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THE SHORT FORM RESHAPED: EMAIL, BLOG, SMS, AND MSN IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY E-PISTOLARY NOVELS

*There is but one art – to omit!
O if I knew how to omit,
I would ask no other knowledge.*
(R. L. Stevenson, *Letters*, II, 270 – Oct 1883)

Brevity in literature is a complex issue: “short stories are short in various ways and for various reasons” (Friedman 1994, 18). Telling a short story or telling a story through a collection of short texts are two quite distinct narrative practices, both in designing and writing fiction. Nonetheless, the genre of the short story and that of epistolary fiction share a hybrid nature, a “power to combine richness with concision” (Shaw 1983, 11), a control over the reader, an inclination for spoken forms, and “the tension between closural and anticlosural features” (Lohafer 1994, 301).

“Seen as a form which arouses a feeling of wonder at finding so much expressed within such narrow boundaries, the short story is an intrinsically witty genre which has affinities with a wide range of artistic strategies for compressing meaning” (Shaw 1983, 11). Twenty-first century e-pistolary novels¹ in book form make the picture even more complex as they are works of fiction of varied lengths, displaying and combining various types of digital and electronic short forms enabled by technological innovation, which started in the mid-90s. Brevity for these collections of e-texts² is as much a trait as a technical constraint. Before moving any further, the spelling of epistolary with a hyphen, i.e. *e-pistolary* or *e-pistolary* novels, is worth a digression. It is a choice intended to highlight the difference between the traditional epistolary genre—a fiction partly or entirely based on a typical paper-based exchange between two or more correspondents—and literary works that consider new forms, modes, and channels of exchange. The novels discussed in this work rely only on text typologies (e-texts) produced by means of new technologies and new means of communication, such as email both via PC and/or mobile phone, texting via mobile phone (SMS), chat services via PC first (MSN) and later via mobile, eBay entries, excerpts from forums and blogs, or online papers and magazines.³

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¹ The unusual spelling of epistolary, i.e. *e-pistolary* with a hyphen, is intentionally meant to narrow the focus of this work to those printed novels that rely only on the new means of communications and technologies so that e-pistles are never letters as traditionally conceived, namely paper-based exchanges, but only correspondences carried out through digital or electronic devices and anyway via the internet connection.

² See previous note as the word e-text(s) points to those text typologies through which the e-pistolary novels are compiled as it is discussed in the following paragraph.

³ Online social media (OSM)—do not feature but for Twitter—neither do most recent apps, such as Telegram or WhatsApp, as they were not yet available, not as widespread as they are now or they simply did not attract authors’ interest.



These narratives are created by borrowing from computer coding strategies or computer-based communication tools and rules, by re-thinking typo-graphic and layout strategies. The digital or electronic short forms are crossbreeds that, by *compressing form and meaning*, capture and mirror the fragmented, often simultaneous, and multi(p)layer nature of the contemporary conversation threads within a pervasive communicative environment. The result is that e-pistolary fiction updates correspondence typologies, thematic patterns, conventions, techniques and rules at various levels (narrative, symbolic and linguistic) while disrupting the linearity of the book form by means of high levels of discontinuity as well as refashioning one of the strongest assumptions of epistolary novels, namely the materiality of the letters “and the corresponding effects in the narrative, where words are made illegible through tears, smudges or torn or crumbling paper; where letters get lost or mislaid; where the handwriting tells us as much about the letter writing situation as the story that is contained in the letter itself” (Bower 2017, 19). It is hard to talk of materiality in emails, chats, SMS, and yet claiming that it is lost may be equally controversial, especially if we consider sound and colour-coding alerts alongside the very idea of brevity that is further enhanced in e-pistolary novels by non-conventional spelling, phonological approximation and a frequent number and variety of abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms, all of which contribute to turning letters and words into images as well as symbols, and foregrounding their shapes in meaningful ways which go beyond their expected semantics as it will be shown in the following sections.

A need to omit becomes thus synonymous with the practice of *effacing*, whereby the aim is to erase the process of mediation, to fulfil a desire other arts, such as painting, photography, film, and television, have also sought “through the interplay of the aesthetic value of transparency with techniques of linear perspective, erasure, and automaticity, all of which are strategies also at work in digital technology” (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, 24). Yet, mostly, omissions and elliptical structures are often not implying that less information is offered, on the contrary different typologies of digital messages entail richness and complexity, for instance by exploiting a language re-mediation through which prosody is restored to writing by phonological approximation which results in an interesting immediacy;⁴ or by maintaining a highly expressive communicative aim, for instance, by employing emoticons. Such solutions and strategies aimed at compensating the *virtuality* of the exchanges generate a context in which “the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium” (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, 23-24). In spite of their asynchrony (especially in emails) and their written aspect, these e-texts take the reader into an enhanced version of the dramatic effect Richardson called the *written to the moment*; these e-texts plunge the correspondents into an almost vis-a-vis exchange running parallel to the current physical reality they are individually set in.

The aim of this paper is twofold. On the one hand, it intends to provide a preliminary mapping of some of the computer-mediated short forms and their re-shaping in literary works: to this end, some narratives are briefly introduced as specimens of twenty-first century e-pistolary novels and some of their salient features highlighted—a question that has not as yet received much critical attention. Four examples have been selected⁵,

⁴ “The logic of transparent immediacy is also at work in non-immersive digital graphics—that is, in two- and three-dimensional images projected onto traditional computer, film, or television screens. [...] Virtual reality, three-dimensional graphics, and graphical interface design are all seeking to make digital technology 'transparent'.” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 23)

⁵ The number of e-pistolary novels published is rich and varied. Even if it is not the purpose of the current work to list them all, it may be worth mentioning that some of them address a wide audience and others are classified as young adult literature. Among the latter, some of the first out on the shelves were for example James Pope’s *Spin the Bottle* (1997) and *ChaseR. A novel in e-mail* by Michael J. Rosen (2002), along with three novels in a young adult series by Lauren Myracle entirely in the style of Instant messaging *ttyl* (2004), *tfn* (2005) and *l8r, g8r* (2007). For a wider public, other works featuring e-communication as a consistent part of their narrative started to appear in the late 90s, a part from the already mentioned novel by Coupland *Microserfs* (1995), the debut work by Sylvia Brownrigg’s *The Metaphysical Touch* (1999) and the illustrated book by Nick Bantock *The Venetian’s Wife* (1996). In 2000, Matt Beaumont’s debut *e A novel*, based on emails only, was published, then *Almost Like Being in Love* (2004) by Steve Kluger followed suit, and more were published shortly afterwards, such as Lucy Kellaway’s *Who Moved my Blackberry?* (2005), Douglas Coupland’s *The Gum Thief* (2007), and David Llewellyn’s *Eleven*. Many more literary works were published that are partly or entirely based on correspondence, but works like *From A to X: A Story in Letters* (2008) by John Berger or *Dear Committee Members* by Julie Schumacher (2015) are about traditional snail mail correspondence and are not dealt with



