

# THE DISTURBED DIALECTIC OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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This paper discusses the relevance of database projects like the Electronic Literature Directory. It is a call for criticism that is technologically appropriate, ethically engaged, and culturally vital.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes the dialectical process:

"The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole." [1]

Viewed from within the Hegelian process, the Real is positioned outside its present manifestations, consisting, rather, of the dynamic processes that comprise its totality.

This insight, crucial to critical practice, requires revision in light of technical change. By revision, I do not mean that we need to fundamentally alter Hegel's argument, I only mean to suggest that we see this passage with respect to new temporal modalities that have shaken up the pursuit of knowledge.

The field of Electronic Literature is characteristically engaged with this disturbance in the dialectic. A casual glance will reveal that there are many significant developments in the field that, had they happened over a longer timeline, would likely be much easier to sort out. Take, for instance, the body of works known as "Hypertext fiction," which represent the closest thing Electronic Literature has to a sustained, stable format. If we track literary hypertext along the history of Eastgate Systems, we are looking at an aspect of the field of electronic literature that dates back to the company's founding in 1982 (though Eastgate's first literary hypertext, Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, was first published in 1987). If we broaden our definition to include interactive fiction and text-based computer gaming, we can push the timeline back to 1975, with the creation of *Adventure*. Beyond this, we can trace the form back to the "Hypertext Editing System" by Ted Nelson and Andries van Dam in 1968. In any case, the history of this particular literary form is a half-century old at its most generous estimation, but it really isn't until Eastgate Systems emerges as the first commercial publisher of Hypertext as Literature, that we see a committed effort to the literary exploration of a particular form, with the bulk of their offerings published in the 1990s. If we add web-based Hypertext fiction to this timeline, that would add to the overall number of works available, but it would still distribute the bulk of creative output over two decades, and would place a massive technical innovation smack in the middle of this arc. [2]

To put this in perspective, one might juxtapose this to the history of the novel which, even at its most conservative definition, spans three centuries. If we want to consider a genre, say, the Gothic: Over 70 years pass between the publication of Horace Walpole's mess of a book, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Edgar Allen Poe's elegant perfection of the gothic in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). Though Franco Moretti has made a convincing case for a more compressed periodization of generic eruptions,

my contention is that this cyclical activity is evidence of the grand dialectical process within which durable forms achieve their refinement, a point which does not conflict with Moretti's model. [3] In other words, historically, the time of literature has been slow and staggered. The kind of back and forth between the creator of a work and its critical reception, followed by a modified approach, and yet more criticism, has simply been short-circuited by the rate of change.

To frame my argument within a more contemporary point of reference, Alain Badiou's notion of "the set" consists of the range of knowledge and the logical potentiality framed within its structure. A "truth" is that which exceeds the bounded structure. This point of rupture is perceived as an "event." [4] If we consider the set and its redefinition by truth as marked by an event, we can rethink what Hegel aims to describe without becoming mired in chronology or bound to fatalism.

We can imagine a horizontal vision of this dialectic, that steps beyond the sequential process of thesis, antithesis, synthesis that seems to favor the vertical progress of the historical from its zero point towards the future. In other words, I mean to ask, can the dialectic as developed by Hegel be applied to a context of simultaneity? Certainly, this seems possible if the organic unity imagined is that of the interpersonal dialog as opposed to long process of "progress." Foucault's heterotopia emerges as a particularly promising instance of a momentary instance of the dialectic in action. Here, truth is located interpersonally, held into place through the negotiations of language, in which the minute turns of the conversation shift meaning over from incomprehensibility to the furtive, contingent moments of communication. To answer my question, we can view the dialectic as a set when it reaches a point of singularity, where an event brings about a social and individual shift in consciousness. The closest we can come to simultaneity in this process is only when it functions systematically, as a set whose rules can be articulated within the defined constraints of its domain.

