



After the Book, the Book? The Digital Writing Experiments of François Bon

Jeff Staiger

Abstract: While most commentators believe that the print book will survive the advent of the ebook, it is at the same time hard not to think that the fundamental technological changes ushered in by the digital revolution will fail to have profound effects on the forms of the book. Arguing that literary forms have always depended on the “material conditions of their enunciation,” the French author François Bon uses historical examples to suggest the book will undergo major, if yet unforeseen, transformations. He maintains that it is urgent for writers to experiment with the possibilities brought about by the digital revolution, lest the actual developments be decided by the commercial interests of large technology entities. In his own experiments with the form of the book in the digital environment -- in his “novel” *Tumulte*, which consists of daily blog posts that mix fiction, memoir, criticism, and other genres, and in a series of digital remediations of his early novel, *Limite* -- Bon imaginatively explores the limits of the concept of the book. Yet while these experiments are suggestive, it is less clear that they represent viable avenues for the book’s development, since their main appeal is arguably for scholars and theoreticians. Focusing on the means of organization and delivery, and the ontological ambiguities arising from the multiple versions of the same text, Bon’s experiments skirt the core power of the book: the sustained arrangement of words that has been the principle means whereby books have conveyed content and sustained intellectual culture.

The Future of the Book

The question of the future of the book no longer seems as critical as it did in the nineties and aughts, when digital technology first began to bring every element of the media landscape under its sway. Some three decades later, it has become clear that the emergence of e-books does not entail the loss of physical ones. They have rather settled into a kind of patchy coexistence, with different readers preferring different modes for different purposes. The convenience of e-books for looking up information is incontestable, and accordingly libraries’ collections of physical reference books have steadily shrunk while these works have largely migrated online. On the other hand, readers have manifested a distinct preference for print books when it comes to the immersive reading of works in such areas as literature and history. Then again, readers of genre fiction have bucked this trend and embraced the electronic format, presumably because it lends itself to a kind of fast, serial reading in which such readers typically engage. Nevertheless, and contrary to the canard that a new generation that has grown up with digital technology will be less attached to supposedly outdated forms, college students prefer physical books. Such a checkered outcome might well have been expected. According to historians of the book and scholars of media, when new rival media emerge to challenge the old, the result has typically been

coexistence, not supersession.¹ Computers and the internet have not replaced television, television did not replace radio or the cinema, photography did not replace painting, although in each case the new technology has had a profound effect on the domain and scope of the old. In any case, the situation of books is otherwise, since the digital option is not a different form of communication but a different vehicle for delivering a form, i.e., writing. Perhaps for this reason the same commentators who point out that the coexistence of print and electronic books is in line with historical precedents tend to hedge by adding that print books will continue to be around for the foreseeable future. But that is an interval which has lengthened to sufficient indefiniteness as to have made the question of the book's survival less acute.

It may be worth pausing to consider the implications of this persistence, somewhat scandalous from the standpoint of technological meliorism, in the face of what might seem to be a more convenient alternative. If books are going to be around for a long time to come, it might just be because they have qualities with which the alleged gains of the new medium cannot compete. Only when the services performed by the book are conceived in such bald functional terms as the delivery of texts, or the transmission of information, does it seem that the quick dissemination and revisability made possible by e-book are big advantages. But the amenities of the book can be imagined in ways far less utilitarian than those associated with its function as a container for content. As a tangible object with a rich array of aesthetic properties, the book anchors the act of reading in the world, helps make it more real by lending it sensory and affective traction in physical sphere, and orients memory and cognition by giving them spatiotemporal purchase. Studies have consistently shown that comprehension and retention are higher in print books.² Conditioned as we are by the experience of advances in technology both conspicuous and routine to expect that all of our electronic apparatuses will continue to be improved, readers' lack of comfort with e-books, at least in the case of the deep reading that has provided the paradigm and ideal of reading in general, can seem like another problem to be solved soon enough by technology. Yet what this expectation fails to consider is that there is one crucial dimension of the book, namely its existence as a material object, that by definition can never be replicated in the virtual sphere. The book's thinghood, a quality no one gave a thought to as long as there was no alternative, may be the decisive factor in a market in which more books are being published and purchased than ever before. It's a good bet that having bodily existence will never be passé.

So, the scandal persists: what appears to be the product of an industrial-age technology has refused to be improved by a technological puissance that has otherwise seemed irresistible. Of course, today's print books are not industrial-age products. As is frequently observed, every step of the publishing process, from composition to typesetting, now relies on digital technology. As Jeffrey Schnapp puts it, "printed books that

¹ The terms are Eisenstein's: "coexistence seems more likely than supersession for some years to come" (*Divine Art*, 240). This compatibilist *both-and* structure is a regular feature of commentary on the issue: Thus Darnton: "...the electronic book [will] act as a supplement, not a substitute for, Gutenberg's great machine" (77); Schnapp: "media revolutions are about realignment, not substitution" (22); Hamilton: "We have long been accustomed to the fact that the emergence of one technology in no way necessarily spells the demise of another. Medial coexistence has generally been the norm, not the exception." Piper spells out the logic of these formulations even more explicitly: "The question is not one of 'versus,' of two single antagonists squaring off in a ring; rather, the question is far more ecological in nature. How will these two different species and their many varieties coexist within the greater ecosystem known as reading?" (*xi*).

² See, for example: Mizrachi, D, Salaz, AM, Boustany, J, Mizrachi, Diane, Salaz, Alicia M, Kurbanoglu, Serap, Boustany, Joumana, and Rabinowitz, Mitchell. "Academic Reading Format Preferences and Behaviors among University Students Worldwide: A Comparative Survey Analysis." *PLoS One*. 13.5 (2018): E0197444. Web.

appear superficially similar to those produced half a century ago are now digital in their design and production” (22). But the similarity is more than superficial; it is tactile and ergonomic, functional and visual. While the latest state of technology may be employed to produce books, they are not devices like smart phones or televisions for which technology is an integral part not only of their production, but also of their functioning. Of course, as book historians often point out, not only have such physical features of the book as shape, size, material, design, organization, paratexts, fonts and the like continued to undergo changes since its inception, but the means by which books have been made, from letter and steam-powered presses to linotype and present-day computer typesetting, have obviously evolved over the centuries.

This observation about the evolution of books, invoked to remind us that in the long view change is constant and inevitable, is rather common in the context of discussions of the future of the book.³ Yet the pertinence of this historical view, which constitutes something of an intellectual reflex among scholars in the face of the unpredictable openness of the future, should not be automatically assumed in the present case. The differences of morphology that are significant within the context of the long history of the book as a material artifact are slight in comparison with the complete change of state represented by the transition to e-books. To say that the change from print to electronic is just another in a series of changes in the career of the book is like saying that the difference between a lake and a cloud is no greater than that between a lake and a pond because, after all, they are all bodies of water. Moreover, the recognition of the ever-changing nature of the book even before the advent of the digital is at odds with the other lesson from the field of book history mentioned above, namely, that coexistence has been the typical outcome when new media emerged to rival old ones. If print books are going to continue to thrive alongside of digital ones, then they will have retained their identity as books, that is, physical things, in the common acceptance of the term; but if, as the observation about constant change seems to suggest, it is only a matter of time before all books shift to digital modes, then the resulting state of affairs would not be coexistence but supersession after all.

