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Navigating Digital Literacy, Literature and Humanities in Irish Society A first Conversation with James O'Sullivan

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According to French historian Roger Chartier (1993), it is possible to understand the accomplishment of the figure of the author only though a holistic interpretation of the space-time context in which authorship develops. Each self-declared, and therefore real materialization of authorship is intimately related to its political, social, economic, and cultural context (Foucault 1969). This is the reason why, for Chartier (1995, 2), any given work cannot be separated from the moment when it was produced, the conditions that brought it into being, the style which shaped it, and the forms through which it became intelligible.

When a work is created within what can be defined as an "analogic" environment, as opposed to a digital one (with its different forms of representation, production, dissemination, and sharing of information), it can be considered or associated to a product of physical, singular, linear, and "rectangular" authorship, and therefore, viewed as analogic itself to a certain extent. Conversely, any literary work created within a digital environment can be imagined as the product of a somewhat shapeless, unfinished and indefinite, fluid, plural, and often collective form of authorship.

As the very idea of authorship is undergoing a radical transformation within the digital environment, so is the role of authors, their practices and centrality inside and outside the text. *Analogic authors* see their works operating in a traditional, typically "Gutenberg-like" environment. By contrast, *digital authors*, namely creators of born-digital literary artifacts, exploit information technology for diverse purposes, ranging from the well-known exploration of "networked authorship[s]" (Poster 2002, 490) – that could be defined as a sort of scattered authorship (Landow 1992, 130) which introduces a cooperative notion of writing (Greif 1988) –, to the illusion of giving the reader the possibility to choose among many reading paths; from the adoption of digital authorship tools – which have contributed to deconstructing the

very idea of “one strong authorial voice” –, to the liberation of the compressed and rectangular space of paper-based, analogue communication.

Influenced by the same revolutionary transformation, scholarly communication lies on the opposite side of the same stage where authorship is enacted, since its creation, organization, publication and preservation processes have been deeply reconsidered according to digital models and formats. Not only are digital technologies coming as a breath of fresh air as far as former machine- and software-based interpretation and analyses are concerned; they have also transformed the modalities and forms of scholarly communication, from doing research and writing, through publishing and conservation, to reading. Scholars exploit computational methods, such as machine learning for distant reading or topic modeling, data mining and management, mapping, graphical displaying or information visualization, thus leading to new critical insights. Digital humanities are also implementing publishing tools and developing traditional means of sharing scholarly publications, opening to non traditional forms of scholarly publishing as well.

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The assumptions above inform the empirical investigation developed in the interview that follows with Irish writer, publisher and lecturer in Digital Arts and Humanities James O’Sullivan. “A born-and-raised native of Cork city”, as he writes on his webpage (at University College Cork)[1], Dr. James O’Sullivan holds an M.A. in Modernity, Literature and Culture at University College Dublin and a PhD in Digital Arts and Humanities at University College Cork, where he currently works as a lecturer. Long engaged in the depths of digital humanities, mostly dedicating his entire attention to its multifaceted forms and modalities, he edited and authored volumes, essays, and poetic collections. His 2019 volume, *Towards a Digital Poetics: Electronic Literature & Literary Games* (Palgrave Macmillan), explored foregrounding issues in the digital field, such as authorship and reading in the digital environment, as well as the concept of interactivity and the apparent illusion of choice it provides to the reader.

In the field of digital technologies, O’Sullivan published several essays in interdisciplinary scholarly journals such as *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, *Literary Studies in a Digital Age*, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, *Digital Studies/Le Champ Numérique*, and the *International Journal of Humanities and Arts Computing*. He has also edited scholarly collections, namely *Reading Modernism with Machines* (with Shawna Ross; Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practices* (with Dene Grigar; Bloomsbury Academic, 2021b), *Digital Art in Ireland: New Media and Irish Artistic Practice* (Anthem Press, 2021a).

As a creative writer, he authored three collections of poetry: *Kneeling on the Redwood Floor* (2011), *Groundwork* (2014), and *Courting Katie* (2017a). He won third place in the Gregory O’Donoghue International Poetry Prize 2016 with “Different Kinds of Life”, published in the April 2016 issue of *Southword Journal*. He is also the founding editor of the independent publishing house New Binary Press and the Director, from its creation in 2019, of DHSI Atlantic, a summer school devoted to Digital Humanities.