namely *Microserfs* (1995) and *J-Pod* (2006) by Douglas Coupland; *The PowerBook* (2000) by Jeanette Winterson; and *Black Box* (2012) by Jennifer Egan. On the other hand, this paper discusses *e² A novel* (2010), the second e-pistolary novel by British author Matt Beaumont, as a case study of a remediation in print of some born-digital short forms compiled through an almost filmic *montage*: an effective rethinking of the letter novel that cleverly combines a multitude of characters, several subplots, and a variety of text types. Based upon a collection of electronic messages only, indeed Beaumont's fiction "emerges from the contemporary digital environment itself rather than from literary history or tradition"—as Nicholas Blincoe argued reviewing Coupland's fiction, a writer and visual artist considered a pioneer in representing the digital era, its communication tools, and its generation through his literary works.

What this work does not investigate is traditional epistolarity or novels based on traditional letters, which have recently been at the core of new extensive studies, such as Rachel Bower's *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980-2010* (2017), whose purpose is to offer a reading of "the epistolary resurgence" while discussing postcolonial world literature and "the literary, socio-political and historical contexts in which literary works are produced," or *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence* (2016) by Godfrey Frank Singer, whose analysis tackles the origin of the genre up to the 18th century, moving across the geographical borders of Italy, France and the US. By focusing on short forms in contemporary e-pistolary, this work, which is also part of a broader study on the influence of new technologies on printed literature, also diverges in purpose from another recent volume, *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction* (2018), a collection of essays edited by Maria Löschnigg, Rebekka Schuh that includes "E-Mail Epistlemologies" by Thomas O. Beebee, who briefly touches on four case studies among which is Beaumont's *e A novel* (2000). Beebee, in trying to cover as diverse works as S. Paige Baty's *e-mail trouble* (1999), a confessional posthumous book blending poetry, autobiography, diary and prose, and *The Daughters of Freya* by Michael Betcherman and David Diamond (not a book but rather a series of 116 e-mails sent to readers' Yahoo inboxes), only briefly touches on email novels as a form and reduces Beaumont's debut novel to a satire whose mere novelty is that "email allows the characters to do it as a form of self-portraiture, which may be seen as an inversion of the humanistic self-portrait" (2018, 218). E-novels in book form never completely erase their bond with their more traditional counterparts. Rather, they play with the genre ironically or subtly, working on the discontinuities between the two, although it would be reductive to discuss them as mere parodies, since they are challenging and disrupting the conventions of different media simultaneously and expressively and hardly ever simply showing a real-world representation.

1. Twenty-first century e-pistolary novels re-shaped

Since the first email novel was released in 1995 as an electronic e-novel,⁶ there have been many narrative experiments both on- and off-line and an increasing number of authors have worked on the "intersemiotic translation or transmutation" of virtual reality into the white pages of a book "by means of signs of nonverbal sign system" (Jakobson 1959, 114), that is, exploiting a variety of typo-graphic and layout solutions.

Among the first to successfully combine literary discourse with the new communication tools was the Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland who describes the new generation of computer-maniacs in their new job environment in *Microserfs* and ten years later with a new fiction, a sort of update, namely *J-Pod*. Both novels are based on diary entries and various other computer-mediated messages and e-textualities that imitate the world wide web graphics and the intensive communicative habitat computers and electronic devices create for users. No longer numerical engines or mere word processors, computers and mobile devices are

in this research that is part of a broader investigation on the influence of the new technologies and new media on printed fiction.

⁶ It is Carl Steadman's *Two solitudes* (1995) a short work of fiction delivered through actual emails which readers could access only "upon subscription to the service", as the author announced, that would entitle them to receive "over the course of several weeks, carbon copies of messages exchanged between two persons" to their email inbox. Almost ten years later, in 2004 Eric Brown created *Intimacies*, an electronic work of literature based on emails and from a plot perspective drawing from *Pamela*, the 18th-century work by Samuel Richardson. Brown renamed *Intimacies DEN, Digital Epistolary Novel*, a format he turned into a trademark and a software.



multifunctioning machines “for generating images, reworking photographs, holding videoconferences, and providing animation and special effects for film and television” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 23).

Another work focusing on the communication-intensive age is by British author Jeanette Winterson namely *The PowerBook* (2000). The author tries her hand at romance via the internet with a series of short, apparently independent narrations addressed to an imaginary *you*, i.e. a virtual reality lover/reader but also customer by a so-called *language customier* or narrator. Finally, in 2011, willing to explore “serialization on Twitter,”⁷ Pulitzer Prize author Jennifer Egan wrote *Black Box* a short story based on tweets alone—i.e. 140-character text messages. Labelled as science fiction, *Black Box* was first published in a serialized form in *The New Yorker's* online twitter account starting in May 2012 and shortly afterwards published as a printed book.

Re-mediation in the above novels is never just the re-thinking of one form nor a mere borrowing or adaptation of techniques and content, rather it is a fertile dialogue between different media where what is incorporated or presented anew in one medium is typically construed or accessed differently: “The work becomes a mosaic in which we are simultaneously aware of the individual pieces and their new, inappropriate setting”, (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, 47). The process of reading and writing is thus foregrounded as the idea of coding and decoding becomes ambiguous and polysemic: what language is being used (machine or human)? By and to whom is the message addressed? Part of any email is in fact intended to give instructions to the machine, via software or the application so any human addressee is always second in the communication process as such. One last question arises: within what channels and relative conventions is the exchange taking place and, therefore, how should it be conceived of and understood by the implied reader? Nowadays, we tend to access communication applications and software both from mobile and desktop devices, but until the mid-2000s this service was not available for all devices and not as widespread as it is today.

The anglophone-focused selection of literary works will now be briefly introduced in separate sections covering the range of short-form literary correspondence. The last section before the conclusion, which is longer, is devoted to Beaumont's second novel.