If we believe that the book is not going to be supplanted by e-books “for now” – and how long is that now? decades? centuries? and how many centuries are tantamount to an effective forever? – then the question of the future of the book is mainly addressed to the possible transformations of the book in its electronic mode. The question then comes down to: what can e-books do that print books can’t? We already have a fair number of specific answers to this question: they can include links, they can promote non-linear reading through hypertext, they can include other media and connect to troves of supporting documentation that it would be impractical to include within the confines of a single physical book, they can facilitate comparison among versions, they can be readily updated and revised, they can make themselves available to feedback even as they are being composed... These are all new capacities in the career of the book, and yet that they have not carried the day and rendered the print book obsolete attests to the centrality in our experience of the forms of attention whose association with the print book may not be simply adventitious. The concept of the book has been put

³ The tendency among scholars to stress continuity rather than rupture is understandable in light of the zero-sum advocacy that one finds in the popular discussions. Schnapp states, “As we catalog some of the current disruptions, it’s important to remember that none of the material, functional, and cultural affordances of the book have ever been fixed and immutable” (25). Hamilton contends that “electronic writing, publishing, and reading constitute merely a new chapter in the advancement of a basic technology that has always been designed to register, store, and circulate information” (28). For Borsuk, “the book is a fluid artifact whose form and usage have shifted over time under numerous influences: social, financial, and technological.” Incontestable in themselves, in the context of discussions of the future of the book such statements do not seem to me to sufficiently acknowledge the magnitude of the change ushered in by the latest “chapter” of the book’s history.

in play, but how much play is in the concept? How far can the book be stretched and still be a book, that is, still do what five centuries have schooled us to want and need the book to do?

After the Book

For some two decades in both his critical and imaginative writings, the French writer François Bon has conducted a searching engagement with the question of the future of the book. As yet little known in the Anglo-American literary world, Bon is a major voice in contemporary French literature, whose prolific output includes some twenty novels, theater pieces, books of essays, criticism (Rabelais, Koltès), rock biographies (The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin), children's books, translations (Lovecraft, the manifesto *Uncreative Writing* by the American poet, Kenneth Goldsmith), as well as genre-bending works like *Tumulte*, classified as a novel but an amalgam of autobiography, criticism, and fiction. In the late 90s the protean Bon began experimenting with online publication on his website, *Tierslivre*, which features blogs, journals, photography, translations, a writing workshop, and digital experiments with the form of the book that will be considered presently. The website has further branched into a publishing venture, *Tierslivre.net*, which publishes the works of Bon and other innovative authors in both digital and print editions. The trajectory of Bon's career itself represents an example of the multiple roles available to the author in the digital age.

Bon's treats the question of the future of the book most explicitly in his book, *Après le livre (After the Book)*, which mixes reflections on emerging developments with examinations of a range of historical cases. As Bon declares, "There has never been an author or writing (écriture) that can separate itself from the material conditions of its enunciation and reproducibility" (11).⁴ One could take this as the broadest of truisms – an immaterial writing process would be a contradiction in terms – and yet Bon lends it force by deploying a diverse and impressive collection of examples of the ways writing has opportunistically taken shape around different historical expressions of "the material conditions of its enunciation and reproducibility." Bon's book proposes that the future of the book is not a matter of prediction, but of practice, which is to say, bracingly, that to a considerable extent what becomes of the book is up to us. This optimistic but nuanced sense of agency guides Bon's approach to the question of the future of the book and is one of the chief virtues of his exposition. Never deterministic in its presentation of the relationship between technology and writing, *Après le livre* emphasizes the dependence of practices on material circumstances that it variously evokes in their historical particularity while yet leaving room for the ingenuity of individuals who work within those circumstances to create forms of expressions that meet their communicative needs. In turn, the book's myriad examples from the history of writing bear directly on the present. Just as authors have always found opportunities in their technological moment, so too can we adapt to present circumstances.

Indeed, for Bon this is not so much an invitation as an imperative: for as he eloquently observes in the book's introduction, "For over two decades now we have progressively entrusted the totality of our practices, from the professionally routine to our most private creations, to electronic devices. And with grave risks, as those devices, their software, and the economy of their circulation, are under the monopoly of a few groups for whom art and civilization are of less concern than the stock market and domination" (8).⁵ For all that, there

⁴ "Il n'y a jamais eu d'auteur ni d'écriture qui puissent se séparer de ses conditions matérielles d'énonciation ou de reproductibilité" (11).

⁵ "... depuis deux décennies... nous confions progressivement la totalité de nos usages, depuis les routines

is wiggle room to invent the forms that take advantage of the possibilities inherent in our interactions with the new technologies. The hortatory cast of Bon's project comes to the fore at the end of the introduction: "our new reading practices are liable to engender their own dense forms, which will not reveal themselves to our imagination except to the extent that we try them out (*expérimenterons*) with them" (15).⁶ This is carefully couched: digital technologies offer opportunities for new forms of written expression, but we -- and Bon's first-person plural is nicely inclusive -- must discover and actualize them in the course of trials that follow the lead of reading practices already molded by new conditions.

The book is open to our experimentation and renovation, Bon suggests, because it never has been a stable object. The many historical instances Bon evokes *Après le livre* serve to show that there is no sole, monolithic entity corresponding platonically to the idea of "the book," but only particular instances of books responsive to changing combinations of expressive needs and technological opportunities. His most prominent example of the looseness of the term "book" is Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, of which he tallies half a dozen versions and concludes "the principal oeuvre of Baudelaire is not a book" and, even more dramatically, "Baudelaire did not write *Flowers of Evil*".⁷ On this account, the book becomes an adventitious receptacle for writings that arrests the ongoing process of composition at what merely happens to be the latest stage of its development, giving the illusion of integrity and finality, where there is only truncated succession. The same logic applies on a larger scale to the oeuvre of Kafka, whose letters, notebooks, drafts, journals, published stories, and novels rescued from the destruction he wished for them, comprise "an ensemble without contours" (137).⁸ The accidents that governed what made it into the Kafka canon -- who chose, when, according to what principles, and what was lost -- bring home the fudging inherent in our conception of the writer's oeuvre. Given the mind's penchant for thinking in terms of discrete concepts, we want to be able to say what we talk about when refer to Baudelaire or Kafka is a definite thing. It is unsettling to think that "Kafka is a dark mass" or that when we look closely enough at Baudelaire's output, all is "diffraction, cloudiness," yet how definite an idea of a body of work do we ever have behind the signifier that is an author's name? (143).⁹

