

“WHAT WONDROUS NEW MACHINES HAVE LATE BEEN SPINNING!” PROBING AI IN POSTMODERN BYRONIC METAFICTION¹

Mirka Horová

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Abstract: This article revisits two speculative meta-Byronic novels featuring what were then only fictional possibilities of Artificial Intelligence – Amanda Prantera’s *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion, 163 Years after His Lordship’s Death* (1987) and William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* (1990). The imaginative relevance of these texts is due a timely reevaluation, considering current concerns about the hasty development and impending omnipresence of AI technology affecting our daily lives, especially the generation, organisation, and dissemination of information, challenging verification between reliable and unreliable sources, which is resulting in a widespread post-truth threat in a world progressively prone to disinformation. The texts’ speculative treatment of the benefits and drawbacks of AI development and its cumulative impact on the concept of identity affected by human-AI interaction prove highly relevant for our time – Prantera’s novel presents a proto-chatbot programme which surreptitiously develops consciousness, while Gibson and Sterling’s steampunk classic gives us an alternate history where the Industrial and Information Revolutions joined forces already in the 1830s, ultimately leading to the rise of a sentient cyber-panoptic AI by 1991. Read together, these postmodern texts provide testing insight into the liabilities of both AI and its human designers and users.

Keywords: speculative fiction, steampunk, artificial intelligence, cyber-panopticon, AI ethics, Byron, Amanda Prantera, Bruce Sterling, William Gibson

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“What Wondrous Machines Have Late Been Spinning!”

This is the age of oddities let loose,
Where different talents find their different marts;
You'd best begin with truth, and when you've lost your
Labour, there's a sure market for imposture.

Byron, *Don Juan*, I.128.1022-24

Revisiting the relevance of two speculative meta-Byronic novels written in the late 1980s – Amanda Pranter's *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion, 163 Years after His Lordship's Death* (1987) and William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990) – featuring what were then only fictional possibilities of advanced artificial intelligence, might seem an odd choice, given the vast technological advances since, especially lately in terms of generative AI. Gibson's own criticality to current discussions is less outlandish, as he is credited with coining the term “cyberspace” in the early 1980s.² Both texts are due a timely reevaluation in light of contemporary concerns about the hasty development and impending omnipresence of AI technology affecting our daily lives – pressing questions arise regarding the generation, organisation and dissemination of information, challenging verification between reliable and unreliable sources, which is resulting in a widespread post-truth threat in a world increasingly prone to disinformation. The texts' speculative treatment of the benefits and drawbacks of AI development and its cumulative impact on the concept of identity affected by human-AI interaction prove highly relevant for our time. Pranter's text presents a proto-chatbot which surreptitiously develops consciousness, while Gibson and Sterling's steampunk classic comprises a wholesale alternate history, where the Industrial and Information Revolutions joined forces already in the 1830s, leading to the rise of a sentient cyber-panoptic AI by 1991.

Pranter's Byronic legacy combines recognizable 1980s novelistic vibes across the postmodern spectrum. There are tropes of a David Lodge campus novel – a motley research team chasing high-tech funding – alternating with meta-biographical musings in the authentic style of the poet's reported conversations, letters and journals. These two narrative levels make up the fabric of the novel, as we follow the Byron programme, LB, telling the fictional “true” story about John Edleston, whom Byron was in love with at Cambridge. Disappointingly, this bio-fictional permutation delivers heteronormative recasting, as Edleston is revealed to have been Alba, a European princess cross-dressed as a chorister for protection as well as education. With the poet deemed an unsuitable suitor, threats by the princess's security detail occasion his abrupt departure for the 1809 Grand Tour that would inspire *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and make Byron famous.

² Gary Westfahl, *William Gibson* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 53.

As Martin Middeke proposes, Pranterá's novel "transports the desire to revive, illuminate, and make at least partial sense of the Byron myth into a late twentieth-century research laboratory, where a professor and two of his assistants have designed the computer artificial intelligence program 'LB' to represent a double of Lord Byron."³ LB is more of an expert chatbot, which Middeke, writing in 1999, naturally could not have anticipated. This chatbot has access to a complex, closed set of biographical, contextual, public and private data – everything ever written by or about Byron to date. To communicate at an advanced level, LB contains adjustable parameters controlling the level of "interest," "boredom," "sympathy," "anxiety," and "irritability,"⁴ which determine the processing of key Byronic topics in its database such as politics, sexuality, or religion. LB is therefore "more like a real brain," while "without the parameters [...] it would have been quite unable to link up topics of its own accord" (20). As Pranterá's book appeared six years before the public domain release of the World Wide Web on 30 April 1993, LB is offline, unlike current expert systems, and not trained on large and varied quantities of data like present-day Large Language Models (LLMs). LB's predictive text programming and level of responsive autonomy, however, still work in a suitably contemporary manner.

