

## Chapter 9

# They Became What They Beheld: The Futility of Resistance in the Space of Electronic Writing

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These last years of the century seem full of flux and controversy, particularly at that interface of culture and technology we call writing. Issues of interpretation, authority, literacy, and textuality gain salience in a society driven by transactions in information. The idea of information itself seems to be shifting, becoming less a matter of content than of association, less monologic truth than polyvalent discourse. In this "age of the smart machine," work increasingly focuses both on actual texts (electronic documents and databases) and on the virtual, social texts that arise as we organize our work worlds around these acts of writing (S. B. Heath, "Fourth Vision" 300–01; Zuboff 179). Our tools for text production change, too, taking us from mixed print and digital technologies (word processing, desktop publishing), to the paperless mode that Diane Balestri calls "writing to the screen" ("Softcopy" 17), and, most recently, to hypertext, or "non-sequential writing" (Nelson, *Computer Lib* 29), a kind of discourse that cannot be presented in definitive, typographic form (see Johnson-Eilola, in the overview to this section, and also Landow, "Rhetoric"; Slatin, "Reading"; C. F. Smith).

The technology of text construction is, in some respects, nothing new. It simply extends an approach to reading and writing that has had broad currency since the 1960s: reader-response theory. What Wolfgang Iser asserts of conventional writing is fundamentally true of hypertext—the textual object is "virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text [the physical artifact] or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it achieves its

dynamism" (21). Hypertext represents an evolutionary outgrowth of late-modern textuality.

But conventional texts have certain limitations. Print's truest products, as Alvin Kernan recently insisted, are "ordered, controlled, teleological, referential, and autonomously meaningful" (*Death of Literature* 141). When literacy serves the interests of individual authority, monologic discourse, and linear argument, these qualities may be essential; but they have less value as we come to define literacy in terms of communities—positing dynamic, collaborative, and associative forms of writing.

Hypertext differs in important ways from earlier forms of writing. For all its "dynamism," the encounter between text and reader in Iser's theory remains internal and passive: we decode characters and syntax; we match "repertoires" with the text; we construct predications and "passive syntheses" (135). These are all purely mental events. Hypertext includes the same range of internalized responses but adds the mechanism of links, which constitute external or "technologized" conventions. The reader must actively choose among options for proceeding by typing commands, touching a "hot" point on the screen, or finding "words that yield" (Douglas, "Wandering" 95). On one level at least, the transactions of reader with hypertext are physical events.

Of course, some hypertextual constructions, like those Michael Joyce has called "exploratory" ("Siren Shapes" 12), retain much of the passivity of print texts. This category includes most instrumental applications, like technical documentation, training manuals, and kiosk guides, as well as some early academic implementations (see Shneiderman, "User Interface"; Landow, "Rhetoric"). But Joyce also posits a second type, "constructive" hypertext, whose features require "a capability to act: to create, to change, and to recover particular encounters within the developing body of knowledge. These encounters . . . are versions of what they are becoming, a structure for what does not yet exist" (11). Constructive hypertext presumes not just a "virtual" work imaginatively constructed in the "convergence" of reader and text but a formally "open work" (see Eco) that blurs distinctions between reception and production. This more radical form of hypertext holds the greatest potential to transform our reading and writing practices.

What value do these changes have for students and teachers of texts? What might we and our students do with constructive hypertext in the classroom? One obvious application lies in rhetoric and composition studies, where a dynamic, evolving, open-ended text helps students improve their planning and invention (Balestri, "Softcopy" 45; Joyce,

"Siren Shapes" 38). But this sort of pedagogy is not where hypertext is likely to have its most radical or transforming effects.

If we assume that electronic writing belongs exclusively in the composition class, or in the composing process of academic writing generally, we assume a model of writing dominated by definitive, artifactual production. According to this model, the value of texts increases as they become formally fixed and stable. Least valuable are students' essays in process, unvalidated fabrics of experimentation and error. The completed, printed paper has better status, especially if it receives a good mark (the finishing touch, the final letter). But the most highly valued form of writing—in an entirely different category, really—is the text-in-this-class, a work of "literature" or literary criticism. Both a cultural and an economic artifact, it bears the imprimatur of a recognized publishing house and an ever more daunting pricetag. Academic readers get what they pay for: the published work has definitive authority, existing in thousands of copies, identical and apparently univocal. It purveys (and endlessly reiterates) the "last word" on its subject. Thus a kind of capitalist idealism inheres in scholarly texts, a hierarchy of forms running from the momentary, dynamic, and worthless to the timeless, unchanging, and costly.

