust, dead-eyed individuals, in the thousands now, walking at a stricken pace that resembled forever.

Then a woman seated on the roof of her car, head in hands, flames – the fire again –²² moving down the foothills in the near distance.

Then grass fires sweeping across the flatlands and a herd of bison, silhouetted in bright flame, going at a gallop parallel to barb-wire fencing and out of the frame.

There was a quick cut to enormous ocean waves approaching and water surging over seawalls and sets of imagery merging, skillfully edited, but hard to absorb, towers shaking, a bridge collapsing, a tremendous close-up view of ash and lava blasting out of an opening in the earth's crust and I wanted it to last longer, it was right here just above me, lava, magma, molten rock, but a few seconds later a dried lakebed appeared with one bent tree trunk standing and then back to wildfires in forested land and in open country and sweeping down into town and onto highways.

Then long views of wooded hillside being swallowed in rolling smoke and a crew of firefighters in helmets and backpack vanishing up a mountain trail and reappearing in a forest of splintered pines and bared bronze earth.

Then, up close, screen about to burst with flames that jump a stream and appear to spring into the camera and out toward the hallway where I stand watching (De Lillo 2016, 121).

The language reveals here that the world, even at its end, is televised and that the camera has become the human eye: “moving at camera level”, “sets of imagery”, “close up view”, “quick cut”. This is the language of image editing.

Besides, the repetition of “then” betrays that the literary figure here is that of accumulation and catalogue, very much as in Cohen's *Book of Numbers*. In that sense, the book is successful in representing the content of the Internet as well as the way the Internet distributes its content by accumulation while for that very reason it becomes a failure as a book, due to its sterility. Everything in the novel is reduced to a list, illustrating in a rather hackneyed way the desire for a superior spiritual life attainable through a new technology: cryonics. It is true to the “abundance” promised by the Internet and to which we'd referred earlier but it is a sterile form of abundance.

²² Here De Lillo betrays the repetitive nature of his work.

We'll note the twin lines of smoke are here again, as in Cohen, and that they evocative of September 11th. In opposition to these apocalyptic visions or images reminiscent of a televised reality, De Lillo uses equally hackneyed images of bucolic bliss reminiscent of the Garden of Eden: "I hesitated, mind blank, and then turned the knob and pushed open the door and walked into earth, air and sky" (De Lillo 2016, 121-2).

The elements here being set in opposition to the vision on the glass screen are symbolic of peace and are a form of non-televised preserved reality. De Lillo stresses that it is not a desert oasis but a "proper English garden with trimmed hedges" representing order after chaos:

Here was a walled garden, trees, shrubs, flowering plants. I stood and looked. The heat was less severe than it had been on the day I'd arrived. This is what I needed, away from the rooms, the halls, the unit, a place outside where I might think calmly about what I would see and hear and feel in the scene to come..." (De Lillo 2016, 122).

Besides being a form of reality rooted in the elements as opposed to glass, the garden is both a representation of Eden and of a monastic environment.

Just as followers of the Singularity were "believers", so are the "pilgrims" (De Lillo 2016, 9) of cryonics, which offers through technology a redefinition of death and hence of spirituality. Cryonics, like the Singularity, offer a numinous experience in the sense that Rudolf Otto gave to this word to which we have already referred, the "numinous dread", the "awe" or *mysterium tremendum* (De Lillo 2016, 13) which becomes in the words of De Lillo: "Anticipation and awe intermingled" (De Lillo 2016, 9) and a pilgrimage. Thus in seventeenth century terms they become new pilgrims of the Mayflower going towards a new promised land, or, to remain coherent with the Biblical imagery, Hebrews in their flight from Egypt to reach The Promised Land. De Lillo acknowledges that directly through the dialogue: "faith-based technology. That's what it is. Another god. Not so different, it turns out from some of the earlier ones. Except that it's real, it's true, it delivers" (De Lillo 2016, 9). And later: "Okay pilgrims. We're back to the old-time religion" (De Lillo 2016, 9), the latter expression taking us without ambiguity to the seventeenth century and a "reformed" spirituality. Should one be tempted to laugh at the pomposity of the dialogue or its stilted quality, or its absurdity, as in the mixture of familiarity and fake lyricism ("Okay, pilgrims"), we are warned through the character of Ross, a billionaire who wants to be frozen to reappear later: "Don't be quick to draw conclusions about what you see and hear. This place was designed by serious people.

Respect the idea. Respect the setting itself” (p.10), as if De Lillo himself were warning us through dialogue of the fact that his own text is not quite as bad as it seems.

As well as a pilgrim, the “expansion and conquest “inherent to the spirituality of the Singularity or the “convergence” turns the Internet user into a conquistador, an important parallel, as we’ll see later that hegemony is in the nature of the Internet and that the Internet user or pilgrim will see his world as “unchartered”, an unknown, infinite and exotic world which asks to be explored, mastered and mapped.

From then on, *Zero K* becomes at once a science-fiction novel which daren’t say its name and a novel of ideas which daren’t say its name. The general naivety of the novel mixed with the triteness of the ideas is already heralded on page 9, quite ironically, by this warning and the use of the clumsy expression “serious people” which appears in this context reminiscent of a Star Trek set and fairly self-contradictory. This is echoed by the stilted quality of the language and dialogue, and lack of characterization mentioned earlier which John Updike stressed in his critical evaluation of the works of Don De Lillo: “His characters have a habit of spouting smart swift essays at one another” (*New Yorker*, 31 March 2003).²³ The quote is taken from a critical review of *One Way Street*, a previous novel by De Lillo which already dealt with the metaphysics of global computerization. In that review Updike qualified De Lillo’s dialogue as “lobotomized”.

The rest of *Zero K*, often repetitive, is worth studying as a condensed illustration of the constant mirror effect between the belief in new technology and new religion, or old time religion renewed as it were in the guise of the “faith-based technology” (De Lillo 2016, 9), especially when this technology is seen as a gate to the after-life, or life after “biological death”.

Whereas in Kurzweil, this new religion took the name of The Singularity, it becomes in De Lillo, the Resurgence, a slightly clearer term, certainly, with which to describe a new form of resuscitation mixed with salvation. “Resurrection” would seem to be a more accurate word though perhaps too obvious. The “resurgence” is a journey to a brighter future. We’ll see later the importance of the notion of “the journey” for Internet writers and thinkers when we envisage the Internet as a space and the Internet user as a pilgrim or missionary or conquistador.

²³ John Updike, « Rue à sens unique », *The New Yorker*, 23 mars 2003, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/31/one-way-street>.

This brighter future is built upon a language which is both its expression and its foundation:

Think about this, what is here and who is here. Think about the end of all the petty misery you've been hoarding for years. Think beyond personal experience. Leave it back there. What's happening in this community is not just a creation of medical science. There are social theorists involved, and biologists and futurists, and geneticists, and climatologists and neuroscientists, and psychologists, and ethicists, if that's the right word." "Where are they?"

"Some are here permanently, others come and go. There are the numbered levels. All the vital minds. Global English, yes, but other languages as well. Translators when necessary, human and electronic. There are philologists designing an advanced language unique to the Convergence. Word roots, inflections, even gestures. People will learn it and speak it. A language that will enable us to express things we can't express now, see things we can't see now, see ourselves and others in ways that unite us, broaden every possibility" (De Lillo 2016, 33).

In other terms, technology is a new revelation in its religious sense through language, word made technology rather than flesh as it were, which brings a new covenant: language will give birth to "things" beyond our present knowledge and bring a new form of salvation, "broaden every possibility". This new covenant called "convergence", "unites", in other words, creates a new community of the faithful, which, as in most visions of redemption, salvation and rebirth, takes the form of a city: "We fully expect that this site we occupy will become the heart of a new metropolis, maybe an independent state, different from any we've known. This is what I mean when I call myself a serious man" (De Lillo 2016, 33).

The image of the new metropolis is actually not new at all, it is a direct reference both to Babel, and the establishment of a celestial Jerusalem on earth with the coming of messianic time, except that the vector for the creation of that heavenly city in a world upside down is technology and the assembled knowledge of the various academics enumerated at the beginning of the tirade, ranges from "social theorists" to "ethicists". The reference to Jerusalem becomes explicit further on in the novel: "He talked about advanced equipment, trained staff. Still, it made him think of twelfth-century Jerusalem, he said, where an order of knights cared for pilgrims" (De Lillo 2016, 42). We will return to the association of the conquest of new technologies with crusades, that is a geographical as well as a mystical voyage, when we come to the notion of pilgrims and pilgrimage in the literature of the Internet.

We already have here the association which we mentioned previously between the Internet and the Conquistador. It is a recurring theme in Internet literature. As we'll see later when we analyse the significance of Amazon for the development of a new conception of

literature, in the book dedicated to that particular enterprise and its founder Jeff Bezos, the author Brad Stone asks the question in the third and last part of his thinly disguised panegyric on Jeff Bezos: “Missionary or Mercenary?”. The contradiction, between the redemption of the soul, the conquest of virgin lands and mercantilism is ever-present in the literature of the Internet as we’ll see in our later developments on web 2.0.

In the above passage by De Lillo, one is struck again by the naïve belief, almost positivist, that academics and specialists in academic fields hold the knowledge to create a voyage that leaves behind “all the petty misery you’ve been hoarding for years”. Again, this naivety is the reflection of the sense of religious awe which is felt in front of the power of new technologies, described by Kurzweil as “exponential”. It is also reflected in the vagueness of the present while we wait for the language of the future to bring us revelations: the word “thing” is used extensively, which here as in the literature of the supernatural, is supposed to evoke a presence, generally a numinous presence, beyond words. But whereas it can create a metaphysical anxiety or fear within the literature of the supernatural, here it reduces the “ideas” in this novel of ideas to a very trite debate on empty abstractions or technological utopias reminiscent of pulp science-fiction.

The third aspect besides the notion of an apocalyptic beginning and a rebirth through technology which *Zero K* illustrates, is the sense of exoticism which comes out of the Internet. The multiplication and the fragmentation of information which contributes to creating what Marshal McLuhan called the Global Village, also creates a new form of exoticism. The screen allows us to go everywhere and anywhere at the same time and brings a form of familiarity with remote places, while maintaining a sense of wonder at the writer’s own familiarity with such exotic places and names: in Cohen’s *Book of Numbers*, this form of exoticism, is created by the numerous references to the Arab world and the emergence in the text of Arab names. In *Zero K*, De Lillo has chosen eastern European or Central Asian destinations, more in keeping with an Orwellian form of science fiction: one of the characters having been to Minsk is wearing glasses “nostalgically called KGBs” (De Lillo 2016, 28).

This accumulation of quickly-reached destinations either through usual means of transport or through the computer screen is also at the heart of the plot mechanism in more traditional science-fiction works by “digital natives” such as Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*. We’ll come back to it when we deal with the Internet as an uncharted place. In the same sense, the choice of name of Martin Amis’s protagonist in *Yellow Dog*, Xan Meo who is white and Anglo-Saxon, expresses the fragmented exoticism linked to the Internet and the

fragmented identity it creates in a new space beyond borders and geographical limits, or even culture as the expression of a specific nation or civilization. In this sense, coming from a non-digital native, Amis, we have here an extension of a post-modern literary techniques adapted to technology. The fragmented self echoed or mirrored in the fragmented narrative is now further fragmented in the technology he is trying to come to terms with or “tackle.”

In very quick succession, over the space of three pages De Lillo mentions London, New York, Minsk, Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and Almaty in Kazakhstan followed by Houston and China. The same device which was used by Cohen in *Book of Numbers* is also used, in Franzen’s *Purity*. The justification given by De Lillo in the course of the book, through the same stilted or lobotomized dialogue sounds like an old-fashioned pulp science-fiction novel:

‘But why so isolated? Why not Switzerland? Why not a suburb of Houston?’ ‘This is what we want, this separation. We have what is needed. Durable energy sources and strong mechanized systems. Blast walls and fortified floors. Structural redundancy. Fire safety. Security patrols, land and air. Elaborate cyberdefense. And so on.’ (De Lillo 2016, 30).

From the metaphysical point of view, the multiplication of places (often mixed with a lack of action as in *Zero K*, or the illusion of action, as in *Snow Crash*, because the action in the latter is very often “virtual” and on screen) offers a sense of disembodiment and of reincarnation in the body of the machine or at least in technology, “technology” being here considered as an abstract concept, a form of new ether which, paradoxically cannot be represented in any definite form (such as the Garden of Eden, for example).

The exoticism which comes with the representation of the Internet or with the choice of technology as the *décor* in which the book will be set (although, again, not the action), helps define the Internet as a space. The difference between this space and any other is that it has no boundaries, and is uncharted. This notion of the Internet as space comes as a reflection of the idea of the Internet user or of the faithful Singularitarian or the follower of cryonics as a “pilgrim”. A pilgrimage doesn’t come without its religious content, or intent. Together with the notion of pilgrimage, the fragmented space which is created by the Internet in parallel to the fragmented mind and the fragmented reading of the world, establishes the Internet pilgrim, the mystical traveller, also as a pioneer, a notion that was already apparent in De Lillo’s references to the pilgrim fathers.

8. The Internet as the Soul of the World

The conception of the future as described by Kurzweil and the Singularitarians is not quite as new as it seems to be. The notion of the “noosphere” was originated by Teilhard de Chardin, and Internet thinkers such as Kurzweil or Eric Raymond have seen in it the “annunciation” of the coming of the Internet.²⁴ The Internet thinkers have seen in the web the realization of Teilhard de Chardin’s concept.

It is necessary here to develop Teilhard de Chardin’s philosophy in order to understand the influence it has had, mistakenly or not, over the Internet thinkers and zealots and by consequence on Internet literature or their conception of literature seen from the point of view of the Internet.

The noosphere is a concept forged from the word *noos* in Greek which designates the spirit. For Teilhard de Chardin, the noosphere will eventually constitute a membrane around the earth, the noosphere is not part of the biosphere but its transfiguration. The biosphere being “the organic substance which envelops the earth”.

Man represents the embryonic stage of the growth of the spirit on Earth. Through him it can be characterized in four stages: the personal, freedom, knowledge and contemplation (Teilhard de Chardin 1969, 127).

To summarize the aspects which relate to the metaphysics of the Internet: the individual is a spiritual centre at its first stage of existence, he is the conscience of an irreplaceable “singularity”, to use the same language as Kurzweil and as the critic Jean Onimus, author of *Teilhard de Chardin et le Mystère de la Terre*.²⁵

Freedom is the capacity to understand the whole of a given situation and to envisage a great number of solutions. It springs out of culture.

Science of knowledge, the third stage, is the conquest of the Universe through the mind. In that sense research takes on a high metaphysical and even religious significance. It becomes a sacred activity. It analyses and deciphers the secrets and the spiritual power of nature and of the material world. We see here how the language of Teilhard de Chardin has found an echo, whether significant or not, in Kurzweil’s Singularity or in what Morozov terms internet solutionism:

²⁴ See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. 1955. *Le Phénomène humain*. Paris: Seuil.

²⁵ Jean Onimus. 1991. *Teilhard de Chardin et le Mystère de la Terre*. Paris: Albin Michel.

The smart technology and all of our social connections (not to mention useful statistics like the real-time aggregate consumption of electricity) can now be ‘inserted’ into our every mundane act, from throwing away our trash to making tea, might seem worth celebrating, not scrutinizing. Likewise, that smartphones and social-networking sites allow us to experiment with interventions impossible just a decade ago seems like a genuinely positive development. Not surprisingly, Silicon Valley is already awash with plans for improving just about everything under the sun: politics, citizens, publishing, cooking.

Alas, all too often, this never-ending quest to ameliorate – or what the Canadian anthropologist Tania Murray Li, writing in a very different context has called ‘the will to improve’ – is short-sighted and only perfunctorily interested in the activity for which improvements were sought. Recasting all complex situations either as neatly defined problems with definite computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized – if only the right algorithms are in place! – this quest is likely to have unexpected consequences that could eventually cause more damage than the problem they seek to address.

I call the ideology that legitimizes and sanctions such aspirations ‘solutionism’ (Morozov 2013, 5).

The incompatibility between “definite computable solutions” in the face of “all complex situations” and a literary approach to the world is self-evident. Further on Morozov resorts to an amusing as well enlightening comparison to explain the thought-process of solutionist thinkers:

[They] have a very poor grasp not just of human nature but also of the complex practices that this nature begets and thrives on. It’s as if the solutionists have never lived a life of their own and learned everything they know from books – and those books weren’t novels but manuals for refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and washing machines” (Morozov 2013, 5).

This is a particularly interesting comparison first because an Internet pioneer assesses that the Internet way of thinking cannot come from experience and cannot come from fiction or literature either. We will see later that the algorithm on which the Internet is built is incompatible with literature as “a drama of choice” certainly if we see the evolution of a character as “a drama of choice” to quote Harari’s description to which we’ll return later. On the Internet a character cannot be faced by choice, the algorithm decides in his stead. Morozov’s comparison is interesting also for showing that literature based on the description of technology doesn’t read like a novel or doesn’t have the necessary qualities to produce aesthetic fiction, it explains why *Zero K* and its focus on cryonics read precisely like a “manual for refrigerators”. We’ll see further that this technology-based literature resembles (depressingly) a user’s manual.

The further stage in Internet solutionism or salvation is contemplation which comes out of the cosmic sense related to what the Greeks called the *thambos*, again fairly close to what Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* defined as the Numinous, a form of attraction towards the supernatural or a form of fascination mixed with “anxiety” and “awe”, the element of the “tremendum”. We will see later that it is very much the kind of feeling which the Internet has inspired non digital native writers with, as if by turning on their screens they were faced with a burning bush offering them a set of incomprehensible laws. To Teilhard de Chardin, though, the mystical vibration which is the cosmic sense, or which derives from it, is closely linked to a scientific vibration.

At the same time the coming together of “persons” tends towards a form of unanimity which finds its full development and achievement in a “super global person”, created by the interaction of all the various people. Humanity becomes thus a “super person”, this is the stage when the noosphere becomes active. Thought comes to the surface of the Earth: “Becoming one immense mirror” (Teilhard de Chardin. 1963, 300). For the first time, humanity as a whole can discover its own image, still according to Teilhard de Chardin.

The general collective thought will create a planetary brain, and humanity as a whole becomes a superorganism, a superperson. This is “Evolution” according to Teilhard de Chardin. One can see already how the concepts of crowd wisdom, and the Singularity can see themselves as the echo of, or the heir to, such mystical thinking.

If the ultimate person in Teilhard de Chardin is the figure of Christ, it is naturally not the same for the Silicon Valley thinkers. Yet they have in common the notion that any form of “regression” that is anything which goes against this movement is a “sin” against Evolution. As Morozov states: in the eyes of the Internet solutionists, “we are living through unique, revolutionary times, in which the previous truths no longer hold” (Morozov 2013, 15).

Teilhard de Chardin, together with his improbable heirs, believes that in order to progress, Evolution must destroy a lot of things: “*Puissance insatiable et dévastatrice de tout ce qui a fait son temps*” (Teilhard de Chardin. 1997, 117).²⁶ For Teilhard de Chardin technological progress was about to build a huge human community. But this evolution would be difficult and men benefitting from a greater freedom would at first find themselves disoriented because of their traditional cultural heritage. In that sense, his notion of Evolution

²⁶ “Insatiable power bringing the destruction of everything that has done its time” [As a professional translator I have used my own translation when it didn’t exist]. 1997. *Lettres de Voyage*. Paris: Grasset. 117.

is close to a revolution because Teilhard de Chardin believed that these traditional cultural values and reflexes had to be destroyed for this Evolution to happen and to fight regression which appeared to him as the greatest danger threatening humanity. We see easily how such a conception can be considered by an Internet zealot as the mirror image of his way of thinking.

The lesson is that whether they want it or not, men have to adapt. Teilhard de Chardin was worried about the conservatism of the Church he belonged to. The shrinking of the planet which meets the notion of the Global Village first expressed by Marshall McLuhan is the vector for the transformation of the planet.

For Teilhard de Chardin, the explosion of media and the transparency of communication will allow the human multitude to create a greater union which will lift it to a higher spiritual plane, such is the destiny of the noosphere. Technology, and technical knowledge are the basis for the creation of an ever larger noosphere, this is a phase of evolution towards the creation of humanity as a “superorganism”. And here again we see how Kurzweil and the geekish²⁷ world can make themselves the distant echo of Teilhard de

²⁷ We'll see later how “geek”, “geekish” and “geekishness” are the terms by which the Internet faithfuls and particularly Internet natives define themselves, their activities and their identities. It even describes a form of particular relationship to the computer screen made of fascination and dependence, certainly identification. The Internet version of the *Cambridge Dictionary* gives these definitions: “1. Someone who is intelligent but not fashionable or popular. 2. Someone who is very interested in a particular subject and knows a lot about it.” Whereas Wikipedia, the ultimate anonymous reference (which we will study at length) when it comes to finding a self-representation of the Internet and its apostles or practitioners, defines Geek in the following terms: “The word Geek is a slang term originally used to describe eccentric or non-mainstream people. In current use, the word typically connotes an expert or enthusiast obsessed with a hobby or intellectual pursuit, with a general pejorative meaning of a ‘peculiar person, especially one who is perceived to be overly intellectual, unfashionable, boring, or socially awkward’. So far, Wikipedia quotes the definition given by Webster’s dictionary, but as it did with the definition of the Internet itself which we quoted earlier, Wikipedia, then redefines the word in its own terms: ‘Some use the term self-referentially without malice or as a source of pride often referring simply to someone who is interested in a subject (usually intellectual or complex) for its own sake’. Incidentally this is how Internet enthusiasts refer to themselves, not least, Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, as we will see later, creator of the ultimate web 2.0 creature from a commercial and cultural point of view. And just as it did when it defined the Internet, Wikipedia sings the praises of the Geek, as the ultimate Internet apostle, under the heading ‘Impact’: ‘Technologically oriented geeks, in particular, now exert a powerful influence over the global economy and society. Whereas previous generations of geeks tended to cooperate in research departments, laboratories and support functions, now they increasingly occupy senior corporate positions, and wield considerable commercial and political influence.’ Here again we have the constitutive elements of success according to the Internet culture: money, power and conquest. Wikipedia goes on making itself the echo of the Singularity and technological messianic thought, presenting the Geek as a new specimen in human evolution: ‘According to Mark Roeder the rise of the geek represents a new phase of human evolution. Mark Roeder being the author of *Unnatural Selection. Why the Geeks will Inherit the Earth* (2013), a title in perfect harmony in its content and its religious overtone with everything we have seen so far regarding the theology and ideology of the Internet. In this title, there is an obvious pun between Geek and Meek as Mark Roeder suggests ‘that the high-tech environment of the Anthropocene favours people with geek-like traits, many of whom are on the autism spectrum, ADHD or dyslexia.’ Kera. 2015. “NPR interview with Mark Roeder”. [Assessed May 26, 2019]. <http://www.kera.org/2015/01/07/nerd-nation/>.

Chardin's thought: the exponential nature of technology is similar to the spontaneous organization of the living creating a brain which is the progeny of humanity but whose power is much greater than that of its progenitor. Still, the difference between Teilhard de Chardin and the Internet zealot is that to him, the creation of that noosphere as the Earth's brain, as it were, is not as important in itself as the consciousness that such a brain should produce. Individualism, which as McLuhan defined it is a product of the Gutenberg technology, is to be destroyed, for terrestrial life to progress through "more perfect units" searching for a common soul. These units of a new type are informal groups, spontaneous associations, destroying the more rigid frame on which social organization rests.

The concepts of "crowd wisdom", and the long tail, developed by Lessig can be considered as the echo or the realization of such notions. In a sense this confirms again McLuhan's notion of a retribalization of society through electric technology. And, indeed, for Teilhard de Chardin, progress in our knowledge and science, will create a wiser management of the earth through that collective soul, which can subjugate instability and the divergence of individuals. Teilhard de Chardin naturally doesn't see it as retribalization but calls it socialisation, it's a unifying instinct, a "*désir fondamental, têtu, inguérissable, d'union totale par où vivent toutes les poésies, tous les panthéismes, toutes les saintetés*" (Teilhard de Chardin 1992, 119).²⁸

In contrast, in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan does attribute to the culture of the electromagnetic field a retribalization of societies rather than the capability to recreate a messianic universalization: "Certainly, the electromagnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous 'field' in all human affairs so that the human family now exists under conditions of a 'global village'. He adds, analyzing Chardin's notion of the "noosphere": "This externalization of our senses creates what de Chardin calls the 'noosphere' or a technological brain of the world. Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library, the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as in an infantile piece of science fiction" (McLuhan 1962, 32).

In 1995, in an article entitled *A Globe Clothing Itself with a Brain*,²⁹ the libertarian magazine *Wired* which constantly refers to Marshall McLuhan, presents Teilhard de Chardin,

²⁸ "A fundamental stubborn, incurable desire for a total union through which live all poetry, all pantheisms, all saintliness" [My translation].

²⁹ Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg, « A Globe, Clothing Itself with a Brain », *Wired*, 1st June 1995, <https://www.wired.com/1995/06/teilhard/>.

(dismissively described as “An obscure Jesuit Priest”), as the inspiration behind Al Gore, Mario Cuomo, the American Democrat, and the Cyber bard Perry Barlow, Internet libertarian and former lyricist for the Grateful Dead. “Teilhard de Chardin, writes Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg, saw the Net coming more than half a century before it arrived.” The author salutes the coming of the retribalization implied in the development of the noosphere explaining “this time, the tribe comes together on a global playing field”. It is significant that the space created by the Internet should be described as “a playing field” and as we’ll see later that the notion of the game is essential and central to the type of relationship which the Internet establishes between people on social media and between reader and writer from a literary perspective. Internet literature is conceived primarily by its authors and readers as a game, more precisely as an extension of a video game as it is read on a screen. As we’ll see later what is at stake in Internet literature is “fun” and the critical approach to it is a set of rules as in any game or a user’s manual.

The Net, or Cyberspace, is here presented as the “primary tool” by means of which to reach Teilhard de Chardin’s third phase in his theory of evolution.” At this point, the earth needs humanity to build the noosphere. As we become conscious of our group mind, a new relationship with the earth emerges. When that happens, Teilhard writes, “we have the beginning of a new age. The earth gets a new skin. Better still, it finds its soul” (Teilhard de Chardin 1992, 119).

Still, it is to be surmised that Teilhard de Chardin would have been rather surprised to find that, after all, the noosphere under the guise of the Internet is constituted of a considerable amount of pornography.³⁰

³⁰ It is extremely difficult to give an actual percentage of the Internet traffic directly linked to pornography. About 4% of websites are pornographic according to the BBC “Web porn: Just how much is there?”, a survey dated 1st of July 2013 (Mark Ward, “Web porn: Just how much is there?”, *The BBC*, 1st of July 2013: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-23030090>). The same survey assesses that 37% is a statistic regularly quoted regarding the amount of the Internet traffic concerned with pornography. Other statistics vary considerably. 37% is already a remarkable figure. Besides, the exact figure is not as important as the fact that the Internet is, in its functioning, inherently pornographic, both exhibitionist and voyeuristic, as we’ll see when we come to study the impact of *Fifty Shades of Grey* on publishing and the type of writing to have come out of the Internet.

9. “Ceci tuera cela”³¹ or Eric Raymond’s Improbable Paternity of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Whereas Kurzweil with the Singularity was the mystic of the noosphere, Eric Raymond, another of Teilhard de Chardin’s improbable heirs, has become its influential legislator and economist, opposing two types of culture, and two types of economics in relationship to culture in a book entitled *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* (1997). The Internet represents the Bazaar culture in that scheme of things and is opposed to an institutional hierarchical form of culture as symbolized by the Cathedral. In his work, Raymond introduces the concept of the Internet as a “space”, an unchartered land, which will be a recurring theme in Internet literature. In the text which answers *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, *Homesteading the Noosphere* (1997),³² Raymond introduces a very important idea to understand the conception of the Internet by those who “live it” as it were, and which resides in the very title of this founding text: “homesteading the noosphere”.³³

The contradiction between Teilhard de Chardin’s notion of the noosphere and the idea of homesteading is self-evident. But here again we find the idea of the Internet as an unexplored continent or rather, galaxy, which is asking to be charted, and which calls for new

³¹ “This will kill that”. We will explain later in the chapter the significance of this reference to Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831).

³² Eric Raymond. 1998. « Homesteading the Noosphere », *First Monday*. <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/1474/1389/14789>.

³³ Homesteading refers to the homestead acts of 1862 and afterwards in American history. The first of which was passed by Abraham Lincoln and allowed any person of American nationality to seize government land or land which didn’t belong to anybody, mostly west of the Mississippi. Homesteaders became an American myth of the pioneering days, living a free and frugal life, imbued with Protestant values which can easily be assimilated to a roundhead Puritan view of the world (see Christopher Hill on the English Revolution, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), particularly, on the Diggers and Levellers, an important reference for Internet enthusiasts). What is important in the reference to homesteaders is that they were supposed to grab land which didn’t belong to anybody. The same idea applies to the Internet when it comes to fighting copyright and intellectual property. The idea underlying the “homesteading of the Internet” is that any information or creation one finds on the Internet doesn’t belong to anybody in particular and is up for grabs. “Homesteading the Internet” has become a notion which the Internet itself and its “practitioners” or apostles have made their own. And again, Wikipedia offers a definition of “homesteading” adaptable to its purpose and to the notions which sustain web 2.0 As it did with the definition of the “Internet” and that of “geek”, Wikipedia applies a moral judgement and sings the praises of the subject which it aims at defining. It starts by warning the reader that he should not confuse homesteading with the homestead act or with homestead principle. It considers that homesteading is “a lifestyle of self-sufficiency”. After a historical reminder which doesn’t exactly make clear why homesteading and homestead acts must not be assimilated, Wikipedia concludes, under the title “An economic choice”: “Many homesteaders express deep satisfaction with their standard of living and feel that their lifestyle is healthier and more rewarding than more conventional patterns of living.” Homesteading has in common with the Internet that it is inherently a form of expansion. In that sense the geek which we’ve already met becomes the modern electronic version of the Oklahoman homesteader.

laws of property: homesteading. Again the basis of these laws and the “customs” which rule them take their origin in a peculiar spirituality or religion, establishing laws and customs to organize the “territory”. Raymond defines his project as trying to “deduce interesting things about the hacker culture and its customs” (Raymond 1997, 1).

It is significant that Raymond should have chosen the Cathedral as the symbol of what is to be destroyed by the Bazaar and it is reminiscent of that episode in Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris* when a scholar meditating on the first printed book to appear in his library of Incunabula muses while looking at the Cathedral: “*Ceci tuera cela*” (Hugo 2019, 43).

Here within the logics of the reversal of the process started by the Gutenberg technology, we can say: “*Cela tuera ceci.*”

The cathedral which is an encyclopedia in stone is destined to be killed by the encyclopedia in paper which in the eye of Raymond represents a new Cathedral: a hierarchy, a structure set in stone indeed without the fluidity of the electronic technology. Besides, the cathedral represents besides a Catholic form of theology to be replaced by what Raymond sees as (erroneously as we’ll see) a “reformed” – in all senses of the term – spirituality, based on the participation of the community of the faithful.

The theories of Raymond establish the link between this mystical view of the Internet and what he terms the “open source”. He claims Locke and the Anglo-Saxon common law or theory of land tenure as the basis of his theory of property applied to the Internet or noosphere. Like Anglo-Saxon law, it is based on “custom”. In that sense, while claiming an affiliation with Locke,³⁴ he in fact invokes a medieval pre-Gutenberg conception of law and property to try and abolish copyright and intellectual property as it has been practiced to this day.

What these theories reveal is the impossibility to conceive of books as a merchandise and even less so their content, be it literature or any other form of content. And yet, books

³⁴ How close the philosophy of Locke is to that of Raymond is open to debate, to say the least, not to mention the philosophy of the Kwakiutl chieftains to whom Raymond also refers as the foundation of his theories, as creators and guardians of an egalitarian society. But Locke is superficially a very convenient figure to invoke to justify a libertarian stance on copyright and intellectual property. For that purpose, Locke can be seen as a revolutionary, a man of tolerance and a proto-libertarian, either from a spiritual point of view or as a precursor of a capitalist society built on the constant amassing of wealth. The notion of property derives from his own version of the social contract built from the state of nature. It is open to so many interpretations that one can see in it a justification of the end of personal intellectual property, especially if one sees in the arguments of Locke that allowing the appropriation of property without consent is justified if it has beneficial consequences for the preservation of mankind. We cannot develop here the relevance of Locke’s philosophy to the Internet theoreticians, we must be content to conclude that it is a convenient reference in its simplification. On this subject see John Locke. 1975. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press and John Locke. 1960. *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

have always been a form of merchandise as Lucien Febvre reminds us in *L'Apparition du livre* in the chapter very aptly entitled: “*Le livre, cette marchandise*”.

Dès l'origine, l'imprimerie apparut comme une industrie régie par les mêmes lois que les autres industries, et le livre une marchandise que des hommes fabriquaient avant tout pour gagner leur vie – même lorsque, comme les Alde ou les Estienne, ils étaient en même temps des humanistes et des savants. Il leur fallait donc trouver d'abord des capitaux pour pouvoir travailler et imprimer des livres susceptibles de satisfaire leur clientèle, et cela à des prix propres à soutenir la concurrence. Car le marché du livre fut toujours semblable à tous les autres marchés. Aux industriels qui fabriquaient le livre: les typographes; aux commerçants qui le vendaient: les libraires et les éditeurs, se posaient des problèmes de prix et de financement (Febvre 1958, 165).³⁵

What the concepts of homesteading, crowdsourcing and “the bazaar” achieve is to do away with the idea that the book is an object and a merchandise and that the computer, the glass screen can offer a cosmic vision of what literature contains and “all possible thoughts” (an expression to which we will return later), the computer becomes a dematerialized territory, or a galaxy, which again does away with the notion of industry and manufacturing and enables Raymond to claim the paternity both of Locke and of the homesteaders. What comes through is the incapability of the open source apostle’s and of Raymond to conceive that books were made by people who had to earn a living. This is where the “gift culture” as conceived of by Raymond comes in, as we’ll see. This incompatibility also comes from the contradiction between what is seen as the sacredness of knowledge and a commercial or industrial approach to it, and indeed by dematerializing the receptacle of knowledge and by getting rid of the craftsmen of knowledge, the Internet creates, in Raymond’s view, a world of pure abstraction, which can yet be grabbed (by homesteaders).

Having defined the Internet as a dematerialized territory, it also becomes an extension of land according to an ancient tribal conception, a sacred space. “This theory,” writes Raymond, like hacker customs evolved organically in a context where central authority was weak and non-existent. [sic] It developed over a period of a thousand years from Norse and

³⁵ “The Book as a Commodity. From its earliest days printing existed as an industry, governed by the same rules as any other industry; the book was a piece of merchandise which men produced before anything else to earn a living, even when they were (as with the Aldus and the Estiennes) scholars and humanists at the same time. Thus it was vitally necessary from the outset to find enough capital to start work and then to print only those titles which would satisfy a clientele, and that at a price which would withstand competition. The marketing of books was similar to that of other products. To the manufacturers who created the books – the printers – and to the business men who sold them – the booksellers and publishers – finance and costing were the key problems. Those problems need to be studied if we are to understand how they determined the structure of the whole trade.” Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin. 2010. *The Coming of the Book*. London: Verso (translated by David Gerard, p. 109).

Germanic tribal laws.”³⁶ Compared with the American frontier, the noosphere is a wild lawless place which becomes “the space of all possible thoughts”. (Although this concept of total intellectual freedom might at first sights seem seductive, the question raised by this formulation is: are we dealing with a euphemism which actually means “anything goes” and “everything can be considered on the same level”? We will answer that question from a literary point of view when we deal with the Internet literature and the notion of literary quality, particularly when analyzing the effect of *Fifty Shades of Grey* on publishing and the notion of “literary success” coming out of the Internet.)

Being peopled and conquered by tribes, namely hackers, organized as such, the Internet, lives on a “gift culture” opposed to hierarchies. In the gift culture, according to Raymond who describes himself on his website as the “tribal historian” of the Internet hacker’s culture, social status is determined not by what you acquire but by what you give away. Amongst the examples of people who have achieved this status in this way, he cites the Kwakiutl chieftains, the Kwakiutl being a tribe of native Americans from British Columbia, and the multimillionaire philanthropists and the hackers, with their “long hours of effort to produce high quality open source code.”³⁷

This mythology of conquest and tribal organization constantly feeds Internet literature, as we’ll see in more detail, be it Neal Stephenson’s *The Mongoliad*, (2012), a pseudo medieval epic belonging to the heroic fantasy genre, or *A Fire upon the Deep* (1992), Vernor Vinge’s Space Opera. We will not dwell further on the latter due to its lack of literary quality or ambition. On the other hand *The Mongoliad* is worth analyzing for its defects (it probably has for its readers some “entrainment quality” as is testified by its commercial success, but this is not the aspect of the work which interests us here). *The Mongoliad* can be described as a crusade of western forces against eastern empires. The “good characters” are the westerners, the “bad” are the others. It is an action novel, a succession of battles which reads like a video game, should one consider that a video game can be read. Although it has no literary value and in all fairness doesn’t aspire to have any, *The Mongoliad* is significant in illustrating the contradiction within the Internet libertarian’s or hacker’s vision of himself. Raymond’s reworking of a Rousseauist noble savage in a technological age produces in fact a new conquistador.

³⁶ Eric Raymond. « Homesteading the Noosphere ».

³⁷ *Idem*.

In his preface to *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, Raymond describes “the people who proudly call themselves “hackers” as a “tribe” (Raymond 1999, XI).

These are the people who proudly call themselves “hackers” – not as the term is now abused by journalists to mean a computer criminal, but in its true and original sense of an enthusiast, a tinkerer, a problem solver, an expert.

The tribe of hackers after decades spent on obscurity struggling against hard technical problems and the far greater weight of mainstream indifference and dismissal, has recently begun to come into its own. They built the Internet; they built Unix; they built the World Wide Web; they’re building Linux and open source software today; and following the great Internet explosion of the mid-1990s, the rest of the world is finally figuring out that it should have been paying more attention to them all along (Raymond 1999, 12).

The language here, stresses both the innocence, and more precisely the “original” innocence of the hacker which is inherited first from the tribal structure of their identity , “the proud tribe”, and a sense of persecution, assimilating them to superior beings “problem solvers” in fact, messiahs or apostles and “builders”, bringing solutions to an indifferent world, finally succeeding after years of preaching in the desert suffering under the “far greater weight of mainstream indifference and dismissal”. Now they have been proven right in the eyes of “the rest of the world” which sees how wrong it had been to ignore them for so long. Now they have seen the light. Should anyone doubt it, one can read the subtitle of the first chapter written in Biblical style and presenting itself as the ultimate form of revelation: “In the beginning, there were real programmers.” By a system of echoes with “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, the programmer is a new god creating a new world, built, on gift culture, inspired by a “proudly” “tribal” conception of society and exchanges.

The paradox and self-contradiction of this conception of knowledge and its exchanges or commerce is, as we’ll see, that it harks back to an aristocratic conception of the writer, dating back to the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth century when it would have been considered vulgar to write for anything other than glory.

The change of mentality is directly linked to the Reformation and the end of the interdiction of usury or lending money with interest as proclaimed by Calvin. On this subject, Jacques Boncompain writes in *La Révolution des auteurs*.

Prendre la mesure de la révolution des auteurs suppose de garder à l'esprit que, jusqu'au XVII^e siècle, la valeur sociale dominante est l'honneur, non la richesse dont l'auteur ne peut parler sans déroger. La Réforme, avec l'autorisation du prêt à intérêt, pose un regard neuf sur l'argent. Les philosophes, Rousseau mis à part, ne le condamnent pas et nouent des alliances avec des financiers dont ils respectent le pouvoir. Selon Diderot, la richesse permet à l'homme de s'épanouir, de jouir de la beauté en toutes choses, d'être un esthète: “J'aurais

donc, écrit-il, des poètes, des philosophes, des peintres, des statuaires, des magots de la Chine; en un mot tout le produit d'une culture." Voltaire rompt aussi le tabou en faisant de l'argent l'instrument de son indépendance. Mme du Deffand, loin de l'en blâmer, l'en loue, le 28 octobre 1759 : "Savez-vous, monsieur ce qui me prouve la supériorité de votre esprit et qui fait de vous un grand philosophe ? C'est que vous êtes devenu riche. Tous ceux qui disent qu'on peut être heureux dans la pauvreté sont menteurs, des fous et des sots." [...]

Beaumarchais, fils de protestant, disciple de Voltaire jusqu'en sa fortune, illustre ce changement de mentalité. Calvin avait levé l'interdiction du prêt à intérêt par cette question: "Pourquoi ne permettrait-on pas aux possesseurs d'une somme d'argent d'en retirer une somme quelconque quand on permet au propriétaire d'un champ stérile de le donner à bail moyennant un fermage?" Beaumarchais et Sedaine auront recours eux aussi à la métaphore du champ pour fonder la propriété dramatique et établir ainsi les auteurs sur un pied nouveau. La Société des auteurs doit sa naissance et son exceptionnelle longévité à la rencontre d'un fils d'horloger, et d'un fils d'orfèvre injustement méconnu, Nicolas Framery (Boncompain 2001, 21).³⁸

The contradiction at the heart of the Internet thinking when it comes to copyright is that the same references are used to explain and to claim the emergence of a libertarian economy freed from property and, especially, intellectual property while at the same time, as everybody uses the metaphor of land and agriculture, the historical inheritance is that of the printing press, the Reformation, interests, and the foundation of capitalism as explained both by Weber and Bataille in *La Part maudite* (1949).

Although Bataille points out the criticism which have been expressed towards Weber's theory, especially by Tawney in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1947). It is remarkable that both Bataille and Eric Raymond use a very similar language to describe the Internet and Capitalism.

³⁸ To measure the scope of the authors' revolution, one must keep in mind that until the seventeenth century, the most important social value was honour rather than wealth which an author cannot evoke without betraying his principles. The Reformation, by allowing loans with interest provides a new outlook on money. Philosophers, with the exception of Rousseau, don't condemn it and build alliances with financiers whose power they respect. According to Diderot, 'wealth allows man to be fulfilled, to enjoy the beauty of all things. I would thus have', he writes, 'poets and philosophers, painters, sculptors, treasures from China. In a word all the products of a culture'. Voltaire breaks away from this taboo, making money the means of his independence. Mme du Deffand, far from blaming him, praises him for it 'the 28th of October 1759: 'Do you know, sir, what proves the superiority of your mind, which has made you a great philosopher? The fact that you have become rich. All those who pretend that one can be happy in poverty are liars, fools or sots...' [...]

Beaumarchais, the son of a Protestant and a disciple of Voltaire including in matters of wealth, exemplifies this change of attitude. Calvin had lifted the interdiction of loans with interest by asking the question: 'Why wouldn't one allow the owners of a certain sum of money to produce some sum of money with it when one allows the owner of a sterile field to rent it to a tenant?' Beaumarchais and Sedaine also use the metaphor of the field to establish intellectual property on plays, thus giving authors a new footing. The Société des auteurs, owes its birth and exceptional longevity to the meeting of the son of a clockmaker 'son and of an unjustly forgotten jeweller's son, Nicolas Framery [My translation].

“À deux mondes religieux différents ont répondu des types d’économie opposés : les liens de l’économie précapitaliste au catholicisme romain ne sont pas moins forts que ceux de l’économie moderne au protestantisme” (Bataille 1949, 100).³⁹

Bataille here assesses the link between a type of religion and a particular form of theology to a particular form of economics, which is what Eric Raymond does for the Internet and the Gift Culture and it also what Kurzweil had done by establishing the Internet and its economy as a new form of life after death. The similarity goes further when they both use (like Calvin) the image of new territory and the idea of land exploitation: “*Un développement est appelé par une ouverture de territoires inexploités, par l’apparition de produits nouveaux, d’où procèdent de nouveaux besoins*” (Bataille 1949, 102).⁴⁰

He establishes the link between a medieval form of spirituality and theology with the creation of the Cathedral as symbol of that theology: “*Ce ne sont pas les théories des docteurs qui définissaient la société économique mais le besoin qu’elle eût par agrément, de cathédrales et d’abbayes, de prêtres et de religieux oisifs. En d’autres termes, la possibilité d’œuvres pies agréables à Dieu (l’agrément dans la société médiévale ne peut nominalement être celui de l’homme) déterminait le mode de consommation des ressources disponibles*” (Bataille 1949, 103).⁴¹

Bataille also insists (like Raymond) on consuming the exceeding wealth uselessly, by which he means that this wealth musn’t come into the process of an economic exchange: “*La religion est l’agrément qu’une société donne à l’usage des richesses excédantes. [...] Mais justement, elles ne servent sur ce plan qu’à la condition d’être gratuites, d’être d’abord des consommations inutiles de richesses*” (Bataille 1949, 109).⁴²

In describing this phenomenon, Bataille reverses the process described by Raymond, because although Raymond subscribes to a pre-Gutenberg form of theology, he identifies it with the bazaar. Yet here again, we see here the contradiction at the heart of Raymond’s

³⁹ Two varying types of economic models have answered two different religious worlds: the links between pre-capitalism and Roman Catholicism are no less strong than those between modern economy and Protestantism [My translation].

⁴⁰ A new development is created by the opening of unexploited territories, by technical changes, by the apparition of new products creating in turn new needs [my translation].

⁴¹ The economy wasn’t defined by the theories of doctors, but the need it felt, by agreement, for cathedrals and abbeys, for idle priests and religious people. In other terms the possibility of creating pious works meeting God’s agreement (agreement in Medieval society cannot be given by man) generally determined the mode of consumption of available resources [my translation].

⁴² Religion is the agreement which a society gives to the use of an excess of wealth. But it is useful on this level only if it is gratuitous, if it is first and foremost a useless consumption of wealth [my translation].

thinking because nothing could be more remote from a gift culture than the bazaar, even if the bazaar does not represent an institution. In fact the Internet is a form of capitalistic economy placed within a medieval spirituality, thus blurring the very nature of this economy. Rather than a gift culture, as we will see, the Internet builds a dominant economy based on monopolies. Again, where literature is concerned, Amazon and the way it functions will offer the perfect illustration of this contradiction.

Yet, as we will see later, and as it appears in a fairly obvious fashion, just as the bazaar has nothing to do with gift culture, nothing could be more remote from this same “gift culture” than Amazon which as we will see is one of the perfect products of web 2.0.

The opposition of views will be found again amongst Internet writers and the romantic or aristocratic notion of the poverty of the author as a guarantee of his literary legitimacy will resurface as we’ll see later.

According to Raymond, by opposition with this more modern and bourgeois (in the sense of non-aristocratic) notion of copyright, the gift culture, the open source culture, unspoiled by exchange economy is characterized, still, by its purity. How else could it be, in its spiritual context? Status is here achieved by peer-repute which, according to Raymond’s thought, is equivalent and put on the same linguistic plane as “honour”, “ethical integrity,” “piety”. Although he will occasionally describe himself as a “nerd” in the Internet literature, the hacker sees himself as a modern day knight crusading for freedom in an unconquered territory.

The hacker would not describe himself as a conquistador or conqueror whom he resembles considerably because he is totally unaware of the extent of the destruction he leaves in his wake. As a “solutionist”, the hacker can be likened culturally and economically to a Pizarro, Cortez and Aguire of culture all rolled into one, much more than to the Indians whom Raymond wishes to resemble.

In *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, Raymond describes this activity as a “transcendent need”. The crusade is again a pre-Gutenberg medieval concept, it is a spiritual as much as a war-like quest and it is this dual aspect which feeds Neal Stephenson’s book mentioned above, *The Mongoliad*. If the hacker has to be akin to a Knight Templar he also has to be initiated into the “mysteries” of hacker culture. In the chapter entitled “The value of humility”,⁴³ Raymond explains that in the hackers’ community tribal elders “are the guardians of the

⁴³ Eric Raymond, “Homesteading the Noosphere”.

hacker's morality. To be accepted in the community one is initiated into the "mysteries" of hacker culture, and Raymond points out that we are dealing with "mysteries in a religio-mystical sense". When one is initiated into certain technical mysteries, the "taboos" of the hacker world (such as stealing someone else's idea to build one's own reputation, in the non-exchange economy of the gift), become self-evident.

Because of its messianic nature and religious essence, the ultimate literature which the Net can produce should logically be mystical or a new form of theology redefining power, glory, the future, the soul, immortality and life after death. In that sense Kurzweil's book, *The Singularity is Near*, is the perfect illustration of what Internet literature should be. Similarly, Geoff Gomez's book with its prophetic tone and naïve enthusiasm is the mystical counterpart of that literature. If Gomez's book, *Print is Dead*, has one quality, it is in its title, which stresses (consciously or not) that the Internet in its nature and in its ambition doesn't aim to extend what print has done, it isn't even a counterpart to print, it doesn't exist alongside print, but it reverses by its nature what print has done from the Renaissance onwards, it reverses the consequences of the invention of the printing press and takes them in the opposite direction as it were, from a theological, philosophical and literary point of view.

Fiction as we have known it even in its postmodern form, as the fictional counterpart to the critical notion of the "death of the author"⁴⁴ and as a representation of a disintegrated self, cannot exist in a world which is based on anonymity and the collective consciousness. We'll come back to this idea when we deal with non-digital native writers such as Jeanette Winterson and their failed attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable.

In fact, the war on copyright and intellectual property is yet another proof, if not the ultimate proof, that the Internet creates a reversal of the process started by print and, in this particular case, print as a factor of fixity in texts and literature. Thus, the Internet and its apostles, like Raymond, recreate a medieval conception of intellectual property and authorship which, as we'll see, is incompatible with the place of the author in humanist and modern literature, that is to say, a non-existent conception of intellectual property and authorship.

⁴⁴ I refer here to Roland Barthes' article, *The Death of the Author*, first published in *Aspen Magazine* (1967 n° 5-6) in English and then translated into French in *Mantéa*, in 1968 and republished in *Le Bruissement de la langue* (1984) in which Barthes declares that the birth of the reader comes from the "death of the author" in the sense that the reader by the very act of reading recreates the text and takes it away from the paternity of an author as it were. The contradiction I would like to stress here is that for this author to die in such a way, he has to have existed and written the text first in a way he will not exist in the context of the Internet, because in the context of the Internet, the author starts in anonymity, as part of a larger entity than the self.

Both McLuhan and Eisenstein can bear witness to this reversal or counter-evolution, not so much akin to a tribal chief's way of envisioning literature, as Raymond would have us believe, to a form of anthropology vaguely reminiscent of a Hollywood western (and not unlike the historical picture painted in *The Mongoliad*) but to a medieval conception which pre-dates intellectual property. "By 1500 legal fictions were already being devised to accommodate the patenting of inventions and the assignment of literary properties. Upon these foundations, a burgeoning bureaucracy would build a vast and complex legal structure" (Eisenstein 1979, 120).

In a footnote, Elizabeth Eisenstein stresses that a landmark in the history of literary property rights came in 1469 when a Venetian printer obtained the privilege of printing and selling a given book for a given interval of time.

Fixity, as established by the printing press, and which either Raymond or Gomez hope to do away with is also at the origin of the author as a character in cultural and literary life. The author born out of the fixity belongs to the Renaissance as opposed to the long tail, crowdsourcing, open source which belong to a new medieval age, *i.e.* the Internet age. Already in the wake of the invention of the printing press, the question of piracy, or open source, according to one's point of view, arose:

Competition over the right to publish a given text also introduced controversy over new issues involving monopoly and piracy. Printing forced legal definition of what belonged in the public domain. A literary 'Common' became subject to enclosure movements' and possessive individualism began to characterize the attitude of writers to their work. The terms 'plagiarism' and 'copyright' did not exist for the minstrel. It was only after printing that they began to hold significance for the author (Eisenstein 1979, 120).

In that sense, yet again, Raymond, by wanting to abolish copyright, makes the prophecy of the "death of the author" come true but in a very different way from the one envisaged by Roland Barthes. What appears with Raymond and the Internet is that the death of the author doesn't enlarge the field of the text, doesn't free it from interpretative tyranny, it simply kills the text by its dissolution into "open source", "crowd sourcing", "mix and match", unless one wants to see the future of literature as an ensemble of Biblical parables constantly open to interpretation or minstrelsy. In fact, through the Internet and its medieval conception of literature, the death of the author marks the death of literature, even in its post-modern and post-Barthesian conception.

As Elizabeth Eisenstein reminds us:

Personal celebrity is related to printed publicity at present. As later discussion will suggest, the same point may be applied to the past – in a manner that is especially relevant to debates over the difference between Medieval and Renaissance individualism. When dealing with these debates, it is useful to recall that both the eponymous inventor and personal authorship appeared at the same time and as a consequence of the same process (Eisenstein 1979, 121).

It is easy to infer that the reversal of this process will destroy the individualism of authorship and personal celebrity from which literature sprung and which it created from the Renaissance onwards.

The question raised by this debate is whether literature as we've known it since the Renaissance, that is associated with authorship, can survive without the individualism born out of print. The answer seems self-evident: no. If the “death of the author” conceived by Barthes gave criticism a new lease of life by freeing it from interpretation and from referring to an author, the “death of the author” as conceived by Eric Raymond in his capacity as spokesperson for electronic technology, is also the death of literature.

To quote once more Elizabeth Eisenstein on the subject:

The wish to see one's work in print (fixed forever with one's name in card files and anthologies) is different from the desire to pen lines that could never get fixed in a permanent form, might be lost forever, altered by copying, or – if truly memorable – be carried by oral transmission and assigned ultimately to 'anon'. Until it became possible to distinguish between composing a poem and reciting one, or writing a book and copying one; until books could be classified by something other than incipits; how could modern games of books and authors be played (Eisenstein 1979, 121).

In fact “lost forever, altered by copying, carried by oral transmission” is exactly what the open source and the long tail entail, because Derek Raymond and open source plus crowdsourcing apostles have a conception of book writing very close to that St. Bonaventura, the thirteenth century Franciscan quoted again by Elizabeth Eisenstein:

A Man might write the books of others, adding and changing nothing, in which case he is simply called a 'scribe' (*scriptor*). Another writes the work of others with additions which are not his own and he is called a compiler (*compilator*). Another writes both other's work and his own, but with others' work in principal place, adding his own for purposes of explanation and he is called a 'commentator' (*commentator*)... Another writes both his own work and others' but with his own work in principal place adding others' for purpose for confirmation; and such a man should be called an 'author' (*auctor*) (Eisenstein 1979, 122).

What is striking in this medieval classification is that a completely original composition doesn't come into the equation, which is what we found again in crowdsourcing

and the long tail, the ubiquitous intervention of “others” which becomes with the end of individualism, as defined by print, a form of tyranny of the majority. We’ll see with the new definition of literary success how this tyranny of the majority acts in defining literary quality or simply “quality” when we deal with “successes” coming out of the Internet, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

By opposition, print created new forms of authorship and literary property rights which “undermined older concepts of collective authority in a manner that encompassed not only biblical composition but also texts relating to philosophy, science and law” (Einsenstein 1979, 122).

In fact, the claim of creating freedom and “sharing” put forward by Raymond turns on its head the fact that the individualism born out of the fixity of the Gutenberg technology has given rise to a greater freedom of expression, notably from “collective authority” in all senses of the term “authority” namely what we have called earlier, the tyranny of the majority, one could even say, the tyranny of anonymity.

We will see later in an extension of this idea that, in the logic of the Internet, quantity equal quality.

III. Heaven and Hell. Amazon, the Economics of Literature and the Crusade Against Copyright

Just as the typewriter and the typewriter novel proved that the content of a book differs according to whether it is written to the rhythm of metal keys or that of the scratching of a quill on paper, I will try to demonstrate that the way the book is conceived economically and that even the way it is distributed, through a click rather than by a lorry, changes the way the page is filled, especially if the page we're talking about is not made of paper, and is more of a screen than a page.

In order to do this, we'll see first what the consequences of web 2.0, the second age of the coming of the Internet, have been on literature and texts and the way they have been conceived by the creators of web 2.0. We'll see how the notion of success in literature has evolved and we'll try to analyse the way non digital natives who have started their careers in the traditional publishing world deal from a literary point of view with the problem of being faced by a screen and by all that a screen can do (and which very often the author himself cannot do, as the screen contains greater technological knowledge than the author who is attempting to write directly or indirectly about technology).

1. Hell

Heaven, Paradise, the Garden of Eden cannot exist without their counterpart, this is a theological necessity or inevitability. Because of its theological roots, it was inevitable that the Internet would produce a series of *morality plays*, the first of which is the birth, growth, decline and fall of the darknet.

The darknet corresponds to the Internet as the image of a bright future already happening. The darknet, as its name suggests, is a mysterious entity which appeared in the seventies and whose activities were linked to dissidence and crime. It is the equivalent of Hell in the technological theology. Just as Satan was God's favourite angel, the darknet was originally born out of the same good intentions which characterized web 2.0, basically the desire to "open" creativity and to transform "cultural consumers" into "users". It is seen as the

product of the fight between the individual and the corporate giants. In the foreword to J.D. Lasica's book *Darknet*⁴⁵ (2005) subtitled *Hollywood's War Against the Digital Generation*, Howard Rheingold quotes Michael K. Powell addressing the National Press Club in 2004, heralding the new era, the "power to the people" promised by the new technology: "The visionary sermons of technology futurists seem to have materialized. No longer the stuff of science fiction novels, crystal balls and academic conferences, it is real... Technology is bringing more power to the people" (Lasica 2005, IX). We shall note again the vocabulary reminiscent of a new messianic coming through the incarnation of technology heralded by its prophets and manifesting itself in the real presence: "the visionary sermons", "it is real" (Lasica 2005, XI). The foreword ends on the injunction: "Spread the word", stressing once more, if necessary, that we are in the presence of a new gospel.

Unforeseen, or perhaps not, by these new apostles, as a space for alternative culture, the darknet went beyond the "freedom" and "power" and "glory" which it was supposed to embody and offered instead a space for camgirls, drug markets and snuff movies.

Running parallel to that form of "creativity", the darknet has been the ground for transhumanist thought, an intellectual movement very close to that of Kurzweil which aims at transforming the human condition through technology. Transhumanists believe in the compatibility of the human mind with technology and hardware and the perpetuation of humanity in a simulated reality called "posthuman goodhood". The main ideologue behind these theories is Frank Tipler who is again influenced by Teilhard de Chardin and the concept of the noosphere.⁴⁶

The literary illustration is again to be found in De Lillo's *Zero K*. as we've seen previously. Yet from a literary and artistic point of view, it is very difficult to distinguish the type of production it inspires from the invention of such characters as Superman or the heroes of Marvel Comics, in spite of the religious and philosophical pretensions of the genre.

⁴⁵ J. D. Lasica. 2005. *Darknet: Hollywood's War Against the Digital Generation*. Hoboken: Wiley.

⁴⁶ Frank J. Tipler, born in 1947, is a physics and mathematics teacher at MIT, he is the author of *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (1986) and *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* (1994). In both books Tipler illustrates his concept of the Omega point, influenced by Teilhard de Chardin and which consists in believing that the universe will eventually reach a point of unification. We will not analyse here at length the works of Tipler, let us just remember that his form of transhumanism has greatly influenced Internet enthusiasts such as Kurzweil, especially the idea that advanced technology can bring immortality to man. Tipler has received harsh criticism from physicists, among them M. Gardner, describing his theory as a theological concept disguised in the language of physics. Tipler's Final Anthropic Principle (FAP) has been renamed CRAP by Gardner, for "completely ridiculous anthropic principle". See Martin Gardner. 1986. "WAP, SAP, PAP, and FAP." *The New York Review of Books* 23, n° 8 (may): 22-25.

Unfortunately, it is in the nature of Edens, Heavens on earth and ideal societies, to yield bitter or dangerous fruit. The mystical content of Internet enthusiasts or believers, also explains the violence of their crusades against older forms of cultural organizations. One recognizes a sort of mystical or religious fanaticism in the crusade against the non-believers and their idol or false god: copyright. Here again, the Internet pioneer or missionary becomes a conquistador freeing us from our ignorance and sins and bringing us a new revelation, destroying economically and intellectually the literary world which had been built so far. It is not limited to the literary world. The literary world is only a collateral damage of this way of thinking, described by Jaron Lanier in the following terms under the title “Tribal Accession”:

one subculture of technologists has recently become more influential than the others. The winning subculture doesn't have a formal name, but I've sometimes called the members 'cybernetic totalists' or 'Digital Maoists'. The ascendant tribe is composed of the folks from the open culture/Creative Commons world, the Linux community, folks associated with the artificial intelligence approach to computer science, the web 2.0 people, the anticontext file sharers and remashers, and a variety of others. Their capital is Silicon Valley but they have power bases all over the world, wherever digital culture is being created (Lanier 2010, 17).

In the following chapters, we will analyse the thinking at the heart of “Creative Commons” and we will see that the most bitter fruit to have come out of the Internet today is Web 2.0, according to Internet thinkers such as Jaron Lanier. The advent of Web 2.0 marks the rift, one could say the fall from the idealistic early period of the Internet and the monster it has become today, marking the end of individuality and the triumph of anonymity.

2. Web 2.0 the end of individuality and the triumph of “crowd wisdom”

Web 2.0 was first defined by Tim O'Reilly in a paper delivered and posted on line in 2005, entitled “What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation on ILine of Software”⁴⁷. Web 2.0 was supposed to create an “architecture of participation”. The definition of web 2.0 came out of a brainstorming session during which O'Reilly and the other participants created two opposing lists, one representing what was: web 1.0, and the other what was to be: web 2.0.

⁴⁷ Tim O'Reilly. 2005. “What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation on Line of Software”. <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>).

According to O'Reilly himself, "the list went on and on". The main oppositions which interest us here are:

Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Mp3.com	Napster
Britannica Online	Wikipedia
Publishing	Participation

The paper establishes seven principles, acting as an informal law for the perfect web 2.0 business, including cultural businesses:

- Services, not packaged software, with cost-effective scalability.
- Control over unique, hard to recreate, data sources that get richer as more people use them.
- Trusting users as co-developers.
- Harnessing collective intelligence.
- Leveraging the long tail through customer self-service.
- Software above the level of a single device.
- Lightweight user interfaces, development models AND business models" (p. 37) companies.

O'Reilly explains should test their features against the list above to see if they are "worthy" of the name web 2.0. The language here indicates that to belong to web 2.0 is considered a distinction. These companies appear as the chosen ones to participate in the new world, also described as "a solar system of sites". References to heaven and space, as immaterial worlds, are numerous in the descriptions and definitions of the web by the technologists or the "pioneers", to use O'Reilly's own phrase. Similarly, one stores one's information, data etc. in a "cloud".

This architecture is essentially based on accumulation, representing in the field of knowledge and culture what De Tocqueville described as "the tyranny of the majority" when analyzing the functioning of democracy in America. In web 2.0 accumulation, mass, numbers make law and define truth. Web 2.0 is based on and develops the concept of "the long tail" *i.e.* "the collective power of the small sites that make up the bulk of the web's content" (O'Reilly 2005, 21).

This is again, in the field of cultural production, the expansion and abundance which Jaron Lanier defined as part of the Trinity of the Internet and which we have come across several times previously.

As Harari points out in the article in *The Atlantic* entitled “*Why Technology Favours Tyranny*”: “Already today, ‘truth’ is defined by the top results of Google search” (Harari 2018, 64-70). “Today” means here 2018. We’ll see how quantity and numbers have affected the notion of quality when applied to literature as well as the other fields mentioned here.

We will study here the consequences on what we call literature of the opposition mentioned above between publishing and participation, or more precisely between Encyclopedia Britannica and Wikipedia.

To achieve this new world, web 2.0 was to represent “a new conventional wisdom” according to O’Reilly and a systematic appropriation and democratization of content which was to establish the web as a “kind of global brain”, also known as the blogosphere (we can note in the word “kind” the vagueness of language we’ve noticed before in the texts and declarations of the “apostles” of web 2.0 and which heralds a numinous revelation).

This “kind of global brain” being again a “kind of” noosphere, we see here in the repletion of the concepts the hegemonic coherence of that way of thinking.

