

New Media Critical Homologies

Brian Lennon
Pennsylvania State University

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Ideally perhaps one should, like the novelist, have one's subject under control, never losing it from sight and constantly aware of its overpowering presence. Fortunately or unfortunately, the historian has not the novelist's freedom.

---Braudel, *The Mediterranean*

I

The computer is one of those swerves in the history of built things that bring whole ways of life to an end -- and seldom with the drama through which the first to sense a change often pronounce it. Regarded soberly, real change is painfully slow, with accumulations to crisis building well off the range of dailiness-numbered sense: a pattern of sun and shadow filtering into a room, here illuminating a particular object for no particular reason, there, with precisely the same absence of portent, shrouding another. There are regressions, and some habits and routines

left precisely as they were or are, while others vanish or metastasize. Newness covers the old with a creeping patina, in which what will be and what no longer is exchange places and seem to intermingle, at the same time.

New media studies, we might say, has discovered temporality. After fifteen years in which its cultural dominant was presentist prognostication, even -- often enough -- a kind of bullying, the field has folded on itself with such new guiding concepts as the “residuality,” the “deep time” or “prehistory,” and the “forensic imagination” of a new media now understood as after all always *al-ready* new.¹ This is a more absorbent fold, perhaps, than that embedded in one of the field’s originary figures, “remediation” -- a determinedly modern progressive figure, though one whose conceptual plasticity always suggested the possibility, beyond linear reframings, of nonmodern medial cycles or folds.² Without a doubt, it is that depth that sends one searching, now, for a reading of the temporal turn that seems all at once to discard and even undermine the prime rhetoric of a field of study settled in self-establishment. Read symptomatically, of course, there is perhaps more to all of this than the usual need for professional distinction in the field itself, which like any mode of absorption of surplus, needs a manufactured boom and bust, on a regular cycle. To the shaming of the slow, the skeptical, and the self-respecting who refused the unfunded mandates of technocratic reactivity, in the New Economic home-classroom-office pod of unrelievedly public life online, new media studies now adds to its figural repertoire a synchronic complement, in the reflection of what Jameson long ago, in *Marxism and Form*, called the “commodity structure of academic intellectual life” (393).

Were it not, of course, for the institutional dynamic of critical desire through which one is forced to embrace what one declines, in order to scale the heights from which to renounce it again, one might have *begun* there. But what is done is done. With the swap-file virtualities of an endless present suffering stain, again, we might suspect this anachronic return to time, in a new media studies that seems never to have known it at all, of being sensitive, registrative, or even merely, vulgarly reflective of the sociotemporal order-as-disorder of U.S. imperial and global capitalist crisis, as an apparent crisis of progress. To materialist critiques of the disembodiment of information, which corrected the intellectual disposition of an

¹See, for example, Acland; Funkhouser; Gitelman; Kirschenbaum; Zielinski. In what follows, when I speak of “new media studies,” I am referring to the emergent field defined mostly by scholars working, willingly or unwillingly, in English studies or other national literary studies departments in universities in the United States. That, of course, is a circumscribed referent, which some of the sources just named (Zielinski) may be argued to exceed -- but just barely.

²See Bolter and Grusin.

early euphoria without doing much to blunt its complacent productivity, one might certainly imagine being attached, now, a materialist critique of the conditions of the critique of disembodiment, itself, in a resource-intensive field of inquiry into disproportionately resource-intensive social behaviors whose future is inseparable from the future of U.S. consumerism – above all, consumption of energy. We must admit, perhaps, that our appetite for the materiality, as much as the virtuality, of new media, is also a form of systems maintenance. One might say that the specter haunting new media studies, today, is the late imperial “peak energy” spectacle of middle-class U.S. Americans in sweaters, riding their bicycles to work.³

This is no merely elected sentiment. Rather, it marks a disposition one might grasp as hidden in plain sight, today, in so far as its material conditions of recognition must burden it also with gratuitous blindness. Certainly, to come to accept the long duration of intellectual history, without which episodic conurbations of research cannot thrive, is to accept the destiny of decline, in what Braudel compressed in the formula “All conquests lead to exhaustion.”⁴ Necessarily, it is to come to permit the presentation of unavoidable, and unavoidably disturbing, questions.⁵ Let me air only one that comes to my own mind, without suggesting that I imagine my own way of life and work, in the field of new media studies, as in any way immune from its most damaging imputations. That question is this: is it possible that we may have lost literacy, all at once and already, without yet, or without ever, gaining “electracy” -- and that in some unimaginable future, we might be charged with simply getting it back -- of retrieving literacy for sheer survival?

I think we can say that we are, at last, officially of two minds on this issue -- which is what one of our first leaders, and first *seceders*, insisted we be. I speak, of course, of hyperfiction pioneer and demiurge Michael Joyce, about whose legacy

³One popular manifestation of this late imperial consciousness can be found in the journalistic fascination greeting Alex Wissner-Gross’s research on the environmental impact of computing infrastructure and activity. See, for example, “Revealed: The Environmental Impact of Google Searches,” *The Sunday Times Online*, January 11, 2009.

⁴Braudel, 166.

⁵Mills, 78: “Certain types of critics [...] judge work [...] according to whether or not its conclusions are gloomy or sunshiny, negative or constructive. [...] Personally, I happen to be a very optimistic type, but I must confess that I have never been able to make up my mind about whether something is so or not in terms of whether or not it leads to good cheer. First, one tries to get it straight, to make an adequate statement -- if it is gloomy, too bad; if it leads to hope, fine. In the meantime, to cry for ‘the constructive program’ and ‘the hopeful note’ is often a sign of an incapacity to face facts as they are even when they are decidedly unpleasant -- and it is irrelevant to truth or falsity.”

I will, in what follows, have something I believe is unprecedented to say. But first, we need to ask a second set of questions, comprising the frame for the first, in an inversion that carries with it all the abject cruelty of admission, at last, to the club that one would never want to have one for a member, just as it is about to close. That in some ways, literary studies finally appears prepared to absorb new media studies, as once upon a time it absorbed (and then purged itself of) cinema and cultural studies, certainly prompts some reflection.⁶ What, we might ask ourselves, can explain our radically untimely embrace, in English studies, of gaming, *Second Life*, and (naturally) “netlish,”⁷ along with (at last) the old hyperfiction and ergodic literature, just as global food, energy, and political and environmental security re-enter the second of two major postwar systemic cycles of scarcity -- now canonically bound, in the immensely influential world-system historiography of Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, and others, to the historically decisive *routine decline of empire*?⁸

In comparative literary studies, meanwhile, where something more than cinema is now definitively on the extraliterary agenda,⁹ one wonders why the comparative project, in its essayistic substitution of transitive (and translative) articulation for critical substantiation, should be so eager to seize what it knows -- since it predicts -- must elude its (as any) grasp. Hasn't comparative literature “won its battles,” in dissemination to fields once supremely confident of their objects?¹⁰ Isn't it the unacknowledged legislator of our humanities disciplines, today? Why would it go prospecting now, when anticolonial comparative methods and models are firmly entrenched even in departments of English, in the study of peoples without a phone? Hasn't comparative literature always embraced its own amateurism, anyway, even at its philologically rigorous origin? (Picture once more Erich Auerbach, famously marooned, without a working library, in wartime Istanbul.) At their very best, we might say, all the innovative formations of the last

⁶For skeptical readings of the absorption of new media studies by literary studies (which are skeptical in different ways from one another, as well as from my own reading here), see Tabbi; Fitzpatrick.

⁷On gaming and *Second Life*, see Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games* and “*Second Life, Video Games, and the Social Text*,” *PMLA* 124.1 (January 2009): 264–272. On “netlish,” see Apter, 239ff.

⁸See Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*; Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*; Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*; Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power*. For a recent comprehensive summary of applications of Fernand Braudel's historical models to literary studies, see Beecroft.

⁹For contrasting views of this development, see Andrew and Poster.

