



Dr Justin Tonra
English

Past Research

I tend to characterise my research with a couple of broad strokes. First, I study the historical and formal conditions under which literature is made, in both wide and narrow terms. In the former sense, that might mean working to design and build a digital system for the digitisation and crowdsourced transcription of unpublished manuscripts, as I did at [Transcribe Bentham](#). My PhD research also focused on literary manuscripts, but in a more forensic fashion and with the more concentrated objective of uncovering the creative processes behind the changes in successive drafts of Thomas Moore's romantic epic, [Lalla Rookh](#) (1817). That doctoral work was the beginning of a sequence of research on Moore which culminated in my new book, [Write My Name: Authorship in the Poetry of Thomas Moore](#) (Routledge, 2020). There, my principal aim is to write about different ways in which Moore constructs an authorial image in his poetry. I examine how he adopts a range of formal and generic strategies to shape different authorial identities: from his use of pseudonyms and personae to modulations of voice achieved through rhetorical and paratextual means. Alongside my analysis of Moore's active role in this process, I write about a set of historical and contextual contingencies that shaped his authorship beyond his control: editors who manipulated his work, publishers who presented it in different forms, and laws which placed constraints on what he wanted to write. Together, these formal and historical factors help to reveal facets of the author and his writing that have received little attention in previous scholarship on Moore.

Current Research

The second way I describe my research is in terms of its consistent focus on the intersections of literature and technology. Previously, I have used digital methods to study questions about [authorship attribution](#) and about the [social networks underlying epic poetry](#). In the final chapter of *Write My Name* I examine Moore's poetic oeuvre through the lens of computational stylistic analysis to investigate parallels between genre and style and to query how digital methods might change our conceptions of authorship. With each of these research projects I apply analytic methods from the digital humanities to literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but my current research relies on different configurations of the relationship between literature and technology. One strand had dragged me into the twenty-first century to assess ways in which Twitter has had a formal influence on contemporary poetry. I focus on associations of the tweet and the verse line in the work of a number of contemporary poets to argue that the social media platform provides a productive constraint which shapes the format and style of their poetry. This research began before Twitter changed the nature of the constraint by increasing the length of a tweet from 140 to 280 characters. The other research I am working on at present is an [IRC-funded](#) project called *Poetry Machines*, where I plan to survey the history of poetry machines and communicate the neglected story of how the precepts of science, engineering, and mathematics have been used to make and shape poetry. The project arose, in part, from a prior work of experimental and

conceptual research called [Eververse](#), where I generated a year-long, million-line poem based on my biometric data. That was my first foray into incorporating creative practice into my research, and it's a method I aim to continue in my current work on poetry machines.

Future Research

I plan to continue research within the broad parameters described above: with a focus on literature and technology, and on different conditions of literary production. However, I firmly believe in the principle that says the more you talk about something you want to do, the less likely you are to do it. Not the most promising opening to a section on future research, but I have learned from experience of the merit in exercising some restraint about one's plans for the future. I do wish to atone for this insufferable reticence, so, in the manner of [George Steiner](#), I'll describe some compelling research that I am passionate about—but which I will not complete. I'm intrigued by the use of lists in literature: from Flann O'Brien's [mock-Fenian taxonomies](#), to Robert Fitterman's [found poetry](#), to the inventory aesthetics of David Markson's "[notecard quartet](#)" of novels. The literary list can serve a host of purposes: it's a way of organising the world; of educating, amusing, or comforting the reader; it's an *aide-memoire* and a means of ordering consciousness; but its form also represents a threat to narrative cohesion. Word lists, in the forms of lexicons and vocabularies, are often integral features of the machine-generated poetry that I have been researching and composing. For a long time I casually accumulated these diverse yet linked interests without arranging them into any very meaningful research questions, until I learned of an ERC-funded [project](#) at the University of Freiburg that addresses the topic of lists in literature and culture in an articulate and engaging fashion. So much for lists. Nonetheless, there is something satisfying and validating about seeing one's disorganised thoughts organised—listed—in a set of appealing research questions, even if they are devised by somebody else.