The Will to Obsolescence: Nietzsche, Code, and the Digital Present

Jen Boyle
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1. Code

_The Writing-Ball is a thing like me, made of iron, yet easily twisted on journeys. Patience and tact are required in abundance, as well as fine fingers, to use us._

— Friedrich Nietzsche

This small love-poem written by Nietzsche in 1882 celebrates his acquisition of the Malling-Hansen Writing-Ball, a machine that would — for a time at least — offer prosthetic assistance for Nietzsche’s failing vision (fig. 1). In various letters, he expresses his delight with a device for writing that is “guided only by a sense of touch” and which no longer requires “the eyes to do their work.”

Friedrich Kittler juxtaposes Nietzsche’s sentiments on the definitively tactile power of the Writing-Ball with frag-

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2 Kittler, _Gramophone_, 201–8.
ments from Heidegger’s essay on “The Hand and Typewriter” to write:

Man himself acts \([handelt]\) through the hand \([\text{Hand}]\); for the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man. Only a being which, like man, “has” the word \((\mu\nu\acute{\delta}ο\varsigma, \lambda\acute{o}γος)\), can and must “have” “the hand.” Through the hand occur both prayer and murder, greeting and thanks, oath and signal, and also the “work” of the hand, the “hand-work,” and the tool. The handshake seals the covenant.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Ibid., 198–200.
“The handshake seals the covenant.” The work of the hand is thus a form of action in the present, a making of “essential distinction”; but it is also a prolepsis, a contract with the future, a covenant. In this sense, the *technē* of the hand and the “handshake” (Nietzsche’s encounter with the Writing-Ball) can be understood as a form of “code” as we have come to understand it in the digital present (the digital: “of or pertaining to a digit or finger”). Digital code operates as a series of procedures and performatives of conversion that depend upon discrete digits (0s and 1s) as opposed to continuous data, quantities, and flow. The “digit” in the digital is a procedural counting and action that begins anew with each instance of its unfolding. As Bradley Bryan frames it, “code is the command of the not-yet. The digital relies on the opening of time made possible by code.”5 The “work” of the hand for Nietzsche, then, is not just the emanation of automatic writing (Friedrich Kittler dubs Nietzsche the first “automated philosopher”) but also the touch of the machine as a differently “digital” procedural calculus: its pressures back, its resistance to complying with a predetermined arc of writing. Nietzsche’s style would fundamentally change with his use of the Writing-Ball, his writing transforming from longer prosaic elements to aphoristic and telegraphic epigrammatics.6

The work of the hand and the machine is a covenant of code, an action in the present and the opening of time made possible by the not-yet.

The protocol of the hand or handshake that conducts Nietzsche through the machine and the machine through Nietzsche is intensive but halting. The hand’s touch to the twisting iron of the Ball’s keys, Nietzsche’s play on the required “tact” in dealing with what is often an unpredictable encounter, and his twisting

6 It is during this time, due explicitly to the mechanical restrictions of working with the Malling-Hansen Writing-Ball, that Nietzsche takes up aphoristic and epigrammatic prose.
of himself as a “thing” like the machine, comprise an event at once historically distinct — so much so that it lends itself to Kittler’s quasi-genealogical reading — but also indistinct, not fully formed, a transformation that is both an intensity in the moment and an unfolding pressure toward the future.

The Writing-Ball is a media-machine that Kittler takes interest in as well — not just because it serves as a vital material remnant of (as Nietzsche put it) “how these machines are working on our thoughts,” but because it hovers as a kind of remainder to the techno-exuberance of Weimar Germany — one might even say, as an obsolete memory. These machines expressed at their moment materialized acceleration, reproducibility, simultaneity, and, most significantly for Kittler, a break with the Symbolic and language, where writing is no longer conducted through the hand (as in Heidegger’s formulation). But such machines also promised a speeding acceleration through and away from a just post-war Europe. The Writing-Ball is coded as present action and future promise. The media machine’s action as past technê is obsolete (its impressions marked and even quickly discarded). Its future promise, however, is a matter of obsolescence.