¹⁰See Saussy, 3.

thirty years of literary studies have demanded respect for the *indiscipline* with which they resisted and lamented the objects of their own disciplinarity -- on their radical work of the imagination, finally closer to the mode of production of the literary object, itself, than anyone dared to dream.

In response to the unanswerable questions implicit in my opening gambit, here -- those of how, and why, new media studies might all at once have “arrived,” and how its arrival takes the form of a temporal loop, cycle, or fold -- let me, before proceeding any further, offer something of a frame for the frame. Always, in attempting to look *through* the reified critical object of a disciplinary research field, I want to propose -- an endeavor to which the diagnostic mode surely invites us -- we are necessarily attempting to look *at* the technocratic procedures producing that object. Let me suggest that inasmuch as it can be said to have emerged as such, new media studies, as a disturbance in both the practices and production regimes of humanistic discipline, is and always has been best thought less as an emergent field than as a site of such double vision.¹¹

Let me suggest, further, that for this question to be of any use to us, we must frame it critically, in the sense that that term has always carried in the history of Euro-Atlantic philosophical modernity, where it denotes the impossible secular task of structural self-understanding. To confront the question of how something eventually *new*, for going at least on a decade and a half, can have only now emerged, I am saying let us do what comparative criticism supposedly does, or does best, and *compare*. Let us look, in this case, for new media critical homologies embedding new media literary-critical formations, in a non-self-evident temporal relation, in their historical antecedents. To honor the convention of providing an example, I will suggest one such homology in a moment.

II

During the New Economic 1990s, as new media invaded literary-critical workspace through the portals of the Web, the discrete and combined hazards of deconstruc-

¹¹Hayles’s “autocritography” *Writing Machines* is arguably one of the few influential recent works in U.S. new media literary studies to renew meaningful contact with this idea – working backward, as it were, from her position as an authority, in the conventional sense, in this field. In some ways, the autobiographical meditation *and* storytelling that frames the book as a *personal* critical retrospective – and a kind of “time out” – leads it closer to common cause with the ground impulse of Michael Joyce’s work, as I read it, than anything else recently published by the field’s leaders (with the possible additional exception of Alan Liu’s meditations on “destructive creation” and the negative dialectics of David Golumbia’s *The Cultural Logic of Computation*).

tion and cultural studies for autonomous art as manipulable object reawakened in anxieties focused on the ephemerality of critical writing and publishing “on line,” in time and in motion. Such fear of the virtualization of the literary-critical took many forms, of course, from Gutenberg elegies, to new formalisms, to the bally-hooded returns of sincerity, nature, personal voice, affect, pleasure, and any number of other monads squashed by demoniac posthumanist theory. If the lessons of modernity and postmodernity had already been learned, that only means, perhaps, that routine vulgar dialectics provided the means to affirm what one salvaged, in such operations, without its preening innocence. And yet latent in this double reading of the standing present, we might say, was an entirely accurate sense that matters had already grown very complicated, indeed, in the interanimation of cultural time and critical history -- and that it was that complication, itself, if anything, that was going to have to be what post-modernization would come to mean. Already, then, we might say, what Benjamin, then read to excess, pictured as “an orchid in the land of technology” – an impossible palpability, within the impassable virtuality of the film set – at once described and militated against the quest for pre-virtual critical authenticity, not because such quests were hopelessly doomed, but because in Jameson’s words, they offered “the expressive raw material of a deeper comparison” (Postmodernism, 301) that needed to be made.

Many of us, in those days, conceived things straightforwardly. We proposed to consider the impact of *electronic media* -- specifically, the document formats or “sites” of the so-called World Wide Web -- on United States literature, just for example, at the turn of the twenty-first century: an inquest that took as its narrative flashpoints 1991, the year Jameson completed a provocative U.S.-centrist statement of ephemeralist postmodernism, and 1993, when the appearance of the Mosaic browser began to renegotiate some of the ground terms of publication in the literary arts.¹² To the extent that such impact was presupposed and determined, by the question itself, to construct an object-pattern or trace of itself as *legible*, we might say that it hardly occurred, to many involved in this enterprise, that it might take the form of erasure *before* the archival fact. That the secession, just for example, not so many epochal years later, of a figurehead from the field he was now to set on its feet, might in fact proceed from the very logic of that pursuit

¹²Tim Berners-Lee had developed a hypertext GUI (Graphical Use Interface) browser for the NeXT computer in 1990. It wasn't until 1993, however, that Mosaic (later Netscape) released a browser for Windows PC and Macintosh. In a recent assessment of a second wave (often termed “Web 2.0”) of this revolution, promising (once again) an unprecedented massification of authorship, Lev Manovich has argued that “the explosion of user-created media content on the web (dating from, say, 2005) has unleashed a new media universe” (319).

of the new, rather than in any way obstructing or contravening it.

The proximity of artifactual life to death, in this new field of critical awareness, was underscored by the panic over object stability that followed discovery forthwith, in a radical compression of the purview of antiquarian desire. Such efforts as the Electronic Literature Organization's Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination (PAD) project, which registered widespread alarm at the developmental precocity, velocity, and caprice of the new literary artists, were no better prepared to question the mandate for conservancy itself than to uphold it, on a U.S. American scene yoked to the startup venture-capitalization of proprietary data file formats and creators and dominated by freelance coders making Web art in their Gleitzeit. The running battle between an art culture producing faster and faster -- indeed, "living" art online¹³ -- and a curator culture determined to find careers in it, nevertheless, offered a dramatic update of the antitheses on the avant-garde formulated by Paul Mann around (snail) mail art, earlier in the decade.¹⁴

It is clear, in any case, that Jameson's postmodernism furnished a vital branch of the narrative network or storyspace charting the complex relation of the literary art practice of the time to its academic theory, and it that it had specifically recursive effects on the relation of art practice to theory and criticism, in its wake. As a publishing medium, it seemed, the WWW had now invited U.S. literature to a set of changes that would recursively alter the Web-as-medium without collapsing into it, or expiring within its limits. By 2001, for example, one could speak of an overlap zone populated on the one hand by print poetries radically animated by cybernetics, and on the other by "code poetries" importing and renovating the interpreted conservatism of a lyric tradition.¹⁵ Within such a new

¹³See Breeze.

¹⁴Mann, *Masocriticism*, x, xii: "Every manifesto, every exhibition, every review, every monograph, every attempt to take up or tear down the banner of the avant-gardes in the critical arena, every attempt to advance the avant-garde's claims or to put them to rest: no matter what their ideological strategy or stakes, all end up serving the 'white economy' of cultural production. It is, finally, circulation alone that matters.... What if there were an avant-garde that was no longer committed to throwing itself on the spears of its enemies but operated in utter secrecy? What if the very history of cultural recuperation led us to imagine that some segment of what had once been the avant-garde must finally have learned from its mistakes and extended its trajectory into silence and invisibility? It might be necessary then to turn that silence and invisibility back against the critical project; it might be necessary to inflict that silence on one's own discourse and suffer it as a kind of wound." See also Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 143: "If the death of the avant-garde is its complete representation within the white economy, then one must assume that other projects have realized this and decided to disappear. In the end it is the theoretical condition of this disappearance that poses the greatest challenge."

¹⁵See Lennon, "Literature and the Transposition of Media." On "code poetry," see Raley.

order of things, Monique Roelofs's "Zwischenology" was a handy figure for the study of such paradox, overlap, or betweenness, which resisted the easier postures of apocalyptic and utopist futurism.¹⁶ And yet print literature was already being used to augur the ruin of post-print irreality. In the commentary on Bob Perelman's poem "China" that formed such a controversial sideshow within Postmodernism, for Jameson's readers working in literary studies, the figure of the poem's absented referents or unities was used to illuminate what Jameson called "the crisis in historicity," a temporal limit in, of, and to contemporary cultural criticism become a limit-site of postmodernist euphoria in dissolution.¹⁷ While for Jameson, the danger lay in the seductions of irreconcilability in situ, his dialectical critic's characteristic ambivalence pursued a discussion of Perelman's poem to its peremptory conclusion (or break), which found Jameson now famously pitting the ephemeral video art of Nam June Paik against the nihilism of a "traditional" poetic poststructuralism enjoined to no longer dare utter its name.