The advent of what Marshall McLuhan has named the Gutenberg Galaxy contributed to the spread of the Reformation through printing. Paradoxically, the Web 2.0 galaxy, which in this new war of the worlds has set out to destroy the Gutenberg galaxy, is imbued with the same spirit as that of the Reformation, or at least its apostles believe it to be so. The faithful participates, talking directly to God. There is no intermediary, no clergy between knowledge and the user, web 2.0 “harnesses collective intelligence”, “the wisdom of crowds” expressing itself in the “blogosphere”, a choir of voices which strongly reminds one of a Quaker meeting. “Blogs are indeed textual, writes Jeff Gomez, and yet their breezy conversational tone makes them seem like a friend whispering in your ear” (Gomez 2008, 85). Fervent technologists have in common that they hear voices. This is an integral part of the numinous experience and the call that follows. What is interesting in this remark about this new Society of Friends as represented by the “blogosphere”, is that Jeff Gomez in *Print is Dead*, betrays that blogs, Instagram, Facebook, and all the “breezy conversation” which occupies the “clouds” are not really part of a textual culture. They don’t belong to the Gutenberg Galaxy but represent a regression towards uncontrolled verbiage; they belong to a primitive society ruled more by sound and ear than by sight and literate culture. Similarly, the obsession with participation, the mix and match way of reading which Gomez prescribes, is a significant aspect of the non-literate culture, as Marshall McLuhan stresses in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, in the chapter entitled: “African Audiences Cannot Accept our Passive Consumer Role in the Presence of

Film” (McLuhan 1962, 38). He reminds us that a “basic aspect of any literate audience is its profound acceptance of a passive consumer role in the presence of book or film” (McLuhan 1962, 38).

He further quotes the works of Professor John Wilson of the African Institute of London University.

An African audience does not sit silently without participating. They like to participate so the person who shows the film and makes the live commentary must be flexible, stimulating and get responses. If there is a situation where a character sings a song, the song is sung and the audience is invited to join in. This audience participation had to be thought of as the film was made and opportunities provided for it (McLuhan 1962, 38).

The obsession with participation found amongst proponents of new forms of literature or editing, in an Internet environment is more than reminiscent of the reaction of the non-literate society when presented with a film or book.

The implication for books and literature, says Gomez is that a new generation of kids, weaned on being “prosumers” will want to interact with and to a degree create the material that they read.

Once books become more widely available electronically it’ll be just a matter of time before a generation raised on the user generated content of YouTube, mash-ups and machinima starts to interact similarly with its text. Whether that means cutting out the boring bits of *The Mill on the Floss*, or else remixing *Middlemarch* and *Middlesex* until the hermaphroditic saga of *Eugenides* is transported to the 19th century world of Elliott (Gomez 2008, 96-97).

What kind of literary sensibility could advocate such a way of approaching literature? What understanding of literature comes out of such ideas? And naturally warnings follow in the fire and brimstone style of the technological zealot, telling writers and publishers that they’d better obey (Gomez 2008, 97):

But there’s going to be no stopping upcoming generations from mixing and matching – and then sharing – the words that they read and writers and publishers need to start to get comfortable with that fact (not to mention that they should acknowledge that this will be a positive development). Or would they prefer that future generations not read this material at all?

In fact this sensibility is anything but literate. It represents a return to the narrative technique of primitive societies.

3. Crowdsourcing or Writing Upside Down

The demand for participation in the creative process is such that certain “authors”, should they be considered so, have resorted to the reverse principle in “crowdsourcing” their literary work. The creative process thus starts by turning to the public and asking them what they want to read. In that sense, this creative process echoes what we have seen as a reversal of the definition of the soul and a pre-Lateran conception of the general soul of humanity as opposed to a post-Lateran and post Gutenberg individualized soul. In this scheme of things, the writer becomes a priest, gathering voices, orchestrating a choir echoing the aspirations and demands of the community of the faithful or participants or society of brothers, rather than one who presents his own personal world view, story, self-expression to the readers.

The fact that writers and publishers are ordered to acknowledge the fact that the change is “positive” is a modern way of setting the participatory notion of literature within the frame of a struggle between good and evil, in which as we can see, good will prevail. Those who cling to their books will know the same fate as the readers in *Fahrenheit 451*.⁴⁸ The answer to Gomez’s last question could be yes, better not read, than read a mash-up or an insignificant and meaningless mix and match. The central premise of literature as a reflection of life itself, seen as a drama of choice, is now reduced to a drama of pick’n’mix.

This way of thinking, this aspiration to hegemony (which we’ll also find in the economics of Amazon for example) is another instance of the primitivism of the Internet militant or of the man who merges himself with the values and attitudes of the Internet world, as demonstrated by Ashley Montagu in his study *Man, his First Million Years* (1969). He stresses the link between non-literacy and the need for domination:

Non-literate man casts the net of thought over the whole world. [...] Most non-literate peoples are extreme realists; they are bent on bringing the world under control and many of their practices are devised to insure that reality will perform according to their bidding. [...] It is necessary to understand that non-literate peoples identify themselves much more closely with the world in which they live than do the literate peoples of the world. The more ‘literate’ people become, the more they tend to become detached from the world in which they live (Montagu 1957, 193-4).

⁴⁸ *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury is a work of science-fiction published in 1953, describing a society in which books are forbidden and readers persecuted. Firemen have as their main duty to burn books and houses in which books are stored. Readers have thus to commit whole books to memory in order to preserve them.

However, because of their influences, their identification with the more radical forms of the Reformation, from a spiritual as well as an economic perspective, be it the Levelers or Diggers or the Pilgrim fathers, the Internet zealots have created a bastardized spirituality mixing incompatible concepts, often due to a misunderstanding on their part of the nature of the literate world. We'll see when we study the literary works of non-digital natives trying to ape the Internet that we'll find the same type of misconception or misunderstanding going the other way and producing a sort of mirror effect.

From a spiritual point of view, in this new digitally mastered Renaissance, the public is inspired by the same spirit which spurred on the Diggers and the Levelers. "The world of web 2.0" is also the world of what Dan Gillmor calls "we the media"⁴⁹ (2004), a world in which "the former audience" (Gillmor 2004, 72) not a few people in a secret room, decides what's important. The language is here voluntarily reminiscent of the Declaration of Independence. As in the first Reformation, the new spirituality established here, belonging and being the expression of "we the people", is founded on a new form of capitalism.

Just as Kurzweil referred to the Unitarian church as the basis of his spiritual education in *The Singularity is Near*, by opposition, Mark Helprin in *Digital Barbarism* claims his Jewish heritage as being the source of his attachment to books and to the printed page:

Even as a child, I was intoxicated by the greatness of the written word, and took refuge in its power as the gift and protection of God. Like music it is a direct route to the truths that lie beyond the understanding, taking those who will follow to a height from which it is possible to see something too bright to comprehend. This attitude and belief has been preserved amongst the Jews since the invention of writing and the advent of revelation. It is so deeply ingrained in Jewish culture and nationality – apart from religion where it is certainly not absent – that I am controlled by it atavistically and thus can never be a modern man. When I chose my profession, which I was sure would keep me poor all my life, I did so not because I wanted to copy the existence of Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald or Nabokov, but because I was compelled to follow the lead of the people from which I am descended, in the most rewarding and satisfying exercise I can imagine: something that, when done with great effort and an honest heart, touches upon the holy, that even in the face of death and destruction, offers warmth, comfort, promise and a shield (Helprin 2009, 70).

What the language used here in defense of the printing press establishes, is that the war around copyright and publishing is a war of religion. One hardly needs to analyse the language used here to see its religious content. "The greatness of the written word" is an echo both of "the greatness of God" and that of *The Bible*. In the words of Helprin, literature and

⁴⁹ Dan Gillmor. 2004. *We, the Media, Grassroot Journalism by the People for the People*. Newton: O'Reilly Publishing.

books, all descending from The Book, offers “protection” and a sense of what lies “beyond”. Thus, books touch on the “holy” as Helprin writes while the counterpart for that encounter with holiness is a vow of poverty, reminiscent of that made by monks: “my profession which I was sur would keep me poor all my life”. It is also reminiscent of the opposition we have seen earlier between glory and money which defined the author in an aristocratic pre-bourgeois context, reproduced here under the guise of “literary bohemia”.

The whole language of this passage, which comprises both “comprehend” and “intoxicated”, two notions which would seem contradictory, is that of the mystical ecstasy and “revelation”.

The choice of the printed book is a choice which belongs to a religious tradition which incidentally holds the truth. Reading a book is the true numinous experience as opposed to the worship of the false God or the idol, namely the Internet, the Digital God; here the call comes even with a vow of poverty, opposed again to that of the technologist and the apostle of the cyberworld.

The other aspect of this extract to which we will return later is that the Internet has destroyed a genre or sub-genre of literature: literary life as a literary subject. And to go even further literary life as it was known in the days of the Gutenberg Galaxy, and to which writers such as Salman Rushdie in *Fury* or Cohen in *Book of Numbers*, will try to evoke as a thing of the past but each in a very different style.

Print created the “man of letters”. As Febvre and Martin point out in *L’Apparition du livre* (p. 18), it is a “neologism” to use the term “man of letters” before the advent of printing. It follows logically with the reversal of the “change” which print brought that the computer, electronic technology will transform the expression “man of letters” into an archaism. In turn, the notion of the “man of letters” engendered literary biographies or auto-biographies from the 18th century onwards as Roger Chartier point outs in *La Main de l’auteur et l’Esprit de l’imprimeur*:

À partir du XVIII^e siècle les compositions littéraires [...] sont désormais conçues comme des créations originales qui expriment les pensées ou les sentiments les plus intimes de l’individu et qui se nouent avec ses expériences les plus personnelles. La première conséquence de cette mutation a été le désir de publier les œuvres d’un même auteur en respectant la chronologie de leur composition, afin de saisir le déploiement de son génie ; la seconde, l’écriture de biographies littéraires (Chartier 2015, 67).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ From the eighteenth century onwards literary works are conceived of as original creations expressing the most intimate thoughts and feelings of an individual and are cemented by his most personal experiences. The first consequence of this change has been the wish to publish the works of one author while respecting the chronology of their creation so as to see the scope and development of his genius, the second has been the writing of literary biographies [my translation].

It can be argued that literature can survive without the novel of initiation or the “portrait of the artist as a young man” as a genre, or literary biographies or literary autobiographies but their disappearance is symptomatic of the death of literary life and literary production linked to the very notion of authorship.

Similarly, the notion of the manuscript and the progressive elaboration of a literary work as a foundation for a certain type of criticism becomes irrelevant with the use of the computer. As Roger Chartier stresses, Gutenberg technology made this study of a literary elaboration possible from 1750 onwards:

L'étude méticuleuse des traces laissées par ce mouvement créateur : notes, documentation, esquisses, brouillons, rédactions successives, épreuves corrigées. Leur conservation par les écrivains du XIX^e et du XX^e siècles – pensons à Flaubert, Zola ou Proust – permettent au critique de remonter, comme l'écrit Pierre-Marc de Biasi, “de l'auteur à l'écrivain, de l'écrit à l'écriture, de la structure au processus, de l'œuvre à sa genèse” (Biasi 2000, 9).⁵¹

Obviously, the “delete” key on the computer has done away with this archeological form of criticism. Whether it is a good or a bad thing it is not for us to decide here, but is another aspect of literary life and literary culture which has been buried by the computer and which even Tipp-ex couldn't do away with.

The notion of the death of the author as a basis for critical studies had also done away with the type of literary criticism mentioned above and this sort of archeology of the literary text. The idea of the death of the author was meant to give the critic as prominent a place in the literary field as that of the author. But there is more than one way to die, because the death of the author as the Internet intends it, by way of death of authorship, also does away with literary criticism as a whole. In this particular case, the death of the author is immediately followed (even, perhaps, preceded, unless they are simultaneous) by that of the critic, as the criteria to assess the value of text on the Internet or born out of the Internet, as we'll see later, has nothing to do with criticism as we know it now.

Through Web 2.0 and its triumph, we see similarities between the Renaissance and the modern cultural revolution in the sense that in the first case we have passed from a pre-Gutenberg world to a post-Gutenberg world, and a departure from one mode of reading to

⁵¹ The meticulous traces left by this creative movement: notes, documents sketches, first drafts, successive versions, galleys, the fact that they have been preserved by writers in the nineteenth and twentieth century allow the critic, as Pierre-Marc de Biasi has written, to go from the author to the writer, from the writing to the written, text, from the structure to the creative process, from the finished work to its origin [my translation].

another, marking today a form of regression towards a pre-literate primitivism as we've already mentioned. It is no coincidence that the term used to describe the generation born in the Internet era should be "digital natives", an expression vaguely redolent of a colonial language, and suggesting the Rousseauist innocence of the good savage, possessing and creating a spontaneous culture uncorrupted by standards and institutions, of which Raymond's evocation of Indian chiefs was an immediate echo.

In the case of Web 2.0 business and profit are the foundations and the epiphany of the new spirituality it promotes. This suggests further that the libertarian ideology which technologists claim as theirs is closer to economic laissez-faire at its most extreme than to Proudhon's "la propriété c'est le vol"⁵². And, indeed, the two examples which interest us most and which O'Reilly presents as the best example of the spirit of Web 2.0 are Wikipedia and Amazon (there are others of course but we'll stick with these two so as to remain within the subject of books and publishing).

4. Wikipedia and Amazon: Flagships of Web 2.0. The New Economics of Reading and Writing

Wikipedia represents a flagship:

Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia based on the unlikely notion that an entry can be added by any web user and edited by any other is a radical experiment in trust, applying Eric Raymond's dictum (originally coined in the context of 'open source software') that 'with enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow', to content creation. Wikipedia is already in the top 100 websites, and many think it will be in the top ten before long. This is a profound change in the dynamics of content creation (O'Reilly 2002).

Indeed, the change means that opinion, be it uninformed, takes the same value as knowledge. In a sense, Wikipedia is the perfect example of a book born out of the Internet culture: it is all encompassing, in the sense that it deals with anything an encyclopedia could deal with and more, from World War Two to Leonardo Di Caprio, via any writer who wants to produce an article on himself, plastic surgery, astrophysics and football. It is participatory,

⁵² "Property is theft", this idea opens Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's book *Qu'est-ce que la propriété ou Recherche sur le principe du droit et du gouvernement* published in 1840 (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2009), 1.

anonymous, and totally unreliable. It is also a perfect Internet book because, not being able to be contained within covers, it is also impossible to define. It is the very image of infobesity, and of an accumulation of useless knowledge shared between various tribes. Again, Internet zealots would replace the term “infobesity” by that of “abundance”. In addition to being beyond definition, it is, being anonymous, beyond control.

Another of the aspects which makes it a perfect Internet book or rather non-book, is its incapacity or simply its refusal to distinguish between various sets of values. As Jaron Lanier points out in *You are Not a Gadget*: “As a source of useful information Wikipedia excels in two areas: pop culture and hard science. In the first category, truth is fiction anyway, so what the wiki says is by definition true; in the second, there actually is a preferred truth so it is more plausible to speak with a shared voice” (Lanier 2010, 142).

In that sense, Wikipedia is perfectly coherent with the notion of quality on the Internet from a purely literary point of view, in the sense that quality doesn’t come into account, as we’ll see when we study in detail *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a publishing and literary phenomenon. Quality, as we’ll also see with Amazon, is equated with quantity. And judgment as to quality, veracity etc. has to be suspended or not even taken into account. As recently as the 17th of February 2020, the website *Wired* published an article by Richard Cooke, entitled: “Wikipedia is the Last Best Place of the Internet”⁵³, and subtitled: “People used to think the crowdsourced encyclopedia represented all that was wrong with the web. Now it’s a beacon of so much that’s right.” Again we should notice the highly messianic and almost mystical vocabulary used to talk about the Internet as “a beacon of so much that’s right” and the constant opposition between right and wrong which the Internet’s apostles use to discuss electronic technology.

Here, as we’ll find when we approach the question of Amazon and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the quality and the notion of “success” pertaining to Wikipedia is conveyed in figures: “Today, Wikipedia is the eighth most visited site in the world. The English version recently surpassed 6 million articles and 3.5 billion words, edits materialize at a rate of 1.8 per second” (Cooke, 2020). It adds further:

Yet in an era when Silicon Valley’s promises look less gilded than before, Wikipedia shines by comparison. [...] The site’s innovations have always been cultural rather than

⁵³ Richard Cooke. 2020. “Wikipedia is the Last Best Place of the Internet”. [Accessed October 26, 2021]. <https://www.wired.com/story/wikipedia-online-encyclopedia-best-place-internet/>.

computational.⁵⁴ It was created using existing technology.⁵⁵ This remains the single most underestimated and misunderstood aspect of the project: its emotional architecture. Wikipedia is built on the personal interests and idiosyncrasies of its contributors; in fact without getting gooey, you could even say it is built on love (Cooke, 2020).

How can anyone doubt the religious emotion which pervades the thought or rather ecstatic emotions of Internet zealots after reading that Wikipedia is built on “love”. Rather than gooey, Cooke sounds here halfway in between mystical and fanatical. As further proof of the triumph of Wikipedia over the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Richard Cooke evokes in the same article the day when he saw a pile of volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* waiting on a pavement to be picked up by dustbin men, heralding once again the end of paper.

As an extension of these notions, this same article opposes pedants and enthusiasts. One has understood that enthusiasm, like “love”, is on the side of “Wikipedians” (they have gained a proper denomination with a capital W) and their sense of humour, according to the article, justifies the fact that they are “that category of person who sits somewhere between expert and amateur, the enthusiast”. “Enthusiasm” in this same article becomes thus the justification for the inaccuracies in Wikipedia articles.

The last argument in favour of Wikipedia against the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, according to Richard Cooke (2020), is that experts don’t contribute for free whereas enthusiasts do. *Encyclopedia Britannica* costs whereas Wikipedia is:

de-personified, collaborative, and for the general good. More than an encyclopedia, Wikipedia has become a community, a library, a constitution, an experiment, a political manifesto – the closest thing there is to an online public square. It is one of the few remaining places that retains the faintly utopian glow of the Early World Wide Web. A free encyclopedia encompassing the whole of human knowledge, written almost entirely by unpaid volunteers. Can you believe *that* was the one that worked?

We have to agree with Cooke that it is hard to believe, at least as hard as it is to believe the style and content of his article and the mystic ecstasy which pervades it. To summarize, Wikipedia, the very symbol of what the Internet is, represents “the whole of human knowledge”, in other word, “everything”, it is a political and religious entity, it exists for the common good, it is anonymous, and it is free. Never mind that it can be inaccurate, wrong, or

⁵⁴ Whatever that means.

⁵⁵ How could anything be created from a non-existing technology?

futile, love and enthusiasm compensate for these defects. It is indeed the only encyclopedia built on love and enthusiasm rather than expertise.

With all the characteristics mentioned above, Wikipedia announces what makes the quality or lack of it which defines internet literary production. We are not concerned here with science but we will consider how Wikipedia as it is described here heralds the type of literary and aesthetic production we'll come across as we explore the body of work which is related to the Internet or which aspires to be the literary expression of Internet technology. It is significant that Jaron Lanier sees in Douglas Adams' science-fiction comedy *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the ancestor of Wikipedia. Because Internet literature thrives on genre fiction, one is tempted to say "sub-genre".

His fictional guide functioned in a similar way [to Wikipedia], with one of its contributors able to instantaneously update the entire entry for Planet Earth (from "Harmless" to "Mostly Harmless") with a few taps on a keyboard. Though Earth merited a two-word entry there were substantial articles about other topics, such as which alien poetry was the worst and how to make strange cocktails. The first thought is often the best thought, and Adam perfectly captured the spirit of much of Wikipedia (Lanier 2010, 142).

What's interesting besides the description of the way that Wikipedia functions, is the fact that it originates in a science fiction comedy. As Jaron Lanier again confirms:

It has been pointed out that Wikipedia entries about geeky pop culture are longer and more lovingly crafted than those regarding reality. A science fiction army from a movie or a novel will typically be better described than an army from reality, a porn star will get a more detailed biography than a Nobel Prize winner (Lanier 2010, 142).

In an article from the *Wall Street Journal* dated 16th June 2007, and entitled "Oh, That John Locke"⁵⁶, Jamin Brophy-Warren has pointed out this lack of a set of values in Wikipedia in gauging the importance of each of its entries in a general cultural context.

There's a new sport on the Internet: competing to come up with the best examples of how Wikipedia, the web's home-grown reference source, is skewed towards pop culture topics. For instance the West Wing of the White House merits a 1,100 word entry on Wikipedia, while "The West Wing" the Aaron Sorkin TV Drama has a 6,800 write-up. This game already has a name: "Wikigroaning".

⁵⁶ Jamin Brophy-Warren. 2007. "Oh, That John Locke". *Wall Street Journal*. [Accessed October 26, 2021]. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB118194482542637175>.

In the course of the article, Jamin Brophy Warren goes on to give other examples of this bias: “The Harlem Renaissance (1,300), The Harlem Globe Trotters (1,900), Apollo 13 Space mission (3,900), Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (6,700)” and a third and last example: “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle character Raphael has a longer Wikipedia entry than Renaissance painter Raphael.”

It is extremely significant that Jaron Lanier should choose the biography of a porn star to illustrate his idea, as pornography is at the core of the Internet, as we’ll demonstrate later. It is part of the essence of Internet and not just because it provides a vast amount of it. Let us remember for the moment that the two types of “fictional” creation which most evoke Wikipedia are “geeky” science-fiction and pornography.

5. Amazon and Everything

In O’Reilly’s founding text on web 2.0, Amazon comes through as the mirror image of Wikipedia, from a business and publishing point of view. Thanks mostly to the illusion that the user participates, raised apparently to the level of a “science”:

Amazon sells the same products as competitors such as Barnesandnoble.com and they receive the same product descriptions, cover images and editorial content from their vendors. But Amazon has made a science of user engagement. They have in order of magnitude more user reviews, invitations to participate in varied ways on virtually every page – and even more importantly, they use user activity to produce better search results. While a Barnesandnoble.com search is likely to lead with the company’s own products, or sponsored results, Amazon always lead with ‘most popular’, a real time computation based not only on sales but other factors that Amazon insiders call the ‘flow’ around products. With an order of magnitude more user participation, it’s no surprise that Amazon’s sales also outpace competitors (O’Reilly 2002, 23).

The lesson taught here is that Amazon succeeds because Amazon is “good”, and the language contains numerous positive implications on the Internet zealot’s perspective on “good”: “magnitude”, “invitation”, “participate”, “the flow” which is suggestive of both abundance (an all-important concept for the Internet as we’ve seen) and generosity. Again we see a sense of community and participation actively promoted here. It is a form of Amazon’s virtue that it gives a voice to one and all, and transforms with its “flow” a user into a potential critic. It is not by chance that its founder has chosen for his company the name of the largest river in the world with numerous tributaries. Amazon bears in its very name the concept of

the flow. In Brad Stone's book on Amazon, *The Everything Store* Jeff Bezos is quoted as saying: "This is not only the largest river in the world, it's many times larger than the next biggest river. It blows all other rivers away" (Stone 2013, 51.) And indeed in an article on Amazon published in *The Atlantic*, November 2019, Franklin Foer tells us that Amazonians (as the employees of the company call themselves) see their own company not just as a retailer, a movie studio, an artificial intelligence developer, a device manufacturer but also and foremost "a set of values".

As for the quality of some of the criticism provided by users, here is what one self-appointed Amazon critic has to say on Elia Kazan's film *On the Waterfront*: "I saw the film as a young man, I haven't seen it yet. Brando was like my uncle Daniel. I'll watch it at Christmas".⁵⁷ Always eager to encourage the expression of the "wisdom of the crowd" and "order of magnitude", "more user participation", to use O'Reilly's words as quoted above, whatever they mean, the Amazon website offers the possibility to click on yes or no, to answer the question: "Was this review helpful to you?"

Crowdsourcing, crowd wisdom, the long tail, are another aspect of "quantity as quality", what is sometimes called "abundance" by Internet zealots and given a new meaning. This cult of quantity and high figures also points out to the fact that the Internet in the set of values and type of appreciation of literary works or all kinds of work is fighting the very notion of quality. Quality for Internet culture is another form of elitism which must be done away with, as Jaron Lanier pointed out in *You are Not A Gadget* in the chapter entitled "Rejection of the Idea of Quality Results in a Loss of Quality":

The fragments of human effort that have flooded the Internet are perceived by some to form a hive mind, or noosphere. These are some of the terms used to describe what is thought to be a superintelligence that is emerging on a global basis on the net. Some people, like Larry Page one of the Google founders, expect the Internet to come alive at some point, while others, like science historian George Dyson, think that might already have happened. Popular derivative terms like 'blogosphere' have become commonplace.

A fashionable idea in technical circles is that quantity not only turns into quality at some extreme of scale, but also does so according to principles we already understand. Some of my colleagues think a million or perhaps a billion, fragmentary insults will eventually yield wisdom that surpasses that of any well-thought-out essay, so long as sophisticated secret statistical algorithms recombine the fragments. I disagree, a trope from the early days of computer science comes to mind: garbage in, garbage out.

There are so many examples of disdain for the idea of quality within the culture of web 2.0 enthusiasts that it is hard to choose an example" (Lanier 2010, 48-49).

⁵⁷ See: https://www.amazon.fr/Waterfront-USA-Zone-1/product-reviews/B00003CXBU/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_8?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&pageNumber=8.

“Disdain for the idea of quality” and the cult of numbers, “of a million perhaps a billion” is what we encounter regularly as we analyse the set of values or absence of it which sustains the Internet. For the examples of that disdain for quality which characterizes web 2.0, we’ll concentrate in the course of this dissertation on literary examples in later chapters, particularly when we deal with the Internet’s idea of “literary success”.

What is significant in the passage by O’Reilly, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is that the ideas expressed here by Jaron Lanier apply to Amazon as well as to Wikipedia: again, on the Internet quantity makes quality, the “magnitude” mentioned, which was abundance in its former guise. And indeed it is a trait of the Internet that its nature is constantly metamorphosed by the sheer volume of the information it carries which creates a sense of immensity, and when one turns mystical, a sense of infinity. Consequently when it comes to business or to publishing or to establishing knowledge through an encyclopedia open to all in its writing, the number of users, the number of readers will determine the quality of the information. “Most popular” as in the paragraph above, has the value of authority and success because from an economic and commercial point of view, “most popular” is the closest synonym to “successful”. In the case of Wikipedia, “most popular” becomes synonymous with “exact”, “true”, “correct”.

In that sense, Amazon is the perfect illustration of the fact that an economic model will transform the way one reads and, further, the way one produces literature. Let us first see the perfect correspondence between Amazon and web 2.0. Amazon reveals itself to be “iconic” as Brad Stone stresses in his book: “The history of Amazon.com as most people understand it, is one of the iconic stories of the Internet age” (Stone 2013, 17).

Whereas Wikipedia is entirely anonymous and faceless, one element allows us to assimilate Amazon to the Internet, the character and ideas of its founder and CEO, Jeff Bezos. Amazon, Jeff Bezos’ creature, started as a bookshop, just as the Internet started as a faster alternative to the telegraph, and just like the Internet, Amazon covers everything to the point that it has given itself the mission of shaping the future and saving the human race – messianic again – through space travel – geek culture again. As Franklin Foer stresses in his article on Jeff Bezos in *The Atlantic*: “Amazon might be a vast corporation, with more than 600,000 employees, but it is also the extension of one brilliant, willful man with an incredible knack for bending the world to his values” (Foer 2019, 56).

Amazon is imbued with the same religious spirit which characterizes the Internet and which spurred on the Silicon Valley pioneers. All accounts of Amazon, be they critical like Franklin Foers's article in *The Atlantic*, or thinly disguised panegyrics like Brad Stone's book *The Everything Store, Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon*, are pervaded with religious language. Brad Stone's title and subtitle are fairly revealing in that sense: "The Everything Store" seems to suggest that Amazon represents everything, Amazon is the equivalent of God's Creation while the subtitle: "Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon" suggests that the present is characterized by the presence of Amazon more than by anything else. We are in the age of Amazon as one may be in the age of miracles. Amazon is the product of a "vision", the vision being of course that of Jeff Bezos's, as will be explained in the course of the book.

Thus Amazon has its own "mythology" (Stone 2013, 20). The first chapter is entitled "Faith", Stone keeps evoking Bezos's "vision" or even "Gospel". We've already seen that Amazon is "iconic". It incarnates "the boundless promise of the Internet as we'll see below". The second part of the first chapter "Faith" in Brad Stone's book is entitled *The Book of Bezos*, clearly presenting Amazon's founder and CEO as a modern-day prophet who deserves his own biblical book. Brad Stone tells us that Bezos does prophesy at Amazon's HQ:

Near the elevators there's a black plaque with white lettering that informs visitors they have entered the realm of the philosopher-CEO. It reads:
'There is so much stuff that has yet to be invented.
There's so much new that's going to happen.
People don't have any idea yet how impactful the
Internet is going to be and that this is still Day 1 in such a big way.
Jeff Bezos' (Stone 2013, 21).

It is a revealing passage in the sense that we cannot be sure that Brad Stone is totally ironic in use of such pompous language as "they have entered the realm of the philosopher CEO" which in its style is reminiscent of science-fiction or heroic fantasy,⁵⁸ while the quotation by Jeff Bezos itself is very representative of Internet literature in its vagueness, and the paucity of the language and style, "much stuff", "much new", "People don't have any idea", "big way" which evokes this vagueness of this prophesizing and promise of better "tomorrows" expressed in an extremely crude and basic vocabulary.

⁵⁸ Heroic fantasy is a literary genre, largely influenced by Tolkien, mixing a medieval folklore with heroic deeds and the supernatural. It is also called occasionally "sword and sorcery".

We cannot stress too much in a literary study the importance of Amazon and its way of functioning, because of its influence not only on the economics of book selling but also, as Brad Stone puts it, because it represents “the extraordinary rise of an innovative, disruptive, and often polarizing technology powerhouse, the company that was among the first to see the boundless promise of the Internet and that ended forever changing the way we shop and read” (Stone 2013, 16).

It is significant that we should find the word “disruptive” in this paragraph which echoes what we have already seen with Eric Raymond and the spiritual inheritance of Teilhard de Chardin, as the Internet was presented as a destructive revolutionary force. Here too, to achieve “its promise” Amazon has to disrupt what it sees as the old order: the way we “shop and read”.

The association of words “shop and read” is also revealing as these two activities in the Amazon perspective on culture and the world are paired together.

To talk about Amazon, is not only to talk about a retailer or a bookshop or economics, it is to talk about the modern form which literature is taking, a form which we’ll study more at length in the chapter on *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

When it started as a retailer of books, Amazon immediately bullied the book business. When Hachette refused “to accede to Amazon’s demands, still according to Franklin Foer, it was punished. Amazon delayed shipments of Hachette books; when consumers searched for some Hachette titles, it redirected them to similar books from other publishers”. In that sense there is a perfect equivalent between Amazon’s practices and the Internet’s aspirations to hegemony and solutionism, for Bezos sees himself as bringing “solutions” to the problems of mankind, just as Kurzweil did, although not using nanobots. Bezos has plans to colonize space: “We have to go to space to save the earth” (Foer 2019, 54). One couldn’t be more messianic than that, the messiah has become conquistador, yet again.

Starting with books, Bezos’ ventures have become so varied and so large that they defy definition, exactly like the Internet itself. Amazon is infobesity turned into commercial venture and intellectual control of what it sells.

Today Bezos controls nearly 40 percent of all e-commerce in the United States. More product searches are conducted on Amazon than on Google, which has allowed Bezos to build an advertising business as valuable as the entirety of IBM. One estimate has Amazon Web Services controlling almost half of the computing industry – institutions as varied as General Electric, Unilever, and even the CIA rely on its servers. Forty two percent of paper book sales and a third of the market for streaming video are controlled by the company; Twitch, its video

platform popular among gamers, attracts 15 million users a day. Add *the Washington Post* to this Portfolio. And Bezos is at a minimum, a rival to the likes of Disney's Bob Iger or the suits at AT&T, and arguably the most powerful man in American culture (Foer 2019, 51).

Whereas Rockefeller built his fortune on oil wells and pump stations, Bezos builds his on "everything" because the tool at his disposal is electronic technology which submits "everything" to its mode of functioning. As Foer points out "His creation is less a company than an encompassing system" (Foer 2019, 51). Note the religious undertone of "creation" and the philosophical one of "encompassing system". Amazon, like the Net, which gave birth to it, is a religious philosophy intending to dominate culture through capitalism. And here again, we find the Internet contradiction of an authoritarian, hegemonic system, built on the pretense of a libertarian principle as we've seen already when tackling the problem of copyright and intellectual property.

The mirror effects between Amazon, Bezos and the Internet are also based on a network of literary and cultural or subcultural references. According to Foer:

Bezos is unabashed in his fanaticism for *Star Trek* and its many spin-offs. He has a holding company called Zefram which honors the character who invented warp drive. He persuaded the makers of the film *Star Trek Beyond* to give him a cameo as a Starfleet official. He named his dog Kamala, after a woman who appears in an episode as Picard's perfect but unattainable mate. [...] When reporters tracked down Bezos's high school girl friend, she said, 'The reason he's earning so much money is to get to outer space.' This assessment hardly required a leap of imagination. As the valedictorian of Miami Palmetto Senior High School's class of 1982, Bezos used his graduation speech to unfurl his vision for humanity. He dreamed of the day when millions of his fellow earthlings would relocate to colonies in space (Foer 2019, 55).

In the second part of his book enticingly entitled "Literary Influences" and which comprises 141 pages, the only "literary" influences mentioned are Robert Zubrin's books: *Entering Space: Creating a Space Faring Civilization* (2011) and *The Case for Mars* (2000). Stone also mentions that Bezos told Fast Company in 2001 that "it would be great if the novel *Dune*, in which humanity has colonized other planets was 'nonfiction'" (Stone 2013, 195). The other literary influences mentioned are *Creation* by Steve Grand, "the developer of a 1990s videogame called Creatures that allowed players to guide and nurture a seemingly intelligent organism on their computer screens" (Stone 2013, 263) and, finally, *The Innovator's Dilemma* by Harvard Professor Clayton Christensen about companies' strategies. In other terms there is absolutely nothing literary in these literary influences.

In fact Bezos, like most Internet zealots, takes the fiction out of science-fiction. He builds a reality on a literary subgenre. These utopian or dystopian visions inspired by literature

are turned into companies and realities. Thus Bezos has created a company called Blue Origin, dedicated to this very project. What is alarming as far as literature is concerned is on the one hand that there are literary references at the foundations of these ideas and on the other hand, concomitantly, that the man and the companies embodying these visions and literary references want a total control on book retailing and publishing from which we can start to infer what the future of literature and publishing might be, and also what the content of “literature” might be.

Jeff Bezos’ literary culture is based on novels by Jules Verne and Isaac Asimov. He has plans to adapt novels to which we have already referred by Neal Stephenson. Significantly, as part of the geek culture, Bezos has used the pizza, the very emblem of international anonymous geekishness as a measuring stick for the way his companies function: he has instituted what he calls the “two pizza team” (Foer 2019, 58) by which he means that teams in the running of Amazon, in order to avoid bureaucracy must be so small as to be able to be fed on two pizzas. We’ll see further how the pizza reference is central and symbolic to the world of Neal Stephenson, particularly in *Snow Crash*.

When it came to finding a name for his company, before he chose “Amazon” he was very tempted by Makeitso.com after Captain Picard’s frequent command in Star Trek (Stone 2013, 41). Not surprisingly, Brad Stone, together with Foer often evokes the geekishness and goofiness of Bezos’s world:

At the time Bezos was newly married with a comfortable apartment on the Upper West Side and a well-paying job. While MacKenzie [his wife] said she would be supportive if he decided to strike out on his own, the decision was not an easy one. Bezos would later describe his thinking process in unusually geeky terms. He says he came up with what he called a ‘regret-minimization framework’ to decide the next step to take at this juncture of his career (Stone 2013, 41).

Brad Stone’s book on the history of Amazon also recalls numerous “goofy” events and “Amazonians” eccentric behaviour. “Goofy fun” is mentioned (Stone 2013, 72) and “goofy hats” (Stone 2013, 85) echoing “Bezos’s vision and geeky charisma” (Stone 2013, 82). All of which illustrate the sect-like dedication of Amazon’s employees to obey Bezos’s “gospel”, a word which comes back regularly in *The Everything Store*, “Get Big Fast” (Stone 2013, 67).

That “goofiness” and “goofy fun” will be at the basis of the literary aesthetics of books which are Bezos’ main references as we’ll see when we come to analyzing the style and the

constitutive elements of *Snow Crash* and which Sianne Ngai will redefine in her study as the zany in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, to which we will come back.

But the principle literary reference, on which Blue Origin is built, is Gerard O'Neill book *The High Frontier: Human Colonies in Space* (1976). We shall remember here again that Internet zealots see their world, the Internet, as an unchartered territory, yet again, to be explored, mapped and conquered. Foer describes O'Neill's book as being loved by "sci-fi geeks, Nasa functionaries and old hippies" (Foer 2019, 58). *The High Frontier* builds a case for the human race to move to colonies in space, cylindrical tubes floating between Earth and the moon. When he was a student at Princeton, Bezos attended O'Neill's seminars and shared his vision, declaring: "We can have a trillion humans in the solar system which means that we'd have a thousand Mozart, a thousand Einstein" (Foer 2019, 67). A declaration which betrays the same fascination for the exponential quality in "everything" as we'd found in Kurzweil, be it in the development of sales of books, socks and all that Amazon offers or in the multiplication of Mozarts and Einsteins. As Bezos stresses himself: "the danger is not extinction but stasis. We will have to stop growing, which I think is a very bad future". In that sense Bezos sees himself as an instrument of "creative destruction" (Foer 2019, 59).

Growth based on "creative destruction" naturally depends on innovation and the natural obstacle to innovation is the "gatekeepers", as he wrote in his 2011 letter to shareholders: "Even well-meaning gatekeepers slow innovation." In this very instance the critique was aimed at New York book publishers whose power Amazon aims to diminish. According to Foer, he "harbored a similarly dim view of self-satisfied old-media institutions that attempted to preserve their cultural authority" (Foer 2019, 569). The marriage of innovation and exponentialism makes Amazon the very mirror image of the Internet and its ultimate product. Starting as a simple retailer, Amazon has thus become according to Foer yet again an "artificial intelligence developer", "a paradigm - a distinctive approach to making decisions, a set of values", "an encompassing system", "a social institution tending to the common good". Just as it is impossible to define the Internet, analysts wonder at the true nature of Bezos's empire, which allows him that sacred messianic stance which will take us all to Space.

All the elements described above, the messianic nature of the enterprise, the ambition to be the "everything store" and numbers as a new criteria for quality, together with the hegemonic dream, imply, where literature is concerned, that it can only exist within the standards established by Amazon (especially when Amazon distributes and publishes this

literature or offers a space from which this self-published literature can be bought). We'll see later how this literature is manufactured, rather than written, and how Amazon has found allies in the enemies of copyright who also see themselves as "creative destructors" and the scourge of the gatekeepers.

6. Lawrence Lessig; Creative Commons

Lawrence Lessig, the principle apostle of this new age and principal enemy of copyright and copyright laws, creator of Creative Commons⁵⁹ has quite logically declared that he was prepared to become president of the United States, another step forward in messianic megalomania. His program includes, naturally, a crusade against corruption, which is in keeping with the aspiration to purity, as a goal of political and mystical messianism.

Lessig's fight, as we'll see, is altogether ideological, mystical and economic and unbeknownst to Lessig himself, is the perfect cultural echo of the ideas embodied by Amazon, disguised as another form of libertarian "gift" culture, not unlike the one Derek Raymond was trying to promote.

The fierce opposition between Creative Commons and the publishing world, based on a capitalistic model, is reminiscent of the opposition between the Soviet Union and the USA during the Cold War when arguing about freedom of expression. Here, the Internet is the Soviet Union with a stronger (or maybe simply different) mystical and metaphysical content, a communitarian religion placing itself "beyond" the individual. Let us quote once again Marshal McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Mc Luhan 1962, 21), himself quoting Alexander Inkeles in *Public Opinion in Russia*.

Alexander Inkeles in his book on *Public Opinion in Russia* (Inkeles 1950, 137) gives a useful account of how the ordinary and unconscious bias, even of the Russian literate groups

⁵⁹ Dictionary.com describes Creative Commons as "a set of various licenses that allow people to share their copyrighted work to be copied, edited, built upon etc. while retaining the copyright to the original work". The second definition is "the nonprofit organization that releases these licenses". The Creative Commons official website creativecommons.org, offers to "Share your work", and "Use and remix" works which are strongly reminiscent of Gomez's idea of intellectual property and of creation as a form of "mix and match" or "pick and mix". It presents itself as "a nonprofit organization that helps overcome legal obstacles to the sharing of knowledge and creativity to address the world's pressing challenges". This is a vast program. We are not told what the "world's pressing challenges are" but we must understand by "legal obstacles" institutions protecting copyright and intellectual property. Whether "knowledge and creativity" could not be "shared" before the advent of Creative Commons, remains open to debate.

has a direction quite counter to anything a long-literate community would consider “natural” the Russian attitude, like that of any oral society, reverses our stress:

In the United States and England it is the freedom of expression, the right itself in the abstract that is valued... In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the *results* of exercising freedom are in the forefront of attention, and the preoccupation with the freedom itself is secondary. It is for this reason that the discussions between Soviet and Anglo-American representatives characteristically reach absolutely no agreement on specific proposals, although both sides assert that there should be freedom of the press. The American is usually talking about the freedom of *expression*, the right to say or not say certain things, a right which he claims exists in the United States and not in the Soviet Union. The Soviet representative is usually talking about *access* to the *means* of expression, not to the right to say things at all (McLuhan 1962, 21).

Indeed, the Internet is more concerned about access than content. The fact that Wikipedia can be proven to be inexact, unreliable as a source of information, is secondary and irrelevant compared to the fact that it exists and offers access to all. The right to say or, more often in the case of Wikipedia, to not say, comes second to accessibility as a quality, even a virtue.

Marshall McLuhan adds in respect to the opposition between the Soviet Union and the United States or England in their respective conception of “expression”, of information and the traditions from which it stems: “Soviet concern with media results is natural to any oral society where interdependence is the result of instant interplay of cause and effect in the total structure. Such is the character of a village, or since electric media, such is also the character of a global village” (Marshall McLuhan 1962, 21).

As we’ve seen, it is as such that the Internet conceives of itself a community without boundaries, a global village which does away with individuality (we’ll see later in the chapter on literary criticism what consequences these conceptions have on the author and literature as the expression of the self).

McLuhan proves the point further by stressing that the advertising and PR community are most aware of the dimensions of global interdependence. Indeed, what we now term social media, networks etc. have become a new heaven for these communities.

Like the Soviet Union, they are concerned about access to the media and about results they have no concern whatsoever about self-expression and would be shocked by any attempt to take over, say, a public advertisement for oil or coke as a vehicle of private opinion or personal feeling. In the same way the literate bureaucrats of the Soviet Union cannot imagine anybody wanting to use public media in a private way. And this attitude has just nothing to do with Marx, Lenin or Communism. It is a normal tribal attitude of any oral society (McLuhan 1962, 21).

Like the Soviet Union, Creative Commons and Internet thinkers like Gomez or Kurzweil have no concern with self-expression, and we'll see later that Internet literature effects an obliteration of the self and of the author in a way very different from the one that has been prophesied by literary criticism from the sixties onwards. It could be argued that through commentaries on Amazon, or on any news item, the Internet offers each and everyone of us the possibility of expressing ourselves. First, these opinions are generally expressed through pseudonyms which are a denial of the self and drown in a mass which creates a general noise in which individual voices are not really meant to be heard. We will return to this when dealing with anonymity and voyeurism on the Internet.

7. Web 2.0 and the Economic Consequences of the Medieval Conceptions of the Soul and the Open Source for the Individual Author and Authorship

We see now the relevance to the council of Lateran as the passage from one mode of individual existence to another when dealing with the Internet's conception of the individual and his relationship to culture. We'll see later how literature born of the Gutenberg Galaxy struggles with that conception. The Internet has brought literature back to a medieval conception of itself, a pre-Lateran conception of literature. We'll briefly analyse here the relationship between a medieval reader and the texts which were presented to him, to understand the incompatibility between the Internet and literary production from the Renaissance onwards.

The Middle Ages didn't possess the concept of authorship. The glamour of having a text published, the figure of the author did not exist. Medieval scholars were indifferent to the notion of identity of an author. In the Middle Ages, as in the Internet or of the open source or Wikipedia quoting your sources is irrelevant, an intellectual habit which has no place. The idea of literary fame and intellectual property belong to the Renaissance, and as we see with Lessig, will die with the Internet Age (McLuhan 1962, 131).

Authorship before print was in large degrees the building of a mosaic, which is why the Internet is intrinsically medieval. It is built and conceived of on the model of the mosaic. A web page, when it is not a photographic reproduction of a printed page is in fact a mosaic, made of dots rather than lines.

As a consequence, as we can see from such notions as “crowd wisdom”, the “long tail” etc. the Internet reader is medieval in his reading habits and, as a medieval scholar, he doesn’t see the contents of books or of a text as the expression of another man’s personality and opinion. The medieval scholar and the Internet reader see this as part of a great and total body of knowledge.

We’ll see that this loss of individuality, the death of the author, not seen as literary criticism in the sixties and especially as Barthes saw it, but as a merging into technology, and the loss of individuality is what inspires non-digital natives such as Rushdie with a dread of oblivion and of the loss of the self, generally expressed with a certain dose of naïve nostalgia.

It is significant that of all architectural schools and types, Eric Raymond should refer to medieval architecture, namely the cathedral in presenting his theories, *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, because there is a sense in which the Internet marks the dawn of a “new middle ages”, should one be allowed to coin a clumsy expression.

Considering the background of the ideologues of the open source such as Lessig and Raymond it is more than possible to see this theory, not only as a mystical vision of the literary work which would exist through its quality alone, detached from any economic or material contingencies, but also as an academic misunderstanding of the economics of publishing, unless these economics are run on a Soviet model and not the capitalistic model on which it has been built.

Certainly, the open source, the refusal to pay for information which is at the root of the war between the publishing business and the Internet zealot is a return to the haggling of oral societies. As McLuhan points out in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*:

print translated the dialogue of shared discourse into packaged information, a portable commodity [...]. How could it do otherwise? It created the price system. For until commodities are uniform and repeatable, the price of an article is subject to haggle and adjustment. The uniformity and repeatability of the book only created modern markets and the price system inseparable from literacy and industry (McLuhan 1962, 164).

We can even conclude, with McLuhan, that the notion of the open source is a notion which indeed belongs to the non-print culture as it is in fact deeply incompatible with literacy and that the market system is also a product of literacy and the print-industry:

Unless processed in a uniform way, it would be quite impossible to have delegation of functions and duties, and thus there could be no centralized national groupings such as came into existence after printing. Without similar uniform processing by literacy, there could be no

market or price system, a factor which constrains 'backward' countries to be 'communist', or tribal. There is no known means of having a price and distribution system without long and extensive experience of literacy. But we are swiftly becoming aware of these matters as we move into the electronic era. For telegraph, radio and TV do not tend towards the homogenous in their effects of print culture and dispose us to easier awareness of non-print cultures (McLuhan 1962, 166).

Again, it is by a *reduction ad absurdum* that we come to the conclusion that literature, as an emanation of print culture, is incompatible with the "electronic era", as the electronic era helps us to understand the nature of economics and tribalism in a non-literate culture, by reproducing its mechanisms and highlighting its effects.

8. From Utopia to Dystopia and Back Again

The sect-like characteristics of Silicon Valley zealots, as represented by the apostates such as Jaron Lanier and Andrew Keen, is not just incidental or of secondary importance, it explains the violence of these illuminati in the debates which oppose them to anybody who doesn't share their self-proclaimed libertarian creed.

What the "utopia" represented by Lessig with Creative Commons as well the fire and brimstone style of Gomez reveal, is the destructive nature of Utopias, to the point that one might argue that the distinction between utopias and dystopias is artificial, even false. There is no difference between the two. Utopias are intrinsically intolerant, as all searches for perfection are bound to be. This is perceptible in *Snow Crash* (1992) and in the delights with which the author enjoys the life of the underworld and sub-culture, represented both by the skateboard and the pizza (influenced from an aesthetic and literary point of view by Thomas Pynchon and the "wacky" or "zany" as a literary category to which we will return briefly). In *Snow Crash* it is impossible to tell if the future is utopian or dystopian because of the pleasure offered by the de-multiplication of the self through computer screens and the profusion of detail offered to create a lurid world.

This authoritative quality of the technological electronic utopia is also symptomatic of a non-literate world, as most non-literate people are bent on bringing the world under control. McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, refers to Ashley Montagu's "competent survey" as he puts it, *Man his First Million Years*, (1957) to describe this phenomenon.

Non-literate man casts the net of thought over the whole world. Mythology and religion may be closely related, but where one grows out of man's everyday life, the other grows out of his concern with the supernatura. And so it is with his view of the world, which will be compounded of secular religious, mythological, magical, and experiential elements all rolled into one.

Most non-literate peoples are extreme realists. They are bent on bringing the world under control, and many of their practices are devised to insure that reality will perform according to, their bidding (McLuhan 1962, 76).

This last sentence announces the next idea we'll come to that is to say the similarity between utopia and dystopia in the technological world and the darker aspect of the messianic message of technology.

The language used is extremely revealing and prophetic: "Non-literate man casts the *net* [my emphasis] of thought over the whole world" (McLuhan 1962, 76). The use of language here to describe non literate man and the Internet zealot, is perfectly coherent and creates an echo which confirms our theory regarding the Internet and literacy.

The Internet as a "net of thought" is exactly what we've seen from the Singularity to Creative Commons, a compound of all the elements quoted above: a compound of "secular mythological magical and experimental elements, all rolled into one" in a non-literate context.

The Singularity and Lasica's *Darknet* were published in 2005, *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* in 1999, thirteen years on and more, the bright and libertarian future promised by these prophets seems a lot less libertarian, and digital technology appears a lot more as a tool of control, incompatible with freedom of choice. We'll see later how this incompatibility affects literature defined as a "drama of choice". In the meantime, we have to analyze the functioning of digital technology to extract its DNA and see why it is the exact opposite of a libertarian utopia.

The nanobots which according to Kurzweil were to lead us from temptation, aging and cancer have to quote Harari in an article in *the Atlantic* (2018) since appeared,

to identify our deepest fears, hatred, and cravings and use them against us. We have already been given a foretaste of this in recent elections and referendums across the world, when hackers learned how to manipulate individual voters by analyzing data about them and exploiting their prejudices. While science-fiction thrillers are drawn to dramatic apocalypses of fire and smoke, in reality we may be facing a banal apocalypse of clicking (Harari 2018, 69).

It is impossible to separate the future of literature from the future of political data as presented here. It is significant that Harari mentions an "apocalypse" as the product of digital

technology, as we'll see that many digital or non-digital natives in the literature relating to the Internet present apocalyptic themes and scenes as a foundation for the new age (in an almost Biblical way), except that they have failed to see the banal nature of this apocalypse and have indeed resorted to representation of Tsunamis, Twin Towers collapsing, far away military conflicts, etc.

This Apocalypse, as is in the nature of all forms of apocalypse, precedes a form of peace. Here, it is a union, between man and machine, man and technology, be it through cryonics in De Lillo's *Zero K* and downloading oneself in Kurzweil or in its fictional version in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*.

We'll see later that the literary creation of the digital natives has followed the logic of the nanobots and have produced a certain number of texts which, because of their very conception, have nothing to do with literature. And we'll see in the coming chapter how the Internet and digital technology has produced a literature of their own, best illustrated by *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and which is the literary consequence of all the theories and concepts we've seen so far in an economic, spiritual and historical context.

9. *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the Cultural Revolution: The Death of the Publisher

The appearance of *Fifty Shades of Grey* on the literary scene, in 2012, marks the revelation of a phenomenon which was developing underground but of which the publishing business wasn't yet aware or was trying to ignore.

Fifty Shades of Grey has sold one hundred and twenty-five million copies and has been translated into fifty-two languages. Until now, these figures were unheard of in the publishing business. Ironically, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was never really been published in the usual sense of the term.

The international success of the novel first as an e-book available in instalments, then as a book made of paper has reversed the traditional process of publishing: the sending of a manuscript to the publisher directly and, if the book is written in English and destined for an English or American publisher, more often than not via an agent, the decision taken by the head of the publishing business alone or, with a committee, to actually publish it, the editing, the press attaché's promotional work leading to a number of reviews, good or bad, and the

distribution of the book in the shops, the reprinting or the return of the unsold copies to be destroyed.

With *Fifty Shades of Grey*, none of these stages in the publishing process have turned out to be necessary, and we have witnessed the direct distribution of an unedited book to the public in immaterial form without the author waiting expectantly for the decision of a committee.

The revolutionary character of that reduction of the publishing process to its simplest form of existence lies in the commercial success of the novel worldwide. This, in turn, raises various questions:

Has self-publishing become acceptable after a period of time when it was considered at worst as humiliating, or at best, a naïve way of having's one work made public? Incidentally, self-publishing was before the Internet era called "vanity publishing".

What establishes nowadays the respectability of self-publishing is numbers, that is to say sales. It is significant that when one types "Greatest successes in publishing" on Google, the first results to appear all concern self-publishing.

The sales of the new self-published books are all the more important as they can do away with distribution. Whereas self-published books could only have a limited resonance in the past due to poor distribution, the Internet solves that problem by its very nature. Distribution on the Internet only requires a click where it required lorries in the pre-internet era and the Gutenberg galaxy.

Could the work of a publisher consist in finding on the Internet what sells, and then translating it into the Gutenberg technology? And consequently, could numbers and quantity be assimilated to or accepted as quality in literary terms? Publishing always established a hierarchy based on quality, between the works of e.e. cummings and Barbara Cartland, to give an extreme example, regardless of sales figures (or perhaps due to low sales figures based on some inverted snobbery) but could the new respectability of self-publishing upset this hierarchy based on the power of the publisher as a representative and creator of common ground? Has the publisher lost his role of contributing by his choices to the definition of the canons of high culture?

Eventually, and in the long term could this new form of technological publishing mark the death of the traditional publishing structure and the end of a certain number of jobs and functions in the publishing business such as editor, distributor, press attaché etc. just as the car when replacing the horse caused the end of saddlers, stable lads and blacksmiths?

Together with the disappearance of the publishing business as an establishment comes the end of a genre in itself: the literary chronicle and the literary life which as a subgenre covered portraits of the artists as young men. With the immediacy of publishing, the novel of initiation describing the process of becoming a writer becomes obsolete. In his essay entitled *The Gutenberg Elegies*, and subtitled “The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age” (1994), which can also be seen as a defence of the book in its paper form, Sven Birkerts has a whole chapter, “The Paper Chase, an Autobiographical Fragment” which is an example and illustration of that genre, starting with: “Many years ago, when I was still in college and affecting paperbacks in my back pockets and dreaming of the great novels I would one day produce, I went to hear Anthony Burgess speak on ‘The Writers’s Life’”(Birkerts 1994, 33). All the elements and themes of the genre are in this sentence: youth, ambition, naivety, learning, the meeting with the great man and literature as a “way of life”.

Professor Solanka, the main character in Salman Rushdie’s semi-autobiographical novel *Fury* belongs to this representation of the writer, although here, instead of having the artist as a young man we have him as an old man, exiled from the present at once by the trends of the modern world and the technology on which it is built. We’ll come back later to the sense of exile in non-digital natives. Here, the writer-cum-intellectual is represented as “old-world, dandyish, cane twirling” (Rushdie 2001, 4). He wears a “straw Panama hat and cream linen suit” (Rushdie 2001, 4). It is hard to tell from the rest of the novel if Salman Rushdie’s dandified representation of the writer is ironic or self-indulgent as, incidentally, the picture he projects of the writer “cane twirling” and Panama-hat-wearing belongs to a cliché. As much of a cliché as the young woman representing the modern world to which it is opposed: “Her spiky strawberry-blonde hair stuck out clown-fashion from under a D’Angelo Voodoo baseball cap, her lips were full and sardonic, and she giggled rudely behind a perfunctory palm” (Rushdie 2001, 4). The fact that modernity is here represented in the form of a sensual young woman and derogatory terms such as “rudely” and “clown-fashion” leads us to believe that the description of Solanka is to be taken seriously as a an embodiment of culture and refinement, betraying a certain naïve cult of the “author and dandy” which will find an echo in Rushdie’s misunderstanding regarding the way the Internet functions.

The other aspect that Rushdie stresses in this naïve description of an author, is the elitism of the literary world.

Literary life, starting with the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, has become a subgenre of literature, in the same way as films about making films or about Hollywood have become a

literary and cinematic genre, such as Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941), based on the life of Hollywood Irving Thalberg and its adaptation for the screen by Elia Kazan. In *The Book Book* (1985) and in his autobiography, *Jew Made in England* (2004)⁶⁰, Anthony Blond gave a picture of what was then called in London specifically the literary world which incidentally had led previously to the creation of literary salons or coteries such as the Bloomsbury group.

As the Internet destroys the “portrait of the artist as a young man” as a genre, or to give it a more precise name, the “novel of literary initiation”, the Internet also brings literary history to an end, as the history of literature doesn't follow anymore a linear chronological pattern, but becomes one with the fragmented nature of the Internet. With self-publishing and the reorganization of social networks along electronical lines and association rather than literary cafés, it is impossible to envisage “movements” in literature such as these that have marked its history, such as romanticism, post-modernism, etc.

The picture of publishing given in books like Anthony Blond's *The Book Book* or his autobiography *Jew Made in England* is that of a world of the initiated, and of privilege, a world often out of touch with post-1970's democratic ideals, which has justified in the opponents of copyright and intellectual property, its destruction, in the same way that the unfair treatment of musicians in a production company has been used by the pioneers of illegal downloading as the justification for destroying the music business, paradoxically also destroying the main source of income for musicians.

In the same vein, stories of rags to riches by self-published writers have become a journalistic sub-genre. In these articles the reader is reminded that the self-published writers having to raise children by themselves saw their manuscripts refused by traditional publishing businesses. *Publishers' Weekly* presented three such authors under the title: “Writers who Rocked Self-Publishing”, Russ Colchamiro Kevin Bohacz and Tim Anderson (Colchamiro, 2014)⁶¹. All of them represent examples of success in the face of rejection from greater

⁶⁰ Anthony Blond (1928-2008) was an old Etonian and publisher who created his own imprint. He published amongst others, Graham Greene, Jean Genet, Simon Raven, to quote the more “respected” writers in his catalog. He was described in his obituary in *The Telegraph* (05/03/2008) as “a gentleman publisher from an age when business was conducted in dusty garrets and promising authors were given small retainers to allow them to find their muse”. He is also described in the same obituary as “Charismatic, daring and dangerous”. One could say that Anthony Blond represented a “Cavalier” tradition of publishing very different from the “Roundhead” posture claimed by people such as Eric Raymond and the apostles of the “open source”.

⁶¹ *Publishers' Weekly*. 2014. “Writers who Rocked Self-Publishing”. [Accessed May 25, 2020]. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/62417-writers-who-rocked-self-publishing.html>.

institutions. Similarly Ed Pilkington in *The Guardian* offered the story of Amanda Hocking, warning the reader: “When historians come to write about the digital transformation currently engulfing the book publishing world, they will almost certainly refer to Amanda Hocking, writer of paranormal fiction” (Pilkington 2012).⁶²

He goes on in the same triumphant tone: “In Internet-savvy circles she has been embraced as a figurehead of the digital publishing revolution that is seen as blowing apart the traditional book world or ‘legacy publishing’” (Pilkington 2012).

All the tales of success in the face of rejection from “legacy” publishing are imbued with a sense of revenge, a Robin Hood-like victory of the poor and the weak in front of an unfair and blind institution, incapable of seeing future success in a manuscript. It is this sense of revenge which will also inspire the Internet thinkers in their wars against copyright and intellectual property.

The expression “legacy publishing” which is echoed by the expression “legacy” books as opposed to simply “books” made of ink and paper, is significant as to the ideas represented by traditional publishing business: it suggests that it belongs to the past, and that this past has come to an end, that it is dead and has been at best inherited, that it does not produce anything anymore and the very notion of inheritance in “legacy” suggests in turn a set of birth rights and privileges which the self-made or self-published writer has challenged, coming out of nowhere and poverty. The self-published writer in that sense defies the Establishment. The expression “The Big Six”⁶³ (now Five) to designate the publishing houses of New York dominating the business is very significant in this respect and is to be found regularly under the pen of self-publishing enthusiasts in their rebellion against the gatekeepers of taste.

True to the mythology of the self-made man, self-publishing has created a new image of the writer, in a sense a more democratic picture, and more economically orientated picture transforming the writer into a businessman or entrepreneur-cum-entertainer. The image of inspiration, of the romantic poet “lonely as a cloud” to use Wordsworth’s image in *The Daffodils* (1804), of the ivory tower, disappears to create a new extremely socialised writer. This socialised author exists, again not as in the past, that is as a member of an elite forming literary cafés and coteries, but as part of the new “social media” or “social network”, which

⁶² Ed Pilkington. 2012. “Amanda Hocking, the writer who made millions by self-publishing online”. [Accessed Octobre 27, 2021]. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/12/amanda-hocking-self-publishing>.

⁶³ The expression “the Big Six” designates the major publishing houses, now five, since the merger of Random House and Penguin. The others are Hachette, Macmillan, Harper Collins, Simon & Schuster.

eminently democratic, at least in the eye of the Internet enthusiasts, and comprising, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc.

In that sense, the writer has become not just an “author” or an artist but an entrepreneur promoting his own product, namely his “book” should one want to call it that, or rather his downloaded text. He has become a member and representative of the “creative industries” to use the expression quoted by Sarah Brouillette in her study of the economics of creativity in a capitalist environment, in *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014).

She observes that:

though ideas about their working lives have made them a norm-setting model, writers appear to experience making culture less an inherently fulfilling self-expression and more and more an encounter with heightened contradictions: between the traditional veneration of artistic autonomy and the reality of conscription into proliferating state and corporate initiatives, and between the social production of culture and the lionization of the individual creator. My focus is how literature has reflexively exemplified, internalized, and critiqued vocabularies and phenomena that are integral to our unfolding creative-economy era (Brouillette 2014, 8).

It could even be argued that the Internet has helped accelerate the movement described here by Sarah Brouillette and initiated by the contradictions which she highlights in the present situation of the writer. Doing away with distance from the reader, “engaging” the Internet self-published writer counting on numbers and sales to evaluate the quality of his literary production, has also done away with what Brouillette calls “the traditional veneration of artistic autonomy” and even the “lionization of the individual creator” as the lionization implies a distance which does not exist anymore in the relationship between Internet reader and Internet writer.

Colchamiro, the author quoted above, explains in the same article in *Publishers' Weekly*: “Potential fans come to you, you need to talk to them in a way that’s like an elevator pitch. If you can’t do that it’ll be tougher to get them in” (Ryan 2014). This is a far cry from J.D Salinger’s idea of promotion, which consisted in disappearing in Vermont, somewhere, never to be interviewed or seen again by either journalist, critic or reader. Russ Colchamiro is present at numerous trade shows to promote his self-published books. He adds: “You have to engage with fans.” According to an article by Rebecca Newman on E.L. James (*The Telegraph*, 7th December 2012), no one does it better than the author of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the most representative product of the self-publishing revolution:

she delights in interacting with fans. Her Twitter feed shares her love of eating Nutella with a spoon, her fondness for walking her Westie dog, Max, near her home in Ealing, West London and such domestic trivia as broken plumbing and an inability to eat a fish taco tidily. It touches on her smoking – menthol slims, or ‘ghetto fags’ – and her joy at settling down at the end of a day with a bottle of Oyster Bay sauvignon blanc and her husband of 25 years Niall.

The same article assures us that “the fans are desperate for a book from “Christian’s point of view” (Newman 2012) (Christian being the male protagonist in *Fifty Shades of Grey*).