This hierarchy owes its existence in large part to the cultural impact of the printing press. Our veneration of the author and the definitive text supports a literary value system designed to restrain a technological monster. Unchecked by publishers and critics, the democratic press would presumably churn out an insupportable surplus of print (see Barthes, "From Work"; Foucault, *Archaeology*; Kernan, *Samuel Johnson*). As the conservatives have it, authorship and the text as *eidōs*—as absolute and universal form—stand as bulwarks against a cultural deluge. This defense becomes all the more crucial (and futile) as technologies of mass communication and desktop publishing alter the economics of print production.

Constructive hypertext thoroughly negates this ideology and its strategy of containment, insisting instead on plurality and participation—a change that might give us pause. If we English teachers embrace this form of text production, do we abandon what we have taken to be central literary values? If new writing systems threaten the orderly and autonomously meaningful text, maybe we are better off shutting them down in the "silicon basement" (see Fund). But before we reach such damning conclusions, we need to give our textual idealism a closer look. What unvoiced assumptions does it contain, and are they tenable?

## Writing as Reading

As a book-learned society, we presumably value the ability to read critically and interpretively—so much so that we regularly agonize over the decline of "literacy" (cultural, multicultural, or simply functional). Our attitudes toward writing are more ambiguous, however. Walter Benjamin observed that, by 1930, any literate European could become an "author," at least to the extent of publishing a letter in the local newspaper (232). But writing never became a truly popular activity, even as the age of mechanical reproduction gave way to the era of desktop publishing. As Anne Ruggles Gere points out, true "authorship" extends only to those with substantial professional or proprietary stake in their work (*Writing Groups* 62). When we refer to "writing" in any context other than pure instrumentality (e.g., business writing or student writing), we invoke a complex system of gates and gatekeepers—the worlds of publishing and academia as we know them (I. L. Horowitz 90).

The gatekeepers behave according to a simple probability judgment: the chances are that any new writing is not worth disseminating. Because productive resources—raw materials, manufacturing time, distribution channels—are scarce and costly (at least if one considers conventional printing), only the most popular or the most highly regarded writing can command them. The default response of publisher and professor must be "not up to our standards" or "this is fine as far as it goes, but. . . ." And, indeed, this principle of conservatism operates retrospectively as well as prospectively. The established canon has its integrity and its prior economic claims, against which any contemporary writing must compete. Unless carefully controlled, expansion means corruption or dilution, so literary gatekeepers attempt to hold authorized production of new texts to a minimum. Thus we might consider *writing* not as a schizoid duality of momentary product versus canonical *eidōs* but, rather, in its true economic continuity, as an implicit attempt at competition. Seen in this light, writing is a suspect act, that "perilous" discursive proliferation of which Michel Foucault speaks as threatening to spread out of control (*Archaeology* 216).

Though such assumptions may seem perverse, they are in fact well grounded in economic and social reality. Restrictions on the creation of "authorized" writing produce an economy of scarcity. If only a few texts survive to be disseminated, it is much easier to concentrate and control literary value, and, of course, this economy benefits those who live by study as well as those who live by sales. Among the agents of

conservation are academic critics and theorists, who strive to maintain what Paulo Freire called a “banking concept” of education, in which knowledge and cultural value figure as commodities offered in exchange for tuition dollars (*Pedagogy* 59; Continuum ed.). Under this scheme, students become empty receptacles waiting to be filled with intellectual “content,” and learning becomes knowledge consumption. As that eminent scholar-banker Allan Bloom has it, education at its best “is merely putting the feast on the table” (51). The rarer the delicacies, the better.

This model of education as commerce and consumption meshes nicely with the idealist hierarchy of text production. The best writings must be definitive and immutable because they will be received as *doxa*, or unquestioned belief, not as *episteme*, or experiential knowledge. Education as banking concentrates on product to the exclusion of process or discursive practice, serving the essentially conservative cultural ends of the system. “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them,” Freire writes, “the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (*Pedagogy* 60). Lest our students think to change (even) the textual world, we set them to consuming more courses in the canon—even as we endlessly debate its makeup.

