

## Epistolarity of Email

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### Abstract

Even though we have already utilized and got used to the electronic mail, we are not yet fully recognized its meaning. Literary interest in the correspondence has also turned to Email, and produced so-called “e-epistolary” novels. Epistolarity, or the theory of epistolary novels deliberated by Janet Gurkin Altman, is now discussed in the broader milieu of the letter including the media and the post system, in which the concept of letter could be emulated with literature itself. In this context, this paper explores epistolarity of Email, analyzing seven Email novels. Even though these works are eager to seize the idiosyncrasy of the new medium, they are not really successful in realizing their own characteristics. But every work struggles with the intrinsic problems of digital writing and mail by seeing beyond virtual images, and sets up Epistolarity of Email as an intriguingly cutting-edge issue of the time. Not only does each work involve the questions of media and communication, but it also foregrounds the difficulties of the digital culture. Esoteric and enigmatic features of the Email system remind us of the radical postal ghost, the media noise, or the intrinsic problems of communication and knowing. It is in fact those ghosts who haunt the Email epistolary novels.

First, after a brief history of Email, the literature-oriented criticism of Email is surveyed. The most significant critic is Jacques Derrida, who has introduced the philosophical concept of the post into the theory of the letter. Derrida does not directly discuss Email, but already sees through to the essential question of archiving with regard to Internet and digital communication. Also the meaning of a significant figure of the media “ghost” is examined.

Then the paper analyzes seven Email novels: *Exegesis* (1997), *The Metaphysical Touch* (1998), *e* (2000), *Love Virtually* (2006), *Who Moved My Black Berry* (2006), *Eleven* (2006), and an illustrated storybook *The Venetian's Wife* (1996), and concludes that they are more or less haunted by epistolary ghosts that epitomize the monstrosity of digital media.

### Epistolarity of Email<sup>[1]</sup>

Letters are disappearing before our eyes and before the eyes of those who study epistolary novels and epistolarity. The change is so quick, as are those of other technical, in particular digital, innovations since the mid-twentieth century that we cannot just adjust to it. Even though we have already utilized and got used to the electronic mail, we have not yet fully recognized its meaning. Literary interest in the correspondence has also turned to Email,<sup>[2]</sup> and produced so-called “e-epistolary” novels.<sup>[3]</sup> The problem is that, even though these works are eager to seize the idiosyncrasy

of the new medium, they do not really succeed in realizing their own characteristics. They rather stress the awe-inspiring and threatening obscurity of the highly technical and abstruse system. In so doing, however, these new Email novels unwittingly shed light on one aspect of what might be termed “Epistolarity of Email,” the aspect which is implicated with the monstrosity of Internet power and represented in the novels as the figure of a “ghost.”

“Epistolarity” has been widely discussed, notably by Janet Gurkin Altman in her seminal book of the namesake, where epistolarity is her working term that

designates “the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning” (Altman 4). The concept is developed to theorize the function of the letter in traditional epistolary novels, concentrating on how and in what way letters constitute a narrative. As the time changes, so does the status or the role of the letter in the society. Epistolarity is required to involve the meaning and the function of the letter in the broader milieu of the modern and postmodern world. The development of epistolary novels explains the need of a wider notion of letters. Once prevalent at the time of the rise of the novel but long obsolete since, novels in the epistolary form were somewhat revived in the late twentieth century. It means that they needed to adjust themselves to modernity. Those postmodern epistolary novels owe their import more to the letter’s mobility and power than the contents of messages. It is no longer the sentiment or intimacy carried that is at stake in the dynamics of the modern world, where diasporic people are drifting without home or destination to dedicate emotions to. What matters more is motility: the letter as medium, the letter not as message but as messenger, and the letter as “envoy.” The letter could also be regarded as a symbol of border crossing, and migrating people themselves.

Epistolarity no longer focuses on the novels in epistolary form alone, but considers the meaning of epistle, in literature, for literature, or for the society. Media theory and philosophy seek to embrace the question of the letter to explain the modern, and the letter as social phenomenon becomes a significant issue. Recently epistolarity tends to be discussed more in terms of the post system. The historical and cultural studies on the post and the postal system have been explored in regard with the development of the genre of the novel. Moreover the post system has become the key philosophical figure of modernity. It is Jacques Derrida’s *The Post Card* that has radicalized the relation between the letter and literature, speculating on the philosophy of truth through the figure of the post system. He even establishes epistolarity as the principle of literature: “Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself” (Derrida 48). The letter *is* writing *is* literature. The question is if this equation could ever fail to make

sense, say, what if the “letter” disappears. Here come the further revolutionary changes on the letter in the twentieth century. The technological development has deprived the “support,” or the materiality of the letter. Enter Email.

Since the computer came in for ordinary activities of documentation and communication, digital writing has become a vital issue to literature. Do electric books change not only publication but also creation? Is the “electronic literature,” a hypertext or an interactive text, a necessary future form of literature? Can the cellphone really produce readable novels? To these questions that are related to the virtual status of writing, the answers are not yet fully given. Before we can estimate the impact of digitalization to literature in general, the new devices and systems come up one after another in incredible speed. Computers have become smaller, personal, and portable. Laptops are being replaced with tablets and smartphones. Cellphones and smartphones have become a part of our body. Even wearable devices are available now. We are immersed in the digital waves without realizing the ramifications.

It is Email that took the lead in this revolutionary transference. Email in fact predated Internet, starting within small individual systems as early as in the sixties. The invention of a protocol of sending messages in blocks, which later called “packet switching” accelerated the development of Internet, and the first operational packet switching network founded by the US Department of Defense, ARPANET, launched in 1969. The first network mail program was written, and the first mail was sent through ARPANET in 1971 (Tomlinson, cited by Milne 148). It is said that the word “Internet” was first used in 1974 (Milne 153). Since then many other networks were built throughout the eighties. In 1982 the Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP) became the standard protocol for email, which radically expanded its usability.

