OVERWRITING: A Critique of Writing; or, Words Becoming Flash
Kiene Brillenburg Wurth

There are people who write because they think it still makes sense, and there are people who no longer write but go back to kindergarten. And then there are people who write despite knowing that it makes no sense—Vilém Flusser.

I
My intention in this paper is to write about overwriting. Overwriting may mean nothing much in our 'digital' age—or, for that matter, in the 'analog' past. We do it all the time, and writing has always been a matter of overwriting: scratching the surface of parchment, wiping out inscriptions on wax tablets to begin anew, erasing charcoal marks with wax, pencil lead with rubber, typo with tipp-ex to write again, or using the OVR function on our computers and overwrite. To overwrite: to cover writing with writing, to record new data over old data, to obscure old data in this way, to render them inaccessible, illegible. The "particle *over* in the construct *to think something over*," Vilém Flusser has suggested, bears on a supplementarity on the one hand and on a counter-current on the other that makes very little sense when writing about writing. Instead, "[w]riting about writing is itself to be seen as a thinking of some sort" (5). Overwriting is a critical thinking, as it is a thinking about the conditions of possibility and impossibility of writing, but this is also a thinking that is caged and enabled by these very conditions of (im)possibility. As for Marshall McLuhan and other media theorists, for Flusser the kind of thinking that writing has engendered is a "linear, directional" thinking and the question is: does this thinking (i.e. does writing) have a future (6)? Can critical thinking survive 'after' writing?

II
In modern Western culture, literature—literally: *quantities of letters*—is an art of writing. We know very well that literature is also—and is now increasingly becoming again—an art and practice of orality or of visuality. Yet as a cultural 'institution' literature is (still) a function of writing. There is a strong connection between writing and temporality, between writing and a linear code that is unrelentingly progressive, unrepeatable. "Writing is about setting ideas in lines" (6). This linear code has been programmed into our writing machines such as the computer, the typewriter, the telegraph, or the printing press. Automation has speeded up the progressive tense of writing, as machines can write much more effectively than we do: "It is enough to observe the breathless speed with which videotexts appear on terminals," or, for that matter, subtitling (21). In their radical non-interactive electronic text-work of the last decade, Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries dramatize and enlarge the progress and unrepeatability of the linear code of writing. In works like *Dakota* (a remake of Ezra Pound's remake of Odysseus's visit to the Underworld during his journey back to Ithaca in *The Cantos*—I and part of II) the reader is viewer and listener at once of flash-based texts set to the drumming of Art Blakey. Like other work of YHCHI, *Dakota* foregrounds the linear progress of writing as we read one to five words at the

time in a huge Monaco font, black against white. We are subjected to the speed of the machine, we have to focus extremely hard to follow the text (or conversely, we do not focus at all and consume the text as flash art), and thus we become aware of our engagement with writing as a technology shaping our perception.

III

What is so striking about *Dakota* is that it approaches the illegible *as* a linear text. Ultimately, the text speeds by so fast that it thwarts apprehension and remembrance. This is a radical linearity, as it pushes the continuousness inherent in writing as a system to its extreme, and renders reading almost impossible. Reading–viewing–listening (the words appear to us as 'bangs' of sounds), your are given over to the text as it offers itself to you. Writing, the verbal–visual writing of YHCHI, here *over*writes writing: we can see it become an excessive writing that obscures the very rationale of linear script and in so doing, in Jessica Pressman's words, "carefully overlays Book 11 of the Odyssey and Pound's revision of it" (309). Seen in this light, *Dakota* appears to us as a code work that *contains* its sources but in that preservation is transforming them into technical images. Words have here become…flash. We know from Flusser that this is the fatal transition for writing: into the universe of technical images we go, leaving writing to the machine.