The extent of the “engagement with fans” is such that the Internet bred literature has become known as “fan fiction”, and in this respect the reader is a fan, which suggests, incidentally, that beyond suspending disbelief, the reader must suspend any critical or sceptical approach to the work of the writer, just like a football fan or a musical fan, driven to hysteria by the mere appearance of his idols. If writers may have had a personality cult in the past, especially if we think of such figures as Hemingway⁶⁴ or Byron building a story or a myth around themselves, their readers were never designated as “fans”, at least not officially.

The unforeseen consequence of a pre- or post-Gutenberg technology which offers a fragmented way of reading is that it has also created a fragmented way of creating reading matter, as we’ll see later, either by rendering the author anonymous or isolated in front of his screen while at the same time constantly reminding the reader of his or her presence. Yet, paradoxically, the presence of the author disappears in his writing, as the democratizing process of the public taking possession of the text goes even further.

As a consequence, the image of the writer as a cultural figure has gone through a revolution: with self-publishing the author becomes an entrepreneur who has to “engage his fans”, a recurring expression to explain that the writer has to establish and keep a permanent contact with his readers, the fans. We’ll see much later, when dealing with forms of electronic literature, that this is a first step towards a more complete disappearance of the reader under the guise of a “user” or even “player”.

On the Forbes website,⁶⁵ Jay McGregor presents a writer by the name of Dawson, who according to the journalist is paid 450.000 \$ a year by Amazon⁶⁶. Jay Mc Gregor is the author

⁶⁴ On Hemingway and the cult of personality, and the writer using himself as his subject, see Richard Bradford. 2019. *The Man who Wasn't There: A Life of Ernest Hemingway*. London: Tauris.

⁶⁵ Forbes is a media company specialized in business, investments and technology. It publishes a paper magazine on top, of its website.

⁶⁶ Jay McGregor. 2015. “Amazon Pays 450000\$ a Year to This Self-Published Writer”. Forbes. April 17, 2015. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jaymcgregor/2015/04/17/mark-dawson-made-750000-from-self-published-amazon-books/?sh=4cb067986b5b>.

of crime thrillers. He has sold three hundred thousand copies, again after an unsuccessful attempt at publishing a book with Pan entitled *The Art of Falling Apart* (2000).

The article on Forbes tells us that after publishing on Amazon, Dawson went “from author to entrepreneur”. The same expressions come back in a number of these articles: “he engages (responding to all fan messages) with all of his fans and focuses on building a rapport to ensure their loyalty”.

Dawson has created a mailing list and relies on a network of blogs. The article informs us that “Dawson is pumping 370 \$ a day into Facebook advertising” (McGregor 2015).

This evolution from author to entrepreneur represents a significant reversal of roles between the writer and his works. Whereas, previously, the loyalty of the public or readers was ensured by the content of the works and its quality, now it is the activity of the writer himself, a form of social media hustling which attracts the “fans” and ensures their “loyalty”. Again the term “loyalty” suggests that rather than gaining readers by meeting their critical standards, one has to build a form of cult following, and to achieve that aim, one has to rely on advertising as one does to sell any product.

The journalist concludes: “He’s done what he could never do with a traditional publisher because he can exercise complete control over the entire process.” In other terms, not only is the author an entrepreneur but he is the managing director of the sales of his home-made products that is to say his books.

It follows, logically, that according to this set of values and in keeping with this *modus operandi*, sales are what determine quality. Quality becomes quantity, and “big is beautiful” is the foundation of the new form of criticism which applies to this kind of publishing. Whereas in the past, if publishers would congratulate themselves on the sales of Barbara Cartland, for example, they would never consider it a superior creation to e.e. cummings to refer again to the same elitist poet, yet in self-publishing, the superior product is the one that sells most.

Hence James Altucher explains “Why *Fifty Shades of Grey* is great literature” without intended provocation.⁶⁷

James Altucher is a blogger amongst many, hedge fund manager, entrepreneur, bestselling author of self-published books on how to get rich and self-improvement, amongst

⁶⁷ James Altucher. 2021. “Why *Fifty Shades of Grey* is great literature”. [Accessed October 27, 2021]. <https://jamesaltucher.com/blog/why-50-shades-of-grey-is-great-literature/>.

which *The Choose Yourself Guide to Wealth* (2015). He is an occasional contributor to the *Financial Times* and self-appointed literary critic. The argument he puts forward to determine that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is great literature, is quite paradoxically that there isn't such a thing as great literature, because it would be arrogant to say so and because who knows what will be great in the future. However, one can still determine that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is great literature by applying the same criteria to a book as one does to a hedge fund, in other terms, the arguments in favour of classifying *Fifty Shades of Grey* as Great Literature are that it "had sold 250.000 copies even before being picked by Barnes & Nobles" (Altucher 2020). It was the fastest selling title in the history of publishing and at a certain date it accounted for twenty-five per cent of all book sales (incidentally *Fifty Shades of Grey* wasn't published by Barnes and Noble).

Nor is a word said about style or literary aesthetics in James Altucher's evaluation, because it isn't taken into account. When dealing with the books written by Hocking, the journalist has to conclude critically: "It cannot be classed as literary" (Altucher 2020).

It is to be noted, in this respect, that the authors mentioned above all belong to genre literature: science-fiction, the paranormal, and erotic literature, which is a genre in itself. Significantly, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was at the origin or has revealed the existence of a subgenre within the genre, called dismissively or not "Mommy porn".⁶⁸

This peculiarity explains the success of the self-published genre fiction with its readers, or to use the modern vocabulary or modern euphemism to designate reader and genre: the "fans" of "fanfiction". The particularity of genre being that the effect or sensation which the book produces on its reader is more important than its aesthetic content, it is easier as a reader of that type of literature to produce a competent pastiche of existing works while obeying the pre-established rules of the genre. As of 2016, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to quote a work of literary fiction which would have followed the same path as the works mentioned above. By literary fiction, we mean here a type of literary work, the first aim of which is to create some form of literary aesthetics or aesthetic emotion in the reader rather

⁶⁸ Nobody knows who coined the phrase "mommy porn" but the Urban Dictionary on the net, gives us the following definition and establishes *Fifty Shades of Grey* as as the founding text of the genre: "Mommy porn is a subgenre of erotica that grew out of the mainstream success of E.L. James' erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Characterized by its perceived audience and elegant [sic] description of female sexual domination, mommy porn first gained popularity with mom's [sic] over thirty years old before it quickly spread to a worldwide audience." It has to be added that in the article quoted above in *The Telegraph* E.L. James herself rejects this description of her book as "one of the most misogynist things". She explains: "How dare they [use the phrase mommy porn to describe or categorize her book]. It's just a book for god's sake. A love story in which people have sex." No further explanation is given.

than a particular emotion such as fear, excitement, anxiety etc. which characterizes genre literature like horror, thrillers, etc.

It is far from being the first time that a badly written piece of literature, or that a piece of literature which doesn't meet the aesthetic or critical criteria of the literary establishment, actually meets the approval of the public. We could give the example of Barbara Cartland, once again and many others.

In 1995, Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier already analysed this phenomenon from an historical point of view putting it into perspective with the advent of electronic media, in a chapter very significantly entitled "Absence de canons et nouveaux canons" in *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental*:

La situation actuelle semble donc présenter des symptômes de dissolution marquée de "l'ordre de la lecture", propre à la culture écrite occidentale, qu'il s'agisse du répertoire de textes, de leur usage et de leur conservation. Le système de production y a fortement contribué en se comportant d'une manière irrationnelle, cherchant à amasser le plus de profit dans le temps le plus bref, sans s'occuper de l'avenir, alors que la coexistence au sein d'un même système médiatique des livres (et des autres produits imprimés) avec les moyens audiovisuels marginalise les premiers, affaiblis qu'ils sont par leur incapacité constitutive à s'adapter à l'époque, à des pratiques d'usage et d'apprentissage qui font de moins en moins cas de l'écrit traditionnel. Autre aspect du phénomène, complémentaire, celui de nouvelles pratiques de lecture ici analysées et qui s'incarnent dans la figure du "lecteur anarchique", jusqu'ici présente seulement chez les jeunes, mais qui est destinée à se multiplier et deviendra probablement le modèle dominant dans un avenir proche.

À ce nouveau lecteur et à ses pratiques innovantes correspond dans une certaine mesure, du côté de la production, une autre figure anormale et potentiellement "anarchique" : celle de l'auteur de produits de grande consommation, qui écrit une paralittérature, réécrit les textes d'autrui, rédige des romans policiers ou à l'eau de rose ou compile des articles de journaux de basse qualité, souvent condamné à l'anonymat ou perdu au sein d'une équipe de rédaction (Cavallo and Chartier 1997, 455).

Today the 'order of reading' characteristic of Western written culture, on the levels of both repertory of texts and the practices for their use and preservation, shows serious symptoms of dissolution. A production system that is behaving irrationally, concentrating on grasping maximum profit in the least time, with no thought of the future, contributes strongly to this trend. At the same time, the fact that books (and other print products) coexist within the same media system as audio-visual devices marginalizes books, which have already been weakened by what is in essence their inability to adapt to new times, new practices, and new learning methods that depend less and less on traditional written matter. Another factor that contributes to the decline of the book is the rise of the new reading practices just described of the 'anarchical reader', a figure that for the moment is more common among the young, but that is destined to proliferate and, in all probability, to become the prevailing model in the near future.

There is another anomalous and potentially 'anarchical' figure who corresponds to the new readers and their innovative reading practices. It is the consumeristic writer who produces texts of para-literature, rewrites other people's texts, churns out lightweight romantic fiction and mysteries, or patches together articles for second-tier periodicals, often anonymously or as

member of an editorial team (Cavallo and Chartier 1999, 366, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane).

The situation described here corresponds exactly to that of Internet authorship or more precisely the lack of authorship and the type of production which results from that situation.

Putting this phenomenon into historical perspective, Cavallo adds:

Le phénomène n'est pas nouveau dans la longue histoire de la culture écrite occidentale, il est toujours présent quand il y a crise de la production, forte augmentation du public et net écart entre les niveaux de produits, comme par exemple dans la France de la seconde moitié du XVIII^e à la veille de la Révolution. Dans les différentes phases de son histoire, ce personnage ambigu a souvent un rôle de contestation active du système culturel (et politique) dominant, comme cela pourrait être aussi le cas (et l'est déjà en partie) de son homologue, le lecteur anarchique (Chartier and Cavallo 1997, 456).

This is not a new phenomenon in the long history of Western written culture. Writers of the sort have surfaced in all times of crisis in book production, of a suddenly expanded reading public, or of widely divergent levels in the product. One example is late eighteenth-century France, on the eve of the French Revolution. In the various phases of the history of this ambiguous figure, he or she has often played an active role in contesting the current cultural (and political) system, just as his counterpart, the 'anarchical' reader, may do in the future, and in part has already done (Chartier and Cavallo 1997, 366, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane).

If the analysis is exact and does indeed correspond to the current situation both regarding the "lecteur anarchique" and "l'auteur" and if it can be applied to the Internet, with hindsight we have to realise that the conclusions inferred at the time when this text was written appear to be now erroneous.

En somme, autant qu'on puisse le prévoir, il semble que sur un plan général, l'affaiblissement du "canon" occidental et l'arrivée de nouveaux répertoires, dans des situations multiraciales ou conflictuelles, et, sur le plan individuel l'affirmation de pratiques "anarchiques" font de la lecture un phénomène éclaté et diversifié, une pratique entièrement privée de règles sauf au niveau de certains individus ou petits groupes : tout le contraire donc de ce qui se passe dans les mass-media électroniques et en particulier dans la télévision, où le "canon" des programmes tend, lui, à s'uniformiser rapidement au niveau mondial et à fédérer les publics, quelle que soit leur tradition culturelle (Chartier et Cavallo 1997, 457).

In summary, in so far as we can tell the future, it seems that on the other hand, the general weakening of the Western canon and its admixture, in multi-racial situations and moments of conflict, with other repertoires and, on the other hand, the affirmation on the individual plane, if not on the level of small groups, of 'anarchical' practices is turning reading into a fragmented and diversified activity totally without rules. This is the precise opposite of what is happening in the electronic mass media, television in particular, where a 'canon' of programmes is rapidly becoming uniform throughout the world, and where the viewing public (of all cultural traditions) is just as rapidly being levelled even though the guerilla warfare of 'zapping' has

begun to introduce anarchical, individual disorder with an iron clad ‘order of video’ (Chartier et Cavallo 1997, 367, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane).

In this first extract, the mistake is to think that « reading » has become the opposite to what the author calls electronic “mass-media” such as television, to which we can add our other glass screen, the Internet. In fact what has happened both with television and the Internet is the isolated anarchic way of reading or of “consuming culture”. Yet the author foresees that “zapping” announces at the time of writing an anarchic individual type of consuming “electronic mass media”. It is mentioned in a parenthesis in the text: “(*même si la guérilla du zapping commence à constituer un facteur de désordre individuel anarchique à l’intérieur de l’ordre de fer*” télévisuel” (Chartier and Cavallo 1997, 457).⁶⁹

Where the text above is right is in the emergence of a multicultural context but again this aspect is reinforced by the Internet while at the same time creating a greater uniformity. Again reading is not here the opposite to what the mass-media offers, it is a mirror image.

Just as the printing press was a one to many communication system made of Europe the first modern society, the Internet breaks down political and geographical, or even cultural, barriers by creating, as we’ve seen, an alternative space which makes nationality irrelevant and obsolete in the field of literature as in all other fields. Internet as a means of communication of the many to the many, one is almost tempted to say (of anybody to anybody) detaches its production and messages from their immediate contexts. Geoff Ryman’s book, 253 (2014), quoted above is an example. The same could be said of *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson or *Book of Numbers* by Cohen, in which the action belongs to no other place than “the modern world” as seen in its entirety through a screen. By opposition, novels by George Eliot or Dickens, for example, are very specifically English and are the emanation of England at the time when they were written.

As a consequence of the error in the text by Armando Petrucci quoted above, another “mistake” or error of interpretation follows when he writes:

En vérité, c’est une erreur, (peut-être inévitable) de se demander si l’avenir de la lecture tel qu’on l’a dessiné ici, fait de pratiques individuelles, de choix personnels, de refus des règles et des hiérarchies, de chaos productif et de consommation sauvage, de métissages de répertoires divers peut être considéré ou non comme positif. La réalité, c’est qu’il semble s’agir d’un phénomène étendu et complexe, destiné à se consolider dans les dix ou vingt ans qui viennent avec le début du troisième millénaire. C’est seulement dans cinquante ou cent

⁶⁹ Chartier and Cavallo 1997, 457: “(even though the warfare of ‘zapping’ has begun to introduce anarchical, individual disorder with an ironclad order of video)”.

ans que nous pourrions savoir où il nous a conduit et, si nous le savons, émettre un jugement. Aujourd'hui, non, il est trop tôt (Chartier and Cavallo 1997, 457).

In reality, it seems mistaken (although perhaps inevitable) to wonder at this point whether or not there are signs that the future of reading matter and reading as they are delineated here – that is as a complex of individual practices, personal choices and rejections of rules and hierarchies; of productive chaos and undisciplined consumption; of *métissages* between different repertoires and highly diverse but parallels levels of production – will be positive. Reading is a broad and complex phenomenon. In the next decade or two, as we move from the second to the third millenium, its direction will undoubtedly become clear. Only in fifty or a hundred years will we know where reading had led us, and, if we still care to, be able to give our judgement. Not now; it is too soon (Chartier and Cavallo 1997, 367, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane).

This book was first published in 1995 and didn't take into account the exponential growth of the Internet and the speed at which the Internet has imposed its standards and criteria. We don't have to wait a hundred years, it is not too soon to see the consequences of the phenomena described above for reading and literature, they have marked the gradual disappearance of paper, obvious in the evolution of the press and newspapers, and have established the triumph of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Wikipedia.

The contemporary reader, such as Gomez or the self-published writers mentioned above, sees himself as part of a “protest” against the “system” both cultural and political. Yet this protest in the second half of the eighteenth century in France found its frame and its way of functioning within the Gutenberg technology at a time when there was no alternative. Nowadays, the Gutenberg technology has receded as Cavallo himself points out, and this analysis when turning to the consequences for the future fails once more to take into account the exponential nature of the Internet's development. We'll find the same failure when it comes to prophesizing in the remarkable works of Elizabeth Eisenstein, as we'll see later.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ A further collateral damage due to the Internet's conception of literature is Bourdieu's analysis of the “*champ littéraire*” in *Les Règles de l'art* (1992). “*La Bohème*”, “*La rupture avec le Bourgeois*” and the idea of a power struggle between an avant-garde form of literature and the academic is within the context of the Internet completely irrelevant, and as obsolete as the novel of literary initiation, as we've seen. One could argue as a lot of self-published Internet writers do that fighting “the Big Six” and traditional or “legacy” publishing is an extension of Bourdieu's conception of the fight to dominate the “*champ littéraire*”, or “Literary field” according to Bourdieu's definition, but the fact that figures have replaced values make this argument equally irrelevant.

10. Pornography and the Essence of the Internet

Most popular best-sellers have been looked down upon by this same literary establishment, what is striking in the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey* are the extremes of success and disapproval which this particular piece of work represents. We have seen that it has broken all records when it comes to sales. On the other hand, *The Telegraph* reported on the 9th of October 2012 that Salman Rushdie declared: “I have never read anything so badly written that got published” (Irvine 2012).⁷¹

Again, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has actually never been published, or has simply been printed after appearing on the net. There is a difference. Second, whether it is well or badly written is in fact irrelevant, it has to be seen in the light of what the Internet can produce as literature. And that literature must in turn be seen in the light of what the Internet is in its essence. It is significant in that respect that *Fifty Shades of Grey* belongs to the genre of pornographic literature.

Mentioning pornographic literature as opposed to erotica, or erotic literature takes us again toward the debate on literary legitimacy. How do we define pornography or erotica, as opposed to each other?

The definition given of eroticism by George Bataille (*L'Érotisme*, 1957) is particularly relevant to us as he states that the “eroticism cannot be envisaged independently of the history of religions” (Bataille 1957, 12).⁷² And we have tried to establish that the same can be said about the Internet (indeed as we'll see every technological innovation, especially in the field of communication or representation, such as printing, recording, filming, opens itself to a religious or metaphysical content or interpretation). Bataille distinguishes three forms of eroticism: “*L'érotisme des corps, l'érotisme des coeurs, enfin l'érotisme sacré.*” Yet, he adds further “*Tout érotisme est sacré*” (1957, 22) and he assimilates further “*le domaine de l'érotisme*” to the “*domaine de la violence*” (1957, 23). Violence here due to its sexual nature being “*la violation*” (1957, 23). What interests here rather than the distinction between the three forms of eroticism is the idea of the sacredness which characterizes all of them. Especially as in a precision further along the text Bataille himself states that rather than

⁷¹ Chris Irvine. 2012. “Sir Salman Rushdie: ‘Fifty Shades of Grey makes Twilight look like War and Peace’”. [Accesses October 27, 2021]. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/9596577/Sir-Salman-Rushdie-Fifty-Shades-of-Grey-makes-Twilight-look-like-War-and-Peace.html>.

⁷² Georges Bataille. 1962. *Eroticism*. London: Penguin, translated by Mary Dalwood.

“sacred” he should have used the word “*divin*”. For Bataille, we are “*des êtres discontinus*” (1957, 13) (“discontinued being” and eroticism is the nostalgia of a lost continuity) and in that nostalgia resides a wish to be immortal (Bataille 1957, 28). In that sense this notion of eroticism offers a mirror image to the conceptions of the Internet that we had found in the Singularity, for example, in the sense that the Internet offers both a continuity, a way of merging into a newly defined noosphere on the one hand and by so doing a new form of immortality by downloading oneself into the machine. The Internet offers thus an eroticism of machines and of technology, within a religious context.

But Bataille never opposes eroticism to pornography, he never gives different definitions for each. Even obscenity, which in *Yellow Dog*, for example, belonged both to pornography and comedy is not opposed to eroticism, it becomes part of it by recreating the lost continuity of the being:

L'action décisive est la mise à nu. La nudité s'oppose à l'état fermé, c'est-à-dire à l'état d'existence discontinue. C'est un état de communication, qui révèle la quête d'une continuité possible de l'être au-delà du repli sur soi. Les corps s'ouvrent à la continuité par ces conduits secrets qui nous donnent le sentiment de l'obscénité. L'obscénité signifie le trouble qui dérange un état des corps conforme à la possession de soi, à la possession de l'individualité durable et affirmée (Bataille 1957, 24).⁷³

There is here no aesthetic or moral judgement of obscenity, it is simply a state of possession of the self, which is part of that search for continuity and which in this respect is simply a trouble, a feeling of unrest, unease, perhaps a form of disorder contrary to the possession of the self and its individuality. If we go further in this analysis and apply it to the Internet, the “obscenity” inherent to the Internet is not so much due to the accumulation of pornographic material, but to the loss of individuality to achieve a form of continuity or fusion through its technology and religious essence as defined by the Singularity.

By opposition, Baudrillard in *De La séduction*, keeps defining pornography in terms of aesthetic condemnation: “*Plus d'incertitude, plus de secret. C'est l'obscénité radicale qui commence*” (Baudrillard 1980, 35).⁷⁴ “*C'est de cette monotonie béante que se berce la*

⁷³ Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality (Bataille, 2012).

⁷⁴ No more uncertainty, no more secrets. Radical obscenity starts here [my translation].

sexualité porno” (Baudrillard 1980, 35).⁷⁵ Incidentally if we know what monotony means, it would be much harder to define “*monotonie béante*” not that it matters here. Much. “*Peut-être d’ailleurs, le porno n’est-il qu’une allégorie, c’est-à-dire un forçage de signes, une entreprise baroque de sursignification touchant au “grotesque” (littéralement : l’art “grotesque” des jardins rajoutait de la nature rocheuse comme le porno rajoute le pittoresque des détails anatomiques)*” (Baudrillard 1980, 46),⁷⁶ “*l’Hyperréalité de la chose*” (Baudrillard 1980, 47).⁷⁷ This last idea is probably the most important one in Baudrillard’s definition of what he calls “*le porno*”. Pornography is a representation of hyperreality, it is a principle of reality by opposition to seduction:

Que tout soit produit, que tout se lise, que tout advienne au réel, au visible et au chiffre de l’efficacité, que tout se transcrive en rapports de force, en systèmes de concepts ou en énergie computable, que tout soit dit, accumulé, répertorié, recensé : tel est le sexe dans le porno, mais telle est plus généralement l’entreprise de toute notre culture, dont l’obscénité est la condition naturelle : culture de la monstration, de la démonstration de la monstruosité productive.

Jamais de séduction là-dedans, ni dans le porno puisque production immédiate d’actes sexuels, actualité féroce du plaisir, aucune séduction dans ces corps traversés par un regard littéralement aspiré par le vide de la transparence – mais pas l’ombre de séduction non plus dans l’univers de la production, régi par le principe de transparence des forces dans l’ordre des phénomènes visibles et computables : objets, machines, actes sexuels ou produit national brut (Baudrillard 1980, 55).⁷⁸

The aesthetic condemnation of pornography, its absence of seduction when it becomes a “*monstruosité productive*” finds an extension in the condemnation of the economic context of pornography as an exploitation of “*le réel*”. It becomes “*la forme même du capital*” (p. 55), “*Une entreprise individuelle fondée sur une énergie naturelle*”, which is endowed with a commercial value.

⁷⁵ That gaping monotony is the mode of existence of pornographic sexuality [my translation].

⁷⁶ Maybe pornography is nothing but an allegory, that is an excessive distortion of signs, a baroque undertaking of oversignifying becoming almost grotesque.

⁷⁷ The hyperreality of the thing [my translation].

⁷⁸ That everything should be produced, that everything should be read, that everything comes back to reality, to the visible world, to numbers and efficiency, that everything should be translated into a power struggle, in conceptual systems or computable energy, that everything should be said, accumulated, classified, accounted for: such is the pornographic representation of sex in pornography (“*le porno*”), but more generally such is the enterprise of our whole culture, the natural condition of which is obscenity: a culture of showing, of demonstrating, of productive monstrosity. Never any form of seduction in any of this, not in pornography as it is an immediate production of sexual act, a ferocious actuality of pleasure, not seduction in these bodies taken in by a spectator absorbed in the emptiness of transparency – no shadow of seduction either in the world of production ruled by the principle of transparency of forces in the order of visible and computable phenomena: objects, machines, sexual acts, or national productivity [my translation].

In that sense, we can see how the Internet can relate to pornography, how the Internet is inherently pornographic, with the association of “a commercial value, together with the sense of accumulation”.

Eroticism is a form of aesthetically institutionalized pornography, but the Internet refusing the very notions of quality and institutions or institutions as we know them to replace them with new libertarian institutions, is inherently pornographic. It creates an “*économie du sexe*” as Baudrillard puts it (Baudrillard 1980, 61).

It follows that we can apply Baudrillard’s definition of “*le voyeurisme du porno*” to the Internet voyeurism: qui “*N’est pas un voyeurisme sexuel, mais un voyeurisme de la représentation.*”⁷⁹ In that sense, with the distance created by the screen between the content of the Internet and its user, everything on the Internet becomes a representation and the user is always a voyeur.

At the same time, neither Baudrillard nor Bataille can give a definition that would establish a difference or a clear limit between eroticism and pornography. And from a literary perspective we are faced here with the same problem raised by all genre literature: when does a work of literature go beyond the genre it belongs to and become “literary”? It is easiest to compare erotic or pornographic literature with the “thriller”, in the sense that both offer a pleasure and a reaction beyond a purely aesthetic literary pleasure (by opposition, other genres, like the western, for example, are not meant to create an immediate almost physical response in the reader like fear or sexual excitement). The “thriller”, as its name indicates clearly, is supposed to create a feeling of fear and to inspire the reader with the type of ambiguous pleasure that fear procures. Obviously, in erotic literature the “thrill” is sexual. It could thus be argued that a work becomes literary when its ambition is to create an aesthetic emotion beyond the immediate almost physical emotion such as fear or sexual titillation. Yet it could also be argued that creating fear or any other form of immediately felt emotion is not intrinsically incompatible with literary quality and the fact that the work which procures this emotion is imbued with literary ambitions, as is the case in most serialized Victorian literature such as Dickens’ or Wilkie Collins’.

A clear-cut separation between genre and literature becomes impossible. Let us say that erotica is a form of pornographic literature imbued with an aesthetic ambition, just as

⁷⁹ Not a sexual voyeurism but a voyeurism of representation [my translation].

certain crime stories (Raymond Chandler's to give but one example) strive in their style to raise themselves above their genre and to establish a form of literary aestheticism.

To take this reflection on *Fifty Shades of Grey* further, we can even consider that it belongs to pornography before it belongs to literature. To give it a new definition, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is pornography in letters as opposed to pictures and, in that, represents a perfect product of the Internet. Just as it hasn't actually been published, contrary to what Salman Rushdie asserts, it hasn't really been written either, in the sense that it isn't "badly" written, it is simply not written at all. The text consists in a succession of independent sentences, with hardly any conjunctives, they are unconsciously minimalistic in their style to the point of representing a total absence of style.

In any given passage, one notices that the association of words, the choice of language itself is always the most obvious, the simplest, the most clichéd: "His eyes flash dark and dangerous" (James 2011, 95). "My heart is in my mouth" (James 2011, 92) followed by "nervous anticipation" followed by "relief that we've arrived alive", "his look is so intense" (James 2011, 93). Metaphors are on the same level as if banality were a deliberate choice which it perhaps is for the sake of immediate readability in a way which is reminiscent of advertising's efficiency: "Dark knight and white knight, it's a fitting metaphor for Christian." All these examples are taken from page 92 but the same exercise, looking for the most banal and hackneyed in writing can be repeated on any page. Page 88, for example, we find: "He shuts the door with a slam", "wolfish grin", "tantalizingly close", and on page 89 "The helicopter rises slowly and smoothly into the air, it's pitch black", "He's concentrating hard". This style finds its extension in onomatopoeia to express surprise or emotion, in a way reminiscent of comic books: "Whoa!" (James 2011, 89). It should be noted here that this "Whoa!" doesn't come as part of a dialogue (although it could be argued, as Gore Vidal does in the preface to Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*, that any novel written in the first person is entirely written in dialogue)⁸⁰ but as a description of the emotion felt at that particular moment by the narrator/character. Obviously the clichés in the language are echoed by clichés in the descriptions: "He has a beautiful profile, straight nose, square jawed" (p. 89). The description stops here and is reduced to its simplest expression. It is not surprising given that

⁸⁰ "Though Burroughs is innocent of literature and cannot reproduce human speech, he does have a gift very few writers of any kind possess: he can describe action vividly. I give away no trade secrets when I say that this is as difficult for a Tolstoy as it is for a Burroughs (even William). Because it is so hard, the craftier contemporary novelists usually prefer to tell their stories in the first person, which is simply writing dialogue." Edgar Rice Burroughs. 1990. *Tarzan of the Apes*. New York: Signet classics. XI.

choice of writing (but is it really a choice? One could be tempted to say yes in view of its commercial efficiency) that the dialogue is constructed along the same lines:

“I need the bathroom.” My voice is a whisper.
He frowns bemused.
“Now you’re asking permission?”
“Er... no.”
“Anastasia, you know where the bathroom is” (James 2011, 359).

And again (p. 94), it should be noted that the following passage is not a parody:

“It’s a very big place you have here.”
“Big?”
“Big”
It’s big he agrees, and his eyes glow with amusement. I take another sip of wine.
“Do you play?” I point my chin at the piano.
“Yes.”
“Well?”
“Yes.”
“Of course you do. Is there anything you can’t do well?”
“Yes... a few things” (James 2011, 94).

Logically again, the dialogue morphs into an exchange of emails, perhaps as a modern reference or equivalent to the epistolary genre and more specifically *Dangerous Liaisons*, if we take into account the mildly pornographic or very basic libertine content of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but the weakness of the style makes it impossible to surmise. The only way around this puzzling question would be to consider *Fifty Shades of Grey* as an experiment in a minimalist avant-garde form of writing.

In *Is Shakespeare any Good*, Richard Bradford plays the game of comparing *Fifty Shades of Grey* and “Beckettian modernism”.

According to Bradford, E.L. James:

abandons anything resembling a story in favour of a glut of erotic episodes. The narrative is non-existent. Instead we accompany the mindsets [sic] of Ana and Christian through more than five hundred pages of sex, variously anticipated, rehearsed and fondly recalled. The locations vary, though the implicit convention seems to be that only glamorous, luxurious and ostentatiously expensive sites are suitable, and we sometimes learn that their lives involve non-carnal activities is disclosed in a heedless, extemporaneous manner ensuring that the parade of pornography continues largely without interruption. [...] It could in her defence, be argued that she has discovered a version of Beckettian modernism that appeals to the reader with little or no interest in high culture. Beckett’s most notable fiction (particularly *Watt*, 1953; *Molloy*, 1956; *Malone Dies*, 1958; and *The Unnameable*, 1960) involves nothing resembling a story or even a recognisable context beyond the imprisoned, self-referring mind-set of the speaking

presence. If it can be said to have a subject it is language, particularly its power as a medium of introverted self-possession. Substitute sex for language and the parallels with James become evident. In Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) Geoffrey Firman, alcoholic depressive British Consul to Somewhere, is less a character than a witness to the novel's unbounded concern with the cyclic and unfathomable nature of truth and its quixotic confederate, writing. Ana is similarly fixated with the sensuous, magnetic presence of Christian, so much so that her story, indeed her life, becomes a static, obsessive exchange of continuity for an endlessly repeated sex act (Bradford 2015, 270).

Bradford acknowledges his "facetiousness" in this passage as indeed no literary critic would be sufficiently cruel to suspect E.L. James of any literary ambition. Yet he wonders: "if there is some analogy between a novel that dispenses with characters and narrative energy in favour of an intellectual fancy and one that does the same to flatter a similarly solipsistic instinct, in James's case unaccountable gratification" (Bradford 2015, 270).

And, indeed, a novel like *Yellow Dog* could be compared to *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the sense that it "dispenses with character and narrative energy" and that like *Fifty Shades of Grey* it is a product of the Internet. Yet no literary critic needs any viciousness to recognize that the writing of *Yellow Dog* is sustained by some form of literary ambition.

Martin Amis' *Yellow Dog* is a product of the Internet because it tries to reproduce it and succeeds only in the sense that it manages an accumulation of meaningless scenes, the critical appreciation of which can only be made in terms of "goofy", "zany", "far out" etc. as we'll see. The same can be said of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the sense that its style or absence of style, and its absence of narrative structure, fit the type of reading demanded by the Internet: a mosaic, disrupted type of reading requiring a minimum of concentration, the linguistic clichés on which the whole novel is built help the reader dispense with the concentration which would be required by a book aspiring to create a form of literary aestheticism.

The other aspect which makes both *Yellow Dog* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* perfect products of the Internet in their numerous imperfections is their pornographic content, be it because *Yellow Dog* aims at representing the "obscenification of society" or because to *Fifty Shades of Grey* provides some form of "gratification".

In her study, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), Sianne Ngai has defined as aesthetic categories of modern times and, more precisely, of "post-modern times", the zany, the interesting and the cute. *Yellow Dog*, in its conception, corresponds to her definition of the zany. Let's first quote Sianne Ngai on the conception of her essay at defining these three categories, and we will also quote her definitions of these categories to see how they correspond both to post-modernist literature, the aesthetic conception of the Internet according

to Internet Zealots or advocates while explaining the aesthetic failure of the Internet aesthetics and incidentally of *Yellow Dog*, and also why it is possible to present as Bradford does with irony, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, as an avant-garde work of fiction.

This book makes a simple argument about the zany, the interesting and the cute: that these three categories, for all their marginality to aesthetic theory and to genealogies of postmodernism, are the ones in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hyper-commodified, information-saturated, performance-driven, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism. This is because the zany, the interesting and the cute index – and are thus each in a historically concrete way about – the system’s most socially binding processes: production, in the case of zaniness (an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor); circulation, in the case of the interesting (an aesthetic about difference in the forms of information and the pathways of its movement and exchange); and consumption, in the form of the cute (an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbour toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities). As sensuous, affective reflections of the ways in which contemporary subjects work, exchange and consume (and as the cute and the zany in particular will show, in ways significantly mediated by gender, sexuality and class), the commodity aesthetic of cuteness, the discursive aesthetic of the interesting, and the performative aesthetic of zaniness help us get at some of the most important social dynamics underlying life in late capitalist society today. No other aesthetic categories in our repertoire speak to these everyday practices of production, circulation and consumption in the same direct way.

In this light it stands to reason that the zany, the cute, and the interesting are ubiquitous in the postmodern literary anthology and museum of contemporary art as they are on the Internet and television (Ngai 2012, 1-2).

As a prime example, Sianne Ngai quotes the “vertiginous zaniness of Thomas Pynchon” (Ngai 2012, 2).

One can see how *Fifty Shades of Grey* can fit into the aesthetic category of the cute, being at one a sentimental novel mixing and inspiring “a wide spectrum of feelings from tenderness to aggression”.

The three aesthetic categories identified by Sianna Ngai are “linked to major representational practices that span across different media: comedy in the case of the zany; romance in the case of the cute; realism in the case of the interesting. They are also linked to specific genres and forms” (Ngai 2012, 3).

Although these categories are linked and create a system of echo between each other (the avant-garde which is “interesting” will also have a “cute” quality), the aesthetic genre which interests us most here in relation to Internet literature, is obviously the zany.

In contrast to the rational coolness of the interesting, the aesthetic of nonstop acting or doing that is zaniness is hot: hot under the collar, hot and bothered, hot to trot. Highlighting the

affect, libido and physicality of an unusually beset agent, these idioms underscore zaniness's uniqueness as the only aesthetic category in our repertoire about a strenuous relation to playing that seems to be on a deeper level about work. When brought out by the post-Fordist, service economy zaniness of performers like Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and Richard Pryor in *The Toy*, the zany more specifically evokes the performance of affective labour, the production of affects and social relationships – as it comes to increasingly trouble the distinction between work and play. The formal dynamics of this seemingly light-hearted but strikingly vehement aesthetic, in which the potential for injury always seems right around the corner, are thus most sharply visible in the arts of live and recorded performance – dance happenings, walkabouts, re-enactments, game shows, video games – and in the arts of rhythm and movement in particular (Ngai 2012, 7).

We'll see later in the chapter on “purely” electronic literature that this aesthetic category which can be applied to postmodern writing and is applied to postmodern writing by Ngai (quoting Kathy Acker, Ishmael Reed, Shelly Jackson – Ngai 2012, 8) leads “literature” to morph into all sorts of “Happenings, walkabouts, game shows and video games”.

Obviously, *Yellow Dog* places itself within that category, not so much by its style (such as the use of a Chinese name for an English character), but by the actions it depicts in the sense that it is theatrical, even beyond theatrical, in the absurd and improbable accumulation of these actions, it is a performance largely playing again on troubling “the distinction between work and play”.

By subscribing to this aesthetic category, postmodernist literature heralds somehow the aesthetics of the Internet, the mosaic disrupted video game type of aesthetics which we also find in novels such as *Snow Crash*. In that sense, the equation between these two forms of aesthetics, one of which is definitely not literary, as we'll see, namely the aesthetics of the Internet because its tool and its basis are not literary and outside the Gutenberg galaxy, this equation raises the question of the literary quality – of postmodernist literature. Is the literary legitimacy of postmodernist literature anything more than that of a “zany” video game.

Is the zaniness of the Internet production as reproduced in a literary frame such as *Snow Crash* or *Yellow Dog* or even *Fifty Shades of Grey*, productive or creative in any way or does it remain a caricature of itself, a form of art for art's sake deprived of any other aesthetics but its own trivial form of aesthetics?

This is the answer which Sianne Ngai provides:

On first glance zaniness seems purely a symptom of the ‘perform-or-else’ ideology of late capitalism, including its increasingly affective, biopolitical ways of meeting the imperative to endlessly increase productivity. Yet for all its spectacular displays of laborious exertion, the activity of zaniness is more often than not destructive; one might even describe it as the dramatization of an anarchic refusal to be productive (Ngai 2012, 12).

Several points are to be stressed in this passage, first the fact that in the aesthetics of the Internet as “zany” and of the literature which represents it as such, quantity and the multiplication of “activity” replaces quality. The other aspect is the anarchic quality of the production which corresponds to the lack of structure and split nature of Internet productions.

The reference to art for art’s sake above, corresponds to the fact that “zany” in the way it functions could be compared to “camp”, the same “campness” to be found in Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes* character in *À Rebours*⁸¹ as Ngai points out. The two ways of performing camp and zany have much in common. She also stresses the difference between the two.

Like zaniness, camp involves a ‘glorification of character’ and makes failure a central part of its aesthetic. As Sontag notes, ‘things are campy not when they become old – but when we become less involved with them, and can enjoy, instead of being frustrated by the failure of the attempt’. Camp thus involves a ‘reevaluation of failure, of a cultural ambition that in its time simply missed its mark, tragically or poignantly or extravagantly’.

This description of camp could perfectly be applied to *À Rebours* and the whole failure of *Des Esseintes* to achieve the enjoyment of aesthetic perfection through an extravagant accumulation of experiences and words. The difference between *À Rebours* and *Yellow Dog* for example lies in the following explanation and difference between camp and zany, given by Ngai.

But while camp thus converts the pain of failure and loss into victory and enjoyment, zaniness highlights its own inability to do this; indeed, the desperation and frenzy of its besieged performers, due to the precarious situations into which they are constantly thrust, point to a laborious involvement from which ironic detachment is not an option (Ngai 2012, 12).

In *Yellow Dog*, pornography takes on the aesthetic qualities of the zany as we’ve seen, through exaggeration, accumulation and by applying to it the definition of the zany given by Ngai above. It is thus not surprising that these representations correspond to the aesthetic of the Internet as the Internet, as we’ll demonstrate, is inherently, in its essence, pornographic.

⁸¹ Huysmans’ novel *À Rebours*, published in 1884 in France, is referred to in English as *Against Nature*, or *Against the Grain*. There are three English editions, both entitled *Against Nature*, the first published in 2003 by Penguin and translated by Robert Baldick, in 2008 by Dedalus Books translated by Brendan King and in 2019 by John Howard.

Logically, the same aesthetic values which determine post-modernist literature are to be found again at the heart of the Internet. To quote Ngai, again:

It is because the zany, the interesting, and the cute index the uncertain status of performing between labor and play, the increasing routing of art and aesthetic experience through the exchange of information, and the paradoxical complexity of our desire for a simpler relation to our commodities that they are ‘about’ production, circulation, and consumption. With the intensified integration of these economic processes – which are also, crucially modes of social organization – it stands to reason that twentieth century objects of varying scales abound in which we can see all three aesthetic categories in play at once, from Samuel Beckett’s late modernist corpus, with its recursive poetics of combination and permutation (interesting), themes of laborious or compulsive doing (zany), and sad/pathetic characters obsessed with cookies, dogs, and socks (cute), to Web 2.0 culture in its entirety, with its zany blogs, cite tweets, and interesting wikis (Ngai 2012, 15).

What *Yellow Dog* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* also demonstrate, each in their own different way, while being “zany, cute and interesting”, is that the main commodity of the Internet is pornography.

Although pornography doesn’t occupy as much space on the Internet as one imagines according to Forbes, it is significant that it is viewed as being constituted of 60% or sometimes even 80% of pornographic material. This misconception comes from the fact that pornography corresponds to the criteria of the Internet, especially the new form of pornography that has been created by the Internet and which bears considerable differences to the tradition of erotic literature as represented by Apollinaire, Aragon or the Marquis de Sade.

Paradoxically, the advent of print also had an influence on the distribution of pornographic material, its conception and its accessibility to the public. One can easily imagine that it is easier to appreciate a pornographic text alone and in silence than having it read aloud by a monk in a room full of other monks.

As Eisenstein points out:

Trends pointing to modernism and to fundamentalism, for example were both launched by Bible-printing – as later discussion suggests. Pornography as well as piety assumed new forms. Book reading did not stop short with guides to godly living or practical manuals and texts any more than printers stopped short at producing them. The same silence, solitude, and contemplative attitudes associated formerly with spiritual devotion also accompanied the perusal of scandal sheets, ‘lewd ballads’, ‘merrie books of Italy’, and other corrupted tales of ‘ink and paper’. Not a desire to withdraw from worldly society or the city of man but a gregarious curiosity about them could be satisfied by silent perusal of eighteenth century journals, gazettes and newsletters. Increasingly the well-informed man of affairs had to spend part of each day in temporary isolation from his fellow men (Eisenstein 1979, 130).

The fact that both the Internet and print were at the origin of a new conception and development of pornography stresses once more the parallel between the passage from an oral tradition to a written one and from script to the Internet, because pornography on the Internet, be it “written” or “filmed”, has the same “qualities” or rather characteristics as the rest of any Internet production and literature in particular.

Incidentally, we’ll note that the development of pornography coming out of a new technology runs parallel with that of a new piety, which is what we have found on the Internet.⁸²

Pornography on the Internet is like the rest, participatory, free, and amateur. What Madelena Gonzalez calls the “Interactive peep-show” in her article “The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology” (2008)⁸³ to which we will come back. Pornography on the Internet is also anonymous. Meredith Bennett-Smith in *The Christian Science Monitor* notes: “Romance and erotica have been at the forefront of the e-book revolution because you can take e-books anywhere without tell-tale lurid covers revealing your reading habits” (“*Fifty Shades of Grey, What is the Appeal?*”, March 15th 2012).

In the interview given to Forbes and mentioned above, Ogi Gas and Jai Gaddam state:

The single most popular adult site in the world is live.Jasmin.com a webcam site which gets around thirty million visitors a month, or almost 2,5% of all internet users. Basically it is interesting that what men prefer the most is watching women strip on a webcam and being able to talk to them while they do, telling the women what they want to see.⁸⁴

⁸² Similarly, with print, the press replaced the pulpit. “Communion with the Sunday paper has replaced church going” as Eisenstein puts it (1979, 131), sermons having once being coupled with news about local and foreign affairs. With print, churchgoers could learn from a lay source the type of information they were once given by their priests. In the logic of the reversal of habits following the advent of the Internet and the return to the pre-Gutenberg way of sharing information, one could consider that Youtube is the new pulpit and has the same contradictions as pornography on the Internet in the sense that it is anonymous yet shared and participatory, that anyone can comment, add remarks etc. Videos of Kurzweil’s sermons filmed, on a screen and refilmed to be shown again on *your* screen is a very good example of a sermon with the computer morphing into a pulpit (cf. CInnovationGlobal, “Ray Kurzweil (USA) at Ci2019 – The Future of Intelligence, Artificial and Natural”, video Youtube, November, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kd17c5m4kdM>). In that sense Youtube as a pulpit is very representative of the illusion of a community created by the Internet, the illusion of the village, global or otherwise, the community to which Gomez was referring for example. As Eisenstein points out “To hear an address delivered, people have to come together; to read a printed report encourages individual to draw apart” (Eisenstein 1979, 132). Although 77587 people have viewed and listened to Kurzweil’s sermon, according to Youtube, it is most likely that they have all watched it alone and separately.

⁸³ Madelena Gonzalez. 2008. “The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology.” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, n°1 (winter), 11-133.

⁸⁴ Julie Ruvolo. 2011. “How Much of the Internet is actually for porn.” *Forbes*, September 7, 2011. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/julieruvolo/2011/09/07/how-much-of-the-internet-is-actually-for-porn/?sh=38ce740c5d16>.

The same principle applies to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. As we have here pornographic films without directors, editors, sound engineers and professional actors, we have amateur literature or rather unliterary texts which can be commented upon, followed and transformed at will, and which are reduced to their most simple expression. To argue, like Salman Rushdie, that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is badly written is equivalent to saying that webcam porn is poor cinema.

The same sense of anonymity and participation is to be found in the Internet habit of giving one's opinion on any piece of information or any book, film, T-shirt on Amazon, or any film or sporting event on Youtube, often in very violent and virulent terms. In this sense, the Internet offers a form of participatory voyeurism of which *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a perfect example as this voyeurism doubles up with various degrees of violence. The quality of the writing in the gratification of this form of voyeurism is as irrelevant as it would be in those comments produced by what is called in the Internet jargon "Trolls".

It thus makes sense that the most successful text to come out of the Internet should be pornographic in its nature, and that it should be able to reproduce the game of hide seek which *The Christian Science Monitor* referred to and which is at the centre of the functioning of the webcam sites. In the same interview in Forbes, offering an echo to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Ogi Gas explains: "Most of the foreign women do it without the knowledge of their friends and family and only do it for Americans so that acquaintances in their homeland won't hear about it."⁸⁵ It could naturally be argued that underground clandestine literature, pornographic or otherwise, to be read secretly and "shamefully" has always been part of the literary landscape as testifies the existence of "L'Enfer" in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, regrouping pornographic texts, as we already have mentioned earlier. The difference between the Internet and these clandestine practices is that they have been marginal and eccentric in the very first sense of this term in the literary world (as the designation "L'Enfer" clearly denotes together with the fact that these works are classified together in the BNF) whereas they are the very foundation of the Internet culture and they explain the vast success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It is surprising that nobody has stressed the fact that not only the commercial success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was unheard of for any self-published novel, but more significantly for any *pornographic* novel.

⁸⁵ See: Julie Ruvolo 2011.

The sense of the overwhelming presence of pornography on the Internet is felt by the non-native writers on the subject, most notably in Martin Amis' *Yellow Dog*:

He knew that the distance between himself and the world of women was getting greater. Each night as he entered the Borgesian metropolis of electronic pornography – with its infinities, its immoralities – Clint was in a sense travelling towards women. But he was also travelling away from them. And the distance was getting greater all the time (Amis 2003, 74).

Through the Internet, the relationship between the character and the world of women becomes pornographic, is pornography.

Pornography associated with the Internet creates a sense of exile, again, this time from “the world of women”. This passage shows the intuition that the Internet creates, paradoxically, isolation and anonymity while destroying the world one knows or aspires to, to replace it with another one which remains undefinable and un-understandable.

We'll note that Amis cannot resist a literary reference here, using “Borgesian” as a way of distancing himself as a writer from the very subject he describes, to establish a literary estrangement from the spectacle of the Internet, in the same way that Rushdie represented the projection of himself in a linen suit and Panama hat as emblems of the more elitist world in which literature in its traditional form has placed him.

Like Rusdie's *Fury*, *Yellow Dog* is self-consciously passeistic or nostalgic. Yet the objects of that nostalgia are never represented, contrary to what happens in *Fury*. “His condition felt like the twenty-first century, it was something you wanted to wake up from – snap out of. Now it was a dream within a dream. And both dreams were bad dreams” (Amis 2003, 37).

What marks the twenty-first century in *Yellow Dog* is what Amis calls the “obscenification of everyday life” (Amis 2003, 11). The overwhelming presence of pornography is part of what makes one want to wake up from the “bad dream” of present times. On the following page, Amis insists, using rather preciously a French word to define the word he has just coined: “yes, and that was part of it, the obscenification: loss of pudeur” (Amis 2003, 12). Further down the page this sense of a world conquered by pornography is stressed by the description of the sunset: “In the west a garish indeed a porno sunset had established itself” (Amis 2003, 12). Even the elements of nature in a city landscape participate in the “obscenification” of present times. The almost biblical undertone to describe that sense of decadence through a possibly symbolic vocabulary “in the west”, “sunset”, is further

developed into an apocalyptic allegory which, as we'll see, is very much part of the Internet vision of the world: "It resembled a titanic firefighting operation, with ethereal engines, cranes, ladders, the spray and foam of hose and standpipe, and the genies of the firemen about their massive work of hell-containment, hell-control" (Amis 2003, 12).

The irony is that pornography ends up pervading the novel itself in the passages where the action if one can call it that moves to "Lovetown" or "Fucktown", a fictional Californian city dedicated to the production of porn films. Amis indulges in endless complacent and self-indulgent description. To give an example: "As he climbed from the car a boobjob of a raindrop gutflopped on his baldspot" (Amis 2003, 287). For all the denunciation of the "obscenification" of the modern world, the jokiness of the expression a "boobjob of a raindrop" participates in this "obscenification" creating besides the repetitions of the sounds "op", "oo" and "ot" in the text, a comic effect based on the some form of onomatopoeia, reminiscent of E.L. James "whoah" as a stylistic effect. Hyperbole is used as a form of humour as in: "That thickened, tightened feeling around the gut and saddle, making him feel that he was to say the least of it a couple of hundred bowel-movements behind the game. There was nothing wrong with Xan that a year in the lavatory wouldn't cure." The humour here (presumably in part aiming at shocking the reader) is based on exaggeration "hundred bowel-movements", "a year in the lavatory" paired with precisely lavatory jokes (p. 212) and the parody (or is it satirical intent) as in naming the main actor Dork Bogarde (after Dirk Bogarde) is equally crude.

Yellow Dog becomes thus first a reflection and, second, a product of what it tries to criticize, denigrate, or represent as apocalyptic: The High Iq moron, the obscenification of the present times, the fragmented mind and so on.

In that sense, Amis' novel is interesting as demonstrating a certain incompatibility between Internet technology and the novel as we've known it. We'll develop at length this incompatibility. Let us observe, for the time being, that in spite of a few mistakes (getting email style and SMS style mixed up), *Yellow Dog* offers a good description of the world projected by the Internet, in the overwhelming presence of pornography and even of an appliance which is pornographic in its nature as it encourages solitary voyeurism, a destruction of language as we've known it, a sense of exoticism destroying specific identities... But as a literary work, *Yellow Dog* is a failure. Its fragmented structure or lack of structure fails to retain the reader's attention, its repetitive themes, and an adolescent, immature, unsophisticated sense of humour weigh heavily upon the style.

To stress the point regarding pornography or genre as the only compatible form of Internet literature, one could put forward the argument that no self-published book of “literary” fiction coming out of the Internet has met with any success comparable to that of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The reason is again in the nature of Internet productions. Whereas literary fiction aims at meeting certain standards (what those standards are is the subject of another debate, that of quality which we’ll pick up later) in order to contribute to a common ground which is the edifice of culture, Internet production aims at hidden consumption, the Internet novel and its success marks the victory of the peepshow over reading culture. Because Internet writing is fragmented and is aimed at a fragmented way of reading, it has to belong to genre literature which are already forms of fragmentation of the book culture, rightly or wrongly.

Some self-published Internet writers claim to be literary writers, as is the case of Jane Davis who published a text on a website called Reedsy entitled “Why I Self-Publish my Literary Fiction”.⁸⁶ Reedsy presents itself as the “foundry of best-selling books”, “a marketplace of professional editors, marketers and designers who can assist authors and publishers through every stage of the publishing process”.⁸⁷

In self-contradictory fashion, the creators of the site add in their presentation: “However we just don’t allow any-old-freelancer onto our roster. So far, only 3% of applications have been accepted ensuring that our professionals are a community of the best the industry has to offer” (Reedsy, 2016).

What would be the difference between any traditional publisher and Reedsy, if that were true? The idea is that while opening the way for writers by offering them a greater freedom, they are also given the impression that they belong to a group of “threepercenters”, a chosen elite. One of these writers is Jane Davis, who has chosen to self-publish her literary fiction because, amongst other reasons, she was “overwhelmed by the over-editing and lack of creative risk that had come over much of] the fiction I was being fed by the marketing machine” (Reedsy, 2016). On the other hand, she explains: “Self-publishing is the mechanism that freed me to be more ambitious in terms of where I wanted to take my fiction. Instead of being dictated to I am free to write about the issues I’m passionate about and fascinated by – the big subjects” (Reedsy, 2016).

⁸⁶ Reedsy. 2016. “Reedsy”. [Accessed July 7, 2016]. <https://reedsy.com/>.

⁸⁷ *Idem*.

Yet on closer scrutiny in spite of these ambitions to “write about the issues I’m passionate about”, Davis’ novels are literary fiction only in the sense that they don’t belong to any genre, rather than through the quality or literary ambition of her style.

Her latest novel, *Unknown Woman* (2015), which has been awarded the Prize for Self-published Novel of the Year, is written entirely in linguistic clichés and expected, hackneyed associations of words, set together in short independent sentences, very much like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. To give a few examples: “lungs so tight with fear she could barely breathe” (Davis 2015, 1), “a shrieking sound pierced the silence” (Davis 2015, 1), “He yanked his hand away – Fuck! – shaking it violently” (Davis 2015, 1), “Flames billowed from an upstairs window”, “Theirs had been an incredibly narrow escape.” The constant use of these associations of nouns and adjectives (all on one page): “narrow escape”, “flames billowing”, etc. puts Davis’s work in the realm of popular fiction rather literary fiction even if *Unknown Woman* belongs neither to crime, heroic fantasy, erotica or any other genre.

11. Internet and Orality. Orality as Literature?

The characteristics we have identified so far in the style of literary Internet production betray that they belong to an oral way of thinking or of creating, they are a product of a pre-Gutenberg orality. To go further in our demonstration we will in this chapter analyse the similarities between orality and the Internet and the peculiarities of the oral world, it will then become easier to understand the nature of Internet production in the light of this analysis, as a pre-Gutenberg world.⁸⁸

What the use of linguistic and stylistic clichés quoted above betray, is that the literature produced on the Internet because of the very medium is closer to orality than literacy, because Internet and the screen take us back to a pre-Gutenberg form of expression. It is hence almost logical that the style of the oral epic should pervade the writing on the Internet. We already had an inkling of this phenomenon when in the first chapter we mentioned Chindu Sreedharan’s *Epicretorld*. It is significant that Chindu Sreedharan should have chosen the epic as a genre as it belongs in essence to an oral tradition and an oral style. If we extend this idea

⁸⁸ It might seem anecdotal but the Internet has given voice to renewed medieval theories such as the flatness of the earth through the International Flat Earth Society in perfect accordance to the medieval way of thinking, the pre-Lateran way of thinking which pervades the Internet.

we find in the opposition between Internet culture and Gutenberg culture, the same opposition we found between Homer and Plato that is between an oral violent epic world and an analytical world, as explained by Walter Ong.

Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) has extended Parry's and Lord's findings about orality in oral epic narrative out into the whole of ancient oral Greek culture and has shown convincingly how the beginnings of Greek philosophy were tied in with the restructuring of thought brought about by writing. Plato's exclusion of poets from his Republic was in fact Plato's rejection of the pristine aggregative, paratactic, oral-style thinking perpetuated in Homer in favor of the keen analysis or dissection of the world and of thought itself made possible by the interiorization of the alphabet in the Greek psyche (Ong 1982, 28).

By becoming a game and by giving a greater importance to images sometimes even moving images as we've seen, Internet literature comes closer to resembling a Homeric epic than a novel be it a de-structured plot-less post-modern novel and thus belongs to what Ong calls an "oral-style thinking".

To that way of thinking corresponds naturally a way of writing. Even if we have established with Ong that "oral literature" or "written orality" are absurdities, we can recognise in the "epic" or genre-like writing of Internet novels and particularly self-published un-edited Internet novels characteristics of orality as Thomas had pointed out in the passage from *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (2014) which we have quoted at the beginning of this dissertation.

We will now analyse with Ong what he calls the psychodynamics of oral societies, to demonstrate that the Internet definitely belongs in its own psychodynamics to a form of orality.

First of all, oral culture and oral narration is additive rather than subordinative. Ong gives as an example, the beginning of *Genesis* in the Douai version of *The Bible* (1610): "And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters." The whole passage contains nine introductory "and" which have been replaced in later version moving away from orality by "when", "then", "thus", "while" to create a greater fluidity in the text and "translate" it in the codes of literacy through grammar.

Written discourse develops more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does because to provide meaning it is more dependent simply upon linguistic structure, since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar (Ong 1982, 38).

Twitterature which we have quoted before is a prime example of the orality of the Internet discourse freeing itself of grammar or ignoring it to replace it by accumulation or an additive style and a minimalist style deliberately trivial as in this parody of Milton's *Paradise lost* for example: "Dressed as snake. She's going for it... Yes! She ate the forbidden apple! Guess God wasn't paying attention. Ominscient, Hah" (Aciman and Rensin 2009). The orality here appears in the crudeness both of the language and the punctuation particularly the exclamation marks and also in the fact that with the "Hah" finishing the sentence, the style imitates spoken speech. Onomatopoeia are used extensively in *Twitterature*.

The various linguistic or literary clichés we have encountered and quoted earlier in self-published works on the Internet ("a shrieking sound", "flames bellowed", "shaking violently" etc.) are also symptomatic of the aggregative rather than analytic style both of orality and the Internet.

Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess but the beautiful princess, not the oak but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight (Ong 1977, 188-212).

Ong adds further referring to Lévi-Strauss (1966, 245): "Once a formulary expression has crystallized, it has best be kept intact. Without a writing system breaking up thought – that is, analysis – is a high risk procedure. As Lévi-Strauss has well put in a summary statement "the savage [*i.e.* oral] mind totalizes" (Ong 1982, 39).

What is significant here is that the cliché style of the Internet reflects on the other hand its other aspect which we have already identified, its hegemonic nature on the one hand and the reduction of thought to what Morozov has called "solutionism". Ong reminds us that similarly in the Soviet Union, the sign of a strong residue of orality in the culture expressed itself through fixed expressions such as "the Glorious Revolution of October 26". The Soviet Union, which could be described as "solutionist and hegemonic" used to announce each year official epithets for *loci classici* (Ong 1982, 245). What we argue here, is that the Internet comes close to what Lévi-Strauss calls the "savage mind" ("*la pensée sauvage*" in French) in that it crystallizes and totalizes, while at the same time trying to give an illusion of freedom.

But the excessive simplification operated in the style, by traditional expressions which cannot be dismantled (sturdy oaks, brave soldiers, beautiful princesses, etc.) which betrays a

rejection of thought comes to be the equivalent of a limitation of the freedom it claims to purport.

It is also accentuated by the speed and exponential progress of the Internet which we have mentioned when analysing the Singularity and the works of Kurzweil. The speed of electronic technology and of the Internet takes it closer to orality than to a literate culture. As Ong points out, handwriting (and possibly any form of writing) is physically a slow process, “typically one tenth of the speed of oral speech” (Ong 1982, 40). Besides a speaker has to encourage fluency. On the Internet, the fluency and the speed of creation is in the tool itself. And volubility such as we find in Internet literature as well as the speed of the process of writing on the Internet much more akin to speaking (as *Twitterature* showed) than writing encourages redundancy and what Ong calls “amplification”. As a consequence, medieval pre-Gutenberg texts and even post-Gutenberg texts who retain the same type of rhetoric “are ‘bloated with amplification’, annoyingly redundant by modern standards” (Ong 1982, 41).

The religious implications are as within the Internet, as we’ve seen, that religious practices change in oral culture together with cosmologies. Here is how Ong explains the phenomenon:

Disappointed with the practical results of the cult at a given shrine when cures there are infrequent, vigorous leaders – The Intellectuals in oral society, Goody styles them (1977, 30) – invent new shrines and with these new conceptual universes. Yet these new universes and the other changes that show a certain originality come into being in an essentially formulaic and thematic noetic economy. They are seldom if ever explicitly touted for their novelty but are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors (Ong 1982, 42).

The similarity between the creation of new universes in disappointed oral societies and such theories as the Singularity is obvious, with the Singularity taking the computer as its new shrine and new universe. The big difference between the world of Internet solutionists or of Kurzweil and that of primitive oral societies is that they do tout their new universe as a new covenant, and as novelty, whereas it fits perfectly the traditions of their pre-Gutenberg ancestors. It hence becomes almost logical that the literature based on this falsely new cosmology should be so “formulaic” to use Ong’s own term.

The originality of oral cultures comes mainly from the interaction with the audience, which is again a characteristic trait of the Internet: participation, the long tail, accumulation, crowdsourcing, etc. We’ll see in a later chapter that the “audience” of “fans” as they will also

be called, are expected to take part in the elaboration of Internet fiction and of participating in the creative process, through various web sites, social media, and ways to interact with the author, something which is of course unheard of concerning any written book (and again can a book, as in a work literature, be anything else than written).

Consequently works of Internet fiction have the same fluidity as those of the oral world. The process of creation of these Internet books to which we'll come back in more detail resembles that of the perpetuation of oral works through reiteration.

Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time – at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely in a unique situation. In oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously. But narrators also introduce new elements into the old stories (Goody 1977, 29-30). In oral tradition there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely. Praise poems of chiefs invite entrepreneurship, as the old formulas and themes have to be made to interact with new and often complicated political situations. But the formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials (Ong 1982, 42).

To create the “vigorous response” in the audience, oral culture, very much like the Internet as we will see later, must rely on its empathy. This empathy as we'll see further will be taken to great proportions in some aspects of the Internet novel and in some websites where the distance between fiction and the writer is abolished in the perception of the reader. As a whole and as in oral societies, we have seen that the Internet believes in a communal soul. It retreats from individuality and we have compared it in this respect with the pre-Lateran world.

Walter Ong writes on the Empathetic and participatory nature of oral societies:

For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathic, communal identification with the known (Havelock 1963, 145-6), ‘getting with it’ writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for ‘objectivity’ in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. The ‘objectivity’ which Homer and other oral performers do have is that enforced by formulaic expression: the individual’s reaction is not expressed as simply individual or ‘subjective’ but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal ‘soul’ (Ong 1982, 47).

In that sense reading doesn't remain an individual experience but is more akin to communion and we have seen how Jeff Gomez praised in a typically oral-triumphant style the common voices, the choir of the “kids” when creating blogs. Writing and reading are solitary activities which according to Ong “throw the psyche back on itself” while “Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and

less introspective and less introspective than those among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups” (Ong 1982, 68).

