Hypertext, Information Overload, and the Death of Literature

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Introduction

The problem I want to address here is that of the possible future of literature at the historical moment in which this form of textuality we have learned to call "hypertext" is swiftly becoming hegemonic[1] and transforming or replacing previous textual practices, particularly those associated with printing. Like all technological devices, information processing machines do not operate in a purely instrumental way, as a tool to increase production and speed. They operate also and primarily in the mode of what Heidegger called "enframing" ("Gestell"), which refers to the power technology has of creating a new environment, and of changing cultural practices, social values, human behaviour, and the existing balance of power (324). It is in this sense, for instance, that the invention of the clock restructured natural time (sunrise, daylight, night, seasons) and its perception into a numerical sequence that was unknown in previous times, and eventually led to the productive control of labor time and,

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[1] I use the word "hegemony" less in the sense of "dominance of one group over others" than in the sense of "cultural control that affects commonplace patterns of thought." In this context, hegemony controls the way new ideas are naturalized or, conversely, rejected by a social group. It alters notions of common sense in a given society and results in the empowerment of specific cultural beliefs, values and practices, at the same time that it excludes other values and practices.

ultimately, to the identification of time and money, as in "time is money"; or that the information-processing machine called print radically restructured the notion of knowledge, and paved the way for the appearance of new cultural formations (such as the novel) and the disappearance of others (such as oral narratives).

In his classic study of Postmodern knowledge, Jean-François Lyotard observed that, along with this hegemony of computers "comes a certain logic, and therefore a set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge statements" (4). An existing cultural form of knowledge can either "fit the new channels," because it can be translated "into quantities of information," or it will become obsolete. In the last thirty years, of course, a number of cultural practices have either become obsolete, or disappeared. I suspect, for example, that with the widespread use of e-mails, letter writing is quickly becoming history. And Derrida has argued that, had e-mail been available to Freud and his patients, psychoanalysis as we know it today would not exist (*Archive Fever* 17).

What, then, happens to the practice of print based literature in the age of hypertext and information processing machines? Will it survive? Will it be transformed, and, if so, in what ways? To ask these questions, of course, involves a tentative definition of the nature of hypertext, the nature of literature or, more precisely, of the literary event, and, finally, a tentative exploration of the difference between them.

The hypertext and its user

Let me turn, then, to the question of hypertext. Two names are usually mentioned in discussions of the definition of hypertext: those of Ted Nelson in the early sixties, and Vannevar Bush, in 1945. Nelson, who presumably used the word for the first time, usually receives more attention than Bush. I believe, however, that one can learn more about hypertext from Bush, who discussed the concept before the word was invented, than from Nelson. Nelson's definition is purely descriptive and disarmingly simple: hypertext, he says, is the kind of "non-sequential writing" in which "a series of text chunks connected by links… offer the reader different pathways" (2). There is always a price to pay for descriptive, oversimplified definitions: they usually occlude more than they reveal. In this case, what

Nelson's definition amounts to is what I called before the instrumental view of technology: a descriptive, essentialist definition of what all hypertexts share in common (connectivity) and of what you can do with it (follow alternative pathways). This oversimplified view of technology is usually followed by another dangerous oversimplification, usually presented as the good and the evil sides of technology: you can use the connectivity of this vast hypertext known as the Internet to provide millions of people with useful information, or you can use it for internet crime.

Nelson's definition then fails to provide a view of hypertext technology as a form of enframing, which would involve an understanding not only of what we can do with hypertext, but of what hypertexts can do to us as we are framed and perhaps trapped by its digital logic. Vannevar Bush, on the other hand, provides us with an understanding of hypertext not only in terms of what it can do, but also in terms of its specific historical conditions of enframing. Bush, in other words, helps us to understand how the development of this new form of textuality appears as a response to certain social, cultural and political pressures, and, in particular, as a response to the postwar need to come to grips with an overproduction of knowledge and information that was quickly growing out of control. Hypertext is here understood not simply as an instrument for the exercise of connectivity, but as a mechanical device meant to meet certain specific historical demands and capable of promoting, so to speak, environmental changes that would have an impact on cultural practices, particularly on the cultural practices related to science and knowledge production.

