From Sappho to Digital Poetry: Historical Breaking Points in Orality and Literacy

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This paper investigates orality and literacy in historical breaking points in the technology of writing. Through poetry that challenges the limits of the written word the paper focuses on materiality, visuality and orality. The first breaking point is that of the printing press and its effects on literacy in Europe. Here the Spanish poet Luis de Góngora and his relationship to the new technologies of writing and printing in the early modern era stands as example. The next breaking point is that of late 19th century France, where the emerging capitalism and broadened literacy in combination with editorials and newspapers changed the landscape of writing technologies and practices. In this epoch, the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé articulates the tension between on the one hand orality and literacy, and between a self-reflexive writing (of poetry) and a writing of the masses (in media) on the other hand. The third breaking point is that of the present digitization of writing, which is contrasted to earlier breaking points. By investigating the historical preconditions of different writing practices the paper offers historical perspectives on the digitization of writing.

FROM SAPPHO TO DIGITAL POETRY: HISTORICAL BREAKING POINTS IN ORALITY AND LITERACY

The present digitization of writing means, as the word implies, that the alphabetical has ontologically become numerical. This has lead critics such as Friedrich Kittler to question if what we do can even be called writing anymore, when almost every written sign is actually produced by a microprocessor.[1] It remains clear however, that digitization is a major breaking point in the technology of writing, a shift that forces us to rethink what writing is. For a long time printed texts have been taken for granted, as an invisible but universal medium of writing, and their digitization makes these frivolous assumptions come into view. Thus, digital poetry becomes an example of a writing technology that brings the new materiality of the text to the fore. By being computed, and running on software, digital poetry often encompasses images as well as sound and movement, which are embodied in the text. As the American critic Katherine Hayles has taught us, this situation calls for Media Specific Analysis, which enables one to move "from the language of 'text' to a more precise vocabulary of screen and page, digital program and analogue interface, code and ink, mutable image and durably inscribed mark, texton and scripton, computer and book."[2] If the digitization of writing means that the medium as such becomes visible, it is important not to get stuck in the presentism that sometimes seams to haunt new media studies.[3] To avoid a one handed focus on the present breaking point I will move beyond the digital revolution to earlier breaking points in the 19th century when a new writing and printing technology emerged, and in the 16th century when the printing press was new. In these breaking points a certain form of poetry will serve as the object of investigation: for the 19th century I turn to the late works of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, which articulate the tension between, on the one hand, orality and literacy, and on the other hand, a self-reflexive writing (of poetry) and the writing for the masses (in media). In the early modern era, with the printing press as an "agent of change" in the words of Elizabeth Eisenstein,[4] the Spanish baroque poet Luis de Góngora approaches what might be called the limits of writing in general and in poetry in particular. But before the printing press was even invented, there was a transition from the oral to the written in ancient Greece. Take the example of Sappho, whose poems were composed to be performed orally. Today we only have access to fragments of her work from other texts – the original poems are lost forever. Of the 264 fragments of Sappho only three are complete enough to appreciate as literary structures. Seven years ago, in 2004, a new Sappho poem was identified on a papyrus in Cologne.[5] The papyrus was recovered from Egyptian mummy cartonnage and it is the earliest known manuscript of her work , copied in 300 B.C., only 300 years after its composition. This philological situation illustrates how the materiality of poetry matters in a broad sense, ever since antiquity. The tension between orality and literacy is obvious in the case of Sappho, but no other poetic feature is currently as neglected in the study of poetry.

Besides regarding the medium of writing as something non-specific, literary scholars have often failed to account for these oral aspects that are central to all poetry, and have instead focused on what a given poem means, as if poetry were only metaphysical and not physical at

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[1]   Kittler, Friedrich. "There is no Software", in *Stanford Literature Review*. 9,1, Spring 1992, p. 81–90.
[2]   N. Katherine Hayles, "Print is flat, code is deep – The importance of media-specific analysis", in *Poetics today* 2004, 25:1.
[3]   W.J.T. Mitchell, "Introduction", in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, red. W.J.T. Mitchell, (Chicago 2010), p. xix.
[4]   Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge 1979).
[5]   Martin West, "A new Sappho poem", in *TLS*, june 21th, 2005, http://www1.union.edu/wareht/story.html

all.[6] In the study of poetry, we need to focus on the media—the technological aspects of writing of the historical situation in which the poem was conceived, as well as the oral or sound features, which are as important to contemporary digital poetry as to Sappho's verses. Poetry becomes poetry in and by these physical and material features.