2. Short forms and slogans in Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* (1995) and *J-Pod* (2006)

Originally serialized in *Rolling Stone* (Tate 2007, 15) magazine, the *Microserfs* narrative came to light in similar publishing circumstances as those of Victorian three-deckers, i.e. serialised instalments, and was eventually re-organised into seven chapters, mainly built on diary entries all introduced by day-of-the-week titles. With its focus on a group of twenty- and thirty-something programmers, coders and bug checkers, *Microserfs* intersperses the main journal-like narration with recurring computer-mediated short forms that Dan, the main character and narrator, intertwines with his electronic recollections of single days. Dan's universe “consists of home, Microsoft, and Costco” (*Microserfs* 1995,3). Home is better described as a “group house” shared with “five other Microsoft employees: Todd, Susan, Bug Barbecue, Michael, and Abe” (*Microserfs* 1995, 3) or as “House of Wayward mobility” where “moss and algae tend to colonize what surfaces they can” and “the dormlike atmosphere precludes heavy-duty interior design ideas” (*Microserfs* 1995, 7). As in Coupland's first novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), *Microserfs* “displays a heightened sense of textuality and an awareness of its status as material object” (Tate 2007, 11). By relying on “distinctive typography”, an array of embedded texts stands out from the main narrative mode—i.e. there are different font types and sizes, with upper and lower cases used expressively, and layout variants to mark shifts in text typologies and addresser/addressee combinations. Yet, as opposed to *Generation X* and its “hectic use of paratextual material—including a witty postmodern glossary and acerbic cartoons” (Tate 2007, 11), short forms in *Microserfs* directly contribute to the plot and its development. They range from emails in bold to commercial documents, such as “a rough draft of a product description” (*Microserfs* 1995, 70) and to full pages of numbers, letters and symbols showing some tech-worker's experiment in compressing the code that results in an encrypted message which starts like this: “%43]505)%1\$]3D=%5D526524Y'OT]24D5” (*Microserfs* 1995, 20) and goes on for a whole page. There are other inserts and even snail mail excerpts feature alongside renderings of actual meetings such as a “venture capital meeting” the report of which is presented on the page in a fashion that is reminiscent of that of a theatre play, but it is clearly not a perfect match despite the fact that lines of direct quotations from each speaker are shown either followed by or introduced by, so to speak, *stage*

⁷ J. Egan in ‘Author's note’, *Black Box*, Kindle edition 2012.



directions describing the speaker's attitude or tone (in brackets). Short forms in this novel are frequently used be it for tables and various types of bulleted lists—for instance, a list of dream categories, of idle items littering the living room, of labels, of living things on the Microsoft Campus, of coding names, of books etc. and each fulfils a different narrative or characterization need.

Language is as much an expressive tool and a medium as a topic to ponder over throughout the novel while comparing or intentionally creating overlaps between computer coding and human speech/writing practices: “Language is such a technology” (*Microserfs* 1995, 174) says Dan. Indeed, Dan's narrative often turns into hybrid stretches such as the one in “A few minutz l8r I bumpd in2 Karla”; or in “It wuz so odd 4 both uv us, C- ng Ech uthr outside the otmeel walz + oystz karpetng uv the ofiss” (*Microserfs* 1995, 18). In 1995, this was an anticipation of the sort of *written-speech* which was later to be commonly employed in informal short text messages as well as private emails. Such wording within the plot is presented by the main character Dan as his friend's invention: “a ‘Prince Emulator’—a program th@ converts whatever you write into a title of a song by Minnesotan Funkmeister, Prince” (*Microserfs* 1995, 18). In this fiction, Coupland continues the “appropriation of techniques from other media” (Lainsbury 1996, 230), he started in *Generation X*, so that slogans and software instructions or directions are often presented in what appears as a messy layout or a series of random words coming from, as Dan himself states, the ‘subconscious’ of machines: “What if machines right now are like human babies, which have brains but no way of expressing themselves except screaming (crashing)? What would a machine subconscious look like? How does it feed off what we give it? If machines could talk to us, what would they say?” (*Microserfs* 1995, 44). To this end, Dan collects in a file “random words that pop into my head”, and feeds “these words into a desktop file labeled SUBCONSCIOUS” (*Microserfs*, 1995 45). As a result, often the narrative is interrupted and whole pages are filled with this rendering or translation of the machine subconscious that Dan is willing to record. The very first reads as follows: “Personal Computer / I am your personal computer / Hello / Stop / Being / Carbon [...]” (*Microserfs* 1995, 46). Partly experiment, these pages increasingly capture the various visual input and aspect of the digital age, stressing the hyper-communicative environment the characters are immersed in without describing it, rather presenting it as if unmediated while it unfolds within the human-machine interaction. Some of these seemingly disconnected strings become slogans that in turn, as Tate argues, “consciously echo Jenny Holzer's text-based public art” a series of “defamiliarizing slogans” by the American conceptual artist that have “appeared in various civic, commercial, religious and other shared public spaces since the 1970s; her words, enigmatic and direct, have been printed on paper, transformed into LED signs and carved into marble” (Tate 2007, 11). Coupland's attempt is aimed at mapping out not just one medium interacting with another but the complexity of mid-90s hypermediated ecology. If on the one hand language can become code and on the other hand computer coding can modify language, it is equally acceptable that at some point, as Dan puts it, “code is the architecture of the 90s” (*Microserfs* 1995, 23) in a fragmented, flexible, all-inclusive, and osmotic idea that mixes up human expressions, media communication and artistic *output*, building what resembles more and more a posthuman identity. The result is not chaos, rather a bidirectional remediation: “Many remediations are reciprocal in the sense that they invite us to imagine each medium as trying to remediate the other. In such cases, deciding which medium is remediating and which is remediated is a matter of interpretation” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 105).

Despite the many short text types, in *Microserfs* brevity is also achieved through a frequent use of the subject pronoun *we*. From the very first lines of the journal, the main character Dan writes from his first-person-perspective and on behalf of the group he belongs to, so that the boundaries between his own individual experience and that of the “other five Microsoft employees” he shares work, home and life with are blurred into a new collective identity that feels, interacts, believes as a unity against *the outer space*. Coupland started using the *we*-narrative, the first-person-plural point of view, in *Generation X*, to condense the three main characters' attitudes and their leanings into the main narrator, Dag, who acted beyond the role of narrator as a sort of *spokesperson* of generation X—i.e. highly educated young people, running away from hyper-consumerist culture and well-paid hi-tech jobs. In that first novel, by mixing style and content, the pronoun “*we*” is a desirable goal for a new status that is away from loneliness as much as a good excuse to not fall into the conventional path of setting up a *standard family*; thus saying *we* in *Generation X* is a constant reminder of the three characters as runaways and a statement against those, for instance Dag's brother, who engage with and abide by the mainstream culture, conventions, and attitudes. *J-Pod* “specifically revisits the new technology-



focus of *Microserfs*—indeed it has been marketed as ‘*Microserfs for the age of Google*’” (Tate, 2007, 163)—and shows a narrator’s diary as well as the we-narrative mode—“The six of us were silent, but for our footsteps” (*J-Pod* 2006,15). The main first-person singular narrative often turns into a collective one for a better representation of new forms of the family unit or grouping that may be less conventional but equally offer a comfort zone and a *tribe* to fit in.