Bush's reputation today rests on what I think are two interrelated achievements: his contribution to the development of the digital age and, perhaps more importantly, his successful efforts to create a relationship between the U. S. government, the military, and the scientific establishment during and after World War II. In the early forties, together with other American scientists, and with the support of President Roosevelt, he participated in the efforts to found what would become the NDRC (National Defense Research Committee), an organization in charge of bringing together government, military, business and scientific leaders to coordinate military research. Bush was also one of the scientists involved in the Manhattan Project, devoted to the production of the first atomic bomb.

I want to call attention to these biographical details both because they are related to his achievement in the area of digital research, and

because they do suggest that the origins of hypertext were not associated with a liberal or even a libertarian agenda, or with the promotion of the freedom of language, presumably liberated at last, as early studies of hypertext often suggested, from the linear tyranny of the book. It was rather associated with far less noble pursuits, such as the postwar effort to control information, and the power which comes with it, whether in science, politics, or military practices. As a scientist involved in the war effort, Bush believed firmly in the need for the close association between "scientific research" and military matters. After the war, this belief was strengthened rather than abated: in an essay published in 1945 ("Science, the endless frontier"), he proposed the establishment of a National Research Foundation devoted, among other things, to the support of "long-range research on military matters" ("Science" 28). This is also the year when he published his major contribution to hypertext theory (even though the term did not exist at the time), in an essay called "As We May Think." The essay addresses the question of how to deal with a growing accumulation of information and knowledge that could no longer be grasped by human memory alone. Confronted with "a growing mountain of research," Bush complained, scientists and investigators are "staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers – conclusions which [they] cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear" ("As we may think" 2). For Bush, however, this limitation of human memory could be compensated by a machine designed to enhance and expand it. The machine would, to put it simply, allow the user to store and retrieve information from a databank of interconnected blocks of meaning. He called this memory expansion device "memex," an information processing machine which he described as a desk with viewing screens, a keyboard, selection buttons and levers and information stored in microfilms. Had Bush used the word "databanks" instead of "microfilms," which was the technology available at the time he wrote his essay, his words could easily be applied to computers. Anyone capable of using the memex in 1945 would probably feel comfortable enough to surf the web today, as the structure of both devices is the same. If the user of the memex, for example, is interested in "the origins and properties of the bow and arrow," all he has to do to learn more is to operate the levers and buttons of the machine to display on the screen selected information from "the dozens of possibly pertinent books and articles in his memex" ("As We May Think" 3):

> First he runs through an encyclopedia, finds an interesting but sketchy article, leaves it projected. Next, in a history, he finds another pertinent item, and ties the two together. Thus he goes, building a trail of many items. Occasionally he inserts a comment of his own, either linking it into the main trail or joining it by a side trail to a particular item… Thus he builds a trail of his interest through the maze of materials available to him. (15)

Bush might well have coined the expression that computer users of today come across again and again: "for more information, press enter." Both the memex user and the Internet surfer of today must skip through the interconnected material of a databank to select relevant material ("chunks of text," as Ted Nelson would say later) which is then visualized on the screen, in the form of collated texts. And both, here and there, insert a comment of their own.

What is germane to my argument here is the understanding of hypertext as a prosthesis, a mechanical device to replace a missing or insufficient body party, human memory in this case, with the purpose to control expanding information that is getting out of hand. Hypertext is, therefore, that supplement of human memory that is required whenever the information to be processed exceeds human capacity, whether this supplement is called a dictionary, an encyclopedia, or a search engine called "Google." What is involved in all cases is, as Bush saw, is "a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another" (15). Nor did he fail to anticipate that this prosthetic form of textuality would become more and more indispensable in the near future, given the growing complexity of modern civilization. Without this new information processing machine, human knowledge would be doomed to be "bogged down" by a failure of human memory (16). Science, in particular, would fail to deliver its goods, as it would no longer be able to come to grips with the growing mountain of accumulated knowledge. "There may be," he observes, "millions of fine thoughts, and the account of the experience on which they are based, all encased within [libraries]; but if the scholar can get at only one a week by diligent search, his syntheses are not likely to keep up with the current scene" (13).

