



## INTRODUCTION 'NUMBERS ILLIMITED'

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Bring out number, weight & measure in a year of dearth.  
William Blake, *Proverbs of Hell*, 1789

At the housesteps of the 4<sup>th</sup> of the equidifferent uneven numbers, number 7 Eccles street, he inserted his hand mechanically into the back pocket of his trousers to obtain his latchkey.  
James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922

He [Johann Sebastian Bach] died from the wonder of numbering.  
He said good-bye as if good-by is a number.  
Carl Sandburg, 'Number Man', 1970.

Writers know, and have known for a long time, that statistics (as from the long eighteenth-century onwards) put even the smallest possible quantity of precious individuality at risk. Theirs is the fear that what is not calculated or does not easily lend itself to calculation – one remembers Blake's indictment of the 'charter'd' streets of London – will increasingly come to be perceived as not existing. A fear that the current hegemony of Big Data, Big Tech, the Big Five... only seems to confirm. But neither the fear of 'drowning by numbers' nor the growing threat of the 'numbing' power of numbers should blind us to the tantalizing, and virtually numberless, possibilities (opportunities, in fact) offered by numbers, small and big. To put it arithmetically, there are **five** reasons presiding over the constitution of this special issue on 'Numbers Illimited':

Reason number 1, sadly enough, is **Topical**. 'In a plague year, the numbers are the narrative: 'The Bill of Mortality, to all our griefs, is encreased 399 this week, and the encrease general through the whole city and suburbs, which makes us all sad', noted Londoner Samuel Pepys on Nov 9, 1665. Those who have been following the toll of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID19) infections and deaths in the news and on social media will know how Pepys felt' [BOYCE, 2020] The opening sentence of Niall Boyce's historical article is worth repeating, and generalizing: in plague years, numbers are the narrative. A narrative of racking and prevention – of detection and registration. The current pandemic of Covid-19 (SARS-Cov-2) that has plagued the world ever since the contagious respiratory disease was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, is taking its toll of infections and deaths, day

by day – and causing a massive outburst, in the medical world, of charts, mortality analyses, maps, fatality ratios, test results, timelines of Covid-19 policies, hospitalization trends, *etc.* One of the manifold entries on the site of the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, the leading scientific authority in the field, is titled ‘Data in Motion’: to match the spread of the virus the sanitary narrative has a momentum – and a 24/7 temporality – of its own. As casualties mount, grim statistics roll in, and their symmetrical growth appears exponential.

It might be argued that ‘Bills of Mortality’ are nothing new under the sun, if only because plagues have been around from the very beginning of man’s history. Daniel Defoe was one of the first to introduce them in his *Journal of the Plague Year* of 1722, more than fifty years after the outbreak of the disease in London. Generically hybrid, the *Journal* is a blend of facts and fiction, story-telling and macabre calculation. Dead bodies, carried away in dead-carts, are transformed into lists of black figures on the white page. ‘Quantification underwrites Defoe’s much vaunted realism’ [SEAGER : 639-653] – but the stories told by numbers come with a spin or bias, emotional, fictional and political. Meddling with data to skew reality, interpreting statistics with a view to manipulating the public, lying about the total sum of casualties – such strategies are well-known to writers of fiction who resort to tricks of their own. A figure is never just a digit. Or, to put it another way, digits can be made to point to truths that are anything but scientific. ‘Sixty million and more’: Toni Morrison’s dedication to the novel, *Beloved* (1987), has stirred much controversy and generated discomfort for some its readers and critics. The figure is supposed to be an estimation (since official figures are lacking) as to the number of victims who died in 200 years of slavery, a large amount of whom never even reached the American soil, dying as captives in Africa or on slave ships during the infamous ‘Middle Passage’.

