The Eventuality of the Digital

Dino Franco Felluga

As this section of this issue of *19* is concerned with visions of the digital future, I will take the perhaps risky stance of discussing something that does not yet exist — may even never exist in the form that I will imagine it here, though, as with any time travel narrative, there is always the possibility that by speaking of this future I could either bring it into being or change the future that has been set for us. Consider me your steampunk neo-Victorian Terminator sent from the future to protect you from the threat of alternative visions for that same future. If this analogy tickles your fancy, imagine, that is, a Victorian version of an ageing Arnold Schwarzenegger *c*. 1991 playing a reprogrammed but out-of-date T-800 who is fighting the seemingly unstoppable, liquid metal, shape-shifting T-1000 played by the lithe and villainous Robert Patrick.

There is no fate but what we make.

If you prefer a more high-cultural touchstone, consider this article as akin to Alain Badiou's notion of event, if with the less ambitious metapolitics of addressing the profession rather than the proletariat. That is, I am not a 'political militant working for the emancipation of humanity in its entirety', as Badiou thinks of true politics; however, I *do* propose that we work together towards a version of what Badiou terms truth: 'A truth', he writes, 'is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order.'[1] 'What happens in art, in science, in true (rare) politics, and in love (if it exists)' — Badiou's four privileged conditions, what he calls 'generic procedures' —

> is the coming to light of an indiscernible of the times, which, as such, is neither a known or recognized multiple, nor an ineffable singularity, but that which detains in its multiple-being all the common traits of the collective in question: in this sense, it is the truth of the collective being. (p. 17)

All URLs cited in this article were accessed on 8 October 2015 unless otherwise stated.
[1] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. xiii, xii.

This is not to say that a subject can ever claim to have the truth, since that truth is compromised and delimited the moment you articulate it and thus tie it to a specific situation:

> Grasped in its being, the subject is solely the finitude of the generic procedure, the local effects of an eventual fidelity. What it 'produces' is the truth itself, an indiscernible part of the situation, but the infinity of this truth transcends it. It is abusive to say that truth is a subjective production. A subject is much rather *taken up* in fidelity to the event, and *suspended* from truth; from which it is forever separated by chance. (Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 406, emphases in original)

I will attempt here fidelity to an event, one that does seek to address 'the truth of the collective being' and that can come into being, in fact, only if the readers of this issue decide to take part, be it for the sake of art, politics, love, or the opening of a new truth made possible by not science per se but, rather, the tools of the digital humanities.

Most articles on the digital humanities either present some already completed digital project or tool in order to encourage adoption and disseminate results, or they consider the larger theoretical implications of the move to digital platforms. This piece seeks instead to bring something into being. It is metapolitical insofar as it is designed to fight for our collective future and for what we believe in as a community (i.e. untrammelled scholarly and public access to our cultural heritage). In the moment of action that constitutes the true political event, Badiou writes, one must act on behalf of all, without self-interest (thus affirming 'the rights of the infinite and the immortal against the calculation of interests').[2]

I say all this as preamble to what is, in fact, a rather modest announcement: I have begun a new digital initiative. It is dubbed The COVE, which stands for The Central Online Victorian Educator. The initiative would be a radical extension of what I began with BRANCH — Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History, 1775–1925, at <http://branchcollective.org>. The BRANCH site has already published half a million words of peer-reviewed, copy-edited, and proofread material by nineteenth-century scholars from around the world, all without the participation of a commercial provider or university press. The site is instead fully not-for-profit, a tax-exempt public charity under section 501(c)(3) of the US Internal Revenue Code. I have now embarked on Phase II of the BRANCH project, which will see another half million words of material published. You can find the full list of already published and promised articles on the site under 'Contributors'. The new COVE project would incorporate BRANCH and also provide a central location for the publication

---

[2] Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), p. 104.

of a variety of Victorian digital objects. I wish to create for Victorianists what Romanticists have had in Romantic Circles since 1996. Indeed, I plan to provide many of the same things, including digital editions, an image gallery, peer-reviewed pedagogical essays, audio tracks, and so on. I have already established minimal funding support to facilitate the management and peer review of this material. Benefitting from my experience editing BRANCH, the four-volume Wiley-Blackwell *Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*,[3] *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* <http://ravonjournal. org>, and the Victorian section of NINES <http://nines.org>, I will serve as general editor, aided by a team of graduate students who will help me with database management, email communications, and copy-editing.

