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Offshore of Writing: E-literature and the Island

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Point of Departure

The broad aim of this paper is to contribute to a discussion on some aspects of the relationship between e-literature, spatiality and site-specificity. The context for this particular investigation is a major initiative for the establishment and development of an Academy of New Media and Digital Arts (see below) on the Italian island of Procida, one of the three islands that sit in the Bay of Naples. Within this initiative, e-literature as both practice and community plays a central role.

One question which inevitable arises from the Procida project concerns the discrepancy between the geographical situatedness of the Academy on the one hand, and the dispersed nature of networked e-lit communities and of e-literature as a practice on the other. How will the relationship between site and network play out? The paper itself is designed to emphasise the spatiality of e-texts, in contrast to the more temporally structured nature of page-based narrative. It comprises a pattern of “insular” sections that are linked to each other, although this pattern is one among many possible patterns. In other words the “textual islands” are both isolated and inter-located at the same time.

- Island 1 – Procida
- Literary Islands – Topos and Logos
- Island 2 – Laputa & Language
- Island 3 – Prospero’s Island and Performance
- Concluding Remarks



Island 1 – Procida

This is a mapping of the project's coastline:

1. The Procida Academy of New Media and Digital Arts intends to consolidate the island's literary identity through digital culture and technological innovation and to become a pilot centre of excellence for digital cultural studies, electronic literature, and e-learning in the fields of e-content and e-publishing.
2. The Procida Academy of New Media and Digital Arts aims to provide a connective/ collective cognitive environment for both research and learning. At the same time, its goal is to produce and promote innovative models of digital storytelling and communication, which will be created through hands-on workshops enabling participants to share knowledge and know-how.
3. With a view to examining the evolution in transmedial linguistics, the research activities will cover the heterogeneous area of e-content, making a distinction between contents with a specifically literary approach and those with a communicative purpose. There will be a focus on the transition from analog to digital languages and on the contribution technological interfaces and scripting make to forms of digital culture.
4. Particular emphasis will be given to the area of e-literature and technological languages, researching best practices in publishing and encouraging the cultural transition towards digital expression through the creation of experimental formats.
5. In accordance with the integration between the humanities and technology, the methodology adopted in the learning and e-learning process will involve both cultural and economic stakeholders, with laboratory activities that take theoretical studies of case histories as their starting point. This approach gives participants an understanding that is enlightened by an awareness of the complexity of the e-content environment, enabling them to develop skills enhanced by the transfer of know-how.
6. The production and promotion laboratories are strategic activities for the New Media and Digital Arts Academy. A heuristic (learning-through-doing) approach

will be adopted, which is best suited to understanding the relationship between content and its transposition into digital form, and to give students the freedom to translate their knowledge in creativity. The P&P Labs involve all the players in the digital cultural industry supply chain – writers, artists and technicians – to give everyone the opportunity to increase their professional skills in their own particular field, and to carve out their niche in the e-content and e-publishing industry.

Thus, the project is conceived of as the establishment of a multimodal hub for the making, publication and dissemination of digital work, with particular focus on e-literature as an expanded cross-artform writing practice. The intention, if this initial phase is successful, is to roll out Academies across a number of islands around the Italian coast.

To return our previous question; what might be the relationship between the site of this initiative – the island – and the practice and context of e-literature? What are the consequences, or contextual ramifications, of developing digital text in such a site, especially given that digital text is always itself a dispersed practice (On the notion of digital text as a dispersed practice, cf. Hayles 185, and below in this text). We would like to approach these questions by way of a discussion of literary, or topical, islands. To be clear, our intention here is not to set up the Island as a metaphor for e-literature as practice and community, but rather to present a set of correlates: a cluster or pattern of ideas which link together site, practice, technology and community.

Literary Islands – Topos and Logos

Hernán Díaz, in his essay “A Topical Paradise” begins by pointing out that literary islands constitute an amalgamation of place (topos) and word (logos). The literary island is a place constructed of words. At the same time, the geographical island shares this dual feature, in that its position in a syntax of islands determines its meaning. Procida itself sits in a syntactic and contextual relationship to other islands, as well as to the mainland. In this respect it functions as both topos and logos.