According to Freire, Western education suffers from “narration sickness,” an obsession with a pedagogic plot directed toward acquisition and accretion (57). But other, more promising and less pathological educational narratives are conceivable. In an imaginative departure from the banking model, Gregory Ulmer introduces surrealism not by referring his students to canonical examples in a surrealist anthology but by constituting his class as a “textshop” charged with creating ready-mades and “automatic” novels. Students are told not to *buy* the text but to produce it—or perhaps to *be* the text themselves. The aim of this radical pedagogy is to “de-program freshmen platonists,” dismantling the myth of the textual *eidōs*:

In the textshop, the student has an opportunity to discover the epistemological assumptions at work in culture and in one’s own thinking. Textshop is “epic” in that it shares with Brecht’s epic theater the desire to show people that culture (or society) is not natural, given, but is made, invented, and hence changeable.

Ulmer’s strategy brings into play each student’s “mystory,” or idiomatic psychic and writerly development, which sets him or her to work in the textual world (“Textshop” 759–60).

Regrettably, the textshop approach does not encourage anyone to change that world. Ulmer seems interested mainly in helping students

discover predefined truths, enlisting *episteme* in the reproduction of *doxa*. There is a certain naive historicism in his assumption that any two iterations of the formula will produce identical results: add one part Mallarmé to two parts Breton and, presto, we have *surréalisme*, same as it ever was. But Ulmer’s radical pedagogy, despite its limits, demonstrates an important principle: “writing” in a course on literature or aesthetics need not be restricted to the desultory term paper or examination essay. Ulmer treats students’ production of texts not as a vice to be regretted (or corrected) but as a source of essential dynamism in the pedagogic process.

### Reading as Writing

How might this notion of productive or “constructive” participation be used to engage students in a more open-ended, less constrained encounter with literature? Could constructive hypertext allow a further development of Ulmer’s “epic” pedagogy, a way of engaging students in a more extensive transformation of their textual world? How would students define and enact their responses to literary texts when those texts were presented as read-write systems—versions of what they were becoming, structures for what did not yet exist? These were among the instigating questions we brought to a pedagogical experiment with hypertextual narrative in Nancy Kaplan’s section of Reading Texts, a one-semester course at Carnegie Mellon University for first-year students, intended both to introduce them to literature and to fulfill a composition requirement.

Our interest in using constructive hypertext was motivated in part by the course’s approach, embodied in its primary textbook, Kathleen McCormick, Gary Waller, and Linda Flower’s *Reading Texts: Reading, Responding, Writing*. Drawing on response theory (e.g., Bleich, Fish, Iser) and an interpretive model based on cultural criticism (e.g., Eagleton, Jameson, Williams), this book explicitly debunks the “old model” of reading, the naive belief that meaning is “in” the text, waiting for the reader to extract and appropriate it. *Reading Texts* suggests instead that literary encounters require “making sense,” a thoughtful engagement with the “repertoire” of codes and references in the text. This encounter consists not of absorption but of interaction, since the reader receives a literary work through the screen of his or her own repertoire of assumptions, beliefs, predispositions, and influential prior texts. Because the nature of this interaction can never be predicted, reading is essentially “polyvalent,” a play of differing ideas (3–14).

Though *Reading Texts* (*qua* book) retains the “idealist” model of the

text as perfected product, it is reluctant to assign absolute meaning or authority to any artifact—even, presumably, itself. This text argues that a book, play, or poem may be the material outcome of a discursive process but that this process is neither definitive nor foreclosing; literature always instigates later interpretive discourses. Texts are *fabricated* once (in the formal sense only) but are *made* (sense of) again and again as the reader interacts with them to produce what Iser calls “the work.”

The introduction of polyvalence to the interpretive scheme provides an opening for resistant readings through critical independence, showing a way past the idealist regression that limits Ulmer’s textshop experiment. *Reading Texts* exhorts students to recognize the interpretive framework or ideology inherent in a literary work—in order to resist it, to reject, evade, or revise that ideology. Readers are to develop “strong” readings that emphasize divergence in the interpretive act:

A strong reading of a text is a clearly articulated reading that self-consciously goes “against the grain” of a text. A strong reading is *not* a misreading. Nor is it perverse or imperceptive. It can only develop if a reader is aware of the dominant text strategies and chooses . . . to read the text differently. . . . A text may want you to respond in a certain manner, but you may *choose* to use your cultural awareness to resist that prescribed way of reading. You become thereby a strong, independent reader. (28)

Strong readers are responsive and responsible, careful to take into account the agenda of the text before them. But they are also free agents, makers of meaning who resist the text’s seductions by building *against* (meaning both on and away from) an initial textual foundation.