What, then, is the ideal reader of this form of textuality that operates as a prosthesis designed to compensate for the limitations of human

memory? Hypertext is certainly appropriate for consulting encyclopedias and dictionaries, for the internet surfer in search of images and texts to illustrate a particular argument, for an amazon.com customer in search of books related to his research, or for a credit card user that must have his purchase authorized by mechanical access to the details of his bank account stored anywhere in the world, in the form of digital data. It may also be useful for readers of literature interested in collecting information on a particular writer such as, for example, William Blake. But none of these practices can be properly called reading. One does not, after all, read a dictionary. Umberto Eco has suggested that hypertext is not really a kind of text that is appropriate for the practice of reading, but a system for consultation. A "system," for Eco, is composed of a large but finite system of signs which has an almost endless combinatory potential, such as the alphabet (2). In "The Library of Babel" (to which, by the way, the Internet has often been compared), Jorge Luis Borges gave the perfect example of this system marked by an almost endless combinatory potential: an imaginary library containing all books and writings from the past, present and future because one can find on its shelves all possible combinations of the 23 letters of the alphabet. Borges's library is, indeed, a vast hypertext system in which every combination of letters has impossibly been actualized, so that this article that I am writing was already on its shelves, in several versions, before I wrote it, and indeed before I even considered the possibility of writing it. So much for originality. Eco suggests that the nature of hypertext as a system of combinations of signs makes it an ideal form of textuality for consultation, but not necessarily for reading.[2] The reader of

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[2] Vannevar Bush was very much aware of the significance of the memex for the consultation of combinatory systems such as an encyclopedia. He predicted that, with the development of automated information processing machines, "wholly new forms of encyclopedias will appear, ready made with a mesh of associative trails running through them, ready to be dropped into the memex and there amplified. The lawyer has at his touch the associated opinions and decisions of his whole experience, and of the experience of friends and authorities…. The physician, puzzled by a patient's reactions, strikes the trail established in studying an earlier similar case, and runs rapidly through analogous case histories, with wide references of the classics for the pertinent anatomy and histology…." ("As We May Think" 16).

texts, as opposed to the reader of hypertexts, works with a specific combination of the system of signs produced according to specific rules of combination that include some possibilities and exclude others: a sequence of signs such as "stm" is not a text, but a possible combination of the system (Eco 2). If I add two vowels to the sequence and produce the word "system," then I have a text for reading, even if this text can be interpreted in different ways. Eco reminds us that systems such as the alphabet are so rich in combinations that they may produce in the user the *illusion* of freedom. Early theorists of hypertext, as I suggested before, praised the hypertext as a major occasion for the experience of freedom. But if Eco is right, as I think he is, there is no such thing as real freedom in consulting hypertexts because the system programs in advance both a limited, even if very large, repertoire, and all its possibilities of combination.

But if the hypertext as a prosthesis of human memory differs from texts in general, it must differ also, and more significantly, from this particular kind of textuality that we call literary writing. And, more importantly, if literary texts are hypertextualized, there must be a difference between reading literature and reading literature in hypertext. This difference, of course, can only be understood more precisely if we return, as a preliminary step, to the always vexing question of the definition of literature.

The literary text and its reader

Perhaps the most productive way to approach the problem of defining literature today is to say right away that it is not a problem at all because it is a false problem: it should not even be stated in the first place. To ask the question "what is literature?" leads nowhere because there is no "whatness," or essence, of literature to begin with. Every attempt to define the specificity of literature by placing it on the outside of something else did not work well because, sooner or later, what was supposed to be outside was always already inside. Literature has consistently failed to be defined as that which is outside of facts, or of pragmatic discourses, or of ordinary speech, because history has often proved fictional, poems have often been used pragmatically, and literariness as a fact of history changes from time to time. Literature, as Terry Eagleton has concisely and conveniently

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described in his bestselling book *Literary Theory* (1983), "does not exist in the sense that insects do" (17). It is rather a cultural construction ideologically constituted by historical value judgements, and its existence must be explained in *functional* rather than *ontological* terms: it tells us, Eagleton concludes, "about what we do, not about the fixed being of things" (8).