“Literary islands [...] are places that have become commonplaces. And the topic the island represents is isolation. [...] Insulation is the commonplace representation of isolation.” (Díaz 79)

Islands are defined by their insularity, their isolation, but they are also relational sites. They are defined by their relationship to each other and to the continental mass. In this latter context, Gilles Deleuze characterises two types of islands according to the manner of their formation:

Continental islands are accidental, derived islands. They are separated from a continent, born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture; they survive the absorption of what once contained them. *Oceanic* islands are originary, essential islands. Some are formed from coral reefs and display a genuine organism. Others emerge from underwater eruptions, bringing to the light of day a movement from the lowest depths. (Deleuze 9)

In parallel, there has been (and still is) much debate about how e-literature seeks to define itself in relation to the mainstream – print-based or analog literature. This process of definition has entailed the development of an historical narrative, a

temporally structured account of e-literature in which works, movements and moments are assigned a place in a linear trajectory. Using the island – or patterns of islands – as a model, perhaps we might adopt a different approach; to think instead about a geography/geology/ecology of e-literature, spatially organised according to the conditions of its emergence –either “continentally” or “oceanically” – in relation to the literary.

According to Díaz, the topical island is first and foremost a place of critical distance – “Islands are defined by shores. An insular shore is always a critical edge” (Díaz 79) – and by extension, a place of resistance. Díaz refers to “four shores of the island that resist four different forms of continental inscription” (Díaz 79) or graphs, which he places under the following headings: spatial, historic, linguistic and textual. “The islands in all these (literary) texts are off the map, beyond time and out of language and [...] out of this world” (83). This is simultaneously true and untrue of e-literature. Thus e-literature is both on and off the map; in our case, physically located in the island academy but dispersed by virtue of its technology and communities.

Just as “[...] topical islands operate on a different time scale to the mainland”, (Díaz 80) so the same could be said of e-literature. The spatial fragmentation of many digital text pieces means that time is invariably fragmented as well. The elements that make up a digital narrative, for instance, can often be put together in a multitude of different ways each time a work is accessed. This entails a different relation to history, one which is determined much more by location, arrangement and perspective. E-literature’s engagement with the simultaneity of multifarious elements allows for a degree of temporal complexity, which the fixed, syntagmatic sequencing of print renders with greater difficulty.

E-literature operates both within and outside language. Due to the dispersed and fundamentally performative nature of digital text, significant attention is paid to the whole environment, the *dispositif*, the site and context within which language is embedded; the “digital holding space of language”, so to speak.

e-literature “‘appertains’ to the literary. The word ‘appertain’ here is used in a legal sense. Describing the status of certain islands which the USA took over to exploit their natural resources, Christina Duffy Burnett explains how in law, they were said to “appertain” to the United States as “possessions”” (Najafi 63). Under this view they belong to but aren’t really a part of the mainland.

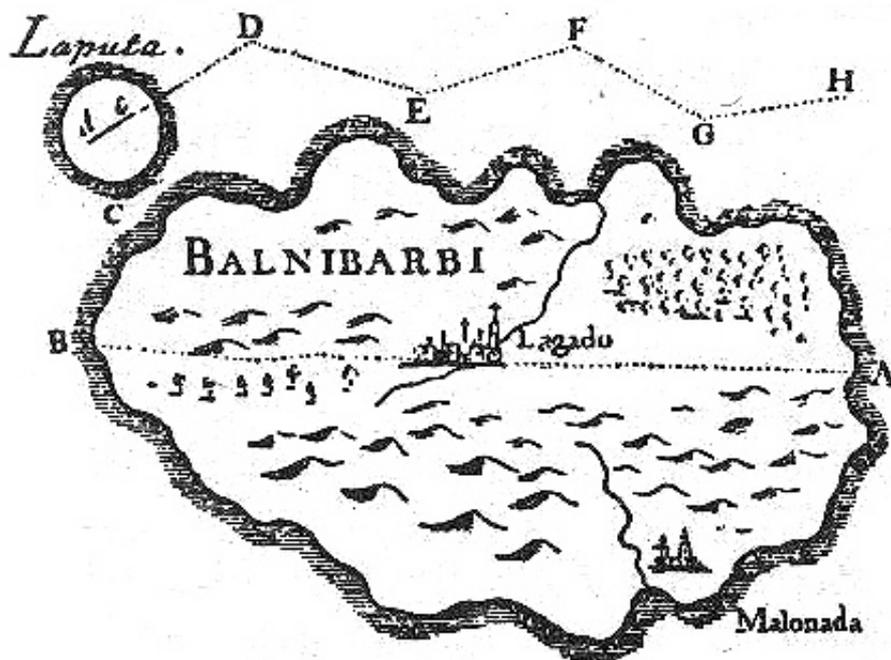
Expanding on this last point, Díaz states that “Literary islands are inhabited by two types – castaways and utopians [...] the former stand on the shoreline scanning the horizon for links to the mainland. The latter turn to the interior” (Díaz 84). This connects with the notion of the critical edge (see above), the shore which constitutes the space of e-literature and digital writers, caught between a longing for where they have come from and a desire to strike out into the interior, to explore unknown territories, caught in an off-modern cleft between nostalgia and innovation.