The figures were meant to shock as they elliptically, and almost hauntingly, tell a story of disappearance and collective amnesia. They also seemed to echo with the firmly implanted template of the six million Jews who perished in the Shoah. Now, sixty is a multiple of six – is ten times higher than six, thereby causing some to contend that Morrison was subliminally suggesting that the Blacks suffered more than the Jews, and that she was consequently playing a very dangerous (and unpleasant) number game. Was the paradigm of the ultimate man-made atrocity being deliberately challenged, for the sake of engaging in some detestable ‘concurrency des mémoires’ [DEBRAY, 2008]?

Or was the novelist drawing on Holocaust literature with a view to further broadening one’s perception and understanding of human suffering on a large scale? The same kind of problem is tackled quite differently by Michael Ondaatje: *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) features practically no figures or numbers, while dealing with the Sri Lankan War, which lasted from 1983 until 2009 and caused between 60,000 and 100,000 deaths. Each in her or his way, Morrison and Ondaatje arrive at the same result: their fictional works preserve from as well as they warn against the unquestionably ‘numbing’ effect caused by numbers on a large scale [SLOVIC, 2007] in the very act of bringing back to life one individual on behalf of the countless victims of systemic violence.

Reason number 2 is **Universal**. Every language on earth features numbers, and numbers form a universal language. Thinking in numbers and thinking the Number, as argued by Alain Badiou, are distinct operations, the latter, practical, the former, abstractly conceptual or notional [BADIOU : 261]. To put it roughly, Number essentializes (Oneness) and unifies when numbers itemize and divide/multiply. The epistemological transition from Pythagoras to Aristotle enacts the passage to an ethos of calculation and differentiation: ‘According to the Pythagoreans, ‘number’ is ‘forming both [the] modifications and [the] states’ of things. As a result, Aristotle’s reflections on *numbers as limits* imply that the latter may not only mark the contours of being but reveal its dynamics, consisting in

transitions and transformations. Aristotle's reflections on numbers read almost as an anticipation of the digital [PROCHAZKA, 2021].

Despite the historical impact of Neoplatonism in early scholastic circles, Aristotelian premises and modalities are indeed quite germane to the Anglo-Saxon psyche. As far as native Anglophone literature is concerned, it feels at home within an empirical, fact-finding, positivistic tradition, a fact which accounts, at least partly, for the fact that five staple characteristics (roughly speaking) stand out: 1. The invention of the *homo economicus*, as pioneered by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and its balance sheets; 2. The promotion of charts, statistics, data, records brought to bear on the literature of sports (angling, cricket, racing, baseball...) [Cf. COOVER, 1968]. 3 The familiarity of counting nursery rhymes ('One, Two, Buckle My Shoe'; 'Alice the Camel has one hump'...) and of similar instances of 'funnumeral' entertainment<sup>1</sup>; 4. The popularity of birthday poems (from John Donne to Dylan Thomas); 5. The centrality of the nation-writing novel (with Benjamin's Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845), initiating a process of disintegration of the body-politic that was to culminate in *Midnight's Children*). A case of political splitting that finds its match in the psychic secessions diagnosed in R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*:

With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens.

The fact that Stevenson was a Scot (groaning under the yoke of the Act of Union), while it may account for his distinct politicizing of the psychic topology, should not distract one from the universal nature of his meta-psychological insights, looking forward as they do to Freud, but also to the alignment of psychology on social and human sciences. Alienation translates most harrowingly in the language of (large) numbers. The unity of being is a fiction which the fictions of modernity strive to build down. Typically, Thomas de Quincey's malaise, when dreaming of the Malay, was conveyed to the reader of his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* in the guise of a distinct phobia of undifferentiated eastern crowds multiplying out of control [BARREL, 1991]. In the last analysis, to paraphrase E.A. Poe, Doppelgänger are neither of Germany, Scotland, or of the East – they are of the soul. A soul, a self, increasingly regulated, informed, quantified, commodified, in the name of the 'nombrification du monde' [REY : 8].<sup>2</sup> For numbers are instrumental in the globalization of a world economy governed by and on behalf of statistics and data. Numbers, to put it formulaically, are both the cause and the consequence of globalization, its alpha and its omega.