And yet all this, one might say, is better re-read, in 2009, as a problem of research and temporality, posed by the critical life-span of a "reading" itself, than as a debate over the form (or content) of the curator's object, now or then. Not least of the durable provocations of Jameson's project, in Postmodernism as everywhere else, is the tropism of his dialectical prose, itself, which has always invited, and received, many comically speculative and many more ploddingly positivist thetic refutations. Among the alignments in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in a contemporaneous and complementary stylization, termed "the battle between marxism and deconstruction" (314), the Jameson of Postmodernism was illuminated, on one side, by the novel and generous use he found for the Baudrillardian chiasmus of the simulacrum, and on the other by his doggedly Lukácsian insistence on cognitive mapping. It is from this conjuncture, we might say, that the new media literalists of the 1990s, stalking auguries of the brave new office, drew their sanctions for reading Jameson, poorly, through a McLuhan read even more poorly, in a mode of reception remarkably alienated from the long intellectual history of a philosophical concept of mediation -- and so unable to imagine "virtual reality" as a descriptor of unavoidably abstract critical *thought itself*. Looking back in counterpoint, it seems that Perelman's poem suffered, in Jameson's never less than withering estimation, not only as an artifact of print culture, but in its typicality as a vanguard expression of the avant-garde type, itself; in the Jameson-

¹⁶See Roelofs.

¹⁷See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 28ff. For an exhaustive reading of this episode, see Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*.

ist typology, the materially practicing poet was the ephemeralist, fixing “joyous intensities” in the self-celebrating play of shallow disjunction (Postmodernism, 29), while the video-tracer recovered a “positive concept of relationship” (31) in transient screen flicker.

All along, it was a matter of the relationship between the time of the work and the temporality of criticism itself, in their mutual imbrication, from which no historical materialist can or must dare to retreat. Video, Jameson told us, disembedded us from the fictive phenomenological-subjective time of film and television representation as always already destined for entertainment, re-embedding someone – or something – as dematerialized subject-in-relay with dematerialized object, in the flow of radically neutral (and deadly boring) social-machine time (Postmodernism, 76). In the process, it bypassed altogether the blank parody of schizomorphic postmodernism, as a “virtual grab bag” of creatively pure and ahistoric self-presence, and as a breakdown of temporality itself, in the infinite jest Jameson thought he discerned, correctly or incorrectly, in Perelman’s “China.” But where that chaff promised enduring diversion, we must, Jameson suggested clearly, rather be prepared to be bored, in order to be critically stimulated at all. If to identify video as the most important and distinctive new art-medium of late capitalism was, then, to arrive on the scene an epoch too late, from the point of view of those needing to promote something new (the World Wide Web as re-remediation), Jameson’s demand for lassitude, in all the hazard it posed to research productivity at an urgent moment of innovation (none of which, of course, blunted Jameson’s own prodigious output one whit), refused to apologize for that.

From the beginning, Jameson had linked the resistance of Adornian prose style to the simple difficulty of temporality, in his exegesis of negative dialectics as the rescue of philosophy, as of all the object pursuits that descended from it, from “a fetishization in time, from the optical illusion of stasis and permanency” (Marxism and Form, 58). Such “falling into time” (to reproduce a tropism Jameson extracts, for his purposes, from Barthes writing on Proust) mandated the production of dialectically comparative sentences, whose strength grows “proportionately as the realities linked are distant and distinct from each other” (54).

It is here, perhaps, that we might mark a form of reserve in Jameson’s work, through which the more or less gentle criticism Adorno receives, at his hands, rebounds. “No doubt the emphasis on method and on the theory rather than the practice of negative dialectics,” Jameson observed, “risks giving an exaggerated and distorted importance to the moment of failure which is present in all modern thinking: and it is this overemphasis, more than anything else, which seems to me to account for that lack of political commitment with which radical students

reproached Adorno at the end of his life” (59). The history of Marxist literary criticism is the history of an advocated interpenetration of (literary?) theory and (literary?) practice, which in Lukács and Jameson, no less than Adorno, produced nothing more or less than another magisterial scholar-critic, who abandons the primary production of works of literature to that division of labor affirmed as the very price of Marxist modernity -- though never without secretly protesting it, again. In a critical review of Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), Perelman himself had toed this austere, if never ascetic line, observing that “in the arena Jameson is working in, ‘theory writing,’ writers, the producers of the raw material, are a bit dispensable” (175). And who can forget the outburst of Mike Featherstone, protesting in his contribution to the 1989 volume *Postmodernism/ Jameson/ Critique* that Jameson was “unwilling to become an advocate of the new methods and practice postmodernism in his writings” (129)? For every one of the terrifically prolific critics in Lukács’s direct or indirect line of descent, it is precisely that nonproductive boredom Jameson theorized, there, that, in so many ways, is really a *nonstarter*.

Thus it is that Jameson throws into relief, in the nascent new media studies of the epoch of the postmodernism debates, the substantive reifications of the “commodity structure of academic intellectual life” – while not, either, escaping from them himself, any more than Adorno might or could have. We might say it is this unbearable distance of cultural criticism from cultural practice that drives the trope of comparison, in Jameson’s work, as the maximal flex of critical discourse to – but never over – the brink of critical silence. To speak, again, of the *impact* of new media *on* literature, it might be imagined that cultural opacity or noise, in any such composition of influence, would necessarily grow alongside complex critical transparency or “silence”: indeed, a Jamesonist mind must posit “homologies” between them, structured affinities whose very dynamic consumes something of the tissue of resemblance itself. Here is this thought, as expressed late in Jameson’s “Conclusion: Secondary Elaborations”:

There may also be structural parallels to be established between these new “informational” machineries that are neither basely physical nor “spiritual” in any nineteenth-century sense, and language itself, whose model has become predominant in the postmodern period. On this view it would not be the informationality of the new technology that inspires a meditation on language and spurs people on to the construction of new ideologies centered on it, but rather the structural parallels themselves between two equally material phenomena which equally

elude physical representation of the older type. (Postmodernism, 385-6)

Is it through just such a negative dialectical construction that the disciplinary object of new media studies has to have come at once, now, to embrace disciplinary “information” *and* noise? For the transpositions, paradoxes and regressions of media to “replace” their remediative linear displacement and (and or) succession, in a kind of noctilucous disturbance that might be understood, now, always to have been underway, if only, suddenly, self-evident? If in 2009, scholarship in literary studies yet evinces precious little of the real possible impact, as one must think it, of new networked and programmable media, is it possible that that is because the structural-historical configurations of print culture and electronic publishing have been mingled – sometimes deliberately, often by chance, in a Babel of avant-garde, epochally middling, and “dead,” dying and spectral media, in a process that no one may regulate, and to which all are accountable?

But one of the consequences of *that* might be that we would have to learn to learn in two drifts, moving contiguously both forward and backward in time, in that flexion the desire for objects impedes. Indeed, I am saying, to do that, we will have to accept the unacceptable fortuity that tells us that new media studies might, for those of us most invested in it, always already have come to an end. To get back to where we went back to, then, we must skip forward to the near past.

