

Othermindedness: The Emergence of Network Culture

There are good reasons—besides euphony or the foolish consistency that leads one to name successive hypertext fictions *afternoon, a story* and *Twilight, a Symphony*—to follow one collection of essays with mind in its title, *Of Two Minds*, with another mindedness here.

If the earlier book summoned and reified a commonplace saying in order to highlight in both computer pedagogy and poetics the sense of perspectivalization—the oscillation between looking at and looking through that Jay Bolter and Richard Lanham have identified as characteristic of the computer, then the current book means to suggest a latter development in the emergence of what I have called network culture. Network culture is not, to my mind at least, the same as networked culture, which is quite a different thing, less projective, more conventionally social. Network culture is an othermindedness, a murky sense of a newly evolving consciousness and cognition alike, lingering like a fog on the lowlands after the sweep of light has cleared the higher prospects. The same or a like fog increasingly seems to cling in the folds of the brain. We ache with it, almost as if we could feel the evolution of consciousness in the same way a sleeping adolescent feels the bone ache of growing pains as if in a dream.

My focus in this collection, as I say in a chapter that follows, is to summon an othermindedness that is less a focus on the other than upon our mindedness. Network culture, if there is to be such a thing, calls us to a new mind, one in which we must not merely affirm seemingly passive choices but find a ground upon which to do so; where we must not only insist upon a natural warrant for virtual worlds but also continually articulate their differences from and affinities with the world we inhabit in nature; where we

must not only identify the continuity of embodied spirit that we increasingly represent as alternate selves, but affirm it.

To say that network culture involves a newly evolving consciousness and cognition is not to make a claim for technological determinism. We make the world new as we see it, but we increasingly see it in devices that seem (or seek) to contain us. Nor is it to give over to the closed-circuit determinism of the evolution of machine consciousness in devices that contain latter-day versions of themselves, implicit in the evolving network of the web, explicit among researchers involved in A-life (artificial life). Yet we will increasingly have to contend with claims for distributed life and consciousness even as we struggle to understand what that might mean for our own prospect and continuity.

I had dinner in recent months with a physicist and a mathematician, both young, both Germans, both computer savvy, who reflected calmly over red wine and samosas about their certainty that computers would before long share consciousness with us. "If a computer can compose music a music critic believes to be a lost minor work of Mozart, then there is no magic which we can assign to human consciousness," said the physicist, otherwise a cultured and witty man. I said I thought there was. He acknowledged my belief and renewed his own, saying, "That's why you are artist and why also I am a scientist."

Yet if we inhabited, however unwittingly and unwillingly, the old two-cultures polarity, it was more the polar sense of Arctic bears circling each other in shared blindness, shuffling in the face of a frozen and bright expanse where we neither could see through nor make out its features. Increasingly any two or twenty or any number of cultures inhabit what seems one white space, its features burnished smooth by shifting light.

Thus I mean also another othermindedness in which I know less and less as this cultural shift takes place before me, as if the sweep of light not only transforms the vista but all that brought me here and that no longer seems to sit at my back. "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now," Bob Dylan sang of all our back pages. In this collection, therefore, there is little of the migration of text from one essay to another that figured so prominently in my earlier collection, not because a point has

been made—it was never a point but a practice—“increasingly characteristic of the late age of print,” as I wrote then—in which “electronic texts . . . moved nomadically and iteratively from one talk to another, one draft to another, one occasion or perspective to another.” That I have not done so now does not signal a lapsing of this practice but rather an increasingly fragmented sense of myself as a creature of network culture, a fragmentation that makes me less likely to think that a given text could migrate comfortably among occasions or shift perspectives.

This is not to say that I have retreated from the hypertextual, only lived into it far enough that I no longer find satisfying factors in its shifting features, no longer feel certain in my life of even the transitory closures that sustain me in my art. I console myself with knowing that no one around me seems to have any more satisfactory answers: neither the media giants who would make presumptive claims on network culture if they could decipher its nature and whose business it is to do so, nor the networked culture of artists, critics, theorists whose glimpses feed me and whose gestures I follow like a man dancing with shadows. I still throw in my lot with the latter, of course, because, as my prefatory meditation here notes, I love shadows and trust outsiders.

As a final note I should account for the use of *emergence* in the subtitle of this collection, a usage that certainly is calculated to associate these essays with the widespread interest in emergent behavior, chaos theory, and the like within the humanities. This is to say I do not deny the association between the thinking here and those moments of perturbation (explicitly discussed in the first chapter) that shift even shifting stabilities into some other state.

