Web Lit and the eBook
by Albert R. Vogeler

Be assured of a quiet household and an hour's uninterrupted time. Sit down at your large screen desktop computer. Relax. Clear your mind. Turn the computer on, go to Google, and tilt back your chair, but not too far. Reduce the screen brightness and enlarge the image by one or two clicks. You are now positioned to enjoy one of the great gifts of the internet-- or, for purposes of this discussion, the World Wide Web. By a series of mouse clicks and keystrokes you will be able to bring instantly to your screen a great part of the literary heritage of western civilization. You will have entered the brave new world of the ebook. (Smaller laptops and hand-held devices are obviously not conducive to pleasurable extended reading).

To imbibe from this infinite font of culture you need not use a library card or a credit card, you need not go out and then return home lugging books bought or borrowed, you need not order them from Amazon, you need not pay a bill or a late fee, you need not stack or shelve books, you will not lose or foolishly lend them, and you can summon them at will from cyberspace, where they patiently bide their time, waiting, it would seem, for you alone. All this would have been fantasy only a few years ago.

I will suggest a little something of the range of your infinite options. My examples are as personal, as idiosyncratic, as your own would be if you were writing this article. Where audio and film versions of literary works are also available online, I cannot refrain from mentioning them.

The whole of Shakespeare has been digitized in full text—37 plays, 154 sonnets—and great video clips of Olivier"s *Henry V's* Crispin's Day speech and Branagh's version of it, plus his magnificent "Non Nobis" from his own *Henry V*. Olivier's *film noir* of Hamlet can be viewed complete, as can his Richard III . All of Bernard Shaw's plays are also online, and the celebrated film of one of them, *Pygmalion,* with Wendy Hiller and Leslie Howard, can be seen on You Tube.

Do you want to savor Poe again? All of the poetry--*Ulalume, The Bells, Annabel Lee*—is accompanied by all of the short stories: *The Masque of the Red Death, The Cask of Amontillado, The Fall of the House of Usher.* O. Henry's short stories that tickled our fancy in high school are here for your re-appraisal; so are those of the mordant Ambrose Bierce and their other turn-of-century contemporaries Stephen Crane and Jack London. Eudora Welty and Raymond Carver are here, as many other modern American short story writers.

If you have the guilty feeling that you *ought* to read Borges--that you're missing the intellectual thrill of his haunting speculative fiction--then your computer can oblige. Start with his mind-bending meditation on libraries, "The Library of Babel," move on to "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," about the world-transforming revelations in a strange encyclopedia, and then confront infinity in "The Aleph."

If neither the uninhibited expansiveness of Whitman nor the demure concision of Emily Dickinson, both awaiting your nod on the web, suit your mood, then Stephen Vincent Benet's 1933 poem "Metropolitan Nightmare" will surely engage you with its modern idiom and prescient images of creeping climate change in New York. Its last line foreshadows an unimagined doom for a city of skyscrapers.

Having perhaps once heard the portentous clangor of the opening lines of the *Aeneid* recited in Latin, or the *Iliad* in Greek, or *Beowulf* in Old English, you may want to recapture the experience: with a little searching, it's yours on the web, along with translations and exegesis of the poems. And there are readings in modern languages with great poetic traditions that may be foreign to our ears: Japanese, Chinese. Arabic, Russian, Turkish, Welsh, and Persian.

The web lets us easily read and hear thrilling lines of poetry that may once have meant much to us— Keats's ecstatic vision of "an endless fountain of immortal drink/Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink"; Tennyson's Ulysses, who had "drunk delight of battle with my peers/Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy"; Shelly's Ozymandias proclaiming, "look on my works, ye mighty, and despair"; Yeats's haunting image of "that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea" in "Byzantium;" Byron's opening lines of "Sennacherib" : "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold/And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold."

In reading Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill" (on the web) we will experience a somewhat puzzled admiration; but to hear him read it (on the web) with his unmatched grandiose exaltation is to experience the full power of the poem and believe that it all makes emotional sense. You have, at similar websites, the

opportunity of hearing Yeats and Eliot, Auden and Frost, and many other poets reading their work as they wanted it heard.

My own short story favorites, Victorian gothic and Edwardian occult, are abundantly available on the web. All the "Ghost Stories of an Antiquary" by Montague Rhodes James are here, with their evocations of the ominous that lurks behind the commonplace. So are Algernon Blackwood's tales of occult forces in nature, like "The Wendigo," "The Willows," and "The Man Whom the Trees Loved;" and Arthur Machen's, similarly devoted to manifestations of hidden horrors. *Dracula* is here, accompanied by learned commentary. If you are tempted to visit the ultimate, over-the-top literary cult of terror, the Web offers you the whole of H.P. Lovecraft's *ouvre* including, of course, the Chtulhu Mythos and the Necronomicon.

But, you ask, how *exactly* do I bring such works to my screen? The simplest way is to type into Google the author, the work, and the word "online." This may suffice, after a little searching, to provide the same results as specialized search sites and techniques. But if you don't know exactly what you want, and need inspiration from listed offerings, then you will find more helpful websites than you might imagine.

Project Gutenberg is the original and most ambitious online reading site. The Literature Network is among the most accessible, offering 266 authors and over 7,500 books, stories, and poems. Even larger sites with well-organized resources are Literature.org., The Online Books Page, and Read Books Online. More specialized, but still immense, are Arthur's Classic Novels and The Literary Gothic. All repay study in themselves, and they point by links to other sites. Aggressive, curiosity-driven searching, as always, is the way to your objective---and to serendipitous discoveries.

Of course not all the literary works you might want to read are currently on the web, and some may never appear. Websites on other continents, in other cultures, serving specialized viewers, with different languages, laws, and interests, and with different Internet protocols, very likely provide content unknown to Americans. The project of finding out what content--in all fields--is available world-wide is a challenge to serious students of the Internet.

If you fully embrace the idea and reality of the ebook, you will have put away the world of collections and connoisseurship, libraries and librarians, bookstores and booksellers, printers and publishers. You will probably be indifferent to book history and lore, design and typeface, editing and printing, binding and illustrating. The habits of turning pages and using bookmarks will have withered. You will have accepted the fact that you can never really possess an ebook, or annotate it, or sell it, or give it away: it is everybody's and nobody's, nowhere and everywhere, evanescent and (almost) eternal. That is surely a dizzying paradigm shift.

Must you make that shift? Can you the reader live simultaneously in two book worlds, the old and the new? Each makes its claims upon us, each offers its own experience. I, for one, am content for the foreseeable future to have "one foot in sea, one on shore."