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Digital Duende: Reading the Rasp in E-Poetry

D*uende*. In Spanish and Latin American mythology, it signifies a ghost, an evil spirit, a goblin-like creature. In the context of the arts, it is a delicately nuanced term, suggesting “the obscure power and penetrating inspiration of art,” and is most closely associated with the music of *flamenco*.¹

Duende has been part of the vocabulary of poetics since 1933, when Spanish poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca invoked the term in his lecture “Play and Theory of the *Duende*” to describe his own theory of the artistic process. *Duende* is, in Lorca’s interpretation, the passion that flows through a piece of art; the rough rasp of a singer’s voice as she transcends conventional musical aesthetics; the pain and fear of love that is *sin remedio*, without remedy.² Lorca did not originate the term *duende*, and the element in art to which he applied it did not just appear with his act of naming. Lorca was describing the intangible draw of art, the *je ne sais quoi* that moves viewers and connects them to something greater than themselves, putting into words the unsaid—unsaid because it is largely unsayable. The artist may strive for *duende*, but it “is something beyond technical competence or even technical virtuosity.”³ Lorca pointed to *duende* as aspiration and inspiration, and in the sweeping, poetic manner in which he describes it, acknowledges the impossibility of capturing *duende* in our limited language. For Lorca, “all arts are capable of *duende*”⁴; but to create a genuine work of art—whether it be sung, danced, written, or painted—“demands conscious struggle . . . and reckless courage.”⁵ *Duende* is not defined by the intellect, but rather recognized by instinct; its arrival is perceived as that of the ‘Other.’

In his 1994 essay “Cante Moro,” poet/critic Nathaniel Mackey took on what he considers to be one of the “ongoing challenges” of “Play and Theory of the *Duende*”: the question of “how to bring *duende*, which [Lorca] discusses mainly in relation to music, over into writing, [and] how to relate it to writing.”⁶ To do

so, Mackey positions *duende* as a sort of cross-cultural ghost, born from a black aesthetic, that speaks in poetry as the voice of the marginalized other. As a term born from the Moorish culture of southern Spain, Mackey finds a deep connection between *duende* and the Otherness of the black experience. To evoke *duende* is, for Mackey, to evoke alterity, to sing with the alien voice, to move below and beyond traditional cultural values of beauty as do Lorca's flamenco singers.

He specifically cites the work of New American poets Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and Amiri Baraka, and Beat poet Bob Kaufman, as well as his own writing, as being in dialogue with Lorca's essay. In keeping with Lorca's assertion that *duende* "is not a question of ability . . . but of blood, of the most ancient culture,"⁷ Mackey gives prominence to the poem that stands at the crossroads of tradition, that cuts across "national . . . and ethnic boundaries," that has many layers of meaning.⁸ He makes the jump from performed song to written poem by aligning the literal troubling or distressing of the voice in *flamenco* to the poetic act of "entering . . . language in such a way that one is into an area of implication, resonance and connotation that is manifold, many-meaninged, polysemous."⁹ And while a poem can invoke many different voices—cultural and connotative—it is when the poet acknowledges through the work that none of these voices holds the claim on truth, that "the realm of conventionally articulate speech is not sufficient for saying what needs to be said," that the poem is opened to *duende*.¹⁰ By discussing the musicality of his own writing, Mackey then expands this modernist exploration of voice and tradition to a more contemporary one of intermedia work. He locates an open space for *duende* in his own pursuit of "lines of kinship and conversation with nonliterary media," and in the ways in which he channels the 'alternate voice' of African music.¹¹

Much as Mackey saw a challenge in Lorca's "Play and Theory of the *Duende*," I see a challenge in "Cante Moro." Though many writers have tried to dialogue with *duende*, Mackey's treatment has, in my opinion, the strongest resonance with the contemporary moment, and is one that welcomes further development.¹² In his argument, Mackey shows how the artistic concerns of one medium—music—can

relate to and enhance those of another—printed poetry. What he does not consider, however, is how it is the variations in media that cause each art form to have a unique expression of *duende*, “different,” as Lorca says, “in form and style.”¹³ In *flamenco* singing, *duende* “surges up from the soles of the feet”¹⁴; but from where does it come in the written poem? From the poet’s body? From the ink on the page? From the physical page itself? The same can be asked in the transition from sung music to instrumental music, and to dance and to painting. If *duende* works with and through each medium in a different manner, is that then how we make distinctions between art forms?