2. Obsolescence

The Writing-Ball embodies obsolescence. Not just because it outlines the past in anticipation of our “new” digital present, nor because it could only be “a thing like” Nietzsche for a brief moment; but because, like many of the tools we employ in our digital present (for the busy work of mining, digging, excavating — all of the hand!), it is an embodiment of what Gilbert Simondon would call arrested “individuation.” That is, the machine transitions to no longer be a vital site of events and processes of becoming (becoming history; becoming machine;

becoming human) but suddenly, violently, grasped as an imaging of the dead object. And yet, like all media machines, it persists and flourishes as a placeholder for the “next” technē, the next opening for the fulfillment of being human against or for the machine (“Machines will liberate us!” “Machines are coming for us!”). Thus, we end up with a powerful paradox of obsolescence— one very Nietzschean in its form: the dead media machine, on the one hand, and the too vital remainder that lurks in anticipation of the next afterlife, on the other.

The dead machine is perhaps the more recognizable aspect of this dyad of obsolescence. This half of machine obsolescence has become a symptom of a new form of historicism that seizes upon the materiality of media objects as epistemic breaks within a linear chronology of history. It is the case, for example, that some quarters of the Digital Humanities have now become places where traditional, even conservative historicisms flourish again under the guise of new accelerations or “access,” exploiting a nostalgic and utopian promise of “the next.” By contrast, the second aspect of obsolescence, the too vital threat to human power, is a shape that outlines some interesting pressures and potential energies of a competing encounter with the digital.

Gilbert Simondon has offered media ecology a direction for negotiating models of becoming over being (“technicity”). Simondon’s technicity casts mediating technē as functionally active entities that do not just mediate modes of being but which actively re-organize the potential of states of being and becoming. In this sense, media objects are not static entities or conduits of human action but act entirely as “genetic” energies that convert the encounter between human action and mediator into new virtualities. This is a mode for re-imagining the assemblages that form between human and non-human agents. Technicity is a perceptual framing that obscures a focus on slowed-down representations and conceptualizations, while illuminating en-

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The will to obsolescence counters with the energies of transduction: powers that materialize across macro and micro scales and in between form and matter (fig. 2). These are processes of reproduction and movement that reanimate rigid actualizations and representational stasis.

Simondon’s transduction, in particular, conceives of new structural couplings of environments and agents as a matter of relations rather than the elements related. Transduction requires that we turn our attention away from the predispositions of what things are and toward how unities transformatively “become” as transfers of scale and pattern within a given medium and from one medium to another. Here, the organic and inorganic, the material and immaterial, scale and movement, intensity and actualization unfold as active relations. Obsolescence as a term in Simondon explicitly returns us to a biological (and geological) model where the obsolete is what is left to pre-actualization as a force, a power, an energy that is virtual and vestigial in its potency. This model of obsolescence conceives of not just an even-
tual “dead end” to a given species, media or form, but embraces the phantasms of the nascent traces of a given organism or energy field, some of which completely atrophy, some of which may flourish as vestigial new starts, hovering with potential to become something else (traits or characteristics quivering with the potential to flourish anew) (fig. 3).

Micro- and macro-protocols of bits and pulses, whose packets and flows accelerate and change form, genetically and differentially, across fiber-optic cables, through air, bending across circuits of human and non-human apprehension, forming “handshakes” between human and machine, surging intensities, quantum entanglements, as Karan Barad describes it, these processes scream out for explorations that return to protean flows and energies. These becomings deny an ontology of conceptualization and epistemic stasis.

I turn now to David Link’s “Poetry Machine” from 2001–3, an event that amplifies in the present the significance of media obsolescence and code on the order of Nietzsche’s Malling-Hansen Writing-Ball Machine:

There is certainly a species of automatic writing at play here, and the scene is set forth as an assemblage of human and machine language. The absent presences are the most interesting
to the extent that they invoke phantasmically the “handwork” of writing and semantic ontologies. Less so the handwork of a Heideggerian losing touch, however, than of Nietzsche’s brushes with the indirect and direct pressures of the hand as the not yet protocol of code.

The keys, absent a hand, go up and down as Link states it, “as if someone was typing.” The “as if” here working creatively as an assemblage of human and machine language, ghosting the simultaneity and distinctiveness of their transducing energies. Yet, this shaping present defies full actualization or articulation. The coherence of the “flows” and “energies” of this event are poetically and generatively compelling. They offer a kind of promise for the future. As Link puts it, “because the system is all the time searching, there is something like a political actuality there.”

The somethings, the someones, the as ifs, all work indirectly as “powers of the false,” shadowing the event. Powers of the false are pressures that exert influence on an event without assuming the shape of full representations. Powers of the false are alignments that come short of full phenomena, but which emerge as differing intensities, and ones that can call forth past, present, and future while persisting within an ecology of flows, flows both quantum and perceptible. The “next” oil spill and the “last” September of terrorist attacks are all vestigial and active on the same plane of flows.