“Don’t you always want to stay in this state?” a former colleague’s husband asked postcoitally on their wedding night. “Michigan!?” she said incredulously. I mean emergence in the way she intuited the end of their marriage in its beginning. Change lies in things but is disturbed unpredictably; in the course of the disturbance not only do the things change but change itself does. Changing change, a term I have used previously, constitutes emergence. Like any buzzword, this one is meant to buzz, but not

like a beeper as much as a bumblebee banging on glass. In my recent thinking I haven't felt any higher calling, cellular, satellite, or otherwise. In lieu of knowing with any certainty, I've chosen to flit for these last years, looking for color, longing for what sweetness the undifferentiated haze offers, inevitably lying blind and stunned. Despite their inevitable polemical and poetical turns, these essays are offered in that spirit. The view from here, abuzz.

That said, the collection here is fairly straightforward, eleven chapters bracketed by a meditative prelude and coda, with a similarly meditative intermezzo interspersed just beyond the midpoint. The essays here, like those of the last collection, continue to take the form of what I have called in *Of Two Minds* a theoretical narrative, both a narrative of theory and a text theoretically at least a narrative and thus not unlike what Gregory Ulmer calls "mystory." Unlike my first collection, there is not a lot of explicit talk about pedagogy, though teaching and the thinking of my students flow through here like a subterranean stream. A number of essays consider the shifting nature of the library as an instance of emergence. Otherwise there is much the same (perhaps strange) range of subjects and interests familiar to readers of my previous collection, from geography to interactive film, from MOOs and other virtual spaces to life along a river. What is perhaps new is a distrust of claims for both newness and the next as well as a recurrent insistence upon grounding our experience of the emergence of network culture in the body.

Not so much new here as newly limned by the act of collecting previously published essays are the pervasive autobiographical elements throughout these chapters. I can only hope that these elements serve as expressions of my repeated belief "that the value of our presence as human persons in real place continues as a value *not despite but because of* the ubiquity of virtual spaces. Our embodiment graces actual and virtual space alike with the occasion for value." The prelude, "Screendoor: A Meditation on the Outsider," means to be a memoir of both actual and virtual space.

Chapter 1, "(Re)Placing the Author: 'A Book in the Ruins,'" was prepared for the conference on the future of the book, sponsored by Xerox PARC (Grenoble) and Umberto Eco's Centro Inter-

nazionale di Studi Semiotici e Cognitivi in San Marino. I have sometimes fancied it a parody of close reading, reading a poem of Milosz as a meditation on electronic text. It begins with the premise that whatever the future has for some time required of us incorporates the past, or rather pulls it through as through the wormhole of a singularity. It proceeds through a reading of Milosz and Sanford Kwinter's essay on Boccioni to consider the spaces our minds create, whether in poetry or varieties of electronic experience.

Chapter 2, "MOO or Mistakenness," builds upon the notion of "the interdeterminability of points of perception" that chapter 1 offers as the fundamental impediment against any satisfying virtual reality. Among the most self-reflexive, hyper, and hypertextual essays here (and one of the few in which nomadic texts from previous chapters appear), it attempts to approximate in linear prose the experience of MOOs as textual virtual realities. It is not surprising, the chapter argues, that the MOO is a locale of mistakennesses. "There is a general feeling that the MOO is a mistake of technological history, a developmental lacuna, a place marker, an interregnum in the immanent hegemony of the postalphabetic image . . . that the MOO moment is temporary and that soon the image will either rob us of the power—or relieve us of the burden—of language."

Chapter 3, "New Stories for New Readers," the first occurrence of my notion of othermindedness, picks up from the locale of a MOO class to consider "stories of technological presence and multiplicity [and] how used to them we are." It extends this inquiry to a critical consideration of the world wide web and suggests a new voice for our interactions, one grounded in age-old values and a forgotten syntax, a middle voice where we begin to see ourselves in where we are and encourage responsibility for our choices. Who we are, the chapter suggests, "is predicated upon a necessary and creative scrutiny of the things we are used to, especially as they have to do with our understanding of differences: between the virtual and the embodied, between the lasting and the transient, between the rare delights of human community and presence and the universal promise of access and equality."

The first of the essays about the library in the electronic age,

chapter 4, "The Lingering Errantness of Place," is a mediation on "error and wander" as both ways of knowing and signs of the emergence of a new mind. The library is considered as "a profession of the value of human multiplicity, proximity, and community," a locale where "in the face of . . . voracious newness . . . we might interpose the lingering errantness of place, the heterogeneous practice of culture as the experience of living in a place over time."