In both *Microserfs* and *J-Pod*, the accumulation of short forms is as much the result of the main journal frame as the outcome of an intentionally metanarrative practice focused on the language and media revolution of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and coding/programming that results in all sorts of abbreviations such as semi-phonetic spelling, morphosyntactic contractions as in spoken informal language, various non-standard spellings, interjections, discourse markers, and emulated prosody through ideograms, symbols, asterisks and other expressive typo-graphic tools. In this sense, short thus conveys more in such concise forms not less, as brevity of all types is overall providing a richer, more intertwined and complex conceptualisation of contemporary exchanges that are construed as conversation-like forms in writing not unlike the way the epistle was understood during the Renaissance when “A letter was considered merely a speech conveyed in writing, defined as ‘talking on paper’ or ‘the converse of the pen’” (Beebee 1999, 1). What is novel in these exchanges is the posthuman condition they present while characters correspond with actual friends and colleagues while they are also in touch with never-met figures only known through nicknames and/or entertaining a human-machine correspondence, which eventually is part of one and the same ecology but involves the handling of human- and machine languages, registers, grammars and rules.

3. Jeanette Winterson’s *The PowerBook* (2000): narration as ‘virtual’ communication

A complex structure made up of twenty-five chapters split into two different typologies is displayed in Winterson’s *The PowerBook*. A virtual correspondence. Written in standard language but presented as a digital exchange, this novel is governed by two narrative modes made distinct using upper- and lower-case titles for each chapter—this is also the only paratextual device for an otherwise standard if fragmented fictional work. The lower-case-titled paragraphs are always very short—one or two pages at most—and their function is clearly one of mediation between the different virtual love stories – i.e. the longer chapters—that the narrator / *language customier*, offers to the virtual *you-reader-correspondent*. Winterson plays on the ambiguity of the very idea of virtual communication: firstly, a narrative is by default a *virtual* (not in presence) communication both with the internal addressee(s) as an email exchange is not a form of instant-message and with the external one(s), i.e. the actual reader. Secondly, the word virtual has for long referred to any exchange mediated by a digital device or a computer to describe what was originally perceived as something happening outside the actual real-life experience. Thirdly, a computer-mediated practice is about a *virtual* co-presence achieved in spite of the physical locations of the correspondents, whereas it has been proved that all activities carried out through the web are emotionally and cognitively comparable to actual vis-a-vis ones. Finally, *virtual* stands for any fictitious identity generated, for example, to anonymously engage with others in an online community, a forum, or in PC or videogames played collectively via the internet. This idea of acting out via a fictitious, hidden or *en travesti* persona (a sort of undercover identity) reconnects in a loop what happens within typical narrative worlds and within the web as people often interact using nicknames or fake profiles. Each time there is an identity shift, a new agenda is taken on and identity itself becomes a medium adjusted to a smoother acting out of roles and aimed at achieving specific outcomes within a specific community.

In Winterson’s work both communication and language constantly imply asking the reader to decode ambiguities of meaning and figures of speech, or to detect intertextual associations, quotes and forms of parodies.

The first two lower-case-titled chapters announce a fresh start, namely a new email in the inbox, by a repeated opening formula: “It’s night. I’m sitting at my screen. There’s an e-mail for me. I unwrap it. It says” (*The PowerBook* 2000, 3). On the contrary, the third of the lower-case-titled chapters (“virtual road” [2000, 71]) marks a dramatic turning point, a loss and the need to start a treasure-hunt, that is, the hunting down of the runaway lover: “Night. / I logged on to the Net. There were no e-mails for me. You had run out on the story. Run out on me. Vanished.”, (*The PowerBook* 2000, 73). The loss expressed in these lines suggests that the *you-reader-lover* has turned into an active doer and, thus liberated, now moves freely and hides in *storyness*. The next upper-case-titled chapter is “SEARCH” (2000, 75). From this point onwards, the digital storyteller,



the one that promised to tell stories that would transform the “you,” forges love stories inspired by some of the “great and ruinous lovers” of the past⁸ and uses them as a searching tool, as if there had been a role reversal and now the hide-and-seek game calls for the storyteller to adapt or re-tell old stories in an attempt to find where – i.e. in which love story – the *you-reader-lover* is hiding. Loss and failure alongside the hide and seek game are there again in another chapter, namely “open it” (*The PowerBook* 2000, 93): “Night. The search engines are quiet. / I keep throwing the stories overboard, like a message in a bottle, hoping you’ll read them, hoping you’ll respond. / You don’t respond. [...]”, (2000, 95). The quest is once again re-shaped in an epistolary exchange where the correspondents seem to carry on talking, so to speak, through the very collection of short stories interlinked by the many possible ways love can make two people close, even *virtually* close—that is temporarily or flirtatiously close.

As is often the case in her work, Winterson plays on the polysemic nature of language and its many functions; without *coding* new rules or strategies, the author stays loyal to traditional narrative layout and techniques, playing on the intricacies and resonances storytelling and the very idea of corresponding can generate mainly through shortcuts that are *figures of speech*—often metaphors but also similes and metonymies. Any fragment is thus a narrative/communicative adventure both dependent on and independent from previous and subsequent parts and the book reads as much as a collection of short stories as a collection of emails which the narrator-editor offers as both a symbolic and a hyper realistic frame as well as a set of instructions.

4. From the page to Twitter in a word-limited pattern: Jennifer Egan’s *Black Box* (2012)

In a very short interview in *The New Yorker*, writer Jennifer Egan explained what made her “structure her story in paragraphs of a hundred and forty characters or fewer” (*The New Yorker*, May 24, 2012). *Black Box* was in fact firstly handwritten in bulletin form in a Japanese notebook that had eight rectangles on each page, but the reasons why Egan opted for such a short form are related to several of her “long-standing fictional interests” (*Black Box*, “Author’s note” - Kindle edition).

One involves fiction that takes the form of lists; stories that appear to be told inadvertently, using a narrator’s notes to him or herself. My working title for this story is “Lessons Learned,” and my hope was to tell a story whose shape would emerge from the lessons the narrator derived from each step in the action, rather than from descriptions of the action itself. Another long-term goal of mine has been to take a character from a naturalistic story and travel with her into a different genre. [...] I’d also been wondering about how to write fiction whose structure would lend itself to serialization on Twitter. This is not a new idea, of course, but it’s a rich one—because of the intimacy of reaching people through their phones, and because of the odd poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty characters. I found myself imagining a series of terse mental dispatches from a female spy of the future, working undercover by the Mediterranean Sea. I wrote these bulletins by hand.