10 Ibid.

11 “The power of the false is the potential of that which is merely simmering in a formation; it is not implicit in the sense of tending on its own to become only one thing. The powers of the false refers to that which quivers with a potential that can be defined authoritatively only after the fact of its emergence and evolution” (Jane Bennett and William Connolly, “The Crumpled Handkerchief,” in Time and History in Deleuze and Serres, ed. Bernd Herzo- genrath (London: Continuum, 2012), 153–73.
3. The Promise

Promises are the uniquely human way of ordering the future.
— Hannah Arendt

The best way to promise: When a man makes a promise it is not merely the word that promises but what lies unexpressed behind the word. Words indeed weaken a promise by discharging and using up a power which forms part of that power which promises. Therefore shake hands when making a promise, but put your finger on your lips. In this way you will make the safest promises.
— Friedrich Nietzsche

As Hannah Arendt states it, the promise is the “uniquely human way of ordering the future” because it is (through action) imminent in the materiality of memory of the past and the potential (through time) of the performative in the future. In many ways, this defines the very possibility of affective action in the polity for someone like Arendt. However, as Nietzsche’s encounter with the Malling-Hansen Ball and David Link’s automated performances with the Poetry Machine make clear, promising is an enactment of the human–media performative as well — particularly as it is inheres in a specific perspective on the digital and code.

Both Arendt and Nietzsche embrace the “unexpressed” in the function of the promise. That is, its potential to retain a power not fully discharged in the first instance. In Nietzsche we see this potential engaged most vibrantly in his encounters with the Writing-Ball. With each strike of the finger on the key, Nietzsche’s “twisting journey” through and between the machine and his text re-animates his actions with greater potencia, an unfolding that desires to be something other than a fulfilled and fully

executed expression in the present. Nietzsche’s encounters with this media technē anticipate digital code. This is not, however, the automatic writing of an inert and dead machine, but the obsolescence of code, the will and “command of the not-yet.” Like Link’s Poetry-Machine, the assemblage of Nietzsche and the Malling-Hansen deepens our engagement with the power of the false. And both mediated encounters engage with a kind of “political actuality,” as Link demonstrates.

From the standpoint of the digital present, Nietzsche offers a different perspective on the power of digital code and technē. The digging and excavating of Big Data within specific configurations of the Digital and the Digital Humanities materialize as projects that reproduce the phantasy of “the next,” simultaneously ordering a clean epistemic break with and a lucid projection of the past. Such projections require an inert framing of the past and the present: the past exists only to be excavated by and through the fulfillment and perfection of the machine. For Nietzsche this model of digital technē is commensurate with a historical culture that “wills” that we become “thinking, speaking, writing machines.” Such projects also resist attention to code as anything other than a mysterious translation of data into the fully “discharged” expression of conceptual meaning—a promise unfulfilled in its insistence on the code understood as the word. Clare Colebrook has referred to this emergence as the kind of “post-human landscape in which there is one general dynamic system with animals, machines and digital codes all woven together to constitute a single ecology. […] What is not considered are radically differing intensities.”

The political actuality of the above configuration resonates as well with Nietzsche’s notion of the “abuse of history”: an inert framing of the present as the past, described at one point by Nietzsche as a lifeless bodymachine: “So cold, so icy that one

burns one’s fingers on him! Every hand is startled when touching him. — And for that very reason some think he glows.”

But Nietzsche’s digital coupling with the Writing-Ball requires more than a capitulation to lifeless machinations. Indeed, it is in Nietzsche that we find a competing perspective on digital code in the present. Countering the sterile and obsolete materializations of the digital machine which offer only a Heideggerian “losing touch,” Nietzsche’s experimentations with digital coding point us to an entirely other dimension of the promise of human–machine performatives. His encounter with the automated media machine is a past-present glimpse at what the digital might promise if we were to redirect our perceptions toward the micro and macro entanglements and intensities made possible by its procedures. Here we would find not the sterile actualizations of Digital Data writ large, but the unexpected and unpredictable unfolding that accompanies the opening of time around code, around the action of the not-yet. Here too we see Nietzsche’s clairvoyance on the enactments between the quantum and the perceivable that code deploys, actions, and outcomes that are conjoined to the hand’s “fine fingers,” twisting keys, morphing ions, and the imperceptible powers of the false that persist through the obsolescence of media and mediation. Nietzsche’s “twisting journey” offers up a different kind of promise on the political actuality of the digital.
