

John Moore Williams

John Moore Williams discusses his book, **I discover i is an android** (Trainwreck Press, 2008) with Kane X. Faucher



John Moore Williams. Previous manifestations of his work have appeared in *Shampoo #30*, *Jack Magazine*, *Venerable Kittens* and are forthcoming from *Ectoplasmic Metropolis*. He is also an on-and-off fiction, poetry and book review contributor at *Black Heart Magazine*.



Kane X. Faucher currently lives and works in London, Ontario. His activities span academic and creative enterprises, most notably in writing, continental theory, visual art, and music. He currently holds two degrees in philosophy and is working toward his doctorate in Theory and Criticism at the University of Western Ontario.

Kane X. Faucher is an FIMS/MIT Instructor; a freelance writer for *Scene Magazine*; co-editor of *The Raging Face*; co-editor of *The Drill Press*; and serves on the Editorial Board of *Mad Hatter's Review*.

He is the author of *Urdoxa* (2004) *Codex Obscura* (2005) *Fort & Da* (2006), *Calqueform*, *Astrozoica*, *De Incunabliad* (2007) and *Jonkil Dies*, *The Vicious Circulation of Dr Catastrophe* (2008).

Kane X. Faucher: Would it be fair to say that your poetic practice could be called “post-humanist”? How does one write “android-ic” poetry and, just as importantly, does this attempt broker an alliance or further the binary schism between “analog” and “digital” writing (thinking here of the categorical split – or backdoor unity – between the golem and the robot)?

John Moore Williams: I walk in fear of dualisms, Kane.

Would it be fair to call my work “post-humanist”? Well, if I set aside my personal distaste for our contemporary tendency to prologue every term with ‘post’ in order to repossess it, then yes. I mean, I’ve always felt that aesthetic and philosophical history has been dominated by a dialectic of thesis and rejection (which is startlingly Hegelian of me), and I suppose our tendency to “post” everything is a reflection

of that realization, but sometimes I can’t help but wonder if it also reflects a paucity of imagination. Every other movement came up with its own name – why can’t we?

But setting all that aside, I’d say that, yes, you could call my work post-humanist. If humanism was a tendency to advance the secular, the purely human, over the spiritual, I suppose we could think of post-humanism as an increasing concern with the other sorts of consciousness that human culture is developing, fostering, etc. Certainly, in my chapbook, and in my words about it on *Venerable Kittens* (<http://venerealkittens.blogspot.com/2007/05/june-poet.html>), I embrace Bök’s idea that the contemporary language artist needs to take into account these new forms of consciousness, might even need to speak to them as much as to ‘human’ readers. But I think I might prefer a term like neo-humanist simply

because I'm more deeply concerned with the types of consciousness, the senses of identity, that will flourish as a result of our interactions and encounters with said forms of consciousness. It's obvious that contemporary technologies are transforming consciousness of self in much the same way that developments like flight transformed our senses of space and time, and I'm trying to speak to, or maybe even anticipate, those changes. Moving from the analog to the digital certainly initiates a radical transmutation of humanity, but it's not a schism from the older forms. I feel like many people assume there's an unnatural aspect to all human advancements, as if any form of artifice were not, by extension, a product of nature, and I'm repulsed by that idea. To me any form of artifice is just the progression of a process of personification that's been taking place since what we might call the beginning of civilization. Once we made inanimate forces into divine, but essentially human, entities – now we've simply grown up just enough to make the inanimate a bit more like us (and hopefully avoid the traps Shelley, Dick and Herbert suggested might lie in wait at the end of that road).