Which also explains why Internet literature resorts to genre, because genre literature such as science-fiction epic or erotica, or heroic fantasy. Genre is naturally less introspective than any other form of literature, it accepts clichés even if it is to reinterpret them and presents heroic figures which need less characterization than more literary forms such as the novel. By opposition genre literature and oral traditions need characters which are “monumental, memorable and commonly public” (Ong 1982, 69). These are the characters that we meet in *The Mongoliad* for example, a war-like epic peopled almost exclusively by heroic characters, or in the main male character of *Fifty Shades of Grey* whose wealth, beauty and powers of seduction are “monumental and memorable” and even in less obvious examples like Amis’ *Yellow Dog*, because the comedy and the characters are so outré that they eventually belong to “monumental memorable and commonly public”. A character like that of Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* to give an example at random couldn’t possibly belong to the oral tradition and we can surmise that we will never find such a character in Internet literature or fiction. There are many anti-heroes in literature but I choose *Dangling Man* as an example as it fits our purpose perfectly. Here is a summary of the plot (or absence of plot) by Lee Trepanier in “The Search to be Human in Dangling Man.”⁸⁹

Bellow’s first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), is about a man named Joseph who does not know how to integrate himself in American life without losing the spiritual value of his isolation from society. Influenced by the current milieu of the time of modernism and existentialism, Bellow presents an alienated hero who seeks to find meaning in a hostile environment. Written as a diary, the novel’s principal audience is himself as he details the life of a young man who believes that spiritual enlightenment can be obtained by isolating himself from society in order to study the thinkers of the Enlightenment. As the months pass, Joseph erupts into anti-social behavior, quarrels with his friends and relatives, and succumbs to outbursts of paranoia and violent behavior. At the end of the novel he admits that his experiment has been a failure and that his search for meaning cannot be conducted in this manner. Reduced to the same common physical, social, and historical denominator as everyone else, Joseph joins the Army to live a life of regular hours and regimentation.

“Does not know how to integrate”, “isolating himself”, “anti-social behavior”, these three elements would suffice to illustrate after the characteristics which we have cited why *Dangling Man* could not be either a work belonging to any oral tradition and by consequence

⁸⁹ Lee Trepanier. 2012. “The Search to be Human in Dangling.” *Expositions* 6, n° 1 (January): 52-58. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299671974_The_Search_to_be_Human_in_Dangling_Man.

to the Internet. As Ong points out: “Colorless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics” (Ong 1982, 69).

The search of the superhero is contrary to that of Joseph the dangling man, he has to be nonhuman to acquire heroic dimensions, even as Ong points out Little Red Riding Hood overwhelming the wicked wolf or Jack climbing the beanstalk (Ong 1982, 69). Both these characters very obviously belong to the oral tradition. The supernatural comes easily into these categories as “bizarre” figures here add another mnemonic aid: it is easier to remember the cyclops, than a two-eyed monster, or Cerberus than an ordinary one-headed dog (Yates 1966, 9-11).⁹⁰ Heroic fantasy and some works of science-fiction are obviously constructed around such characters. But the same could be said, again, in the exaggeration and over-comedic nature of the characters in *Yellow Dog* by Martin Amis for example. The “zaniness” as an aesthetic category (a notion we’ll come back to need to develop later) participates in that oral tradition of the “bizarre” character, here in a comic register. But this technique represents a regression from the novel, if not morally or aesthetically, certainly in its conception. As Ong writes:

As writing and eventually print gradually alter the old oral noetic structures, narrative builds less and less on ‘heavy’ figures until, some three centuries after print, it can move comfortably in the ordinary human lifeworld typical of the novel. Here, in place of the hero one eventually encounters even the antihero (Ong 1982, 70.)

As the character and action becomes more human and the search for “humanity” becomes the “quest of the hero” the novel is less concerned with cosmology than the epic. As Internet and its technology reverses this process an “re-oralize” fiction amongst other domains, its productions become more theological and concerned as we’ve seen by incarnation, boundaries, and what lies “on the other side”, bringing again close to an oral non-literate view of the world.

As we’ve seen the Internet is an uncharted land or universe, we can even say that it is a new form of the cosmos precisely because it is uncharted. We have seen that the computer is a window to another world, and Internet advocates and enemies of copyright like Raymond have accumulated comparisons with pilgrims, pioneers etc. In that sense Internet is land without maps and in that sense too Internet takes us back to the world before printing.

⁹⁰ Frances Yates. 1966. *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: University Press.

For oral cultures, the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at its centre. Man is the *umbilicus mundi*, the navel of the world (Eliade 1958, 231-5). Only after print and the extensive experience with maps that print implemented would human beings, when they thought about the cosmos or universe or 'world' think primarily of something laid out before their eyes, as in a modern printed atlas, a vast surface of assemblage of surfaces (vision present surfaces) ready to be 'explored'. The ancient oral world knew few 'explorers' though it did know many itinerants, travelers, voyagers, and pilgrims (Ong. 1982, 72).

The Internet also has pilgrims but has no maps. And the theme of the boundlessness of the Internet and its exponential growth makes it a new cosmos. This limitlessness of the Internet is also perceptible as we have seen in the accumulation of exotic and faraway destinations, in Winterson as well as Cohen or De Lillo and Amis. The Internet abolishes distances (incidentally, it has abolished the Atlases mentioned by Ong above as it has destroyed encyclopaedias like *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*) and in that sense recreates a world without maps, an oral pre-Gutenberg world, yet again.

This difficulty comes from the fact that contrary to text, the Internet is not incarnate. The difficulty or rather the impossibility to situate the Internet to find its limits, its contours is the equivalent in terms of space to its impossibility to become incarnate. The mosaic type of reading which the Internet and the screen have created (what Lévi-Strauss calls the bricolage or patchwork in primitive thought) has also been a form of retreat from a literate world because as Ong points out: "Texts assimilate utterance to the human body" (Ong 1982, 99).

They introduce a feeling for 'headings' in accumulations of knowledge: 'chapter derives from the latin *caput* meaning head (as of the human body). Pages have not only 'heads' but also 'feet', for footnotes. References are given to what is above and below. In a text when what is meant is several pages back or farther on. The significance of the vertical and the horizontal in texts deserves serious study. Kerckhove (1981) suggests that growth in left-hemisphere governed the drift in early Greek writing from right to left movement, to boustrophedon movement (ox-plowing pattern, one line going right, then a turn around the corner in the next line going left, the letters inverted according to the direction of the line), to *stoichedon* style (vertical lines) and finally to definitive left-to-right movement on a horizontal line. All this is quite a different world of order from anything in the oral sensibility which has no way of operating with headings or 'verbal linearity' (Ong 1982, 99).

Similarly the Internet sensibility to use Ong's terms is a different world from that of the linearity of the Internet, or the way that an Internet reader would not go from one page to another but from one "link" to another. The question once again, is can literature exist outside of that linear structure which as we've seen and as we'll see again fiction coming out of the computer has destroyed and which fiction which aspires to imitate the computer has restored

in spite of itself as was the case in Jeanette Winterson's *The Power.book* or even in Geoff Ryman's 253.

12. Why Not Self-Publish

To remain within the context of literacy and traditional publishing, certain writers refuse to turn to Self-Publishing as a way of asserting their belonging to a high literary culture. The romantic way in which their choice is expressed attaches them clearly to that tradition of literary novels which we described earlier and in which we have “portraits of the artist as a young man”. In an article in *The Guardian*⁹¹ Ros Barber writes: “For me traditional publishing means poverty. But self-publishing? No way.” It is significant that the refusal to self-publish on the Internet is assimilated to a vow of poverty (and quite realistically according to another article in *The Guardian* which assessed that the income of writers has diminished on average by 30%). We already encountered this “vow of poverty” in Helprin in a religious context when it came to choosing the literary profession. The vow of poverty here is to be seen both as a reflection of the myth of Bohemia which has fed the genre ever since Boswell and is also to be understood as a religious form of renunciation of the material world or at least to the material benefits to come out of writing. In that sense, the opposition between self-published and traditional writers finds a political and religious extension, which lies at the heart of the war between and incompatibility of the Internet and the publishing world. It is also significant that the choice made by Ros Barber confirms the fact that from an Internet perspective, quality is numbers and sales. Here, to a certain degree, poverty guarantees by sacrifice that the work produced will be a work of quality. In the argument put forward, Ros Barber asserts that literary fiction can only be produced as the result of an apprenticeship and that this apprenticeship has to be done within an established literary and publishing culture: “Good writers become good because they undertake an apprenticeship” (Barber 2016). She adds “traditional publishing is *the only way* to go for someone who writes literary fiction. An author who writes literary fiction is dependent on critical acclaim”. One last argument, to which we'll return because it is at the heart of the Internet way of thinking: is that with self-publishing

⁹¹ Ros Barber. 2016. “For me traditional publishing means poverty. But self-publishing? No way”. *The Guardian*, 21 march 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/mar/21/for-me-traditional-publishing-means-poverty-but-self-publish-no-way>.

“you risk looking like an amateur”. We will see that from an Internet perspective this is not really a risk. Rather it is a quality. And in that sense the values attributed to Internet literature meet those of pornography on the Internet, notably in the “cult of the amateur”, to use Andrew Keen’s expression (Keen 2007).

13. Crowdsourcing Literature. Letting “the Fans” Write your Novel

The disappearance or rather subjection of the writer to his fans *i.e.* readers has been pushed a step further with the reversal of the creative process, as exemplified by Anna Todd. The economic model of crowdsourcing has, in her case, been applied to writing and creation in what has been described as “crowdsourcing the novel” in an article published in *The Atlantic*, by Bianca Bosker (December 2018).

The case of Anna Todd is perfectly representative of all the aspects of self-publishing which we’ve seen above with the added particularity of the constant intervention of the numerous readers and fans *as* the book is being written. The creative process and the language used in the article on Anna Todd in *The Atlantic*, sum up the contradiction to which literature and literary creation, spurred on by the Internet, have arrived.

“For fun, she read *Wuthering Heights*, *Twilight*, *The Things They Carried*.” The association of titles is reminiscent of what Gomez was preaching in favour of digital natives and their approach to literary works, in the sense that subculture and classics are set next to each other with no sense of value or relative quality, the only critical assessment being the amount of “fun” each title provides. Just as Gomez advocated mixing George Eliot with something more “fun” in case the descriptions became too long, Bianca Bosker describes *After*, Anna Todd’s series of novels written on her smartphone as “generously sprinkled with *Pride and Prejudice* allusions and oral sex” (Bosker 2018, 65). In that sense, by resorting to pornography, or the odd pornographic scene, Anna Todd is the perfect Internet writer and heir to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, as pornography is, as we’ve seen, part of the nature of the Internet and consequently of the Internet novel. The difference here is that pornography is merely part of the “fun” and doesn’t belong to a philosophical or aesthetic project as it did in the writings of the Marquis de Sade or in Apollinaire’s *Onze Mille Verges*.

In other terms, Anna Todd’s writing is another form of Internet pulp which is justified by the amount of sales it has produced. We are told that Anna Todd doesn’t pause to proofread

and that: “By the time Todd wrote chapter 90 – of an eventual 295 chapters – her-novel-in-progress had been read more than 1 million times.” Consequently, the process we have described of the publisher relinquishing his natural and traditional role as a discoverer of talent and as an intermediary between writer and public follows immediately. Here again, the agent and publishers have become mere packagers in the case of Anna Todd: “Multiple literary agents reached out to her” (Bosker 2018, 66). And again this process is seen as revenge on what Anna Todd herself describes as the “creaky bureaucracy of an old machine” (Bosker 2018, 66).

By opposition, *After* offers the readers or “fans” what they want after actually asking them through social media: “She cultivates intimacy with her followers, ‘you guys feel like family’ she wrote in a Facebook post this September.” Which is another form of the choir, the community of the faithful as evoked by Gomez and which is an inherent part of the Internet spirituality, a new and ultimate form of Society of Friends. Bianca Bosker further stresses that Ann Todd “participates in half a dozen Instagram group chats with her most die-hard fans” (Bosker 2018, 66).

Giving the public what it wants is not new and has been part of publishing policies since the age of the best seller and popular novel. Mickey Spillane, or again Barbara Cartland have always been published for their commercial rather than aesthetic or literary values.⁹² But the new factor here is that the public is asked directly what it wants before it appears on the

⁹² It has to be said in defense of Mickey Spillane as representative of popular writers and who was often quoted saying “Those big-shot writers could never dig the fact that there are more salted peanuts consumed than caviar” (Arthur Vandebilt. 1999. *The Making of a Best-Seller from Author to Reader*. Jefferson: Mc Farland, 135) that he was aware of having made the deliberate choice of vulgarity from an aesthetic point of view, creating incidentally a form of popular sub-cultural violent baroque. Here is a typical description of a female character by Mickey Spillane: “She had million-dollar legs that girl and she didn’t mind showing them off. For a secretary she was an awful distraction. She kept her coal black hair long in a page-boy cut and wore tight-fitting dresses that made me think of the curves in the Pennsylvania Highway every time I looked at them” (2006. *The Mike Hammer Omnibus*. London: Allison & Busby, 11).

The expression “million-dollar legs” together with the oral style and familiar tone stress the choice of vulgarity as the tone or style of the text, while at the same time, within that vulgarity, the comparison between the body, its “curves” and the “Pennsylvania Highway” is complicated and sophisticated, almost precious. Everything in that extract is deliberate as testifies the rest of the books by Mickey Spillane, always hyperbolic as here and following the same rhythm, created by short sentences and clipped dialogue, imitating perhaps the rhythm of the typewriter. The choice of topics and atmosphere in Mickey Spillane’s novels also belong to a vulgar genre, not unlike in the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon whom we’ve already mentioned, dealing with sex, violence, scandal, etc. To a certain degree, Spillane’s books have followed a similar evolution, becoming classics of a sub-genre while retaining their intrinsically vulgar quality. If we were to compare Spillane with Chandler, the evolution from pulp fiction to the classic would become even more obvious.

By contrast, in Anna Todd and the self-published authors, the aesthetic choice doesn’t even come in the equation, they are not aware that their own literary production belongs more to the school of salted peanuts, if that, rather than caviar.

page, and this process is not only inspired by market research but also by the way algorithms function, as we'll soon see.

The irony is that *After* and the whole of Anna Todd's production become a marketable product engineered after market research and testing customers. In that sense, it is very much a product of consumption products such as Coca-Cola or Pepsi Cola and yet it becomes a symbol of a revolutionary evolution, and even of a social revolution, the symbol of a literary revolution. When Ann Todd talks about her creative process she talks about "investing in her own marketing", and asks: "What is the benefit of having a publisher?" (Bosker 2018, 66), especially in view of the fact as she mentioned, as quoted earlier, that she doesn't proofread, or feel the need to edit her work.

As a consequence, the style and aesthetic quality of *After* are totally non-existent, as in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Again, the quality of the writing is purely pornographic as its role is to excite, titillate, please the reader, and these effects or emotions, or sensations are the only consideration in the creative process at the total expense of aesthetics and aesthetic choice. We will further demonstrate that choice cannot come into the equation as *After* is the product of an algorithm.

Writing *After*, out of the Internet, is seen as a revolutionary stance which echoes the theories of Internet revolutionaries and anti-intellectual-property guerrilla fighters such as Eric Raymond:

Wattpad⁹³ holds special appeal for Todd because it enables writers with backgrounds like hers – writers whose books would otherwise 'never see the light of day because their names aren't known or they don't have whatever following or they don't have experience in publishing' – to share stories that resonate with readers, regardless of whether those stories charm literary editors in New York (Bosker 2018, 67).

Here, the language of revolution is not confined to literary standards, again we are not involved at all in the power struggle which Bourdieu described in *Les Règles de l'art* between bourgeois institutionalized art and the avant-garde, we are here talking of the revolution of the uneducated, the provincial against the seat of power, New York, between the value of sales

⁹³ On its web site, to the question: "What is Wattpad?", Wattpad itself replies: "Wattpad is an entirely free website where people can write and read. They can also share their artistic talents by creating covers and trailers for the authors, as well as icons for people's profile picture. Wattpad connections [sic] readers with the many books that are being added to their ever expanding library every minute of every day. Readers on Wattpad spend more than two billion minutes on this website every month" (Wattpad. 2021. "What is Wattpad?". [Accessed October 28, 2021]. <https://www.wattpad.com/>). This last sentence is again very significant of the fact that on the Internet success is measurable in figures, the two billion minutes testify to the quality of the website and justifies its existence as an alternative to publishing.

figures and the values of literary criticism be it in regard to institutionalized literature or the avant-garde. In that sense, the Internet puts together Barbara Cartland and e.e. cummings, to give but two examples, in the same world of “the creaky bureaucracy of an old machine”. It is also sadly ironic that the ultimate product of the cultural revolution, following the open source and the creative explosion promised by such theorists as Gomez or Raymond, should be in a first stage *Fifty Shades of Grey* and in a second stage Anna Todd’s *After*. When analysed, both these works become the literary reflection, not just of consumerism but of a form of digital dictatorship which is also incidentally the dictatorship of the majority, disguised as a new form of democratic participatory writing, as we’ll see in the following part of this chapter.

What makes *After* the ultimate product of Internet literature and takes it a step further than *Fifty Shades of Grey* is that it is a product of an app and an algorithm and that fact will stress further the incompatibility between what we have called literature and Internet technology. For two reasons: first, the app Wattpad makes writing an illiterate exercise akin to oral story telling through participation. Second, because an algorithm is incompatible with the drama of choice which is at the very centre of our literary or otherwise conception of life.

We can also see the incompatibility between this form of collective creation and literature, when we compare it to the analysis of creation in regard to the “other” as we find it in Derek Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature* (2004):

While affirming the other as other, I encounter the limits of my own powers to think and to judge my capacities as a rational agent. In this way the encounter with others is not different in its essentials from the experience of the other as one attempts creatively to formulate fresh arguments or to produce an original work of art or philosophy.

The response which seems to be called for by this glimpsed apprehension of otherness as a result of the failure of existing modes of thought and evaluation is therefore a kind of creation. To respond fully to the singular otherness of the other person (and thus render that otherness apprehensible) is creatively to refashion the existing norms whereby we understand persons as a category, and in that refashioning – necessarily inaugural and singular – to find a way of responding to his or her singularity. Moreover, respect for the singularity of the other person requires that *each* time we encounter him or her we do so with a readiness to be creative in our response – an imperative that also springs from the fact that he or she is no longer exactly the same person as before. ‘The other’ in this situation is therefore not, strictly speaking, a *person* as conventionally understood in ethics or psychology; it is once again a relation – or a relating – between me, as the same, and that which, in its uniqueness, is heterogeneous to me and interrupts my sameness. If I succeed in responding adequately to the otherness and singularity of the other, it is the other in its relating to me – always in a specific time and place – to which I am responding in creatively changing myself and perhaps a little of the world as well (Attridge 2014, 45).

Internet by not respecting “the singularity of the other person” renders this “relation” or “relating” impossible. The act of creation becomes with the Internet an anonymous group endeavour and is at the opposite of the process which is described here.

Besides this incompatibility between literature and the Internet because of the very conception of what creation is, there are two more aspects to the algorithm that make it incompatible with literature, first the fact that it is, in this instance, a group activity and second that it is the tool of the tyranny of “solutionism” as defined by Morozov (2014) which we have encountered earlier, and is incompatible with choice.

Douglas Shaw wrote for instance on the BBC site of “The App that Makes Writing Less Lonely”.⁹⁴ He starts by explaining: “If you see a writer in a movie, most likely she (or he) will be tapping on a laptop. But many young writers are doing it on mobile phones, and sometimes in teams.” Why one should have to see a movie to comprehend what a writer’s work consists in is not explained in so many words here. It is significant, though, that a writer at work should be represented through a screen, either in a cinema or on television, to exist in a post-Gutenberg world. It answers the fact that a writer is here necessarily writing on a screen rather than a page, a laptop rather than a typewriter or a mobile phone rather than a piece of paper.

The fact that the mobile phone is a writing tool, also signifies that the writer demands an immediate response to his writing. The time lapse between the literary creation and its reception is that of a phone call. As it is expressed clearly in the article, through the words of Daniel, Pen Name, LisVender, a Stephen King fan who writes fantasy and horror: “Inkvite works really well because it feels like you are getting out a quick text or a tweet, or something” (Douglas 2018).

In his explanation of the attraction of Inkvite, Daniel or LisVender analyses perfectly, although in spite of himself, why his writing has nothing to do with literature:

You get an idea in your head, you can be standing on a bus, or on a break at work, when an idea hits you. You don’t have that interval where you are staring at the keyboard or blank phone.

It appeals to that smartphone psychology, there are notifications on your phone, the app tells you when it’s your turn on a story – when you see that little red dot with the number on it, you go. ‘Oh I need to do that’ (Shaw 2018).

⁹⁴ Douglas Shaw. 2018. “The App that Makes Writing Less Lonely.” *BBC*. November 25th 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-46117043>.

To summarize “that smartphone psychology”, as part of the process of writing fiction, is comparable to painting by numbers in a pictorial creative process or writing a psychological novel exclusively with emoticons.

Daniel adds further: “When you are writing on your own, linear fiction, ideas go up like tent poles. But when you write in a team, things can go in a completely unexpected direction” (Shaw 2018).

Daniel seems to have the intuition that his fiction is not “linear” and is consequently a puzzle, a mosaic, it is in fact an alienated form of writing.

And he concludes: “It’s a great thing to relinquish control of writing.”

Perhaps, but that writing has nothing to do with literature. How can one relinquish structure, mastery of language, choice and still consider one’s work literature? The answer is that one cannot.

This conception of literature also answers its new disincarnated form. Creation comes to the “writer” as a form of illumination or visitation from above, “in a bus” for example. Before the screen, knowledge and books were located, in libraries, shelves and bookshops, the screen reduced to a mobile phone has helped the complete disincarnation of knowledge, away from paper, stone buildings, wooden shelves, by compressing it into a phone. By doing so, the time of creation has been proportionally reduced to almost nothing, from sudden inspiration to “writing” if we can call it that, or at least recording on a portable electronic device.

With its immediacy, the process of writing described in the article is very much akin to calling a helpline. “We express a lot of our inner turmoil and emotions on the app. It’s one of the things that brings us together. Some writers do this through their fiction, others treat the platform more like an open diary. I remember one time I saw what my friend Phoenix had written and I knew she was in trouble” (Douglas 2018). It is as if reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to take a random example, should alert the reader to the fact that Oscar Wilde is “in trouble”.

This type of reaction to the writer and the hero and the general confusion which the empathy of the reader creates is extremely reminiscent of the empathy which Walter Ong mentioned in reference to Homer. The testimony of the “fans” mentioned above is strongly reminiscent of the reaction of the public listening to an ancient epic to *The Mwindo Epic* or *The Iliad*, prompting Plato to ban poets from his Republic.

Under the influence of writing, despite his protests against it, Plato had excluded the poets from his Republic, for studying them was essentially learning to react with 'soul' to feel oneself identified with Achilles or Odysseus (Havelock 1963, 197-233). Treating another primary oral setting over two thousand years later the editors of the *Mwindo Epic* (1971, 37) call attention to a similar strong identification of Candi Rureke, the performer of the epic, and through him of his listeners, with the hero Mwindo an identification which actually affects the grammar of the narration so that on occasion the narrator slips into the first person when describing the actions of the hero. So bound together are narrator, audience and character that Rureke has the epic character Mwindo himself address the scribes taking down Rureke's performance. 'Scribe, march!' or 'O scribe you, you see that I am already going'. In the sensibility of the narrator and his audience the hero of the oral performance assimilates into the oral world even the transcribers who are de-oralizing it into text (Ong 1982, 46).⁹⁵

Examples abound in the article mentioned above on Inkvite about all the psychological good the app has brought to the young writers who use it: "I started writing when I was ten. I never shared my work with anyone, just saved it on a file on a computer. My friends eventually encouraged me to break out of my bubble. From around the age of 14 I started writing on Inkvite." Etc.

Sites such as Inkvite and the way they are used both by readers and writers, and the immediacy which it creates between reader and writer confirms again the non-literate world to which they belong and what we might term the implicit orality in their essence, as we've seen with Ong and as we see it again.

The writer's audience is always a fiction (Ong 1977, 53-80). The writer must set up a role in which absent and often unknown readers can cast themselves. Even in writing to a close friend I have to fictionalize a mood for him, to which he is expected to conform. The reader must also fictionalize the writer. When my friend reads my letter, I may be in an entirely different frame of mind from when I wrote it. Indeed I may very well be dead. For a text to convey its message, it does not matter whether the author is dead or alive. Most books extant today were written by persons now dead. Spoken utterance comes only from the living (Ong 1982, 101).

Just as *Fifty Shades of Grey* equated writing with group fantasies, Inkvite equates it with a shared lonely hearts column for adolescents where personal problems are expressed through fiction, preferably genre fiction, as Internet literature demands.

The app that makes writing less lonely has in fact more to do with group therapy than with writing fiction from a literary point of view. There is no avoiding the fact that writing

⁹⁵ *The Mwindo Epic* is sung and narrated in the Bantu language and tells the heroic feats of Mwindo, a hero of the Nyanga tribe in Eastern Zaire. The epic is punctuated by songs and proverbs.

literature is lonely, being an activity born out of the individualism, created by the Gutenberg technology.

The participative way of creating fiction, as we've seen before, belongs to an oral, illiterate tradition, storytelling and audience participation, the tradition of the ear as opposed to the eye, to use classifications established by Marshall McLuhan.

As one relinquishes language and structure when writing through an app, one also has to relinquish choice, both for the character and its creator, as we hinted earlier, because it is in the nature of digital technology and of algorithms to deprive its user of choice.⁹⁶

We now see from a literary point of view the consequences we had foreseen in the contradiction between a utopian libertarian future promised by the pioneers of algorithms and the tyrannical nature of their functioning. In the article in which Yuval Noah Harari provided a response to the Singularity optimism and apostles of long tails and bazaars such as Raymond, he also turns to the consequences of algorithms on taste and what he defines as “the drama of decision making” by establishing a parallel with the progress of chess programs where “creativity is already considered to be the trademark of computers rather than humans” (Harari 2018, 66). In that sense, he confirms all that Kurzweil prophesized but with very different conclusions. “Yet in recent years computers have become so good at playing chess that their human collaborators have lost their value and might soon become entirely irrelevant” (Harari 2018, 676).⁹⁷

What Kurzweil has described as the exponential nature of artificial intelligence's success, finds an alarming illustration and confirmation in chess, considered as a *human* science. Harari's discussion on chess is worth quoting at length as he then presents a parallel with the power of algorithms where choice and the drama of decision making is concerned, and because, while it proves Kurzweil right, it also contradicts his optimism.

⁹⁶ An algorithm, to define it in simple terms relating to the problems of literature, or to stress by its very definition its incompatibility with literature, is a set of rules or instructions destined to solve problems. Wikipedia, the voice of the Internet, informs us that: “Algorithms are always unambiguous.” It adds: “A partial formalization of what would become the modern concepts of algorithms began with attempts to solve the *Entscheidungsproblem* (decision problem) posed by the German mathematician David Hilbert in 1928” (Wikipedia. 2020. “Algorithm”. [October 27, 2021]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algorithm#Informal_definition).

⁹⁷ Literature cannot be assimilated to chess, obviously, but the parallel is justified by the fact that we have here two human activities based on a structure, requiring, together with rules, a certain amount of strategy, knowledge, creativity, intuition, surprise, to create reactions in the opponent. Should one want to take this parallel further, one could even argue that chess pieces are comparable to characters, the knight, the bishop, etc. and become part of a narrative in the hands of the players, and that chess could not or would not be normally considered as a purely mathematical discipline, which is what an algorithm would make of it.

On December the 6th, 2017, another crucial milestone was reached when Google AlphaZero program defeated the Stockfish 8 program. Stockfish 8 had won a world computer chess championship in 2016. It had access to centuries of accumulated human experience in chess as well as in human experience. By contrast Alpha Zero had not been taught any chess strategies by its human creators – not even standard openings. Rather it used the latest machine-learning principles to teach itself chess by playing against itself. Nevertheless, out of 100 games that the novice Alpha Zero played against Stockfish 8, Alpha Zero won 28 and tied 72 – it didn't lose once. Since Alpha Zero had learned nothing from any human, many of its winning moves and strategies seemed unconventional to the human eye. They could be described as creative, if not downright genius.

Can you guess how long Alpha Zero spent learning chess from scratch, preparing for the match against Stockfish 8, and developing its genius instincts? Four hours. For centuries, chess was considered one of the crowning glories of human intelligence. Alpha Zero went from utter ignorance to creative mastery in four hours, without the help of any human guide (Harari 2018, 67).

And now, to the other “crowning glory of the human intelligence”, the written word... As Harari points out, we already trust sites such as Netflix or Spotify to tell us which films or which music we are most likely to appreciate, in that sense, algorithms make perfectly coherent, stereotyped and caricature-like characters of ourselves, and leave no place for inherent contradiction and incoherence. In the drama of decision making, the algorithm doesn't leave room for Othello's last remark to Iago before murdering Desdemona: “And yet, the pity of it.” Similarly, the tragic dilemma has no place in that world.

Again to quote Harari on the contradiction between the digital age and its monstrous child, Artificial Intelligence on the one hand and human intelligence on the other hand:

Humans are used to thinking about life as a drama of decision making. [...] Works of art – be they Shakespeare plays, Jane Austen novels, or cheesy Hollywood comedies – usually revolve around the hero having to make some crucial decision. To be or not to be? To listen to my wife and kill King Duncan or listen to my conscience and spare him? To marry Mr. Collins or Mr. Darcy? Christian and Muslim theology similarly focus on the drama of decision making arguing that everlasting salvation depends on making the right choice (Harari 2018, 67).

But as we've seen, digital technology offers a different type of theology by redefining the soul as a pre-Lateran soul common to the world or as some vague reworking of a noosphere in which there is no need or space for individual choice. On the contrary, the downloading of oneself into a machine and the relinquishing of individual choice is what guarantees in this case eternal salvation.

Let's quote again Harari for the consequence in this opposition of world views on literature.

It is not hard to see how AI could one day make better decisions than we do about careers, and perhaps even about relationships. But once we begin to count on AI to decide what to study, where to work and whom to date and even marry, human life will cease to be a drama of decision making, and our conception of life will need to change. Democratic elections and free markets might cease to make sense. So might most religions and works of art. Imagine Anna Karenina taking out her smartphone and asking Siri whether she should stay married to Karenin or elope with dashing Count Vronsky. Or imagine your favourite Shakespeare play with all the crucial decisions made by a Google algorithm. Hamlet and Macbeth would have much more comfortable lives, but what kind of lives would those be? (Harari 2018, 68).

Harari's last question at the end of this paragraph, "Do we have models for making sense of such lives?", when applied to a purely literary context, announces an idea which we'll develop later, that there is no critical tool to assess the literature which comes out of the computer, the Internet and digital technology.

Should we, as a consequence, search for emotional turmoil, fear, suspense, as part of entertainment or a perverse taste for unsettling ourselves which is often what reading does, an algorithm is better suited to provide it than any author? As Harari puts it: "We are unlikely to face a rebellion of sentient machines in the coming decades, but we might have to deal with hordes of bots that know how to press our emotional buttons better than our mother does..." In that sense, the death of the author has come true, but in that sense alone, simply because literature as an individual exercise, as the shared expression of individuality, is incompatible with algorithms and the DNA of digital technology.

It could be argued that the literature which represents the "drama of decision making" is essentially based on plot and that post-modern literature did away with that kind of drama as did the Internet inspired literature which follows it. Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers*, also does away with it, while doing away with readability. The same could be said of Martin Amis' *Yellow Dog*, to the point of leaving the reader wondering what he is actually reading and if he is reading at all, rather than deciphering a succession of meaningless sentences strung together in a meaningless way.

It starts with the first paragraph of the first page of the first chapter of the novel, entitled "Renaissance Man": "But I go to Hollywood but I go to hospital, but you are first but you are last, but he is tall but she is small, but you say up but you go down, but we are rich but we are poor, but they find peace but they find..." (Amis 2003, 3).

It could be argued that Amis tries to create an intriguing beginning to his novel by using a poetic device consisting in stringing in a sort of incantation a contradictory statement "Rich", "poor" with the repetition of "but" creating that trance-like rhythm reminiscent

perhaps of Gertrude Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose" in "Sacred Emily" in *Geography and Plays* (1922) or of *Ecclesiastes*: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh", or "The sun also ariseth and the sun goeth down," (*King James. Ecclesiastes* 1; 2) or even the haunting rhythm paired with naivety of a nursery rhyme.

One could also argue that by using these references, Amis tries to point out the spiritual impoverishment of the world he describes, but it is not a very convincing argument in favour of *Yellow Dog*, because as we'll see and demonstrate later, the book turns into a meaningless farce using crude comical devices.

IV. When Old Writers Go Native: Glass Screens, Cars and Horseless Carriages

Whereas to “digital natives”, algorithms don’t actually represent a “mystery” but a way of functioning and they can organise a novel around a glass screen, as is the case with *Snow Crash*, non-digital natives, like Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie or Jeanette Winterson have felt rightly, or wrongly, compelled to “tackle” electronic technology and its consequence as a literary subject. The questions which arise from this project or posture is: can technology be a literary subject, is there such a thing as a non-literary subject? What kind of writing can give an account of the inner workings of a glass screen? And how should such fiction be written?

We have seen so far the works of writers representing the modern world in the light of electronic technology, like Salman Rushdie’s *Fury* and, even more so, Amis’ *Yellow Dog*. We’ll see in the following chapter how writers like Jeanette Winterson try to imitate the functioning of electronic technology on paper and how they try to “domesticate”, as it were, the new technology to make it compatible with the Gutenberg technology on which and with which their works are built.

In a second stage, we’ll study and compare with this literature which represents or imitates the world of the glass screen, a form of literature designated as “electronic” which has been created (is it really written?) for the computer by the computer. The question there will be, is it literature at all?

1. Non-Digital Natives and their Glass Screens

Marshall McLuhan writes in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*:

An age in rapid transition is one which exists on the frontier between two cultures and between two conflicting technologies. Every moment of its consciousness is an act of translation of each of these cultures into the other. Today we live on the frontier between five centuries of mechanism and the new electronics between the homogenous and the simultaneous (McLuhan 1962, 141).

He adds: “It is painful but fruitful.” We already know it’s painful but to what extent is it fruitful, in the field of modern literature which concerns us here?

The anxiety created by the Internet in contemporary writers stems from their diminishing income, the revolution and economic crisis in the publishing industry and from the aesthetic perplexity engendered by the internet. It is significant that McLuhan mentions that the “consciousness” of moments of transition such as this one, created by the uncontrolled development of the Internet, is an “act of translation”. The question for contemporary writers will be how to translate a typographic art into that of a post or pre-Gutenberg illiteracy, both forms illiteracy having as we’ve seen much in common.

A translation has often been described by translators as a creative process. Perhaps. It is mostly an inexact recreation, a betrayal of the original literary art of the translated, an imitation or a pastiche of the original text, sometimes in a language totally incompatible with that of the original text. To give a pictorial parallel, a translation is like a black and white photograph of an oil painting hung on a museum wall. The reader gets the subject or story, the structure, but none of the colour, materiality and immediate aesthetic impact.⁹⁸

Is it possible to cross the frontier by translation from a literate form of creativity inherited from the Renaissance to a novel which espouses the incompatible characteristics of the Internet, strongly resembling those of the “scribal” culture?

It is significant that McLuhan mentions “a frontier” in the sense that in the works of the writers concerned, the Internet appears as “a world”, or a “universe” but this universe hasn’t been mapped or charted, and the novel written in reference to the Internet, as a mysterious unexplored galaxy, has as a function to draw a map of that world, and to make sense of that world by creating a flat expanse of recognizable and understandable signs and frontiers. This reaction places the author in the situation of the Renaissance explorer, in a world which doesn’t belong to the Renaissance anymore and which doesn’t obey its rules.

The creative process in the works of contemporary writers such as Jeannette Winterson and Salman Rushdie, or Martin Amis when addressing the anxiety created by this uncharted land of the Internet, can be assimilated to a laborious translation of a literate world into a non-

⁹⁸ On the subject of translating and the element of “betrayal” inherent to that literary activity, see Roger Chartier, *La Main de l’auteur et l’Esprit de l’imprimeur*, particularly, the chapter very aptly entitled “Traduire” and within this chapter the part entitled “Traduire et trahir” (1997, 71). Chartier reminds us that following the advent of the printing press, translating represented the first form of professionalization in the literary world. Translators are paid, sometimes handsomely paid, to practise their trade although they are considered at the bottom of the literary hierarchy, precisely for the reason mentioned above, that they are both “copyists” and “traitors” rather than creators.

literate world, in the sense that they try to assimilate into an “Internet context” whatever that means or an “Internet language”, forms of literate creation. As a consequence, these books have taken works of a literary tradition and tried to rewrite or translate them in the light of the Internet. Thus, *The Power.Book* is a translation or rewriting of *Orlando* in a form which imitates the Internet, *Fury*, is a pastiche of Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*.

The failure is due to the fact that the translation is done the wrong way round, the only way to approach the net for such writers and heirs of the postmodern would be to translate a post-Gutenberg, or regression to the pre-Gutenberg era, into literate terms. A book by definition, be it a “power book”, cannot be non-literate.

A parallel can clearly be established at this point between the present day and age and the Elizabethan discovery of new continents and new cultures which hadn’t reached a “Gutenberg level of development” to coin a new expression after McLuhan. He writes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: “As western literate communities encounter the various primitive or auditory communities still remaining in the world, great confusion occurs. Areas like China and India are still audile-tactile in the main” (McLuhan 1962, 21).

The Internet is today’s equivalent to China and India to the writer who comes out of the Gutenberg world and technology and his confusion comes from the fact that he doesn’t understand the total incompatibility between his world and that which he tries to penetrate with his tools, the printing press and the novel, be it modern or post-modern; McLuhan adds to the previous remark: “For nothing can exceed the automatism and rigidity of an oral, non-literate community in its non-personal collectivity” (McLuhan 1962, 21).;

The zealot-like diktat of the Internet community regarding copyright, the long tail, open source, etc. and the destruction of the individualism built on Gutenberg technology is a good example of that “rigidity”. Jeanette Winterson’s attempt to produce an internet creation in *The Power.Book* with printed and bound pages shows a lack of understanding of that “rigidity”.

Whereas the e-book can be, in its first form, a photographic reproduction of pages, Jeanette Winterson in *The Power.Book* attempts to reverse that process. By a mirror effect, the printed page, (the mirror being a leitmotiv of the novel), reproduces a screen or at least tries to.

Jeanette Winterson’s novel, *The Power.Book* manages to give the impression of being an Internet product by being a conglomeration of stories and locations. Just as the

Internet evades definition, so does *The Power.Book*, to quote Jenny Turner's review in the *London Review of Books*, "A Tulip and Two Bulbs":

Much of *The Power.Book* is made up of aphoristic fragments concerning the nature of erotic love: 'Love's script has no end of beginnings. The characters and the scenery change. There are three possible endings: Revenge. Tragedy. Forgiveness... Nothing could be more familiar than love. Nothing else eludes us so completely.' These are not dissimilar in solemnity or content to the aphoristic fragments concerning the nature of erotic love to be found in *Written on the Body* (1992), *Art and Lies* (1994), *Gut Symmetries* (1997). In other words *The Power.Book* is not methodically new. Except that it isn't really a novel anyway. It's more like a set of short stories being marketed as a novel, in the way that Melissa Bank's *The Girl Guide to Hunting and Fishing* was last year. Except that it isn't even a set of short stories. It's more like a bundle of bits and pieces, nicely laid out, signed, numbered and bound in home-splodged cardboard and sold as an artist's book at a private gallery in the West End. It's a half-finished, collectors-only artefact, which has somehow stumbled into mass-market circulation. It's close in fact, to not being a book at all.⁹⁹

Although one would think it wouldn't have been Winterson's ambition to produce a book close to "not being a book at all," the choice of the Internet or modern technology as a subject or environment for that type of literary production, is perfectly suitable because of the non-linear characteristics of that technology.

Similarly, Salman Rushdie's *Fury*, or Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* are made up of a catalogue of non-events, literary or otherwise, a succession on non-subjects and non-plot, "signifying nothing" to quote Shakespeare.

It might be said that those last two novels, do not explicitly engage with the Internet or the Internet culture, although Martin Amis often refers to the "obscenification" of modern culture and to the overwhelming presence of pornography on the Internet as pervading the general culture of modern society. One could also argue, more importantly, that although we can't treat novels by Dickens and George Eliot as being fictionalized essays on the economic and social conditions of 19th century Britain, with retrospective wisdom we are able to draw parallels between inferences in the novels to what we know about the world in which they were written. The Industrial Revolution, its social consequences are ever-present in the works of Dickens and Eliot. It is not just the background to the action, it is an implied presence in every aspect of the novels.

Although we can't "prove" that *Yellow Dog* is a novel primarily *about* the Internet, the cultural interfaces between it and the mode of Internet use in the early 21st Century are

⁹⁹ Jenny Turner. 2000. "A Tulip and Two Bulbs". *London Review of Books*. September 7, 2000. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n17/jenny-turner/a-tulip-and-two-bulbs>.

obvious, especially in the incoherence and impermanence which characterizes the novel. There is no discernible plot, no centralizing theme, none of the incidents and characters seem to be related to each other in a way that we can customarily regard as logical. In this sense *Yellow Dog* creates, as we'll see later, in greater detail, a replica of the obsessions with impermanence and shifting certainty that informs the most zealous advocates of a new notion of "literature" on the Internet, while remaining on paper *i.e.* limited to the frames imposed by the Gutenberg technology.

In fact, and possibly in spite of itself, *Yellow Dog* is a good reflection of the Internet and the aspect which was mentioned earlier in this dissertation: infobesity, a meaningless accumulation, which would have to be described as "abundance" to gain any form of significance or spiritual existence. Within reason, one could compare it to certain works of decadent literature such as Huysmans's *À Rebours*, a novel built on enumeration in order to reflect Des Esseintes's spiritual quest, a quest which is doomed to fail as it is drowned in an accumulation of objects and the words describing them, enjoyed for their own sake. Thus *À Rebours* is built on the re-creation of the language of perfumes, flowers, poisons, etc. for its own sake. The language itself becomes a spiritual dead end. The catalogue, the lists, and again the enumeration are the literary figures used to express and represent the failure of this spiritual quest.

The catalogue as a literary figure in *À Rebours* expresses Des Esseintes's sense of complacency and it is carried further by the morbid or scatological nature of the objects mentioned and this complacency is taken onto a moral level particularly in the chapter VI on lewdness.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Our point here is not to develop a comparison between *À Rebours* and *Yellow Dog*, but just to show how "abundance" morphs into "infobesity" and how the catalog and accumulation is the literary expression and representation of a spiritual dead end or of the death of an ideal. Here is a quote from the sixth chapter of *À Rebours* which illustrates the point: "*En effet, d'Algurande acheta des meubles façonnés en rond, des consoles évidées par derrière, faisant le cercle, des supports de rideaux en forme d'arc, des tapis taillés en croissants, tout un mobilier fabriqué sur commande. Il dépensa le double des autres, puis, quand sa femme, à court d'argent pour ses toilettes, se lassa d'habiter cette rotonde et s'en fut occuper un appartement carré, moins cher, aucun meuble ne put ni cadrer ni tenir. Peu à peu cet encombrant mobilier devint une source d'interminables ennuis ; l'entente déjà fêlée par une vie commune, s'effrita de semaine en semaine ; ils s'indignèrent se reprochant mutuellement de ne pouvoir demeurer dans ce salon où les canapés et les consoles ne touchaient pas au mur et branlaient aussitôt qu'on les frôlait malgré leurs cales. Les fonds manquèrent pour les réparations du reste. Tout devint sujet à aigreurs et à querelles, tout depuis les tiroirs qui avaient joué dans les meubles mal d'aplomb jusqu'aux larcins de la bonne qui profitait de l'inattention des disputes pour piller la caisse ; bref la vie leur fut insupportable ; lui, s'égaya au dehors ; elle quêtà parmi les expédients de l'adultère, l'oubli de sa vie pluvieuse et plate. D'un commun avis, ils résilièrent leur bail et requérèrent la séparation de corps*" (Huysmans 2004, 67). D'Algurande proceeded in due course to buy furniture all made on the round – console, tables hollowed at the back so as to form a semi-circle, curtain-poles curved like a bow, carpets cut crescent shaped – a whole suite of furniture made specially to order. He spent twice as much as other people then, presently, when his wife, finding

In that sense, *Yellow Dog* could again be compared to *À Rebours* in its insistence on “obscenification” and the pornographic content of the Internet or even the pornographic nature of the Internet.

However if in Huysmans the representation of complacency can be suspected of being itself complacent, it becomes obvious in *Yellow Dog*. One could quote the whole book, or any long extract from the book to show that we are dealing with a nonsensical succession of words barely creating a situation, often using repetition as an effect, presumably a comic effect, although one can never be sure, as in the following passage:

It seemed to Brendan that the performers, with more haste than lust, were working their way through a checklist or duty-roster: some of this, then some of that, and then this, and then that, including some of this, not forgetting that, and then maybe this and then *always* that. Always that – at the end (Amis 2003, 257).

The repetition of “this” and “that” is used to its utmost in order to create, presumably, a sense of futility, but the process is strung out too long to achieve any form of comedic effect, or rather if it achieves some comedic effect it is of a very heavy and insistent type. Especially as we encounter the same technique a few pages later at the beginning of the chapter entitled “3. Apologia – 2 2: Keith the Snake”: “Did you dear? Did you dear? Ah I trust me wreath was in its proper place? Ah. Did you dear? Did you dear? Ah. He’s coming in her? *Handsome*. Yes dear. God Bless” (Amis 2003, 260).

herself short of money for her dress, got tired of living in this round house and removed to an ordinary square habitation at a lower rent, no single piece of furniture would fit in or look right. Little by little, these unconscionable chairs and tables and chests of drawers gave rise to endless squabbles, conjugal happiness, already worn thin by the friction of life in common, grew week by week more and more ambiguous ; mutual recriminations, followed, as they found it impossible to live in their drawing-room where sofas and console-tables refused to touch the wall, and, in spite of wedges and props, shook and shivered whenever you came near them. Funds were lacking for repairs and improvements which, to tell the truth, were quite impracticable. Everything became a subject of bitterness and quarreling from the drawers that had warped in the wobbling furniture to the petty thefts of the maidservant who took advantage of her master and mistress’s squabbles to rob the cash-box. In one word, their life grew unbearable; he sought amusement out of doors, she tried to find in the arms of lovers an anodyne for the wretchedness of her overcast and monotonous life. By common consent, they cancelled the settlements and petitioned for a separation” (Huysmans. 2019. *Against the Grain*. London: Lector House, translated by John Howard).

In this extract the failure of the couple described here starts with the accumulation of objects (besides the obvious symbolic value, perhaps overstated, of trying to fit round pieces of furniture in a square apartment), but it is the accumulation of objects which leads to the moral and sentimental failure of the characters. We’ll notice how Huysmans lists the items of furniture rather than describing them briefly as a whole. In the rest of the chapter Des Esseintes plans to “create” a criminal by introducing a young boy to an accumulation of sensuous pleasures in a “brothel”, the accumulation here, not of objects but of material and sexual gratification leading to the moral failure and criminalizing of the character.

The principle is the same as before, stressed by the expression “God bless”, bringing in a metaphysical or religious vocabulary emptied of its meaning. The same heavy comedy is to be found in the heavily referential names of the characters or in the absurdity of these names, such as calling an Englishman Xan Meo for no other reason than a form of gratuitous exoticism. Here are several other character names which illustrate this point: Joseph Andrews, Clint Smoker, Tony Eist, Keith the Snake, to which we can add the very poor play on words, supposed to reproduce the vulgarity of pornography on the internet but which eventually participates in the vulgarity of the book itself, as in this passage describing the industry of pornographic films:

They’ve been madly Anglophile for some time – long before the Princess business. A lot of the girls are English. English Rose, Brit Isles, Greta Britain, Unity Kingdom. And the men give themselves English stage names. And Knighthoods. Sir Phallic Guinness, Sir Bony Hopkins, Sir Dork Bogarde (Amis 2003, 250).

Again, with the accumulation of examples, one is left with the feeling that one has just read a catalogue of rather crude jokes which are to be enjoyed for their own sake. At best, the subject of the book is its own incoherence implying that the book becomes its own subject; there is no distance between what the book tries to represent and what it is as a work of fiction. *Yellow Dog* takes on all the faults it tries to satirize.

In *À Rebours*, Huysmans expresses by this catalog of “curiosa”, amongst other things, the impossibility of a doctrine such as art for art’s sake. But in *Yellow Dog* it is the novel which is overtaken and smothered by its own techniques and becomes an accumulation, a manifestation of infobesity, a catalog of scenes, situations and characters, saying nothing, meaning nothing. Whereas *À Rebours* represented nothingness and spiritual sterility in the guise of an accumulation of words and objects while saying “something”, *Yellow Dog* fails in the second aspect of this literary enterprise.

As a consequence, one feels the puzzlement of critics when faced with *Yellow Dog*. To give one example, here is the way the book is presented by Nicholas Lezard:

To summarise: the actor/writer/ rhythm guitarist Xan Meo, who has gangster ancestors, is savagely beaten up, and as a result of his injuries, undergoes a significant personality change, from reconstructed to very much unreconstructed male. His grammar collapses in on itself and he becomes given to such pronouncements as ‘salad is bullshit’ – and much worse. This is very well observed indeed.

Then we have nice-but-dim Henry IX (‘interested in watching television – or in staying still while it was on’) traumatised by the revelation that someone has been spying, or worse, on his daughter, Princess Victoria. [...] There is Clint Smoker, yahoo journalist of the sub-tabloid

Morning Lark, utterly without redeeming qualities, even with his tiny penis. There is also a coffin loose in the hold of a passenger jet which doesn't seem to have much to do with anything but allows for some buttock-clenching moments of airborne terror.¹⁰¹

And Lezard to conclude: "If you're feeling stern, it is a mess of unresolved postures, of a magniloquence at odds with the scanty and barely comprehensible plot."

"There is" and "We have" seem to be the only link between the elements of the book, creating a disjointed work, and yet not a work which would try to place itself within the tradition of nonsense verse as we find it in Edward Lear, the palpable ambition of the book being much greater than that as a reason to give a representation of the modern sub-culture of the Internet and a critique of royalty and the monarchy. One suspects that the model used here by Amis would be that of "gonzo" journalism applied to fiction.¹⁰² Gonzo journalism having a debt to sub-culture and to those semi-critical notions which we've evoked earlier in reference to *Snow Crash*, embodied by the symbolic presence of numerous pizzas in the narratives. Yet the fiction here seems to have relinquished its journalistic aspect to remain purely "gonzo." To quote a critic on its literary quality, we turn to Tibor Fischer in *The Telegraph*,

Yellow Dog isn't bad as in not very good or slightly disappointing. It is not-knowing-where-to-look bad. I was reading my copy on the Tube and I was terrified someone would look over my shoulder [...] because someone might think I was enjoying what was on the page.¹⁰³

What is interesting in this statement besides its critical astuteness, is the creation of this new category of critical point of view: "not-knowing-where-to-look-bad" because as we'll see later, for a bad imitation of post or pre-Gutenberg writing, such as *Yellow Dog* tries to be, the critical tools to evaluate or appraise it don't exist. *Yellow Dog* says nothing, signifies

¹⁰¹ Nicholas Lezard. 2004. "The Many Faces of Martin Amis." *The Guardian*. May 29, 2004. <http://mural.uv.es/cesanba/amison04>.

¹⁰² Gonzo journalism is a trend, perhaps a school of writing, started by Hunter Thompson which consists in reporting on a given subject, such as an election campaign, from a furiously subjective style and point of view to the point where a non-fictional subject is treated in a fictional mode and even auto-fictional mode, sometimes at the price of self-indulgence. Hunter Thompson was known to send by fax articles which made no sense whatsoever to the magazines who'd commissioned them. This stance is supposed to highlight the decadence and moral depravity inherent to the subject, be it, in the case of Thompson, Richard Nixon, hippies or Las Vegas as a symbol of American decadence. The expression "gonzo journalism" first appears in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (2005), pompously subtitled "A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream", and published in 1971. Apparently the term comes from a song by New Orleans singer James Booker (see Jann Wenner and Corey Seymour. 2007. *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson, An Oral Biography*. New York: Sphere).

¹⁰³ Tibor Fischer. 2003. "Someone needs to have a word with Amis". *The Telegraph*. [Assessed October 29, 2021] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3594613/Someone-needs-to-have-a-word-with-Amis.html>.

nothing, has no plot, and doesn't refer or try to refer to anything in particular in reality or in literature. Besides, the "not-knowing-where-to-look" character of the "bad" expresses the disjointed nonlinear and fragmented nature of the Internet novel, which, in turn, raises this question: could a good internet novel (especially written by a non-digital native) be "not-knowing-where-to-look-good"? We'll see as we proceed with our analysis that the incompatibility with the Internet structure and the Gutenberg world makes it very unlikely.

In Jenny Turner's description of Jeanette Winterson's *The Power.Book* in the *London Review of Books*, we find the same sense of an accumulation of elements, without any real link or coherence, more "there is" and more "we have":

There isn't much detail of any sort in the novel, but what there is bland rich-enough-to-live-like-a-poor-man Eurochic: the odd glass of champagne, the occasional artichoke, trips to Capri and Paris, but not the fashionable bits, which are 'too crowded, too expensive and too noisy for me'. There's a list of Great and Ruinous Lovers – Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere. There are storyettes about knights and foxes, and Paolo and Francesca, and a real self-parody of a framing story about a girl who fakes a set of male genitals with a tulip and two bulbs. There's a recipe for Salsa di Pomodori ('Serve on top of fresh spaghetti. Cover with rough new parmesan and cut basil. Raw emotion can be added now') (Turner. 2000).

Again, the sense that the novel is essentially a catalogue without thread and occasionally without depth makes it a good mirror image of the Internet of what a real *Power.book* is, although the way to render this similarity is here technically limited to a gimmick based on a different typographical choices and the insertion in the text of some form of internet jargon, punctuating aphorisms on the nature of erotic love or unoriginal metaphors on body parts:

"She touched my bulbs.

They are like sweet chestnuts.

(Tulips my darling, tulips)" (Winterson 2000, 20).

Or further down: "I call it my Stem of Spring" (Winterson 2000, 21).

And still further to express the confusion between masculinity and femininity in the act of love and in a style vaguely redolent of Mills and Boon sentimentality: "You were sun and moon to me" (Winterson 2000, 67). Here the moon naturally represents the feminine element and the sun, the masculine element, in a fairly unoriginal use of symbols.

Whereas *Fury* treats the Internet and the digital culture only implicitly, one is faced with the same embarrassment and awkwardness when it comes to defining what the book is about:

To summarise, which is never easy with Rushdie: the hero, Malik Solanka (Rushdie's age). He was born in Bombay (Ditto, on Methwold's estate, off Warden Road remember, *Midnight's Children?*). In the 1980s, Malik gave up his tenured post at King's College, Cambridge (Rushdie's College), despairing of the 'narrowness, infighting and ultimate provincialism' of academic life (the reasons, verbatim, that Rushdie gave us for leaving London). [...] Not much happens. Malik drinks too much, and fires his Polish housekeeper. An anti-Semitic plumber fixes his toilets. He gets wrenching phone calls from his deserted wife, Eleanor, and his little son, Asmaan." Etc.¹⁰⁴

Here again, through the words of John Sutherland we have the confirmation that *Fury* is a novel with no literary justification for its existence other than the fact the author wrote or had to write it in spite of the fact that he had nothing to say. In that, and in the fact that the book is a disguised autobiography made of non-events, Rushdie gives a good image of Internet culture by becoming himself through his book, an anonymous exhibitionist or hidden exhibitionist which, as we've seen, is one of the roles bestowed by the Internet on both writers and readers.

The same applies to *Yellow Dog*, as we've seen, and to Jeanette Winterson's *The Power.Book*. As we'll see, Jeanette Winterson's way of parrying this criticism is that "language" for the sake of "language" is the only thing that counts when it comes to writing a book.

Paradoxically, it is here that the success of *The Power.Book* and *Yellow Dog* lies, in their differing, yet parallel, attempts at imitating or reflecting digital technology and the contents it offers. It is successful precisely because it's not identifiable, it's half finished, it's "a bundle of bits and pieces" and "not a book," to quote Turner again.

Besides, having sex as its central topic, makes it indeed close to Internet culture. We've seen while studying the impact of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, that sex and pornography are at the core of Internet culture. The treatment of sex in Jeanette Winterson's novel is similar to what can be found on the web, an "orderly anarchic space that no one can dictate, although everyone tries" (Turner 2000).

By Winterson's own admission, *The Power.Book* is about "boundaries", more precisely, boundaries of sexual identity, as the character of Ali shifts from man to woman. But to the notion of boundaries corresponds, as in most Internet-influenced literature, an exotic multiplication of destinations, Capri, Paris, although more traditionally literary and

¹⁰⁴ John Sutherland. 2001. "The Sound and the Fury". *The Guardian*. August 24, 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/aug/25/fiction.salmanrushdie>.

Bloomsbury field, than the central Asian, mysterious science-fictionalized locations of De Lillo in *Zero K* or the violent middle-eastern decor of Cohen's *Book of Numbers*.

The theme of the boundary is in turn taken up by the attempt to create, unsuccessfully as we'll see, a confusion between writer and author, as *The Power.Book* aims to be, very much like the net, participatory. Similarly, Winterson aims at blurring the boundaries between reality and the virtual world, through the "stories" written on his/her computer by her narrator character in her shop, and as we will see later by the baroque technique of the play within the play applied here to the book within the book, because the subject of *The Power.book* as we'll see is the book itself.

However *The Power.Book* doesn't tell a story, it simply imitates the web or tries to, a convenient choice for a novelist who defines herself as starting where Virginia Woolf had stopped in *A Room of One's Own* (2019). Winterson places herself in the continuity of modernism and rejects plot. "I do not like it, she writes in *Art Objects* (1995, 175), I think it is best left to crime writers of the old school." Though *The Power.book* is a mix and match of stories, it refuses to tell a story. Again in *Art Objects*, she writes: "If the novel is to survive it will have to do more than tell a story. Fiction that is print television is redundant. Fiction that is a modern copy of a 19th century novel is no better than any other kind of reproduction furniture" (Winterson 1995, 43).

Whether literature needs *The Power.Book* to survive is a question best left unanswered, but ironically *The Power.Book* is a clumsy reproduction of an electrical appliance, namely the computer.

In fact, Winterson misjudges her position in literary history. She places herself at the point where Virginia Woolf stops and thinks that she has moved on from that point. Winterson's argument could place her in terms of literary theory at the beginning of post-modernism. *The Power.Book* bows to the tyranny of the new, in this case, technological innovation. The critical argument in favour of Modernism was that literature, to properly engage with change in society must radicalize itself. Most Modernists literary work, such as *The Waste Land* (1922) or *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) did.

The argument remains the same a century later but with literature shifting to, or finding its space in a non-literary technology with the consequence that while the content remains trite, its representation becomes irrelevant and based on a misunderstanding. Besides whereas at the beginning of modernism, writers such as Joyce could describe thoughts and feelings that were "unpleasant" to the contemporary reader, that is to say shocking morally and

aesthetically, there is nothing in *The Power.Book* which could achieve the same effect nowadays, which stresses again Winterson's anachronistic stance in defining herself as following a direct line from modernism or post-modernism.

The ambition at the heart of *The Power.book* is to establish its author as the Virginia Woolf of the electronic age. This becomes apparent when reading Winterson's essays on literature, and her definition of literature as "art objects" in the book that bears the very title "Art Objects", presumably meant to contain a pun.

In *Art Objects* Winterson announces the parallel between *Orlando* and *The Power Book*. The terms in which she analyses *Orlando* in the essay entitled "A Gift of Wings" reveals *The Power.Book* as an ulterior project with the aim of reproducing *Orlando*, particularly in its central theme, sex, and the passage from one sexuality to another. "For *Orlando*, transformation is sex and sexuality" (Winterson 1995, 67). Later she describes *Orlando* in terms which she tries to apply to *The Power.Book*: "*Orlando* takes a broad canvas of four hundred years, much broader than the contemporary *The Forsyte Saga*, and brings it in to us, not on a series of tea-trays, but on a flying carpet" (Winterson 1995, 72).

One even wonders if Winterson sees herself as the inheritor of Woolf's "effrontery" to use a term present in the subtitle of this collection of essays, because of her choice of subject: "Woolf smuggled across the borders of complacency the most outrageous contraband; lesbianism, cross-dressing, female power" (Winterson 1995, 50).

The difference between tea trays and flying carpets as literary tools seems at best a little hazy. What is revealing here is the Orientalism¹⁰⁵ of the image of the flying carpet which is to be found in Woolf's choice of Persia as one of the locations of *Orlando* and of the choice of Ali as a character in *The Power.Book*. Throughout the book, the language refers to an "Orient", that is to say in a Romantic vision of the world as a "foreign part", "elsewhere":

¹⁰⁵ Orientalism is a literary and artistic movement born at the end of the eighteenth century, mostly in France consisting in representing 'elsewhere' ("*ailleurs*") under the guise of the Orient, a vague term describing essentially the Arab world, North Africa as well as the Ottoman Empire. *Vathek* is one of the first examples of this literary movement, written in French by Beckford, published in English in 1786, and subtitled *An Arabian Tale*. In painting Orientalism offered the possibility of exploring new forms of exotic eroticism and sensuality. Orientalism was also at the origin of a new fashion amongst romantic writers such as Chateaubriand, Nerval, and later Pierre Loti amongst others: the voyage towards « the East » which allowed to associate this new form of sensuality with a different approach to spirituality. On this subject see *La Tentation de l'Orient*. 2019. Montréal: Études françaises; *L'Orientalisme en Europe de Delacroix à Kandinsky*. 2010. Paris: Hazan; Urs App. 2010. *The Birth of Orientalism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Michel Leiris. 1981. *Journal du romantisme*, Paris: Skira.

“Turkey” (p. 9), “Suleyman the Magnificent” (p. 10), “Allah” (p. 13), “Sultan” (p. 14), the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, Minarets (p. 16).

This Orientalism which is a nineteenth and even late eighteenth century form of exoticism, answers that of works such as Cohen’s *Book of Numbers* in a more “old-fashioned form”. Incidentally, the comparison with *The Forsyte Saga*, is completely out of place as *The Forsyte Saga* places itself within the frame of a classical literary genre as the title indicates: The saga.

Further on, Winterson writes of the “connections across time and space” effected by Woolf, which she tries to reproduce in *The Power.Book*. “Cities and people pass between us, in a moment we are in England, in another moment in Persia, then the carpet flies on, ignoring the claims of the clock” (Winterson 2000, 19). In *The Power.Book*, it is the computer which has taken the role of the carpet in Woolf’s novel, as described or analysed by Winterson.

On the one hand, Winterson places herself out of the “ordinary” be it the ordinary writer or reader. She adopts an elitist ivory-towered posture reminiscent of Rushdie’s naïve self-portrait as a literary dandy in the opening pages of *Fury*. She calls it herself an “elitism of survival” (Winterson 1995, 43).

Readers who don’t like books that are not printed television, fast on thrills and feeling, soft on the brain, are not criticizing literature, they are missing it altogether. A work of fiction, a poem, that is literature, that is arty, can only be itself, it can never substitute for anything else. Nor can anything substitute for it. The serious writer cannot be in competition for sales and attention with the bewildering range of products from the ever expanding leisure industry. She can only offer what she has ever offered; an exceptional sensibility combined with an exceptional control over words (Winterson 1995, 35).

In other words, we have here a rewording of “Art for Art’s Sake” as a literary manifesto. In Winterson’s view of literature, the “ordinary” (Winterson 1995, 42) Victorian novel is the foundation of this “reproduction furniture” which she sees as being extended in television: “I would have thought that the rise and rise of TV and film would have entirely satisfied our ‘mirror of life’ longings. The screen large and small can do perfectly what the ordinary Victorian novel could do, which is why adaptations of same work so well” (Winterson 1995, 42).

We’ll see later that this last remark is absolutely wrong.

Such remarks also offer useful pre-emptive strikes against the accusation of excessive elitism and lack of content in one’s literary production. By considering herself a direct

descendant of Virginia Woolf, Winterson pre-emptively accuses any detractor of being reactionary for denouncing the lack of content of her book, just as the critics of English Romanticism or of modernism a century later were. Similarly, as we'll see later, detractors of e-literature will be accused of being Luddites. Still, this accusation is perhaps more to the point, as one doesn't reject here the standards of literature, but its very essence. It is not the contents or lack of it, or even the style or lack of it which is regrettable in Winterson, but the lack of understanding that the Internet cannot produce literature because of its technological nature.

