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<http://www.cyberartsweb.org/cpace/ht/jhup/parallels.html>

Hypertextual Derrida, Poststructuralist Nelson? George P. Landow, Professor of English and Art History, Brown University

Hypertext: the convergence of contemporary critical theory and technology
[Pages 1-3 in print version. © the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.]

The problem of causality. It is not always easy to determine what has caused a specific change in a science. What made such a discovery possible? Why did this concept appear? Where did this or that theory come from? Questions like these are often highly embarrassing because there are no definite methodological principles on which to base such an analysis. The embarrassment is much greater in the case of those general changes that alter science as a whole. It is greater still in the case of several corresponding changes. But it probably reaches its highest point in the case of the empirical sciences: for the role of instruments, techniques, institutions, events, ideologies, and interests is very much in evidence; but one does not know how an articulation so complex and so diverse in composition actually operates. -- Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xii-xiii.

When designers of computer software examine the pages of *Glas* or *Of Grammatology*, they encounter a digitalized, hypertextual Derrida; and when literary theorists examine *Literary Machines*, they encounter a deconstructionist or poststructuralist Nelson. These shocks of recognition hypertext, apparently unconnected areas of inquiry, have increasingly converged. Statements by theorists concerned with literature, like those by theorists concerned with computing, show a remarkable convergence. Working often, but not always, in ignorance of each other, writers in these areas offer evidence that provides us with a way into the contemporary episteme in the midst of major changes. A paradigm shift, I suggest, has begun to take place in the writings of Jacques Derrida and Theodor Nelson, Roland Barthes and Andries van Dam. I expect that one name in each pair will be unknown to most of my readers. Those working in computing will know well the ideas of Nelson and van Dam; those working in literary and cultural theory will know equally well the ideas of Derrida and Barthes.

All four, like many others who write on hypertext and literary theory, argue that we must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them by ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks. Almost all parties to this paradigm shift, which marks a revolution in human thought, see electronic writing as a direct response to the strengths and weaknesses of the printed book. This response has profound implications for literature, education, and politics.

The many parallels between computer hypertext and critical theory have many points of interest, the most important of which, perhaps, lies in the fact that critical theory promises to theorize hypertext and hypertext promises to embody and thereby test aspects of theory, particularly those concerning textuality, narrative, and the roles or functions of reader and writer. Using hypertext, critical theorists will have, or now already have, a laboratory with which to test their ideas. Most important, perhaps, an experience of reading hypertext or reading with hypertext greatly clarifies many of the most significant

ideas of critical theory. As J. David Bolter points out in the course of explaining that hypertextuality embodies poststructuralist conceptions of the open text, "what is unnatural in print becomes natural in the electronic medium and will soon no longer need saying at all, because it can be shown" (143).

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For Edward:

I am thinking through your proposal that perhaps we think about poststructuralism as an approximation of Indic thought, or certain strands of Indic thought, hegemonically. Or more properly speaking that this approach has a certain hegemony to it, because we (integral thinkers, I mean) are invested in nonduality, and that by dint of the multicultural and polyvalent threads of our discourse, we need to make sure that our project does not get eaten up by post-Hegelian phenomenology, say. What does integral theory have to offer that, say, phenomenology does not? For starters, we have a better understanding of Indic thought than Schopenhauer had, and we value it more, perhaps above all. Is that an instance of hegemony? Perhaps, but it is only a problem if we are doing violence to Schopenhauer. (If you bend a thinker of Schopenhauer's caliber, or Aurobindo's for that matter, he will bend right back eventually... assuming that a text is a history of its interpretations, &c.)

In my own practice, and I have no idea how successful I am at this, I try to think horizontally. I recontextualize, rather creatively in some instances, certain ideas from all over history. When I am teaching, too, I find myself singing Merle Haggard songs while explicating Shakespeare. That recontextualization is a kind of integralism. You build a constellation, which changes how you think of the stars, and in a sense how those stars work in concert with one another.

As for the question of the postmodern--I am not touching that one with anyone's bargepole. If the postmodern even exists as a concrete phenomenon, it probably works much as Fredric Jameson suggests it does. The concept "postmodern," however, carries a lot of polemic baggage. From one perspective, it is a way to sell records and paintings and architecture, or at least it was until people figured out how awful the Portland Building is. (I mean the Michael Graves schtick... if Graves is postmodern, and Frank Gehry is postmodern, I do not see how "postmodern" can be a coherent concept even in architecture alone. Moving on...) From another perspective, it is a way of dismissing something out of hand. Hypothetically, Deleuze may have had something smart to say about ice hockey, but if NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman doesn't want to hear it, he can state: "Irrelevant posmodern nonsense... no soul there, no tradition, no reality, no transcendence. Ice hockey is about all these things--reality, soul, heritage, the transcendence of a fine performance."

The idea that there is no depth, only surface, or that depth is nothing but another surface, can be pretty irritating to some (such as my parody of Gary Bettman above). I like it quite a lot. And to go back to the Madhyamika noodlings I speculated on earlier, you can probably see why. Emptiness is form, form is emptiness. Emptiness is the "trace" of form, form is the "trace" of emptiness. (this is totally contingent, speculative bullshit--the reader is advise to kindly take it for what it is, use if useful, or discard if infected)

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Daniel said: "In every position taken, perhaps especially the position that there are no positions, the trace of the opposite is always already present if only in the form of a 'trace.'"

This is exactly the argument of the Nyaya, who noted that if Nagarjuna asserts that all things are empty of existence then wouldn't the same apply to Nagarjuana's claim?

