



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2017) Review of Composition, Creative Writing Studies and the Digital Humanities by Adam Koehler. *The Review of English Studies* 68 (287), pp. 1032-1034. ISSN 1471-6968.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/18231/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

Review of Koehler, Adam, *Composition, Creative Writing Studies and the Digital Humanities*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017)

**Author's original version, accepted for publication in *Review of English Studies*, published by Oxford University Press.**

What does it mean to “write” in the digital age? As Matthew Kirschenbaum has shown us in recent days, technologies of word processing made the transition from business environments to creative writing with an unforeseen and paradigm-altering swiftness.<sup>1</sup> N. Katherine Hayles has also demonstrated how the processes of publishing print books has been a digital-first endeavour for quite some time.<sup>2</sup> For the majority of people who write in the world today, digital technologies are an indispensable part of the process.

Yet, how do we conceive of digital writing as different from other forms of production? Is simply using a word processor enough of a mediation to call writing “digital”? Or should we be interested in e-literatures that more fundamentally harness the potentially radical possibilities of the digital space but that involve various new types of labour (coding, design, digital preservation)? We never used to insist that those writing with pencils should have taken part in and understood the constitution of those inscription tools. That said, among other practices, various schools of concrete poetry in the twentieth century – most notably those that gathered in the network around Hansjörg Mayer – broke down these binary barriers between tools and products in what Bronač Ferran has called a “typoetical revolution”. The affordances of the digital *are* certainly different. But are radical works in this space still “writing”? If so, what kinds of writing and from what types of spaces?

These are the sorts of questions that sit behind Adam Koehler's *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities*. Specifically, Koehler is motivated to address matters

of shifting disciplinarity in the era of the digitally-mediated writing subject, working between the spaces of composition and creative writing, as the book's title might imply. It is here, indeed though, that one encounters the first particularity of Koehler's work: there is a strong North American slant to his angle. Those outside this academic system may be less familiar with what is meant by "composition" in the senses used in Koehler's monograph. In the UK, for example, the only place that you will find a module on "composition studies" is within a music department. Certainly, Koehler's book could have used an additional contextualisation of this field for readers outside the space, although the comprehensive literature review of the role of creativity and imagination in writing instruction goes some way towards this (23-35). Indeed, the first chapter after Koehler's introduction felt, to this reader, as a plunge into the deep end.

On the other hand, many more scholars elsewhere will be familiar with the rise of the creative writing programmes that Koehler charts; whether they be through courses in their own departments or in the study of contemporary fiction, as noted by Mark McGurl and others.<sup>3</sup> If, then, Koehler's approach to composition felt too sudden for me, his discussion of digital creative writing appeared over-rehearsed. Moving through all the seminal big-name figures, from Jackson's "Patchwork Girl", through to Hayles's medial ecologies, up to Egan's Twitter fiction, the charitable way to characterise this would be to say that Koehler's scholarship is thorough. However, to my ears it sounded a little too much like a story that I have heard many times before.

If the first two chapters here left me a little adrift, in the third Koehler's book comes into its own and his work on the recent Kenneth Goldsmith controversy is up-to-the minute and relevant (80-85). It also demonstrates the fresh ways in which Koehler considers artists to be "digital". For, in this case, the definition of digital is shaped by a type of identity politics that is mediated by the technologies of social media; a post-identity politics, in some ways. This broader framing of the politics of the digital, even when a white poet then reads aloud – in analogue – from a poorly considered aesthetic work appropriating a black man's death, is productive and politically

persuasive. It is also an excellent analysis of the ways in which different disciplinary spaces, across creative-critical boundaries, interact, merge, meld, and seep in their practices while still remaining distinct in their politics.

Another highlight of this work, for me, was the patient and steady assault on Jonathan Franzen's continued arguments against digital practices (103-117). Although one may always flinch upon reading of how turning to Heidegger will clarify a problem, this section was well-informed and philosophically astute on the ways in which “technologies” of writing stretch back a long way. Indeed, the ways in which we define “technology” are important and Koehler cogently frames our strange naturalisation of technologies from bygone eras, as though their re-enchantment will somehow protect us as talismans against the new. That new, in Koehler's framing, is a set of practices – “nonlinearity”, “intertextuality”, “genre shifting”, “appropriation” – that act as markers of a “techno-cultural shift” (136).

In all, though, I have to confess, I do not think that I am the target audience for this work. For the new media ecologies that Koehler describes in *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities* felt, to me, curiously devoid of digital specificities. Could we not take the above traits, for instance, and situate them amid any number of past literary moments? Romanticism, Modernism, or Postmodernism? We do have a discussion of Twitter fiction, certainly, but what is specifically digital about such a writing practice that was not already somehow encapsulated by Oulipo's constraint-based techniques? Yes, Koehler poses a set of interesting questions about these practices and the rise of composition and creative writing alongside one another; the “fenceless neighbours” to which he turns. But actual engagement with specific underlying digital technologies, their affordances, and consequences, seemed lighter to me. I also wondered why there was not greater discussion in the book of studies on disciplinarity itself. Surely some of the emergent work in the field of critical university studies would at least have merited a mention here?

Perhaps, however, I am just expecting too much from a book that is aiming to cover a lot of ground. Its ambitions to synthesize three huge fields into a narrative of co-genesis was always going to be tricky. *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities*, then, attempts that task and I feel it doesn't quite get there. It does, though, provide fertile ground for further exploration and points towards a set of *self-questioning* practices that are and that will remain crucial to the spaces of composition and creative writing. In fostering these questions and holding up a cruel glass, and not because it comes to any definite resolutions, Koehler's book undertakes an important task.

1Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

2N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 6.

3Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).