Drawing on the universality of numeracy to stave off as much as possible – but just how much, that is the (moot) question – the all-pervasive perils of globalization, literature falls back on what it does best: it uses numbers, instead of being utilized by them. Take the example of Jon McGregor's

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<sup>1</sup> 'Funnumeral' is a free adaptation of Edna O'Brian's coinage – 'funnominal' to describe James Joyce: 'Poor Joist, funnominal man', in *James Joyce* : 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rey draws the line between digitization and 'nombrification'. The main argument of his essay is best summarized as follows: « Au commencement était le Verbe, il semble qu'à la fin tout doit devenir nombre ».

*Reservoir 13* (2017) that recounts the disappearance of a thirteen-year old girl who went missing in the Peak District, on New Year's Eve. Thirteen is the number of reservoirs that surround the village, obtained, one learns, via the former flooding of valleys, at the bottom of which sit the ruins of old villages; it is the age of Rebecca on the day of her disappearance; last but not least, it is the number of chapters in the book, each covering a single year. At the close of the novel, thirteen years have elapsed, 13 chapters have unfolded – and still no trace of the girl who has vanished into thin air, or so it seems. What *Reservoir 13* has, which another novel on exactly on the same subject, *Missing Fay* (2017), by Adam Thorpe, does not have, is a way with numbers, precisely. Jon McGregor's anti-thriller plays with the superstitions attached to the number 13 – only to better dismiss them. One thing leading to another it is the whole of literature, of novelistic fiction, that is turned into a 'Reservoir' (a quasi universal word in little need of translation). A Reservoir of sensitivity, to counter the numbing alluded to above: with each passing year, the child is remembered less and less vividly, on the individual and human level, but it is her transformation into something at one with the growth, the agency and the rhythms of the natural world that the novel painstakingly, and movingly, chronicles. A reservoir of figures and stories, of numbers and emotions, to be tapped at will, so as to keep the finality of loss and closure at bay. What's more, reservoirs are for storage as well as for supply.

If the following titles – a scanty selection, at best – are anything to go by, the literary supply of numbers is truly illimited, and so is its appeal:

*Zero K, A Room of One's Own, A Tale of Two Cities, Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog), The Sign of Four, 4: 48 Psychosis, Slaughterhouse-5, Now We Are Six, The House of the Seven Gables, Number 11, Twelfth Night, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', Catch-22, The 39 Steps, 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel, The Crying of Lot 49, Fifty Shades of Grey, Fahrenheit 451, One Hundred Years of Solitude, One Thousand and One Nights, 1984, Life of Pi, And Then There Were None* (etc.)

The memorability of such titles, irrespective of their fictional content, is enough to predicate an organic connection between seas of stories and seas of numbers, with novels, plays and poems awash in 'multitudinous'<sup>1</sup> waters. Viz. *The Arabian Nights*. Memorable is the word. Measure, numbers, meter, harmony condition the composition of poems (and of music) as they facilitate their storage in the chambers of the heart or in the vaults of the mind: 'Weave the mystic measure / Of music, of dance, and shapes of light' [SHELLEY IV : 77-78]. Memorability comes from afar. In the English-speaking world, ancestral familiarity with the Bible co-exists with a long-standing tradition of fact-checking empiricism. In the whole of the Holy Scripture, and not just in *Numbers*, the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible, numbers are compellingly mobilized to count things and people (the census taken of the Israelites evinced a total of 603,550 souls). Likewise, the word and work of God were cast in iconic forms, with certain numbers (1, 3, 7) underscoring ideas of completeness and perfection, while others (666) point to the number and mark of Satan (the Beast).