“The story was originally nearly twice its present length; it took me a year, on and off, to control and calibrate the material into what is now ‘Black Box’,” concludes Jennifer Egan in the interview reinforcing the idea that brevity was key to her writing plan.

The experimental nature of this science fiction, as noted by the author, is based on a very contemporary online social media (OSM) – i.e. Twitter – but the shading of one genre into another that informs the genesis of this writing and the shift from handwriting to tweets is based on an intimate correspondence, a sort of diary or a

⁸ Chapter 7, the 4th of the lower-case-titled ones, presents the “great and ruinous lovers” (as the title says) in a very interesting list that starts and ends with couples who were turned famous by literary works, such as Lancelot and Guinevere and Dante’s Paolo and Francesca but includes many more. The list features other famous literary characters like Tristan and Isolde, Siegfried and Brünnhilde, Romeo and Juliet, Cathy and Heathcliffe from the Victorian novel *Wuthering Heights*. However, some of the couples are real-life figures somehow turned epic characters either due to a controversial love-story or a popularly recognised passionate love affairs, such as Vita and Violet, that is, Violet Trefusis and the poet Vita Sackville-West, who Virginia Woolf included in her novel *Orlando*; the love relationship between Oscar (Wilde) and Bosie (Alfred Bruce Douglas), Burton and Taylor, Abelard and Heloise.



set of “narrator’s notes to him or herself” (*Black Box*, “Author’s note” - Kindle edition). The reflexive nature of the correspondence does not prevent it from retaining a strong dialogic dynamic. Addressed to a shifting “you,” the correspondence is not exactly a diary or a self-address only and indeed the “you” is both singular and plural, intra- and extra-diegetic. As a matter of fact, the second person narrative is addressing other prospective secret agents within the plot and clearly the implicit reader in that *doubly-deictic* “you,” convincingly discussed by narratologist David Herman (1994) as a breach of the border between intra- and extradiegetic level.

The serialized aspect of the narrative and its epistolary intent is further confirmed as the novel is meant as “a series of terse mental dispatches from a female spy of the future” recorded while living through a first-hand experience and to be used by would-be citizen agents. Egan’s reliance on short form—tweets in particular—is also associated with the prospect of reaching readers in instalments directly through their mobile phones and being able to exploit the “odd poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty characters” (*Black Box*, “Author’s note” - Kindle edition).

As a book (and e-book), *Black Box* is organized into forty-seven chapters each made up of four/five sentences—gradually longer, up to 20 sentences each—all of which are constituted of single lines strictly of a hundred and forty characters or fewer. Despite such technical constraints, the syntax varies a great deal and ranges from simple to complex sentences and from compound to non-finite ones. Reliance on ellipsis of different sorts is strong and yet a high investment in cohesion is to be appreciated through the widespread use of repetitions, reiteration and the exploitation of keywords—some morphologically altered words, stemming from the same root, are used in different grammar functions and through collocations various meanings of the very same word are activated, thus creating irony and ambiguity. To account for the varied syntax and richness in lexico-grammatical structures, it is worth noting the presence of dialogues and fragments of spoken discourse, which are used within the plot to analyse the pragmatic function of specific lines pronounced under specific circumstances (speech events and speakers’ implicatures), a strategy that allows the writer to fulfil the how-to nature of the narrative, that is, providing instructions and guidelines for the most efficient behaviour or response.

5. From short forms to shortenings and abbreviations: Beaumont’s *e² A novel*, a case study

Far from matching any of the traditional letter novel features, *e² A novel* refashions them all. It is set in a 21st-century British urban working environment, it does not deal with romance (a typical theme of the genre), and displays born-digital correspondence as a daily practice of interaction between people working together, on one side, and, on the other, among family components. As opposed to traditional or even modern epistolarity, *e² A novel* can be regarded as an example of the subgenre of office-bound fiction⁹ as almost all exchanges take place during standard nine-to-six working hours and are among people at their workplace. The second main plot is family life where the parents are two very busy professionals (Janice and David Crutton) dealing with their two teenagers, a girl and a boy. In Beaumont’s novel, the topic of love is dealt with as an aside but is in no way central to the two main plots, which are more concerned with individual dreams, ambitions, and daily chores. Romance, love and feelings are presented through a sceptical perspective or offered as a parody in what turns out to be a display of the most frequent types of contemporary relationships. Beyond the two main plots, the novel articulates through a complex array of intertwined subplots that include a detective *whodunit* format about a serial office thief. The latter sub-plot becomes particularly prominent as clues about the theft are spread throughout the book by way of another short form, i.e. eBay listings, which are cleverly interweaved with the other e-messages in a *montage* that eventually lead readers to work out the identity of the crime perpetrator.

Traditionally, the *epistle* is a bridge or distance-breaker linking those who are (or are kept) apart. Untypically, in *e² A novel*, digital correspondence is displayed as the main interaction of those who are by bond, work or necessity closer in daily life. Most of the time, there is no actual physical distance that the various message types, i.e. email, SMS or MSN, cover in Beaumont’s book. Ultimately, it is the *virtual story* (as it is fiction but it is also mainly happening through the internet) of communication-hungry people who live in a speeded-up age in which work- and family-life easily overlap, and digital devices nurture a frenzy of communication per se that

⁹ Office-bound fiction became popular in the 90s with Douglas Coupland’s novels based on computer geek life, i.e. *Generation X. Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), *Microserfs* (1995), *J-Pod* (2006).



fulfils a heuristic and epistemic function—i.e. the intensive *talking* is a way to filter the environment, to speculate and be guided in the investigation and solution of problems.

As opposed to a typical paper epistle, in the e-novel an email can be used and is perceived as either a formal written document addressed to other professionals or as a colloquial exchange among colleagues, between husband and wife, or friends. E-mails can shift from a one-word to a longer text, namely from a formal business letter to the brief exchange of a colloquial phone call. “In only three decades, email has grown from a government-initiated, academically-implemented system for sharing information into an international alternative to long distance phone calls, inter-office memos, and face-to-face encounters” (Baron 1998, 134). A hybrid textuality by nature, email combines written and spoken register, ranges from the length and formality of a written document to the directness of a memo within a company, from a very formal invitation to an informal personal note and becomes the main channel across different social and age groups in a new form of realism or rather hyper-realism.

Since email replaces a wide range of textualities, adjusting written texts to text-to-be-spoken or vice versa, email format refashions traditional registers and somewhat re-mediate the very idea of written language, going back to its earlier purpose: “Writing evolved for a range of distinct social functions; it was not primarily a new way of doing old things with language. In other words, it came into being precisely so that new registers could be created [...] what emerges is a new range of functional variation, which leads to the emergence of configurations of semantic and lexico-grammatical patterns that then come to be recognised as characteristic of writing” (Halliday 1985, 44).

