

**“Full of Sound and Fury” But “Signifying Nothing”?
Poetry in a Digital Age**

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In many ways, the question posed in this essay’s title is absurd. In our society, poetry makes very little sound and causes even less fury. Still, given perennial concerns about the decline in reading, the death of the novel in particular, and of literature in general, it is worth exploring how electronic media, particularly the online environment, have affected poetry in the U.S. I will begin by describing some of what is happening with poetry in a digital environment, examine the promise of, and problems with these developments, and offer some reflections on this changing scene.

Circulation

In describing the situation, I will address two broad areas: circulation and creation. Circulation has to do with the many ways the digital environment is affecting the publication, dissemination, and preservation of poetry. Creation has to do with the way that digital media have affected poetry (and literature as a whole) as an art form, particularly how such media have influenced poetic format, structure, and language or have spawned new forms of poetry.

Let me begin with the unsurprising observation that the digital environment has pervaded the world of poetry in the same ways that it has pervaded other areas of our lives. If we go online to shop, pay bills, order airline tickets, file taxes, stream movies, make hotel reservations, download music, peruse restaurant reviews, or locate a mechanic, it should come as no surprise that computer technology plays a key role in all aspects of the publishing industry.

Those who are committed to traditional print, who love the heft of a book in their hands, the materiality and semi-permanence of ink marks on wood pulp, must admit that the world of print now depends on computers. These days most authors submit manuscripts in an electronic form, the editorial process may be negotiated largely via email, the typesetting is done by computer, and, as with most manufacturing processes, computers play a vital role not only in the printing itself but also in order fulfillment, tracking, and shipping. While it might be going too far to see books as “electronic texts for which print is the output form,”¹ computers do play a role at every stage of the publishing process.

Computers are also crucial to the business of selling books. Many books are sold online, whether via Amazon or a publisher’s website; and that may be especially true of books of poetry, which have notoriously small print runs and meager sales. (The poetry section at the average Barnes & Noble is hardly more than a shelf or two and much of that space is taken up with older, established work by dead writers (e.g. Homer, Shakespeare, Dickinson, Frost), leaving little room for new volumes.) Thus, the online environment likely makes it easier for readers to find and purchase newly published poetry. Finally, digital technology helps writers sell books in person without having to involve cash. A writer with an iPad or smart phone and the appropriate app can charge people’s credit cards at the point of sale (after a reading, for example) rather than carrying wads of cash or losing sales because potential customers do not carry cash.

The digital environment has also affected the way that literary journals present and promote themselves as well as the way they interact with writers. Most journals today have a website that includes not only subscription information but also submission guidelines and (sometimes) sample work. While years ago, writers would have to learn about journals by word

¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 43.

of mouth or the shelves of a university library or publications like *Poet's Market*, such information is readily found online and is usually more complete and up-to-date than what was available in the print sources of the past. From the website, the writer can learn guidelines (submission periods, editorial philosophy) and can often submit directly to the magazine through electronic links. Many publications even use submission management applications, such as Submittable, which enable the writer to create an account, submit to the magazine via that account, and track submissions.

Along with influencing the world of print, computer technology has made possible online publication, whether on a website or an online journal. Some journals are available in print and electronic forms; some make selections of their print material available online; and some are exclusively online. Since online publication generally is cheaper than print publication, it is possible for small online journals to exist without requiring much in the way of subscription fees, charitable contributions, or grant money to stay afloat. These online journals help de-centralize publishing, which is especially helpful for experimental or avant-garde work that is often overlooked by the poetry establishment. While it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine how many online journals publish poetry, the following search may give some sense of the quantity. The Poets & Writers website maintains a list of "LitMags." When I filtered that list for journals that published poems and were on the web, the number of journals listed was 648 (23 September 2015). With the increased number of outlets for poetry, more people can publish more poems than ever before. And increased publication may make for increased readership. As Kate Angus suggests, "Thanks to the ease of sharing poems through email and social media, it's possible that poetry's audience might be greater now than ever."²

² Kate Angus, "Americans Love Poetry, But Not Poetry Books." *The Millions* (2014): n.p.
<http://www.themillions.com/2014/07/americans-love-poetry-but-not-poetry-books.html>

