

Editor's Column: The Internet Sublime

IN HIS ESSAY "THE READING PROCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL Approach" (1972), Wolfgang Iser offers a synopsis of his well-known and influential views on reading. Whenever I read this text—which I do every few semesters, since it is a fixture in a course on literary theory that I teach to graduate students—I am struck by a series of conceptually linked assertions Iser makes at various points. Two of the most representative ones read as follows:

Sterne's conception of a literary text is that it is something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination. *If the reader were given the whole story*, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. In this process of creativity, the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play.

The author of the text may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination—he has the whole panoply of narrative techniques at his disposal—but no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the *whole picture* before his reader's eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text.

(51, 57; my emphases)

Iser's conception of reading is predicated on the existence of various gaps, interruptions, and omissions, and it is by negotiating them that the

reader advances into the text. A final quotation from Iser makes this evident:

Even in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage, *if only because no tale can ever be told in its entirety*. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself. (55; my emphasis)

My purpose here is not to engage in a critique of Iser but rather to point to the principal presupposition underlying the assertions I have reproduced above. Central to Iser's formulations is a conceit that I would like to refer to as the readerly sublime. For how else could we describe the conditional implicit in the phrase "If the reader were given *the whole story*" or the injunction against an author's setting "*the whole picture* before his reader's eyes"? Not giving the reader *the whole story* is depicted in these quotations as a choice—that is, a decision that by its nature is optative. Iser's conception of reading is constructed against the backdrop of both the existence and the impossibility of the readerly sublime thus posited.

Just a few years earlier, in his "The Death of the Author" (1968), Roland Barthes had similarly associated the reader with a paradoxical space of heterogeneous sublimity: "A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost [. . .]" (148). In this often-cited phrase, Barthes conceives the reader as a location of perfect reception in which contradiction and multiplicity are transcended in their simultaneous and absolute intelligibility—as a space in which nothing is wasted because

nothing is lost. Barthes's projection of the reader in this quotation has its roots in the structuralist idea of intertextuality: the presupposition of a space of unlimited semiosis that avowedly provided the conditions of possibility for meaning for any text—a textual homologue of the relational and differential nature of meaning that Saussure had posited in the linguistic realm. In a splendid essay entitled "Presupposition and Intertextuality," Jonathan Culler later evinced conclusively the radically idealist foundation of the concept of intertextuality by showing that whenever critics attempted to use the concept instrumentally, they invariably turned their critical performance into the discrete identification of citations and repetitions of earlier texts.

The projection of the readerly sublime into contemporary theorizations of reading, underscored by these quotations from Iser and Barthes, is recurring in current discourse on the intersection of digital technology and interpretive work in the humanities. Readers may be changing nowadays into cybernavigators, end users, or online nodes, but it appears to me that there is a persistent rhetoric of the sublime associated with reading, irrespective of how radically that activity is supposed to have evolved.

Among the entities that have striven the most to advance academic knowledge and awareness regarding the interface between the new digital technologies and the humanities is the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH), at the University of Virginia, which was founded in 1992. The institute's Web site (jefferson.village.virginia.edu) is a marvelous location that should be consulted by anyone interested (and can anyone responsibly claim not to be?) in the possibilities the new technologies of information and knowledge offer to the humanities. The institute's site serves also as a repository for a number of projects that singly and collectively instill a wide-eyed sense of the myriad ways electronic archives and the hypertextual organization of information can be applied to literary and cultural criticism.¹ Notably, the site

showcases a collection of superb essays by IATH fellows and staff members concerning electronic scholarship and culture that address the new media, theorize their diverse implications, and speculate on how they may evolve to impact our work. It is difficult for a reader of these essays not to share their manifest enthusiasm about the critical possibilities inaugurated by the arrival of digital technology. Yet I have chosen excerpts from them to evince the presence of a rhetorical modality that for the purpose of this essay I would like to call the Internet sublime:

We stand at the beginning of a great scholarly revolution. Even now we operate under the extraordinary promise this revolution holds out: to integrate the resources of all libraries, museums, and archives and to make those resources available to all persons no matter where they reside physically. The hardware and software tools that help to realize these expectations are under development, indeed, are well advanced.

The task of digitizing our archives—not just the archival systems, but the corpus of materials housed in our libraries and museums—is enormous. Nonetheless, it is a job that is already underway and it will continue. A core of digitized reference materials is emerging quickly and the rapid expansion of this core is taking place every day. (McGann, “Radiant Textuality”)²

In addition to making primary materials more accessible to a broader audience, electronic editions have, at least potentially, the disturbing quality of open-endedness, of extensibility, and of collectivity. Because digital presentation makes it possible to add to what exists without continually reproducing the base, electronic editions are very likely to set for themselves a larger scope than one would take on in any print work; in many cases, this will mean that the project must be carried out by many hands, may be deliberately left open to connection with related databases, and probably will continue to grow long after the project’s originator has passed on to other things, or has simply passed on.

(Unsworth, par. 16)

[W]e no longer have to use books to analyze and study other books or texts. That simple fact carries immense, even catastrophic, significance.