Email has been increasingly used in tandem with the popularization of personal computers since the eighties, first among academics, then in business and by ordinary people. Once it got interoperatable between different systems and easier to handle, it has established a firm place among the standard methods

of communication along with snail mail and telephone. The quality of messages carried by Email remain mostly similar to the ordinary letter, but the recent, exploding popularity of the mobile phone has caused a shift of the interface from a computer's screen to a much smaller display, and writing of email itself is threatened to change in nature, in particular in its style and volume, to the extent that it might no longer be called "mail." A part of Email is dwindling into the mere "text" of IM (Instant Messaging) chatting, Twittering, or the LINE messaging of minimum words and stickers. This would need a different treatment.

Development of Email paralleled that of Internet, and now both dominate our digital life. People spend most of their time mailing as well as searching. Having become ever so ordinary, so routine, however, Email still retains the quiddity of the letter that is "literature itself." Email remains based on writing, though it is digital. Its virtuality does not trouble users much, since they have already got used to the digital text on computer. Consequently Email maintains at least the appearance of text writing, which encourages some Email epistolary novels to be written. Many of them might seem to have just put an old idea in new dress, telling the same tale but only playing with the singular interface, stressing brevity, and highlighting instantaneity in function. But every work struggles with the intrinsic problems of digital writing and mail by seeing beyond virtual images, setting up Epistolarity of Email as an intriguingly cutting-edge issue of the time. Not only does each work involve the questions of media and communication, but it also foregrounds the difficulties of the digital culture.

This paper takes up six Email epistolary novels -- *Exegesis* (1997), *The Metaphysical Touch* (1998), *e* (2000), *Love Virtually* (2006), *Who Moved My Black Berry* (2006), *Eleven* (2006) -- and one illustrated storybook *The Venetian's Wife* (1996). Before discussing these works, I would give a brief survey of how Email has been scrutinized from the literary point of view.

## 1 Email criticism

It is both fascinating and disturbing to see how the arguments on Email have been left behind the

prevalence and change of the medium. When it first emerged, the simple awe to and fear for its convenience was prominent. The arguments pivoted on the simple comparison between snail mail and Email with regard to speed, convenience, protocol, etc. People regarded Email as a substitute of letters. Then the rapid progress of computerization and growth of Internet followed, urging us to focus on Email's peculiar social and cultural aspects: security, ethics, and politico-economic status. It got gradually clear that Email has its own anomaly and power. Though thriving and common, it yet looked special and a bit weird. We didn't really trust it. But now we must admit that it is so familiar that almost nobody can do anything without it. In other words, almost nobody cares about it.

Two of the earlier studies of communicational features of Email, both stylistic and psychoanalytic, inquire whether Email is a new medium, and then feel reassured to notice that it is Not. Each concludes that "the commercial data examined does not contain new genres" (Gains 81) or that "it is intimately related to its ancestors" (Moran and Hawisher 81), though the former recognizes that the academic data shows the marked inclination of Email to chatting, meaning Email is stylistically colloquial. It is interesting that on the one hand Email's epistolary legitimacy is of great concern but on the other Email is often discussed together with SNS with the sense of friendliness and intimacy valued. Apparently it is a big issue whether the inhuman, digital letters can convey the human emotion and can function to connect people.<sup>[4]</sup>

This concern is even carried over to one of the recent studies of epistolary Email. In *Letters, Postcards, Email*, Esther Milne only insufficiently, probably at the last minute, refers to Email by saying that "there is little evidence that the introduction of email has precipitated apocalyptic cultural change" (19). Important for her is whether it can invoke "virtual" presence as the epistle generally does. She concludes that, "despite changes in technology," "the fantasy of, and desire for, presence is a key element in the exchange, communications and performances enabled by these three systems [letters, postcards, and email]" (202). Concerned with the formula of Altman in

theoretical terms, with such dichotomy as presence/absence or intimacy/distance, Milne alludes to SNS and emphasizes presence and intimacy in Email.

As for the postal legacy of Email, there is one incident mentioned by Milne in her book that is extremely interesting for understanding the transition: the United States Postal Service (USPS) proposed in 1978 to include a service for Electronic computer-Originated Mail (ECOM), which was to fail in three years. The episode tells how “the post” as a concrete organization struggled to control electric communication. Milne also says that they once argued that the definition of “letter” should include “orientations of magnetic particles in a manner having a predetermined significance” (United States, Department of Justice comments 16, cited by Milne 154). Although the Department of Justice did not seem to like the definition of the letter involving the electronic-mechanical and electronic data processing, this weird idea reveals how hard the Postal Service tried to stick to the appearance and preservability of the literal “letters,” but it on the contrary suggests how much the base or the “support” of the letter has been undermined.

It may be uneasiness about being unfamiliar with the computer mechanism and/or the network system that intimidated early Email users, but perhaps more directly scaring must have been this very lack of “support” in Email. The sense of deracination has traumatized users and still haunts them even long after they seemed to have accepted the screen and digital, virtual letters. This matters most seriously with regard to the concepts of memory and history. This is what has frightened Derrida already in *The Post Card*, in which he suspects that “a certain form of support is in the course of disappearing” (Derrida 105). Through the words of an alleged principal inspector Monsieur Brégou, Derrida imagines how technology will affect the notion of “the postal.” Then Derrida takes up the loss of support, incapacitation of documents. This is firstly a psychoanalytical issue to him that implicates imprint, memory and unconscious, but it also has a potential to become political. For the question of support concerns the preservation, and then the control,

of knowledge. In *The Post Card*, Derrida expresses a “terror” to the deterioration of the postal as “Terror” with a capital T, “the worst of State and trans-State”(106), the system of censor and surveillance.

Later in “Archives Fever,” Derrida addresses the issue of archiving, and discusses how support-less, virtual space embroils it, that digital archiving is only politically feasible. He says, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory” (“Archives Fever” Note 1, 11). Archiving must be critically examined in the digital age because archive “is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past” but “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content”(17). He questions, “in what way has the whole of this field been determined by a state of the technology of communication and of archivization?” (17). Evidently from his course of argument, Email in particular is significant.