That much I should be able to do; however, the more ambitious (perhaps even impossible) idea is to move significantly beyond what Romantic Circles currently offers and to explore new ways of accessing, visualizing, editing, disseminating, and playing with the material in the site. I have put together a team of Canadian and American researchers who will together be seeking grant support from both Canadian and American funding agencies so that we can create a suite of tools for the study and research of the period. This is the part of the article where we truly begin to move into the realm of speculative fiction. Nonetheless, I think that it is worthwhile — however ill-advised it may be to talk of things that may never exist — to imagine the future that we Victorianists would like to see come into being.

It is this part of the article that also serves as an event in Badiou's sense, for, to succeed, The COVE will require the readers of this issue to act for the truth of the collective being. At the most basic level, the content in The COVE will come from other scholars. As with BRANCH, I am but the editor and facilitator. The COVE can succeed only insofar as Victorianists are interested in joining this Central Online collective. What will come of these actions cannot be fully anticipated, which was the case also when I began BRANCH, a site that is, in fact, dedicated to the question (and metacritical investigation) of event: What counts as event? Who decides what should be plotted on such a timeline? Can one even think of literature, art, and history in terms of a timeline's distinct *puncta*? In fact, I had no idea when I started the project which topic clusters would evolve to become the most robust — art galleries and exhibitions, as it turns out, under 'Culture'; Africa under 'Empire and the World'; alternative science and Darwin under 'Science and Technology'. That is, since the events have been largely chosen by scholars, the final product is as much a reflection of the critical interests of the present as it is an elucidation of nineteenth-century history and culture. So it will be with The COVE, which is to say that it will be others, ultimately, who will determine its final make-up.

---

[3] *Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Linda K. Hughes, 4 vols (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

This article functions, then, as a call to you (to contribute, to serve as section editors, even, if you wish, to support the project financially through your academic institutions). I am also calling on you to offer suggestions about how we might best proceed; indeed, you can do so now by turning to the COVE site at <http://covecollective.org> and joining the conversation.

Our idea is to create a suite of tools for the study and research of the period. The goal will be to make this a destination place for anyone teaching and researching the period and to serve as a model that other field groups could then follow. Many of these tools may be overly ambitious as they would require rather significant grant funding to put into place; however, I think it is worth thinking about what is possible before I propose a more concrete and immediately applicable idea that we would like to pursue in the short term. Some of the more ambitious tools include: an exhibit-maker interface (that allows teachers and students to create new web pages using the material in the site, building on the already successful Omeka and Open Exhibits platforms at <http://omeka.org> and <http://openexhibits.org>, respectively); gaming software (inspired by Jerome McGann's now mothballed IVANHOE at <http://ivanhoegame.org> and Jason Camlot's still very much alive iOS Victorianator game, which can be downloaded to your iPhone at iTunes); a timeline builder (where you can easily plug in the SIMILE timeline events from BRANCH to create your own subject-specific chronology); and iOS apps (starting with BRANCH).

I mention these unrealized ideas to suggest also how the implementation of digital tools can change the way we approach what we do as scholars of nineteenth-century culture. The difficulty is in making such tools immediately applicable to the things that we already do as a first step to reimagining those activities by following the logic of the new tool. The tools also need to be made user-friendly enough to bridge the current (ultimately, I think, debilitating) divide between traditional and digital humanists. BRANCH is a good example of what I mean. One goal of the initiative was precisely to enlist traditional scholars in a digital project that rethinks how we do traditional scholarship. In many ways, BRANCH articles are not so different from articles published in scholarly journals and, indeed, some of the pieces could just as easily have been published in existing journals; however, by having scholars think about timeline events on a software tool (the Andrew W. Mellon-funded SIMILE timeline), the new format has facilitated new approaches and even formats for traditional scholarship: for example, the metacritical investigation of how we think about temporality (examples include Garrett Stewart's 'Curtain Up on Victorian Popular Cinema' and Jonathan Sachs's '1786/1801: William Playfair, Statistical Graphics, and the Meaning of an Event') or the examination of how the nineteenth century brought into being our current way of thinking about time (e.g. Martin Meisel's 'On the Age of the Universe'). The genre is quite