However, this digital experimentation within writing is still unstable and difficult to match with a standard. In the last 15/20 years, as it has become available to the general public, email is the main computer-mediated communication (CMC) and yet there is still no widely accepted convention, set of rules, or “historically grown etiquette” (Frehner 2008, 42) under which standard and non-standard language and style choices can be detected. In spite of the many *netiquette* rules and guidelines that have been published since Shapiro and Anderson (1985), this way of communication makes use of the features of unplanned discourse through constantly evolving non-conventional spelling techniques that aim as much at brevity and speeded-up transfer as at concealing the medium and thus wanting to compensate for the lack of prosody. In her corpus-based linguistic analysis of private emails, text messages and multimedia messages, Frehner (2008, 52) has described some rules and classified some of the most frequent non-conventional spellings that range widely from lexical reductions to ad hoc abbreviations: “letter or number homophones, g-clippings, consonant clusters, omission of apostrophes, emulated prosody or onomatopoeic exclamatory spelling, phonological approximation, syntactic reduction and other non-standard shortenings.” In addition, emails, especially private ones, feature a creative and expressive use of punctuation, capital letters, symbols and emoticons, together with idiomatic, slang or sociolects that imitate or call to mind speech.

Apart from letters being replaced by emails, other e-messages contribute both to re-model the story development and to show the re-shaping of contemporary communicative practice—i.e. mobile phone text messages (SMS), instant messages (MSN), blog entries, that is, posts and comments, eBay listings and voicemails shown as transcripts. All these short e-text typologies are the communication tools through which about 70 correspondents (77 senders) interact in *e² A novel*. Such a polyphonic e-correspondence is fictitiously multimodal as it evokes a processing of the various e-texts both via mobile phones and via computers,¹⁰ both via web browsers, blog pages or emailing service, while at work and when on the move. However, it is worth remembering that in Beaumont’s second e-novel emails are the only electronic messages that can be sent or received either through mobile phone or computer-mediated communication (CMC), whereas the other e-texts in the novel, i.e. MSN, blogs and eBay listings can only be exchanged via CMC. On the contrary, SMS is a mobile-only communication technology (at least in the novel) that calls forth a shift in the medium and therefore in time and space whenever characters are using it. Interestingly this channel-swapping in Beaumont’s novel is rendered through layout and graphic variations, avoiding any narrator’s interventions (but for chapter titles) and thus further enhancing immediacy (Beaumont 2010, 12-13 and 15).

¹⁰ When Beaumont’s novel was published, social media and the most recent apps were not as popular as they are now, and some had not even been launched yet. In addition, some of the current communication tools were in their early days thus operating only either via mobile or via computer but not accessible from both devices.



From: **Janice Crutton**
To: Noah Crutton
Sent: 20 December 2008, 15.12
Subject: List

Since you are intent on re-creating last summer's Glastonbury music festival behind a locked and barricaded bedroom door, this is the only way I have of communicating with you. A to-do list:

- 1 Please turn your music down.
- 2 If you have dirty laundry in there, chuck it onto the landing[...]
- [...]
- 10 TURN THE BLOODY MUSIC DOWN!

Mum x

MSN:

NoahsDark: jus got e from mum
Rialto: woss her want??
NoahsDark: sez turn musik down
Rialto: she sad. u listening 2 dethrush? [...]

SMS:

Mum: Where are you?
Tam: Shopping 4 your krizzy prezzy Why?
Mum: Dad and I are going out. Need you home by 6
Tam: Cool—xxx

As shown, SMS and MSN layouts are fairly similar, yet turn-taking is achieved through alternating nicknames¹¹ pointing, if subtly, to their difference: characters' familiar names are usually shorter in SMS as compared to those used in MSN exchanges as in the following examples (251; 254):

MSN:

Kazoo: Where are you?
Dong: Waiting to board. Why?
Kazoo: Just checking you haven't done runner.
Dong: Have you no faith?
Kazoo: Too much bravado. Don't trust it.
[...]

SMS:

Kazu: You on board?
Don: Yes
Kazu: OK?
Don: Perfect. Stewardess giving me more comp champagne
Kazu: Drunk?
Don: A little

¹¹ In the novel the veiled nature of nicknames follows patterns that support the reader's inferring process without disclosing too much: some nicknames are initials others play with phonological approximation; some others are the results of a contraction between the initials of first and family name. There are some less obvious nicknames that result from more specific aspects of characters' identity and/or behaviour, typically used within a relationship.



Kazu: Go easy
Don: Got to switch phone off. Stewardess says plane will crash if I don't. Oh God, old nightmares returning. Get me off this fucking plane. It's going to crash, I know it [...]

The channel-swapping, in particular to SMS or to MSN, comes across as an increased number of colloquial patterns or unplanned discourse features, whereby certain word classes are left out—e.g. typically auxiliary verbs, pronouns (especially *I*), and other functional words such as articles and prepositions. Non-conventional spelling ranges very widely and together with punctuation or lack of it—the use of capital or repeated letters, numbers, symbols, asterisks and emoticons—are aimed at compensating brevity with expressiveness and at overcoming the limits of time and technology.¹²

Presented in a simplified layout, partly fictional and partly customized, email is adapted to the page¹³ and is a re-thinking of an unfixed experience to a great extent dependent on software and users' skills/choices—the following table compares and contrasts email layouts as presented in *e² A novel* and in Beaumont's previous email-only work *e A novel*, (2000):

Email layouts in <i>e A novel</i> (2000) and <i>e² A novel</i> (2010)	
<i>e A novel</i> (2000, 1 - 2)	<i>e² A novel</i> (2010, 121; 436)
<p>David Crutton - 3/1/00, 8.27am</p> <p>to... All Departments</p> <p>cc... james_f_weissmuller@millershanks-ny.co.usa</p> <p>re... NEW MILLENNIUM - NEW HEIGHTS</p> <p>First, a happy new Millennium to each and every one of you. Thank you also for sacrificing your bank holidays today to come in and begin the bid for the Coca-Cola business. [...]</p>	<p>From: David Crutton</p> <p>To: All Staff</p> <p>Sent: 8 January 2009, 12.22</p> <p>Subject: New Business Announcement</p> <p>I am delighted to announce that Galax International Tobacco has appointed us as its lead agency in Europe and the Middle East. [...]</p>
<p>pertti_vanhelden@millershanks-helsinki.co.fin</p> <p>3/1/00, 8.46am (10.46am local)</p> <p>to... david_crutton@millershanks-london.co.uk</p> <p>cc...</p> <p>re... NEW MILLENNIUM - NEW HEIGHTS</p>	<p>From: Pertti Van Helden</p> <p>To: David Crutton</p> <p>Sent: 27 January 2009, 13.14</p> <p>Subject: Re: Phenomenatic coinciment!</p>

¹² As extensively discussed by Frehner, "Text messages are very simple in their format and layout and there is no possibility of underlining single words, using italics, bold letters or colours" (2008, 103). Thus "graphological means" have compensated in text messages (SMS) for "suprasegmental phonological features" (Bergs 2003: 4) as they had done in the first email service.

