

A Case of Shifting Boundaries. A Review of
The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature.

Eds. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale.

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The sheer size of *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* is not only indicative of the breadth and scope that the thirty-seven essay volume aspires to, but also of the wide applicability of the term ‘experimental’ in discussions of literature. The elasticity of the term, and perhaps the occasional fuzziness with which it is employed, are tangible in a volume that brings together, for instance, discussions of Martin Amis, Jorge Luis Borges, Ernest Hemingway, Franz Kafka and Thomas Pynchon with others of Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, Neil Hennessey, Jhane, Brian Kim Stefans, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and OuLiPo. The term ‘experimental’, it would seem, can be used to describe works which have been canonized and institutionalized in countless university courses around the world, such as the work of Kafka – often considered paradigmatic of Modernity – as well as to others defined precisely by their resistance to canonization and institutionalization, what Steve Tomasula describes as “underground activity, hidden in plain view”.¹ Indeed, the essays in this volume suggest a seemingly ineluctable paradox. As Brian McHale argues, “Genuine experimentation [...] should be incompatible with popular success, as it should be with elevation to the scholarly or pedagogical canon.”² Thus, how is a canon of experimental literature worthy of analysis and sustained criticism in a volume like this to be established when experimentation may be indifferent or even antithetical to humanist notions of aesthetic value and popularity?

Video games, code poetry, concrete poetry, expressionist film, the *nouveau roman*, surrealist experiments with language, graphic novels, hoax-poems, interactive fiction, conceptual art, autobiography and the Shakespearean sonnet are some of the genres that are defined as experimental in this volume. As this incomplete list shows, to think about experimental literature is often to problematize disciplinary borders that have deep roots in literature departments. Shaken, for instance, is the requirement of the exclusivity or at least the primacy of the letter in the definition of literature. “Never

¹ Steve Tomasula, “Code Poetry and New-Media Literature,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (New York: Routledge, 2012), 483-96 (484).

² Brian McHale, “Postmodernism and Experiment,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, 141-52 (149).

before”, writes Jessica Prinz, “have the “visual arts” been so verbal”, and this, she claims, makes boundaries between literature and other media fluctuate and dissolve.³

Experimental literature, therefore, is not simply an attempt to do something different *with* literature. It is also a radical questioning of what literature can be and of what can be literature. Experimental literature tends to develop from what John White describes as an “interdisciplinary ethos”, and this, inevitably, heralds a series of questions that revolve around accepted conceptions of the ‘literary’ as well as the critical traditions that surround it.⁴ The author as creative genius and the value of creativity or originality become almost irrelevant in a consideration of genres like hoax-poetry, uncreative writing or the proceduralist work of OuLiPo. The prioritization of semantic meaning and the sharing of universal human concerns appear problematic in code or concrete poetry. The activity of reading literature becomes itself a thorny question as essays by Alison Gibbons on multi-modal literature, Hillary Chute on graphic narrative, Irene Kacandes on experimental life writing and N. Katherine Hayles and Nick Montfort on interactive fiction testify. The focus thus often shifts to the critical apparatus itself – to its limits and potentialities – as we are called to perform what Andrew Epstein describes as a “rather dramatic shift in our critical vocabularies, our means of assessing creative words”.⁵

As we are told a number of times, a new language of criticism is what we need to understand and appreciate the experimental literature discussed in this volume. This suggestion in several essays in the volume, however, coincides with a recurrent tendency in most of the contributions to introduce the subject or genre to be discussed by tracing its genealogy. Indeed, this is not only the case in Part 1 of the volume, which focuses on the historical avant-gardes, but also in Parts 2 and 3, which deal, respectively, with contemporary experiments in print and beyond the page. Intriguingly, therefore, arguments that highlight the effect of the era in which we live on the literature that may be produced, such as Tomasula’s claim that “cultural changes redefine our expectations for what counts as a novel, short story or poem”⁶ or Gregory Ulmer’s positioning of Marcel Duchamp as the Aristotle of “electracy” and his projection of the future as the age of “post-criticism”,⁷ are interlaced with recurrent attempts at tracing a parental lineage to experimental works discussed, as in the case of Epstein, who links contemporary uncreative writing by Kenneth Goldsmith to the strategy of appropriation in the modernist work of Pablo Picasso and T. S. Eliot. This creates a curious unresolved dichotomy in these discussions of experimental literature.

³ Jessica Prinz, “Words in Visual Arts,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, 323-37 (336).

⁴ John White, “Italian Futurism and Russian Cubo-Futurism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, 21-35 (23).

⁵ Andrew Epstein, “Found Poetry, “Uncreative Writing,” and the Art of Appropriation,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, 310-22 (320).

⁶ Steve Tomasula, “Information Design, Emergent Culture and Experimental Form in the Novel,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, 435–451 (447).

⁷ Gregory Ulmer, “Post-Criticism Conceptual Takes,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, 267-79.

True to the tradition of the avant-garde and manifestoes outlined in essays by Peter Stockwell and Laura Winkiel, among others, critical work on experimental literature participates in a discourse of futurity. In doing so, however, it often feels impelled to return to the past, somehow to prove that the future it projects in the present has always already been legitimized as the future to be envisaged by important predecessors. If experimental literature has a tense, it seems, it is the future anterior.

This reveals another significant fact about experimental literature. While critics attempt repeatedly to establish the lineage of experimental work, the manifestoes that announce the arrival of the experimental (or at least *used to* announce, since literary manifestoes seem to be becoming rarer) speak of revolution and a radical departure from the past.⁸ The aptitude for a belligerent tone correlates to the inherently political dimension of the avant-garde. Indeed, as Winkiel reminds us, the term “avant-garde” originates as a French military term used by Jacobins during the French Revolution to describe a political stance intended to reach beyond military circles and towards a broader audience of patriots. The avant-garde, then, demands action and change; it even performs this action with its own language. Experimental literature, when it is associated with the avant-garde, is rooted in history, and it is thus not surprising that various experimental trends in literature originated in Parisian cafes or Parisian journals.

As this compendium shows, aesthetic and political or institutional concerns intersect repeatedly in discussions of experimental literature. However, what distinguishes experimental literature from other literary work that may explore this interface is the role played by a third dominant motif, that is, literature’s relation with science in experimentation. In the introduction, the editors argue that experimental literature often uses the language of science to challenge science for prestige.⁹ While this is debatable, particularly since prestige does not seem to be an easily attainable target for experimental work which posits itself as counter-institutional, the relevance of scientific values for experimental literature is clear. Not only is experimental literature open to the possibilities offered by technological innovation, whether this relates to developments in printing processes, as in concrete poetry, or in digital technology, as in electronic literature, but it shares with science – and work done in labs – a desire for investigation and innovation which is always amenable to the possibility of failure.

The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature is an excellent place to start for those who would like to read or have just started reading around the topic of experimental literature. Its scope is almost encyclopaedic, and one of its key strengths is its comprehensiveness in terms of the kinds of experimental literature discussed. However, what it gains in breadth it sometimes lacks in development. While the compendium brings together a number of important essays, including a cluster of essays

⁸ It is perhaps worth remarking for instance that, as Ivan Callus pointed out to me in a recent discussion of the subject, Electronic Literature, a genre that has been growing for the last twenty years, still lacks a manifesto that one would expect with the arrival of the avant-garde.

⁹ Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, 1-19.

addressing the relation between experimentation, postmodernism and its afterlives, its format means that it functions primarily as an advanced introduction to the different genres discussed and some of the issues they raise rather than providing a significant and sustained development of new concepts or ideas in the study of experimental literature.

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