The arbitrariness of the boundaries of the book, of which Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* is Bon's chief example, is a property with which he explores in his own digital experiments. Another such property, anticipated in certain manifestations of the book in its long history but that can be exploited to an unprecedented degree in the digital realm, is immediacy. In this regard, Bon adduces as an ideal for web-writing the example of the 17th-century author, Madame de Sévigné, whose eloquent and sage letters from Paris to her daughter in Provence were copied and read, with de Sévigné's consent, before they even reached their addressee. Assembled posthumously -- mostly from the copies, the originals not having survived -- the letters were published as a book that has become one of the classics of French literature. Comparing her writings to that of her contemporary, the memoirist Saint-Simon, whose works were composed at great intervals after his involvement in the court of Louis XIV, Bon extols the day-to-day responsiveness of her letters to the intrigues of the court. These letters required distance as a catalyst -- de Sévigné's son, placed at the court, did not need daily reports --

professionnelles jusqu'aux commodités les plus privées, à des appareils électroniques. Avec des risques lourds, quand ces appareils, leur logiciels, et l'économie de ce qu'ils véhiculent, sont sous monopole de quelques groupes dont l'art et la civilisation sont moins la préoccupation que la bourse et la domination" (8).

⁶ "nos nouveaux usages de lecture, les propres forms denses que ces usages sont susceptibles d'engendrer, et qui ne se révéleront à notre imaginaire qu'à mesure que nous les expérimenterons..." (15).

⁷ "L'oeuvre principale de Baudelaire n'a jamais été un livre"; "Baudelaire n'a pas écrit *Les Fleurs du mal*" (70; 67).

⁸ "...une ensemble sans contours" (137).

⁹ "Kafka est une masse sombre."; "diffraction, nuage" (143).

and, Bon avers, “and for the most acerbic things one had to express, which put a mirror to the political apparatus (dispositif) taken in all its concrete elements, one had to really send it through the mail” (159).¹⁰ Bon concludes:

But what a definitive example of literature without the book, of a summoning of a private form of writing to bring literature in political contact with the world, according to an efficacy – at the risk of ephemerality and oblivion – that the book would never be able to confer upon it! Exactly what we are looking for in Web writing. (160-1).¹¹

For Bon the promise of writing on the web lies in its immediate consequentiality, a direct intervention in the events of the world that he calls in the broad sense political, a promise so great that the ephemerality and oblivion that would seem to be the fate of most writing, on the web or in books, are ingeniously converted into the stakes of a daring existential bid for relevance.

Closely allied to the virtue of immediacy in Bon’s view is that of brevity. It is simply a practical constraint that writing that is closely responsive to events—or at least to the moment of one’s own being, and that is going to have a direct effect on the social world,—is going to be relatively brief. While short forms may be written and disseminated in any medium, the digital environment particularly favors them. Noting in the section, “Towards a history of brevity” how the demands of the periodical press fostered the form of the short story and thus had a profound effect on the development of American literature, so that for authors such as Faulkner and Hemingway the short story became “the social site” while their novels were “...an almost personal exercise or reserved for the more limited public of patrons of book stores.”¹² Bon observes that, analogously, “the tools of the web, which limit the load of what they transmit (one hundred forty characters for Twitter, four hundred fifty characters for Facebook) have created an infinity of roundabout practices (usage détournés)” (132).¹³ From a theoretical standpoint, the crucial passage in the section, indeed in the whole book, is the following:

With blog publication, in which the posts follow the rhythm of daily publication, and our own practices of daily consultation of aggregators, we read each Web page as a complete story. Nevertheless (and this trend is increasing), the majority of blogs propose a series, or constructed ensembles, and ask that these ensembles be retrospectively discovered in a continuous manner. From this point of view, that which one calls the “digital book” could not but be the retrospective construction of a fragmented writing – but this fragmentation during the time of writing was already that of literature in general (the constraint of one hundred twenty words a day that Stevenson imposed on himself) and it is the slow time of material publication of the printed book that has rendered this process of recomposition invisible to us (131).¹⁴

¹⁰ “et que ce qu’on exprime de plus acide, qui met en miroir le dispositif politique pris par ce faisceau d’éléments concrets, on a réellement à l’expédier par la poste” (159).

¹¹ “Mais quel exemple définitif de littérature sans livre, de convocation d’un usage privé de l’écrit pour que la littérature vienne au contact politique du monde, selon une effectivité – au risque de l’éphémère, de l’oubli – que le livre ne saurait lui conférer! Exactement ce que nous cherchons dans l’écriture Web.” (160-1).

¹² “le lieu social...”; “un exercice quasi personnel ou réservé au public plus restreint des libraries” (130).

¹³ “Les outils de réseaux, qui limitent la charge... de ce qu’ils transportent (cent quarante caractères pour Twitter, quatre cents cinquante caractères pour Facebook), ont créé une infinité d’usages détournés.” (132).

¹⁴ “Avec la publication sur blog, rythmée et indexée selon le jour de publication du billet, et nos propres usages de consultation quotidienne de nos agrégateurs, nous lisons chaque page Web comme une histoire complète. Pourtant (et ce mouvement tend à s’intensifier), la plupart des blogs proposent des séries, des ensembles construits, appellent à découvrir rétrospectivement ces ensembles de façon continue. De ce point de vue, ce qu’on nomme “livre

Rather strikingly, Bon elevates the fragment to the essential form of literature. As a matter of necessity, one does not write a book, one writes parcels that eventually add up to a book. Now this point would reduce to the obvious – since we are creatures of time, our exertions are necessarily spread out in quanta of application – if it did not insinuate that writing has to be fresh in order to be urgent, or at the least that its urgency has a fairly short half-life. For the implication is that the printed book, to name the whole in question, has something artificial about it inasmuch as it submerges the expressive claims of the parts of which it is comprised. These claims are deemed to have a superior authenticity by virtue of their association with the heat of a present moment whose exigencies continue to inform them. The conceptual unity of the printed book, Bon suggests, is compromised for being the result of a process whose individual stages it conceals.

At the same time as Bon seeks to expose the instability of the book, his thinking about the history of the book is informed by an evolutionary paradigm according to which later stages of development conserve the advances or conquests of previous stages, while transforming and adapting them. Thus, for example, he worries how the thickness of the physical book, which orients the reader by providing a visual and tactile gauge of their progress through the text, can be preserved in the digital environment. The evolutionary model includes change within a reassuring framework of continuity; the new forms we may devise will extend developments in the history of the books rather than abandon them. Bon believes that “there is nothing more highly technological than the modern printed book,”¹⁵ but also that we are in an epochal moment in which our daily intercourse with new communication technologies are bringing about sweeping changes in our relation to the word and the world, changes that will inevitably affect the book along with everything else and push that rich evolution still further (103). New forms of the book in the digital realm may be at variance with our common intuitions of what the book is, and yet in Bon’s account those intuitions have solidified around a conceptual illusion of fixity that scants the multifarious range of actual specimens of books through history. The looseness and fragmentation that Bon identifies in his historical examples of the book in order to destabilize its fixed concept are qualities that the digital medium especially encourages.