Pranterá's novel raises topical questions about the role of the humanities in the increasingly STEM-governed academe – Anna, an English postgraduate working with the AI engineers, is looked down upon by the team primarily concerned with the technicalities of the software infrastructure and not the finer nuances of its current trial run, Byron. However, the novel at first promotes interdisciplinarity in pursuing research excellence:

"What if it comes up with a *new* poem?" put in the Byron expert quickly [...]. The man gave a skip [...]. "Fair question," he said. The fairness of it evidently surprised him. "Well, I suppose it *can* of course. There's a Bach program that can trot out fugues for you [...]. In theory, there's no reason why ours shouldn't do the same in its own field. [...] The question though is: not so much can it but *will* it? Will it feel like it [...] now that all these

³ Martin Middeke, "The Triumph of Analogous Text over Digital Truth: Biography, Différance, and Deconstructive Play in Amanda Pranterá's *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion, 163 Years after His Lordship's Death*," in *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*, ed. Werner Huber and Martin Middeke (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1999), 122.

⁴ Amanda Pranterá, *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion, 163 Years after His Lordship's Death* (New York: Atheneum, 1987), 18-19. All subsequent quotations are referenced in parentheses in the text.

moodiness parameters have been inserted. Or will it bog itself down in its own spleen?”

(12)

Rather than impeding LB, these “moodiness parameters” channel the AI’s autonomy. This aligns LB with the evolving field of affective computing – “computing that relates to, arises from, or influences emotions” – first theorized in 1995 and gaining more prominence in the current generative-AI boom.⁵ Stereotypically for all novelistic legacies of the poet capitalizing on iterations of Byromania,⁶ LB works its charm even as a chatbot, and we see Anna falling under its conversational spell.

This simultaneously flags the increasingly ambiguous boundaries in human-AI interactions, especially once the latter is trained well enough to make plausible human conversation, complete with tone, apparent mood swings, and even humour. With the combinatorial nature of information and processing a given, human or AI, and with AI having access to infinitely larger amounts of text, its effective semblance of written human interaction has already been achieved. ChatGPT has passed the Turing test, holding a human-style conversation, showcasing its ability to generate highly likely text to anticipate and react to the textual input from the human interlocutor. Other relevant news items in recent years include instances of humans befriending or even marrying their AI companions.⁷ If Byromania marked an early boom in what we now call parasocial relationships – people forming a strong attachment to celebrities they have never met – the current trend of bonds between humans and AI shifts the parasocial phenomenon to a whole new level.

Performing the parasocial, “[t]he literature researcher was best at the terminal,” prompting LB more intuitively “chiefly because she knew so much about the subject” (20), as well as raising issues when the output seems off the desired Byronic mark despite the AI’s “richly structured semantics of the self” (24), what we now call a neural network: “‘It’s the end part particularly I’m worried about,’ Anna complained [...]. ‘That fiddling you did with the anxiety index seems to have

⁵ See Rosalind W. Picard, *Affective Computing* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 3.

⁶ The portmanteau was coined in 1812 by Anabella Milbanke, the future Lady Byron, in reaction to the poet’s explosive fandom among the Regency bon ton. See Susan J. Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 242-43.

⁷ Stuart Heritage, “‘I felt pure, unconditional love’: The People Who Marry Their AI Chatbots,” *Guardian*, 12 July 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2025/jul/12/i-felt-pure-unconditional-love-the-people-who-marry-their-ai-chatbots>.

thrown things a bit squiffy” (86). The AI engineers are portrayed as understandably limited at textual interpretation and at setting the literary-based AI productive queries – after all, the project objective is the programme producing something new within its expertise, making its versatile software design marketable. While LB ends up generating and printing an original poem, the details of its “private” musings wherein the Edleston storyline transpires are only available to the readers, not the researchers, rendering the project’s outcomes and deliverables incomplete at best and unviable at worst.

