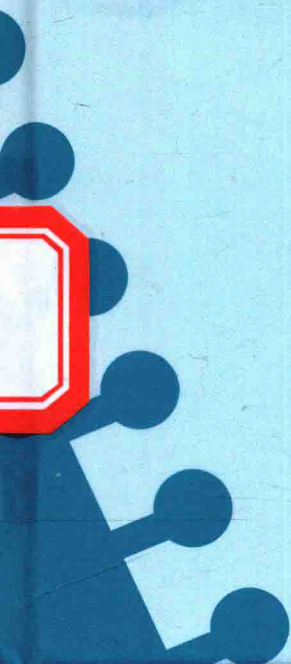


NEW WRITING VIEWPOINTS

Creative Writing and the Radical

**Teaching and Learning
the Fiction of the Future**

Nigel Krauth



NEW WRITING VIEWPOINTS: 13

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of the Future

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Creative Writing and the Radical



NEW WRITING VIEWPOINTS

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Introduction

This book examines the radical thinking and experimentation creative writers have undertaken in the last 250 years, but particularly what they have achieved in the 20th and early 21st centuries. While it focuses on literary writing, it is not about literary theorists, literary critics, literary academics or their thinking. It is about writers and their motivations, their striving and frustration, problems they were challenged by and ways they overcame them. It concentrates on prose – on fiction particularly – although much that is radical in the history of writing has been done by poets; playwrights and screenwriters have contributed too. I am committed to fiction here because its history is now notably implicated in the changes occurring to writing in the digital age, for instance in the emergence of the app novel. Poets were quick to embrace the digital sphere in the 1990s, but the shift of fiction to digital platforms takes with it a far greater readership, and a far larger portion of publishing enterprise.

My aim in this book is to show that the transformative possibilities of the digital age have not been a sudden surprise to prose writing. Experimental writers were not ambushed by hypertext or hypermedia; in fact, they rehearsed them for more than a century without knowing what the new forms would be called, or what they would really look like. The technological turn that finally catered for their revolutionary ideas was never certain. Even so, poets and novelists – by looking across at other art forms, by attempting to escape the strictures of the printed page, by seeking ways of incorporating more of the senses (visual, aural, tactile) more immediately into reading – posited a new kind of writing whose time has now come. By seeking to encompass the verbal, visual and aural arts, radical writing set itself up for the hypermedia age.

It can be observed that in critical writing generally the word ‘radical’ refers to particular types of politics – left-wing or right-wing but mostly the former – and the kinds of writing that come from those viewpoints. In talking about the arts, the word ‘radical’ is almost always used in conjunction with references to the ‘avant-garde’, which is itself a highly contested term, even though

its meaning as 'those who are experimental forerunners' is reasonably clear. While the term *avant-garde* continues to be debated (Which techniques does it cover? Which arts practitioners does it apply to?), I have sought to claim the adjective 'radical' and take it away from its merely supportive and often redundant role, as in 'the radical *avant-garde*', to give it a real meaning. In this book I use the term *radical* in a specific way: to refer to the kind of writing that is done when the writer has – explicitly – innovation in mind.

For me, the Radical occurs when a writer sets out to defy convention and write in such a way that the accepted processes of writing and reading are called into question. The radical writer has the intention of reaching an audience by means that are different from the norm, that involve more of the physical senses in the reading (a more bodily involvement in the reading), or an intellectual understanding that the work is to be read differently in order to gain a fuller experience at a psychological or emotional level. The radical intention of the writer tends to announce itself quickly: the words are not set out on the page in the conventional fashion; typography is upset by concrete effects; visual images are entwined among or break into the text; the pages of the book don't work normally; the book has become something else entirely – a box of papers, a panoramic map, a soft cloth, and so on. Whatever the radical intention, the writer is keen to contact the reader by means other than those by which mainstream publishing (in her/his time) has typically communicated with its audience.

Several digital media theorists and critics have already visited the territory I step into. The most influential of these are George P. Landow (1992, revised 1997, 2006), Janet H. Murray (1997), Espen J. Aarseth (1997), J. Yellowlees Douglas (2000), Jay David Bolter (2001, revised 2011) and N. Katherine Hayles (2008). Each takes their own view of the migration of print into digital media, and each looks to the literary past for forerunners to writing in the computer age. But none of them, to my mind, really takes on the viewpoint of the writer. Although they address in some detail questions about authorship, it is authorship theorized by Derrida in particular, with Barthes, Foucault and game theory also contributing. Although highly useful for viewing the overall shape of the remediation process and changes to technological production, these perspectives treat texts mainly as disembodied phenomena and as works for readers rather than products deriving from writers' motivation. Also, they tend to look at history and its advances/problems in terms of hypertext rather than the more exciting hypermedia, which is, I believe, the form the radical writers of previous centuries were grasping for, even though they could not anticipate its shape or nature. Landow and those following have interrogated particularly the way text works in new media settings as opposed to on the printed page, but while

they observe that reading *multiply* instead of reading *linearly* is key to developments, they are less interested in reading and writing *multimodally*.

In this book my commitment is especially to the viewpoint of the writer. I examine writing process in the digital age and make a trace back through print literature to see how writers themselves sought to escape the print medium. I believe that the anticipation and striving among experimental writers for a composite medium that allowed text, visuals and audio was so strong, it is a great pity for us now that writers like Laurence Sterne or Guillaume Apollinaire did not have hypermedia to work with. Without knowing how the computer would work or what its outputs would look like, they pioneered changes to writing that the digital age has opened up to all and made mainstream.

The awareness, among early 20th-century writers, of future technological change can be gauged from Paul Valéry's observations. In 1928 he wrote:

For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art. (Valéry, 1964: 225)

He described technological advances and consequent changes to creative product making in terms we recognize easily almost 100 years later:

At first, no doubt, only the reproduction and transmission of works of art will be affected. It will be possible to send anywhere or to re-create anywhere a system of sensations, or more precisely a system of stimuli, provoked by some object or event in any given place. Works of art will acquire a kind of ubiquity. We shall only have to summon them and there they will be, either in their living actuality or restored from the past. They will not merely exist in themselves but will exist wherever someone with a certain apparatus happens to be. A work of art will cease to be anything more than a kind of source or point of origin whose benefits will be available – and quite fully so – wherever we wish. Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign. Just as we are accustomed, if not enslaved, to the various forms of energy that pour into our homes, we shall find it perfectly natural to receive the ultrarapid variations or oscillations that our sense organs gather in and integrate to form all we know. I do not know