Reason Number Three is **Differential**. Indeed, the following issue is out to make a difference. A two-fold difference, as a matter of fact. First because this special issue focuses on a topic that is not so frequently handled by literary scholars. All too few books, chapters, papers take the question of numbers, numeracy, the numbersome, etc., seriously. Of course, there are the odd exceptions (ENGELHARDT, PLOTNITSKY, PORÉE...) but they only confirm the proverbial rule. Why is that? Largely,

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<sup>1</sup> The adjective used by Macbeth, II, Scene 2, and by John Ruskin, in his ekphrastic evocation of *The Slave-Ship*, the famous seascape by J.M.W. Turner.

though not exclusively, because of the stain of irrationality aspersed on numbers by numerology and its overzealous followers (but astrology and their fans could also be added to the list, *pace* Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath...). The belief that everything is a number, that numbers have meaning and power far in excess of their arithmetical or numeral value, that they are endowed with occult properties, that everything is 19, 22 (or 23 for that matter), 42, *etc.*, is, frankly, not the line taken by the contributors of this issue. Neither is the current impact of conspiracy theories, with their own esoterica and hidden cabala, likely to diminish the amount of legitimate skepticism, not to say outright disbelief, we experience in the face of enciphering and encoding gone wild. Academically speaking, such sums will not add up.

Also because, and this is more of an objective factor, numeracy is not that widely shared (euphemism of the year!) in the world of literary scholars. C.P. Snow's famous pronouncement of 1959 about the split between 'Two Cultures' – that of scientists and that of literary intellectuals – is, sadly, more relevant than ever, with the gulf between illiteracy in the camp of scientists and innumeracy in that of literary scholars widening by the hour, the minute... or should one say by the nanosecond (!). To the latter count – mathematical illiteracy – we can only plead guilty, but at least we know the costs of such ignorance – and they certainly include increased susceptibility to pseudoscience of all kinds [PAULOS]. In that light, 'Numbers Illimited' felt like a rather unique opportunity to attend to a long overdue business – the business of doing the maths while attempting to catch up on the vast amount of lacunae in our overall scientific knowledge, all of which in the name of the much-touted, and not so customarily implemented, interdisciplinarity.

Secondly, difference is germane to the kind of idiosyncratic, out of the ordinary math-making produced at the hands and pens of writers. It so happens that, most of the time, the latter will not go by numbers, as it were. Their math will not abide by the regular rule. As exemplified by E.E. Cummings in the famous preface he gave to the collection *is 5* (1926):

Ineluctable preoccupation with The Verb gives a poet one priceless advantage: whereas nonmakers must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four, he rejoices in a purely irresistible truth (to be found, in abbreviated costume, upon the title page of the present volume).

After stating that the poet's true concern is with the word, Cummings voices his alternative poetics – for which an unorthodox mode of calculation (two times two is five) serves both as an allegory and as a claim, and a pretty steep one at that. The joke cracked by Cummings – rather than transitively deliver the result of his operation, he elliptically signals back to the cover of the book which the reader is holding, thereby leaving him/her on tenterhooks – tells a story of difference and differentiation, of defamiliarization, if one wills.<sup>1</sup> This invites us, incidentally, to reconsider the case of Lewis Carroll, in *Alice in Wonderland*. While it is clear that the conservative mathematician at Christ Church, Oxford, was strongly upset by the transgressive breakthroughs made possible by new mathematics, symbolic algebra and projective geometry, so much so that he set out to satirize them *ad lib* (as well as *ad hominem*, the man in question being none other than William Rowan Hamilton, the author, in 1853, of *Lectures on Quaternions*), his more creative and imaginative mind could not help welcoming the liberating potential and appeal of such deviancy. Satire is fun, but alternative and crooked routes are, in all fairness, funnier and funnier, 'curiouser and curiouser'...

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering, in Cummings's case, that he very readily converted himself to the benefits of naming his collections by way of numbers: 50, 90, 73 (posthumously).