The question is why a reproduction television novel imitating Dickens or Braddon,¹⁰⁶ to quote a more "ordinary" Victorian novelist, should be any less artistically acceptable than a pseudo computer novel reproducing Woolf? In *Art Objects*, Jeanette Winterson seems to think that a writer can find himself good ancestors or bad ancestors. At the opposite end of fiction as "reproduction furniture" as mentioned before, we have "new territory" (Winterson 1995, 170). Yet Winterson deplores the modern tendency: "Writers who we are applauding and encouraging are not writers who are doing new work. They are writers who are plodding on with methods and forms worked out by their ancestors. And not their Modernist ancestors" (Winterson 1995, 176). Incidentally, what comes through in this last remark is that Modernism is conceived by Winterson as the absolute good and the corner stone on which every future literature has to be built, very subjective idea at best.

This suggests that if writers were plodding on in the tradition of their Modernist ancestors, it would be acceptable, because, as she states later on: "Literature is experimental" (Winterson 1995, 176). The choice, according to Winterson, is to consider Modernism "relevant" to "the way we need to be developing fiction now", or to "condemn writers and readers to a dingy Victorian twilight" (Winterson 1995, 176).

Like the Modernists, Winterson considers conventional writing as second rate. And she turns to the Internet for innovation, yet she cannot see that the only coherent literature which can come out of the Internet is not a postmodern pastiche of the digital world such as *The Power.Book* but an utterly traditional form of genre literature or as we've see in the

¹⁰⁶ Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1837-1915), has often been considered as second rate, but even if the devices of her plots seem somewhat obvious today she has to be given credit as a precursor and possibly an inventor of the whodunit and even the "cliff hanger". Her first novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) was first serialized and introduced the reader to a *femme fatale* type of heroine, a bigamous seductress who deserts her child, murders her husband and seriously thinks about killing the second one. Mary Elizabeth Braddon published in all 74 novels, all of which were a mixture of sex, scandal, immoral behavior, violence, murder and mystery, before Noir literature became a genre.

chapter on *Fifty Shades of Grey* or in non-literature, as we'll see when dealing with experimentation in the chapter entitled "Calling Cars Horseless Carriages".

The same principle applies to language. In *Art Objects* Winterson argues that "adaptations of Dickens do not work well, because what gets lost is everything that really matters: language" (Winterson 1995, 42). Ironically, she doesn't see that the same applies to an adaptation of *Orlando* to the computer screen, because on the computer screen what matters most, is not language., or certainly not literary language, as we've seen in our analysis of the functioning of the post Gutenberg world.

The idea of using the digital world as a model or "territory" to produce an elitist form of literature, new yet still "modernist", can only be based on a misunderstanding of the notion of the digital world and its workings. By its participative nature, the Internet is, as we've seen, anything but elitist, opposed to Art for Art's sake, and notions such as the long tail, creative commons, go against any of the conceptions of literature brought forward by Winterson in her essays. There is no room for "elitism of survival" in the digital world. That elitism of survival must exist outside and is nothing more than the "reproduction furniture" of Winterson's recurring references: Woolf, Eliot, Joyce.

By referring constantly to these authors, and by imitating Woolf in *The Power.Book*, although disguised in digital jargon, she betrays the same non-digital nostalgia that Rushdie claimed at the beginning of *Fury* through the hackneyed sartorial eccentricity of his main character complete with Panama hat and twirling cane and which we have already evoked.

To this misconception of the net answers another misunderstanding concerning the nature of the object that she has in front of her, the computer, and its capacity to dissolve space, including a page. If a page is a space, it stops existing as such on the computer screen.

By reproducing a screen on paper, Jeanette Winterson is faced with the same problems which have beset the digital natives writing about the net, in the sense that she has had to address the question of the net as space and has had to ask herself how to reproduce that dematerialized space within the confines of a book.

To do so, the typography and the vocabulary align themselves with those of a screen. Thus the table of contents is called a "menu", chapters are entitled "Open Hard Drive", "New Document, etc."

The problem is that these words are clearly printed within the confines of a book, they belong to a defined and limited space and in that sense cannot reproduce the impression of an opening towards a limitless space which the screen offers. The reading remains linear. To

destroy the linear nature of the book, the idea in its composition is that “I can change the story” (Winterson 2000, 5) which of course is an illusion. The story is embedded in Gutenberg technology and the use of a digital vocabulary cannot in any way change it. Similarly the linear quality of the story is challenged by the fact that it goes from various moments in time backwards and forwards and that the character goes from being masculine to feminine and feminine to masculine. Again, this device amounts to rewriting Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* within a parody of a digital environment.

The sexual ambiguity between Alice and Ali is a direct reference to the sex change of Virginia Woolf’s character echoed, in the text by other literary references to Shakespeare creating a literary legitimacy within that digital environment. In that sense too, *The Power.Book* aspires to be a translation of the literary form, and the translation is itself the subject, meaning that there isn’t in the book a proper subject or central topic, the prism through which this translation from literary to digital, from Gutenberg to post-Gutenberg takes place, is love or sex, more precisely lesbian sex. Although *The Power.book* is in no way pornographic, Jeanette Winterson seems to have sensed almost intuitively by that choice of a central theme, that sex and pornography are the essential component of Internet culture. Lesbian sex is here described as a “mirror” and crystalizes the themes linked to the Internet and translation, as in the following passage, a dialogue between two female lovers:

“She said “what about you? What brings you to Paris?”
“A story I’m writing.”
“Is it about Paris?”
“No, but Paris is in it”
“What is it about?”
“Boundaries. Desire.”
“What are your other books about?”
“Boundaries. Desire” (Winterson 2000, 35).

The dialogue occurs in Paris between two female characters having a liaison, the mirror effect in the fact that the “writer-character” describes the book she is writing and which we are actually reading as she describes it, as a distant echo of the Elizabethan technique of the play within the play. It echoes the project enunciated in the first chapter “language costumier”, “I can change the story. I am the story” (Winterson 2000, 5), assimilating the book to a computer or the “Power.book” of the title, an idea which also announces this other description of the book within the book, again in a dialogue between the same female lovers:

“You’re the writer.
“It’s your story”
“What happened to the omniscient author?”
“Gone interactive” (Winterson. 2000, 27)

In these last two sentences, Winterson clearly places herself within the principles of the Internet literature and technology, as we’ll see in detail later on, except yet again, she does it on paper, not on a screen.

Whether *The Power.Book* will be the condition for the survival of the novel is a question that has been answered by Elaine Showalter in *The Guardian* on describing *The Power.Book* as the work of “a mannered novelist with nothing to say”¹⁰⁷, an appreciation strongly reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s *Fury*, or Amis’ *Yellow Dog*, novels evolving around the theme of digital technology and “the modern world”.

By contrast, Joshua Cohen, who is a digital native, claims brutally in the first sentence of his novel *Book of Numbers* his attachment to the Gutenberg technology: “If you’re reading this on a screen, fuck off” (Cohen 2015, 1). It is the opposite process to that of the *Power.book* which told the reader to try to imagine he (or “she” to use Wintersonian language gimmicks) was reading a screen, while reading a page printed on paper. Yet both books express, in spite of themselves, the incompatibility between what they try to express and the medium they use, while both books somehow insist through their titles that they are actually books, Cohen’s novel even borrowing its title from *The book*, that is to say *The Bible*. At the same time the juxtaposition of “Numbers” and books hints at the same contradictory association as the “*Power.book*”, the scientific, literary and mystical being present in the first, while the second associates “book” with technology. Still the numbering of the pages in Joshua Cohen’s book going from 1.1 to 0.161 and to 1.419 reproduces the same gimmick as in Winterson’s *Power.Book*, which consists of printing a technological code on a page in the hope of creating a confusion between both.

The mirror effect in *The Power.Book* finds an echo in the *Book of Numbers*, in a series of *mise en abîme*. The novel by Joshua Cohen tells the story of a hapless or unsuccessful writer named Joshua Cohen who becomes ghostwriter for an Internet millionaire reminiscent of Bill Gates but who happens to be called Joshua Cohen.

¹⁰⁷ Elaine Showalter. 2000. “Eternal Triangles”. *The Gardian*. September 2, 2000. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/02/fiction.jeanettewinterson1>.

The book starts with a fairly traditional evocation of “The artist as a young man”, in the depiction of the failed writer whose manuscript has been destroyed by the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11th, introducing the apocalyptic theme common to a large number of books dealing with the Internet age (we had the plane crash in *Yellow Dog*, foreign wars and tsunamis in *Zero K* etc.). The description of the “artist as a young man” takes on here a parodic and telegraphic style as an acknowledgement of that genre, and a way of establishing a link with it before moving on to digital writing and the *mise en abîme* of Joshua Cohen:

I’d worried for months, fretted for years, checked thesauri and dictionaries for other verbs I could do, I’d paced. [...] To write it, I’d taken a part time job in a bookstore, I’d taken off from my parttime job in the bookstore. I’d lived cheaply in Ridge wood and avoided my friends [etc.] I handed it to my agent, Aaron, who read it and loved it and handed it to my editor, Finitivity, who read it and if he didn’t love it at least accepted it and cut a check the size of a page – which he posted to Aar who took his percentage before he posted the remainder to me – before he, he scheduled the publication. Etc. (Cohen 2015, 10-11).

It is such passages which inspired Mark Sarvas to write:

Cohen the character (the other is always Principal) can be an arch scold, and his share of the tale weighs down *Book of Numbers*. This might be the moment to declare a binding moratorium on New York novelists writing novels that feature New York novelists. The too many pages devoted to agents, publishing deals, lunches, literary rivalries and the Frankfurt Book Fair (Adorno, anyone?) can be numbing.¹⁰⁸

In a sense, this judgement reminds one of that other critic describing Jeanette Winterson as a writer with nothing to say.

Book of Numbers is to a certain degree the opposite of a photographic reproduction of a printed page. It is a printed descriptive picture of the Internet world, through a dialogue between the main character and himself. In a word, *Book of Numbers* is the exact opposite to what it claims to be on its first page. The failure of the book is the same as that of Winterson, the untranslatability either of literature into numerical technology or of numerical technology into literature.

In *Book of Numbers*, the evocation of literary life and its failures, retold in a fairly traditional narration, gives way progressively to the constitutive elements of Internet

¹⁰⁸ Mark Sarvas. 2015. “*Book of Numbers*, by Joshua Cohen”. *New York Times*. July 2, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/books/review/book-of-numbers-by-joshua-cohen.html>.

literature: exoticism, a multiplication of faraway destinations brought near by screen technology, the sense of doom and the nearness of the Apocalypse, all themes which will also find an echo in yet another Internet novel Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*.

2. Anxiety and Television

In *Purity*, Jonathan Franzen echoes Winterson's anxieties about "television- literature" but from an opposite standpoint, claiming perhaps to be less elitist and to take the reader into account. As he declared in a revealing interview in *Le Monde*: « *En tant qu'écrivain, je ne peux pas m'empêcher de penser au lecteur, ce qui ne veut pas dire que je le flatte. Les esprits chagrins m'ont accusé de dire que l'auteur doit essayer de plaire au lecteur. Ce n'est pas ça du tout. Ce que je dis c'est que le lecteur aussi a des droits* » (Lesnes 2016, 2).¹⁰⁹

We are not in the same "ivory-towered" post-modern position claimed by Winterson, but the difference stops here. When it comes to writing about technology and tackling the relationship between new technology and literature, the mistakes remain the same.

Like *Zero K*, and *Book of Numbers*, *Purity* has in its plot all the elements of the novels dealing with the subject of Internet and surveillance, new technologies and identity. To sum up: *Purity* is a young American girl who likes to be called Pip, like the character in *Great Expectations*. The novel is rife with Dickensian references. The writer character in it is called Charles and writes very long books with a profusion of characters, plots and sub-plots. She doesn't know who her father is, she is raised by an ex-hippie hypochondriac mother and she will meet a certain Wolf (as in Big Bad Wolf) a hacker from East Germany, reminiscent of the ex-soviet exoticism of *Zero K*, who is a fictional projection of Assange, now having found refuge in Bolivia, thus obeying the need for multiple faraway locations to achieve the effect of the modern technological novel. Wolf also vaguely belongs to a sect. Pip goes to work in Bolivia but is appalled by the hierarchy at the centre of "sunshine project", the fictional projection of Wikileaks. The rest of the plot and subplots twist around fairly naïve spy story devices and sex, the idea illustrated here being that identity is made up of secrets.

¹⁰⁹ "As a writer I can't help thinking about the reader, which doesn't mean that I flatter him. Some sad people have accused me of saying that the author must try to please the reader. That's not it, at all. What I'm saying is that the reader has rights, too" [my translation].

Although the novel is a lot more “plotty” than Winterson’s *Power.Book*, these two pieces of work have in common that they place themselves in opposition to television on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as novels which “must” adapt to technology, as the title of the interview in *Le Monde* illustrates: “*Le roman est une forme vivante qui doit s’adapter à la technologie.*”¹¹⁰ Franzen puts the novel as an art form in competition with television, as it were, and asserts how tedious reading descriptions can be, a remark which reminds us of Gomez advising digital natives to skip descriptions in George Eliot, should they find it too boring.

*Dans les romans du XIX^e siècle – voyez Zola – il y a des pages et des pages de descriptions. Nous n’avons plus besoin de celles-ci. Il est fastidieux de lire un long paragraphe sur le visage de quelqu’un. Nous sommes tellement habitués maintenant à allumer la télé et à voir les images... (Lesnes 2016, 2).*¹¹¹

One would have thought that literature was based on language and wonder why the art of the portrait should be limited to painting or photography? Why should literature be considered fastidious if it creates a portrait in words? This sounds like arguing that since the invention of radio waves we don’t need dialogue anymore, or, since the invention of photography, painting has become irrelevant. This type of absurdity comes from the notion that literature *must* adapt. Why? Nobody knows, not even Franzen can give us the answer. It could also be argued that when Zola was writing, photography had been invented, and Zola never felt that a photographic portrait spared him the “tedium” of describing a face.

Still in the same interview, Franzen affirms that television “frees” him from writing descriptions. (Why not cinema and films, and television more specifically? We’ll answer that question a little later by highlighting the misunderstanding of the workings of glass screens both in Franzen and Winterson). He explains his new freedom with reference to a figure in a carpet, presumably referring in turn to Henry James’s short story: “*Je suis ravi que la télévision me libère de la responsabilité de décrire un morceau de tapis.*” (Lesnes 2016, 2).¹¹² In all fairness, Franzen doesn’t quote James or refer to him directly. Incidentally *The Figure*

¹¹⁰ “The novel is a living art form which must adapt to technology” [my translation].

¹¹¹ “In nineteenth century novels – take Zola – for example, you have pages and pages of description. We don’t need them anymore. It is fastidious to read a long paragraph on someone’s face. We are so used now to switch on television and see pictures” [my translation].

¹¹² “I’m delighted that television frees me from describing a bit of carpet” [my translation].

*in the Carpet*¹¹³ has nothing to do with carpets. But why should describing a carpet be the “responsibility” of the author? The only answer would be again, because literature relies on language and the written word, a fairly obvious answer, almost a truism to which “technological writers “have blinded themselves in the name of the tyranny of the new once again: “*Le roman est une forme vivante qui doit s’adapter à la technologie. Une forme artistique qui reste vitale. J’essaie de la pousser dans une direction nouvelle. De voir ce qui continue à marcher et ce qui ne marche plus.* » We are not given any precision or definition as to what all these words mean: “*Vitale*”, “*nouvelle*”, “*ce qui marche et ce qui ne marche plus*” (Lesnes 2016, 2).¹¹⁴

Incidentally, “*ce qui marche*” seems to be a serial type of fiction, as perfected by Dickens, Collins and those who were then considered the rather “vulgar” writers of the Victorian Age, whom Franzen tries to emulate, although fairly unsuccessfully.

The irony is that *Purity* should have been adapted for television, probably freeing its author from a series of literary duties. The adaptation will be written by David Hare, theatre director and playwright and Franzen himself, Daniel Craig being cast in the role of Wolf. Unfortunately (or fortunately) the project has been dropped, one of the reasons being that Daniel Craig had to impersonate James Bond once more. We could have seen, should we think along the lines of Franzen, how television would have given the book the literary quality it lacks because it does lack quality and has been received very critically by numerous more independent critics (by which I mean not necessarily affiliated to the *New York Times* or the *New Yorker* to which Franzen is a contributor).

In NPR Roxane Gay points out that the excessive fragmentation of the plot, turns the book into a farce¹¹⁵. On the same website, Maureen Corrigan concludes on *Purity*:

I think, at bottom, *Purity* is really about Franzen’s aesthetic desire to spin out lots and lots of stories, to experiment with his craft – which is a fine endeavor, but leaves the reader feeling simultaneously overwhelmed, yet curiously empty by the end of this long packed novel. You’ve got to be a Dickens to be able to command a cavalcade of stories and characters without numbing your audience. Some contemporary novelists like, say, Zadie Smith, David

¹¹³ *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896) is a short story by Henry James in which the narrator, a literary critic wants to find the essential secret, the “point” at the heart of his favourite writer’s works.

¹¹⁴ “The novel is a living art form which must adapt to technology. An artistic form which remains vital. I try to push it in a new direction. To see what continues to work and what doesn’t work anymore” [my translation].

¹¹⁵ Roxane Gay. 2015. “A Compelling Plot Gives Way to Farce in Franzen’s *Purity*”. December 1, 2015.

<https://www.npr.org/2015/09/01/435543843/book-review-purity-jonathan-franzen>.

Mitchell and Donna Tartt have pulled it off, but, despite the Dickensian echoes of his heroine's name Franzen can't meet such great expectations in *Purity*.¹¹⁶

Here is an example of the "cavalcade of stories" in *Purity*:

Wolf's motto, and his project's battle cry, was *Sunlight is the best disinfectant*. Born in East Germany in 1960, he'd distinguished himself in the 1980s as a daring and sensational critic of the Communist regime. After the Berlin wall came down, he'd led the crusade to preserve the enormous East-German secret police archives and open them to the public; here again, he was hated only by former police informants whose post-reunification reputations had been tarnished by the exposure of their past to sunlight. Wolf had founded the Sunlight project in 2000, focusing first on assorted German malfeasances but soon broadening his scope and toxic secret worldwide (Franzen 2015, 58).

The important word here is "worldwide" in the sense that the plot and the characters have the ambition to be all-encompassing, to offer a global picture, written in, at best, a journalistic style or a deliberate absence of style. We will notice again the soviet exoticism, carried through by the mention of East-Germany and the secret police which we'd found in *Zero K*. The accumulation of information of which we only have a small sample here, is echoed by a multiplication of destinations further down in the text: "Belize, Bolivia, Tennessee." And the accumulation of information is stressed in the text itself: "Pip was struck by how many of the exposures had to do with the oppression of women" (Franzen 2015, 58) or "The sheer volume of the online information about Wolf deepened her remorse" (Franzen 2015, 58).

To answer this multiplication of plots, the dialogue clearly belongs to the aesthetic category of the "zany" as defined by Sian Ngai as we see in the following passage. I will quote at length to demonstrate the persistent meaninglessness of the dialogue which unfortunately, in its zaniness, pervades the novel to the point of transforming it into an empty shell. The dialogue here occurs between Pip, the main character and her mother and is aimed at demonstrating the dysfunctional character of Pip's mother and hence of the relationship between mother and daughter.

"Have you given any thought to how you want to not-celebrate your not-birthday? She asked her mother."

"Frankly I'd like to stay in bed with the covers over my head. I don't need a not-birthday to remind me I'm getting older. My eyelid is doing a very good job at that already."

¹¹⁶ Maureen Corrigan. 2015. "Franzen's Latest Novel: An Ambitious but Tarnished *Purity*". September 2, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/09/02/436593413/franzens-latest-novel-an-ambitious-but-tarnished-purity>.

“Why don’t I make you a cake and I’ll come down and we can eat it? You sound sort of more depressed than usual.”

“I’m not depressed than when I see you.”

“Ha, too bad I’m not available in pill form. Could you handle a cake made with stevia?”

“I don’t know. Stevia does something funny to the chemistry of my mouth. There’s no fooling a taste but, in my experience.”

“Sugar has an aftertaste, too,” Pip said, although she knew that argument was futile.

“Sugar has a sour aftertaste that the tastebud has no problem with, because it’s built to report sourness without dwelling on it. The taste bud doesn’t have to spend five hours registering strangeness, strangeness! Which was what happened to me the one time I drank a stevia drink.”

“But I’m saying the sourness does linger.”

“There’s something very wrong when a taste bud is still reporting strangeness five hours after you had a sweetened drink. Do you know that if you smoke crystal meth even one your entire brain chemistry is altered for the rest of your life? That’s what stevia tastes like to me.”

“I’m not sitting here puffing on a meth stem, if that’s what you’re trying to say.”

“I’m saying I don’t need a cake.”

“No, I’ll find a different kind of cake. I’m sorry I suggested a kind that’s *poison* to you.”

“I didn’t say it was poison. It’s simply that stevia does something funny...”

“To your mouth chemistry, yeah.”

“Pussycat, I’ll eat whatever kind of cake you bring me, refined sugar won’t kill me, I didn’t mean to upset you. Sweetheart, please.”

No phone call was complete before each had made the other wretched (Franzen 2015,5).

The zaniness which expresses the dysfunctional character of the relationship lies in the length of the nonsensical exchange over the phone, plus, the use of absurd word associations such as “not-celebrate”, “not-birthday”, the exaggerated comparison between meth amphetamines and stevia, while the last sentence quoted above is excessively explicit and explanatory about what the writer is trying to convey, after such a lengthy passage containing no meaning. In that sense, this phone conversation is a good reflection of the novel as a whole. A long development of a very simple, almost simplistic idea, rendered “complicated” by a multiplication of plots, as this exchange is made “complicated” by a multiplication of vacuous tit for tat exchanges on an empty subject, namely sugar and stevia, even if one should be tempted to see in the mention of “sourness” as opposed to “sweetness” a vaguely symbolic content.

Franzen’s literary failure, like that of Winterson, highlighted by the literary references to Dickens and Woolf which unfortunately call for comparisons, seems to stem from his sense of duty, and the need to adapt “literature” to new technologies. The need to address “the modern world” and new technologies and to cram into the plot as many fashionable items as possible proves detrimental to the writing, the quality of which should be based on language and words, rather than on an exercise considering itself as a substitute for television.

3. What a Glass Screen Does to You

What is significant in both Winterson's and Franzen's reaction to television is the intuition of the incompatibility between the screen and the page, which we also find in the opening sentence of the *Book of Numbers* already quoted: "If you're reading this on a screen, fuck off" (Cohen 2015, 1).

Both Winterson and Franzen express a defiance of what Winterson calls "television literature". In an interview, Jonathan Franzen rejects description as a literary tool, in the same way that Joshua Cohen does at the beginning of *Book of Numbers*, explaining that television somehow does a better job of it. As an alternative to this "television-literature", they offer a form of uneasy post-modern imitation of contemporary technology while acknowledging as their ancestor either Virginia Woolf for Winterson or Dickens for Franzen in the choice of the name of his main character, Pip, in *Purity*. The contradictions are manifold. In an age when television writing has been hailed as successful in the form of the series, the ancestry of which is clearly to be found in Shakespeare and Dickens, (while cinema increasingly relies on special effects), writers offer an alternative approach to the screen by trying to belong to another form of screen, that of the digital age.

The response to one technology by another technology – the Gutenberg one – in order to avoid becoming outdated is reminiscent of the invention of Vistavision or Panavision by studio cinemas in the 1950s precisely to counter the growing influence of television. In the 1950s movie attendance dropped dramatically even in cities which only had one television station and cinemas began to close. To counterattack, the film industry decided to exploit the two obvious advantages which film enjoyed over television: colour (most televisions were still in black and white at the time) and the size of the picture hence the invention of Cinemascope, technicolor, Vistavision.¹¹⁷

A reminder of the effect of the appearance of this first form of domestic glass screen in living-rooms on reading habits can help explain the anxious intuitions felt by both Franzen and Winterson when they see themselves hesitating between a duty to literature and television.

¹¹⁷ On this subject, see David Halberstam. 1993. *The Fifties*. New York: Fawcett Columbine. and *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "History of the motion picture", the chapter "The threat of television". On the invention of technicolor and the invention of colour television see also Arthur Knight. 1957. *The Liveliest Art*, London: Penguin Books, p. 155-156 and 280-281.

Again, as a new form of technology, television had to be set against the Gutenberg technology because television was the “ancestor” of electronic technology and the computer in its exponential growth, to begin with, and in its influence on reading habits when “zapping” came into play.

Writing in 1995 in the chapter “Lire pour lire” in *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental* by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, Armando Petrucci gives this analysis of the progress of television and its effect on reading.

À la différence du passé, la lecture n'est plus aujourd'hui le principal instrument d'acculturation à la disposition de l'homme contemporain ; son rôle dans la culture de masse a été sapé par la télévision, dont la diffusion s'est très rapidement généralisée dans les trente dernières années. En 1955 aux Etats-Unis, 78 % des familles possédaient un poste de télévision mais en 1970, le pourcentage était de 95 % et en 1985 de 98 %. Simultanément dans la société américaine, le nombre des quotidiens diminuait : ils étaient plus de 2500 en 1910, 1750 en 1945 et 1676 en 1985. [...] Globalement on peut affirmer que de nos jours dans le monde entier, la formation et l'information des masses dévolues pendant des siècles à l'imprimé donc à l'acte de lire, sont passées aux moyens audiovisuels, à l'écoute et à la vision, comme le nom l'indique (Chartier 1997, 450).¹¹⁸

Besides announcing an exponential progress or movement from a literate to what McLuhan has described as an audile culture, television was ushering in progressively and through remote control the mosaic type of reading which now characterizes the Internet. This type of reading was only possible through the glass screen.

On le sait, la télécommande a permis au spectateur de changer instantanément de canal, de passer d'un film à un débat, d'un jeu au journal télévisé, d'une publicité à un feuilleton et ainsi de suite, dans une vertigineuse succession d'images et d'épisodes. Une telle pratique engendre dans le désordre de nouveaux spectacles individuels composés de fragments non homogènes juxtaposés. Chaque téléspectateur est l'auteur unique de ces spectacles, dont aucun ne s'insère dans une culture télévisuelle organique et cohérente ; ils sont à la fois actes de dépendance et actes de refus et dans un cas comme dans l'autre, la conséquence d'une totale déculturation et d'une création culturelle originale. Le zapping est un instrument individuel de consommation et de création audio-visuelle absolument nouveau. À travers lui, le consommateur de culture médiatique s'est habitué à recevoir un message composé de

¹¹⁸ Reading today, unlike in the past, is no longer the principal available instrument for acculturation. In mass culture it has been undermined by television which has spread rapidly to become almost universal in the past thirty years. In 1955, 78 per cent of families in the United States owned a television set; in 1970 the figure had grown to 95 per cent and in 1985 it had reached 98 per cent. In the same period the number of daily newspapers declined in American society: more than 2500 daily papers were published in 1910, by 1945 these had declined to 1750 and in 1985 to 1676. [...] overall it is fair to say that throughout the world today, the role of mass information and education that for centuries was fulfilled by printing, hence by reading, has been transferred to the audio-visual media, which means (as the name indicates) to listening and viewing. (Cavallo and Chartier. 1999. *A History of Reading in the West*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 361 (translated from the Italian by Lydia G. Cochrane.

fragments non homogènes, et surtout, si on le juge dans une perspective rationnelle et traditionnelle, “privé de sens”. Il s’agit d’un message qui nécessite un minimum d’attention pour être suivi et apprécié et d’un maximum de tension et de participation ludique pour être créée.

Cette pratique médiatique de plus en plus répandue est exactement le contraire de la lecture entendu dans son sens traditionnel, linéaire et progressive, mais elle se rapproche de la lecture transversal, cavalière, interrompue, tantôt lente, tantôt rapide qui est celle des lecteurs deculturés (Chartier 1997, 451).¹¹⁹

This description of zapping as a mode of watching television could correspond to a description of reading on the Internet, a destructured mosaic-like form of reading, demanding the same type of attention to non-homogeneous fragments, and as the extract above stresses, this kind of reading can only be created by the spectator and the reader. It follows that a writer trying to create a non-homogenous creation, a juxtaposition of fragments to reproduce the effect of the Internet of any screen is bound to fail, because the writer produces this form of zapping rather than the reader. The page, paper, the book, all reconstruct a linear progressive form of reading. The spectacle is not personal or unique. It is the same for every reader, in a book it recaptures the fixity of print. Consequently, what remains in a book which would try to imitate its effect is a total absence of sense or meaning without the “*participation ludique*”, “Playful participation”. As we’ve already seen, participation” and as we’ll see, “*ludique*”, belong to the screen not to the page. This is why we’ll now see how attempts like Cohen’s *Book of Numbers*, Winterson’s *The Power.book* and Amis’ *Yellow Dog* can only fail in what they’re trying to achieve.

¹¹⁹ The use of remote-control devices has given television spectators the power to change channels instantly, jumping from a film to a debate, from a game show to a news programme, from a commercial announcement to a soap opera, and so on, in a bewildering succession of images and episodes. In the unprogrammed disorder generated by this practice, new programmes and individualized spectacles are created out of non-homogeneous juxtaposed fragments. The only author of these creations is the individual television viewer. No such spectacle fits within the framework of an organic and coherent television culture; each one is in effect both an act of dependence and an act of rejection, and in either case they spring from situations that in part reflect total deculturation and in part are original cultural creations. ‘Zapping’ is an absolutely new and individual technique of audio-visual consumption and creation. The consumer of media culture who practises it has grown accustomed to receiving a message made of disjointed bits and pieces. Above all, judged from a rational and traditional viewpoint, that message has no ‘meaning’. It is none the less a message that demands a minimum of attention if one is to follow and enjoy it, and a maximum of tension and sportive participation to create it. This increasingly widespread media practice is the exact contrary of reading understood in the traditional sense, which is linear and progressive. It is fairly close, though, to the transverse, desultory, interrupted sort of reading – now slow, now fast – of deculturated readers (Chartier 1999, 362, translation by Lydia G. Cochrane).

4. Realizing that a Glass Screen is Not a Page

What we find, in Franzen, Winterson and Cohen, is the intuition that what is produced on a glass screen might be incompatible with what is produced on the page and that when style is reduced to an imitation of the multiplication of ideas and representations on a glass screen (television, tablet, computer, phone, Ipad, etc.), it leads to the type of aesthetic failures which are chronologically: *Yellow Dog*, *The Power.Book*, *Purity* and the *Book of Numbers*.

It is significant that the invention of the computer is contemporary to that of television, in the Fifties, and, in that sense, the computer can be seen as an extension of television (and certainly not cinema), inheriting the aesthetic components and essentials of the television show because as a glass screen, the television set and the computer are seen as a window or a passage, a door, a transition, an allegory constantly used by writers. In the opening of *Zero K*, the character who decides to try cryogenics is ushered through a building lined with television screens opening onto the world.

The principle of “being able to see inside without opening” is what defines television and in the fifties was applied to every aspect of life, including the kitchen oven. In that sense, like the computer television satisfies the public’s craving for voyeurism a lot more than either literature or cinema have ever done. In her study of visual culture of everyday life in the 1950’s, entitled *As Seen on TV*, Karal Ann Marling writes: “The glass door lets Lucy peep into her oven: she loves it because it lets her see inside. And seeing is absolutely central to the meaning of the 1950s. The only thing wrong with movies was that they weren’t TV, offering a free look at the contents of other people’s lives, and houses on demand” (Marling 1994, 14).

In that sense, television, the glass door, satisfies the same voyeuristic cravings as the Internet, social media, with the difference that social media and the Internet allow the user to participate, as we’ve seen, he is both voyeur and exhibitionist, but, like the computer, the glass door provides universal voyeurism down to the “pornography” of Sunday lunch being cooked while we watch.

With the Internet, we go one step further in this process, the user is both the actor, producer of his own reality TV and doesn’t need a writer to provide the script, he is himself the script writer. Internet literature is the extension of that conception as the writer is his own publisher, publicist and editor, all rolled into one. Both social media like Facebook, Snapchat etc. and Internet literature are a constant reworking by everybody or anybody of this essential television program: “This is your life”, changed into “this is my life”.

Further, as for the Internet which works in a kaleidoscopic mode, the ideal of television and of the glass screen is to provide a multiplication of itself, a screen within a screen, a multiplication of screens within one screen, which goes far beyond art for art's sake or the concept of the text within the text which can only be linear, be it *en abîme*, whereas the multiplication of points of view, subjects, images, is simultaneous on the glass screen. So the ideal of the Fifties, heralding that of the computer age, is the creation of screens within screens, of the multiplication of screens so as to see the world through a window just as one could see one's roast through the oven door. The perfect example of this ideal is represented by the Monsanto House of the Future as Karal Ann Marling points out:

[it]resembled a giant TV set, or rather four of them, protruding from a single stalk like some monstrous electronic flower.

The house was made of plastic panels, cast in sensuous pliable curves. It was crammed with microwave ovens and pictophones and the latest in domestic gadgetry: it had 'Atoms for Living Kitchen', a vinyl floor with embedded flakes of synthetic pearl and closed-circuit TV in every room for looking at one's own stuff. It had regular TV sets, too, for watching *I love Lucy* or the Wednesday night favorite, Disneyland (and other people's no-wax floors) in homey comfort. For the House of the Future wasn't *that* different, except in its video syncretic shape from the standard picture-window model in Levittowns everywhere.¹²⁰ And the picture in the picture window was like the picture on the TV set or the view into Lucy's oven. They all provided framed views of what was going on inside. Look! Look at that! So the person sitting in the living room window watching the set was a kind of minor league star as well as a spectator. Look at me! Look at my house and my new color TV! Life in the 1950s imitated art – as seen on TV (Marling 1994, 6).

The parallel with the Internet world and the development of social media, Facebook, Twitter, is obvious. The user is both subject and actor, master exhibitionist and the object of his own shared voyeurism. It is interesting that Karal Ann Marling stresses the sensuality and near sexual attraction exerted by the glass screen which is echoed by the constant "pornographication" of life (to coin a barbaric word) offered by the Internet. We find an echo of this Internet narcissism and exhibitionism, the passage from "this is your life" to "this is my life" in Franzen's, *Purity* or in Cohen's *Book of Numbers*, where the writer has represented himself within his novel, the novel like the screen becomes a mirror and a stage for the writer

¹²⁰ Inspired by the housing crisis at the end of the Forties, Bill Levitt had the idea that "custom housing" like "custom tailoring" didn't exist anymore and that a new market had opened for mass-produced clothes and the same principle could be applied to housing. He thus created the largest housing project in American history about twenty miles from Manhattan. The project was originally called Island Trees, but the name Levittown stuck. Levitt houses were extremely simple and designed with a young family in mind. Significantly, the house was designed with a kitchen at the back with a panoramic window so that a mother could watch her children as through a television screen. Soon after, Levitt would offer a free television with the purchase of each house to entice new customers. On this subject, see David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (1993).

in a way it hadn't been before, even in writings like Jack Kerouac's for example where the limit between fiction and autobiography is blurred.

Television and the Fifties, and the Internet are all about looking, "looking at people and their clothes and being looked at in turn". And from this statement, Karal Ann Marling concludes that "In this respect there is something post-literate about the 50s" (Marling 1994, 6).

This is exactly the conclusion we have reached about the world that came out of the Internet having followed a similar path, starting with the glass screen as the opening onto the world, be it the political world, the aesthetic world or the world of fiction or the so-called digital literature. We may just add that if television has created a post-literate world, the Internet has also created, as we've seen, in its redefinition of the soul and its narrative system, a pre-literate world. But in the end it amounts to the same thing, in the sense that it is a non-literate world.

Karal Ann Marling takes her point further when she sees another example of this non-literate world in the self-representation of America at the 1958 Brussels World Fair.

The U.S Display, a collection of amusing gadgets, kitchen appliances – including a pink built-in oven – frozen food packages, Coke machines, bits of back home streetscape and fashions scattered willy-nilly across an indoor pond containing a series of 'islands for living' was playful and incoherent by contrast.¹²¹ Hollywood movies were expected to be a big draw for the United States [...] The design team in fact considered its overall exhibition plan highly cinematic or tele-matic in character: the audience was invited to draw its own conclusions from a barrage of visual stimuli, delivered in short filmic "takes". Packaged in this way, the United States was not a written text (Marling 1994, 47).

The terms used to describe this display are perfectly adaptable to the Internet: "a collection of amusing gadgets", "willy-nilly", "playful and incoherent" "a barrage of visual stimuli". The Internet thus appears as the ultimate tele-matic "kitchen appliance", as it were. The ultimate irony where literature is concerned is that we have gone full circle, as the novels by Winterson, Franzen and Cohen, showing such distrust, condescension towards screens and television, are themselves extremely telematic, precisely because they are putting themselves in competition with the glass screen, either by establishing an artificial distance through the affected vulgarity and violence of the language of the *Book of Numbers*'s first sentence, or by trying to imitate a glass screen as in *The Power.Book*, or by trying to use the contents of the Internet, its "willy-nilly", "playful and incoherent" quality paired with "a barrage of visual

¹²¹ With the Russian display.

stimuli” as in Franzen. The more these authors try to distance themselves from television, the more they become tele-matic. Their novels appear pretty much like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, as we’ve seen, as “texts which are not written”.

The double irony of Franzen’s posturing is that his distancing himself from television while imitating another glass screen. This is elitist and yet through the name of his main character in *Purity*, Pip, he is referring to a popular writer of his time, Dickens, whose serialized writing is the closest literature to a television series, in its structure.¹²²

However, this is only one aspect of the contradiction, the second aspect is that both Winterson and Franzen distance themselves from television by imitating the content or the form of the individualized glass screen.

Already, in the Fifties, the intrusion of the shared glass screen or television in each interior was seen as a way of democratizing art. As Karal Ann Marling writes:

On TV, the distinction between picture and art tended to break down in the welter of shifting images: Ed Sullivan juxtaposed Elvis with Charles Laughton, Maria Callas with a troop of jugglers. Everything occupied the same electronic frame. To optimists, all this popular art-mindedness [...] spelled the growth and diffusion of culture in America (Marling 1994, 82-3).

The above paragraph could be applied verbatim to the Internet except that instead of America we are now talking of the “growth and diffusion of culture in the global village.”

The above description of the effect of television on art and culture is reminiscent in a lesser form, of what we called in our introduction “infobesity”. Also, like the net, “television was a picture window on faraway places” (Marling 1994, 3).

One cannot adopt an elitist posture by using an instrument that says: “everybody and anybody can write”, “everybody is a writer”, and a published one at that, which is what the Internet says. The Internet marks the triumph of the amateur. One could compare the success

¹²² Contrary to a classic drama built on the rules of unity of time, space and action, television series are built along three plot lines A, B, and C. A represents the general argument of the series. B deals with a conflict which will be solved in the course of several episodes, generally between three and four and C, is a sub-plot which is resolved in the course of one episode. In that sense, television series resemble a Dickensian serialized novel in which the action evolves from one episode to the other without always having a pre-established plot. Similarly with the multiplication of locations, minor characters and plots, television series resembles a Shakespearean form of narrative. To illustrate this narrative process, in a series like *Breaking Bad*, plot A can be described as such: the main character is a respectable family man and chemistry teacher who has just learnt that he has cancer and decides to sell methamphetamines to provide for his family. Plot B is that he must find a partner and teach him how to produce the drug. Plot C can be that his partner has overdosed.

of *Fifty Shades of Grey* which we have evoked to the success of painting by numbers, another fifties invention echoing the democratization of art.¹²³

What our present day has in common with the Fifties besides the total democratizing of art, is that television heralded the advent of transhumanism. “The notion that a machine, a record or a kit could turn a rank novice into a competent artist discloses a remarkable faith in instrumentality. [...] The pantograph bridged the same gap between culture and tinkering” (Marling 1994, 73). The Internet and its glass screen under various guises have done the same for literature and tinkering with words.

By opposition to works which try to imitate the functioning of the screen, a book like *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers uses indirectly the glass screen as its central subject in order to demonstrate and illustrate its powers of surveillance, but it does so by using traditional literary language. Although style is not the main preoccupation of the author, *The Circle*, dealing with Internet remains in the domain of literature as it doesn't try to imitate or to merge with its own subject. *The Circle* is a dystopia, reminiscent of Orwell's *1984*, in the sense that the idea prevails over the style, and yet it is more literary than either Cohen's or Winterson's attempt to represent or imitate the Internet.

Because of the telematic quality of the Internet and the Internet novel, the traditional tools of criticism are inadequate to account for the purely literary quality of the works concerned with the imitation of digital technology or even with digital technology as a subject. Thus each book dealt with here has to be treated as a sort of “phenomenon” a “consequence” of a state of technology incompatible with the notion of literature as we've known it in the Gutenberg era. This has been the case with *Purity*, with *The Circle*, it will be the case with Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, yet another illustration of the role of the screen, the machine, the game-like structure of the Internet narrative, echoing forms of messianic or dystopic transhumanism and the Singularity, and the constant reference to a technological subculture. On the one hand books like *The Circle*, carrying a message, are loosely interested in style. On the other hand, books which aspire to a literary tradition are stylistic and literary failures because of their author's desire to adapt to technology.

¹²³ On this subject see the chapter in Karal Ann Marling's *As Seen on TV* “Hyphenated Culture: Painting by Numbers in the New Age of Leisure” (p. 51 onwards), on painting by numbers and the success of Anna Mary Robertson Moses or “grandma Moses” becoming an art celebrity in the fifties through television. A parallel could be drawn here between the blog writer and the painter by numbers especially if the writing is helped along by an “app”, as we've seen earlier. To a certain degree, E.L. James could be described as the Grandma Moses of Internet erotica.

We'll see in a later chapter how literature created specifically for the screen by the screen takes this contradiction and incompatibility further.

Before this stage in the development of digital literature, a novel like *Snow Crash*, while using a classic form, has the computer, the glass screen, as its central theme which has several implications for the style and content of the work. Like all Internet literature, *Snow Crash* is characterized by a profusion of themes and ambitions: metaphysical, political, economical, philosophical, cybernetics, archeology, a very ambitious program if there ever was one, with the consequence that as in many or most of these novels dealing with the digital world, the plot defies summing up, and even sometimes understanding. It was the case with non science-fiction writers such as Amis in *Yellow Dog*, because these novels reproduce successfully the fragmentation which is the essence of the Internet to which we've referred many times.

The main character of *Snow Crash* is a hacker, named Hiro Protagonist and describes himself on his business card as "Last of the freelance hackers." To sum up, Hiro Protagonist has created a virtual world, the Metaverse in which his adventures take place. He reaches the Metaverse through his computer. The Metaverse also has a metaphysical aspect, as can be guessed from the suffix, its otherworldliness embraces a form of spirituality: "A *speech with magical force*. Nowadays people don't believe in these kinds of things. Except in the Metaverse, that is, where magic is possible. The Metaverse is a fictional structure made out of code" (Stephenson 1992, 197).

The Metaverse is a permanent virtual and parallel reality, barely distinguishable from *the* "reality", or the "real world" or the "material world". In that sense, the computer is classically assimilated to a window or door or passage to another world which is stressed by the "exotic" references, the multiplication of nationalities and names taken from various languages, such as that of the main character which has a distinctively Japanese ring to it (just as *Yellow Dog's* main character had a Chinese name for no reason at all). Hiro's roommate is called Vitaly Chernobyl. The references to the sub-culture or popular culture necessary to create a book on digital worlds are provided by the fact that Hiro is some sort of skater or surfer and delivers pizzas, and various sword fighting scenes (Hiro is also a swordfighter) provide a series of references to Kung Fu films.

According to Neal Stephenson's himself in *Some Remarks* (2012), in the chapter, "It's All Geek to Me", the "cultural universe of fantasy and science-fiction", is "Styled and informed by pulp novels, comic books, video games and Asian Martial Arts flicks". He further

adds “Lack of critical respect means nothing to sci-fi’s creators and fans” (Stephenson 2012, 60). Note again the use of the word “fan” rather than reader, and here of the word “creator” rather than writer. For indeed, the author of science-fiction or of digitally inspired fiction is more an inventor than a writer in a traditional literary sense.

As a consequence, the text is always self-parodic and in that echoes the double life of the character in a double world as represented by the computer. This self-parodic style makes it hard to evaluate the literary ambition of the author, especially as the book belongs to a subgenre of science-fiction, namely Cyberpunk, and as Neal Stephenson uses clichés of the genre such as the main character himself, the “mad hacker” who is to Cyberpunk what the private eye is to Forties and Fifties crime writing.

In a novel like *Snow Crash*, the author becomes mostly an inventor, here he even becomes a game designer, very much like his own character, extending once more the effect of a novel *en abîme*. In *Some Remarks*, Neal Stephenson reveals that *Snow Crash* was initially designed as an interactive game.

As virtual reality becomes the only reality, the novel is necessarily devoid of any psychological dimension or any characterization. Language becomes here the invention of the author, as in the sentence: “She is about to lambada this trite conveyance” (p.27), where the significance of the verb “lambada” is to be surmised. Or when language is used to describe one of the author’s inventions:

Y.T bought the wheels. Each one consists of a hub with many stout spokes. Each spoke telescopes in five sections. On the end is a squat foot, rubber tread on the bottom, swiveling on a ball joint. As the wheels roll, the feet plant themselves one at a time, almost glomming into continuous tire. If you surf over a bump, the spokes retract to pass over it. If you surf over a chuckhole, the robo-prongs plumbs its asphalt depths (Stephenson 1992, 27).

Here the invention of a futuristic plank is echoed by the invention of the “robo-prongs” illustrating both ways in which the writer becomes inventor.

For this reason, the text often becomes first explanatory, then didactic. The writer puts himself in a position where he has to explain his invention, be it the contraptions imagined in the text or the words and terms created to designate these contraptions or the way they function, as in the following extract.

“Bioelectronic sensor. Human cell membranes. Grown in vitro, which means in glass – in a test tube. One side is exposed to the outside air, the other side is clean. When a foreign substance penetrates the cell membrane to the clean, it’s detected. The more foreign molecules penetrate, the higher the pitch of the sound.

- Like a Geiger counter?
- Very much like a Geiger counter for cell-penetrating compounds,” Ng says (Stephenson 1992, 221).

Because the writer is an inventor who has to explain his invention, it follows that, as in this passage and in the dialogues throughout the book, characters talk to the reader rather than to each other, giving the text its stilted artificial quality, not unlike the dialogue we found in the very distant father and inspiration of Cyberpunk, Jules Verne, who treats inventions and their functioning as the dynamic force, as it were, of his novels, such as *Robur le conquérant* (1886) for example. Technology as a subject and as a source of inspiration or driving force of creation is in itself, by its very nature, the source of this “explicitness”.

To quote Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media*, himself quoting Lyman Bryson,¹²⁴ “technology is explicitness” (McLuhan 1964, 56). In this context he means that technologies are “ways of translating one kind of knowledge into another mode” (McLuhan 1964, 56). In that sense, words “are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translate experience into our uttered and outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness” (McLuhan 1964, 57). But to play on words we can extend, or perhaps trivialize the meaning of “explicitness” to apply it to literature, in which case, it could mean at worst “stating the obvious”, at best “translating” as explaining. Literature uses the technology of words to empty it of its explicitness by extending the art of the metaphor. But “explaining” that form of explicitness inherent to technology is incompatible with aesthetic standards of literature to which, according to Neal Stephenson, science-fiction writers are so immune and indifferent.

In that sense, this type of science fiction presents the same aesthetic weakness as the novel of ideas, such as *Zero K* which seems to have both weaknesses wrapped in one book. The novel of ideas is bound to be an explicit demonstration of some form of theory. It explains and theorizes and demonstrates at the expense of aesthetics.

In fact, the science-fiction novel and the novel of ideas meet in what Neal Stephenson has termed “idea porn” in that they are both perfectly fitted to the nature of the Internet and its absence of traditional aesthetic values.

And yet, in spite of its self-parodic, subcultural or pop-cultural, and comic quality, *Snow Crash* does aspire to metaphysical content and becomes a literary or fictional echo of

¹²⁴ Bryson Lyman (1888-1959) was an educator who taught Teachers College Columbia in 1935. He specialized in adult education and wrote several essays such as *The New Prometheus* (1941) and *Science and Freedom* (1946) on the subject of education.

the Singularity. Again, this is revealed through the reworking of the Bible and Sumerian myths through the prism of the computer and digital technology and expressed more often than not through dialogue: “Your mistake, Ng says is that you think that all mechanically assisted organisms – like me – are pathetic cripples. In fact, we are better than we were before.”

As in the Singularity, the computer here brings a New Covenant and reinterprets religion. As in Cohen’s *Book of Numbers*, biblical references are omnipresent, together with Sumerian myths and the various early influences of the Bible. By consequence, the computer becomes a world of myths, especially the myth of Creation, and hacking becomes a spiritual activity akin to that of Talmudists or cabalists.

“You may remember an unexplored fork earlier in our conversation that would have brought us to this same place by another route. This myth can be compared to the Sumerian creation myth in which heaven and earth are united to begin with but the world is not really created until the two are separated. Most Creation myths begin with a ‘paradoxical unity of everything, evaluated either as chaos or as Paradise’ and the world as we know it does not really come into being until this is changed. I should point out here that Enki’s original name was En-Kur, Lord of Kur. Kur was a primeval ocean – Chaos – that Enki conquered.”
“Every hacker can identify with that” (Stephenson 1992, 238).

The whole of chapter 30 is a theological and historical discussion, again very didactic and explanatory in style, comparing and contrasting the Torah with the Internet and digital technology. “So the Deuteronomists codified the religion. Made it into an organized self-propagating entity,” Hira says. “I don’t want to say virus. But according to what you just quoted me, The Torah is like a virus. It uses the human brain as a host. The host – the human – makes copies of it. And more humans come to synagogue and read it” (Stephenson 1992, 214).

And later, Genesis is in turn translated and explained in terms of electronic technology: “Eve, as recall, is considered responsible for getting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, from the tree of *knowledge* of good and evil. Which is to say, it’s not just fruit – it’s data.” “If you say so, sir” (Stephenson 1992, 217).

The chapter is built on a dialogue with the librarian, significantly representative of an old order or an old world, that of books, as opposed to the screen. Yet, sometimes, the tongue in cheek or self-parodic style of the work, mostly through the use of popular references and pizzas, warns the reader not to take it too seriously, which is another aspect of digital literature or literature concerned with the digital age and technology: it refuses to take itself seriously or pretends to, especially when it is the work of digital natives. When it comes to “Gutenberg

natives” the awareness of literature as a portal to a sacred world remains and the comedy is strained or not totally controlled, as was the case in *Yellow Dog*. In that instance, the novel took refuge in comedy and in a fairly outré form of comedy to justify or camouflage its ineptitude. Here is one example of strained comedy in *Yellow Dog*:

“They reckon here he’s going to Charlton. After prison.”
“Charlton? They’re crap.”
“Car’s crap. So’s Charlton. He’s crap and they’re crap.”
“*Car’s* crap. But Charlton aren’t *that* crap.”
“Bullshit. They’re less crap than he is but they’re still crap.”
“Boys, boys, you’ve got to learn some new swearwords. Take crap, say, I mean, bullshit actually means something. Something fairly complicated. Something like: rubbish intended to deceive. But Crap? Crap just means crap. As a word crap is *so* crap.”
“That’s the whole point of it. Crap’s wicked.”
“Yeah. Crap’s cool.”
“I’ll tell you what *is* crap,” he said, flicking his book on to the table, “and it’s *this* shit” (Amis 2003, 221).

The comedy here relies on the repetition of “crap” what the character calls a “swearword”. The comedic effect is reinforced by the parody of a textual analysis and the “complicated” meaning of the word “bullshit”, as if “bullshit” were a concept or a sophisticated term. As comedy, the effect is poor and crude. The passage has no meaning, its only intention or purpose is to make the reader laugh by that repetition. It could be argued that Amis tries here to represent the impoverishment of vocabulary and thought in a modern context but we come here to the same paradox that we had encountered with his representation of the “obscenification” of society in that the end result, the book, turns itself into a poor form of comedy deprived of any form of reflection. As a further example of this paradox, to stress the comic effect, Amis has to resort to typographic devices, namely italics, in a way which is reminiscent of the use of onomatopoeia in comic books or cartoons.

By opposition, *Snow Crash* reads more like the video game it was intended to be, should one envisage the possibility of “reading” a videogame rather than a book.

Yet *Snow Crash* is a video game printed on paper, which explains, as we’ve seen, its limitations as a literary work. *Snow Crash* still belongs to a Gutenberg technology from which it strives to escape in a playful way. A further stage in the Internet technology is represented by the works we’ll study in the next chapter, electronic literature, if we can call it that, texts, if we can call them that, which were created for the computer by the computer, which exist in

and on the computer and have nothing to do with ink or paper. The question will be precisely: “Can we call them that? Can we call them texts at all?”

5. Calling Cars Horseless Carriages

The process of dis-incarnation of literature heralded by other forms of dis-incarnation such as the Singularity leads to an ever greater estrangement from the printed page as we know it with its black stripes on a white background. Reading from a computer screen changes not only the content, the way one reads but the process of creation itself. In a similar way, typewriters created the “wisecrack” dialogue of the Thirties detective novels such as Chandler’s, also influenced by another new technology of the time, the camera and the sound system or “talkies”. But mostly, the typewriter has created the typewriter novels, one of the best (or worst) examples being Hubert Selby Jr’s *The Room* (1971). However the typewriter novel was still a paper production.

To make another comparison between the typewriter as a new technology and a new form of writing, we could refer here to Jack Kerouac’s manuscript of *On the Road*. (1957). By creating reams of pages attached rather than bound, the manuscript itself becomes a representation of the road, a long stretch of paper unrolling in front of the reader. Or is it? Because it is very unlikely that the manuscript in this form found a reader, a point which raises the question of whether literature can exist by itself, or needs the presence of one or several readers. Incidentally, the equivalence between the content and the technology which produced it, the typewriter, gives extra strength and veracity to Truman Capote’s judgement on Kerouac’s oeuvre: “It’s not writing, it’s typing” (John Deck 1973).¹²⁵ Besides, even if the manuscript, imitating a road, presents itself like a roll rather than a bound mass of pages, it remains paper, and the text written on this paper is not malleable once it has been defined as the definitive version of the novel.

The question raised by the page on a moving screen is: can electronic literature be considered as literature at all?

¹²⁵ John Deck. 1973. “At the very least, an inspired kind of typing”. *New York Times*. April 15, 1973. <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/15/archives/kerouac-at-the-very-least-an-inspired-kind-of-typing.html>.

It might appear necessary to “define literature at this stage”, which would be as vast and impossible a task as defining “the Internet” and containing it within precise boundaries. Yet, we can claim that literature as we’ve known it to the present day, is born out of the printing press and by trying to establish the basic qualities of a text coming out of that printing press we could establish a new “degree zero of writing” to paraphrase Roland Barthes¹²⁶ or “degree zero of literature” more in its external form than in any consideration of style content.¹²⁷

As the essential characteristics of the printing press which created literature, we will retain, in the footsteps of both McLuhan and Eisenstein, wide dissemination, standardization, rationalizing and codifying, fixity and cumulative change, amplification and reinforcement. Eventually we’ll have to ask ourselves if literature can exist not only outside books but outside the book trade?

6. What is Electronic Literature?

Katherine Hayles in her critical study of the new “genre” or form of creation, *Electronic Literature*, mysteriously subtitled “New Horizons for the Literary”, offers what she calls a “third approach” to “the intermediation that inextricably entwines body and machine” (Hayles 2008, 3).

We are still situated within the logic of the Singularity, the transformation of our vile body onto a glorious body through technology. Notice the expression “a third approach” very akin to a “third way”, always redolent of a reformatory zeal or project, especially as we do not know what the other two ways are. The “third way” becomes here a way of designating a norm of literary creation and of an understanding which, as yet, don’t exist. There have been many “third ways” in politics, in genomics and epigenomics, and now in literature. All third ways have in common that they open onto or lead to a “new world”, generally with new rules and a new form of understanding.

The two questions which Katherine Hayles asks herself as a consequence of the entwinement of “body and machine” are first: can one understand electronic literature as part

¹²⁶ Roland Barthes, 1953. *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*. Paris: éditions du Seuil.

¹²⁷ On the question of literary legitimacy and quality, see Richard Bradford. 2015. *Is Shakespeare Any Good?*. Chichester: Wiley.

of a literary tradition, and, second, how to introduce transformations that redefine what literature is?

The literature we are dealing with here goes a step further in its electronic “nature” than books by either Cohen or Franzen or Eggers, taking the computer and the Internet as subjects or even models. The electronic literature we’re concerned with here, is in Hayles’s term, “digital born” and “meant to be read on a computer” (Hayles 2008, 3), very unlike Cohen’s in which the reader was told to “fuck off” in the first line of the first page, should he ever be tempted to read on a screen.

From the outset, the announcement that literature read on a computer has to be redefined as literature creates a doubt, further confirmed by the fact that digital born pieces of literature are not called books (they couldn’t be if they only exist on a screen) but “digital objects”, further described as “hopeful monsters” or a “hybrid creations” (Hayles 2008, 4) referenced by ELC, *i.e.* Electronic Literature Collection. She adds: “perhaps a third have no recognizable words”.

The language used in the introduction constantly betrays a sense of unease, for example: “By calling these works literature”, a turn of phrase which indicates that these works may not actually be literature but have to be *called* that, which, in turn, implies that a new word or name has to be created, which explains the original mystery of the subtitle: “the literary” has to be substituted for “literature “ to include these works, “*The literary*” being, of course, sufficiently vague as a notion to create a certain degree of comfort when trying to give a critical assessment of such hopeful monsters as Judd Morrissey’s *The Jew’s Daughter*, (2013), Michael Joyce’s *Twelve Blue* (1996) or Mencia’s *Worthy Mouths* (2000) to which we will return. Without this new word which is hardly a concept, it would be all too easy to answer Hayles’ own question: “Must an artistic work contain words?” As far as literature is concerned, the answer would be yes, or should one be tempted to answer the question by another question: What else could it contain?

Thus, the literary can include literature without words which Hayles opposes to what she calls “literature proper” built on “verbal art”, (Hayles 2008, 5) again having to rename the “objects” of her critical studies to bring them into existence within a new field which appears to have less and less to do with “literature proper” (Hayles 2008, 5): “The works in the ELC and more generally the entire field of electronic literature test the boundaries of the literary and challenges us to rethink our assumptions of what literature can do or be” (Hayles 2008, 5).

Significantly the term “boundaries” takes us back to the notion of the digital theorists that the Internet, the web, etc. has to be mapped or that “Homesteading” has to be performed to take possession of the noosphere, while the reinvention of a critical vocabulary announces already in the introduction of Hayles’s book, the failure to assimilate what she calls “the literary” or electronic literature which is “digital born” to any form of literature.

7. The Various Epochs and Genres of Electronic Literature. And is it Literature?

Electronic literature can be divided into several genres and periods. What is considered the “Classic” period by critics is composed of blocks of text on screen, like a photographic reproduction of a page, the most representative of which is Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995), a reworking of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in feminist mode.

These works have to be written in Storyspace, a software program designed to write hypertext and created by Eastgate system, a software company which also publishes electronic literature and hypertext.

This first “school “gave birth to “hybrid forms”, such as Coverley’s *Egypt: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (2002) or *The Unknown* (1998) co-authored by David Stratton, Scott Rettberg and William Gillespie, or Judd Morissey’s *The Jew’s Daughter* (2013). The latter is composed of a single screen of text in which some passages are replaced as the reader runs the mouse of his computer over them. Quoting David Ciccoricco, Hayles adopts the word “network” fiction to describe this form of literary creation (Hayles 2008, 8) defining it as “digital fiction which makes use of hypertext technology, in order to create emergent and recombinatory narratives” (Hayles 2008, 8) which evokes a more sophisticated and technological form of novel designed for adolescents and in which the reader is “the hero” and can choose different types of development for the narrative. This leads to the third form of electronic literature: interactive fiction. Interactive fiction differs from the other types of electronic literature because like books for adolescents, it introduces a strong element of gaming. As a consequence, as Hayles admits, “the demarcation between electronic literature and computer games is far from clear” (Hayles 2008, 8). Hayles quotes Nick Montfort who in *Twisty Little Passages, an Approach to Interactive Fiction*, (2005) prefers the term “interactor” to reader.

To sum up so far: literature is to be called “the literary” rather than literature, some of it doesn’t contain words, and the reader is not a reader but an interactor, works produced are not books but objects.

In interactive fiction, it follows that the interactor “controls a player character by issuing commands. Instructions to the program, for example, asking it to quit are called ‘directives’” (Hayles 2008, 8). It is as if a reader could tell Emma in Jane Austen’s novel to stop acting in such a silly way and she would obey.

Hayles cites numerous examples of different kinds of game plays offered by the works of Interactive fiction. In each, the writer or author relinquishes his authorship to the reader through the means of specific programs. Amongst them is Jon Ingold’s *All Roads* (2001) where the player-character is a teleporting assassin.

The allusion, evoked by the title, “all roads lead to Rome”, suggests that the imperial power is here the author’s capacity to determine what the interactor will experience. The player character’s vocation can thus be interpreted to imply that the metatextual object of assassination is the illusion that hypertext is synonymous with democracy and user empowerment (Hayles 2008, 9).

It is not entirely clear but this seems to answer the libertarian notion that copyright is derived from an excess of authority and that authorship, and the possibility of determining what the reader will feel, is also part of an excess of “imperial” power opposed to democracy and user empowerment. In other terms, the reader doesn’t have to react according to the wishes of the author and is enabled to modify the text or “the object” so as to gain freedom and power. The reader cum player cum character of the book is an assassin, his murderous act frees him from the excessive, “imperial”, power of the author in a traditional literary work who determines what he is supposed to feel. In a slightly absurd twist, allowed by the use of the words “Rome” and “Imperial”, the new reader, the reader of “metatext” can be the murderer of the Roman Empire or of imperialism as represented by a traditional author of a literary work. It has to be added that the notion that a writer can manipulate his readership to the point that every reader will have exactly the same experience while reading his work is at best open to debate.

In this sense, the digitally “created” work contains the same contradictions as that of literary works on the internet imitating the Internet, a Gutenberg creation trying to imitate a post- or pre-Gutenberg technology. Only here, it is carried further in the sense that the

paranoid dystopia of these works, fed by fear of the Internet, is now expressed in a context where the creator surrenders his own creativity to the machine, that is to say the computer, the screen, the program. Beyond his creativity he surrenders his “body” to that same machine to the point of oblivion. The narcissistic announcement of “the death of the author” becomes a reality. What remains to be seen is if these critics, especially Foucault and Barthes, meant it that way, or even believed it would actually happen. E-literature doesn’t need an author, and we’ll see at a future stage that it doesn’t even need a reader as the “human reader”, to use the terminology of Katherine Hayles, can be opposed to machines and programs. The question raised here, can literature exist without writers or human readers, can be answered by another question: is this question really worth answering?

If a particular tool can dictate, within a given field, a form of creativity or a specific style, as the typewriter in novels such as Hubert Selby Jr’s *The Room*, in the case of digital literature, the tool and the technology themselves become the creator.

By opposition, if genre literature, from which a lot of electronic literature “descends” as it were, in particular science-fiction and crime, can be assimilated to a game, it remains that in these cases, the only player is the writer, in the sense that he manipulates the reader. The same could be said about any piece of literature or cinema which relies on suspense. In the case of digital literature, the reader under his, (or her to use Katherine Hayles’ feminist terminology), many guises, reactor, gamer, etc. manipulates the writer under his or her many guises, erasing the common ground, in a word, the text on which the notion of literature is based and destroying the first characteristic and principle of the Gutenberg technology : repeatability, for the next reader will not come across the “manipulation” effected on the text by the last reader, he will in turn transform it, so that two readers will never read the same text. The very fact that we cannot give an example of this phenomenon inherent to this conception of electronic literature shows that it has actually and definitely done away with repeatability.