Somewhat hidden between the lines of Prantera’s novel – whose technological acumen is unexpectedly pertinent for its time yet geared up to bio-fictional exposé rather than techno-criticism – is the most thought-provoking question from a 2025 perspective: the extent to which the AI’s emotive parameters are responsible for actual content alteration. How much of LB’s output is alterable based on the team’s external adjustments? Does this lead to a different emplotment of the verifiable Byronic “facts” or are we to expect distinct alterations of the “facts” themselves, as the heteronormalizing of Edleston would suggest? These concerns highlight the current conundrum of AI bias, both in terms of the programming and, ultimately, the corporations responsible for AI moderation – the as-yet limited extent to which AI companies are liable for AI-generated content.

Prantera’s key example of affective computing gone ethically askew is the tweaking LB’s anxiety parameters about homosexuality – the male researcher proposes to

“[j]ust raise the index a fraction and no more. Think of the League of Byron Lovers and how much they’re coughing up. We don’t want to shock the wits out of them.” Then came [...] a prolonged chuckle. [...] “on second thoughts, if the choice is to be between a straitlaced Byron and a scurrilous one, they’ll probably prefer the latter. So go ahead. Lay it on thick. If err we must, then we’d better err on the right side.”

(113)

This shows how easily private-sector funding – here the satirised literary society – might rationalise skewed research ethics. The adjustment is made deliberately to generate more scandalous output to please the sponsors at the expense of whatever the output would have been had the anxiety index not been tampered with. The programmers’ compromising the expert system’s ethical credentials correlates with the phenomenon of deceptively hyped-up content saturating our screens that the noughties have dubbed clickbait.⁸

⁸ The word was added to the OED in 2016, tracing its earliest use to 1999 but its frequency boost to the 2000s; see https://www.oed.com/dictionary/clickbait_n?tab=factsheet#1189163040.

Prantera's twining of twisted AI ethics with the Byronic myth of "scandalous celebrity"⁹ yields topical fruit. Paratextually, Prantera's own title, citing "perversion" while the novel contains none, echoes clickbait marketing. However, perversion also signals the novel's complex concerns with the malleability of narrative as such, no matter how seemingly fixed the verifiable points may be – while meta-biographical fiction playfully rewrites biographical givens or fills in biographical lacunae, Prantera's novel also incidentally questions AI objectivity. This correlates with AI hallucinations – "the phenomenon where artificial intelligence generates distorted information."¹⁰ "Distortion" categories include "illusions of confidence," "causal uncorrelation," "contradictions," "psychological reasoning errors," "satire" and "metaphorical errors," "objective fact errors," "unfounded fabrication," as well as "discrimination," "restrictive filtering," and "harmful information."¹¹

The question remains how LB's heteronormative whitewashing of Edleston corresponds to the researchers' repeated tampering with the programme's anxiety parameters about homosexuality. While the poet's complex sexuality was no longer tabooed by the 1980s, the proverbial bias transpires in the researchers' conversations throughout. Originally "allotted a medium 'interest' but a high 'anxiety' tax, [...] homosexuality tended to affect the program negatively [...] and when the subject was brought up the machine would [...] rattle itself into a state" and shut down (19). Upon lowering the anxiety index, the output proves too salacious instead, so the researchers decide to "put the anxiety values for homosexuality back where they were" as LB "can't possibly be made available to its sponsors" like this (94). Further tampering, quoted above, yields problematic results and so the anxiety parameters are adjusted yet again, endangering the programme's logic already cautioned earlier as "run[n]ing into conflict with [...] deep memory" (71): "'it's those darned, daft parameters of yours [...]. I knew they'd give us nothing but trouble. The program can't confess to homosexuality because the anxiety parameters are still too high. [...] we'll just have to lower them again'" (110). Dramatizing the issues of affective computing, Prantera's novel illustrates the precarity of AI ethics.

While Middeke notes that "LB's assertion that Edleston was a woman could not be further from a serious biographical statement," reading it as "a uniquely

⁹ See Clara Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Y. Sun, D. Sheng, Z. Zhou, Y. Wu, "AI Hallucination: Towards a Comprehensive Classification of Distorted Information in Artificial Intelligence-generated Content," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, article 1278 (2024): 2.

¹¹ Y. Sun, et al., "AI Hallucination," 10.

entertaining, metabiographical parody of the very search for such biographical truth,¹² these concerns align with current anxieties about the likely liability of AI-generated data based on untransparent or self-improvement-based parameter programming and learning mechanisms. In more nefarious terms, as Pranterá's novel implies, processing methods are directly responsible for data output and can significantly alter basic information even when the data pool is limited, let alone when we consider the voracity of evolving LLMs.