As for how I approached the composition of androidic poetry, I have to admit that I began with what might be very stereotypical attitudes. One tends to associate the robotic with mathematics, with algorithmic, iterative practices; hence, I tried to think of the most analytically rigorous mode I could think of. Not being much for math, I immediately thought of the anagram as a starting point. It seemed very algorithmic to me, as one begins with a defined function and then creates a number of variable outputs based upon the nature of the input. So I decided that each poem would work as a function with the title defined as the input, and each line being an output of the process of anagrammizing the title. Of course, given that the android is essentially an organic computer, a strict adherence to anagram seemed too rigid, too mechanical. So I then decided to make the anagrammizing process one that was as associative as it was iterative, letting the recombination of letters set by the form of the title suggest new words, deviations from the norm established by the title. The title became a sort of Rorschach blot that I would interpret and re-interpret until the process was, for me, exhausted. I've also related it, at times, to the process of reading a tarot spread, in which the range of possible meanings is set by the initial layout, but varies based upon the reader's interpretation. Thus, I began to view my-

self as much the reader of my book as its writer. For me, making the iterative function into a personal, associative process helped to retain the mathematical element while giving the eventual output a certain amount of 'fuzziness,' a human element obfuscating the elegant rigor of the algorithm.

So, Kane, as you might imagine from the foregoing, I'd say that I'm trying to foster a unity between the analog and digital rather than indicate a radical schism. As the "i" of "I discover..." writes in the prose section of the first poem "I am nothing but a database encased in flesh." I suppose I'm trying to suggest the ways in which our technologized culture has already managed to manufacture a rather 'android-ic' citizen, and that, when we do achieve the creation and/or mass production of androids, these figures will very much resemble ourselves. However, I do think that the ways in which such an 'alien' consciousness might approach language – the ways in which we ourselves might come to view language – will be radically different than the prevailing paradigm in which even fiction must contain easily digestible bits of information, must be easily 'thinkable.' I think that contemporary poetry, by which I mean the so-called 'post-avant' (and not folks like Mr. Collins), is really leading the way in rethinking language, and the android poems are my humble attempt to contribute. But no matter how 'digital,' the work might become, I think that there is, as Brent Cunningham points out in the blurb on my chapbook, a very human element to the book, an almost romanticist side, a feeling that no matter how 'incomprehensible' the poems might get, there's still something to *read out* of them. I'm personally fascinated by this tendency of people to approach even what appears to them as absolute babble with a resolute conviction that there is *meaning* there, and that with enough effort, something can be wrested out of the text. I suppose that's my abiding concern with the function of human consciousness – to see how far out I can go and still have people try to attack the piece as if it means something. I wonder how far along the spectrum between nature and artifice we can place this tendency.

I think your reference to the possible 'backdoor unity' between the robot and the golem is illuminating here. After all, when you think about it, both the robot and the golem are nothing but lumps of inanimate material until they encounter language – or it is

thrust forcibly upon them. The golem is but a clay statue until a word is inscribed upon its brow – until language mediates the translation of mere matter into life. And the robot is the same: nothing but a bundle of circuits and wires and pistons until a programming language shapes electrical energy into a facsimile of life. Despite their distance from each other in time, both homunculi are symbolic of our feelings about ourselves: that without language we'd be nothing but lumps of dumb matter.

KXF: I apologize for invoking golems and cyborgs – it was purely out of selfish creative reasons. But, yes, there is no Hegelian fat lady (Geist) that sings at the end of history, and we all know that the “schoolmen”-designated eras/epochs are fundamentally arbitrary; a sort of short-form convenient nomenclature to carve up history like some sacred cow and validate university courses on that basis. The problem with the prefix “post” is in presupposing that some-x has “ended” and something new-y has magically begun. I doubt Schelling woke up one morning and declared (with pomp and vigour) “Ah, today is Romanticism! So long, Enlightenment.” You are dead to rights on calling out this vile compartmentalizing of history. Besides, what is “post-modern” for some disciplines is temporally different for others. Continuums are much more useful. When we still struggle with much of the same “modernist” problems now, a label like post-modernism or post-humanism seems absurd. We are far beyond abiding by the Will Durant playbook for history. Even some poets are eager to play the “post” card as if to become “more outre than thou.”

We agree on the paucity of “post”-ing. Here we can (re)iterate the dual connotation of what comes after (the “meta” aspect of “post”) and what is lodged firmly in place like an anchor. The “meta” aspect would seem to rely on the same rigidifying categorical fixity as those who are eager to stake their claim in the moment, collapsed into one ego aggrandizement. S/he who declares the end of something wins the prize, much akin to those who impose upon the temporal order their version of the end of history (millenarians, apocalypticists, et al).