III

Last modified on March 3, 2004, the Vassar College faculty Web page of Michael Joyce offers little more than a telegraphic summary of Joyce’s work and teaching, prefaced by a small photograph image of a rock cairn and the statement “Michael Joyce is no longer maintaining a public web presence.”¹⁸ One cannot exactly say

¹⁸See <http://faculty.vassar.edu/mijoyce/>. Following completion of an abridged first draft of the present essay (in November, 2008), Joyce’s faculty Web page was modified once, on December 26, 2008. Before that date, the page had been unmodified since March 3, 2004, as stated here. As of the date of composition of this endnote (October 28, 2009), Joyce’s page has not been modified again since December 26, 2008. I can think of no better way to point to the epistemological gap produced by the publication-*suppressive* quality control of peer review and editorial mediation (even, as in the present case, on an unusually and gratifyingly rapid schedule) than to let the original date stand as a mark of the real present tense of this essay, modified by a kind of posthumous temporality: where Joyce could and can edit his personal Web page publication at any (and in real) time, this endnote must stand for the critical *invisibility* of the present essay during its composition,

that this end of events, and the order of things marked by it, is much of a secret, as by any measure Joyce has, in the years since he thus returned to writing books in print, made his absence as pivotal to new media studies as his presence had been -- if only through negation, and not in the slightest as a form of the usual gimmickry. We might say, in fact, that the power of such end-punctuation has always rested in its injunction *not* to exercise one's hermeneutical training on it -- to honor its apparent nihilism as both something more and something less than a simple, baffling "no." And yet, that the undisputed leader of an emerging field might so decisively step back, thus, on what might have been considered the verge of something like victory, is apparently something of a scandal for new media studies. The wrench that Joyce thus threw into the perpetual motion machine of bureaucratic culture -- his implicit demand that we simply stop for a while -- is not discussed at any length or in any depth in any peer-reviewed published scholarship on Joyce's work currently on record.¹⁹ That is understandable, of course, given

revision, review, editing, and production for publication. None of this is inevitable: proposals to reverse the order of the entire process, *beginning* with publication and *concluding* with peer review, are now part of the administrative mainstream, and collective work-flows approximating this reversed order of priority and labor already exist, in the form of the open access academic journal *Philica* and the Naboj "dynamical" peer review system for article preprints in physics, mathematics, computer science, and other science areas deposited in the arXiv.org repository hosted and operated by Cornell University.

¹⁹In one of a series of generous and thoughtful essays tracking Joyce's work, Dave Ciccoricco devotes some discussion to what he charmingly terms Joyce's "Not Home Page" -- but (disingenuously, judging by his tone) pronounces himself baffled by it, deferring its reception to the uncertified philosophical speculator of the realm of "theory" and the hidebound archivist who presumably defined literary studies (or perhaps history) in its salad days. "Whether he intends to return home," Ciccoricco writes of Joyce's withdrawal, "to 'his storytelling roots' (as the dust jacket of his recent print novel suggests) or just home for the day is a question best left to amateur prophets; probing his personal motivations, similarly, is best left to the 'biographiles'." With that question dispatched as more or less out of bounds, Ciccoricco moves on to discussing at length Joyce's collaborative work with Mark Bernstein (whose career provides conveniently contrasting institutional-modernist continuity) and conducting an exhaustive dialectical analysis of the demi-concept Contour (capitalized in ironic reification) in hypertext theory. That Ciccoricco's essay is perfectly, admirably successful at what it sets out to do, need not keep us from marking the aversion with which it begins -- which in some ways recalls Kant's observation, in the Preface to Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present Itself as Science, about liminal questions:

To ask: whether a science is possible, presupposes that the actuality of the science is in doubt. But such a doubt offends everyone whose entire goods and chattels may perhaps consist in this supposed jewel; and hence the person who permits

that when I say Joyce implicitly demanded we “stop,” I mean, of course, that he demanded we stop speaking (and writing) with such consensually unadulterable zeal, on our topic of choice: an endeavor which, as most every reader of this essay will know -- for reasons I will therefore not bother to detail -- is structurally impossible.²⁰

Nevertheless. All supervisory protestation aside, we scholars, who have been gifted with speech, know that we will always be haunted by those who cannot speak, whether or not we choose to regift or to yield them speech, and even if we *do* finally just choose to be quiet. The sources of Joyce’s enormously influential work, sources he never attempted to disguise, lay in the sociality of a twenty-year career as a writing educator at Jackson Community College in Jackson, Michigan, on the one hand, and in the textuality of the essayist counter-tradition of poststructuralist French feminism, on the other. Indeed, Joyce went out of his way, in his critical and personal essays, to advance these elective affinities, which one might say describe two of the territories most evenly at odds with the bureaucratic research-intensive regime of the new object for whose sake new media studies, in its self-constitution through Joyce’s work, was embraced. For literary scholars eager at once to seize the object “hyperfiction” and to both subordinate and elevate themselves, in traditional fashion, in the critic’s relation to the writer, the institutionalized activism of writing pedagogy, at the intake valve of the educational system, represented an anonymous form of professional labor conveniently discarded with Joyce’s transition to the more properly rarefied environ of Vassar. And if a determinedly continental *écriture féminine* was never wholly marginal to the first-wave U.S. hypertext theory that hitched its critical wagon to

himself to utter this doubt should be prepared for resistance from all sides. Some, proudly conscious of their old and hence supposedly legitimate possession, with their metaphysical compendia in their hand, will look down on him and despise him; others, who nowhere see anything that is not the same as something they have already seen somewhere else, will not understand him; and everything will go on for a time as if nothing had occurred that might give occasion for fear or hope of an imminent change. (64)

²⁰Anyone working in U.S. academe who is so isolated as to require clarification, here, might consult two documents: the Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion, published in 2006, and Mark Bauerlein’s center-right response, in a report entitled “Professors on the Production Line, Students on Their Own,” produced in 2009 for the conservative American Enterprise Institute’s Future of American Education Project. Both reports attempt to address the structural function of the now entirely indigestible (if not, for that reason, unsustainable) quantity of scholarly publication in the humanities.

Joyce's writerly star, it was certainly never central, either, at least to the extent that the usual alchemies of Anglo-American import substitution, administered by both masculinist and feminist notaries, transformed its practices and procedures into works and theories. The red thread of Joyce's life-work might thus be said to traverse a blind spot in the voluminous body of scholarship chronicling it, to the extent that its lesson left for the curator's habitus has always already, in a way, been unlearned.²¹ That lesson, we might say, lies in the capacity of the literary artifact to make counter-claims on the method and form of the criticism literally *regarding* it: and not because what we call social and historical "context" – a wealth of found or imagined realia, in the fact of the world – impresses the work, in an emplacement the critic can demand from the research object while tactically bracketing it in her own effort. Rather, we might say, in the unavoidably sublimated, and so inadmissible homology, or structural affinity, of *critical with literary writing itself*.²² To begin to discern the outline of the new media critical homology I am proposing, one would, to start, have to look to the theory of the essay as it lives, today, in U.S.-based rhetoric and composition studies, in its constructive intimacy with democratic statism. Simultaneously, and with tolerance for their conflict, one would have to look to its legacy in what Todd May has called "poststructuralist anarchism" -- and *its* afterlife in the early hypertext theory of Joyce's moment.

To "see" both at once, one would need something like what the compositionist Douglas Hesse, combining concepts from Ricoeur and Heinrich Schenker, calls the *Auskomponierung* or "composing out" of the essay, as the diachronic prolongation, in sophistic narrative, of the synchronic chord of the scholastic proposition ("Essay Form and *Auskomponierung*," 292ff). Already, in the very first of the "theoretical narratives" of his book of densely tropological essays, *Of Two Minds*, Joyce had written, in the collective first person, of being "too late at the end of something and unable to speak" (1). To write, as Joyce wrote, that the book's "interstitial" documents were not *composed* from nomadic and iterative

²¹Indeed, we would do well to read *this* Joyce's embrace of silence, within the cultural *Kraftfeld* he created, in counterpoise with the noise of the other, historical Joyce, who, as Christine Brooke-Rose has put it, "was careful to leave... keys that initiated and continued to feed the immense Joyce industry" (3).