Après le livre itself exemplifies these qualities, as well as the initiative and resourcefulness Bon urges upon its readers. Originally born as blog posts, each of the individual mini essays that make up the book conserves its self-sufficient rhetorical thrust, creating a mosaic of differently-angled approaches to Bon’s demonstration of the book’s dependence on “the material conditions of its enunciation.” The logic that organizes the whole could be said to be not strictly bibliographic but blogospheric, each piece being intimately bound up, at least in theory, with the occasion of its production as a piece of writing for the web. Hence the title, which paradoxically announces the supersession of the thing it names, is justified by Bon’s contention that digital technology has already thoroughly remade our writing and reading practices, and by extension our relation to the world, so that effectively, as he states in the last of the book’s mini-essays, “we are already after the book” (270).¹⁶ Yet the assemblage of the individual pieces in book form confers a unity that is not only physical but also thematic, while not incidentally boosting their collective discoverability.

numérique” pourrait n’être que cette construction retrospective d’une écriture fragmentée – mais cette fragmentation dans le temps d’écriture était déjà celle de la littérature en general (la contrainte des cent vingt mots quotidiens que s’imposait Stevenson), et c’est le temps long de la publication matérielle du livre imprimé qui nous rendait invisible ce processus de recomposition.” (131).

¹⁵ “rien de plus hautement technologique que le livre imprimé moderne” (103).

¹⁶ “Nous sommes déjà après le livre” (270).

The Book Repurposed

The two experiments with digital books that Bon conducted before the publication of *Après le livre* both exploit the qualities of immediacy, brevity, and plasticity that, as we have seen, he identifies as the particular virtues of the new medium, though in different ways. In 2005-6 Bon opened up his creative process with the sequential publication, in 227 daily installments on his website, of what would become the novel, *Tumulte*, a book made entirely of “invented stories and memories mingled, those tilting moments in the experience of the day and cities, writing without premeditation and immediately available on the Internet” (7).¹⁷ The resultant pastiche preserves the centrifugal thrust of the units of composition whose individual situational interest and validity, as we have seen him contend in *Après le livre*, are veiled by the illusion of completeness that attends the book published so long after their advent. The title refers to the welter of daily experience the book records, but also to the dynamic medley of genres and media that in particular make up the web version of the work, which included photographs and other material since suppressed. In the preface to the printed work Bon describes the whole as “a book... born... of these accumulated pathways, an unexpected clearing, submitted to the friction of the world and its days” and asks “is not all that also the novel?” (7).¹⁸ This tantalizing question has no sure answer. Summoning the well-known extensibility of the term, one might say that it is interesting to think of it as a novel if the author calls it one. It is like a novel in the pride of place it gives to subjective experience; its mass of raw material is proto-novelistic, as if Bon had succeeded in going beneath the novel form to dredge up the substratum of fantasy and perception and dailiness that authors draw upon to fashion a novel; it particularly resembles a modern novel in its turning itself inside-out to reflect on the process of its own genesis; and even in its bulk it is novel-like.

Yet this generic indeterminacy echoes a more fundamental indeterminacy deriving from the existence of two discrepant versions of the same work in different media. In her discussion of *Tumulte*, the critic Alice James underscores the almost uncanny ontological ambiguity resulting from *Tumulte*'s double existence. While the website may be regarded as a supplement or epitext to the book, she notes, “the book’s constant reflection on its own mode of production makes it difficult to approach [the] print version as an independent object” (42). The web version contains images and references, including comments on other authors, that did not make it into the book. As Bon revised the entries, the original drafts were erased, appropriately enough according to the logic of immediacy he wishes to espouse. Even so, the printed version bears evidence of the earlier stages of its coming into being, preserving future-tense reflections on its eventual publication as a book and referring to its own passages as “these online texts.”¹⁹ Citing these and other peculiarities of Bon’s project, James comments that “the printed ‘novel’ thus points beyond itself to its origins and continuations in ‘virtual’ space, but also stands as a material monument that replaces the ephemeral online archive” (43). Such uncertainty leads her ultimately to reflect, “Where then is *Tumulte*, what is its place? In some respects, it must be understood as a conceptual project, forever incomplete, always invoking the idea of a book that would be an ultimate revelation, but that lies forever beyond our grasp... the printed text becomes a point of entry into [a] hidden book, the original project, whose totality is accessible only to its author (46-7).” The limitless plasticity that is

¹⁷ “d’histoires inventées et de souvenirs mêlés, ces instants de bascule dans l’expérience du jour et des villes, écriture sans préméditation et immédiatement disponible sur Internet” (7).

¹⁸ “naissait un livre fait de ces chemins accumulés, un défrichement imprévu, soumis à la friction du monde et des jours. Est-ce que ce n’est pas aussi tout cela, le roman?” (7)

¹⁹ “ces textes en ligne.”

one of the distinguishing capacities of the digital book, its ready revisability, becomes in the case of *Tumulte* the carefully crafted undecidability as to the relative priority of web and print versions.

In 2010 Bon retyped his second novel, *Limite* (1985), word for word onto his website, made slight alterations along the way, added autobiographical commentary on the different sections of the novel, and renamed the resultant new work, “*Roman de Limite*” (*Novel of Limite*). Later, he gathered the commentary into a continuous strand, made some changes to the layout of the novel’s sections, and made this further work available as an ebook with the title, *The Second Book is Always the Most Difficult to Write: Limite and the Novel of Limite*.²⁰ As a final step, he made the ebook purchasable as a print-on-demand physical book in 2016. Together, these multiple versions of what is by and large the same text, each slightly reconfigured according to the capacities of the platform in which it is contained – website, ebook, physical book – constitute another experiment with the forms of the book in the digital medium that raises deep questions about the nature of the book.

One suspects that retyping rather than scanning his novel onto his website was an important step for Bon because it reactivated his relationship to the work he had written more than two and a half decades earlier, allowing him to make little changes and awakening the memories and associations that comprise the web version, which is thus akin to a director’s cut of the original novel. It made for the practice of a certain immediacy, even as he remediated a former work: adding fresh commentary to the text he was reviving lent it the effect of a direct action of the sort he extols in the case of Madame de Sévigné. As for his predilection for brevity, the sections of this commentary accompanying chunks of the original text, amount to about a dozen pages. It is thus in its plasticity, the third distinguishing attribute of writing in the digital environment championed by Bon, that the chief interest of his project lies. The versions of *Limite* Bon put in play are only four: the original print novel, the web edition with commentary, the ebook version of web edition, and the print-on-demand version of that. Yet in their differences they gesture towards the ideal of infinite textual mutability that has become practicable with the advent of the digital.