The question is raised, however, as to why we should bother seeking out *duende*, this ahistorical *feeling* that is difficult to put into words, that causes even the most eloquent speaker to talk in circles, and yet is arguably an aim at the heart of every artistic venture. Why take on a search that is always already inconclusive? Because, while this search will never yield a graspable *duende*, it does provide a clearer picture of an artwork’s—or a medium’s—unique situation among centuries of cultural production. To seek out a source of *duende* in a piece of art forces a comparison to that which came before; it excavates relationships between media that may not have been considered and examines them at a deeper level. That is the goal of this piece, to use *duende* to come at a mulled-over topic from a different angle, not to offer an authoritative declaration of “here lies *duende*.”

The medium shift between printed and digital poetry (or, interchangeably, e-poetry) has, perhaps, higher stakes in the discussion of *duende* than, say, from sculpture to dance. There is a certain level of reader discomfort with the marriage of new technology and poetry, a sense that heavily computerized mediation can have the effect of rendering a poem passionless, which can lead to a denial of “digital *duende*,” the failure to acknowledge that e-poetry is a form even capable of evoking the spirit of artistic expression. In his book *Prehistoric Digital Poetry*, C. T. Funkhouser notes that, while he is unable to formulate a standard definition for e-poetry, “randomization, patterning, and repetition of words, along with discursive leaps and quirky, unusual semantic connections, are almost always found in [digital

poetry], through sometimes these effects are so amplified that the poems would not be considered poetry by someone using traditional definitions.”¹⁵ However, the same could be said for a considerable amount of the written poetry produced today. Can and should Mackey’s thought on *duende* in print be directly applied to cyberspace? Is the medium unique enough to support its own instantiation of *duende*? I believe it is, and Loss Pequeño Glazier, digital poet and Webmaster of the Electronic Poetry Center (EPC), appears to think so as well when he uses a line from “Play and Theory of the *Duende*” to epigraph his online introduction to the EPC.¹⁶

Though they do share what Lorca calls “the common base of word,”¹⁷ what separates digital poetry from innovative print poetics is the Internet: a medium, a multimediality, and a space where marginalized communities are put into dialogue. *Duende* thrives within the Internet’s embrace of alterity—though it is an alterity more general and less specifically racial than that used by Mackey. Online, communities are formed by the Other, the marginalized being, in order to connect with the other Others. Interactions are instant and global, occurring between those who use their Internet avatars to find comfort in a common difference. The raw edges of alterity are visible at every turn, and from these overlaps is born e-poetry, an art form of distinct significance, and “not print poetry merely repositioned in the new medium.”¹⁸

But to situate *duende* digitally, it is first necessary to consider how the print medium expresses *duende*, and in what ways the poet’s manner and means of inquiry must change when filtered through a modem.

The printed page is a dualistic space of text versus margin; and it is in violating this sharp division that print poetry attempts to summon the *duende*. To trespass the clean, white border with black ink is to release the voice of the margin. Robert Duncan, one of Mackey’s *duende* poets, was deeply concerned with this sense of the marginal and explored it—literally and figuratively—in his poetry. Duncan’s poetics express a desire to disrupt the hierarchy of the page, to let the text bleed across the entire page, without boundaries. As Michael Davidson notes in his

essay on Duncan, “Marginality in the Margins,” many of Duncan’s poems “occur in marginal states of consciousness that . . . often utilize the literal margins of the page for their enactment,”¹⁹ and that “whether writing to another poet or permitting other writings to interrupt his conversation, Duncan saw the boundary between text and margins as a shifting one, in whose instability lay the hope of abolishing the totalized authority of other texts.”²⁰ Though the need to destroy authority and breach the barriers of the acceptable is what connects Duncan to *duende*, it is the medium of the page that makes the expression of this need distinct. It should be noted that Duncan’s approach, however, does bring up a theoretical difficulty—one that will become even more pronounced in the context e-poetry: if *duende* is positioned as the Other, isn’t the possibility for *duende* eliminated when the margin disappears? The initial act of barrier-shattering welcomes *duende*, but where can this transgressive force thrive once the voice of the minority becomes the voice of the majority?