²²Which finds departments of English studies, for example, serving today as common homes for dedicated "creative writers," who create literary objects, dedicated literary scholars, who analyze their creative colleagues' published products, and dedicated rhetoric and composition scholars, to whom the theory-praxis of writing about writing itself now falls (and belongs).

detachments, but *as* such *Bruchstücke*,²³ in a form that places them radically at odds with the generic professional self-reproduction constructing a field, is after all only to remind ourselves that fourteen years after the University of Michigan Press published Joyce's radically essayist multigraph, traditionally peer-reviewed scholarship emerging from literary studies itself *into* the research field of new media studies, as such, remains scarce.²⁴ That *Of Two Minds* is a book of critical fragments introduced by a parable reproduced from the author's unpublished "twenty-some-year old" novel (1) invokes a homology on which I have elaborated elsewhere,²⁵ between the productive activity contained and managed by the term "creative writing" and the act of invention, rather than discovery, constituting a new field of inquiry. That a few pages later, Joyce went on to invoke a "tradition of hypermedia studies" is in turn arguably something of a feint, in so far as the division of labor solicited, here, is metastasized to the point of failure *as* division:

We had generally completed the underlying functionality of the [Storospace] program before we heard the term hypertext or read Ted Nelson's *Literary Machines* (1990). Yet from the earliest point in our collaboration we progressively found ourselves in contact with the tradition of hypermedia studies, beginning with Bush and Engelbart and continuing to Nelson. That tradition of scholarship and active collaboration existed as something of an iceberg -- or, more aptly, like some huge octopus with only its eye above water but with submerged tentacles reaching almost everywhere around us, including pedagogy, linguistics, cognitive science, literature, physics, database theory, classics, media studies, medicine, and so on. Because it was

²³On *Bruchstücke* (better translated "broken pieces," Jacobs argued, than "fragments"), see Jacobs and De Man.

²⁴One might say that new media studies scholars' engagement of change in the material conditions of production for their own work virtually guarantees its fragmentation by multiple modes, streams, and media forms (both print and electronic journal articles and books, but also electronic resources, genres, and modes of distribution of various kinds -- Web sites, blogs, wikis, and so on). This is not just because some of the historically most conservative, and therefore most prestigious print journals in literary studies, for example, have been slow to welcome work in the field -- it is because that dilation itself embodies a sedimented attachment to the artificial scarcity of a print economy and its control mechanisms. (We might say as well that a collective fixation on "quality control," invoked to justify the competitive suppression of publication in literary and cultural studies -- "mistakes" made in which never in fact endanger human life, or any other public resource -- seems finally to be facing meaningful challenge, today.)

²⁵See Lennon, "The Essay, in Theory."

a tradition concerned with links and interrelationships, it observed no intellectual boundaries. (32)

A credulous reading of the first two sentences, here, will overlook their excavation by what follows them, the concealed inertia of the iceberg yielding to the life of the disciplinary octopus, itself exceeded and erased in its substantiality by an abstract conceptual image -- of the genrecidal impossible possibility, as it were, of a tradition recognizing *no* bounded corpus or archive or division of labor. Here is the double writing of much of Joyce's body of work, in its both critical and creative forms, which found its reception, for the most part, in uncompounded readings: that of the eager scholar-entrepreneur, here, who seizes on the historical trope of discrete continuity (a "tradition") essential to the institution-building project of discipline; that of his counterpart, there, for whom that discretion itself, more (or less) than a pragmatically ineluctable, bureaucratic fiction, is the very gap or trace of that disavowal without which such fictions may never come to be.

It was the extrusion of the computer itself, Joyce explained, as a *mediator* of scholarship, that epistemically reframed our "work" on, in, and of knowledge: an event whose meaning lay in the negative critical disturbance of discipline, rather than the positivized fulfillment of "interdisciplinarity," that it certainly always suggested:

As we appropriated computers to our uses and modeled complex understandings upon a foundation of low-level concerns, we found ourselves in dialogue with others who, though they proceeded from much different disciplines, shared a common process of tool building and intellection with us.

I knew of, and for years had given lip service to, the interdisciplinary nature of my professional life. I had done my work at the Iowa Writers Workshop and so was in touch with a widespread and active artistic and learning community as well the scholarly and critical community that Sherman Paul had introduced me to. I had trained myself as a composition theorist in the line of fire, as chair of a community college English department, and knew that field through research, practice, conferences, and anxiety attacks. Not only did each of these domains interact with one another; they also actively espoused essentially interdisciplinary stances.

Despite all this, the problem was that, if we talked at all, my colleagues and I more often than not spent more time talking among

ourselves about interdisciplinary learning than we did putting it into practice. (32-33)

Read attentively, in 2009, such meditation perhaps displays some of that patina of enigmatically recent age, so disturbing to the temporization of research, to which Nietzsche, writing of the utility and disadvantage of scholarly historiography for life, gave the not entirely translatable term *unzeitgemäß*. If the narrative through which Joyce appears to construct the fulfillment of interdisciplinary desire in computerization thus seems, in its presentist or futurist naïveté, like something from what Glenn Willmott calls the “junk pile of critical history,”²⁶ that is because ever the rhetorician, Joyce knew how to declare one thing while suggesting another, or, what is another way to put it, how to use language to suggest the difference of language from code, without reducing that insight, itself, to transmission. It is in this respect that, then as now, one might say, many of Joyce’s more comfortably technocratic peers and promoters simply have not, and do not, *read* him.

Through all the periods of the periodizations that followed, from a first generation of link-focused “verbal” hyperfictions received with inflated deconstructive claims, to the structural-functionalist restoration of Espen Aarseth’s *Cyber-text: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), to a third wave as yet exposed to reification,²⁷ Joyce’s legacy has perhaps too often turned on readings of his hyperfictions -- above all, the inaugural *Afternoon, a story* -- which reconstruct the work implicitly or explicitly as the work of a working artist or writer, demandedly distinct from the thinker, critic, theorist, or essayist Joyce always already also was (and is).²⁸ To be sure, such readings have often made good use (if often in precritical fashion) of Joyce’s various declarations of authorial and other forms of procedural intention, as a mode of indulgence of such hyperprofessionalized ethnographic consultation. It is less often, one might observe, that the critic of *Afternoon* has committed to reading the thinker’s essays of *Of Two Minds* (just to start with) in determined counterpoint with the writer’s artifact. And never, as far as I can tell, has anyone pondered the modification of that counterpoint, itself, by the self-consciously Bartlebyesque resignation of the intention declared on that very strictly access-controlled and verified means of publication, Joyce’s personal

²⁶See Willmott, 207.

²⁷This periodization follows that of N. Katherine Hayles; see Hayles, 27ff.

²⁸“A self-avowed ‘postmodern classic’,” Kirschenbaum notes, “*Afternoon* is the single best-known work of the nascent electronic literary canon. Nearly every serious critic in the field has found occasion to write about it at once time or another” (164).

“not at home” page.²⁹ Let me suggest, by way of a kind of testimony, if not an accomplishment of compensation, that if we still want to consider Joyce’s work a founding moment in new media literary studies, in the United States, we will have to recognize the radical untimeliness of, and at, that foundation. I mean the extent to which the negativity of Joyce’s secession from this emergent field must be understood not as the end of his influence in it, but in antinomian fashion, as its beginning again.