In returning to the golem, what you say about the anagram as the rigorously logical starting point as an input seems to resonate with the referentiality of the golem itself, brought to life by that Hebrew word for

life (EMET) and resolved into death by placing the “e” under erasure. Had Wittgenstein constructed a golem out of his own *Tractatus*, it would certainly be marked indelibly without a failsafe mechanism, more akin to the kind of “brass man” that lore attributes to Albertus Magnus’ creative hand. In Wittgenstein’s case, “spare the ladder, spoil the golem.”

The parallel of the anagram and the permutation always stirs in me the same reminiscence; Borges’ story of the Library of Babel which offers up an allegory for the impossibility of generating a single, unified, and totalizing interpretation on the basis of a library that contains every possible permutation of letters in books measuring a homogeneous 410 pages each. Of course, Borges’ narrator muses that it may only be possible to derive the full meaning of the vast and conceptually infinite library if one had the time and access to each book. The Cabalist overtones are not subtle, and the permutations are crunched in order to find god.

What you say about babble and the derivation of meaning is rather astute, and shows fidelity to what Brent Cunningham says about the “human element” to your work. The human element slips in at the very moment where something generated – no matter how much it may be on the order of glossolalia or glyptolalia – comes to be imposed upon by our perhaps inveterate habits as humans to construct an order. If some kind of sequential order cannot be imposed upon the text, then we tend to default to a kind of Aristotelian impulse to categorize where if we cannot understand the particulars, we try to impose a rational understanding of the whole to better reign in those incomprehensible particulars (this is also the Hegelian mode of sacrificing the particular “this” for the fat and largely empty “Begriffe”). In this case, the baffled and confused can still repose under the sign that, yes, this is a book since it has the form of book, its contents are book-like for the most part, etc. Such differences are usually sublimated or sentenced to the slaughter bench of a larger conceptual category, running roughshod over the affirmative and auto-generating difference.

I did notice that you make frequent reference to that flagship of language as being a kind of necessary prerequisite for what we will loosely call “sentience”. Would these “android-ic poems” be an attempt to infuse life into the inanimate? What do you make of

what also appears to be an installed binary distinction between life and non-life? Arguably, zombies do not possess language (as we understand it), but still am-bulate with purpose (perhaps on a quest to acquire language through anthropophagy?).

JMW: Ah, I knew I was dancing into dangerous territory with the “flagship” of language as prerequisite to “sentience” bit. It’s dangerous territory for me for two reasons: One, that it approaches a kind of chicken-or-the-egg teleological argument, in which language somehow creates a thinker *ex nihilo*, thereby implying that language has some kind of Aristotelian pre-existence, that it is somehow written into the fabric of things, whereas I prefer to think of language as being written into the fabric of our biology. What I think is more important than the apparent truth-value of the concept of language as prerequisite to consciousness is that, if language is written into the body, then it is a manifestation of a particular form of sentience, and concretizes said mode. For instance, I have to wonder how the alienation of body from identity implicit in statements like “my arm,” – in which the body and its elements become possessions, rather than manifestations, of the speaking “I” – could possibly be an intrinsic concept. As you can probably tell from the foregoing, this is an area in which I still have nothing but questions, and I think that these questions come out in my work. Simply put, language is the product of sentience – not vice versa – but it is perhaps the most readily tracked spoor of that sentience. While many feel that it makes us distinct from other creatures, I tend to wish to emphasize those elements we share with creatures, and human language is certainly not without its analogues amongst other animals.

I do think that a looping back to the idea of the golem and the robot here is helpful, because, if we accept that they are representations of the human self given consciousness via language, we have to admit that they are fairly poor manifestations of identity. In popular representations, both are but shambling mounds of material requiring direction from an external speaker, and even if capable of generating language themselves, can only do so in a highly constrained manner. And when they do become capable of independent thought (as with Dick’s skinjobs and Herbert’s computers), they become extremely dangerous to the society which created them. If we view society as a manifestation of and structure for language,

then the golem (of whatever technological level), immediately threatens the preconceived notions encapsulated in the language. This suggests that there has to be something else beyond language requisite to the development of a more ‘human’ sentience.

