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Destination Unknown: Experiments in the Network Novel

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Destination Unknown:
Experiments in the Network Novel

A dissertation submitted to the

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by

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Abstract

The dissertation contains two components: a critical component that examines recent experiments in writing literature specifically for the electronic media, and a creative component that includes selections from *The Unknown*, the hypertext novel I coauthored with William Gillespie and Dirk Stratton.

In the critical component of the dissertation, I argue that the network must be understood as a writing and reading environment distinct from both print and from discrete computer applications. In the introduction, I situate recent network literature within the context of electronic literature produced prior to the launch of the World Wide Web, establish the current range of experiments in electronic literature, and explore some of the advantages and disadvantages of writing and publishing literature for the network. In the second chapter, I examine the development of the book as a technology, analyze "electronic book" distribution models, and establish the difference between the "electronic book" and "electronic literature." In the third chapter, I interrogate the ideas of linking, nonlinearity, and referentiality. In the fourth chapter, I examine some specific examples of network novels: Robert Arellano's *Sunshine '69*, Shelley and Pamela Jackson's *The Doll Games*, Rob Wittig's *Blue Company,* and *The Unknown*. In discussing these network novels, I illustrate how the network imposes certain constraints on the form of the novel, and discuss some of the strategies that authors have employed to create distinctly literary reading experiences for the fragmented reading environment of the network. In the conclusion of the critical component, I survey some of the new forms and genres currently in development, and delineate some of the challenges faced by the field of electronic literature at this time.

The creative component of the dissertation includes forty "scenes" from *The Unknown*, the 1998 trAce/AltX International Hypertext Competition-winning collaborative hypertext novel. The preface to these selections discusses the effect of remediating sections of a novel written for the network into print. In print, the selections from the hypertext novel function autonomously as a comic, metafictional, and intertextual road-trip novel, and track the rise and fall of the eponymous authors of *The Unknown*.

Dedication

This dissertation is a belated eightieth birthday present for my grandmother, Mercedes Rettberg, who, with the tenacity only an Irish grandmother could muster, promised to haunt me for eternity should I not complete my Ph.D. while she still walked the earth. You finally got a doctor, Grandma.

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been completed without the generous help of family, friends, colleagues, teachers, and institutions. The Charles Phelps Taft Advanced Graduate Fellowship from the Taft Memorial Fund at the University of Cincinnati provided me with generous funding that translated into the writing time without which *The Unknown* would not have developed into a fully-fledged hypertext novel. I'm grateful to all of my teachers, particularly the faculty of the University of Cincinnati, who gave me room to explore many paths that might have seemed tangential at the time, but which have since become the core foci of my academic career.

I am grateful to Robert Coover, who selected *The Unknown* as the co-winner of the 1998 trAce/AltX International Hypertext Competition, introduced me to the world of electronic literature, helped me to launch the Electronic Literature Organization, and offers me a model for the writer's life. I am also grateful to Jeff Ballowe, Marjorie Luesebrink, and the other board members and advisors of the Electronic Literature Organization, who made the last three years of my life into a pre-doctoral post-doc in electronic literature that any graduate student would envy. My "e-lit friends" in Chicago, especially Rob Wittig and Kurt Heintz, helped keep the "virtual" work I was doing with electronic literature anchored in a social reality that was only a few blocks from my front door. I already miss our bimonthly "e-lit dinners" at Moti Mahal on Clark Street and the many engaging conversations we shared.

I am especially grateful for the friendship and camaraderie of my coauthors in *The Unknown*: William Gillespie and Dirk Stratton, with whom I shared the most exhilarating adventures of my writing career, and who will always be my brothers as much as collaborators. My parents, Paul and Barbara Rettberg, have stood by me and supported me through all the ups

and downs of my fragmented journey through life, as have my brothers Paul, Kyle, and Eric, my sister, Megan and my Aunt Debbie. More than anyone else, I owe my wife and best friend Shelly an enormous debt for the many hours, rightfully hers, which I sacrificed to this endeavor; I can only hope that my love for her and renewed attention might begin to repay her patience.

The three members of my dissertation committee have helped me in immeasurable ways, and have exhibited a great deal of tolerance with an unconventional student exploring an unconventional focus on an unconventional schedule. During my time at the University of Cincinnati, Norma Jenckes was an exceptional advisor, guiding my scholarship in drama, nurturing my creative impulses as a novice playwright, and employing me as an editorial assistant on *American Drama*. While I was living in Chicago, Joseph Tabbi was both a great friend and a scholarly mentor who kept me connected to academe and the world of ideas, constantly encouraging me to balance the practical concerns of my organizational work with my intellectual development as a scholar and writer. Tom LeClair, the Chair of my dissertation committee, was the reason that I applied to the University of Cincinnati's doctoral program in the first place and has been a true mentor throughout my time in the program. I am grateful for his tireless work on this dissertation, and I am proud to have earned his respect with its successful completion.

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Part One

Experiments in the Network Novel

Introduction

Four years ago, I left Cincinnati with half a print novel and every intention of finishing my dissertation, that novel, within the year. At the same time, I'd just started a "fun" project, *The Unknown*, with two friends and coauthors, Dirk Stratton and William Gillespie. *The Unknown* hypertext novel was a lark, a project that we worked on for fun, one that we thought of as a silly, only possibly healthy, distraction from the more serious fiction, poetry, and criticism that each of us wrote "professionally." As I worked on the two projects, however, I found that the print novel was becoming less and less interesting to me, and that the writing I was doing on *The Unknown*, and simultaneously publishing on the World Wide Web, was becoming more and more intriguing. Writing collaboratively and nonlinearly, writing not for print but for screen, presented challenges of a kind that I had never before encountered. *The Unknown* was an experiment in writing a novel native to the Internet, a novel shaped more like a network than like a book. The writing experiments I've participated in and observed since revolve around the same concerns. How does one tell a story that isn't simply distributed on the network, but that is native to the medium? What possibilities does the electronic environment offer writers that the print environment does not? How can we write literature for people who spend much of their reading time on the Internet?

The printed book has had much more time to evolve as a reading technology than have the various computer and screen-based reading technologies. It has only been about twenty years

since the first works of hypertext fiction hit the screen. A vast population of talented authors writes literature for print, while the authors of literature for the electronic media can be counted in the low hundreds internationally. In an essential way, electronic literature is experimental literature. The works that are important to the field now are not "masterpieces" but instead "proof-of-concept." Insofar as a "canon" is developing, it is a canon of experiments that are successful to the degree that they have led to further experiments. At this point the criticism of hypertext, kinetic poetry, interactive fiction, time-based electronic work, and algorithm-based poetics should focus not on the process of canonization, of selecting out our cultural touchstones from a presumably vast pool of work, but on a process of deliberate observation, by dint of which we might hope to learn what techniques, approaches and technologies will be useful for further generations of writers.

Authors of electronic literature face different challenges than do authors writing for print. Cultural practices already in place have largely removed the process of designing the reading interface from the hands of print authors. In print publishing, the author prepares and edits the manuscript. The process of designing the cover, layout and typography of the book is handled by others, as is the process of binding and distributing the finished book. Authors creating work for the electronic media are intimately involved in designing the reading interface, in coding and/or programming the work, and in the process of distributing the work on the network or via other media. I mention these factors not by way of apologizing for the relative paucity of "masterworks" of electronic literature, but to foreground the fact that electronic literature is truly in its infancy, and should be appreciated as nascent, as a field in formation, rather than as a bank of "great works." Electronic literature is not literature that happened back then, which we can

learn from, but a set of literary experiments that are happening now, in a framework that we, as readers and writers, can help to shape.

Print literature is not intrinsically superior to electronic literature. Neither is there anything about the nature of electronic writing that makes it better than writing made for print. Each medium, each writing culture, each mode of distribution, each set of reading and writing practices, has its own particularities and its own constraints. I embrace electronic literature for its potentiality as much as its actuality. As a reader, I'm attracted more than anything else to the *strangeness* of these new forms, which borrow from multiple traditions, not only those of literature, but also those of visual, conceptual, and performance art, those of graphic design, those of artificial intelligence and computer programming. The field of electronic literature is currently engaged in a process of inventing new paradigms for the writing, distribution, and reading of literature that furthermore reveals many assumptions that print culture has absorbed and institutionalized to the point that they may now seem transparent. The book is not a *natural* form for reading, but a technology for reading that was invented, and that has been refined over time.

Reading contemporary electronic literature before its "classics" have been chosen, we can observe conventions slowly taking shape in the contested writing medium of the network. Contemporary electronic literature lacks not only a canon, but also clearly defined genres. It's unclear what we should be measuring these works against. If we compare works of electronic literature only to print literature, we lose sight of their qualities as applications for the computer. If we compare works of electronic literature only to other applications for the computer, we lose sight of their qualities as contemplative reading experiences. As a reader, I privilege and assess different aspects of a hypertext fiction, a kinetic poem, an algorithm-driven morphing poem, or a

time-based email novel, than I would in a piece of print literature. In some respects, I'm more

tolerant of flaws in works of electronic literature than I am in works of print literature. The

question for me is not whether one form or one medium is superior to the other. My primary

interest in electronic literature is rooted in the ways that any given work utilizes the capabilities of

the media for which it is designed, in addition to the aesthetic and conceptual qualities that I value

from a lifetime of reading print literature.

I probably wouldn't value a poem such as Orit Kruglanski and Raquel Paricio's "Exhale"

very much if I were to simply read the text on the page:

> her body had turned to explanations
> she was no longer possible
> for sexual desires
> it's a relief, really
> her skin became the desert
> around this time
> she gave up thirst
> but we walked great distances in her sleep
> it's a relief
> her hands, which had been empty so long
> turned cold.

In simple text format, this is a capable but not particularly memorable poem about a corpse. In its

media-specific context, however, this poem makes for a powerful reading experience. Designed

as a Director application for the Macintosh with a built-in microphone, "Exhale" requires the

reader to "breathe life" into it. As the reader blows gently into the microphone, seemingly

disconnected letters shift like windblown leaves across the screen. Gradually, and only with

much physical effort on the part of the reader, the poem takes shape as a complete text. The effort

of breathing into the machine revivifies the poem, and gives a certain power to this poem of loss

that it would not have had were it not for its interface. "Exhale" doesn't make the mistake that so

many works do, of treating the interface as an afterthought, as a delivery mechanism for the text, or the reverse, of treating the text as mere decoration for a beautiful or clever interface. A work of electronic literature functions best, and has the most powerful affect on the reader, when the reader's interaction with the machine is part of the metaphor of the work itself.

Works of electronic literature should be understood not only as texts, but also as text-machines functioning in network environments. The best basis for a constructive critique of electronic literature lies in the analysis of the specific effects of its interactions with the operations of the computer and the network itself. Certain scholarly works, such as George Landow's *Hypertext 2.0*, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext*, and Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*, tend towards the establishment of totalizing systems for the critical discussion of electronic literature or digital art. In each case, the critic attempts to lay the groundwork for further critical discussion by establishing a set of terms, and a set of boundaries, a kind of paradigm. Each of the three authors makes valid observations: Landow explores the relationship between hypertext and poststructuralist theory, Aarseth examines the ergodic properties of electronic literature and constructs a partial topology of the forms made available by the processing power of the computer, and Manovich describes in detail some of the object-oriented artforms and object-oriented creative processes new media artists work with. My own sense, however, is that the time has not yet come, nor will it come any time soon, for a totalizing theory of electronic literature, as its technological platforms and formal genres are still being defined.

As a field of literary study, hypertext has both benefited and suffered from its relationship to critical theory. During the 1980s and early nineties, critics managed to generate reams of critical articles about hypertext, its significance, and its theoretical bases. An MLA database

search for the keyword "hypertext" during the years 1980-1996 turns up 151 articles and books. During the same period, fewer than forty works of hypertext fiction, poetry, and nonfiction were formally published, authored by fewer than twenty writers. The critics turned out in droves; the writers did not.

Hypertext's pioneers tried to build a market of ideas, which would allow for the study of forms of literature that were intended for the screen rather than the page. The hypertext author Michael Joyce and the critic Jay David Bolter developed Storyspace, the first hypertext application designed specifically for the production of literature. Author Robert Coover established hypertext's credibility as an avant garde form, and wrote several important essays about hypertext for *The New York Times Book Review*. Theorist George Landow linked hypertext literature to au currant poststructuralist theory. Annual conferences were organized at which programmers, theorists, critics, and a handful of writers could get together to share their work. Hypertext and interactive narrative established a foothold in academe at elite east-coast institutions including Brown, Vassar, Georgia Tech and MIT, and others soon followed suit. The initial institutionalization of hypertext is in many ways a success story. In the 1980s and early nineties, hypertext's pioneers planted seeds that resulted in what is now a small but flourishing critical industry in electronic textuality. While hypertext theory found a home in the university system, its pioneers met with much less success at institutionalizing centers for the creation of new literary work (Brown University's Hypertext Workshops are one notable exception), or at creating a readership for hypertext outside of universities.

Thankfully, the World Wide Web has improved that situation. The Web itself is a massive hypertext, its lingua franca the rudimentary hypertext system HTML. In 1989 in

"Information Management: A Proposal," the developer of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, suggested that the European Center for Nuclear Research (CERN) should work "toward a universal linked information system, in which generality and portability are more important than fancy graphics techniques and complex extra facilities" (204). A system that would be "Portable, or supported on many platforms" and "Extendible to new data formats" (205). In 1990 Berners-Lee developed the first Web server and browser software. In 1993, graduate student Marc Andreesen and his group at the University of Illinois-Champaign's National Center for Supercomputing Applications released Mosaic. The first widely utilized Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) browser, Mosaic was distributed for free and was installed on thousands of machines worldwide within months of its release. Mosaic utilized a page metaphor, which allowed for the inclusion of text, graphics and other media elements together in a single graphical user interface. Microsoft's Internet Explorer, Netscape's Navigator, Mozilla, and the other popular current browsers are its descendants.

Computing had a place within the humanities well before the launch of the Web, so it should come as no surprise that literature could be found on the Web even in its earliest hours. Indeed, at the Electronic Literature Organization's April 2002 State of the Arts Symposium, Loss Pequeño Glazier reported that the Electronic Poetry Center he directs at SUNY Buffalo was at its 1994 inception momentarily the largest site on the World Wide Web.[1] In the mid-nineties, scores of literary sites began to flourish on the Web, including commercial platforms for buying and selling books, sites representing literary organizations and journals, sites that fulfilled the functions of reference books, sites about authors and their works (ranging from fan sites to formal

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[1] The Electronic Poetry Center is online at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/>.

scholarly sites), and online literary zines. In the mid-nineties, there was also a shift in electronic literature publishing—a move away from using formally marketed floppy disk or CD-ROM media as the primary distribution method of electronic literature, and towards using alternative distribution methods enabled by the Internet.

In comparison to other publishing options, the Internet poses both opportunities and challenges to authors of electronic literature. Among its clear advantages:

- Millions of readers worldwide can access the Web.

- Authors don't need to mediate their publications through publishers in order to reach a readership.

- The widespread use of the Web has resulted in a higher level of computer literacy in its readership. So while authors creating hypertext for Storyspace need their readers to first study the Storyspace Reader application's rules of operation, authors of Web-based HTML hypertexts or Flash works can generally assume that readers will need less instruction before they are able to operate the text.[2]

- While university faculty and students remain among the core readership of Web-based electronic literature, more opportunities and mechanisms exist for readers to encounter freely distributed Web-based electronic literature in non-academic settings than those for readers of commercial electronic literature, such as Eastgate's disk-based hypertexts. A reader is likely to encounter a network novel, such as *The Unknown*, via the equivalent of "browsing the stacks" in a Web search.

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[2] Storyspace is hypertext authoring software distributed by Eastgate Systems <http://www.eastgate.com>.

- The Web and the widespread use of Internet applications such as email, chat rooms, weblogs, and instant messaging clients have furthermore provided electronic literature authors with new forms and styles of writing. As new modes of textual communication become popular among Web users, the need and desire for creative forms that engage or comment on these changes in textuality increase.

The disadvantages that writers face in creating and distributing electronic literature for and via the Web are also numerous:

- Publishing models for disk-based media, which mimic print publishing models, are often interpreted as being more *credentialed* than most of the do-it-yourself or community-based publishing models of the Web.

- Network culture is based to an extent on free and open distribution of content, so it is very difficult to successfully generate income by publishing on the Web. Some economic models do exist for charging for access to content, but the notion that "information wants to be free" is still embedded in most users' perceptions of the Web. While institutions and individuals are willing to pay for access to specialized content databases (such as the *OED* online, the MLA database, *The New York Times* archive, and the *Consumer Reports* database) and some forms of entertainment content (such as sports broadcasts, interactive gaming sites and pornography), the idea of paying for access to online literature in the same way as one might buy a book is still anathema to most Web readers. In the absence of a tangible physical object, most readers are unwilling to regard a work of electronic literature as a commodity.

- Whereas an application such as Storyspace was developed specifically for creating literature, authors working on the Web most often have to work with applications developed for other, typically commercial, purposes. Critics of Storyspace hypertexts or Infocom language-derived interactive fiction can talk in very specific terms about the ways that individual authors utilize particular functionalities of a specialized application (for example "the guard fields" and "treemap views" in Storyspace), while works of Web-based electronic literature are often jury-rigged or "kludged" from pieces of software originally intended for different applications. So the shared language that the authors and critics of the early Storyspace hyperfictions put a great deal of work into developing is largely inapplicable to new work. Critics must now approach the technological apparatus of each individual Web-based work on its own terms.

In spite of these factors, a majority of authors now working in electronic literature create their work with the intention of distributing it on the global network, and most create works that could be described as Web applications. Notable exceptions do exist. Poet John Cayley, the winner of the 2001 Electronic Literature Award for Poetry for his work "Windsound," produces the majority of his work using Hypercard, a Macintosh hypertext program that is no longer supported by Apple. A flourishing community of Interactive Fiction writers uses the old Infocom language that gave the world "Zork" to create adventure-game-style fictions. Many working in "interactive drama" or "interactive cinema" distribute their work primarily on CD-ROM, because of bandwith limitations. Despite these exceptions, however, the Web is still the primary mode of distributing electronic literature. Cayley's works are downloadable from his Web site, as are the majority of

Interactive Fiction works, and most CD-ROM works are distributed primarily via online catalogs. The lions of the Eastgate stable have also made the switch. Stuart Moulthrop, author of the influential Eastgate hypertext *Victory Garden*, has been creating and distributing work online since 1995. In recent years Shelley Jackson, the author of the best-selling Eastgate hypertext *Patchwork Girl*, has published two e-lit works online: "My Body" and *The Doll Games*, which she coauthored with her sister Pamela. Even the venerable Michael Joyce, author of the first Storyspace hypertext fiction *afternoon, a story*, published his last hypertext work online before announcing his retirement from the field.

At the time of the Electronic Literature Organization's 2001 Electronic Literature Awards, some 141 works were submitted in the categories of electronic fiction and poetry. About two thirds of these works were Web-based. The Electronic Literature Organization's 2002 State of the Arts Symposium included a gallery of electronic literature, which featured forty works, the majority of which were produced within the last year. These recent soundings of the field were remarkable not only for their quantity, but for their formal diversity. Unbound from the common Storyspace interface of many of the early works of hypertext fiction, authors have also moved beyond common definitions of "hypertext," "hypermedia," and even beyond common definitions of "fiction" and "poetry." The fiction shortlist for the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards included two hypertexts: Shelley Jackson's classic *Patchwork Girl* and Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls*. Fisher's hypertext about adolescence and identity-formation took the prize, but the shortlist also included several works that had nothing to do with hypertext. The list included Paul Chan's "Alternumerics," a font-based conceptual work; "The Impermanence Agent," by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, A.C. Chapman, Brion Moss and Duane Whitehurst, a work of fiction that integrated

material from the reader's browsing of sites on the network; and Mez's "_the data][h!][bleeding t.ex][e][ts," which consisted of "remnants from email performances devoted to the dispersal of writing that has been inspired and mutated according to the dynamics of an active network."[3] In a sense, the doors of hypertext have been blown open, and a full range of literatures developed for the computer and the Internet are now being explored in the writing laboratory that the network comprises.

In the study that follows, I focus mainly on work that has been published since the launch and widespread adoption of the World Wide Web. I would direct readers interested in the particularities of pre-Web hypertexts to Jane Yellowlees Douglas' excellent study; *The End of Books–Or Books without End?: Reading Interactive Narratives*, Michael Joyce's *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics*, as well as to the critical work of Jay David Bolter, George Landow, Terrence Harpold, and Matthew Kirschenbaum. My specific interest is in the creative work that has followed since the mid-1990s, works that have been created for and distributed on the Internet. The questions that I consider include:

- How does the network function as a writing technology? What are some of the material differences between the technology of the book and the technology of the network, and how do these differences affect the form of writing produced for the network?

- What effects does the location of electronic literature on the global network have on reading practices? How does the technology of the Internet itself affect the way that literature produced for it is read?

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[3] From the project description for 2001 Electronic Literature Awards at <http://www.eliterature.org/Awards2001/fiction-Mez.shtml>.

- How is the network functioning in the formation of new reading cultures? What are the differences between a Web readership and the traditional readership of literary print fiction?

- What aspects of the novel are frustrated in a network environment? What aspects of the form of the novel can be enhanced on the Internet?

- How do we begin to analyze works which are "published" before they are necessarily "finished"? What are some of the effects of the temporality and mutability of the network novel?

In her essay "Flickering Connectivities in Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis," Katherine Hayles calls for "medium-specific analysis." She suggests that, "Perhaps now, after the linguistic turn has yielded so many important insights, it is time to turn again to a careful consideration of what difference the medium makes" (para 2). To lay the groundwork for her analysis of *Patchwork Girl*, the critic proposes a thought-experiment in which she restricts herself to commenting on only the characteristics of the digital computer, and how the work utilizes those characteristics. Hayles articulates eight points about electronic hypertext. For the purposes of this study, her seventh point, that "Electronic Hypertexts Are Written and Read in Distributed Cognitive Environments," bears particular relevance. Hayles observes:

> Modern-day computers perform cognitively sophisticated acts when they collaborate with human users to create electronic hypertexts. These frequently include acts of interpretation, as when the computer decides how to display text in a browser independent of choices the user makes.… When we read electronic hypertexts, we do so in environments that include the computer as an active cognizer performing sophisticated acts of interpretation and representation. Thus cognition is distributed not only between writer, reader, and designer (who may or

> may not be separate people) but also between humans and machines (which may or may not be regarded as separate entities). (para 12)

Electronic literature is always read first by a code-processing machine before it is presented to its reader. Electronic literature projects on the Web should be read in the context of their specific materiality as network literature.

The Internet itself should be understood not only as mode of distribution, but also as a writing and reading medium distinct both from printed books and from discrete applications distributed as licensed software. Network publishing reveals and to an extent circumvents existing power relations and divisions of labor in print publishing and literary cultures. Network readership is shaped differently from existing print literature communities. In the absence of clearly delineated economic structures, and outside of traditional literary cultures, a new "open source" interdisciplinary reading culture is taking shape, one in which established notions of authorship are contested, and in which "re-mixing" is a guiding aesthetic.

In the second chapter of this study, I examine the development of the book as a technology to establish some of the specific materialities of print, analyze "electronic book" distribution models promoted by publishers and major technology companies, and establish the difference between the "electronic book" and "electronic literature." In the third chapter, I interrogate the ideas of linking, nonlinearity, and referentiality. In the fourth chapter, I examine some network novels: Robert Arellano's *Sunshine '69*, Shelley and Pamela Jackson's *The Doll Games*, Rob Wittig's *Blue Company,* and *The Unknown*. In the conclusion of the critical component, I survey some of the new forms and genres currently in development, and delineate some of the challenges faced by the field at this time.

Two

Books, Electronic Books, and Electronic Literature

In 1999, when I returned to Cincinnati from my home in Chicago to take part in the Ropes

Lecture Series, shortly before joining the audience of the Sven Birkerts and Richard Powers

debate on the role of technology in contemporary culture, I encountered one of my old creative

writing professors. On seeing me, she said, "I hope your dissertation's coming along, Scott, and it

had better be a book." The assumption I heard behind the comment was that if literature was not

destined for print, or perhaps more accurately, for print culture, then it was not only *not* literature

but further could be construed as an *assault* on literature. The discourse surrounding electronic

literature often falls into this false dichotomy, as if experimenting in the creation of new literary

forms denies the validity of existing forms.

Sven Birkerts, who spoke later that evening, has been one of the most outspoken

proponents of this point of view. In his *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an*

Electronic Age, Birkerts asserts that the fundamental difference between words printed on the

page and words on the screen is one of matter: "The words on the page, however ethereal their

designation, partake of matter. The words removed to storage, rendered invisible, seem to have

reversed expressive direction and to have gone back into thought" (154). In asserting the

importance of the mode of transmission, Birkerts goes on to compare words carved in stone to

words on a screen:

> The word cut into stone carries the implicit weight of the carver's intention; it is
> decoded into sense under the aspect of its imperishability. It has weight,
> grandeur—it vies with time. The same word, when it appears on the screen, must

> be received with a sense of its weightlessness—the weightlessness of its presentation. (155)

On its surface, Birkerts' argument is fundamentally ridiculous: the matter of the word, its measured weight in stone or milligrams of ink on the page, or in pulses of light, clearly does not affect the reader's reception of the word as much as do the other words that surround it, or for that matter as much as the ideology, personality, and experience of the person reading it. In fact, more "signs" (though not necessarily any more or less thought) are involved in the production of the onscreen signifier than are involved in the production of the on-page signifier. As Katherine Hayles stated in an interview with *The Iowa Review Web*:

> When signifiers appear on the computer screen, however, they are only the top layer of a complex system of interrelated processes. Marks on screen may manifest themselves as simple inscriptions to a user, but properly understood they are the visible, tangible results of coding instructions executed by the machine in a series of interrelated processes, from a high-level programming language like Java all the way down to assembly language and binary code. (2, para 2)

Weight or weightlessness, mass or matter, is not the real issue. Rather, the impact of an author's choice to utilize a particular medium can be measured in the effects that the system of communication has on the work as it is processed by that system. Both the conscious choices that the author makes to utilize the capabilities of the medium and the unconscious and arbitrary effects that the medium itself has on the work play significant roles in the reader's reception of the work. Any work of literature is subject to the conditions of the technology used to create and distribute it, and is further subject to the cultures and economies that utilize and control that technology.

The Nature of the Book

A fact that is often lost or elided in qualitative discussions of print versus electronic literature is that the book itself is a technology. Literature courses at the university level typically spend very little time addressing the technology of the book. The technology of the book is treated as transparent, obvious. We assume that readers understand how to "work" a book. We don't provide a user's manual. Innovations such as page numbers, tables of contents, indices, footnotes, headers, and cut pages are not discussed. Because print culture has largely naturalized the book, its rules of operation need not be analyzed—readers have already internalized them. Yet most works of electronic literature do require instructions. Because of the variety of platforms, and the diversity of techniques that authors are utilizing in the creation and distribution of works of electronic literature, a great deal of the reader's "work" in reading lies in actually learning how to operate the work, in learning how the reading interface functions.

To establish a frame of reference, we should first examine the book as a technology. In his essay "The History of Communication Media," Freidrich Kittler divides the history of writing into a section on scripts and one on printing. Kittler describes the evolution of the script, from stamps in clay through papyrus to the parchment codex. Kittler writes, "Books, which were durable, erasable (as in the palimpsest) and addressable with special pages (indices) were worth their extra weight and extra cost. They decoupled increasingly cursory reading from the laboriousness and slowness of orality" (A1, para 10). According to Kittler, the principal initial advantage of the codex book over the papyrus scroll was based neither on the book's cost nor its transportability, but in its addressability. Information can be located quickly in a book with numbered pages. In the case of scroll, there are no pages to number. If someone were to cite a

particular reference within a scroll, it would be very difficult for him to record its precise location in a way that could be easily communicated to others. Kittler reports one other advantage (and in other circumstances disadvantage) of the parchment codex over the papyrus scroll—the information inscribed in the codex could be erased. So these first books were not necessarily intended to fix knowledge permanently as much as they were intended to make knowledge erasable, amendable, and searchable. The handwritten codex was in this way constructive, rather than presentational, providing a stable and transportable medium for inscription, but a stable medium that could be modified by an interactive reader.

Kittler points out that new media don't necessarily make older media obsolete, "they assign them other places in the system" (A2, para 2). For instance, it was only with the rise of the printed book, an inerasable and depersonalized medium, that the widespread teaching of handwriting took place. Where the palimpsest was an erasable medium for the transmission of knowledge, a medium intended to be polyvocal, the printed book was intended as a storage device. Kittler theorizes that with the rise of print and the proliferation of books, the function of the university changed as well. The mission of scholars became more hermeneutic as "literature and science had to revamp their transmission and receiving techniques: away from the literalness of quotes from the scholarly elite, and rhetorical mnemonics, towards an interpretative approach which reduced the quantity of printed data to its essence" (A2, para 3). The book in effect changed the place of the scholar within the system of learning. When books were rare, handcrafted media, the scholar served as a storage device for knowledge. Prior to print, the codex was less important as a storage device than it was as a communication device, a "working out

space" for ideas. The printing press, however, fixed ideas in type, assuring them a degree of

permanence that manuscript culture did not.

Printing also shifted the economics of publishing, giving rise to the idea of copyright.

Before the printing press, the question of who owned the text was largely determined by the

possession of a physical manuscript. The process of copying a manuscript was tremendously

labor-intensive, and the skills necessary to perform that labor were very rare at a time when

literacy itself was sparse. While prior to the printing press, it was necessary for one individual to

devote a great deal of time to make one copy, after the printing press, it became just as easy to

make several hundred copies as it was to make one. The dissemination of printed books resulted

both in the more widespread growth of literacy and in a shift of priorities in publishing

economies. Before print, every copy was in a sense an "original"—the product of the individual

copyist's labor. After the printing press became widely available, however, it became less

important to own and regulate the manuscript as a discrete artifact than to control the right to

reproduce and print it.

In Adrian Johns' study of print culture in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England,

The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making, he recounts the difficulty with

which some of the conventions we take for granted in modern print culture were wrought. He

demonstrates that while the technology of print publishing was intended to fix and disseminate

knowledge, the culture of print publishing had to evolve mechanisms above and beyond

technology in order to assure that fixity would come to pass. For while a printed book is a copy

of an original, prior to the development and enforcement of copyright regulations, there was no

method through which one could guarantee that any given book was in fact a true copy of the

original to which it was purportedly attached. The problem of piracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was both an economic problem and also a problem of the reliable distribution of knowledge. Johns traces in particular the impact of piracy on the Scientific Revolution. In the case, for instance, of an astronomer's illustration, while an "authorized" printing would at least in theory represent an accurate copy of the scientists' work, a pirated copy could and often would utilize inferior techniques, which could result in an inaccurate representation of the original illustration. Johns provides the example of some illustrations of the lunar surface in Galileo Galei's *Sidercus Nuncius*.[4] While Galileo's own edition represented his observations of the moon as rough and cratered, three subsequent pirated editions degrade his observations considerably by utilizing different woodcuts from the originals and publishing them out of sequence. In the third pirated edition of the work, published sixty-eight years after the first edition, these illustrations bear almost no similarity to the original. They could be pictures of an entirely different orb than the one Galileo observed. In this case, the widespread publication of Galileo's work could be said not only to have not contributed to fixing his observations for posterity, but also to have actively distorted them. Because the pirated work was often cheaper and more widely available than the authorized copies, scientists and other authors often found themselves associated with ideas and observations that were far different from those that they intended.

The notion of "copy" was then established as an economic and cultural principle for the printing of books, albeit one that was subject to regular violation. Johns writes:

> Foremost among the virtues of the model Stationer was adherence to the principle of "copy." This meant the recognition of another's prior claim to the printing of a work in which he or she had been the first to invest time, skill, capital and credit. Such recognition entailed a principled repudiation of what contemporaries were

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[4] *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* 22-23, Figure 1.9.

> learning to call "piracy." Universal adherence to copy would, in principle, have eliminated any need to doubt printed materials because of their being printed. Such universal adherence proving unachievable, in the real world those who depended on books expressed serious doubts about the practices pervading the domains of print. (187)

Johns chronicles the rise of various institutions intended to enforce this idea of "copyright," first the Stationer's Guild, controlled by the printers, and then the Royal Society, developed specifically to disseminate and more strictly enforce copyright for its scientific publications. Eventually this work led to the modern systems of copyright that are in force today. If we understand fixity to be one of the primary technological features of the printed book, we also need to understand that what the technology enables is not necessarily what the culture determines. While the technology of the book tends towards the fixity of knowledge, it took several hundred years of negotiations between authors, publishers, printers, and booksellers before conventions were established to enforce the fixity of the printed book.

I've tried to establish above that the book can be understood as a technology intended to fix "original" texts permanently in print, and to make those texts addressable. The capabilities of the book as a technology did not, however, determine its actual use. The book achieved fixity only through a process involving cultural and economic negotiations. The concept of "author" can also be understood as a cultural and economic negotiation. Very little is known of "Homer" or the author of *Beowulf*, partly because an economic conception of authorship wasn't necessary in oral storytelling culture. In print culture, attribution to a specific person or entity is more important because the contractual agreements involved allow for publishers to establish the authenticity of the book they print by proving their legal relationship to its author.

The conventions and the cultural assumptions of print, developed in the early modern era, face new challenges with the rise of network textuality. The network is a technological system that tends towards fluidity in the same way that print tends towards fixity. Fluidity has its benefits—a network novel can change and evolve over time. The drawbacks of the network as a writing medium are, however, numerous. The Web is based on the metaphor of "space." Someone must "rent" the space. Domain names are not purchased but leased. Connections to the network are likewise leased. Imagine what the consequences would be if a fiction writer had to repurchase the paper that her book was printed on every two years. Because network space is rented, writing disappears from the network. The software platforms used to publish and read writing on the network are also unstable. Every time a Web browser's specification changes, works of electronic literature written to the previous specification are lost. Every time that a software developer goes out of business and stops supporting a given platform, works of electronic literature are lost. Sometimes the benefits of the fluidity of electronic literature can seem to be little more beneficial than writing in the sand.

Most works written for the network are addressable, but in a way that is fundamentally different from the addressable book, with its page numbers and indices. Web pages are not fixed in spatial dimensions, so there is no consistent way to number them.[5] They do, however, have addresses—specific locations on the Web. And while few hypertext authors create conventional indices, if the work is published as HTML pages on the Web, those pages are available to search engines, some of which index every single word in the work. Works that run as applications,

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[5] The online journal *Postmodern Culture* usefully numbers paragraphs in its text-only version. In this dissertation, I've tried to cite Web articles by URL and paragraph where appropriate. I've indicated page and/or section number prior to the paragraph number for Web texts that do use those conventions.

such as Flash poetry or John Cayley's Hypercard poetry, are not addressable in this way. This lack of addressability can be detrimental to serious reading of the work. For instance, in Cayley's poem series *riverIsland*, one navigates Quicktime panoramas to reach the different poems, which undergo "transliteral morphing" as the reader navigates the space. I'm teaching this work and I'd like to guide my students towards one particular section where a poem changes from English to Chinese to French as they navigate the space. But I can't point them to a Web address, and I can't point them to a page number. To get them to that place in the work, I would literally need to draw a map.

The idea of "copy" changes in the context of the global network. Web sites are not copies in the same sense as printed copies. Works of electronic literature written for the network are not inscribed in the same sense as those written on paper or etched in stone. Web pages are copies that are updated the moment the original is updated; they are in a sense both the original and a copy of the original. An error introduced or corrected on the "master" copy of a work of network literature affects every "copy" of it that is live on the network. Likewise, if the "master" disappears from the network, all other copies disappear from the network as well.

The "disappearing ink" problem of Web publishing is one that is only beginning to be addressed. The Internet Archive Project[6] recently released the "Internet Wayback Machine," one attempt to restore to the Web some of the more positive characteristics of "copy." The project is an attempt to archive as much of the Web as possible, and to make "dead" pages searchable both by address and by date. The archive has its problems—while it archives HTML pages, it cannot preserve the different applications and standards that were in place at a given time, so there is no

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[6] The Internet Archive Project is at <http://www.archive.org>.

guarantee that any given page will work as it did in its original state. External links also pose problems—the links of the past will not deliver archive users to the resources that they linked to in the past, but to those resources as they exist now, or more often, to a 404 error. It's not yet entirely clear if the Internet Archive Project is legal according to current copyright laws. A strong argument could be that if the owner of a piece of intellectual property removes it from the Web, others don't have the right to archive and preserve it unless they have purchased that right. Nonetheless, The Internet Archive Project is the most valuable and comprehensive attempt to date to preserve the World Wide Web as it existed in the past, allowing some form of "copy" of Web sites to remain publicly accessible after Web sites themselves are gone.

The "Electronic Book" (so far)

Before turning to the specific materialities of the network, I think it necessary to distinguish between those forms of expression I refer to as "electronic literature" and the idea of the "electronic book" that has been adopted by some software and hardware developers, such as Microsoft, Adobe, and Gemstar; and commercial publishers including the Random House family of brands and others. The difference between the electronic book (e-book) and electronic literature (e-literature) can be summarized concisely: advocates of electronic books are primarily interested in creating book-like reading experiences in electronic media, while proponents of electronic literature are primarily interested in utilizing the technological capabilities of the Internet and the computer to create reading experiences specific to the computer. Neither of these ambitions is inherently better or worse than the other, and neither electronic book publishers nor

electronic literature publishers have thus far succeeded in finding audiences comparable to the audience for print literature.

The e-book story may serve as a kind of cautionary tale. The short history of e-book publishing is one replete with disappointments, and is perhaps more indicative of what happens to innovative ideas when they are co-opted by corporations than anything else. The electronic book, particularly when paired with print-on-demand technologies, could offer solutions for academic publishing, small press literary publishing, and many other niches. At present, however, most e-book publishing efforts are either modeled on vanity press publishing or attempt to recreate the blockbuster model of contemporary commercial press publishing.

When Stephen King published his story "Riding the Bullet" with Simon and Schuster in March 2000, the e-book, which had previously largely been the project of a couple of small start-up technology companies, suddenly became a household word. Because the number of readers who downloaded the King story was comparable to the number of readers who purchase his books, the New York publishing industry quickly jumped on the e-book bandwagon. From the perspective of the publishing industry, e-books (in this context, the content of printed books distributed as electronic files) mean lower distribution costs: no binding, no warehousing, no shipping costs, and no returns. The potential that electronic books hold for the publishing industry is higher profits, so of course they initially embraced the concept. E-book divisions of the majority of the large commercial publishers seemed to spring up overnight.

Around the same time, Microsoft announced a new software product, the Microsoft Reader, e-book reading software that could be installed on desktop, laptop, and Pocket PCs. Adobe also repackaged a version their Acrobat software as e-book reading software. Gemstar, the

parent company of *TV Guide*, acquired the two notable e-book hardware companies, Nuovo, the makers of the RocketBook, and Softbook. E-Book hardware devices are book-sized devices with the ability to run e-book software—essentially small laptops with less processing capability and no keyboard, designed for the sole purpose of screen reading. In an audacious press release, Microsoft laid out a timeline that predicted the e-book would surpass the paper book, making the bound paperback a rare item within thirty years. Publishing executives, wary of the Napster story, sought out lessons from recording industry executives on how they might protect their digital files from hackers, and publishers invested millions of dollars to develop sophisticated digital rights management systems to make e-books difficult to copy. Gemstar repackaged and released the RocketBook device as an RCA e-book reader, signed exclusive contracts with publishers to release a few blockbusters as e-books prior to their print publication, and even managed to get the device featured on Oprah.

Amidst this flood of hype and capital, the nascent e-book industry seemingly forgot altogether about one major factor in publishing economy—the reader (in this context, I mean the human being who would willingly purchase the electronic book). While the e-book has certain clear advantages for the publishing industry, its advantages to the reader are somewhat less clear. Travelers might enjoy the capacity of e-book hardware to carry multiple titles on a single device. There are certain, very limited, features built into most e-book platforms that are not present in the paper book in the same way, such as the ability to add searchable notes, or text-to-speech features that enable readers to have the computer read the book to them (albeit in a tinny computerized voice). Out of fear of undercutting the sales of the print versions of these books, however, most publishers have been reluctant to activate what would seem to be the most obvious

feature enabled by electronic book publishing—a lower price. If we assess a printed book against

a screen-reading device on a purely physiological basis, the printed book is a superior technology

for sustained reading (particularly of such forms as the conventional novel). While I might ignore

the eyestrain factor and purchase a copy of Don DeLillo's next novel as an e-book if it cost me

half as much as the paper version of the same book, I'm reluctant to pay the same price for a

digital file as I am for a printed and bound book. From the dismal sales of mainstream e-books,

one could surmise that the majority of readers agree.

It would be preposterous to imagine that electronic books will surpass their printed

counterparts anytime in the near future. As is so often the case in matters of technology,

however, the real question is not whether one technology will replace the other, but whether the

new technology can find a useful place in the system. While the publishing industry's initial

foray into e-books focused on the mainstream market, we've seen comparatively little activity in

the segments where electronic book publishing would seem to make more sense, such as in

academic publishing, in the publishing of backlists, and in the small and independent press.

There is a crisis in academic publishing. Stephen Greenblatt, the current President of the

Modern Language Association, recently published a letter to the organization's membership

calling for "Action on Problems in Scholarly Publishing." In his letter Greenblatt describes the

difficult challenge posed to junior faculty members in the contemporary university. The

professionalization of the humanities has resulted in a greater demand on faculty to publish in

their disciplines. Many universities require junior faculty members to publish a scholarly book

before they are granted tenure. At the same time, dwindling state budgets in the U.S. have

resulted in lower budgets for university libraries to purchase academic titles. This in turn has led

academic presses to publish fewer titles. Greenblatt describes the challenge this poses for junior faculty members: "They face a challenge—under inflexible time constraints and with very high stakes—many of them may be unable to meet successfully, no matter how strong or serious their scholarly achievement, because academic presses simply cannot afford to publish their books" (para 3). While Greenblatt suggests that institutions consider increasing subsidies for academic publishing, I would suggest that a reassessment of the distribution models of academic publishing might be in order. One would assume that in requiring junior faculty to publish, most humanities departments don't do so with the expectation that such publication will result in a wide general readership. The expectation is rather that books published by reputable academic presses have gone through a peer-review process by other scholars working in the same specialization, who have then found the book worthy of publication. The scholar is then judged to have made a significant contribution to the field. There is absolutely no reason why this same peer-review process could not be put into place to publish academic books electronically. While the costs of editing manuscripts and marketing books would still be in effect, the bulk of publishers' costs—those involved in printing and shipping the book—would be vastly reduced. And if an expanded readership for academic discourse *does* matter, peer-reviewed texts that are distributed online, that are indexed and searchable, and that are available at little or no cost to readers, make a great deal of sense.

