

Literary Studies in the Age of New Textual Literacies

In the past, literacy has chiefly meant alphabetic literacy. That meaning has dominated because the chief technologies of literacy, especially the early printing press, have privileged the written language over all other forms of semiosis. ... [Today's definition of literacy] includes visual, electronic and (for want of better terminology) non-verbal or gestural or social literacies.

Nancy Kaplan, "E-literacies" (3, 13, 15, 28)

The particular importance of network textuality — that is, textuality written, stored, and read on a computer network — appears when technology transforms readers into reader-authors ... because any contribution, any change in the web created by one reader, quickly becomes available to other readers. The ability to write within a particular web in turn transforms comments from private notes, such as one takes in margins of one's own copy of a text, into public statements that, especially within educational settings, have powerfully democratizing effects.

George P. Landow, *Hyper/Text/Theory* (14)

Competing paradigms in literary interpretation

Historically, textual study meant writing and reading verbal texts in the medium of print. In the last few decades, however, the concept of "texts" has expanded far beyond the printed word. "Texts" now include web publications,

advertising, film, television, and other graphic media. A literate public must be able both to read and to write in these multiply-defined textual media. Instead of resisting these changes of paradigm, literary studies can participate in defining the new, expanded literacies of the present, providing us with the tools to negotiate an expanded range of discourses and texts.

Contemporary literary theory has made an important step in that direction, moving away from the concept of the self-contained work/text, secure in its boundaries and rhetoric, to the idea of the permeable and open-ended text that is continually expanded through recontextualization (reader response), rhetorical problematization (deconstruction), critical reformulation (feminism, new historicism), and cross-cultural translation (postcolonial / multicultural criticism). Critical reading becomes — in Wolfgang Iser's well-known formulation — "a dynamic process of recreation" ("The Reading Process" 279) which allows readers to formulate "alien" thoughts and perspectives but also to question existing perspectives and norms (*The Act of Reading* 147).

These theoretical insights have been reinforced and aided by the new hypertext and networked communication technologies developed over the past ten to fifteen years. These technologies have allowed us to interact with the text more closely, highlighting its associative and dissociative impulses and enriching its structures with layers of annotations, linked intertexts, and "winding paths" of signifiers. Electronically-assisted textual analysis has often resulted in "perceptual and conceptual breakthroughs" (Travis 9), replacing the linear logic of reading and writing with the creative "logic of patterning": "The writer and the reader do not discover or recognize a preexisting pattern; rather, they make patterns possible" (Travis 9). On a more general level, electronic and global networking technologies have mediated a quiet revolution in the humanities, introducing new forms of scholarly production and challenging the traditional epistemological and methodological standards of literary studies. A "new paradigm for textual analysis" (Kaufman 1) has been made available, with powerful text-based search engines, multiple layers of indexing, and multi-media contextualizations. While quantitative methods of analysis continue to prevail in most computer-assisted analyses of texts, there are significant opportunities for developing content-analytic techniques that enhance rather than reduce the differential play of a text, re-structuring text and reader.

The two competing paradigms of criticism — one hermeneutic, text-centered, the other transactive, reformulative — seem at first glance separated

by a profound disagreement. One position holds that “there is a meaning *in* a text, ‘put in’ by a writer, which has to be ‘fished out’ by the reader/hearer/critic/analyst in order for the interpretive process to take place” (Birch 21). The opposite position proposes two radically revised focuses, on *how* texts articulate, rather than *what* they mean; and on interpretation as a construction of meaning, a socially-grounded practice of cultural exchange. And yet, each perspective has its significance in the broader critical dynamic. Recent critical pedagogy has managed to integrate aspects of both, allowing us to move beyond the traditional opposition between an “objectivist,” text-based, and a “subjectivist,” interactive concept of signification. Readers are invited to explore the relationship between text, culture, author and reader, making their interpretations more responsive to the conflicting cultural experiences brought into contact. They are also urged to intervene actively in the process of meaning making, “reconfiguring” the world of the text from alternative points of view. Textual interpretation becomes an act of “rewriting” whose task it is to foreground the text’s own “rewriting or structuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*” (Jameson 35).