¹³ Some young adult writers have been more adventurous in devising email layouts and offer a more immediate context to readers, for example James Pope in *Spin the Bottle* (1997) and Michael Rosen in *ChaseR: A Novel in Emails* (2002) renamed *Don't Shoot! Chase R.'s Top Ten Reasons NOT to Move to the Country* for its 2nd edition (2007). It may seem a paradox but other authors of sci-fi epistolary novels, namely Gary Shteyngart in his *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) or Ernest Cline in *Ready Player One* (2011) have been less daring in designing emails, online chats or other MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon or Domain) and have either re-shaped them as standard letters or offered a tame version of a theatre play layout.



Your email I think is coming to me in Helsinki by mistake, but it's notwithstanding fun to be reading about chums in London. [...]	You are as hilarious as the usuals, Dave! Your latest e-mailing is reminiscing me of the time I come Miller Shanks London for Euro CEO conferences and you tell taxi driver take me to the Tower Hamlet for the proper Cockney welcome. [...]
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Though fictional, Beaumont's email format provides the expected functional elements that distinguish introductory information (header) from the message (body) and the optional signature as a fixed set (similar to that of the business letter) that is "dictated by the mailer software [and] has become increasingly standardised over the past twenty years" (Crystal 2001, 94). The sender's address, the receiver's address, the *date/dateline*, and the *reference* or subject line guide the reader in the polyphonic narration that is the result of a clever if complex montage. So, for example, in *e² A novel*, addresses are not *addresses* at all nor are they email-addresses; they are replaced by proper names and the sender's is always in boldface—a marked choice that belongs to the paratextual elements showing turn-taking and introducing the many characters (as mentioned, more than seventy), avoiding any direct narrative intervention and too much struggling with who's-who on the reader's part. However, in working hard to make the surface of the medium disappear, ironically "the artist's success at effacing his process, and thereby himself" becomes "a mark of his skill and therefore of his presence", (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 25). Beyond montage the series of e-messages is organized under twenty-one titles that offer yet another layer of communication through other very short and elliptical phrases that highlight the day of the week and the mood of that day. Paratextual elements also contribute to communication and hints at the hidden perspective—the seeing through—that narrator/editor as creator and external reader as voyeur share. Both control space from a single vantage point and "manipulate the world itself, because the mathematization of space makes the context or medium transparent and provides immediate access to the world", as argued by Bruno Latour, (Bolter and Grusin 2000, footnote 2, 24)

At first glance, the *dateline* and the *subject line* serve as a linear plot development and yet whenever emails alternate with other e-texts, any email dateline also provides for the time lapse of the other e-messages were sent and may even highlight a time shift backwards (as on page 246). In addition, if not left blank, the subject in the header "usually contains a brief description or the keyword of the message and can thus be used as a contextualisation cue to make intertextual references" (Frehner 2008, 41). Another standard shortening "Re:", i.e. *Reply* in the subject line, is "very useful especially if the threads get longer and helps to contextualise the message by maintaining the reference object" (Frehner 2008, 41) and distinguishing between direct replies and messages with similar subject but different addressees or with multiple addressees that imply a potential series of replies. Oftentimes, though, the subject line is not indicative of the main topic of a conversation that might have dragged on and moved into some other issue of discussion. The main topic might also not be mentioned in the subject line and instead be replaced by a word or a homophone string of letters for a mood either of anger or happiness. ("From: Paula Sterling / To: Dotty Podidra / Sent: 20 January 2009, 10.01 / Subject: Aagh!" [Beaumont 2010, 250]).

If *salutation* and farewell or *complimentary close* are often left out, shortened or customized to become more expressive through punctuation or symbols—e.g. "Milt xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx" (Baumont 2010, 244)—*signature* is exploited as the *addresser's identification device* used to various ends, e.g. characterization purposes, as a tool to achieve irony (Beaumont 2010, 11-12), but also intra-diegetically to soften a harsh tone – as for instance in an exchange between mother, Janice, and her son Noah (Beaumont 2010, 9).

6. SMS, MSN and eBay listings

As already mentioned, though email dominates the narrative in *e² A novel*, other short forms largely contribute to it. This proliferation of short forms in the novel exhibits a "change of scale" (Fowler, 1982, 170), with a sound preference in its internal structure for brachylogia and a frequent shift from one communication tool to the other—i.e. SMS and MSN but also eBay listings. "Text messaging is, technically speaking, a written/graphic way of communicating, despite its being conceptually rather spoken- and proximity-oriented", (Bergs 2003, 58) whereas MSN is an instant messenger service developed by Microsoft (1999) that allowed (the service was terminated in 2013) anyone with a Microsoft account to sign in and communicate in real time with other registered users. In SMS and MSN the preference for brevity in Beaumont's fragmented narrative discourse is