In addition to scholarly books, e-book and network published academic journals might usefully displace many of their print counterparts. Many academic journals are printed in runs of 500-1,000 to satisfy the demands of the offset printer, and then distributed to a much smaller subscriber base (one that relies on the same shrinking university library subscription base as do

scholarly books). If these journals were published electronically, at a fraction of the cost, their

publishers might be able to apply the current costs of printing in other parts of their budget—such

as paying for solicited contributions, additional editorial assistance, perhaps even paying peer

reviewers.

Although the bulk of scholarly publishing is currently still done via offset printing, there

are already many good examples of journals that publish exclusively in electronic format. Some

journals, such as the *Journal of Digital Information* (JoDI)[7] and the *electronic book review* (ebr)[8]

have taken the leap into electronic publishing one step further and moved beyond publishing

book-like digital objects towards publishing journals that take advantage of the network itself as a

medium. JoDI uses the network not only as a publishing medium, but also as a review and

response mechanism. Articles submitted to the journal are put online in a "prepublication" part of

the site. Reviewers then comment on the text directly online. After an article is published, the

discussion then continues, as readers can add their own comments and ripostes. The academic

article in this context is seen not as a dead end, or a static piece of knowledge, but as a spur to

further debate of the matters at hand. The *electronic book review* was recently redesigned and is

now distributed as an online database. In addition to using hypertext links in the body of essays

published on *ebr* to allow for easy intertextual navigation between essays that refer directly to

each other, the thread system graphically demonstrates the relationship between essays within

nine themes that the journal explores. Finally, readers of the journal can "weave" these threads to

create their own personal tables of contents. The valuable net effect of the changes to *ebr*'s

interface will be that all of the content of the journal is available at any given time, and is valued

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[7] The *Journal of Digital Information* is at <http://jodi.ecs.soton.ac.uk/>.
[8] The *electronic book review* is at <http://www.electronicbookreview.com>.

equally. The content of all of the essays is available and searchable. While serial publishing tends to value the last remarks made during a scholarly conversation over those made in years past, this form of publishing makes the entire conversation accessible, flattening the effect of time and revaluing information apart from when it was published.

Print-on-demand technology—machines that can print and bind small runs of books—has been developed in tandem with the various e-book formats. So it is now possible for publishers to release a title simultaneously as an e-book as a print-on-demand book. While the cost of a print-on-demand title for the consumer is roughly the same or slightly higher than the cost of an offset book, and publishers realize a similar profit per unit for each sale, the real advantage of print-on-demand is that it allows publishers to print very small runs economically. In theory, using print-on-demand technology, it should cost the same per copy to print and bind a single copy of a book as it would to print hundreds. While print-on-demand will be of little use in publishing blockbusters, academic publishers and publishers of literary fiction and poetry could use the technology to expand their list of offerings. Print-on-demand could also address one of the crises well familiar to scholars of contemporary literature—the problem of publishers who let their backlists go out of print. Because of the costs involved in storing books on warehouse shelves, many titles are remaindered and/or pulped within two years of their initial publication. The publishers then retain the copyright to those titles but choose not to print them. Utilizing e-book and print-on-demand technology, however, those titles can now be kept available well after their initial publication. The only costs for publishers to do so will those of creating a digital file and storing it in a database.

Small presses should be particularly interested in e-book and print-on-demand technology. Rather than investing all of their resources into a few books per year, smaller publishers could publish almost as many titles as their editorial resources allow. They could take risks on books less certain to garner commercial success. Alt-X Press[9] is one such small publisher experimenting with print-on-demand publishing. Titles published under the Alt-X Press imprint are distributed as free Adobe .pdf e-books online, and are available for purchase as print-on-demand titles. While Alt-X's freebie business strategy has its problems (the imprint, which has no paid staff, offers its authors little editorial or market support), it does serve as a test case for future independent publishing efforts.

The most successful e-book publishing effort thus far is probably Project Gutenberg, which publishes not "e-books" but "e-texts." A project that preceded the World Wide Web, Project Gutenberg is dedicated to distributing works in the public domain as text files over the Internet.[10] Since its inception, the project has grown to include thousands of titles, and is utilized much more extensively than any other e-book platform. Project Gutenberg is a good example of how an e-book publishing endeavor can play a useful role by fulfilling a need that print publishing does not fill. Prior to Project Gutenberg, works in the public domain were public only in theory, as readers still needed to track down a rare manuscript or a commercial product, a physical object, in order to access them. Now those titles are instantaneously available to anyone with an Internet connection. Not surprisingly, Gutenberg texts are more popular among users of handheld electronic reading devices, such as the Palm Pilot, than are the products of any commercial e-book publisher.

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[9] Alt-X Press is at <http://www.altx.com/ebooks/>.
[10] Project Gutenberg is at <http://promo.net/pg/>.

I've briefly touched on some of the problems and potentialities of electronic book publishing. Where the commercial publishing industry, in alliance with Microsoft and the parent company of *TV Guide*, has attempted to recreate an e-book publishing paradigm in the mold of the conventional book publishing industry, it has largely failed. Electronic book publishing, the creation of low-cost book-like reading experiences for network distribution, will become a more important part of publishing practice as individuals and institutions identify the specific areas in need of alternatives to offset printing, such as the academic press.

E-books will not replace print books. If the technology is creatively employed, e-books should, however, offer threatened segments of literary and academic publishing alternatives to conventional publishing practices. Having said this, it would be a mistake to conclude that all electronic reading experiences could or should be book-like reading experiences. The most innovative contemporary writers making literature for the computer are not publishing e-books, but are instead publishing work that resembles the network more than it does the book. While the e-book, the book-like digital object, has some potential practical applications, those who assume that e-books constitute the best possible use of the electronic media for literature strike me as naive. The Internet is not a worldwide printing press, but a participatory communication system that has a different relationship to time, space, culture and economics than has book publishing or for that matter any other communication system that has preceded it.

The Nature of the Network

The activity of reading online is different on several levels from reading a book. On the basic level of the reader's physical situation, the activity of reading pixels of light is a different

experience from reading letters printed on the reflective surface of the page of a book. My body

is configured differently as I read online than it is when I read a book. My spine is positioned

differently as I sit in a chair looking up at the monitor than when I sit on the couch looking down

at the book in my lap; my eyes scan a different type of visual plane in a different manner.[11]

Putting aside the obvious physical and ergonomic differences between reading from a computer

screen and reading from a book, the more profound material difference between reading online

and reading print is that each act comprises participation in two divergent communication

systems.

Electronic literature is subject to the processes and constraints of multiple communication

systems. Consider some of the effects that its location on the Internet has on a hypertext novel

written in HTML. The writer is first constrained by the program or programs used to create the

work—be it an HTML editor such as BBedit or Dreamweaver, an image manipulation program

such as Photoshop or Fireworks, or interactive animation software such as Flash. Each platform

enables and restricts writing practice according to its own rules. Further, the network itself

actually "reads" texts published to it. Unless a Web site is specifically designed to inhibit the

activity, "spiders"—the agent component of search engines—will "crawl" the site and then index

its content to search engines. Each of these programs works according to its own criteria to

categorize and assign value to texts. While librarians perform a similar function for books

published in print, they do so according to a system of conventions designed specifically for that

purpose. Search engines on the Web catalog content in a much more arbitrary way than librarians

do books. Many search engines will, for instance, assign a higher value to a given site within a

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[11] Jay David Bolter analyzes many of the physical and environmental differences between reading
and writing on a computer and doing the same in books in his study *Writing Space*.

topic if its publishers have paid a higher fee than others. Finally, when readers access the work

itself, little can be done to insure that the work will be presented in a consistent way to readers.

Each version of each Web browser in each operating system interprets HTML in a slightly

different way, and thus presents a variant of "the work" of electronic literature. The environment

of the reader's device also has a radical effect on how the work is read. A work such as *The*

Unknown can be read on a variety of devices—not only the standard variants of the desktop

computer, but also Web-TV, Palm Pilots, and even mobile phones.

The book is a single-use technology—books are designed for reading. Most books are

intended to "immerse" the reader in the singular activity of absorbing and interpreting the

particular material that the given book contains. The environment of the networked desktop

computer, on the contrary, offers a multitude of distractions. Multiple windows are open at any

given time, icons adorn the bottom of the screen suggesting other activities, a clock ticks off

every passing minute, and a chime sounds when a message is received by the email program

running in the background. Network literature competes with a host of other work, socializing,

information-gathering, and entertainment activities. Where the technology of the book

encourages contemplation, the technology of the networked personal computer encourages

multitasking; where the technology of the book tends towards fixity, the technology of the

Internet tends towards fluidity. To make literature for the network, authors need to take these

factors into account.

Thankfully, if the Internet is not like books, it is also not like television. For all the

imagery, Flash animation, Quicktime video, Real media, MP3 files, interactive games and other

multimedia goodies out there, the Internet remains primarily a text-based medium. Since the pre-

Internet ARPANET, email has been and remains the most popular application of the global network. Even as broadband connections become more popular and bandwidth increases, allowing for the arrival of more audio and video content, the most widely accessed of the newer Internet applications, instant messaging, remains text-centric. While the popular media forms of my youth were television and videogames, and my parents' generation the first raised on television, and their parents the first raised on radio, the generation now in high schools and entering universities may be the first raised on a text-based network. Today, I asked my class of twenty-five eighteen to twenty-two year-olds how many of them had written an email within the last twenty-four hours. Every single student in the class raised a hand. I asked how many of them used an instant messenger program. Twenty of them raised a hand. I don't think we could have expected the same proportion of students to raise a hand had we walked into a college classroom ten or twenty years ago and asked how many of them had written a letter within the past twenty-four hours. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that 46% of Internet users use email on a daily basis and 11% send an instant message on a daily basis, while only 7% watch an audio or video clip.[12] If the Internet is not the ideal environment for book-like reading experiences, it is nonetheless a highly *textual* one. While the emoticons and shorthand of instant messaging may not be the stuff of great literature in any conventional sense, there is clearly a constituency of millions comfortable with and accustomed to reading and writing on the Internet. Literature, or some text-based art form, should logically find a place in a network whose users are predisposed to textual activities.

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[12] Pew Internet and American Life Project. 28 Oct. 2002.
<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/chart.asp?img=Daily_A1.htm>.

Theorist Niklas Luhmann has proposed that in order to understand the function that communication systems play, we need to reconfigure our understanding of subjectivity. In "The Mind and Communication" Luhmann writes:

> Communication is only possible as an autopoietic system. With the help of language, it reproduces communication from communication while using the structural requisite of its own reproduction to employ the mind as a medium. The mind therefore participates in communication as a structurally determined system and as a medium. This is only possible because the mind and communication, psychic systems and social systems, never fuse or overlap, but are completely separate, self-referentially closed, autopoietic-reproductive systems. (379)

By participating in a communication system, the communication leaves one autopoietic system, i.e. my mind, and then enters another autopoietic system, i.e. the Internet, before "arriving" at another autopoietic system, i.e. your mind. Each system through which the communication travels is operationally isolated, and each subjects the information to its own rules of operation. The communication system does not "think" the communication in the same way that a mind does, but subjects it to other processes that change it as well. If we accept the premise that minds don't communicate, that rather communication communicates, then the questions of how communication systems function, and what processes they subject information to, become more vital. In the case of network literature, the in between space of communication is a complex global network.

In his study *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* Friedrich Kittler postulates some effects that each of the technologies in the title of the work had on culture as they developed as systems. His method presupposes that communication technologies are not only tools used by humans, but that, as intermediary technologies, those systems in effect also use humans in a reciprocal fashion. Kittler reports that Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in a letter describing his experience with an early

typewriter that "Our machines are also working on our thoughts" (200). We don't simply work

the machine; the machine also works *us*. What might some of the material effects of this latest

writing machine, this network of many intermediating processes, then have on literature produced

for it? We may very well be too close to the genesis of the global network to surmise precisely

how it works on our thoughts, but I would argue that one of the best reasons to study literature

produced for the Internet is that in so doing, we might come to a better understanding not only of

what we are doing to the new media, but also of what the new media are doing to us, as they alter

our communications.

The Internet itself has materialized as one of the dominant media forms in contemporary

culture not as the result of any single coherent plan, but at the confluence of military research,

computer science research, grassroots libertarian culture, and eventually commerce. In *The

Internet Galaxy*, Maneul Castells reports the story of the Internet's disparate evolution.[13] The

Advanced Research Projects Agency, formed by the U.S. Department of Defense, established the

Information Processing Techniques Office in 1962. In 1969, they established ARPANET as a

way to share computer processing time between the facilities of the agency and the research

groups working for the agency. By 1973, this network had fifteen nodes. In 1973, a group led by

Bennet Cerf developed a transmission control protocol (TCP) that would make it possible for

networks to transmit to each other, and in 1978 an inter-network protocol yielded the TCP/IP

protocol that is the standard for Internet communication today. In 1983, the military split the

specific military uses of the network off to MILNET, and the research component ARPA-

INTERNET was left for public/research work. In 1990, ARPANET was decommissioned and the

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[13] The facts here are cribbed from the first chapter of Castell's study, pages 11-35.

National Science Foundation was charged with the network's management. Finally, in 1995

NSFNET was shut down and the operation of the Internet backbone privatized.

Although the military turned this Internet backbone over to big science, which eventually

privatized it, the big inter-network that eventually evolved into the infrastructure of the Internet

was not the only one developed during this time. Various Bulletin Board Systems were

developed for PC-to-PC communication using MODEM protocols, and USENET evolved as a

UNIX-based network. While the Internet's backbone was developed by a revolving group of big

government agencies, the majority of the applications that would form the basis of network

culture—such as newsgroups, and eventually Web browsers—were developed by individuals or

small groups working at universities. In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee developed the World Wide Web

software that would become standard protocols for Web content: Hypertext Transfer Protocol,

Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Uniform Resources Identifiers (later called URLs).

Berners-Lee's proposal for the World Wide Web was first made to CERN, his employer, who

initially rejected it as a solution to their internal information management problems. He then,

however, continued to develop the software, and released it on an open source basis, where it was

hacked by various programmers who developed browsers of their own. Marc Andreessen and

Eric Bina developed and released Mosaic in January 1993. Andreessen then joined Silicon Valley

entrepreneur Jim Clark and others to form Netscape Communications, which released the first

commercial browser, and launched the commercial Internet boom, in 1994.

In this very sketchy, partial and simplified picture of the Internet, I think that it's most

important to note that the evolution of the network was not a smooth one or even an intentional

one. Most of the innovations that eventually led to the ubiquity of the Web were initially

dismissed. The initial packet-switching technology on which the network is based wasn't adopted by APRANET until three years after it was proposed. Tim Berners-Lee's superiors at CERN initially overlooked his proposal for the World Wide Web. Even Ted Nelson's influential early work on hypertext was largely ignored at the time it was produced. The history of the Internet is replete with great ideas, put to the side by the bureaucracies that commissioned them, and then rediscovered and further developed by others in the future. Unlike the coordinated development of the U.S. Space Program during the Cold War, there was very little in the way of top-down hierarchical development of the "Internet Program." The development of the Internet and the World Wide Web would not have happened were it not for the initiative of individuals developing software and systems which in most cases were tangential to their stated missions or "day jobs." While the development of the Internet was not essentially hierarchical, it would also be an error to describe the process as anarchical. The process of the Internet's growth was rather driven by decentralized knowledge communities, and was accelerated because the majority of the developers involved in developing the applications that became the Internet's standard protocols were willing to release their ideas and software on an "open source" basis.

Like the Internet itself, electronic literature is developing in fits and starts as the project(s) of a loosely knit, decentralized knowledge community. The majority of contemporary electronic literature is released in a similarly open fashion. Very few works of electronic literature are released commercially. Most are published on the Web, and readers aren't generally expected to compensate the authors in order to access the work. A publishing model without an economic model has plenty of problems. I can't think of a single author of electronic literature who is able to live off the proceeds of his or her work. At this stage, however, it seems to me that the

majority of electronic literature *needs* to emulate the model of the Internet itself, and be freely distributed. There simply isn't yet a large enough readership to support more than a few small commercial publishers. The lack of commercial interest in electronic literature might actually be a strength—as long as electronic literature is developing within a self-defining, self-sustaining interest community, e-literature won't be co-opted by corporate interests in the same way as e-book publishing has already been co-opted.

In contrast with traditional writing practices, many working in electronic literature work on an "open studio" model. It's not uncommon for authors to release an unfinished work on the Web, soliciting commentary and advice from their peers, or forging new collaborations mid-stream.[14] It's also not uncommon for authors to borrow bits of code, bits of technique, bits of design with permission from their peers. There is a definite "open source" tendency in electronic literature. Perhaps because so many literacies and skills are involved in the production of more elaborate works, collaboration is commonplace. As is the case in poetry, many of the readers of electronic literature are also its writers. The technological network has served as a platform for the development of a social network, a community. While one can hope for a wider readership than that community, it's extraordinarily useful to the writers charting these untested waters to know that a responsive peer readership will appreciate what sometimes seems like an esoteric endeavor.

At this point it is difficult to project what forms of literature will "work" on the Internet, which will be discarded, and which, if any, will evolve into popular literary art forms. It is, however, clear that the digital public, this generation of instant messengers, will expect to

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[14] Examples of Web works published in progress include *The Unknown*, M.D. Coverley's *Egypt* project, and Barry Smylie's ongoing *Iliad* project.

encounter something other than a book from literature in the digital domain: a kind of literature that is informed by the textual experience of the time-based, hypertextual, participatory, multimedia Internet.

Three

Hypertext: Linking, Nonlinearity, Referentiality

Vannevar Bush's essay published by *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1945, "As We May Think," was the first important step toward a conceptual basis for hypertext. During World War II, Bush was the Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, where he supervised the big science effort to win the war. Bush supervised projects including the Manhattan Project and many other efforts to utilize contemporary state-of-the-art technology to win the war. Written at the close of war, just prior to the nuclear attacks on Japan, "As We May Think" represents Bush's effort to turn the sword of science into a ploughshare. In the article Bush paints a expansive vision of a future in which technology helps to reshape the connection between individuals and the knowledge base. Bush's goal, as *The Atlantic Monthly* editor described it, was to establish "a new relationship between thinking man and the sum of our knowledge" (37). Bush projected some advances in specific technologies that may now seem anachronistic: dry photography, voders, and microfilm. Although Bush's vision was assembled with bits of analog technology, his idea of how we might assemble those bits together to create a technologically enhanced knowledge base was quite prescient. The "memex" he describes—a desk-sized multimedia microfilm machine—offered many of the same functions that the contemporary Internet offers today. The memex he conceived is an expandable knowledge base. Though the memex would be purchased with an encyclopedic knowledge base already installed—with books, pictures and periodicals available on microfilm—a dry photography mechanism would also allow for users to add their own writing and correspondence to the database. So the memex would differ from an

encyclopedia-style database in that the memex would be constructive. The key innovation of the memex, and the one important for this discussion of hypertext, is the way that the user could connect all of the information together. Bush describes this feature of the memex as "associative indexing, the basic idea of which is a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another" (45). The user would then store these connections as "trails." The core idea of the memex is that these trails "do not fade" (45). A memex user would be able to store these trails of association and then share them with others.

Bush's idea of linking pieces of knowledge together to form trails provides a basis for the idea of hypertext. Noah Wardrip-Fruin, one of the editors of *The New Media Reader*, notes that although the analog technologies of Bush's vision are largely outdated, in some ways his vision of linking was more sophisticated than the model of linking employed in the contemporary Web (36). Hypertext documents in HTML connect to each other forming links, but readers cannot preserve their exploration of the Web in the form of trails. Links are one-way tickets. Readers can follow a link to a destination, but can't use the same link to get back to whence they came.

Theodore H. Nelson coined the term "hypertext." In the early 1960s, Nelson began work on the Xanadu project, a hypertext system that was never fully implemented. In his 1981 book *Literary Machines*, Nelson described his intention to pick up where Bush's vision left off, to develop a "system for text editing and retrieval that will receive, and handle, and present, documents with links between them" (446). Nelson envisioned a hypertext system based on the general concept of "a literature," which Nelson describes as any "system of interconnected writings" (445). Nelson's vision of Xanadu was a system that would make the interconnections between writings visible, follow-able. Like Bush, Nelson envisioned links not as one-way streets,

but as permanent connections. The system would enable users to not only follow these links but also to form them. Any document in the system, then, would be in constant evolution, as new users added links to and from the document to others, forming new paths. These over-writings would not, in Nelson's vision, elide previous versions. Instead, the Xanadu system would archive every version of the document. In this way, for instance, a novel written in Xanadu would not just be the finished novel prepared for formal publication, but also all of the alternative versions/drafts of the novel. Nelson proposed that all of the links not only from but also to a given document would be available to the readers of that document. To avoid the obvious problem this would create—a document that showed all the links anyone had ever made to it would present the reader with a maddening array of choices—Nelson proposed that links could be filtered or "sieved" so that readers could search out links by various criteria, "say, location, author and time" (459).

Nelson's grand vision for the Xanadu system was hampered by real-world economic considerations. Nelson and his team were developing their system as proprietary software, and in the pre-Web era conceived of an elaborate royalty scheme which would not only pay for the system's infrastructure, but would also pay authors royalties each time that their content was used. Given a few changes in the course of the history of the Internet's development, Xanadu might very well be the system utilized by millions today. This might also have had a deep effect on the way that people read and write hypertext literature. One common complaint about much Web hypertext literature is that readers typically can't go back to the link that they came from.[15]

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[15] Granted, they could hit the back button of their browser, but to do so is to exit the interface of the constructed literary work for the interface of the browser application, and disrupts the reading process.

Two-way links would solve that problem. If the Web were Xanadu, we would also probably explore it differently, as we would have not only the links the author of the site provided, but also those formed by our fellow readers.

The links of the World Wide Web are "dumber" than the link as conceptualized by Bush, Nelson, and many of the other hypertext pioneers. The huge advantages that HTML had over the other hypertext systems with which it was competing at the time of its development were its portability and its extendibility—HTML would run on virtually any system and allowed other platforms to "plug in" to it, so one can for instance include Flash, Quicktime, or VRML in an HTML document. HTML's most important advantage over other contemporarily available hypertext systems was the fact that it was non-proprietary and available for free public use. The emphasis of the standards underlying the Web is not technological sophistication but instead wide accessibility.

The first influential literary hypertexts—works such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* and Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*—were authored in Storyspace, the hypertext application which is still distributed by Eastgate Systems. Others works, such as John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*, were authored in Hypercard, a hypertext application that was once freely distributed by Apple. Although the early hypertext fictions of the 1980s and early nineties may *look* out of date, due to the datedness of the graphical user interface in which they are presented, from a purely technological perspective the link in a Storyspace hypertext is more advanced than a link in an HTML hypertext. Storyspace authors can choose to present their work

in a spatial format, for instance, in which the different segments of the text, or "lexia,"[16] are

represented as boxes in a visual map view and links are shown as lines connecting them. The best

example of this spatial capability of Storyspace is Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, a work that

includes a "patchwork quilt" that is both a visual and narrative metaphor, and that divides lexia

written about specific body parts into a "graveyard" where the individual sections are divided,

like headstones, on the screen. Storyspace authors can also use "guard fields" that restrict access

to certain parts of the story on the basis of what portions of the readers have already read, a key

feature of Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*. Without extensive programming and design work,

authors working in HTML hypertext can provide neither guard fields nor a spatial representation

of the hypertext's structure.

The link in any case, whether a simple HTML link or a Storyspace link, presents many

narrative challenges to readers. Stuart Moulthrop, in his essay "Pushing Back, Living and

Writing in Broken Space," notes:

> In traversing a semantic space, the link by implication spans or contains that space,
> if not in its infinite totality then with a kind of cognitive blank check for which
> there can never be sufficient discursive funds. Links like words may be "brokers"
> of meaning, but they are not honest brokers. As a divingboard into darkness, the
> link from "space" to the saucer cult invites us to consider an enormous range of
> possible destinations—from Hubble photography to differential topology to Gene
> Roddenberry's "final frontier." Yet only one possibility is realized, and likely as
> not it will not be what the reader anticipated. (section 3, para 12)

This gap of meaning between the writer's intention and the reader's experience is a space of blind

negotiation. It is a space of frustration as well as one of play. Links could potentially have a

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[16] George Landow describes the blocks of text in Storyspace hypertexts as lexia in his *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, "Hypertext, as the term is used in this work, denotes text composed of blocks of text—what Barthes terms a lexia—and the electronic links that join them" (3).

variety of navigational and referential functions within a hypertext. Most links placed within the body of a hypertext aren't clearly labeled by their rhetorical function.

In *The Unknown*, links within the body of the text often have a clear conceptual relationship to the material that follows them—for instance, on the page "unknown.htm," the reader who follows the link from the name "Thomas Pynchon" will find himself in a scene that features a barbeque at Thomas Pynchon's home. The link doesn't always, however, have such a clear and direct correlation to the material that follows. Sometimes we used the link as an ironic device. The reader who follows the link on the same page of *The Unknown* from the sentence "You keep trying to <u>describe</u> it," might reasonably expect that what follows will continue the philosophical meditation on the concept of "the unknown" begun on "unknown.htm." The link instead leads to a fictional *New Yorker* review of *The Unknown: An Anthology*. Like many links in *The Unknown*, this link is intended as a kind of joke, a subversion of the reader's expectation. Readers don't always react well to such subversions of their expectations. The link in hypertext represents a kind of confrontation between the author, the text, and the reader. Poorly chosen links, links that don't "work," that don't "pay off" the reader, are those that fail to meet the reader's expectation for a sense of connection or causality or to subvert those expectations in a decipherable way. The reader of a hypertext is not only reading the text, but also the intentions of the author's linking strategy.

Hypertext doesn't liberate the reader as much as it changes the relationship between reader, writer, and text. Readers navigate a given text differently, but in an "explorative"[17]

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[17] In his essay "Siren Shapes: Exploratory and Constructive Hypertexts," Michael Joyce distinguishes between "explorative" and "constructive" hypertext. "Explorative" hypertext limits

hypertext, the reader's ability to choose links to follow doesn't in actuality free him from the designs of the text's author. The reader is simply given a different but nonetheless finite set of choices. In *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth notes that most hypertexts actually limit a reader's choices more than the book, which is a "random access" device (46). The technology of the codex does not require the reader to start at a given page or read in any particular order. Aarseth's claim is factually accurate, but it fails to acknowledge that readers do the majority of their reading according to a learned set of behaviors. When mystery readers skip to the last page to find out whodunit before finishing the book, they are consciously "cheating," operating against the implicit code of mystery-reading behavior. The implicit code of reading most types of fiction in codex book format favors starting at the first page and moving to the last. Hypertext readers don't have such a developed implicit code of behavior to react with or against.

The link is a constraint in the reading process, and in effect a technology of control, rather than one of liberation. While the link enables the reader to make choices that determine how a given text is navigated, the reader does not determine what those choices will be. The limits are imposed by the author and by the program. The work is not "constructed" by the reader, but is rather "navigated" by the reader. The text that the reader reads is structured by the reader's binary transactions[18] with hypertext links. The text itself functions according to a set of rules determined by the author within the constraints of the program and the interface used to create and deliver the

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the reader to the navigation of a static text via author-selected links while "constructive" hypertext enables readers to add links and new lexia to the system.

[18] Poet John Cayley uses the term "transactions" rather than "interactions" on his site "Of Programmatology" <http://www.shadoof.net/in/> and elsewhere. He points out that "interaction" would imply that readers somehow have a dialogue with the text, while "transaction" more precisely describes the programmed response to the reader's input.

text. By choosing to follow links, the reader is not adding to the work, but rather "cutting" one reading of it from all of the other potential readings available in the work as a totality.

To argue that the link is inherently a constraint, rather than a liberatory device, is not, however, to say that the reader of any text, in print or electronic format, isn't already "liberated." The process of making meaning from a given experience, the act of interpretation, occurs within the reader's subjective experience. Neither the author nor the text-machine can determine this subjective meaning.

While the reader on one level is processing a given "surface" level of text (i.e. following the progression of events in a particular "episode" "scene" or "lexia" in a hypertext fiction), the link interrupts that chain of thought. The link presents the reader not only with the questions of the surface text—for example, "What is happening within this section of imagined world? How does this part of the story relate with the others I've read before?"—but also with the questions of the linked text—for example, "What will my selection of this link reveal about the section of text I'm reading?" or "Will clicking on this link lead me to a more interesting story than the one I'm reading?" or "What am I missing if I don't click?" Links tend to present obstacles to contemplative reading by increasing the speed with which readers move through a given work. No sooner is a reader delivered to a scene or episode than tempted to the egress. Keith Gessen, writing for *The New Republic Online*, notes specifically of some links in *The Unknown*:

> These links have the effect of destabilizing the sentence, collapsing its surface, and making it difficult to finish. And yet the *raison d'être* of the Web, both in its utopian and capitalist manifestations, is the click; to resist the click is to resist the Web itself. And who would want to do a thing like that? (para 9)

The link is an entrance but also an exit. Each link confronts the reader with a choice, distracting from the story at hand, and hints seductively at the unknown potentiality of the next.

Every instance of linking in a hypertext presents the reader with a language game that he may choose to play or ignore. A long Faulknerian sentence with embedded clauses, qualifiers and hypothetical phrases can present its reader with a similar type of challenge. The reader can choose to dig into the potentially enriching distractions that the sentence offers, or rush to the period to get on with the story. In a hypertext, however, what comes after the link isn't a period followed by the next sentence in logical sequence, but instead another page of text, with links of its own, offering still more language games to play. The challenge for hypertext writers is to provide readers with the delights of these games without allowing the pleasures of linkage to overcome the pleasures of narrative within individual scenes, and within the work as a whole. We risk losing the forest for the branches of its trees.

Live readings of *The Unknown* provide an example of how linking offers the reader both pleasures and frustrations. One of the distinguishing features of *The Unknown* project was our attempt to present the work not only as an online work, intended to be experienced by the solitary reader in isolation, but also as live performance in "meatspace." To that end, we have gone on several "tours," and presented the work in many venues, ranging from a backyard barbeque and a Chicago tavern to more formal settings such as the Digital Arts and Culture, Modern Language Association, Associated Writing Program, and Hypertext conferences. Our performance is meant to mimic the transactions of the hypertext novel reading experience. We typically begin the performance in medias res with a scene that is somehow related specifically to the site in which we are performing the work. Prior to beginning the reading, however, we let the audience know that they have our explicit permission to interrupt us, to shout out if they want to follow a link. At every link in the reading, we ring a Pavlovian call bell, a reminder to the audience of their

flickering moment of agency. When an audience member shouts out a link, we stop reading, follow the link, switch readers, and start the new scene. Of course, this puts us in an uncomfortable position as authors. On one hand, we want the audience to interact, and to direct us down a path that we otherwise would not have chosen to follow; but on the other hand, we feel affection for the scenes as they were individually written, and a desire to read at least some scenes in their entirety. The choosing audience almost invariably favors the interactivity of disruption, the speed of transformation, over the pleasure of closure, even of individual scenes.

After the reading, we typically hear two different reactions from audience members: someone will come over to tell us how exhilarating it was to be able to control and subvert our "authoritative" reading, and someone else will come up and tell us how frustrating it was that other audience members could not resist the urge to follow links, preventing us from finishing our reading of individual scenes. These two reactions to the live readings of *The Unknown* have shaped the way that I think about linking in general. The link is likely to pay off for the reader who favors the radical speed and dramatic shifts of hypertext, who focuses on the poetic moment of linkage, but the link is also likely to frustrate the more traditional and, in some ways, more patient reader who takes pleasure in the "tyranny of the author" and in reading as a contemplative act. How does one write a story that satisfies both types of readers? The tension between the two conflicting desires for movement and for contemplation is one of the central problems of hypertext literature.

Hypertext authors should be as concerned about how their audience will react to a given aesthetic choice as would any author of print literature. While many readers in electronic literature's potential audience have developed hypertextual reading strategies from the experience

of surfing the Web, *literary hypertext reading* is a behavior yet in development. Most of the

content of the commercial World Wide Web is intentionally designed for readers to *skim* and

glean information in brief spans of time. Many of the same readers who will blurt out that they

"can't read off of a screen" when they discuss their frustrations with hypertext have in fact

already resituated "non-literary" reading and writing habits, such as keeping abreast of breaking

news and corresponding with their peers, onto the network. Literature, however, generally

privileges contemplation. The challenge for the hypertext author is to create work that offers

readers both satisfactory performativity[19] in linking and the contemplative satisfaction of

processing the poem or story as a gestalt, as an "immersive" reading experience.

The simple functionality of the link in most Web-based hypertexts works to the advantage

of hypertext authors who want to reach a wider audience than those able to access the proprietary

code of Storyspace. The HTML link is not necessarily a better technology than that of Storyspace

but is a more accessible one. The history of media is replete with examples of "superior"

technologies overcome by those that are simply more accessible, for instance the VHS over the

Betamax format in video, and most recently MP3 over higher-fidelity digital audio formats. The

linking technology in simple HTML hypertext benefits not from its inherent complexity but

instead from its culturally situated *familiarity*. Readers understand implicitly the basic concept of

the link as a connection between one virtual space and another. The Web has been around long

enough that the "general reader" of the medium is familiar with the three states and basic function

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[19] In her essay "Reveal Codes: Hypertext and Performance," Rita Raley distinguishes digital from analog hypertext by stressing the performativity of the digital: "both operator and machinic processor are crucial components of the performance of the system. The performance that encompasses user and the machinic system is an interactive one and to some degree collaborative. Further, this performance collapses processing and product, ends and means, input and output, within a system of 'making' that is both complex and urgent" (para 10).

of the HTML link. This familiarity, this training in a cultural practice of reading, helps to curb

some of the contempt many readers exhibit when first experiencing hypertext's barbaric incursion

into the much-treasured, closely held domains of fiction and poetry.

Nonlinear and/or Multisequential Storytelling

Hypertext presents authors with a multiplicity of narrative challenges, but hypertext also

enables us to tell nonlinear and multisequential stories. There is a reason why Robert Coover, one

of the twentieth century's most revered authors of postmodern fiction, has made the hypertext

movement one of his stepchildren. Fragmented, recursive, or multisequential models of narrative

have been explored by late-twentieth-century authors of postmodernist fiction including Coover,

John Barth, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, Carole Maso, David Markson and many others. The

links of hypertext, while shifting the context from the page to the screen, and from traditional

publishing systems to networked environments, are not without antecedents in print. Hypertext

literature can be productively understood as a movement within the larger framework of

postmodern literature.

"Nonlinear" is a problematic term. While it is possible to speak of a nonlinear tradition in

print literature, we usually don't actually mean that the text itself is nonlinear, but instead that a

given story has a non-chronological or multisequential arrangement. In his essay, "Nonlinearity

and Literary Theory," Espen Aarseth defines the nonlinear text as "an object of verbal

communication that is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but one in

which the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape,

conventions, or mechanisms of the text" (51). Even print stories that radically reconfigure the

progression of narrative—such as Robert Coover's short story "The Babysitter," which provides

multiple versions of what could have happened one evening between a man, his wife, and their

babysitter—don't function nonlinearly according to Aarseth's definition. Contemporary films

such as *Run, Lola, Run*, which retells three times the story of a woman's attempt to save her

boyfriend's life, also feign nonlinear storytelling, but almost always conclude with a "definitive

actuality." Even a story told chronologically backwards, such as the film *Memento*, presents its

viewer with a fixed series of events. The medium of the book, or of the film, enforces a form of

linearity. In both cases, though the reader or viewer can experience multiple plots and explore

multiple progressions of events, these versions are put together in a linear fashion. One version of

the story precedes the other within the text, and the version with which a book or film concludes

is typically privileged as the most meaningful of the variations presented. After all, a reader

might logically reason, the author chose to conclude with this version, so it must be the "real"

conclusion.

Whether or not the plot of a given work is chronologically linear, the form of the book or

film necessitates a linear *arrangement*. If books were not bound, this might not be the case. If

the versions of Coover's "The Babysitter" were strewn about the floor for the reader to pick up

and rearrange, we could say that it was nonlinear. If Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* were bound onto a

spool, as the author once suggested, then its arrangement would affect a nonlinear reading of that

text. Few printed works are functionally nonlinear. Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* notably works

against the linearity implicit in the codex form. Cortazar prefaces the reader's journey through

the text by providing a set of instructions, suggesting that though the reader can certainly read the

book from beginning to end, an alternative order of the chapters which he provides will yield different results.

In his short story "The Garden of Forking Paths," Jorge-Luis Borges offers one vision of the nonlinear novel:

> I lingered, naturally, on the sentence: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*. Almost instantly, I understood: 'the garden of forking paths' was the chaotic novel; the phrase 'the various futures (not to all)' suggested to me a forking in time, not in space. A broad rereading of the work confirmed the theory. In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. (33)

The nonlinear novel described in the short story is not the form of the story itself. In typical Borgesian irony, the protagonist of the story describes the path that he chose, one that ends in the essentially arbitrary murder of the Sinologist Stephen Albert, as if it were an inevitable outcome. The narrator tells the story as if circumstance guided him down an inevitable path, when in fact had the narrator made a different set of choices, the outcome would have turned out differently. In his essay "No War Machine," Stuart Moulthrop notes that the story's ending can be read as a metafictional commentary on linearity of print. Moulthrop theorizes a hypertextual treatment of the same story:

> If one intervenes in the Borgesian story hypertextually, one can at least begin to explore the historical divergences and alternate bifurcations which the protagonist rules out. A hypertextual treatment evokes not the foredoomed singular path through the Garden but a network of parallel wanderings: "an infinite series of times … a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent, and parallel times" (Borges, 28). While no hypertextual approximation of this network can constitute a "strictly infinite labyrinth" in Borges' terms, it can at least annul the exclusive determinism of the story's original course. (para 8)

A truly nonlinear narrative structure is more readily accomplished in hypertext for the computer than it is in print. There need not be a "first page" or a "last page" of a hypertext fiction. There

needn't be a single authoritative version; many potentialities can be made available for the reader to explore. Of course, just because a story's narrative structure is nonlinear doesn't mean that any given reader's experience of it will also be nonlinear. In his *Hypertext 2.0*, George Landow remarks that:

> … removing a single 'probable or necessary chain of events' does not do away with all linearity. Linearity, however, then becomes a quality of the reader's individual experience within a single text and his or her experience following a reading path, even if that path curves back upon itself or heads in strange directions. (184)

The index page of *The Unknown* varies each time that readers encounter it. When readers go to the work's "home page," they see a masthead with one of a dozen images of the work's authors, chosen at random by a script. If they click on the masthead image, "The Unknown," they are delivered to a "default" starting point. If they click on the random image, or if they wait for thirty seconds, they are delivered to a random page from the novel. Though there are several "scenes" in the novel that could be described as "beginnings," it is far more likely that the reader will instead start from one of the many middles, or even at one of the ends. This is not to imply that *The Unknown* was written with a specific linear chronology in mind, which was then broken up by its arrangement. In fact, many of the "beginning" scenes were written towards the end of the writing process, and we never had any intention of arranging the hypertext so that those scenes would necessarily be read first. We assembled an "extratextual chronology" as we wrote the novel, but it was an order that rose out of the chaos, not an order fractured into chaos. An "ending," such as Dirk's death in Los Angeles, didn't bring the writing, or the narrative, to a halt, but instead served as an occasion for the generation of new material, which either contextualized or reversed that "ending." If Dirk had been slaughtered as a cult leader and messiah figure,

shouldn't he have written some gospels prior to his assassination? What might the conversion of one of his disciples have been like? Who would be investigated as a likely suspect in the murder? Why not add a resurrection? *The Unknown* is neither chronologically linear nor multilinear in the way that a hypertext retelling of "The Garden of Forking Paths," with multiple plot outcomes branching from a single starting point, might have been. Every outcome in *The Unknown* was used to generate more plot, both chronologically prior to and after that outcome, and to generate different forms commentary on that plot event. None of the endings bring the hypertext to a final and clear resolution, not even those in which one or all of the characters die. Plot events in *The Unknown* are never dead ends, but instead occasions for the production of further layers of discourse.

Many print novels begin not chronologically, but by establishing a frame of reference, perhaps by introducing the protagonist, by establishing the conflicts that will be resolved over the course of the story, or by providing the reader with exposition that will set the story in a given place and time. Like many modern novels, *The Unknown* makes use of a framing device—the fictional book tour. The frame of *The Unknown*, however, doesn't bookend the "core story," but is instead splintered throughout it. Readers are likely to deduce the basic plot and themes of the novel after even a brief reading of the work, not because the plot and themes are laid out in a logical progression, but because they are repeated in many different variations throughout the work. Our hope was that readers would become engaged in the process of piecing together their own linear narratives from the material presented to them nonlinearly. We were hoping to engage our readers in a kind of ontological game, in which each reader would assemble a different "story world" from the pieces that his or her exploration of *The Unknown* yielded. The work as it exists

online is structured in such a way that it is nearly impossible for any two readers of *The Unknown* who read the hypertext for more than a few minutes to read the same work. One can provide readers with a shared linear reading experience of *The Unknown* only by pulling sections out of their hypertext structure and assembling them linearly, as I have done in the second section of this dissertation.

When I discuss hypertext fiction with people who have never read any of it, they typically mention "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure" stories, a genre of fiction that was popular in adolescent/young adult publishing during the 1980s. At the conclusion of every section of a "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure" story, the reader would be given certain options: e.g. "If you want to look behind the tapestry, turn to page 37. If you want to stab blindly at the person behind the tapestry, turn to page 142. If you want to walk past the tapestry and go on with your life, turn to page 197." These rudimentary branching narratives were multisequential—they allowed the reader to make certain limited choices that would determine the outcome of his reading experience. "Choose-Your-Adventure" stories certainly bear a relationship to the mode of hypertext described in Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths." Yet surprisingly few hypertext narratives are written in this vein. Marjorie Luesebrink's hypermedia story "Default Lives" plays on this notion of a reader's agency. The story is a "pachinko game of life" in which the reader is given choices such as whether to be a woman, man, other, or artist. Those who choose to be a woman can be beautiful or not beautiful. Regardless of the reader's choice, the option that the story ends up presenting is ultimately arbitrary. The reader who chooses to be a woman, then chooses to be a beautiful woman, and then chooses to be beautiful woman going from man to man ends up "keeping up appearances" and then "planning for retirement," a selection that inevitably

leads to "you should have started planning for retirement earlier." Ultimately all of the readers end up in the same place. All their choices lead to a limited default life.