Yet however strong, the kind of literary response defined by *Reading Texts* has distinct limits. Though genuinely centered on the reader, this mode of interpretation vectors that reader toward a strictly limited goal—the production of a traditional academic paper. The concentration on process that informs the book’s discussion of reading evaporates when the subject of writing comes up, revealing a dominant concern for a particular product. Taking on decidedly instrumental and executive contours, the text invokes “task representation” and cost-benefit analysis: “Let’s examine some of the benefits and costs . . . of using the summary plan” (62). The approach to writing here seems less oppositional or critical than pragmatic. Apparently not sharing Ulmer’s concern about cultural *doxa*, the authors propose no radical departures from the reading response, the research paper, and other standard

assignments. They do not foresee that strong readings may sometimes issue in revisionary poems or fictions, as both Harold Bloom (13) and Ihab Hassan (170) have argued. Nor do they ever suggest that student writing can be placed on the same formal level as “literary” writing or in any way be linked to it except through the standard conventions of quotation and reference.

None of this should surprise us, since *Reading Texts* is, after all, a *textbook*, a commercial Gutenberg artifact consisting of a finite discourse fixed in formal borders, a “closed book” that creates a bias toward hegemony and monologue. A textbook may, as *Reading Texts* does, share its discursive space with quoted selections of student prose; but such openings are anomalous and overdetermined, specimen texts offered for examination. (The expropriation of other texts is an inescapable consequence of print. In this essay, which we have written for a book, we too have our mounted specimens.) The textbook maintains its discursive precedence in the history of any writing: first comes the text-in-this-class, then any student’s production on, about, or from it. When a textbook embraces a student text, it assimilates that text into its priority. No book can truly open itself to subsequent discourses, which remain dynamic, provisional, and in every sense of the word *imperfect*.

Hypertext challenges this hierarchical, book-centered model of writing and literary response. Being electronic (i.e., defined on the scale of molecules and particles), hypertext knows no real limits on the scope of its discourse. In practical terms, “writing space” may be considered infinitely expansible and thus *promiscuous* (in the root sense of “seeking relations”). Because there is always room for a new link and a new word, no hypertextual discourse is ever formally closed. While one version of the hypertext must always precede another, its precedence is not equal to the formal priority reinforced by printing.

Earlier classroom observations have revealed that hypertextual writings stimulate students to produce their own texts and to accord these texts something better than perfunctory or secondary value (see Joyce, “Siren Shapes”; Moulthrop and Kaplan). Accordingly, we looked to constructive, read-write hypertext as a way of combining the interpretive resistance suggested by *Reading Texts* with the radical writing practice of Ulmer’s textshop. We hoped to present a form of literature (or “paraliterature” or “paracriticism”) open not only to interpretation but also to expansion and revision. Introducing hypertextual fiction in this way amounted to a strong reading of *Reading Texts* (the course as well as the course text), an attempt to diverge from the standard

introduction to literature, to dismantle interpretation as secondary discourse and the textbook as *eidōs*. We hoped to engage our students in resistant readings of print-based education.

But a nontraditional approach to literature was not all we expected to instigate. Knowing the nature of resistance, we anticipated that our students might turn against our technocritical agenda as well, pursuing strong readings of our social "text" by offering their own counterresistance. We did not know what interpretive form this reaction might take, nor did we know whether hypertext would help or hinder students in expressing it. But our expectation of resistance in some form was well founded: in at least one instance a student undertook a double reversal—to subvert the very subversiveness of hypertext. In reflecting on this attempt, we have come to realize that our understanding of "resistance" in electronic texts was naive.

### Paths of Lost Resistance

For two-thirds of the semester, Kaplan's section proceeded as a conventional introduction to literature: students read canonical poems, stories, and plays and wrote response statements and formal papers. The turning point came when the class encountered Jorge Luis Borges's fiction "The Garden of Forking Paths." The story provides an effective transition between conventional and hypertext writing, since it thematizes the tension between the multiplicity of fictional possibility and the definitiveness of linear narrative.

"The Garden of Forking Paths" is a metaphysical spy story about Yu Tsun, a Chinese agent working undercover in England during World War I. Yu must communicate the location of a British artillery park to his German masters before a British counterspy arrests him. With only a revolver and a single cartridge at his disposal, he forms a desperate plan to murder some person whose last name is also the name of the strategic town of Albert. From newspaper accounts of the murder, Yu's masters will decode the message.

