Cause or Convergence, Influence or Confluence?

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HYPERTEXT the convergence of contemporary critical theory & technology

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What relation obtains between electronic computing, hypertext in particular, and literary theory of the past three or four decades? At the May 1990 Elvetham Hall conference on technology and the future of scholarship in the humanities, J. Hillis Miller proposes that the relation . . . is multiple, non-linear, non-causal, non-dialectical, and heavily overdetermined. It does not fit most traditional paradigms for defining 'relationship'" ("bib1.html#miller2"> 11).

Miller himself provides a fine example of the convergence of critical theory and technology. Before he discovered computer hypertext, he wrote about text and (interpretative) text processing in ways that sound very familiar to anyone who has read or worked with hypertext. Here, for example, is the way *Fiction and Repetition* describes the way he reads a novel by Hardy in terms of what I would term a Bakhtinian hypertextuality: "Each passage is a node, a point of intersection or focus, on which converge lines leading from many other passages in the novel and ultimately including them all." No passage has any particular priority over the others, in the sense of being more important or as being the "origin or end of the others" (58).

Similarly, in providing "an 'example' of the deconstructive strategy of interpretation," in "The Critic as Host" (1979), he describes the dispersed, linked text block whose paths one can follow to an ever widening, enlarging metatext or universe. He applies deconstructive strategy "to the cited fragment of a critical essay containing within itself a citation from another essay, like a parasite within its host." Continuing the microbiological analogy, Miller next explains that "the 'example' is a fragment like those miniscule bits of some substance which are put into a tiny test tube and explored by certain techniques of analytical chemistry. [One gets] so far or so much out of a little piece of language, context after context widening out from these few phrases to include as their necessary milieux all the family of Indo-European languages, all the literature and conceptual thought within these languages, and all the permutations of our social structures of household economy, gift-giving and gift receiving" (Miller, "The Critic as Host, " 223).

Miller does point out that Derrida's " *Glas* and the personal computer appeared at more or less the same time. Both work self-consciously and deliberately to make obsolete the traditional codex linear book and to replace it with the new multilinear multimedia hypertext that is rapidly becoming the characteristic mode of expression both in culture and in the study of cultural forms. The 'triumph of theory' in literary studies and their transformation by the digital revolution are aspects of the same sweeping change" ("Literary Theory," 20-21). This sweeping change has many components, to be sure, but one theme appears in both writings on hypertext (and the memex) and in contemporary critical theory -- the limitations of print culture, the culture of the book. Bush and Barthes, Nelson and Derrida, like all theorists of these perhaps unexpectedly intertwined subjects, begin with the desire to enable us to escape the confinements of print. This common project requires that one first recognize the enormous power of the book, for only after we have made ourselves conscious of the ways it has formed and informed our lives can we seek to pry ourselves free from some of its limitations.

Looked at within this context, Claude Lévi-Strauss's explanations of preliterate thought in *The Savage Mind* and in his treatises on mythology appear in part as attempts to de-center the culture of the book -- to show the confinements of our literate culture by getting outside of it, however tenuously and however briefly. In emphasizing electronic, noncomputer media, such as radio, television, and film, Baudrillard, Derrida, Jean- François Lyotard, McLuhan, and others similarly argue against the future importance of print-based information technology, often from the vantage point of those who assume analogue media employing sound and motion as well as visual information will radically reconfigure our expectations of human nature and human culture.

Among major critics and critical theorists, Derrida stands out as the one who most realizes the importance of free-form information technology based upon digital, rather than analogue, systems. As he points out, "the development of *practical methods* of information retrieval extends the possibilities of the 'message' vastly, to the point where it is no longer the 'written' translation of a language, the transporting of a signified which could remain spoken in its integrity" (10). Derrida, more than any other major theorist, understands that electronic computing and other changes in media have eroded the power of the linear model and the book as related culturally dominant paradigms. "The end of linear writing," Derrida declares, "is indeed the end of the book," even if, he continues, "it is within the form of a book that the new writings -- literary or theoretical -- allow themselves to be, for better or worse, encased" (*Of Grammatology*, 86). Therefore, as Ulmer points out, "grammatalogical writing exemplifies the struggle to break with the investiture of the book" (13).

According to Derrida, "the form of the 'book' is now going through a period of general upheaval, and while that form appears less natural, and its history less transparent, than ever . . . the book form alone can no longer settle . . . the case of those writing processes which, in *practically* questioning that form, must also dismantle it." The problem, too, Derrida recognizes, is that "one cannot tamper" with the form of the book "without disturbing everything else" (*Dissemination*,3) in Western thought. Always a tamperer, Derrida does not find that much of a reason for not tampering with the book, and his questioning begins in the chain of terms that appear as the more-or-less title at the beginning pages of *Dissemination*: "Hors Livres: Outwork, Hors D'oeuvre, Extratext, Foreplay, Bookend, Facing, and Prefacing." He does so willingly because, as he announced in *Of Grammatology* , "All appearances to the contrary, this death of the book undoubtedly announces (and in a certain sense always has announced) nothing but a death of speech (of a *so-called* full speech) and a new mutation in the history of writing, in history as writing. Announces it at a distance of a few centuries. It is on that scale that we must reckon it here" (8).

In conversation with me, Ulmer mentioned that since Derrida's gram equals link, grammatology is the art and science of linking -- the art and science, therefore, of hypertext. One may add that Derrida also describes dissemination as a description of hypertext: "Along with an ordered extension of the concept of text, dissemination inscribes a different law governing the effects of sense or reference (the interiority of the'thing,' reality, objectivity, essentiality, existence, sensible or intelligible presence in general, etc.), a different relation between writing, in the metaphysical sense of the word, and its 'outside' (historical, political, economical, sexual, etc.)" (*Dissemination*, 42).

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