For the reduction of Joyce to hyperfiction author, in the new media studies scholarship that more or less brackets Joyce’s critical project, is nothing in fact new as a disciplinary gesture; rather, it is a repetition of the founding ruse of literary-critical modernity, in what Clifford Siskin has called “novelism”: the generation, from a heterogenous and yet unified (or combined and uneven) field of writing, of the separate positions of the self-identified critic and her critical object, produced by the writer. In the subordination of writing, a discourse and an institution, to the (fabricated) research object “the novel,” modern disciplinarity in the literary sphere naturalizes writing as mimesis – that is, gives it a job to do, in determined opposition to the radical self-reflexivity of writing as mass professionalization itself, in its capacity simultaneously to expand and contract the division of intellectual labor. Over and against this “novelism” of U.S. new media literary studies, I am suggesting, Joyce’s work must be read -- must be reread -- in context of the German and French counterconcretions of what R. Lane Kauffmann and Claire de Obaldia call “Continental essayism,” and which has to be seen as a legacy of the moment of “high theory” and its import substitution in the U.S. academy. As a problem of form and of style in the temporizing of the knowledge-object, that legacy, as Jameson observed apropos of Adorno, is nothing if not the incitement to rereading, itself, as juxtapositional comparison, the generation of critical homology:

Such essays are thus the fragments of or footnotes to a totality which never comes into being; and what unites them, I am tempted to say, is less their thematic content, than it is on the one hand their style, as a perpetual present in time of the process of dialectical thinking itself, and on the other their basic intellectual coordinates. For what as fragments they share in spite of the dispersal of their raw material is the common historical situation itself [...] which serves as the framework within which we understand them. To this concrete situation itself

²⁹The phrase is Ciccoricco’s.

the language makes fateful and monitory allusion: the administered world, the institutionalized society, the culture industry, the damaged subject -- an image of our historical present which is Adorno's principal sociological contribution and which yet [...] is never expressed directly in the form of a thesis. Rather, it intervenes as a series of references to a state of things with which our familiarity is already presupposed [...]. The mode is that characteristic German sarcasm which may be said to have been Nietzsche's contribution to the language and in which a constant play of cynical, colloquial expressions holds the disgraced real world at arm's length, while abstractions and buried conceptual rhymes compare it with the impossible ideal. (Marxism and Form, 52-53, quoted with omissions)

IV

The capacious and considered retrospective treatment of Joyce's *Afternoon* offered by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum in *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, an ambitious and successful recent attempt to bring U.S.-based new media studies to disciplinary self-consciousness, is a good place to start. Kirschenbaum's reading, if he would want to call it that, begins with the dramatic historicizing, in a journalistic mode, of Joyce's conversion from print novelist to hyperfiction writer, upon seduction by the personal computer as writing tool:

Storyspace was a product of the early 1980s personal computer boom. At the time, Joyce, whose first novel *The War Outside of Ireland* (1982) had just won a regional literary prize, was interested in exploring what he termed "multiple fictions," the concept that would eventually be made manifest as "a story that changed with every reading," the mandate with which Joyce wrote *Afternoon*. He had become a home computer hobbyist, acquiring first an Apple II and later a Macintosh. Early in January of 1982 (the same year "the computer" would be dubbed *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year") Joyce wrote to Howard Becker, a sociologist at Northwestern who had read and admired his first novel and whom Joyce has since characterized as his earliest hypertext supporter. Becker was a self-professed Apple evangelist. (168-69)

Kirschenbaum's account ends, meanwhile, not with Joyce's own authorial closing parenthesis of 2004, under that sepulchral rock cairn, but with an equally moving first-person narrative of Kirschenbaum's own archival work with the Michael Joyce Papers now housed at the University of Texas. This, we might say, was singularly *temporizing* work, involving the emulation of obsolete software environments and other forms of "hacking" at the intersection of what Kirschenbaum distinguishes, in a conceit fundamental to his argument, as "forensic" and "formal" concepts of medial materiality. Fittingly, perhaps, it is the one moment, in this industrious and exacting work of structural retrospection, when its author yields to the melancholy of the digital archive, in its unavoidable juxtaposition of immaterially presentist wireless facilitations with the future anterior dilations of software and bit rot:

The digital objects in the DSpace repository are what are known in the trade as BLOBs, Binary Large Objects. DSpace knows how to manage both item-level metadata and access to these files, but it does not facilitate the use of them. To actually work with the Afternoons or with any other material it must first be downloaded to the desktop of the Ransom Center's laptop, where I use what means and know-how I can to make cranky old binaries execute on the up-to-date operating system. Sometimes I am unsuccessful. [...] At the end of every work day I leave the Ransom Center and cross busy Guadalupe Street to a coffeehouse that offers public WiFi service. I log on and immediately copy and paste my notes into an e-mail message that I send to myself, the bits beamed into the late Austin afternoon to be sprayed across the surface of a hard disk spinning in the silo of a server farm I will never see. (208)

Objects hidden in space and vanished in time are juxtaposed, here, in an analogy for the distinction between forensic and formal materiality (the bit as inscribed, yet only microscopically legible, vs. the bit as manipulable self-present symbol), itself designed to facilitate a procedural intervention in the wayward idealism of new media literary studies, without allowing it much of an answer. To the extent that that distinction informs Kirschenbaum's approach to *Afternoon* as an archival object, it includes a pointed demonstration of critical distance from one of the fancies of so-called first-wave hypertext criticism, in a gambit that we might say does more to emplace Kirschenbaum's study in the dislocations of its own moment than anything else in the book. That fancy, of course, was the euphoric identification of electronic writing or textuality, in its play of absence and

presence, with the theses of poststructuralist literary and cultural theory, as exemplified in George P. Landow's landmark 1991 study *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*.

Landow's book, Kirschenbaum reminds us, was typical in placing Joyce's *Afternoon* at its center, as a reunion of the mutually alienated cultures of the writer and critic, as well as a triumphally performative material enactment of antithetic poststructuralist "theories" whose rhetorically conceived credibility was under assault, then as now, from latter-day Johnsons willing to bruise their toes on the rock of positive common sense to score a point. This untimely "convergence," which Landow more or less continued to defend in the updates producing *Hypertext 2.0* (1997) and *Hypertext 3.0* (2006), was right from the start, Kirschenbaum tells us, "oddly out of step with mainstream literary studies," which had already sloughed off its poststructuralist torment for (a presumably less culpably faddish) cultural studies and the new historicisms (165). But it turns out that the impairment of *Hypertext's* critical modernity, as Kirschenbaum understands it, has another, deeper or wider source, in that "latent Romanticism" of literary studies of which poststructuralist criticism was merely a single convenient symptom, and which Kirschenbaum suggests infected "much of the writing about the experience of reading (or playing) *Afternoon*" (166).

Aware, for all that, that the period under discussion was not simply a moment of addled hallucination, but a meaningfully different critical-historical conjuncture, Kirschenbaum does make a somewhat cursory nod, in *Mechanisms's* coda, to the simultaneously ethnographic *and* philosophically critical concept of media appropriate to cultures that still, so to speak, believe in ghosts -- or modernities in revolt:

The recovery of the past through objects in the present is our one recourse, besides spiritualism, to satisfying a desire to speak with the dead. Storage, which I have discussed throughout this book, is all about creating a systemized space in which this activity can unfold.
(251)

But Kirschenbaum does not seem all that interested in the *negativity* of the spectral that was integral to the French poststructuralist teratology of Nietzsche with Freud and Marx, through which we might say the subject of Euro-Atlantic techno-modernity, at a particular critical-historical conjuncture, pursued the ethical imagination of the unheard (or violently silenced) speech in its "dead" peripheries. That, if anything, needs to be taken as the most charitable understanding

of the impulse that drove what Kirschenbaum calls “high poststructuralism,” read not for its theses on *the* administered world of literary criticism, but for the indirection, both modal and stylistic, through which it operated as what Jameson, himself barely tolerating its challenge to Lukácsian Marxism, would call a “problem of continuity” (Marxism and Form, 50).³⁰

To be sure, Landow’s exponence of hypertext was always characterized by an eagerness to *make connections* that were always, in his own eyes (and his own words), slightly embarrassing.³¹ But that is perhaps merely a way of pointing to its roots in a tradition (Jameson’s word) other than, and other to, the Anglo-American tradition in which Kirschenbaum’s own, determinedly empiricist work appears to move -- and which carries what Jameson calls an “anti-speculative bias,” in the emphasis placed “on the individual fact or item at the expense of the network of relationship in which that item may be embedded.” The liberal positivism of that tradition, Jameson tells us, is characteristically resistant to the forging of fanciful links (Marxism and Form, x) – among such ostensibly irreconcilable categories, for example, as a software program and a theory of reading. To this observation, one would perhaps have to add Adorno’s trenchant readings of that chorismos or “block” in the Kantian modernity to which he saw Euro-Atlantic thought as having regressed, today, yet which he characterizes, with something more (or less) than uncomplicated hostility, as “what a Romantic artist once named the innermost life of the world” (*Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 178). One ought not to need to engage in pointlessly arcane disclamation, here, to be permitted to observe that Jameson’s dialectical thought shares with poststructuralist theory (or whatever we want to call it) a stance inimical to that disavowal of reflexive critical attention that is in some ways implicit in third-wave new media criticism’s disavowal of its first-wave proto-theoretical naïveté -- as it is explicit, perhaps, in a now vast corpus of restorationist work on literary studies “after theory.” Implicit *and* explicit, we might say, in the disavowal of poststructuralism, is a disavowal above all of the need to read that massive corpus of cultural criticism, grounded in Continental European philosophy and social theory, that was generated in its name -- and to read it, so to speak, closely: a term marking not claims for the ontological primacy or exclusivity of texts, but simply the practice of not taking things literally, of thinking twice, looking before one leaps, and so on. All the uncomfortable pauses in textual practice, that is to say, that truth be told, do interfere in the reg-

³⁰Marxism and Form, 50.