But on arrival at the home of Stephen Albert, his arbitrary victim, Yu discovers that Albert, an eminent Sinologist, holds the key to a mystery from Yu's past. A renowned ancestor, Ts'ui Pên, had undertaken two great but apparently futile projects: an intricate novel and a "strictly infinite" labyrinth. But no trace of the labyrinth was ever found, and the novel exists only as "an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts" in which the hero dies in one chapter but shows up alive in the next (24–25). Albert has recently solved the riddle of the missing

masterpieces: the maze is not lost and the book is complete. Book and labyrinth are one—Ts'ui Pên's *The Garden of Forking Paths* is a narrative labyrinth. Albert explains:

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. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. . . . Sometimes, the paths of this labyrinth converge: for example, you arrive at this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend. (26)

The story's metaphysical tragedy (or surrealist satire) lies in the fact that Ts'ui Pên's theory of time does not hold for Yu Tsun and Stephen Albert, who dwell in *Borges's* "Garden," not Ts'ui Pên's. They have only one past and one future, and in it Yu Tsun must coldbloodedly murder the man who has just restored his cultural patrimony. As he aims his revolver, Yu experiences a momentary "swarming sensation," a blurring copresence of alternate realities. But this hallucination fades and he pulls the trigger, locking in a single, foregone conclusion (the bullet for Albert, the noose for himself).

This outcome can be read as a "deconstruction" of determinism in the detective story (Brooks 319); but this reading assumes that stories, obedient to the limits of print, must always enforce a singular choice of futures. With hypertext the range of options broadens, allowing narratives that at least approximate Yu's vision of infinite pathways (Bolter 137). In fact, if one transfers the text of *Borges's* story to a hypertext system, it is possible to perform this transformation on "The Garden of Forking Paths" itself. As an exercise in practical paracriticism, Stuart Moulthrop produced a hypertext pastiche of *Borges's* story, an electronic fiction called "Forking Paths" (see "Reading").

The pastiche contains most but not all of *Borges's* text, as well as a number of digressions and extensions. For instance, in the original text Yu Tsun is directed to turn always to the left on his way to Stephen Albert's; the pastiche includes the possibility of a turn to the right, an option that leads to an encounter not with Stephen Albert but with a mysterious woman who has her own plot to hatch. Where *Borges's* story is told mainly in the voice of Yu Tsun, the electronic "Forking Paths" contains a number of voices, some fairly close mimics of *Borges's*, others transparently metafictional. The hypertext also comprises various endings, realizing alternative resolutions of the Yu-Albert story

(e.g., one in which Yu abandons his spy mission and lives out his life as Albert's companion). At least one of these endpoints denies termination:

The Garden is a place of possibility; it is consecrated to alternatives, choice, and change. It cannot close, but instead OPENS to admit you in the role of co-creator. Come inside. Look . . . learn . . . build for yourself.  
(node 84/T)<sup>1</sup>

Our presentation of hypertext fiction in Reading Texts took off from this invitation. Along with "Forking Paths," students encountered "Afternoon: A Story," a multiple fiction by Michael Joyce (see Douglas, "Wandering; see also the overview to this section of the volume) and "Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse," by John McDaid (see Moulthrop, "Toward a Paradigm"). In all these cases, students were faced with narratives that defy closure and encourage highly participatory interactions.

All three hypertexts were also potentially *constructive*, open to revisionary writing as well as exploratory reading. As part of our resistance to the conventional hierarchy of writing, we invited students to realize this possibility—though it was up to the students to decide whether or how to respond. In outline, the hypertext writing assignments resembled those given for conventional texts. Kaplan asked students to move from a subjective, reader-based "response statement" to a more fully articulated piece intended for a broader audience. If they wished, students could write both assignments as conventional essays, treating the hypertexts as occasions for traditional literary analysis. A few writers took this option. Students were also invited to consider working in a hypertext system, either *Storyspace* or *Hypercard*. Doing so posed relatively few problems, since everyone in the course had achieved basic competence with personal computers by taking Carnegie Mellon's required Computer Skills Workshop. Kaplan also offered a brief introduction to authoring in the two hypertext systems and made available online help materials and documentation.