"Nagarjuna, in *The End of Disputes*, responds in two ways. The first is an attempt to show the haughty Logicians that, if they really critically examine this fundamental concept of proof which grounds their theory of knowledge, they will find themselves in no better position than they claim Nagarjuna is in. How, Nagarjuna asks in an extended argument, can anything be proven to a fixed certainty in the way the Naiyayikas posit? When you get right down to it, a putative fact can be proven in only two ways; it is either self-evident or it is shown to be true by something else, by some other fact or piece of knowledge already assumed to be true. But if we assent to the very rules of logic and valid argument the Vedic Logicians espouse, we shall find, Nagarjuna thinks, that both of these suppositions are flawed. Let us take the claim that something can be proven to be true on the basis of other facts known to be true. Suppose, to use a favorite example from the Logician Gautama, I want to know how much an object weighs. I put it on a scale to measure its weight. The scale gives me a result, and for a moment that satisfies me; I can rely on the measurement because scales can measure weight. But hold on, Nagarjuna flags, your reliance on the trustworthiness of the scale is itself an assumption, not a piece of knowledge. Shouldn't the scale be tested too? I measure the object on a second scale to test the accuracy of the first scale, and the measurement agrees with the first scale. But how can I just assume, once again, that the second scale is accurate? Both scales might be wrong. And the exercise goes on, there is nothing in principle which would justify me in assuming that any one test I use to verify a piece of knowledge is itself reliable beyond doubt. So, Nagarjuna concludes, the supposition that something can be proven through reference to some other putative fact runs into the problem that the series of proofs will never reach an end, and leaves us with an infinite regress. Should we commit ourselves to the opposite justification and propound that we know things to be true which are self-evident, then Nagarjuna would counter that we would be making a vacuous claim. The whole point of epistemology is to discover reliable methods of knowing, which implies that on the side of the world there are facts and on the side of the knower there are proofs which make those facts transparent to human consciousness. Were things just self-evident, proof would be superfluous, we should just know straightaway whether something is such and such or not. The claim of self-evidence destroys, in an ironic fashion which always pleased Nagarjuna, the very need for a theory of knowledge!

"There is however, Nagarjuna famously asserts, another *pettito principii* in the Nyaya charge that the thesis "all things are empty and lack a fixed nature" is incoherent. The statement "all things are empty" is actually, Nagarjuna says, not a formal philosophical thesis in the first place! According to the Nyaya rules of viable logical argument, the first step in proving an assertion true is the declared statement of the putative fact as a thesis in the argument (*pratijna*). Now in order for something to qualify as a formal philosophical thesis, a statement must be a fact about a particular object or state of knowable affairs in the world, and it is a matter of doctrine for Nyaya that all particular objects or states of

affairs are classifiable into their categories of substances, qualities, and activities. Nagarjuna however does not buy into this set of ontological categories in the first place, and so the Logician is being disingenuous in trying to covertly pull him into the ontological game with this charge that the idea of emptiness is metaphysically unintelligible. The Brahminical Logician is insisting that no person can engage in a philosophical discussion without buying, at least minimally, into a theory of essences and issues surrounding how to categorize essences. It is exactly this very point, Nagarjuna demurs, that is eminently debatable! But since the Logician will not pay Nagarjuna the courtesy of discussion on Nagarjuna's terms, the Buddhist replies to them on their terms: "If my statement (about emptiness) were a philosophical thesis, then it would indeed be flawed; but I assert no thesis, and so the flaw is not mine."

From the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/nagarjun.htm>

Now how does Derrida answer the same question of his own apparent performative contradiction? To be continued...

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Ok, one final thought that won't let me sleep until it's out.

Daniel said: "The exercise of thinking through Madhyamika is to quit thinking, in short."

I don't "think" so. Non-duality is not merely non-conceptual or beyond language; emptiness is form and form is emptiness. David Loy expresses it best in the following quote talking about Dogen. From a 2006 interview at <http://www.holosforum.org/davidloy.html>

Well, this relates to the way we understand spirituality and meditation. For example, we often tend to understand meditation-in Zen especially-as getting rid of thoughts. We think that if we can just get rid of thought, then we can see the world as it is, clearly, without any interference from conceptuality. We view thinking as something negative that has to be eliminated in order to realize the emptiness of the mind. But this reflects the delusion of duality, rather than the solution to duality. As Dogen put it, the point isn't to get rid of thought, but to liberate thought. Form is emptiness, yet emptiness is also form, and our emptiness always takes form. We don't realize our emptiness apart from form, we realize it in form, as non-attached form. One of the very powerful and creative ways that our emptiness takes form is as thought. The point isn't to have some pure mind, untainted by thought, like a blue, completely empty sky with no clouds. After a while that gets a little boring! Rather, one should be able to engage or play with the thought processes that arise in a creative, non-attached, nondualistic way. To put it in another way, the idea isn't to get rid of all language, it's to be free within language, so that one is non-attached to any particular kind of conceptual system, realizing that there are many possible ways of thinking and expressing oneself. The freedom from conceptualizing that we seek does not happen when we wipe away all thoughts; instead, it happens when we're not clinging to, or stuck in, any particular thought system. The kind of transformation we seek in our spiritual practices is a mind that's flexible, supple. Not a mind that clings to the empty blue sky. It's a mind that's able to dance with thoughts, to adapt itself according to the situation, the needs of the situation. It's not an empty mind which can't think. It's an ability to talk with the kind of vocabulary or engage in the way that's going to be most helpful in that situation.