³¹“Hypertext,” Landow wrote in one of the sentences most often extracted from Hypertext, “creates an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment” of aspects of Barthes’s and Derrida’s theories of reading (Hypertext 3.0, 52).

imented progress of a properly professional body of work (Joyce's own irregular and finally negative path to his professional profile, today, is ample evidence of that). Counterposed with such ritual circumscription, Landow's inadroit claim for hypertext as the embodiment of literary theory (and later, as the disembodiment of postcoloniality³²) might be described as sincerely *enthusiastic*.

But Landow's pronouncements were perhaps never as unreflectively thetic, in the first place, as Kirschenbaum, with others before him, makes them out to be. In the tropisms of those "shocks of recognition," of those concepts that "cry out for hypertextuality" (Hypertext 3.0, 1, 53), one finds not, in fact, the advancement of theses, but rather imagined comparisons between factual and fictional worlds -- offered not to falsifiability tests, but to what Elizabeth Bruss called the criterial, rather than evidential ground of argument (44). Indeed, one might say this was the very premise of the now justly famous opening gambit of Hypertext:

When designers of computer software examine the pages of Glas or Of Grammatology, they encounter a digitalized, hyper-textual Derrida; and when literary theorists examine Literary Machines, they encounter a deconstructionist or poststructuralist Nelson. These shocks of recognition can occur because over the past several decades literary theory and computer hypertext, apparently unconnected areas of inquiry, have increasingly converged. [...] A paradigm shift, I suggest, has begun to take place in the writings of Jacques Derrida and Theodor Nelson, Roland Barthes and Andries van Dam. I expect that one name in each pair will be unknown to most of my readers. (Hypertext 3.0, 1)

To be sure, Kirschenbaum's extended argument for the diachronic remanence of data in inscribed storage, over its static ephemerality in the endless present of screen memory, is a successful corrective of some bad habits in the reception of new media literary artifacts -- including what he would call the "medial ideology" of self-evident representation, as marked by the volatile enthusiasm Landow imputes, in this more or less famous passage, to the "encounter" between theory and machine. Quite plausibly, those bad habits were themselves built on bad habits in the Anglo-American literary reception of the endgame of continental European philosophy, as an import substitution scheme and editorial racket the

³²See Hypertext 3.0, 345, which finds Landow advancing the claim that "Hypertext in its most commonly encountered form, the World Wide Web, provides a particularly important way for the empire to write back."

legacies of which have yet to be sorted out coherently even today. Speaking as a literary scholar, writer and humanist partisan who for five years has used a Concurrent Versioning System repository for all of my text production, itself taking the form of document-records simply numbered in time, I was delighted to find in Kirschenbaum's book a substantive meditation on a problem I had so far been unable to frame for myself with any degree of critical adequacy whatsoever. While checking into my personal CVS repository successive drafts of the essay you are now reading, on this page or screen, I realized why, for reasons Kirschenbaum's book has helped me think through, that practice of self-archiving has displaced my own previously vigorous interest in "screening" individual new media literary artworks, as a primary mode of "doing" new media studies, in the sense that one "does" one's work in one's field.³³ It is the cyclic or folded temporality and historicity in critical practice itself, we might say, that goes missing in the acquisitive pursuit of critical objects whose volatility our very profession forces us to undermeasure.

I must admit I am haunted, on the other hand, by the confidence implied by Kirschenbaum's emphasis on the persistence of data, in the legacies of the inscribing technologies of nineteenth-century Euro-Atlantic imperial modernity -- and in the confidence it implies in that modernity as a civilization.³⁴ Let me suggest that among other places, it was precisely in that first-wave hypertext theory, which Kirschenbaum (not exactly without precedent) now proposes we discard, that what we might call poststructuralist *essayism* "survived," in the sense of that term familiar to readers of Derrida's readings of Benjamin's altogether too famous essay on translation, where it marks the fragile founding twilight of "our" modernity as a guarantor of secular truth. Indeed, this emphasis on continuity seems to sit at some odds with the reaching for figures of cyclic or folded temporality, in some of the more imaginative new work emerging from the field into which the argument of Kirschenbaum's book is crafted to intervene³⁵ -- work that one might

³³See Lennon, "Screening a Digital Visual Poetics."

³⁴"We live in a time of the forensic imagination," Kirschenbaum observes in the book's titular passage, "as evidenced by the current vogue for forensic science in television drama and genre fiction. Forensics in this popular sense returns us to the scene of the crime; as a legal and scientific enterprise forensic investigation has its origins in the same nineteenth-century era that produced the great inscribing engines of modernity -- the gramophone, film, and the typewriter all among them" (250).

³⁵At this juncture, no one has done more than Alan Liu to articulate a negative dialectics for new media studies, as an emerging field, and to link it, as a form of thought and writing, to what I am calling "essayism." Apropos of the negativity of critique (and drawing directly on the polemics of Arif Dirlik), Liu observes: "Put in the past tense, such questions concern what Jean-

read as embracing a newly self-conscious and justly sensitive form of temporizing attention to its own Euro-Atlantic First Worldism *as* a field. To its own dependence, that is to say, on wealth-dependent (and as such, highly leveraged) habits and levels of energy consumption. If, among its many valuably singular insights, *Mechanisms* contains one potentially fatal intellectual infelicity, we might say it lies in this emphasis on the remanence of data, deployed against the virtualities of the poststructuralist imagination, at precisely that cultural moment when the permanence of the progressive civilizational legacies of Euro-Atlantic modernity is a question, rather than an answer, for more core subjects of the United States empire than at any time perhaps since the 1970s.

In postwar U.S. literary studies at its boldest, anyway, “literarity” has always been understood to include the undisciplined Nietzschean temporality of the event, alongside its Weberian secular avocation. Kirschenbaum glances in this direction, I think, when he concedes that “software is also ineluctably part of a proleptic *now*” (203), empirically affirming Joyce’s own assertion, in the lines

François Lyotard has called the ‘metanarratives’ of progressive humanity and speculative reason that academic historicism once sustained but that now, from the viewpoint of cultural critics, seem just so many empty postures. But it is the present tense of these questions – the sense that they bear on a gigantic ‘now’ inclusive of the Enlightenment and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries together – that cultural criticism has found most compelling. That now is modernity. In the broadest sense, the underlying historical concern of cultural criticism has been modernization, the centuries-long ‘progress’ of rationalization, routinization, institutionalization, organization building, and empire building (with their attendant political, market, and media effects) engineered by post-Enlightenment industrial societies. Cultural criticism is the critique by disjunction of such progress” (5). The temporality of what Liu calls “academic historicism,” here, needs supplementing or supplanting by the temporalities of an imagined or comparative historicity: “Where once the job of literature and the arts was creativity, now, in an age of total innovation, I think it must be history. That is to say, it must be a special, dark kind of history. The creative arts as cultural criticism (and vice versa) must be the history not of things created – the great, auratic artifacts treasured by a conservative or curatorial history – but of things destroyed in the name of creation” (8).