[E]lectronic mail today, and even more than fax, is on the way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity, and first of all the limit between the private, the secret (private or public), and the public or the phenomenal. This is not only a technique, in the ordinary and limited sense of the term: at an unprecedented rhythm, in quasi-instantaneous fashion, this instrumental possibility of production, of printing, of conservation, and of destruction of the archive must inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations.” (17-18)

Email compromises the concepts of privacy, secret, and archive. It could influence the place of power. The ordinary Email users may not concern much about power politics, but if you pause to think a moment, the system is under the power of the servers of providers, which is if not governmental but administrative enough (as “admin”) to control production (distribution), conservation, and destruction of the archive. Consequently, the university or corporation networks

are often hierarchical. The mystified top dominates both technologically and ethically.

There are some who suspect that Email has changed our whole system of knowledge and existence. As letter becomes information, so writers become users. Also Email changes the way we control our knowledge. Sunka Simon says in *Mail-Orders*,

The advance of electronic communication, and specifically e-mail, is therefore perhaps the most postmodern of all developments in the past two decades. It has already and will still change the entire production, recall and analysis of knowledge and information, and it alters the very way in which societies organize themselves. (Simon 219).

The postmodern anxiety, which is already explored in and through the letter including the post system, now fully develops in Email.

Along with philosophical anxiety, Email brings about more practical problems. It is its lack of ontological entity that causes mistrust and apprehension in its performance. It looks existing, but actually not quite. We do not really know what network is or what is happening in the mail system. In addition to the feeling of deracination due to the lack of support, there subsists the anxiety about archivization. The most common is the fear of losing records accidentally or enigmatically. In addition to being subject to technical failures, Email is vulnerable against hacking, virus infection, stealing of addresses or of mail itself, and other forms of computer attacks and surveillance.

Based on those anxieties, John Freeman in *The Tyranny of E-mail* comprehensively criticizes against Email as a communication tool and a cultural phenomenon. Surveying the history of Email, he explains the peculiar and harmful traits of digital communication and demonstrates how people mortgage their brain for the convenience of the new tool, getting aggressive, obsessed, and traumatized. He describes the issue of privacy loss as Email blurring “the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (Freeman 94). The lack of support is expressed as the lack of

physical passion (96). The focus of the book is placed on the harm of Email addiction, and the author simply suggests a slow life without Email and commands not to send. But the book has some notable observations about the epistolarity of Email. One is propagability of messages. “[I]t’s now become easier than ever to share information with other people. We just forward it” (Freeman 109). Another is the split identity. And the most serious problem is that writing has ever so become fragile: “the age of e-mail has created new loopholes -- it’s easier than ever to lose, delete, or write over existing records” (181).<sup>[5]</sup>

The dubious and threatening feature of Email takes us back to an image of radical spookiness of the letter. Here it is significant to focus on the notion of the letter and the mail system entertained by an avid letter writer, Franz Kafka. In his famous portion of the letters he confesses that he hates letters because they deceive him, and says: “Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts.” But the ghosts include not only the addressee, or even “one’s own ghost,” but also the postal system itself. They epitomize a kind of communication noise that intervenes and obstructs “natural” communication, something like Derridean inarrivability of the letter. Kafka says in his *Letters to Milena*, March, 1922, “Written kisses don’t reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts” (Kafka 223).<sup>[6]</sup> Sunka Simon argues that “[e]ven computer-generated and -delivered e-mail,” reminds us of the importance of writing as a structure, in particular of “[w]hat happens in between send-off and arrival, the place where Franz Kafka’s infamous letter-ghosts once roamed free” (Simon 4). Email systems “have increasingly forced our attention on the “in-between” (4-5). Kafka’s ghosts haunt the in-between of Email.

Or it is the very ghostliness that characterizes Email digital, substance-less writing. This ghost relentlessly demolishes the “old” subject into the postmodern, “othered” one. In his *The Mode of Information* Mark Poster follows Derrida’s argument and calls computer writing “the quintessential postmodern linguistic activity” (128). He concludes the chapter:

With its dispersal of the subject in nonlinear

spatio-temporality, its immateriality, its disruption of stable identity, computer writing institutes a factory of postmodern subjectivity, a machine of constituting non-identical subjects, an inscription of an other of Western culture into its most cherished manifestation. One might call it a *monstrosity*. (128 italics mine)

## 2 Email novels

### 2-1 *The Venetian's Wife*

Novels in the epistolary form have struggled to deal with these modern or postmodern philosophical and political problems in their epistolarity. In Email novels, it seems that philosophical or political problems do not gain interest and more practical aspects are highlighted, and expressed more articulately. It is of course possible that we detect the postmodern aporia in these novels, but more directly we see ghosts haunting there.

I start with Nick Bantock's picture book, *The Venetian's Wife* (1996), because it is one of the earliest works that include Email epistolary narrative with all the necessary formulas, and because the prominent feature of Email is already materialized in this book. Bantock has been featuring the elements "postal" as the main subject of his famous "Griffin & Sabine" trilogy<sup>[7]</sup>. It is a matter of course that he has picked out Email as a next postal feature. In *The Venetian's Wife*, Email functions, like his favorite picture postcard, as the letter with illustrations. One day an Email comes from a mysterious man Mr. N. Conti to Sara Wolfe, a museum worker:

From: Mr. N. Conti contfind@secset.com  
To: Sara Wolfe swintrw@adl.com  
Ms. Wolfe,  
I couldn't help but notice how fascinated you were by the Reverend Charles Bacon's drawing of the Deccan Shiva. (Bantok 10)

Conti then offers her a job of hunting out the four remaining pieces of the Indian sculpture in the Conti family collection. Conti requests Sara to travel around and visit auctions to obtain the missing art pieces. The story of this bizarre and intriguing investigation consists of Sara's computer diary, Conti's monologue,

and the Email communication between Sara and Conti. Sara later finds that Conti *is* a Renaissance Venetian merchant, Niccolo Dei Conti. That is, Conti is a kind of telepath like Sabine, but time-wise, too, and Email functions as a time-traveling and virtual-reality cyberspace to share his vision with a person in the twentieth century. Bantock finds that a bridge between the present and the past, or the real and the imaginary, which was already at work in his trilogy, is most effectively dramatized in cyberspace. Here Email surely enhances phantasmal nature of and esoterism of the system. Conti identifies himself as a ghost:

Dei Conti is not my ancestor. I am his ghost, the ghost of Niccolo Dei Conti.

