Adam Koehler

Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities

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For Stephanie,
electric in all the best ways

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Foreword

Tim Mayers

Sometimes things are most difficult to see when they are right in front of you. And sometimes, if the things themselves seem clear, the nature of the *connections between them* is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to see. I am delighted to be writing these words of introduction for Adam Koehler's book because of the connections I believe this book will allow us to see (or, if we have already seen them, that it will help us to articulate). This book will, along with much other exciting scholarship in *creative writing studies* published during the second decade of the twenty-first century, help establish and clarify the terms of a scholarly conversation that will—and must—continue into the coming years.

Writing, certainly one of the most consequential inventions in human history, serves as a great example of how we can miss what should be most obvious. Writing is so much a part of our hyper-literate society that we usually can't see it in anything approaching its fullness. Nor can we often see writing's connections, in their fullness, to virtually everything else in our lives. Discussions of writing in the public sphere, and in parts of academia (especially the composition classroom) often get bogged down in complaints about comma splices or text-message abbreviations or a host of other perceived errors. In creative writing workshops, concerns about static surface features of individual pieces of writing can also have a tendency to overshadow much more consequential matters. All the tiny details—the minutiae—too often blind us to the breathtaking and dynamic scope of all that writing is, and can be.

Surely some of that difficulty arises because the word "writing" is used in at least several different senses. Many of the key words of our culture(s) present a similar difficulty. In an ambitious recent work entitled *The Nature of Technology: What It is and How It Evolves*, W. Brian Arthur writes, "'Technology'

has at least half-a-dozen major meanings, and several of these conflict." Words closely associated or overlapping with "technology," he continues, are "loaded with emotional associations" (5). A major theme of Arthur's book is that, in spite of the saturation of the human lifeworld by technologies of numerous sorts, we don't really yet have "an '-ology' of Technology. . . . We have no agreement on what the word 'technology' means, no overall theory of how technology came into being . . . no deep understanding of what 'innovation' consists of, and no theory of evolution for technology" (12–13). How ironic it is, then—but also how *telling*—that in Arthur's otherwise fascinating book, he mentions *writing* almost not at all, and *language* only in passing on a few occasions. He seems to have missed the possibility that writing could be a foundational technology that makes so many other technologies possible. He seems to have missed the possibility that without writing, virtually all of the recent "advances" in engineering and the sciences would be unimaginable. *As a technology*, writing fades into invisibility for Arthur, even while he is . . . well, *writing*!

Another thing often easy to miss is this: scholarly writing, in its idealized sense, is supposed to constitute a type of "conversation" (think of the Burkean metaphor of the parlor, so ritually cited in so many places by now that it's become its own sort of cliché). The scholarly conversation is supposed to advance and extend knowledge—or to explore questions—in ways that no single individual can; the conversation, by its nature, is supposed to be bigger and more important than any individual participant. And yet how often are our parts in these conversations distorted by the necessity of considering them as mere lines on *curriculum vitae* or items on pages of works cited? Even worse, how often do our parts in scholarly conversations go unanswered or unacknowledged? In light of these questions, I feel both fortunate and honored that this book not only cites some of my work but also challenges it and extends it. Koehler's reading, in Chapter 1, of the overlapping and problematic histories of how "the creative" has figured in composition scholarship over the past half century often had me nodding in agreement, pausing to ponder its implications, and making notes for future reading. Adam Koehler situates my scholarly work (and the work of many others) in a way that I could not have done so myself; he helps me better understand the place of my own work—and the work of others—in the larger conversation. In his later chapters, Koehler

builds upon this insightful reading of disciplinary and subdisciplinary history to show how something called *digital creative writing studies* is not only a possibility for the future (a future in which it might help English studies survive by renegotiating calcified terms and ideas that would keep it stuck in the past), but something that is being practiced right now, something we can find if we know how to look for it, and something that has roots reaching decades into the past, again if we know how to look for it.

When I was a graduate student from the mid- to late-1990s, I was deeply at work on a doctoral dissertation on the past, present, and potential future relationships between composition studies and creative writing (a topic that continues to consume much of my scholarly attention even now, two decades later). But I was also deeply involved in a then relatively new subfield of composition studies called "computers and writing." I was teaching composition in a networked classroom with a computer station for each student, experimenting with class discussions in chat-room environments, and engaging in (almost) real-time scholarly conversations via e-mail listservs. I had a vague sense then that these two facets of my emerging professional life connected somehow—or at least *ought to have* connected somehow. But it was difficult to articulate those connections, and in the ensuing years I never succeeded in doing so, beyond a few broad gestures. But now, with the publication of this book by Adam Koehler, in which he identifies and maps out the domain of *digital creative writing studies*, those connections become much clearer.

