

‘Keep It New’: A (Re-)Introduction

Fiction is called experimental out of despair.¹
(Raymond Federman)

“Literature is news that STAYS news.”²
(Ezra Pound)

Experimental literature, in its broadest sense, might be said to ask the following question: what more can fiction do than it currently does? It is a consideration that inevitably discloses both a sense of dissatisfaction with what we have, and a trusting optimism in the future’s ability to deliver new possibilities. The experimental – from *ex-periri*: to try; literally, to cross a [‘perilous’] border (Latin *peric[u]lum*: experiment, trial, risk, danger) – has connotations of risk, excitement, innovation, and aesthetic progressiveness, but it also frequently contains a knowledge of its own possible failure: an awareness that experiments by their nature might go badly wrong. Experimental fiction is a series of attempts at change, and yet the last sixty years of literary history have been marked by an anxiety about its own possible “exhaustion” (John Barth). What if all experimentation has already been tried? Both the experimental, and its close relation the avant-garde, look forward – a potentially problematic stance given a contemporary scene that is still preoccupied with its own ‘post’ness. Indeed, as Brian McHale has recently asked, can the literature of the postmodern be experimental at all?³

Both the avant-garde and the experimental thus bear a combative relation to what has gone before, and to literary history as a whole. The avant-garde contains the promise of both an aesthetic and a political radicalness: remembering the term’s military etymology,⁴ we are cognizant of the neo or contemporary avant-garde’s aggressive potential. Perhaps for this reason, experimental or avant-garde fiction often rubs people (readers, critics) up the wrong way: it implies there is something wrong in what we already have, and seeks to usurp it. It refuses consolation, recuperation, all of the dulling and soporific effects of traditional narrative, and is subsequently accused, variously, of self-indulgence, political quiescence and solipsism. Sometimes it is too political – the history of the avant-garde in the twentieth-century, especially French “literature of commitment” (*littérature engagée*) – and sometimes it is not political enough – the characterization of experimental writers and audiences as aloof, anti-reader literary elites. Itself a marginal mode, experimental literature has obvious

¹ Raymond, Federman, “Surfiction – Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction,” in *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, ed. Raymond Federman, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981), 6.

² Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961 ed.), 29.

³ Brian McHale, “Postmodernism and Experiment,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (New York: Routledge, 2012), 141-52; also mentioned in the „Introduction,” 5.

⁴ One which made an alleged ‘New Critic’ like Roland Barthes distrust the word and align himself with the ‘rear-guard’ instead; see for instance “Réponses,” *Tel Quel* 47 (1971): 102, and Antoine Compagnon, “L’arrière-garde, de Péguy à Paulhan et Barthes,” in *Les arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle*, ed. William Marx (Paris: PUF, 2004), 93-101.

affiliations with other types of writing that have been pushed out, overlooked or ignored by the mainstream, in particular women's writing. Nevertheless, as Christine Brooke-Rose⁵ has noted, many experimental novels are surprisingly phallogentric. Does the stylistically experimental necessarily imply the politically subversive?

Experimental as a term is unavoidably evaluative: either as a synonym for unsuccessful, unreadable, or elitist; or with its positive but equally problematic associations of progressiveness and intellectual ambition. In its positive incarnation it contains an implicit condemnation of everything that is *not* experimental; it creates its own version of what it subverts or moves on from, conceiving the non-experimental as a homogenous mass. Keeping in mind Rita Felski's warning that those critics "who proclaim the subversive power of formal experimentation, fail to consider that the breaking of conventions itself becomes conventional",⁶ we ask whether the paradox inherent in the canonization of experimental and avant-garde fiction means that postmodernism has incorporated and recuperated it to the detriment of experimental literature's ability to fulfil its remit: that, is, as Eva Figes put it, "What matters is that the writer should shock into awareness, startle, engage the attention: above all that he should not engage in the trade of reassurance."⁷

This thematic issue gathers contributions on a small yet representative range of writers and/or 'trends', in no way meant to be exclusive of whatever else is happening in the field of literary experimentation, that have endeavoured to live up to the sometimes aporetic challenges of keeping the art of fiction and story-telling 'novel', straddling the divide between aesthetic-formal innovativeness and 'real-life', public awareness. Thus some consideration could have been equally legitimately given to new Apocalypse and/or post-9/11 fiction, the rise of a new brand of 'ludic literature' registering the impact of videogames and ludology on textual production and consumption, the still on-going yet differently inflected women's experimental writing and *nouvelle écriture féminine*, and even the increasingly tenuous border between 'fiction' and poetic (post-Language Poetry) non-fiction not limited to 'code poetry', etc. For those (and many others), the reader is referred to Mario Aquilina's review of Routledge's momentous, recent *Companion to Experimental Literature* – one of whose strands, multimodal literature, provides the focus for the other review, by Julia Jordan.

The opening essay, by Patrick Keller, offers an implicit bridge with one of yesterday's postmodern veins of experimentation: surfiction – a label engineered by Raymond Federman by analogy with surrealism since it likewise attempt to go beyond realism – arguing that its latest avatar has mutated beyond the porous limit between the textual (scriptural) and the filmic (script). It also provides an apt introduction to an issue whose timeline ranges across an era which saw the increasing impact of mediatization and, more generally, new technological forms of production on the literary.