Since one of the strengths of the online environment is its ability to supply lots of information very quickly, it has helped make more poems (and related information) more accessible to more people. For example, the Poetry Foundation website provides links to articles, interviews, podcasts, and videos; it offers a poem a day; and it has an extensive database of information about poets along with a way to search for individual poems. According to one count, “the Poetry Foundation’s website receives tens of millions of unique visitors each year.”³ A similar site is maintained by the American Academy of Poets (poets.org), which, according to its website, sponsors the original poem a day. Each day that service distributes via internet and social media a poem to “300,000 plus readers”.⁴ The website also provides biographical and critical information on over 2,700 poets and an archive of over 6,000 plus poems.⁵ Providing access to individual poems is the primary function of PoemHunter.com. Its database is searchable by poem, poet, and quotation. It, too, provides lists of poems and offers a poem a day. The database is extensive, as a few examples will illustrate: Shakespeare has 404 poems, Donne 193, Keats 218, and Sexton 188. According to its search bar, the database contains “1,333,561 poems from 124,112 poets.”⁶

The digital environment also makes it possible to preserve, access, and disseminate audio and video materials. As a result it is relatively easy (not to mention cheap) to find recordings of poems whether read by the author or others. On YouTube, for example, my search of “poetry reading” yielded 197,000 results (24 September 2015). The first four poets (videos) listed were e.e. cummings (read/performed by Pearls of Wisdom) (212,234 views); Charles Bukowski

³ Angus, “Americans Love Poetry,” n.p.

⁴ Angus, “Americans Love Poetry,” n.p.

⁵ www.poets.org

⁶ www.poemhunter.com

(170,355 views); Donald Hall (62, 526); and Ted Kooser (76,570). A search of “spoken word poetry” brought 102,000 results. Many of these videos have had an astonishing number of views. For example, in the two years since it was posted, Lily Meyers’s “Shrinking Woman” has had over five million views (24 September 2015).

Creation

While the circulation of poetry has clearly been affected by computers and the online environment, the question still remains whether (and in what ways) the digital environment has affected the creation of poetry. In other words, have digital technologies spawned new forms of literature, particularly of poetry. The answer is yes. These new forms are referred to by the umbrella term “electronic literature.” As N. Katherine Hayles explains in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, “electronic literature” refers to works you could neither compose nor play or perform without digital technology. You need a computer and the appropriate hardware. Such literature excludes “print literature that has been digitized”; instead, it is “‘digital born,’ a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer.”⁷ Furthermore, Hayles suggests, “electronic text remains distinct from print in that it literally cannot be accessed until it is performed by properly executed code. The immediacy of code to the text’s performance is fundamental to understanding electronic literature, especially to appreciating its specificity as a literary and technical production.”⁸ Though the field is only several decades old, it already includes a wide variety of forms, as this partial list by Hayles makes clear:

Hypertext fiction, network fiction, interactive fiction, locative narratives, installation pieces, ‘codework,’ generative art, and the Flash poem are by no means an

⁷ Hayles, *Electronic*, 3.

⁸ Hayles, *Electronic*, 5.

exhaustive inventory of the forms of electronic literature, but they are sufficient to illustrate the diversity of the field, the complex relations that emerge between print and electronic literature, and the wide spectrum of aesthetic strategies that digital literature employs.⁹

I will focus on Flash poetry. In this genre, the “influence of software is especially obvious,” explains Hayles, and the genre is “characterized by sequential screens that typically progress with minimal or no user intervention.”¹⁰ Let me describe several examples. In doing so, I make no claim to represent the full range of possibilities. These are simply pieces from an online anthology of electronic literature edited by Hayles and several of her colleagues. Still, I believe they give some sense of what Flash poetry is and does.

The first piece, “Birds Singing Birds’ Songs” by Maria Mencia (2001), combines audio, text, and graphics but includes no written “content” in a traditional sense. Once the reader/viewer starts this program, she is presented with a screen depicting blue sky and clouds with the clouds moving from right to left. At the bottom of the picture is a row of numbers (1-13) with a play and stop button beneath each one. Each number activates a moving graphic element and a sound; the graphic element is a bird-shape (composed of text) that flies around the sky; the sound element is a human voice “imitating” in some sense the bird’s song. Viewers can play the numbers singly or have as many birds flying and singing as they like. As Mencia explains in her introduction to the piece, she “wanted to explore kinetic typography, the animation of images and sound.”¹¹ She began with some transcriptions of bird songs and asked “some singers to sing their own interpretation of the transcription of the songs.” These interpretations became the “soundtrack” as it were for each bird shape. Later she “attached” these sounds to the “animated birds in the shape of calligrams. The outlines and letters of the text birds corresponded to the transcribed

⁹ Hayles, *Electronic*, 30.