While the language of print culture has been applied to Internet technology—e.g., ‘Web page,’ ‘scrolling’—the World Wide Web bears only passing resemblance to the book. Most notably for this discussion, there is no margin, literal or social, on the Internet. Online documents lack the margin that print poets like Duncan so eagerly engage. A Web page can be almost infinitely long and wide (with the visual field restricted only by the size of the computer), and ‘page’ breaks need only come when the designer deems them necessary. Scribbles in paper margins have their counterpart in hypertext—the ‘democratic marginalia,’ if you will, which demands that the power of the gaze be shared equally among ideas, granting each thought its own distinct piece of online space. In *Hypertext 2.0*, George P. Landow explains that “hypertext [linking] . . . emphasizes that the marginal has as much to offer as does the central, in part because hypertext does more than redefine the central by refusing to grant centrality to anything, to any lexia, for more than the time a gaze rests upon it.”²¹

In the same way that the Internet has eliminated the physical space of the margin, it has also eliminated the restrictions traditionally placed on the socially

marginalized. Sociologist Daniel Downes explains in his book, *Interactive Realism: The Poetics of Cyberspace*, that there is an accepted “notion of the cybercommunity as a safety zone for social experimentation.”²² In fact, marginalized communities are often brought to prominence online, where everything from RPGs (role-playing games) to fanfiction encourages deviation from the social norm. The Web’s unique ‘page’ does not push anything or anyone to the margins. Every user can be both author and reader, publisher and published. The division between two users can even be elided, as is the case with collaborative projects like wiki servers, in which work by individuals can no longer be distinguished from the content as a whole. If, as Davidson notes, “textual politics—the seizing of one’s means of literary production—coincides with social marginality,” then digital poetry represents the reclamation and expansion of the printed and social margin.²³ Poets working with the Internet as medium are therefore able to integrate cross-cultural and peripheral elements far more pervasively than can print poets like Mackey. This again begs to ask from whence *duende* is supposed to come now that it cannot haunt the margins. I suggest that the Internet’s—and therefore digital poetry’s—disregard for ‘tradition,’ its deliberate ignorance of social and textual barriers, is *duende*. It is alterity in a different fashion, an Otherness distinct to the medium of the Internet. Though e-poets use different tactics to summon *duende*, it is accessible to them precisely because the medium is itself the act of transgression that heralds the arrival of *duende*.

Lorca says that “the arrival of the *duende* presupposes a radical change to all the old kinds of form.”²⁴ Online, this ‘radical change’ is one that destroys physical form in favor of creating an open space in which strictly defined individual identities are permitted to melt and merge. As Downes explains, “the screen is a border, a liminal site, a place of dislocation that simultaneously separates us from one another and brings us together. The screen is a permeable border that allows a cataract of experience to pass.”²⁵ The loss of the static page allows for the birth of the truly interactive text, one that destroys the space between reader and author. While some hypertext works can hardly be considered interactive, responding to the

user's click only by taking them to an already fixed page, others are sensitive to every movement of the user's mouse. This type of e-poem is *spontaneously created*—one of Lorca's requirements for *duende*—at the moment of reading, and the odds are against the same pattern re-creation by another user. As Jay David Bolter explains in "Literature in the Electronic Writing Space," "an electronic text is fluid, adjustable right up to the moment of reading. Indeed an electronic text only exists in the act of reading—in the interaction between the reader and the textual structure."²⁶ Interactive digital poetry is a strange breed that relies on the physical input of the user, machine, programmer, and author to create a live, mediatized performance.

E-poems that utilize mouse-over technology, in which elements of the poem change as the user drags the mouse across the page, are particularly unpredictable and performative. Jim Andrews has a collection of such works called "stir fry texts," which are similar to the material cut-up experiments of the OuLiPo group but distinguished from them in the "the spastic interactivity [the stir fry texts] give to the reader/viewer, the way that they insist on hanging together as texts, physically, anyway and, if they are successful as texts . . . the range of insights they afford into themselves and the random and the cut up and the Web and into oneself."²⁷ In "Log," a "stir fry text," there are three main layers of text, and each text is cut into about 30 pieces.²⁸ When the user mouses over a portion of the text, that phrase flashes and transforms into the corresponding phrase below. Every drag of the mouse creates a different poem and a different mix of the three texts. Words often appear as if they are resisting the mouse-over change, and the whole text shakes, revealing pieces of the hidden layers. As Andrews explains, "mousing over stir fry text replaces only a part of the text and the body of the new text moves as an entity to adjust itself to the change, providing the pleasant illusion that it has some sort of unified character or personality even in its transformations."²⁹ Users control the timing of the changes with their mouse and select the area targeted for change, but have no say in what the changed poem says. The reaction of the text to the mouse is largely unpredictable, which makes central the concept of competing voices, or a voice within a voice; the user's movements affect the text on several layers, all but

the most basic out of that user's control. Their movements are, in short, *possessed* by the ghost in the machine, the hidden code that controls how the text responds to mouse-overs. "Log" engages in an interactive and multi-vocal performance that blends textual elements and foregrounds the strangeness of the author-user-machine triangle, opening up the stage for *duende*.