⁵ One of the foremost experimental British authors of this last quarter of a century, Brooke-Rose is not represented by any essay here since a study of one of her novels, *Thru*, was published in a recent issue of the journal devoted to "Limits of Criticism / Critique of the Limits". See Marija Grech, "Degen(d)eration: Writing *Thru* the Seriously Playful," *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 1.2 (2011): 91-100.

⁶ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 159.

⁷ Eva Figes, "Note," in *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, ed. Giles Gordon (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 113.

Among the featured writers, it is perhaps not fortuitous that two essays, Molly Hoey's and Sinem Yazıcıoğlu's, focus on Chuck Palahniuk alone, arguably the most prominent illustrator of the otherwise heterogeneous, often infallibly scandalous genre of Transgressive Fiction. These two studies deal respectively with the generic issue of how to read, i.e. relate, more affectively and 'experientially' than traditionally critically, to the taboo-free excesses of transgressive prose, and, in a globalized world of generalized apocalypses and reality spectacle, with its ambivalent commodification of the 'disaster genre'. Both articles also engage in different ways with the in-built popular, mediatic vein, as well as appeal, of Palahniuk's narratives. Popularized on the back of Bret Easton Ellis's *succès de scandale American Psycho* (1991) but claiming such notorious predecessors as William Burroughs and, on the Continent, the Marquis de Sade, Transgressive Fiction can be seen as a 'global' phenomenon, whose *écrivain terrible* on the French scene, Michel Houellebecq, has therefore been included in the 'Miscellaneous' section, in David Vella's relentless clinical dissection of the 'neohuman' (rather than posthuman) macabre in two of the most famous novels by the French writer: *Atomized (Les Particules élémentaires)* and *The Possibility of an Island (La Possibilité d'une île)*.

Experimentation often comes with complexification, as is the case with Charles Palliser's intricate creations (here *Betrayals*) and Mark Z. Danielewski's masterpiece *House of Leaves*. María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro's attempt to tease out the labyrinthine intricacies of Palliser's most daunting novelistic project to date through the metonymic lens of its seventh chapter resorts to Umberto Eco's typology of mazes as well as Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome as critical touchstones while analysing the novel's late postmodern subversion of the Poesque analytic tale and detective formula. Thomas Davidson's essay highlights the spatio-temporal constructions of the mixed economy of 'real virtuality' inhabited by Danielewski's fictional house, whose online forum was famously used to extend the narrative into digital space. Danielewski's novel is seen as a meditation upon the ontological uncertainty produced by the all-encompassing ubiquity of digital technologies, which blur the boundaries between online and offline, fact and fiction, reality and fantasy.

Tracing a lineage to former constraint-driven programmes like the French Oulipo – Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* and *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* suggest themselves as comparable antecedents – Marecki and Malecka resort to translation procedures to emphasize how the interactive, collaborative 'code fiction' in Nick Montfort's textual generators of computational poetry, here chosen as an example of digital literature, calls for a 'remix' of process and output, but also input – by comparing versions of the code across source and target languages – when the constraint is the basic unit of translation.

More concerned with the spectral than with spectacle, Arleen Ionescu's creative analysis of deconstructionist critic Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*, possibly the first full-length essay on this excellent debut novel, follows up the author's plea for an alternative "reality literature" in his "Afterword" by reconstructing the virtual hauntings of his uncanny narrative by both Jacques Derrida, Royle's major critical influence, and, less predictably, James Joyce. Prompted by Royle's similarly titled essay, her 'clipping' method of transient textual visitations treats the page as a ouija board of sorts, a visual, experimental surface not only for literature's typographical freakishness but also for critical discourse.

Using as a touchstone several short stories by Lydia Davis, also a well-known translator of Maurice Blanchot into English, as well as of Proust's *Swann's Way* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and author of the chapbook *Proust, Blanchot, and a Woman in Red*, of mixed essayistic and fictional modes, Ivan Callus's essay likewise engages with the impact of theory on recent experimental fiction. Framed by its critical opening gambits, which propose a (self-)reflexive critical stance on the volume's tacit historical construction of 'experimentation', its attempt to negotiate literary criticism's, even critical theory's time-lag in the twentieth-first century makes his essay an aptly retrospective reading acting as a caveat after the main body of previous author-centred essays, hence its strategically late positioning in the issue.

Since experimentation often involves and implies by nature a redrawing of the borders and crossovers into the uncharted (hence the aptly named 'Transgressive Fiction': from *trans* + *gradi*: to step across), it is also fitting that the final essay in this issue should be the first instalment of a serial creative-cum-critical composition by Brian Macaskill on Coetzee, Joyce, ethics and mathematics. An extension of the creative-critical interface seen above, Macaskill's virtuoso "Track One, Point One" develops a contrapuntal ('fugal') method of reading these two nomadic writers in exile (*fugere* and *fugare*: to flee and to pursue) by overlaps and parallel synchronies, an unorthodox, 'transgressive' performance of sorts, to be continued in subsequent issues, which has been exceptionally allowed its own formatting experimentation.

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