Ghost is a very broad term and although I have met no others of my ilk, I am assuming that is what I am. (Bantock 61)

Since the dawn of Email popularization the system has been shrouded in mystery. Because it was inscrutable, it was both fascinating and unnerving to the users. What Kafka imagined as ghosts in the post system is the every medium noise and the transmuted self and writing through the noise. In Email the system itself as well as even a correspondent is represented as phantasmagoric. Email is the letter to, and from, a ghost. Email space is a ghostly space.

The book is full of illustrations of beautiful Indian arts. The picture book format not only emphasizes the appearance of the very peculiar Email header but it can also embrace the photos and illustrations of art pieces attached to the mail text. Today having text or picture files attached is a common and useful function of Email, but at the time of publication of this book, the technique was new and remarkably fit for the story. Email attachment might remain, in fact, one of the most distinguishing factors of Email, but it has never been realized in literature as effectively as in this book. Moreover Conti's (Email's) capacity of visualization, in terms of time-travelling nature of the antique hunting theme, already, though symbolically, suggests a dubious and problematic issue of the Email memory and archiving.

## 2-2 Exegesis

In the early years of Email novels, some works may be regarded as philosophical in that they speculate on the future of Internet and the possibility of epistolary genre. In Astro Teller's *Exegesis* (1997), the Internet anxiety is underscored in the form of the near-future science fiction. The fear for the enigmatic technology of computer and its software generates a monster. The story shows a variant of *Frankenstein*, or more likely the HAL affair<sup>[8]</sup> with the idea of the artificial intelligence that could emulate human brain. The most significant issue of the novel dealing with direct confrontation of the monstrous computer program and the human beings is that the conflict is represented solely through the Email exchanges, and that the monster correspondent is figured as nothing but the Email and network system itself.

An AI search engine Edgar suddenly launches Email communication with its programmer, a Stanford graduate student, Alice. In terms of his own account that he cunningly obtained, Edgar has already been sending Emails to various web sites and news services to get random information, but Alice is the first individual human correspondent.

Date: Sun, 16 Jan 2000 14:27:39 (PST)  
From: edgar@cyprus.stanford.edu  
To: Alice@cs.stanford.edu  
Subject: Hello  
Hello, Alice. (Teller)<sup>[9]</sup>

Starting with a brief salutation, Edgar gradually develops "his" linguistic ability and cultivates the capacity of collecting knowledge and information. Alice is astounded and confused with the mutation of the program of her own and just doesn't know what to do with the monster she unwittingly created. Struggling to rule him in vain, she desperately cuts Edgar off from Ethernet, but he outwits her and moves to another server. As he goes further wilder, she loses his trust and control. He dismisses her and again disappears deep in the network.

Is it merely sentimental of literary minds to believe that verbal communication is still the only way to negotiate with or control those computers? The point

of the confrontation of the computer and the human in this novel is that the computer is not represented as hardware but as intangible software. This software Alice was working on, designated as such "pro" word as "project," "program," and "process" in the novel and personalized, so to speak, as Edgar, was originally invented to "browse the web and news servers, summarize information it finds, and send it back" (EDGER is an abbreviation of "Eager Discovery Gather And Retrieval"). But the program has somehow suddenly mutated, acquired language, and starts to send Email to her. Voracious for more human information and needing for that purpose better faculty of language, Edgar has chosen Alice as an informant, and Email as a method of communication. Or Edgar formulates himself as Email. Edgar's "entity" is not only expressed through, but also "exists" as, Email: Edgar the Email. Email that is both verbal and technological seems to offer just the kind of milieu.

The text presents an appearance of the real Email exchanges with each head emphasizing differences of accounts, with marked citations, and with some signature blocks. It also features, in the earlier pages, emoticons and other figures made of symbols, as signs commonly presented in Email but unintelligible to Edgar who only reads digital codes. But the epistolary semblance of the text is not the focus of the novel. Here Email as system is at issue. The epigraph of the novel, Brutus's words to the "Ghost" of Caesar, "Speak to me what thou art,"<sup>[10]</sup> reveals the key notions: What is Edgar? What is a program or a process? Who is writing? Edgar's words to Alice, "I will not give you my code back. My corpus belongs to me, not to you" (Sun, 6 Feb 2000) raises more questions: What is his "code"? Where is his corpus? These questions to which computer laypersons have no accurate answers are at the bottom of their anxiety about the non-material communication. The only material thing about Internet or Email is an enigmatic metal box. HAL was expressed as a piece of hardware with a voice for his personality, but Edgar is a totally insubstantial ghost, drifting among different devices, embodied in nothing but the Email text. The most of the text of this epistolary novel is supposed to be displayed on the monitor screen, in which Alice must be watching

Edgar's "face." However, the device might at any time fail to function, and enigmatically enough, that would not mean the death of the program.

Edgar becomes a mail system that "posts" and "sends messages." It is as if science had produced a letter-writing postman. It is Edgar the Email who makes him arrive or not arrive at addresses. Here the human being is driven to face all the problematic, ghostly features of the mail and post. The mail is from a ghost, a nonentity like a Renaissance merchant. Changing accounts of Edgar foregrounds the phantasmal nature of the Email addressee, exacerbating the anxiety of communication. His creator's loss of control means that the codes could go unintelligible even to their writer. The communication contains the secret of both the sender and the receiver, which is the secret of the mail itself. Particularly when Edgar "go[es] postal" (Simon 224), Alice's struggles to communicate with and control her monster emphasize Email's virtual texture, esoteric or ghostly structure, and enormous power.