flexible, with a few essays between just 1500 and 2000 words while others clock in at over 20,000 — the Web, after all, does not have the same limitations of a codex book or journal. By having scholars from different fields discuss the same events, the site also lays bare the act of interpretation in a way that works counter to the monochrome version of knowledge provided by something like Wikipedia. (A good example is how differently a literary critic and a historian approach the same set of events — say, the Anglo-Afghan Wars, which literary critic Zarena Aslami and historian Antoinette Burton both examine in BRANCH; or how differently even critics from the same discipline approach the same historical set of occurrences, as in Marjorie's Stone's and Kate Lawson's investigations of the 1844 Post Office Espionage Scandal.) The format of the site, in other words, links scholars, approaches, disciplines, and historical events in ways that open up new paths of discovery.

My point is that almost any software tool has the potential to make us reconceive how we imagine our approach to the critical objects we study and in ways that we may well not be able to anticipate. In past articles on the digital humanities in *Victorian Studies* and *Critical Quarterly*, I have discussed this difficulty.[4] Not only can we often not foresee how new technologies will develop — one need only mention how difficult it was just ten years ago, before Twitter, Facebook, the iPhone, and the iPad, to foresee the development of the Internet towards social networking, mobile computing, and metadata — but our tendency is also to rely on old formal structures to help us to make sense of the new. Such skeuomorphs — as I called those formal structures, following N. Katherine Hayles — keep us from fully exploring the potential (or even the logical fruition) of the innovation. 'A skeuomorph', Hayles writes, 'is a design feature that is no longer functional in itself but that refers back to a feature that was functional at an earlier time.' The skeuomorph calls into play

> a psychodynamic that finds the new more acceptable when it recalls the old that it is in the process of displacing and finds the traditional more comfortable when it is presented in a context that reminds us we can escape from it into the new.[5]

The archaic, skeuomorphic language we use to make sense of the computer and the Internet cannot but delimit even as they also strive to facilitate our understanding of the new medium — from Web 'pages' and 'bookmarks' to 'windows', 'folders', and 'trash'. Such semantic skeuomorphs are easy to

---

[4] Dino Franco Felluga, 'Addressed to the NINES: The Victorian Archive and the Disappearance of the Book', *Victorian Studies*, 48 (2006), 305–19; 'BRANCHing Out: Victorian Studies and the Digital Humanities', *Critical Quarterly*, 55 (2013), 43–56.
[5] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 17.

point out: more difficult to see are the many ways that we keep ourselves from realizing the full implications of a given software innovation. The relatively short history of the Internet is filled with the meteoric rise of software companies that could see what was needed before anyone else could (and that then did that thing better than others): Google and the search engine; Facebook and social networking; Twitter and mobile messaging; Snapchat and self-erasing video messaging; Apple and its suite of hardware devices. Like the scientific breakthrough that opens up a new way of seeing the world (one of Badiou's favourite examples of 'event'), digital tools can open up new ways of seeing and thinking, though always with a skeuomorphic lag between innovation and full, often unexpected realization.