Given the impossibility of saying what literature is, we must resign ourselves to simply accepting its existence. Literature happens, it comes to pass, it comes and passes, and may eventually pass away. In a passage meant to ridicule the formalist effort to identify the defamiliarizing effect of literature, Eagleton gives an example of this coming to pass of the literary text. "If you approach me at a bus stop," he says "and murmur 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness', then I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary" (2). But having acknowledged "the presence of the literary," Eagleton stops short of saying anything about what I do, or what happens to me, or to you for that matter, once we are in the presence of the literary as individuals, or as subjects. Am I simply a consumer of a commodity produced by the literary market? Although it is certainly possible to answer yes to this question, the answer does not tell the whole story. Consumers consume literature in different ways, and it is even possible, as Barthes has suggested in his reading of Balzac and elsewhere, that literature may well be a form of discourse that resists consumption. This form of being in the presence of literature not as a consumer, but as someone that experiences something other than consumption is what I want to emphasize here, as the necessary preliminary step in the attempt to distinguish the "literary experience" from "hypertextualized literature." In a nutshell, the distinction is that between, on the one hand, literature as primarily an event (and not an object) to be uniquely experienced, at a particular historical moment, by you and me, and the literary hypertext, on the other, as primarily a prosthetic device carefully fabricated to be consumed as a commodity in the market. Of course the distinction is not absolute, as there are overlaps from one concept to the other. Still, as I will argue, it is not a useless distinction either.

If literature is an event in which you and I experience, in different ways, a certain historical arrangement of words that comes to pass and may pass away, what then is this arrangement, and what is the experience of it as an event that, by definition, is unique? Historically understood, this

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arrangement of words that we call literature today is a relatively recent invention: it has existed for about three hundred years, and, as will be discussed later, is increasingly giving signs of exhaustion and, perhaps, of being on the verge of collapse from severe fatigue.[3] From the eighteenth century on, Literature has usually signified those *printed* texts produced by the creative imagination of, preferably but not exclusively, a genius that is not so much a *poietés* (that is to say, a maker in the original sense of the word) as an inventor. And what the creative genius invents amounts to, as Alvin Kernan has suggested, an expression of what remains of beauty in a world increasingly dominated by scientific rationalism (computers included), by the machine and industrialization, and by consumerism and materialism. The creative imagination of the genius resists these manifestations of decadence by diving into the "divine energy existing in the depths of [his] authentic self" with the purpose of bringing new meaning into a decayed world (Kernan 19). An antidote to the horrors of rationalism, science and the machine, this new meaning would be often associated with the values of the primitive, the irrational, nature, or the unconscious. The word "new" is also very significant here, as it points to the literary meaning to be expressed as an unveiling and as a revelation. Wordsworth's "spots of time" and James Joyce's "epiphanies," of course, are the two most

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[3] The historical specificity that marks this literary production as different from previous forms of expression have been exhaustively explored, particularly by critics that expanded on Raymond Williams's groundbreaking insights on the difficulty of defining literature and culture (See, in particular, *Marxism and Literature* 49-50). Literature as we understand it today, for instance, can hardly be understood except as profoundly marked by the cultural changes associated with the hegemony of print, consolidated in the eighteenth century. These changes include the spread of literacy, the possibility of universal education, the appearance of a new market for books, the development of nation-states and national literatures, the modern research university, the rise of democracies and the right to say anything (not always enforced, of course), a new sense of the self developed in a complex history from Descartes through Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud and beyond, and, finally, a new sense of author, authorship and genius closely associated with the laws of copyright.

remarkable examples of the ways in which newness enters a decayed world through art.

