

Escape from the Temple of Laughter From Book-object to Digital Event

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Article abstract

Reflecting on what can be found “beyond the book”, this article focuses on the multimodal children's novel *Escape from the Temple of Laughter* which was published in the mid-1990s. Viewed as both a container and a place of writing, this novel is a book with very porous borders whose content has literally escaped from it, thus avoiding the totalizing control of the codex. At the time of publication, even before the Web 2.0 existed, *Escape from the Temple of Laughter* was already a hypertext. The book is now being digitalized and the second part of this article questions the meaning of this re-contextualization. Is it really an attempt to go “beyond the book”, or is it simply an alternative means of dissemination? Does digitalization add something new to the text, or does it highlight some of the features that were already present in its print form?

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Escape from the Temple of Laughter

From Book-object to Digital Event

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Résumé

En guise de réflexion sur ce que l'on peut trouver « au-delà du livre », cet article s'intéresse au roman multimodal pour enfants *Les évadés du temple du rire* (*Escape from the Temple of Laughter*) publié au milieu des années 1990. Partant d'un examen du livre à la fois comme un contenant et un lieu d'écriture, cet ouvrage est un livre aux frontières très poreuses dont le contenu s'en est littéralement échappé, se soustrayant ainsi au contrôle totalisateur du codex. Au moment de la publication du livre, avant le Web 2.0, *Les évadés du temple du rire* était déjà un travail hypertexte. Le livre est maintenant en cours de numérisation et la seconde partie de cet article interroge la signification de cette recontextualisation. S'agit-il d'un véritable mouvement « au-delà du livre », ou simplement d'un mode de diffusion alternatif ? La numérisation ajoute-t-elle quelque chose de nouveau au texte, ou met-elle en avant certaines fonctionnalités déjà inhérentes à la version imprimée ?

Abstract

Reflecting on what can be found “beyond the book”, this article focuses on the multimodal children’s novel *Escape from the Temple of Laughter* which was published in the mid-1990s. Viewed as both a container and a place of writing, this novel is a book with very porous borders whose content has literally escaped from it, thus avoiding the totalizing control of the codex. At the time of publication, even before the Web 2.0 existed, *Escape from the Temple of Laughter* was already a hypertext. The book is now being digitalized and the second part of this article questions the meaning of this re-contextualization. Is it really an attempt to go “beyond the book”, or is it simply an alternative means of dissemination? Does digitalization add something new to the text, or does it highlight some of the features that were already present in its print form?

Mot-clés : Roman multimodal, *Les évadés du temple du rire* (*Escape from the Temple of Laughter*), Lecture d’hypertextes papiers et numériques

Keywords: Multimodal Novels, *Escape from the Temple of Laughter*, Reading Print and Digital Hypertexts

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Escape from the Temple of Laughter

Jerome Fletcher

This paper is divided into two sections. The second section is a discussion of the questions and consequences which attend the shifting of a book from its analog form to a digital form. The book in question is *Escape from the Temple of Laughter*, a children's book which I published back in 1994. The discussion also picks up on a key metaphor in the book's title in order to investigate some of the differences between the reading of print-based texts and digital texts in general. The paper begins, however, with a brief presentation of the book itself, its format and contents, so that it is clear what is being discussed in the second half.