The castaway/utopian distinction parallels the one which Deleuze makes between the figure of Robinson Crusoe on the one hand, who rescues everything he can from the shipwreck in order to remediate the objects and re-create something which resembles “home” – including the political structures which he then imposes on the one whom he makes subservient. On the other hand, Jean Giraudoux’s castaway, Suzanne (*Suzanne*

et le Pacifique 1921 Émile-Paul frères) sets about transforming and reconstructing a world from the ground up. E-literature has always been presented with, and finds a tension between, these two approaches to writing as an arts practice. To what extent is e-literature an escape from, and to what extent is it still thoroughly dependent upon, remediated literary models?

A final characteristic of the literary island for Díaz is that it constitutes “[...] a confined difference that does not reach out beyond itself – it resists but never spreads out; it is subversive, never colonizing. In their non-expanding, self-contained difference, islands are seditious and insubordinate. This persistent gesture of refusal (this agonistic affirmation) turns them into politically active spaces” (Díaz 84-5). The “offshore” location of e-literature and its communities tends to foster just such a set of ideological gestures.

At this point we might continue our speculation by moving away from the literary island in general to look at some links between the Procida project and two specific literary islands: Laputa and Prospero’s island. The former is drawn from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, the latter from *Shakespeare’s The Tempest*, and we can use them as a way of articulating further correlations between the island and “offshore” digital writing practices.



Island 2 – Laputa & Language

In Part 3, Chapter V of *Gulliver’s Travels*, the eponymous hero escapes from pirates and is rescued by an enormous hovering island that appears like a dark cloud above his

head. The floating island of Laputa forms an odd counterpoint to the Procida project. Laputa is an island, but its location is not fixed. At the same time, the island is effectively the “mainland”, the seat of government and power. Gulliver is only allowed to leave Laputa and visit the mainland city of Lagado by royal dispensation, and Lagado is famous for its academy. Much of Swift’s description of the academy of Lagado is a deeply conservative satire on the scientific research projects of the Royal Academy, which had been instituted in 1660. However, in the midst of his mockery, Swift proves to be remarkably prescient about some future technological developments; in particular, machine-generated language. This is the passage in full:

We crossed a walk to the other part of the academy, where, as I have already said, the projectors in speculative learning resided. The first professor I saw, was in a very large room, with forty pupils about him. After salutation, observing me to look earnestly upon a frame, which took up the greatest part of both the length and breadth of the room, he said,

[...] Every one knew how laborious the usual method is of attaining to arts and sciences; whereas, by his contrivance, the most ignorant person, at a reasonable charge, and with a little bodily labour, might write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, laws, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study. He then led me to the frame, about the sides, whereof all his pupils stood in ranks. It was twenty feet square, placed in the middle of the room.

The superficies was composed of several bits of wood, about the bigness of a die, but some larger than others. They were all linked together by slender wires. These bits of wood were covered, on every square, with paper pasted on them; and on these papers were written all the words of their language, in their several moods, tenses, and declensions; but without any order. The professor then desired me “to observe; for he was going to set his engine at work.” The pupils, at his command, took each of them hold of an iron handle, whereof there were forty fixed round the edges of the frame; and giving them a sudden turn, the whole disposition of the words was entirely changed. He then commanded six-and-thirty of the lads, to read the several lines softly, as they appeared upon the frame; and where they found three or four words together that might make part of a sentence, they dictated to the four remaining boys, who were scribes. This work was repeated three or four times, and at every turn, the engine was so contrived, that the words shifted into new places, as the square bits of wood moved upside down. Six hours a day the young students were employed in this labour; and the professor showed me several volumes in large folio, already collected, of broken sentences, which he intended to piece together, and out of those rich materials, to give the world a complete body of all arts and sciences; which, however, might be still improved, and much expedited, if the public would raise a fund for making and employing five hundred such frames in Lagado, and oblige the managers to contribute in common their several collections. He assured me that this invention had employed all his thoughts from his youth; that he had emptied the whole vocabulary into his frame, and made the strictest computation of the general proportion there is in books between the numbers of particles, nouns, and verbs, and other parts of speech. (201-3)