A large majority of the class produced responses to the hypertext fictions as hypertexts. Some created polysequential essays or narratives independent of the prior texts. One student, exploring the relations between compositional and narrative sequence, rearranged the components of Joyce's "Afternoon" in the order they were composed. Others accepted the invitation of the non-ending in "Forking Paths" and built their own extensions of its fictional universe. All these projects represented significant and critical engagements with hypertext fiction. But

the most interesting response, from the perspective of our concern about strong readings and resistant writings, was a text that Karl Cray embedded in his copy of "Forking Paths." Cray's writing showed us something about interpretive resistance in hypertext we had not previously considered—quite simply, that it cannot ultimately succeed.

Cray's text comprises seventeen nodes and twenty-seven links created in his copy of the *Storyspace* document (or, in that program's parlance, "space") called "Forking Paths" (see fig. 1). His decision about where his commentary would take place means that "Karl's Forking Response" consists of the nodes and links he wrote *plus* all the nodes and links of the prior text, Moulthrop's "Forking Paths." (In a print environment, the equivalent decision would produce a commentary or reading in which the whole story—the subject of the commentary—is reproduced.) Cray's decision to work within the original text raises interesting questions. How do we identify or affiliate this text? Cray named his work "Karl's Forking Response," but this title is at least as ambiguous as the prior title, "Forking Paths," which deliberately sows confusion between it and the original Borgesian text. Who is the author of this writing—Cray? Moulthrop? Borges? Ts'ui Pên? More to the point, why are we asking this question?

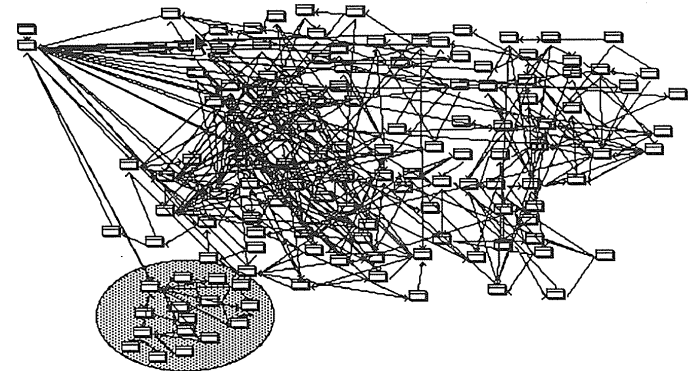


Fig. 1. *Storyspace* structure diagram of "Karl's Forking Response." Boxes are nodes; arrowed lines are links. Structure in shaded oval was added by Karl Cray to the prior text (shading added).

Crary could have avoided these issues by developing his text as a separate hypertext writing or space, in which case his discourse would stand in the same relation to its subject as most student essays or professional articles stand in relation to their subjects, as objects distinct from and outside the physical boundaries of the work they discuss. Instead, he chose to write inside the electronic space of the prior text in order to heighten the question of textual ownership. In a series of nodes, he discusses Moulthrop's appropriation of Borges at length, worrying that publication of the pastiche might violate any copyright held by Borges's heirs and assigns. But he is less certain about property rights in the electronic fiction itself:

"Forking Paths" is the ultimate realization of the text that Borges wanted to write but wasn't able to. Borges couldn't have written "Forking Paths," and Moulthrop couldn't have written "Forking Paths" if it weren't for Borges. In that sense, "Forking Paths" is a joint work of Borges and Moulthrop. (node k010)

By his own logic of extension and fulfillment, Crary could name himself in the series of authors. His amplified "Forking Paths" would have been impossible without the print and prior hypertext versions, but those two texts (particularly the second, with its invitation to reader-writerly participation) could not be fully "realized" without his work.

Yet though Crary formally integrates his writing into the structure of the "Forking Paths" pastiche, he does not call himself an author of that text, and this reluctance—or refusal—has great importance. Crary treats "Forking Paths" and its dubious textual genealogy as distinct from his own writing project. After all, even though he decides to write *in* the text, he has been assigned to write *about* the text, and Crary is quite clear about what such assignments involve: "A primary notion in the theory of the Reading Texts class is that of the author-reader interface created by the intersection of the author's and reader's repertoire" (node k008). Reader's text and author's text are different entities, aligned but also separated along an "interface" of repertoires. As a strong reader, Crary realizes that he must come to the text with his own agenda. He has to exercise some form of resistance.