Ultimately, does it matter from an ontological perspective that the domain of discourse occurs within the boundaries of a long arc of historical time or an abbreviated one? Is the issue the interval within which the system processes information or is the issue the means by which systems process information? To reflect on the effects of processing speed, imagine the game of *Risk*. Played on a board with dice, it is a game that can easily last several hours. Players roll dice, argue with one another, take trips to the restroom, but the objective of the game itself is always to conquer the world. Early electronic versions of the game significantly sped up key aspects of play, most notably the rate at which combat is resolved, dead pieces are removed from play, and cards are cashed in for more pieces. Also, cheating and error are significantly more difficult in this iteration of the game. As processors speed up, these actions speed up significantly, such that an old digital version of *Risk* can run at speeds that exceed perception. And, with face-to-face interaction limited by the interface, table talk is further limited. Yet, the basic objective remains essentially the same: take over the world. Viewed from this perspective, the basic rules of the game of *Risk* and the objectives of play remain more or less the same, but on the computer, the five hour board game can easily be played in an hour. And, if you play against a computerized opponent, this play time can be compressed even further. Within this framework of interactions, speed itself makes no alteration to the game whatsoever, unless, of course, a key feature of the game is the relationship of the human player to the game as a discrete domain of interaction, an object consisting of many little pieces that follow many rules in pursuit of a particular end. With speed it is possible to care less about the game, to suffer the loss of the illusion of the game's relevance, to weaken the immersion, and to eventually erase its pleasure.

Thus, I argue, that to understand the meaning of any process, the projection of a hypothetical subjective externality to the system matters (In other words, subjectivity produces criticism and is produced by

it). The dialectical view is less a progression through sequentially interrelated phenomena, than it is a commitment to a critical relationship to systems regardless of their interval. Just as one can easily perceive the vast difference between distinct iterations of the same game whose rules and objectives remain the same, one can affirm that the human subject itself can always potentially exist as the site of the critical encounter, when one directs consciousness to seek the most subtle relative differentials between the representations. The dialectical process is a simplification of this basic process of consciousness, and we map it onto illustrations that are obviously sequential, but the critical capacity could easily be mapped onto more subtle sequentialities, networked causes, distributed effects, and nearly simultaneous interactivity. What is needed is not a new critical faculty, but critical tools and techniques which can effectively account for differentials that occur beyond the limits of our perception. We must acquire telephoto lenses, wide angle views, slow motion techniques, freeze frames, and other ways to comprehend fast interactions, wide sweeps of behavior, gentle modulations of thought and action.

But, at the same time as we deploy new tools and methods, we must not mistake these tools and methods for subjects themselves, for the basic goal remains the same: to know what it is that is happening when something happens. The critical faculty itself, while significantly altered in its form by the new terrain, cannot be altered in its function without ceasing to be criticism. In other words, against the backdrop of material and cultural changes (both microscopic changes to the object of criticism and macroscopic changes to the system within which objects are situated), we must begin first by imagining the very potential of the truth procedure itself, the hypothetical perception of rupture. For, though we are always first situated within a milieu which seems to define itself through the consistencies of its domain, we also know that it is this very situated character of subjectivity that desires to be otherwise and elsewhere, whether we seek to be a few inches over or a few seconds sooner or later, we have motive to move, to form, to alter, to explore. This very kindling of desire is what removes us from the present moment and places us into the slipstream of historical and speculative thinking, of memory and anticipation, is the selfsame capacity that at the more abstract level enables us to imagine sudden tectonic shifts or to witness glacial changes. Those revolutions of thought which alter the very ground rules that frame what we see begin as critical stances, as hypothetical alternate subject positions that challenge the ones that we presently occupy. Criticism must begin with a commitment to what it is: A position, enmeshed in the social web, but never simply constituted by it. To put it more bluntly, criticism might be the decision to be something more than nothing, to step out of epiphenomenal existence, to struggle against instrumentality.

While poststructuralism has rendered it difficult for subjects to imagine discrete, defined roles in discursive projects, the projection of such roles is necessary if we wish to engage in critical practices. This is not to pronounce that I am a “critic,” and therefore will cease to be a “reader” or “writer.” Rather, it is to say that in a time when crowd-sourced approaches, fan-based scholarship, and the general spirit of open access have revealed the critical value of readerly practices, we must then accept the notion that alterations to these practices matter. At a time when networks, technology, and participatory media trends have likewise removed the critical barriers to aesthetic expression, we must accept the notion that writing has also been fundamentally altered. Rather than permit criticism to be subsumed into expressive and interpretive practices, the task before the critic is to imagine criticism that can identify in these shifts a fundamental change in the relationship between reader and writer via text. We learn nothing beyond what we already know if we overlook the systemic relation between writer-text-reader (or producer-commodity-consumer, programmer-software-user, architect-building-occupant, teller-story-listener, or really any mediated relationship).