When a book is translated into electronic form, the book’s semantic and visual features can be made simultaneously present to each other. A book thus translated need not be read within the time-and-space frames established by the material characteristics of the book. If the hardcopy to be translated comprises a large set of books and documents, the power of the translational work appears even more dramatically, since all those separate books and documents can also be made simultaneously present to each other, as well as all the parts of the documents.

In most cases scholars confront a vast, even a bewildering, array of documents. Determining a single focus can be analytically useful, even imperative for certain purposes. On the other hand, one can easily imagine situations where a single determining focus hinders critical study. Besides, in many other cases one would like the possibility to make ad hoc or provisional choices among the full array of textual alternatives—to shift the point of focus at will and need. One cannot perform such operations within the horizon of the book. [. . .] Unlike in traditional editions, “hyper”editions need not organize their texts in relation to a central document, or some ideal reconstruction generated from different documents. An edition is “hyper” exactly because its structure is such that it seeks to preserve the authority of all the units that comprise its documentary arrays. In this respect a hyperedition resembles that fabulous circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. (McGann, “Rationale”)

The sublime, almost theological connotations of the rhetoric used in these passages needs no underscoring—and here I take apocalypse and eschatology as derivatives of a theological mind-set as well. One finds other indications of the Internet sublime in certain strains of a celebratory discourse about the transformed status of subjectivity on the Internet, according to which the Web provides individuals with innumerable

multilayered possibilities for constructing and assuming multiple subjectivities at will. As Luis F. Avilés summarized recently:

En sus dos versiones del Hermes conectado y del viajero emigrante, el espacio que se crea es el fluir maleable y cambiante de la identidad. Hermes, el eterno improvisador, es el alquimista del lugar, al cual va convirtiendo en espacio a su placer. Las gramáticas de esos espacios convergen y se recombinan en el nuevo viajero virtual y emigrante, cuyo desplazamiento físico permanece como recuerdo legendario de un viaje que puede olvidarse, y que va a ser sustituido por el "comfort" del viaje virtual, y por la posibilidad del juego con la "identidad" (esta última palabra ya carente de sentido por su relación con lo que no cambia, lo idéntico).

(71 [see also Stone; Turkle])

In its two versions, the plugged-in Hermes and the migrating traveler, the space thereby created is the maleable and shifting flow of identity. Hermes, the eternal improviser, is the alchemist of place who turns it into space at will. The grammars of those spaces converge and are recombined in the new virtual migrating traveler whose physical displacement remains as the memory of an imaginary journey that can be forgotten and that is substituted by the comfort of virtual travel and by the possibility of a play with "identity" (the latter term now lacking meaning because of its relation with that which does not change, with that which is identical with itself).

(my trans.)

It is as if digital technologies enabled the post-structuralist dissemination of the subject, which had threatened to compromise ideological and political agency, to be combined with the subsequent understanding of the subject as multiple that arose as a means of providing such an agency to that dissemination. But the emphasis now is not on the tactical situatedness of the subject and how its transformations can be used strategically but on a euphoria derived from the vertiginous, endless permutations that the medium appears to afford. Place thus loses

out to space, in a move that short-circuits hierarchical considerations about access to and the use and development of the new technologies. This is yet another instance of an Internet sublime that beckons us with its exhilarating threat of overwhelming our analytic categories.

The critic Sven Birkerts's book *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* is a cautionary tract against the digital age. His essential argument could be summarized by the following quotation:

My core fear is that we, as a culture, as a species, are becoming shallower; that we have turned from depth—from the Judeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery—and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness. That we are giving up on wisdom, the struggle for which has for millennia been central to the very idea of culture, and that we are pledging instead to a faith in the web. What is our idea, our ideal, of wisdom these days? Who represents it? Who even invokes it? Our postmodern culture is a vast fabric of competing isms; we are leaderless and subject to the terrors, masked as freedoms, of an absolute relativism. (111–12)

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, Birkerts should have nothing to fear: the vast lateral connectedness that he sees at the heart of the new *épistémè* is a never-ending surface for which some of its proponents keep alive in their rhetorical and conceptual presuppositions the sort of immanence that Birkerts claims it has displaced. This immense expanse is no less "deep," no less transcendent, for its putative superficiality. Our rhetoric about the new epistemological arrangements of the digital age is still thoroughly suffused with the ineffable radiance of the sublime.

This issue of *PMLA* includes an essay by David S. Miall titled "The Library versus the Internet: Literary Studies under Siege?" Miall's dispassionate, clear-headed account of the ways in which the new media may prove useful to literary

critics is a sobering reminder of the present limits of that intersection. As long as we measure the usefulness of the new technologies against what we have traditionally defined as scholarship, there will always be the two-pronged peril of engaging either in the euphoria of the Internet sublime or in a critique based on nostalgia for a perceived loss of essence. What is required is a double gaze that keeps one eye on what we currently do and another in constant search not just of ways in which the new technologies can help us accomplish our tasks better but also of ways their advent will transform the nature of what we do.

Carlos J. Alonso

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, the *Pompeii Forum Project* (jefferson.village.virginia.edu/pompeii/), *Salem Witch Trials: Documentary Archive and Transcription Project* (www.iath.virginia.edu/salem/), and the phenomenal *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Research Archive* (jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/).

² The title of this essay is indicative of the rhetoric that I am attempting to identify here.

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