In this historical context of the last three hundred years, then, the job of the artist has been to contribute to that "culture of redemption," which Leo Bersani has recently defined as marked by the belief that "a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience" (1). No matter how diverse in their writings, styles and world views, Romantic and modern writers such as Dickens, Blake, Flaubert, Elliot, and Pound share this effort to rescue and, if possible, redeem what e. e. cummings called "this busy monster, manunkind" (397). There is damage and degradation, as Kernan reminds us, to be criticized and, if possible, redeemed, in the Yonville of Flaubert, the Satanic London of Blake, the Coketown of Dickens, the "unreal city" of Eliot, or the Paris subway of Pound. And there are fallen beings inhabiting these places and living meaningless lives, a Prufrock here, a Madam Bovary there, a hollow man elsewhere. Repair and redemption of this manunkind would only happen, if at all, if readers could be exposed to "a certain type of repetition of experience in art" (Bersani 1).

What literature does, then, is to try to change and repair the reader, and by extension culture itself, as it exposes them to the revelation to be experienced in art. Producing this revelation as an alternative to scientific rationalism, as I suggested before, requires a certain emphasis on the use of language not so much for what it can say or tell explicitly (that would be the rational use of language), but for what it can suggest or show, and on the need for a poetics that increasingly chooses to specialize in shunning allegory and transparency in order to emphasize symbolism, metaphor and density. This kind of poetics, of course, spells trouble for the reader in search of closures and quick answers, as she is more often than not invited to become involved in a search of meaning that, because unleashed by the vagueness of suggestions rather than statements, tends to lead to possibilities without end.

What is then the ideal reader of literature conceived as an event to be experienced as possibilities without end? For the French critic Maurice Blanchot, the experience of this reader is analogous to that of Ulysses, as he takes precautions to listen to the song of the sirens without, however, suffering any harm. In a powerful reading of Blanchot, Hillis Miller

observes that the siren's song is "always proleptic," that is, it is *always* assigned to a time that precedes its real happening. The word "always" here points to an infinite regression: the song remains forever a promise of a song to come in the form of a final presence that remains absent forever. Of course, the voice that we hear behind Miller's reading Blanchot (and behind my reading of both) is the voice of Jacques Derrida, for whom, predictably, literature should be understood as a specter, or as a "spectral apparition" ("Shibboleth" 58; *Specters* 6) that is made real by flesh and blood but in which flesh and blood must disappear, as Joseph Kronick has concisely put it, "right away in the apparition" (2, 4). Literature, in other words, is the promise of the ghost to come, but because the ghost is both the body and its denial, and because it can never be grasped, it signifies also "the ineluctable loss of the origin" (Kronick 4).

Like Ulysses, then, the reader in the presence of the literary, whether he is Eagleton at the bus stop, or you and me reading a book, is a ghost chaser (but never a ghost buster) and a listener of the song to come. Needless to say, this is not an experience of consumption, but an opportunity to come to grips with that uncontrollable otherness that, presumably, has the power to change you and me, perhaps even Eagleton, as readers of literature. It is no wonder then that we are afraid of ghosts, and that Ulysses insists on being tied to the mast of his ship. Reading as the unpredictable event of an encounter with the otherness that refuses to be domesticated involves the inevitable sense of uncertainty and loss, but also of surprise, in a reader that can never be sufficiently prepared for the song to come. This does not mean, of course, that one can dispense with all previous and laborious preparations that necessarily precede the act of reading. It means rather that this preparation, however extended and exhaustive, is necessary but always insufficient to respond fully to the unique event of individual reading. If, on the one hand, it is true that hypertext may be useful in this preparation for reading, as it provides us with easy access to a variety of contexts, it is also true that it amounts to a preparation only, radically different from reading as an encounter with the unexpected.