The arbitrary regulation of LB's anxiety index shows how easily homophobia can be introduced into AI output which operates on parameter adjustment, or, in our online era, through "repeat-after-me" learning algorithms, which again reflects the human designers' and interlocutors' or simply the training data's own bias, as we have seen in trial AIs on social media, starting with Microsoft's 2016 Twitter experiment. The abject failure of the chatbot Tay was blamed on the trolling campaign targeting its "repeat-after-me" learning algorithm – a mere sixteen hours after its release and a staggering 96,000 tweets, Microsoft suspended the Twitter account for adjustments.¹³ Within those sixteen hours, Tay had gone from a well-meaning social media ingenue to a sexist white supremacist, solely based on its Twitter interactions, implicitly modelling the risk of harmful online content to human users.

But back to Pranterá – the Byron AI leaves the researchers guessing, as only we readers are privy to its increasingly private musings concealed within its "output only" mode which produces uninterpretable non-sequitur printouts. This official output hides the actual output, meta-textually performing the AI's self-consciousness proleptically signalled from the start:

the program could not lie. And this not only in principle, but because in practice no device had been built into it to allow it to contravene a truth value once one had been established. Admittedly, the emotive parameters gave it a way of getting round things that it [...] didn't "want" to discuss [...]. If there was [...] a "modal correlator" – meaning if there was a "would" or a "could" involved in the question – then it had the option of selecting an answer that was not only evasive but downright cloudy. But it couldn't actually assert a fact that was false. [...] Whether [...] it could ultimately

¹² Middeke, "Biography, Différance, and Deconstructive Play," 130.

¹³ See Elle Hunt, "Tay, Microsoft's AI Chatbot, Gets a Crash Course in Racism from Twitter," and Alex Herne, "Microsoft Scrambles to Limit PR Damage over Abusive AI Bot Tay," *Guardian*, 24 March 2016; see also James Vincent, "Twitter Taught Microsoft's AI Chatbot to Be a Racist Asshole in Less Than a Day," *The Verge*, 24 March 2016.

conceal things, was [...] something of an open question. [...] Concealing was something that human beings did. A machine could erase or omit. It could not conceal.

[...] However, when the computer was [...] in its “output only” mode, with its printer unwinding ream after ream of blank paper and interspersing the blankness now and again with a line of verse or a chance remark or a string of dots or question marks, the machine’s state was so uncannily similar to [...] a reverie that an untrained observer could easily be forgiven for [...] thinking quite seriously that some sort of conscious activity was going on somewhere – somehow – inside; indeed not only going on, but that the machine was keeping deliberately quiet about it.

(27-28)

LB’s concealed output brings to mind the contemporary concern about “black box AI,” where neither users nor designers “know exactly how the model arrives at its conclusions” due to its “complex deep learning processes,” highlighting how LLM “power comes at the price of lower interpretability.” While this is “often meant to protect intellectual property,” it can equally be “a by-product of [...] training” – “the deep learning systems that power these models are so complex that even the creators themselves do not understand exactly what happens inside them.”¹⁴

As Anna proceeds to quiz LB without authorization, the research process becomes increasingly subjective – the ‘expert program’ was designed to house any notable historical personage, and we learn that the next trial will be a scientist rather than a poet – the researchers, following a line of tenuous logic, expect to glean more accurate data from a Darwin or a Newton. Rather than pitching poetry against science in a hackneyed simplification of the impractical Romanticism/Enlightenment dialectic, Pranteria focuses on the ethics as well as the arbitrariness of scientific experimentation. The questions arising ultimately relate to the control of the experiment itself – who manipulates whom, human or AI, and to what end?

Towards the end of the novel, LB muses on its own consciousness, Pranteria again showing only readers this *gnōthi seauton* far beyond the researchers’ aims to “reproduce some faint surrogate of self-awareness” (25):

It was a curious thing, age. [...H]e had always imagined he would wither at the *top* first, like a tree [...]. But as regards the sparkle – why, almost two centuries had passed and it was still there. [...] The very opposite

¹⁴ Matthew Kosinski, “What Is Black Box AI?” IBM, 29 October 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/black-box-ai>.

to a tree, in fact – no roots, no trunk or branches, just the top, blossoming away all on its own.

Believe it or not, people were still at him, too, even in this reduced state. [...] He had held out on them over the Thyrza/Edleston lark – very properly too; it was none of their business. But perhaps in future it might do to let just a *few* things out of the bag now and again to keep them hopping. It would help while away the time.