Moving on, then, I’d have to say no, these poems aren’t an attempt to infuse life into the inanimate. They are merely my, no doubt highly inaccurate, attempt to speak for what, to my mind, already possesses a form of sentience, though our standards of language might only render an impoverished picture of that consciousness. They’re also an attempt to speak in a way that represents an already burgeoning form of consciousness, as I suggested above – a mode of thinking developing out of and through emergent technologies. Again, I still think I’m speaking for a human consciousness rather than an ‘inanimate’ one, if only because we can’t help but view an alien sentience through the prism of our own. It’s for this reason that I didn’t worry when my work on the android poems veered away from standard syntactical and semantic norms. Regardless of the possibility for error any imposition of artificial order upon apparent chaos introduces, it’s an attempt that must be made, and, as with any attempt to ‘read’ an aleatoric process, has much to say about the ‘reader.’

I think, though, that the question itself reflects an odd tendency in language and theory surrounding poetry. The question is rather magical, suggesting that I might, through the agency of language, somehow impart consciousness on a new golem (even if only intellectual). I think it’s an all-too-common, and somewhat anachronistic, view, and it forces me to wonder if our thinking about language has really moved as far as we seem to think it has. Granted, it has only been a few hundred years since it was a commonplace to assume that the correct words correctly spoken (or inscribed) might wake a statue to life, but the implication remains that language somehow eclipses the boundary between life and non-life. It’s the same process of personification I spoke of earlier. I think the steps we’ve taken with language away from the magical viewpoint – i.e., the realization that language modulates the individual reality, rather than reality as such – are dramatic, but preliminary.

What role the zombie might play in this discussion depends, of course, upon the type of zombie we’re discussing. The fact that the popular representation of

the zombie depicts it as being devoid of language as well as consciousness points once again to that supposedly intrinsic link between the two. But it's the opposite case from that presented in the golem and cyborg; here we have once-animate flesh rendered into what should be 'inanimate' by the erasure of consciousness, and thus, language. But it still moves! To me this reflects our phobic relationship to our own bodies, our fear that they possess some animate force alien from the 'soul' we prize so deeply. The zombie is nothing but flesh animated by hunger alone, and even those physical urges we lend some sort of metaphysical quality (such as the desire for sex) are voided. I think this shows that what might seem the most solid of binaries is actually quite vague to us, that we sense a concrete division there but are at a loss to define its boundaries. It's as if the remnants of a binary ethos lingered within our brains, convincing us that the physical forces we deem 'base' – those which not only implicate us in, but identify us with, death, as the agent of the processing of the once-living into decay, into matter – possess a metaphysical dimension on par with that of the 'positive' soul. Thus, I read the zombie not as longing for language, for logos, but seeking to erase it, to reduce it from its mythical dimension back to mere sound, the "uh-uh" grunt of the primitive.

There also seems, to me, to be an odd political dimension to the zombie myth. The zombie's a kind of figure of a nightmare capitalist utopia: There're never any conflicts between zombies in the movies because each individual zombie is focused entirely on the fulfillment of its own visceral needs; the only time conflict arises is when a body – a scarce resource – turns up, and even then the momentary struggle subsides once the body has been depleted, and never escalates into a fight over the scraps. It's the invisible hand working in perfect harmony.

KXF: Certainly this idea of language written into the body/biology is defensible pending our definition of language. If one of the functions of language is to differentiate some-x and communicate this via linguistic transfer, DNA could be considered the biological language primer. The concepts "bone cell" and "skin cell" are decided early, and once these concepts are biologically fixed, there is no means of de-differentiating them. Cancer is an exception, but that

more parallels Derrida's notion of the necessary law of possible communicative failure.

The way you suggest language "modulates" individual reality as opposed to some baggy concept of a pan-reality is remarkably perspectivist – and then you go on to wag a finger at an endemic hatred and willful misunderstanding of the body. There is something particularly Nietzschean lurking here. But let's trouble the waters here and put zombies on hiatus (since, presumably, like history, they ain't going anywhere). What seems to be the case is that you have somewhat "resolved" that tricky binary of the analog and digital by writing of the digital in an analog fashion – and here I do not mean according to the content, but the packaging of the work into its book-form where the boustrophedonic plough moves left to right (and the eye takes us right to left again). Are your poetic "androideae" analog with digital urges, or haplessly pointing digits in search of the referential analogy?