Reading Alice as the work of a hide-bound mathematician misses the point, it appears, for the delights of puzzlement are innumerable. The true wonder of Wonderland lies in the ‘wonder about numbers’ [SANDBURG], in the risqué fooling around with non-Euclidian geometry, in the bold opening out of horizons (mathematical, terrestrial or otherwise) – a lesson easily learned by writers of all ilk, for whom numbers possess a mind-boggling ‘generosity’ [CORNISH], a quickening or multiplying power, which exhilarates and dazzles more than it scares. There is a wonder in numbering, as argued by Carl Sandburg in his evocation of J.S. Bach, the ‘Number Man’. Numbers don’t come with a cap; the sky is their limit. John Keats hyperbolically raves on a ‘million-pleasured breast’, when Walt Whitman, a former maths teacher, boasts of his largeness, of his containing ‘multitudes’ counted by way of an inflation of millions, billions, trillions, quadrillions, octillions... [FOLSOM, 2016]. Melville’s Ishmael ‘expand[s] to the bulk’ of the whale: his staggering ‘under the weightiest words of the dictionary’ has an iconographic counterpart: the skeleton dimensions he proceeds to set down ‘are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed’ [MELVILLE : 563]. A mighty theme generates a mighty book. Salman Rushdie repeatedly yields to the prolific appeal of the ‘multitudinous’ in crowds, in children (the thousand and one defiant Midnight’s children born during the hour of India’s independence, depleted and eventually defeated, bringing the dream of an alternative India to a melancholy end), in stories – those of the Arabian Nights, spelled out in letters or in numbers: *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Days*, his novel of 2015 containing the sum of his past, present and future works. *An Infinite Jest* played out, in the case of David Foster Wallace, across the length of 1079 pages (in the paperback edition). Countability is all, or so it seems.

To return to alternative numbers, the child of Wordsworth’s ‘We Are Seven’ takes pride of place. Deaths of fellow-siblings simply can’t be subtracted from the total sum, for they remain (‘And I never fail to be surprised / by the gift of an odd remainder’, [CORNISH]) – a piece of felt-on-the-pulses evidence that flies in the face of her stale interlocutor’s fact-finding rationality. A view cherished by the Romantics and pursued by writers anxious to calculate and compute outside the box, against the grain, for this how newness, or novelty, enters the world, at an angle from reality, be it obtuse, acute, skewered...

Reason Number Four is **non stastistical**. Firstly, Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) offers the paradigm of this anti-statistics stand: the character, and the positivist, utilitarian philosophy, of Gradgrind, become the equivalent of a Deleuzian ‘personage conceptuel’ geared towards the grinding of life by submitting it to the tyranny, the despotism of ‘tabular statements’ – of Numbers and of numeracy for the sake of it. Both of which are under the law of ‘Capital’ (and of Coketown capitalism). Opposing the imposition of patterns and grids, Dickens delivers one of the most implacable – because of its far-reaching implications – condemnations of our societies of surveillance and control. A specter is haunting the world – the specter of Gradgrindism:

Now, besides very many babies just able to walk, there happened to be in Coketown a considerable population of babies who had been walking against time towards the infinite world, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years and more.

These portentous infants being alarming creatures to stalk about in any human society, the eighteen denominations incessantly scratched one another’s faces and pulled one another’s hair by way of agreeing on the steps to be taken for their improvement – which they never did; a surprising circumstance, when the happy adaptation of the means to

the end is considered. Still, although they differed in every other particular, conceivable and inconceivable (especially inconceivable), they were pretty well united on the point that these unlucky infants were never to wonder. Body number one said... [DICKENS]

A counter-narrative is most wanted, underwritten by Dickens's firm reliance on Poetry and the Circus as mighty alternatives to 'l'évaluation assujettissante des sujets' – the idiom favoured by Alain Badiou:

Contre le jugement contemporain au regard du nombre, il faut dire que rien de ce qui fait nombre ne vaut. Ou que tout ce qui trace, en situation, le parcours d'une vérité, se signale par son indifférence à la numéricité. [...] Ne faut-il pas, pour nous retourner en pensée vers le despotisme du nombre, une autre idée du nombre, pour y soustraire le Sujet ? [BADIOU : 59]