¹⁰ Hayles, *Electronic*, 28.

¹¹ Maria Mencia, Introduction. “Birds Singing Other Birds’ Songs.” *Electronic Literature Online*, vol. 1, (2006). <http://collection.eliterature.org/>

sound made by each bird, so making the birds sing their own visual-textual compositions.” She further explains that “the visual character of the typographical character was another important characteristic in the making of each individual bird, which leads to the matter of the materiality, virtuality, and movement of the letter.”¹²

A second example, “Cruising” by Ingrid Ankerson and Megan Sapnar, combines visual images with text and sound. The main visual image is a background photograph showing a young woman putting on lipstick. Across the lower half of this photo is a sequence of grainy black and white stills, each of a small-town street scene. When the piece is played, these photographs scroll past in ticker-tape fashion (almost like a film). The words of the poem are printed across the top of these photos, and as the piece is played, a woman’s voice recites the words. The poem’s speaker, a teenage girl, describes cruising a small Wisconsin town looking for boys. Like a good spoken word poem, this piece is personal, narrative-oriented, and accessible on a first hearing. A jazz-oriented soundtrack accompanies the woman as she speaks the words. The poem also has an interactive component. By moving the cursor, the viewer can enlarge or shrink the ticker-tape (video) portion and can speed it up or slow it down; in this way, the viewer is “driving” the poem.

The third example, a poem by Robert Kendall called “Faith,” combines text in motion (graphics) and sound. As Hayles explains, the poem “uses the computer’s multimodal capabilities to create a work in which color, animation, music, and timed sequence collaborate with the verbal text to create signification.”¹³ She goes on to describe the way the poem unfolds: “As the words change position and become interpolated into new texts, they retain a hint of their previous significations through the colors that link them to their earlier appearances. The effect

¹² Mencia, Introduction.

¹³ Hayles, *Electronic*, 29.

creates a palimpsest that visually performs the vacillations the lyric voice verbally articulates as it oscillates between logic and faith.”¹⁴

Evaluation

Having described some of the ways that digital technology is involved in and is changing the poetic landscape, I now want to consider what is good, bad, or indifferent in these developments. Again, I will trace issues of circulation and then of creation.

Let me begin with the positives. Many of the things that digital technology makes possible are good. The ease with which one can access poetry online has no downside that I can see. In fact, online archives and poem-a-day features encourage people’s engagement with poetry. All of these things are positive signs that some people are still interested in poetry and that the number of people who are is larger than one might expect. The increase in publishing opportunities provided by online magazines is also good. Poetic innovation has often taken place in the realm of little magazines rather than in mainstream publications. Online publication provides the avant-garde with an increased number of outlets and with the possibility of reaching a wider audience.

While my impulse is generally to think that anything that encourages more people to read and write poetry is good, there are those who fear that more is not better. One criticism is that while more poems are being “published,” in some sense of that term, it simply means that we are inundated with mediocrity. While no one would argue that everything being published is great and enduring art, the preponderance of mediocrity does not make the situation worthless. No one, I think, would argue that playing tennis is a waste of time unless a person is good enough to compete at Wimbledon. The same holds true for poetry. There is value in the reading and writing

¹⁴ Hayles, *Electronic*, 29.

of it, even if one does it less skillfully than others. As Chesterton once said, “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.”

The charge of mediocrity also loses some force when the issue is considered historically. Most of what was written in most periods was mediocre and has been forgotten. What has endured is, we believe, the best of the past, our hope being that the cream will rise to the top. Such faith does, however, lead to a second (and more telling?) criticism which is that given the sheer number of poems being published today, real talent may not be able to rise, that the cream may get lost in a vat of mediocrity. David Alpaugh, in an article titled, “The New Math of Poetry,” admits that it is nearly impossible to determine the number of poems published each year, though he goes on to estimate that “more than a 100,000 poems” were published in 2010, and he believes that number will grow as the number of journals (many of them online) grows.¹⁵ He fears that a great poet may end up being “buried in the overgrowth” and that, he says, “would be the most devastating result of the new math of poetry. The loss would be incalculable.”¹⁶ Given the sheer volume made possible by digital technology, such a concern seems more valid now than it might have in earlier periods.