Crary attempts to resist "Forking Paths" by objectifying it, establishing an aloofness from its gregarious metafictional game. Like a good strong reader (and he is a *very* good one), Crary senses what the text "wants" him to do and swerves from that interpretive track. He refuses to invent further variations on pastiched Borges themes. He will be sober and reflective, not fictively playful. His deviation heads him away

from the narrative ground of story space, off to the apparently separate realm of commentary, an alternative theory space. "Come inside," the prior text says, "Look . . . learn . . . build for yourself." Though Crary is happy enough to look, learn, and build, he declines the first overture, preferring to hold himself and his writing apart from the earlier texts.

### How Does Your Garden Grow?

Thus positioned—theoretically "outside" but formally "inside"—Crary launches into an anatomy of the pastiche, an attempt to classify all its parts according to a comprehensive taxonomy:

The text in "Forking Paths" can be divided into four types:

- 1) original Borges text
- 2) text that sounds like Borges text, but is not
- 3) text that does not sound like Borges text, but is still related to Borges' story
- 4) complete digressions (node k004)

This formalist theorizing represents Crary's strongest interpretive move against the prior text. The ideological repertoire of "Forking Paths" privileges intertextuality and narrative relativity. Enthusiastically promiscuous, "Forking Paths" interactively "shares" the work of narrative continuity, mixing up receiver and producer. Formally, its links connect its nodes in loops and spirals, defying identification of discrete narrative pathways (see fig. 1). Stylistically, the buccaneering strategy of pastiche plays havoc with what Foucault called the "author-function." To use *Reading Texts*'s language of textual desire, "Forking Paths" "wants" to provoke a general breakdown of distinctions.

Crary wants something else entirely. He wants to draw and enforce distinctions, to restore some rationality and "coherence" to his readerly experience. Insists Crary: "When I read a text, I expect to be able to follow what is going on in the story. One event should flow logically to the next" (node k006). His analytic addition to "Forking Paths" forms a bubble of critical order in the literary chaos of the pastiche. His categorizing imperative helps him swerve from lawlessness to general principles, from confusion to firm conclusions; it is the strong reader's finest hour.

Unfortunately, it is also his last stand. Although Crary attempts to

insulate himself from the welter of the pastiche, a touch of self-reference—a fatal flaw—punctures his analytical bubble. In a supremely Borgesian turn, it develops that Crary has encompassed his text in its own taxonomy: all of Crary's nodes fit within his catchall fourth category, "complete digressions" from the stories of Yu Tsun and company. Because of this, his attempt at reader-writerly resistance cannot succeed.

How can this be? Why can't Crary be allowed his independence from the prior text? To echo Borges, "Why does it disturb us that the map be included in the map and the thousand and one nights in the book of the *Thousand and One Nights*?" Our disquiet comes from ontological self-interest: "These inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious" ("Partial Magic" 196). Crary's taxonomy may not threaten its readers with fictivity, but it does cast serious doubt on the intratextual "reality" of Karl Crary.

Because Crary's discourse is formally linked to "Forking Paths," a reading of "Karl's Forking Response" is likely to carry the reader from the Borges-Moulthrop fiction into Crary's commentary without signaling any intertextual boundary. In this case, the reader might reasonably consider "Karl Crary" (quite contrary) not an external commentator but just another self-conscious *lector in fabula* (see Eco, *Open Work*). As Crary notes, "Forking Paths" already includes several such characters. Crary's fourth category makes as much sense of his own antithetical structure as it does of these previous discursive oddities. Contrary indeed to his textual resistance, Crary's commentary helps the Garden grow.

### Becoming by Beholding

Perversely, Crary's failure stems from the very strength of his attempt. He could have written a traditional, printed essay, which would have established a formal boundary between his discourse and that of the fiction, an interface along whose boundaries the play of mutual resistance could take place. But this strategy would not have been as strong in its attempted resistance as Crary's decision to build his readerly (and boundary-less) interface inside the hypertext space itself, challenging the medium on its own terms. Crary tries to do strong reading the hard way. Judged on his own terms, he may not have succeeded, but the limits of his achievement are enlightening.

At least as far as constructive, or read-write, hypertext is concerned,

Crary's challenge never stood a chance. In this medium, there is no way to resist multiplicity by imposing a univocal and definitive discourse. Hypertext frustrates this resistance because, paradoxically, it *offers* no resistance to the intrusion. The medium omnivorously assimilates any structure raised within it. Writers can try to build distinctions and hierarchies, but the qualities of hypertext as a writing system ultimately subvert these constructs.