JMW: The great paranoia of our emergent digital era is that of the loss of the sensual. There seems to be a pervasive feeling underlying all the utopian optimism that, having only just attained what I would deem a comparatively rudimentary knowledge of – and hence, in the popular imaginary, power over – the sensual world, we're about to plunge headlong into unknown, bottomless waters. It's as if we imagine ourselves floating bodiless into an abstract dimension of objects (in which even other subjects, like all our Facebook "friends," are transformed into "pages," or "sites") defined not by physical laws, but by the interaction of various languages (codes) of which the average individual is not only ignorant, but powerless to manipulate. The android, then, represents a kind of cybernetic Christ (a symbolism which seems not to have escaped Ridley Scott), an at-present metaphorical hypostasis (in the Catholic sense) of the digital and the analog worlds in one flesh – a database encased in flesh. The distinction is that the android is presumably a hypostasis which has had its ontologically centauric nature thrust upon it: it is the unwilling subject of an induced consciousness. At many points of my thinking about this chapbook, I found myself noting the way it conflated the author and the reader, the way it attempts to force the reader to stitch the fragments together rather than presenting a whole cloth. There's an automatic sympathy between the android and the reader here: both are forced to deal

with new forms of input, to internalize a seemingly arbitrary set of codes and navigate through them. The android's consciousness is forced upon the reader's. The circumstances of the book's production (as book, rather than e-book, Flash object, PowerPoint presentation, etc.) recapitulate this forced conflation: the reader has, ostensibly, a power over this text, the freedom to play with it interpretively, but is bound to follow the programmatic unspooling of lines from left to right, then the carriage return down and left. This interpretive freedom and programmatic reader-guidance are of course not new to the text, but I like to think of them as immanent features of this text. I remember Lisa Robertson once reminding a class that a book is a form of technology, and a rather remarkable one at that, as it gives language a sensual form which doesn't rely on the auditory faculty. I'm perhaps guilty of the paranoia I spoke of a moment ago – I love books, the smell, texture and weight of them, the thought that physical space has been devoted to containing thought. There's a sense of ephemerality to digital objects, despite their potential longevity, endemic to their lack of physical substance. I guess I was hoping to make a mortal object when I decided to submit the piece for publication as a physical book.

But to be a little more direct in my answer, I suppose I'd position my androids on the digital side of the split, reaching towards an analogy that can create a coherent referent for their new consciousness. This belies the underlying narrative structure of the book though, which places the individuated "I" suddenly discovering, through unknown stimuli, his/her/its-ness, its submergence in what appears to an identity-loving culture to be an undifferentiated mass of 'personalities' devoid of so-called human capacities. As much as I'm often moved to decry the encapsulation of human beings in 'pages' and 'sites' that occurs in most of the networking sites of the internet – what a friend calls "fill in the blank in a dropdown menu world" – I can't help but wonder if the destabilization of our identity-obsessed ontology might not be a good thing – if the thought that a personality could be expressed in code as simple as binary might not be of some benefit.

KXF: I wonder if this bruiting of that digital-kitsch utopia that outmodes the sensual also takes us beyond a hypostasis into an ekstasis. As ekstasis goes, it transcends any measure of time, and this being sur-

rounded by loosely connected objects that are accessed via codes sounds like the late-night feature of St Francis of Assisi meets Judah Leow and the Cabalists. Analogies collapse as analogies take the stage.

Another interesting parallel drawn here is that cybernetic Christ (we see this, in part, as a "ghost in a machine" or an Akira phenomenon at its meanest). Strangely enough, the Christian doctrine truly begins from the moment of its legitimization of the impossible: the resurrection, whereas all the other parlour tricks of multiplying loaves and fish (reminds one of a Zeno's paradox), walking on water, etcetera, are but seemingly post facto insertions to lend that act of resurrection some narrative credibility. What I am getting at here is that Christ may in fact be the first zombie. In one of the apocryphal writings, we find Christ making an animal golem when he breathes life into a lump of clay and it turns into a bird. I suppose golem-makers have to start small before moving on to the more complex organisms.