The book object

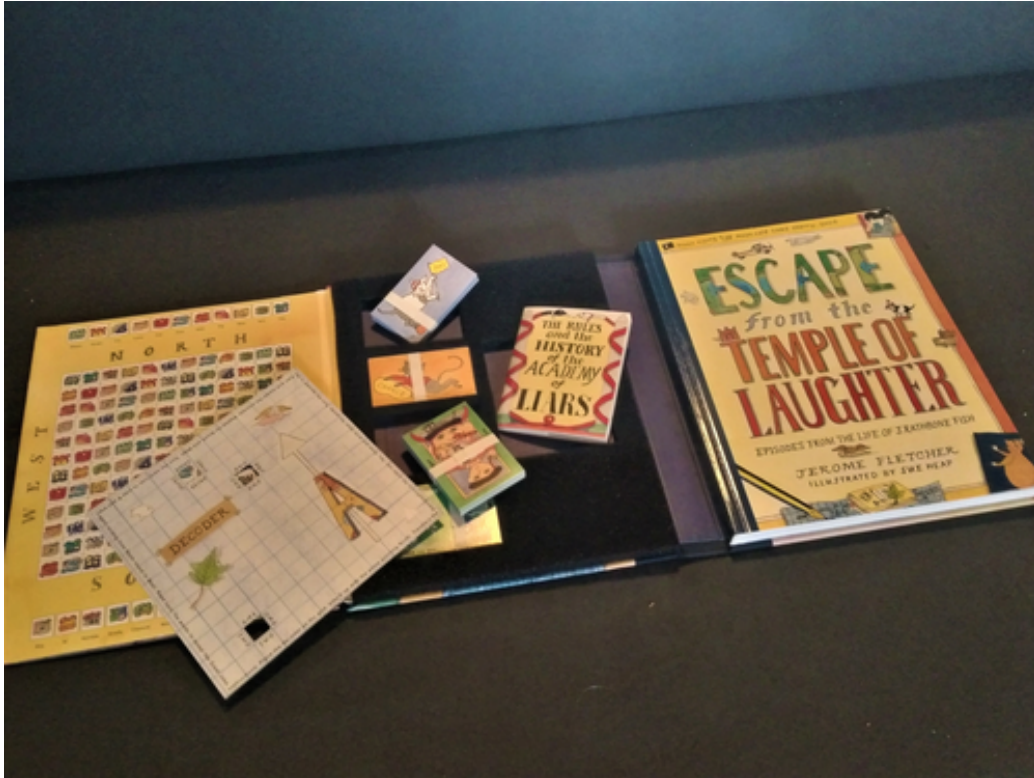


FIGURE 1 –

Escape from the Temple of Laughter (Figure.1) is structured around five episodes in the life of J. Rathbone Fish. These deal with machines, maps, monsters, jokes and lies respectively. Each chapter has one or more additional elements associated with it.

Machines



FIGURE 2 –

The “machines” chapter relates the building of a cloud-making device which causes climatic mayhem. Associated with this chapter is a weather predicting device, made up of rotating dials, in the manner of a *volvelle*, which have to be aligned manually.

Maps



FIGURE 3 –

This chapter explains the mystery of a “ghost” map, i.e. a map which is itself a ghost. The book contains a selection of maps from Mr Fish’s map collection, some of which are referred to in the text itself.

Monsters



FIGURE 4 –

One of the maps referred shows the distribution of Small Monsters in the British Isles. This leads to the establishing of a Zoo for Small British Monsters, together with a souvenir album and a series of stickers. A series of miniature narratives is contained within the album.

Jokes



FIGURE 5 –

The collection of maps prompts a collection of jokes by way of a Museum of Lost Causes. The museum of Jokes is also called the Amuseum. This prompts an epic adventure in search of the oldest recorded joke in history. Along with a reproduction of the Great Joke, there is a board game contained within in the book – Outwit Chester (Figure. 6) – which relates to this episode.