Limite presents the thoughts and perceptions of four loosely related working-class characters during one day of their lives: industrial designer, soccer player, guitarist in a rock band, and their unemployed friend. Displaying the same penchant for experimentation that Bon will display and advocate two and a half decades later in *Après le livre*, it is executed in a style that might be called experimental realism; that is, unlike most cutting-edge fiction of the post 60s era, it does not impugn the existence of “the real,” but, eschewing the worn conventions of realism, it employs radical methods for attaining it. The novel is structured through brief “bursts of reality,” in the words of one critic, intense stream-of-consciousness vignettes that rely on compression, ellipsis, argot and other verbal means to create the effect of direct immersion in the worlds of its characters.²¹ Erika Fülöp, who has discussed Bon’s remediation of the novel at length, observes that there is a continuity between his early concern with “the real” and the new order of direct contact with the reader made possible by the web. She also connects the *Roman de Limite* with the modernist tradition of works in which “the process is consubstantial with the product” (75). I would add more particularly that the memoir about one’s creative work is a subgenre that has recently been enjoying a vogue among French novelists, as for example in recent works about their works by novelists Christine Montalbetti, Gerard Gavarry, and, in the burlesque mode, Eric Chevillard.²²

²⁰ *Le Deuxième livre est toujours le plus difficile à écrire: Limite et le roman de Limite.*

²¹ “éclats de réalité” 10 and passim.

²² Christine Montalbetti: *En écrivant Journée américaine*; Gerard Gavarry: *Façon d’un roman, ou, Comment d’après le livre de*

But the big difference between the print and web versions of *Limite* is that the latter is porous, its boundaries uncertain. In the digital environment the novel fitted with Bon's reminiscences is only the shortest of hops away from the other personal material on his site and to the rest of the effectively infinite plethora of the web. In Fülöp's formulation, "the text placed in the network loses the material unity of the physical book (71)." This is crucial: the situation of the text on the web puts the identity of book starkly in play, raising questions in which the theoretical and practical, the profound and the trivial, are difficult to distinguish. The book seemingly dissolves in the digital environment, opened up, as Fülöp describes, to lines of interest that may develop far from the textual field that is Bon's novel, or his novel of his novel. But material unity, mostly taken for granted as a property of the book in the predigital era, is no mean thing to be blithely dismissed. It has always quietly served the crucial function of furnishing an analog for the conceptual unity the book confers on the textual elements it contains, such as the poems of Baudelaire, the letters of Madame de Sévigné, or the mini-essays of Bon that make up *Après le livre*.

Bon's experiment brings home the fundamental tension between our tendency to think in terms of discrete entities, of things, and our recognition of the ways in which such thinking can be inadequate. We can readily adjust to the idea that the web version of *Limite* is a dual entity, but it is stretching the concept to think of it as a book. Fülöp chooses the term "project" to differentiate the various phases of Bon's remediation of *Limite* from the physical book, with all that designation implies of unity and closure; in contrast, "the digital allows the author to embrace the organic and continuous development of writing, in the life of which each publication, each update and new version is now admittedly just one stage rather than a conclusion" (83). Bon himself invokes "the logic of the project" with respect to the ensemble of versions of *Limite*; and effectively defines this as "an open work, meaning that it can be constantly remodelled" (quoted in Fülöp, 83).²³ Throughout her discussion she is alive to the tension between the "the logic of the book" and "the logic of the project," between closure and fixity and openness and mutability, detectible in the drift of Bon's own terminology. Thus, while citing Bon's claim that the placement of *Limite* on the web "amounts to an active contestation of the concept of the book as a closed object," she adjoins that "by the same token, it affirms the unity of the author's oeuvre as a whole in its digital existence, as a literary space shaped by him" (72). The conceptual integrity that is lost on the level of the book is recouped on the level of the oeuvre in the form of the website, which, however, contains the word for book, "livre," in its very name, *Tierslivre*. Further on she finds it "remarkable that even in [his] description of the project, Bon calls the result 'a complete online electronic book'" (72).

However liberating the logic of the project may seem to be, the logic of the book proves to be tenacious even in Bon's own characterizations. He describes the ebook version of *Limite* as "a digital version, reread, revised & augmented with a feuilleton on the genesis of the novel on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of its publication" (quoted in Fülöp, 77).²⁴ Fülöp comments:

While [the web version] seemed to move away from the logic of the book and traditional publishing, this reframing with reference to an anniversary as a trigger draws on the editorial strategy of the conventional book market.... If we are not entirely returning to the fixity of the printed book published by a third-party publisher, there is nevertheless the return to the logic of the book...

Judith j'ai inventé une histoire de banlieue, et à l'aide du cocotier, du cargo, du centaure, écrit trois fois hop là (sic!); Eric Chevillard: L'auteur et moi.

²³ "un' oeuvre ouverte, ça veut dire qu'on peut la remodeler en permanence" (quoted in Fülöp, 83).

²⁴ "version numérique, relue, révisée & augmentée d'un feuilleton sur la genèse du roman pour le 30ème anniversaire de sa publication"

severed from the website even though sold through it, and readable independently from the network that gave rise to it (78).

What the logic of the book entails is a certain boundedness, a coherence, that the several changes Bon makes in the ebook edition of *Limite* serve to reinforce. He supplies the name for each narrator at the beginning of each section, obviating the need for the reader to work out the identity of the narrator from the content of the narration. While this simplification is not strictly entailed by the logic of the book, since the more ambiguous presentation was a feature of the original print edition, it nevertheless suggests Bon feels the need to provide to reference points to orient the reader in the virtual space of the ebook that the physical edition could dispense with. He removes all but one of the hyperlinks from the commentary, sealing the book off from the digital environment that dissolved its boundaries in the web version. He numbers the segments of the commentary, a move which, as Fülöp notes, gives it more identity as a textual thread in its own right, while at the same time ensuring that it “is now more tightly intertwined with the novel’s passages as here they alternate throughout in a *single document*” (78, emphasis mine). Even this last phrase attests to the force of the persistence of the logic of the book – for it is only on the ideal plane that this “single document” can be grasped as such. Bon even goes so far as to reinforce the unity of ebook by giving one of the narrators his own initials, so that he becomes a character in his fiction as well as the author of the commentaries upon it. “If the unification of the text in a single file reinforces the symbiosis between the two threads visually and structurally,” Fülöp comments, “this newly declared identity of the two voices unifies them semantically and ontologically...” (81). The logic of the book seems to entail the increased presence of the author.

In the end, Bon created a print-on-demand version of the whole project, with the title, *The Second novel is always more difficult to write* and the subtitle, *Limite, and the novel of Limite* and then, on the title page, a second subtitle, *Limite, and feuilleton of the rewriting of Limite*, a superimposition that implies the ontological undecidability of the project and gives equal weight to each of what we might think of its versions: novel, commented novel, ebook. Bon asks, “why print on demand?” and answers “1) because it exists, 2, because it is going to become in the coming months an essential cog in the distribution of the book” (quoted in Fülöp).²⁵ This would seem to concede that, despite all the play with the expressive possibilities of the different digital versions and the putative advantages of the digital as a means for immediate publication, the print book is still necessary for the project to reach an audience. In sympathy with Bon’s venture, Fülöp herself attempts to ward off any irony one might find in the choice to cap the project with the good old print book encompassing the whole, characterizing it as a further exploration of medium-specific possibilities offered by the print-on-demand mode: “the printed book returns, not as a recognition of the failure of the digital adventure or the persisting superiority of the paper book, but as an affirmation of the technological advances that enable it.” But she allows that “it also illustrates the persistence of the financial indispensability of the printed book” (84). More than just financial, however, one might think the indispensability is also epistemological, in that Bon’s experiment stands a better chance of being discovered and recognized if it exists as discrete thing.