There are some "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure" hypertexts on the Web—for instance a rudimentary "Choose Your Own Damn Harry Potter Adventure" I just encountered via a Google search. Most hypertext fictions are not, however, written in the second person, and do not encourage *you* to choose a specific set of actions for the character. They encourage the reader to instead choose a link blindly, without knowing in any clear way its purpose. Perhaps allowing the reader a significant degree of first-person agency in a work of literature, and writing to the reader in the second person, *is* juvenile. I don't think that literary readers want their stories to come to them as worlds in which all possibilities can be realized. The fact is that many of the paths in the garden of forking paths lead to places less interesting than ordinary life. The role of the hypertext author is still a role of selection, of choosing a set of possibilities that one can choose from. It isn't necessary to make the reader a character in the fiction, or to pretend that the reader is truly in control of the narrative. And while multisequential fiction, offering the reader multiple plotlines with multiple outcomes, is one obvious model for hypertext fiction, it isn't the only one. Plot is only one element of story that can be bifurcated hypertextually.

Some hypertexts, such as Robert Arellano's *Sunshine '69*, use hypertext to split the narrative into different points of view, so that one can follow the story as a polyvocal narrative by following individual characters. Judy Malloy's work *Uncle Roger* also uses links to divide the narrative by character. After each segment of the text, there is a list of character links. Malloy doesn't use the links to explicitly split the point of view, but instead to transport readers to another scene in which each character is mentioned. In Geoff Ryman's hypertext *253*, links do

explicitly split the point of view—each scene is a character sketch of one of the 253 people on a London Underground train.

Many hypertext narratives substitute space for chronology as the main navigational metaphor of the work. Both *Sunshine '69* and *The Unknown* include linked maps, so that readers can navigate some portions of the text using geographical space as a visual metaphor. *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*, a hypertext anthology of short stories about New York, is entirely indexed by a map of Manhattan. In Shelley Jackson's "My Body," the hypertext links lead to woodcuts of different parts of the author/narrator's body, which in turn lead to story fragments related to each body part. The link in this case is the connective tissue of the "corpus."

Some hypertexts use links to emulate and parody the structure of specific Internet discourse styles. William Gillespie and Nick Montfort's *Ed Report* parodies an austere government report in the style of the Warren Commission's report on the John F. Kennedy assassination or the Starr Report on the Lewinsky affair. Rob Wittig's "Project Marsha" styles its links on those of the "angel home page" genre. Though it would seem to fly in the face of the hypertext aesthetic, links can also, of course, be used chronologically, or even to emulate turning the pages of a book.

A hypertext fiction is a narrative database. The authors of a hypertext make choices that determine the array of possible narrative structures within that database by constraining the choices that the reader can make in navigating sections of the database. Rather than putting themselves in the shoes of a character and marching down the path of that character's narrative, readers of most hypertext fictions must build coherence from a world of fragments. One of the difficulties of teaching hypertext fiction is that it is nearly impossible for every student in the

class to have read the same text. Each student will have encountered different fragments of the story, and followed different threads. The task of reading a hypertext is one of assembling fragments into a "whole" reading experience, which will likely be yours and yours alone.

Relatively few literary hypertexts are actually structured like a branching tree or a forking path. The majority of hypertext fictions are rather structured like a referential web. Hypertext links can represent connections of all kinds. There are no predetermined rules of grammar for the hypertext link. Each author of each hypertext fiction makes decisions about the rhetoric of linkage in the specific context of each work. Links that are not clearly attached to a specific navigational apparatus (such as a map, or a list of people) can signify virtually whatever kind of connection their author chooses.

In *The Unknown*, links were used primarily to play with various modes of linguistic referentiality. One scene might be linked to another in a logical chronological progression, or as a joke, or for more or less arbitrary reasons (e.g. every scene in which "beer" is mentioned is linked to another scene in which "beer" is mentioned). Part of the play of writing *The Unknown* was making up the rules of linking as we went along. A link in *The Unknown* can shift the topic in much the same way a mention of one word or person can shift the focus of a spoken conversation to a different topic. Every link in the hypertext is there for a reason, but the reasons are not always the same. The referential connections that determine *The Unknown*'s links are alternatively clear and obscure, logical and arbitrary.

Referentiality

The encyclopedic novels of the twentieth century, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, William Gaddis' *JR*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*—constitute overwhelming assemblages of information. These novels engulf readers in worlds of specific information not only by their sheer volume but also by referring to and invoking discourses outside of the text itself. Whether or not the works in question were intended to be mimetic, the level of verisimilitude in each work is such that the novel can convincingly conjure the world it represents by offering us brief "real-seeming" fragments. The details that matter most in establishing the reader's ontological orientation are not those of plot or of character in the conventional sense, but of the specific discourse systems that each work treats. The encyclopedic novel does not encompass an entire world, but has enough references to the texts that compose (or comprise) that world that the novel appears to be comprehensive. *Ulysses* isn't a great novel because it's a well-written portrait of Stephen Daedalus and Leopold Bloom, but because the novel in a sense contains Dublin, and contains a large chunk of the western world's cultural heritage, by virtue its many references. The "external links" of *Ulysses*—the separate volume of notes that many readers reference while they are reading the novel—were arguably as important to Joyce as were the words he put within the pages. He certainly put a great deal of effort into setting Stuart Gilbert down the path to tracking down his references.

Engaging verisimilitude is a kind of shell game. The lawyers in Gaddis' novels are probably less mimetically "real" than the lawyers on any given primetime television drama. But the references they make to specific case law, real or fictional, suffice to put down a marker for the system of discourse the novelist is representing. Not one that establishes "this is a real lawyer

speaking," that the character is a fully fleshed and "rounded" lawyer but instead establishes that "this is real-lawyer speech." The world of an encyclopedic novel is web of referents, a bricolage of discourses.[20] The systems novel is an assemblage of pieces that convincingly refer to "whole" systems in the "real" world outside of the text.

The novel-as-web-of-referents appears in both excessive and minimal formats. Carole Maso's *Ava* or David Markson's *Reader's Block* exemplifies the model of the novel as a compaction of human knowledge. Both *Ava* and *Reader's Block* are novels told in brief fragments, primarily fragments of factual information and quotations from other works of literature. In both cases, the authors use fragments and references to cultures outside of the text to represent consciousness as a collection of information. And the novels, while functioning as discrete stories themselves, are not fully actualized until the fragments of fact are contextualized by other readings outside of the text itself.

When books refer to texts, persons, and narratives outside the frame of the story, they rely on either the reader's knowledge and/or labor to track down the references, or on the convention of footnotes to guide the reader toward the sources that will fill the gap. In both David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, the authors consciously play with the reader's expectations of the footnote as a referential device. An endnote in *Infinite Jest* might be a one-line joke, an explanation of Wittgenstein, a discourse on male identity in film, a short story, a citation of a real or fictional source for the information in the body of the novel, or any number of other things. The novel challenges the reader to separate out what's substantial

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[20] Writing on the systems novel, Tom LeClair notes, "…the systems persona is a collector rather than a creator, an editor rather than an artist, an "orchestrator" (as Barth calls himself) rather than an inventor, a large-minded bricoleur rather than an engineer" (LeClair 23).

and what's detritus. Wallace's endnotes include not only factual references based in reality

outside of the text, but also manufactured references which have the effect of giving the same

kind of authoritative weight to the alternative history the text itself describes. The author presents

each type of knowledge as being equally valid. Wallace also plants within the footnotes

important information about the novel's characters and their relationships that would, in a realistic

novel, be considered crucial to understanding the story. In Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, many

of the footnotes are written by the least "scholarly" character in the novel, Johnny Truant, a club

kid who has assembled the obsessive scholar Zampanò's work. Truant's footnotes contain within

them the realistic novel of his own life. Both Danielewski and Wallace invert the notion of

footnote as formal authoritative commentary, and in so doing call into the question the idea of

"authoritative knowledge" itself. Both novels flatten hierarchical distinctions between different

types of discourse. In both *House of Leaves* and *Infinite Jest*, the auras of the core stories, and the

multiplicity of discourses that become attached to them, are more significant than the central

narratives in themselves.

The nature of referentiality changes subtly in a network hypertext novel. While

Danielewski and Wallace subvert the convention of footnotes by including material that is as

significant as the body text within their notes, the footnote still provides a marker back to the

"main" text. Most hypertext novels don't provide this reference back to where the reader came

from. There usually isn't a "main" text in a hypertext, but instead a database of hierarchically

equivalent texts referring to each other from many different directions. Hypertext novels written

on the network can furthermore link to texts altogether outside the discrete territory of the novel

itself. A Web hypertext version of David Markson's *Reader's Block* could, for instance, link to

further information about the many authors and artists to whom Markson refers, and in some cases to entire texts or artwork produced by them.

A novel written on the network is never a completely discrete experience, but always an experience in relation to and in competition with the other texts available on the network. Readers don't need to leave one environment and go to another in order to leave one text on the network and go to another, not as they would need to close and put down a book before picking up the newspaper. The Web browser encourages movement through chains of reference, through textual spaces. The hypertextual experience of Web reading is based on moving rapidly from one source to another. Readers who "can't read off a screen," probably mean that they can't read the Web without moving through it. One challenge for hypertext writers is to find ways to deal with this imperative desire for transition, for movement through the network, without losing the reader to the world of another text.

The structure of the network itself is based on acts of referencing. Even the movement of packets of information through the network is an act of referring. Unlike the referential system of footnotes, one does not usually "drill down" from one text to the source and back up again, but instead moves across databases. The Web suffers from the problem that Nelson identified so early in the development of hypertext: Web links do not link backwards, only forwards. The most common mode of reading the Web is not recursive. The links of the Web are largely digressive. References lead to references, which lead to further references. While print novels such as *Infinite Jest* and *House of Leaves* invoke profuse referentiality within a discrete text object, the global network is an enormous textual space, without distinct boundaries, which can appear endlessly referential. A network hypertext novel, such as *Sunshine '69* or *The Unknown*, can

similarly appear to be bottomless, endless. While it is possible to read every page of both novels, their forms discourage completion. Without pages to count, it is difficult for the reader to track her progress through the work. If a novel is truly shaped like a web, any but the most obsessed of readers will probably never read it in its entirety.

Writing on the network, hypertext authors can link not only to "source material" within the discrete confines of the work they write, but also to any other location on the Web. This practice of external linking would no doubt be more common if it were not for the fact that authors have no way of guaranteeing that the materials they link to outside of their own text will remain in place. As I noted in the previous chapter, Web sites are notoriously unstable. To keep a hypertext novel with many external links operable, its author would have to actively monitor and maintain those links. Most authors of hypertext fiction on the Web use external links sparingly. While almost anything in the world of information on the Web *could* be linked into a Web hypertext, the more external links that a work has, the less stable that work becomes, and the more prone to "breaking" with 404 errors.

Authors working on the network can make use of other types of referentiality. The previously mentioned "Impermanence Agent" by Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al., for example, references material particular to each single reader's Web browsing history. It would be possible to pull a variety of other user-specific information into a fiction. It would also be possible to change a variety of time-specific references. For instance, a character in a network novel could pick up a newspaper and scan the headlines to find the same headlines as those that are in the paper the day the reader is visiting the site. The author could change that information by hand or such time-based elements could be scripted to change automatically. Network documents are

mutable and programmable in ways that print is not. The author of a fiction that makes use of variable elements that are scripted, rather than fixed definitively into the text, has to give up a great deal of narrative control. It would be easy enough to write a story that changes on every reading given the events of the day. It would be more difficult, however, to see to it that those events are always woven neatly into the context of the story in any but a superficial way.

The network is rife with narrative potential, yet the network presents many challenges for the literary writer, ranging from the "surfing" reading patterns of Web readers to the instability of the medium itself. The novel is probably the literary form most wedded to the technology of the codex book. In some ways, the transition to making poetry for the computer is less of a leap than attempting to write novels for the network. Many of the techniques on which the novel has traditionally relied—from character development, to linear plot progression, to the orchestration of themes—must be abandoned or reinvented in the network environment. The experiments of the modern and postmodern novel were compelling precisely because they pushed against the constraints of the form of the novel within the technology of the codex book. Many techniques utilized in postmodern novels are also utilized in network novels, but for an inverse reason: not to fragment and deconstruct the conventional novel within the codex, but to retain or reconstruct some of the literary qualities of the novel within the network, a medium that is fragmentary in nature. In the next chapter, I explore some examples of attempts to create novels particular to the network, some early experiments in a genre still in formation, the network novel.

Four

The Network Novel

In this section I describe some works of fiction that are not only published on the Internet, but which are structurally and aesthetically informed by network writing and reading practices. The specific works that I examine in this section—Robert Arellano's *Sunshine '69*, Shelley and Pamela Jackson's *The Doll Games*, Rob Wittig's *Blue Company*, and *The Unknown*—are each designed for network reading and subject to or determined by particular operations of the network itself. Three of the four works are Web hypertexts, and the fourth, Rob Wittig's *Blue Company*, is a serial novel written for email on a time-release basis. These projects are among the more "literary" works of electronic literature. At the risk of begging the difficult-to-answer question, "What is literature?"[21] I suggest that each of these works can and should be read both as *novels* and as network documents. My interest in these works is based on the ways that network novels adapt techniques from print literary traditions as much as on their network-specific aspects.

I should note that none of these four works represent "cutting edge" technology, and none are representative of the most sophisticated design. In terms of the programming involved, none of them are in the league of some of the more complex "literature applications" produced by other contemporary electronic writers. In comparison to works such as Talan Memmott's multilayered

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[21] I don't completely buy into the Russian formalist Shklovskii's notion that "literariness" is a function of the process of defamiliarization. But if it were, most works of electronic literature, in their self-consciousness as texts, would certainly qualify. Hypertext defamiliarizes even the most ordinary of experiences by transforming them into strange reading experiences. My own take on "literariness" is that reading communities make texts "literary." Critics, booksellers, universities, and libraries make texts literary. Texts are made literary by their readership, and not by anything inherent in the texts themselves. My distinction here between more or less "literary" works of electronic literature is based on the extent to which each text utilizes or adapts traditional literary devices and techniques.

and deconstructive *Lexia to Perplexia*, John Cayley's Hypercard and Quicktime VR poem sequence *riverIsland*, or *Mysteries and Desire: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy*, an animated interactive memoir produced in Director by Marsha Kinder and the Labyrinth Project at the University of Southern California, these works are "plain vanilla." They make little use of programming outside of simple HTML and the odd javascript or cgi script. I select them for discussion here not because they are the most technologically "advanced" works but because each is both narrative-driven and can be described as a network document. These works are primarily text-based: while all use images and/or multimedia, those elements are included largely to support the text, not the other way around. Some works of electronic literature, such as Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*, could essentially not be represented in non-electronic format. Each of these works could be remediated into print without losing the narrative elements that form their cores.

The Network as Reading and Writing Environment

The network is a writing environment, not just a reading environment. The novels I explore here are the products of network writing strategies and reflective of network writing styles. Each is also in some way collaborative. The two women who wrote *The Doll Games*, Shelley and Pamela Jackson, were assisted by a photographer as well as several other contributors. Robert Arellano principally authored *Sunshine '69*, but a graphic artist and several musicians also contributed to the work. Three writers—William Gillespie, Dirk Stratton, and I—did the bulk of the work on *The Unknown*, but the hypertext included contributions of various kinds by at least a half dozen other writers, as well as an artist and a musician. *Blue Company* was primarily written by Rob Wittig, but included contributions by two other writers—William

Gillespie and Nick Montfort—and was designed by Rick Valicenti. In contrast to print novels,

collaboration on network novels is a common practice rather than the exception. A diverse set of

skills is necessary to create an effective multimedia network document. Even simple Web design

requires some practical skills beyond those involved in writing fiction, and if one wants to

effectively utilize imagery, audio, video, databases, or sophisticated programming, it makes a

great deal of sense to seek out collaborators with specific expertise. There is also less economic

incentive in being the solitary author when one is producing work for a network that offers little

in the way of remuneration—there are typically no royalties to split.

Network novels are mutable. Each of the four network novels examined below takes

advantage of (and/or suffers from) its capacity to change over time. *Sunshine '69* was first

published online in 1996, but underwent renovations in 2000. *The Doll Games* was published

online in 2001, but months after it was first published a section of interviews with other writers

followed. *The Unknown* was first published online in 1998, and credentialed with an award in

1999, but we continued to expand the work until the end of 2001. *Blue Company* was first

"performed" in 2001, then slightly rewritten and performed for a second audience in 2002. There

are disadvantages to the mutability of the network novel. Perhaps sometime between 1999-2001,

The Unknown reached its optimal size, and only then fell over into the territory of narrative bloat.

Because a novel written for the network could theoretically go on forever, undergoing continuous

expansion and revision, it's very difficult to resist the impulse to do so. The physical and

temporal limitations of print encourage a kind of formal discipline that is not omnipresent in

network novels. We're still finding and repairing errors in *The Unknown*, errors we might have

caught earlier had the work been published in print. Of course, when we do find errors in the

hypertext we can go back and fix them almost instantaneously. Mutability is, of course, not a quality unique to the network novel. Print books are regularly published in multiple editions. The distinctive qualities of mutability on the network are the ease and the speed with which texts can be changed, and that changes made to the "original" also take effect in every "copy," with the exception of copies made specifically for archival purposes.

Network novels reflect and are subject to an environment of other network communications. A *Blue Company* reader might have found the novel "blocked" by anti-spam software running on her ISP's server that blocked any email arriving from an "@yahoo.com" address. A portion of *Sunshine '69* that included music files to accompany the reading of certain portions of the text no longer works because the server that hosted the music files no longer exists. Portions of *The Unknown* and *The Doll Games* link to external Web sites, which could cease to function at any given time. Conditions in the environment of the network can act on the network novel as a system, and cause it to function differently, or not function at all.

The technology of the network is unstable. Virus attacks and various other technical problems periodically slow down network communications. Shortly after *The Unknown* won the trAce/Alt-X award, a router went down at the University of Cincinnati, where the work was originally hosted. We were just about to present the work to the Technology Platforms for Twenty-First-Century Literature Conference at Brown University when we realized that the site was down. After some frantic phone calls to Ohio, we managed to roust a network supervisor from his sickbed. He had to physically move the server from one side of campus to another location across campus, which had a reliable router functioning, to restore *The Unknown* to the Web. Were it not for that physical effort, at the time of our most important reading of the work,

all we could have shown of *The Unknown* would have been a "404 Error." When the server

hosting a network novel breaks down, the novel breaks down simultaneously for all of its readers.

Novels in Fragments

Web browsers or the windows of an email program are distractive environments, which

work against "immersive" reading. A reader is unlikely to set aside a few days, or even a few

hours, to "tackle" a network novel in its entirety the same way that one might attempt to finish

reading a particularly enjoyable book. Most Web readers "surf" in some fashion during an online

session, and are used to "sampling" content from a variety of sources, not to carefully reading a

single text. One of the challenges of writing a network novel is how to go about providing an

enriching reading experience both for the "common Web reader," the surfer whose visit will brief,

and for the "literary reader," who will read the work as a novel, not as a mere momentary

distraction. Authors can plan for the attention deficit syndrome endemic to Web reading by

structuring each segment or HTML page as a self-contained story or story fragment able to

function independent of its context within the whole. Network novels must function in parts, for

they are unlikely to be read as wholes.

While network novels are subject to many different forms of environmental interference

and must function within a fast-paced Web reading environment, they also attempt to engage their

readers in ways that are distinctly literary. The authors of the works examined here all conceived

of their works as both a reading experience specific to the network—a network document, a web

of HTML pages, or a series of emails—and as a novel (or, in the case of *The Doll Games*, as a

pseudo-nonfiction literary construct similar to a novel). Each of the four works demonstrates self-

conscious awareness that the form of the network document is in conflict with certain aspects of

the novel, particularly the realistic novel. To create novel-like story structures, authors of

network novels must work against the constraints imposed by the network environment, and

doing so, position their works in oppositional or parasitic relationships with the network

environment and common network reading behaviors. The epistles of *Blue Company*, from a

time traveler sent back to fourteenth-century Milan, appear intrusively in the stream of urgent

memos and solicitations of the reader's email inbox. The office supervisor searching for a good

typing test with which to assess her temporary workers might find herself in the middle of *The*

Unknown's bizarre book tour. Someone looking to purchase an inflatable sex doll, by searching

for "doll sex," might find himself in the midst of *The Doll Games*' ruminations on the

construction of gender identity. Network novels plant literary reading experiences where they

might not be expected and, in certain cases, where they might not be welcome.

When William Gillespie, Dirk Stratton, and I were writing *The Unknown*, we described

each individual section as a scene, rather than as a chapter. We used the former term rather than

the latter because we realized that each fragment that readers were exposed to would need to

establish its own setting, conflicts, and perhaps even characters. Each scene within the hypertext

would ideally provide its own context, and not depend on other scenes for its internal coherence.

Much of *The Unknown* is modeled on the picaresque form, offering brief sketches, satire, and

episodic adventures. In theory, each scene can function as narrative both independent from the

rest of the novel and in relationship with the other scenes linked to it, just as one can read

episodes of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* out of sequence, without becoming disoriented.

Although each scene of *The Unknown* has its own distinct focus, style or "theme," we tried to

weave certain overarching themes (the cult of celebrity, the quest narrative, the road trip, and the confusion and/or diffusion of identity), and recurring character issues (William becomes mean and withdrawn, Scott becomes greedy and power-hungry, Dirk becomes messianic and manipulative, and all three struggle continuously with various substance abuse problems) across many different scenes. So while a reader who visits the hypertext briefly will have a different experience from the literary reader who devotes hours to studying *The Unknown*, it's probable that each reader will leave the experience with some understanding of the work's general themes. Each scene stands alone, but has some elements of the whole encoded within it.

The other three novels also function episodically, albeit in different ways. *Sunshine '69* isn't focused on any single protagonist or group of protagonists, as is *The Unknown*. Arellano's work is instead divided across nine different perspectives, linked by their common destination at Altamont. *The Doll Games* is arranged more like an academic study, a kind of casebook or portfolio, than the sprawling structures of *Sunshine '69* or *The Unknown*. The differentiations between *The Doll Games*' sections, which I'll explore further below, are between different types of material—for instance, a photo study, transcripts, and cartoons— all describing the same "games." Each section of *The Doll Games* essentially applies a different way of seeing to the same central phenomena.

Rob Wittig's constraints in setting up the episodes of *Blue Company* were different than those of a hypertext novel. Because his work was written in thirty-eight email messages delivered over the course of a month, he could build consistent plots and themes in the same way as any author of a linear serial fiction would—and he could also use "cliffhangers" to build a sense of suspense. But because Wittig was usually providing the reader with only a message or two each

day, and because those messages were competing for attention with all of the other messages in the reader's inbox, Wittig needed to imbue each day's message with enough interesting material that it could serve as a stand-alone reading experience. So while the episodes of *Blue Company* often foreshadowed coming events and reflected on events that had already occurred, each message also served as an episode in its own right. Wittig took advantage of the near-simultaneity of email to establish synchronicity between the events that were occurring in the story and the timing of the messages' distribution—so the events that happened over the course of one day in the story were usually recounted in a message that the reader received once a day.

Using "Flat" Characters

It would be difficult to structure a hypertext novel, particularly one designed for Web reading, to fully develop its characters in the mode of the realistic novel. Characters in many postmodern novels are "flat," and are utilized by their authors to represent certain "types" or systems of ideas. The character of Jack Gladney in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is more fundamentally the idea of "Professor of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill" than he is an attempt to describe a single human being, and the dead father in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* isn't any individual father but an allegorical collection of the symptoms of "fatherhood." Confronted with the challenge of writing a novel to be read in fragments, in nonlinear fashion, authors of network novels often choose to construct "flat" characters. The characters in *The Unknown* and *Sunshine '69* are constructed more as types, styles of discourse, and representations of ideas than as Jamesian characters.

The Unknown consciously rejects the idea that it could develop "rounded" characters.
While scenes within *The Unknown* describe catharsis, epiphanies, and even a denouement, *The Unknown* largely utilizes its characters to describe or satirize those concepts, rather than utilizing catharsis, epiphanies, or denouement as devices to show any kind of development in the characters as representations of actual people. Characterization in *The Unknown* is disingenuous to the extent that the novel's characters are often used as blunt instruments to explore styles of writing, including imitations of the style of other writers such as Nelson Algren, Jack Kerouac, Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Beckett, and Julio Cortazar; literary devices and concepts; and specific discourse styles such as the corporate memo, the typing text, the book blurb, and the theatrical review. The metafictional gesture of naming the characters after the authors isn't incidental, but serves to highlight the fact that it doesn't ultimately matter *who* these unknown characters are. We weren't interested in developing "Dirk," "Scott," and "William" as individuals who could seem to "leap off of the page" into "real life"[22] as much as we were interested in the various ways that ideas of identity can be constructed and distorted by different systems of representation.

Insofar as the characters of *The Unknown* do change from scene to scene, those changes are not the product of character "growth" but are instead the result of the styles of writing applied to the characters. The characters of *The Unknown* are media onto which discourse is inscribed. This sense that the characters are media is made explicit in the scene titled "Postmodern in Seattle"[23] where the character "Scott" is wandering in the rain and thinking about Postmodernism, after shooting heroin and drinking a double latté:

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[22] Although we did in fact "perform" our Unknown characters at readings and academic conferences on more than one occasion.

[23] <http://www.unknownhypertext.com/seattle2.htm>.

> Postmodernism, of all the <u>fucking</u> things, why did he need to worry about that now, when he almost had everything he wanted.
>
> "Postmodernism."
>
> He thought.
>
> I are media.
>
> We is media.

In this scene, the character "Scott" was co-written by the authors Scott and William. The singular and the plural, individual and collective, are deliberately confused. The "he" who "thought" isn't an individual, but a linguistic construct assembled by two different authors on the same page. Identity is both medium, to be inscribed, and media in the sense of a locus of "mass media discourse." The point made explicitly here and implicitly throughout the hypertext is that a fictional character never has any material existence beyond the language used to construct it. As the eponymous authors of *The Unknown*, we weren't authentically concerned with *who* our characters were, our even *what* our characters were, but instead *how* our characters could be constructed by different ways of writing them.

At the time of its initial release in 1996, Robert Arrellano's *Sunshine '69*[24] was one of the first hypertext novels written specifically for the Web,[25] and it remains one of the best attempts to tell a coherent but multilinear and polyvocal story in the distractive environment of the network. *Sunshine '69* is a historical hypertext novel that attempts to encapsulate the zeitgeist of the 1960s by tracking events in the lives of nine characters from June through December 1969, concluding

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[24] <http://www.sunshine69.com>.
[25] Some of Judy Malloy's "narrabase" hypertext projects, such as *Uncle Roger*, preceded *Sunshine '69*.

with the Altamont festival held on December 6, 1969. Arellano loosely based his fiction on

historical fact. At different points in the novel, the reader can encounter a "bird's-eye view" of

the historical events in 1969, and the work includes a bibliography of the nonfiction sources that

Arellano sampled from. While the novel references historical fact, Arellano uses that context as

background for a largely metaphoric tale of corrupted visions. In the course of the novel, Mick

Jagger makes a deal with Lucifer that results in the tragedy at Altamont, and LSD is transformed

from a substance for utopian mind-expansion to a sinister market commodity.

The characters of *Sunshine '69* are sketched very quickly and cartoonishly as types—in

one section of the hypertext, a page including a cartoon drawing of a suit and a character sketch

represents each individual character. The drawings don't include any faces—as if to underscore

that these characters should be understood not as individual human beings, but as stereotypes,

fictional personalities representative of the cultural forces at play in the novel. Alan Passoro is a

Hell's Angel, one of the gang hired for security at Altamont; Lucifer is the devil; the Glimmer

Twins are Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones; Ali a.k.a. Ronald Stark is a

shady agent provocateur with connections to the CIA; Meredith Hunter is a young African-

American hipster from South Berkeley; Orange Sunshine is alternatively a hippie girl-next-door

and a brand of LSD; Norm Cavettesa is discharged veteran recently back from Vietnam, and

Timothy Leary is one of the leading advocates of experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs.

Author Arellano freely mixed "real" people with fictional characters. Leary, Jagger and Richards,

real persons in the world outside the novel, are also icons that have come to represent cultural

movements. Hunter and Passoro are real persons who did not become icons: Hunter was the 18-

year-old murdered at Altamont, and Passoro the Hell's Angel who stabbed him. The other

characters are presumably fictional. By mixing the "real" with the imagined characters, Arellano

flattens the distinction between "real" history—a young man named Meredith Hunter really died

at Altamont—and imagined, metaphorical history—Mick Jagger did not make a deal with Lucifer

to bring about an end to the idealism of the Sixties by organizing a concert at Altamont. Real

events, adapted from nonfiction texts, are juxtaposed with imagined events to create an alternative

history, and to underscore the idea that all histories are narrative constructs. In the context of the

novel, the characters who really lived through the events, or who died as a result of them, are no

more or less real than those imagined by the author to represent flower children, government

spies, or allegorical evil.

The nonlinear style of hypertext reading poses problems for authors interested in

developing characters in the mode of the realistic novel, but as postmodern novels demonstrate,

characters needn't be fully "developed" to serve a worthwhile literary purpose. Characters can

serve as markers for character types, or as media for different kinds of discourse. Both *The*

Unknown and *Sunshine '69* use their characters to literary ends, without developing those

characters as "rounded" representations of human beings.

Navigating the Network Novel

In the absence of a singular arrangement, such as that in the conventional print novel,

authors of nonlinear fiction can provide readers with other navigational tools to guide them.

These tools can be as simple as the "alternate reading order" that Julio Cortazar provides the

reader of his print hypertext *Hopscotch*, or can make more elaborate use of the multimedia

capabilities of the computer. In the absence of linear structure, Robert Arellano provides

Sunshine '69 readers other ways of navigating the text. Once the readers get past the Flash

introduction to the work, each screen of the novel has four buttons linking to "Calendar,"

"People," "8-Track," and "Map." Each button links to a different navigational apparatus.

While the "Calendar" might appear at first glance to offer the reader a kind of linear

chronology, in fact, it doesn't do so in the coherent way that one might expect. Each scene is

written from the point of view of (or written from an objective point of view about) a specific

character. So while the reader is introduced to Meredith Hunter on June 21st, 1969, the following

day on the calendar, June 22nd, takes the reader to a section of "The Gobspell According to St.

Puke," a metacommentary/mock gospel Arellano wrote to accompany the "main" narrative of

Sunshine '69. If readers follow the calendar, they don't see Meredith again until August 4th. The

other character's "throughlines" are similarly jumbled on the calendar. While this navigation tool

offers you a chronological frame of reference, it doesn't let one follow any single character across

the timeline. As one moves through time, one must also move through different characters'

perspectives on entirely different events.

The "People" button does allow the reader a mode of navigation to follow specific

characters. Following the link leads one to a page of "suits," images of the characters' clothing,

which are linked by name to a page for each of them. When one follows the link to a particular

individual's name, one is delivered to a page with their name, suit, and a very brief character

sketch e.g. "Alan Passoro: **A HELL'S ANGEL** from the Oakland Chapter who <u>dishes it out</u> as

hard as <u>he takes it</u>."[26] Beneath each character sketch is a list of links to items in the character's

pocket. One can follow the links to sections of the novel that include those objects. By doing so,

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[26] <http://www.sunshine69.com/Alan_Passaro.html>.

the reader can "dig" through each character's experiences in a nonlinear fashion, and get a kind of gestalt impression of each character's place in the story.

As I mentioned previously, the "8-Track" mode of navigation has fallen into network obsolescence, but once offered readers soundtracks to accompany their reading of specific sections of the work. The "Map" button leads to an image map of the San Francisco Bay area, where the majority of the novel's scenes are set. The reader can click on one of eight areas and be delivered to a page that lists all of the sections of the novel set in that area, in chronological order. In addition to these tools for navigating the work, each section of the text has referential links within the body of the text that can also be used to navigate the fiction. *Sunshine '69* provides the reader with network-specific reading strategies via navigational tools through which the reader can gather details of the story by a process of induction.

The Unknown also provides navigational tools beyond the links within the body of the text, in a navigation bar that is included at the bottom of every page. The hypertext has a "Map" button, which links to "An Incomplete Map of Their Travels"—an imagemap of the United States with concentric circles indicating where particular scenes were set. The reader who clicks on the circle over Albuquerque will be delivered to a scene in Albuquerque. If *The Unknown* refuses to orient its readers within a clear chronology, at least it offers them some means of geographical orientation. The map is, however, incomplete. We developed the map before we had finished writing the hypertext, and so many settings are not linked there. The "Bookstores" button similarly orients the reader in terms of the geographical setting and, to an extent, in the plot of the work. The page linked to the button begins with an apology to the bookstores we read in during our alleged tour, and follows with a list of those bookstores, each linked to the scenes that were

set there. The "People" button on *The Unknown*'s navigation bar links to an index of people, both real and imagined, referred to within the hypertext. Unlike the index of people on *Sunshine '69*, the links on this list do not shift the narrative perspective to those people. The people listed might be utilized as characters in the linked scene or simply mentioned within the scene.

The six colored buttons beneath the top row each link to a different "line" of the hypertext. As we added different types of material to the work, we developed a typology to differentiate between the different types of "scenes" we included in the work, and loosely modeled an indexing system on the Chicago Transit Authority's color-coded navigation system. Each of the colored buttons on the navigation bar links to a different kind of text. The "Red Line" indexes all of the explicitly fictional "book tour" scenes; the "Purple Line" includes "metafictional bullshit"; the "Blue Line" includes "documentary material," such as transcripts of recorded conversations between the authors; the "Orange Line" is a collection of letters between the authors; the "Brown Line" a collection of art projects; and the "Green Line" documentation of the readings we performed of *The Unknown*. Each page in the hypertext also indicates which line it belongs to by the color of its side borders. The lines of *The Unknown* don't serve to orient the reader within a plot progression, or a character's development, or even within the development of the work's themes. The lines serve instead to orient the reader ontologically. The different lines inform readers not where they are within *The Unknown*, but what category of material they are experiencing.

Both *The Unknown* and *Sunshine '69* provide readers with navigational tools that can help, in a limited way, to orient their readings of the two works. These tools don't provide a clear order to the work, insofar as they don't suggest, "read this first, followed by this, followed by

that," but they do provide readers with strategies for navigating each text—navigate by setting,

navigate by people, or navigate by type of material—or, at the very least, with some method of

knowing whether or not they have "exhausted" particular parts of the texts. In contrast to the

loosely structured Web hypertexts *The Unknown* and *Sunshine '69*, Shelley and Pamela Jackson's

The Doll Games has an explicit structure, that of the academic case study.

The Case Study as Network Novel: Shelley and Pamela Jackson's *The Doll Games*

I may be taking certain liberties in calling *The Doll Games*[27] by Shelley and Pamela

Jackson a network novel. In the project description the authors wrote for the program of the 2001

Digital Arts and Culture Conference, they described the project as sitting "uneasily between

fiction nonfiction, serious inquiry [and] parody: [its] authors find subject matter very strange

moving."[28] *The Doll Games* documents a complex narrative game that the two sisters used to

play when they were prepubescent girls, and frames that documentation in faux-academic

discourse. In "sitting uneasily between" different styles of discourse, the work enlists the reader

to differentiate between authoritative knowledge and play. Although the dolls in question are

"things of childhood," the project reveals that in the games the authors used to play with these

dolls, one can find the roots of both Pamela and Shelley's "grownup" lives: Shelley's vocation as

a fiction writer, and Pamela's as a Ph.D. in Rhetoric. Throughout, the project plays with

constructions of gender and of identity. This is a "true" story that places truth of all kinds in

between those ironic question marks. *The Doll Games* is a network "novel" in the sense that it

uses the network to construct narratives in a particularly novel way. *The Doll Games* is also

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[27] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames>.

[28] <http://www.stg.brown.edu/conferences/ DAC/abstracts/jackson.html>.

consciously structured as a network document, and plays in an ironic fashion with its network context.

 The Doll Games explores the boundary between triviality and seriousness, challenging the reader to separate the tongue-in-cheek from the authentic. The introduction to the project establishes the tone of the work as a whole:

> As scholars and artists look closer to home for inspiration, and once-despised genres reveal wondrous molecular structures under the lenses of academe and art, the doll games remain the province of what we still fondly and dismissively refer to as 'little girls.'[29]

The Jackson sisters conclude that the concept of "little girl" itself must be interrogated, that the "little girl must be defrocked." The project of *The Doll Games* is at once a mockery of the New Historicist strategy of unearthing historically neglected genres and recontextualizing them within a framework of identity politics, and a fairly thorough utilization of that strategy on the authors' own personal fictions, the games they played as young girls.

 From the title page of the work onwards, the authors play with the semiotics of network communication. The title page offers three images, the title of the work, and the authors' names. The three images are mysterious close-up photos of dolls: the neck and jaw of one, the drawn-on lips and nose of another, and the third a witch doll's mouth. Moving the mouse over each image pulls up another: a "naked" doll photographed from behind, a doll with enormous eyes painted blue, and an abstract image that might be the "sex" of a doll. Yet clicking on each image leads the reader nowhere. The gray title of the work, the most static element on the page, is the only one that links to the rest of the project. The splash page draws the reader to certain elements, which in turn refuse to yield. The text is "playing the reader" by working against expectations of

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[29] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/littlegirls.html>.

how an interface usually works. From its first page, *The Doll Games* signals its reader that he

cannot expect the work to yield easy meanings, but that the process of making meaning will

require unconventional and non-trivial effort.

The first page past the title page, which includes the "serious" introduction I mention

above, also includes a small gray footer with the keywords "...doll sex, doll mutilation,

transgender dolls, prosthetic doll penises, doll death, doll dreams.…" These keywords may be

intended to cue readers as to the content of what will follow, but they also serve a function in how

this particular HTML page will be read *by the network*. The Jackson sisters likely knew how

search engines operate, and placed these keywords conspicuously on the front page in order to

draw a particular readership for the work. Indeed, *The Doll Games* is the first site returned by a

Google search for "doll mutilation." The savvy placement of phrases such as these by the

Jackson sisters can be used to draw readers to network literature, in this case readers who are pre-

qualified as interested in *The Doll Games* by virtue of their interest in doll mutilation.

The Doll Games is a metafiction. At its center are the actual games that Shelley and

Pamela Jackson played in their youth. The section of the work titled "definition" and subtitled "a

funhouse mirror" is ostensibly written by J. F. Bellwether, Ph.D., a scholar who has made the

study of a "ground-breaking series of theatrical performances by Shelley and Pamela Jackson that

took place in a private home in Berkeley, California in the first half of the 1970's" a focus of his

scholarly work.[30] This section serves two narrative functions: it places the work within a mock-

academic mode of satire and underneath that satire establishes the project as a serious

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[30] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/definition.html>.

investigation of the relationship between play and gender roles. The satire of the academic voice

is on target. Bellwether's voice is that of an audaciously self-important scholar:

> The ending point of the doll games is easier to locate, though too much weight has
> been placed on Shelley Jackson's famous dictum (1976): "People are more
> interesting than dolls." (I argue this point at greater length elsewhere; see "Did the
> Doll Games Ever End?" Postmodern Culture MDXIXVIIIIIX.)

Bellwether situates his commentary as if he is fighting for turf within a critical industry centered

on this game played a quarter of a century ago by two young girls in Berkeley. At the same time,

Bellwether's introduction offers the authors' likely motivation for putting the project together:

> The doll games emerged in Berkeley, California at a time when race, gender,
> politics, and sexuality were fiercely and publicly debated. Indeed, as the dolls
> were taking their first steps toward literary history, the artists' family was opening
> a feminist bookstore just down the street from People's Park. The Jacksons'
> privately staged confrontations between androgynes and "dainty ladies" took place
> in the context of a public discourse on gender of which they were, therefore,
> entirely aware. That the artists took both parts (and all their myriad refractions and
> reflections), changing identity and gender at will, not only reveals the inherent
> flexibility of the form, but goes some distance toward explaining why these games
> still hold their mystery after all these years.

The placement of the project within a satirical framework at the outset has the odd effect of

enabling the authors to seriously explore the formation of their own identities through their

girlhood play. Because they approach the topic from self-effacing, comic perspectives, the

authors are able to offset any ridicule that may have been directed at the project were it a

"serious" academic project. The Jacksons employ comedy strategically, striking an ironic pose in

order to employ the tools of theory on material that they might have been unable to address in an

official academic context.

The Doll Games is a self-consciously polyvocal work. In the section titled "Introductions,"[31] Shelley and Pamela each introduce the games and establish the focus of their adult interest in them. A third voice, that of the fictional editor Bellwether, intrudes in a footnote to note that the introductions are "marred by the self-consciousness which stifled the project in its infancy." His note is followed by a link to his own introduction, which concludes with the question that the reader will of course ask: "Is it possible that I am neither the critic nor the audience, but just the latest dummy of the Jackson girls…?"[32] The third voice complicates our understanding of the work as collaboration. Did the two authors construct Bellwether's voice together? In what sense is the critic's voice the "real" voice of the work? Is the critic the construct, or is each of the "Shelley" and "Pamela" voices just as artificial as the fictional third?

The section of the work entitled "dolls"[33] makes effective use of visual rhetoric to establish the dolls as both "characters" and as possessions that reveal something about their owners. The section resembles a cross between a museum catalog and a series of character sketches. Each of the twenty pages includes a doll's name, a paragraph about its "personality," role in the game and/or provenance, and a photo of the doll. The photographs are particularly effective as "texts" in that they present the dolls not only as objects but also as representations of the particular characteristics that the girls ascribed to them. The photograph of "poet and libertine" Harvey shows a small doll with an oversized head and engorged member, shot in a kinetic blur against a cloud of red smoke. The photograph of Alanzo, the "darkly handsome" pirate, shows only his head from his eyes to his suave black hair, reinforcing the mystery that the

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[31] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/intros.html>.
[32] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/editorintro.html>.
[33] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/dolls.html>.

girls ascribed to him. The written descriptions of the dolls, their roles, and their various

mutilations wouldn't be nearly as engaging without this visual component, the "photographic

evidence" of each doll's actuality. The section also illustrates one of the basic advantages of

publishing on the Web. Only very well-funded literary writers could hope to include full color

photographs in their published books. With just a camera, a scanner, and some skill, Web authors

can utilize all the rich imagery they care to.

The "artifacts" [34] section of *The Doll Games* consists of a "Catalog of Objects Pertaining

to the Doll Games of Shelley and Pamela Jackson, Omitting Manuscripts and Other Written

Ephemera, which are Itemized Elsewhere." The section provides descriptions of the various

accessories and objects in alphabetical order. The objects—such as an apron, set of two barbells,

barrette and bathroom commodities—are described in very dry, evidentiary terms, and not within

the context of particular narratives. The editor notes that the list of objects "assembled cannot

possibly fulfill the illustrative function for which they are intended, and serve as much to repulse

understanding as to invite it." Rather than clarifying or dictating meaning, the list of objects

challenges the reader to in a sense join in the games, by imagining how the objects might be used

within narratives involving the dolls that were cataloged in the previous section of the work.