A second, and somewhat surprising, criticism of the increase in digital archives has been advanced by members of the avant-garde who fear the current situation is taking the “avant” out of avant-garde. While acknowledging that the digital environment helped many avant-garde writers publish their work and distribute it more widely (outside the channels of mainstream poetic taste and publication), these critics fear that the very online anthologies designed to preserve this work end up co-opting it for the literary establishment, producing “neutralized and depoliticized archives of avant-garde literature: at least where they comprise digital

¹⁵ David Alpaugh, “The New Math of Poetry.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010): n.p.
<http://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Math-of-Poetry/64249/>

¹⁶ Alpaugh, “The New Math,” n.p.

appropriations, a sort of ambiguous, even omnivorous curatorial activity.”¹⁷ Once this work is recognized by major cultural institutions, so the argument goes, it ceases being counter cultural.

A very interesting case in regard to weighing the positives and negatives of the digital impact on poetry is spoken word poetry. As a genre, spoken word is performance-based, often depending on tonality, facial expression, and movement as much as on word choice and verbal play. The pieces are meant to be (indeed must be) performed before an audience; in fact, many spoken word poems are not written down, and some of the poets refuse print publication. While spoken word poetry originated in African American culture of the 1960s, it connects with traditions of oral poetry that stretch back centuries. In that sense, it recovers aspects of poetry that were in danger of being lost in a print age. What digital media have provided are ways of preserving and disseminating spoken word performances, largely through video. In the last couple of decades the internet has played a key role in the growing popularity of the genre. On the upside, this technology makes the work available to a wider audience, and more importantly, it preserves the performance qualities (you can see and hear the person) along with the art form’s oral quality. The downside of the technology is that if spoken word operates, in part, by the performer developing a relationship with the audience, that relationship (in terms of actual physical presence, embodiment) is lost in a virtual environment. It is the difference, of course, between attending a live performance and watching a video of it. The video is better than nothing, but it is not the same as being there. So, digital media preserve aspects of the art form that print could not but not its totality.

In evaluating creation, specifically new art forms that fall under the term “electronic literature,” I begin with a caveat: I am not an expert in electronic literature, and I do not have a

¹⁷ David Lau, “Avant-Garde Cooptation.” The Poetry Foundation: Harriet Blog (2014).
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/04/avant-gardecooptation/>

wide exposure to it. What I am offering is my response to a handful of pieces found in one anthology. In addition to these limitations, anyone who sets himself up to judge new art forms runs the risk of one of two extremes: reactionary dismissal and uncritical embrace. With that tension in mind, let me offer my views on the small sampling of digital poems I described earlier. My principal criterion is that the poems should do something worthwhile that requires computer technology to be able to do it. I find the pieces are a mixed bag.

“Birds Singing Birds’ Songs,” for example, is the least successful of the three. While the piece could not exist without computer technology, the project is not that worthwhile. It strikes me as the kind of art in which the idea is more interesting than the work itself. My reaction on first viewing it was a mixture of “huh?” and boredom. I find watching the “birds” flying around the screen to be less engaging than a video game or Facebook. Interestingly enough, I find the idea of the project intriguing, especially its exploration of the interplay among sound and phoneme and vocalization. For me, it is the kind of work that may appeal to the intellect but that is not, in Keats’s phrase, “proved upon our pulses.”

“Cruising” is more successful in that its themes and use of language are worthwhile, though the computer-dependent parts strike me as ancillary. I find the poem’s use of language very attractive: I assent to the voice that speaks passionately out of its particular experience (cruising for boys in small town America), a particular experience that, as in all good poetry, connects to shared experiences of youth, longing, and the desire for love. I think, though, the poem would work just as well as an audio file. It is the words that please me (part of my old-fashioned sensibility), and the way they are performed is moving and appropriate—a spoken word feel. The jazz-like background music creates an up-tempo feel but otherwise adds very little to the experience. The imagery provides an appropriate visual context, but I am not sure

that context is necessary. I can just as easily imagine such scenes on my own. The ability to “drive” the poem by manipulating image size and speed, which is meant to replicate the act of cruising, does not add anything to the meaning; in fact, it seems hokey.