The second aspect of Gutenberg technology which e-literature does away with is accessibility and transportability. “In Janet Cardiff’s *The Missing Voice* (Case Study B 1996), for example, the user listened to a CD played on a Walkman keyed to locations in London’s inner city, tracing a route that takes about forty-five minutes to complete” (Hayles 2008, 11). By giving this example Katherine Hayles asks the question at the heart of electronic literature. Can literature exist outside books? There is nothing extremely new about the device to start with, every museum has offered the same thing via audio tours for decades. The second aspect

is that literature that could only be read in a specific place, in situ, goes against any notion of literature as a reproduced, transportable text. What is remarkable about this example is that it is also an extremely old-fashioned idea, in the same way that Internet writers or digital authors have, as we've seen, tried to kill or dispense with a specific sense of place by the multiplication of exotic locations and the sense of the electronic speed of the computer which takes writer and reader through a "cyberspace", at once abstract, geographical and infinite.

Katherine Hayles also gives as an example: Blast Theory's *Uncle Roy all round You* (2003) which "combined a game like search for Uncle Roy, delivered over PDAs, with participants searching for a postcard hidden at a specific location. Meanwhile online observers could track participants and try to help or confuse them, thus mixing virtual reality with actual movements through urban space" (Hayles 2008, 13). In this instance, literature alarmingly resembles televised treasure hunts with audience participation reminding us of popular programs in the nineteen eighties, such as "Treasure Hunt" which appeared on Channel 4 between 1982 and 1989 and which was an English adaption of the French program "La Chasse au Trésor."¹²⁸ One can watch or "read" or witness the existence of *Uncle Roy all ound You* on Youtube and find there the confirmation that it has absolutely nothing at all to do with literature.

The importance of redefining place in a disincarnated world, a world which defines itself as virtual, is further illustrated by the CAVE virtual reality projection room or gallery site. Here again what primarily defines CAVE is a non Gutenberg-friendly lack of portability.

CAVE is a virtual reality simulator, installed at Brown University by Robert Coover,¹²⁹ at "the turn of the millennium" to use his own term in an interview given to the *New Scientist* (17 November 2010). The messianic and obviously "millennaristic" connotation in the choice

¹²⁸ In this program some candidates had to solve mysteries, riddles and pass on the results to help a helicopter pilot find a treasure in a specific region of France. Needless to say, there was absolutely nothing literary about the program.

¹²⁹ Robert Coover is a pioneer and advocate of electronic literature, a professor of literature at Brown University and an American writer, author of *The Public Burning* amongst many other books, published in 1977 and dealing with Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in a highly symbolic and didactic manner often considered as *avant-garde*. His main opus, *The Public Burning* was described in the *New York Times* (14th August 1977) by Thomas R. Edwards in the following terms: "an extravagant, even wasteful expenditure of creative energy. As a work of literary art, *The Public Burning* suffers from excess: it is considerably too long and repetitive, it tests one's capacity for embarrassment rather too cruelly, its savage humour makes its sympathetic treatment of the Rosenbergs themselves, in all their hopeless ordinariness, sometimes seem mawkish by contrast. [...] But all vigorous satire is simplistic and excessive, and this book is an extraordinary act of moral passion, a destructive device that will not easily be defused" (Edwards 1977). Whether "all vigorous satire is simplistic and excessive" is open to debate. What is significant in this appraisal of Coover's work is that even packaged in Gutenberg technology it is a "destructive device" which is exactly how one would describe CAVE as we'll see later. It seems that being a "destructive device" is the main aim of Coover's literature, be it as a book or a machine, dare one say a gadget?

of the word “millennium” should be noted. The idea is indeed revolutionary and supposed to bring definitive changes to our culture. As Coover himself announces: “It is no surprise that new literary forms are emerging in response to this new technology, forums that may in time replace those of books and film as the reader’s choice” (Coover, 2010). We find here the same missionary zeal and destructive glee which characterized such works as *Print is Dead* by Gomez, as digital technology and its productions are supposed in their millennaristic crusade to “replace” former technologies, whereas, to give but one example, cinema in its beginning never presented itself as a new art form which was going to replace either literary fiction or theatre.

The parallel between cinema and electronic literature deserves here a parenthesis to stress both the similarities and contrasts which mark the emergence of this new technology, the camera and projector, in the world of fiction. The early aesthetics of the cinema were directly derived from the stage, pretty much as electronic literature was at its beginnings a reproduction of a printed page. The camera was set in what would have been the best seat in the house: centre orchestra. There were no camera movement and the effect was static. Although the first subjects were more like tableaux than fully developed narratives with actual plots, the pioneers of the production and distribution companies, such as Zukor or Laemmle, who were to create the Hollywood studio system, sensed very quickly that cinema could be developed into high art and for that had to borrow its plots from Victorian fiction and had to produce much longer films. This decision was met with the incredulity of the other distributors who couldn’t imagine that the public would actually sit for more than eight or ten minutes in front of a screen. Still, Zukor produced adaptations of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* which turned out to be popular successes and which also managed, as planned, to attract the middle classes to “movie theatres” and to transform cinema from the nickelodeon, a working class form of entertainment, to a sophisticated art form. At the same time, cinema, “movies”, moving pictures, whatever one wants to call them, never claimed to be moving literature or screened plays, but aspired to becoming *le septième art*,¹³⁰ with no desire to replace any other. In other terms, cinema and “movie people”, as they called themselves, never called cars horseless carriages.

¹³⁰ The expression « septième art » was coined in 1911 by the essayist Ricciotto Canudo in *Le Sixième Art* (1911). The other arts were, to put them in order according to Canudo: architecture, sculpture, painting, music poetry and drama which included dancing or ballet. Canudo argued that motion pictures or *le cinématographe* as it was then called, was a form of fine art in motion.

The introduction of yet another technology into films, namely sound, confirms the relevance of the parallel between cinema and the creation of digital literature, in the sense that sound, when it first appeared, also played the part of a misunderstood technology, as Ring Lardner Jr., a prominent screenwriter in Hollywood from the forties onwards points out, in his memoirs entitled *I'd Hate Myself in the Morning* (2000).

When silent movies became the “talkies”, Hollywood studios imported Broadway’s most successful playwrights to fill the new need for dialogue. Both parties saw little difference between a drama performed by a live actor in a theater and one recorded by the new sound cameras, and both were dismayed when audiences found many early talkies wordy and tedious. The devices the movie-makers had developed in the silent days – the close-up, the reverse angle, the moving shot, the abrupt cut, the dissolve, the divided screen, different lenses, varying depths of focus, montage, camera speeds, flashbacks and flash forwards among other novel techniques – had created a whole new storytelling language. For the first time that language included sound, which meant sound effects and background music as well as dialogue. But the spoken word turned out not to have the same all-important significance it had on the stage. You couldn’t plant a vital story point in a line of dialogue and be sure it had registered; you had to reinforce it with another plant, preferably a visual one. Waldo Salt has described our craft as “a separate form, and what it is, is writing in images. There is a separate aesthetics that is quite different from the theater or the novel. It comes closer to the technique of poetry (Lardner 2000, 171-2).

In that sense, Ring Lardner is quite close to Canudo’s conception of the cinema as “a conciliation of the rhythms of space (the plastic arts) and the rhythms of time, music and poetry” (Canudo 1911). The proximity of films and poetry, as seen by Lardner, can be attributed to the fact that in both films and poetry, the image is the essence of the work as opposed to just one of its devices, as it can be in a theatrical dialogue or in the course of a novel. The image is the narration in films and poetry, it is a mere tool or a means of the narrative technique in the novel or in the theatre.

The new effects brought about by the new electronic technology have nothing to do with literature, they are “a separate form” like the motion pictures” is “a separate form”. They might be very valuable according to their own aesthetic criteria, should they have any, but certainly not according to literary criteria. They may be closer to “happenings” or what modern art calls “installations”. In no way can they be assimilated to literature. It would be as absurd as considering that Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954), for example, is a bad or a good book or that *Jane Eyre*, is a bad or a good film, although *On the Waterfront* has been novelized by its screen writer Budd Schulberg, and *Jane Eyre* has been adapted for the screen several times. Films and books cannot be envisaged or judged by the same criteria. One is almost embarrassed to join a debate which forces one to assess such obvious truths but such

is the nature of criticism of electronic literature at present. To conclude for the time being, an electronic “production” cannot be assimilated to a literary work and cannot be judged along the same lines.

Besides, contrary to electronic literature which claims to be both libertarian and elitist, films were not meant for a “coterie” as electronic literature self avowedly is, as we’ll see later, due to its very technology. In *An Empire of their Own* (1988) Neal Gabler quotes an editorial entitled “A Democratic Art”, from the 24th of August 1913 in *The Nation* which declared:

The Crowds not only throng to the shows, they talk about them, on the street corners, in the cars and over the hood of the baby carriages... the crowd discusses the technique of the moving picture theatre with as much interest as literary salons in Paris or London discuss the minutiae of the higher drama (Gabler 1988, 56).

Although *The Nation* draws a parallel between the subjects discussed in the literary salons of Europe and the “moving picture theatre”, there never was any suggestion that a continuity existed between the two or that one was to replace the other.

While *The Nation* was aware of the democratic quality of the cinema, electronic literature cannot be discussed “over the hood of baby carriages” because of its technology, although it presents itself as a democratizing force for literature and knowledge by its opposition to print culture, as is apparent in Coover’s interview.

How does this literature work? This is Coover’s answer:

It is like going to a 3D IMAX movie and being able to step inside it. You wear 3D glasses, but also sensors by which the computers track each movement and gesture, reacting to them in preprogrammed way. We also carry various navigational tools, somewhat like video game joysticks, used in our case to facilitate spatial hypertext fictions, poems, conceptual literary art and theatrical pieces. Indeed, writing for the Cave is probably closest to writing for the stage, and projects developed within it can be highly theatrical, literary entertainments for the user as actor and director and for viewers sharing the space. Works for the Cave are utterly unique, without analogues in other media, though traditional literary values remain (Hayles 2008, 12).

What these “traditional literary values” are, we are not told, but the last sentence, according to which there are no analogues in other media to the works produced in that “eight foot cube using large projectors beaming off mirrors onto back-projection screens to a multi-sided Cave that uses small tiled computer screens” (Hayles 2008, 12), betray the fact “this literature” has nothing to do with literature although it retains, according to Coover, unspecified “literary values”, and traditional ones at that.

What the cube illustrates is the digital writer's obsession with the avatar and the question of how to make the virtual world real, how to enter into the fictional creation and become part of it; how, yet again, to transform our vile body into a glorious body, and, as we'll see, to try and make literature a "bodily experience", as absurd as that may sound. Katherine Hayles describes in such words the productions of the cave or cube: "these works enact literature not as a durably imprinted page but as a full-body experience" (Hayles 2008, 13). Rita Riley who is a contributor to the *Iowa Review* and "works on the critical interpretation of electronic media" (Hayles 2008, 24) describes reading in this new environment as a "kinesthetic, haptic, and proprioceptively vivid experience" (Hayles 2008, 12), whatever that means, which begs the question: Can literature be assimilated to a tantric massage?

Further on in Coover's interview, he draws a historical parallel which highlights his own contradictions and the incompatibility between literature as we've known it until the postmodern period and electronic literature:

The technology of writing itself placed many new constraints on the traditional oral tale, depriving it of, for example, voice, gesture, facial expression, costuming, music, audible phrasing and rhythms, improvisation and interaction. But those same constraints made possible new art forms – including literature itself" (Hayles 2008, 12).

It follows that if writing (it is not certain that writing can be described as a technology but rather, when it comes to the novel, as the artistic by-product of Gutenberg technology) destroyed the oral tradition with all it entailed in order to create a new art forms such as literature, then electronic literature is actually destroying the literary tradition and literature itself to create new art forms such as walks through London with a Walkman, but these new art forms cannot possibly be called literature any more than literature can be called "written orality".

On the other hand, printing, which is undoubtedly a technology, creates literature itself. The two main characteristics of this technology being movability, reproducibility. When it comes to electronic literature, Hayles herself stresses the limits produced by CAVE (or the Cave) as it requires extremely sophisticated equipment, (the cube) costing "upward of a million dollars" (Hayles 2018, 12) which makes it an elitist literature in more ways than one, and which is extremely difficult to take from one place to another when compared to a

paperback. Katherine Hayles herself admits that this literature is in consequence limited to “a coterie” (Hayles 2008, 12).

At the same time, CAVE is represented as “seminal” (Hayles 2008, 15), influencing interactive dramas and collaborative writing which is a literary reflection of the Internet Culture of participation and the long tail. As an example of this influence and of the kind of literature it produces, Katherine Hayles refers us to *M Is for Nottingham*.

Writers, including Coverley and Kate Pullinger, joined in collaborative writing at a website preceding the Incubation 2 Conference in Nottingham, riffing on the murder mystery genre¹³¹ to create a story revolving around the ‘death of the book’. During the conference the denouement was acted out by volunteers in costumes, thus adding a component of live dramatic production (Hayles 2008, 15).

This description leaves the reader with the uneasy feeling that this is a form of intellectualized panto.

The contradiction within the electronic literature crowd as to what is or isn’t literature brings to the fore, once again, the question of boundaries which, as we’ve seen, were very prominent when it came to defining what the web is. Here, the question is not to know whether the web is a new space or a new continent but how boundaries exist within that space between what it creates and what we’ve known:

Like the boundary between computer games and electronic literature, the demarcation between digital art and electronic literature is shifty at best, often more a matter of the critical traditions from which the works are discussed than anything intrinsic to the works themselves (Hayles 2008, 12).

Two conclusions are to be drawn from Katherine Hayles’ remark: first the absence of a critical tool or perspective to approach electronic literature and, second, the coherence between the impossibility of determining “boundaries” or a “demarcation” and the fact that part of the creative process has been relinquished to the machine, as we’ve seen above. Just as the machine dominates and dictates the forms of literary creation, the machine itself rather than its user, determines boundaries and demarcation. Creation obeys the rules of the machine and the machine itself will determine whether we’re dealing with a video game or with literature, leaving critics like Katherine Hayles to resort to expressions like “some species of”, “shifty at best”. The absence of the language of criticism derives from the fact that electronic

¹³¹ Hence the reference to Hitchcock’s *Dial M For Murder* (1954) in the very poor parody of a title.

literature can only be seen from a critical point of view which as yet doesn't exist. Its non-existence explains the constant calls for materiality and incarnation which allows reading to be assimilated to a "bodily experience".

The above points are confirmed by the fact that to communicate with the machine, "humans" have to resort to the creation of a new language which Katherine Hayles calls "a Creole". "A linguistic practice in which English (or some other natural language) is hybridized with programming expression to create a creole evocative for human readers especially those familiar with the denotations of the programming language" (Hayles 2008, 21).

This is an interesting choice of word, suggesting that the coupling of the human with machines is creating a new race, or a mixed race, reminiscent of the mixed ethnicity of the half black and half Spanish or half black and half French inhabitants of the Gulf of Mexico in the 18th and 19th centuries. The other striking aspect of this quote is the suggestion that a reader could be anything other than human. Hayles gives us several baffling examples of the new creole, such as Diane Reed Slattery, Daniel J. O'Neil and Bill Brubaker's *The Glide Project*.

The work 'enacts' the visual language of *Glide*, which can be seen and performed as gestures in a dance but cannot be spoken because the semicircular shapes comprising it have no verbal equivalents, only clusters of denotations functioning in this respect, somewhat like ideographic languages" (Hayles 2008, 21).

To give but one more example in Sha Xin Wei's *Tgarden* "virtual reality technologies are used to record the movements of dancers as they attempt to create new gestural vocabularies".¹³²

We have seen so far that in electronic literature, the reader becomes an interactor, the book an object which doesn't necessarily contain words. Now, the language of electronic literature is not a natural language and is not necessarily understandable; no wonder we are constantly reminded that criticism has, in turn, to become something else to accommodate and approach this type of creation. : "The multimodality of digital art works challenges writers, users and critics to bring together diverse expertise and interpretative traditions so that the aesthetic strategies and possibilities of electronic literature may be fully understood" (Hayles

¹³² Sha Xin Wei is a mathematician from Arizona State University. Wikipedia, (which one is allowed to refer to in this context as the very emanation of the technological college and being the ultimate electronic encyclopedia as we've seen) lists as his creative achievements, among others: "The T Garden responsive environments [quoted above], Hubbub speech-sensitive urban surfaces, Membrane calligraphic video. Softwear [sic] gestural sound instruments, Ouija performance-installations," etc. We can't here give an exhaustive lists of Sha Xin Wei's creative achievements, nor can we analyse at length the various qualities of these achievements as they would take us too far from literary considerations for the reasons developed above.

2008, 22): “The computational media intrinsic to electronic textuality have necessitated new kinds of critical practice, a shift from literacy to what Gregory L. Ulmer calls electracy” (Hayles 2008, 23), “criticism needs to change to accommodate digital media” (Hayles 2008, 25).

This is perfectly logical if literature has to be redefined so that the digital productions referred to here can enter that category, and literary criticism has to follow the same path. Ideally, it has to become the very tool to redefine literature and create a literary legitimacy. It appears, in fact, from the various examples quoted, or rather “described” here, that this literature is at best a not so new form of performance art, the novelty of which resides in the fact that it happens on screen rather than in an art gallery or in some other specific space (thus answering digital literature’s obsession with the dilution of space into an avatar of itself). At worst, e-literature is a videogame for which there is apparently a form of criticism. Hayles refers us here to Ian Bogost Unit Operations, “An Approach to Videogame Criticism”, in which he develops an extended analogy between the unit operations of object orientated programming and a literary approach that explores the open, flexible and reconfigurable systems that emerge from the relations between units” (Hayles 2008, 27). The expression “unit operations” describes here the traditional interpretation of literary criticism.

However, to consider video games like *Age of Empires* or *Tetris* which consists in fitting geometrical shapes into each other, as literature, criticism would indeed have to change and adapt, especially as the texts or “objects” presented as electronic literature are so difficult to access: “Electronic literature has already produced many works of high literary merit that deserve and demand the close attention and rigorous scrutiny we have long practiced with print literature. Such close critical attention requires new modes of analysis and new ways of teaching, interpreting and playing” (Hayles 2008, 30). We can note the verb “playing” as if criticism was an old way of “playing”. What these new modes or new ways are, we are not told.

Ironically, the criticism that has been applied to these new objects belongs to print, including Katherine Hayles’s which explains why so much more time and space have been dedicated to her book than to the objects she mentions and presents. Electronic criticism can only describe and explain the way works function as machines or programs, very much like a user’s manual, but cannot apply any literary criteria to them. The works mentioned by Hayles are not quotable or fixed. This renders any critical analysis of them, as literature, impossible. We have in a negative form what David Ciccorocco expressed when analyzing *The Jew’s*

Daughter, by saying that “any narrative written in digital environments, is always in some way a narrative about digital environment” (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad 2014, 39).

Even while trying to justify the use of technological devices as literary devices in *The Jew’s Daughter*, namely the link and the act of linking, Ciccorico admitted the literary limits and critical limits of such devices, which the exponential quality of the digital technology and the multiplication of such devices only accentuate.

Our unflinching fascination with newness, with what Michael Joyce (2000) has called the “allure of nextness” characteristic of today’s upgrade culture threaten to reduce any act of literary innovation to *mere* experimentalism. Digital fiction is not only vulnerable to the same threat, but is ironically, also susceptible to becoming culturally passé or technically obsolete before it can coalesce into recognizable forms or genres. (Bell, Ensslin, Rustad. 2014, 40)

What will appear in the second part of this chapter concerning electronic literature and criticism, is that criticism itself, when dealing with such works tells the same story that studies on the Singularity told, as was shown in a previous chapter. The role of criticism is to transform yet again, our vile body into a glorious body. In that respect, we find in criticism the same obsession with the themes of materiality, incarnation and space as we found in the print novels dealing with the subject of the Internet. Yet criticism here is not applied to these themes but to itself.

8. Embodiment and Materiality in Digital Literature

The sense of anxiety emanating from the Internet theorists and writers as to the immateriality of their production and of digital technology leads them to numerous reflections on “embodiment” which in the spiritual context of the Internet can be translated as “incarnation”. The anxiety as to the immateriality of digital media is particularly perceptible in the fear that “electronic literature risks being doomed to the realm of ephemera” due to its fluid nature (Hayles 2008, 39-40). Hence, the recurring questions on “storage” when it comes to digital literature.

From the perspective of the critic of digital literature, the question of storage answers that of materiality. Quite logically, but also quite surprisingly it becomes an echo or an extension of the ideological context which we’ve seen before in such concepts as the long tail or crowdsourcing, as if the digital nature of the work, the digital embodiment or

disembodiment, or the transformation of the vile body into a glorious body, was, very much as in the thinking of the theologians of seventeenth-century England, part of an ideology of liberation.

Complementing studies focusing on the materiality of digital media are analyses that consider the embodied cultural, social and ideological contexts in which computation takes place.[...] Mark B. Hansen, focusing more on digital arts than electronic literature, makes powerful arguments for the role of the embodied perceiver as not only a necessary site for the reception of digital art works but as a crucial aspect foregrounded by works that literally do not make sense without taking embodiment into account. (Hayles 2008, 36.)

This context is put in parallel with the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as creating the “liberal humanist subject”, a slight shortcut at best: “electronic literature is both reflecting and enacting a new kind of subjectivity characterized by distributed cognition, networked agency that includes human and non-human actors” (Hayles 2008, 36).

How non-human actors can create or participate in any form of subjectivity, is at best baffling, at worst a complete contradiction in terms unless the machine is conceived of, consciously or not as a new form of deity. The same applies to the idea and the nature of the “social” and “ideological” context derived from that subjectivity. We are in fact very much at the centre of the puritanical thought of the seventeenth century in which each individual talks individually to his Maker, here the non-human factor or actor, that is to say, the computer and digital world raised to the position of Creator, or of the metaphysical entity capable of transforming our body, while, at the same time, a new collectivist economic theory develops based on that theology and which echoes the economic and political thoughts of the diggers and levelers of Cromwell’s army.

The main Cromwellian voice is here is that of Adrian MacKenzie, author of *Cutting Code: Software as Sociality* (2006), exploring “how social forms, subjectivities, immaterialities and power relations entwine in the creation, marketing and use of software”. This form of criticism takes us back to the militancy of Gissig, regarding copyright and intellectual property and becomes indeed a critical echo of that “ideology” and of Eric Raymond’s *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*. Hayles salutes this ideological effort in such terms:

McKenzie’s work serves as salutary reminder that just as one cannot understand the evolution of print literature without taking into account such phenomena as the court decisions establishing legal precedent for copyright and the booksellers and the publishers who helped promulgate the ideology of the creative genius authoring the

great work of literature (for their own purpose of course), so electronic literature is evolving within complex social and economic networks that include the development of commercial software, the competing philosophy of open source freeware and shareware, the economics and geopolitical terrain of internet and World Wide Web (Hayles 2008, 39).

It is striking here that electronic literature is described as the opposite of and possible destroyer of what Hayles calls “the ideology of the creative genius” by which we must understand the notion of individuality which comes with the Renaissance. Yet, she believes that subjectivity can still hold a place in that new world view, which again, seems self-contradictory.

What has previously been presented as the art form of a “coterie” requiring equipment only affordable by well-endowed universities, contrary to the nickelodeon as was mentioned before, is now presented as a libertarian art form “evolving” into “the philosophy of open source freeware and shareware, the Internet becomes a sort of commune where everything belongs to everybody, a collectivist and generous (‘shareware’) commune based on a form of exchange which excludes property, very much in a leveler’s way” (Hayles 2008, 39).

This claim to a libertarian philosophy creates, in turn, a language half-way between the evangelistic, the sect-like and the Stalinist when one describes the future of literature and criticism: “Exploring and understanding the full implication of what the transition from page to screen entails must necessarily be a community effort, a momentous task that calls for enlightened thinking, visionary planning and deep critical consideration” (Hayles 2008, 42). The expressions used here are also reminiscent of those found in political speeches promising a Bright future (“Community effort”, “enlightened thinking”, “visionary planning”), very much as in a political speech where nobody is given any clear indication as to what exactly the “enlightened thinking” and the “visionary planning” are and how they will bear fruit.

The content of the vision which opens onto a bright future, as we’ve seen again and again, consists in the transformation of our vile body onto a glorious body. The transformation of the self and of the soul by the Internet is at the centre of the critical works of Bernadette Wegenstein. Here it is worth quoting at length Katherine Hayles quoting and analysing Wegenstein’s point of view. Critical analysis of literature in response to technology has never been as mystical as this:

The medium that signifies the body, its *representation* [her italics], no longer is any different from the “raw material” of the body itself. Without mediation, the body is nothing. However mediation already is what the body always was, in its various historical and cultural strata.

Mediation in this sense includes the body's perceptual processes, the subcognitive processes that build on and interpret these processes, and the fully conscious processes that interpret them in turn. In the digital age, these internal processes are intimately and complexly connected with intelligent machines, which have their own cascading processes of interpreting information and hence of giving it meaning (Hayles 2008, 56).

The "transformation" here, is nothing but another form of transubstantiation. Incidentally, transubstantiation was defined as part of the dogma at the council of Lateran to which we alluded at the beginning of this study and, as we saw, the Internet redefined the soul in pre-Lateran and pre-Gutenberg terms. It follows that it should redefine transubstantiation, as in the text quoted above, in terms of the machine and technology. The machine gives "meaning" to the "internal processes" of the "body" as "raw material". We have here a reworking of the theology of transubstantiation with the machine taking the place of the host perhaps even of the divinity itself.

The computer imbues the "player", a term which designates either the reader or writer, with the spirit. Its technical complication and sophistication becomes the Spirit, his (or in Hayles feminist terminology and grammar "her") inspiration, the computer being the higher form of intelligence, in this process of "intermediating dynamics" : "The programmer [read "writer"] experiences creation as an active dynamic in which the computer plays the central role" (Hayles 2008, 56). Although Katherine Hayles assimilates works of electronic fiction to a game, it has to be said, that in this instance, as in many other instances, there is nothing to gain, no victory in reading such texts, which makes them very different from games.

Besides, never in the field of literature has the typewriter or the quill played the central role in writing. Here, in electronic literature, the roles are reversed, producing, as Hayles herself points out: "unexpected results" (Hayles 2008, 56). This again begs the question: how can any creative exercise in which the tools take over from the creator be called literature? How can any writer lose control of his text to the point of being surprised by the result, or find the result completely different to what he had planned? – as if the pen or the typewriter started writing by itself, without even asking its "user" what he thinks about what ends up on the page? This process is only acceptable if the text is dictated or the hand is pushed by a higher power. Here, this higher power is "deified Digital" electronics. Hayles gives an example of such functioning of what she calls literary creation and establishes a comparison between the way a book works and a computer program, defining a new form of aesthetics called the "Recombinant flux". In this sense, a book is more the result of a mystical trance than of a deliberate conscious creation.

The book is like a computer program in that it is technology designed to change the perceptual and cognitive state of a reader. The difference comes in the degree to which the two technologies can be perceived as cognitive agents. A book functions as a receptacle for the cognition of the writers that are stored until activated by a reader, at which point a complex transmission process takes place between writer and reader, mediated by the specificities of the book as a material medium. Authors have occasionally attributed agential powers to the book (in Borges's fantastical *Book of the Sand*, for example, the letters shift into new positions every time the book is closed); in actual books, of course, the letters never shift once ink has been durably impressed on paper. But in many electronic texts, words and images do shift, for example through randomizing or programs that tap into real-time data flows to create an infinite number of possible recombinations. 'Recombinant flux', as the aesthetic of such works is called, gives a much stronger impression of agency than does a book (Hayles 2008, 58).

The first point to be raised by this quotation, is that the difference between Borges's book of sand and electronic books, is that the former is the subject of a short story, that is a piece of printed literature belonging to the fantastical genre, as Hayles herself points out, while the electronic book is the medium itself, it is not part of a fantastical tale, it is the *reality*, the actuality of electronic literature, whether it is its materiality or not. Hayles's conclusions as to the aesthetics of the "recombinant flux", stress again the incompatibility between this form of creation and literature, in the sense that its fluidity destroys any possible common ground between the writer and his readers and thus what Hayles herself calls the "transmission process" (Hayles 2008, 60). The other conclusion, that "the computer can function as a partner in creating intermediating dynamics in ways that a book cannot" (p. 60) shows that computer-created literature is not literature, in the same sense that a person turning a kaleidoscope could hardly be called a painter of fluid images.

She herself betrays her contradictions when she stresses the differences between generations of electronic literature by declaring: "Especially in the first generation of electronic literature the influence of print was everywhere apparent, much in the way the first automobiles were conceived as horseless carriages" (Hayles 2008, 60). And indeed, electronic literature is to literature, what cars are to horseless carriages.

To demonstrate further her argument as to the possibilities of the computer as opposed to print in matters of literary creation, Katherine Hayles opposes Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a Story* (1987) and his later work *Twelve Blue* (1996).

afternoon has as a main character Peter, a divorcee who witnesses a car crash in which his ex-wife and his son may have been involved. *afternoon* is made up of 539 screen pages linked by 950 links. It is not possible to read these pages sequentially. If a reader goes from

one page to another just by clicking on next, it is only possible to read 35 of these pages. In order to read the rest one must make choices. Thus, the reader must answer certain questions, he can also click on intriguing words or words that will excite his curiosity. The words have to be found by the reader himself meaning that the reader must check if a link can be activated from these words. But a word containing a link at a first reading might not have a link anymore at the second reading, making it impossible to read the same thing twice. Unlike a narrative in a book, *afternoon* has thus several beginnings and several endings. The text itself follows a multiplicity of labyrinthine progression. Needless to say, there is no beginning or end to the narrative. Especially as the work is constantly “in progress” as its author claims there is no desire or project here to produce a complete text. The text becomes a series of interchangeable poetic fragments.

Twelve Blue represents yet another evolution from this “printcentric” form of literature. Here, the “player” is submitted to a continuous succession of images, characters and events meant to imitate the “surfing” movement of the web reader. *Twelve Blue*, we are told, is web-conceived and web- Born. The problem with *Twelve Blue* is that it is physically unreadable as Katherine Hayles puts fairly clearly in her approach: “The player who comes to *Twelve Blue* with expectations formed by print will inevitably find it frustrating and enigmatic, perhaps so much so that she will give up before fully experiencing the work” (Hayles 2008, 64).

Again here, criticism must be content with a description of how the work functions. And to explain it, one must accept what we have called again and again the transformation of the vile body unto a glorious body, by becoming one with the machine. It is no use trying to apply one’s “human intelligence” to the text and apply criteria of criticism, one must espouse the text by becoming part of the machine.

I use the word “espouse” in all awareness of its implications and connotations. Criticism is not judgement any more, it becomes a form of ecstatic acceptance which implies that it is not criticism at all, it is its exact opposite, if anything.

“Like sensual lovemaking the richness of *Twelve Blue* takes time to develop and cannot be rushed” (Hayles 2008, 64) writes Katherine Hayles, answering our previous question: yes, from this perspective, literature can be assimilated to a tantric massage. The use of an erotic vocabulary and sensual images becomes so widespread as to become baffling: “Let us begin, then with a leisurely embrace that wants to learn everything it can about this

textual body” (Hayles 2008, 64) and “Images caress one another by fleetingly touching” (Hayles 2008, 67).

According to Bernadette Wegenstein, in the digital age the cognitive process which includes the body’s perceptual processes and the process of the mind that interpret it are one. And in digital literature the text performs actions that bind together author and program, player and computer, “into a complex system characterized by intermediary dynamics” (Hayles 2008, 57). Again, the critical language here is much more vague than the erotic language used to describe the text, for a very simple reason: if there is a language of religious ecstasy in front of the miracle of the computer, there is no critical language to access or evaluate technological literature because the notion of a technologically created literature is an absurdity. As we have seen, electronic literature is a literature with no repeatability, no fixity, no reader, no writer, no text and no written language. It is hence is not literature, one wonders if it is anything at all.

Conclusion

Whereas most dissertations start by establishing the limits of their subject and the domain of their research, this one has started by establishing the impossibility of defining limits and starting from that statement. Indeed, what are the limits of the Internet? What is the Internet? Is there such a thing as a limit to the Internet? In fact, the Internet defines itself as limitless. It is the impossibility of answering these questions that has raised another question: does the Internet escape definition by words, is it beyond language because it has become or taken the place of a supernatural being in our lives, societies, culture, civilization? Is the Internet a spiritual revolution as much as a technological one and thus, are literature and the products of Gutenberg technology a result of the collateral damage of the cultural revolution which has ensued?

Starting as an extension of the telegraph meant to ease exchanges between academics, the Internet has become “everything”, it has become information, memory, knowledge, economics, and intelligence. If the Internet cannot be defined, it can still be identified by what it produces and its most spectacular products, its flagships: Amazon and Wikipedia. They are representative of the Internet and of what the Internet makes of culture.

Both of these “Internet creatures” are particularly important to us because of the impact they have had on books and literature, both economically and from a literary or cultural point of view. Amazon hasn’t had an influence merely on the sale of books but on the aesthetics it has created in order to sell these books, by pushing “participation”, what used to be called “vanity publishing”, and by establishing numbers as the ultimate criteria for success.

Wikipedia is a participative encyclopedia which as a competitor has had disastrous economic effects on the other traditional encyclopedias coming out of the Gutenberg technology such as the *Encyclopedia Universalis* or the *Cambridge Encyclopedia*. It has gained a form of hegemony in the domain of information while being both anonymous and unreliable. Besides, although Internet creatures such as Amazon aimed at controlling and dominating the fields they cover (and there are few and fewer fields they don’t cover), Wikipedia doesn’t demand control over content. Anybody can add and participate. The second consequence is that it is not capable of establishing any form of hierarchy or appreciation of

value within the cultural field. A football player, a seventies psychedelic group and a landmark in world literature are all treated on the same level, with, generally, preferential treatment when it comes to the football player or the seventies psychedelic group. In that sense, any cultural subject becomes a product to be appreciated by the users.

One of the founding principles of Amazon was that the user or customer decides and this has direct consequences for literary creation, and literary consumption, because reading has become essentially a form of literary consumption. From the point of view of Amazon, the writer must produce and provide for the user.

Starting as a book retailer, Amazon has become “everything” just like the Internet, the matrix which gave it birth. It has become the everything store. “Everything” is a word often used on the Internet or when talking about the Internet. Indeed, one can now find everything on the Internet. The only other entity capable of representing “everything” is God himself. Only God can be all-knowing like the Internet is and only God can be all-providing like Amazon is.

From book retailer, Amazon has thus become a philosophy, a religion and a solution to saving the human race, however absurd this must seem.

However, this absurdity is real and it is quite ironic at first sight that the Internet project which started as a libertarian adventure to give knowledge and expression to “the people” has produced as its perfect progeny an organization which, according to observers, could represent a danger for democracy. On the 29th of July 2020, the four CEOs of GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple) had to appear in a visio-conference in front of the House of Representatives to answer questions on social media, fair trade and their possible influence on the American elections. David Cicilline a representative for the Democrats accused GAFAM of “having too much power”.¹³³

On the other hand, one shouldn't be surprised by this contradiction. It was born out of the new spirituality which came out of the Internet and which has cast a spell or created a new covenant in our post-Gutenberg civilization or Galaxy to use Marshall McLuhan's term.

We know the influence which the printing press had on the intellectual development and spreading of the Reformation, however complicated and polemical the mechanisms of

¹³³ Alexandre Piquard. 2020. “Une audition inédite pour les PDG de Google, Amazon, Facebook et Apple”. *Le Monde*. July 28, 2020. https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2020/07/28/une-audition-inedite-pour-les-pdg-de-google-amazon-facebook-et-apple_6047512_3234.html.

these developments may be. It appears thus that each scientific or technological change or revolution or “progress”, according to the light in which we want to see it, contains its own new form of theology, or at least a reworking of an older form of theology. The printing press contained in itself and in the way it functions, the promise of translation, the vernacular version of the Bible and the consequences it had on the position of the clergy, Roman Catholic theology and the rise of Protestantism. Once again, I refer here the reader to Elizabeth Eisenstein’s conclusion to *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Similarly, as we saw in their language and the numerous references of its followers to Teilhard de Chardin, the Levelers and Diggers of seventeenth century England, and such theories as the Singularity, the Internet and electronic technology contain their own form of theology, the erosion of individuality coupled with that of the fixity of the text is one of the foundations of this new theology and this new definition of the soul which will bear directly on the conception of literature amongst many other domains.

In *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental* Jean-François Gilmont writes in the chapter “Réformes protestantes et lectures”: “*Tout naturellement les historiens ont répété que le succès de la Réforme devait beaucoup à l’imprimerie. Il n’est pas trop impertinent de remarquer que cette affirmation relève souvent du lieu commun plus que de l’analyse érudite.*” (Gilmont 1997, 265). Historians have quite naturally repeated that the success of the Reformation owed much to printing, a statement that is often a commonplace more than the result of scholarly analysis.

It may be so, but the rest of the chapter contradicts these preliminary remarks. Gilmont himself quotes a contemporary of the invention of the printing press who felt that this new technology contained in itself a new form of theology, that the technology itself was imbued with a religious identity: “*François Lambert d’Avignon va jusqu’à affirmer en 1526 que l’apparition de l’imprimerie au xv^e siècle a été voulue par Dieu pour permettre la Réforme.*”

In 1526, François Lambert of Avignon went so far as to assert that the appearance of printing in the fifteenth century had been willed by God so that the Reformation could occur. (Gilmont 1997, 213, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane).

He adds: “*Il est classique de citer un propos de table de Luther: “L’imprimerie est l’ultime don de Dieu et le plus grand. En effet par son moyen, Dieu veut faire connaître la forme de la vraie religion à toute la terre jusqu’aux extrémités du monde.*” Similarly he quotes John Foxe in *The Book of Martyrs* describing or defining the printing press as “a divine and miraculous invention.” (Gilmont 1997, 265).

One often quotes Luther saying: “printing is the ultimate gift of God. Through it God want the whole earth to know the shape of the true religion, all over the world.”¹³⁴

Louis XII of France expressed a surprisingly similar view in the *Déclaration de Blois* on the 9th of April 1513, celebrating the benefits of the discovery of the printing press, as the invention appeared to him to be “more divine than human.”¹³⁵

Similarly, contemporary witnesses of the development of the Internet have seen in this new technology a form of divine intervention which redefined the Renaissance theology based on the printing press as we’ve known it until now.

As the Internet evaded all attempt to define it in its essence or nature, it quickly became a space, an uncharted territory, which had to be conquered, both in the name of the new spirituality which it had produced, and in the name of the new economy it had produced. We have here pretty much the usual alliance of mercenary or conquistador and missionary.

What is the essence of the spirituality born out of the Internet? The Internet redefines the soul in terms which contradict the individualized vision of the soul as was defined by the council of Lateran. It recreates a medieval conception of the soul, and sees the Internet as the unified and anonymous soul of the world and of humankind, with the help of a warped interpretation of Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of the noosphere. This new definition of the soul corresponds to the new mode of reading which internet has created, a non linear, non literate form of reading, and a mosaic like way of reading which mirrors orality. In that sense, again, the Internet takes us back to a pre-Renaissance or medieval type of orality and of reading narrative, which explains, largely, its incompatibility with literature as we’ve known it to the present day.

Is literature disposable? Does it have any other function than to function or be a game, is the question which the Internet and its form, in other terms, the glass screen, force us to ask ourselves. From the Fifties onwards, with the advent of television, the glass screen has become the privileged way to looking at the world. The question is: can the glass screen which, by nature, provides dotted lines and a mosaic, be compatible with the stripes of the linear

¹³⁴ Without going into a detailed study we can surmise that, before the Internet, a technological invention like the audio cassette would have been assimilated to a form of oral theology in a non-literate context to use a McLuhanite vocabulary. It has been said that the audio cassette or tape was to the development and spread of radical Islam what the printing press was to the Reformation (cf. Soraya El Alaoui. 2013. *Les Réseaux du livre islamique*. Paris: CNRS éditions. 76).

¹³⁵ Cf. Jacques Boncompain, *La Révolution des auteurs, naissance de la propriété intellectuelle (1773-1815)* (2001, 29).

narratives we find on paper. Is there such a thing as a literature on the screen, for the screen, by the screen?

What is the place of literature beside a glass screen and what is the place and nature of literature on a glass screen and who are the writers who are likely to provide this literature? We have distinguished three types of writers who have addressed these questions and tried to find a place for literature in this new mosaic which is the reading grid offered by electronic technology.

First, we have dealt with what we called the non-digital natives, by which I mean writers who haven't grown up with the Internet and who have discovered electronic technology while they were already published authors and felt a certain bemusement, together with anxiety at the appearance of this new world.

The second type of writers were the digital natives, a younger generation for whom the Internet was nothing new but something that has always been there and which, to a certain extent, doesn't need definition, the Internet was a presence in their intellectual and creative world which went without saying. It was obvious, an integral part of their world. Yet, these digital natives chose to write on paper, or at least to present and distribute their literary production on paper.

Last, we have studied a few examples of "literature" or "something which presents itself as literature", created specifically for the screen by the screen and on the screen, to be read on a glass surface, never meant so see paper.

These productions have failed aesthetically as we've tried to demonstrate, either because they had no aesthetic project other than to imitate, more or less consciously, a state of chaos which springs out of the nature of the Internet and pervades the modern world as was the case in Cohen's *Book of Numbers*, or Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog*, more obviously than in any other work we have studied here. They also failed because they were unable to recognize the incompatibility between what we may term the "materials" of literature and the Internet. Imitating a glass screen on paper doesn't make the page a glass screen and doesn't make its content in any way close to a form of electronic literature, as was shown by Janet Winterson's *The Power.Book*. As Eisenstein points out: "in order to assess changes ushered in by printing, for example, we need to survey the conditions that prevailed before its advent. Yet the conditions of scribal culture can only be observed through a veil of print" (Eisenstein 1979, 8).

By reversing the process of change started by the printing press, the Internet as a new script and scribal age has reproduced exactly the same situation in reverse, that is, contemporary writers trying to assess the changes ushered in by the Internet and electronic technology from a literary perspective can only do it through ‘a veil of print’. This veil of print has blinded these non-digital natives to the nature of the tool and the world they were facing.

Madelena Gonzalez has analyzed the complicated process leading to this failure from the aesthetic perspective, stressing the inner contradiction of the representation of the “obscenification of every day life” in novels which in their forms and developments are technologically obsessed.

The excessive consciousness of the ‘real’ as mere artifice leads many serious authors to engage in an ongoing mockery of mimesis. *Yellow Dog* (Martin Amis, 2003), *Fury* (Salman Rushdie, 2001) [...] and *The PowerBook* (Jeanette Winterson, 2000) are all works by major, well-established writers with international reputations, and they have been chosen in an attempt to illustrate some of the dominant tendencies in the British novel today. They all seek to renew a doubting diegesis through constant self-reference, whether it be their own status as texts or through recourse to a perverted and ironic intertextuality which is used to bolster up their beleaguered poetics. As they engage in the cloning of creativity in order to produce the endless replicas and debased imitations of compromised originals, which they make available to their readers as examples of a late postmodern and, usually virtual, “reality”, the very medium or mode of expression of the novel is put into question. The rampant technophilia which characterizes these examples may be representative of a wider tendency in the twenty-first century novel for which technology constitutes both an opportunity for experimentation but also an essential threat to its future. In competition with the World Wide Web of stories, the networked environment of the Internet, many writers feel the need to flex their literary muscles, committing their texts to excess and the extreme, not only thematically, but also formally and linguistically. By ‘blinding’ the reader with their own form of ‘science’, reinventing literariness as demotic ornamentation, these novels are in the process of re-appropriating the space usurped by the contemporary technoverse with its levelling impulse. The symbolic poverty caused by the spread of industrial technology to all spheres of human conduct is thus being challenged by a desperate attempt to re-aesthetize our so-called post-real experience and thereby reconnect us to a consciousness of the political and the ethical (Gonzalez 2008, 111-112).

The literary failures which I have studied here have thus provided a sort of mathematical proof by *reductio ad absurdum* that there is no such thing as an electronic literature and that the productions which present themselves as such should find another name, in the way that cars have stopped being horseless carriages in order to become cars.

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan has the following to say:

That print increasingly hypnotized the western world is nowadays the theme of all historians of art and science alike, because we no longer live under the spell of the isolated visual sense. We have not yet begun to ask under what new spell we exist. In place of spell, it may be more

acceptable to say ‘assumptions’ or ‘parameters’ or ‘frame of reference.’ No matter what the metaphor, is it not absurd for men to live involuntarily altered in their inmost lives by some mere technological extension of our inner senses? (McLuhan 1962, 183).

This was first written in 1962; it has now become obvious “under what new spell we exist”, and a spell it is: the Internet. Like all spells and supernatural beings, it defies definition, because the Internet is perceived as an extension of our inner senses but also as a transcendental form of existence. The Internet has become a religious system a form of the *numen*. And like all religious systems, it has no limit, the Internet deals with the infinite.

This explains that Internet literature, should it exist, could only be theological. Indeed, most books dealing with the Internet are not works of fiction, they present themselves as a form of gnosis about what the Internet can bring, about what limits it impresses on our lives it imposes and how it can free us from these limits, how it can even free us from death and help us be reborn as part of the machine. It can free us also from various cultural and economic shackles, as was demonstrated in *The Bazaar and the Cathedral*, explaining how the Internet was to usher in an era of liberation from institutions, intellectual property, copyright and oppression, an era of freedom of speech and participation. At the other end of the spectrum, Internet “apostates”, as they called themselves, denounced the ever more tyrannical nature of the Internet, its solutionism, its aspirations to overall control, be it from a spiritual, intellectual or economic point of view, as the example of Amazon showed, one of the flagships, or to be more precise, *the* flagship of Web 2.0, together with Wikipedia.

Most non-literate people are bent on bringing the world under control. It is in the nature of the Internet to be controlling or at least hegemonic. What comes out of the Internet culture is satisfaction with the present, while the non-native expresses regularly his dissatisfaction with that same present while trying to represent it with tools which are beyond his comprehension. This has been the case of writers like Rushdie, Amis, Winterson. At the other end of the spectrum, the Internet native, as is the case of most non literate person, identifies closely with the world in which they live. Literacy as a human condition brings a form of detachment from the world.

The reversal of the process initiated by the Internet and electronic technology when it comes to literacy has ramifications, not only in the writing of fiction and literary works but in history as well. One can only wonder how the history of the present day will be written. The aesthetic literary failure which we have pointed out due to that “veil of print” which created a form of blindness can be translated in the writing of the history of our present day. Eisenstein

again points out that “constant access to printed materials is a prerequisite for the practice of the historian’s own craft”, but the conjunction of infobesity and the reversal of the principles of printing and the Gutenberg technology are suppressing “printed material” as we’ve known it, that is to say multiplied and fixed in its form and content at once. Thanks to the Internet and electronic technology, we are back in the age of the script and everybody is a scribe. How can history be written from such a situation with such material?

However, what we can infer from the question: how will the writing of history or even of the present become possible through the veil of the Internet, either from a purely historical or fictional point of view together with the reversed process to print which the Internet has initiated, is that our present day is a form of reversed Renaissance. This particular Renaissance is going backwards like a film rewind and giving birth to a new medieval way of thinking directly affecting the way one reads and writes literature amongst other types of texts.

In the conclusion to the chapter entitled “Some features of Print Culture” Eisenstein writes:

Thus, although I believe that scribal culture did come to an end, I am not persuaded that one can say the same about print culture. The effects of printing seem to have been exerted always unevenly, yet always continuously and cumulatively from the late fifteenth century on. I can find no point at which they ceased to be exerted or even began to diminish. I find much to suggest that they have persisted, with augmented force, right down to the present. Recent obituaries on the Age of Gutenberg show that others disagree. As yet, however, so few historians have been heard from that final verdicts seem unacceptable and, in more ways than one, premature (Eisenstein 1979, 159).

In a footnote she adds: “The obsolescence of print technology and its supersessions by electronic media has been repeatedly asserted by McLuhan, not only in the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, but also in *Understanding Media*.”

Both these passages echo an earlier attack in Eisenstein’s book on McLuhan’s point of view:

When its author [*i.e.* McLuhan, it being *The Gutenberg Galaxy*] argues that typography has become obsolescent and that an “electric age” has outmode the ‘technology of literacy’ he is himself (in my view, at least,) failing to take full note of what is under his own eyes and that of the reader he addresses.

Elaborate media analysis does not seem to be required to explain current myopia about the impact of print. Since Gutenberg’s day printed materials have become exceedingly common. They ceased to be newsworthy more than a century ago and have attracted ever less attention the more ubiquitous they have become (Eisenstein 1979, 17).

Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* was published in 1979, and presumably written with a pen and a typewriter at a time when the space occupied by the personal computer and by Internet was still difficult to foresee, which can possibly explain and excuse her optimism concerning the ubiquitous survival of print. The speed with which electronic technology replaced what McLuhan very aptly called the "technology of literacy" could not be foreseen either, and before 1979, what Eisenstein calls "the present", belonged to cheap science fiction. Ironically, it is this exponential development which has made Eisenstein's remarks about obsolescence obsolete.

Now, about half a century later, which is in historical terms and in terms of technological innovations or even revolutions, a remarkably short time, it seems that McLuhan was right.

The examples Eisenstein uses later to illustrate her point show how wrong she was in her prediction:

Although calendars, maps, time-tables, dictionaries, catalogues, textbooks and newspapers are taken for granted at present (or even dismissed as old-fashioned by purveyors of novelties) they continue to exert as great an influence on daily life as ever they did before (Eisenstein 1979, 17).

If that was true in 1979, it is not anymore, the diminishing power, impact, presence of dictionaries and newspapers has been well documented, smart-phones and tablets have done away with calendars and time-tables.

The author of the introduction to Part III of *Agent of Change*, "Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein", states that Eisenstein saw "print an electronic media as interacting with one another with print maintaining its function as reactive agent" (Alcorn Baron, Linquist and Shevlin 2007, 302). We know now that it is not the case. And Eisenstein herself saw the reversal to a medieval conception of writing which we have tried to study in the course of this dissertation, she writes in "From Scriptoria to Printing Shops": "We seem to be in the midst of yet another publishing revolution that very well may undermine current notions of intellectual property rights and bring us closer to the medieval experience of everyman serving as his own scribe." (Eisenstein 1979.40)

This is a perfectly accurate and precise vision of what notions born out of the Internet such as "open source" and "crowdsourcing" and "the long tail" have achieved.

Yet when students of Eisenstein take on the same optimistic position as to the future of print for example, in a book published in 2007 one has the feeling that one is reading wishful thinking rather than analysis. The author of the introduction (which is not signed) considers that “print shows no sign of approaching obsolescence” and evokes an “evolving relationship between the old media and the new” (Eisenstein 1979, 309). The author of the introduction to the conclusion of Part III of *Agent of Change*, goes on to give examples that prove him wrong, either because, here again, the examples are obsolete or because he (or she) himself (or herself) stresses the lack of fixity in Internet texts.

Electronic technology dominates the process, but print persists as the endpoint of much textual production – and not only that of books. Here again we should not forget the prevalence of printed ephemera both historically and currently. We receive e-tickets for travel, but we print out the e-mails confirming these electronic purchases, and, once at the train station or airport, we receive printed paper boarded passes, if we did not print them earlier from a home computer (Alcorn Baron, Linquist and Shevlin 2007, 308).

Here at best, the author betrays his age by admitting that he prints his e-tickets as smartphones and apps have done away with print and paper. Similarly, Kindles and electronic readers of books do not have print as “an endpoint” and nobody ever prints a Kindle version of a novel.

The author proves himself wrong by stressing, on the other hand, the absence of fixity in an electronic text in an extract worth quoting at length as it encompasses beautifully the contradiction within the author’s demonstration.

Notwithstanding the ability to ‘save’ electronic copies and bookmark Web sites, the need to print copies of such material to help ensure the preservation of its content remains strong. An electronic file or Web site can be altered effortlessly with just a few keystrokes yet retain its original name; URLs disappear with regularity; and more frequently than not on any given Web site, at least one of the links no longer functions. The speed with which hardware, electronic readers, and platforms become outdated and superseded by newer forms of technology and the uncertain life span of storage devices such as CDs and DVDs (the current industry estimated life span of these devices ranges from thirty to, in rare cases, a few hundred years) further underscore problems of textual preservation and fixity in the new media. In short, despite possessing an exponential capacity for instantaneous, global dissemination as well as other capabilities distinct from those of print, electronic media at this stage in their history do not offer significant advances in the preservation of texts. Electronic formats in fact are arguably the least stable medium for recorded communications (Alcorn Baron, Linquist and Shevlin 2007, 307).

Indeed, not, only does electronic media not “offer significant advances in the preservation of ‘texts’”, it is even, from a literary point of view, the ideal tool for the modification, alteration and destruction of texts through its capacity to transform and to offer the reader the possibility of meddling with and reshaping the text.

Referring in a footnote to the National Council of Archives, the author adds: “A piece of paper can last for centuries left alone in a dark dry room. Nothing created by a computer has that kind of inherent longevity” (Alcorn Baron, Linquist and Shevlin. 2007, 307).

This lack of longevity and fixity is what showed that electronic literature, written by the computer for the computer, is not literature at all. What the literary experiments with literary creation based on the computer yielded were almost a joke: it yielded a literature which could not be saved, reread or quoted, and in some instances a literature that could not be read once, a literature without words.

To conclude the conclusion on one last point: between the moment when this dissertation was begun and that when the reader will come to the end of this conclusion, some of the elements described here will already have become obsolete due to the exponentially changing form and nature of the Internet. That in itself would be a sufficient argument to prove that the Internet is incompatible with literature born out of the Gutenberg technology.

Where print created individualism and permanence, electronic technology and the Internet create anonymity and obsolescence.

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Abstracts

New technological advances create their own form of mysticism, a new vision, a sense of miracle, as was the case for electricity which was compared to “a fairy”, a supernatural presence, or the printing press hailed by Luther as a gift from God. Electronic technology, with the Internet, has transformed our relationship to time, space and the individual. Just as the printing press created repeatability and individuality, the Internet brings a New Covenant as testifies the mystical, religious language of its pioneers or “apostles” from Silicon Valley. Has the Internet redefined the soul? To what extent has it modified the way we envisage literature born out of the Gutenberg technology? As the place occupied in our culture by paper and ink recedes in favour of the glass screen, computers, tablets, phones, we wonder if the Internet, electronic technology, and its implicit theology are compatible with literature as we’ve known it since the invention of the printing press. To do so, we have distinguished between three types of writers. First, the older generation of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson and Martin Amis who try to approach this new technology and the transformation it imposes on their world, with the traditional tools of the Gutenberg technology. Second, “digital natives”, such as Joshua Cohen who grew up with the Internet, have always known the Internet as a tool but who choose to write and publish in the traditional book form while having the Internet and its functioning as their subject. Finally, we will study works of literature or at least works which define themselves as such and which have been conceived directly on the computer and are meant to be read or “approached” with a computer. In parallel, we will study the economic influence which the Internet has had on publishing, and how it has transformed the very notion of publishing, transforming the contents of literature and the position of the writer in relation to society and to his readers.

Les nouvelles avancées technologiques créent leurs formes de mysticisme, une nouvelle vision, le sentiment du miracle, ce fut le cas pour l'électricité, décrite comme « une fée », une présence surnaturelle, ou pour l'imprimerie que Luther saluait comme un don de Dieu. La technologie électronique et Internet ont transformé notre rapport au temps, à l'espace et à l'individu. De même que l'imprimerie créait d'une part la possibilité de reproduire un texte à l'identique en un grand nombre d'exemplaires et d'autre part, l'individualité, l'Internet apporte une Nouvelle Alliance, comme en témoigne le langage mystique, religieux des pionniers et des premiers « apôtres » de l'informatique de Silicon Valley. Internet a-t-il redéfini l'âme ? Et dans quelle mesure la culture issue d'Internet a-t-elle modifié la façon dont nous envisageons la littérature telle que l'a créée la technologie de Gutenberg? Tandis que le papier et l'encre cèdent la place dans notre culture à l'écran de verre, l'ordinateur, la tablette, le téléphone portable, nous sommes en mesure de nous demander si Internet, la technologie numérique et la théologie qui lui est implicite sont compatibles avec la littérature telle que nous l'avons connue depuis l'invention de l'imprimerie. Pour ce faire, nous avons distingué trois types d'auteurs : les écrivains d'une génération qui a grandi sans connaître Internet ou l'ordinateur, comme Martin Amis, Jeanette Winterson, Salman Rushdie et qui approchent les thèmes qu'impose cette nouvelle technologie en se servant des outils traditionnels de ce que Marshall McLuhan a appelé la Galaxie Gutenberg. Ensuite, nous nous sommes penchés sur des auteurs qui eux, ont grandi avec l'ordinateur, ont toujours connu la technologie numérique mais qui ont choisi d'écrire et de publier de façon traditionnelle tout en choisissant Internet et son fonctionnement comme sujet de leur

littérature. Enfin, nous étudierons des œuvres littéraires ou qui se définissent comme telles et qui ont été conçues directement sur ordinateur, et dans le but d'être lues sur ordinateur. Parallèlement nous étudierons l'influence économique qu'Internet a eue sur l'édition et nous verrons comment la conception même de l'édition en a été modifiée, transformant à son tour, le contenu des œuvres littéraires et la place de l'écrivain dans la société et face à ses lecteurs.

Résumé

Notre façon de lire a-t-elle été modifiée par Internet et notre rapport à l'écran de verre ? Ayant transformé notre mode de lecture, Internet a-t-il modifié notre façon d'écrire ? Et en conséquence notre regard et notre jugement sur la littérature ? Ce sont là les principales questions auxquelles cette thèse s'efforcera de répondre. Quel type d'influence Internet et la technologie numérique ont eu sur l'écrit, la littérature, d'un point de vue esthétique, moral, peut-être politique et économique et même métaphysique.

Existe-t-il une littérature propre à Internet ? Internet en tant qu'outil peut-il produire de la littérature et peut-il être un sujet littéraire ?

Ces questions proviennent du simple constat, souvent répété par les éditeurs de livres et de journaux que l'écrit sur papier occupe une place toujours plus réduite en tous cas du point de vue économique dans ce qu'on appelle le paysage culturel. La distribution et les tirages des journaux et magazines se sont considérablement réduits et les éditeurs répètent sans cesse que les ventes de livres diminuent d'année en année.

En même temps, certains succès issus d'Internet (et il faut comprendre dans ce cas précis qu'il s'agit de succès commerciaux, en général autopubliés, comme *Cinquante Nuances de Grey*, pour n'en citer qu'un) sont cités régulièrement pour affirmer la valeur littéraire d'Internet et sa contribution à une nouvelle forme de créativité littéraire dans un contexte plus « démocratique » que celui de l'édition traditionnelle.

Internet a-t-il apporté une alternative au mode de lecture qui est apparu avec l'invention de l'imprimerie ? Est-ce qu'Internet prolonge le mode de lecture de la technologie de Gutenberg et y apportant la spécificité de sa production littéraire, notamment dans le domaine de la fiction ?

La première question à se poser pour se lancer dans l'entreprise qui consisterait à apporter des réponses à ces interrogations est : qu'est-ce qu'Internet ? Comment le définir ? Quelles sont ses qualités et quel en est le contenu ?

La réponse qu'offre Internet à cette première question par l'intermédiaire d'un de ses produits les plus représentatifs sur lequel la thèse reviendra longuement, Wikipedia, est étonnamment messianique dans son langage, expliquant qu'Internet fait désormais partie des

« sept merveilles du monde¹³⁶ ». Cependant toutes les définitions d'Internet par Internet restent insuffisantes, comment définir en effet un outil qui possède un tel don d'ubiquité et permet de consulter un corpus de textes sans fin, acheter des billets de train, consulter des journaux, voir des films etc. Les définitions qu'offrent Internet sur Internet seraient l'équivalent d'une définition de l'imprimerie qui se contenterait de décrire les différentes parties d'une presse à imprimer. Finalement, ce que les tentatives de définitions d'Internet par Internet révèlent est qu'il est impossible à définir, plaçant en Internet au-delà du langage.

Mais un parallèle peut déjà être établi entre Internet et la presse à imprimer dans ce qui est leur développement exponentiel : comme l'imprimerie, Internet s'est imposé progressivement (et très rapidement) dans « tous les aspects de la vie moderne » pour reprendre la définition de Wikipedia à laquelle nous avons déjà fait référence.

Cependant Internet se présente comme étant en opposition à tous les produits de la presse à imprimer selon la définition citée. Internet « redéfinit, et contourne tous les médias traditionnels », ce qui implique selon Wikipedia même « le courrier en version papier et les journaux ». Nous verrons que nous pourrons ajouter à cette liste le livre et la littérature car nous sentons déjà qu'Internet s'approprie la distribution de produits culturels avant d'en être à l'origine : sous forme de *blogs*, *webfeeds*, etc.

Il en découle que Internet et les autres produits de la technologie numérique tels qu'Amazon, aspirent à l'hégémonie. « Internet touche les réseaux d'approvisionnement de pans entiers de l'industrie » affirme Wikipedia tout en se présentant comme un monde ou un espace libertaire : « Internet n'a pas de gouvernement central¹³⁷. » Ce qui n'est d'ailleurs pas entièrement vrai comme nous le verrons.

Pour comprendre l'influence d'Internet sur la littérature (en langue anglaise et dans n'importe quelle autre langue d'ailleurs), il est essentiel d'en étudier le fonctionnement global. Là encore nous établirons un parallèle avec l'invention de l'imprimerie, car on ne peut pas étudier l'impact de la presse à imprimer sur la littérature, sans étudier aussi son impact sur tout ce qui l'environne : depuis la distribution du livre jusqu'à la propagation des idées de la Réforme à partir du seizième siècle.

De même, il est impossible d'étudier l'impact d'Internet sur la littérature sans faire de comparaison avec celui qu'a eu la presse à imprimer sur la littérature ainsi que son influence

¹³⁶ Wikipedia. 2021. « Internet ». <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet>.

¹³⁷ *Idem*.

économique et spirituelle. Si la presse à imprimer a permis la diffusion des idées de la Réforme et la minicassette a aidé à la propagation de l'islam radical, l'Internet a répandu une nouvelle forme de spiritualité que nous étudierons dans la première partie de la thèse après avoir donné en exemple quelques textes fondateurs d'une littérature qui se présente comme numérique, c'est-à-dire conçus par et pour l'ordinateur et son écran de verre.

Toute littérature issue d'Internet devra se référer à cette forme de spiritualité, dont une des formes les plus présentes s'appelle la « Singularité », une redéfinition de l'âme inspirée par la technologie électronique et la vie de l'ordinateur.

Dans la première partie de la thèse nous analyserons le type de message messianique que crée Internet et qui s'est répandu depuis Silicon Valley, nouvelle Jérusalem et lieu de naissance d'une Nouvelle Alliance. De même que l'imprimerie propageait le protestantisme, Internet a développé une nouvelle forme de spiritualité qui n'est pas aussi neuve qu'il pourrait paraître et qui s'apparente à une conception médiévale de l'âme qui pré-date le concile de Latran, une conception de l'âme moins individualiste et fondée sur la notion de la communauté des fidèles.

Comme Elizabeth Eisenstein le souligne dans *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge 1979) : « Nous devons étudier plus concrètement comment les formes spécifiques d'enseignement livresque peuvent se rattacher à des techniques spécifiques pour produire et distribuer les livres¹³⁸ » (Eisenstein 1979, 25).

L'autre question qui en découle et à laquelle nous devons nous attacher est la suivante : existe-t-il un lien possible un rapport, une forme de communication entre Internet et le savoir livresque ? Nous tâcherons d'y répondre dans le cours de cette thèse. Internet est-il compatible avec le livre ? Nous savons avec certitude qu'Internet est né de l'ordinateur, nourri par l'ordinateur et vit dans l'ordinateur, derrière un écran de verre. Mais cette définition tout comme celle de Wikipedia, ne nous indique pas ce qu'est l'impact de ce qui vit derrière l'écran sur ce qui vit devant ou à l'extérieur de cet écran. Pour ce qui nous concerne, la question est de déterminer quel est l'impact de la vie derrière l'écran, Internet, sur la littérature née du papier (par opposition à la tradition orale) et qui passe du papier au papier, c'est-à-dire du manuscrit au tapuscrit, et des épreuves au livre.