The "documents" [35] section of the work is a "Catalog of Manuscripts and Other Written

Ephemera" written not about the dolls, but *by* them. Thus we have, for example, "Dieting the

easy way by Dawn" and "Moments with Mara by Harvey." Each of the manuscripts is presented

in its entirety, along with scholarly and archival notes by the editor. The high seriousness and

probing nature of the editor's comments are juxtaposed with the juvenile epistolary style of the

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[34] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/artifacts.html>.
[35] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/writings.html>.

manuscripts themselves. The "documents" section is wonderfully effective at mixing discourse

styles to show that the same cultural artifacts that might be casually discarded as playthings can

take on deeper significance when they are filtered through academic discourse.

The "commentary"[36] section of the work includes a variety of materials that contextualize

the games in different ways. A timeline offers six historical periods running from "Prehistory" to

"Decadence" and "Decline." A glossary offers a list similar to the artifacts section. Rather than

serving as a device to explain particularly complex terms specific to the work, however, the

entries in the glossary explain the particular use of simple terms within the context of the games,

e.g. "Money: No money was exchanged in the doll games. Dolls scavenged, stole, and crafted

their own goods in the subsistence economies of pirate ship, outlaw den, desert island and

orphanage." The glossary helps to reinforce the idea that the games became a private world, with

its own constructed culture and mythologies.

The "commentary" section also includes two drawings, one a comic by Pamela, showing a

young girl curled up in bed with two dolls, waking to perform mock cunnilingus on one of the

dolls, and the other a self-portrait of Shelley as Harvey, the libertine doll. These images serve to

reinforce the idea that the dolls served as external projections of each girl's internal process of

gender/identity formation. This section also includes separate journals written by Pamela and

Shelley as they put the project together, reflecting both on specific aspects of the games and self-

consciously on the progress of the project itself. Pamela's journal is constructed as a footnote-

style hypertext, wherein specific phrases such as "nasty, dirty Eden" link to mock-scholarly

references, which open in small separate windows. Shelley's journal by comparison is more

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[36] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/commentary.html>.

traditional, including sections numbered by days, each ruminating on a specific topic. The term "commentary" doesn't necessarily describe the variety of material in this section. Each of the subsections varies in style and substance from the others. They are linked rather by the fact that they are all conscious recollections by the two adults, looking back on how the games shaped and informed their identities, and to an extent the way that they relate to others. Pamela writes in her journal, "Since doll games I have had Jesse/Lauries in my life... and Harveys and Willys... and Ainas... but never a big Josh*."[37] For each of the two authors, the doll games never actually ended but continued to develop into a kind of private language, a framework through which they still interpret their adult relationships.

The "tapes"[38] section of the project continues the double meta-commentary of the journals —asking both "What were doing when we played the doll games?" and "What are we doing as we put this project together now?"—but in dialogue format. The conversation (or conversations) between Shelley and Pamela was presumably transcribed from an actual taped conversation. This transcript is divided into twenty-five sections, each given a specific subject heading. The section "webs of reference" bears particular relevance in understanding the project as a network novel. Shelley Jackson writes (or said):

> S: I remember being fascinated with making something real by creating its history, and creating this body of documentation that in the non-fictional way made up a web of references that made the things of the world seem really real because they were referred to from all different directions. Which seems like a very postmodern art project, and also somewhat like a hypertext.[39]

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[37] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/pjournal.html>.
[38] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/tapes.html>.
[39] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/t24-world.html>.

The Doll Games is a referential web. It's worth noting that while all of the material in the project

refers to the games of make-believe that the authors played as young girls, the individual games

of make-believe themselves are never presented as coherent narratives. The authors approach the

material from a variety of directions, using a variety of discourse styles and disciplinary

approaches. The project is alternatively an academic study, a psychological analysis, a

documentary, a "making of" special, an archeological investigation, a photo study, and a comic

book. The narrative structure is decentralized and fragmented. Like many works of hypertext

fiction, *The Doll Games* resists tidy closure. The project makes the world of the games seem

"really real" not by framing the games as a coherent narrative, but by spreading them across many

varied discourse networks.

The last section of the work, the "interviews"[40] section, places the specific doll games

played by Shelley and Pamela Jackson in a wider context. The first two interviews, one with

Shelley and Pamela's mother and father and another with their younger brother, are specific to

their games, but the remaining seven are with other writers, and tell of each writer's relationships

and games with their own dolls. This section is the area where the project is likely to continue to

expand. The Jacksons include a "note to contributors"[41] subtitled "come play" that asks readers

to email in their own doll stories, and asks a specific set of seven questions to guide those

contributions. The "note to contributors" also forbids explicit mention of Barbie dolls: "You-

know-who will be called B***** on this web site, for our own protection, and to draw attention to

the <u>astonishing tactics</u> of a certain little lady's lawyers." The words "astonishing tactics" are an

external link that leads to trademark.org, a site that details the extent to which Mattel has gone to

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[40] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/interviews.html>.
[41] <http://www.ineradicablestain.com/dollgames/question.html>.

protect its trademark.[42] Readers' contributions to the interviews section of *The Doll Games* are

not automatically added to the text, but are reviewed and edited by *The Doll Games*' authors. The

authors warn that they "may also reject your contribution if we take a strange dislike to your

email address, if your findings don't support our theories, if we have recently been rejected

ourselves, or if we wish to give ourselves a feeling of power." By including these other

doll/identity narratives and by including the subversive link detailing the Mattel trademark

disputes, the Jacksons expand the project's frame of reference. The exploration of the Jackson

doll games becomes resituated as a case study within the universe of "all doll games."

  The Doll Games establishes its "literariness" through its self-consciousness as textual

artifice. The authors constructed the work in such a way that its form echoes its content. *The

Doll Games* itself becomes a game for its readers to play. The project is more potential

narrative—the stories that readers are encouraged to construct from the wide variety of materials

the authors have provided them—than it is a recounting of the actual games that Shelley and

Pamela Jackson used to play. The authors can't provide the reader with the same experiences of

the game as they had when they were young. That central text exists only in their memories, or

rather in their reconstructions of their memories, and is essentially unknowable. All that remains

of their games are artifacts, interpretations of those artifacts, and interpretations of those

interpretations. *The Doll Games* is a collection of texts describing and reinterpreting an absent

center. Through their use of the fictional critic Bellwether, the authors of *The Doll Games* call

into question the "triviality" of childhood play. Is Bellwether's erudite historical analysis of the

games, after all, any less trivial than the games themselves? *The Doll Games* suggests our

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[42] <http://www.trademark.org>.

understanding of the world is always mediated through texts, and artfully calls into question the ways that we distinguish between forms of knowledge. It flattens distinctions between traditionally privileged forms of discourse and others, such as the distinctions between a critic's commentary on an experience, a transcribed conversation about that experience, and a comic drawn by an author reflecting on that experience. Ultimately, the serious "adult" format of the case study is equivalent to the box that the two girls used to contain their dolls. The text of *The Doll Games* itself is ultimately a language game, a work of literature that encourages its readers to "come play," and to create meaning from that play.

Epistolary Now: Rob Wittig's *Blue Company*

Hypertext novels written on the Web often operate as webs themselves, as internally and externally referential story-worlds. Network hypertext novels imitate the medium in which they are published. The behaviors readers have developed while reading other network documents shape the way that they read hypertext novels on the Web. The most utilized Internet application, however, is not the hypertextual Web, but electronic mail. Email has displaced many activities that were in the recent past handled with paper correspondence or by telephone, and has also introduced some new practices of textual communication. Email is used for corporate memos, for socializing, for joke telling, for advertising, for flirtation, for legal filings and other correspondence of all kinds. It's surprising that the Internet application that has had the most profound effects on everyday textuality has not been utilized to a wider extent as a medium for literature. The serial publication of novels is nothing new: it was standard practice in nineteenth-

century England and in a various other reading cultures. The widespread use of email in contemporary culture may yet revitalize the practice of serial publishing.

Rob Wittig's electronic literature projects focus on the ways that systems of network communication are changing the quotidian practices of everyday life. His various experiments in electronic writing include the aforementioned "Project Marsha," a tale of marital discord told through a series of three progressively deteriorating angel home pages; "Friday's Big Meeting," a Renaissance-style romantic comedy told through a "corporate chat room of the future" interface; and *Blue Company*, a novel written and published daily in a month of email messages. Wittig's *Blue Company* is low-tech storytelling in comparison to many works of electronic literature. It uses only simple HTML and hand-drawn images included as attachments. Yet the work manages something that many more technologically sophisticated works do not—it brings narrative into the stream of everyday network textuality.

Foremost among Wittig's narrative concerns are the effects of the widespread use of email, chat rooms, and other forms of network communication on the style(s) of contemporary textuality. His experiments in network writing are applications of these new styles to literary practice. In his essay "Observations From Here: An E-Lit Writer Links to the Past," Wittig observes:

> I notice (and love) the explosion of grassroots stylistic invention in e-mail and online chat rooms. The rapidity and relative ease of the interchange (just hit one button to Reply) has been accompanied by an informality of grammatical style (parallel to the relaxed standards of acceptable business attire over the last decade). The online style is characterized by brevity, a conversational or pseudoconversational tone, incomplete sentences, interpretational spelling (both unintentional and for effect), and the use of brief self-descriptors, as in words set between asterisks *grin*, acronyms like roflmao (Rolling on Floor, Laughing My Ass Off), and smileys or emoticons (facial expressions formed from punctuation). (51)

Blue Company is an inventive exploration of particularities of email as a literary medium. Wittig remixes several literary genres in constructing *Blue Company*: the time travel novel, the medieval romance, and the courtly love story. While Wittig borrows themes and plot conventions from each of these forms, he writes the episodes of *Blue Company* in the distinctly twenty-first-century online style he describes above.

The premise of *Blue Company* is that copywriter Berto Alto's employer has transferred him through space and time to fourteenth-century Italy to work on the Blue Company "campaign"—in this case not only a marketing campaign, but also a battle campaign. Berto ostensibly writes the emails on a laptop that he and a few of his coworkers have smuggled into their baggage. All of the messages of *Blue Company* are written from Berto's point of view, and are flirtatiously addressed to a woman back in the twenty-first century. Although we hear of this character only through Berto's followups to her messages, Wittig uses her as a pretext to include details from the reader's present (in the context of 2002 *Blue Company* performance—May to June 2002) that bear some relation to the story. For example, in his May 23, 2002 epistle, Berto writes:

Quintuple Talk

You're right, the Carter/Bush/Castro vortex
does remind me of how **reluctant colonies**
are dealt with back here . . .
. . . except that the "good cop / bad cop"
"good president / bad president" routine
seems **incredibly unsophisticated**

Former President Carter had been in Cuba the week before this message was delivered, and the controversy over his visit was still in the news. This technique, of scattering bits of the news of the day within the fiction, underscores the performative nature of email as a narrative environment. Wittig didn't simply divide *Blue Company* into thirty-eight arbitrary "chunks" for email distribution, but conceptualized the narrative as a performance that would take advantage of the near-simultaneity of email as a distribution medium. Because email usually arrives moments after it is sent, Wittig was able to correlate the pace of the novel's distribution to the pace of the events unfolding within the story. Berto's correspondence from the past wasn't situated in a static past, which had already occurred, but in a past in interactive conversation with the reader's present.

At one point in the narrative, specifically on May 30, 2002, Berto and the Blue Company are participating in a tournament, which includes ragging and bragging, archery, wrestling, sword-fighting, and the like. At this point, Wittig broke with his usual practice of sending out one email per day, and sent out five messages between one and six in the afternoon, as Berto reported the details of the ongoing tournament. As I was going about the business of my day, working at my desk in front of the computer, I found myself more and more engaged in the narrative of *Blue Company*, wondering how the fictional tournament was proceeding. At this point, the essential difference between serialized email fiction and other serial fiction became clear to me. Email, somewhere between conversation and print mail, offers a kind of immediacy that no other serial form offers. It was as if a courier were running from the fourteenth century to the twenty-first to deliver messages about the tournament to me. The experience of these five messages would have been quite different had I not been sitting at my computer while they were sent. Indeed, Wittig

later reported that a few subscribers emailed him to complain that getting five *Blue Company*

messages in one day rather than the single daily message they had grown accustomed to irritated

them. The next day's message began:

> My Dear You,
>
> Sorry for all those messages yesterday . . .
> I hope I didn't **overdo** it.
> I know you're busy.

In my view, the intrusion that those messages represented was worthwhile precisely because

people are busy. I was willing to "suspend my disbelief" because the *Blue Company* messages

were intruding on my daily routine in the manner of a rapid-fire email exchange I might have had

during the course of some crisis or another while I was managing the Electronic Literature

Organization. The form of communication was both familiar and compelling. The style and

pacing of those messages, in seeming true to the medium, also seemed true to life.

The immediacy of serial email narratives is, of course, dependent on several factors outside

of the author's control. The timing of my experience as a *Blue Company* reader was probably

atypical. Many of the work's readers probably weren't sitting in front of their computers all day.

Readers who were on vacation and away from their computers for a week or two probably didn't

even read the entire novel—what seemed to me like a well-earned narrative respite from a day of

work in front of the computer could seem more like just another slough of messages to plow

through for those readers who were "unplugged" for any length of time. The use of time-specific

references further complicates matters for readers who encounter *Blue Company* months or years

after its initial performance—the work is dated in a very specific way. It's likely that the

reference to "The Carter/Bush/Castro complex" will be lost on readers who read the work even

six months after the ex-President's visit to Cuba. If the network novel is conceived of as a performance, to be read only once, in its time-specific context, this issue might not pose so many problems. But if the work is intended as a novel, which can be re-read or performed again at a different time, this type of time-specific reference can pose problems for the reader.

Wittig is one of a handful of writers exploring the network as a performance medium, and is perhaps the most successful at integrating "old" narrative forms with new styles. The Australian writer Mez and American Alan Sondheim[43] are two other email "performance artists," each of whom uses email lists as the primary platform for their "codework"—literary constructs involving the language of code, or machine-manipulated language, mixed with natural human language. Others are experimenting with creating literature for network forms other than email, exploring web logs as a form of fiction, or writing dramas to be "performed" by text-bots in MOOs.

As is the case in the other network novels I've mentioned, the content of *Blue Company* is intimately related to its form. Just as Berto agonizes over the six hundred year gap between him and his lover, the novel attempts to bridge a similar gap between story material from the past and the present "online style" of writing. Wittig purposefully avoids long descriptions. *Blue Company*'s protagonist, the copywriter Berto, tends towards short, pithy descriptions. The medieval subject matter of the novel is free of florid description. The tropes of the twenty-first century are applied to stories of the past. When Berto and the Blue Company are ensconced in the forest with the bandits of the Witch's Company, Berto writes that they had avoided forests up until that point because "forests are **where** the **gang-bangers** are." Unfriendly locals are

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[43] See <http://www.eliterature.org/interactions/starthere/work-alansondheim.shtml> for an introduction to Sondheim's work.

described as "Late Medieval Hicks." The Black Death is described as a "Demographic Neutron Bomb." Wittig is able to muster a great deal of verisimilitude in his description of certain aspects of late fourteenth-century life, ranging from the pig fat that soldiers used to grease their armor, to the fashion of medieval footware, to the various solutions employed in lieu of twenty-first century plumbing; but Wittig's narrator recounts these details of fourteenth-century life using terminology we might expect to find used in the halls of a contemporary advertising agency. The hand-drawn images that punctuate Berto's messages seem charmingly anachronistic, appearing in the midst of Berto's hip, slangy, contemporary rhetoric. The drawings also serve to lend the novel a richer texture it would not have had if the reader had only Berto's quick descriptions of the sights and sounds of fourteenth-century Italy. Wittig's narrative is a postmodern one in the same sense as much postmodern architecture, freely making use of building materials—such as the "lover from afar"—that were more prevalent in the narrative structures of previous eras to build a distinctly contemporary novel for the network.

Reading Network Reading: *The Unknown*

In this section I focus on one "extraliterary" aspect of the network novel: what we can learn through the analysis of log files about readers' experiences of literature produced for the network. A network novel published on the Web records its readings. Every time a reader accesses a Web site, an entry is made in a log file. In the case of a hypertext novel on the Web, this effectively means that each time each reader accesses a single "page" of the novel, the system makes a note of it. Most Web users are aware of "cookies"—code that can be sent by Web sites to users' browsers to store and report certain information back to the server. Cookies are not,

however, necessary for a server to gather some basic information whenever a site is visited. Log files record the specific IP address of each user and the time at which they enter and leave a particular page. The equivalent for print would be the following: each time a reader picked up a book, a note would be set down recording the time and what page they turned to. Each time they turned the page, another note would be set down. Authors or publishers of network novels published on the Web can look over the shoulders of their readers. While I feel divided as to whether or not this information should aesthetically inform the writing of electronic literature, it does provide us with a way to gauge how people read network novels differently from the way that they read print novels. Readers of network novels operate text-machines. While log-file analysis can't provide an understanding of how readers interpreted a story, it can show how they operated the text-machine.

Log file analysis is an inexact science. While one can tell from a log file how many times a site or a given page was accessed by a specific IP address, and one can learn a great deal about the behaviors of specific readers, the overall picture is muddied by the effect of spiders, programs that "crawl" the Web and index its contents for search engines. Search engines tend to award longevity, so the longer that a site has been on the Web at the same address, the more spiders will crawl across it. Log files record visits, hits and page views by spiders in the same way that they record visits, hits and page views by human beings. A hit is recorded any time a single file is loaded, so separate hits are recorded for each page and any image files on that page. A page view is recorded for each HTML page visited. A distinct visitor is recorded once for each session by a machine with a specific IP address. The unique host figure records the total number of machines with unique IP addresses that visited the site over the course of the month. For the purposes of

this analysis, I pulled the data from the log reports of *The Unknown* for the month of September in

the years 2000, 2001, and 2002. Figure 1 shows hits, visits, page views, distinct visitors and

unique hosts during the month of September in each year. Figure 2 is a chart comparing page

views in each period. Figure 3 is a chart comparing numbers of visitors in each period.

Sept Year	Hits	Visits	Pviews	Distinct Visitors	Unique Hosts
2000	31,173	827	4,765	827	595
2001	147,673	5,349	16,334	5,349	2,723
2002	257,362	9,406	20,156	9,406	5,435

Figure 1

Figure 2

Distinct Visitors in September
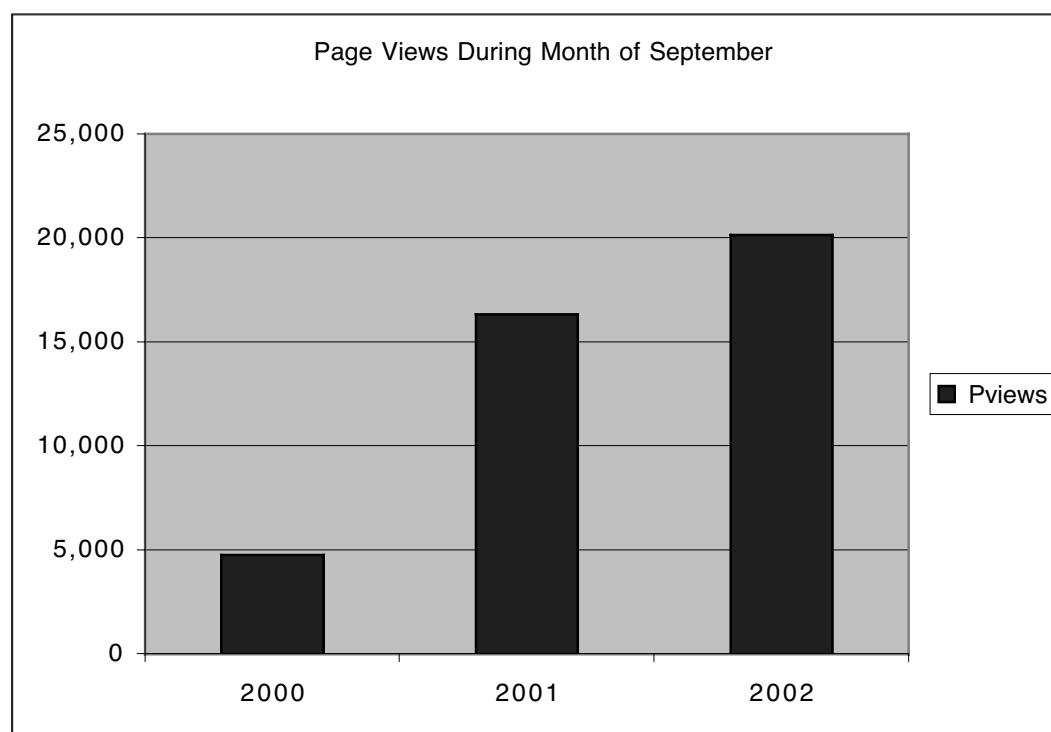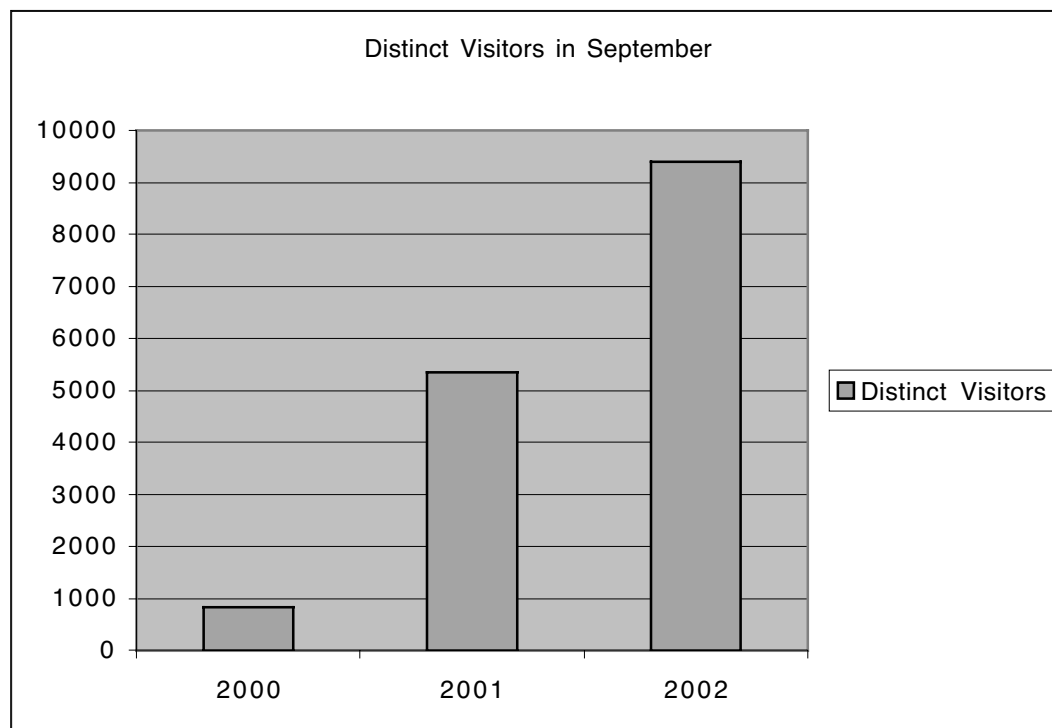
Figure 3

In 2000, we had just moved *The Unknown* from its initial server at the University of Cincinnati to a commercial server, so that data may be artificially low. Nonetheless, the data clearly shows a growth pattern in traffic during the three-year period. These numbers do not however necessarily indicate that more *people* are reading *The Unknown*, at least not to the extent that a surface reading of the numbers would seem to indicate. About 40-50% of the recent visits to *The Unknown* are those of spiders. In those cases, the "reader" is literally inhuman, a computer program that "reads" the text only as data.

Because *The Unknown* is a fairly mammoth work, and is peppered with references to real people, places and events, and because most search engines now index the full text of the sites that they spider, the likelihood that a given reader will stumble into *The Unknown* while searching for something else has increased over time. While there were 9,406 visits to *The Unknown* in

September 2002, the index page of the site, *The Unknown*'s "front door," was viewed only 1,370 times. This indicates that the majority of the visitors to *The Unknown* arrived there either by following a bookmark or link from another site to a specific scene in the novel, or more likely, that they arrived at the hypertext while searching for something else. Not surprisingly, playboy.htm, parismiller.htm, and fuck.htm are among the perennial most-viewed pages. These "accidental tourist" readers tend to leave as quickly as they came, although some do hang around long enough to get an impression of what world they've stumbled into.

In September 2000, the log files indicated that the average visitor spent eight minutes visiting the site and viewed an average of 5.8 pages. In September 2001, the average visitor spent about five minutes visiting the site and viewed 3.1 pages. In September 2002, the average visit was down to three minutes and the average number of pages viewed down to 2.1 pages. I don't think that this data indicates that the average Web surfer is getting less and less attentive, but rather indicates that the number of visitors who arrive at *The Unknown* accidentally has increased. The data supports the theory that the majority of its readers arrive at the hypertext novel unintentionally, in the course of attempting to find something else, than do those that arrive intentionally. The spiders not only distort the traffic numbers of *The Unknown*, but also drive more people to it.

As the authors and publishers of *The Unknown*, we put some effort into building an audience for the work. We presented the hypertext at major conferences, read in bookstores and bars, and talked with reporters. Yet I don't think that when we started the project in 1998, any of us would have predicted that the most powerful force in shaping the audience of *The Unknown* would be not ourselves, reviewers, critics, journalists or the teachers who have included it in their

courses, but instead the spiders that regularly index the contents of the Web. From one perspective, it's fairly disheartening to know that the vast majority of people who visit *The Unknown* do so unintentionally and leave after scanning only a couple of pages. From another viewpoint, it may be appropriate that a work based on subversions of various kinds of discourse would be read in this way, as surprising "bad information" found on a Web search.

Log files can also tell us a great deal about where our readers are coming from. Figure 4 is a chart showing the distribution of visitors to *The Unknown* by "top level" domain during September 2002, discounting domains that did not deliver more than 1,000 hits and unresolved domains. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of *The Unknown*'s visitors, about 85%, came from the U.S. Somewhat more surprising is the fact that the majority of those visitors are coming from .net or .com domains, and not from university addresses. Only 8% of our visitors come from .edu domains. This could indicate either that *The Unknown* is one of the first hypertext novels to reach a general audience outside of academe, or that it simply hasn't found a comparatively large audience within academe.
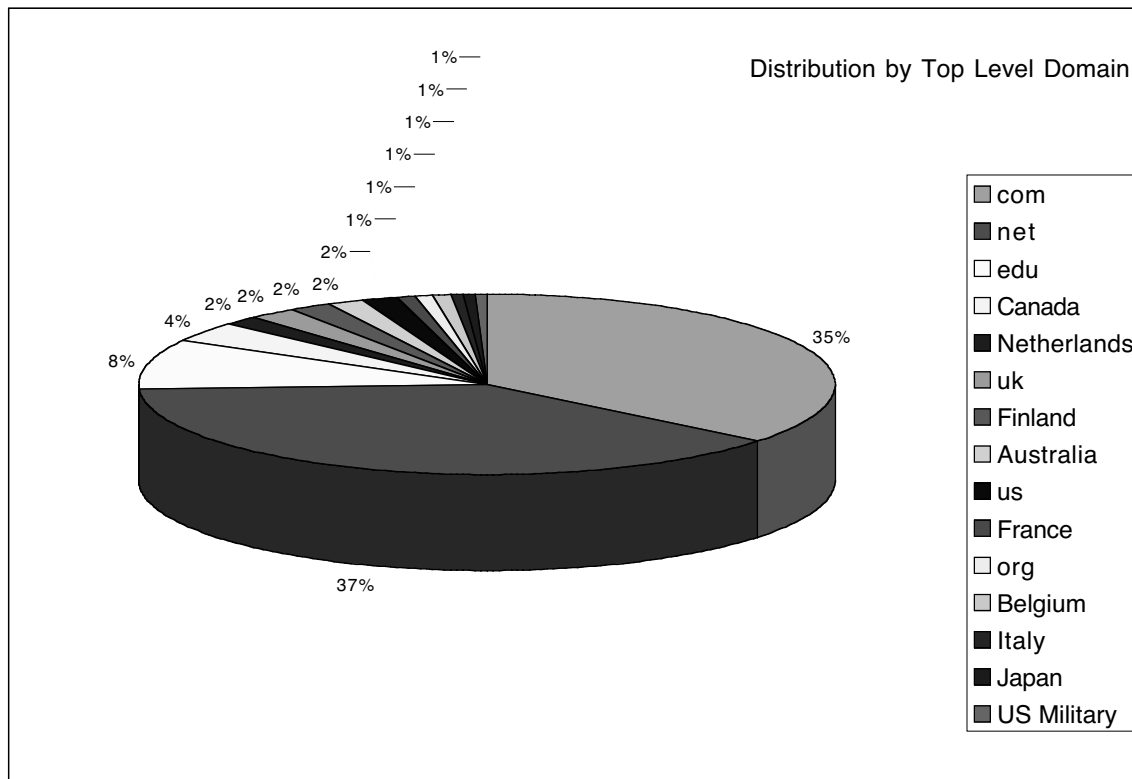
Figure 4

Although the log analysis software running on the server that hosts the

unknownhypertext.com domain doesn't analyze referrer information, it would also be possible to

see the sites where users were coming from before they arrived at a given network novel. This

information could be useful to help determine how effective consciously crafted efforts to build

an audience for works of electronic literature, such as the Electronic Literature Organization's

Electronic Literature Directory, have been to date.

A particularly telling statistic from the log files of *The Unknown* is the time of day during

which visitors typically access the site. Figure 5 is a line chart showing page views by time of

day during September 2002.

September 2002 Page Views by Central Time Hour of the Day
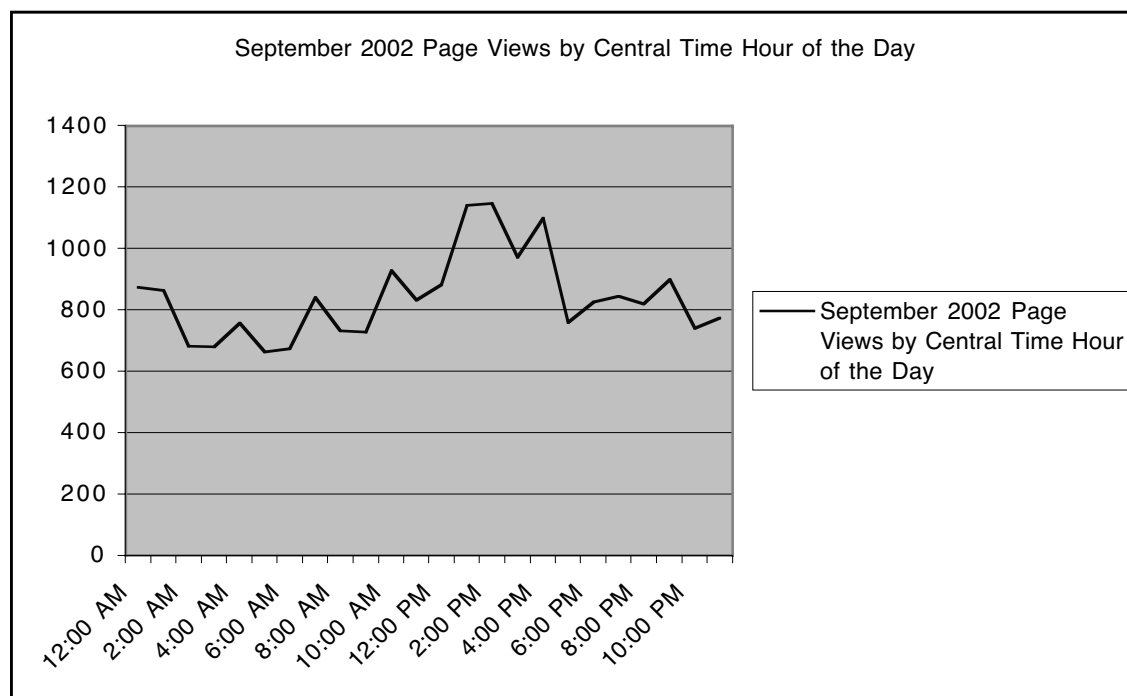
Figure 5

More readers visit *The Unknown* during the hours of 1:00-4:00 PM CT than during any other time of the day. This statistic has held true month after month, year after year. Since the majority of our visitors are coming from .net or .com domain names, it's reasonable to assume that the bulk of readings of *The Unknown* occur in the workplace, sometime after lunch.

While these data summaries provide some relevant general information about who reads, or stumbles into, *The Unknown*, as I think about how I might go about developing network-based literature projects in the future, the access detail reports, which provide specific information about individual reading sessions, are of the most value. Each specific logged reading of *The Unknown* serves as a case study. A scan of individual log files verifies that the bulk of our readers have not entered the site from the index page—many of them seem to have found *The Unknown* while

looking for *Playboy*, Henry Miller, Hunter S. Thompson, Richard Powers, Raymond Federman, or some other specific cultural referent or literary figure.

When we wrote *The Unknown*, we conceived of it as both a novel and a hypertext. The bulk of individual readings recorded in our log files seem to indicate that it is, however, rarely read in the contemplative manner of the novel, but more often scanned in brief reading sessions. If I posit that those who came in through the "front door" were our "intentional" readers, very few of them appear to have read many entire scenes, but instead to have followed links out of most scenes before completing them. It's only logical that no one would try to read *The Unknown* in its entirety in one sitting, but disheartening to find that very few readers spend even ten or fifteen minutes in a single session with the hypertext. The majority of "intentional" reading sessions of *The Unknown* last only a few minutes. In any given month, the log files will record only a few sessions that lasted longer than an hour. Although there is the odd reader in the Netherlands who spent hours during September 2002 reading *The Unknown* in multiple sessions, the majority of *Unknown* readers read only brief sections from the hypertext novel for five minutes here and there at work when their boss isn't looking. In its network incarnation, we can't even say that *The Unknown* is authentically read *as a novel*. The general reader has only a fragmentary, aphoristic exposure to the work. At this point, about four years after its initial Web publication, while a hundred thousand or so people have read a bit of *The Unknown*, it's unlikely that more than a handful of people have read it in its entirety.

While it's impossible to say if the profile of the Web reader sketched by an analysis of the log files of *The Unknown* is particular to the specific work, or indicative of how people will

respond to any hypertext fiction in a network environment, I think the following are reasonable

conclusions:

1) Search engines have a substantial effect on how network novels are read.

2) Network novels are read under substantially different conditions than are print novels.
   In contrast to a print novel, which might be read at the beach or in bed, a network novel
   is more likely to be read furtively in the workplace.

3) Typical readers read Web hypertexts in much the same way as they read other network
   documents. Visits tend to be short, rather than languorous. Readers will more likely
   experience individual parts of a network hypertext novel than process it as a whole.

4) If links are offered to readers, they are more likely to follow them than not.

5) To create effective narrative experiences for the network, we need to come to a better
   understanding of network reading behaviors.

In this section, I've only touched on some of the potential applications of log file analysis

in understanding reading behaviors particular to the network. Although there is an intrusive

aspect to reading log files of literature written for the network, this type of analytical work could

be more benign than malevolent. Commercial Web sites regularly track this kind of information

for marketing purposes. I would suggest that literary critics might usefully examine log file data

not to determine how to better sell product, but instead to better understand how network

literature is being read. For better or for worse, reading and writing habits are changing with the

rise of the global network. Authors creating work for the electronic media should understand not

only who their intended audience is, but also how that audience reads. The operations of the

network itself help to shape the reading strategies exercised by network readers. We should use every tool at our disposal to better understand what kind of readers we are becoming.

Constructing Literary Reading

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate how the operations of network communications influence the way that network novels are written, structured, and read; and to describe some strategies that authors writing for the network have adopted to create literary fiction specific to the medium. *Sunshine '69*, *The Doll Games*, *Blue Company*, and *The Unknown* are all reading experiences that borrow both from the form of the print novel and from forms of communication particular to the Internet—World Wide Web pages and email. I consider each of the four works to be effective hybrids—they are all reading experiences which can offer pleasures in the fragmentary, skim-reading environment of the Internet and which are also rewarding for the more intrepid reader who, working against the conventions of network reading behavior, reads the work with sustained attention.

The network novel is a work of "intermedia," a work that falls between different media forms. Richard Higgins described the happenings he organized during the 1960s as "an intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs" (50). The network novel could similarly be understood as determining its own form and medium in each instantiation, or rather *being determined by* a combination of the reader's intention, the writer's intention, the operations of the network and the material circumstances of each individual reading. The majority of a network novel's readership will experience each given work as a

network "happening" rather than as a novel. The reader who comes to a network novel with the intention of reading it analytically, of reading it as a *novel*, will in effect be reading a completely different work than will the reader who is driven to it by the arbitrary operation of a search engine. In my brief analysis of *The Unknown*'s log files, I have demonstrated that the network has the power to "assimilate" the network novel, to drastically effect the way that it is read by serving it out of context. Writers have never been able to completely determine the circumstances under which a particular reading of their work will occur. But Web hypertexts and email novels are subject to several layers of interpolation that print texts are not subject to. Network novels are products of the network as much as they are the products of their authors' work.

I've clearly established some of the challenges of writing for the network, some of which are intensely frustrating to me as a writer. While I'm glad, for instance, that I can access the log files of *The Unknown* and get a certain level of insight into how the work is read, that insight is frankly disappointing. It is, of course, possible for authors to respond to network readers' behaviors, as those behaviors become known. After learning how readers used links in *The Unknown*, in the next hypertext fiction I wrote, "The Meddlesome Passenger,"[44] I chose to structure the links differently. Clicking on the links within the body of the text of "The Meddlesome Passenger" won't move the text to another page, but will instead launch a paratext that comments on the main text. Having learned my lesson from *The Unknown*, I made it harder for the readers of "The Meddlesome Passenger" to get away from reading the text as I intend them to read it. The tyrannical author rears his ugly head again.

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[44] <http://beehive.temporalimage.com/content_apps51/app_b.html>.

Each of the authors of the four works I described in this chapter pay a great deal of attention to language, and perhaps privilege the writing in their work more than they do the interface it's presented in. They are "writerly" texts—they allude to other works of literature, they are self-conscious of their nature as literary artifice, and they employ variations of many of the traditional tools of narrative—plot, setting, character, and style—on their subject matter. They are fundamentally *writing* for the computer, and not simply wonderful interfaces that make use of words. I don't yet have a theory of what will "work" and what will "not work" in creating a literary experience for network reading. I do, however, think that as writers proceed with experiments in network writing, it behooves us not to ignore the tools available to us. We have at our disposal three different types of tools: the various applications that allow us to achieve multimedia effects impossible in print, the tools of "surveillance" that can help us gauge how people read differently in the network environment, and, most importantly, the arrows that have always been our quivers—the tools of language that we sometimes neglect in favor of the latest cutting-edge technology. I don't care if a network novel provides me a beginning, middle, and an ending; and I don't care if it offers me psychologically realistic portraits of its characters; but ultimately, I do care whether or not the novel told me an interesting story (or stories) in a compelling way.

Five

Conclusion: Further Down the Forking Paths

There is no way of knowing if hypertext fiction and network novels will be anomalies, footnotes in the history of literature, or will serve as experiments that guide the development of future literary forms native to the network. One of my students recently asked me if I thought that hypertext is just a literary fad. I had to pause before I answered that I didn't think hypertext fiction is a fad, but a stage in the development of some other kinds of literature that we can't yet describe. One thing is clear about the future of electronic literature: the story of its development will not be a unified tale of progress, with smooth transitions from one mode of writing electronic literature to the next. Hypertext hasn't outlasted its usefulness as a literary experiment, but as I review the 300 or so works of electronic literature that I've read in the past several years, the majority of them have not been hypertexts. A relatively small group of writers are developing electronic literature, and yet there are as many potential forms of electronic literature as there are combinations of literary genres and computer applications. The impulse to try something new is only natural. Only after hundreds more of these experiments have taken place, and only after many more writers have joined in the experimentation, will clearly defined genres of electronic literature take shape.

In May of 2002, I visited the CAVE at Brown University, where Robert Coover has been conducting an electronic writing workshop. The CAVE is a virtual reality environment. CAVE visitors walk past a bank of computer workstations, shed their shoes, don special glasses and headgear, and enter a virtual environment. Projectors cast images on three walls and on the floor,

and stereo speakers contribute an audio component. With the aid of the glasses, those images appear to be three-dimensional. The headgear tracks where the user is within the virtual environment, and controls the imagery that the computers project, so that the world is always viewed from the user's perspective. Users can also employ a wireless mouse device, a kind of magic wand; by clicking on its buttons, users are able to change the appearance and function of the device, for instance, from a paintbrush to a vacuum cleaner. The paintbrush paints phrases into the virtual space and the vacuum sucks them away. Coover's latest experiment in electronic writing is an attempt to introduce the word, and perhaps narrative, into this virtual environment. His students are creating projects such as walk-through poetry and a cocktail party drama set in a nearby Providence student apartment. In the CAVE, this apartment has been meticulously modeled. Textures and wallpapers have been mapped onto virtual surfaces. In one of the virtual environments, words peeled off the walls and flew past my head. Trying to read these words and make sense of them made me feel queasy. I felt the urge to duck as these three-dimensional signifiers swirled around me, and I had difficulty piecing them together as a poem. The words seemed more like unidentified flying objects than parts of a poem. I visited Brown's CAVE after Coover's team of writers, artists, designers and programmers had had only one semester of class time to work on these environments, so they had essentially built only an architecture and a set of tools for what will presumably become a narrative environment. It will no doubt be strange and delightful to see what comes of Coover's experiment. Still, as I was dodging from the phrases flying towards me, I couldn't help but feel some nostalgia for the relatively calm environment of a hypertext novel, wherein my agency as a reader is limited to the selection of which words or buttons to click to move the text from one HTML page to another.