According to Badiou, the effort to think the number anew, away from the belief that 'ce qui compte (ce qui vaut) est ce qui est compté' [31], in contradistinction to 'la science des hommes mis en nombres, jusqu'à saturation de toutes les correspondances possibles entre ces nombres et d'autres nombres' [46] is urgently required. All the more so as, since the days of Dedekind, Frege, Cantor, Peano, at the turn of the last century, such thought is badly missing, not to say conspicuously absent. 'L'art ne relève à proprement parler du nombre qu'autant qu'il y a une pensée du nombre' [28]. Badiou is a philosopher, but he also writes plays and speaks eloquently of poetry: it is quite possible that the alternative idea of the number he has in mind will come to pass at the hands of artists, rather than of thinkers (and scientists, for that matter). Conversely, it must be stated that Dickens' *Hard Times* is felt to be the least Dickensian, the most formulaic of all his novels. The novelist thinks hard, thinks against hard statistics, hard calculation, but his thinking is possibly too pat, too Manichean. In other words, the problem need not be dealt with in the all too strict binary mode described by Olivier Rey, in *Quand le Monde s'est fait nombre*. Throughout the nineteenth century, he argues, with solid evidence to substantiate his views, the relation established between literature and the irresistible rise of statistics was, at first, 'one of emulation and competition, then one of opposition and revulsion' [REY : 279]. Fair enough. But opposition to the intrusiveness of numbers is not the end-all and be-all of the questioning.

First because numbers need not be conspicuous to engage the interest of the artist. George Eliot chooses to end her masterpiece with a telling gesture towards 'the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs' (*Middlemarch* : 785), and to whom we owe 'half' the fact that 'things are not so ill with you and me'. The invisibility, not of the masses, but of lonely individuals like Dorothea Brookes, is, typically, the province of the novel.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, it falls on the novelists to develop 'counternarratives' to the 'hard numbers' – either of the dead or of the living. In the former case, the example of Don DeLillo comes to mind. Speaking of 9/11, he writes:

The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative.

There are 100,000 stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world. Where we were, who we know, what we've seen or heard. There are the doctors' appointments that saved lives, the cellphones that were used to report the hijackings. Stories generating

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed, say, to the ultravisibility of the masses in contemporary, nineteenth-century paintings, with the paradigmatical example of *The Derby Day* (1856-1858), by William Powell Frith.

others and people running north out of the rumbling smoke and ash. Men running in suits and ties, women who'd lost their shoes, cops running from the skydive of all that towering steel.

People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us.

There are stories of heroism and encounters with dread. There are stories that carry around their edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate, or premonition. They take us *beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being*. For 100 who are arbitrarily dead, we need to find one person saved by a flash of forewarning. There are configurations that chill and awe us both. Two women on two planes, best of friends, who die together and apart, tower 1 and tower 2. What desolate epic tragedy might bear the weight of such juxtaposition? But we can also ask what symmetry, bleak and touching both, takes one friend, spares the other's grief. [DELILLO, 2001]

After voicing the theory, in the Guardian article of December 2001, Delillo finally composes the counternarrative he had in mind, at a temporal remove from the tragedy. *Falling Man* (2007) strikes the right balance, as evidenced by the contrast between the end of chapter 1, with the vision of 'others behind him, filling the middle distance, a mass in near formation, people walking out of the smoke' [DELILLO, 2007 : 5] and the end of the last chapter, 'In the Hudson Corridor', at one with the (metonymic) 'shirt come down out of the sky' [246] belonging to the one and only falling man immortalized in the iconic photography by Richard Drew. The many and the one; the one out of the many – which also translates into the political equation of the American people, of the American nation: '*E pluribus Unum*'. Counting the uncountable one by one, in other words [Cf. PACHET, 1993].