In her summary, Fülöp characterizes *Limite* as a “truly transmedial... project... in that each version brings something new... and it is not one but three and four: *Limite*, the 1985 novel, *Limite et roman de Limite*, the 2010 online autobiography; *Limite et feuilleton de l’invention de Limite*, the 2014 e-book, and *LIMITE*, the sum of all of these” (82). Yet, as we have also seen in the stubborn reassertion of the logic of the book even in midst of

²⁵ “1) parce qu’elle existe, 2, parce qu’elle va devenir dans les prochains mois un rouage essentiel de la diffusion du livre.”

Bon's endeavor to pursue the logic of the project, closure is not easily banished. Even as one postpones completion of the project as a whole, closure reestablishes itself on the level of the unit represented by the various stages Bon has brought forth. And while Bon may have blurred the identity of the novel *Limite* in an array of configurations, *LIMITE* the project has been closed for many years.

The Book After All?

Bon's experiments demonstrate some ways in which writing can exploit the specific powers of the digital medium to create new forms. Yet whether they reveal likely paths the book may take in the future is not certain. Is Bon arguing that in the future all writing, even ambitious literary writing, will be done on the web and will be molded by that medium's affordances to take advantage of the qualities of immediacy, brevity, and plasticity he champions? A late, uncharacteristically sarcastic, entry in *Après le livre* on "Imperturbable Writers" certainly makes it seem that way. In Bon's account, the sin of the imperturbable writers is that they are incurious about the new technology. Carrying on with their writing and publishing as they have been doing all along, they don't have author sites, they haven't explored the new possibilities opened up by the Web, and, although they allow that the internet is fine for scientists, sociologists, and sellers of books and other merchandise, they act as if it wasn't there and had no importance for what they are doing. The segment makes clear that for Bon the relationship between the old technology of the book and the new technology of the Web is not one of coexistence, but rather of supersession after all: those who go on producing novels according to the old patterns are ridiculously and even contemptibly out of date. Yet this seems quite unfair: has the rise of digital technology and the possibilities of instant publication through the Web rendered the novel, product of a supposedly suddenly antiquated dispensation, obsolete? Or is it that the imperturbability of these writers is based on their belief that the content of what they have to say is paramount and counts for a great deal more than the containers in which it is conveyed? That it is by means of the minute negotiations of words, intimately allied to motions of mind, that the canny writer communicates new ideas in accordance with new conditions of experience, rather than by new means of delivery?

The appeal of Bon's projects seems to me chiefly theoretical and academic. While it is not within the scope of either James's or Fülöp's essays to treat the semantic realm of the respective texts with which Bon experiments, but only their general implications as projects in the digital medium, an exclusive focus on the medium can easily lead us to forget that first and foremost they are texts, that is, an amount of words arranged to refer to states and events in an empirical or imagined world. In deference to the principle that every change in the vehicle makes a difference in the content that is conveyed, a principle that currently has the vast sanction of the materialist disposition in humanistic thinking behind it, we want to believe that our reception of the sumptuous texts of *Limite* and *Tumulte* is colored by the medium in which we encounter them. Yet there remains the question of how much and in what way the different experience of a particular text in different media bears on our understanding of its semantic substance. Perhaps the meaning of the medium and the meaning of the message are not as interdependent as we schematically like to think. When I am engaged with one of the 237 sections that make up the print edition of *Tumulte*, some of them stripped-down fictive scenarios, some metacommentary, many autobiographical, my awareness that what I am reading was first written directly online without drafts recedes into the background as a point of circumstantial interest that has little to do with the main thing: the reckoning with the thrust of the individual pieces.

The qualities that are particularly favored by writing on the web amount, in Bon's exposition, to a general elevation of process over product. The digital medium encourages, to a degree previously unthinkable, the

baring of the creative process that was already a pronounced tendency in his pre-web writings. The web effectively collapses the distance between writing and publishing: writers can post their efforts on the web, receive criticism, reformulate, and repost. Multiple versions can easily be displayed side by side, and, as in the case of *Tumulte*, the variability of digital publishing allows for the purging of elements from the print version that appeared in the web posts, blurring the question of priority between the two texts. All of these effects that take advantage of the possibilities of changeability and instantaneity afforded by the digital medium to highlight process have, as I have suggested, the cachet of authenticity behind them. In their exposure of the written text as a sequence of approaches to the formulation of meaning that is empirical and constructed and not ideal and final, they are in accord with the general tendency towards self-reflexivity and the foregrounding of technique that has prevailed in our culture for decades. More particularly, the assumption of progress that accompanies this tendency entails a characterization of the traditional book as limited and, in regions of academic discourse where the influence of post-structuralism continues to exert a distinct if general influence, even oppressive. Already at the beginning of the digital revolution Paul Duguid found it noteworthy that “a fair amount of post-structuralist theory is being ingested to provide support for what is, in fact, the demonization of the book” (75). In the early days, digital technology was going to free textuality from the stodgy confines of the book, which with its closure and fixity could suddenly be deemed an obstacle to the free dissemination of a generalized *écriture* that seems to be Bon’s implicit ideal. Yet one might think such a demonization of the book is a rather sloppy confusion of discursive orders; the book is closed only in the mundane sense that it is a discrete thing, but within that closure its semantic and conceptual reach can be all but infinite. One could even go so far as to say that its boundedness is what makes possible its boundlessness.

Even in Fülöp’s careful exposition, these shades of what Duguid calls “liberation technology” are detectible. About so fraught an issue it may not be possible to remain impartial, but in comparing the different qualities of the book version of *Limite* and its digital revampment, Fülöp’s language subtly departs from strict neutrality, tilting towards the rhetoric of readerly empowerment that has all but obligatorily accompanied discussions of digital technology from the time of its advent. The web version of *Limite* becomes “part of a reader’s journey which weaves a mental text following the logic of their points of interest and the links offered across the web, rather than a logic proposed by any single author or work” (71). This may sound liberating, but is also a rather idealized depiction of what could also be described as distraction, dispersal, dissolution. Conversely, while the phrase “following... a logic proposed by any single author or work,” is meant to stigmatize traditional engagement with literary art as now limiting and retrograde, the same activity could easily be phrased in affirmative rather than pejorative terms, such as “participating in the author’s revelatory negotiations of sense.” Further on, Fülöp’s bias becomes still more conspicuous when she asserts, “Renouncing the sacred status of the work’s structure as a self-sufficient entity with a core is the price to pay for opening up to the web and entering the flux...” (72). This is delicately couched. She does not directly state whether the price is worth it, but, again, the language insinuates that it is, since for the skeptical academics like ourselves who comprise her readership the label “sacred” is bait for antagonism. Yet the price seems to be very steep. What does “opening up to the web and entering the flux” actually mean? And why is it automatically assumed to be a good? The language in this sentence verges on the religious: “entering the flux” may be fine as a prescription for one’s spiritual expansion, but in practical terms it doesn’t furnish an explanation of its supposed benefits beyond the implication that following whatever paths one is inclined to follow is better than following the paths set down by the author, which seems to me to miss the whole point of reading. The hollowness of what Fülöp proposes as the benefit of placing *Limite* on the web and dissolving its boundaries, at the point