[1] <http://research.ucc.ie/profiles/A003/jamesosullivan> (03/2021).

Courtesy of Tomás Tyner (University College Cork)

The aim of the following interview started in April 2021 via e-mail is to be a celebration of neither electronic literature, nor digital humanities but possibly an examination of them both. Beyond the standardized pattern of questions and answers, a number of issues has been explored and widened through quotations (within black boxes) taken from the interviewee's works.

AA: Thank you, James, for this interview. The first question I would like to ask you is about your personal experience in the digital environment. When and why did you first come to enter the "digital" field?

JO'S: Well, that's a tricky question. If you mean digital as in discipline, then my current professional trajectory probably started when I first met Dr Órla Murphy[2]. I took a seminar Dr Murphy was teaching, which introduced me to the idea of "digital humanities". I came into her classroom as a graduate of computing who was studying literature, really not sure what to do next, and left having felt like I had found my tribe. But if you're talking about my experience with the digital in general, and we're not talking in the philosophical "we're all digital now" sense, then I guess it started back when I was much younger, when one day, out of the blue, my dad came home with a computer. I've no idea where it came from, and I had no idea how it worked, but I started tinkering in DOS, and I suppose my interests developed from there.

[2] Dr Órla Murphy is head of the Department of Digital Humanities at the School of English and Digital Humanities (University College Cork).

Since then, I have always been tinkering with computers and tech in some shape or form. I think I was lucky to have that experience, because I feel like my generation might be the last to really experience computers as systems as opposed to interfaces, and the former offers a lot more understanding.

AA: You have authored many poems and three collections of poetry – Kneeling on the Redwood Floor*, 2011;* Groundwork*, 2014;* Courting Katie*, 2017a –, questioned new forms of digital literatures and literary video games in* Towards a Digital Poetics *(2019), and edited several scholarly collections, such as* Reading Modernism with Machines *(2016). How would you describe the role that the digital plays in your work as a creative writer? Have you ever tried to combine – or figure out you will – your engagement as a digital humanities lecturer and scholar with your creative side, opening your poetry to its digital possibilities?*

JO'S: Honestly, not really. I compartmentalize these things: I am a professional academic, I teach, and I research. That's my job. Electronic literature and digital forms of expression are part of what I research. My poetry is different, that's really just something I do for me, for enjoyment. Of course, my creative writing has bled into my work in education, giving me an appreciation of practices and contexts, which are relevant to my research and teaching, but I have never really considered merging the two. Maybe I'll create my own works of digital literature someday, but it's not something I'm thinking about at the moment. There's enough bad art in the world without me adding more!

AA: "Whatever the future of electronic literature, there is a past and there is a present, and there can be no treatment of our past or consideration of our present without acknowledging the works of the […] many pioneers whose stories undoubtedly exist" (O'Sullivan 2018). If you were chosen to be a member of a national literary committee to evaluate three pioneering projects in e-lit since the 2000s, which ones would you award the first three prizes in the Irish environment?

JO'S: Well, I have to say Graham Allen's one-line-a-day digital poem, *Holes*[3], because I've been involved with that as its publisher. *Holes* is a great example of how basic tech can be used to bring literature beyond the constraints of print. Justin Tonra's *Eververse*[4] is a very intriguing concept and quite foundational. I think in the years to come we'll see a lot of other artists follow his lead and explore biometric forms of writing and expression. Jeneen Naji's *River Poem*[5] is

[3] Graham Allen is Professor of Literature at University College Cork. His poems were firstly published in journals like *Southword*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Revival*, the *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Cyphers*, *The SHOp*, and *The Rialto*. In 2014 and 2016 they were collected in two volumes respectively entitled *The One That Got Away* and *The Madhouse System* and published by the New Binary Press. "Holes" is a "ten syllable one line per day" (<http://newbinarypress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Holes-by-Graham-Allen-1.png>, 03/2021) digital poem thanks to which Allen attempts a new approach of writing the self. He started its composition on December 23rd, 2006.