Reading literature means then, paradoxically, being prepared to be surprised again and again. And the reader, in being surprised by the otherness in the event of reading, undergoes a change, redefines one's own views, feelings, and perceptions, and has the carpet of his horizons of

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expectations pulled from under his feet.[4] This experience of the event in time and space, of course, escapes control and cannot be simulated by a machine, as is the case of the literary hypertext, which is about the immediate connections of meaning in a spatial dimension. Reading hypertexts, if it can be called reading at all, is a form of collating pre-programmed pathways of meaning in a spatially programmed environment, whereas reading literature involves the exposure or a reader, in time, to the unstable experience of walking in pathways that, so to speak, lead nowhere. It is unlikely that a computer will ever be programmed to produce this experience inherently marked by temporality and the unexpected: the event of reading resists being translated into a programming which must necessarily take place within the eternal present of a space of total predictability. Reading hypertext, then, is a form of experiencing a spatial form of collage, and it is therefore a practice of non-reading. Reading literature, on the other hand, is a form of experiencing the uncertainties of time, history, and mortality.

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[4] Georges Poulet has written extensively on the power the text has of affecting the reader. "Reading," he says, "is the act in which the subjective principle which I call *I* is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my *I*. I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me" (45). To be "on loan to another," implies a crisis of subjectivity in which the subject of reading is both active and passive, dispossessed and powerful in her dispossession. Poulet claims that Rimbaud's famous words, "Je est un autre" describes accurately this alienated subjectivity. "Reading," Poulet explains, "is just that: a way of giving way not only o a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them" (45). What, more precisely, is this "alien principle"? Poulet describes it "a subjectivity without objectivity," meaning by that "a subject which reveals itself to itself and [to the reader] in its transcendence relative to all which is reflected in it." He concludes his meditation on reading with the image of this "alien principle" as a ghost that haunts every critic in her quest for the "elucidation of works". The work of objective elucidation can only get you so far. After that, the critical work of elucidation, …in order to accompany the mind in this effort of detachment from itself, needs to annihilate, or at least momentarily to forget, the objective elements of the work, and to elevate itself to the apprehension of a subjectivity without objectivity (49).

Reading literature in hypertext. Or, what hypertext can do to literature

I want to conclude by returning to the question of how hypertext can affect literature in the context I have just outlined. I have good news and bad news, but I want to give particular attention to the bad news, as I feel that this is the most urgent question to be addressed. The good news has to do with the immediate advantages of the Internet for the accumulation of hypertextualized literary texts online and for their immediate dissemination. As more and more hypertextualized literary texts are made available everyday to readers, teachers, and students all over the planet, it is obvious that never before so many have had so much easy access to a vast amount of texts with so little effort. And with professional hypertextualization, readers can access not only primary sources, but significant historical contexts and additional information. Nor is this a matter of quantity only, especially when the hypertextualization is expertly provided by distinguished scholars and with the financial and logistic support of powerful institutions, as is the case of the Blake Archives. I think it is safe to say that readers of Blake, today, will be better served by accessing the Archives than by consulting printed editions. Visit the Archive and you will, for instance, have immediate access, with the click of a mouse, to all the illustrations available that relate to the word "tiger," or the word "lamb." No printed edition of the poet can make available to the reader the amount of information, the ease of connections, and the facility of access provided by the multimedia Blake available online. Or consider the experience that is becoming more and more available worldwide today, of teachers and students in the wired classroom. Marjorie Perloff has recently commented on one such experience.

Teaching a graduate seminar "in avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century" in 1998, without using the Internet, she had a hard time assembling course materials, especially in cases involving the use of images or sound: the visual poems of Marinetti, sound poems, performance works. Teaching a similar course in a wired classroom seven years later was much easier, because most of the material was available online. "I brought my little laptop," she said, "and we were ready to go." Teacher and students had easy access to materials related to the Futurists in www.futurism.org.uk, and to other materials in the Museum of Modern Art Archives. "On this site," she observes, "one can click on individual

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books and then turn the pages to see individual texts – much more than one can do at actual exhibits where the books are in glass cases" (Perloff 3).