In the early 17th century the Spanish poet Luis de Góngora developed a new poetics that in many ways broke with the rules of writing of the time. Góngora termed his writing "poesia limite", a poetics marked by broken syntax and mixing of languages and genres. A salient feature of this poetics is his use of the rhetorical figure hyperbaton, in which words that naturally belong together are separated from each other. This dissociation of words creates on the one hand a visual architecture, in which a new order of written words emerges, and on the other hand it creates a particular and unusual rhythm. The hyperbaton in Góngoras hands is thus both a material and visual feature, and an oral feature creating new sound patterns. To complicate the newness of this scriptural practice, one might add that the hyperbaton is drawn from Latin, in which the syntactical rules allows a more liberal placing of words in sentences. Góngora draws on older language rules to move beyond the contemporary limits of writing. This can be understood in terms of a syntactical remediation. In this historical context, the new media technology of the printing press had made written texts available for more people than ever before. The reactions to this new media situation where diverse, and ranged from those who hailed the new technology as divine to those who looked upon it with scepticism, saying it would vulgarize knowledge. Góngora belonged to the latter category, and never printed a book in his lifetime, but let his poems circulate in handwritten manuscripts. The relation between old and new media forms in this breaking point is accordingly complex.

Printed books also played a major role in the reformation, and subsequent counter-reformation and inquisition in the Spanish empire. Thus, writing technology was an important tool in the exercise of power, and in 1613 when Góngora wrote his poem Soledades, he was attacked by many critics and was accused of having written a diabolic poem in which chaos reigns and no words or thoughts can be understood.[7] The reason for this condemnation was the specific form of his writing, which did not obey the platonic-Christian demands on a text to express divine truth through beauty in a clear manner.[8] Since Góngora hade refused to publish any printed versions of his work, it was not until his death in 1627 that the first printed edition saw the light. However, the selling of this edition was immediately forbidden by the Spanish inquisition.[9] Góngoras poetry arose as an alternative form of thought in the declining Spanish empire, and as an opposition to the political and military discourse that would not tolerate it. Thus, the writing technology is at the heart of the clashes between worldviews and modes of communication.

To take just a brief example, we might turn to the recurrent rhyme of Pluma/Espuma in Soledades, literally meaning feather and foam. The last line of the first of the two solitudes is:

Bien previno la hija de la espuma / a batallas de amor campo de pluma (1090)[10]

Meaning something like: well prevented the daughter of the foam / to battles of love field of feather.

The daughter of the foam is of course Venus, who guards the protagonist of the poem, and who stands in contrast to the general use of the Christian virgin for this function in contemporary poetry. But the foam, from which Venus arose, might also be understood as the

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6   *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, red. Marjorie Perloff och Craig Dworkin (Chicago 2009), p. 2.
7   See for example: Ana Martinez Arancon, *La Batalla en torno a Góngora* (Barcelona 1978).
8   Sofia Kluge, "Góngora's Heresy: Literary Theory & Criticism in the Golden Age". *MLN*, Hispanic Issue, 2002:2 vol. 122
9   Elias Rivers, *The Image of the Baroque*, 1995, p. 114.
10 Luis de Góngora, *Soledades*, ed. John Beverley (Madrid 1995).

white page, and the feather as the writing quill. The battle of love thereby transforms to a battle of words and writing.

By the end of the 19th century a new media situation arose with the mechanical printing press, allowing the mass production of books that were sold to a growing literary market, and discussed in the expanding field of newspapers and magazines. At the same time the possibility to record sound with the phonograph and visual impressions in photographs and moving images resulted in the decline of the written word's monopoly over communication.[11] In this media landscape, Stéphane Mallarmé derived poetry from the 24 letters in the French alphabet and the blank space between them. In his critical poems Mallarmé reflects upon the different forms of writing in this breaking point, and in major poems such as "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance",[12] one finds the realization of a scriptural practice in dialogue with the new media situation. If we consider the poem "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance" we find words spread out on white pages in different fonts and characters, which might be read in different manners. In his preface to the first and only publication of the poem during Mallarme's life, the poet states that: "The variation in printed characters between the dominant motif, a secondary one and those adjacent, marks its importance for oral utterance and the scale, mid-way, at top or bottom of the page will show how the intonation rises or falls."[13] Thus, in a time when oral emission is disappearing with new technology, Mallarmé establishes a connection between the printed words and the voice. The extreme textual quality of the poems stands in tension with the immanent oral features that might never be realized, other than in the mind of the reader. In the poem, the dispersed words and the intentional and striking whiteness of the page, stress the materiality of this and any text. In fact, this and other late poems of Mallarmé are emblematic of the discourse network that arose by the end of the 19th century.

Today, in digital poetry, we see how sound and images are often embedded in the very poem. But even the words, computed as they are, seem to adopt new patterns for communication, or digital signifying strategies. In a digital poem the written word can adopt essentially oral practices, such as being interchangeable and dialogic in that it is programmed. Furthermore the fact the poem takes place on a screen subverts the definite quality of printed texts. A digital text can be changed at any time. The immense and never ending flow of texts in the digital era means that digital poems are often minimalistic, in order to be heard.

Returning to the contemporary situation of digital communication, one realizes how these breaking points carry major changes in what is sayable and thinkable in our time. The material features of the communication process dictate what might be written or read. Because of its meta qualities, Poetry today, as in earlier breaking points, stands as the very hardware of data processing.

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[11]   See: Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford 1999).
[12]   Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (Paris 1914).
[13]   Mallarmé, Stéphane, "Preface/Préface" to "Un coup de dés" in *Collected Poems*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1994, transl. Henry Weinfield, p. 121–123