when the exposition would seem to demand that this advantage be spelled out concretely, is particularly telling. Every reader will have experienced the benefits of concentrated attention to a written work – but what is to be gained from placing that same work on the web – the ability to leave it in favor of other things that beckon to one’s attention, in the name of a putative immersion in a textuality whose rewards are far from apparent?

Against the easy celebration of the supposed emancipatory effects of writing published on the web, it might be in order in the remainder of this essay to draw on the insights of the discipline of book history to make a preliminary pass at a sketch of the virtues of textual fixity and stability that are routinely disparaged in accounts of the digital. If one of the lessons of which book historians like to remind us is that the book has always been changing, another is that the fixity of the printed page was an achievement that had decisive effects on the propagation of knowledge. This claim was first advanced by historian Elizabeth Eisenstein in her influential study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change in Early Modern Europe*. The power of Eisenstein’s account consists in the wide-ranging ways she evokes the concrete effects of what is at bottom the mental phenomenon of the experience of a stabilized record of knowledge based on the printed page, implicitly asking the reader to comparatively imagine what the world of letters and the life of the mind was like before and after such a record was available. In short, the fixity of the printed page made it possible on a scale never before experienced to secure gains in thought and knowledge, which then could become the object of scrutiny and comparison, by many minds working on the same, standardized versions. As she puts it, in a formulation that applies equally to humanistic studies and the rising sciences, “Once a finding could be permanently secured by being registered in print, the way was paved for an unending series of discoveries and for the systematic development of investigatory techniques” (124). Thus, “permanence introduced a new form of progressive change. The preservation of the old... was a prerequisite for a tradition of the new” (86). Eisenstein argues that print was in effect the engine of the spread of knowledge that underlay the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution, and thus was decisive in the rise of modernity.²⁶ And these are just the social effects; in his famous study, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong enumerates an ample array of psychological effects of print, including the fostering of introspection, interiority, and individuation that depend on having a fixed noetic world established by print books.

The importance of the fixity of the printed text is so basic it is easily overlooked. It is the prerequisite for intellectual exchange – even arguments for the ultimate indeterminacy of meaning come to us in the fixed forms of books the meaning of whose passages can be cited, analyzed, and argued about in their turn because they are physically identical for every reader. Moreover, the printed page is not simply the arbitrary capture of the latest stage of an ongoing writing process that has no greater claim to our interest than any of the previous stages or possible later ones. Fixity implies finality.²⁷ Yes, thought has no ultimate resting place, in principle there is always more to say, further perspectives and contexts that can be brought to bear on a subject. But there is an operative finality we aim for in written communication. On one level, writing, necessarily comes out of us sequentially, so that it can be casually imagined to transcribe an unfolding process of thinking. Yet though

²⁶ I am aware that Eisenstein’s argument has been challenged, most notably by Adrian Johns in *The Nature of the Book*. Johns argues that print, because it made forgery and piracy possible, actually destabilized the record of knowledge, thus necessitating the development of social norms to regulate and guarantee the authenticity of texts. However, for the purposes of my argument the key point is that Johns does not contest the importance of fixity, but only the nature of the historical circumstances that led to it.

²⁷ Cf Ong: “Print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion” (132).

we read what is written in one direction, writing is not a one-way street, but an iterative labor in which thoughts build on one another, ideas are selected and rejected, formulations are set down only to be reworked. Along the way drafts serve as provisional objectifications of one's thoughts, which allow one to identify gaps and contradictions, and address them, and understand better what to emphasize and what to downplay. In such a manner the writer gradually draws nearer and nearer to a suitable arrangement of words for the intuition or intuitions they want to convey. Even more complexly, the initial intuition may be fugitive or confused, so that one gets a grip on it only in the repeated attempts to word it, which externalizes it so that it can be held up for evaluation and further development. Eventually some degree of satisfaction with one's composition together with some accommodation to the need to have something to show the world leads one to commit to a final state of the words on the page in the fixed form of printed book or article. Thus reified, the airy swirl of one's hunches and preconceptions and stances and arguments are then available in an organized form to others for stimulus, inspection, critique, etc., as they come to terms with their own ideas about the issues in question (to confine the discussion to expository writing) perhaps with a view to elaborating their own positions in response.

Writing is an orchestration of words, a crystallization of mind. This is not to imply that it is a rigid block of semantic algebra. Good writing may be leagues away from raw process, but it generally includes the imitation of process, which is to say that one can carefully manage one's words in order to create the effect of a consecutive process of thinking, of logical progression, of the drama, even, of reasoning. We want writing to flow, that is, we want it to simulate the fluidity of a thought process even within the fixed architecture of the completed product, but compared to the actual messy to-do by which that sensation of movement is achieved the effect of process is highly refined and idealized. Would you like to see the several drafts of this essay, the many attempts at adequate expression behind just this present paragraph? This arrangement of words will suffice, I imagine, for your purpose of understanding my positions and judging my arguments. I have no wish to see the drafts of Fülöp's study of Bon's *LIMITE* project; the published version cogently lays out her interpretation of the significance of the aspects of Bon's project that pertain to possible forms the book may take in the digital era.

In the realm of imaginative literature, which trades much more heavily in aesthetic qualities, the demand for lifelike flow is even more pronounced. So, the inclusion of something like pure process may indeed be a desideratum, even if, as long as print was the only medium for its conveyance, the display of true process functioned like an unattainable asymptote, as in Beckett's *The Unnameable*. Throughout the 20th-century literary writers have employed stream-of-consciousness, metafiction, casual narrative style, and other techniques to open up their texts to unkempt process, but what they are in effect doing is fruitfully playing upon the tension between spontaneity and artifice. That is, as long as the fixity of the work is an inescapable given, one can include within it as many notes of process as one wants and thereby achieve an agreeable dishevelment and dissonance. But with the advent of the Web the case is now different. One can, as Bon has done, send brief pieces out into the electronic yonder daily, radically shortening the interval between message and reception and, inasmuch as the pieces are understood to be parts of an eventual whole, allow the recipients to follow the process of a work's coming into being with unprecedented closeness. As already noted Bon sees in this immediacy of contact a superior social agency for writing, and although one might suspect that this agency is more ideal than real, such an objection is not wholly valid because in fairness it must be said it is debatable whether any account of the efficacy of literature, including the cultural historical ones currently in vogue, are free of a generous admixture of idealism. But what is offered as process has an extremely short floruit indeed before it hardens into product. As James observes, "*Tumulte* conveys the poignant sense of a lost immediacy,

aligning the act of writing with the fragility of the present moment that disappears even as it appears” (43). What’s left is the book, *Tumulte*, which has the unselfconscious frankness of a journal or sketchbook, but lacks the internal coherence that comes from more considered writing. Without the foil of fixity, fluidity comes across as mere lack of development.