[4] Justin Tonra is Lecturer in English (Digital Humanities) at the National University of Ireland in Galway. Together with Brian Davis, David Kelly, Waqa Khawaja, he created *Eververse*, an innovative project which focuses on the generation of poetry automatically and in real time by using biometric data (NLG techniques) from a fitness tracking device which correlates to the poet's different physical states.

[5] "The River Poem" is a digital poem created by Jeneen Naji, Pauric Freeman and Mark Linnane, in collaboration with Maynooth University's Building City Dashboards research project. The poem shows extracts of text produced by the Generative Pretrained Transformer 2 (GPT2) machine learning algorithm (that was trained on

technically interesting in that it uses GPT-2, but it's also materially beautiful and a wonderful example of how the digital is not just about screens. It's a gorgeous work. Anything that has been published by Fallow Media is worth checking out, or of course, anything by my old friend John Pat McNamara, one of the Ireland's first high profile e-lit authors.

> If the sublime does not exist on the surface level, then it emanates from beneath, from the technical surfaces which the user cannot always penetrate, an essential part of the aesthetic that produces the interactivity, but is hidden from the reader. In electronic literature, the sublime is intrinsically subsumed: this is particularly so in narratives set within 'open' worlds, expansive virtual spaces designed to intrigue users through the illusion of choice and the allure of exploration. (O'Sullivan 2019, 83)

AA: As writing "is going digital", so is reading. In Towards a Digital Poetics*, you explore this relationship between word and computer, focusing on how the screen itself transforms the ways we read and write. Could you tell us something about this transformation?*

JO'S: There are a lot of different ideas teased out in the book, but I suppose I am essentially trying to get at the essence of what it means for literature to be digital. Just popping stuff online or recording your work for a YouTube video doesn't make writing digital, it makes it digitized, and there is a world of difference between these two states. The book is an exploration of what it means for writing and literature to truly be digital. When something is truly digital, a lot is transformed: the multimodality of expression, the perceived agency of readers, the way that immersion and interactivity are deployed in the service of narrative.

> What do we mean by 'digital art'? Much art, as one would expect with any type of cultural production in the twenty-first century, is framed by the digital. But art which is digitally remediated only so that it can be stored or shared via computers is not necessarily digital art. Acts of digitization can change aspects of a work and influence reception, but if we are to see digital art as a distinct formal category, then we must recognise the distinction in works which draw upon new media as an essential part of the creative process. (O'Sullivan 2021a, Ch. 1)

AA: The fragmented nature of digital literary works, which resemble hypertextual links, moves close to Barthes's "lexias" which, with their "galaxie[s] de signifiants" (1984, 11), establish intra- and inter-textual connections able to dismantle the unity of text. Quoting Barthes – "a text's unity lies not in its destination but origin" (Barthes trans. by Heath 1977) – Benkler argues (2007) that also the unity of a digital text cannot be found in its origin but in its destination. Do you agree with his vision?

James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*) onto a 3D model of Dublin City: "Snippets of phrases were removed from the algorithm's output by the human authors and then placed in a spreadsheet. Python code in TouchDesigner software then randomly selects a new quote from the spreadsheet at specific intervals and places it into a queue. This queue forms a long string of text which is animated along a path that follows the route of Dublin's River Liffey. When a quote reaches the end of the path, it is automatically swapped out for a new random quote" (<http://jeneeninteractive.com/?p=373>, 03/2021).

JO’S: I don’t think that vision really serves us, because whether a hypertext is digital or otherwise, focusing on the underlying mathematical structures is just so academic. It tells us nothing of the experience, it tells us nothing of the story, and I think it is a slightly tired way of thinking about the structure of narrative.