Kenneth Goldsmith's "Fidget"³⁰ is what Marjorie Perloff would call a "differential text," or a text that exists "in different material forms, with no single version being the definitive one."³¹ There is single "real Fidget": there is the Fidget applet, or the digital poetic text; the Fidget Real Audio, as performed by Theo Bleckmann; and the complete Fidget Texts in book form. In the "Fidget applet," the complete written text is converted into a user-navigable web that both moves independently of the user and also shifts to different screens as users click and drag their mouse. The movement of the mouse also cues the highlighting of individual body parts and actions, like "elbow," "neck," "releases," or "pulls." The physical movement of the user outside the computer is in this manner connected with Goldsmith's recorded physical movement. As the applet mediates Goldsmith's movement, which is first mediated by printed text, the e-poem is, through its connection to the computer, mediating the user's movement as well, and making visible its effects. "Fidget applet" plays on the digital platform's unique opportunity to trouble body-text-machine connections, and to take the user through an experience of multiple mediation.

Funkhouser argues in *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* that, in terms of digital poetry, "nothing particularly new has emerged since the initiation of the [World Wide Web]," and that "contemporary digital poetry merely refines earlier types of production and disseminates works to a wider audience via the network."³² However, Funkhouser greatly limits himself in failing to separate the medium of the computer from the medium of the Internet, which I contend is the defining element of contemporary digital poetry. While the computer provides the basic processes of digital poetry and is obviously essential to the Internet's existence, the World Wide Web is a singular medium, distinguished by multi-vocality and inclusiveness, and

by a crowding of media into the same digital space that the disconnected computer cannot replicate. The Internet “borrow[s] from and remediate[s] almost any visual and verbal medium we can name”; a single Web page may at once feature digital streaming of a television show, quotations from a printed text, user commentary, sound clips, and visual art.³³ As Glazier notes in “The Conditional Text: Siting the ‘Poetry’ in E-Poetry,” “the interrelationship between media is crucial to digital space since the multimedia work is not a collection of different media that are juxtaposed, but an arrangement of media that are interwoven in their interests.”³⁴

It is in this space of mixed mediation that *duende* thrives. Lorca observes that “*duende* . . . draws near places where forms fuse together into a yearning superior to their visible expression.”³⁵ To encounter the ‘fused forms’ of media on a Web page is to experience a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Like *duende*, a multimedia poem represents the channeling and melding of voices; as Mackey notes, “a different medium is a different voice.”³⁶ Digital poetry that visibly integrates sound and movement into its text highlights each individual medium while bringing to the forefront its *poesis*, or the process of the poem’s creation. It is a ‘liveness’ that goes beyond the limits of that treated by Philip Auslander, a performance whose immediacy is located precisely in its hypermediacy.³⁷

Digital poet Craig Dworkin’s piece, “Soundpoem (for Tom Raworth),” pressures the limits of hypermediacy and mixed media, silence and vision, in order to unlock the alternate voice of the *duende*.³⁸ “Soundpoem” opens onto a simple brown screen with a picture of a square piece of paper in the top center. Animation cycles through thirteen scraps of paper, the first eleven bearing the image of a hand making the American Sign Language sign for a particular letter; together, these signs spell out “lautgedicht,” the German translation of “soundpoem.” The twelfth scrap of paper merely shows a closed hand, while the last reads, “St. Valentine’s Day, 1998, Berkeley, 2/30.” In this piece, Dworkin is playing with the notions of both the “soundpoem” and the multimedia e-poem. It is a sound poem for the deaf, the enunciation of a physical language—which is, in turn, mediating a foreign language—through a medium defined by its integration of media. It is

a paradoxical e-poem meant to trouble the user's understanding of how media function and to expose conflicting media as a means through which to express the Internet's colliding alterities.

Though all arts are filtered through some sort of imagistic or linguistic system of signs, the programming code written beneath the hybrid media of an e-poem is a specifically digital phenomenon. Code, whether in the form of HTML or the binary of 0s and 1s that runs all digital technology, is a fully articulated language, different from but integral to the visible text on the page. The presence of code below the surface of the screen creates a charged dualism between "on the one hand, . . . the code-based symbol levels of a computer that can hardly be perceived by the user; and on the other hand, the 'screen aesthetics,' or whatever is displayed to the user on the screen."³⁹ The collisions or collusions that occur between the language of code and the language of poetics create a tension between the 'real' and the realized.