In my own work (see *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting*, chs. 1, 6-8; also “Hypertextual and Networked Communication in Undergraduate Literature Classes” and “The Rereading/Rewriting Process,” the latter coauthored with Ann Woodlief), I have recommended a re-creative model of literary interpretation based on strategies of rereading/rewriting. This approach, I have argued, can benefit students of literature in several ways: a) freeing them from the “quest-for-meaning” paradigm (or mere text consumption) and channelling their interpretive abilities into more active modes of critical analysis and construction; b) enabling readers to examine and correct their own reading habits and assumptions; c) making readers more aware of the naturalized conventions that participate in their construction of meaning, and of their potential for renewal. Reading and writing become inseparable in this perspective, part of a critical dialectic that both interprets and reperforms the text.

In most theoretical models of critical reading, the transition from a naturalized, early response, to a self-conscious critical interpretation requires a stage of *rereading*. The activities of *rereading* described by Barthes, Iser, Riffaterre, Ricoeur, or more recently by Thomas Leitch and Matei Calinescu, refocus the reader’s attention on the text’s discursive ideology usually missed in first reading. In re-reading we are “thrown into language, into its flow and surprises,” compelled “to recognize that [they] are part of that flow, of that

‘writing’” (Kaufer and Waller 83). Ideally, the act of critical reading should unfold along an uninterrupted “double dialectic,” with an active, transformative *rereading* already implicated in first reading. This, as Barthes has suggested (16), would mean reading a text as if it had already been read, its rhetorical strategies foregrounded, its hermeneutic code converted into more complex cultural codes that engage the reader in the production of meaning. *Rereading*, in this perspective, must necessarily lead to (*re*)*writing*, that is to a self-conscious critical performance that will negotiate the text’s experiential and cultural propositions in relation to those of the reader.

If properly performed, critical rereading/rewriting can enrich and pluralize interpretation, establishing a more responsible, collaborative relation with the text. Networked, hypertextual electronic environments offer us additional opportunities to perform these interrelated operations as a reading community in a nonlinear field, bridging reading with writing, and response with interpretation. Our interpretation can thus share the advantages of multilinear organization, open-endedness, greater inclusion of nontextual information, and interactive authorship.

Hypertextual rereading and rewriting strategies in literary studies

The computer offers a number of ways in which readings of a work can be considered and compared, and meanings can be negotiated by every member of an interpretive community. Many teachers have long thought that collaborative writing is essential for learning how to write, yet it is just as essential for learning how to read critically. The computer offers an effective collaborative environment for the reading — rereading — writing — rewriting process.

In a typical literature class taught by me over the past ten years, students met twice or three times a week in a networked computer lab to read, write, and converse mostly electronically, achieving a level of interaction that cannot be reproduced in a traditional classroom. Our tools for navigating the world of “hypertrails” were first a Windows-based hypertexting program, GUIDE, and now the Internet, with Netscape Composer. Our tools for electronic interaction are discussion forums such as those provided by Blackboard that enable the literature class to function as an interpretive community, exchanging interpretations that are individually persuasive and collectively aware of the larger conventions at work.

The electronic technologies encourage participants to read in a multisequential and exploratory fashion, producing “hypertextual” criticism (annotating, cross-referencing, and linking texts), and communicating among themselves throughout the reading and writing process. By segmenting the critical process into discrete steps (affective first readings, reflexive rereading, critical analysis and self-analysis), class participants are made aware of their choices and helped, through carefully designed reading and writing protocols, to readjust their interpretive approaches after each stage.

Focused first readings

As a rule, a first reading is emotional, selective, and generally uncritical. The reading process relies heavily on sequential and holistic procedures, on “naturalization” (Jonathan Culler), “consistency-building” (Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* 122-30), “selective attention” (Louis Rosenblatt). We read for closure and coherence, singling out helpful clues and eliminating problematic ones, and we are disappointed when a text resists synthesis. My procedure during this early stage of interpretation is to enhance the students’ self-consciousness about reading by assigning texts that challenge their interests; also to slow down and disrupt the linear progress of first reading through analytic questionnaires and interpretive tasks. Students are asked to take notes during their first reading on an electronic “Notepad” launched as a writing window from within the literary text. The types of questions students are invited to consider are designed to foreground points of tension both within the text, and between the text and the interpretation we impose on it. The first reading questionnaires tune students to details, gaps, rhetorical strategies, and language “clues,” moving them beyond a naturalized first reading.