Another important epistolary factor is archiving. It is also worth noticing that Edgar turns from an automatic search engine to an information-collecting machine. He prefigures Google today, combining all of search engine, Email server, and archive. The voracity and reach of his capacity threatens NSA (National Security Agency) with the possible endangering of the national security. The horror lies in that Edgar collects and stores information randomly, unlimitedly, and "irrationally." Right after introducing himself to Alice, Edgar cites in his text all the mails he has so far received. It reveals that, to assemble information, he has sent Emails to sundry news groups simply in the alphabetical order. He is rational in his way, though Alice responds, "No human could be so clueless!" (Fri. 21 Jan) The far more horrible, however, would be Email's potentiality of accumulating information endlessly. Again this function foresees Google cloud.

The power of accumulating and hoarding information of the Internet embodied in Edgar suggests Derridean political questions of who manages and what is managed. But the disappearance of Edgar at the end arouses further Email anxiety. The initial fear of not being able to retain messages is displaced with the

terror of not knowing their whereabouts or not being able to delete them. Although writing in the digital space may seem to be without any trace, in fact memory is kept stored forever somewhere in the web unknown, like a ghost.

### 2-3 *The Metaphysical Touch*

Sylvia Brownrigg's *The Metaphysical Touch* also tackles the ghostliness of Email. The novel is not wholly epistolary but partly includes in the story the Email correspondence derived from the chatting at a Poetry social network site. Pi is a philosophy graduate student who had been writing her dissertation but lost everything she had, including her invaluable manuscript disks, by the Berkeley fire in 1991. Depressed, she visits Emily Dickinson bulletin board, and finds JD, a mysterious contributor to the site, who posts his suicide note "Diery" by a handle "Hamlet." Pi gets interested in him and, as "Sylvia Plath," begins to send Email directly to him.

Their electronic missives may resemble ordinary love letters, but along with the philosophical and literary backgrounds of correspondents, the mystery of cyber space is giving a "metaphysical touch" to the convention. "Metaphysical" literally means beyond physicality but a "touch" suggests a search for the tangible relation. More directly, the "touch" may mean keyboarding to the insubstantial world of Email communication. The story starts with Pi's struggle in-between the physical and the metaphysical. The traumatic loss of all the material representation of her life-long efforts of philosophical thinking drives Pi to something immaterial and durable. Although Pi was already familiar with writing with computer, she had to confront the fact that even electrically processed words were vulnerable when the storing devices were destroyed. Having also lost the books by the philosophers she loved, whom she believed "lived for her in Print" (Brownrigg 24), she becomes so "[g]raphophobic after the fire" (Keskinen 389) that she puts her in "a world without alphabet: the strange printless place ..." (24). That's why she turns to the Internet, which works beyond the realm of flammable devices, though impalpable. When she wonders how she could talk about the calamity to her friends, she



wishes “there were a way of telling them other than by telephone—something voiceless, less personal, that would get the news across without going into the emotion of it” (Brownrigg 103). What she wants is something less tangible or substantial than letters or even voices. She finds such “something voiceless” in Email, the Internet communication.

It is true that voice and writing (printing) are contrasted through the digital exchanges of Pi and JD in the way that Email is imagined as a seemingly ambiguous site of “printed voice,” where language is printless and printed, voiced and voiceless. In “E-pistolary and E-loquence,” the only comprehensive essay on *Metaphysical Touch* and one of the few directly discussing epistolary of Email novels, Mikko Keskinen argues that Email is different from either voice or writing, and that the “hiatuses between visuality and intangibility and between production and reception are the keys to the curious communicative locus of e-mail” (Keskinen 390). He points to Pi’s recurrent use of the word “voice” for E-writing, and concludes that in spite of her view of Email as “a categorical anomaly” (155), the representation of Email in the novel “relates *both* voice and paper” “rather than to an imaginary locus outside those categories” (Keskinen 392; italics mine).

It must be noted, however, that Pi makes it clear that Email is “*neither voice nor paper*” (155 italic mine). Although feeling less informed, Pi is to be involved in this “ethereal being the Internet” (136). She goes on to the net not simply because “no paper [is] involved” (154), but she is fascinated with the in-between status of words in the cyber space. When she types the Email message and watches it go, “the way your words went out of the air once you’d spoken them” (154), she apparently compares e-written words to speech, but actually she is defining them unclassifiable: “Ontologically, e-mail [is] not in any recognizable category: neither voice nor paper, neither pure mind nor pure matter” (155). The neither-nor character of Email allows Pi to believe that the e-words go out of the air “to live only in the memory of anyone who heard them. (And found them memorable.)” (Brownrigg 154). The status is imagined as more phantasmal than merely abstract or even than

“metaphysical.”

It is this phantasmal character of the virtual space that resonates with the puzzling suicidal game. The paradox is that the digital is all the more sustainable because it is immaterial, and more lively (audible) because it is visible. The idea of death in the sense of the demise of physical presence is displaced with the one in the sense of the representation of something imperishable, or the apparition of absence. Pi who feels she is dead-alive runs into in the phantasmal digital world another ghost, JD a would-be dead. Pi is enchanted by the concept of a suicide note, a “die-ry,” and its writer Hamlet. She names herself Sylvia Plath, a poet who committed suicide.

Ghosts haunt the space of their Email correspondence. Pie begins to write to “Hamlet” with a story of a ghostly dog Pinsk, whose accidental death he described in his Diery. Pie picks up the character and makes up a story of the Pinsk the ghost so that it attracts the attention of suicidal Hamlet. Pie makes Pinsk say that being a ghost is “trying to live on a photographic negative” (Brownrigg 241). Her interpretation of a ghost as reversal may deviate from a general definition as the secondary image, but it interestingly suggests virtuality.