To truly apprehend the nature of the dialectic of reader and writer held together by the thread of the text, there must be a clearly delineated third position, that which is neither reader nor writer, though one might at times be one, both, or neither. Rather than define the critic as a special class of person, it is better to identify the critical faculty as a distinctive subject position, a way of viewing the text and how it functions socially as a nexus of interaction between readers and writers.

The problem of speed, though it upends the vertical progression of past regimes of production and reception, is not in itself a problem for criticism. There are still readers and there are still writers and they still interact through the text. The difference is that these particular subject positions are not so easily isolated, not easily localized on a particular historical individual or archival document. We don't necessarily need a stable sustained form like the novel or the Gothic to understand the significance of Electronic Literature more deeply (though such consistencies, where they are perceptible, provide excellent case studies), what we need is a critical exploration of the plane of consistency itself (in this case, it is that of technological change and social adaptation). What Derrida did for words, we must do for the interface, the platform, the logic of new media itself. But we cannot simply argue against the aura of stability associated with words, we must turn to the aura of currency, of the presumed veracity of change, of the upgrade, of the improvement, of the debugged. The promise of newness is that which we have come to trust. A rigorous discussion of this trajectory is among the most pressing critical projects facing us today: What are the poetics of innovation? How does it function grammatically? How does the poet play with this language? What are the social, ethical, philosophical implications of this presumed foundation of cultural existence. Whereas past critics may have had the time and luxury to mistake their acts of reading or writing with criticism, losing sight of the function of the text within culture, we have the luxury of living at a time when we are seeing a radical shift in the function of the text itself. The question is whether or not we will do it. Or if we will simply watch the relationships between readers and texts change without thinking critically about what these changes mean, what changes we'd prefer, what changes we'd sooner avoid. In effect, it requires a critical commitment, not to what we will conclude that the text means, but to a process of criticism that is preoccupied with care, that is "interested" in the very hope that culture might truly be determined through a disinterested process of seeking what's best for human culture, rather than being determined by the tremendous social forces that have emerged as a default consequence of ademocratic processes of free market ideology. We must, as *Ars Industrialis* suggest in their 2010 "Manifesto," "struggle against carelessness [*incurie*], against the destruction of attention." [5] Such literary criticism must attend to that which is not immediately understood, but which holds power in the realm of expression, which animates the text, which is written, hard to notice, but nevertheless true.

In practical terms, as it pertains to the *Electronic Literature Directory*, there are two possibilities relating to the twofold process of the ELD's editorial protocols. On one level, it is a rather mundane, but necessary, meeting place for readers, writers, and works. The entries themselves really and truly do tend towards mere readerly descriptions. [6]

The second possibility, and this is one is highly contingent, is that database projects like the *ELD* may serve as a nexus for precisely the cultivation of care and attention in service of the social as the next logical step towards a criticism that is, to quote Matthew Arnold, "sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge." In creating a common space, a public sphere for "electronic literature" that is open to all, we might inspire and cultivate a critical practice which is aware of the changing dimensions of the text vis-à-vis the discourse that takes place on our pages. What we lack in the slow deployment of verticality, we might gain in horizontality. If we grow large enough, not simply as a matter of quantity, but large enough in the depths of our social consciousness, we might take this broad horizon of literary

discourse and, in the crucible or speed, pressure, and the needs of the moment, distill a sense of just what these changes mean for criticism.

### **References and Notes:**

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4. A. Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005).
5. *Ars Industrialis*, "Manifesto," 2010, <http://arsindustrialis.org/manifesto-2010> (accessed September 2011).
6. *Electronic Literature Directory 2.0, 2009-Present*, <http://directory.eliterature.org> (accessed September 2011).