In the latter part of the course, when students have mastered the authoring mode of hypertext programs like GUIDE, StorySpace, or Netscape Composer, they are required to annotate the text directly, embedding definitions, comments and questions in note buttons. This technique provides ample opportunity for commenting (practically every word can be associated with an annotation, becoming a “yielding word”), but also can allow the clustering of annotations around particular key words, or a reading of all class annotations together to assess the density of comment that a particular passage has received. I urge students to annotate in a way that invites audience participation, asking thought-provoking questions and suggesting explorative tasks rather than providing answers. The electronic annotation of the text is

followed by an electronic discussion in Blackboard, in which students discuss and fine-tune their first reading responses. The first phase of our critical work also involves shorter writing tasks, exploring the interplay between the text’s and the reader’s cultural “repertoires” (which, as described by McCormick, Waller, and Flower [16-27] in the auxiliary textbook used in this class, include views, themes, and ideological positions); as well as the “fit” between the text’s and the reader’s “literary repertoires” (which include awareness of genre features, rhetorical strategies, conventions, and innovations).

Multisequential rereadings

A more systematic exploration of these cultural and rhetorical issues can only be achieved in *rereading*. Rereading allows us to retrace and analyze our first reading responses, relating them back to the text’s generic and cultural features, but also to the assumptions and experiences that we bring to the text. At its best, re-reading is a form of *re-writing*, teasing out new implications, finding “otherness” as well as self-discovery, connecting the text under discussion with other texts and experiences.

Hypertextual technology is very helpful in this regard, enabling students to move from a linear first reading to a multisequential exploration of a text. It literally slows down reading, allowing students to take advantage of the feedback that results from associations and cross-references. Students are presented with a hypertext version of the literary work prepared by previous classes, which includes thematic and lexical annotations, reference links to other literary and historical texts, and internal “trails” that connect images, phrases or themes, offering alternative reading trajectories through the work. For example, the hypertext of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” contains interrogative annotations, external links to Eliot’s cultural references, and a number of internal “trails” that map the motifs of erotic longing, sickness, drowning, and (self-)questioning. By using the mouse, students control the order of reading, creating their own interpretive pathways through the hypertext’s annotations and associated materials.

It has been my experience that students quickly learn how to move from reading critical hypertexts to creating their own. Thus, after they become acquainted with the authoring techniques of GUIDE or other hypertext programs, they are asked to create their own hypertextual trails during rereading, stringing together theme words and patterns of images, and prefacing them with an annotation that calls attention to the significance of

that particular strand. I also invite students to bring their own "intertexts" (brief sections of relevant works written by the same or related authors), and link them to the text they are rereading. These intertexts expand the reading frame, throwing an oblique, thought-provoking light on the story or poem under examination; they also impress upon students the idea of the interconnectedness of the texts of a particular author, period, or culture.

From understanding to reformulation: Writing hypertextual criticism

The interactive critical pedagogy I have been describing should give students ample opportunity to move from reading to writing, and from *understanding* to *reformulation*, so as to experience a stronger mode of cultural construction. Moving from reflexive response to more formal interpretation, students are encouraged to engage the text through a "multisequential" approach which enables them to explore the rich internal linkages that a literary text develops, and to further connect this text to other relevant "intertexts" (biographical, historical, narrative). They are taught, in other words, to do "hypertextual criticism."

This type of criticism shares the advantages of hypertextuality: multilinear or networked organization, open-endedness, greater inclusion of intertextual information, interactive authorship, etc. More importantly, hypertextual criticism is a form of "participatory" criticism, bridging reading with writing, response with interpretation, questioning with argument. In that sense, hypertextual criticism has been anticipated by a number of directions in "poststructuralist" theory. Even before hypertextual programs became available, Jacques Derrida wrote his criticism in the form of elaborate "notes" and parallel commentaries, often sharing the page with the literary text itself. Feminist critics like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous or Adrienne Rich developed a mode of criticism that is part autobiography and part interpretation, part argument and part narrative; postmodern writers like Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, Grace Paley, and Joanna Russ developed hybrid genres they called "critifiction" (novel-essays). These hybrid, multilevel texts make it difficult to determine where the literary text ends and criticism begins; boundaries are called into question, genre features rethought, the creative play of language allowed more freedom. The techniques of hypertextuality can also be recognized in modernist literature: in the free associations and complex referencing (linking) of T.S. Eliot's poems, in the parallel (simultaneous or contrastive) narratives of Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Graham Greene, in the