There are a number of ways in which this 17th century description, albeit loaded with a heavy dose of irony, mirrors contemporary interests in and concerns around the compositional strategies of e-literature; the writing machine, writing as editing, literary assemblage, textual fragmentation, the reduction of language to a set of formal, rule-

determined operations, collaborative authorship, exclusive use of the aleatory (cf. Samuel Beckett on Burroughs' cut-ups – "That's not writing. It's plumbing"), etc. All of these are areas of unease for the literary, not least because they undermine notions of originality, textual ownership and copyright.

In addition to the random text generator, another target for Swift's satire is a particular view of language promulgated by many of Lagado's academicians. They conceive of an ideal language as having a one-to-one relationship with the world. It should be material and non-metaphysical, a thing, to such an extent that the academicians have decided to do away with it altogether. Instead they carry around with them sacks filled with the objects they wish to discuss.

We next went to the school of languages, where three professors sat in consultation upon improving that of their own country. The first project was, to shorten discourse, by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles, because, in reality, all things imaginable are but nouns. The other project was, a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever; and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health, as well as brevity. For it is plain, that every word we speak is, in some degree, a diminution of our lungs by corrosion, and, consequently, contributes to the shortening of our lives. An expedient was therefore offered, "that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on... , many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things; which has only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged, in proportion, to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like pedlars among us, who, when they met in the street, would lay down their loads, open their sacks, and hold conversation for an hour together; then put up their implements, help each other to resume their burdens, and take their leave. But for short conversations, a man may carry implements in his pockets, and under his arms, enough to supply him; and in his house, he cannot be at a loss. Therefore the room where company meet who practise this art, is full of all things, ready at hand, requisite to furnish matter for this kind of artificial converse. (203-4)

This is a sort of crazed version of an early Wittgensteinian view of language, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* – "that which cannot be carried around in a sack, thereof we should remain silent." It is a covert wish to have done with language. This is a view of "language as object" taken to extremes, one which, as we will see, runs counter to a more compelling view of language as "event" in the context of e-literature. This notion of linguistic event has a strong correlate in N. Katherine Hayles' view of digital text in general:

[...] a digital text exists as a distributed phenomenon. [...] the text exists in dispersed fashion even when it is confined to a single machine. There are data files, programs that call and process the files, hardware functionalities that interpret and compile the programs, and so on. It takes all of these together to *perform (my italics)* the digital text. Omit any of them, and the text literally cannot be performed as something the reader can use. [...] For this reason, it would be more accurate to call a digital text a process rather than an object, an attribute I highlight by referring to the time of performance for an electronic text versus the time of production for print. [Digital text]

[...] is performative by its very nature, independent of whatever imaginations and processes the user brings to it. (185)

It is worth mentioning that here Hayles is invoking the concept of the performativity in relation to digital text in order to investigate how time operates within e-literature. We, on the other hand, are more interested in the space or site of that performance. These analyses are not mutually exclusive, of course.

The event /object distinction is interesting in the context of Swift's island of Laputa. In many ways the floating island itself could be thought of as an event, not an object. According to Díaz, this is true of all literary islands;

Literary islands are always events, not places. One does not find one's way to them. It is rather they who manifest themselves with the force of an event, emerging at the last moment always like a deus ex machina. These appear to be restlessly nomadic spaces themselves, actively moving, hiding, and emerging. (X)

The Academy of New Media and Digital Arts on the very real island of Procida can itself be thought of in these terms. The Academy will be less a place than an event-space, an emerging hub or node within the network of e-literature.