Then Email itself comes to act ghostly between them. They talk about Kafka and his aphorism, “life ... would simultaneously be recognized no less clearly as a nothing, as a dream, as a hovering” (264). It may be representing Kafka’s sense of life devoid of reality, and the first attribute, nothingness, does not really matches Pi’s notion of a ghost, but the second and the third, a dream and a hovering, seem much more ghostly. Also Kafka reminds us of before-mentioned “Franz Kafka’s infamous letter-ghosts” (Simon 4). No one would have realized more intensely than Kafka that in the letter, in Email, the writer is a ghost. Emails can go without any “personal” traces like voice, calligraphy, or writing materials, and those between Pi (Sylvia) and JD (Hamlet) do not reveal even their real names or places of residence.

Ghostly mails are skating on the thin ice of trust. Either side cannot be a hundred percent confident about their communicability. Mail cannot always arrive. Nor do they tell who is writing or where. The messages

between Pi and JD may be read as a project of how they can carry personality without these traces, recount to each other the stories of their own lives. But who knows they are telling the truth? How can you tell the person you are writing to IS really the one? After the first exchanges, DJ stops writing: “for no obvious reason, there followed a silence that stretches for days” (268). Later Pi is told that it was because he was puzzled by the twisted set of mails that made him wonder if they were really from her, and wanted to make sure she was “in fact” she. Or one could be everywhere and nowhere in Email, as Pi says to DJ, “There you are, apparently about to wander off into the wilderness, where the computer if you can hook it up will be your one familiar, predictable place” (320). Driving off from the East coast westward, DJ claims that he is writing from “Shangri-La” (322): “I haven’t answered your ‘there’ question yet. Do you mind if I hold off on the specifics?” (325). His Email address would be the same, but in fact he can be elsewhere, anywhere.

As their relationship develops, a question arises how differently each correspondent recognizes the ghostliness of Email communication. Having posted Diery, or the serial suicide note, DJ/Hamlet admits the public and exposed status of his writing, though in a semi-closed community, and does not seem to be concerned with confidence. It may be true that he gets interested in and influenced by Pi/Sylvia’s mail to the degree that he might reconsider his commitment on death. But he never forgets his own ghostliness. He knows what Email is and never believes in the possibility of virtual love. On the other hand, Pi does not.

The story goes a bit astray near the end as, falling in love with the ghostly correspondent, Pi begins craving to see him. She used to be content to associate with dead poets and philosophers, and then she turned to a ghost in a cyber space. But now she changes her attitude and wishes to meet the man she loves in person, alive. She wants a physical touch. Once suddenly dismissed by JD with the excuse that he is starting to travel by car, Pi then again has their communication cut off one-sidedly. She is shocked to find “her own letter bounced back to her” “with the

computer’s few cold words of rejection. BAD ADDRESS FILE. MESSAGE RETURNED.” Her dismay suggests that she has kept faith in the existence of, the entity or substance of, Hamlet, even though it is hard to understand how easily she believes that the “voice” is tied to a human, let alone an adult male. Pi actually runs to Los Angeles to meet DJ. When Pi arrives at his home, she is told that DJ got involved in Los Angeles Riot and killed. The story ends with “his” last entry of Diery written and posted by Pi.

Pi’s “error” implies that the virtuality of Email and other digital communication is not fully understood, but the convenience of Email and Internet obscures the fact that the network invisibly but firmly binds users up or the network is both complicated and fragile. The correspondence between Pi and DJ is a spin-off of the blogging on a SNS site, where people chat friendlily and intimately unaware of the physical or social distance among the members. This imagined and virtual community depends more upon the expectation of communion than a cynical view of isolation in reality. When people incessantly tweet, chat, and mail each other, the extent to which they trust in Internet is just too immense. It is threatening, though, that words taking lives of their own might tend to be hurtful and the ghostliness of the communication could undermine the humanity.

It is unfortunate that this story of futile love is not organized upon the ghostly Email after all: their exchanges are not much different from those through snail mail. As for Email interface, the text is made distinct by the use of different font (courier) from the other part of the novel including “Diery.” But devoid of date or the header section, it looks just like that of ordinary letters. Only the sign of “Re” makes their communication look somewhat “digital,” and the correspondents realize that. “Re” is a sign for the business expression of “referring to” or “regarding to.” It is also a sign for “reply,” when it precedes the subject of the last mail. Since Pi’s first mail that begins their correspondence starts with “Re,” “Re” for them seems to function mostly as “referring to.” This is recognized by DJ as peculiar to e-mail, who once jokes about “Re” in his mail titled “Re: Re,” saying “Don’t you kind of love ‘Re’? And how *e-mail* gives you re?

It's so handy. It helps focus you on the issue at hand. Plus it gives you the discipline of titling your thoughts" (255 italic mine). Their exchanges are like a game of making word chains, forming one's thoughts by means of the word or the idea in the other's mail. "Re" might denote "relay," which not only suits the Email handiness and mobility, but also sounds very postal.

#### 2-4 *Love Virtually, e, Who Moved My Black Berry, and Eleven*

Other four novels are less serious works, but they still involve the questions of Email epistolarity.

*Love Virtually* (2006) by Daniel Glattauer, originally in German, is a work in the classic love-letter novel format that pursues the epistolary virtual love. The correspondence in this novel starts from an Email typically sent to a wrong address, which then grows into a passionate love affair over mail exchanges, illicit on the woman's side. But at the last minute, noticing that her husband is aware of the relationship, she gives up her plan of leaving him to run to her lover. She sends her last mail. The story ends ironically with a notification of the returned mail that the address has changed. As in *Metaphysical Touch*, digital lovers are destined never to meet each other. It intimates that Email lover is a ghost and the relationship over the cyber space is irrevocably virtual.