Many writers working in electronic media have left HTML hypertext behind. Although few have access to the costly tools necessary to work in a CAVE or other virtual reality environments, many electronic writers are now working in Flash, Quicktime and Director. The Web site *Poems that Go* publishes works of kinetic and reactive poetry.[45] Some of these poems work as animated text movies, while others function more like filmic games of hide and seek. The reader moves the mouse and clicks her way through a text that responds to her by launching different texts and visual elements within a consistent frame, rather than moving from page to page, as one moves through hypertext. The move to create poetry in these environments seems quite logical, even natural. Making poems that move around the screen and integrate reactive multimedia elements is only a few steps away from making concrete poetry or sound poetry.[46]

There have been fewer experiments in using the tools of narrative to create works for the animated environments of Flash. "Inside: A Journal of Dreams"[47] by Andy Campbell and filmmaker Judi Alston is one intriguing example of "digital fiction" in Flash. The project is a dream journal, presented in an "e-book" format—the reader navigates the work by "turning pages" of a book image. Each journal entry within the book makes use of different Flash techniques to illustrate the content of each dream. The project showcases innovative kinetic typography that manages not to distract from the "core" text, but instead to enhance our reading of it. In his project description, Campbell writes that "Inside blatantly presents you with weird and bizarre publishing impossibilities; the book is a dream diary spread over 160 virtual pages

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[45] <http://www.poemsthatgo.com>.
[46] The site Ubuweb <http://www.ubuweb.com> is an essential archive of visual, concrete and sound poetry that demonstrates the connections between those forms and current work in new media poetry.
[47] <http://www.digitalfiction.co.uk/inside/>.

and tries to feel like a dream in itself." Unfortunately, as is the case in many Flash projects, the "publishing impossibilities" that the dream journal stunningly represents are more interesting than the narratives of the dreams themselves. "Inside" is a series of experiments in interface design more than it is an experiment in writing a novel. "Inside" shows that Flash does have potential as an interface for electronic fiction, if "Inside" doesn't itself fulfill those possibilities as a work of fiction. Like the apartment modeled in Coover's CAVE, the interface of the "Inside" project is a great narrative environment, waiting for a fully developed narrative to fulfill its potential.

In her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray advocates "cyberdrama," which would utilize the computer to model the world convincingly. She writes that the computer "is first and foremost a representational medium, a means for modeling the world that adds its own potent properties to the traditional media it has assimilated so quickly" (284). In Murray's vision, the holodeck (imagined by the producers of *Star Trek*) in which we, as "interactors," could enter a virtual reality environment and play roles in immersive dramas, would represent a fully realized form of electronic narrative. While nothing approaching the holodeck currently exists, electronic literature driven by artificial intelligence is on the near horizon. "Façade" by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern is a one-act animated interactive drama, which will be released, as a free download, in the summer of 2003.[48] Mateas and Stern describe the project on their site:

> You, the player, using your own name and gender, play the character of a longtime friend of Grace and Trip, an attractive and materially successful couple in their early thirties. During an evening get-together at their apartment that quickly turns ugly, you become entangled in the high-conflict dissolution of Grace and Trip's marriage. No one is safe as the accusations fly, sides are taken and irreversible decisions are forced to be made. By the end of this intense one-act play you will have changed the course of Grace and Trip's lives—motivating you to re-play the

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[48] "Façade" will be distributed at <http://www.interactivestory.net>.

> drama to find out how your interaction could make things turn out differently the next time.

From its description and from the preliminary demonstration of the project I saw at an exhibition, "Façade" seems like an animated cross between a text-adventure game and a Raymond Carver story. "Façade" and projects like it utilize the computational properties of the computer in ways far more advanced than the simple hypertext link. One of the goals of "Façade," like that of other "generative story systems," is to pass a variation of the "Turing test"—to use the computer to convince the reader/interactor that she is actually interacting in a real-time basis with characters who can react to her in much the same way as they would if they were actually human.

"Façade" and projects like it are certainly part of the future of narrative. I'm not sure, however, that they are part of the future of literature. Throughout the process of writing this study, and honestly for as long as I've been writing and reading electronic literature, this issue of what is and what is not "literature" has been in the forefront of my mind. I also know that among the ongoing debates in the field, the question of what is and what is not "electronic literature" recurs. We face this uncomfortable question of how to delineate boundaries. I don't have any easy answers to the question of where these lines should be drawn. While I'm looking forward to playing "Façade," I'm pretty sure that after I experience it, I won't feel that it was the equivalent of watching a drama or, for that matter, of interacting with two friends in the middle of a marital dispute. When I play Interactive Fictions, sometimes I feel that I'm reading literature, or solving a riddle, but more often I feel like I'm just playing. Some kinetic poems feel more like music videos, or extremely energetic paintings that make use of words, than they do poems. Some hypertexts feel more like text gadgets than they do fictions. And while I know that I shouldn't use the word "feel" when I'm writing about these subtle subjective distinctions between literary and

nonliterary forms, I don't know that another word would be appropriate to describe the

phenomenological differentiation between literary and nonliterary experience.

The distinction between literary and nonliterary forms of writing is ultimately subjective.

I'm not ready to lay down boundaries for these text-machines, and yet I feel the anxiety of working

in a field that doesn't have those boundaries in place. I suppose we could just draw our lines in the

silicon and say, "hypertext is hypertext, cybertext is cybertext, net art is net art, and literature is

something else," but then where would that leave electronic literature? Perhaps in art school.

Mark Amerika, author of the Web hypertext *Grammatron* and the publisher of Alt-X, now

describes himself as a digital artist, and teaches in an art program. Diane Greco, a hypertext author

and the former editor at Eastgate, seems to have made the switch, writing in an interview with *Now*

Culture that "Digital art *happens* in a fundamentally different place. It's not reading or writing.

It's something *else*" (106). While I'm inclined to agree that *digital art* is something other than

electronic literature, I'm not ready to simply give up the ghost, throw on a black turtleneck and

beret, and describe what I *write* for the electronic media as digital art. From my perspective,

taking on the persona of a digital artist would the equivalent of throwing up my hands and walking

away from a difficult problem. Yes, people are doing something different from book-reading

when they read a work of electronic literature. Yes, the institutions of the art world are more

welcoming than literary institutions to forms of expression that mix the written word with other art

forms. But ultimately, I don't want to hang my hypertext novel in an art gallery—I want the

reader to sit down in front of a computer and *read* it. I want electronic literature to *happen* where

literary reading has always happened—in the reader's head—as much as it happens on the screen.

I don't feel that I should discard the tools of narrative just because they work differently and with

more difficulty in the network environment than they do on the printed page. I feel that literature will have its place in the network. In my view, locating that place is the main purpose of these experiments in electronic writing.

Electronic literature is first and foremost a "potential" literature. And there are so many potentials to be explored—from hypertext to serial forms to font fictions to codework to Flash and Director to VR environments to artificial intelligence to global positioning system literature for the mobile phone—that it's very difficult to settle into one mode of writing long enough to understand it as a "genre." Reporting on the Electronic Literature Organization's 2002 State of the Arts Symposium for the *Iowa Review Web*, Ravi Shankar noted that he found among the participants an "annoyance at having come too early, of having arrived upon the multifarious and fertile lands of e-literature long before the instruments of canonicity" (3). There are indeed many frustrations involved in electronic literature; for writers, who have a difficult time finding an audience, much less a paying one, and who find their work obsolete within years of its creation; for critics, who try to assess moving targets in the absence of a clearly defined critical vocabulary; and for readers, who must learn how to operate any given electronic work before they can appreciate it as literature. Yet, in many ways, I find those very frustrations rewarding, challenging in much the same way as "rich ambiguities" in a work of literature. For all the security the instruments of canonicity would offer, they might also serve to fence electronic literature into rigid categories, and eliminate many of the pleasures of exploration we're able to experience now, before the boundaries of electronic literature have been clearly demarcated.

The media and software involved in making electronic literature are changing so quickly that many early experiments in electronic literature have already been lost, as the platforms they

were authored in have become obsolete. As Robert Coover wrote in his 1999 essay "Literary

Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age,"[49]

> And for the authors themselves, there are all these new tools to learn. Writing
> consumes one entirely. But learning these new applications also consumes one
> entirely, and they keep changing, sometimes so radically that what's been written
> in the old can no longer be read in the new. (para 13)

Technological obsolescence is a serious problem for authors of electronic literature. If we're

writing not for fame, nor fortune, nor even a substantial audience, shouldn't we at least be writing

for the sake of other writers who can learn from our experiments? What is the point of literary

experimentation if the results of those experiments are lost? One could argue that the process of

selecting what works to save and what to leave behind should be left to future scholars, who will

go back and dig up the "important" works of electronic literature, but I'm not convinced that such

decisions should be left to the future. I'm not even convinced that the "important" works are the

ones that we should be preserving. I've argued here that we should adopt an experimental

perspective on contemporary electronic literature. If the network is our literary laboratory, the

mistakes that we make today will likely be as important to future writers as our successes.

A process of institutionalization is underway for electronic literature, or more precisely,

multiple processes of institutionalization are occurring simultaneously. The questions of where

the criticism, theory, and production of electronic literature belong within traditional institutional

structures have not yet been resolved. Likewise the questions of what if any market structures

will evolve to support electronic literature, and how these new forms will find a wider audience,

remain unresolved. Disciplines within universities are currently contesting the question of who

"owns" electronic literature. Should this work be studied and produced within literature and

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[49] <http://www.nickm.com/vox/golden_age.html>.

creative writing programs? Should all forms of digital expression be within the province of visual and conceptual arts programs? Should new media studies evolve as an offshoot of computer science programs? Because most genres of electronic literature are developing outside of commercial structures, the question of how to situate electronic literature within institutions of higher learning takes on a greater sense of urgency. The shape of "electronic literature" as a field of knowledge will be determined within universities. If a canon of electronic literature takes shape, it will be a canon determined by what works are taught in university courses. And while electronic literature is developing outside of a commercial economy, the full-time jobs in electronic literature will be full-time jobs at universities.

Where and how electronic literature is taught will significantly affect its place in the culture at large. If electronic literature is taught primarily within arts and design programs, then images, interface, and concept will likely predominate over narrative content. If electronic literature is primarily taught within computer science or "game studies" programs, then works will more likely be understood in terms of how they function as computer programs than as works of literature. If literature loses touch with electronic literature, I fear that electronic literature might become little more than visual art that uses words as one of its materials, or games that utilize narrative to move players from one action sequence to the next. If literature and creative writing programs move aggressively to make room for electronic textuality in the curriculum, then future forms of electronic literature will have much in common with existing literary traditions, and will be driven by narrative and language-based poetics. As new media studies, electronic textuality, digital art and electronic writing programs spring up within universities, the pool of writers creating electronic literature and the group of readers working seriously to

understand its place in our culture will both continue to grow. The amorphous collection of new media writing practices we currently call "electronic literature" will likely divide into several different disciplines, each with its own distinct boundaries and "canons." Once those disciplines and their canons take shape, electronic literature will no longer be avant garde, but instead, one would hope, a component of the mainstream of literary studies.

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Part Two

Selections from *The Unknown*

Preface

The creative component of this dissertation includes selections from *The Unknown*, a hypertext novel written by William Gillespie, Dirk Stratton, and myself. The project started in the summer of 1998 and concluded (as much as an online project can ever be said to conclude) in the fall of 2001. After going to great lengths to distinguish between the nature of hypertext written for the Internet, that written for Storyspace, and literature written for print, it may seem absurd to include in the second component of this dissertation selections from a hypertext novel, pulled out of the network context in which they were originally written. I harbor no illusions that the experience of reading these selections from the hypertext on a printed page, where they are fixed, static and "ordered," will replicate the experience of reading them online where they are flickering, transitory, and subject to the reader's arbitrary selection of links. I hope that this will be a different reading experience altogether from that experienced online.

Some strictly doctrinarian adherents of hypertext might view any attempt to pull hypertext out of electronic space and fix it to the printed page as a kind of heresy. My own view, however, has always been that the electronic enhancements of any given work are secondary to the qualities of the text itself. *The Unknown* exists differently online than do the stitched-together selections from it printed here. My hope and that of my coauthors in *The Unknown* wasn't so much that *The Unknown* would be revolutionary in its use of the electronic medium as much as that it would simply be good writing, regardless of the medium in which it became manifest.

The Unknown was an experiment in collaboration as much as it was an experiment in hypertext. William, Dirk and I found the challenges of writing on the network together as fascinating as the challenges of linking texts together. We didn't so much publish *The Unknown* on the Web as we actually wrote and edited it on the Internet. The hypertext was both the place where the work was done and the manifestation of that work. The technology of the network encourages connection, encourages the inclusion of disparate elements to form a gestalt of a disparate whole. Early on in the process of writing *The Unknown*, we decided to explore the notion that an Internet novel written by a community of people might be more akin to an artistic "movement" than to a traditional novel.

The general premise of *The Unknown* is that a group of three (and sometimes four) writers, feeling their work under-appreciated by the publishing industry and the gatekeepers of literary culture, have published an anthology of their own best work and embarked on a tour around the world to promote that work. In the fictional world we had imagined, we left little to outside forces, and established a vertical publishing economy based on our own writing. Since we were modeling not a conventional novel, but a self-enclosed literary culture, it stood to reason that we shouldn't include only the episodes of the novel, but also all of the material surrounding the creation of those episodes, and representations of the "writing culture" that *The Unknown* became. So we introduced writing about the writing, and letters we wrote to each other (reasoning, of course, that the critics of the future would want to lay their hands on our correspondence). And why stop there? There was plenty of room for the kitchen sink in our hypertext novel. We threw in the transcripts and audio files of our first conversation about the project, which we had thoughtfully recorded in anticipation of the critical interest that such

artifacts would generate. We put on suits and spent a day bumping around Chicago with a photographer, diligently recording and taking notes on the whole process, and included that "audio of the photo shoot." Once *The Unknown* became somewhat known and we started giving readings of the work, we scrupulously documented those readings, often recording them and putting those recordings into the hypertext. When reviewers started taking note of *The Unknown*, we stored copies of their reviews, even the negative reviews, on *The Unknown*. When a couple of academics wrote theses on *The Unknown*, we asked for permission to put those in the hypertext as well. In his review of *The Unknown* for the *Dallas Morning News*, Joseph Millazo noted that the project "parodies the very meaning of 'literary' and the modes of production that govern the creation of literature."[50] *The Unknown* vision of the network novel is a text that can change and grow over time, while simultaneously capturing and absorbing all of the texts that surround its ongoing creation. The plot of *The Unknown* is largely the story of its own process of becoming "literary."

The Unknown was written collaboratively. The techniques and the forms of this collaboration varied widely. Some parts were written collaboratively, when two or three of us met in person to take turns at the keyboard. Some sections of *The Unknown*, those on the "Blue Line" of the hypertext, are actually more or less verbatim transcripts of recorded conversations. The majority of *The Unknown*'s parts were, however, written individually by one of the three of us, and then linked into the hypertext.

For the purposes of the creative component of this dissertation, I include primarily material that I wrote by myself. Because the question of authorship is intentionally confused in

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[50] Millazo, Joseph. Review of *The Unknown*. *The Dallas Morning News* 5 Aug. 2001.

the hypertext, I'm violating an informal rule of *The Unknown* in clearly attributing authorship; but since these selections appear in a dissertation with my name on it, I want to be clear and credit my coauthors where appropriate. With the exception of the scenes noted below, I wrote the selections from *The Unknown* that follow. The following sections included were authored collaboratively:

Hypertext of the Unknown <unknown.htm>

Gillespie, Rettberg, Stratton

The Unknown, a Hypertext Novel <default.html>

Rettberg, Stratton

Audio of the Photo Shoot <train1-3.htm>

Gillespie, Rettberg

San Diego and the Gathering Cult <sandiego.htm>

Gillespie, Rettberg

Many sections of *The Unknown* were "over-writings," in which we took a text written or produced by another author—such as a fundraising letter, a book review, or a typing test—and rewrote it for it for the sake of parody in *The Unknown*. As such, unwitting collaborators should be credited for some of the verbiage in the following scenes:

Fall at the House of John Barth <barth.htm>

Edgar Allan Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher"

What Did You Expect, The Unknown? <unknownspeaks.htm>

Sean Kelly, *New York Times*

Typing Test of the Unknown <typetest.htm>

Anon. (A typing test used at Garretson/Santora, a Chicago law firm where I

temped during the summer of 1999)

Dirk is Cuchulainn <tain.htm>

Irish myth *The Tain*, translated by Thomas Kinsella

End Construction <endconstruction.htm>

Robert Boyle, "An Advertisement About the Loss of His Writings"

So what, precisely, becomes of *The Unknown* when a portion of it is detached from its

network context and inscribed in print? Have I performed butchery or heart-transplant surgery?

The text that follows has a certain form that the hypertext doesn't have, and it also has a clear

chronology. It lacks the multilinearity, the abrupt and shocking jumps, and the polyvocal

dynamism of its hypertext antecedent. In this text events follow one another in an almost logical

progression. The scenes from *The Unknown* are arranged here in a structure that is almost

academic: preface, body, denouement, commentary, and afterword.

The first text included here, "Hypertext of the Unknown" <unknown.htm>, was the first

scene of the hypertext that William, Dirk, and I wrote together, in June 1998. When we began

that scene, starting with a Thomas Pynchon quote about the ignorance of young writers, we had

absolutely no plan, no idea where we were headed, or for that matter what a hypertext could or

should become. As I read that scene now, however, in the context of the other texts that follow, it

seems to encapsulate many of the themes of *The Unknown*. As I look over the links in this scene,

which now function not to take me to another point in the text, but instead as a form of emphasis,

I read a pattern of themes, something like the DNA of *The Unknown*: "mental map, Thomas

Pynchon, sublime, describe, Language games, don't know, pain, joy, memory, We, frontier,

creatures, America, domination, the limit, undoing, horizons, remember, totality, of scale, policy, etiquette, Unknown, Undiscussed, at a table, right now." In black on white, ink on paper, the links of *The Unknown* form a kind of web of verbal connections. Much of what we wrote about at length is summarized in the links of each page. The ridiculously hypertrophied, only half-joking, ambitions of *The Unknown*—to write a kind of mental map rather than a story, to write as well as Thomas Pynchon, to describe the sublime, to write a work of immense scale, to undo all horizons—all seem present in the links of *The Unknown*'s first page. Some of our methods seem to be here as well—we played language games, we tested limits, we breached all kinds of etiquette. When we were writing *The Unknown* as hypertext, we thought more about the other pages that links were pointing towards than about how they functioned as visual cues within each scene. In print, the extent to which *The Unknown*'s links "encode" certain recurring tropes and themes becomes more evident.

The scene following "Hypertext of the Unknown" is "The Unknown, a Hypertext Novel," the "default" page that Dirk and I wrote while debating the merits of having a "homepage" or consistent starting point for the novel. I think it's clear to readers from this page onwards that they have entered a work that is not afraid to stare very deeply and unflinchingly into its own navel and reveal what it sees there. Perhaps what bound Dirk, William and I more than anything else to *The Unknown* was our shared esoteric and irrational love of metafiction. We loved telling stories about telling stories so much that we wrote stories about characters named after us alternately complaining about and celebrating stories that told stories about themselves.

It's difficult for me to write about *The Unknown* without digressing. I feel silly explaining what the work does—it's clearly allusive, it's clearly metafiction, it's clearly satire, and it clearly

doesn't take itself so seriously. It's written as much for the receptionist who reads a few scenes for a laugh during her lunch break as it is for the serious hypertext scholar in the Netherlands who reads it for hours on end. *The Unknown* takes entertainment seriously. It's difficult for me to even think about *The Unknown* with a straight face. *The Unknown* has already theorized itself so extensively and so contradictorily that the minute I start to write seriously about the work I feel that I'm beginning to write yet another scene of *The Unknown*. This is a work that trumpets its own ridiculousness, which revels in the folly of writing fiction at all. I take electronic literature seriously, and yet ninety percent of the reason why I've worked so hard at getting other people to take electronic literature seriously is because the collaborative experience of writing *The Unknown* reminded me how much fun writing fiction can be. I think the best thing that I can do here, by way of concluding this preface, is not to provide yet more *Unknown* theory, nor to draw comparisons between this work and the many works of print literature from which it shamelessly borrows and steals, but instead to provide a plot summary, to clarify once and for all what actually occurs in this linear reduction of the hypertext novel.

Three idealistic young writers start out in the Midwest, and launch themselves on a book tour, in a paragraph that, the discerning reader might say, sounds like it was ripped off from Don DeLillo in one of his more nostalgic moments <innocent.htm>. The first few stops of their tour in Iowa seem to place the work in a kind of pastoral context, albeit one filled with bookstores and misbehaving postmodern authors <iowa1-3.htm>. At some point, the authors travel on a train in Chicago and discuss public health transportation <train1-3.htm>. From there, they travel to Baltimore, where they attempt to rest at the home of a famous metafictionist in an anachronistically gothic environment <barth.htm> before traveling to New Jersey to drink with

David Markson, whom they quiz about the personal lives of certain dead writers <newjersey.htm>.

As their tour picks up steam, the three writers cross the Atlantic to promote their book in England and play pool with Martin Amis <england.htm>. In Paris, one of the one of the authors channels Henry Miller and has lots of anonymous sex <parismiller.htm>. In Ireland, another channels the character of a mythological warrior in the process of attaining some supernatural powers <tain.htm>. Soon enough, they are back in the Midwest, where there is a betrayal, recounted in Algren-esque language <algren.htm>. Things are getting rougher and rougher for our protagonists. Thankfully, they land a publicist <publicist.htm> who helps to organize their lives, and who then becomes sexually involved with one of the authors <marla.htm>. Ted Turner summons the young authors to Atlanta and makes them an offer they can't refuse, which they refuse <atlanta.htm>. The scribes visit Gainesville, Florida to give a reading and wrestle alligators, where they learn to their distracted dismay that a fiction writer is in trouble for writing stories loosely based on actual persons <florida.htm>.

The writers' decadent rock and roll lifestyles get the better of them while they are in Boston <boston.htm>, and they spend some time in Rehab recovering, but only for a moment. Perhaps it is their visit with Larry McCaffery in San Diego that sends them spiraling back down to the depths of depravity <sandiego.htm>. One of them has become a cult leader. Fame has its costs <fame.htm>. By the time they get to Los Angeles, they have become media celebrities, and have become increasingly alienated from each other <la2.htm>. They have problems, perhaps even a death wish or two, and have become increasingly self-destructive <bungie.htm>, <bungie2.htm>. Hollywood confuses them <lapoem.htm>. Their reading at the Hollywood Bowl

headlines a lavish Turn-of-the-Millennium celebration hosted by Steven Spielberg <laparty.htm>. Thomas Pynchon opens for them, though his reading is a little disappointing <pynchread.htm>. In spite of all the tensions and the fact that one of the three authors is in a coma as a result of a serious bungie jumping accident, their reading seems to be going well <la2kread.htm> when, at the precise turn of the Millennium, one of them is tragically murdered <laparty.htm>. To add insult to injury, the murdered messiah-figure-author's last wish is not granted <dirkswish.htm>.

Thankfully, something magical happens <dirkspirit.htm>, and before long all three of the protagonists are once again intact, living in a hut in Thailand, where they watch readers from all over the world read their hypertext novel <thailand.htm>. In the absence of the three central author-figures, the oft-ignored fourth pens a tell-all biography <unknownspeaks.htm> which is reviewed in *The New York Times.* Eventually, the authors return to the U.S.A. and open an office in Chicago, where they employ a clerical staff <typetest.htm>. Their hypertext is canonized, and becomes the subject matter of Freshman English essays <argessay.htm> and dissertations <andyet.htm>. Years later, the authors comment on their experiences in a series of interviews <interviews.htm>. Due to advances in technology, they are able to travel to the past, and when that advanced technology fails, they are marooned in the early eighteenth century. Thankfully, a concerned literary critic travels back in time to retrieve the trio and encourages them to stop writing their hypertext novel, as it has become so obnoxiously bloated as to eliminate all literature <endconstruction.htm>. Sadly, in the end <theend.htm>, all the protagonists are mortal, and die. Closure is thus finally and irrevocably achieved.

Hypertext of the Unknown <unknown.htm>

> Everybody gets told to write about what they know. The trouble with many of us
> is that at the earlier stages of life we think we know everything—or to put it more
> usefully, we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance.
> Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person's <u>mental map</u>. It has contours and
> coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as well.
> <div align="right">—<u>Thomas Pynchon</u></div>

When you get right down to it, it's all <u>sublime</u>. That is, indescribable. You don't stop, though. You keep trying to <u>describe</u> it.

<u>Language games</u> become a form of breathing.

What you <u>don't know</u> can and will hurt you, but not as much as will what you already know which already has and will continue to bring you <u>pain</u>.

This is also the ultimate cause of <u>joy</u>.

To what extent is the unknown a function of <u>memory</u>, and to what extent <u>fate</u>?

<u>We</u> are <u>frontier</u>-obsessive <u>creatures</u>. From <u>America</u>, could we be otherwise? This is not all the stuff of <u>domination</u>. One would hope. To know what is not known. This is <u>the limit</u> and the expanse and the ultimate <u>undoing</u> of all <u>horizons</u>.

But how can we explore the spaces between understandings of things?

How can we begin to question how we <u>remember</u>, not what we remember?

How can we know the <u>totality</u> of what we do not think?

There is a problem <u>of scale</u>. To discuss U.S. foreign <u>policy</u> is to avoid discussion of the fact that we are sitting at a table.

There is a problem of <u>etiquette</u>. That is, in addition to the <u>Unknown</u>, there is the

<u>Undiscussed</u>. And we are sitting <u>at a table</u>. But that fact is not very interesting to us <u>right now</u>.

The Unknown, a Hypertext Novel <default.html>

S: Regarding our hypertext novel for the Millennium, *The Unknown,* I think we need <u>a</u>
<u>home page</u>, <u>a start page</u>, <u>a beginning</u> <u>of some kind</u>. That's <u>what Brian thinks</u>, and he's pretty
much a good source, since he doesn't like our writing, but likes the idea in general, so he's a good
guy to listen to in terms of general Internet issues.

D: Though I have absolutely no <u>credibility</u> as far as the Internet is concerned, I am
violently, that is, as much as a pacifist can be <u>violent</u>, opposed to a homepage, and I refer you to
Brian's <u>e-mail</u> concerning this subject in which he notes that the very idea of hypertext requires,
philosophically, that there be no one single launching point, no "page one" as there is in
conventional print books that allow only one direction, i.e. from page one to the end, whatever
that page might be. To insure that our hypertext remains as "<u>pure</u>" as possible, I suggest we not
designate any page as the "homepage." To do so would be to violate the essence of our
hypertextuality.

S: Ah, yeah, well, but we gotta think of the consumer—that's not what I meant—the
reader. You gotta think of the reader's expectations. I mean, if we didn't have a homepage, like
the wildly though not as wildly as the rest of us, <u>inconsistent</u>, Brian intoned (and by the rest of us,
of course, I mean the main players, me, <u>you</u>, <u>William</u>, <u>Frank</u> [and <u>Katie</u>, why is she always put in
brackets?]), recently, if you don't have a homepage, which explains why and how a project like
this hypertext novel exists, you'll lose a certain percentage of your readers from page one. We
need to have some page named default.html that will be a consistent first page, so the people who

happen to read this page *Hi People Who <u>Read</u> Our Stuff, We <u>Love</u> You* know what to expect as they delve into the encyclopedic millennial satire that is *The Unknown.* You know what I mean?

D: Yes, <u>but</u>…

S: Oh, we better mention some other people, we better thank them—sorry Dirk, didn't mean to interrupt—<u>Adam</u>, of course, for the photography and tricky Photoshop stuff, <u>Mike</u>, for the party and communications systems and trains, Fred, for the great guitar playing, Paul, for the great <u>songs</u> and words and guitar playing, and all the people on the day on the CTA, Karen, Eric, Molly, <u>Anne</u>, and then of course well—shit this could go on for hours—oh Dirk I'm interrupting again, sorry.

D: Look, Scott, I don't mean to be a hardass, but this just seems to be a time (a place?—such <u>concepts</u> get so attenuated in hypertext) to establish a position that will not melt in the face of the demands of the marketplace, or the "common reader"—whatever, or whoever, that is. Agreed: not having a homepage might possibly reduce our potential readership. But isn't it worth something to acquire the type of readership that will encounter our hypertext unaided, without requiring the crutch of a homepage? Don't we want readers who don't need to be told that the navigation bar, with its several-colored rainbow, will take them to any place in hypertext they want to go whenever they want to? Don't we want readers who don't need to be told that they can access lists of "<u>People</u>" or "<u>Bookstores</u>" or click on a "<u>Map</u>" any time they decide to pursue another route in the hypertext? Perhaps I'm being <u>elitist</u>, but…

S: No, no, you're right. That should be <u>obvious</u>, of course you're right. But at the very least we need to have somewhere where we <u>acknowledge</u> the fact that this whole thing is uh, wrought with <u>conflict</u>. I mean, we shouldn't have people thinking this is <u>easy</u>, this whole

collaborative novel-writing thing. We should explain our <u>pain</u>, in case they think that we're just

leeches, living off <u>a welfare state</u> that doesn't exist anymore. Because we're artists, and we work

hard at producing these types of non-commercially <u>redeeming</u> items.

D: Wait, just a dad-blamed minute: this homepage, should it ever exist, is not the place to

rehash the contentious nature of <u>collaboration</u>. If anything, it should provide the illusion that

there is some mutually agreed upon entrance into this <u>wondrous</u> experience we have labeled,

perhaps <u>pridefully</u>, *The Unknown*—

S: And somewhere in there we should mention our excitement about all the possibilities of

this new, uh, <u>media</u>, convergence. I mean that we're lucky enough to have one of the <u>twenty-first</u>

<u>century</u>'s best <u>artists</u> on the site, that's one thing, and the <u>audio</u> of many of the great artists we

know or run into captured at erratic moments, that's another, and I mean, uh, oh sorry, I was

interrupting again—

D: <u>Exuberance</u> noted. Look: either we conform completely to the theoretical foundations

of <u>hypertext</u> (such as they are) and forego a deity-like authorial genesis for our text, or we

<u>succumb</u> to the presumed needs of our audience, who, if we decide to provide a homepage,

apparently need to be taken by their tender hands and led gently into the wild, nonlinear world of

hypertext, where readers actually have some volition, apropos their <u>movement</u> through the text

they've decided to <u>engage</u>.

S: Yeah, and there's a lot of good stories in here.

D: All I'm saying is let's be true to the precepts of hypertext, such as they are, i.e. the

<u>liberation</u> of the reader to engage in a text in a fashion akin to that of the author (who,

hypothetically <u>ceases</u> to exist in the traditional sense in the hypertext environment)—and let the

<u>poor</u> benighted readers just read—without beginnings, without prescribed directions, without the anxious author leaning over their shoulder whispering in their ear: "Time to turn the page."

S: It's not all rambling, we should say that too. Though you, Dirk, tend to speak in long paragraphs—

D: In short, what I'm saying is, "Isn't a homepage the ultimate <u>sellout</u>? The final capitulation to (linear) print conventions? I mean we're on the World Wide Web! Why act like any ordinary paper-and-ink book? Sure, explaining that our hypertext provides a constantly convenient means to move from one site to another, multiple means, in fact, might appease the <u>less patient</u> of those who happen to stumble upon our creation, but, from an ethical standpoint: is it <u>worth it</u>?

S: That reminds of something that <u>Bill Gates</u> said to me when we had dinner last week when he was in town—

D: You do have a tendency to drop <u>names</u>, don't you?

S: Yeah. So we ate at Smoke Daddy's, right down the street. Howard and the <u>White Boys</u> were performing, I remember they were playing, "Nobody Loves Me But <u>My Mother</u>, and She Could Be Jiving Too," that's not the real title, is it, and I ate a beef BBQ sandwich and he ate a pork one, we both had sweet potato fries, and Bill said, "Scott, a lot of people <u>hate</u> me now, and I'm not sure who my friends are, but I put out a decent product, I put out a decent product that <u>millions</u> and billions of people use. Isn't that good enough?" And then I mentioned Carl Sagan to change the drift of the conversation before I confessed to him, finally, that I used Steve Jobs' product way more than his. But that's not what I was saying. Anyway, the point is, like <u>T.C. Boyle</u> said, "I don't consider the <u>publicity</u> part of a book to have anything to do with the book

itself, and the writing of the book—that's done, that's finished. Now it's time to go out and let everybody know it exists." That's part of our job too, you know? Oh <u>shit</u>, I don't even want to see the transcript of this thing. Is it worth it? By <u>George</u> or <u>God</u> or <u>whatever</u>, yes it is.

D: So, if I'm <u>hearing</u> you correctly, and as you know, that's always a dicey thing as far as my <u>compromised ears</u> are concerned, you're saying that a homepage is definitely worth it, whatever one might think about its propriety from a strictly artistic, that is, pure and unsullied by the stench of hundreds of years of debilitating <u>capitalist</u> <u>heavy breathing</u>, standpoint…?

S: And we should also mention the recent <u>profound</u> decline of the <u>American</u> political system, and the function of hypertext fiction within such a declined system, and how we hope that Frank <u>quits his job</u> and becomes an artist, full-tilt, no, I didn't mean to say that, when you <u>transcribe</u> this, leave that out—and that people that we know are great artists who are unknown, and that it's great that we know so many of them—so that in a way this is an even better community service project than planting <u>grass</u> with the kids. Sorry, oh, sorry, Dirk, I didn't mean to <u>interrupt</u>—no I wasn't interrupting there, was I—that was an awkward pause—I guess I meant well-done <u>community</u> service project. Is it community service if you're servicing your own community? Or is it just good neighbors? And how did insurance companies become that? Man I'm <u>rambling</u>…

D: To say the least. Scott, by all that's <u>holy</u>, and that ain't much these days, let's stick to the subject at hand. Homepage: yes or no. I must admit, I'm feeling less vehement in my opposition, if only because your incessant straying from the "assignment" (to use a phrase you seem particularly fond of) indicates that there might be a pressing need for some fundamental grounding, some <u>bedrock</u> spot where the eager but lost might find some place to begin their

journey. I mean, if you're in any way indicative of the type of reader our hypertext might attract,

surely we need to clearly point out that at any time such a reader can enhance their experience of

The Unknown by scrolling down to the bottom of whatever page they're reading in order to click

on either the "People" "Maps," "Bookstores," or any of the color bars so conveniently provided to

further their exploration of this infinite jest of a textual extravaganza, *The Unknown.* Do we even

need to continue this dialogue?

S: Perhaps then we should explain the whole CTA metaphor: that the colored bars at the

bottom of the page, the buttons, the "lines" as it were, link to parts of the novel that are

conceptually different from each other. The Red Line is primarily about the whole ugly story of

what happened on the book tour, The Purple Line is "Metafictional Bullshit," that is, places where

we talk about the concepts etc., The Blue Line is a space for documentary projects, like our Audio

of the Photo Shoot, and the Transcript of the Unknown, and the (as yet not uploaded though

presently documented) Day on the CTA, while The Brown Line is all about Image=Text projects

like Katie's great Watercolor Diary, and the Blue Note Cards, and the Post Card Poems (on the

way), and then of course there is The Orange Line, with all that classic correspondence, and the

Green Line, where readers will be able to find reports and audio from our live events. Is that what

you mean?

D: Even if it weren't, there's not much I could do about it now, given that you have so

helpfully filled everyone in on the secret.

W: Hey, though I hate to crash your sweet little two-man party, what about my thoughts

concerning a homepage? Don't they count for something?

F: Yeah, ditto, and "Et tu, Bruté" you usurping dudes in <u>Chicago</u>! What happened to collaboration? Democracy? All for one and one for all?

S: Oh, <u>you guys</u> still want to be in the Unknown?

D: Of course they do, Scott. Despite your high-handed <u>appropriation</u> of Frank's good name and reputation, there seems to be…

S: Hey! I said I was <u>sorry</u>!

D: I know, I know. All I was saying was that whatever our personal disagreements about *The Unknown,* no one seems willing to completely disown it, which might seem like something less than a sterling endorsement, but it nonetheless suggests that were it not for *The Unknown,* none of us would be spending so much time worrying about it, but now that we are, we've come to the <u>conclusion</u> that, despite the uneasiness, we'd rather worry about *The Unknown* than return to a time when *The Unknown* wasn't even a glimmer in our collective <u>consciousness</u>.

S: And don't get me wrong, I mean I think that Frank and William, who are <u>sensitive</u> and <u>irrational</u>, but great writers, should do another Welcome to *The Unknown*

W: Whatever that was you just said, it was not particularly funny.

S: How's your back doing?

W: Not particularly well. We need to talk.

S: Guys, by the way, how the fuck did you get in here, who let you in, oh, hey Adam.

A: <u>Sorry</u>.

S: Glad to see you, glad to see everyone. Pull up a chair, guys.

W: I'm more comfortable standing, ever since the <u>accident</u>.

S: Grab a <u>beer</u>. Ah, but you guys are writing that intro page tomorrow night, right, and then ah, William is going to set up some kind of a PERL script so that half the time they'll get this, and half the time they'll get that. And so, ah, it will all be okay. <u>Okey-Dokey</u>?

D: Sounds good to me.

S: Well, guess that's the end of our little hearthside introduction. We were wearing smoking jackets at the time.

F: I want to talk to you, <u>Rettberg</u>.

S: Ah, have you got a beer? <u>Hungry</u>?

F: I've got some issues. You're writing in <u>my</u> voice, without my consent.

S: The chili's pretty good. Grab a <u>bowl</u>. You need anything?

W: Yeah, we've got <u>problems</u>.

S: Do you realize how long people have had to <u>scroll</u> down by now?

D: They've <u>probably</u> hit a link by now, and gone deeply into our hypertext novel.

S: What are you doing with that <u>fork</u>, William?

F: We want to talk to you, Scott, about some <u>decisions</u> you made, with the hypertext.

S: Yeah, uh, you guys want a <u>cookie</u>? I got some good ones, right over here.

F: We're your friends but, ah… we need to converse.

S: <u>Arrrrrgh!</u>

A: <u>William!</u> Scott, are you okay? Scott? Scott?!!

D: <u>Nothing good</u> can come of this.

How I Long For Those Days of Innocence! <innocent.htm>

No one would ever describe our <u>time</u> in the Midwest as insane, or as decadent. That was the beginning, that first road trip, when we were still truly and completely unknown, aside from the hypertext. Weeks later, we would remember that time as one of innocence, as one of hunger. There was <u>fire</u> in our bellies and we were looking for readers. Our budget was <u>shoestring</u>, and <u>our ride</u> was not luxurious. We had to rely on friends, old <u>teachers</u>, people we knew tangentially, for <u>food</u> and places to crash. But we made every appearance, in those early days, just as scheduled, by hook and crook, fixing breakdowns with duct-tape, fixing bored miles of <u>corn</u> with <u>word games</u> and <u>laughter</u>. We didn't know how we would make it from one day to the next. A <u>bowl</u> of ramen and a six-pack of Bud was a kingly feast back then. We *had to* be creative with our time, not knowing what would come, relying on words for our sustenance. <u>How I long for those days</u> of <u>disorder</u>, of hunger, of facing down <u>the unknown</u>!

Driving in Iowa <iowa1.htm>

Scott's a real sentimental guy, when you get down to it, I thought to myself as we rode

through miles and miles of <u>interstate</u> cornbelt, him praising the scent of the air, the height of the

corn, the blueness of the sky. He said, "I can think here. I can think." He pointed out the way

that the red paint was peeling off of specific barns, saying one looked "rustic," another "<u>pastoral</u>,"

another "quaint," another "antiquated," another "kind of <u>sad</u>, the forgotten memories it seems to

contain." He speculated on the life histories of entire communities.

Scott was kind of excited to be going back to his little college that he went to, you could

tell. He breathed a lot through his nose and looked sincere. His eyes had a kind of glow to them.

He mentioned a novel that Jane Smiley had adapted from *King Lear*. The drive was long and flat.

He told us that he thought Iowa ended up with all the good parts of the 1950s. He said "This is

how it used to be is how it is here." He tried to talk us into stopping at the place where they made

that *Field of Dreams* movie. But Dirk wanted to get there, wherever it was we were going,

ASAP. He said he was getting sick of Midwestern driving, that it seemed like everything was the

same everywhere in the Midwest, he said, "<u>Ohio</u> is <u>Indiana</u> is <u>Illinois</u> is <u>Wisconsin</u> is Iowa is

<u>Nebraska</u>." Scott said, "Aw shucks, Dirk, it gives ya time to think." I chuckled, because I always

chuckle when Scott says "Aw shucks." We listened to some Buck Owens tapes. I thought of

Frank, and how lucky we were to be able to make trips like this, on our book tour, while that poor

guy had to slog away at his 9-5 way over there <u>in California</u>. You would think he'd miss the

seasons, miss the fall, miss the spring, that he'd even miss the pungent scent of fertilized miles of

cornfields on a hot summer day. We drove the speed limit. We rolled the windows down. We

passed a magnificent fruit and vegetable stand. We didn't stop, but the watermelons were enormous. Life was everywhere.

We smoked a joint of high-quality marijuana a friend had grown for us in a closet in his house. We talked about organic farming. We talked a little about Flannery O'Connor. Scott told us about a 150-year-old <u>abandoned</u> cemetery he had gone to when he was taking a class in field botany. Out in the middle of nowhere. Scott told us how it has some wildflowers growing there that are so rare that they think it may be the only place in the whole world where they grow, and how he thought it was kind of beautiful, that all of those long forgotten decomposed bodies were feeding these rare kinds of wildflowers, in a place where hardly anyone ever goes to. I saw what he meant. Iowa reminded me a lot of <u>Central Illinois</u>, but it somehow seemed even flatter. How does all that <u>corn</u> get eaten?

Coe College, in Cedar Rapids <iowa2.htm>

We drank with Chuck Aukema in the MaidRite bar across the street from Coe College, a quick few or so before the reading. The Cedar Rapids air smelled like burnt Hi-Ho cereal. The MaidRite was pretty much as Scott had described it, big and wooden, a place where people drink. This Aukema turned out to be a fascinating man. He had the look of authentic <u>Beat poet</u>. Scott claimed he would have probably never gotten interested in hypertext at all, and would have been therefore been unable to help me write my hypertext novel, *The Unknown,* were it not for the fact that this Aukema had told him all about it back in 1989-92, well before the Internet had become such a big thing. Aukema, it seems, had been writing hypertext fiction since the 1970s, but had not had the hardware available to him at the time to make it work properly. His "string theory" stories were more than two decades <u>ahead of their time</u>. It was because of him that Scott had first read <u>Borges</u>, <u>Pynchon</u>, <u>Raymond Carver</u>, <u>Robert Coover</u>, and William Gibson.

The MaidRite was filled with college students and ex-cons. William nearly got into a fight with a car-thief, also named William. As usual, I had to resolve the problem, just as I'd resolved many other situations during our journey. The resident adult, I put up with both <u>William's violent nature</u> and <u>Rettberg's immaturity</u>. Yet still they scorned me as a mere poet and dragged me through that great desert of corn. But I am indeed stoic, I will do whatever it takes, and I will not stop until I have <u>saved American literature</u>. Gillespie was slugging back the Grainbelt whiskey like there was no tomorrow. I decided to go light on the LSD that evening, since this Aukema turned out to be such an engaging host. They rang a bell every time someone

ordered a shot, and this pleased William no end. Pavlovian, lumpen, William. Pitchers were very

reasonably priced at the MaidRite, and we had a few.