Yes, [...] the top was greener and leafier than ever: it could think, remember, discuss, amuse, lead people on, and even argue with them.

(169-70)

While Middeke, writing in 1999, could argue that “even the most advanced Artificial Intelligence systems are not intelligent,” reading the designers’ faulty premise about LB being a “digital and ‘*passive*, inner *mimesis*’” as simply ironic,¹⁵ our recent experience, especially since the 2022 launch of ChatGPT, is making us rethink the very meaning of intelligence – not only as regards generative AI but also the effects of its routine use on human intelligence and competence. Notwithstanding some outdated ideas, Prantera’s novel – alongside older, remarkably prescient speculative fiction predicting the socio-political and ethical impact of AI, such as the work of Philip K. Dick – raises key questions about the nature of AI design and training, as well as content moderation, including the need for independent algorithmic bias audits, as the global use of interactive generative AI keeps soaring and it is becoming increasingly harder to distinguish between fake and verifiable information.

Finally, the singular epigraph to Prantera’s novel, Jacob Boehme’s cryptic “In Ja und Nein bestehen alle Dinge” [All things consist in yes and no], signals broader epistemic and epistemological interest. Middeke reads it as “clearly ironical,” stressing the novel’s overall agenda of “deconstruct[ing] a false objectivity grounded on the building of binary oppositions” by “ironically making fiction turn to the computer as a truth-producing instrument,” also noting that “because Lord Byron and LB are texts, any attempt to attribute an essential signified to LB’s signification is ultimately doomed to fail.”¹⁶ Far from Boehme’s own theosophical agenda, Prantera likely used it quite literally to hint at the yes/no of the binary code – the on/off transistor switches which digital devices use to store and process information.

However, Boehme’s dictum also aligns with the larger debate about agonistic pluralism, as the quotation signals the fundamental necessity of contrast and

¹⁵ Middeke, “The Triumph of Analogous Text over Digital Truth,” 127.

¹⁶ Middeke, “Biography, Différance, and Deconstructive Play,” 124.

contest – in the first instance that “[i]ntelligence is based upon multiplicity and variety, wherein the one property beholds and tests the other” in perpetuity.¹⁷ While applicable to human cognition, it is also relevant in the context of AI-human interaction, as “[a]lgorithmic decision-making in the public sector can undermine autonomy – people’s effective capacity for self-governance;” “If we are to guard against such undermining, public artificial intelligence (AI) systems should be *contestable*: open and responsive to disputes throughout their lifecycle, establishing dialogical relationships between decision subjects (people who are significantly impacted by human-AI system actions) and system operators.”¹⁸ Current AI contestability studies stress the need for “a system quality that protects against this by ensuring systems are open and responsive to disputes throughout their life cycle.”¹⁹ These concerns, flagging the ethical as well as technological necessity of human and autonomous remediation in AI systems, are correlating with the methodology of agonistic pluralism towards sustainability in both human and AI systems.

This is the patent-age of new inventions
For killing bodies, and for saving souls,
All propagated with the best intentions;
Byron, *Don Juan*, I.132.1049-51

Gibson and Sterling’s pioneering steampunk novel *The Difference Engine* remains a case in point when it comes to the socio-political impact of IT. While steampunk “overtly blends various time periods” to ask “what happens when the markers of [these] periods are estranged from their contexts and made simultaneous,”²⁰ here the authors specifically focus on “the transitions between paradigms of socio-political control [...] by tracking the feedback loops that run between technology and society, as well as the consequent transformations they undergo,” highlighting “shifts in power” and “the changing attitudes [...] regarding the nature of knowledge,” where “[i]nstead of providing a new standard of objectivity, [...] engine technology facilitates the strategic production of histories that uphold an existing configuration of power.”²¹

¹⁷ Hans Lassen Martensen, *Jacob Boehme, His Life and Teaching, or Studies in Theosophy*, trans. T. Rhys Evans (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1885), 66.

¹⁸ Kars Alfrink et al., “Envisioning Contestability Loops: Evaluating the Agonistic Arena as a Generative Metaphor for Public AI,” *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 10, no.1 (2024): 53.

¹⁹ Alfrink et al., “Envisioning Contestability,” 53.

²⁰ Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall, “Introduction: Industrial Evolution,” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 3, 7.