Chapter 5, "Beyond Next before You Once Again: Repossessing and Renewing Electronic Culture," is an explicit meditation on place in the face of an emerging electronic culture seemingly too ready to discard not only place, but body and history. It borrows as its subtitle the name of Sherman Paul's collection of "essays in the Green American Tradition," *Repossessing and Renewing*, as a conscious nod and a continued memorial to my mentor, who late in his life offered me the grace of affirming that my hypertextual experiment was for him within the Green Tradition. This essay intends a gesture toward what comes beyond next, which is nothing less than what is before us: ourselves as expressed within time and space.

The next chapter, chapter 6, "Songs of Thy Selves: Persistence, Momentariness, Recurrence, and the MOO," is likewise both an elegy and a meditation on place, looking at the MOO (and poetry alike) as "a conscious attempt at a proximate geography, a claim for the transcendence of the virtuality of language over the mortality of the body" wherein, "like any poetic text, the MOO aspires to moral discourse."

The intermezzo, "One Story: Present Tense Spaces of the Heart," suggests a similar inclination toward moral discourse in hyperfiction, where what we read is "the difference between the desire and the trace [and thus] how the forms of things mean." Originally published as part of a (premature, I think) "Memoriam to Postmodernism," this meditation situates hyperfiction within a weave of texts from the Maya, to Gertrude Stein, to contemporary feminist fiction and poetry all "trying to see a truly participative, a multiple, fiction."

Chapter 7, "Nonce upon Some Times: Rereading Hypertext

Fiction," considers the work of two hypertext fiction writers, Mary Kim Arnold and Shelley Jackson, as well as hypertext poet and theorist Jim Rosenberg as instances of how "hypertext only more consciously than other texts implicates the reader in writing at least its sequences by her choices [and how hypertext] more clearly than other texts seems to escape us before we have it formed into an understanding we might call a reading."

"On Boundfulness: The Space of Hypertext Bodies," chapter 8, originally written as a contribution to a collection of essays on geography and cyberspace, considers those spaces that are both within and somehow simultaneously outside the space of the text, most notably our bodies. Another highly self-reflexive chapter, it suggests that "the gesture of the parenthetical, the dialectic, the thematic, the rhythmic, the fugal, the isobaric, the metonymic, the list, the link, the litany . . . constitute the space of hypertextuality. Boundfulness, in this sense, is space that ever makes itself."

Both chapter 9, "Forms of Future," and chapter 10, "Paris Again or Prague: Who Will Save Lit from Com?" look to contemporary Europe as an occasion for reflections upon new media that invert those of Tocqueville, moving beyond democracy in America and, for good or ill, toward technocracy in networked Europe. Chapter 9 suggests that "the emergence of a truly electronic narrative art form awaits the pooling of a communal genius, a gathering of cultural impulses, of vernacular technologies, and most importantly of common yearnings that can find neither a better representation nor a more satisfactory confirmation than what electronic media offer." Building on a meditation of Berlin as a locale for "the constant blizzard of the next," the chapter argues that "we must nonetheless find our way through both our own private histories and the cumulative history of our cultures . . . a history of our making and our remembering alike."

Chapter 10 suggests that Prague is, if only in the smoke-wreathed icon of its poet and playwright president, Paris again, the new, perhaps the last, republic of words, a new, perhaps the last, gasp of lit before com. Looking at a contemporary German interactive video artist and a contemporary Irish writer and visual

artist, the chapter argues that “not just lit but com as well depend upon our ability to interrupt the flow of nextness with a sustaining sense of the ordinary.”

The last chapter is such a history of making and remembering alike. This essay, “My Father, the Father of Hypertext, and the Steno . . .” begins as a reading of Vannevar Bush’s seminal 1945 essay “As We May Think.” This reading is both interspersed and followed by a theoretical narrative that centers on three figures, my father, an armchair philosopher-scientist and a real-world photographer and steelworker; the father of hypertext, as Bush is often considered since his “Memex” essentially outlined the scholars’ workstation and the world wide web; and the anonymous steno, sometimes called the Typist, who recurs as a figure in Bush’s essay and whose “impulses . . . flow in the arm nerves . . . [and] convey to her fingers the translated information which reaches her eye or ear.” Bush dreams of intercepting these impulses in a gesture of what seems both cyborgization and however unconsciously figured sexual imperialism. Perhaps, this essay will suggest, the war against memory is a struggle against embodiment and birth itself, the double portal of memory.

The coda, “Portrait of the Artist as a Search Engine Entry,” also ends with a memoir of my father as well as of me as father. While it suggests that, for now at least, “the most likely portrait of you that would emerge if you got run over by a laundry truck wouldn’t come from the internet but from the contents of your wallet,” it nonetheless finds evidences of the emergence of network culture in the “naive mix of coherence and happenstance left out for a world to see” both apparent on the web and, one hopes at end, throughout this collection as well.