IV

The questions that Flusser posed in the 1980s—does writing have a future? What of critique and critical thinking 'after' writing?—are the questions that literature is now trying to come to terms with: it is working through writing in its relation to overwriting and erasure. That is to say, literary writing is working through the *remains* of writing: what remains of alphabetic writing today, as writing is rapidly being overwritten by code. These remains here refer to the material trace of writing as a code of presence in literary writing, its literal persistence (ie handwriting), and to the linear consciousness, moving in a line from past to future, that has been marked as the legacy, the residue, of writing. Though this legacy remains very much unsettled, itself the product of a new mythology, literary writing is now already drawing attention to the possibility of the dramatic undoing of writing as a constitutive force of historical consciousness. From "Memento Mori," *Memento* and *Remainder*, to *The Raw Shark Texts*, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, or *Erasure*, writing—handwriting—is powerless against the forces of oblivion: alphabetic writing in these works still inscribes memory, but it is the kind of un–lasting memory that Flusser and McLuhan have associated with oral culture. It is a memory constantly overwritten by another present, another connection. It is the memory of a blank mind.

V

No one can write past writing. Not, at least, without re–imposing the kind of linear consciousness that comes with "alphabetic lines and the thought that moves along them" in Flusser's historical universe. These alphabetic lines, he claims, "cut windows in this world, letting critical light in" (159). Critical thinking may be hard to imagine without alphabetic thinking, as it allegedly was the alphanumerical code that enabled (ordered, regulated) what we call thinking in the first place and that effectuated an assault against images as devices of deception (32). For Flusser, the alphabet is the code of the Enlightenment, but the latter has "run its

course," and the former is "useless" as a medium of critique for synthetic images (151, 152). If one of the aims of critique in the Humanities today continues to be "a critical investigation of the foundations of our world," and if the Humanities are to "continue to be the site where critical analyses of contemporary social realities are conducted, and where the techniques and future-oriented potentials of such analyses are taught," these investigations need to be expanded towards the codes of the apparatuses that fashion our world today (Kaiser & Thiele 1, 2). In the humanities, in literary studies, we need to study programming and code work and develop a new idiom for close reading before the world becomes illegible. And yet.

VI

If the Enlightenment has run its course, and the new is now as "transparent as a net," with no surprises left in store, Flusser's questions about the future of writing, as well as the contemporary fictions I have alluded to above, redirect us to that same Enlightenment and the critical projects it has set in motion (151). They do so as they make us aware of a movement we may be going through today, the outcome of which is not foreseen. We may be leaving writing behind, or writing may alternatively be seen as exploding into the hypertextual universe of the computer, we may even leave reading behind in the hypertextual scanning of a neo-liberal economy that is always short of time, and this we may see reflected in *Dakota* or in erasure works like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*. For the time being, however, it is still literary writing that intimates, in Marx's old saying, "what the present now bears within." All those characters in contemporary fiction who cannot stop the currents of information overwriting their memory, who have as it were come back from the dead, posthumous characters, mere enactors of code or script, all these characters redirect us toward the very forces out which critique has evolved: the force of the new, the new world, the crisis after an old order had been left behind, the crisis expressed in, or as, methodical doubt that lies at the basis of Kant's critical project. These posthumous characters show us what it is like—to speak with Hegel—to become what one is no longer, to have a present without a past, to enter a thoroughly changed world, to think the world anew. In short, they show us what it means to be overwritten.

As I see it, this issue of overwriting should not so much induce us to conceive of a new critique of subjectivity in the face of a mythical disappearance of writing (though a posthuman critique is entirely feasible here), as to rethink critique and literary criticism at the crossroads of writing as a cultural practice and writing as code. As I have tried to argue, the digital present *and* future is still tightly connected to the groundwork of critique as it was developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: critique has not turned in on itself, as Flusser maintained, it is still working through the shock of the new.

References

Auster, Paul. 2007. *Travels in the Scriptorium*. New York: Picador.

Flusser, Vilém. 1987, 1992. *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

_____. 2011. *Does Writing Have a Future?* Transl. Nancy Ann Roth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. 2010. *Tree of Codes*. London: Visual Editions.

Hall, Steven. 2007. *The Raw Shark Texts*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

McCarthy, Tom. 2007. *Remainder*. New York: Vintage.

Pressman, Jessica. 2008. "The Strategy of Digital Modernism. Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *Dakota*" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 54-2, 302-326.

Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries, *Dakota* at http://www.yhchang.com/DAKOTA.html, last visited November 26, 2012.

Kiene Brillenburg Wurth teaches at the Department of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University.