Finally, I find the poem, “Faith,” most successful in doing something worthwhile that could not be done without computers (though at times it verges on the gimmicky). It may be that I am responding primarily to content, valuing a poem whose topic (faith v. logic) I find intrinsically interesting and whose conclusion resolves the faith/logic tension in a way I affirm. While I do not find the soundtrack to be particularly significant (it mainly reinforces the movement of the text)—and the anthology offers versions with and without sound—I do find the animation of the text significant. The way that the words and phrases of the poem move on the screen, fade in and out, and combine with other words to become part of a new text offers a visual analogy of a thought process, one in which our words and ideas shift, take on new configurations, and result in changed understandings. As such, this aspect of form dramatizes the poem’s thematic struggle between faith and logic, and thus, is part of the meaning. That meaning is “proved upon the pulse.” Furthermore, the animation of the text is crucial to the poem’s meaning: If the words were not arranging and re-arranging, you would not get the poem, both in the sense of getting all the words of the poem and getting the sense that they morph. You could not write such a poem without the software.

What is the upshot of this brief evaluation? First, some electronic literature has more value than others, so rather than dismissing it out of hand, we should discriminate carefully. Second, evaluation criteria are based on prior experience and training; consequently they may not be adequate for evaluating new artistic forms. This observation, however, leads to larger issues regarding the differing modes of cognition required by print and electronic media.

Implications

Setting aside the issue of to what degree a given digital poem works or does not, it is worth placing this discussion in a larger context of concerns about the impact of electronic media on human cognition. While I am not a media ecologist familiar with the rich and complex conversation on this topic, I do want to bring some of these insights to bear. One of the most eloquent voices to address the place of literature in a media-saturated society is Sven Birkerts, most notably in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Originally published in 1996, this collection of essays explores what Birkerts sees as the potential losses resulting from the shift that has been taking place in our culture. In his view, the shift to an electronic world is and will be as momentous as the shift in ancient Greece when an “oral culture was overtaken by the writing culture” and the shift that occurred “after Gutenberg invented movable type.”¹⁸

Birkerts laments the increasing loss of the kind of reading experience made possible by print. “The order of print is linear,” he claims, and is “bound to logic by the imperatives of syntax.” Furthermore, it requires the “active engagement of the reader’s attention,” it is “fundamentally private,” and, since “printed material is static—it is the reader, not the book, that moves forward.” These “layered” materials “lend themselves to rereading and to sustained attention.”¹⁹ He contrasts this experience with that of the “electronic order” which he claims is “in most ways opposite.” Information travels “along a network,” the “engagement is intrinsically public,” and the contents “are felt to be evanescent” because they are subject to change “with the stroke of a key.” Visual media give precedence to “impression and image” over “logic and

¹⁸ Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), 118.

¹⁹ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 122.

concept,” so that “detail and linear sequentiality” are sacrificed. And finally, “the pace is rapid, driven by jump-cut increments, and the basic movement is laterally associative rather than vertically accumulative.”²⁰ The electronic order “encourages in the user a heightened and ever-changing awareness of the present,” which “works against historical perception.”²¹ In sum, “if the print medium exalts the word, fixing it into permanence, the electronic counterpart reduces it to a signal, a means to an end.”²²

What is of utmost importance for Birkerts is the inwardness of the reading experience, the way it connects us to what he calls “duration time.”²³ He describes the experience that reading provides in this way: “Reading, pledged to duration, refuses the idea of time as simple succession. Reading argues for a larger conception of the meaningful, and its implicit injunction (seldom heeded even by readers) is that we change our lives, that we strive to live them in the light of meaning.” Further, “What reading does, ultimately, is keep alive the dangerous and exhilarating idea that a life is not a sequence of lived moments, but a destiny.”²⁴

Birkerts is not alone in identifying two different orders. Theorists of electronic literature, such as Hayles, acknowledge differing modes of attention and describe them in terms similar to those of Birkerts. According to Hayles, “anecdotal evidence as well as brain imaging studies indicate” that the younger generation is “undergoing a significant cognitive shift.” This new cognitive mode, which she labels “hyper attention,” is characterized by “a craving for continuously varying stimuli, a low threshold for boredom, the ability to process multiple information streams simultaneously, and a quick intuitive grasp of algorithmic procedures that

²⁰ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 122.