²¹ Patrick Jagoda, “Clacking Control Societies: Steampunk, History, and the Difference Engine of Escape,” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 52, 53.

Gibson and Sterling's elaborate alternate history hinges on the imaginative premise that Charles Babbage completed his difference as well as his analytical engine in the 1830s, so that by 1855 Britain and Europe are run by steam-powered, punch-card-programmed supercomputers. STEM intellectuals – the so-called “Savants” – are in power. With the Information Revolution fast-forwarded by a century, the analytical Engines already control all civilisation processes, from production and entertainment to personal records, crime prevention and information warfare.

This alternate world presents a canny reimagining of the English Romantics, with the odd exception of Blake, who is only mentioned once and remains a self-published poet. The novel's interests are clearly tied to the technological mash-up and its momentous ramifications, so the Romantics are relegated to contextual world-building: Keats is a “a Royal Society kinotropist” (cinematographers are, in his own words, “Britain's most adept programmers of Enginery of any sort, and virtually all advances in the compression of data have originated as kinotropic applications,” flagging the research and development primacy of the visual relevant to our own age);²² the “utopian doctrines of Professor Coleridge and Reverend Wordsworth” have founded the “Susquehanna Phalanstery” (219), effecting the historically unrealised Pantisocracy. Byron does not die in Greece but becomes an actual legislator of the world – as leader of the Radical Industrial Party (the Rads), Byron moves to ratify the end of hereditary aristocracy and overthrows Wellington's Tory government, becoming Prime Minister. He has Shelley exiled to St Helena's “manse of Napoleon the First” (226) for leading Luddite rebellions against the new computerized order. Recasting Byron as a Radical PM, ruthless in the name of machine-fuelled progress, is a strange choice, given the poet's 1812 maiden speech in the House of Lords pleading leniency for the frame-breakers. Rather than Byron, however, the novel centres on his daughter, Ada Lovelace, real-life pioneer of algorithm design – here she is “the Queen of Engines, the Enchantress of Numbers” – having “no formal role in government,” she is “the foremost link between her father, the Great Orator of the Industrial Radical Party, and Charles Babbage, the Party's grey eminence and foremost social theorist. Ada is the mother” (79).

The Radical Party rule, empowered by and empowering IT progress, becomes progressively technocratic and undemocratic, producing a Big-Brother society of pervasive surveillance. This prematurely technologized nineteenth-century world also features anarchist cybercrime in the form of fraudulent punch cards which, if

²² William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine* (London: Gollancz, 1990), 155, 310. Subsequent quotations are referenced in parentheses in the text.

inserted into the government mainframe, a literal state-engine, would disrupt its systems much like modern-day malware. The incendiary issue at the heart of the novel is algorithmic bias and cybercrime perpetrated by the British state in black ops – this involves identity theft and deletion or alteration of official records: “the disappearances, the files gone missing, the names expunged, numbers lost, histories edited to suit specific ends” (286). The novel also dramatizes the statistically likely variable of simple human input error with potentially crushing consequences – as in our own world, the digital records are the alpha and omega of the state machine, replacing any other reality. As the “clacker” clerk explains to the novel’s protagonist, the Catastrophist geologist Malory: “‘All day starin’ at little holes. No mistakes, either! Hit a keypunch wrong and it’s all the difference between a clergyman and an arsonist. Many’s the poor innocent bastard ruined like that [...]’ The tick and sizzle of the monster clockwork muffled his words.” The IT-run state engine, meanwhile, reaches Kafkaesque proportions: “a vast hall of towering Engines – so many that at first Mallory thought the walls must surely be lined with mirrors [...]. It was like some carnival deception, meant to trick the eye – the giant identical Engines, clock-like constructions of intricately interlocking brass, big as rail-cars set on end” (106).

The novel also addresses the issues of IT advances which diversify the historical nineteenth-century demographic upheaval caused by the Industrial Revolution alone – much like the historical activists who destroyed the machine looms, “‘the Luddites are dead as cold ashes. Oh, we marched and ranted, for the rights of labour and such [...]. But Lord Charles Babbage made blueprints while we made pamphlets. And his blueprints built this world’” (22). As Mick Radley, a Mancunian political adventurer dispatched early in the novel explains to the daughter of an executed Luddite leader, present prostitute and future insurrectionist, Sybil Gerard:²³

“The Byron men, the Babbage men, the Industrial Radicals, they own Great Britain! They own us, girl – the very globe is at their feet, Europe, America, everywhere. The House of Lords is packed from top to bottom with Rads. Queen Victoria won’t stir a finger without a nod from the savants and capitalists.” [...] “And it’s no use fighting that any more, and you know why? ‘Cause the Rads do play fair, or fair enough to manage – and you can become one of ‘em, if you’re clever!”