collage assemblages of W. C. Williams, e. e. cummings, and Michel Butor, and so on. Hypertextual criticism allows us to interact with the text within its structure or in its immediate vicinity: annotating and interrogating it, surrounding it with information and other intertexts, navigating its various semantic paths.

The nuts and bolts of hypertexting are still somewhat awkward and dependent on available software. I began with the GUIDE program, in which students could easily take an on-line text and create a critical hypertext in stages, beginning with thematic and lexical annotations (in pop-up notes) on first reading, continuing with internal links on rereading, and finishing with more complex "expansions" that contained linked "intertexts" and the students' own critiques. However, with the advent of discussion forums and intuitive html editors such as Netscape Composer and Front Page it has become clear that the Internet is the best platform for this kind of community rereading and hypertextual critical writing. Whatever specific tools students use, it is important that they read and write in a "multilinear," hypertextual mode, and share their rereadings/rewritings of a work in an interactive community of readers. However awkward or complex, the hypertextual and interactive technology allows students to experience the three modes of textualization described by Robert Scholes (24), blending "text-within-text," "text-upon-text," and "text-again-text" in complex critical products that satisfy visually as well as intellectually.

By themselves, hypertextual and networking technologies do not guarantee satisfactory critical results. Even the most experimental cybertext runs — according to one of its chief supporters — "the risk of being so distended and slackly driven as to lose its centripetal form, to give way to a static low-charged lyricism—that dreamy, gravityless, lost-in-space feeling of the early sci-fi films" (Coover 25). In her discussion of hypertext fiction by Michael Joyce, Carolyn Guyer, and Stuart Moulthrop, Molly Abel Travis emphasizes the formal inventiveness of the mode but also the ways in which it can fail to yield the expected richness of readerly and writerly experience. Though more authentically dialogic than printed narratives, hypertext fiction puts inevitably limitations on interactive creativity and explorativeness. We could argue, in fact, that a printed text can provide a well-trained reader with the experience of a "nearly endless narrative" more easily than an electronic hypertext where the complicated logistic of navigating multipaths and the pressure of "randomness and expansiveness might come to feel as oppressive to [readers] as linearity and closure did for modern and postmodern writers"

(Travis 108). However, a hypertext can clearly teach a less adept reader to read in a multiplex, associationist way, navigating alternative paths through a text. Hypertextual and virtual reality technologies also enhance the sociality of reading and writing, enabling more people to interact than ever before. But there is a catch here, too. The "virtual space of [an] electronic multicultural classroom" encourages intercultural conversation but also disembodies cultural agents, removing (especially in anonymous electronic conversation) "accents," "skin color," and gender (127).

Before we can derive the intended benefits from these new technologies, we need to interrogate their limitations. As long as these technologies are used to reinforce old habits of reading/ writing or to ask "fairly traditional questions of traditional texts" (Olsen 312), they will deliver modest results. What we need to do is not temper "the friction-producing differences of multiculturalism" with the "friction-reducing technology of informatics," as Travis (118) proposes, but rather to enhance the dialogic/heterologic aspect of our critical transactions. The electronic technologies can provide us with the "interstitial space" where links to others and otherness can occur. Literature and literacy, however, remain an important component in this equation, encouraging "differentiated subjects" to "careful [intercultural] reading and listening" (Travis 132). Our most urgent task is to integrate literature in the global informational environment, where it can function as a full-fledged, imaginative partner teaching its interpretive competencies to other components of the cultural landscape. The global informational environment is inconceivable without the exigencies of creative authorship, critical rereading and rewriting, and cultural reformulation. Writing, conceived no longer as a mere verbal product, produced by isolated individuals, but as an interactive process that emphasizes the multi-dependencies of textuality, can be at the center of this new semiotic revolution.

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