²¹ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 123.

²² Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 123.

²³ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 84.

²⁴ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 85.

underlie and generate surface complexity.”²⁵ This mode is distinctly different from “deep attention,” which is “traditionally associated with the humanities” (what Birkerts advocates). Such attention is “characterized by a willingness to spend long hours with a single artifact [...], intense concentration that tends to shut out external stimuli, a preference for a single data stream rather than multiple inputs, and the subvocalization that typically activates and enlivens the reading of print literature.”²⁶

Birkerts sees this new mode threatening to replace the “deep attention” fostered by the print order; however, Hayles, and many like her, find the mode positive and believe that some electronic literature draws on both forms of attention: “With multiple data streams, constantly changing stimuli, and evocation of an intuitive grasp of algorithmic operation, these works appeal simultaneously to deep attention and hyper attention as part of the process transforming what it means to read.”²⁷ In this changing environment, the “interiorized subjectivity associated with print has not disappeared,” she maintains, “but it is being hybridized by a complex dynamic in which a subvocalized human voice, the characteristic mode through which print creates and performs its distinctive mode of subjectivity, is no longer the primary goal of screen displays.”²⁸ Unlike Birkerts, Hayles believes we should stop insisting on “an internalized subvocalized ‘voice’ as the standard for literary quality.”²⁹

Both parties see changes taking place in literary forms, and both describe the two modes of attention in similar fashion. Birkerts sees the story as one of displacement and loss and laments it; Hayles celebrates what she sees as hybridization, though she seems more committed

²⁵ Hayles, *Electronic*, 117.

²⁶ Hayles, *Electronic*, 117.

²⁷ Hayles, *Electronic*, 118.

²⁸ Hayles, *Electronic*, 118.

²⁹ Hayles, *Electronic*, 118.

to those forms of literature that reward “hyper attention” (an emphasis which supports Birkerts’ view of displacement).

Let me suggest two implications of these changes in literary form and attention. The first is that while electronic literature may involve new art forms, it does not involve new forms of poetry. Despite Hayles’s statement that works of electronic literature hybridize both kinds of attention, they seem more interested in engaging, exploring, and rewarding “hyper attention” than balancing it with “deep attention.” Such a shift in attention, goals, and standards is not necessarily bad, but it is different. In my limited experience, the new work has left me cold, a reaction that is likely a result of personal taste and of my generation. Having been trained in the habits of “deep attention” fostered by reading print and not having had my brain function shaped to the same extent as today’s youth by early and repeated exposure to digital media, I prefer linearity, a single stream, and sustained attention. Ironically, rather than providing increased stimulation, the constant change, the surface skimming, of the new technologies bores me. No doubt partly I respond best to those works that fulfill my expectations for what a poem should be and do.

But I think the difference is more than generational taste. Rather than seeing digital poetry as an update of, or replacement for, traditional (print-based) poetry, a better approach might be to treat “digital poetry” as a distinct art form. While it may resemble traditional poetry in some ways, it is different enough to be treated as an entity in and of itself. (For example, both novels and movies offer sustained narratives, but we do not confuse the two by seeing movies as electronic novels.) One way that screen-oriented and print-based poetry differ has to do with “subvocalization.” As Hayles explains, the “hyper attention” drawn on and rewarded by screen-based literature eliminates the “subvocalization” that is characteristic of the traditional reading

experience.³⁰ To do so with lyric poetry, however, robs it of a crucial quality and one of its key effects. As Helen Vendler rightly explains, “The poem is *written for you to say*. You are the speaker of every lyric poem you read. That is what a lyric poem is: It is a speech made for you to utter.”³¹ Part of the power of lyric poetry resides in the way that the reader gives voice to, in a sense becomes, the speaker. If we take that away, we might still have an art form that is valuable, but it will not be lyric poetry. It will need a new name.