Prelude

Screen door: A Meditation on the Outsider

On the one hand there are those who waste away in agonizing struggle between what no longer is and what will never be—the followers of neutrality, the advocates of emptiness; they are not necessarily defeatists, they often become the best of ironists. On the other hand there are those who transcend: living neither before nor now but beyond, they are bent with a passion that, although tenacious, will remain forever unsatisfied. It is a passion for another land, always a promised one, that of an occupation, a love, a child, a glory. They are believers, and they sometimes ripen into skeptics.

—Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*

Every outsider is also in. Or only. Whether within the solitary husk of self or the categorical position she is put in: fat or thin, lonely, poor, alien, bright, dreamer, one of them, belongs to him, used to be, wants to be, will end up, at the window.

I spent much of my adolescence looking out the screen door. Even in winter I looked out, swinging the heavy front door back on its hinges, peering through the fog of breath I made there, the frost, the same skim of dirt year to year, never washed off when the screen came down and the outer storm on before the season. It became something of a family joke or, sometimes, an annoyance, in the way a father will be annoyed about the relentlessly habitual in an adolescent son.

Inside I was always out. Beneath the spill of light from the utility pole toward the corner where the Protestant church was, scratchy bricks and a smooth stoop of weathered gray concrete, its nave a cavern, its sad yard right field when we played baseball on the street. Sometimes, as someone walked by, the stub of a cigarette went up like a small, sad rocket launched from between forefinger and thumb toward the gutter or yard. Sometimes packs of children went by, arm in arm, tough, tender, already on their way to what they would become, futureless and featureless replica

of mother or father. It was an Irish ghetto, Irish-American, though we didn't observe the hyphen or didn't admit the ancestor culture could be something on its own. We were the Irish and they were what was left (or we didn't know any better). Outside in. Arrogance is the expression of an outsider's vulnerability. That and loss. Hope is only loss seen from within.

What was I looking for? Certainly there was no image for my expectation, no white horse, headstrong and snorting, shoes clattering on the brick streets, flanks silver with sweat under the streetlight. Nor a goddess dragging a two-wheeled wire shopping cart like a chariot behind her, chewing gum, the outline of her bra straps through the back of her T-shirt, her boyfriend whistling, swearing, launching cigarette butts, or absent altogether.

Waiting. I was patient then, I think, or a certain kind of bored that passes for patience. A knowledge that there would never pass here any person or thing that could satisfy my wanting. Nor that there was any alley, exit, shortcut, gate that would take me farther than my eyes could. Cricket chirps and passing traffic, someone's shout, a faraway laugh, moths or june bugs clattering against the mesh of the metal screen.

It must have pleased me, poised there, both in and out, waiting for what would not, what could not, come. This is of course the language of sexuality; I am not unaware that an adolescent boy at a door is inevitably an image of unassigned longing. (Were there flowers in my neighborhood? There was an alley beside the church choked with Queen Anne's lace and smelling therefore of dirt and carrots, where once we smoked and once someone's older sister languidly, bored, peeled back her swimsuit top to show us a breast. I think she wanted us each to pay something to see it. But were there other flowers, sweeter, lilacs? locust? rhododendron fumes? intoxicating and nearly sickening honeysuckle nights in August? Who can say, the past is gone.)

Sometimes, I am certain, though I can recall no example, I thought things, wonderful things, brave things, eloquent, poetic, surprisingly wise even to my own eyes. Ideas. I remember nothing. There were occasional cars (they would have had fins or bulbous fenders, glasspack mufflers, turquoise paint). I wasn't an only child (not in an Irish house!), rather the oldest of eight but I

cannot remember much of their noise behind me. Perhaps that is why I looked out: to be within myself, briefly outside them. Perhaps I meant to leave them an image of myself, looking outward, dreaming, bravely, meditative, melancholy, bound elsewhere.

I can remember the scent of the screen, rusty and faintly mildewed, and the night air sometimes sweet as fog, other times a humid swelter. In those days I wore copious amounts of after-shave: Canoe for awhile and then some lime fragrance. In those days there were still great elms along the street, the light pooling beneath them.

I think this is an image of how I feel about the computer screen as well. We seem lonely to me there, I have written elsewhere (outside in) about the world wide web. Sometimes when I say this it annoys others, in the way a father is annoyed by a son's denial of the obvious; sometimes others merely pity me, the way passers-by mock someone standing in the shadow of an open door, moving on, not really knowing or caring who he is. Looking out, uncertain, scanning from pooled light to deep shadow, from passing lights to solitary walkers along the sidewalk or a boisterous group, half drunk and shouting down the center of the street. It is good to be there and here at once, but lonesome nonetheless, bereft, lost, grasping. Maple seeds helicopter down into the brick street and are swept to the gutter by the breeze or the billow from passing cars.