achieved through “fingered speech” as American linguist John McWhorter (TED Talk, 2013) has renamed texting, which entails further reduction and expressiveness. The *writing* of these proximity-oriented e-messages (mainly SMS, MSN) employs a range of opaque condensed forms: from abbreviations to clippings and acronyms¹⁴ and “despite the fact that it involves the brute mechanics of something that we call writing”, is enabling us to “write the way we talk” by way of orality markers, syntax *nextness* (parataxis or clausal/phrasal organization), and pragmatic adjacency—see SMS exchange between Kazu and Don (Beaumont 2010, 10). Capital letters and standard punctuation are often omitted in both SMS and MSN, and yet words spelt with upper case are very frequent examples of “graphological means” that “emulate suprasegmental phonological features” (Bergs, 2003, 60)—that is orality and prosody. Capital letters are interpreted as shouting in computer-mediated communication and often used for that end, to stress the intended meaning, or to convey precise feelings as of surprise or worry: “sjdG: [...] Everything OK? / MiltShake: So not OK. / sjdG: What’s up, sweetz? / MiltShake: Outraged!!!! / sjdG: (Is it DC again? / MiltShake: Much worse!!! / sjdG: OMG!! What??” [Beaumont 2010, 103]). Similarly, repeated punctuation often marks the tone of a phrase, clause, sentence—“SMS / Bex: You awake tam?? Has your mum killed you?? Does she know about tongue stud?? Txt me asap!!”, (Beaumont 2010, 19). Repeated punctuation as in “Don’t you get it????” are used as emulated prosody to convey anger, and/or surprise or shock as in “OMG!!!!!!!!!!” (2010, 105); or even curiosity and impatience as in “And??” (2010, 219): “multiple question marks or exclamation points signal the reader to intensify the degree of rising intonation in a question or loudness of an assertion”, (Lee 2003, 320). In addition to non-standard punctuation, a frequent use of special characters or symbols for emphasis can be noticed—see the use of asterisks as in “*Dangerously*” (2010, 48); “overtly” (2010, 220) and emoticons “:) :)” at the end of a sentence. Last but not least, non-standard spelling may introduce pronunciation variants or onomatopoeic spelling like in “sooo naive” (2010, 350); possible pragmatic effect as in “Huh? or “phooey” (2010, 350)—a word uttered or screamed in frustration, annoyance, or anger—or interjections and discourse markers such as “ouch” (2010, 194), “aaagh!” (2010, 351), “yikes” (2010, 352), or “Duh!!” (2010, 405). At times non-standard spelling is an explicit attempt to approximate the phonetic value of specific words so “that they represent the specific pronunciation of their user” (Frehner 2008, 59) thus defining an idiolect. Liam O’Keefe, also known as Keef, for example, is a character who gradually becomes a key figure for plot development, and whose idiolect is particularly marked: in MSN, he uses “ya” for “you” (2010, 96) “soz” for “sorry” (2010, 100), “gotta go” for “I’ve got to go” (2010, 152), “lemme” for “let me” (2010, 194). Susi Judge-Davis Gaultier, a minor chatty character nicknamed sjdG in MSN, writes “plz” and “sweetz” (103) thus offering a distinct way of expressing themselves. Abbreviated orthography is also frequent as in the following acronyms “FYI” - for your interest (2010, 48); “LOL” - Laugh Out Loud (2010, 130); “BTW” - by the way (2010, 147; 375); “OMG” - Oh my God” (2010, 217; 345); “IMO” - in my opinion (2010, 363); PTSD - post-traumatic stress disorder (2010, 464). Other shortenings range from non-standard clippings to untypical acronyms, such as “mo” for *moment* (2010, 147), “comp champ” for *complimentary champagne* (2010, 254), “e” for *email* (2010, 349), “v.v.” for *very very* (2010, 487). Syntax relies on omission and elliptical structures, further emphasizing proximity as in “Me lover, not fighter. Saved by arrival of Dimitri” (2010, 194) or in “I am going straight to hell. Do not pass go, do not collect £200” (2010, 219). In dialogic SMS communication as in MSN the correspondence proceeds through adjacency pairs (2010, 242):

SMS:

Mum: Where are you?
Tam: School
Mum: Where in School?
Tam: Science block

In a quasi-proximity and quasi-synchronous communication that erases distance and time (129).

¹⁴ For the sake of clarity, abbreviations include “initialism” when a group of initial letters is used as an abbreviation for a name or expression, each letter being pronounced separately and not as a single word (e.g. UK or BBC). On the other hand, an “acronym” - such as NATO or SARS - is a word formed from the initial parts (letters or syllables or arbitrary parts) of a name. Finally, “truncation” is any abbreviation of a word consisting only of the first part of the word.



MSN:

DottyPod: You there?
Paula86: I'm here.
DottyPod: JC looking over your shoulder?
Paula86: Safe.
DottyPod: Have our bosses flipped again?
Paula86: Looks like it. [...]

Short forms thus become synonyms of close both relative to time and space as well as from a relational perspective.

To conclude, eBay listings are the odd one out as they are the only non-bidirectional communication short forms in the e-novel, they break the correspondence flow and therefore the narrative. Also, they remain anonymous (81).

eBay.co.uk:

2 leather beanbags

Item specifics: two large bean bags upholstered in tan leather. Supremely comfortable. Would suit family that enjoys casual lounging. Or person with piles.

Current bid: **£5.00**
End time: 9d 12h 05m

Like classified ads, eBay listings show a recurring text pattern with a brief item description, followed by the profile(s) of the would-be buyer(s). Despite their purely informative function, these short entries contain expressive language and are humorous (see last line of the above sample). These entries are not completely isolated items in the entire fiction. Indeed, they are always anticipated by a few words in an earlier email—not necessarily the preceding one—in which what is on sale is described as missing by random characters: “I did come across a couple of anomalies. A Wii console and remote, three Wii games and two leather-upholstered beanbags appear to be missing from the new Creative Romper Room” (2010, 79). Tough unidirectional or monologist in kind, eBay listings are a one-to-many communication tool that could show feedback of some sort—i.e. an increase in the bid or a comment/request. However, in the e-novel, this is not the case as they serve purely as a means of creating the suspense around the office theft. Once the crime gains attention within the workplace, eBay entries increase the tension on the suspect(s) and contribute to the emergence of the detective subplot enriched by a series of threatening emails circulated among “All staff”—unidirectional messages aimed at scaring the criminal—until the case is solved.

7. Conclusion

At first glance, short forms in e-pistolary novels of the twenty-first century may take us back at least graphically to experimental vogues in narrative. In fact, each typo-graphic and layout solution is part of a scheme that seeks to establish a new hybrid register that happens to be *written* but is in fact spoken and is achieved by overcoming the limits of wording by paratextual and non-verbal signs. Less the result of experimental literature, the short forms so far discussed are specimens of the contemporary communication shift we are experiencing in real life. In this re-wording and re-fashioning of communication, short as shown in the examples, often means more, as the semantic of prosody is restored through symbols, mainly punctuation, emoticons and the use of upper- and lower-case.

Short also means richer because, in shifting from one medium to the next, we learn about the characters' relationships via the use of the informal nicknames used in the opening as opposed to the more traditional and formal proper names and signatures, found for example, in business emails. Short means more by evoking the multimodal aspect of contemporary communication as characters frequently swap from one channel to the other, showing the growth of specific social customs in new media. Short means closeness in most cases and hints at privacy and intimacy. In short forms, however, there is also embarrassment, lack of empathy and often



the signs of relationship struggle of sorts. A rhetoric based on shortness favours sociolect, like jargon and slang, and establishes discourse communities through it.

Digital short forms in twenty-first century novels have shown their reliance on effacement of both the author and the medium for the sake of immediacy (acting both on time and narrative device). However, the final impact is indeed controversial as all marked choices actually bring to the fore the author in a variety of roles—editor, narrator, compiler—and offers an overview of the process of writing and conversing within the conventions and strategies of each medium.

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