This is indeed good news. In fact, it is so good that anyone suspecting there might be any bad news associated with it should be taken as suspect of being a new luddite or a technophobe, or a Jurassic traditionalist unworthy of serious attention. What could be wrong with this accumulation of hypertextualized literature and art online, especially if is taken as an expansion of existing printed material for easier dissemination and easier manipulation? In this sense the Internet presents itself as a complement to the book, and the business of reading literature will go on as usual, only better. Marjorie Perloff, for one, endorses this view. The course she currently teaches on the avant-garde "is never based on electronic materials alone; it must always be supplemented by close reading of the poems and artworks themselves as well as by research in the library" (4). Far from opposing each other, digital resources and physical resources here complement each other in the best of all possible worlds: real libraries and electronic archives, hypertextual gathering of information as well as close reading. What is implied here is that the Internet is a tool to enhance already existing technologies, such as the technology of the book, not a replacement for them. "The Internet," she concludes,

> cannot replace the instructor's intellectual organization of and response to the material in question: to treat it as a teaching tool is to remember that sometimes telling is better than showing. But used with a certain degree of skepticism and irony, Internet access can transform the classroom. Indeed, whether we like it or not, it has already done so (5).

I will take my chances of being labeled a Jurassic technophobe and suggest that there might be, in fact, some bad news associated with the wonders of hypertextual material accumulated online. But this can only be done if we are willing to think of technology not merely as a tool to do things faster and better but, in a tradition often associated with Heidegger and McLuhan, among others, as an environment, or enframing, or emplacement. Technologies and technologically produced textualities could then be thought of as emplacing devices, and what they emplace is not only objects, but also people. This technological emplacement reconfigures space, time, objects, people, culture, behaviours. Neil Postman conveniently

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summarizes this view of technology in the first chapter of his *Technopoly*. "A new technology," he observes,

> does not add or subtract anything. It changes everything. In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe. After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new coloration to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry. (18)

The "new coloration" produced by new technologies, of course, depends on their hegemonic power. Television changed everything because it became hegemonic in relation to other media. If Postman is right, technologies that become hegemonic, such as electronic hypertextuality, do not necessarily operate as complements to older technologies, such as the printed book. "New technologies," Postman claims,

> compete with old ones – for time, for attention, for money, for prestige, but mostly for dominance of their world view…. And it is a fierce competition, as only ideological competitions can be. It is not merely a matter of tool against tool – the alphabet attacking ideographic writing, the printing press attacking the illuminated manuscript, the photograph attacking the art of painting, television attacking the printed world. When media make war against each other, it is a case of world-views in collision. (16)

If Postman is right, then we have to consider the possibility that electronic hypertext reading might eventually displace rather than complement literary reading as the kind of practice typical of the Gutenberg Era. In terms of my previous discussion, this means that collage and annotation as practiced by Vannevar Bush might well displace siren song listening as dangerously practiced by Ulysses. More specifically, if the hypertextual practice of searching databanks to produce a collage of materials to which annotations are added becomes dominant, and readers become increasingly motivated to see it as the natural way to read, then the experience of reading literature as a form of experiencing the uncertainty of a secret that cannot ever be fully revealed will tend to recede in the background. Thomas Frisk has suggested that, if not for other reasons, reading *Moby-Dick* interactively promotes a kind of reading that competes

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with, rather than complements, other forms of readings because "a spurious feeling of accomplishment" is involved in hypertext reading. It is the accomplishment, for instance, of clicking on "white whale" or "Nantucket" and calling up "pictures, sounds, and assorted addenda." The reader feels that he can now "demand things of this text":

> I don't submit to it in the same way as before, carefully constructing may own vision of it, what it means to me. I challenge it "explain yourself; give me more." The subtle physical satisfactions of my interrogation – clicking, opening, a minute sort of video game – are not to be ignored. Yet paradoxically with such interactivity I am in a more passive position regarding the text. Although I can punch buttons to ramify and illustrate it, those enhancements don't deepen my involvement with, my responsibility to, or my own ideas about the text. Like a good consumer, I merely accept the repressive "choices" that are offered me.
> This seductive entwining of power and passivity is undoubtedly the reason why a younger generation has less and less patience with bare text that's "just black and white and doesn't move…." Less and less time spent in reading can only hasten the day when a page of naked print seems as strange as a field plowed by oxen.[5] (207)