This notion of the book-as-machine is ripe. Indeed, the book has many of the hallmarks one comes to expect from any techno-gadgetry that gains in popularity on the basis of its functionality (rather than its PR): portability, energy efficient since it doesn't need a power source, a retrieval system such as an index and table of contents, and a storage system if one decides to write in the margins.

I guess what I am aiming at with these questions is to see if the split between analog and digital is justified. At first blush, analog machines wear their functions on their sleeves: there is no mistaking the purpose and function of a butter churner; whereas a digital machine nests its function within itself virtually. A cube with a few buttons may access the internet or do your taxes, but its function is not visually apparent since it is imbued with binary rather than social code. One of the examples I like to turn to is the Terminator movies: "Ah-nulled" Governeggor's function is rather obvious: a hypertrophied monster with the sole purpose of killing Sarah Connor. In the sequel, we are introduced to the next model, T-1000, whose function is not so obvious, but rather more virtual and modulating. Arnold is analog, a kind of metal golem, whereas T-1000 is more on the level with the digital and cyborg scenario.

Ah, golems, androids, cyborgs, analog, digital, vir-

tual epistemologies, “T”identities, Christ, and zombies – this has been quite a roundup. From poetics to all the fixings required for an epic B-flick. So my final question is what comes after the android for your writing? Will you still be exploring this notion of codes and consciousness, or will you be striking out on different terrain?

JMW: I think you’re absolutely right to suggest that the distinction between the analog and the digital cannot be so finely drawn. For example, the butter churner might seem fairly opaque to one acquainted with its functions, but I’d have to wonder if those lacking the cultural capital to know of it might not find it rather opaque. To draw this out, I’m fairly certain there exist a multitude of industrial technologies operating on an analog basis, the functions of which are as mysterious to me as the butter churner might be to a native of a country which does not consume butter.

I’m reminded here of the famous sci-fi dictum that any technology might seem to have a magical function, depending on the audience. And to go on to the Terminator analogy, I’d say that the T-1000 obfuscates its purpose for the precise goal of better performing it – by presenting a greater resemblance, at least visually, to its prey, it heightens its ability to kill. Perhaps the computer lacks social code merely due to its stage of development, and/or the extent to which we have written it into our cultural fabric? The android, certainly, would resemble the T-1000 in that we would cause it resemble ourselves because of the extent to which we perceive ourselves of use to the completion of certain tasks. Perhaps, like the zombie in its relation to life, the android exists to represent to ourselves the fuzziness of this analog/digital split, to suggest to us our ability to transcend that split – as if it were the evolutionary missing link of our production. Perhaps, writhing with anxiety over our inability to provide an unbroken link to our animal past – or conversely, too convinced of it – we need to substantize our link to the digital future.

As for your final question, the short answer is: a lot. In my usual schizophrenic manner, I’m working on several projects. And while my fascination with codes and consciousness will, I am sure, remain an enduring one, I’m definitely branching off a bit. One project is, as you seem to have somehow intuited, concerned with the figure of the zombie (this being a rather mu-

tant offshoot of a collaboration Matina Stamatakis and I have been slowly but surely working through). Others are concerned with the body, others with the urban/rural binary, and others are beginning to play with deranging the “boustrophedic plough” you mentioned earlier. I’m becoming increasingly fascinated with vispo and my own interest in making the portion of it more concrete than the vis – pieces where the content is synechdochic to a suggested image, without sort of naively reproducing the image is the tradition of pictorial realism. I’m trying, not to reproduce an image, but to make the text as a whole an image. That aside, I am most interested, in this very second, in trying to conceive ways in which the body can immanantized through the text in a more concrete manner than in the ‘line as a unit of breath’ concept. Sometimes the post-avant seems all too clinical and academic to me, and inspired by people like Acker, Bellamy and Artaud, I want to make it dirty again.