To open up this unique digital door to *duende*, e-poetry can work to expose the code hidden below the surface. Such pieces are often called "codeworks," a term attributed to poet/critic Alan Sondheim for "digital poetry that reflects the intrinsic textuality of the computer."⁴⁰ By bringing programming code and poetic language together on the same plane, codeworks poets create moments of tension, contact, danger—moments of *duende*. Though codeworks do not have an exact equivalent in other art forms, their visible code can be considered in relation to the *flamenco* rasp, in their mutual breach of aesthetic rules and disruption of technical perfection.

Multimedia artist and digital poet Simon Biggs uses the revelation of code in his piece "non-Loss'y translator" to undermine the construct of on-screen language.⁴¹ The term "lossy" refers to a form of compression for digital sound and image files that causes a loss of detail when the file is decompressed; so Biggs' "non-Loss'y translator" decompresses or unravels keystrokes literally "without loss," resulting in a proliferation of code language on the screen. Upon opening the site, the user is greeted by a large, white cursor blinking on a black background. Every keystroke the user makes—alphabetical, numerical, or functional—causes

six versions of linguistic, visual, and sonic code to appear, layered on top of each other. The 'top' code, in white Courier font, is what the user inputs. Typed letters or numbers cannot be deleted; rather, hitting the 'delete' key spurs the appearance of more code. The next layer is that of blue protocol code, which is made up of a range of numerical digitals. Another layer is made up of red Greek letters; the next, binary code (0s and 1s) in green; and the next, visualized Morse code, in teal. The final, which shows up only when a letter is entered, is Unicode Braille, displayed in two columns of large and small fuchsia circles. The effect of the layering is magnified as the user continues to type, and the 'poem' takes the form of a visually loud palimpsest of code. Each piece of code is a different representation of the same keystroke, a melding of six languages in one space—the creation of *duende*.

In her work, digital poet Mez (Mary-Anne Breeze) blends HTML and English together to create a language she calls "mezangelle," intended to represent the mutual dependence of poetic language and code necessary to create e-poetry. In an interview for furtherfield.org, Mez tells co-founder of CONT3XT.NET⁴² Franz Thalmer: "much of my present output questions the concepts of "reality" + "virtual" + their systematic definition crumbling. i'm exploring how this disintegration may lead 2 a continuum approach of the real<-->virtual."⁴³ The clash of the real and the virtual is what's at stake in Mez's mezangelle codeworks, as the 'real' language of the artistic, poetic text is forced into visible interaction with the previously invisible, alien, 'virtual' language.

In a codework entitled "pro][tean][.lapsing.txts,"⁴⁴ Mez presents the 'clash concept' at work *in* her mezangelle language *through* her mezangelle language. The work opens with a page of text in mezangelle, topped by the now-familiar coded header for an email:

From: ".dirtee codah." <netwurker@hotmail.net.au>

Date: Mon Feb 11, 2002 5:20 pm

Subject: N.formation.sources[*i. am. [trapped. in. seizure. language.*

The term “.dirtee codah.” functions as a hyperlink that takes the user to other parts of the work. Throughout this piece, Mez meditates on what it means to be ‘trapped in seizure language’—the language of the physical, epileptic seizure, but also the language of capture, of imprisonment. The particular linguistic construction of *mezangelle* ‘captures’ code within poetic language—or, perhaps, the poetic language within code—to create something that is “part girl| [part][ial][boy () .” If “The DNA of programmer fare is code;”⁴⁵ then *mezangelle* is the DNA for a world balanced between the push of poetic language and the pull of code; a ‘dirty,’ troubled language that puts pressure on the conflict, the *duende*, between the two forces.

At the close of “Play and Theory of the *Duende*,” Lorca asks, “Where is the *duende*?” *Duende* is in all arts, and all arts find themselves defined in *duende*. The *duende* is in the wind, “a mental wind blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents; a wind [. . .] announcing the constant baptism of newly created things.”⁴⁶ *Duende* has been swept along across the decades, swirling here in music, there in print; and now, it finds itself filling the bellows of bits and bytes. *Duende* seeks the new form, the fused form, the troubled form; and as different as digital poetry is to all other genres and media that have channeled the dark spirit, *duende* nevertheless thrives in it. In fact, e-poetry is open to possession precisely because it exists in a medium full of possibilities unrealizable by other media forms, a medium that is, at its foundation, an act of social and textual transgression, an unmitigated embrace of alterity. Though we can never point to digital *duende*, the search for the spaces it *could* inhabit highlights what it is about e-poetry that distinguishes and legitimates it as an independent and innovative, not derivative, art form. Digital poetry inhabits a unique space in art and technology—as space in which *duende*, the dark spirit, the voice of many voices, the Other, can thrive.

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