Escape from the Temple of Laughter



FIGURE 6 –

Lies

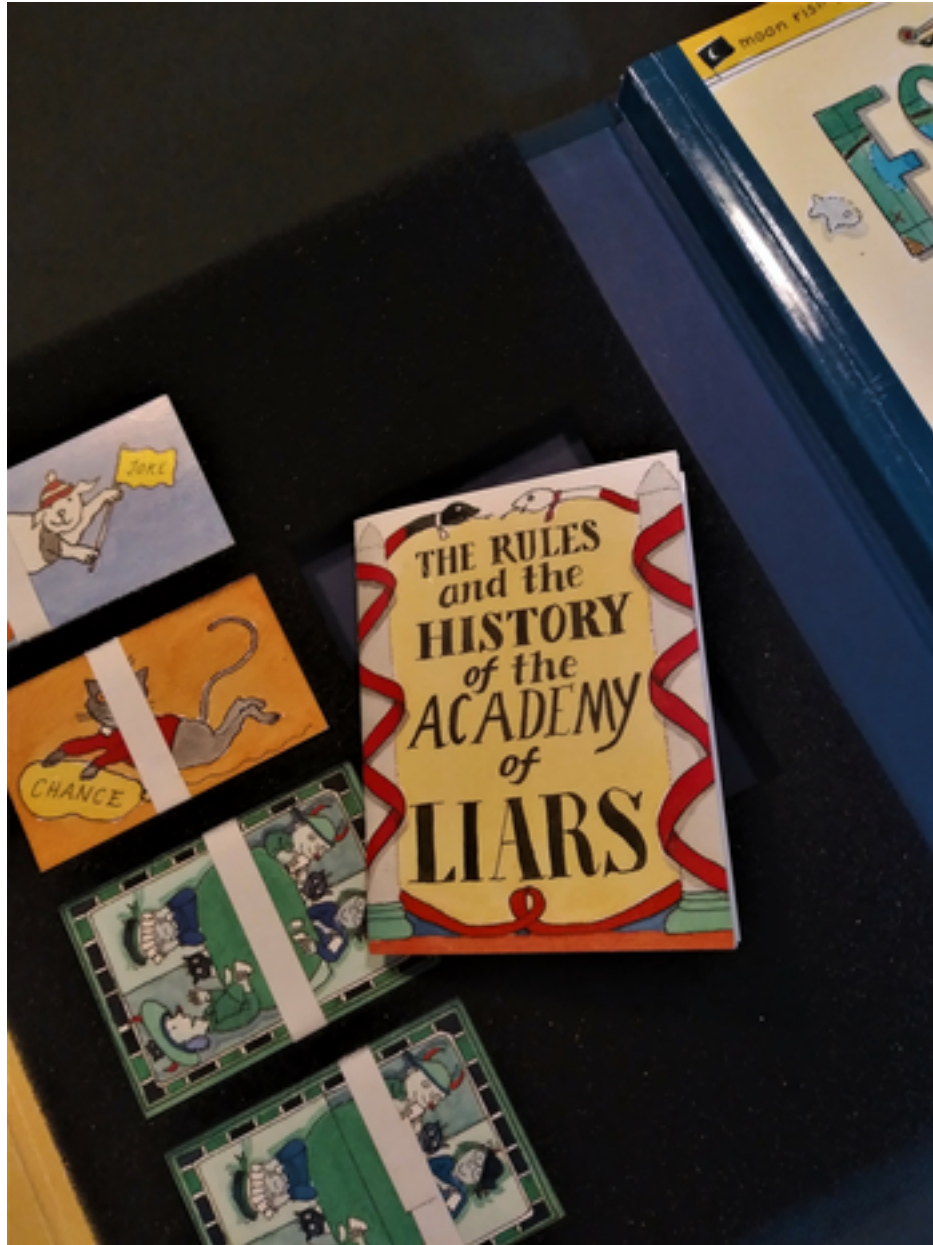


FIGURE 7 –

The final chapter concerns the unmasking of a secret organisation called the Academy of Liars and culminates in our hero taking part in a lying competition. Another element contained within the book is a miniature book in which is written the history and rules of the Academy of Liars. The book-within-the-book contains an even smaller book which gives the rules of Codswallop, a lying and cheating card game officially endorsed by the Academy.

From Book Object to Digital Event

Since the publication of the print version of *Escape from the Temple of Laughter* in 1994, at a time when the CD-Rom was seen as cutting edge, there have been huge developments in the area of digital publishing. The possibilities available to the publication and dissemination of a digital version of a print book nowadays are considerably greater than back then. And at the time of writing this paper, I am working on a digital version of the print book. This project is very much at the planning stage, however, and for that reason, it is an interesting moment to consider what the process of digitising this particular book might involve.

The first point I want to make is that, as you can see from the way the book is conceived, it already contains elements of the digital – and by that I mean firstly that it entails a high level of interactivity and secondly, that the extraneous elements of the book are specifically designed to escape the totalising control of the codex. In this respect, the whole assemblage might fittingly be described as “paper hypertext”, or hypertext “*avant la lettre*”.

A consequence of acknowledging the presence of hypertextual features in the print version is that we should guard against an all-too-easy binary division between the analog and the digital; nor should we, as I do in the title of this paper, assume a clear-cut distinction between the “book-object” and the “digital event”. It is obvious to me at least that the print version of the book is a highly performative, “eventilised” text (to use N. Katherine Hayles’ term), and I would refer you to Anthony Wilden’s essay on the “Analog and the Digital” in his *System and Structure : Essays in Communication and Exchange* as a useful corrective here. Wilden makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the “continuous function” of the analog computer (such as the slide rule or the clock, or indeed the weather predicting device described above) and on the other hand, “any device employing the on/off characteristics of electrical relays or their equivalents [...]” (1972, 156) which

he categorises as a digital computer. By this definition, for Wilden, the teeth of a gear form a digital system. Furthermore, he emphasises that there is no clear line between the analog and the digital. Any assemblage, any system of communication, is going to be a mixture of both – one example he cites is the synaptic organisation of the brain. Wilden argues that

[...] even the distinction [between analog and digital] in man-made machines requires careful definition, for the digital computer involves a code and any code considered in its totality is an analog of something (a “map” of some “territory” or other). In the case of the digital computer, the machine processes are analogs of mathematical formulae which are digital representations of some system or other. (1972, 157)

Wilden goes on to describe how Von Neumann also emphasised this constant switching between the analog and the digital in the behavior of the message systems of the body : “a digital command releases a chemical compound which performs some analog function or other, this release or its result is in turn detected by an internal receptor neuron which sends a digital signal to command the process to stop or sets off some other process, and so on” (1972, 158). This then is a call for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the analog and the digital in general, as well as in the particular case of the text.