In the space of hypertextual writing, anything that arises will be merged, gathered into the network of polyvalent discourses. Ordering principles imposed on a hypertext remain strictly contingent, open to reinterpretation or circumvention by subsequent writer-readers. Interpreters who enter the labyrinth bent on voyeuristic "objectivity" will inevitably lose their way in the garden. They become what they behold, their efforts at discrimination and definition overrun by the general "swarming" of the text. Any attempt to subvert hypertext from within succumbs to *mimetic collapse*: it becomes the thing it describes.

But perhaps this outcome merely restates the obvious truth that the medium is always the message. Surely "mimetic collapse" is nothing new in literary interpretation. It occurs as a matter of course when we respond to print texts. We regard the print text as an authoritative object, and in our analysis or criticism we imitate that authority. Our interpretive essays are indeed "severe poems" (as Harold Bloom might call them) in the sense that they are distinctive *makings*, powerful and monologic assertions. The point holds even when we espouse intertextuality, polysemy, or difference, for we still expect our disquisitions to keep the reader spellbound through all our dialectical reverses until we have had the last word. What the "strength" in strong reading amounts to, after all, is the ability to compel others to attend to our discourse and admire our cleverness in outwitting the primary text.

We restate the obvious, then. To work in any medium is to express that medium's particular message, whether in conventional writing or hypertext (Kaplan, "Ideology"). But in concentrating on this universal sameness, we risk eliding a critical distinction. As the media differ, so do their messages: the formal, or "mimetic," constraints of hypertext exactly invert those of print. Where a resistant reading of print literature always produces another definitive discourse, the equivalent procedure in hypertext does just the opposite, generating not objective closure but a further range of openings that extend the discursive possibilities of the text for "constructive" transaction. The electronic text becomes a dynamic, expansive system, "a structure for what does not yet exist."

In print's system of textual production and reception, textual fabri-



cation occurs only once for each written artifact. That artifact may subsequently give rise to many remakings (of sense), because each meaning-making act begins with the fixed and stable fabrication that precedes it and that survives the readings and writings perpetrated on and against it. In hypertext's system of textual production and reception, each meaning-making act is potentially, at least, a radical *refabrication*. Because textual fabrication recurs, the hypertextual writing that precedes and gives rise to interpretive reading-writing acts within it does not survive those acts intact.

Every system of textuality imposes conditions on creativity and interpretation. When the defining technology is print, these conditions favor singular and definitive discourse—the production of a literature devoted to property, hierarchy, and a banking model of culture. But in hypertext, very different conditions prevail. Hypertextual writing invalidates priority and singularity. It emphasizes cooperation and community rather than agonistic struggle. Resistance in hypertext is futile; the highest value resides not in contention but in *extension*, not in negation but in collaboration.

What do these theoretical gleanings mean on a more pragmatic level? What relevance do they have for teachers and students in actual classes? It would seem that our conclusions must be negative. If Crary's attempt at creative resistance does not succeed, then our attempt at a technologically radicalized pedagogy must also be counted a failure. In terms of *Reading Texts* and its principles, our experiment appears to offer little. Hypertext does not represent what the computer companies call a "software solution" for courses in reader-based interpretation. It is not merely a more accessible way to introduce or to practice interpretive resistance. Indeed, the more we experiment with hypertext in literature courses, the deeper our conviction grows that this new medium is fundamentally at odds with the aims and purposes of conventional literary education. This conclusion seems particularly true if Shirley Brice Heath is right: that those aims have come to constrain "the full meaning of *responsible*—being able to respond in something other than a prescribed formulaic and almost ritualistic manner" ("Fourth Vision" 303).

But here we, too, like Crary, may succeed by "failing." For if hypertext opens new possibilities for literary culture—even for literacy itself—then the idea of resistance may not have eluded us after all. Perhaps hypertext does not make resistance futile; perhaps it shifts this notion from the neutrality of academic theory onto the livelier and more dangerous ground of social practice. In reading and writing hypertexts, our resistance may come to focus not on prior texts or creative precursors but rather on the literary institutions we have inherited from the

history of print—institutions that make reading into a test of strength, authorship into a hierarchic mystery, and texts into closed books. Hypertext may bring many of our basic assumptions about literature in for very hard scrutiny. The subject of our "resistance," in the end, may be print culture itself.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Among the other perplexities hypertextual writing brings us, citation conventions are surely one of the most vexing. For the hypertextual fictions "Forking Paths" and "Karl's Forking Response," we have chosen node names because, like page numbers, they can be used for searching and retrieving desired sections of text.