A second implication of the shift in forms of attention is philosophic. I want to suggest that digital media, including electronic literature, may reinforce a sense of time that ought to give us pause. In *Beginning With the Word*, Roger Lundin describes the thoroughgoing naturalism that dominates our society. The “tacit creed of contemporary naturalism” is that the “world is a closed system governed by impersonal laws. To be human is to live within the system while remaining slightly askew from it due to the accident of consciousness and the mystery of language.”³² With this understanding of the world comes a view of time: “The world as a finely calibrated, heartless mechanism—the world as reason takes it to be—is ruled by *chronos*, which measures the endless succession of moments that flow past us with each tick and tock of the clock.”³³ He goes on to explain that “*Chronos* time has no place for stories of divine love or human salvation, for those are airy fancies spun with words, not hard facts grounded on the rock of reality.”³⁴ In contrast to *Chronos* time is *Kairos* time, which is associated with imagination: “Unlike human reason, which renders time as alien, relentless, and indifferent to human needs,

³⁰ Hayles, *Electronic*, 118.

³¹ Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin, 2010), 15.

³² Roger Lundin, *Beginning with the Word: Modern Literature and the Question of Belief*. (Wheaton: Baker Academic, 2014), 4.

³³ Lundin, *Beginning*, 137.

³⁴ Lundin, *Beginning*, 137.

the imagination is able to offer the satisfactions of *Kairos*.³⁵ And *Kairos* time, as Lundin explains, is “pregnant with meaning, and it represents human experience and history as possessing a God-given, story-shaped form.”³⁶

Interestingly these two kinds of time parallel, to a degree, the two forms of attention we have been discussing. *Chronos* time with its “endless succession of moments that flow past us” sounds much like the “hyper attention” described by Hayles with its “craving for continuously varying stimuli”³⁷ and which Birkerts believes “encourages in the user a heightened and ever-changing awareness of the present.”³⁸ Whereas *Kairos* time with its emphasis on meaning and on human experience having a “story-shaped form” sounds like the “deep attention” praised by Birkerts, which he sees necessary to reading print literature, an experience that connects readers to “duration time,” and thus, provides a sense, at least, that one’s life is “destiny” rather than simply “a sequence of lived moments.”³⁹

While lamenting the steady erosion of the deep attention fostered by reading and the sense of meaning it makes possible, Birkerts maintains that “we are, as a species, wired for meaning”⁴⁰ (a rather ironic metaphor in context), and consequently he holds out limited hope for a backlash against what he sees as a crisis of meaning. He predicts three possible “collective reactions to this crisis”: one, a “return to religion,” since “whatever else they may be, our religions are grand stories that make a place for us”; two, therapy, which provides an “explanatory narrative that has a purchase on time”; or three, a “resurgence of the arts, of literature in particular,” which in its content and forms is “pledged to coherence” and provides a

³⁵ Lundin, *Beginning*, 137.

³⁶ Lundin, *Beginning*, 138.

³⁷ Hayles, *Electronic*, 117.

³⁸ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 123.

³⁹ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 85.

⁴⁰ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 195.

“doorway back into duration.”⁴¹ While Birkerts’ belief in our deeply felt need for meaning and in the possibility that religion and/or literature might satisfy that need is certainly attractive, especially to a person who affirms meaning, it is inadequate. All that Birkerts can affirm is the therapeutic value of such pursuits. They fulfill a desire, and thus, seem to meet a need, but they do not seem to be grounded in a reality beyond human desire. What Lundin says of the mid-twentieth-century critic, Frank Kermode, seems true of Birkerts as well: “Kermode secularizes the concept of *Kairos* and applies it to the illusion of meaning that stories create for us. Within the structured orders of fiction, we are enabled to pretend that our profane lives have sacred origins and ends.”⁴²

We live in a time of rapid change with all the attendant sound and fury. Such change, as even an elegist like Birkerts will admit, is unstoppable, but that is no cause for alarm so much as discrimination. We need to recognize the positive results of changing technologies, find ways to evaluate new forms of art, and determine what new forms of technology signify. We also need to recognize what is worth preserving. If print literature and the reading experience it provides are worth preserving, and I believe they are, it is not because they provide meaning (or an illusion of meaning) that satisfies human wish. To the extent they point toward possibilities of meaning, they provide valuable testimony to the source of meaning that exists independent of human desire, a source that will continue to signify regardless of human change.

⁴¹ Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 196-197.

⁴² Lundin, *Beginning*, 138.

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