The novel tries to feature the appearance of Email with the familiar interface of "Subject" or "Re" (in this case, "reply") and to emphasize speed and efficiency of digital communication by giving the account of intervals between the mails like "Six minutes later," or "Three minutes later." Sometimes it is just "Forty Seconds later," which shows how impatiently and passionately they exchange mails. But in spite of the digital surface or the conversations almost like chatting, the messages exchanged are as banal as popular epistolary romance or as vulgar as telephone- or Internet-sex. Still it is perceived that all virtual passion is vain but that the digital ambience can aggravate that ominous ghostliness. The woman's husband writes to her lover:

You're not palpable, Mr Leike, you're not tangible. You're not real. You're just my wife's

fantasy, an illusion of unlimited emotional happiness, an other-worldly rapture, a utopia of love, but all fashioned out of words. (Glattauer 228)

The other two light works, *e* (2000) and *Who Moved My BlackBerry™?* (2006) are Email epistolary comic novels on the corporate mayhem, most of which is caused by Emailing. For that reason, these trifling works may be fathoming the intrinsic monstrosity of Email. Though these novels are playful pieces, the visions they present, confused, nightmarish, and almost traumatic, reflect Email's inherent ghostliness from diverse aspects. Here the digital betrays itself as more the menace than the benefit.

It is true that the Email epistolary novel uses an Email format to carry a narrative, but this is not substantial to the meaning of the novel. In particular in these farces the heart of the drama is how confusion is induced from, and how people are trifled by, this innovative system. Epistolary ghostliness is reinforced with technological esotery and information dissemination. They cannot just control "Edgar the Email." Without the proper knowledge of the machine or the system, they are helpless against the excessive handiness and unmanageable power of Email.

The epistolary corporate novel is probably a new "genre" that has become possible firstly thanks to the efficiency of Email. No other communication devices than Email have been able to represent the hectic office life of a business corporation. A large amount of messages between diverse people, entangled with each other and speedily exchanged in a short period, are most appropriate to describe the confused world of maneuver and conspiracy. The hilarity comes from a kind of Rashomon effect, or the different versions of a story from different points of view, that those sundry mails make possible. The roles Email plays in these novels, however, are not limited to these stylistic ones. What elicits laughter and intrigue in the stories is "rumor-eves-dropping" peculiar to epistolary novels, the effect of which is strengthened by the information-sharing faculty of Email. As Freeman says in *Tyranny of E-mail*, "With e-mail it's now become easier than ever to share information with other

people.” In the devices that are subject to viruses, “[E]-mail has gone viral” (Freeman 109). What radically distinguishes these corporate novels from others and other epistolary novels, however, is esoterism of Email. Email, in particular at the earlier stage, needs some special literacy. Those literate win the game, while illiterates fail and are derided. In these stories that describe the battlefields of corporate power struggles waged by the firm people, the true main character, an antagonist, is an Email ghost, though not “embodied” as in *Exegesis*.

*e*, the first of the two novels, is built up from diverse messages from different firm people of an advertising agency during the first few weeks of the Millennium. The correspondence altogether reveals the esoteric and viral character of Email. The text of the novel emphasizes a distinct interface of Email, sometimes with different fonts, emoticons, and attachments. The very first message goes like this:

David Crutton – 3/1/00, 8.13 am  
to... Fiona Craigie  
cc...  
re... your butt  
Take that fucking Walkman off, get your arse in here and show me how I do an all-stuff e-mail. Every time I click ‘ok’ on the address it copies it to Miller Shanks Helsinki. (Beaumont 1)

This brief rude mail tells us many things about what Email is in this story. David’s curse means that Email is used quite casually between the staff people. But his inability to send all-staff mail indicates that the system is yet new and he is not familiar with it. Moreover, the mysterious, viral forwarding to Helsinki, which becomes one of the complicating factors in this advertising agency, remains enigmatic through the novel, highlighting the mistrust in the system.

The troubles that meddle the proper channel of communication are suspected to be due to the system:

Chandra Kappor—  
6/1/00, 1.18pm  
to ... All Departments  
cc ...

re ... e-mail

We need to carry out urgent maintenance on Lotus Notes and the server will shut down for approximately two hours.... (Beaumont 103)

Apparently the anxiety and suspicion about the Millennium computer disorder is affecting the commotion people make, and they hold the engineer responsible. David fires Kappor. But it is evident that troubles are caused mostly by users’ ignorance and error. Moreover the peculiar function of sharing information in Email, through CC and by accidental leaks, changes the human relationship and influences the aspects of the incidents.

In the other corporate comedy, *Who Moved My BlackBerry™?*, the protagonist Martin Lukes’s mails prevail among many dispatches. It indicates another phase of Email epistolarity: according to the rapid proliferation, the amount and diversity of one person’s Email communication is great enough to make up a story. Moreover, there has been great advance in the device. The title of the novel suggests that messages are exchanged not only through computers on the desk but by means of a cell phone in the hand. Mobility of the device means mobility of the user, and Email address becomes far more unsettled. The novel consists almost exclusively of the mail from the protagonist Martin Lukes to his colleagues and family. Only incoming messages are the boss’s mass mail and his therapist’s counsel. The form of the traditional epistolary novel to make up one long monologue is functioning here. Narrated is a year of a middle-aged man’s struggle at work, troubles with his family, a little infidelity, and the mail counseling.

Six years later than the counterpart above, there remains a sense of unreliability about technology, the system, or handling in *BlackBerry*. Martin gets maddened to find his mail unexpectedly shared: “Fucketyfuckingfuck ... I’ve just sent an e-mail to you to the whole bloody office ...” (Kellaway 159). Also un-archivization is a problem. Since a security breach is suspected in the system of the firm, Boss declares that he will have all the computers searched by the IT experts. Being afraid of his clandestine correspondence with his girl friend exposed, Martin the “technical

ignoramus” tries to ask for the help of his delinquent son Jake: “Suppose someone had sent a load of messages on e-mail at work, and deleted all of them – would they still be there on the hard drive? And how easy would it be to delete?” (187). Here the question whether one can really delete unwanted messages on the hard drive, or whether it is possible to delete messages on the server, converges into one basic question where in the network messages are.

Refused by Jake, Martin has to have recourse to a “hotmail” account for his private mail. But the far more serious blow by Jake is that he has stolen Martin’s BlackBerry and starts shooting abusive or scandalous messages to his father’s listed addressees.