To the extent that it builds on the critiques elaborated in such essays as “Dark Continents: Critique of Internet Metageographies” and “Of Bugs and Rats: Cyber-Cleanliness, Cyber-Squalor, and the Fantasy-Spaces of Informational Globalization,” caps a productive deviation from narrowly conceived new media studies as such, and evidences the complex long duration of a personal intellectual history, Terry Harpold’s recent *Ex-foliations: Reading Machines and the Upgrade Path* presents a meditation on Joyce’s *Afternoon* (pp. 175ff.), among other objects of the disciplinary temporality of new media studies, that is very much in the spirit of my own thinking, here. I thank an anonymous reader for *Postmodern Culture* for encouraging me to consult this last work, which reminded me of the influence Harpold’s polemical interventions, at the very end of the 1990s, had on my own formation at that altogether earlier stage.

echoing Marx and Engels that Kirschenbaum quotes from *Of Two Minds*, that “Electronic text appears as dissipate mist” (*Of Two Minds*, 233). But that assertion, like others in Joyce’s essay into which it is woven, is *rhetorical* -- by which I mean simply that we are forced to find in it the possibility, the certainty, even, that Joyce was and is saying something other than, or in addition to, what he actually wrote. What we call poststructuralist theory, which we would do better to call poststructuralist *writing*, was not a body of falsifiable propositions, least of all about the positive qualitative ephemerality of anything, including the object “writing.” What we call poststructuralist theory, in its particulate presence in U.S. literary culture, was an intensity of *writing practice* through which the works of Derrida, Deleuze, and all the other usual suspects served temporarily to reverse the programmatic suppression of rhetoricity in bureaucratic academic modernism. As a committedly literary user of the Concurrent Versioning System whose arborescent constraint Kirschenbaum delicately counterposes with the rhizomorphist euphoria of literary theory,³⁶ let me insist that, all revisionist hopes and dreams notwithstanding, the disciplinary question of what we call “theory” is still very much unsettled. Because as an essayist I set out (with no illusions of freedom) to write rhetorical essays, rather than deliberately structured text, the hierarchical tree that I cannot escape is something for which I nevertheless have no substantive *use*. And to speak of archiving, rather than writing, I find little need, in preserving my own body of work, for the disciplined programmer’s branch invoked by Kirschenbaum against early hypertext theory’s imagined comparisons, which he permits to be marked, in his text, as another form of humanist naïveté. That he claims, on one page of *Mechanisms*, that the appeal of poststructuralism for new media studies has been “abandoned, or at least . . . diluted” (43), and on the next that the “medial ideology” it promoted remains entirely intact (45), speaks to the weight that the CVS tree is being made to bear, in the strife of faculties marking Kirschenbaum’s clearing of space for himself in critical history:

From this perspective the poststructuralism that has held sway over

³⁶See *Mechanisms*, 206: “The textual practices embodied by a CVS stand in marked contrast to the ‘version’ of electronic textuality that is perhaps better known in literary and artistic circles, largely as a result of first-wave hypertext theory. At no time is this more obvious than when comparing the figures of the tree – the basic data structure of any versioning system – and the rhizome, or network. That Storyspace embodied both from the start is no surprise, given that it was also intended to support a rudimentary versioning system for its authors. [...] The same story spaces that modeled evanescent postmodern theory, in other words, could also, at least in principle, be made to enforce just the kind of versioning protocols that were then emerging in the software development industry.”

discussions of electronic writing since the late 1980s is a demonstrable medial artifact, one that had more to do with its moment (and marketing) than with the fundamental nature of electronic textuality. By contrast, an industrial-strength CVS environment is perhaps the ultimate realization of the kind of document science that has been practiced since the first stemma were printed in 1827 to display the relationships amongst a group of Swedish legal manuscripts. (201)

To demand, as Kirschenbaum demands, that those who study books also study software, is to make claims on the modernity of literary studies itself, asserting priority for the mechanism and its technical administration (and administrators) at a level that exceeds the modesty, and indeed the genuine appeal, of Kirschenbaum's proposals for those of his readers already with him in the letter, if in agreement or disagreement in spirit -- and rather than not yet there. New media studies has always generated forward momentum through grandiose claims for renovation and threatened consequences for those left (or staying) behind, and while it seems only fair to grant Kirschenbaum's own theses their own aspect of indirection, it needs to be said that since no "poststructuralist theorist" has ever asserted *thetically* the ideal rhizomorphism of anything, be that anything textual or nontextual, first-wave hypertext theory cannot credibly be accused of doing that, either, no matter how crudely and schematically some of its individual exponents may have (and have been) read. The critical clout of Kirschenbaum's intervention pales where its foils are literally spectral, in this sense -- a kind of ghost data, or intrasystemic ideal -- and where "poststructuralist theory," the thing he pursues to debunk, eludes him only because it was never there.

Joyce's sentence "Electronic text appears as dissipate mist" was written in the language of manifesto, which as Janet Lyon observes in her study of the form, "marks the point of impact where the idea of radical egalitarianism runs up against the entrenchment of an ancien régime" (1) and is *difficult to read*, in so far as "its apparent rhetorical straightforwardness obscures the degree to which the form is embedded in the contradictions of political representation" (2). In its "literally, inexorably, and grindingly absolute" linearity, the genetic CVS architecture that Kirschenbaum mobilizes against the misguidedly rhizomorphist theses of post-structuralist theory (and its hypertext-theoretic avatars) seems in some ways to serve to reproach Landow not only for his bureaucratic First-Worldist left anarchism, but for the still more irredeemable excess of a vision of hypertext as de-

colonization, as well.³⁷ But it was Edward Said himself who, in the essay that placed the anti-systemic form of the essay at the heart of what Said called “secular criticism,” described Euro-Atlantic imperial modernity as a product of the inexorably democratic displacement of the natal and vertical filiations of family and culture, by institutions such as the university, whose social character was best figured as agenealogically horizontal (17). To the extent that such “affiliation,” whether conservative (in, e.g., Eliot) or progressive (in Lukács), tends to recreate a “systematic totalizing world-view” -- that is, to reinstate, in new form, the authority previously evacuated from genealogical filiation – Said argued that affiliative orders become cultural systems through which university-based intellectuals, for example, lose touch, in time, with “the resistance and the heterogeneity of civil society” (26). Despite the abdication of the genuinely insurrectionary literary theory of the 1960s (Said was no more sympathetic to “poststructuralism” than Jameson), this compensatory cultural system, Said suggested, is now feeling decisive pressure for the first time, as the dynamic legacy of decolonization replants the world-system’s peripheral regions squarely in front of (and even within) the campus gate. That one looks in vain, in the pages of *Mechanisms*, for any sense of that pressure, leaves one wondering what has replaced it – and what form its own criticism must take.

An antipositivist might take a page, so to speak, from the double negation of a romantically ironic book on note-taking entitled “How to Make a Complete Map of Every Thought You Think.” That “book” is a freely available PDF document authored by software programmer Lion Kimbro, who advocates the deliberate creation, in note-taking practice, of what, with doomed aspiration to polysyntactic perversity, he calls “imaginary false links.”³⁸ Here, I’ll suggest, is a useful point of convergence -- or opposition -- between comparative literary-critical practice and new media studies. In the now strategically anachronistic first-wave ephemeralist concept of the differential hyperlink, a liminal interval traversing and demarcating at the same time, one might determine a homology with what Adorno called the essay as form, in which our non-elective capitulation to modernity is balanced by a non-frivolous dream of freedom.³⁹ Is it really too much to say, lending the word

³⁷See Hypertext 3.0, 346: “The chief value of placing these essays online is simply that Zimbabweans can speak – or rather, write – for themselves rather than having critics from the [sic] Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States write for them.”

³⁸See Kimbro, *How to Make a Complete Map of Every Thought You Think*: “TOLERATE ERRORS. If this is hard for you, start fucking things up by attaching imaginary false links in one place (I guess). Start making up links that go to creatively unrelated places” (PDF version, p. 84).

³⁹See Adorno, “Der Essay als Form”; Adorno, “The Essay as Form.”

all the weight it deserves, that this *matters*?

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