Island 3 – Prospero's Island and Performance

The emphasis of the Procida initiative is to form communities by bringing people together to develop their own tools and texts, which can then be disseminated outward from the island. In contrast, Prospero in *The Tempest* insists on bringing his books to furnish his insular cell in exile. On Prospero's island it is the book, and the pre-existent learning that it contains, that is central. It constitutes the foundation of his power over the indigenous community. Caliban realises this only too well. When plotting Prospero's death he advises Stephano to first seize his book:

Remember first to possess his books; for without them
He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not ne spirit to command;
(*The Tempest*. Act 3. Sc. 2. Lines 87-90)

At the same time, in the object/event debate, Prospero's book appears to be closer to the latter than the former. The book(s) which hold the secret of his power are more performative than narrative. Prospero is a magician. He knows "how to do things with words" (cf. J. L. Austin), like conjure storms, and he is a reader of scripts. His books are books of spells, and in that respect, one could argue that they are collections of executable codes. And when it comes to language itself, the performative features equally strongly. Prospero teaches language to the indigenous community, (i.e. Caliban), for which Caliban is grateful. But only insofar as it allows him to use it performatively. Caliban uses language in order to curse Prospero for teaching him language.

*You taught me language, and my profit on't Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language! (*The Tempest*: Act 1. Sc. 2 Lines 363-5)*

The performative charm and the curse sit side by side. It is not a particular language

that Caliban detests; it is Language per se, especially in contrast to the other non-linguistic multi-medial delights that the island has to offer.

[...] the isle is full of noises, Sounds, and sweet airs,
that give delight and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments will hum
about mine ears; and sometime voices that,
if I then had waked after long sleep, will make me sleep again;
(The Tempest. Act 3. Sc. 2. Lines 130-5)

From an e-literature point of view, Caliban's presence and situation on the island is intriguing in light of recent debates within the field around the link between digital text practices and cultural anthropophagism. The latter was articulated in the 1928 Cannibal Manifesto by Brazilian poet, Oswald de Andrade. Underpinning this position is the idea of colonial resistance. Cultural colonialism can be effectively resisted by consuming the coloniser's own culture, thereby using his own strength against him, in the same way that the cannibal consumes the body of his enemy to absorb his powers.

The idea of anthropophagism in relation to e-literature has been articulated in particular by Chris Funkhouser in a series of essays and presentations. For Funkhouser, digital anthropophagism operates in three modes:

1. through transcreation, in which "original" writings are processed and re-stated;
2. through direct incorporation of external elements in the orchestration of original expression (which can include multiple languages, images, and symbols); and
3. in the mechanical presentation of the work (and inventing new technological navigational structures, appropriation of coding language).

Funkhouser mentions two further "mechanical and aesthetic cannibalistic" developments: computational generators producing text by remediating grammars and vocabularies of named authors, and works that in real time make use of images and text from the Web to create output; in other words, digital writers "feeding off" the network to produce new work. This has been developed further by web-based systems which take physical information from persons or places and remediate this as digital work. (For example, Dalibor Martinis and Mihael Giba's online urban installation *Global Picture; A Sensor of the Human Condition*)

Remediation/regurgitation is also how Roberto Simianowski uses the idea of cannibalism. Funkhouser cites Simanowski's notion of

"the other" in digital media and how is it devoured, focusing on how text is regurgitated as a visual object, as sound, and performance – sometimes stripped of original linguistic content.

Here again the figure of Caliban emerges in a complex of signification – as the victim of the cultural imperialism and colonising influence of the Book, the "cannibal" who wishes to wrest Prospero's books from him and consume them, a correlate to Andrade and Funkhouser's cultural cannibal, and the "other" of digital text suppressed by Prospero's executable/performative codes, and who understands their power.

Concluding Remarks

The objective of this paper was not to set out a cogent argument so much as to establish some potentially significant connections between the places in which e-literature is produced – in this case, an island Academy – and the contextual signification with which such spaces are always already freighted, both as geographical features (topos) and literary constructs (logos). This is not somehow tangential to e-literature, any more than it is to locative narrative, for example. It is central to it. We would argue that due to the highly performative nature of e-literature and its context-sensitivity, the spaces which it occupies, the locations of its composition and the sites to which, and in which, it is disseminated are all of central significance. Finally, in the same way that Prospero's arrival with the power of his technology and knowledge proved a mixed blessing for the settled community, it is important to remain sensitive to and cognisant of the consequences of new arrivals on the island of Procida.

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1 Comment

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