¹³⁸ Il s'agit là de ma propre traduction, il n'existe pas de traduction de cet ouvrage en français.

Pour évaluer l'influence et les conséquences de ce contexte technologique sur la littérature nous avons distingué trois types d'écrivains, tout d'abord ceux qui sont nés avant l'invention d'Internet et en tous cas avant la domination d'Internet sur la vie économique et culturelle, d'auteurs tels que Jeanette Winterson, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Franzen ou Don De Lillo, et qui ont chacun essayé à leur manière d'aborder le sujet troublant qu'est pour eux Internet, en essayant parfois de trouver « une solution » au problème que représente pour eux Internet, alors qu'ils n'ont connu avant l'ordinateur qu'un seul autre écran de verre : la télévision.

Nous n'avons pas étudié l'ensemble de l'œuvre de ces écrivains, mais nous nous sommes penchés uniquement sur les livres qui traitaient d'Internet et de la technologie numérique, soit de manière directe comme *The Power.Book* de Jeanette Winterson ou indirecte comme *Fury* de Salman Rushdie. Là encore, nous n'avons pas fait une étude exhaustive de ces ouvrages du point de vue stylistique, mais nous nous y sommes référés pour souligner l'incompatibilité entre la culture de l'écrit et de l'imprimerie avec Internet et illustrer l'incompréhension sur laquelle ces œuvres de fiction sont construites, dans leur tentative « d'appriivoiser » ou de représenter la culture électronique.

Le deuxième groupe d'écrivains que j'ai pris en considération est constitué d'auteurs qui auront toujours connu Internet au cours de leur vie, qui n'ont jamais assisté à « l'apparition » d'Internet et pour qui il s'agit d'une présence évidente, qui va sans dire. Ils appartiennent à une génération susceptible de se rendre directement devant un écran avant de consulter un texte sur papier et pourtant ils ont choisi de publier leurs œuvres par le biais de l'édition traditionnelle avec un éditeur. Nous étudierons notamment *Book of Numbers* de Jonathan Cohen comme étant particulièrement représentatif de ces écrivains.

Pour évaluer l'influence d'Internet sur la littérature contemporaine nous nous sommes penchés sur des œuvres qui ne mériteraient pas normalement, du fait de leur qualité littéraire, une analyse méticuleuse de leur style comme nous essaierons de le démontrer. Internet, en raison même du type de lecture qu'il crée, assimile souvent l'œuvre littéraire à un jeu vidéo. Nous nous sommes donc référés à des textes appartenant à de la littérature de genre ou à des domaines « sous-culturels » qui obéissent plus ou moins servilement à un ensemble de règles pré-établies d'une part et qui d'autre part ont pour but, d'effrayer, de surprendre, d'exciter le lecteur plutôt que de représenter une réussite esthétique.

C'est pour cette raison également, afin de *pousser* le procédé encore plus loin que nous avons analysé d'un point de vue critique des « succès » issus d'Internet comme *Fifty Shades*

of Grey (*Cinquante Nuances de Grey*). J'ai tâché ainsi de déterminer ce que la littérature électronique définit comme « la qualité » d'un texte, et de savoir si la notion de « qualité » entre en jeu dans la composition d'œuvres littéraires sur Internet. Peut-on même qualifier ces œuvres de « littéraire » ?

L'exemple de *Fifty Shades of Grey* est particulièrement important et significatif pour deux raisons. Tout d'abord, parce qu'il représente un renversement du procédé traditionnel d'édition, dans la mesure où des éditeurs ont décidé de transformer un texte publié à compte d'auteur en livre, c'est-à-dire un livre de papier, imprimé, relié, distribué, en raison du succès commercial de cette œuvre sous forme d'*e-book*. La seconde raison qui fait du livre d'E.L. James un exemple significatif est son contenu pornographique, ce qui le rend parfaitement cohérent avec le contenu et le fonctionnement d'Internet. Comme nous essaierons de le démontrer Internet est dans son essence pornographique. Ce qui aura permis de transformer un genre « sulfureux » et « illicite » qui à la Bibliothèque nationale appartient à L'Enfer, qui disait-on se lisait « sous le manteau », en un paradis commercial. La question que nous poserons à partir de *Fifty Shades of Grey* sera : la littérature électronique peut-elle être autre chose que de la littérature de genre ?

Nous nous pencherons alors sur des œuvres provenant directement d'Internet, créées en général par auteurs qui ont toujours connu Internet. Elles se divisent en deux catégories : certaines présentent une narration relativement traditionnelle et s'apparentent à un genre (encore une fois comme *Fifty Shades of Grey*). Nous verrons alors comment Internet a modifié la façon dont on considère les romans autopubliés, que l'on appelait autrefois « à compte d'auteur ». Le glissement du « compte d'auteur » vers une nouvelle respectabilité *via* Internet est d'autant plus évident en anglais quand on compare les deux expressions : *vanity publishing* décrivait autrefois le compte d'auteur et *self-publishing* est son synonyme aujourd'hui. En tâchant d'évaluer la qualité de ces œuvres, créées par et pour l'ordinateur, nous essaierons de savoir si la littérature est compatible avec un écran de verre.

En posant cette question nous devons prendre en considération la façon dont les nouvelles technologies modifient notre façon de lire, afin de comprendre leur influence sur l'écriture de la fiction. Il est impossible d'évaluer l'influence d'Internet sur la littérature sans étudier l'évolution de la lecture d'un point de vue historique. En d'autres termes, la littérature peut-elle être contenue dans autre chose qu'un livre ? Sa forme matérielle peut-elle être autre que du papier et de l'encre ? Nous devons aujourd'hui définir la matérialité de la littérature, nous ne pouvons plus nous contenter de la décrire purement en termes abstraits et

philosophiques. De telles questions auraient paru absurdes à un auteur victorien ou Edwardien, mais la présence constante de l'écran de verre dans notre monde a rendu cette même question incontournable aujourd'hui. Cependant en analysant le style de ces œuvres nous verrons qu'elles s'apparentent dans leur mode de narration à une forme d'oralité, que Walter Ong (Ong 1982) a décrit comme une oralité secondaire, semblable à celle qui est apparue peu après l'invention de l'imprimerie.

Par extension nous sommes amenés à nous demander encore une fois : qu'est-ce que la littérature ? Question qui a reçu tant de réponses qu'elle paraît justement impossible à répondre mais qui aura l'avantage de nous montrer ce qui n'est *pas* de la littérature, ce qui n'a aucune légitimité littéraire. Ce qui implique encore de se demander ce que sont les qualités « littéraires » d'un texte ou ce qu'est la « bonne littérature ».

Pour ce faire, il faudra juger de la capacité des outils traditionnels de la critique à s'appliquer à la littérature électronique. Nous devons alors nous demander s'il est nécessaire d'inventer une nouvelle forme de critique littéraire pour aborder ces nouvelles œuvres.

I. Les romans d'Internet, sans jugements de valeur

Dans un premier chapitre, nous nous efforcerons de présenter trois romans ou trois « fictions » puisque les critiques hésitent à employer le mot de « roman » qui ont été établis par la critique comme des « textes » (là encore ce mot présente quelques difficultés, nous verrons pourquoi) fondateurs de la littérature produite par Internet à partir de l'ordinateur, la littérature numérique. Nous exposerons alors sans juger de la qualité de ces œuvres la façon dont les critiques les abordent, toujours sans tenter de porter de jugement (peut-être quelques réserves toutefois) sur les méthodes employées par ces critiques en tous cas dans un premier temps.

Les ouvrages concernés sont *Twitterature* d'Alexander Aciman et Emmett Rensin (2009), *10 :01* de Lance Olsen et Tim Guthrie (2005) et *The Jew's Daughter* de Judd Morrissey (2000).

C'est dans le tout dernier chapitre de la thèse que nous tâcherons d'émettre un jugement sur la place de cette littérature et de cette critique par rapport à certains critères

établis par la technologie Gutenberg qui a « inventé » le livre et la littérature tels que nous les connaissons dans leur version *literate* pour reprendre le terme de McLuhan, depuis la Renaissance.

1. L'Internet comme notre sauveur. La révolution spirituelle. Internet est-il un monstre ou la nouvelle âme du monde ?

Dans ce premier chapitre, partant de l'impossibilité de définir Internet, nous allons essayer de démontrer que ce « silence », cette absence de vocabulaire ou de langage, ouvre un espace pour une conception spirituelle d'Internet et que cet espace est le lieu d'affrontement d'apôtres, de pionniers voire d'apostats. Nous verrons que cette nouvelle forme de spiritualité redéfinit l'âme et nous étudierons les conséquences de cette nouvelle conception de l'âme humaine sur Internet même puis sur la littérature.

À son origine Internet a été conçu comme un réseau de communication permettant à des universitaires d'échanger rapidement une somme importante de travaux tandis que son ancêtre, ARPANET a été créé pour des besoins militaires¹³⁹.

Mais la masse d'information qu'a produit Internet et qu'elle recouvre a modifié sa nature même, la transformant en une sorte d'hydre dévorant ses enfants. Comment définir un réseau qui offre simultanément des informations sur des manifestations en Arménie contre l'augmentation du prix de l'électricité, des résultats sportifs en Thaïlande, de la pornographie en vaste quantité, une encyclopédie anonyme, tout ce qu'il faut pour rejoindre le Djihad et tout ce que l'on peut vendre, depuis des cargos d'occasion amarrés partout dans le monde, jusqu'à des appartements en passant par des films et des livres ? C'est cette masse d'information et de possibilités qui a fini par porter le nom « d'Infobésité.

Si bien qu'on en est amené à se demander si la Digisphere est un monde ou LE monde tout entier, aisément dématérialisé et transportable dans sa poche ou son sac à main grâce à un Ipad, smartphone, etc. Internet est-il donc une culture en soi, un mode de vie ?

L'infobésité a transformé Internet en une entité absurde, incontrôlable et indéfinissable parce que nous nous retrouvons dans la situation du Bédouin écoutant la radio dans désert,

¹³⁹ Pour une histoire détaillée d'Internet cf. The Internet Society : www.internetsociety.org.

évoquée par Marshall McLuhan dans *Understanding Media* (McLuhan 1964, 16) submergé par un flot de concepts pour lequel notre technologie ne nous a absolument pas préparés. Comme le souligne McLuhan encore une fois : la vitesse de l'électricité dans la technologie moderne mélange les cultures de la préhistoire, avec la lie de la culture de marché industrielle, l'illettrisme avec une culture de l'écrit et une culture qui suit celle de l'écrit.

L'étude de la littérature et des œuvres littéraires contemporaines en référence à cette situation explique la confusion que la rencontre de la technologie électronique avec celle de Gutenberg a créée dans notre culture.

Si nous n'avons pas de mot pour définir et décrire Internet avec précision, nous savons en tous cas qu'il s'agit d'un monstre, d'une création incontrôlable, qui a su développer son propre langage, son mode de vie et une génération propre qui s'y reconnaît.

De même qu'on peut diviser l'histoire de l'humanité ou en tous cas de l'Occident entre avant et après J.-C., on peut parler d'un monde d'avant et d'après Internet.

Le parallèle n'est pas innocent : dès les débuts de Silicon Valley, le projet Internet était empreint de messianisme et d'idéalisme. Internet promettait une nouvelle liberté, une nouvelle alliance, pour reprendre un vocabulaire religieux, et ce en libérant la parole et la créativité.

Afin de comprendre l'influence d'Internet sur la littérature contemporaine, il est essentiel d'en comprendre la spiritualité ainsi que le message métaphysique contenu dans Internet.

Internet est construit sur cette trinité pour faire écho à l'expression de Jaron Lanier (2010, 8) : le changement en accélération permanente, l'abondance et la singularité.

L'abondance est une autre forme de la religiosité qui imprègne l'esprit d'Internet, c'est une forme de promesse. La promesse d'abondance transforma Internet en un « pays de lait et de miel », voire la Cité de Dieu de Saint Augustin quand Internet aura redéfini l'âme selon les termes d'une théologie pré-Gutenberg proche de celle des Pères de l'Église. L'abondance est la contrepartie positive de l'infobésité. Internet devient ainsi une Terre Promise et la possibilité d'une vie de richesse.

Voir une nouvelle technologie comme une manifestation d'un pouvoir surnaturel et métaphysique n'a rien d'exceptionnel ou d'inédit. De même que Raoul Dufy parlait de la Fée électricité, Jules Verne décrivait dans *Le Château des Carpathes* (Verne 1976, 237) l'électricité comme l'âme du monde et nous verrons que l'imprimerie a été saluée à son arrivée comme une manifestation du pouvoir divin.

De même que la première phrase à sortir du télégraphe dont Internet est une extension fut une citation du Livre des Nombres, la première production de la technologie Gutenberg aura été la traduction de la Bible, parce qu'essentiellement toute nouvelle avancée technologique est vécue, en tous cas en partie comme « un miracle ». Elizabeth Eisenstein dans *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, confirme d'ailleurs la prolifération d'une littérature religieuse à la suite de l'apparition de la presse à imprimer sous forme de catéchismes, pamphlets, etc. (Eisenstein 1979, 78).

De façon similaire l'apparition de l'ordinateur a donné naissance à toute une littérature messianique. Nous nous pencherons surtout sur l'œuvre de Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity*, dans la mesure où elle est la plus représentative et celle qui a rencontré le plus grand succès, c'est-à-dire l'influence la plus grande à Silicon Valley.

2. Prêtres, hérétiques et apostats

Dans *You are Not a Gadget* (2010), Jaron Lanier, lui-même un des pères fondateurs de Silicon Valley, souligne la ferveur qui habitait son travail et celui de ses collègues. Il décrit les débuts d'Internet dans un langage qui rappelle celui des utopies politiques ou spirituelles, dressant le portrait d'une humanité lavée de ses péchés et libérée de ses chaînes, le Net allait créer une nouvelle ère pour l'humanité, au-delà de toute politique « identitaire » au service du bien. L'humanité devait même se libérer de la peur de la mort (Lanier 2010, 14).

Andrew Keen, autre pionnier de Silicon Valley, lui fait écho dans *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), démarre en se présentant comme une de ces personnalités qui ont vendu le rêve Internet avant de devenir un « apostat », lui qui avait été comme il le dit lui-même un « membre du culte » (Keen 2017, 14).

Ce culte prend plusieurs formes comme l'affirme Morozov, troisième pionnier et troisième apostat, qui se présente comme un « hérétique » dans son livre *To Save Everything Click Here*, mais au centre de chacune de ces formes, on trouve le « solutionnisme » et « Internet comme centre de tout » (Morozov 2013, XIV). Il confirme également que du point de vue des Zélotes de Silicon Valley, Internet est un don des dieux à l'humanité. « Internet est sacré pour les geeks » (on trouvera plus loin une définition du *geek*). Il ajoute : « Si ça a l'air d'être une religion, c'est parce que c'en est une » (Morozov 2013, 23).

Ce qui apparaîtra au cours de cette thèse c'est qu'Internet est un dieu jaloux, qui ne se contente pas de cohabiter mais qui exige et recherche l'hégémonie sur la culture contemporaine et les courants de pensée de cette culture. Ce désir de domination sera clairement affiché comme on le verra du point de vue de l'économie de la culture par une institution comme Amazon, pur produit d'Internet et un de ses symboles les plus puissants.

Il est dans la nature des religions d'offrir des réponses et des solutions et d'établir un système de lecture du monde. Internet est un de ces systèmes, il couvre tous les aspects du monde et comme nous le verrons offre même la vie après la mort, une vie éternelle qui diffère radicalement de la notion de postérité qui est la manière traditionnelle et littéraire d'obtenir l'immortalité et qui prolonge la vie de l'âme après qu'elle ait quitté le corps.

3. La génération numérique, les élus et la communauté

Le sentiment de la communauté se retrouve, exagéré et exacerbé dans *Print is Dead* de Geoff Gomez (2008). L'auteur salue la réussite d'Internet dans le fait d'avoir créé une « génération numérique » : « Ils partagent leurs vies » (Gomez 2008, 82-83). Gomez souligne par là le caractère participatif d'Internet. Et il cite dans ce même passage Wikipedia comme le meilleur exemple de cette participation avec une admiration qui relève dans le langage qu'il emploie de l'extase mystique. La participation devient une communion. Les utilisateurs d'Internet deviennent des moines d'un autre âge renonçant à leur individualité pour rédiger une nouvelle bible de la connaissance. C'est là encore une fois, la confirmation que le mysticisme des apôtres d'Internet les rapproche d'une conception médiévale de l'âme, l'individu doit mourir à soi-même pour accéder à la Cité de Dieu. La conception de l'âme ici est aristotélicienne et non pas platonicienne ou néo-platonicienne, ce qu'elle deviendra à la Renaissance. Comme le souligne Jaron Lanier, Wikipedia et la Bible ont beaucoup en commun. Comme la Bible Wikipedia a une multitude d'auteurs, c'est un texte cumulatif et le « mystère » autour de l'identité de ces auteurs sert à faire de cet écrit un oracle (Lanier 2010, 46). D'autre part, Wikipedia représente l'abondance, Wikipedia se conçoit comme une corne d'abondance du savoir. Il est aussi remarquable dans le texte de Gomez auquel nous faisons référence, cette communion est représentée comme étant au-delà du langage. De même que

cette imprécision du langage exprime ou crée ce que Rudolf Otto dans *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) a décrit comme le *numen*, le langage extrêmement vague employé par Internet crée l'angoisse métaphysique au centre de la littérature fantastique : « C'était comme si. » Ou en anglais le mot « chose » (*thing*) qui revient régulièrement pour exprimer l'angoisse métaphysique par rapport à un phénomène au-delà du langage. On emploie le mot « thing » parce qu'il ne veut rien dire, c'est un mot vide de sens qui reflète l'incapacité du langage à décrire ce que l'on voit même dans le cas de la littérature fantastique, ce que l'on en voit pas mais que l'on croit percevoir. Dans le vide que représentent ces deux expressions se glisse l'hésitation quant à l'origine des phénomènes décrits dans la littérature fantastique (Todorov. 1970) et c'est aussi l'origine du mécanisme de l'espoir qui devient dans la littérature fantastique celui de la peur. C'est pour cette même raison que le langage d'Internet est vague, il est le reflet de la religiosité qu'il inspire à ses convertis. Et c'est aussi pour cette raison que les écrits qui sont les plus représentatifs d'Internet, qui en sont les fruits, sont dans leur nature théologiques, car la littérature d'Internet traduit en mots et en images une réalité au-delà du langage. On pourrait ici comparer avec ce que l'architecture et la peinture baroque ont accompli pour la théologie catholique, notamment les œuvres du Bernin à Rome, par exemple, exposant par leur matérialité une théologie contraire à celle de la Réforme.

4. Internet et la spiritualité du primitif. Le village global

Dans cette thèse, nous suivons la démonstration de McLuhan selon laquelle la technologie électrique est à l'origine d'un glissement depuis une civilisation visuelle vers une civilisation auditive.

McLuhan et Carothers (1950) affirment que les découvertes dans le domaine électromagnétique ont créé un « champ » simultané dans l'ensemble des occupations humaines, ramenant la culture à un stade auditif d'avant l'écrit. L'importance de cette théorie vient de ce qu'elle permet de démontrer l'incompatibilité entre Internet et la littérature. L'écriture en tant que retranscription phonétique avait rompu et dispersé en divers éléments le monde magique de l'oreille pour créer le monde neutre de l'œil, permettant ainsi de « détribaliser » l'individu. Selon McLuhan, l'homme primitif vit dans ce qu'il appelle une machine cosmique d'une nature beaucoup plus tyrannique que l'homme qui appartient à la

civilisation de l'écrit. Le monde de l'oreille, de l'ouïe est plus inclusif que celui de l'œil, et donc de la vue et de la lecture. L'oreille est hypersensible. L'œil est toujours dans la catégorisation de McLuhan, froid et détaché. L'oreille livre l'homme à une panique universelle tandis que l'œil et la vue qui trouvent une extension dans la lecture, ménage la liberté de certains espaces, et leur épargnent la pression incessante de la réverbération acoustique.

La simultanéité du « champ » des activités humaines et la « retribalisation » opérée par la technologie électronique ont créé cette contradiction dans les termes.

Et en ce sens, Internet représente dans une de ses phases, un monde tribalisé et dominé par les mêmes peurs que le monde primitif d'avant Gutenberg.

5. Internet comme miroir de la spiritualité médiévale. La Singularité

Dans ce que nous appellerons sa phase médiévale, Internet est une forme de technologie pré-Gutenberg qui recrée naturellement une forme de spiritualité et de littérature pré-Renaissance plutôt que postmoderne, une littérature dans laquelle le langage et la description d'un conflit humain revêtent moins d'importance que l'invention, la révélation, la prophétie.

Fidèle à sa nature post-Gutenberg et post-typographique, Internet redéfinit l'âme en termes qui pré-datent le concile de Latran de 1513. Le concile de Latran établissait alors deux formes d'hérésies concernant l'immortalité de l'âme. Il existe une âme commune à toute l'humanité ou l'âme meurt avec le corps. Dans les deux cas, l'âme de chaque individu ne survit pas à sa mort corporelle. En conséquence, la définition de l'âme individuelle était rétablie par l'Église, en termes platoniques, au moment précis où l'imprimerie créait l'individualisme et le nationalisme.

À l'inverse, Internet recrée une âme pré-Latran, commune à l'humanité tout entière. Internet et la théorie de la Singularité, développée par Ray Kurzweil, suit un chemin inverse à celui du concile de Latran : l'âme de chaque individu se fond en une *noosphere* empruntée à la philosophie de Pierre Teilhard de Chardin ainsi qu'en l'âme de la machine elle-même.

Encore une fois, le langage d'Internet est vague parce qu'il se réfère à une forme d'immensité (Jeff Gomez évoque l'Internet comme ayant mis fin au temps et à l'espace, tout comme la venue du Messie est censée marquer la fin des temps). Comme l'univers, Internet est en expansion permanente et est incontrôlable. En cela, Internet a les mêmes attributs que Dieu. Il en découle qu'Internet doit nous contrôler si l'on en croit la Singularité telle qu'elle est définie par Kurzweil. Le fait qu'Internet est incontrôlable et que son pouvoir est infini modifie la relation de l'homme à son ordinateur d'une manière similaire à la relation de l'homme avec son Dieu unique et tout-puissant.

Mieux encore, selon la Singularité, à mi-chemin de la philosophie et de la croyance, Internet peut offrir une vie éternelle après la mort corporelle. Puisque la technologie électronique sous forme d'Intelligence artificielle est en expansion permanente, comme l'univers, ses progrès sont exponentiels, et c'est grâce à cette qualité que l'électronique nous apporte ce sens de l'immensité et même de l'infini.

La Singularité nous annonce que la fin est proche (Kurzweil 2006) mais que l'humanité peut voir l'avenir en rose grâce à l'intelligence artificielle. Cette vision apocalyptique est inspirée par une angoisse prométhéenne face aux progrès de l'intelligence artificielle, justement censée donner naissance à un être supérieur ou à une forme d'intelligence surnaturelle. Si le thème de l'intelligence supérieure de la machine et de la révolte des robots qui s'ensuit sont des thèmes courants de la science-fiction, dans l'univers des pionniers de Silicon Valley, ils sont source d'optimisme. Silicon Valley ne s'angoisse pas de *l'hubris* du scientifique qui prend la place de Dieu, mais nous raconte l'histoire de Prométhée et du Dr Frankenstein à l'envers. Et contrairement aux auteurs de science-fiction, les apôtres de la Singularité ne voient pas là, une fiction, mais une réalité future qui inspire confiance.

Selon Jaron Lanier les livres déclinant la Singularité « sont aussi courants dans les départements de science informatique que les images pieuses dans les librairies religieuses » (Lanier 2010, 25).

La Singularité nous promet qu'après la mort de notre corps, nous serons téléchargés dans un ordinateur tout en gardant notre conscience. Notre âme vivra pour l'éternité dans une super-conscience. Les êtres humains feront partie alors d'un système d'information. Comme l'analyse Jaron Lanier :

Si vous voulez faire la transition, de l'ancienne religion, lorsque vous croyez que Dieu vous apportera la vie après la mort, à la nouvelle religion dans laquelle vous espérez obtenir l'immortalité en étant téléchargé dans un ordinateur, il faut croire que l'information est une réalité et qu'elle est vivante (Lanier 2010, 25).

Nous voyons maintenant comment la notion d'infobésité, annonçait cette autre notion, dans la mesure où l'accumulation d'information devient la vie et même la vie après la mort. Nous verrons également lorsque nous en viendrons à analyser la littérature produite par Internet que du point de vue du monde digital, la quantité s'apparente à la qualité dans tous les domaines.

Toutefois, pour que l'infobésité devienne la vie et partie intégrante de la vie spirituelle, elle doit prendre une autre nature et un autre aspect car l'accumulation, qui d'un point de vue littéraire se traduit par la figure du catalogue, est une forme de sécheresse spirituelle. L'accumulation du point de vue de la littérature mystique devient un obstacle à l'épanouissement de cette vie spirituelle. Cette contradiction deviendra apparente dans le roman de Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*. L'énumération, le catalogue sont la forme littéraire de l'absence de sens. Les mots deviennent des objets, une liste d'ornements. Pour que l'infobésité prenne un sens elle doit devenir « l'abondance ».

Or l'abondance est le deuxième élément de cette trinité qui forme Internet et que nous avons déjà évoquée avec Jaron Lanier.

Il est donc logique que dans son ouvrage qu'il décrit lui-même comme « l'histoire du destin de la civilisation humain-machine » (Kurzweil 2006, 5), Ray Kurzweil mesure le succès de cette nouvelle spiritualité en dollars, affirmant que l'industrie de l'ordinateur vaut, au moment où il écrit, plus de trois milliards de dollars. Nous verrons plus tard l'extension de ce concept dans ceux de *crowdsourcing*, *the long tail*, *open source*, qui aura des conséquences directes sur l'édition en tant qu'industrie puis sur le contenu des livres.

Dans sa bible de la Singularité, Kurzweil allie cette notion de partage et de succès financier dans la promesse d'un nouvel âge, celui des « machines intelligentes », l'intelligence de la machine devenant impossible à distinguer de celle de son créateur, c'est-à-dire, nous, l'espèce humaine, menant à un avenir qui transcende la biologie.

6. Vils corps

La Singularité (toujours avec une majuscule) a pour mission de « donner un sens à notre vie » (Kurzweil 2006, 7). Celui qui croit devient un « Singularitarian ». Ce n'est plus une philosophie à laquelle on adhère, il s'agit maintenant d'une conversion. Le chemin de la Singularité est, nous promet-on, un éveil progressif à travers six étapes (1, la physique-chimie, 2, la biologie, 3, le cerveau, 4, la technologie, 5, l'union de la technologie et l'intelligence humaine, 6, l'éveil de l'univers).

Si on suit la logique de Kurzweil, un ordinateur pourra finalement être capable d'éprouver de la pitié, de la compassion, de l'amour tout en restant à l'abri de tout sentiment négatif ou répréhensible. La Singularité permettra aussi la transformation de nos corps en un corps glorieux, celui de l'ordinateur dans une logique qui rappelle fortement le passage de la Lettre aux Philippiens (3 ; 21), promettant que le Christ transformera le « corps de notre humiliation en le rendant semblable au corps de sa gloire, par le pouvoir qu'il a de s'assujettir toute chose¹⁴⁰. »

En termes de Singularité, le « corps de notre humiliation », ou *vile body* dans la version de King James, est le corps biologique. C'est l'intelligence artificielle et la technologie de l'information qui dans ce cas vont opérer la transformation pour en faire un corps de gloire.

Il en résulte que lorsque nous atteindrons cette forme de plénitude, toute littérature ou toute forme d'art représentant un conflit humain ou un dilemme moral deviendra inutile. « Il n'y aura plus de distinction post-Singularité entre l'humain et la machine ou entre la réalité physique et virtuelle » (Kurzweil 2006, 27).

On peut craindre que Kurzweil exagère quand il nous explique avec le plus grand sérieux que les machines peuvent tomber amoureuses, être de meilleurs amants que des êtres humains et améliorer nos performances sexuelles. La Singularité, ne s'arrête pas là, elle nous débarrassera une fois pour toutes du cancer et de la pollution ainsi que de la faim dans le monde. Et ce grâce à la nanotechnologie, autre progrès, que nous ne décrivons pas dans les détails dans le cours de ce résumé.

Rappelons toutefois que Kurzweil croit en ce qu'il écrit, tout comme Silicon Valley. L'absurdité générale qui caractérise ces idées implique qu'elles ne peuvent être comprises que

¹⁴⁰ (1880). *Nouveau Testament*, Genève: Cherbuliez. 189. Traduction de Louis Segond.

dans une sorte de transe mystique inspirée par l'angoisse que ressent le théoricien d'Internet face à l'idée de la désincarnation. Comme dans les écrits des Pères de l'Église qui s'interrogent constamment sur la modalité et la possibilité de la résurrection des âmes, car l'âme n'est à ce moment du christianisme pas encore immortelle, l'idée du corps et de son alternative revient sans cesse dans la littérature qui prend la technologie pour sujet. Toutefois, il faut se garder, malgré l'absurdité de ces théories, de sous-estimer leur présence et leur signification pour comprendre l'essence même et l'esprit qui animent Internet ; en particulier le contenu érotique de ces théories concernant le corps, car comme nous le verrons plus tard en étudiant dans un contexte littéraire, l'influence et la signification qu'a pu avoir un roman comme *Fifty Shades of Grey* sur l'édition, Internet est essentiellement pornographique, dans sa nature comme dans son fonctionnement.

Cela dit, les idées de Kurzweil quant à l'avenir et la nature humaine, ne peuvent s'intégrer, d'un point de vue littéraire, que dans des œuvres de science-fiction, ou dans des contes moraux, ce qui explique par exemple l'échec littéraire d'une œuvre telle que *Zero K* de De Lillo (2016). Les Singularitarians ont créé leur université, on notera sans s'étonner qu'il n'y a pas de département de littérature dans cette université.

7. *Zero K*. Une tentative de représentation des nanobots et de l'immortalité

La technologie comme source d'immortalité que ce soit par l'intermédiaire des nanobots ou des sciences électroniques trouve son illustration dans *Zero K* de Don De Lillo. La technologie au centre du roman est la cryogénisation, la conservation de corps à très basse température dans l'espoir qu'un jour la science ou quelque autre messie permettra leur résurrection.

Partant de l'idée que « tout le monde veut posséder la fin du monde » (De Lillo 2016, 3), *Zero K* devient un roman d'idées s'exprimant par le dialogue. Le thème de l'Apocalypse y figure en bonne place, comme souvent, presque toujours dans la littérature d'Internet, consciente de se situer entre la fin d'un monde et le commencement d'un autre. Il en est de même dans *Book of Numbers* de Joshua Cohen qui démarre sur une évocation du 11 septembre

et la destruction des *Twin Towers*. Un roman comme *Zero K* qui traite de la vie éternelle et de la résurrection par la technologie ne pouvait éviter le thème de l'Apocalypse si présent dans la science-fiction, il en ressort logiquement que le langage rappelle souvent celui de la Genèse et en particulier le Déluge. Mais dans la logique de la technologie numérique, l'Apocalypse et le Déluge sont perçus ici à travers des écrans de télévision, la télévision étant une forme de voyeurisme domestique comme nous le verrons plus en détail. L'Apocalypse est donc ici domestiquée, ne serait-ce que par la taille de l'écran et transportable grâce à l'ordinateur. Notons simplement pour le moment que l'enfance de la technologie numérique correspond à l'apparition de la télévision et au développement d'une vision réduite du monde, disponible « chez soi », tout en restant coupé ou éloigné du monde, ce qui explique cette notion de voyeurisme domestique. Nous nous attacherons plus tard à étudier plus en détail le système d'échos entre la télévision et Internet et ce qu'on peut appeler « l'héritage de l'écran de verre ».

Le roman est construit sur le contraste entre la paix offerte par le monde de la cryogénéisation et l'accumulation, le catalogue de désastres qui défile sur les écrans. La figure littéraire du catalogue revient sans cesse dans la littérature d'Internet, la meilleure illustration en est peut-être *253*, de Geoff Ryman. En littérature, le catalogue, comme nous le verrons, développé dans *À Rebours* par Huysmans, par exemple, est la forme donnée à la stérilité et la déliquescence morale. Le cas de *253* est différent et illustre parfaitement la formule de McLuhan, selon laquelle le médium est le message. *253* a été créé sur le web comme un roman d'Internet, né d'un écran de verre puis traduit par la suite en un roman de papier et d'encre. Le livre consiste en une liste de personnages dans une liste de wagons dans le métro londonien. Le lecteur peut passer de l'un à l'autre sans se soumettre à une lecture linéaire, il n'y a ni ordre, ni structure narrative. En cela, nous sommes là face à un parfait « livre-Internet » si ce n'est que sa transformation en un objet de papier impose un ordre qui n'a pas besoin d'être respecté. C'est là une des principales caractéristiques d'Internet : réadapter la notion de l'espace. Comme le dit Ryman (Ryman 1998, 1) : « dans le cyberspace, les gens deviennent des endroits » (ou des lieux). Nous trouvons la même idée dans *Zero K* de De Lillo et *Book of Numbers* de Joshua Cohen : le personnage devient un espace, transportable à travers toutes sortes de lieux exotiques, tout en restant au même endroit. C'est le même procédé que l'on trouve dans *Purity* de Franzen et qui est rendu possible par l'écran comme portail sur le monde et sa représentation. Cette transportabilité du personnage et du lieu crée une sorte d'identité cosmopolite propre à Internet. Ce cosmopolitisme d'Internet, au lieu de créer une identité multiple par une accumulation d'identités diverses, crée une identité « globale » à l'image du

village global, ce qui apparaît avec évidence si on compare un roman issu d'Internet avec les romans de Dickens par exemple, spécifiquement anglais et propres à leur époque.

Comme il sied à une création littéraire d'Internet, la version imprimée de *253* commence par un mode d'emploi : « Comment se servir de ce livre » (Ryman 1998, 1). La raison pour laquelle *253* ne peut pas être lu sans un guide et sans explication vient du fait que l'œuvre a été initialement conçue comme « un spectacle » sur un écran. Ainsi, le livre est-il construit sur une série de liens sur lesquels on peut cliquer pour aller d'un personnage à un autre ou d'un thème à un autre. L'ensemble du livre est d'autant plus étonnant qu'il est écrit avec une absence délibérée de style, à l'exception parfois d'un jeu de mots, souvent assez pauvre. À la lecture de *253*, on ne peut que se demander si l'œuvre a une quelconque valeur ou un intérêt littéraire.

Le fait qu'il est impossible de savoir si l'auteur lui-même considère son œuvre comme littéraire vient du fait qu'elle se présente comme un jeu, à l'instar de la plupart des créations issues d'Internet, comme *Snow Crash* par Stephenson, par exemple, sur lequel nous reviendrons. Ce que *253* démontre comme nous le mentionnions plus haut c'est que le médium est le message, et le roman a pour principal mérite de démontrer l'incompatibilité entre le papier et l'écran de verre.

L'écran comme portail s'ouvrant sur un autre monde est un thème récurrent de la science-fiction, comme dans *Snow Crash* de Neal Stephenson : le personnage entre en contact avec « l'autre » monde désincarné en franchissant l'écran ou en restant assis devant dans une sorte de répétition générale du transhumanisme promis par la Singularité. Même en arrivant à sa fin, le monde est télévisé et l'écran marque la première étape du renouveau que ce soit dans *Snow Crash*, *Zero K* ou *Book of Numbers*. Et le langage biblique devient par la même occasion, en particulier dans *Zero K*, le langage de la table de montage ou de l'ordinateur, dans *Snow Crash* et *Book of Numbers*.

Il s'ensuit que si on avait des croyants dans le monde de la Singularité, on trouve dans le monde de De Lillo des pèlerins à la recherche d'une vie spirituelle au-delà de l'écran et que peut offrir une nouvelle technologie la cryogénéisation. *Zero K* en devient à la fois un roman de science-fiction qui n'ose pas se présenter comme tel et un roman d'idée qui ne dit pas son nom. Mais ce qui frappe le plus c'est la naïveté qui sous-tend le roman et la banalité des idées que s'échangent les personnages dans des dialogues particulièrement artificiels. Pour reprendre la description de John Updike dans le *New Yorker* du 31 mars 2003 : « Ses personnages ont l'habitude de se cracher au visage des essais courts et malins. » Dans cette

même revue critique, il décrit les personnages et les dialogues de De Lillo comme « lobotomisés¹⁴¹ ».

Si *Zero K* est souvent répétitif, le roman a l'avantage d'illustrer le perpétuel système de reflet entre la croyance en une nouvelle technologie et une nouvelle religion. Si cette nouvelle religion portait le nom de « Singularité » chez Kurzweil, elle s'appelle « Resurgence » chez De Lillo. Dans un cas comme d'un l'autre il s'agit d'un voyage vers une cité idéale (là encore la Cité de Dieu de Saint-Augustin qui revient faire une apparition sous un autre nom, on ose à peine dire un pseudonyme) et qui s'apparente également à une forme de conquête. En ce sens nous rencontrons ici pour la première fois le parallèle entre l'apôtre d'Internet et le conquistador, le conquérant à l'assaut d'un nouveau continent, venu apporter en plus de la prospérité, la bonne parole (nous verrons d'ailleurs que dans ce domaine le choix du nom Amazon par Jeff Bezos pour son entreprise est loin d'être innocent ou simplement dû au hasard).

8. Internet est l'âme du monde

La conception de l'avenir chez Kurzweil et les « Singularitarians » n'est pas aussi nouvelle qu'elle pourrait le paraître. Il faut en chercher l'origine chez Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la notion de *noosphere*. Les penseurs d'Internet, comme Kurzweil et Eric Raymond ont vu dans ce concept une forme d'annonciation de l'avènement d'Internet et ils ont vu dans Internet l'incarnation de la notion de Teilhard de Chardin.

Le mot *noosphere* a été créé par Teilhard de Chardin à partir du grec *noos*, qui désigne l'esprit. Résumons ici très brièvement la pensée de Teilhard de Chardin pour voir l'influence qu'elle a pu avoir, à tort ou à raison sur ses improbables héritiers. Pour Teilhard de Chardin, la *noosphere* formera une sorte de membrane autour de la terre, elle n'est pas la biosphère, mais sa transfiguration. La biosphère étant « la substance organique qui enveloppe la terre » (Teilhard de Chardin 1969, 27). L'homme représente l'état embryonnaire du développement

¹⁴¹ John Updike, « Rue à sens unique », *The New Yorker*, 23 mars 2003, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/31/one-way-street>.

et de la croissance de l'esprit sur Terre. À travers l'homme, cet esprit se développe en quatre étapes : le personnel, la liberté, la connaissance et la contemplation (Teilhard de Chardin 1969, 127).

Pour résumer les aspects de cette théorie qui ont un lien avec la métaphysique d'Internet : l'individu est le centre spirituel au premier stade de son existence, il est la conscience d'une irremplaçable « singularité » pour reprendre un terme commun à Kurzweil et à Teilhard de Chardin d'après Jean Onimus (Onimus, 1991).

La liberté est la capacité de comprendre l'ensemble d'une situation donnée et d'envisager un grand nombre de solutions. Cette liberté provient de la culture.

La science du savoir est la troisième étape, la conquête de l'univers par l'esprit. En ce sens, la recherche revêt une signification métaphysique et religieuse. Elle devient une activité sacrée, elle analyse et déchiffre les pouvoirs spirituels du monde matériel. En cela, le langage de Teilhard de Chardin, a trouvé un écho dans ce que Morozov a défini comme le « solutionisme » d'Internet. Comme il l'écrit, Silicon Valley s'est donné pour but « d'améliorer tout ce qui existe sous le soleil ». À toutes les situations complexes correspondent des solutions offertes par la technologie numérique (Morozov 2013, 5).

On comprend facilement l'incompatibilité entre une approche littéraire du monde et l'idée de trouver une situation scientifique à toutes « les situations complexes ». Avec « les bons algorithmes », explique Morozov, tout s'arrange dans l'idéologie de Silicon Valley (Morozov 2013, 5). Il ajoute :

Ils comprennent très mal ce qu'est la nature humaine ainsi que les pratiques complexes que cette nature engendre. C'est comme si ces solutionnistes n'avaient jamais vraiment eu de vécu et comme s'ils avaient tout appris par les livres, sauf que ces livres ne sont pas des romans mais des modes d'emploi pour réfrigérateurs, aspirateurs et machines à laver (Morozov 2013, 5).¹⁴²

Il est particulièrement important de remarquer ici que la façon de penser d'Internet d'après un de ses pionniers est incompatible avec la fiction ou toute forme de littérature.

De la même manière, nous verrons plus tard que l'algorithme, technologie sur laquelle Internet est construit, est incompatible avec une littérature qui se définit comme le drame du choix. La citation de Morozov est également intéressante dans la mesure où elle montre que

¹⁴² Ma traduction.

la littérature, dont le centre est la description et l'analyse d'une technologie présente ou future, réelle ou fictionnelle, n'a pas les qualités nécessaires pour produire une fiction esthétique, ce qui explique que stylistiquement, *Zero K* et les longs développements que contient le roman sur la cryogénisation, s'apparentent à un mode d'emploi.

Le stade ultime du solutionnisme ou du salut, selon que l'on veut employer un terme religieux ou scientifique, est la contemplation, liée au sens d'une présence cosmique, que les Grecs nommaient le *Thambos* assez proche de ce que Otto décrivait dans *L'Idée du sacré* et appelait le *numineux* : une forme d'attrance vers le surnaturel ou de fascination, même d'angoisse, et de terreur, l'élément du *tremendum*. Nous verrons également que ce *tremendum* est le type de réaction ou de sentiment provoqué par Internet chez les écrivains d'avant l'époque d'Internet, comme si allumant leur ordinateur, ils se retrouvaient face à un buisson ardent leur offrant un ensemble de lois incompréhensibles.

Chez Teilhard de Chardin la vibration mystique que donne le sens du cosmos est très proche d'une vibration scientifique.

Parallèlement, la réunion de diverses « personnes » crée par Internet une forme d'unanimité qui se développe pleinement en une « super personne globale ». La pensée, toujours selon Teilhard de Chardin, apparaît alors comme un immense miroir à la surface de la terre (Teilhard de Chardin 1963, 300).

La pensée collective crée un cerveau planétaire et l'humanité un super organisme. On comprend alors comment la notion de *crowd wisdom* (qu'on traduirait littéralement par « sagesse de la foule ») ou la Singularité se conçoivent comme les héritiers de cette pensée mystique.

Si pour Teilhard de Chardin la « personne ultime » est la figure du Christ, il n'en est évidemment pas de même pour les pionniers de Silicon Valley. Toutefois, ils ont en commun le sentiment que tout ce qui va à l'encontre de ce mouvement est une « régression », voire une faute ou un péché. Teilhard de Chardin et ses héritiers improbables pensent même que pour suivre son évolution, le progrès doit détruire : « Puissance insatiable et dévastatrice de ce qui a fait son temps » (Teilhard de Chardin 1997, 117).

En cela Kurzweil et les geeks auxquels il s'adresse se considèrent comme l'écho de cette pensée : le développement exponentiel de la technologie est similaire à l'organisation spontanée du vivant créant un cerveau qui est la progéniture de l'humanité, mais dont la puissance est plus grande que celle de son créateur. En conséquence l'individualisme que McLuhan définissait comme un des produits de la technologie Gutenberg doit être détruit pour

que la vie terrestre progresse en créant de plus grandes unités à la recherche d'une âme commune, brisant le cadre rigide des organisations sociales traditionnelles. On trouve en fait là la notion de tribalisation élaborée par McLuhan comme conséquence du développement de la technologie numérique. Les concepts de *crowd wisdom* et de *long tail* créés par Lessig en sont le prolongement. Teilhard de Chardin ne considère évidemment pas cette évolution comme une forme de retribalisation mais de « socialisation », un instinct qui unit, « désir fondamental, têtu, inguérissable, d'union totale par où vivent toutes les poésies, tous les panthéismes, toutes les saintetés ». McLuhan, lui, considérait que la technologie électromagnétique recréait un « champ » commun à toutes activités humaines faisant de l'humanité une famille vivant dans un « village global ». Il ajoute, de façon critique, se référant à Teilhard de Chardin et à la *noosphere* : « Au lieu de tendre vers une vaste bibliothèque d'Alexandrie, le monde est devenu un ordinateur, un cerveau électrique, comme dans une histoire de science-fiction infantile » (McLuhan 1962, 32).

En 1995 le magazine *Wired* présentait Teilhard de Chardin dans un article intitulé *A Globe, Clothing Itself with a Brain*¹⁴³ comme un « obscur prêtre jésuite » qui aurait été l'inspiration derrière Al Gore, Mario Cuomo et le barde Perry Barlow, libertaire d'Internet et anciennement parolier du Grateful Dead. Là, le net ou le cyberspace sont représentés comme l'outil qui permet d'arriver à la troisième phase de la théorie de l'évolution selon Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Grâce au net l'humanité va construire la *noosphere* dont la terre a besoin, toujours selon *Wired*.

On peut toutefois subodorer que Teilhard de Chardin aurait été étonné d'apprendre que la *noosphere* sous la forme d'Internet est constituée d'une part considérable de pornographie.

¹⁴³ Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg, « A Globe, Clothing Itself with a Brain », *Wired*, 01 juin 1995 [Consulté le 19/10/2019]. <https://www.wired.com/1995/06/teilhard/>.

9. « Ceci Tuera Cela », Eric Raymond et l'improbable paternité de Teilhard de Chardin

Si Kurzweil avec la Singularité était le mystique de la *noosphere*, Eric Raymond, héritier tout aussi improbable de Teilhard de Chardin, en est devenu le législateur et l'économiste. Il met en opposition deux types de culture et deux types d'économie de la culture dans son livre intitulé *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* (1997).

L'Internet est censé représenter la culture du bazar et s'oppose à une forme hiérarchisée de la culture symbolisée par la cathédrale. Dans ses travaux, Raymond introduit la notion d'Internet comme d'un espace, d'un pays vierge dont les contours n'ont pas encore été dessinés. Ce sera là un thème récurrent dans la littérature d'Internet. En conséquence ceux qui « vivent Internet » doivent en prendre possession, comme les *homesteaders*, les pionniers, prenaient possession de la terre dans l'Ouest américain au dix-neuvième siècle. Encore une fois les bases de la loi fondée sur l'antécédent, et qui vont s'appliquer à ce nouveau territoire, sont à trouver dans cette spiritualité particulière d'Internet qui se veut souvent libertaire, sans l'être toujours.

Il est d'ailleurs significatif que Raymond ait choisi la cathédrale comme symbole de ce qui doit être détruit par le bazar et que rappelle cet épisode de *Notre-Dame de Paris* de Victor Hugo, lorsqu'un prêtre méditant sur le premier livre imprimé à entrer dans sa collection d'incunables, lève les yeux vers la cathédrale et conclut : « Ceci tuera cela » (Hugo 2019, 43).

Aujourd'hui selon la logique du renversement du processus démarré par la technologie Gutenberg, nous pouvons dire « Cela tuera ceci. »

La cathédrale, qui est une encyclopédie en pierre, est destinée à être tuée par l'encyclopédie de papier qui aux yeux de Raymond représente une nouvelle hiérarchie, une structure de pierre qui n'aurait pas la fluidité de la technologie électronique. La cathédrale représente également une forme de théologie catholique qui doit être remplacée par ce qu'il voit (à tort) comme une théologie réformée organisée autour d'une participation des fidèles.

Les théories de Raymond forment le lien entre le mysticisme propre à Internet et ce qu'il appelle *open source*. Il se revendique de John Locke et la loi Anglo-saxonne, fondée sur la coutume et le précédent, pour développer ses notions sur l'histoire de la propriété. En fait

il essaie en se référant à un système pré-Gutenberg et médiéval de mettre fin à la propriété intellectuelle.

Ce que ces théories trahissent, c'est essentiellement l'incapacité à considérer le livre comme une marchandise et son contenu encore moins. Or les livres ont toujours été une forme de marchandise, comme nous le rappelle Lucien Febvre dans *L'Apparition du livre*, et plus précisément encore dans le chapitre intitulé, justement « Le livre, cette marchandise » (Febvre 1958, 165).

Les notions de *homesteading*, *crowdsourcing* et du « bazar » permettent de se débarrasser de l'idée que le livre est un objet et de penser que l'ordinateur, l'écran de verre, peut offrir une vision cosmique de la littérature. L'ordinateur devient un territoire dématérialisé, une galaxie, ainsi l'idée de la fabrication et de l'industrie du livre disparaissent.

Parallèlement la notion d'*open source*, qui signifie en gros que tout le monde doit avoir accès aux œuvres de tout le monde sans n'avoir rien à payer, trahit l'incompréhension de Raymond devant le fait pourtant assez simple que des livres sont écrits, fabriqués, vendus et distribués par des gens qui gagnent leur vie de cette façon. Le livre contrairement à ce que pense Raymond est une source de revenus. Pour Raymond en se débarrassant des industriels et de l'artisan du savoir, Internet devient un monde d'abstraction pure. Conquis par des « tribus » de hackers, Internet devra alors vivre dans une culture du « don¹⁴⁴ » (Raymond 1998).

Cette mythologie de conquête et de culture tribale alimente constamment la littérature d'Internet. *The Mongoliad* (2012) de Neal Stephenson en est un parfait exemple. Une épopée pseudo-médiévale qui s'apparente à l'*heroic fantasy*¹⁴⁵ et mérite d'être analysée pour ses défauts. *The Mongoliad* peut être décrit comme une croisade des forces occidentales contre des empires orientaux. Les « bons » sont les occidentaux, les « méchants » sont les autres. C'est un roman d'action et une succession de batailles qui se lit comme un jeu vidéo si tant est que l'on peut lire un jeu vidéo. Si *The Mongoliad* n'a aucune valeur littéraire, il faut aussi lui reconnaître que cette œuvre n'a aucune prétention littéraire non plus. Mais le roman est significatif en cela qu'il illustre la contradiction au sein de la « pensée Internet » dans

¹⁴⁴ Eric Raymond. 1998. « Homesteading the Noosphere », *First Monday*. <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/1474/1389/14789>.

¹⁴⁵ *L'heroic fantasy* (qu'on appelle aussi parfois « merveilleux héroïque » ou « médiéval fantastique » est un sous-genre de la science-fiction fortement influencé par l'œuvre de Tolkien, mettant en scène des héros mythiques dans un décor médiéval également peuplé de créatures fantastiques, telles que des dragons, des fées et toutes sortes de monstres.

laquelle le hacker se voit comme un conquistador libertaire, tout en étant encore, en plus, une sorte de bon sauvage rousseauiste toujours selon Eric Raymond (Raymond 1999, XI).

Le paradoxe et la contradiction interne dans la conception du savoir et de son commerce selon Eric Raymond est qu'elle se rattache à une conception aristocratique de l'écrivain qui remonte au dix-septième et au début du dix-huitième siècle lorsqu'il eût été considéré comme vulgaire que d'écrire pour un autre but que la gloire.

Le changement de mentalité peut être daté aux débuts de la Réforme et en particulier à la fin de l'interdiction sur l'usure proclamée par Calvin. Comme l'écrit Jacques Boncompain dans *La Révolution des auteurs* :

La Réforme avec l'autorisation du prêt à intérêt pose un regard neuf sur l'argent. [...] Calvin avait levé l'interdiction du prêt à intérêt par cette question : "Pourquoi ne permettrait-on pas aux possesseurs d'une somme d'argent d'en retirer une somme quelconque quand on permet au propriétaire d'un champ stérile de le donner à bail moyennant un fermage ?" Beaumarchais [fils de protestant] et Sedaine auront recours eux aussi à la métaphore du champ pour fonder la propriété dramatique et établir ainsi les auteurs sur un pied nouveau (Boncompain 2001, 21).

La contradiction au cœur de la « pensée internet » quand on en vient à la question du copyright et de la propriété intellectuelle est que les mêmes références sont utilisées pour revendiquer d'une part l'émergence d'une économie libertaire, libérée de cette notion même de propriété, tout en utilisant la métaphore de la terre et de l'agriculture, et d'autre part l'héritage historique de l'imprimerie, la Réforme, et le fondement du capitalisme tel que le montre Weber.

Comme nous le verrons plus tard et comme il nous apparaîtra de façon évidente lorsqu'on se penchera sur l'exemple d'Amazon comme le produit type du Web 2.0, le bazar n'a rien à voir avec la culture du « don », pas plus qu'Amazon, justement.

D'après Raymond, par opposition à une conception plus moderne et bourgeoise (au sens de non-aristocratique), la culture du don est caractérisée par sa pureté. Le statut du hacker qui est la forme moderne du justicier, et une sorte de justicier qui vole aux riches pour donner aux pauvres toujours dans la conception fautive et naïve d'Eric Raymond, est garantie par la réputation qu'il se forge auprès de ses pairs.

Le hacker ne se définirait pas lui-même comme un conquistador, il lui ressemble pourtant beaucoup en partie à cause de l'ampleur de la destruction qu'il sème derrière lui. Dans *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, Raymond décrit l'activité du hacker comme un besoin

transcendant. Sa croisade le ramène encore une fois à un concept médiéval, qui précède la technologie de Gutenberg, c'est une quête à la fois spirituelle et guerrière, et c'est ce double aspect qui alimente le livre de Neal Stephenson cité plus haut, *The Mongoliad*.

En raison de sa nature messianique et de son essence religieuse, la littérature la plus représentative du Net sera logiquement mystique ou une nouvelle forme de théologie qui redéfinit la puissance et la gloire, l'avenir, l'âme, l'immortalité et la vie après la mort. En ce sens, le livre de Kurzweil *The Singularity is Near*, est l'illustration parfaite de ce que la littérature d'Internet doit être.

Il en est de même pour le livre de Geoff Gomez, *Print is Dead* (qu'on traduira par « L'Imprimerie est morte » ou « Le Livre est mort ») avec son ton prophétique et son enthousiasme naïf, il est le pendant mystique de cette littérature théologique. Si le livre de Gomez possède une qualité, c'est dans son titre qui souligne, consciemment ou pas, qu'Internet dans sa nature et ses ambitions ne peut pas être un prolongement de l'œuvre de l'imprimerie, il en est même le contraire, il n'existe pas non plus parallèlement à l'imprimerie, mais par sa nature, annihile les conséquences de l'invention de l'imprimerie et renverse le processus entamé par l'imprimerie depuis la Renaissance.

La fiction telle que nous l'avons connue même sous sa forme postmoderne, comme la contrepartie à la notion critique de « la mort de l'auteur » et comme représentation d'un moi éclaté, ne peut pas exister dans un monde créé sur l'anonymat et la conscience collective, on serait tenté de dire la conscience « collectivisée ». Nous y reviendrons quand nous nous pencherons sur les auteurs de générations prénumériques, comme Jeanette Winterson, et leurs échecs littéraires lorsqu'il s'agit d'essayer de réconcilier l'irréconciliable.

La guerre contre le copyright et la propriété intellectuelle est une preuve de plus, si ce n'est la preuve ultime, qu'Internet renverse le processus initié par l'imprimerie et dans ce cas particulier, l'imprimerie comme facteur de fixité dans les textes et la littérature. Raymond et Internet recréent une conception médiévale de la propriété intellectuelle et de l'auteur qui, comme nous le verrons, est incompatible avec la place de l'auteur dans une littérature humaine et humaniste.

McLuhan et Eisenstein témoignent tous deux de ce renversement ou de cette contre-évolution : « Déjà en 1500 toutes sortes de textes légaux étaient conçus pour le brevetage des inventions et l'attribution de la propriété intellectuelle. À partir de ces fondements, une bureaucratie naissante allait construire une vaste et complexe structure légale » (Eisenstein 1979, 120).

La fixité apportée par l'imprimerie et dont Raymond et Gomez voudraient se débarrasser est également à l'origine de la création de l'auteur comme personnage de la vie et la culture littéraire. L'auteur né de cette forme de fixité du texte appartient à la Renaissance contrairement à *the long tail*, *crowdsourcing*, *the open source* qui eux appartiennent à ce nouvel âge médiéval, c'est-à-dire l'âge d'Internet. Comme le souligne Elizabeth Eisenstein à la suite de l'invention de la presse à imprimer la question du plagiat et du vol (ou de l'*open source* selon le point de vue que l'on adopte) s'est posée immédiatement. Comme elle l'écrit : « Pour le ménestrel, les termes "plagiat" et "copyright" n'existaient pas » (Eisenstein 1979, 120).

En voulant abolir le copyright Eric Raymond donne toute sa réalité à la prophétie de Barthes sur la mort de l'auteur, mais d'une façon très différente de celle dont ce dernier l'avait envisagée. Ce qui apparaît avec Eric Raymond et Internet c'est que la mort de l'auteur n'étend pas le champ du texte, ne le libère pas d'une quelconque tyrannie interprétative, elle tue simplement le texte par sa dissolution dans l'*open source*, le *crowd sourcing*, « un méli-mélo » de textes qui se mélangent sans fin. En fait par l'intermédiaire d'Internet et sa conception médiévale de la littérature, la mort de l'auteur marque la mort de la littérature, même dans sa conception postmoderne ou postbarthienne.

Selon Elizabeth Eisenstein, la célébrité est liée aujourd'hui (ou en tous cas à l'époque où elle écrit en 1979 et avant) à une publicité écrite. Lorsqu'on débat de la notion d'individualisme à la Renaissance et au Moyen-Âge, il est important de se souvenir que la notion d'auteur et d'inventeur éponyme apparaissent au même moment et selon le même procédé.

Il est donc facile d'en conclure que le renversement de ce processus va détruire l'individualisme qui fait la notion d'auteur et sur lequel la littérature est construite depuis la Renaissance.

La question levée par ce débat est la suivante : la littérature telle que nous l'avons connue depuis la Renaissance, associée à la notion d'auteur, peut-elle survivre sans l'individualisme qui est le produit de la presse à imprimer ? La réponse est évidente : non.

Paraphrasons encore une fois Elizabeth Eisenstein : le désir de voir son œuvre imprimée (fixée à jamais avec son nom dans des index et des anthologies) est très différent du désir d'écrire des vers qui ne seront jamais fixés de façon permanente, qui pourraient se perdre à jamais, altérés, copiés ou – s'ils sont vraiment mémorables – transmis oralement et finalement désignés comme l'œuvre d'un anonyme. Jusqu'à ce qu'il devienne possible de

faire la distinction entre composer un poème et en réciter un, ou écrire un livre et en copier un, tant que les livres ne peuvent pas se classer par autre chose que des incipits, comment pourrait-on jouer le jeu moderne des livres et des auteurs (Eisenstein 1979, 121) ?

« Perdu à jamais, transmis oralement, modifié, altéré » c'est effectivement ainsi que *open source*, *the long tail*, et *crowd sourcing* abordent la littérature. Eric Raymond a la même conception de la littérature que Saint-Bonaventure, le moine franciscain du treizième siècle qui classifiait ainsi les auteurs : un scribe (*scriptor*) qui recopie sans modifier le texte d'un autre, un homme qui écrivait les textes d'un autre et les rassemblerait (*compiler*), un troisième qui écrivait à la fois les textes d'un autre et les siens mais en accordant la place principale aux textes des autres (*commentator*) et enfin un autre qui écrivait ses textes ainsi que ceux des autres, mais en donnant la place principale à ses propres textes en se servant de ceux des autres pour confirmer ce qu'il avance. Celui-là est un *auctor*. Ce qui est frappant dans cette classification médiévale des hommes de lettres est qu'il n'y a aucune place pour la composition originale d'un texte. C'est ce que nous retrouvons dans la notion de *crowdsourcing* et *the long tail* : la présence permanente de « l'autre », qui vient s'agrèger comme un auteur supplémentaire mettant fin à l'individualisme de l'imprimerie pour le remplacer par une forme de tyrannie de la majorité, dans le cadre ce que Ong a appelé l'oralité secondaire.

Par opposition l'imprimerie, en créant de nouvelles façons d'être « auteur » et en établissant des droits à la propriété littéraire, sapait les concepts plus anciens d'autorité collective, non seulement concernant les compositions bibliques mais également la science, la philosophie et le droit (Eisenstein 1979, 122).

Dans la réalité quand il prétend créer une nouvelle forme de liberté par « le partage », Raymond interprète par un contresens, voulu ou pas, le fait que l'individualisme né de la fixité et la répétabilité de la technologie Gutenberg a créé une plus grande liberté d'expression, libérant la parole de l'autorité collective et la tyrannie de l'anonymat qui répond à cette tyrannie de la majorité que nous évoquions plus tôt.

Nous verrons d'ailleurs quand nous aborderons la notion de succès littéraire définie par Internet (en particulier autour du roman *Fifty Shades of Grey* de E.L. James) que celui-ci est très exactement le produit de cette tyrannie de la majorité et que, dans la logique d'Internet, la qualité s'apparente à la quantité.

II. Le Ciel et l'Enfer. Amazon, l'économie de la littérature et la croisade contre le copyright

De même que la machine à écrire et le type de roman qui en est sorti ou *typewriter novel* prouvent que le contenu d'un livre diffère selon qu'il est écrit au rythme de touches métalliques ou du mouvement d'une plume d'oie, nous nous efforcerons dans ce chapitre de démontrer que la façon dont le livre est conçu économiquement, et même sa distribution par un clic d'ordinateur plutôt que par un camion, change le contenu de la page et la façon dont un auteur va la remplir, d'autant plus si cette page n'est pas faite d'encre et de papier mais s'affiche sur un écran de verre.

Pour ce faire nous verrons d'abord quelles sont les conséquences de Web 2.0, la deuxième ère d'Internet, sur la littérature et les textes et la façon dont ces textes et cette littérature ont été conçus par les créateurs de Web 2.0. Nous verrons en conséquence comment la notion de succès en littérature a évolué et nous essaierons d'analyser la façon dont les auteurs qui ont démarré leurs carrières dans le monde traditionnel de l'édition ont abordé d'un point de vue littéraire, le problème que leur pose l'écran et tout ce dont cet écran est capable (et que très souvent l'auteur lui-même n'est pas capable de faire, son écran contenant un savoir technologique supérieur à lui-même quand l'auteur choisit justement la technologie comme sujet.)

1. L'Enfer

Le Ciel, le Paradis, le jardin d'Éden ne peuvent exister sans leur contraire, c'est nécessité théologique inévitable. Compte tenu de ses racines théologiques il était inévitable qu'Internet produise un ensemble de moralités (au sens de *morality plays*¹⁴⁶) dont la première est la naissance, la croissance, le déclin et la chute du Darknet (aussi parfois appelé Darkweb).

¹⁴⁶ Les moralités étaient un genre dramatique très populaire au XV^e et XVI^e siècles, une pièce allégorique illustrant un concept chrétien (cf. "Morality Play". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Consulté le 21/10/2021. <https://www.britannica.com/art/morality-play-dramatic-genre>).

Comme son nom l'indique, le Darknet est une entité mystérieuse qui apparaît d'abord dans les années soixante-dix et dont les activités sont liées à la dissidence et au crime. C'est l'équivalent de l'Enfer dans la théologie technologique. De même que Satan était à l'origine l'ange préféré de Dieu, le Darknet est né des mêmes bonnes intentions qui caractérisent Web 2.0 (pour résumer, le désir d'ouvrir la créativité, de la libérer en transformant les « consommateurs » de la culture en simples « utilisateurs »). Le Darknet se considère comme le fruit du combat entre l'individu et les grandes corporations. La nouvelle technologie devait rendre le pouvoir au peuple, comme en témoigne J.D. Lasica dans son livre *Darknet* (2005) sous-titré « La guerre menée par Hollywood contre la génération d'Internet ».

Or le Darknet est allé bien au-delà de la « liberté » de ses apôtres, en offrant un espace aux *cam-girls*, *snuff movies* et au commerce de la drogue.

Parallèlement le Darknet a ouvert un espace dans lequel a pu se développer une théorie trans-humaniste assez proche de celle de Kurzweil. Les tenants du transhumanisme croient en la compatibilité de l'esprit humain et de la technologie et la survie de l'humanité dans une réalité simulée et posthumaine. Le principal idéologue derrière cette doctrine étant Frank Tipler, lui aussi influencé par Teilhard de Chardin et le concept de la *noosphere*. On en trouve l'illustration littéraire dans *Zero K.* de De Lillo, comme nous l'avons vu précédemment.