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[5] Together with drastic changes in the meaning of reading, changes in writing are felt by many to be taking place. In his presidential address to the MLA in 1999, Edward said complained that in the new electronic order, "which has made writing so much more easy, efficient, and available, as well as disposable," students are writing more, but not necessarily better. "Whereas ten years ago one had to plead with students to produce eight to ten pages for a term paper, now one has to be absolutely despotic about not reading anything over fifteen pages. Student as well as faculty writing, with its rapid editing, transcribing, patching, and pasting potential, has developed a noticeable structural relaxation and very often an unattractive distension. You can write on a keyboard with only the effort required to press keys and editorial buttons; you can save, modify, adapt, and incorporate huge numbers of words seemingly without labor or sweat…. The result is a standardization of tone that has more or less done away with the quirkiness and carefully nurtured gestation of handwritten writing that one associates symbolically as well as actually not only with Freud but with the great literary figures contemporary with him such as Proust, Mann, Woolf, Pound, Joyce, and most of the other modernist giants" (Edward Said, "Presidential Address 1999: Humanism and Heroism," *PMLA*, vol 11, number 3, May 2000, 285-291).

There is a difference, then, between experiencing the literary and reading literature as a practice of constantly pressing enter for more information. If this distinction makes sense, then it should be clear that the production of literature in hypertext promotes the practice of expanding and controlling the memory of literature, but not that of *reading literature*. And, as the practice of control becomes hegemonic, and more and more hypertextualized literature is stored in the Internet, we may well be tempted to identify reading with the collage of data to be displayed on the screen. Ultimately, this would amount to promoting the kind of reading exemplified by Vannevar Bush, to be followed by the deterioration of the practice of listening to the song of the sirens, or of chasing the ghost to come. I do not want to claim that this experience is inherently good, desirable, necessary, as it has its pitfalls too.

The culture of redemption, as Bersani has suggested, may well amount to an invitation to forget history, for example. True as this may be, it is also safe to say that the literary has enormously affected our understanding of culture and education, our sense of time and history, and indeed the meaning of what it is to be human, as an alternative way of life to what some have labeled "posthuman," meaning by that the way of life of cyborgs with prosthetic memories in the Age of Information.

If the practice of listening to the siren's song to come does recede to the background, then, will something important be lost? The answer to that question depends ultimately, I think, on whether we may or may not still value, in our days, literature as an experience of redemption which necessarily exposes us to irreducible otherness and, by implication, to our own limitations as subjectivities existing in time. Most people, I suppose, will agree today that these promises of redemption and repair did not do much to prevent the horrors of the last century, and will not certainly be enough to exorcise the new terrors to come in the new century. But it is still possible to believe that, if the experience of the encounter with otherness cannot change history, it can nevertheless perhaps be of help, with luck, in minimizing the damage a little. And it will do so by reminding us of the dangers involved in the overwhelming human impulse to control and to reduce difference to sameness. If literature is the arena where the relation to the irreducible other is staged, one might do worse today than to be exposed to it and to listen to the song to come.

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T. S. Eliot remarked in the mid thirties that what I have been calling here, following Blanchot, the song to come might well be a form of wisdom on the verge of being lost as it was quickly being displaced by what he called knowledge and information. "Where," he asked, "is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where the knowledge we have lost in information" (97)? I have suggested that, today, Eliot's belief in the goodness of wisdom has to be severely qualified, as it was not perhaps wise enough. But it should not, I think, be dismissed as irrelevant either. If, in repeating the question, we are not allowed today to entertain great expectations, we may perhaps still believe that, given the impossibility of grand solutions, the next best thing might well be to cling to the hope that things can get better simply because, here and there, whenever readers like you and me experience the literary, anti-entropic forces may, with luck, stop them from getting worse.

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