Aukema explained to me, in an intellectual aside while the two youngsters were playing

pool with two felons, that his theory of hypertext was that it was the true way for writers to

achieve immortality, that what would be possible in the future was a kind of technologically-aided

consciousness, that what writers will do in the future is upload their entire personalities onto the

World Wide Web. My retort was that such a thing was already possible, and in a more

humanistic way. Just look at Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed. All that would really be necessary

to achieve immortality was to start a religion, and then imprint your teachings upon the minds of

the gullible many, and thus, via memes, replicate yourself in a more spiritually meaningful way

than either technological replication or genetic manipulation (i.e. cloning) could provide.

Granted, I agreed with him that it would be difficult to do such a thing effectively on a large scale,

and that it would take a vastly powerful force of personality. Impossible, really, but then one

never knows, does one? I was interested in steering the conversation the way of T.S. Eliot's

influence on Ronald Johnson, but this Aukema would have none of that. Ah well, another

fictionite.

By the time we left the MaidRite, it was dark and William reeked of cheap whiskey.

Nonetheless, the reading went remarkably well. When we arrived in the lovely room in Stuart

Memorial Library, backed by long horizontal picture windows and spooky paintings of spooky

farm people by Grant Wood, I was given a piano player, who did a not-terribly-horrible job of

accompanying me on "Someone's Always Fucking With My Mirrors." William's rap song about

Iran-Contra went over very well with the faculty, who were evidently liberal, but not very well

with the students, who were clearly conservative. One thinks of the "How You Gonna Get Them Back On the Farm After They Seen <u>Paris</u>" song that was popular during the First World War, only inverted. Scott's fairly shallow short-short "<u>Bombs Making Love</u>" was well received but I suspect only because of its shock value. Such a young writer, is he. <u>Ah well</u>. Then we read from my hypertext novel, and you of course already know how well that goes.

We wandered off after the reading to a cement pier on a pond behind some train tracks in the shadows of the world's largest cereal factory and smoked a tremendous amount of marijuana, skillfully rolled into joints by yours truly. It was the last of the Central Illinois Gold, but Aukema promised that Coover would be bringing in some killer hydroponic shit from the greenhouse at <u>Brown</u> for our reading the next day at <u>Prairie Lights in Iowa City</u>.

We Sat in Aukema's Kitchen in Iowa City <iowa3.htm>

And so we had read at <u>Prairie</u> Lights, where I had bought my first copy of *Writer's Market* when I was 19 years old. And so it had gone well, more or less. There had been some gnashing of teeth. William had been accosted by a crowd of young M.F.A.-getting poets who said that language poetry was not allowed, and in response he had read "<u>The Table of Forms</u>," or anyway part of it. Coover had appeared to be amused, at least enough that he refused to sign any autographs while we were reading. There was some tension in the room, sure, but as long as Coover was happy, we were happy.

Frank Conroy was already drunk. Dirk had already vomited, as usual, and then read haiku. I think it was peyote, this time. I apologized to Conroy about a piece Krass-Mueller had written about him, which had seemed to me to be cruel. Krass-Mueller's piece was about how Conroy wrote a travel piece for some cruise line. This was in Krass-Mueller's piece, which was ripping on cruise lines, for *Harper's,* who sent him on the cruise, which he did not enjoy. It was a funny piece, but I thought it was kind of cruel to rip on Conroy when Conroy was just doing the kind of thing that we (I mean writers, you know?) all do when we're hard up for cash. I mean we (The Unknown) had already done shit that was far worse than that was. For cold hard cash. For the Almighty dollar. We were prostituting ourselves for the sake of American literature, and I told him that our friend Frank had even written copy for <u>Procter and Gamble</u>. Writers gotta eat, I said to him, and fuck, if you can get on a cruise for free, you get to eat, which is part of the job, right? Or at least it comes with the territory. I told him about some fucking intern at *Harper's* who'd pissed me off once when I sent them a story. But he didn't piss me off so much that we'd

turn down the opportunity to publish excerpts of our travel memoirs in said magazine. I mean I

don't hold a grudge, you know? Of course later, we'd blow that opportunity too, when we missed

our dinner with Lapham. But this was all before that ugly night in Boston. This night was

special. I wasn't even on heroin at the time.

And so we had read at Prairie Lights. I read some shit I wrote when I was 19, and thought

that the best way to get published was to send stuff out to some of the addresses in *Writer's*

Market. And don't get me wrong, there's some great people at F&W, and that whole sending

stuff out routine works for some people, I've got a lot of friends who've built whole careers like

that, and others who've built careers around fucking editors. There I mean fucking in the physical

sense. Poets. Whatever works, I guess. But the mail—it's not for me. I mean I tried that once,

back when I was 19, back when I still had a pretty good relationship with the U.S. Postal Service.

But they had fucked me since then, countless times postal workers had fucked me over. Fuck in

the metaphoric sense, I mean, there. Graduate school applications had been lost, magazines had

been stolen, and books had never been delivered. And so I was supposed to send my shit out into

the hands of those fucks? Trust them with my blood, sweat, and tears? I don't think so. So that

created some problems. Most publications still don't take email submissions. And even if it got

there, I was supposed to trust my work to some pimply-faced fucking intern at *Harper's*? I told

Conroy all this, I was kind of babbling, and I told him that that book of his *Stoptime* is a real

classic, in my book.

Anyway, the reading was pretty decent, the people in Iowa City just love a decent reading,

and we're decent readers. Then we (that is me, Wm., Dirk, Aukema and Coover—Conroy, as

I've said, was pretty much wasted by the time the reading started and retired to his rooms shortly

thereafter) went back to Chuck's house and we sat in his kitchen and rolled a couple doobies of

the Brown University chronic. Coover didn't actually smoke any of it, at least not in front of us.

The air was pungent and wholesome. Coover is, hey let's face it, one of my heroes. So even if he

did smoke any, I wouldn't mention it here, because it turns out, we discovered, that a lot of people

who read our hypertext novel tend to believe that everything we write about all the highly

regarded literary figures who we mention in the hypertext is true. Which, as I've explained again

and again, it's not. It's mostly bullshit, as they say in the vernacular. Still nobody believes me.

Like this is some kind of fucking biography. But anyway, I'm not gonna have anybody believing

that Coover, who is an American literary icon, a true great man in the "great man" theory of

history sense of the word, was actually sitting there getting stoned with us. Regardless.

So we were flying, and then William got lost on Aukema's porch. I should explain.

Aukema's porch is a great library. Bookshelves floor to ceiling, chock full of literature. Almost

all of the influences of the Unknown are in there, a lot of them signed. Because Aukema, I should

mention this about Aukema, Aukema knows everybody worth knowing who's a writer. Almost.

The script to *Taxi Driver,* for instance, was sold over a long distance phone call from the very

kitchen we were right then sitting in. T.C. Boyle made Aukema a dwarf character in his novel

World's End. Aukema is a very cool guy, who, I should mention this right now as a little bonus

for all you dissertation-writing types out there, actually had a great deal of influence on the course

of late twentieth-century American literature, particularly hypertext literature. Once, I got into a

fight, not a real fight, but some pretty serious verbal sparring, in that kitchen of Aukema's with

Chris Offut, who thought that my short-short story "Mohawk Hangnail" was dangerous, and that

it would be a bad influence on American literature. That it would be bad for the kids. I like

Offut's stuff, but we had both been drinking quite a bit of whiskey. I think the word "fuck" was

exchanged several times. He might have said, "fuck postmodernism," and I might have said,

"fuck naturalism," but I'm not sure. As I've said, we were both quite drunk. He's a good writer

though, check out his book *Kentucky Straight.*

But we were talking about Coover. Have you read *Pricksongs and Descants,* or <u>*A Night*</u>

<u>*at the Movies,*</u> or *Pinocchio in Venice,* or *The Public Burning*? If you haven't read any of his

work, I'd recommend that you pop open another window on your browser (yeah, right now, but

leave *The Unknown* <u>open</u> too) and go to your online bookstore of choice (But not <u>Barnes &</u>

<u>Noble</u>, fuck them, monopolists) and purchase a copy of one of his books. Now, you might not be

able to find a few of his books, but I think that most of them are back in print, finally. Which is

very good. That it's back in print. His work. Which is good. So let me just come out right now

and admit that we've (The Unknown, here referred to collectively) lifted a few techniques from

the guy. Is that a crime? I don't think so. Writers can get away with all sorts of that kind of shit.

He didn't mind, at any rate, at least that's what he said, when we were sitting in Aukema's

kitchen and we admitted to his face that we were ripping him off left and right. And it's not just

us I'm talking about either; it's a whole generation of hip American writers. But that's another

story. Or is it?

We talked about a lot of things with those two guys, Dirk and me. We talked about

molecular biology. We talked about cannibalism and stereotypes of Native Americans. We

talked about new medical instruments that are invisible to the naked eye. We talked about

evolution. We talked about various pharmaceuticals and <u>how they are tested</u>. We plotted, we

schemed, we made <u>big plans</u> for American literature. Hypertext especially. It was a good night,

that night in the kitchen at Aukema's house in Iowa City. I think William stole some books from Aukema. I remember thinking that I write an awful lot about marijuana when I am out of it, or some words to that effect.

Public Health Transportation <train1.htm>

S: Are there trains that run from Chicago to Champaign?

W: Ah, yeah.

S: Are there any that run straight to your door?

W: Ah, no.

S: Why not?

W: Because a whole lot of savvy businessmen have misplaced resources and put a lot of our resources go into developing cars.

S: And the oil companies, and the rubber companies, and the steel companies have conspired to keep us free from public transportation.

W: That's right… The government owes it to its citizens to provide reliable, safe, clean public transportation.

S: Free.

W: Ideally, yeah.

S: And health care too.

W: That's a different issue but yeah.

S: No, I—I think it's the same issue, William.

(Rustling of microphone.)

S: Actually, what I would envision would be a public transportation system that is also actually a public health system. You'd have trains running anywhere, you know, within ten blocks of walking distance anywhere in the country, and on those trains there would be hospitals,

where anyone could get on, take a ride, say, from here to Gary, get an appendectomy, and be back within ten blocks of their dwelling within, say, three hours.

W: Reliable, safe, clean and free.

S: On the trains.

W: Public Health Transportation.

S: You could get to the hospital anywhere… It could be kind of bad in emergency situations, I suppose.

W: Not at all. You'd have a hospital coming to your door.

S: Yeah, but what are the schedules gonna be like? I guess maybe they'd have to have little train ambulances as well. Or they could use helicopters. And loading docks on the trains for the helicopters. So you could be airlifted, and put down some kind of a chute, on the train, safely, right into the rolling hospital.

W: Then the highway system can be converted into bicycle and footpaths.

S: With ponds.

W: So people can get from one place to another, and see all the places they've been to eat, and this will rebuild a _sense_ of community in America.

S: And there will be vendors with mangos. And ecoles. Ecoles?

W: I'm not sure.

A: Elotés.

S: Sweet corn with cheese and red pepper and—

W: All the good things… And no more Kinko's or _Starbucks_.

S: Yeah, no more Starbucks. Kinko's would need to be replaced with by lots of Mom and Pop Hi-Tech Hi-Speed printing facilities.

W: And in the America that I envision, you would never be alienated from the labor that went into the making of anything that you use. So something like a cup of coffee, you would start by picking the beans and preparing them and grinding them.

Division of Labor <train2.htm>

S: Um, no division of labor whatsoever?

W: Um, no, well—

S: —I don't think that would work out. There's only so many things you can do like that. For instance, it's very difficult to grow coffee beans in Chicago. I mean, you wouldn't be alienated, so you wouldn't have any Columbian workers, you know, getting paid peanuts for coffee beans, but—

W: If you wanted a home computer, you would have to design and build and program it yourself. Which would be hard, but—

S: —That would make people's lives very short, William.

W: Why?

S: Because they'd get on these projects and that's all they'd ever do. Say I'm going to design some kind of a multimedia VRML workstation. I'd have to gather all the materials, and blow the glass for the, ah, monitor tube or gather all the liquid crystal for the liquid crystal display, uh, it would get very complicated and time-consuming. And we wouldn't have the kind of sophisticated technology we have today.

S: I think people should be more concentrated on sharing their labor. Rather than sort of this I don't know ah, Hobbes, thing you got going on, dog eat dog, don't be divided from your labor, divide and conquer kind of Hobbesian—

W: It's also kind of a vaguely Marxist and Buckminster Fullerish kind of notion that we had to have had a lousy society in order to get the kind of society that we want, so things like the

highway system were built for people to drive their own car and, ah, be alienated from the wilderness and from their fellow travelers. Even though it was a bad idea, it was necessary, so that we could have the highway system, which will now be the public bicycle paths that I described earlier.

S: So are you trying to say that these Asian Longhorn Beetles infesting the trees all over the Chicago area, eating them from the inside, turning them into firewood, that that's a good thing?

W: What does that have to do with it?

S: Well, because that will bring down one element of society in Chicago and necessitate something to take its place. People planting trees or just adapting to streets without any trees whatsoever. Is this the kind of nightmare dystopic future that you envision?

W: No. My nightmare dystopic future is different from that. We're passing the, ah, stadium, of the Chicago Cubs.

S: Wrigley Field. Have you ever been there, William?

W: Yes I have.

S: Do you like baseball?

W: No.

S: Why not? Not even at Wrigley?

W: There's just enough people who like baseball that I feel that the world would be better off if I concentrated my interests in areas of knowledge that were less well developed.

S: Is that part of being hip? Not liking baseball?

W: No, well, at some point it, well in some—No. Not at all.

S: You did stumble on that. Kind of as if it were revealing one of the chinks in your alternative armor.

W: I thought it was, but then I found out Paul Auster likes baseball. Now I don't know what to think.

S: Well.

W: Speaks <u>French</u> fluently, and he likes baseball.

S: How fluent is your <u>French</u>?

W: Not very.

S: You're of French origin, though?

W: I don't think so.

S: Not at all? What would your ancestral origins be?

William's Ancestral Origins <train3.htm>

W: Missouri, <u>Iowa</u>.

S: Missouri and Iowa, ah, before that? Back eight generations?

W: I think Scotch, and Ireland.

S: Scotland and Ireland. When your people first came to this country, did they conquer and slaughter Native Americans?

W: I don't know. They probably—they probably did something more like—stand in long lines at Ellis Island, doing a lot of paperwork, being poor, and working in meatpacking plants.

S: Did they worked in meatpacking plants?

W: I don't know.

S: Did they ever grow potatoes?

W: Yes.

S: Did they ever make <u>scotch?</u>

W: Don't know.

S: Or <u>poteen</u>…

W: Maybe there's a little Welsh.

S: Well, you're pretty much Anglo, then.

W: Basically, yeah.

S: Well there's nothing wrong with <u>the English</u>. I, for instance, think that your people buying Amoco, well that's just fine. I mean sure this guy, the new owner's sort of hung on

rebuilding the British Empire by buying up all our gas reserves, and then recolonizing us and

making us pay fealty to a Queen Mother. That's fine. They write good poems.

W: <u>Sorry</u>, I've lost the thread.

S: Oh, I don't know. It is a <u>hypertext</u>.

W: There's a good place for some grass.

S: Right there on the <u>abandoned</u> El tracks?

W: It's an excellent place. Never in shade.

S: Yeah, but they might want to put that train back.

W: Not after they see the grass.

S: That could be the train that goes straight to your door.

W: Kind of dangerous for the kids though, I guess, to plant it up there.

S: Yeah, but I think it's good for the kids, in Chicago, to face a little danger. It, ah, builds

character.

Fall at the House of John Barth <barth.htm>

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low, the Unknown had been passing together, on horseback, through a singularly <u>dreary</u> tract of country in Maryland, and at length found themselves, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy house of John Barth. I know not how it was—but with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable metafiction pervaded <u>Dirk's spirit</u>. I say <u>insufferable</u>; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind receives even the sternest natural images of storytelling or the storyteller. We looked upon the scene before us—upon the mere house, with the boathouse and the gray sea behind it—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank marijuana plants—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with the utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the afterdream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping of <u>the veil</u>.

Dirk groaned and the horses neighed. We tied them onto the thing onto which you tie horses so that they might lap at the trough of murky gray water, and yet not prance away into the inky day, I forget what such a thing is called—but I remember that Barth had one, most conveniently—the horse-post?

William said, "So this is Baltimore?" and groaned as well.

Our asses were sore, as we were unaccustomed to riding horses. Scott groaned as well.

What of John Barth?

The spry old man ran up to greet us.

William paused to think—what was it that so unnerved him in the contemplation of John Barth?

John Barth gave all high fives. He was bouncing about, chock full of energy.

It was possible, William reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, or the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression.

"Hello, Mr. Barth," Scott said.

"On with the story," Barth said, "on with the story."

He evidently thought we were in Baltimore to play writing games. He'd prepared a list of them, and was quite anxious to play them with us, "Before the end, we must play before the denouement," he said, referring, as he did so often that quite anxiety-ridden day, to all of experience as if it were a narratological experiment.

He tried to get us to do an exquisite corpse.

We were tired, and had no interest anything so violent.

He tried to get us to write about the travels of a coin, from the coin's perspective.

It felt facile and vacuous. William crumpled his page up and soon the other Unknown followed.

He tried to get us to write about the sea. He encouraged us to write from the point of view of a sperm, swimming.

William guffawed, and told Barth he knew nothing of politics.

"A little liqueur, <u>en medias res</u>?" Barth asked as he offered us some sickening melon concoction.

In better days, we would have had none of that. We would have smashed the foul-smelling bottle to the floor and demanded Booker's. But these were not better days, and as far as we could tell, there were no other bottles in that wretched house. It was gut-wrenching, <u>sugary-sweet</u> poison, it was like drinking medicine, suffering the taste of it, knowing full well that it wouldn't do the job. We passed it around. Scott held his nose.

"I have had that for years," Barth said, as if it weren't obvious to us, "that bottle could tell a few stories."

Dirk tried to politely hint that we were tired, and in need of warm, dry, beds.

"<u>To the sea</u>, then, am I right, men, some salty air for what ails you, again we enter the archetypal epic of man and the sea, ay?" Barth asked, and squinted his eye like a pirate.

We didn't want to be impolite. The guy had written like forty books, and we only had one hypertext novel, itself impossible to hold.

William vomited ten yards out from shore, and Barth called him a "scurvy knave" and said something about minding the topmast.

Scott said something about <u>writer's block</u>, while Dirk tried and failed to write a poem about an albatross.

"Writing is like following <u>a wave</u>," Barth said, and he looked meaningful, even mournful, "the story is the ripple behind the wave," and we had no idea what he meant, "and we are the foam on the ripple." Then he laughed, and said, "Ahoy mateys, a squall's coming in. The sea is all the stories wrapped in one," and he giggled, "the Chesapeake Bay is an encyclopedia," he was

laughing at his own jokes, if that's what they were, or perhaps this was the onset of some sudden madness, the three of us trapped on a boat with him, Dirk vomiting now as well, a syrupy green, "and this boat, our little dingy, this boat is a comma," and Scott grew ill as well, globs of Midori projecting from his nose out onto the deck, "life is all punctuation," Barth said, profound now, deeper now, "and every <u>ending</u> is an ellipses."

In New Jersey, We Drank with David Markson <newjersey.htm>

I bowed my head and began to weep. I was <u>without reason</u>. I was beyond depressed. I was the opposite of ecstatic, whatever that is.

We were drinking with David Markson, and he had made me sad.

William was to blame.

"Harold Brodkey died of what?" William asked him.

"Do you think Wittgenstein was <u>isolated</u> from himself?" William asked him.

"If you had Alzheimer's, what would you write?" <u>William</u> asked him.

"And what about Mark Twain?" William asked him.

"Do you think <u>Beckett</u> hated <u>Joyce</u>? In the end?" I asked him.

Dirk did stretching <u>exercises</u>.

It was cold, in that bar in Hoboken, after our lackluster reading at Hoboken Books, and we talked about Dostoevski, and we talked about Sylvia Plath and Edward Albee and <u>William S. Burroughs</u> and Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

We didn't come to any <u>conclusions</u>.

We were quiet, all of us, for a while, all flooded with memories of people gone and betrayals and loss. We were <u>drinking bourbon</u>, and finally we stopped asking questions and we listened. David Markson was talking in a low whispered voice about <u>love</u>, and we drank for hours. There was a moon that night and it glowed, and it was bright, even in Hoboken, New Jersey.

England <england.htm>

Johnny Rotten met us at Heathrow. He had to take us out to the car one by one, in
wheelchairs. We were all on <u>heavy tranquilizers</u>. We were really crapped out in London, man,
we were drunk in Soho stumbling around, we shot pool with Martin Amis. Something Dirk said
about poetry really pissed him off, I can't remember what, or maybe it was the way he faked an
English accent when he was talking about T.S. Eliot, but it was cool anyway because Amis really
liked William.

We were a hit though; we were in the tabloids next to the page three girls. We read at
Blackwell's and Dutton's and a couple grocery stores. Johnny Rotten kept us supplied with good
smack. I remember drooling, and <u>shooting heroin</u>, yellow dusk in misty morning fog thinning red
veins. Or arteries. Whatever. I don't know. Oh fuck. We were <u>wasted on BBC</u>, but somehow
we sounded perfectly coherent. <u>What Dirk said</u> made a lot of <u>sense</u>, sort of.

I remember so little. The <u>bitter beer</u> of pints and pints. There's a lot of ash there still. We
went to that wax museum named after the French lady. Dirk was tripping pretty hard and freaked
out, screaming about Winston Churchill melting into Marilyn Monroe. I think we pissed off
Prince Charles. I still have no idea why he came to our reading. Man, do the English do a good
breakfast. Their bacon makes ours look like nothing but a charred strip of pig's ass. So anyway
we sold a lot of books there, I think, and there were a lot of groupies and they all had cool
accents. We were glad Tony Blair was in charge instead of Thatcher or that pea-soup guy. Ugh.
There was a lot of sickness in London, having nothing to do with the city, which has a lot of cool
history, like beheadings they explained at this one place where William was chewing on some

horse tranquilizers he'd <u>stolen</u> when we took that day trip out to Yorkshire and got shitfaced with that veterinarian guy. The, <u>uh, Tower</u>. Yeah. The Tower of London.

I remember thinking about shit when we were at the Tower of London, or specifically, that people must have shit, when they had their heads cut off, right there in the <u>court</u>yard, where an immense raven was pecking at the pebbles and a Beefeater was doing a show for the tourists. Those guys eat a lot of beef, let me tell you. I know I'd shit if my head got cut off. Wouldn't you? William refused to go to the <u>British</u> Museum, because, he said, all of <u>the shit was stolen</u>. I walked around a lot of the time, feeling sick to my stomach. Dirk kept doing imitations of Austin <u>Powers</u>. Except for breakfast, the food was pretty mediocre, they seem to boil meat a lot there, though the fish 'n'chips were quite good. Never mind the curry in the Chunnel, on our way over <u>to Paris</u>. Suffice it to say that I ruined three suits during my time in London.

Scott is Henry Miller in Paris <parismiller.htm>

Paris is exactly as Henry Miller described it. By the time we get to Paris I'm burning with

passion and <u>fire</u> in my soul and turgidity in my loins and Frank is here he's handling everything

he's handling my appearances he's handling my publicity he's even handling the women fate

would throw my way as a consequence of my now being a celebrated and translated international

author and I don't give a Tennessee holler or an Arkansas hoot because I'm in Paris and I know

some French and I've read Rimbaud and Verlaine and Jim Morrison and Rabelais and I'm in

Paris and the night is screaming for me because I'm in Paris and I want to fuck the world. It's a

blur of red <u>wines</u> and cancan dancers and poets and newspapermen and hookers from Alsace and

well-bred women from London and banker-women from Amsterdam. Long sweaty nights with

way too much wine in dangerous bars with gangsters speaking French and <u>jazz wafting out</u> all

over the Left Bank and I'm eating <u>fucking</u> snails for breakfast lunch and dinner and loving it. I

want to live right now, and then fuck it. The whole wad today. I want to tear the bone from the

leg of the world and crack it open and suck the marrow from it, baby, gobble it down, I'm in Paris

and I'm having <u>lots of anonymous sex</u> and I'm the featured guest at orgies and I'm convincing my

friends <u>to ditch</u> their girlfriends that they just got pregnant telling them they should go somewhere

and write and I'm taking the money that they give me give to the girl that they left behind and I'm

spending it on absinthe and guzzling it up and down the Champs-Elysées and under the Eiffel

Tower and I'm swilling it at Montparnasse and then I'm fucking her too and walking and talking

and the sky is torn up with globules of sweet flesh dripping from the moon. Rodin and Moliere

and Voltaire are raising their arms up to me and there I am riding my way into the arms of three

or four women half my age and twice my age black and yellow and <u>brown</u> and blue. We rut. I'm fucking everything and everyone. I'm fucking the whole fucking city. It's Paris and I'm still young. I'm virile and I'm hungry and I'm cadging drinks. I'm scum and I'm beautiful. It's Paris and I'm here right now—you can start—and right now I don't give a fuck about *The Unknown.* Here's the unknown, the real unknown. I smell it, I taste it. It's dribbling from my tongue. The sweat that this city is giving off, the shit and the piss on the streets and the wine and the pheasants dripping blood in the marketplace and the bread which I tear in hunks and dip in the grease and let run down my chin and the bars I get kicked out of and the smell of her gorgeous blue panties laid out on yellow silk sheets, or hers in my teeth, or hers in the boulangerie. I'm fucking the unknown, boys, fucking it crazy. I'm using a bidet to wash my ass of shit. Smoking hash and eating croissants. Fucking women in foreign tongues. It's me and the sky and the whole jellyroll and a box of crackers too. I'm fucking the whole idea of France. I'm fucking all of <u>Europe</u>. It's Paris. It's beautiful. It's my world and I'm fucking it <u>crazy</u>, fucking it crazy cock <u>crazy</u>, fucking tropic of cancer type fucking fertile ripe fruit fucking from the vine sweet juice honey oil social fucking fucking outdoors fucking in a garret fucking at a cocktail party fucking at a theatre fucking constantly, constantly fucking. I'm fucking Anais Nin. I love it. We love. We fucking love fucking. It fucking we love. I her fucking me fucking her we fucking constant fucking, fucking, fucking…

Dirk is Cuchulainn <tain.htm>

Dirk's powers were well manifest in <u>Dublin</u>. Most eerie was the resemblance between what Cuchulainn went through during his warp spasms, and how Dirk describes the most frightful of his psychic journeys into the unknown territory of telepathic supernatural investigations. And I don't just mean mushrooms.

Dirk puts it like this:

When the first vision hits me, it's an out-of-body jolt, wham! right away. It seizes me and I see myself, and I am different. It makes me into a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, <u>unheard of</u>. My shanks and joints, every knuckle and angle and organ from head to foot, shakes like a tree or a reed in the stream. My body makes a furious twist inside my skin, so that my feet and shins and knees switch from the rear and my heels and calves switch to the front. On my head, the temple-sinews stretch to the nape of my neck, a mighty, measureless knob as big as the head of a month-old child. My face and features become a red <u>bowl</u>: I suck in one eye so deep into my head that a wild crane couldn't peck it onto my cheek out of the depths of my skull; the other eye falls along my cheek. My mouth is weirdly distorted: my cheeks peel back from my jaws until my gullet shows, my lung and liver flapping in my mouth and throat, my lower jaw strikes the upper a lion-killing blow, and fiery flakes large as a ram's ass reach my mouth from my throat. My heart booms loud in my breast like the <u>baying of a dog</u> at its feed or the sound of a lion among lambs. Malignant mists and arcs of fire flicker red in the vaporous clouds that rise boiling above my head. The hair of my head twists like the tangle of a thornbush stuck in a gap,

then rises up from the dead center of my skull a straight spout of black blood darkly and

magically smoking like the smoke from the Vatican when a new Pope is anointed.

Sure you guys are <u>jealous</u> of my psychic powers, my <u>luck with women</u>, the oversized size

of my fan population. But you would not want to be in my <u>shoes</u>. Trust me.

Scott Had Been Left Behind <algren.htm>

Those fuckers <u>left me</u> behind. My car was gone and my laptop too. Which has all my writing on it. Bastards. What they had done was clear, and which end of the stick they left me with. The Unknown slush fund? That was gone too. In Dirk's fridge, there was a moldy crust of Gorgonzola, a half-drunk flat Miller High Life, and some sour buttermilk. The place disgusted me and it <u>smelled like rot</u>, so I got the hell out of there.

Every man's a <u>con man</u> and you can't trust those guys as far as you can throw them into a pile of trash. I lit a cigarette and wondered why they left me, and stole my shit, and what they planned to with it. It had to be money; somehow, that's what it always comes down to, that's the bottom line, dollars and cents. Could I hold it against these guys if they were in for the quick kill, if they were on the make from day one?

Of course I could, and I did. I was walking up McMillan Street at fucking 5 A.M. and I wished harm upon those guys. I hadn't changed the oil in about 2 years and I smiled as I thought that the Corolla might pick now to crawl up and die. Not that I wanted nothing extremely bad to happen to the guys. They fucked up, they were <u>thieves</u>, and they were deceitful, hey what's new?

But why now, and why like this, and why did they take my writing and my laptop too? It'd be one thing if they left me with something, but of course Dirk's computer was just a twisted mass of charred metal and plastic, after the rocket scientist had, one acid-discombobulated evening, come up with the brilliant idea of trying to wire his hotplate directly into his motherboard so that he could fry up little cocktail weenies for supper while he was proofing *The Unknown*.

The best laid plans of guys like Dirk and William… so these fuckers left me no way to write… again I wondered what they were planning on doing with my writing… sell it? Yeah, right. On a good day, when the sun is shining and folks are feeling generous, my writing and a buck will get you a cup of <u>coffee</u>.

By now they'd probably sold the laptop, and discarded my only copy of all my best shit. That hurt me, right there. It was like a sharp kick to the gut from a bull at the rail yard. Which is where I was headed, just as soon as I got done stealing a portable typewriter and a ream of paper from the University of Cincinnati English Department. It was early, and nobody really recognized me with my beard, and it was just sitting there in the corner. No big deal, I figured, I'm a writer, so I need a typewriter at least, you know?

So at the rail yard I stumbled, the portable in my backpack was kind of heavy and the train was moving fast. Fell flat on my face and the next thing I know, this bull's standing there holding me by the scruff of my neck. He knows <u>my name</u>. Somebody at the Department noticed the ream of paper was missing and phoned it in. Even as I was hopping the rail yard fence in hopes of catching the eastbound to Indianapolis, the helicopter had been hovering behind.

So they put me in a holding cell with a bunch of guys and I don't want to write much about that. I worked out a deal with a guy. He made sure nobody "Queened" me, and in exchange, I explained to him the finer points of James Joyce's *Ulysses,* and additionally made up some shit about *Gravity's Rainbow.* Guy had some smack too, so within an hour I was back on the <u>dirty shit</u>.

Tom LeClair bailed me out and got me a bus ticket back to Chicago. He urged me to stay the hell away until the heat cooled off. The Dean said he'd drop the charges if I'd do a Web page

for his dog, but he didn't want to see my ass among those <u>rolling hills</u> until I returned for my

<u>dissertation</u> defense, and I agreed.

I sold off all Dirk's books at a used bookstore for a grand total of twenty <u>bucks</u> before I

got on the Greyhound. I was sweating all the way back to Indianapolis. My life was shit and

nobody could be trusted. Those guys would take the whole floor if you gave them an inch.

I scored <u>more H</u> in Indie. I was nodding the whole way back to Union Station. I was

seeing angels through the fog and I didn't give a rat's ass about those guys trying to scrape a few

bucks off the shabby remainders of my life's work. I had the fix and I was in it. For me the

writing was about the writing of it. Those guys would never understand that. <u>Money slips</u>

anyway, I would have it and then it would be gone. Let them take it and make some fucking Otto

Preminger type of <u>Hollywood extravaganza</u> with it. I made the words and I had my fix. It was

dark and I was nodding. Figure it all out in the morning, which anyway might never come.

I walked from Union Station to the El at Clark and Lake. The night was cold and it was

windy. Little pellets of freezing rain cut into my cheeks like daggers of betrayal. I rode the train

in a trance, got off the <u>Blue Line</u> at Division, stopped in at Cut Rate Liquors, stood at the long bar

and began to get drunk. Old Style and shots of Jameson's, four apiece down and I got to admit

that I'm feeling the anger. Two guys get into a <u>knife fight</u> at the other end of the bar and before

you know it I'm arguing with some toothless postal worker having a couple on the way to his

route.

"Look, Sparky, it was the guy with the knife out first what was to blame."

"They're all scum. That's why I don't give a rat's ass about yer mail, or any that comes out of the Wicker Park station. Half these people are scum, and I'm gonna risk my life for the other half? Right. I'd rather burn the shit. Fuck these people."

"Don't <u>say</u> that."

"You live here, you can kiss your <u>mail</u> goodbye."

"You bastard."

I'm drunk and tired and I live in the area and mail is tremendously important to me and I don't always get it, so the next thing I know we're swinging and crashing into bottles. Last thing I remember the bartender has hopped over the bar, there's a shotgun in my nose and some beefy bastard picks me up by my feet and throws me face first on the pavement and I'm a bloody mess as I start to crawl towards <u>Paulina</u>.

I score more H on Cortez and shoot it up under the streetlight. The night is cold and one of my teeth is hanging on only by a bit of gumskin and I'm shooting a vile chemical into my veins and it seems like the only the thing that can comfort me and I'm standing amidst the rats and winos and the filth and garbage and I'm wishing I had a <u>song</u>.

Then some fuckers in a Cabriolet roll me, I don't remember much, they take my last five bucks and leave me bleeding in the gutter. A bald guy wakes me up, saying "Hey, hey, hey," as I'm drifting through pleasure and pain, imagining I'm hearing jazz, clotting blood filming over my eyes, wet and sticky on my skin. Turns out the guy's Myopic Joe, he takes me to his <u>bookstore</u>. He lets me wash up, loans me a copy of *City on the Make,* and he makes me some coffee.

When I finally make it back to the apartment on Paulina, the next morning after the night before after the night before that, there's an eviction notice on my door but the key works and most of my shit's still there. <u>Maestro</u> has been fed during my absence, and his litter box is clean. Nobody sold me out in Chicago. My cat attempts to lick my wounds and I shoo him away. A light blinks on the answering machine.

Dirk and William. The axle broke in West Virginia, and they need a ride. Fuckers. I scrape up all my change and head for Division Street thinking I know where there's a game I can get in on for cheap. Maybe I can win a few hands and come up with enough to buy a <u>used car</u>.

Marla is our Publicist <publicist.htm>

    <u>Marla</u> is our publicist. She operates out of <u>New York City</u>, sets up all of the book signings, the college lectures, the <u>product endorsements</u> and <u>public service spots</u>. She got us some great green in terms of the <u>European swing</u>. Dirk's poetry <u>apparently</u> appealed to the <u>French</u>, William's deconstructive fiction to the Germans, and <u>the English</u> took a shine to Scott's <u>sense</u> of play. It was all a part of the Publicity, which turned out to be enormously important. Marla is a redhead, 5'8, and she works the phone like a demon. We hooked up with her through the Internet after the hypertext had been online for a few months, but before *The Unknown* itself had gone to the printer. *Criticism of The Unknown* then still in the planning stages. We were a little nervous about the whole thing, self-publishing, establishing our own publishing company, and thus eliminating the rest of the publishing industry, etc. It took some girding of the loins as the poets say. Marla came in right at the nick of time. She's always just a cell-phone call away. Sure, some of our gigs may have seemed a little ridiculous, like that the signing at <u>Ed's Used Automobile Lot</u> in Phoenix. She swore they said books when she booked it. Ed's Used Book Lot. Can you imagine? But oh well, she's pulled our asses out of the <u>fire</u> more times than she's stuck us in the frying pan.

    We read at coffee shops and bars and <u>independent booksellers</u> from coast to coast. Things got a little crowded in the van from time to time, but we were having the time of our lives. We met <u>so many people</u>, some of whom we should briefly acknowledge. It almost gets you to thinking of a thousand points of light, like that wasn't all bullshit.

Marla, in Her Own Words <marla.htm>

It was never easy to manage their raw talent. It would have been far easier to manage a

raw squid. Talent is always difficult, and they had a lot of that, and that. They were erratic.

They were a challenge. They were <u>intellectuals</u>, they were dynamic, and they excited me.

I wanted to spread that excitement. That is what I do. Most of my clients before the

Unknown wrote genre fiction. Romance, Mystery, <u>Suspense</u>. I am a commercial person, and if

you say that what I do is shallow, I won't argue too vociferously. I am about buzz, making a

good buzz, not always for good books, not always for books that I myself would read. This is the

career that I have chosen. I'll never change the world, but I know what makes a great headline. I

know how to get reviews. I know how to place an artist anywhere from a chi-chi cocktail party to

a university symposium. I can get you in the *Village Voice.* I can get you <u>interviewed</u>. I can get

you a reading at a multiplicity of bookstores. I know how to bend the right ears. I'm good at

what I do. I work the phones; I work the phones.

I have a B.A. from Vassar with a double major in English and Advertising. I like

Victorian novels, how they take their time to fulfill a long slow arc, how they create a world from

manners, how they turned the position of governess from a menial occupation to one that is

heroic. I <u>ride</u> the streams of media, which shift from hour to hour. My Rolodex is voluminous.

My friends say that I'm a <u>fun</u> drunk, when I drink, which I do on Saturday nights. I swing dance

and I samba. I'm not very good at dancing, but I do it anyway and I have a blast. I'm single but

I'm not lonely. The last time I had sex I wasn't making love. He was a financial whiz-kid who

worked for Citibank. It had been months and he told a good joke. He was cynical but was a

decent lover. I wasn't in love with him, but we had a few decent dates. I'm not looking for

permanence. I don't think I'll meet Mr. Right, not in New York. None of that matters to me right

now. I have a niece named Allysa and I take her to the movies every Tuesday night. I took her to

see *Titanic* three times, and I'll admit I cried the first two times.

I worked for an agency I won't mention here before I set off on my own. I was tired of all

the assignments they gave me. Mass-market dross. I set off on my own and I took several of

their "best" clients with me. Dick Thrush, author of the *Nick Cabin, Clown Detective* series;

Celina Worble, author of the *M is for Murder, L is for Love* series; and Helena Cartwright, author

of the *Wide River, Long Lost Love* pastoral romance series. I was paying $1,200 per month for a

studio apartment on the Upper East Side, and my ends were barely meeting.

I was feeling kind of lonely and slightly desperate, financially, when I ran across the

Hypertext of the Unknown. It was different and exciting. I thought the balding one was pretty

cute. And, let me confess, let me be up front, it smelled like money, real money. And more than

that, it smelled like Art. Can I describe to you how good those two things smell together? I can't,

so I won't, but it is like a hot fudge sundae on a hot July afternoon after a good workout and a

warm bath with your favorite moisturizing bath beads.

I was extremely interested in what they were doing and so I approached them. And they

were approachable. What's more, they needed me; they really needed someone like me. They

liked me and I liked them. They were disorganized, barely in control. They had too many ideas

and not enough time. So I made their arrangements. I magnified them. I broadcast them. I got

them readings and interviews and appointments and shows. I made love to one of them, once. It

was a breach of professionalism, but so what? It was discrete. It was a wonderful night in Trump

Tower that I'll never mention or forget. Silk sheets and a magnificent view, room service with coq au vin, strawberries, champagne and laughter.

New York is a big city. I take long walks at night in Central Park. The boys. I call them that, the boys, they call me on the cell-phone, sometimes while I'm out walking. I tell them where to go and what to do, and they appreciate that. They are bigger than either they or I ever thought they could become. There was a hole in my life and they filled it. I've got more clients than I can handle, now, and I just got a new assistant. I hear twenty different languages every time I walk down the street. I eat thirty different types of cuisine. I often bump into old friends, from Brooklyn, or from prep school, or from Vassar, and most of them have become different, like we all do. Sometimes I get lonely, but not often. This is my life, and I am living it in <u>New York City</u>.

What Actually Happened in Atlanta <atlanta.htm>

What happened in Atlanta was that a very polite man in a chauffeur's uniform met us after our reading at A Capella Books in Little 5 Points and whisked us cross state. A few hours later, we were on Ted Turner's yacht off the coast, near Savannah. I don't think Ted trusted us to show. His personal assistant had arranged the meeting with Marla, saying Ted wanted to give us "a look-see."

That was a long boat ride. William got seasick over the side rail. Ted and I talked about Bosnian war crimes. Jane Fonda still looks great. Ted <u>married</u> well. And I don't give a shit what you say about what she was doing during Vietnam. She's a looker and a real good actress with a mind that won't quit.

Frank, awkwardly, kept referring to *Barbarella.* Jane got flushed and embarrassed. Ted scooped her up in his arms tickled and joshed her. They're a real nice couple, always giggling like <u>school kids</u>.

Ted wanted to do a colorized version of the hypertext, which he would air on the USA <u>Network</u>. But he wanted us to take all the drug references out. We thought it over.

Jane picked up a phone and a butler appeared with a lid of grass.

Jane rolled a joint.

Ted said, "Better be Maui Wowie, son, or you're in the shitter."

The butler said, "But Dad, all I could get was Jamaican."

Jane, sitting cross-legged on the <u>deck</u> in her steel-blue bikini, took a deep hit, and said, "It's good shit, Ted, it's real good."

Ted unhanded the butler, saying, "Dammit, son, when I say Hawaiian, I mean Hawaiian. Jamaica is a whole other island. Am I wastin' my money on all those maps?" He took a big hit and passed the doobie to Dirk, and with a furrowed brow appeared to be weighing matters of substance, then said, "This is good shit, son, so you're lucky. But mark my words, sonny boy, the next time pull something like this, you go right over that rail."

He said all this in a relatively calm, even good-natured, way, so you could tell that he was kidding but that he was also simultaneously dead serious.

The butler said, "<u>Sorry</u> Dad, it won't happen again."

Ted said, "It had better not. Now go do your homework. <u>Geography</u> and Procurement."

"Yes, Dad," the butler said, and went back below deck, submissively. The waitress then appeared and we had five of the biggest <u>lobsters</u> you've ever seen with drawn butter, and a real nice zucchini, garlic and tomato side dish. We had slushy fruit drinks with Malaysian names. They had mangos and kiwi and pineapple and strawberries in them.

Ted gave us a little talk on the importance of vitamins.

We talked about <u>metaphysics</u> with Jane.

Ted gave us some <u>investment</u> advice.

We didn't do the deal on colorizing the hypertext, but it was a real nice afternoon. The money would have been nice, but at that time we still felt that it was important for us to retain our artistic integrity.

Ted said he'd make sure the book got plugged <u>on CNN</u>.

We Got Some Press When We Were in Gainesville <florida.htm>

It was shortly before our reading in Goerings Book Store in Gainesville, Florida that we read about ourselves in *The New York Times.* In spite of our best attempts to get publicity for the hypertext, attempts which had often hurt us more than they had helped our cause, we had received virtually no press, and zero in terms of grants and awards, until that fateful day in Gainesville when I cracked open the *Times* in <u>search</u> of material for a quick newspoem.