Malheureusement, il est dans la nature de projets tels que l'établissement des cieux sur la terre d'engendrer la violence dans les croisades menées en leurs noms. C'est ce qui s'est produit lorsque les enthousiastes de ce nouvel horizon culturel se sont dressés contre les formes plus anciennes d'organisations culturelles. Jaron Lanier a témoigné de la violence de ce qu'il appelle « l'accession tribale » et qui comprend la lutte contre les droits d'auteur.

Dans les chapitres suivants, nous nous sommes penchés sur la pensée et le fonctionnement de *Creative Commons*, marquant la fin de l'individualité et le triomphe de l'anonymat.

2. Web 2.0, la fin de l'individualité et le triomphe du concept de *crowd wisdom*

Web 2.0 a été défini d'abord par Tim O'Reilly (2005) dans un essai publié sur le Net et qui instituait un modèle pour la « nouvelle génération de programmes informatiques ».

Selon les principes d'O'Reilly l'accumulation, la masse, le nombre finissent par établir la vérité. Web 2.0 est construit sur la notion de participation. Nous verrons dans ce chapitre comment la quantité et les chiffres ont altéré la notion de qualité dans le domaine de la littérature et les conséquences sur ce que nous appelons la littérature de l'opposition entre édition et participation, ou plus précisément, entre l'*Encyclopedia Britannica* et Wikipédia.

Le projet d'O'Reilly se présente comme une appropriation et une démocratisation du contenu, devant faire du Net « une sorte de cerveau global ».

La conséquence étant que n'importe quel lecteur peut s'appropriier le texte et le modifier, se débarrassant ainsi de la « répétabilité » et du caractère fixe de la littérature. En fait cette technique qui permet d'agrèger sa participation personnelle à tout texte, grâce aux blogs, Instagram etc. représente un retour aux techniques narratives orales des sociétés primitives.

3. *Crowdsourcing* ou le processus d'écriture mis à l'envers

Le besoin de participation au processus de création est tel que certains auteurs ont eu recours au procédé inverse à celui de la création littéraire dans la mesure où ils sont allés consulter leurs lecteurs sur ce qu'ils désiraient. C'est là le principe du *crowdsourcing*, littéralement « approvisionnement par la foule » (qu'on traduit également en français par « production participative »). Lorsque le processus de création consiste à se tourner vers le public pour lui demander ce qu'il souhaite lire ou entendre ou voir, il se fait l'écho de ce qui était le contraire de la définition de l'âme selon le concile de Latran, c'est-à-dire une âme contraire à celle individuelle que devait redéfinir la technologie Gutenberg. L'auteur devient un prêtre qui rassemble les voix de « la foule » il dirige un chœur qui se fait l'écho ou la caisse

de résonance des souhaits et aspirations des fidèles, plutôt que de présenter un point de vue ou une œuvre personnelle aux lecteurs dans laquelle il exposerait sa vision du monde.

Selon Gomez, écrivains et éditeurs se doivent de voir ce changement comme « positif », un progrès, la notion d'une littérature participative s'inscrit dans la lutte entre le bien et le mal dont se réclament les apôtres d'Internet. Car comme nous l'avons vu Internet et son fonctionnement aspirent à l'hégémonie (on le verra également dans l'aspiration à l'hégémonie économique que représente une entreprise comme Amazon). Or comme le démontre Ashley Montagu (Montagu 1957, 193-4), le besoin de dominer est caractéristique des sociétés non-littéraires.

Compte tenu de leurs influences, de leur identification à des formes radicales de la Réforme protestante, les zélotes d'Internet ont créé une spiritualité bâtarde en mêlant des concepts incompatibles, et ce souvent dû à une incompréhension de la nature de ce qu'est le monde lettré ou littéraire, voire un refus de comprendre et un rejet.

Ce que le langage employé par les zélotes d'Internet et leurs détracteurs révèle, c'est que le débat tourne à la guerre de religion. Ainsi Mark Helprin par exemple évoque la sacralité du texte imprimé. Tandis que les livres touchent au sacré, toujours selon Helprin, la contrepartie de cette rencontre avec le sacré est le vœu de pauvreté qui redéfinit l'opposition entre la gloire et l'argent dans un contexte aristocratique et prébourgeois, reproduit ici sous la forme d'une sorte de « bohème littéraire ».

Internet en revanche a tué ce genre ou ce sous-genre de la littérature que cette « bohème » évoque, la vie littéraire comme sujet littéraire. L'imprimerie a créé « l'homme de lettres ». C'est un néologisme d'après Febvre et Martin d'utiliser ce terme avant l'invention de l'imprimerie, il s'ensuit logiquement que le renversement opéré par la technologie numérique va à son tour rendre ce terme et l'idée qu'il contient obsolètes.

On peut avancer que la littérature serait parfaitement capable de survivre à la disparition du roman d'initiation littéraire ou du « portrait de l'artiste en jeune homme » ainsi que des biographies ou autobiographies littéraires, mais leur disparition est symptomatique de la mort de cette vie littéraire et de la production littéraire liée à la notion d'auteur.

De façon similaire, l'idée du manuscrit et de l'élaboration progressive d'un texte comme fondement d'un certain type de critique devient sans objet avec l'usage de l'ordinateur. La simple touche suppr. a effacé cette forme de critique comme le Tipp-ex même n'aurait pas su le faire.

À travers Web 2.0 et ses triomphes, nous voyons donc des similarités entre la Renaissance et la présente révolution culturelle dans la mesure où avec la Renaissance nous sommes passés d'un monde pré-Gutenberg à un monde post-Gutenberg : nous sommes passés d'un mode de lecture à un autre. Nous assistons aujourd'hui à une forme de régression vers un primitivisme pré-littéraire.

En ce qui concerne Web 2.0, le commerce et les bénéfices forment la fondation et l'épiphanie de la spiritualité que ce mode de pensée cherche à promouvoir. En cela l'idéologue libertaire que ces technologistes revendiquent est plus proche du « laissez-faire » d'un point de vue économique que d'une idée à la Proudhon, selon laquelle « la propriété c'est le vol ».

Les deux exemples qui nous intéressent le plus ici, car ils demeurent dans le domaine de l'édition et du livre, et qu'O'Reilly présente comme les meilleurs exemples de Web 2.0, sont Wikipedia et Amazon.

4. Wikipedia et Amazon, fleurons de Web 2.0. La nouvelle économie de la lecture et de l'écriture

Le principe de Wikipédia est d'attribuer la même valeur à l'opinion qu'à la connaissance. C'est le type même du livre né de la culture d'Internet : il recouvre tout dans la mesure où il aborde tout ce qu'on pourrait aborder dans une encyclopédie et plus encore depuis la Seconde Guerre Mondiale jusqu'à Leonardo Di Caprio, en passant par n'importe quel écrivain désireux de produire un article sur lui-même, l'astrophysique, le football ou la chirurgie esthétique. C'est un livre participatif, anonyme et nullement fiable. C'est aussi un livre parfaitement représentatif d'Internet puisque ne pouvant être contenu entre deux couvertures, il est indéfinissable. Il est l'image même de l'infobésité, d'une accumulation de connaissances inutiles partagées par diverses tribus. Encore une fois, les zélotes d'Internet préféreront la notion d'abondance à celle d'infobésité. En plus d'être au-delà de toute définition, Wikipédia, étant anonyme, est aussi hors de contrôle.

L'aspect supplémentaire qui en fait le parfait livre d'Internet est le refus ou l'incapacité de distinguer entre diverses valeurs. Comme l'indique Jaron Lanier, Wikipédia excelle dans deux domaines, la pop culture et la science. Dans la première catégorie la fiction et la vérité se confondent, faisant que tout ce que dit Wikipédia est vrai. Dans la deuxième, il y a une vérité « préférée », il est donc plus plausible de parler d'une même voix.

Dans ce sens, Wikipédia est parfaitement cohérent avec la notion de qualité sur Internet d'un point de vue littéraire, dans la mesure où la qualité ne rentre pas en compte, comme nous le verrons lorsque nous étudierons *Fifty Shades of Grey* comme phénomène éditorial et littéraire. Pour Amazon également, la qualité se mesure en quantité. Tout jugement de valeur sur la qualité ou la véracité d'une œuvre doit être mis en suspens. Tant pour Amazon que pour Wikipédia en tant que livre représentatif d'Internet, la notion de succès s'exprime en chiffres.

D'après les wikipédiens (ils se sont donné un nom) ou partisans de Wikipédia, leur encyclopédie comporte l'ensemble de la connaissance humaine, lui conférant ainsi une qualité messianique car Wikipédia représente « tout » d'après certains critiques comme Richard Cook. Wikipédia est une entité politique et religieuse qui existe pour le bien commun, anonyme et gratuite. Peu importe qu'elle soit imprécise, inexacte, elle est la seule encyclopédie construite, toujours selon Richard Cook, sur « l'amour » et « l'enthousiasme » plutôt que l'expertise.

Toutes les caractéristiques mentionnées ci-dessus permettent d'annoncer par le biais de Wikipédia la qualité ou l'absence de qualité qui va caractériser la production littéraire d'Internet.

5. Amazon et tout

Dans le texte fondateur de Web 2.0 par O'Reilly, Amazon apparaît comme le reflet de Wikipédia d'un point de vue commercial et éditorial. Surtout, grâce à l'illusion que l'utilisateur participe. Amazon promeut une sorte de sentiment d'appartenance à une communauté auquel le client participerait et elle se présente comme donnant voix au chapitre à tous et à toutes et transforme un utilisateur en critique potentiel. Dans un article dans *The Atlantic* sur Amazon, Franklin Foer révèle que les *Amazonians*, pour reprendre le terme

qu'utilisent les employés d'Amazon pour se désigner eux-mêmes, voient leur compagnie non pas seulement comme un détaillant, un studio de production de films, un développeur d'intelligence artificielle, mais surtout comme un « ensemble de valeurs ».

Quant à la qualité de certaines « critiques » il suffira d'aller consulter le site pour se rendre compte qu'elles laissent à désirer.

Crowdsourcing, *crowd wisdom* et *the long tail* sont autant d'aspects de la notion de « quantité comme qualité » et que les zélotes d'Internet appellent « l'abondance ». Ce culte de la quantité et des gros chiffres démontre que dans son ensemble de valeurs Internet s'oppose même à la notion de qualité littéraire. Car pour Internet la « qualité » renvoie à une forme élitiste de culture dont il faut se débarrasser comme le souligne Jaron Lanier (2010) dans son chapitre : « Le rejet de l'idée de qualité entraîne la perte de qualité. »

Dans cette étude, nous nous concentrerons sur les conséquences littéraires de ce rejet de la qualité et nous verrons ce que d'un point de vue littéraire Internet désigne comme un succès, comme une œuvre littéraire de qualité.

Les points de convergence entre Amazon et Wikipédia démontrent qu'un modèle économique va transformer la façon dont on lit et même la façon dont on « produit » de la littérature.

Si Wikipédia est entièrement anonyme, il est un élément visible qui permet d'assimiler Amazon à Internet, le caractère et les idées de son fondateur, Jeff Bezos. Amazon couvre tous les domaines au point de s'être donné pour mission de donner forme à l'avenir et de sauver la race humaine grâce aux voyages dans l'espace, réunissant parfaitement le messianisme et la culture geek. Amazon est imprégné du même esprit religieux qui caractérise Internet. Amazon a créé sa propre mythologie. On ne saurait trop souligner dans une étude littéraire l'importance d'Amazon et de son fonctionnement en raison de son influence, non seulement sur la vente de livres, mais comme le dit Brad Stone parce que cette entreprise a été la première à comprendre la promesse que contenait Internet et a modifié définitivement la façon dont nous lisons et dont nous consommons. De plus, pour arriver à ses fins Amazon doit détruire « l'ordre ancien » de la consommation notamment de la consommation de livres en ce qui nous concerne. L'association de ces deux verbes « lire » et « consommer » est révélatrice de la vision du monde selon Amazon et particulièrement de la vision de la culture.

Parler d'Amazon ne se limite pas à parler d'un détaillant ou d'une librairie ou d'un modèle économique, c'est aussi évoquer la forme moderne de la littérature et que nous étudierons dans le chapitre consacré à *Cinquante Nuances de Grey*.

Comme le fait remarquer Foer dans l'article qu'il lui consacre dans *The Atlantic*, Amazon n'est pas tant une entreprise commerciale qu'un système. Et ayant à sa disposition la technologie numérique, Bezos peut construire sa fortune sur « tout », c'est-à-dire tout ce qui peut se monnayer, depuis les livres d'occasion jusqu'aux voyages dans l'espace. Il a lui-même baptisé Amazon « *the everything store*. » On comprend également ce que l'aspiration à « tout » peut avoir de mystique.

La culture de Jeff Bezos est fondée sur la lecture d'œuvres de science-fiction depuis Jules Verne jusqu'à Isaac Asimov. Et comme la plupart des zélotes d'Internet, il s'emploie à retirer la notion de fiction à la science-fiction pour en faire une pure réalité scientifique. Cette réalité scientifique, comme nous l'avons déjà mentionné sera ce qui permettra de sauver l'humanité en colonisant l'espace.

Pour créer cet avenir radieux, il est nécessaire de mener une révolution contre ceux que Bezos et les geeks désignent comme « les gardiens » de l'ordre ancien, ou *gatekeepers*.

6. Lawrence Lessig : *Creative Commons*

Lawrence Lessig est un des principaux apôtres de cette nouvelle ère. Il est aussi pour cette raison un des principaux adversaires du copyright et de la propriété intellectuelle. Lessig est le créateur de *Creative Commons*. Son combat est à la fois idéologique, mystique et économique. Il est en fait sans que Lessig lui-même l'affirme le parfait reflet culturel d'Amazon, sous une forme libertaire. Lessig se réclame de la culture du « don » ou *gift culture* en anglais, une culture qui s'échange dans un village global sans limite. Car dans son essence, Internet se préoccupe plus de l'accès que du contenu et en cela se rapproche d'une forme de société orale, ou en tout cas, d'une société qui n'est pas fondée sur le livre.

7. Web 2.0 et les conséquences économiques d'une conception médiévale de l'âme et de l'*open source* pour l'auteur et la notion de propriété littéraire

Nous voyons le rapport entre le concile de Latran comme le passage d'un mode d'existence individuelle et Internet dans la notion de l'individu selon Internet et la place de l'individu dans la culture qu'Internet produit. Internet a ramené la littérature à une conception médiévale d'elle-même. Le rapport entre le lecteur médiéval et le texte permet de comprendre l'incompatibilité entre Internet et la production littéraire depuis la Renaissance. Tel un lecteur du Moyen-Age, un lecteur d'Internet, en raison de notions telles que *the long tail* ou *crowd wisdom* ne voit pas le contenu d'un texte ou d'un livre comme l'expression d'une personnalité ou l'opinion d'un individu, mais comme une partie d'un ensemble de connaissances appartenant à tout le monde.

Avec cette perte d'individualité, la mort de l'auteur apparaît non plus comme dans l'appareil critique des années soixante et de Barthes en particulier, mais comme une fusion avec la technologie, et la perte de l'individualité est ce qui inspire des auteurs comme Rushdie dans *Fury*, des auteurs qui précèdent l'ère numérique, et exprime cette perte d'individualité avec une certaine dose de nostalgie naïve.

Il est d'ailleurs significatif que Raymond se réfère à la cathédrale dans *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* car Internet marque l'avènement d'un nouveau Moyen-Âge. Nous pouvons même conclure avec McLuhan que l'*open source* n'appartient pas à une culture de l'écrit ou en tous cas de l'imprimerie.

8. Aller-retour entre utopie et dystopie

L'aspect sectaire de Silicon Valley tel que l'ont évoqué des « apostats » comme Jaron Lanier et Andrew Keen n'est pas fortuite ni d'importance secondaire et elle explique la violence avec laquelle ils défendent leurs convictions face à leurs adversaires.

Ce caractère autoritaire de l'utopie portée par la technologie électronique est également symptomatique d'un monde qui n'est pas celui de l'écrit. D'autant plus que les civilisations ou les peuples qui ne sont pas de l'écrit ont tendance à vouloir soumettre le monde à leur contrôle, toujours si l'on en croit McLuhan. En conséquence, le thème de l'Apocalypse revient régulièrement dans la littérature inspirée ou produite par Internet comme une illustration de cette confusion en l'utopie, l'avenir radieux et l'autoritarisme qui caractérise Internet, y compris dans ces mêmes utopies qui y sont produites. Car malgré les incompatibilités que nous avons soulignées, Internet produit une littérature qui lui est propre et dont le meilleur exemple est sans doute *Fifty Shades of Grey* (*Cinquante Nuances de Grey*).

9. Fifty Shades of Grey et la révolution culturelle

L'apparition plutôt que la publication de *Fifty Shades of Grey* sur la scène littéraire en 2012 révèle un phénomène qui se développait sans que le monde de l'édition en prenne conscience volontairement ou pas.

Fifty Shades of Grey a été traduit en cinquante-deux langues et s'est vendu à vingt-cinq millions d'exemplaire. On n'avait encore jamais connu un tel succès commercial dans l'édition. L'ironie est que *Fifty Shades of Grey* n'a jamais vraiment été publié au sens habituel ou traditionnel du terme.

Le succès de ce roman, d'abord sous forme d'*e-book* disponible par tranches ou par épisodes, puis sous forme de livre d'encre et de papier, a renversé le processus de l'édition : envoyer un manuscrit à un éditeur avec ou sans l'intermédiaire d'un agent, la décision du directeur de la maison d'édition ou du comité de lecture de publier le manuscrit, le travail de l'attaché de presse, la distribution du livre dans des points de vente, les retours des invendus passés au pilon ou l'impression d'une nouvelle édition.

Avec *Fifty Shades of Grey* aucune de ces étapes dans le processus d'édition n'a été nécessaire et on a pu assister à la distribution d'un livre, ou plutôt d'un roman qui n'était pas vraiment un livre, sous une forme immatérielle sans que l'auteur ait à attendre la décision d'un éditeur.

Le caractère révolutionnaire de cette réduction du processus d'édition réside dans le succès commercial de l'œuvre à l'échelle mondiale.

Ce qui pose de nouvelles questions : est-ce que l'autopublication ou le compte d'auteur est devenue acceptable après avoir été considéré comme un choix humiliant au point d'être désigné en anglais par les termes *vanity publishing* ?

Ce qui établit aujourd'hui la respectabilité de l'autopublication est le chiffre, les ventes. Il est significatif que lorsque l'on demande à Google quels sont les plus grands succès de l'édition, les premiers titres à apparaître sont des autopublications.

Les ventes des autopublications récentes sont d'autant plus importantes qu'elles se passent de distribution. La distribution sur Internet ne réclame qu'un clic là où on avait besoin de camions dans la galaxie Gutenberg.

Le travail d'un éditeur peut-il consister à trouver des titres vendeurs sur Internet pour les traduire dans le langage de la technologie Gutenberg ? Et en conséquence peut-on

assimiler les chiffres de vente et la qualité ? L'édition a toujours établi une hiérarchie construite sur la notion de qualité de l'œuvre, sans prendre en compte les chiffres de vente (entre Barbara Cartland et e.e. cummings¹⁴⁷ pour prendre des exemples extrêmes). Mais la respectabilité nouvellement acquise de l'autopublication peut-elle détruire cette hiérarchie qui s'appuie sur le pouvoir de l'éditeur comme créateur d'un ensemble de valeurs communes ? Est-ce que l'éditeur a perdu son rôle de contributeur, en vertu de ses choix à la définition des canons de la culture ?

Finalement, dans le long terme, est-ce que cette nouvelle forme de technologie peut marquer la mort de l'édition traditionnelle et détruire un certain nombre de métiers, tels qu'éditeur, attaché de presse, distributeur etc. comme la voiture a mis fin à l'existence de certains métiers tels que palefrenier, sellier, maréchal-ferrant, etc. ?

Avec la disparition de l'édition vient celle d'un sous-genre littéraire, celui de la chronique littéraire et de la vie littéraire. Avec l'immédiateté de la publication qu'offre Internet, le roman d'initiation qui décrit l'auteur devenant un auteur devient obsolète. Le professeur Solanka dans *Fury* de Salman Rushdie appartient à cette représentation de l'écrivain. Et cette représentation appartient à son tour, consciemment, au « monde ancien ».

De même qu'Internet détruit « le portrait de l'artiste en jeune homme » comme genre, ou pour lui donner un nom plus précis le roman d'initiation littéraire, Internet marque la fin de l'histoire littéraire, car cette histoire ne suit plus une évolution chronologique mais se fonde à la structure fragmentée et en mosaïque d'Internet. L'autoédition et la réorganisation des réseaux sociaux sur le mode électronique plutôt que dans des cafés littéraires rend impossible d'envisager des mouvements littéraires qui ont marqué l'histoire tels que le romantisme, le postmodernisme, etc.

L'opposition au copyright et à la propriété intellectuelle s'alimente d'autre part d'une image élitiste de l'édition qui justifierait sa destruction.

Par opposition, les histoires de succès financiers rencontrés par des auteurs autopubliés sont devenues quasiment une sorte de genre journalistique. Ces histoires sont d'autre part

¹⁴⁷ e.e cummings (1894-1962) est un poète expérimental qui comptait parmi ses premiers admirateurs Valery Larbaud, John Dos Passos et T.E. Lawrence. Il est l'auteur de douze recueils de poèmes dont *Tulips and Chimneys*, influencés par Pound et Swinburne selon *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985, 245). Barbara Cartland, elle, n'a pas droit aux honneurs de cet ouvrage. Elle est l'auteur de 728 livres publiés de son vivant et 160 à titre posthume. Tous sont traduits en trente-huit langues et vendu à sept cent cinquante millions d'exemplaires. Ces romans appartiennent tous à la littérature sentimentale, on les décrit également comme des « romans roses ». Aucun d'eux n'a jamais récolté les éloges de la critique.

racontées comme des revanches prises sur l'institution. L'expression *legacy books*, c'est-à-dire les livres de papier et d'encre, relèguent le livre à une forme d'héritage d'un lointain passé, destiné à mourir. De même que pour désigner les éditeurs new-yorkais, les internautes utilisent l'expression *The Big Six*¹⁴⁸, qui suggère un pouvoir dominateur qui impose un monopole et écrase les auteurs.

Fidèle à la mythologie du *self-made man*, l'autopublication ou *self-publishing* a créé une nouvelle image de l'écrivain, plus démocratique, plus axée sur l'économie transformant l'auteur en un homme d'affaire et un amuseur. L'image de la tour d'ivoire est abolie. L'auteur est désormais « socialisé », notamment par l'intermédiaire des réseaux sociaux, il ne fait plus partie d'une coterie ou d'une élite. Il devient un entrepreneur qui promeut son produit.

L'auteur doit s'adresser à ses « fans », c'est le mot qui est désormais employé pour décrire les lecteurs. La littérature Internet se décrit elle-même comme « *fan fiction* ». La conséquence est que l'on suspend son jugement critique, le propre d'un fan étant de ne pas avoir de distance avec l'objet de son adoration. Nous verrons plus tard avec la littérature électronique que le fan va même devenir un « joueur ».

Il n'est pas étonnant compte tenu de cette nouvelle définition de l'auteur et du lecteur, ainsi que de la notion de qualité s'exprimant en chiffre de vente, que la plupart des auteurs publiés considérés comme des succès selon les critères d'Internet appartiennent à la littérature de genre. Le plus souvent, la science-fiction, le fantastique et la littérature érotique. Il est significatif que *Fifty Shades of Grey* est à l'origine d'un sous-genre de littérature érotique désigné par les termes de *mommy porn*. La prédominance de la littérature de genre chez les auteurs autopubliés sur Internet s'explique également par le fait que dans la littérature de genre, la sensation produite chez le lecteur ou « fan » est plus importante que l'émotion esthétique, C'est particulièrement perceptible dans l'horreur, le thriller, la pornographie. D'autre part, il est plus facile en tant que lecteur de produire un pastiche acceptable d'un roman de genre en se pliant aux règles qu'il impose.

C'est loin d'être la première fois que des œuvres qui ne suscitent pas l'approbation des critiques et des institutions littéraires rencontrent un vaste succès commercial. Toutefois, d'un point de vue historique, nous pouvons donner à ce phénomène une dimension supplémentaire en rapport avec la technologie numérique, comme le font Guglielmo Cavallo et Roger Chartier

¹⁴⁸ Pour les nommer, ces six éditeurs ou groupes éditoriaux sont Rando House, Penguin, HarperCollins, Hachette Book Group, McMillan et Simon & Shuster.

dans un chapitre intitulé « Absences de canons et nouveaux canons » dans *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental*.

10. La pornographie ou l'essence d'Internet

La plupart des best-sellers sont méprisés par l'élite littéraire ou l'establishment littéraire. Ce qui est frappant dans le cas de *Fifty Shades of Grey*, c'est que l'extrême succès commercial remporté par le livre est à la mesure du rejet des critiques. Salman Rushdie déclarait dans le *Telegraph* qu'il n'avait jamais lu un livre publié aussi mal écrit. Comme nous l'avons dit, *Fifty Shades of Grey* n'a pas tant été publié qu'imprimé après avoir été lancé sur le Net. D'autre part, la question de savoir si c'est bien ou mal écrit n'entre pas en jeu. *Fifty Shades of Grey* doit être jugé en fonction de ce qu'Internet produit comme littérature et cette littérature doit être vue en fonction de ce qu'est l'essence d'Internet. Nous n'entrerons pas dans ce résumé dans le débat entre « érotisme » et « pornographie » tels que ces deux termes ont pu être définis par Bataille et Baudrillard. On conclura que l'érotisme est une forme de pornographie constitutionnellement esthétisée et accepté.

En revanche, *Fifty Shades of Grey* sacrifie totalement l'esthétique littéraire à l'effet produit, à la sensation, c'est de la pornographie en lettres plutôt qu'en images et en cela représente le parfait produit d'Internet.

Contrairement à ce que pense Salman Rushdie le roman d'E.L. James n'est pas « mal écrit », il n'est pas écrit du tout. Le style, ou plutôt le texte qui n'a pas de style, consiste en des associations de mots évidentes, des clichés de langage et des onomatopées.

De même, *Yellow Dog* de Martin Amis est également un produit d'Internet, malgré une évidente ambition littéraire qui nourrit l'œuvre, parce que le roman est une accumulation de scènes sans aucun sens que l'on ne peut évaluer qu'en termes critiques comme « dingue », « zinzin » (*goofy, zany, far out*). Ces deux romans, par leur absence de structure, reproduisent d'autre part le mode de lecture en mosaïque d'Internet.

L'autre aspect qui fait de *Yellow Dog* et *Fifty Shades of Grey* des produits représentatifs d'Internet est leur contenu pornographique, même si *Yellow Dog* cherche à représenter l'*obscenification* de la société et *Fifty Shades of Grey* à offrir une forme de gratification.

Dans son essai *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), Sianne Ngai a défini les catégories esthétiques de la période postmoderne, les divisant en trois : le *zany* ou « dingue », « farfelu », *the interesting* ou « intéressant » et *the cute* au sens de « mignon », voire « mignard et sentimental à la fois ».

Même si ces genres peuvent à l'occasion se répondre et se compléter (par exemple l'avant-garde qui se veut « intéressante » aurait aussi des caractéristiques « mignonnes » ou « mignardes »). Mais la catégorie qui nous intéresse le plus ici en rapport avec la littérature d'Interne est le *zany* ou « dingue », « farfelu », « délirant », etc. Nous verrons quand nous étudierons la littérature électronique que cette catégorie esthétique, qui s'applique à la l'esthétique postmoderne, fait que la littérature peut se fondre en toutes sortes de *happenings*, de jeux vidéo et de promenades en tous genres.

De toute évidence *Yellow Dog* se place dans cette catégorie du *zany*. Et en se plaçant dans cette catégorie, la littérature postmoderne annonçait l'esthétique de la littérature d'Internet, l'esthétique fragmentée qui est celle du jeu vidéo et que l'on retrouve dans *Snow Crash*.

L'équation entre ces deux formes d'esthétique pose à nouveau la question de la qualité littéraire. La légitimité de la littérature postmoderne tout comme de la littérature d'Internet est-elle la même que celle d'un jeu vidéo ?

Finalement, dans des exemples tels que *Yellow Dog*, ou *Snow Crash*, voire *Fifty Shades of Grey*, le caractère *zany* hérité d'Internet fait de ces œuvres et de leurs esthétiques des caricatures d'elles-mêmes, une forme d'art pour l'art sans autre esthétique que leurs propres esthétiques respectives et triviales.

Dans *Yellow Dog*, la pornographie prend les qualités esthétiques du *zany* par le biais de l'exagération, de l'accumulation, ce que *Yellow Dog* et *Fifty Shades of Grey* démontrent également, chacun à sa façon, en étant « *zany, cute et interesting* ». La principale marchandise offerte par Internet est la pornographie.

Paradoxalement, l'invention de l'imprimerie a aussi eu une incidence sur la distribution de textes pornographiques.

Le fait que l'imprimerie et Internet sont tous eux à l'origine d'une nouvelle conception et d'un nouveau développement de l'imprimerie souligne encore une fois que nous sommes

face à une transition d'une tradition orale vers une tradition écrite, puis de cette même tradition écrite vers Internet ; car la pornographie sur Internet, qu'elle soit « écrite » ou « filmée », possède les mêmes « qualités » ou caractéristiques que le reste de la production d'Internet et en particulier sa production littéraire. On remarquera également concernant le développement de la pornographie à la suite de l'invention d'une nouvelle technologie est parallèle au développement d'une nouvelle forme de piété.

La pornographie sur Internet est comme le reste des productions d'Internet, participative, gratuite, amateur. Et *Fifty Shades of Grey* correspond parfaitement aux critères d'Internet, qui offre des films pornographiques sans metteur en scène, sans ingénieur du son, etc. Nous avons avec *Fifty Shades of Grey* un texte amateur qui peut être commenté, transformé à volonté. Dire avec Salman Rushdie que *Fifty Shades of Grey* est mal écrit est l'équivalent de dire que la pornographie amateur filmée sur webcam et diffusée sur le Net est du mauvais cinéma.

L'anonymat et la participation que l'on trouve dans l'habitude propre aux utilisateurs d'Internet de donner son opinion sur n'importe quel sujet, depuis un film jusqu'à un T-shirt en passant par l'actualité internationale souvent en des termes extrêmement virulents, offre une forme de voyeurisme participatif dont *Fifty Shades of Grey* est d'autant plus représentatif que « l'œuvre » offre divers degrés de violence.

Si l'Enfer de la Bibliothèque nationale en France témoigne de l'existence d'une littérature clandestine, pornographique ou autre, lue dans le secret voire « la honte », dans le cadre d'Internet ce type de lecture n'est pas marginal, cette forme de pornographie et de voyeurisme sont le fondement même de la culture d'Internet.

Ce sentiment de l'omniprésence de la pornographie sur Internet a été partagé par les auteurs qui ne sont pas des « natifs » de la technologie numérique, notamment Martin Amis qui l'exprime dans *Yellow Dog*.

Associée à Internet, cette pornographie crée un sentiment d'exil, toujours chez Amis, exil à la fois du monde moderne et dans le cas précis de *Yellow Dog* du monde « des femmes », signifiant par là que la pornographie sur Internet réduit le rapport entre hommes et femme à la sexualité et plus particulièrement au voyeurisme.

Tout comme *Fury*, de Salman Rushdie, *Yellow Dog* revendique son passéisme. Pour Amis ce qui caractérise le vingt et unième siècle est ce qu'il définit comme l'*obscenification* de la vie quotidienne. L'omniprésence de la pornographie fait partie pour Amis des raisons de vouloir se réveiller et échapper au cauchemar que représente le présent.

L'ironie de ce positionnement vient de ce que la pornographie est omniprésente dans le roman, ce qui dénonce son omniprésence dans le monde moderne. Ainsi *Yellow Dog* devient à la fois un reflet et un produit de ce que le roman aspire à critiquer, dénigrer ou à représenter comme une forme d'Apocalypse. Si *Yellow Dog* offre un reflet acceptable d'Internet, d'un point de vue littéraire, c'est un échec. Sa structure fragmentaire ou plus exactement son absence de structure échoue à maintenir l'attention du lecteur, l'aspect répétitif du roman qui s'attache sans cesse aux mêmes thèmes, et l'humour à la fois adolescent et lourd, pèsent sur le style.

Pour appuyer l'idée que la pornographie ou le genre sont les seules formes de littérature compatibles avec Internet, on pourrait avancer qu'aucune fiction littéraire autopubliée n'est jamais sortie d'Internet.

Toutefois, certains auteurs autopubliés sur Internet se revendiquent comme des auteurs littéraires. Un de ces auteurs est Jane Davis, qui publie sur une plateforme du nom de Reedsy, et qui explique le choix de l'autopublication par le fait que les éditeurs traditionnels « sur-éditent » les textes et se refusent à prendre des risques dans le domaine de la créativité.

Son dernier roman *An Unknown Woman* (2015) a reçu le prix du Meilleur roman autopublié pour l'année 2015 et est entièrement écrit en clichés de langage et en expressions toutes faites.

Ce style trahit d'ailleurs une fois de plus qu'Internet est une culture de l'oralité, car dans l'oralité l'usage du cliché est constant. L'oralité préférera toujours le « preux chevalier » et la « belle princesse » au « chevalier » et à la « princesse ». Ce qui ne marque pas forcément la « supériorité qualitative » d'une fiction écrite sur une fiction orale mais simplement le fait que le style de l'oralité ne convient pas à la littérature.

D'autres auteurs, en revanche, adoptent l'attitude contraire à celle des auto-publiés. Notamment Ros Barber qui affirme que l'édition traditionnelle est pour elle un choix de pauvreté mais qu'elle se refuse catégoriquement de s'autopublier. Ros Barber considère le parcours imposé par l'édition traditionnelle comme une forme d'apprentissage (là encore on retrouve la notion de « portrait de l'artiste en jeune homme » et de sacrifice) qui permet d'atteindre à la qualité littéraire.

11. *Crowdsourcing* ou quand les « fans » écrivent votre roman

La disparition ou la soumission de l'auteur à ses fans, c'est-à-dire ses lecteurs, a été poussée plus loin encore par l'inversion du processus créatif, dont Clara Todd offre le meilleur exemple. Le modèle économique du *crowdsourcing* a dans son cas été appliqué à l'écriture.

À travers les réseaux sociaux, l'auteur demande au lecteur ce qu'il a envie de lire et le lui sert, en quelque sorte. Il n'y a rien de nouveau à donner au public ce qu'il réclame, tous les choix d'auteurs particulièrement commerciaux et sans qualité littéraire évidente dans l'édition traditionnelle en témoignent. Ce qui est révolutionnaire dans ce cas précis, c'est le fait de demander directement au public ce qu'il veut, sans avoir à le supposer ou le deviner.

Il en découle que le roman de Clara Todd, *After*, est le produit d'une étude de marché et de tests auprès des consommateurs. L'ironie étant que ce roman se présente comme une révolution qui détrônerait l'emprise des grandes maisons d'édition. Le but principal du roman étant d'obéir aux souhaits de ces lecteurs, il en découle logiquement que le style et les qualités esthétiques sont loin d'être une priorité et en effet sont aussi inexistantes dans *After* que dans *Cinquante Nuances de Grey*.

Ce qui fait d'*After* l'ultime produit d'Internet, plus encore que *Cinquante Nuances de Grey*, vient de ce que ce roman est le produit d'une *app* ou application et d'un algorithme. Or ce que nous appelons littérature est incompatible avec cette forme de technologie. Et ce pour deux raisons, l'application Wattpad utilisée pour la création de ce roman fait de l'écriture un exercice qui n'a rien à voir avec l'écriture mais appartient à l'oralité par le biais de la participation. Ensuite parce qu'un algorithme est incompatible avec le drame du choix qui est au centre de la conception littéraire de la vie.

Il en découle qu'un troisième aspect rend cette forme de création incompatible avec la littérature, en ce qu'elle est le produit de ce que Morozov a appelé la « tyrannie du solutionnisme ».

De même, le fait que de jeunes auteurs utilisent leur téléphone comme outil d'écriture suggère qu'ils demandent de leurs lecteurs une réponse ou une réaction immédiate. Par l'intermédiaire des applications et des réseaux sociaux, l'écriture devient un dialogue qui se confond avec une forme d'assistance téléphonique, voire d'annonces matrimoniales. D'après les utilisateurs de ces applications l'immédiété du texte assimile la littérature à une forme

de thérapie qui n'aurait rien à voir avec la maîtrise du langage, le style, voire l'intrigue, la construction d'un personnage.

La conséquence suivante, partant de cet état de fait, est que nous ne disposons pas d'instrument, d'appareil critique pour évaluer cette littérature d'un point de vue littéraire.

III. Quand les vieux écrivains aspirent à devenir des natifs de la technologie numérique : écrans de verre, voitures et voitures sans chevaux

Si les natifs de l'ère numérique ne considèrent pas les algorithmes comme un mystère et peuvent organiser un roman autour d'un écran de verre, les natifs de l'ère « prénumérique » comme Martin Amis, Salman Rushie ou Jeanette Winterson, se sont sentis obligés d'aborder la technologie numérique comme sujet et de s'interroger sur les conséquences de son existence ainsi que de son fonctionnement sur la littérature. Les questions que posent ce projet sont les suivantes : la technologie peut-elle être un sujet littéraire ? Quel type d'écriture peut rendre compte du fonctionnement intérieur d'un écran de verre ? Et comment doit-on écrire ce type de fiction ?

Le chapitre suivant démontre comment ces auteurs n'ayant pas grandi avec cette technologie, comme Jeanette Winterson, essaient d'imiter sur le papier le fonctionnement de la technologie électronique et comment ils essaient de « domestiquer » (en quelque sorte) cette technologie pour la rendre compatible avec la technologie de Gutenberg.

Puis, nous comparerons cette littérature avec celle qui a été créée (est-elle vraiment écrite ?) pour l'ordinateur et par l'ordinateur. La question sera là de savoir si cette littérature est vraiment de la littérature.

1. Les natifs de l'ère pré-électronique et leurs écrans de verre

L'angoisse que crée Internet chez les écrivains contemporains est à la fois économique et esthétique. Car ces écrivains ont vu leur revenu diminuer en raison de la révolution causée par Internet dans le monde de l'édition. Selon Marshall McLuhan dans *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, tout moment correspondant à la prise de conscience du passage d'une transition entre deux cultures et deux technologies, tel que nous le vivons avec l'avènement du digital, est un acte de traduction de chacune de ces cultures dans les termes de l'autre.

La question pour les écrivains contemporains sera de savoir traduire un art typographique en une forme d'oralité ou en tous cas en une forme contraire à la forme littéraire pré- ou post-Gutenberg.

Le travail d'auteurs contemporains comme Martin Amis ou Jeanette Winterson dans les œuvres citées ici peut être assimilé à une laborieuse traduction d'un monde littéraire en un monde non littéraire. En conséquence, ils ont repris des livres appartenant à la tradition littéraire pour les réécrire dans un contexte d'Internet et avec le langage de la technologie numérique. C'est ainsi que *The Power.Book* représente pour une large part une traduction d'Orlando de Virginia Wolfe. De la même manière, *Fury* de Salman Rushdie peut être assimilé à un pastiche de *Herzog* de Saul Bellow.

L'échec esthétique et littéraire de ces livres vient de ce que la traduction est faite à l'envers. La seule façon d'approcher le Net pour ces écrivains et les héritiers du postmodernisme serait de traduire le post-Gutenberg en termes littéraires. Car un livre par définition ne peut appartenir à l'oralité.

Si un *e-book* peut-être une reproduction photographique de pages, Jeanette Winterson dans *The Power.Book* essaye de reproduire le procédé inverse. La page tente de reproduire l'écran.

Mais si le roman de Winterson parvient à donner l'impression d'être un produit d'Internet, c'est en étant une accumulation de lieux et d'histoires. Si Internet échappe à toute définition définitive, il en est de même du *Power.Book*.

De façon similaire, *Fury* de Salman Rushdie et *Yellow Dog* de Martin Amis se constituent en un catalogue de « non-événements », une succession de « non-sujets » et de « non-intrigues ».

On pourrait avancer que ces deux derniers romans ne traitent pas de façon explicite d'Internet ou de la culture d'Internet, mais surtout, il faut considérer que même si on ne peut pas classer les romans de Dickens ou de George Eliot comme des essais déguisés en fiction sur les conditions économiques et sociales du dix-neuvième siècle, nous pouvons rétrospectivement établir des parallèles sur l'incidence, dans ces romans, du monde dans lequel ils ont été écrits. La révolution industrielle et ses conséquences sociales sont présentes dans les romans de Dickens et Eliot. Il ne s'agit pas uniquement de l'arrière-plan mais d'une présence implicite dans tous les aspects du roman.

Ironiquement, *Yellow Dog* est une bonne représentation d'Internet car le contenu imite de façon limitée (paradoxalement) l'infobésité du Net, c'est-à-dire que nous sommes en présence d'une accumulation de faits, de personnages qui transforment le roman en un catalogue, figure littéraire de la stérilité spirituelle, de l'absence de spiritualité, si l'on en croit les écrivains décadents comme Huysmans qui ont largement fait usage de cette figure stylistique, notamment dans *À Rebours* comme nous l'avons déjà souligné.

De la même manière Jenny Turner dans *The London Review of Books*, décrit *The Power.Book* comme une accumulation d'éléments sans lien ou cohérence.

Et les critiques, tels que John Sutherland dans *The Guardian*, ont éprouvé face à *Fury* de Salman Rushdie le même embarras lorsqu'il s'agissait de définir le sujet ou la justification de ce roman.

2. L'angoisse et la télévision

Dans *Purity*, Franzen se fait l'écho de Jeanette Winterson lorsqu'il évoque ses inquiétudes quant à « la littérature de télévision », mais en partant d'un point de vue opposé, aspirant sans doute à être moins élitiste et à prendre le lecteur en considération. Franzen ne se place pas dans la même « tour d'ivoire » que Winterson, dans sa posture postmoderne. Mais la différence s'arrête là. Lorsqu'il s'agit d'écrire sur les nouvelles technologies et sur la relation entre technologie et littérature comme sujet, les erreurs restent les mêmes.

Comme *Zero K* et *The Book of Numbers*, *Purity* présente dans son intrigue tous les éléments des romans qui traitent d'Internet. Pour résumer, *Purity* est une jeune Américaine

qui aime se faire appeler Pip, comme le personnage principal des *Grandes Espérances*. Les références à Dickens sont nombreuses, le personnage du romancier dans le roman s'appelle Charles et écrit de très longs romans avec de très nombreux personnages, des intrigues principales et secondaires. Franzen multiplie les destinations comme l'exige l'idée du village planétaire et de l'exotisme selon Internet et que l'on a rencontrée dans l'orientalisme de Winterson¹⁴⁹ notamment, ainsi que de Joshua Cohen dans *Book of Numbers*. Pip va travailler pour l'équivalent de Wikileaks en Bolivie. Le reste de l'intrigue se perd dans des méandres caractéristiques d'histoires d'espionnage plutôt naïves et des intrigues sexuelles, l'idée que le roman illustre étant que l'identité est faite de secrets.

Même si *Purity* est plus axé sur l'intrigue que *The Power.Book*, ces deux romans se présentent comme en étant en opposition à la télévision et d'autres part comme des romans qui « doivent » s'adapter aux nouvelles technologies, si l'on en croit l'entretien de Franzen dans *Le Monde*, cité dans le cours du texte : « Le roman est une forme vivante qui doit s'adapter à la technologie. » Dans ce même entretien, Franzen met le roman en compétition avec la télévision et affirme qu'il est très ennuyeux de lire des descriptions, remarque qui nous rappelle le conseil de Jeff Gomez, de sauter les descriptions à la lecture de George Eliot.

Or la littérature est un art du langage, l'équivalent serait d'affirmer que l'art du portrait doit se limiter à la photographie ou à la peinture. Pourquoi la littérature devrait considérer comme « ennuyeux » un portrait en mots ? Ou encore doit-on penser que depuis l'invention des ondes radiophoniques, le dialogue est une forme littéraire inutile ? Comme pour Winterson, l'échec esthétique et littéraire de Franzen dans *Purity* vient du sentiment de l'obligation que la littérature contracterait auprès d'une forme de technologie qui lui est incompatible.

3. Ce que nous font les écrans de verre

Ce qui est significatif dans la réaction de Franzen, tout comme dans celle de Winterson, est l'intuition d'une incompatibilité entre l'écran de verre et la page, et que nous

¹⁴⁹ Cet orientalisme s'exprime par petites touches, un voyage en tapis volant, un capitaine de bateau musulman (un personnage qui s'appelle Ali) et ainsi de suite.

trouvons également dans la toute première phrase du livre de Joshua Cohen *Book of Numbers* : « If you're reading this on a screen, fuck off » (Cohen 2015, 1).

La contradiction est que ces auteurs tout en rejetant ce qu'ils appellent "l'écriture télévisuelle" essayent d'appartenir à une autre forme d'écran : celle de l'âge digital.

Effectivement, en tant que nouvelle forme de technologie, la télévision doit être opposée à la technologie Gutenberg car elle est « l'ancêtre » de la technologie numérique et de l'ordinateur dans son développement exponentiel. D'après Roger Chartier, la télévision a commencé à modifier les habitudes de lecture avec le zapping. Par la commande à distance, annonçant le passage vers une culture orale et *audile* pour reprendre le terme de Marshall McLuhan, la télévision créait une forme de lecture en mosaïque, qui caractérise aujourd'hui Internet et qui n'est possible que par l'intermédiaire d'un écran de verre. Il s'agit d'une lecture déstructurée qui s'attache à des fragments non homogènes qui ne peut être que le fait du spectateur ou du lecteur. Il en découle qu'un auteur qui voudrait imposer à son lecteur ce type de lecture échouerait forcément puisque la démarche s'appuierait sur une contradiction dans les termes. Par opposition, la page, le papier, le livre construisent tous une forme de lecture progressive et linéaire. La « participation ludique » que mentionne Chartier dans la lecture que crée le zapping ne peut exister que sur l'écran.

4. Quand on se rend compte que l'écran de verre n'est pas une page

Il est significatif que l'invention de l'ordinateur soit contemporaine de celle de la télévision et peut en être considérée comme une extension, héritant des composantes esthétiques et de l'essence du « show » télévisé. En tant qu'écran de verre, la télévision et l'ordinateur sont tous deux considérés comme des fenêtres, des passages, des portes, des transitions, autant d'allégories que les auteurs utilisent régulièrement.

La possibilité de « voir à l'intérieur » sans avoir à « ouvrir » est ce qui définit la télévision et ce qui dans les années cinquante s'appliquait à tous les aspects de la vie, y compris le four de la cuisine. En ces sens, la télévision, comme l'ordinateur, a satisfait le voyeurisme du public beaucoup plus que le cinéma ou la littérature avaient pu le faire. Dans son essai sur la culture visuelle, Karal Ann Marling a étudié le fait que « Grâce à la porte de verre Lucy

peut jeter un coup d'œil dans le four et elle l'adore parce qu'elle peut voir à l'intérieur. Or, le fait de voir est central à la signification des années cinquante¹⁵⁰ » (Marling 1994, 14).

Avec Internet nous franchissons un pas de plus dans ce processus, dans la mesure où l'utilisateur est le producteur de son propre show de télé-réalité et il en est aussi le scénariste. La littérature d'Internet est l'extension de cette conception car l'auteur est aussi son propre éditeur, son propre attaché de presse et son relecteur. Les réseaux sociaux et la littérature d'Internet sont un perpétuel remake de l'émission *This is Your Life*, devenant *This is My Life*¹⁵¹.

De plus, de même qu'Internet fonctionne sur un mode kaléidoscopique, l'idéal pour la télévision et l'écran de verre est de fournir une démultiplication de soi, un écran dans l'écran, une multiplication d'écrans au sein de l'écran, qui va bien au-delà de la doctrine de l'art pour l'art ou le concept du texte dans le texte qui ne peut être que linéaire.

L'idéal des années cinquante, annonçant celui de l'âge électronique, est la création d'écrans dans l'écran, voir le monde à travers une fenêtre comme on pouvait voir le rôti à travers la fenêtre du four. Karal Ann Marling dans son étude démontre que la télévision et les années cinquante consistent à « regarder les gens dans leurs habitudes et à être regardé à son tour ». Elle en conclut que de ce point de vue-là, les années cinquante appartiennent à un monde *post-literate*, c'est à dire à un monde d'après la culture de l'écrit.

C'est là la conclusion à laquelle nous sommes arrivés sur le monde issu d'Internet, en commençant par l'écran de verre comme ouverture sur le monde qu'il soit politique, esthétique, littéraire ou celui de la littérature numérique.

On ajoutera que si la télévision a créé un monde d'après Gutenberg, ou *post-literate*, Internet a également recréé un monde primitif, pré-Gutenberg. Ce qui finalement revient au même dans la mesure où nous ne sommes plus dans un monde « lettré », un monde de l'écrit.

Ce qui nous permet de voir l'ironie au centre de l'œuvre de Franzen et de Winterson, dans la mesure où ils cherchent à se distancier de la télévision en imitant un autre écran de verre.

¹⁵⁰ Ma traduction. Il n'existe pas de traduction française de cet ouvrage à ce jour.

¹⁵¹ *This Is Your life* est une émissions américaine, radiophonique diffusée entre 1948 et 1952, puis télévisée à partir de 1952 dans laquelle on retrace la vie d'un invité en faisant appel à des personnes qui l'ont connu. L'émission a par la suite été adaptée en Grande-Bretagne et en France.

L'autre contradiction tient à ce que Winterson adopte une posture élitiste en utilisant un instrument qui déclare : tout le monde peut écrire, tout le monde est écrivain, tout se vaut, la notion de qualité n'est pas à prendre en compte.

Par opposition à ces œuvres qui tentent d'imiter le fonctionnement de l'écran, un roman comme *The Circle* (2013) par Dave Eggers, prend l'écran de verre comme sujet et illustre ses pouvoirs de surveillance, mais il le fait en ayant recours à un langage littéraire. *The Circle* traite d'Internet sans imiter Internet.

En raison du caractère télématique d'Internet et du roman d'Internet, les outils traditionnels de la critique sont inadaptés pour rendre compte de la qualité littéraire des œuvres qui s'attèlent à imiter la technologie numérique ou même qui prennent la technologie numérique pour sujet. Chaque livre abordé ici doit donc être considéré comme « un phénomène », une conséquence d'un état technologique incompatible avec la notion de littérature telle que nous l'avons connue à l'ère de Gutenberg.

Nous verrons dans le chapitre suivant comment la littérature créée spécifiquement pour l'écran entraîne cette contradiction et cette incompatibilité encore plus loin.

5. Les voitures sont-elles des calèches sans chevaux ?

Ce chapitre s'attache à analyser – ou doit-on dire décrire ? – un certain nombre d'ouvrages – peut-on dire « romans » – conçus et réalisés plutôt qu'écrits et publiés, sans avoir jamais eu affaire d'une façon ou d'une autre avec le papier comme ceux que nous avons évoqués au tout début de la thèse. Nous nous référons maintenant essentiellement à Katherine Hayles dont les travaux ont inspiré ceux des critiques que nous avons cité précédemment, notamment Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin et Kristian Rustad, et qui ont servi de fondements à la critique du roman ou de la fiction ou de la littérature numérique.

Le processus de désincarnation de la littérature annoncé par les autres formes de désincarnations liées à Internet, telles que la Singularité, entraîne un éloignement toujours plus grand entre littérature et page imprimée telle que nous l'avons connue, une série de rayures ou de lignes noires sur fond blanc.

Or, la lecture sur écran modifie non seulement le contenu, le mode de lecture mais aussi le procédé de création. Pour établir un parallèle, la machine à écrire a créé un autre type de dialogue et un autre type de romans qu'on désigne en anglais par les termes de *typewriter novel*.

Pour répondre à la question que pose la page mouvante sur un ordinateur : « la littérature électronique est-elle vraiment de la littérature ? », on pourrait être tenté de vouloir définir la littérature, une tâche aussi vaste et impossible à accomplir que celle de définir Internet. Toutefois, on peut affirmer que la littérature telle que nous l'avons connue jusqu'à présent est née de l'imprimerie.

Pour ce qui est des caractéristiques essentielles de l'imprimerie qui a créé cette littérature, nous retiendrons, suivant les pas de Macluhan et Eisenstein, la large distribution, la standardisation, la rationalisation et la codification, la fixité et le changement cumulatif, l'amplification. Finalement, nous pourrions nous demander : la littérature peut-elle exister en dehors du commerce du livre et de l'édition ?

6. Qu'est-ce que la littérature électronique ?

Dans son étude de ce nouveau « genre » qu'est la littérature électronique, ou cette nouvelle forme de création, Katherine Hayles, évoque une « troisième approche » sur « l'intermédiation entre qui mêle inextricablement le corps et la machine » (Hayles 2008, 3). On reste dans la logique de la Singularité, la transformation de notre corps en un corps de gloire par la technologie.

Les deux questions que se pose Katherine Hayles en conséquence de cet entremêlement ou de cette fusion du corps et de la machine sont d'abord, la compréhension de la littérature électronique comme faisant partie de la tradition littéraire, et ensuite, l'introduction des transformations nécessaires pour redéfinir la littérature.

La littérature qui nous concerne ici est selon Katherine Hayles « née de l'ordinateur » et est censée être lue sur un ordinateur.

Dès le début de la démonstration, la nécessité d'adapter le langage à cette nouvelle forme jette un doute sur la légitimité littéraire de cette littérature, en commençant par le fait

que ces créations ne peuvent pas être désignées comme des livres mais comme des « objets digitaux » ou des « créations hybrides » ou des « monstres emplis d'espoirs » (Hayles 2008, 4).

Le langage critique de Katherine Hayles traduit sans cesse un certain malaise, une hésitation par exemple : « en donnant à ces œuvres le nom de littérature » au point qu'elle est obligée d'inventer un nouveau langage qui corresponde à ces « monstres » pour les décrire comme *the literary* (qui diffère de « littérature »), qui est un nouveau concept permettant d'inclure une littérature sans mots. Katherine Hayles pose la question : « Un travail artistique doit-il obligatoirement contenir des mots ? » Ce à quoi on est tenté de répondre par une autre question, si le travail artistique en question est littéraire : « Que pourrait-il contenir d'autre ? » Le *literary* qu'on ne saurait traduire en français par le littéraire s'oppose selon Katherine Hayles à « la littérature à proprement parler » qui serait une forme « d'art verbal ».

7. Les diverses époques et genres de la littérature électronique

On considère comme la période « classique » de la littérature électronique celle qui présente des blocs de texte sur l'écran, comme une reproduction photographique d'une page. Nous ne détaillerons pas dans ce résumé les œuvres qui constituent les piliers de chacune des époques de la littérature électronique, nous nous contenterons d'évoquer les aspects conceptuels de cette littérature et nous soulignerons leur incompatibilité une fois de plus avec l'idée de littérature.

Dans cette nouvelle conception d'une littérature participative, comme l'exige la nature d'Internet, le lecteur n'est plus passif, il est un « interactor », il participe et modifie le texte. Et il le modifie physiquement, non pas seulement par sa lecture ou son interprétation. Dans cette littérature le lecteur peut modifier le parcours ou les choix d'un personnage par exemple.

Cette fiction interactive s'assimile finalement à une forme de jeu, une version électronique des livres pour adolescents présentés comme « le livre dont tu es le héros » où l'action se modifie en fonction des choix du lecteur, si ce n'est que dans ce cas précis, on est plus proche d'un jeu vidéo que d'un choix établi et finalement fixé sur le papier.

De même que le créateur abandonne sa créativité à la machine dans la littérature d'Internet ou en tous cas dans sa conception, il lui abandonne également « son corps ». Il en découle qu'il existe également deux sortes de lecteurs : le « lecteur humain » et la machine. On en arrive donc à envisager une littérature sans auteur ni lecteur. Ce qui suscite cette autre question : une telle littérature vaut-elle la peine d'être envisagée ?

Par opposition, si la littérature de genre manipule le lecteur car c'est un reproche que fait Katherine Hayles à la littérature traditionnelle, et en particulier la science-fiction et le roman policier qui peuvent être assimilés à des jeux, il n'en reste pas moins que dans ces cas, le seul joueur est l'auteur dans la mesure où c'est lui qui manipule le lecteur.

Dans le cas de la littérature numérique, le lecteur sous ses nombreux aspects « reactor », « joueur », etc. manipule l'auteur sous ses nombreux aspects, détruisant le champ commun à l'un et à l'autre et aux lecteurs entre eux. En un mot, le texte sur lequel la notion de littérature est bâtie n'existe plus, car la littérature numérique s'est débarrassée de la notion de reproductibilité.

De même, la littérature numérique se débarrasse de l'autre aspect de la technologie Gutenberg, la transportabilité.

Si l'auteur doit abandonner sa créativité à la machine, c'est aussi la machine qui détermine les limites et les formes de cette création et les démarcations de la littérature. Si la machine domine et dicte les formes de création littéraire, c'est la machine, notamment l'ordinateur, qui va déterminer si l'on a affaire à un jeu vidéo ou à de la littérature, obligeant les critiques comme Katherine Hayles à utiliser des expressions telles que « une sorte », « une espèce » etc. L'absence d'un langage critique claire pour analyser les « créations » que donne Katherine Hayles comme des exemples de littérature vient du fait que la littérature électronique ne peut être considérée que depuis un point de vue critique qui n'existe pas.

Pour communiquer avec la machine, toujours selon Katherine Hayles, le « lecteur humain » (peut-il être autre chose ?) se doit donc de créer un nouveau langage désigné comme une forme de « créole ». Ce créole serait alors un langage hybride, qui emprunterait à la fois à une langue vivante et au langage du programmeur. Intéressant choix de vocabulaire qui suggère que l'accouplement de l'humain et de la machine (car Katherine Hayles décrit également la lecture comme une expérience corporelle et sensuelle) serait à l'origine d'une nouvelle race. Katherine Hayles nous donne plusieurs exemples de ce nouveau créole dont *The Glide Project* de Diane Reed Slattery, Daniel J. O'Neill et Bill Brubaker. Là, l'œuvre incarne le langage visuel de *Glide*, représenté en une série de gestes qui s'apparentent à une

danse mais qui ne peuvent pas être exprimés car ils n'ont pas d'équivalent verbal. Un autre exemple est *Tgarden* de Sha Xin Wei dans lequel les technologies de la réalité virtuelle sont utilisées pour enregistrer les mouvements de danseurs qui s'efforcent de créer un nouveau vocabulaire gestuel (Hayles 2008, 21).

Nous avons vu jusqu'à présent que dans la littérature électronique, le lecteur est un « interacteur », le livre est un objet qui ne contient pas nécessairement de mots, et maintenant, le langage de cette littérature n'est pas un langage naturel et n'est pas forcément compréhensible, il n'est pas étonnant en conséquence que la critique doive se transformer en autre chose que la critique pour approcher ce type de création.

En fait, la conclusion de ces contorsions de langage pour décrire la littérature électronique est que celle-ci s'assimile à une forme de *performance art*, aux happenings du pop art, au mieux, plutôt qu'à de la littérature.

Par extension, la littérature qui s'attache à décrire ses objets, s'assimile, elle, à une sorte de mode d'emploi.

8. Incarnation, matérialité et la littérature numérique

Le sentiment d'angoisse qui émane des théoriciens et des écrivains d'Internet quant à l'immatérialité de leur production leur inspire de nombreuses réflexions sur « l'incarnation » et la « corporalité ». Cette angoisse est particulièrement perceptible lorsque l'écrivain d'Internet voit son œuvre comme éphémère. C'est pour cette raison que se pose la question du stockage.

Dans la perspective d'une critique de littérature numérique la question du stockage est aussi celle de la matérialité du texte. Elle est un prolongement du contexte idéologique que nous avons abordé plus tôt lorsque nous nous sommes penchés sur la notion de *long tail* ou *crowdsourcing*. Pour une critique de littérature numérique comme Hayles, la littérature électronique « reflète une subjectivité nouvelle caractérisée par une nouvelle distribution des connaissances, qui implique des acteurs humains et non-humains » (Hayles 2008, 36).

Comment un « acteur » non-humain peut participer à une nouvelle forme de subjectivité est pour le moins surprenant – au pire il s’agit là d’une contradiction dans les termes à moins de considérer la machine comme une nouvelle forme de divinité.

D’autre part, toujours dans cette forme de pensée, la littérature électronique est décrite comme le contraire, voire le destructeur, de ce que Hayles appelle « l’idéologie du génie créatif », par laquelle il faut comprendre la notion d’individualité qui nous vient de la Renaissance. Ce qui est encore en contradiction avec l’idée que la subjectivité de l’homme ou de la machine, si elle existe, peut avoir une place dans cette forme de création.

Si précédemment, la littérature électronique a été présentée comme une forme artistique appartenant à une coterie, un petit groupe, nécessitant des équipements extrêmement coûteux que l’on ne peut trouver que dans les universités les plus chères, cette même littérature est présentée maintenant qu’elle s’est défaite de l’idéologie du génie créatif individuel comme une forme d’art libertaire : Internet devient une sorte de commune où tout appartient à tout le monde, créant un monde d’ouverture et de générosité, souvent décrit dans un langage qui oscille entre le style évangéliste et le style stalinien.

La transformation de soi et de l’âme par Internet est notamment au centre de la vision critique de Wegenstein. Son analyse critique de la littérature en réponse à la technologie est entièrement mystique et redéfinit la transsubstantiation en termes de machine et de technologie. Dans ce contexte, l’ordinateur divinisé inspire le « joueur », terme qui désigne à la fois le lecteur ou l’auteur. Les complications techniques inhérentes à la machine deviennent son « esprit » : « Le programmeur (ou auteur) fait l’expérience de la création comme une dynamique active dont l’ordinateur est au centre » (Hayles 2008, 56). Cependant dans cette forme de création également décrite comme un jeu puisque l’auteur et le lecteur sont deux « joueurs », il n’y a rien à gagner, il n’y a ni victoire, ni défaite, impliquée dans la lecture de ces textes électroniques, ce qui les rend très différents d’un jeu.

En littérature, le rôle central de la création n’a jamais été dévolu à la plume ou à la machine à écrire. Mais comme dans la littérature électronique, l’ordinateur est au centre de la création, selon Katherine Hayles elle-même, les résultats peuvent être « étonnants ». Or comment en littérature un auteur peut-il perdre le contrôle de sa création au point de ne pas savoir ce qui va sortir de sa plume ou de sa machine à écrire ?

Conclusion

La littérature électronique est une littérature sans répétabilité, sans caractère fixe, sans lecteur, sans auteur, sans texte et sans langage écrit. On peut en conclure que ce n'est pas vraiment de la littérature, et on peut se demander sans vraiment apporter de réponse ce que c'est exactement.

Si la plupart des thèses commencent par établir les limites de leur sujet, celle-ci a démarré en affirmant l'impossibilité d'une telle démarche. Internet ne connaît pas de limites. Internet se définit comme un espace sans limites. Et comme une forme transcendante de notre existence.

Inspiré par ce sens de l'infini Internet a créé une nouvelle spiritualité, contraire à celle qui naquit à la suite de l'invention de la technologie Gutenberg et qui alimente la littérature telle que nous l'avons connue depuis la Renaissance.

Ce que nous avons essayé de démontrer en analysant les différents types de livres issus d'Internet ou qui traitent d'Internet est l'incompatibilité de cette nouvelle technologie avec ce que nous avons appelé jusqu'à présent la littérature.

Pour finir, entre le moment où cette thèse a été commencée et celui où le lecteur arrivera à la fin de cette conclusion, beaucoup des éléments décrits ici seront devenus obsolètes en raison des changements exponentiels et de la nature même d'Internet. Ce point suffirait presque à prouver qu'Internet est incompatible avec la littérature qui provient de la technologie Gutenberg.

Là où l'imprimerie avait créé l'individualité et la permanence, la technologie électronique et Internet créent l'anonymat et l'obsolescence.