> Those who can read can see information for what it is, they can see what words pretend to say, sunken ideas that were never intended to be exposed. And this condition of knowing has always been present, such that we can say that text is unchanged. Text remains what text has always been; what has changed is what we do with text. What has changed are those waveforms through which text is now likely to pass. The potential in words is in their arrangement, how they are brought together to form signage systems. Part of the act of arrangement is the waveform selection, the choosing of those apparatuses through which reception will be facilitated. Words on the page can act in certain ways while words on the screen might act in others, and there are different kinds of pages and different types of screens. But no matter how an arrangement is presented, no matter the waveform selected, text is text. When the first words were committed to paper, nobody envisioned the emergence of interactive fiction or generative writing, nobody would have predicted the communities of practice and aesthetic movements that have emerged around the great many of forms of digital fiction and electronic literature. Text has persisted throughout much cultural fermentation, and whatever waveforms have existed, do exist, and are yet to exist, we can be almost certain that text will continue as long as humanity. (O’Sullivan 2020a, 206)

*AA: E-literature works can be envisaged as “open works” in which readers play or think to play a fundamental part of the work itself. In “Interactivity and the Illusion of Choice” (*Towards a Digital Poetics, *77-93) you argue that literary virtual spaces are planned to capture the reader through “the illusion of choice”, leveraging on those cognitive biases that can affect his belief of autonomy and independence from the author. Yet, several studies try to demonstrate how hyper-literature and -links have a counter-effect in hypertext readers, leading them to confusion and cognitive overload (Pope 2006; Mangen, van der Weel 2015). Do you think that such an illusion of co-authorship or “wreadership” may cause a cognitive loss, urging Dante to look for his Virgil once again?*

JO’S: No, I don’t think so. Read *Ulysses* and tell me that cognitive overload is unique to digital literature. I appreciate the point being made, and cognition is way outside my wheelhouse, but every form of expressive practice has the potential to produce works which confuse. When I reference the illusion of choice, I’m getting at an aesthetic construct, the idea that mathematically rigid narrative structures can seem without constraint, and that’s a powerful thing for storytellers and their audiences. And it’s an interesting thing for literary and cultural critics to consider. If there are cognitive consequences, well, that’s a price worth paying for a good, immersive story, I would think.

> Both linearity and choice are a myth, equal parts of the illusion of interactivity. If there is any rhetoric being deployed in this space, it is the rhetoric of interaction, the idea that there is something to be automatically gained from presenting what we read in particular structures. There is always something to be gained from structure, but the gain is never automatic. Electronic literature is not merely the epitome of the Barthesian writerly text, what is occurring is quite the opposite, it is a relationship between author and reader, coder and user, that is entirely based on platform-enabled illusions. Where the author was once master of narrative, they must now also be master of medium; where readers once relied on authors for the content of story, they must now, in effect, rely on authors for the entire textual construction. Any choice that a reader may make in an electronic system is indeed a selection, but it is not a product of some technological freedom; they select from those choices presented to them by the author, all of which are devised with a finite story in mind. If anything, the role of the author has only been enhanced, but it is tempered by the realities of media specifics, of human–computer interaction, and the limitations of each given device. (O'Sullivan 2019, 78)

AA: I have often wondered when and how electronic literature could be treated from the perspective of the digital humanities until I came across your Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms & Practices *(2021b). Your volume and the wide variety of essays it includes says that the time has arrived to properly integrate electronic literature into the Digital Humanities, though e-lit culture still appears to be marginal and produced by a limited number of writers.*

JO'S: Dene Grigar[6] is the person to speak to about this: she's really been driving e-lit as a branch of DH, taking a leading role in the e-lit offerings at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute, for example. I'm not as convinced as she that electronic literature and digital humanities do make for entirely natural bedfellows, but if DH is really about interdisciplinary approaches to writing, making, reading, and so on, then surely e-lit should be a larger part of it than is currently the case? I appreciate that analytics will always be a larger part of DH than close reading, but close reading of born digital literature seems closer to DH than it does other fields. But I'm straying into arbitrary disciplinary arguments now; it doesn't really matter what discipline digital literature belongs to, as long as people continue to make it and an increasing number of critics study and teach it.

[6] Dene Grigar is Director of the Electronic Literature Lab. and of the Creative Media & Digital Technology Program at Washington State University in Vancouver. Author of several media works, such as *Curlew* (2014), "A Villager's Tale" (2011), and "24-Hour Micro-Elit Project" (2009), she researches on electronic literature workflow, from its creation to preservation.