I will provide just one more example in the space that I have left — the tool that The COVE hopes to make functional in a way that will bring traditional humanists together in another shared digital venture that can facilitate the archiving and sharing of our cultural heritage: an annotation tool that functions like a crowdsourcing mechanism for the critical annotation of digital texts, building on the World Wide Web Consortium's new Open Annotation Protocol and previous open source annotation software like Genius at <http://genius.com>, hypothes.is at <https://hypothes.is>, Susan Brown's CWRC-Writer at <http://cwrc.ca>, and Amanda Visconti's Infinite Ulysses at <http://infiniteulysses.com>. The codex book naturally predisposes us to think of knowledge in terms of authoritative creators who own the products of their genius, a concept that was completely foreign to an earlier oral culture and that is increasingly foreign to the new digital culture of avatars, mash-ups, hip-hop sampling, open source software, the Creative Commons movement, and Wikipedia. The very notion of authorship is itself a product of print technology, and our courses and scholarship follow the logic of this earlier technology, particularly — in English classes anyway — the teaching of canonical authors using codex editions created by single authors and then edited by authoritative senior scholars. But what if we could provide an easy-to-use digital platform that allowed multiple scholars to annotate a given text, with many different kinds of annotations (textual, interpretative, historical, each easily toggled on or off with the click of a button)? I don't like the term crowdsourcing given the provenance of the term in late-capitalist outsourcing — let us call it 'insourcing' as it would function precisely to combat the outsourcing techniques of commercial providers like ProQuest and Gale Cengage who have the OCR (Optical Character Recognition) for *EEBO*, *ECCO*, and *NCCO* completed by *comprador* outfits in Asia. Imagine an insourced edition of, say, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* or something smaller, perhaps just Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', that is edited and annotated by ten, twenty, or more top Victorian critics, all working together to facilitate our understanding of the primary text? What if we could also then

facilitate the display of past iterations of the source text, using NINES's JUXTA software <http://www.juxtasoftware.org>? If we could put such editions through peer review, revision, copy-editing, and proofing (as I do for all BRANCH articles), who would not want to use such an edition in the classroom (or for their own research)?

Of course, none of this will happen without some degree of institutional and grant support. There is also the question of how to sustain such a project into the future, since grants never provide support past the original investment. Until now, we Victorianists have relied on printing presses and commercial providers to disseminate our cultural heritage, for there are not insignificant costs associated with such publication, but we have done so at our peril. Here, too, I feel that we need to think outside of the skeuomorphic box in order to imagine alternative mechanisms for the support of our scholarship. As a result, one of the things that our digital humanities group will be exploring is some alternative mechanism for the generation of (always not-for-profit) income, particularly micropayments from students and non-academics using the site — say, $10 per year in exchange for access to the suite of tools, which will provide functionality beyond basic content (which, I want to make clear, I see as still freely accessible). Just thirty classes with thirty students each would thus generate $9000 — you can see, I hope, the potential for self-sufficiency here. I am taking Sean Takats's Zotero at <http://zotero.org> as inspiration, since income from premium access to Zotero's features now provides the majority of non-grant funding for the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University (and stole the market from the for-profit Endnote software tool).

If we are successful in putting together significant support, The COVE could potentially be a response to the unwillingness of commercial providers to pursue the Mellon-funded initiative to create a virtual university, so that scholars at less well-funded universities could still gain access to databases through their period societies (e.g. ProQuest's and Gale Cengage's *ECCO*, *NCCO*, *EEBO*, and newspaper repositories) — the ultimately failed initiative I started with Elaine Freedgood in 2009. The initial meeting at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation office in New York (in February 2010) brought together the leaders of most of the major North American period and field societies to address the issue (ASECS, RSA, SCSC, SEA, NAVSA, NASSR, ALA, MSA, NACBS, ACLS, and others); I there presented our proposed solution (a virtual university that gains access for members through our consortium of period societies). The meeting led to a feasibility study helmed by the American Council of Learned Societies, followed by negotiation with the commercial providers, especially ProQuest and Gale Cengage. The unwillingness of these commercial providers to find a mechanism for giving scholars access to their databases, for the reason

that it was not worth their effort for so little monetary return, as well as the fear that such access would threaten their library subscription model, is a sign that we must find an alternative way forward to safeguard our cultural heritage and facilitate scholarly investigation of past cultural objects, affirming instead, to quote Badiou on metapolitics again, 'the rights of the infinite and the immortal against the calculation of interests' (*Metapolitics*, p. 104).

To return all the way back to my opening analogy, the commercial providers in this speculative fiction would be aligned, I suppose, with the awesome superiority of the liquid metal, shape-shifting T-1000, but the fact is that, however poorly funded and scattered we might be, we do have some tools at our own disposal that we can employ to fight against a future where the commercial providers control access to our cultural heritage. We are fighting, alongside many others, for the future of not humanity but the humanities, you might say. All that is missing is modest funding from universities and the organizing power that not-for-profit groups like our field societies can provide.

There is no fate but what we make.