Perhaps twenty or thirty years from now, it will seem odd—a distinct historical curiosity—that we ever drew such sharp (even if usually implicit) lines of demarcation between "composition," "creative writing," and "technology." The pace of technological change with regard to writing has, until recently, been slow enough to allow practices and ideas to become established as apparently "natural." Writing existed for thousands of years before the widespread adoption of print technology, which itself held primary sway for a much shorter period of time (a couple of centuries, give or take a decade or two). The word processor as a writing tool (and the computer on which it usually operates as software) has been in widespread use only since the 1980s, and already many of the earliest word processing programs are essentially obsolete. The smart phone was not introduced to the market until

the first decade of the twenty-first century, and already it operates as a daily writing tool for many people. There is no reason to expect that this pace of technological change will slow down any time soon. Today's common writing tools (including the state-of-the-art Mac laptop on which I am composing this foreword) are likely to seem obsolete a decade from now, if not sooner. Older writing tools will almost certainly mingle with the new, but the overall landscape of writing will have changed.

In that kind of environment, what will "creative writing" look like? How will the literary and generic forms inherited from the age of print have evolved in new composing and reading environments? How might these developments have affected the teaching of writing? This book you are about to read will help prepare you for the possibilities.

Introduction

In *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities* I critically examine how scholarship and pedagogy in the fields of composition studies and creative writing have inflected each other at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, specifically arguing for a distinct and critical extension of creative writing studies that examines the ways in which the act of writing imaginative texts is technologically mediated. Scholars in both composition studies and creative writing such as Wendy Bishop, Paul Kameen, Patrick Bizzaro, Tim Mayers, Paul Dawson, Kelly Ritter, Stephanie Vanderslice, Dianne Donnelly, Katherine Haake, Graeme Harper, and Douglas Hesse, among others, have contributed over the past twenty years to a growing body of scholarship that works within or at the intersection of composition studies and creative writing, each searching in different ways for how research within and between these two areas can reinvigorate work in both fields. This book begins by way of an examination of the variety of disciplinary challenges—calls to unify and/or delineate the disciplines, pedagogical imperatives, theoretical orientations—in order to further refine the relationship between these two fields (rather than revolutionize their place[s] in the institution), then moves to an examination of the ways in which the digital humanities has been called upon in emerging scholarship that seeks to refine, reflect on, and in some senses revise that relationship. At the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, as this book will demonstrate, while composition is still trying to figure out its relationship to creative writing and while creative writing is adapting to the moniker "creative writing studies," we see a set of urgent questions emerge: What theoretical and pedagogical innovations have they offered each other? What institutional boundaries should they draw around themselves? How has each field's branching into and theorizing about digital writing affected the other? In short, this book investigates answers to these questions. Or, in the words of Douglas Hesse, "because the new media

offer a complex (if not altogether neutral) turf to which we might bring our different traditions [in order to explore] more commonalities even as we respect our dissimilar orientations and aspirations," this book begins the work of critically examining how digital multimodality would work in the context of that shared space between composition studies and creative writing ("The Place of Creative Writing" 49).

I point out three threads of scholarship in order to stage that discussion: (1) scholarship in composition studies that recruits "creative" or aesthetic theories, but that does not explicitly comment on or call upon its relationship with creative writing as a discipline; (2) scholarship that explicitly comments or calls upon the relationship between composition studies and creative writing, often scholars with interests in either exploring institutional borders and/or theoretical and pedagogical points of contact; and (3) emerging scholarship in creative writing studies that examines, as Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll point out in *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research, and Pedagogy*, the ways the field "further invents" itself and "encourages multiple meanings" (xii). Put simply, this book unthreads these three strands of scholarship in order to braid them back together as each has begun to reconstitute itself in an age of the digital humanities.

Aesthetics and "creative composition"

As composition studies went through its infamous institutionalization during the 1960s and 1970s (during which it sometimes glanced askance at its neighbor creative writing in order to situate its place in that institutionalization), scholars recruited aesthetics often associated with "creative" types of writing (collage, memoir, freewriting) in the expressivist theories of that time (Murray, Macrorie); then again in the neo-expressivist scholarship of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century (Sirc, Owens). Derek Owens' *Resisting Writings (and the Boundaries of Composition)* and Geoffrey Sirc's *English Composition as a Happening*, for example, demonstrate how aesthetics and "creative" assignments work across a variety of literacy and power dynamics within the university, ultimately championing a way of imagining writing that invites what they see as marginalized voices into the field of composition. Such