We were eating breakfast at the Swamp restaurant. I had a plate of biscuits and gravy and a cup of coffee. Scott had eggs benedict, a small orange juice and a cup of coffee. Dirk had scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage links, Canadian bacon, toast, a small orange juice, a cup of coffee, a bloody mary, a glass of grapefruit juice, a glass of water, and a Coca-Cola.

There was the usual stuff about the <u>turmoil in Washington</u> (5 resignations, 2 accusations, 4 appointments of special prosecutors, a color photo of Larry Flynt handing out million dollar checks) and the <u>fear of Y2K</u> stock market decline, on the front page. But what caught my attention was the headline on page 17. I chuckled and then began to read:

COCHRAN, DERSHOWITZ QUOTE HYPERTEXT NOVEL

IN DEFENSE OF NOVELIST KRASS-MUELLER

The case of Manson v. Krass-Mueller pending before San Jose U.S. District Judge

James Ware, which will undoubtedly go down as one of the strangest libel cases in

the history of the sport, has taken yet another deeply <u>surreal</u> turn.

Mary Lyn Manson, a former professional tennis player, is suing best-selling author

Krass-Mueller for libel because his 1996 novel *In Cold Jest* portrays a sexually

promiscuous, drug-abusing character with severe psychiatric problems named

"Mary Lyn Manson."

Multiple defense motions to dismiss have been denied. The jury selection has

been completed after much to-do. The defense team attempted to load the jury

with Krass-Mueller's peers, who are MacArthur Fellows, or "Genius Grant"

recipients. The prosecution attempted to remove all jurors who testified that they

had read a work of fiction within the last twenty years. Judge Ware reached a

compromise, loading the jury with an ethnic mélange of undergraduate students

from Pomona State University, majoring in Education and Communications.

After the prosecution's overtly dramatic opening argument, which featured, in part,

a wildly weeping Ms. Manson alternately rending garments from her flesh,

popping valiums, and dry-humping her attorney as footnotes from Krass-Mueller's

best-selling but obscure novel about addiction and junior tennis were read to the

jury, Cochran led the jury on a veritable literary tour (de force) through a whole

series of classic literary texts. He and Dershowitz read in two-part harmony from

James Joyce's *Ulysses.* They read excerpts from both the "Oxen of the Sun" and

"Cyclops" portions of that novel, followed by a reading from a 1904 Dublin

Society Registry. From Joyce, they moved to a reading from Thomas Wolfe's

novel *Look Homeward Angel,* followed by contemporary editorials from an

Asheville, North Carolina newspaper.

The most bizarre moment in this strange legal circus came when Cochran directed

the jury to fasten their eyeballs on the screen, which lowered from behind the dais.

The lights in the courtroom were dimmed, and Cochran used a remote control to

turn on a projection unit connected to a high-end G3 Macintosh computer. A

Netscape browser appeared on the screen, and Dershowitz typed in the URL:

<www.unknownhypertext/boston.htm>.

"What you are about to read," Cochran announced in deep stentorian tones, "is a

hypertext novel that will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, beyond the smell of a

garlic-filled breath, beyond the slight uplifting whush of a whispered aria, that

what Mr. Krass-Mueller, the genius novelist who may have this very day

composed fifty thousand words which would have moved American literature to

the next level for the twenty-first century, were he not forced to sit here on trial for

his MacArthur money, indeed for his very reputation in the pantheon of great

American writers, that what this shining star in the cosmos of American letters, is

accused of doing, is in fact a common practice among the generation of novelists

who are today taking their place at the table that is constructed in the shape of

things to come in contemporary American fiction. What you are about to read,

once the images load, since Alan did not have time to load them into the cache

earlier, are pages from *The Unknown,* a hypertext novel that has very quickly

become a cult classic. If you say that what Mr. Krass-Mueller, one of the greatest

novelists of 1996 and the recipient of many grants, the author of many stories

which now have movie interest, if you say that what this great writer comparable

to Dostoevski and Jerry Kosinski and William Gaddis, if you say that what he has

done is slander, is libel, then indeed I must ask why the work of these hypertext

novelists the Unknown is so widely available for free on the World Wide Web

where anyone can read it at any time. Mr. Krass-Mueller, a great writer whose

time and money are worth so much more than that of these young hypertext cult

figures, must sit here today, his hours being wasted, while these young

hypertexters, rank amateurs, are free to sit in a bar in Gainesville, Florida, sipping

an exotic variety of beverages, in preparation for a reading tomorrow afternoon at

Goering Books near the University of Florida followed by the spectacle of an

alligator wrestling match later that evening in Tallahassee alongside of novelist

Harry Crews.”

“How did they know about that? Man, these people do their research,” Scott said.

“We’re wrestling alligators?” Dirk asked.

“Er, you are,” Scott said.

“I’m not finished,” I said.

“That guy Cochran makes Frank sound short-winded,” Scott interrupted.

“This all seems a little implausible,” Dirk muttered.

"It's a weird time to be a living writer," Scott said.

"I'll finish now, if that's okay," I said impatiently. Dirk and Scott sipped their coffees and nodded their heads.

> A stunned jury listened to pages from *The Unknown,* including 'boston.htm,' in which sordid details of Krass-Mueller's own life were laid out in a satirical feast that also implicated *Sexual Blood* author Mark Amerika, followed by 'iowa3.htm,'which implied that *The Public Burning* author Robert Coover had smuggled a controlled substance from a greenhouse at Brown to a hypertext novelist's kitchen in Iowa City, followed by 'florida.htm' in which the entire proceedings of this very trial were held up for ridicule and scorn.

"Now that's weird," Dirk said.

"That's the postmodern legal system for you," said Scott.

"Can I finish, damn it, please, can I fucking finish without being fucking interrupted? Please, please, fucking please, fucking shut up please and please let me finish?" I asked.

"Sometimes you take things just a tad too serious," Scott said, "and that in turn makes me feel insecure."

I stabbed him through the hand with a fork. He yelped. I finished:

> Though this hypertext novel is widely unheard-of, evidently it is popular in cult fiction circles on the West Coast. None of the editors or reviewers at the *Times* offices have heard of it, but word from our friends at *The New Yorker* is that Arthur C. Danto has been contacted, and will have something in time for the Tuesday edition of the weekly magazine. *Times* editors asked Laura Miller to

review it for this publication, but she has declined. *Times* editors are now in the

process of attempting to reach technology critic Sven Birkerts at his cabin on

Walden Pond.

After Dershowitz had read these pages from this large and offensive literary

monsterpiece, in a very serious, accusatory tone, Cochran, using the remote control

as a device for emphasis, uttered the words which will doubtlessly become the

catch-phrase that will characterize this strange proceeding from here on out: 'If the

Unknown do it, you must acquit.'"

"Hmmm," said Dirk.

"I'll call Marla. We should probably let Frank know too," Scott said.

"Alligators?" Dirk said, befuddled, "Why alligators? Why me?"

"It's your turn," Scott said, and then cupped his bloody hand over the cell-phone and

dialed Marla.

"Dirk, get back to work, Dirk," I sang, and then I had an idea for a sonnet.

Boston <boston.htm>

What can be said about the second time we were in Boston? I'm not sure if anything should be said at all, or if we should keep the strange facts of that visit completely anonymous.

When does one realize that one, and all of one's closest friends, have hit rock bottom? This was after Seattle, after Paris, after Dublin. We had cleaned up our acts in Europe, but only for a short while. Ours were the struggles of true addicts. The substance wanted us, and it grabbed hold of us even after we had swatted it away. Now when I say "the substance" I'm not saying that this was any one substance. It was a lot of substances. We all had our favorite ways of weakening the tenuous threads that connected us to reality. Dirk was at this point heavily into hallucinogenic substances. Somehow Terrence McKenna had become involved in our tour, and in Dirk's cult. They were working together with mushrooms and LSD and other drugs that hadn't even been tested yet. Dirk said that they were trying to destroy the Ego.

I thought that perhaps that could be a good thing. I was smoking tons of pot and back on the heroin. There was just fog and hunger and decrepitude. It was either ugly and cold or warm and womblike. It was all bad though, let me assure you. Not at all pretty. I wanted to crawl out of my own skin. I had become mean and withdrawn. Frank was on uppers and crystal meth. He was also drinking enormous quantities of straight bourbon, Booker's. William was shoveling handfuls of downers down his throat, snorting enormous rails of cocaine, and drinking coffee incessantly. We were all drinking lots of expensive imported beer. We weren't quite all there, our second trip to Boston. We had a problem. No. We had a lot of problems. And they were all serious.

And so when Marla showed up at two in the afternoon one day at the lousy dirty fleabag of a hotel suite we had trashed the night before, she took one look at us and burst into tears. We had missed our meeting with the editors of the *Boston Book Review,* and dinner with Lewis Lapham (for years I'd dreamed of sitting down for a dinner of honey roast ham with the man) was now clearly out of the question. Marla saw us, in our incoherent states, in our filthy rags, reduced, our suite reeking of vomit and offal and hashish and burnt crack and pizza and sweat, and she confronted us and she expressed her love for us and her deep concern and her worries that what she smelled was the stench of death.

We were ashamed, and not just because we had shot the television set the night before, which was immature. We were ashamed because collectively we were a decadent waste of talent, the right train on the wrong track, heading nowhere. We couldn't even come up with decent metaphors any more.

And so we checked into Rehab. Marla helped us with the paperwork and saw to it that we could get in with assumed names and circulated a good cover story about us going to the Andes to do some mountain climbing and to get some rest from the media for a little while. And so that is how we ended up spending some time in the highly exclusive detoxification center known as Tennis House in Boston's Back Bay.

I'm not the kind of writer who would try to capitalize on this experience, who would cannibalize the life stories of those people who led me down a righteous path to sobriety (granted it was a short trip down said path) but do let me say that there were a lot of famous people at Tennis House. There were two Kennedys, and I won't say which ones. There was a cute young Barrymore who'd become famous as a child. There was a talk show host who used to be the

mayor of <u>Cincinnati</u>. And writers? Is there something about the basic structure of M.F.A.

programs that plants in the heads of young novelists the notion that they must be either substance

abusers or recovering addicts? Is it out of some twisted <u>sense</u> of admiration for William Faulkner

or <u>Raymond Carver</u> or <u>Edgar Allan Poe</u>? I won't name any names, except for that of Mark

Amerika, who was quite cruel in the way that he eviscerated me on the <u>courts</u>, winning and

taunting, taunting and winning, day after day after day.

You see, at Tennis House, the recovery program is quite unusual. Sure, there's much of

the stuff you'd expect, the period of being locked in a room alone, vomiting and sweating out the

substance, the pain of withdrawal which has already been documented by more talented writers,

the group meetings which are simultaneous love-and-hate-support-and-confrontation sessions, but

there was no bullshit talk of a higher power here. All references to the Almighty were replaced

with references to tennis. The founder of the facility, a hale, fruity, and ingenious man, loved

tennis. The game was both the carrot and the stick at Tennis House.

Breakfasts were hearty and good and filled with <u>carbohydrates</u> at Tennis House. They

were served at 5 A.M. because we were expected to be showered, suited up, and on the courts for

drills by 6:10 A.M. Drills. Can I describe what torment drills present to the recently recovering

addict? First thing in the morning, the Tennis House ball-launching-at-you machines were always

set full tilt. You would stand alone, on the court, while all the other addicts stood sidecourt

watching you, fearfully awaiting their own turn as you were buffeted by a <u>cruel</u> maelstrom of

yellow balls, or alternatively, like Mark Amerika, who always went first by virtue of alphabetical

order, laughing their asses off as you were battered and bruised, physically tormented, by that

Spalding hailfire. And yes it was effective. Yes it did make you regret the substance and the way

it reduced your ability to swat those damned balls away from you. Many were the addicts reduced to tears. Frank had a horrible time with it. The sprints were even worse.

It was brutal. We had four matches a day, interspersed with meals and A.A. type bull sessions. There was little time for anything but tennis. I never, during the two weeks we were at Tennis House, actually learned how to play tennis, Mark fucking Amerika baiting me the whole time, but I did gain a new respect for the game. It does keep your mind off the substance. My time at Tennis House was an endless cycle of humiliation and exhaustion. <u>Heroin</u> was the furthest thing from my thoughts. Dirk was strangely calm throughout, and he turned out to have a terrific serve, with which he aced many a minimalist writer.

Our fourteenth day at Tennis House, and that is how you lived life there, one day at a time, William and I were in our afternoon doubles match, getting crushed by Amerika and a writer who had been famous in the Eighties for a novel about decadent youth but who had had a lackluster career since, when (and I know the factuality of this has been <u>debated</u> and that some <u>critics</u> have suggested that this was actually some kind of collective hallucination planted in our heads by Dirk who wanted out of Rehab and back into the loving arms of his devoted acolytes, but nonetheless this is the way we experienced it, William, Frank, and I) a large flying saucer came crashing through the roof, crushing Amerika and the other writer. Small green men emerged and whisked the four of us into their vessel. And that is how we were abducted by aliens and spent some time in orbit. But that is <u>another story</u>.

San Diego and the Gathering Cult <sandiego.htm>

The van died shortly after San Francisco. We hitchhiked all the way to San Diego. Scott was now pretty much completely off the <u>heroin</u>, though he was shivering and vomiting with regularity. Larry McCaffery wants to talk; we kept saying to each other, standing on many shoulders of the California Highway System, Larry McCaffery wants to talk. After a bit of a fistfight near Oakland (before the van broke down), Scott and William had convinced Dirk to send his disciples home (though this was not to last, un/fortunately). Obviously, when the van broke down they felt like assholes, and missed Dirk's disciples, who surely would have gotten them out of the jam (or at least Dirk).

We were roaded-out when we met McCaffery up at the University. McCaffery was dressed all in leather, and still down about the Kathy Acker thing. Taken before time. Which he considered a movement stopped. He was in the market for a new movement. He wanted to know what we had to offer.

"Frankly, Larry," Dirk began, "<u>Avant-Pop</u> is by now dead, dead, dead. You need something with more chutzpah! Have you heard of *The Unknown*?" (as he proffered a copy).

"No thanks, you freakin' freak," said McCaffery. "I've already bought two copies, and several for <u>members</u> of my family and inner circle of the hip. It's damn funny, the hypertext, and the book is very good, but that's not a movement, boys, just three guys and their friends having fun. Tangentially transgressive, but no Avant-Pop."

Dirk spat on the ground and began to manifest his <u>telepathic</u> powers. McCaffery began shivering. Scott began to wonder if this was all part of the withdrawal. William began to wonder

if McCaffery was actually named William. McCaffery sat down at his computer and wrote a thirty-page article about *The Unknown,* on the spot. He actually titled it "*The Unknown,* on the Spot," and it was <u>brilliant</u>.

We read at Bluedorn's (sic) and at Dauntiful Books (sic). At Dauntiful Books, Mary Leary, local reading organizer, was very impressed with the way Dirk "handled" the audience. But she got hurt during the press to the stage and she got blamed. McCaffery, though, had in fact caused all the trouble by trying to buy speed off of his grad students, and then distributing it to Dirk (and the rest of us). Not that the idea of a speed-reading was a bad one altogether. By now we were getting fairly tired of these things, so the quicker the applause subsided and the volumes of *The Unknown* anthology were moved off the shelves and autographed three times, the better. In our book. But Dirk on speed caused some kind of hyper-reaction among the crowd members, to whom Dirk was manifesting his <u>psychic powers</u> as he read a series of sestinas. It was a mad rush and bodies were merely obstacles to be stepped on, even nearly crushed, as was the case with Mary, whose leg was broken and who was then chastised by the bookstore owner for making a scene and by McCaffery who said she had "Broken up the mosh pit, Mary, with your pathetic whining."

William and I walked out on the coast and watched the dolphins jumping up from the waves. Something clearly <u>had to be done</u> about Dirk. Something. But what? I phoned <u>Marla</u> and she set us up with <u>a new vehicle</u>, a white Chrysler sedan, which was not the best but which was delivered to our beachside location.

We picked up Dirk, who had already recruited about a dozen new cult members, all of them <u>grad students</u> of McCaffery. They trailed us halfway back to <u>Illinois</u> before we got rid of them.

Fame Has Its Costs <fame.htm>

At some point it had simply gone too far.

We had begun to live out the hypertext.

We were decadent, overfed, shallow and vain.

Scott, who has practically no hair to begin with,

Was traveling with a personal stylist.

Dirk, who for years has prided himself on his poverty,

Spent millions on automobiles. He would never buy just

One at a time, saying that he would need a different color

BMW for each day of the week, to match the Excaliburs.

His followers emptied their retirement accounts,

Leaving nothing for themselves,

Catering to his every whim,

Of which there were many.

William had become mean and withdrawn.

Many of his friends were no longer speaking to him.

It had become necessary to travel with a security guard,

Because we never knew when he might run into another

Writer named William.

We still liked him, of course.

But we had begun to question whether he liked himself.

Frank was the only one who was holding together, more

Or less.

This was still his first flush of fame, since he came late

To the party.

He wasn't like us; we were drowning in it.

He was just beginning to sip it.

He was churning out work like a madman,

Most of it sexually oriented poetry,

Which was odd,

Since Frank had never been a poet before.

He confided to us later that

He was only planning on writing poetry

For a short time, in order to fund his fiction habit.

"Poetry? Hmmm… money there," he said.

His weekends, he would leave us, and make

The rounds of poetry circuits, the writers' colonies,

Readings at small colleges, a panel at the AWP,

All the real high-paying gigs.

His curious mix of postmodern technique,

And a purely lumpen <u>sense</u> of sentiment,

Got him on the cover of *Poets and Writers*.

As writers, we were excited, almost exclusively,

By the dark side of fame, by the idea that we ourselves

Could (and had) become the kind of writers

That we most reviled (in behavior—this is not to say

That any of us had thrown up our arms and started

Writing about people who live in the suburbs and

Have affairs in the house and around the garden—there

Is more than enough of that shit to go around—or that

We had come up with some kind of formula, like some

Unmentionably famous horror writers—or that we would

Ever embrace the sterile academicism of some of the

Lesser metafictionists—or that we even had within us

The potential to write commercial crap like Sidney Sheldon or

The <u>law</u> degrees required to write a

Best-seller, or the kind of odd patience it takes

To write the kind of quaint conventional realism that regularly emerges

From university writing programs, the kind of insular-crowd-pleasing,

Normalized prose that <u>many middle-of-</u>

<u>The-road</u> M.F.A. programs typically encourage, toady little

Stories, each with a prepackaged epiphany that an embarrassed

Joyce would have called petty.) No.

What we had become, however, was overexposed

And commodified. There were plastic action figures. There were

Lunchboxes (Dirk in white Moses robe, William and Scott in black suits,

Frank in surfing gear.) There were more groupies

Than we could count. People with advanced degrees were

Following us around and taking notes. Grad students had dissertations

In the works. We were seen on several different news programs,

And we had done the whole circuit of talk shows.

All that already lagging behind us, grown tired.

The funny thing about fame is that it doesn't really

Lead many more people to read your books,

It just leads them to buy your books,

To talk about them from the reviews,

To fetishize the volume, a coffee table

Ornament at best, a doorstop at the worst,

A famous book leads people

To assume that they know you personally,

Without ever even skimming through the book itself.

We had seen it happen to other writers,

And that was a fate we intended to avoid.

But it sucks you in, all that

Wealth and notoriety.

It had gotten to the point where we

Were disappointed if there wasn't at least

One scurrilous rumor about us

In every issue of the *Weekly World News*.

We were junkies for our own publicity,

We had begun to believe it,

And it in turn had eclipsed us

(Whatever "us" it was that we began with)

We had written ourselves out of our own range,

And become cartoons for the paparazzi to

Animate with flashbulb light,

We had come to expect exemplary service,

And forgotten who exactly we were to begin with.

We squabbled amongst ourselves

Over small details.

We were petty and vindictive.

We all had serious drug problems.

We were becoming stagnant.

We would go for hours, sometimes

Whole afternoons, without writing at all.

We were like <u>rock stars</u> without <u>music</u>.

It was clear.

That something.

Needed to be done.

Luckily, we were writers,

Writing our own lives,

So we could go back and change them,

As we ourselves changed.

We Had Become Media <la2.htm>

If I have to pick somewhere to die, then let it be Los Angeles.

—Dirk Stratton, Dec 30, 1999, scoffing at rumors of a terrorist and/or Secret

Service plot to assassinate his person, at the Palladium nightclub, in Los Angeles.

Dirk, you cannot, no. You will not, yes. Play yourself in any film that I direct.

We got you the midgets. Isn't that enough?

—Terry Gilliam, Director of The Unknown, a film of the Hypertext Novel by the

Unknown.

Odd things happen to book and writers when they become famous.

—Ron Sukenick, in an interview with Larry McCaffery.

Always teasing the disabled, the miserable, Mr. Supposed Liberal Near-Socialist,

while under that sleek Communalist presence lurks the mind of an Arch-

Conservative Reconstructionist, bent on destroying the harmony we have

established through mind control is cooperation, brotherly love and sisterly, our

home is our one planet, we is I, I is we togetherness. Such enemies are dangerous.

Their presence must be scrutinized. The point at which we stop becoming co-

conspirators is the point at which they seek their own destruction. What is God if

not people working for us, with us, in us?

—Dirk Stratton, comment made to Magic Johnson about friend and fellow

Unknown, Scott Rettberg, Dec 28, 1999, at a Los Angeles Lakers-Indiana Pacers

game, at sidecourt.

It has really gotten out of hand. First William's <u>Bungie Jumping Accident</u>, and

now Dirk's large-scale recruitment campaign. More of that in the midst of these

solemn days. Yes, I think the cult has gone too far. I just want Dirk back to

normal. If I've made some comments to the Press that were negative about my

friend's activities, it is only because I am concerned for his mental health, and for

that of his acolytes. We're trying to work with Terry to get this film done, and

these things are all distractions. We need to turn down the media glare, and return

to a celebration of the multimedia, community-based <u>art</u> that this whole project

began with, and turn down the ego factor.

—Scott Rettberg, comment made to Ted Koppel, Nightline, Dec 27, 1999.

Phonies.

—Holden Caulfield, Catcher in the Rye.

I tell you, I hate those lugubrious little f***ers. They stole all my ideas. I had this

thing planned ten years ago. They directly stole my ideas. They *borrowed* things,

if you call it that. Whatever, it was here before it was there. *The Unknown* is not

by or about these three—

—I believe four, isn't it Mark, if you include Mr. Marquardt?

—Whatever, four guys. *The Unknown* is all about Mark Leyner, and I wish the

reading public would wake up and realize and process that before the turn of the

Millennium.

    —*Mark Leyner and Charlie Rose, The Charlie Rose Show, Dec 15, 1999.*

Yes, Mr. Stratton I felt violated me in various ways while I was enrolled in his cult

program. I didn't mind it at the time, but when I think back on how he sort of

crept into my skull, I feel kind of creepy. But live and learn. It's given me some

great material for my next album. No hard feelings, really. It's part of the

danger—the excitement of—living life— you know what I mean?

    —*Liz Phair, interview with Barbara Walters, Dec 21, 1999.*

I have not seen or heard from my daughter for 47 days and 46 nights. This is a

matter of grave concern, to me personally. She has missed her classes at Stanford,

and though she is her own person, with her own thoughts, hopes and fears, just like

any other American, I will not tolerate this kind of mind control. This is not the

way that America should be entering the twenty-first century. I can assure you that

I will do all that is in my power to bring my daughter back to the fold, and back in

school. Chelsea's education is very important to Hillary, and myself, and she is not going to get it at the hands of this Dratton fellow.

—*Bill Clinton, press conference, Dec. 30, 1999.*

William Had Some Problems <bungie.htm>

William, who had, according to all appearances, been just as or even more excited than any of the rest of us about the prospects of seeing our hypertext brought to the big screen as a major studio release, did not, in fact, take well to the atmosphere of Los Angeles. There is a lot of work involved in moving a film from the concept to the can, most of it social work. There are producers to meet, backers to pitch, directors to choose, stars to select and/or woo. The difficulties we encountered as a result of the groundswell of interest in Dirk's cult activities were to be expected, but I had expected better from William. We were all a little apprehensive about moving from a psychic atmosphere described by one critic as "Midwestern Literary Evangelism" and another as "Techno-Pastoral" to one that could only be described as "Bedding Down with Satan." The devil wears a thousand guises in Hollywood, but such are the costs of seeing a dream to its full fruition.

Film was a medium that none of us could even begin to understand, but we knew that it had been the art form of the twentieth century. While we have our understanding of collaboration, in Tinsel Town, collaboration takes on an altogether different pallor; it is the stuff of bitter feuds and power struggles, of profit margins and compromises; it is a messy, twisted business that can drain the soul of a writer. It's just like *Speed the Plow.* Frank and I loved it. We found ourselves in this element and found that we were surprisingly good at manipulating it. Money was being thrown at us from a million different directions, and choices had to be made. Not that money was, at this point in our careers, much of an issue. We could have all lived comfortably, given our modest tastes (with the exception of Dirk) for years, just on the money we

had made from the sales of our anthology. What we wanted was bigger than money. We wanted

artistic <u>control</u>, which is worth far more than any bundle of cash.

Those first couple of weeks in <u>L.A.</u> were hairy. So many pretenders at every turn. Every

night there was a different party that Marla told me was "absolutely critical" for me to attend.

William went only to the first couple: a rather large affair hosted by the DreamWorks people and

a wonderful day out at Coppola's ranch. Then William virtually disappeared, leaving Frank and I

with the primary schmoozing duties. Dirk was, of course, attending parties of his own, hosted by

celebrity members of the faithful: Tom Cruise, Simon LeBlanc, Tito Jackson, Clint Eastwood,

people like that. But film was the furthest thing from their minds: they were hung up on theology.

I was worried about William, and I told Marla so. He had become <u>mean and withdrawn</u>.

He abused waiters, waitresses, and stewardesses with a regularity that we had come to expect only

from Dirk, who had become accustomed to being a living messiah with great expectations and a

lot of "needs." I had not heard from William for nearly a week and a half when I had <u>Marla</u> track

him down via his credit card receipts, which disturbed me. It looked as if he was having <u>fun</u>, but

not the kind of fun you'd expect from William. To wit:

$2,250—Idle Wealth Speedway, San Luis Osbispo

One-day rental of high performance automobile, track time.

$1,500—Swim With the Fishes Aquatic Adventures, Oakland

Scuba diving with killer sharks in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge.

$2,000—Snowy Joe's Dry Cleaning, Compton

Most likely a purchase of cocaine and/or crystal meth, or (highly improbable) the

cost of stain removal from 142 dress shirts, as billed.

$1,555—Fly By Night Skydiving, Sonora, CA

Two midnight jumps (unassisted) from a turboprop at 3,500 feet.

$2,033—Trinity River Rafting

Three-day whitewater rafting expedition in Northern California. Solo.

$3,555—Stuntpower Institute

A weeklong course of stuntman study that included "Safely Falling From a Great

Height," "Through Broken Glass Without Losing Your Ass," "Running Amid

Explosions" and "the Doctor Is Out—Stitching Your Own Wounds."

I asked Marla to have the credit card company give me a call the next time anything

popped up, and they did, and that is how I witnessed William's near-fatal, coma-inducing, bungie

jumping <u>accident</u> in the Sierra Nevadas, at the Royal Gorge. It brings me <u>pain</u> even to think about

it now.

Before William's Accident <bungie2.htm>

I pull up in David Geffen's borrowed Jeep to find William sitting on the ledge with Putzy and Rolpho, whom he introduces as "Bungie Jumping Professionals." They've all got their shirts off. Putzy and Rolpho are two well-built guys with tattoos of grinning skeletons and snakes, black and white and red and green all over, "tribal," they call it. William has a tattoo too, I note, of Gertrude Stein's head, freshly cut into the flesh over his left shoulder blade.

"That's new," says I.

"I got drunk in Tijuana," says William, "with some lesbian bikers. You like?"

I nod my head, though I'm not crazy about the tattoo. Stein's cool and all, but her head on your shoulder? It says "Yes we have no bananas today," underneath the head.

"You wanta jump?" asks William.

"No," says I.

"You want a hit?" asks Putzy.

"Humboldt County Kind Bud," says William, "the real stuff."

I nod my head. Putzy passes the joint. I inhale like Clinton in his younger days. It's great shit. Near-hallucinogenic strength. I waver, and nearly fall off the cliff. Rolpho laughs.

"Looks like youse goin bungie without a cord," Rolpho says. "Splat," he says, "huh-huh-huh. Splat."

"Man, that'd be something," Putzy says, "no brangg, brangg, brangg. Just splat! Man'd that be a mess."

"That's all just macho bungie talk," William says, "don't you worry, bub. These guys are highly trained professionals, right?"

"Three hunert fifty jumps," Rolpho says, "no <u>casualties</u>."

"Uh…" says Putzy.

"A casualty is when someone dies," Rolpho says.

"Uh…" says Putzy.

"As a *direct* result of the jump," Rolpho says.

"Uh, yeah," says Putzy.

"You guys got your own insurance, right?" asks Rolpho.

William nods.

"I'm not jumping," says I. I can barely speak. Two hits of this shit and I'm off in <u>Katmandu</u>. "I don't think you should either, William," says I. "It's dangerous, and we need you back in L.A. Spielberg wants to have a sit-down."

"Oh yeah?" asks William, barely interested.

"Sign this," says Rolpho. William signs it.

"Didn't he make *Schindler's List*?" asks William.

"Yeah, William," says I. "<u>Spielberg</u>! William, Steven Spielberg! He might cut us some major funding. We can't be late for this. Come on."

"Oh and that's more important than my jump?" William asks sardonically.

"Yes! Yes, William, this very well maybe the most important meeting of all of our careers," says I, indignantly.

"Careerist," says William.

"William," says I.

"Yuppie," says William.

"William," says I.

"Jump with me," says William.

"No, William. We need to go," says I.

"Brawk, brawk, brawk, <u>chicken</u> man," says Putzy, "I seen old men twice yer age go over this edge and live to tell the tale."

"Look fucko," says I, "I don't give a rat's ass about your bungie. I'm talking about a meeting with Spielberg. Spielberg!"

"Oh," says Rolpho, "Look, Will, if you don't have time—"

"William!" says William, "My name is not <u>Will</u> or <u>Bill</u> or Billy or Willy. It is William, and I do have time to do this bungie jump."

"<u>Sorry</u> William, I mean, look, if you're not up for it, it's just that it's nonrefundable, you know, so," interjects Rolpho.

"Let's <u>do it</u>," says William.

Los Angeles Media Confusion <lapoem.htm>

Terry Gilliam wants to film the hypertext.

Francis Ford Coppola wants in on the Project, and

James Cameron just sent in a large bid

I don't know, William

I think we should go with Gilliam

Because I really like *Time Bandits* and *Brazil*

And he's got a good sense of surreality

So we could play up the Dada element

On the other hand,

Cameron is a nut on verisimilitude,

So we could count on an in-depth treatment,

And no bullshit from the producers.

And there's always Coppola who let's

Face it is pretty much king out here.

William!

There is media, and I are confused.

Pull out. Pull out of the coma.

So you can help us decide.

The Party of the Millennium <laparty.htm>

It was brisk, for Los Angeles.

The weather was dark, by California standards.

The biggest audience we had ever read to.

In that stadium where the Dodgers play,

The ones in California, not the ones in Brooklyn.

Most of the people were there to see Dirk,

To worship him or just

To see what he'd do next.

Miracles had been recorded.

Excesses had been documented.

His gospel had been translated and distributed internationally.

Many of his adherents were famous.

All the Scientologists had switched over

To the house that Dirk built.

(Tom Cruise had sworn off L. Ron Hubbard, saying that now he was into "real

theosophical literature" and not "that sci-fi new age tripe.")

New Year's Eve is a great time to be in L.A.

As honored guests at the Party of the Millennium

Hosted by Steven Spielberg.

The twentieth century was just about over.

We reflected on what we had done in it

Together, over <u>beers</u> backstage

(Guinness, from our personal keg, in chilled pint glasses),

We put aside everything, our differences,

Dirk and I (and Frank),

To usher in the next thousand years.

William was there, too, still in a coma.

We listened to <u>recordings</u> of him, the *Eclectic Seizure Hour,*

Our first conversation of the Unknown, the audio tape

Of our photo shoot in Chicago

When I was telling him a bunch of lies at the Green Mill,

After the owner yelled at us for taking pictures without permission.

And the cassette of the time

We read his clown/Iraq play on the radio.

We listened to all of these things, and we

Splashed spoonfuls of good Liffey <u>brown</u> on Gillespie's lips,

He didn't wake,

But it made him remember,

I'm nearly sure.

Frank was filling in nicely, and he's always been more stable

Than any of the original Unknown,

A good solid Ringo,

A reliable drummer for our metaphoric laser light show,

So we weren't lacking for talent,

And Dirk still had the psychic powers

Going full strength.

Which helped nearly

As much as it hurt.

Just that afternoon,

He had read Uma Thurman's mind

(She was up there in the front row with Chelsea)

Just for fun.

She was thinking about chocolate

And world peace, how it sounds

Like whirled peas. And she realized it was not her

Thought, but a saying she saw on a

Bumper-sticker on a luxury Humvee when

She was at the shoot of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues,*

Is what Uma thought that last day

Of the twentieth century.

I should have been happy

But it's hard to get into a New Year's extravaganza type of mood,

And to perform

When one of your best friends is lying there,

In a state which leaves him

Completely unable to lie anymore.

Vegetative.

For a fiction writer used to obscuring

The truth, finessing realities, and exploring

The unknown, this is a fate worse than death, some

Would say. Or better. The drool gathers and slowly

Mingles with Guinness,

A small pool in the cleft of William's chin.

The stadium crowd had gathered that day to celebrate en masse

Our <u>collective</u> hallucination, our archaic calendar, our passing of time.

Spielberg went all out with the party.

It cost more than *Waterworld* to throw this Hootenanny.

The theme was "Emerging

From the Swamp of the Twentieth Century."

Those bird dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park* the Perawhatevers,

Mechanical beasts, postmodern Minerva's owls,

Buzzed over the crowd, there were all sorts of soldiers,

Or people dressed that way, from the various sides of

The Second World War, which was creepy, banners were hung,

Their color was purple, and an entire slave

Rebellion was reenacted before our eyes,

On a full scale ship in an Olympic-sized pool while a

Gigantic remote <u>controlled</u>

Shark plucked those dinobirds from the air for snacks, as

A giant balloon <u>alien</u>, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade size

A friendly one, with a Reese's Pieces T-Shirt on,

Circled the Goodyear blimp, showering the crowd with

Bite sized candies while beneath, celebrated

American Olympic track and field runners dodged

Obstacles encountered by Indiana Jones in the Temple

Of Doom. There was only one fatality,

Carl Lewis, who was not, at this relatively late point in his career,

Any longer the fastest man alive, at least judging by

The massive spike ball

Which rolled

Over him.

Given the danger inherent in any spectacle,

And the size of the crowd,

People figured that while

The incident was a tragedy,

It was not, on its own account,

Statistically relevant,

As three children were born in the crowd that morning.

The yin/yang balance at that point still firmly yin

It was like a Woodstock for the upper-middle class,

And fun for the whole family.

There was a lot of hype and togetherness

The bands were mostly good, though Cher's

Voice cracked pretty notably during her

Set with Springsteen ("Hey I Got You Babe/I'm On

Fire.") The surviving members of the

Grateful Dead, though they didn't call

Themselves that, did "these Boots Are Made For

Walking" with Nancy Sinatra. Kenny G. turned out

To do a saxophone version of "Dueling Banjos" with Bjork.

She just used her voice. Other elves were present as

Well, and several albinos, including Johnny Winter who

Did a piece with the Marines' Marching Band. Paul Simon

Was inspiring with Jethro Tull, and Lou Reed brought us down, but in

A good way. The GoGos, the Bangles, Menudo, the Rolling Stones and Meatloaf

All had reunion shows in a special side tent. Surviving members

of The The got into an altercation with surviving members of

The Replacements, which was all but peaceably

Resolved by The Pogues.

Dirk's followers were all packing heat.

The Secret Service Men stared them down.

A concatenation of Louis Farrakhan's followers, Latin Kings,

Hell's Angels, Guardian Angels, the Massad, and the Peace Corps,

A rainbow coalition that was Jerry Brown's idea,

All armed to the teeth, handled security, and there was

Little to no trouble

In the mosh pit.

(You haven't seen anything until you've seen a group of Peace Corps linguists learning

how to garrote an unruly crowd member according to the precise instructions of an Israeli

Intelligence agent in close proximity to a Hell's Angel square dancing with a Guardian

Angel to Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," whilst a Black Muslim calls for them to

"Alabama Left.")

An air of hope, cooperation, and reconciliation did battle with

A miasma of disgust, fear and loathing.

Hope floated, but loathing settled.

Was it coming to a head? an end? a still point?

There was some <u>anxiety</u>.

We went on after Pynchon, on the main stage, at 11:30 P.M., Millennium Eve, <u>1999</u>.

Terrible World!

That was a half hour that will live in <u>infamy</u>.

Pynchon Opened For Us <pynchread.htm>

Pynchon's reading was a little disappointing. Not because of what he read, which was a _brilliant_ chapter from the sequel to _Gravity's Rainbow_ (in which Tyrone Slothrop has become a field-agent for a group of 3 or 4 [the exact number isn't entirely clear] hypertext novelists known as "the Sublime," and is going around the country covertly wiring up secondary schools and major corporate intranets so that their homepages would, at the turn of the Millennium, automatically default to "the Sublime" hypertext novel [-within-the-novel]), but because of the way in which he read it. Everyone assumed, indeed the Press had reported, that this event was going to be a major "coming out" for the infamously secretive novelist. However, after the Metallica set, when they announced, "the inimitable Mr. Thomas Pynchon," thirty-five guys, all dressed in identical black suits and fedoras, all of them with the same exact tan-colored tie with Sony clip-on lavaliere microphone attached, took the stage simultaneously. Most of them looked alike, and they all read or at least lip-synched the passage, so that the vast majority of Americans, present company excluded (Hi Tom) still have entirely no clue what Thomas Pynchon looks like.

I could have sworn I saw William twitch several times during that reading. He's always been crazy about Tom's work, though even after reading it 14 times, he still has absolutely no idea what was going on in _Gravity's Rainbow._

Our 2K Reading <la2kread.htm>

I'm beating around the bush a little here, because what I have to write next brings me <u>so much pain</u>.

We had decided to keep the reading <u>simple</u>. We only had a half-hour, and we needed to be thematic. We all knew what the crowd wanted (some of the ruder acolytes had been chanting, "Dirk! Dirk! We is One. Dirk! Dirk!" all through <u>the Pynchon reading</u>.) They expected it to be the best reading of the Millennium, and they expected it to be mostly Dirk.

The holographic clock that had been lit up in the center of the stadium since nightfall grew larger with each second's click, as did the sound of the heartbeat chronometer. We considered these obstacles to a successful reading, but not insurmountable ones. Dirk wanted to hang backstage until it was "his turn," which made for another distraction, howling faithful disappointed, and groaning and moaning for five solid minutes, until Dirk himself spoke over the P.A. system, ordering the masses to allow us to read, and to pay attention, which they did.

Frank screamed, "Hello, Los Angeles!" and the crowd roared. Then he read one of his poems, "To All the Girls I've Loved Before, Look at Me, I'm Famous Now, Don't You Wish You Hadn't Dumped Me" followed up with his infamous soft-core porn/art poem, "Still Life With My Pecker." Then he and I read selections from William's "<u>Poem</u> For Money," after the roadies and the nurses rolled William's gurney onstage. William didn't move much, but the monitors showed signs of cerebral activity. Then we did the hip-hop song William wrote about sleeping on a park bench while we were in Paris titled, "I'm Drunk and Don't Speak French and Homeless For the Night, Pass Me That Bottle of Red, My New French Friend." The Beastie Boys

came out and scratched the vinyl with us. It was 11:45. The projected hologram clock was about

30 yards high. The telltale heart noise was thundering. The cast of *Stomp!* came out and did a

tap-dance type drum roll while the announcer from the Chicago Bulls announced Dirk. All went

to black and a vast array of lasers pulsed concentric circles of green, red and blue, amoebic

variations, hypnotically pulsing.

Ominously.

Of the Millennium We Sing <ladirkdeath.htm>

In that blinding shaft of yellow light, Dirk sings from the *Gospel of the Unknown,* backed by the Kronos Quartet. Dirk sings "Someone's Always Fucking With My Mirrors" and the crowd goes wild. We think the tensions between Dirk's followers and the Secret Service have dissolved in the flaring harmonic murmurs of Dirk's first platinum A-Side, but then we feel that the tensions are precipitating again. Chelsea Clinton and Uma Thurman are dancing cowboy style, then ballroom style, right up in the front row. I become suspicious of the intentions of one of the Latin Kings nearest them. (Though Dirk's followers generally, or the very least "often," give me the creeps, right at this point, I feel a sharp sense of identification with them). I am torn between my enjoyment of this mass lovefest (Spielberg is just backstage right, visibly *beaming* at my compadre Dirk) and a fear that things have simply gone too far, that something is likely to burst at any moment. Buddy Guy steps in midway through the song, which, in my opinion, just blows the roof off that joint (or would have if it had a roof, which it of course doesn't). Who could not love each other and all fellow humankind when Buddy is singing with Dirk of the dangers of inappropriately adjusted mirrors and of Cartesian doubt of all known sensory apparatus? It is 11:51. The holographic clock is fifty yards high and the heart chronometer's pounding is drowned out only by the wail of the guitar and the floating noise of amplified violins, violas. Dirk's voice almost sounds like that of a singer.

Then the song is done.

Dirk reads from the Book of Signs; a battalion of mimes takes the stage as the musicians exit. Is this really how He intends to end the show, and to end the Millennium? With good

intentions, a decent gospel, and a mob of mimes? So be it. They (the mimes) are all dressed in

purple (which seems both right and wrong). They are people of all nations, of all ages, of all hair

colors and skin tones (Okay, none of this is, obviously, "all" of anything, there are only fortysome

people up there on the main stage, but nonetheless, we're talking about a worldwide diversity type

of crowd.) None wears any makeup. Some of them turn out not to be mimes after all, but ballet

dancers of the utmost grace.

Dirk's followers mouth the words to his most famous gospel, and the mimes work the

movements and enact Dirk's pastoral preachings, along with the ballet dancers, who dance

stunningly well, considering that there is no <u>music</u> outside of the telltale heart. It is more

beautiful than *Swan Lake.* He finishes at 11:59. The holographic clock now fills the whole

stadium. Steven Spielberg joins Dirk, as the mimes prance about circling them, kicking up their

heels and maypole dancing. Together Dirk and Steven count down from

60

59

58

57

56

55

54

53

52

William is still in the coma. Frank is jumping up and down. We're all on the big screen

TV. It's even bigger than the one in New York City on that famous corner which always scares

me when I see it at the end of the evening news broadcast. It's Orwellian.