To return to the children’s book, one way of looking at the shift from the book object to the digital event, is as a correlate of translation. Whenever we think about translation we tend to gravitate towards some well-worn conceptual tools – which include such notions as loss, fidelity, completeness, accuracy, authorship, etc. In this context, I’d like to consider in more detail the notion of “loss”. i.e. what might be lost in the shift from the analog to the digital? I want to concentrate on this because in the hype that surrounds massive digitisation projects such as google books, it is easy to forget that this translation/digitisation process is never an unalloyed good.

In considering a digital version of *Escape from the Temple of Laughter*, three areas of potential loss immediately present themselves.

The Haptic : Weight, Touch, Unfolding (Explication), Manipulation

There is a significant set of embodied experiences of the book which will be lost in translation to the digital version. These centre on the sense of touch. Feeling the weight of the physical object, the tactile quality of different elements, the way in which the reader needs to unfold (i.e. explicate) and manipulate the additional features – none of these will be available to the user of the digital work. Or to be more precise, the array and variety of tactile experiences from the physical object will not be available to the user of the digital work. This goes beyond simply a particular sensation. Touch is a form of embodied knowledge that connects with the psyche in an intense way. According to Bertrand Russell “Not only our geometry and our physics, but our whole conception of what exists outside us, is based upon the sense of touch.” (Russell et Pirani 1985, 10) Touch, more than any other mode of sensation, defines for us our sense of reality. It was the radical skeptic, St Thomas who realised that touch was the only sense that can be relied upon to guarantee belief. There is a level of reality associated with touch which cannot be reproduced digitally.

Scale

It could be argued that there is no scale in the digital, no absolute relationship of size between elements. Part of the charm of the book-object is the fixed relationship of size between elements. Thus, the miniature book delights by reference to the size of the whole book which is oversized for a traditional children’s novel, something which in itself adds to the allure. In fact there is a link to another form of children’s book – the annual. These were often compilations of elements which had already appeared in comic form and as the name implies, it appeared once a year – often at Christmas. The size of the book locates the book therefore within the realm of the gift, as opposed to the mass market publication, and thereby adds to its status as an object. An engagement with the miniature, of course, goes beyond a certain delight. As Susan Stewart has argued in *On Longing* :

The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from

contamination. It marks the pure body, the inorganic body of the machine and its *repetition* of a death that is thereby not a death. (1993, 69)

Containment

Another feature of the book-object is the extent to which the various elements can be contained, unified if you like, then dispersed, then unified again. It exists in a dispersed state and as an integrated whole. This dynamic of integration and dispersal is played out in the digital version too, albeit in a slightly different form. Any digital version will have as its default position that of the dispersed; the elements of the digital assemblage will exist in a massively scattered form. It is only at the moment of instantiation or performance, that the different elements are assembled machinically to form (the illusion) of an integrated whole. This assemblage cannot then be taken out and packed away in the same way as the physical book can. Nor is the same pleasure afforded to the process of dispersal and integration in the digital environment, mainly because this takes place within the machine and is not accessible to the user. Indeed one might want to take issue with the idea of the integrated digital version. There's a sense in which it is only ever dispersed as a series of codes which are only assembled in the moment before being exploded into its composite parts again.

This question of containment and dispersal leads me into a number of observations that I want to make around the theme of “escape” within the book and how that also manifests itself in the print and digital environments.

This central metaphor of “escape”, immediately apparent in the title, is one which is also taken up with the sequel to this book, *Mr Fish and the Ship of Fools*; in this sequel a series of narratives about imprisonment and release are linked together by a central narrative about the imprisonment and release of a bookworm. (“*un ver de livre*”, rather than “*un rat de bibliothèque*”) The paper hypertextual narratives as we might call them are referred to as “riddle tales” (*contes de devinettes*) because the final word of each tale when linked together form a riddle and it is the answering of this riddle that brings about the release of the bookworm from its imprisonment within a print book which is the subject of the central narrative. Significantly at the end of *Mr Fish and the Ship of Fools*, the bookworm manages to crawl out of the book and into a modem and is transformed into a digital worm (*un ver numérique*).