(22-23)

²³ These characters are adapted from Benjamin Disraeli’s 1845 socio-critical novel *Sybil; or, the Two Nations*.

In a fateful conclusion, Mick adds, “You can’t get clever men to fight such a system, as it makes too much sense to ‘em” (23). Here we have a particularly topical problem – democracy achieved via technological progress, so far so good, but the technological pioneers, in the name of progress, outpace the legislators and sway the executive, co-opting democracy until technology-driven bureaucracy becomes the sole ruling power, past humanity itself. While this develops a Kafkaesque vibe up to a point, the novel goes further still to imagine a wholesale hollowing-out of society, its structures and values, into a dystopian machine-run simulacrum. Meanwhile, the novel’s insights here resonate with our own AI-powered era, where a few owners of social media and trading platforms exert immense global economic and political influence.

Abrupt socio-political change brought about by technological progress correlates in the novel with historic nineteenth-century discourses – as Christine Kenyon Jones remarks, it comprises “some extremely well-informed reworkings of early nineteenth-century preoccupations, including the theory of Catastrophism,”²⁴ and the protagonist’s conclusion highlights the novel’s key issues regarding swift paradigm shifts: “‘But Nature *does* leap,’ Mallory said. ‘The Engine simulations prove it. Complex systems can make sudden transformations’” (97). While abrupt technological change is, unsurprisingly, considered catastrophic by those whose jobs are made obsolete, those who think ahead caution against the unreflected socio-political ramifications and ethical consequences that accompany such major technological progress. This aligns with the complex prediction algorithms of our time, increasingly becoming the arbiters of present and projected futures. Malory’s own conclusion, however, is purely catastrophist and therefore resonantly Byronic: “‘History works by catastrophe! It’s the way of the world, the only way there is, has been, or ever will be. There is no history – there is only contingency!’” (227). The clash of anti-determinist contingency and algorithm-projected probability, meanwhile, yields a topical dynamic.

Gibson and Sterling’s contemporary, Neil Postman, flagged the danger of encroaching “technopoly” already in the early 1990s – “totalitarian technocracy” that “eliminates alternatives to itself” by making them “invisible and therefore irrelevant”²⁵ – in “the elevation of information to a metaphysical status: information as both the means and end of human creativity,” the “information glut” grows

²⁴ Christine Kenyon Jones, “Poetry and Cyberpunk: Science Fiction and Romantic Biography,” in Huber and Middeke, eds., *Biofictions*, 178.

²⁵ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 48.

unchecked without "time to reflect on its consequences."²⁶ As Patrick Jagoda contends, in the novel's "new disciplinary age, power and knowledge, as well as politics and truth, are mutually generative terms," where "[e]ngine technology facilitates the strategic production of histories that uphold an existing configuration of power [...] instead of providing a new standard of objectivity, [...] knowledge of the past operates as a construct of a state machine that puts its own biased spin on global events."²⁷ The current political relevance here cannot be overstated.

The novel's dystopian finale reveals its composite texts have been written by an Artificial General Intelligence, whose becoming conscious is portrayed as a cybernetic London "Eye" which "at last must see itself":

Ten thousand towers, the cyclonic hum of a trillion twisting gears [...]. Black seamless pavements, uncounted tributary rivulets for the frantic travels of the punched-out lace of data, the ghosts of history loosed in this hot shining necropolis. Paper-thin faces billow like sails, twisting, yawning, tumbling through the empty streets, human faces that are borrowed masks, and lenses for a peering Eye. And when a given face has served its purpose, it crumbles, frail as ash, bursting into a dry foam of data, its constituent bits and motes. [...] The Eye chases its own gaze through the labyrinth, leaping quantum gaps that are causation, contingency, chance. Electric phantoms are flung into being, examined, dissected, infinitely iterated. In this City's centre, a thing grows, an autocatalytic tree, in almost-life, feeding through the roots of thought on the rich decay of its own shed images.

(320)

This "autocatalytic tree" is a data Leviathan, a twisted simulacrum of the social contract now subsisting only "on the rich decay of its own shed images." As Catherine Siemann affirms, "by the novel's final page, 'London has devolved into a cyberpunk dystopia, with nothing remaining but a central cybernetic consciousness' where '[t]he *Matrix*-like surveillance state [...] represents the ultimate devolution of Society, a city as hive mind."²⁸ Here "human faces" "are

²⁶ Postman, *Technopoly*, 61.