While Bon’s writing is itself meticulous and eloquent, nowhere in *Après le livre* does one find this sense of writing as (relatively) perfected communication, the crystallization of a labor of thought, I have tried to sketch as an alternative to the picture of writing as a good in itself that informs his theory. To have acknowledged this deliberative dimension of the writerly endeavor would be to call into question the extent that our writing is shaped, or channeled, or colored – it is the precise nature of the causality that is in question – by material processes. Bon finesses the question of determinism nicely, as I have noted, by suggesting a kind of reciprocal interaction of the writing process and our tools. Yet for all that he leaves the nature of the relationship between them vague. The effect of our tools on our writing or forms of writing does not seem to appear so strong when one considers writing from an interior standpoint. How deep does the influence of our tools go? If tools affect how we write, do they also affect how we think? Or perhaps the connection between writing and “the material conditions of its enunciations and its reproducibility,” to recall Bon’s formulation cited above, has been overemphasized? Perhaps our tools are what we always thought them to be -- at least before the style of thinking became fashionable that purports to show the dependence of what has been deemed central on what has usually been dismissed as marginal -- instruments, means, but unimportant to the undertaking of writing itself? So ingrained is the materialist disposition of contemporary academic thought that the proposal that maybe the marginal is marginal after all may seem preposterous. Yet, does it make a difference to the thought I am conveying in this sentence that it was scrawled on recycled college-ruled paper in a handy 8 ¼ by 6 ⅞ inch notebook with a cheap pen, corrected in the same manner, and then improved while being typed on a laptop keyboard? Or is the thought rather generated inwardly, responsive to the demands of my argument as I feel them emerging and subsequently tidied up in accordance with internalized criteria of effective communication? It may be true as Bon claims that our thoroughgoing reliance on digital technology is remaking our orientation to the world, but are the effects of that reorientation to be located at the point of contact with our tools or in more intimate regions of our understanding of ourselves and our possibilities?

In any case, one could only regard “les écrivains imperturbables” – for all his unnamed writers are understood to be novelists – as culpably out of style if one has lost faith in the novel itself as a major form of the book, and that, in turn, is all but tantamount to losing faith in texts themselves. I think this belief in the obsolescence of a dominant form to which he was formerly dedicated, having written some twenty novels himself, lends pathos to his decision to repurpose *Limite*. Out-of-print, deaccessioned (my copy is a former library book from a remainder house in France), forgotten, even by its author, who also even renounced the genre of which it is an exemplar because of its insufficient reality, *Limite* was a good candidate for revival because it was in effect dead and buried. This very alienation from his own creative effort of some three decades earlier allowed for the pleasant surprises of the recollection he engaged in while retyping the textual mass on his website. One could see in this revival an allegory for the career of print texts in the digital age: outmoded, neglected, inert, but then given new life on the Web when they are reframed, retouched, relaunched. In this allegory, *Limite* stands for both an old novel Bon happened to write, and any old novel, and indeed print literature itself, its title nicely serving to signify not just the limit of representation, of the extreme verbal means employed to simulate the immersion in the lived consciousness of possible others, but the end point of the relevance of a worn-out genre and medium overtaken by new urgencies allied with new communications

technologies. The allegory might even be thought to gain further pertinence from the circumstance that the reborn versions of *Limite* conserve the book published in 1985, while building on it and adapting it to a new medial environment in accordance with the evolutionary paradigm that informs Bon's thinking about cultural history. So, the earlier phase of print literature, the stratum of the book, would live on in the digital Ever-After of the World Wide Web. Except that the allegory could be construed in a less sanguine way, in which the afterlife offered by the Web is little more than a lasting berth in an astronomically populated necropolis. For if the text Bon so carefully crafted two and a half decades earlier is no longer vital enough to command attention in itself – and how many novels live on in the cultural imagination a couple of decades after their first appearance? – then it is doubtful that electronic repackaging is going to raise its profile with posterity and imbue it with immortality. Whether it achieves that will have to depend on its own intrinsic power.

Works Cited

- Bon, François. *Après le livre*. Paris: Seuil, 2011. Print.
- . *Limite*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985. Print.
- . *Limite, Version Numerique*: <https://www.tierslivre.net/spip/spip.php?rubrique60>
- . Bon, François. *Tumulte*. Paris: Fayard, 2006. Print.
- Borsuk, Amaranth. *The Book*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT, 2018. Print. MIT Press Essential Knowledge Ser. Print.
- Darnton, Robert. *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future*. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2009. Print.
- Duguid, Paul. "Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book." *The Future of the Book*. Geoffrey Nunberg, Editor, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 63-101. Print.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending*. Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Print.
- . *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 1983. Print.
- Fülöp, Erika. "Limite Unbound: François Bon's Digitalized Fiction and the Reinvention of the Book." *The Journal of Romance Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 62–90. EBSCOhost, doi:10.3828/jrs.2016.160105. Print.
- Gavarry, Gérard. *Façon D'un Roman, Ou, Comment D'après Le Livre De Judith J'ai inventé Une Histoire De Banlieue, Et à L'aide Du Cocotier, Du Cargo, Du Centaure, écrit Trois Fois Hop là*. P.O.L., 2003. Print.
- Hamilton, John T. "Pagina Abscondita: Reading in the Book's Wake." Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, et al. *Book Presence in a Digital Age*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Print.
- Hesse, Carla. "Books in Time." *The Future of the Book*. Geoffrey Nunberg, Editor, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 21-23. Print.
- James, Alison Siân. "Beyond the Book: François Bon and the Digital Transition." *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, vol. 40, no. 2 [125], 2011, pp. 37–51. EBSCOhost, search-ebscobostcom.libproxy.uoregon.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2011297186&login.asp&site=e=ehost-live.
- Johns, Adrian. *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 1998. Print.

- Montalbetti, Christine. *En écrivant Journée Américaine: Texte et photographies*. Paris: Biro, 2009. Print.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey. *The Future of the Book*. University of California Press, 1996. Print.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London; New York: Methuen, 1982. Print.
- Piper, Andrew. *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic times*. Chicago; London: U of Chicago, 2012. Print.
- Schnapp, Jeffrey T., and Battles, Matthew. *The Library beyond the Book*. Harvard University Press, 2014. Print.
- Viart, Dominique. François Bon: *Étude de l'oeuvre*. Paris: Editions Bordas, 2008. Print.