AA: *On your webpage you highlight that what you teach is "digital literary and cultural studies". Do you think of your work as part of the digital humanities or is it something much larger?*

JO'S: I see myself very much as digital humanities scholar. I appreciate that DH means different things to different people, but have a very strong sense of what I believe it is, which is the use of sophisticated computational methods to analyse cultural materials, or the application of critical thinking to computation. I appreciate that is quite broad, but I feel that you just know good DH when you see it, because the relationship between the digital part and the humanities part is essential and meaningful.

AA: The 2009 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education *claimed that digital humanities was not just "the next big thing", but "the Thing". As you know many different types of digital humanities projects have spread since then all over and in many ways, from archives and databases to maps and timelines. You dedicated at least two essays to the issue and history of digital humanities in Ireland*, The Emergence of the Digital Humanities in Ireland *(2015), and* The Digital Humanities in Ireland *(2020), focusing on the projects and institutions that have contributed to the appearance and development of the discipline. I would like to ask you if you feel the necessity to devote a new project to the Irish digital framework and situation and which new issues would you take into consideration which you hadn't in the aforementioned publications.*

JO'S: I don't think I have much left to say on the subject of DH in Ireland, and honestly, I don't think it would be fitting for me to say anything further, as too much of the one voice makes for a very limited history.

AA: In The Digital Humanities in Ireland *you wrote: "If the digital humanities are to thrive they must be allowed to remain culturally dissonant". Could you explain us the meaning and implications of this assumption? Is it simply about geography?*

JO'S: Geography is certainly part of it: you cannot separate local cultures and contexts from how any discipline is constructed in a certain place. As an academic and educator, you need to think about what your discipline achieves for your community, and the answer to that question will vary greatly depending on who is asking it and where they are. I've worked at a big, wealthy American institution, and I can tell you that DH over there looked very different to DH at other places I have worked, because they have different possibilities, different social dynamics. The resources at your disposal, the cultural legacies in which you are immersed and the political challenges you face, these all influence how disciplines are constructed in any one place. And that's good, because if everyone everywhere was doing the same thing, well, the world would be a very boring place.

> […] if we are to appreciate DH in Ireland, we must consider DH as Irish. […] Irish DH is its own DH, made so by the peculiarities of an Irish academy which is in many respects considerably different to its international counterparts, and so we should problematise it in its own right. This is doubly important at a time when, far beyond DH, the Irish academy continues to re-brand and essentially Americanise itself for the purposes of attracting a higher volume of international students required to redress a sustained lack of state funding. […]
> Irish DH has long suffered from a quiet parochialism. Everyone wants to be 'the first' to do something, even us educators, who should be far more concerned with charting courses for others than we should be planting flags. The realities of the increasingly neoliberal marketplace—conditions from which education has not been immune—are causing institutes of higher education to promote their offerings with grand statements that tend to diminish the value of that which might not be perceived in the public gaze as the 'new, big thing.' We need to resist allowing DH to be dragged further into that process. It is natural when uncharted space appears—and much of DH remains uncharted—that everyone is eager to claim it as their own because it can be used in the desperate justification for survival that is destroying state-funded higher education. But the DH arms race in Ireland needs to come to an end, and in its place should come the revival of the inter-institutional, national cohorts and research agendas. (O'Sullivan 2020b)

AA: Could you explain what you mean by the "machinic episteme" you and Shawna Ross announce in Reading Modernism with Machines. Digital Humanities and Modernist Literature*?*

JO'S: Put very simply, it's the knowledge we gain from machines. Shawna's work is worth exploring further: she is one of the stars of my generation of DH.

> Digital humanists doing research in modernism are thus truly reading modernism with machines: more than simply means to an end, our machines underwrite the reality of our scholarship. Their processes and outputs influence what emerges as knowable and what counts as proof, bending modernist texts and modernism itself toward our contemporary machinic episteme. Of course, it is no more willfully anachronistic than any school of literary criticism—so long as we do not silently attribute to modernism itself our own contemporary revolutionary digital rhetorics of the new. (O'Sullivan, Ross 2016, 1-2)

AA: The greatest part of your research and teaching is devoted to digital humanities and digital culture, with a particular focus on digital literary and cultural studies, and computer-assisted criticism. Do you think a full commitment with the digital humanities entails programming skills, and if so, should programming become a requisite for Arts and Humanities Universities as well?