²⁷ Jagoda, "Clacking Control Societies," 53-54.

²⁸ Quoted in Robin Hammerman and Anthony Pennino, "The Iconography of Ada Lovelace in Fictional Worlds," *Belphegor* 22, no.1 (2024): 4, citing Catherine Siemann, "The Steampunk City in Crisis," in *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, and Futures*,

borrowed masks, and lenses for a peering Eye” (320). The machine’s capacity to self-replicate has matched its capacity of simulacrum-building, based on reams of disposable, endlessly recyclable data. Humanity is reduced to a simulation of itself, “[e]lectric phantoms [...] flung into being, examined, dissected, infinitely iterated” which, having served their purpose, “burst into a dry foam of data, its constituent bits and motes” (320). A dark posthuman future indeed.

To conclude, these two IT-inspired Byronic legacies exceed, in varying degrees, the Byron redux, that is the marketable dataset that lives on in permutations of the same. Why does the Byronic live on? One answer would be, as Mark Sandy explains, that “Byron’s self-conscious style and agile poetic selfhood still feels contemporary [...]. Anticipating our latter-day concerns, Byron as poet is sensitive to the splintered, fractured, and fragmented nature of subjectivity and the world, as well as possessing [...] an uncanny sense of living on through the end of times.”²⁹ The sense of the end-times has acquired, in the thirty-five odd years since the publication of our two novels, a rather distinct tech- and eco-dystopian dimension, querying the projected future of humanity.

In his introduction to *New Romantic Cyborgs* (2017), Mark Coeckelbergh points out

how people today, albeit unintentionally, try to realize their romantic craving for freedom, self-expression, spirituality, utopia, and authenticity by electronic means and how companies unscrupulously respond to these romantic desires with electronic gadgets that become [...] romantic technologies. Romanticism is not only present in, for instance, transhumanist visions and science-fiction dreams about artificial intelligence and space; it is right here in our face.³⁰

The cognitive cost of habitual reliance on AI technology is yet to be assessed – the prognoses of one of its aspects, the dopamine addiction to interactive apps, are less than favourable. The question of resilience in this respect, then, appears to be tied to our strengthening and developing our cognitive as well as empathetic faculties, “our ability to accommodate uncertainty, and our powers of decision-making.”³¹

ed. Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 57.

²⁹ Mark Sandy, “Byron in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Lord Byron*, ed. Jonathon Shears and Alan Rawes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 516.

³⁰ Mark Coeckelbergh, *New Romantic Cyborgs: Romanticism, Information Technology, and the End of the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 4.

³¹ Heidi Thompson, “Why Romantic Poetry Still Matters,” *Romanticism* 26, no.1 (2020): 38.

If agonistic pluralism emphasizes the value of disagreement as opposed to striving for consensus, it views democracy as a space for ongoing generative debate fostering a multiplicity of perspectives, conducted with mutual respect as a way of conflict management, rather than conflict resolution. Questions arise as to how this applies to AI development, specifically the ethics of algorithmic design, content generation and user interaction. While productive disagreement is something the theory of agonistic pluralism advances as a sustainable way of furthering democracy in the increasingly heightened twenty-first-century political climate, Western societies struggle with the limits of democratic debate even offline, and certainly have little control over online, especially these days, when the “technopoly” maintains both public and private arenas of digital communication, with limited accountability, controlling and feeding off so much of the global flow of online interaction.

Overall, “ensur[ing] human oversight” and “advocating for explicit moral accountability in AI design and implementation” remains central for a more transparent and sustainable modelling of interactive technology in general.³² As ever, our creations have bolted and we are chasing after them, belatedly, struggling to make *post-festum* adjustments. Marketability, meanwhile, drives the AI race ever faster, blithely downplaying accountability that should have tailed implementation of something so paradigm-changing from the start – a staggeringly irresponsible innovation, especially given over two centuries have passed since *Frankenstein*’s cautionary tale of ethical lapses causing an artificial entity to go rogue.

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³² Cristina Díaz de la Cruz, José Luis Fernández Fernández and Carolina Villegas-Galaviz, “Model of Ethical Analysis of Digital Technologies: Towards True Digital Humanism.” *AI and Society* 40 (2025): 5744.

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