Secondly. In the age of digital humanities, our project is not statistics-driven. Nor, for that matter, is it anti-statistics. There is no point, indeed, in opposing the invaluable trend initiated by Franco Moretti and his call for 'Distant reading'. The advantages of topic modelling, of scanning and researching for large constellations of meaning, are, no doubt, palpable. So are the benefits of large-scale literary history – if only because the latter remains inaccessible without the aid of computational methods and equipment susceptible to produce telling statistics over very long timelines. Graphs, tables, maps, data mining are, we realize, part and parcel of the 'general literacy' of today. Where we are tempted to draw the line, however, is when one is given to infer that literature is Data. Or that 'operationalizing' (Moretti's buzz-word) is the key to all literary doors. We very much prefer Ted Underwood's position: a disciple of Moretti, he combines close reading with quantitative findings. In his pithy formulation, numbers matter – but so does reading, for nothing will save scholars from 'having to read' [UNDERWOOD : 363]. 'Literature by the Numbers', as advocated by Ben Blatt, *Ulysses by Numbers*, in the skillful hands of Eric Bulson, begin their task by stating the obvious – that numbers don't mean anything on their own, that interpretation and context count. The one and only method worth adopting, they argue, is as follows: 'A novel and its numbers: a novel *as its numbers*' [BULSON : 9].

As it happens, no quantitative methods were implemented in the course of this special issue, again, not on principle, but essentially because one wished to remain as close as possible to the microscopic (rather than macroscopic) level – that of the sentence, the line, the word... – at which literary decisions are made. A case in point are the 'kisses four' of Keats's first draft of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' of April 21, 1819. Four kisses, an even number, therefore, rather than three or five – for sharing an odd number of kisses would prove most 'awkward'. Besides, only 'four' rhymes internally

with 'sore', as opposed, say, to six. In a facetious passage of his journal to his brother, Keats pretends that he actually considered writing 7 kisses, before renouncing. Anecdotal? Possibly, and yet the 'kisses four' phrase was removed from the version of the poem published in the *Indicator*, on May 20, 1819. A major, rather than a minor, loss. Likewise, William Wordsworth tampered with a couplet in 'The Thorn' of 1798.

I've measured it from side to side:  
'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.

Those lines, 'the most ridiculed in English literature', were removed when the poem was edited anew, in 1820. The positivistic tonality of the measurement in question may have alienated Wordsworth's contemporary readers – but who can deny the structural at-oneness between poetry and measure?

Five years have past; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
These waters, ... [WORDSWORTH, 1798]

Duration is subjective, accounting for a fair amount of dilation, made significant in spite of the apparent truism; dates matter, in a poem composed on the eve of the anniversary of July 14, the symbolism of which finds itself ambivalently summoned and dismissed in the same breath [ 'A date and nothing more'. DERRIDA : 85]. Numbers match and fall into place: the five stresses of Wordsworth's memorable pentameters rhyme, unfortuitously, with the five years elapsed since the last visit to Tintern Abbey, thus transforming it into the place of repetition, the site of poetry that counts. Be it the poem by Wordsworth, or that by E.E. Cummings, '9', poetic measure and beat tick against the clock, with a view to making a difference:

lips because tic clocks toc don't make  
a toctic difference  
to kisskiss you and to  
kiss me [CUMMINGS, 2016]

Reason Number 5 is **Collegial**. This special issue was put together by the research team '19-21' (formerly *Vortex*), based at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris. Both its former and its present name felt and feel like a predestination. Previously concerned with the stillness at the heart of the modernistic vortex, our lot is now cast with numbers 19 and 21, standing for nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century literature in English. Numbers and the numbersome occupied us for two to three years, as part and parcel of a 'quinquennial' project, and our collective effort was rounded off by a *Journée d'Étude* in September 2018, for which we were joined by colleagues from outside Paris III. Their joint effort is now converted into an online publication thanks to the generous hospitality of the General Editor of *Cercles*, Philippe Romanski. A thousand thanks to him.