It is last seen disappearing into the vastness of cyberspace. Whether this is actually an escape or not is debatable. But it's worth considering the notion of "escape" in this context.

In *Escape from the Temple of Laughter*, as in all books-within-boxes, there exists the possibility for the contents and, by extension, the narrative to escape from the fixed confines of the codex. This brings to mind such works as B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, some early detective novels by Dennis Wheatley or Anne Carson's *Nox*, although the latter is actually a concertina book within the box. But there are a large number of examples of this form of print object.

In hypertext too the trope of "escape" could be said to be central. In relation to hypertext, there is a well-attested behaviour whereby the user or reader clicks on a link in order to open a web page and immediately goes looking for the hyperlinks on that page, i.e. the ways out, the exits, the means by which s/he can effect an escape from the web page. This particular phenomenon has been demonstrated using eye-tracking technology¹. As an aside, it's worth noting that a large number of videogames are posited on the notion of escape too; not only escaping "death" in inverted commas, but escape from the various contained spaces and levels by which the videogame is structured. In this respect, the videogame still pays homage to what is considered to be a foundational interactive fiction Adventure, which was devised by a speleologist and was structured on the exploration of a series of caverns and passageways in a cave system.

One could argue that there is a significant difference between the sort of structure where the narrative digresses at certain points from a central narrative but keeps returning to the centre and the radically decentred structure where there appears to be no centre to return to. I would agree with this. However, I don't agree with the often-heard claim that the latter is a defining characteristic of digital hypertext and the former is not found in the analog book. These are compositional choices made by the writer/s. They are not inherent in the respective technologies. And, of course, we can go back to the 18th century and beyond to find examples. *Tristram Shandy*, which acted as something of a model for *Escape from the Temple of Laughter*, is a radically

1. see Andrew Michael Roberts AHRC-funded project, Poetry Beyond Text : vision, text and cognition. Dundee University 2011

decentred narrative structured on digression, something which Sterne himself famously acknowledges :

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine ; – they are the life, the soul of reading ; – take them out of this book for instance – you might as well take the book along with them ; [...] restore them to the writer ; – he steps forth like a bridegroom – bids All hail ; brings in variety, and forbids appetite to fail. (Sterne, *New*, et *New* 2003, Pt 1, Chap, 22, p. 164)

At this point having considered “escape” in relation to both the print version and the possible digital version of this text, it occurred to me that this trope was unsatisfactory, in that it described an outcome rather than a process. Escape always requires a “from” or a “to”, and what was required here was a consideration of the presence of “forces” within the text. In other words, what are the forces which compel or encourage the reader to leave the orbit of the narrative to seek another, or indeed to remain within the orbit of the narrative? Is this purely a technical question, or perhaps a contextual question? How might these forces operate in the different environments of print and the digital?

The moment the phrase “the orbit of the text” is invoked, the respective forces are already named within or enfolded in that metaphor ; i.e. “centrifugal” and “centripetal”. The former moves outwards and away from a centre and the other is attracted inwards towards a centre. The etymology of the two words refer respectively to “flight from”, a fleeing (fugal) and a “seeking out” (petal). Again, in general I’m not keen in general on such binaries, so I will also be looking at ways of combining these two into a third term, such that the original binary might disappear or at least become blurred.

I could see how these two opposing forces might map onto the notion of escape, especially in the oversimplified distinction between the analog and the digital. In this formulation the print book would be largely conditioned by a centripetal force which draws the reader more and more into the narrative and the hypertextual version conditioned by centrifugal forces causing the reader to flee a central narrative. Confusing this picture would entail showing how these two forces might operate simultaneously within both the print and the digital environment. At the same time, we might retain the trope of “escape” in the concept of “escape velocity” – the energy which is necessary to escape

the gravitational pull of one or other of these forces. So at this point the question arises as to how far this orbital model of reading might be pushed.

An initial task was to see if there are any other theorists of centrifugal/-petal narrative out there. I should state that this research is in its early days, and there may well be a fully fledged and detailed working out of these concepts somewhere which I haven't yet come across. Peter Jaeger at a conference recently made a reference to that moment of becoming aware that one is reading one thing and thinking of something totally other at the same time – which seemed to me an instance of these sorts of forces in action. And Robert Coover in his well-known *New York Times* article “The End of Books” refers to the idea of centripetal force when he writes of electronic literature :

[...] what of narrative flow ? There is still movement, but in hyperspace's dimensionless infinity, it is more like endless expansion ; it runs the risk of being so distended and slackly driven as to lose its centripetal force, to give way to a kind of static low-charged lyricism – that dreamy gravityless lost-in-space feeling of the early sci-fi films. (1992)

Here he recognizes the effect of such a force, especially in hypertext, but is thinking of it as a function of narrative itself, rather than as a function of the relationship between the reading and the writing.