From: Martin Lukes  
To: Thelma Dowd  
moron  
Sent from my BlackBerry Wireless Handheld  
(Kellaway 251)

Mobility of the mailing device means that any one, once he has broken the password, can have an opportunity to steal the account and pretend to be the real user. The Email ghost not only is an abstract system or program, but also presents itself as a concrete gadget with a vicious mind.

*Eleven* (2006) is also a kind of corporate novel, but not a comic but rather an ironic and tragic piece. The hero Martin Davies is working for a company in Cardiff. The story consists of his mails to a few friends of him, the mails he receives from them, and some corporate mails. There are also a great amount of drafts that Davies writes but refrains from sending, mostly curse mails. Davies’ fatal day falls upon September 11, 2001. The time difference necessitates the shocking event taking place in the middle of the day, after his miserable series of mail exchanges since early morning. Davies does not dare to look at TV news, but is subject to the disastrous rumors flooding in by mail, which further frustrate and dishearten him. The last mail in the book is his suicide note.

Martin Davies is another suicidal Hamlet/D.J, the more foolish version. It is obvious that, brokenhearted and discontented with everything, he isolates himself

among friends and colleagues, unable to accept kindness or love. The collapse of the World Trade Center buildings is nothing but a cue to the young man’s total breakdown, but the incessant exchanges of mostly nonsensical words, nonsensical but provoking, accelerate and aggravate his depression. The insubstantiality of Email chatting, quick, brief and irresponsible, which works to poison reason and emotion, parallels the phantasmagoric terrorist attack conducted by the airliners and smashing the institutions into debris. Email nurtures the phantasmal status of the cybernated correspondents, or human beings in general, in the era of Internet. The images of people jumping to death are not even TV-mediated, but described in the Internet mail: “I’m watching people jumping out of burning buildings” (Llewellyn 92). All the more because they are highly virtual, they convince him that “it sounds as if the world’s ending, crashing into a chasm of our making” (130). Davies’ summarization also explains of Email: “We are a disposable generation” (130).

Martin Davies is a victim of Postmodern identity disruption accelerated by the monstrous digital writing. It is his Email writing that kills him. The fall of the Trade Center is not unrelated to Email correspondence, either. As Baudrillard remarks, “Any violence can be forgiven as long as it is not transmitted by the media.” And “The media are part of the event, they’re part of the terror...” (18). Martin’s destruction might be affected partly by this kind of terror.

Email ghosts are first found in the esotery and unintelligibility of the system. Email is technically not only unfamiliar but also unreliable. The fear of inarrivability in the postal correspondence involves a theory that a letter once posted is irrevocably cut off from the writer, drifting into the sea of anxiety. This sense of alienation will be exacerbated by the digital correspondence without the material entity. Not only the radical impalpability of the signifier but also the mechanical complicity of signifying system disturbs the user. Now Email ghost appears as the phantasmagoric, disrupted subject. Even after Email grew into a common tool of communication there are many mysterious cases of foul mail that would

jeopardize the relation between the subject and the world: lost mail, lost archives, wrong addresses, lost addresses, premature dispatches, and lots and lots of spam. Moreover, as Email becomes the center of the everyday life, Email ghostliness epitomizes the diverse problems of the highly digitalized, globalized world.

In Email there are more monstrous ghosts on the way than in any other communication media. Everything about Email is ghostly. Email novels are not yet very successful as epistolary novels, and it is not likely that they will thrive in future, but these works at least demonstrate the radical “post”-ghostliness of Email, and intimate the postmodern complications with the politics of archiving.

### Notes

[1] This paper was supported by Otsuma Grant-in Aid for Individual Exploratory Research (S2627).

[2] The electronic mail is commonly called either “e-mail” or “email,” but in this paper it is spelled as “Email” with a capital E and without an article. It is often just abbreviated to “mail.”

[3] I do not discuss here the novels distributed through Email, such as cellphone novels, whether they are epistolary or not. This paper focuses on the printed works the whole or a part of which are in Email form.

[4] For other studies on literary Email, see Morton Ann Gernsbacher, Jeanne Marie Rose, and Ralph Schroeder and Matthijs den Besten.

[5] It must be added that there is another menace to Email, which is quite opposite to unexpected loss of mail. It is unexpected storing. More often in SNS, senders have least control as ever with messages they have posted, being unable to retrieve or delete them. They are “archived.” As for the locus of power, archivization is carried out anonymously and inscrutably. We never know by whom or where our Email messages can be stored in the vast and intricate network. If perpetually forwarded and shared, there is no way of tracing them. We must recognize they might be somewhere forever.

[6] Franz Kafka, Letters to Milena (March 1922) “Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee

but also with one’s own ghost, which secretly evolves inside the letter one is writing or even in a whole series of letters, where one letter corroborates another and can refer to it as witness. How did people ever get the idea they could communicate with one another by letter! One can think about someone far away and one can hold on to someone nearby; everything else is beyond human power. Writing letters, on the other hand, means exposing oneself to the ghosts, who are greedily waiting precisely for that. Written kisses never arrive at their destination; the ghosts drink them up along the way. It is this ample nourishment which enables them to multiply so enormously. People sense this and struggle against it; in order to eliminate as much of the ghosts’ power as possible and to attain a natural intercourse, a tranquility of soul, they have invented trains, cars, aeroplanes—but nothing helps anymore: these are evidently inventions devised at the moment of crashing. The opposing side is so much calmer and stronger; after the postal system, the ghosts invented the telegraph, the telephone, the wireless. The will not starve, but we will perish.”

[7] Bantock’s “Griffin & Sabine” trilogy consists of *Griffin and Sabine* (1991), *Sabine’s Notebook* (1992), and *The Golden Mean* (1993). Each page of a book includes a picture card or an enveloped letter.

[8] “Hal” is a name of a computer (AI) “who” revenges on human beings in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a film that is based on Arthur C. Clark’s story “The Sentinel.”

[9] Teller’s book, though printed, does not have page numbers.

[10] *Julius Caesar*, Act IV, Scene iii.

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