JO'S: That is a complicated question, and I don't think I have the scope to answer it here. I will say this: I don't think that coding is essential, but depending on the kind of DH work you do, it certainly helps. If you are doing cultural analytics of any sort, you really should understand the methods and techniques you're applying. If you don't understand what a particular method is doing, why are you using it? That seems intellectually dishonest to me, but of course, understanding a method and being able to program aren't the same thing.

AA: In 2012 you launched your publishing house, the New Binary Press[7]. Despite your role and engagement as a digital scholar and teacher, you have admitted that print publications have far greater "material and cultural importance" than their digital counterparts (Horgan 2017, 20). Are you still convinced of that?

JO'S: I think I am still convinced, because I have read a lot of great print works in the intervening years, but encountered only a few remarkable digital pieces. But give it time: print had a handy head start. I should add that I have recently shutdown New Binary Press, but that's a different story and one I address in a recent essay, "Publishing Electronic Literature", which is in *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities*.

> A manuscript is proposed and submitted, given form and sold—that is the usual order of things. The publishing process doesn't end with that first act of dissemination, publishers must always retain something of a stake in the works they have taken charge of, but the relationship does change once a manuscript is a book. There are many activities post-production—promotion, interaction with booksellers, the realisation of subsequent editions—but a publisher's intervention usually declines over time. Once a publisher has made a book of a manuscript, they release it to the wild—books live and die in public, far from the guarded confines of their press. Even with born-digital literature, aside from the odd bit of file and server maintenance, the publisher will fade to the periphery as their ability to contribute to a title's critical and commercial success slowly starts to diminish. (O'Sullivan 2017, 109)

AA: In line with the open-source ethos of the digital humanities, this article will be published in the open-access scholarly journal, Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies *of the University of Firenze, which is much committed to sharing scholarly communication in this way. What do you think of open access or better of open science?*

JO'S: That's another complicated question. When it comes to open access, I am quite conflicted. I obviously believe that access to knowledge can improve society, but I do think that open access advocates overstate its potential to radically alter the conditions of the underprivileged, or

[7] "Founded in 2012, New Binary Press publishes literature across a variety of media, including born-digital electronic literature. In fact, the press has been built on e-lit, with one of its first titles, Graham Allen's one-line-a-day *Holes* (Allen and O'Sullivan 2016; Karhio 2017; O'Sullivan, 'Publishing *Holes*'), remaining one of the imprint's flagship projects, and the publishing house includes leading figures such as Nick Montfort, Stephanie Strickland, John Barber, and Jason Nelson among its authors. New Binary Press is reflective of the culture of assemblage that one encounters in the space occupied by new media artists and writers; its catalog is somewhat dissonant, functioning as something of a laboratory designed to facilitate literary experiments, a sandbox for wilder things without a home. While I have not really fulfilled what I set out to accomplish with my press, its founding purpose remains clear in that it is an experiment in the production and publication of all kinds of literature, print, electronic, and whatever else might seem interesting" (O'Sullivan 2021, 259).

fail to recognise the privileged position that one must themselves be in to wholly embrace the open agenda. Being able to take a position against intellectual property is a socioeconomic luxury: certainly, the little bit of money that I make from my publications makes the difference in my life, and I'd be slow to give it up. I can't afford, and my institution can't afford, the open access fees for many of the prestigious journals, and as a first generation academic I refuse to give up professional capital because others are more comfortable doing so. Income and promotion are directly tied to how and where one publishes, and not all academics have the luxury of ignoring these things. Again, I do see the value in open access, I'm just saying it's more complicated than we are often led to believe: it's complicated in terms of class dynamics, its complicated in terms of publishing models and institutional resources, and its complicated in terms of personal circumstances, intellectual property and ownership.

AA: James, if you were asked to contribute to a new monographic research on Digital Humanities and electronic literature in Ireland, which will be the topic of SiJIS 2020 issue, would you accept?

JO'S: I would be happy to discuss how I could help with your future special issue.

AA: Thank you very much for your time, James. I'll be looking forward to collaborating with you!

To be continued...

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Writings