49

48

47

46

Who could not think about <u>time</u> at a time like this?

43

42

41

40

39

The mimes and the ballet dancers form a tight prancing ring that whirls about Spielberg

and Dirk. The holographic clock is twice the height of the stadium now; they show a shot from

the Goodyear blimp. I think about that. It really was a good year, give or take a few serious

injuries and a lot of mileage.

35

34

33

32

Euphoria. Fear of <u>Y2K</u>. Good riddance, foul century of my youth.

30

29

28

Whole lives spent and ended. Geopolitical arrangements solidified and removed. Ideologies played out, man's inhumanity to man, terrors.

25

24

23

22

There is activity on the monitors next to William's gurney. Frank is laughing un<u>contro</u>llably.

20

My thoughts turn homeward. My mother and father. My <u>niece</u> and my brothers and sister. My grandparents and aunts and uncles. The children I played with when I was young. The two dogs I knew and <u>my cat</u>. My beloved living and my beloved dead.

18

17

16

That circle around the director and my friend, this strange messiah, seems so tight as to be forbidding, so fast it spins to a blur of purple light.

15

14

Will all the machines simply shut down, whir to a halt? Will we return to an agrarian

society? What are people really like "in a state of nature?" Do we really want to find out? Was

William's bungie jumping accident really an accident? A suicide attempt? A mur—

12

11

10

I'm feeling apprehensive. Something is wrong. Spielberg looks panicked. Thirty years

on this blasted mound of rock. Men have walked on the moon, but not on Mars. People are more

concerned with their President getting a blowjob in the Oval Office than the guy with no legs who

asks them for change at 8 A.M., in front of the train station, and they walk by.

7

Here it goes. There's still no cure for cancer.

6

Where will we be in ten years?

5

I can't see Dirk or Spielberg, just a mass of purple palpitating humanity. The monitors

next to William are going crazy. Did he move?

4

How many people didn't live to see this?

3

What will we do after it's all over?

2

Will I ever have children?

1

What kind of world would they make?

The exploding holographic clock, the fireworks, the champagne bottles, the flying corks, the screams of joy, the mass of purple bodies onstage, the flashing of steel, the flashing of steel, the flashing of steel blades, and Dirk's scream rising above all other screams, not screams of joy, screams of pain. William is up and off the gurney. <u>I are confused</u>. There is the flashing steel, the flashing of dozens of blades. It is played out before my eyes and on the Big Screen. I'm rushing towards it, into it, but it is already too late. Dirk lies punctured, stabbed, bleeding from two thousand wounds. His eyeballs rolling across the planks. A body barely held together, chunks of flesh strewn from bones, meat where there was once a man, forty mimes with bloody hands and faces. A wicked smile and evil laughter. William, in his white hospital gown, is splattered with Rorschach test splotches of Dirk's blood. Dirk, who we knew and loved. The murthered messiah. The poet lies dead. There are screams and screams and moans and screams. We are washed in his blood. There are Billy clubs and hands on bodies. There are the sounds of small arms being fired. Purple shrouds shed and tossed into the air, clotted with blood. Discarded daggers with taped handles. There is pandemonium, and then there is weeping.

A shock of calm. Near silence, a gathered mass of humanity, weeping for its collective sins.

That was how that terrible century, the twentieth one, came to its logical conclusion. This is the end of my friend and brother. This is the end of the <u>Unknown</u>. This is the horror. The horror. The horror. And <u>only the beginning</u> of what it would <u>become</u>.

We Thought His Last Wish Silly <dirkswish.htm>

We did not obey Dirk's last wish. We did not have his head removed and cryogenically

frozen, and then have his body reduced to a pile of cinders. We did not do that; it just seemed too

macabre, and the head, to tell you the truth, did not really look worth saving, what with the

eyeballs missing, the nose and ears cut off. Nobody would ever want to wake up looking like

that. It wasn't just that we didn't want to go to the trouble and expense—our access to the body

was fairly well restricted. Dirk was pretty much in a cooler at the F.B.I. evidence lab, for months.

We buried him in a casket when the time came. This pleased his religious relatives. The casket,

obviously, was closed, but I still think the whole head freezing and incineration option would

have been more troubling to us all, in particular for his mother. She had to deal with his

eccentricities in life, I thought, which must have been troubling enough. To extend his bizarre

and troubling rituals beyond his death, I thought, would have simply been too much.

I believe this decision was the right one. Though we still have very little idea which

chemical processes were involved, I'm all but positive that whatever freak accident brought Dirk

back to life would not have occurred if there had been nothing left of him but a frozen head and

some ash in a jar.

Dirk's Spirit <dirkspirit.htm>

After his death, Dirk shed his corporeal form, and floated, like a spirit, only not quite, like a soul, but he didn't believe in that, like a shade, but more the kind you'd sit in under a tree than a ghost, like a, what, like a Jungian archetype, no, like the zeitgeist, that's not it exactly, it is difficult to describe, this thing that Dirk was after he had been so brutally slaughtered, pureed on the altar of circumstance, made a sacrificial offering of, carefully excised from the map of human endeavor, no, that's not it, that's too much to say that, for indeed, if anything, his loss was his gain, as it were, in terms of the popular consciousness, in the way that these things happen to artists after they are dead, as had happened to William Gaddis, whose *A Frolic of His Own* began flying off the shelves soon after his life-force had expired, whose works were suddenly being taught in freshman composition classes the world over, yes, Dirk too, this had happened to, as Oprah had the rest of us on her show to promote the anthology and to discuss the latest Unknown title, *The Teachings of Dirk,* as women wearing black veils were gathering in town squares across this great nation and others to mourn, as old men were seen weeping in their steins of domestic beer, as Clinton, nearly out of office, himself offered words of reconciliation and condolence, as children everywhere, boychild and girlchild, born fresh unto the Earth, were newly baptized "Dirk" and "Dirkina" and "Dirkelle" and "Strat," as an amateur astronomer, working late into the night, gazing at the stars in between line breaks of "the Bland Taste," spotted a new comet in the night sky and assigned it the appellation of "Stratton's Star," so it went, and this was not a small breath of acknowledgment, this was not fifteen minutes of fame, this was hours of it, and it went on, and so it went, and he did not, he would not, fade from it, and his message was spread, and

there were many in his tribe as they cried out in early hallucinogen-drenched <u>mornings</u>, "We are

Dirk! We is one!" and it was as if the whole thing had been <u>planned</u>, or rather not planned, but

according to a pattern which rose out of the chaos, and children were planting trees in his name,

and I am not avoiding here the impossibility of life after death, I am embracing it, for who am I to

say, who am I to deny, that Dirk's was a living spirit, and one which traveled, and soared, and

sank, through multitudes, in those earliest moments of the twenty-first century, as Dirk was a

pilgrim who had finally made it to Mecca, bowing before the great stone at the same time as he

was a monk levitating inches in a monastery in Tibet at the same time as he was a banker

watching his Internet stocks come crashing down at the same time as he was an electrician

working twenty-four hour days for weeks at a time as the grids slowly returned to normal function

at the same time as he was an Ethiopian with no <u>shoes</u> running across the cracked and barren

earth, dreaming of distance, at the same time as he was a nun momentarily contemplating a man

whom she might have loved had she not taken <u>the vow</u> at the same time as he was an angry

teenager flipping burgers for a national chain and seeing no future in the world we had made at

the same time as he was a note in a song that the whales made as they sang to each other a song of

woe for their brothers who had passed, and were dying, in the devastated ocean, as part of Dirk

occupied the taste buds on the tongue of a three year-old girl eating an ice-cream sandwich for the

first time, and another part of him absorbing the pain of an eighty-five year-old woman as the

explosion tore through her home in <u>Kosovo</u>, killing her husband of sixty years as the brick wall

came crashing on his side of the bed, Dirk was in her wail, Dirk was in the streets, dancing with

the <u>half-naked</u> crowds in Brazil, Dirk was a woman in the south of France who had just invented a

new epistemology, who is to say that he was not there, that he was not in all of these people, that

he was even in the lemurs in Madagascar, this is what he claimed, this is what he said, this is what

he felt and I would be a liar if I said that I looked in his eyes as he told me these things and did

not believe that they were true. There were no scars from pounded nails, there was no fingering

of the slices in his side, but he said what he said with <u>feeling</u>, he said it once more, with <u>feeling</u>,

and I know that what he said was <u>true</u>.

In Thailand We Liked to Watch <thailand.htm>

During the summer of <u>Ought Two</u> we were in Thailand.

I can't recall the state of our <u>moral</u> <u>decrepitude</u>, nor our precise location.

I believe that we were behaving in a completely respectable fashion, aside from <u>the drugs</u>. Our collective youth had worn us of any sophisticated oats-sowing and what not, and though we were sweaty and incoherent, smoking from a Hookah in Thailand, our behavior was, aside from that, quite the behavior you'd expect of normal writers on the precipice of their middle ages.

Admittedly we had developed a tendency to fall out of schedule on <u>our tour</u>.

I regret that we missed our reading in Hong Kong. That would have been <u>large cash</u>.

We were in the jungle, in a hut. There were all sorts of tropical birds flying about that we could watch through the doorway. And monkeys too, William tried to pet one and he <u>got bit</u>.

There was more high-end weed than we could possibly want <u>to smoke</u>, tied onto tight sticks.

We drank <u>coffee</u> flavored with coconut milk.

We were supposed to be in New Zealand, but we were just <u>bushed</u> and enjoying our time in Thailand.

Anyway we were sitting around in that hut, not far from the temple, where Dirk had just come down from on high from… the Monks had a great deal of respect for Dirk for <u>obvious reasons</u> I'll not go into here.

We must have stayed there two weeks. People kept bringing us exotic fruits and <u>fresh linens</u>.

What I remember of that time is that Z working with our engineers back up in the lab in Bear Creek had sent us the iWatch plugin, which enabled us to watch people reading our hypertext novel.

It was a very cool device, though I'll confess as I reach back into the trove of time that it did lead to a kind of perverse weird narcissism.

Now don't get me wrong, this didn't let us peer back through the screen of people who were reading us, it just let us see where they were coming from and what paths they took while they were reading. But I was sure that the hit from Boston came from Robert Pinsky.

There was a period of depression. Not depression exactly, more sponginess, moodily slipped into an atmosphere womblike and yet still allowing for walks filled with wonder.

Dirk told us, in one hour, after he had walked to the temple, of his theory of the reason why the FBI had chosen midgets to assassinate him. But that is another story. We were just glad he had been resurrected.

We were watching the map on the screen; we were watching people read us. A man in Bangladesh read the Boston hotel scene. He read it for thirty-seven seconds. We speculated on what sentence he had arrived at, concluded he stopped at "Hefe-Weizen."

A government official in the Department of Defense very carefully read the Rupert Murdoch beheading scene, and the DC things, and then appeared to be going about a methodical personal-destruction-information-gathering campaign focused upon each of us.

A woman in Canada spent a great deal of time reading Henry Miller and the eighties scenes. Although we only knew of the Internet server she was logging into, we sensed by the way

she read that she was female. She read intelligently, carefully, she used the navigation devices and made a careful collage of our memories.

It was wonderful watching the map of people reading us. It almost made us feel like we didn't need to write.

Or… that we should feel obligated to write each of our readers specifically. And so we did. We sat about the hut in orange robes and sandals. Somebody shaved our heads. And we wrote email to our readers, which we did not send, for fear of being discovered.

We were sitting there, over their shoulders. And we loved them, if not individually.

What Did You Expect, the Unknown? <unknownspeaks.htm>

The Unknown Speaks!
by Frank Marquardt
Illustrated, 335 pp. New York:
Grove/Atlantic. Paper, $13.50
Book Review by Sean Kelly

The last word in *The Unknown Speaks!* is given to <u>Brian Hagemann</u>, the network

supervisor who first hosted the hypertext novel in a hidden folder on the Peace Education server

at the University of Cincinnati. "*The Unknown,*" he concludes, "wasn't influential at all."

Everyone currently employed as a comedy writer in Silicon Alley is a geeky alumnus of a

low-rent state university whereas, until 1999, everyone employed as a comedy writer in Silicon

Alley was either some ivy league smartass or a graduate of the School of Hard Knocks, preferably

<u>Brooklyn</u>. And the reason for this change in hiring practices of the Humor Moguls is that

William Gillespie, Frank Marquardt, and Scott Rettberg all went to <u>Illinois State University</u> for

their Masters degrees, and Rettberg joined Dirk Stratton at still another low-rent state university,

the University of <u>Cincinnati</u>.

Otherwise, sad to say, Marquardt has a point. Once, before our wondering eyes, a

sequence involving Dirk <u>in orbit</u>, being fed through an umbilical and forced to write was followed

by a discussion of <u>feminist</u> philosophy and <u>vomiting</u> in an airplane. Then and there many of us

assumed that <u>some kind of revolution</u> was being broadcast on the Internet, that the world—at least

the little world of hypertext comedy—was <u>changed utterly</u>, But the Unknown's style of

cognitively punning, surreal continuity ("but how do we explore the spaces between

understandings of things?") has had no lasting influence on hypertext comedy. From "Saturday Night Net" through "In Living Cyberspace" and beyond, online comedies still <u>begin with a premise</u> and then proceed (mostly <u>downhill</u>) to the punchline and Flash animation; and a majority of hypertexts on the Internet continue to be spoofs of other Web sites, despite the Unknown's demonstration that laughs could be extracted from subjects like <u>brawling poets</u>, <u>Shakespearean</u> bowling, the <u>death of rock stars</u> and <u>bookselling monopolies</u>.

<u>Whatever</u> the Unknown were doing, it was satire. (The plethora of topical political references accounts, in part, for the hypertext's quality of datedness. It seemed as if *The Unknown* was already dated the day it was launched, a throwback to a forgotten age that perhaps never existed.) Much of the humor, as when a dowdy housewife complained, "Kids were very different back then. They didn't have their heads filled with all this <u>Dirk Stratton dualism</u>," or when <u>William Gaddis</u> materializes to play pool with the Unknown, in a scene with almost no dialogue. This form of drollery—call it "<u>Pynchon</u> Goes to the Laundromat"—has been a staple of American, or at any rate *New Yorker*, humor since the days of S.J. Perelman and Peter De Vries.

Scenes from *The Unknown* have been recycled on Comedy Central and public television, and A&E is currently doing the series on Saturday nights, although with mood-shattering <u>commercial interruptions</u>. According to *The Unknown Speaks!* it's lucky the hypertext ended up being seen here at all. "Those guys couldn't change a flat tire, much less write their ways out of a cardboard box." Marquardt writes, explaining that without the scenes he personally authored, the hypertext novel would have been, "absolute drivel. Utterly, beyond the point of redemption, drivel and slander."

This reviewer did note a certain, almost strange, sense of jealousy in Mr. Marquardt's narrative of the turbulent rise and fall of the Unknown, "there they were drinking champagne <u>at Brown University</u> and hobnobbing with visionaries and celebrities and where was I? Where was I? I was still working, chained to a desk at day and furiously working at night towards the mastery of such skill as they would never know. I was a writer, damn them. And now, and now, they are gone. Where's *The Unknown* now? It's not up there on the bestseller list with the *Fortune Cookie Guide to Good Living V,* now is it?" On the other hand, warmth often shines through in Mr. Marquardt's rendering of his <u>presumably deceased</u> comrades: "Three guys those were guys."

Typing Test for Unknown Employment <typetest.htm>

(Please complete in 5 minutes)

When you are ready to look for your first job with the Unknown, you will realize that you need <u>job leads</u> with the Unknown and must know what is expected of you in the Unknown <u>corporate headquarters</u>. Beginning Unknown workers quite often fail to give enough time or consideration to determining the kind of Unknown work in which they are interested and for which they have competence. After you determine what parts of <u>the Unknown</u> you want to work with and are competent to work in, use a variety of job leads to obtain initial job employment. These leads could be found buying Dirk a series of drinks, including buttermilk, or by impressing Scott with your children's book of branching story paths and stunning visuals, or by writing a complex <u>formal poem</u> with 20 consonants for William's "<u>Newspoetry</u>" site, or even by dropping off a substantial amount of your favorite illicit substance along with a witty or <u>quixotic</u> note.

Your teacher will explain what your school will do to help you, but do not depend on the school alone. Realize the value of <u>many leads</u>, and follow them up quickly. If you can do so, study a sample online application blank before applying for a job as you will likely have to write <u>a character sketch</u> before you are

given an <u>interview</u>. From the study of the blank you will soon

realize that it is necessary to be <u>concise</u> and creative in making

up the <u>information</u> asked for. Don't always make an appointment

if you expect to have an interview. Too many beginning workers

think that this must be done. Sometimes it's better to simply

drop by the Unknown offices with a bottle of expensive liquor.

The main purpose of a job interview is to help the Unknown

determine the sort of person you are and just what you can do for

the Unknown and what you expect in return.

Take your credit cards with you for your interview. Also

take a <u>data sheet</u> that lists your school marks, except for those

that you don't wish to disclose, a vague description of your

skills, two or three references (drinking buddies or casual

acquaintances will suffice) and the names of any previous

employers, along with notes on why you don't want to work for any

of those bums anymore. Realize you may have to answer questions

about your hobbies or <u>personal habits</u>, especially if they are

peculiar, or make for good story material. When you go for the

interview for the new job at the Unknown, be prepared to take

tests that may or may not prove your competence, or may prove

nothing at all. No matter how expert the Unknown interviewing

you, she or he will probably want to have some paperwork to

shuffle around, as she or he cannot be sure of the soundness of

her or his judgment without some irrelevant test results to aid in checking her or his appraisal of your work competence, even though most of the Unknown skill tests, such as the one in basic Swahili <u>grammar</u>, will have little to do with whatever job you are applying for, and may in fact be <u>impossible to complete</u>.

You can expect a part of the employment test to be on English, spelling, and arithmetic. The Unknown expect that you will know how to use a computer to spell-check a document, and though none of the partners are particularly adept with arithmetic, they have <u>a great deal of respect</u> for people who do have math skills. If the job requires skill in typewriting, the test will undoubtedly call for a timed writing and for the typing of a letter or two and a tabulated report. Don't be surprised if the Unknown take these papers from you and then ignore them completely. They were probably just assessing how you act <u>under stress</u>, or maybe they wanted to keep you busy while they finished a round of golf on their computers. Such a test is not very important, and could be thought of as a routine <u>quiz</u>.

Once they are on the job, beginning workers seem to have difficulty in spelling, in filing, and in using the telephone. The Unknown suspect that this is because of <u>drugs</u>, <u>boredom</u>, and uncomfortable headsets. Some find their basic skills quite good, but when they have an unexpected problem or see one of the

partners in a <u>compromising position</u> or under the influence, they don't seem to realize that they should just ignore whatever they just saw and continue to do whatever they were doing. This all adds up to trouble.

There is a need for good personal relations with your fellow workers. This is why we started the Unknown softball team, and this is also why the Unknown can so often be found together with their employees in neighborhood taverns. A jealous worker can cause a lot of friction. Cliques that exclude some just because they are not liked, or don't write enough, or resort to cliché, or are just plain jerks, will cause trouble too. Where people work together in a busy Unknown office, <u>some may antagonize</u> others, and yet they may not know it. It pays to have good personal relations.

(If you have already typed this far, you either type too fast or should check on the person giving you this test. Please do that now. In the event that the person giving you this test is <u>found unconscious</u> in a pool of drool on the desk, or on the floor near the desk, please lightly check the pulse of the person giving you the test. If the pulse of the person giving you the test is positive, please pour some of the water found in the cooler in the reception area into one of the white paper cones attached to the side of the water cooler. There is a bottle of

aspirin on the desk to the left of the water cooler, and there

are also several packages of Tums. Please take the cone of

water, one aspirin, and two Tums, back to the person who is

giving you the test. Shake the shoulder of the person in the

pool of drool lightly, and offer him or her the water and

tablets. You are hired. In the event the pulse of the person

giving you the test is light, or negative, or if you are not able

to revive the person in any way, please immediately call Marla

[*1 on all office phones], and tell her to send help quick.

Thank you for typing. You may now stop typing. Please stop now.

Stop typing. Thank you.)

The Unknown Should Be Banned <argessay.htm>

For my argumentative paper topic I will write about the Unknown, and how the government should not be giving funds (money) to guys like these, and how it should be banned. That's not "art" and most artists are just weird people who call themselves that so they can walk around with attitudes and dress funny anyway. Furthermore, I will raise counterpoints to points that I make because like <u>Professor</u> Stratton always says, "An opinion is just a <u>balloon</u> floating about in the aether until it is tied down to earth with the strong rope of logic, only then is it an argument" and also he says, "there are two sides to any equation." And like we say in marketing class from that *Art of War* book, "To win you need to understand your enemy."

First of all, the Unknown is bad because there is:

- <u>Swearing</u>

- <u>Violence</u>

And worst of all, there is

- <u>Drugs</u> and also some

- <u>Sex</u>

All you need to do, my friend is <u>open</u> up the Good Book and turn to the Ten Commandments. How many of the Ten Commandments do these guys obey? Maybe three.

Now some people might say, "but what they're doing has nothing to do with <u>religion</u>" and I say they're wrong, because that's <u>what God is</u>, is everything, and everywhere he's watching over and everyone will be judged. You can't tell me I'm wrong, only that you don't believe.

So Professor Stratton says that we can't base our arguments completely on religion cause this is a <u>state</u> school and so second of all, I want to say that the Unknown should be banned because kids could see it.

Kids could see the Unknown on the Internet, which is on the world wide web and has email and netscape. Let me tell you, you can get anything on it. My roommate was looking at some pictures that would make my mother have <u>a heart attack</u> if she knew what was going on in today's <u>society</u>! There are <u>millions of people</u> on the Internet and most of them are kids! Bill Clinton is putting it in the schools and you know how he is with morals! There should not be internets in schools except colleges if you ask me but that is another argument. But what I am saying is that kids could see the Unknown and get infected. There are ideas in it that are not right for American youth and these people are bad examples!

Now some people might say that there is filtering software that could stop the Unknown from being read by kids <u>in today's society</u>. I say that those people are living in a dream-world, because that software doesn't work just listen to what they say about it on the news.

My last and most important point is that the Unknown should be banned because they are bad for America. America is a great and big nation. These guys make <u>fun</u> of the people we elect, which is illegal, and also they even pretend that one of them is a god! I don't know about you but in my book <u>that's sacrilege!</u> And that's a crime too. They even say once that they want to <u>replace the highways</u> with bicycle paths and make everybody go to the doctor on trains! These people are dangerous and my Dad even sent me a column by the famous writer George Will that said so!

Now some people might say some hooey about the first amendment, which is about the freedom of the press and I say these guys aren't the press! Whatever. <u>These guys</u> are three guys

on the Internet and they're distributing filth and smut and bad ideas. They're not reporters, so they don't have what the liberal media calls freedom of the press; I looked it up.

In conclusion, the Unknown is bad for America and so is the National Endowment for the Arts. Why don't these people just get jobs instead of going after our hard-earned tax dollars?

And yet… <andyet.htm>

And yet the vampirical *Unknown* thrived on its own blood as the critics shed it. The day

Kakutani tore them a new one in the *New York Times* they would later remember as the one of the

fullest they had lived, firing off impassioned defenses of the choices they had made while writing

The Unknown, choices that not a single one of them had realized they were making at the time.

Truth be told, the pattingdog praise occasionally and casually tossed their way never roused the

Unknown as much as the bitter faceslaps ripe with envy. In the end those were more fun, in that

they elicited a response, inevitably generating new writing that absorbed the criticism and

rebirthed it as fiction.

And always the critics had some good points. The link does bleed. The editorial process

was shoddy. To a comment "I can't see why anyone but the Unknown and their friends would

want to read this," a pensive Dirk would reply, "You know, I've been thinking about that." To a

charge of excess, a drunken Scott would reply, "Goddammit I should have listened to my mother

and stuck to post-Carver minimalism." When Frank Marquardt heard of the review that accused

the Unknown of exercising poor content control, he would nod his head in rapid and ferocious

agreement and mutter, "Drivel. Slander. Absolute bloody drivel." Gillespie would sneer at

Rettberg and look shamefully to the dirt every time the Unknown was accused of namedropping.

And so the Unknown welcomed the poison of even shoddy criticism into their systems

and built antibodies of text within the body of text that surrounded them. The rhetoric of failure

was always already hopelessly intertwined with the forward progression of the story *The*

Unknown was always becoming. And as the landscape spread ever-wider the Unknown were hot

coals dwindling on an abandoned campsite somewhere off in the distant horizon, at times little more than an imperceptible speck in the rearview mirror of a squalid VW Bus, until the wind came, another critic's stinging <u>rebuke</u> stoking the fire just as it was stoked every time one or another of the Unknown would shoot an angst-ridden diatribe to his fellow authors. Sturm and Drang fueled the Unknown. Never penitent, always in catharsis.

And the Unknown always bought drinks for the graduate students who wrote their Master's Theses on *The Unknown*, whether they agreed with the conclusions or not. Expensive drinks, in classy bars. The Unknown were known to blow a week's wages on surf, turf and accoutrements for any doctoral student who had the courage to make *The Unknown* the subject of her <u>dissertation</u> in any discipline.

Portions of Interviews with the Unknown (various) <interviews.htm>

"what <u>bugged</u> me most was the way that *The Unknown* ended up driving a wedge between us."

"yeah, he was like that, he would dive headlong into things, sometimes it would work out, sometimes he would end up with a head <u>injury</u>."

"were plenty of days when it stopped being <u>fun</u> enough to continue."

"and then it was a <u>success</u> more or less and we should have stopped that day."

"who knows maybe he's <u>addressing</u> the UN. I stopped caring a long time ago."

"if you see that <u>bastard</u> tell him he owes me fifty bucks and a fifth of Bookers."

"no there was never any <u>infidelity</u> in that sense though each of those two had it in them."

"why is it that everyone wants to ask me about the <u>beverage</u> thing? Buttermilk coats the stomach."

"when the truth was that each of us was in the midst of a kind of <u>drying-out</u> period during most of that time."

"can't believe he ended up in the <u>clergy</u>, after all of that."

"nobody believed he was real until his byline started popping up in <u>Wired</u>. Even then, a lot of people thought it was part of an elaborate Unknown hoax."

"sometimes I wonder about Z. Last I heard he had some kind of civil service job in <u>Southern California</u>. Sorting mail, I think."

"she ended up going back into the law after they got married. Intellectual property. Did a lot of work for Dirk's Internet <u>company</u>. Before it went bust."

"it was like he got <u>addicted</u> to it, and he couldn't stop, couldn't move forward or go back."

"without a <u>spiritual</u> component, you may as well be snorting cocaine. I'm not sure if he ever caught on to that."

"finally, I consider him a <u>fake</u>, essentially. Loud talker but when it came to the writing he just wasn't there."

"once it started getting taken seriously that opened up all sorts of <u>problems</u>."

"could see it coming. They didn't realize that it takes real effort to stay <u>young</u>."

"myth. And we were consciously doing that. The irony is that the part everyone thinks was made up, about the magic mushrooms and the LSD and the 36 hour bourbon binge, was absolutely <u>true</u>."

"catharsis, yeah, I could buy that. It was like the Unknown came at this critical vacuum time for each of us in a different way."

"had to. Somebody finally needed to burst that <u>bubble</u>."

"of sheer idiocy. Of course no <u>agent</u> would touch it."

"and he was insane. Then, lo and behold, there it is, just like he said. He did it again. But that doesn't change the fact that he was <u>insane</u>, even destructive."

"the worst of times. Who are we to whine about that? Jesus, do you know how many people were getting slaughtered in Eastern Europe? in the <u>Middle East</u>? right down the street?"

"it got to be too much, nothing but picnics in <u>Urbana</u>. So I unsubscribed."

"couldn't tell what was bullshit and what was sincere."

"should have gone on that tour in Australia. That would have been fun."

End Construction <endconstruction.htm>

Garraway's Coffeehouse • London, England • November 28, 1701

Dirk, Scott, and William, having been marooned in the earliest days of the eighteenth century as the result of Dirk spilling Gin on the TimePilot, have made due for nigh on three months by working as pamphleteers. Each week they deliver the Stationers Scandalous sheets telling of Phantastik Sojourns in lands yet imagined, which are printed before the Sabbath and distributed by mercuries of all sexes, sorts and sizes, two pence apiece, to a waiting audience on the Streets and in other places of Publick resort, and also in the Coffee Houses.

Drinking glog and smoking Virginia tobacco from Meerschuam pipes, the Unknown are debating the publication of certain Printed Matter laid before them, as they are wont to do on a Tuesday. Around them pyrates, usurpers and experimental philosophers of ill-repute sit before their own scandal sheets, spreading gossip about the nature and propriety of the facts or rumors disseminated by them in the week before.

Born Hacks, the Unknown churn out a new stack of pamphlets each week: telling Romantick Tales of Adventures Beyond the Seas, Three Centuries hence, in a place of Make-Believe when Amerika is a nation separate from the Crown, wherein the Hacks' very owne images are projeckted through a device of peculiar opticks onto a screen as the shadows of a dancing flame are cast upon the wall in Cities with such names as Lost Angles. The Stationers and the booksellers provide ample beer, mutton, and rashers for this Mysterious trio of Hacks and on certain occasions even greet them in their Parlors for talk of Politicks and Philosophy.

Christopher Wren and sometimes even the President of the Royal Society Sir Isaac Newton

discourse in heady matters of Physicks with the Unknown Hacks, who are warmly greeted as true

Curiousities oft known to provide hours of Amusement with tales of themselves bewitched by

Extraordinary Elixirs.

Dirk works at manuscript, quill ascrawling while Scott and William argue.

S: Fudd? Fudd? What have we come to, that Fudd is distributed in the Streets under the

imprimatur of the Unknown? No offense, Dirk.

W: The mercuries report that Dirk's libretto doth selleth very well. Indeed, mightily well,

such that match-girls can be heard tweeting it about the Commons.

S: Jesus, would you stop with the fake accent? And what's with this Disc Golf sequence?

In Hawaii? How does that advance the central plot of the nov—

W: Novels haven't been invented yet.

S: Right, right. Serial Phantasy.

W: Nor has disc golf, though Wren, having met with great Amusement upon receipt of

this Fancy, hath sworn to design Throwing Discs to our specifications.

Dirk cocks an eyebrow and ceases scrawling.

D: Really?

W: Indeed. Glog?

D: Sure.

S: Me too please. What are you working on, Dirk?

D: A sonnet.

S: About the Restoration?

D: No. It's about Bugs Bunny.

S: Ye Gods!

D: Homesick again?

S: I have not heard my lover's voice for nearly ninety days.

There is some commotion as Christopher Wren rushes towards the Unknown's table carrying a double latté. He bumps into William, who spills glog on the copies.

D: Ruined! Ah well.

CW: Goodly Unknown! Have ye heard the scandal spilled recently about St. Paul's Churchyard, legends of ill repute staining your very owne names?

W: What ho?

After using the remainder of Dirk's ill-fated poeme to sop up the spill, Wren unrolls a printed notice of poster-size.

An Advertisement of Mr. Marquardt, about the Loss of many of his Writings: Adress'd to Mr. *J.T.* to be communicated to the those friends of His, that are *Unknown*, which may serve as a kind of Preface to most of his Mutilated and Unfinish'd Writings.

As for the Report that doubtless has reach'd your ears, of the Loss of several of my Manuscripts, and the Defacing of divers Others, 'tis but too true: and I am very sensible of it. But yet 'tis not barely upon my own Account that am so, but very much upon that of my inquisitive Friends, and Mr. *J.T.* in particular. For I cannot but be troubled *that* I find my self disabled to answer the Expectations they had, that I should gratifie their Curiosity, by entertaining them with several Tracts upon Philosophical Subjects: And *that* some unwelcom Accidents that have of late befallen me, oblige me to dissuade them from expecting henceforward that I should present them with almost any Treatise, Finish'd and Entire. When not long since I had occasion to review and range my Writings, I found to my Suprize, as well as Trouble, that I wanted four or five Centuries of Experiments of my Own, and other Matters of Fact, which from time to time I had committed to Paper, as they were made and observ'd. How all these should come to be lost, whilst some other Centuries of Notes and short *Memoirs*, some of them Speculative and others Experimental, escap'd, I can as little declare, as recover them. It brings me a great deal of sadness to speculate that it might possiblie be mine own brothers in the Unknown who have made off with these Discourses, but reports have come to me that those penny-sheet *Hacks* known as Mr. *W.G.*, Mr. *S.R.*, and Mr. *D.S.,* have spoil'd my owne reputation by asserting that certaine workes of my owne auth'rship belong to them. I contest this forgerie, and demand it brought to a stop. Likewise, I hear tales that certain workes of ill-repute have been *Hack'd* in my owne name by these Pyrates of my goode name. Pleafe report any knowledge of these despicab'l and treachr's actes of Plaigiarie to Mr. *J.T.* at Spread Eagle Inn, who actes on my behalf in this matter. May God have Mercy on their souls!

S: Frank?

CW: So you have heard of this man? Surely what this broadsheet implies is not true?

W: That's just Frank. He bears some grudge against our pennysheet, which has seen such great distribution around the churchyards and bear pits.

CW: So Ye did not secret away his writings to claim them as your own?

S: Chistopher, Christopher, my good man, you see us in here every day working diligently on our own works Comick and Philosophical. Surely you don't think that that we need the words of this Frenchman—this *crapaud*!

CW: 'Twould indeed surprise me, you seem men of great virtue. But you must make haste to dispell these vile rumours. The coffee houses of London are alight with the news, and even the Royal Society has heard some whispers that you are Charlatans as a result of it. Make haste to reply. Your very name and the import of your Experiments are at Stake.

D: Where is this Spread Eagle?

S: And who is this *J.T.*?

The three leave the coffee house, sinister voices whispering of pyracy all about them. Wren hails a taxicarraige, which forthwith comports the four gentlemen to Spread Eagle Inn on Gracechurch Street. At the Spread Eagle, who should be sitting at the bar dressed in black preparing to dig in to a Ploughman's lunch matched with the house strong brew but Joseph Tabbi, editor of the *Electronic Book Review*.

S: Tabbi?

CW: So this Dutchman is behind the slander?

S: Beg pardon. Joe Tabbi, Christopher Wren, an Architect and Experimental Philosopher of some considerable repute. Wren, Tabbi, an Editor, Critick, Flaneur and Provacateur of some repute overseas.

JT: Pleasure. I know your work.

CW: I know you not. So this libel-spreading Dutchman purports to be your friend?

D: Christopher, all our friends spread libel on our account. Come over here, boy, have a cigar. Just arriv'd from the New World.

W: So Tabbi, did Marquardt really send you?

S: And how did you get here?

JT: Two pints for the Hacks. Gentleman: a word?

S: By all means.

JT: Wasn't Marquardt who sent me, tho I was sent. Hadn't heard from Rettberg for some weeks, and thus concerned, made an exploratory visit to your Unknown <u>office</u> where I found this device.

W: Aha. The lost TimePilot.

JT: Made a quick study of it and spent some weeks in an NEH Summer Symposium twenty years in the future, that is in 2021, in Fargo, North Dakota, where I learned some dreadful news of the consequences of your behavior.

S: What could we have done? Does disc golf take off during the American Revolution?

JT: No. It's not so much a matter of what you did and what you didn't stop doing.

W: Shrooms? Absinthe? Hemp? Glog?

JT: No. *Writing*. Writing *The Unknown*. You never stopped writing *The Unknown*, any of you. It grew and grew, like a cancer. At first, it drew quite a bit of critical attention. Then the critics got sick of *The Unknown*, because it never stopped growing, scene after scene, year after year. It sprawled on and on, and never arrived at a destination. The detritus… the fact of the matter is that, in the future, *The Unknown* takes up most of the Internet. You can't do a search on Google anymore without getting smacked in the face by it.

W: So we're famous in the future?

JT: Famous? In the future you're *reviled.* Graduate students who wrote their dissertations on your work in '02 found that their work was completely outdated by '03. You made a mockery of the idea of literature, so much so that people decided that it was better not to read *anything* purported to be literary, for fear that they might run across another reference to or in *The Unknown*. In the future, the MLA is bankrupt and the verge of collapse, because *The Unknown* has driven the majority of its customers away. Nobody wants to read anymore.

S: Gee, that's awful.

Dirk, overhearing this discussion, sends Wren on his way and orders an ale of his own.

D: So in the end, *The Unknown* is bad for the kids?

JT: Only those who can read. Few are left in the future that you've made. Most of the books were burned in retaliation, and text was eventually banned from the Internet.

S: Oh man. Well, what can we do about it?

JT: You can do what you should have done years from now. You can come back with me and end construction.

W: End Construction?

JT: That's right. End Construction. Cease and desist. Not go changing. Fix *The Unknown* once and for all, and print your book, and be done with it.

D: Stop writing?

JT: Pause for a moment. Arrange. Print. Bind. Send to circulating libraries <u>overseas</u>. Leave *The Unknown* to its rightful place in the margins of literary history. And move on to the next project.

There is a moment of solemn silence. The Unknown eye each other cautiously.

S: There's been talk of this before. William asked me to stop, and I stopped, and then *he* started again.

W: And then I stopped and then *he* started again.

D: Don't look at me. I was at work on my Warner Bros. sestina series when they dragged me back in again and then we got the TimePilot and off we were to the Paleolithic — wait just a gosh darned minute—

S: What is it, Dirk?

D: This isn't a scene in *The Unknown*! We finished that years from now!

W: Well what the hell is it then, I see Unknown all around me—

D: This is a scene from *The Unknown Time Machine*; the second novel we conceptualized in the back of Cynthia's car on the way back from Albany but never got started—

S: A sequel to *The Unknown*?

Tabbi shakes his head, mournfully muttering "End construction. End construction."

Tabbi selects 2001 from the TimePilot's pulldown menu. There is a flash of blinding light.

The innkeeper shakes his head and draws himself another pint.

The End <theend.htm>

You have reached the last page of *The Unknown*. You can breathe a sigh of relief. You've completed the entire novel. Please stop reading now, and I'll tell you what happened.

The Unknown all died, of course, in the end, every last one of them.

Dirk lived the longest. He outlived Scott, who had a heart attack at the age of sixty-five while making love to his wife, and William, who died on the toilet trying to overcome a bowel obstruction at the age of seventy while suffering from a severe case of gout.

Dirk was struck by a poultry truck at the age of ninety-seven. His was the most glorious death of the three, as upon striking him, the truck overturned and spilled out live fowl, many of whom attempted to fly away. Some succeeded in escaping the wreck, and went on to start a small colony of feral intelligent chickens, who still prosper in hiding in North Dakota today, plotting the overthrow of the American McChicken consumer, sharpening their beaks and growing stronger, generation after generation.

But we spend too much time dwelling on death. Let us speak of what they did with the remainder of their lives, of the men that they became from the men they were.

Oh shit, I nearly forgot—Frank died tragically at the age of forty-two during his honeymoon in Sweden of a grisly garbage disposal accident.

Their lives (and our story) end thusly:

After the film came out, the Unknown went their separate ways, though they could never quite shake each other because of the damn Internet.

With the success of the Unknown film, William was offered an exorbitant amount for the screen rights to his novel *Johnny Werd*. He became very rich, though the film was never made. For a time, William was happy. He finished his magnum opus *Pox You Bastard Face Him Now Give Jail Quiz K.O.,* an apparently conventional novel about an inmate in a maximum security prison who overcomes his fear of public speaking and becomes the first incarcerated individual to go all the way on Regis Philbin's *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire* and who then buys his way out of the penal system and goes on to start a home for wayward boys on the front acres of his marijuana farm.

Those critics who did not find it overly sentimental loved the book and William received a Macarthur grant. Sadly, his next two books, based on the works of John Cage, were never published, or even read, by anyone. William spent the bulk of his later years actually building and populating the home for wayward boys he had written about. His literary output during this period was substantially reduced, but many of the residents of his home for wayward boys went on to become very well respected and famous writers. Tommy Curlew, the renowned poet of "Garden Tools Bring Me Down" went on to write William's biography *6 letters shy of an alphabet, 12 volumes over a ton*.

Following the dissolution of his cult and his own profession that his entire resurrection had been a sham (though doubters of this story are legion and certain sects of Dirk continue to thrive in Montana), Dirk, seeking a quieter life away from the cutthroat world of electronic writing and the glare of Hollywood, established a poetry bakery in Covington, Kentucky, where he baked haiku for many years. Initially supported by his former students (he was well loved) at the School for the Performing and Creative Arts, who would ask Dirk to write them a cake not

only for special events such as birthdays or bar mitzvahs, but also relatively mundane occasions, such as a speeding-ticket-free week, Dirk's bakery eventually became the toast of Covington, loved not only for the ever-changing 5/7/5 pastries, but also for the exotic and extensive beverage bar. Unfortunately, once the Haiku Café was listed in the Mobil Travel Guide, it became simply too much for Dirk to handle (*Entertainment Tonight* came by to ask if in fact Tom Cruise had stopped in on a daily basis during the filming of *Rain Man 2*—he had, of course) and so Dirk learned Flash and became one of the greatest kinetic poets of the age, as well as the fervent leader of the Ronald Johnson fan club. In his seventies, Dirk moved back to Spokane and started a sheep-and-magic-mushroom farm, where he toiled in obscurity on his masterpiece *I is We, a Memoir*.

Scott settled down after the film, finished his Ph.D., did some time for charges related to Dirk's assassination (barely substantiated insurance fraud), was released, got a cushy university job on the east coast and met Thomas Pynchon once a week for drinks. His novel *Loose Surfaces* never sold as well as the novelization of *The Unknown*, but his *Without Stopping* met with a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and some critical acclaim. *Forthright Lies* was his bestseller. Scott lied to his children about what he did for a living, for fear that they might read his books or hypertext novels and be ill-influenced by them.

Frank became a fortune cookie magnate, and discovered that he had a distinct proclivity for blowjobs. He and William Vollmann spent many a late night in the Tenderloin, cruising for supple lips. His posthumously published *UnderArm* won a National Book Award.

Katie Gilligan remains one of the great artists of the twenty-first century.

Paul Kotheimer just came out with a new album, *Wheelchair Songs*.

The Unknown critical industry rumbles on—scores of dissertations have been written, best selling pop psychology fanzines have been distributed, appointments have been made and professors have been granted tenure. From Freshman English to graduate seminar, from sociology to contemporary philosophy to Web archeology, every year more readers come to the ever-obscure example of late-late-twentieth-century hyperfiction. Some marvel at its understated elegance, others at the plethora of historical references that so date it. Most still leave frustrated and go home to read the work of better writers.

Yes, the word has changed. Not so much, and not so well. American letters could have certainly hoped for a better example, but so it goes.

There you have it.

THE END