Ordered more or less in chronological order, our array begins with a piece on Poe's tale, 'The Man and the Crowd' in which. **Danielle Follett** argues that, in the relation of singularity to multiplicity as fictionalized in Poe's tale, various rapports of one to one, or of one plus one, lead to the persistence of two separate spheres. **Clément Oudart** is next, with a capital reminder: all verse is to be governed, and this piece of wisdom is brought to bear on Williams Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1923), about which he contends that Williams struggled with the stakes of numerical data in innovative poetic writing, and that, more generally, 'poetrics' (a superb portmanteau word combining

poetry and metrics) speaks, beyond the technicity of the approach, directly to the relation of arithmetic with life. Moving back to prose, **Régine Camps-Robertson** tackles one novel by Don Delillo, *Cosmopolitan*, with an agenda: numbers are a consistently organic part of fiction, and they tell a story of their own, featuring a tension between symmetry and asymmetry. A similar pattern is taken up by **Pryanka Deshmukh**, *à propos* an obvious piece of work by Paul Auster, *4321*: she demonstrates that the use of numbers, largely (but not exclusively) in the form of ascending or descending sequences, serves highly strategic narrative goals, by pointing to the relation of zero to Austerian themes of disaster, loss or solitude. She concludes by calling *4321* forms the ultimate Austerian novel, revisiting and rewriting, via numbers, the entire Austerian opus.

This makes for a smooth transition with the remaining articles whose approach tends to be more synthetic and generic. **Elisabeth Angel-Perez** begins by taking a new look altogether at drama in general, at British contemporary plays in particular. She is one of the first critics to shed light on the (hitherto largely unsuspected) part played by numbers on stage, which she sees as partaking of a process of re-enchantment of the world, since British playwrights (Sara Kane, in particular) have a knack for providing audiences and readers with mathematical structures, ideal for preserving “infinite conversation”. **Catherine Lanone** concludes our literary take with a wide-ranging survey of contemporary art and fiction, in which she claims that in this ‘hypernumeric’ [ANDREAS & GREENHILL] world of ours the role of contemporary art and fiction is to generate a *dissensus*, and to combat the “numbing of ethics associated with numbering (in the words of Scott Slovic). She does so by discussing a variety of works, artistic and literary, ranging from A. Gormley to Jonathan Coe, via Zadie Smith and Caryl Phillips.

The final paper is by our colleague, the French philosopher **Ghislain Deslandes**, well-known for his joint engagement with the philosophy of Pascal on the one hand, and of managerial sciences on the other. Such rare combination makes for a robustly comprehensive piece about the threats, perils, and limitations of ‘Governance by Numbers’ (the premise from which we started). Drawing on the work of the late Bernard Stiegler, Deslandes rounds off this Special Issue by putting in perspective the manifold ways in which ‘calculation’ is seen to ‘destroy the incalculable’.

**Five** reasons were cited at the outset of this Introduction. Rounding it off, is a poem praising the greatness of a prime number, *i.e.* the number 5. Drafted in the imagist vein by William Carlos Williams, ‘Great Figure’ (1921) summarizes many of the developments briefly sketched above, with special emphasis on the alternative or differential dimension referred to above. Building on the semantic ambiguity of the noun ‘figure’, which counts five letters by the way, the poem takes its readers by surprise, tricking them into believing that an important person’s bodily shape (figure) is expected to emerge from the anonymous crowd. When in actual fact, the figure (digit) 5 flashes its enduringly iconic, epiphanic, hallmark, signaled by the five words of line 3: ‘I saw the figure 5’. All in all, figures as numbers, numbers as figures are fully entitled to steal the show. When the word and the number find themselves rolled into one, the figure is bound to be great, and the poem figural:

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck

moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city. [WILLIAMS, 1921 (1991)]

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