One theorist I have found who makes specific use of the distinction between centrifugal and centripetal texts is Northrop Frye. However, his is a slightly different and much wider usage of these terms. In the second essay of *The Anatomy of Criticism*, entitled ‘Ethical Criticism : Theory of Symbols’, Frye establishes a distinction between a process of critical engagement which centripetally focuses in on the aesthetic function of a text, and one which centrifugally move outwards towards the text's social function and external considerations (1957). à

Another critic/practitioner I have returned to with some benefit is Charles Bernstein and his chapter on the “Artifice of Absorption” in *A Poetics*. Bernstein is mainly concerned with poetry here, but he begins by setting up a tension between what he refers to as “absorption” and “anti-absorption” (repellence) and he deals in a number of variants of these as well. The two terms have clear resemblance to the two forces I have been referring to. In his initial

argument, he appeals to a notion of “artifice” as that which absorbs or otherwise the reader in the text. In other words, the greater the extent to which the text makes apparent its own artificiality, its own status as a construct, the less “absorbed” the reader becomes in the text. Another way of saying this is; the more the text draws attention to itself as artifice (note the use of the phrase “to draw attention to” – a metaphor of attraction) the greater the centrifugal force away from the text as a place of absorption. At the other end of the scale, Bernstein refers at one point to the condition of “hyper-absorptive textual *gravity*” (my italics) without developing the idea further. Without discussing Bernstein’s discussion in detail, it is worth noting that he sees this as more than just a formal matter. He states that “[...] the dynam[ic] of absorption is central to all reading and writing” (1992, 23).

Following Bernstein, we can ask if there are certain forms or compositional modes which almost unfailingly create centripetal or centrifugal effects. What about the horror story, the detective story or science fiction? Does direct address force the reader in one direction or the other? What about the unity of its elements: “[...] the *causal* necessity of every element and relationship being strikingly and instantaneously apparent” (1992, 37)? What force is exerted by regular recurrence, repetition or recognition? Could we perhaps speculate on the “mass” of a text which might increase its gravitational pull? How might the speed (i.e. ease) of reading condition the centrifugal or centripetal? Or the smoothness or striation of the linguistic surface? At one point Bernstein argues that “[...] artificial, jaggedly rhythmic prosodic elements [...] create a centripetal (or vortical) energy in the poem that is able to capture and hold the attention (not just conscious attention, but the imagination or psyche)” (1992, 53). As with the trope of escape, however, I have the same problem with the terms “absorption” and “repellence” as referring to states or outcomes rather than processes or forces. This detracts from the relational and performative connotations which the adjectival centrifugal and centripetal carry.

In the end, Bernstein (quite rightly) admits that “It remains an open question, and an unresolvable one, what will produce an absorptive poem and what will produce a non-absorptive one” (1992, 30). “To speak of a radically impervious text (*in my terms ‘impervious’ here is synonymous with centripetal*) is to speak oxymoronically [...]” *Centripetal and centrifugal* “[...] are relative, contextual and interpenetrating terms, not new critical analytic categories” (1992, 65). The extent to which and the ways in which centripetal

and centrifugal forces operate within the reading environment can be articulated ; we can be aware of them. However, they are not simply a function of the text. They emerge from the interaction between text and reader and as such, they are as much an aspect of the reading habits and experience of the reader her/himself. This may sound like a banal point to make – indeed it is. (What textual element ever produces a wholly predictable and wholly determined response ?) However, on the question of the digital/analog I would like to think that this provides a more nuanced distinction than the binary of analog = centripetal and digital = centrifugal.

At the end of this paper, I realise that to a certain extent I have enacted or performed some of the premises of the paper itself. Having started from a particular and clearly defined distinction between the centripetal analog/book object and the centrifugal digital performed event, I appear to have wandered centrifugally from that point and ended up through a series of digressions at a position which is, if not diametrically opposed to, at least in contradiction to the proposition of the title. This is rather pleasing – and to misquote Sterne : “Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine ; – they are the life, the soul of academic papers.”

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