

*Beyond Next Before  
You Once Again*  
Repossessing and Renewing  
Electronic Culture

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I. COLOR

**W**E ARE WHO WE ARE. WE ARE USED TO SAYING SOME THINGS GO WITHOUT saying. This does not. For it is the saying which makes us what we are.

This essay 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. I also appropriate the title as a charge to myself to take up Sherman's journey in the face of an emerging electronic culture seemingly too ready to discard place, body, and history. Notions like net years and virtual presence threaten the persistence of being which the tensional momentum (to use Carolyn Guyer's phrase for the reciprocal aspect of what we otherwise misrepresent as polarities) of repossessing and renewing call us to. 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. We are who we are and we see ourselves in brief light but live always in the shadow of what comes next.

We are surely not the first but without doubt the most self-conscious age to see ourselves as living before the future. In our technologies, our cultures, our entertainments and, increasingly, the way we constitute our communities and families we live in an anticipatory state of constant nextness. There is, of course, a branch of philosophy which concerns those who see themselves as inhabiting the time before the future. That branch, eschatology, is perhaps the archetype of other-mindedness and its itch of desire for constant, immediate and successive links to something beyond.

Eschatological ages have both their virtues and their particular vices. The chief virtue is hope, that constant anticipation of the next which keeps us poised, unsettled and open to change. The chief vice is paradoxically inaction,

a self-satisfied belief that there is no need to act in the face of a decisive and imminent history. Like any teacher and writer, I see my task as encouraging virtues and discouraging vices insofar as I can recognize the difference between them. And so as a teacher and writer deeply involved with technology I have for some time been concerned with the passivity that electronic media encourage.

Early on I distinguished between two kinds of hypertext, the merely exploratory and what I termed the constructive hypertext seen as “a version of what it is becoming, a structure for what does not yet exist.” More recently as both packaged infotainments on CD ROM and the World Wide Web alike have encouraged a kind of dazzled dullness and lonely apprehension, I have elsewhere proposed that we appropriate as a trope, if not a model, for our interactions an obscure and foreign sense, the middle voice of the classical Greek verb. The middle voice is a form neither active nor passive, yet one which tips the meaning of an action to account for the presence of she who acts or is acted upon.

Our sense of ourselves as actors colors our appreciation of the world in which we act. We are who we are in an active and public sense. We become both the beneficiaries and the constitutive elements of what we might call, to use an old fashioned term, the public good.

In its eschatological aspect (and perhaps in millennial fervor as well) the Web encourages at least an expectation of public goods, if not a public good. There is a wide-spread if naive expectation that material ought to be universally and freely available. “Content-producers” (the obscene worker-bee appellation for artist and writers and thinkers) are urged by commentators like the computer market analyst and erstwhile pop-philosopher, Esther Dyson, to find their incentive and make their living from the value added in lectures, sinecures, and so on, which result from public knowledge of their work. What makes such urging suspect is not its truth value—since what Dyson and others so breathlessly prognosticate is merely the yawning present state of most artists and intellectuals—but rather its *misprision*.

Here, I mean *misprision* both in the common sense of that word as something of an insult and the root sense of *misprision* as a maladministration of public office. For the truth is that the kind of economy which would provide incentive and sustenance to she who provides free value to it assumes a common understanding of the public good which free access to information, knowledge, and art represents.

The question at hand seems to be whether there is any longer a *Public* in either the civic sense or economic sense. The public’s expectation that it will have free access for possession of public good(s), cultural or otherwise, is fundamentally constructive. Art and commerce each intend to serve freedom (or at least make that claim). Yet to the extent the Web is predicated on anonymity and irresponsibility, no publics actively assume the responsibility for the goods to which they have access, instead they passively allow it, in greater and lesser

volumes like irrigation sluices. So-called value-added schemes (the inner sanctum, the registered shareware user, and intranet) induce this public to increase the inward flow, to let the supposed provider include knowledge of the public holdings. In the net economy you don't take money from people, you give them the right to let you in the place where they spend it. When you charge access on the net it is the same as doing advertising, just a matter of what people will let into their lives.

As artists and thinkers and teachers we want, I hope, to reverse the flow. We want to encourage responsibility for even seemingly passive choices, for virtual worlds, and for alternate selves. We want to encourage a collaborative responsibility for all that we as makers and shapers consider a desirable thing to maintain and for which, we believe, there exists if not a *Public* then various communities willing to sustain it.

This is to summon an other-mindedness which is less a focus on the other than upon our mindedness. Networked learning calls us to be mindful of ourselves in increasingly other roles than that as passive consumer, but rather as co-creator and reciprocal actor.

Lately I find it useful to ask anyone I speak to, but especially my students, to consider what comes next after the Web, not in the sense of the next browser increments, Java applets and operating system transparency, nor the next order of magnitude of increase in instantaneity or availability. At first it is a shock—especially for those who have not lived through the succession of vinyl to cassette to CD to DVD—to understand that I do not mean some mere appliance like the cable-bound network computer. Instead I mean what next literacy, what next community, what next perception, what next embodiment, what next hope, what next light.

Perhaps these are the old habits of a once Irish Catholic boy, or the new habits of an increasingly old-hat hypertextualist, but they are also habits of other-mindedness and, while not restricted to any *techné*, are characteristic of the way we see ourselves through our technologies. Thus, for instance, the Canadian painter and theorist, Guido Molinari turns a color theory into a networked otherness:

Establishing the capacity of color to bring about an indefinite number of permutations is what, in my view, constitutes the dynamic that produces fictional spaces and gives rise to the experience of spatiality—excluding, by definition, the notion of any specific, given space. It is only through the notion of becoming which is implicit in the act of perception that structure is explored and established as existential experience. (1976, 91)

We are who we are. We see our spaces in how we live our differences and we live in what we see of ourselves within their otherness. This is both the present task and the constant teaching we are called to by any *techné* from the oldest days to the next days which, after all and despite our lights, can only follow the present as we perceive it.

## II. BODY

We seem to have lost track of mortality, if not death, in the face of the constant replacement which, as I have elsewhere suggested (“print stays itself, electronic text replaces itself”), is characteristic of electronic text and culture. We know better, but we wish for more.

The body is the fundamental instance of a nextness which argues for the value of what has come before it. It grounds and forms the “existential experience” which Molinari characterizes as “the notion of becoming which is implicit in the act of perception.” Because we are going to die, we are the embodied value of what has come before us. I mean (you mean) the ambiguity of “come before” here, both the sense of that which—and those who—precede us, and in the sense of what we sense, as in that which comes before our eyes. In this instance, it may be useful to redeem the euphemism. Because we are going to pass away, we are the embodied value of what we pass through and what passes before us.

It is the push of passing, the fixed stamp of ourselves, that we resist in our embodiment. All this passing leaves us open. “Location is about vulnerability and resists the politics of closure,” says Donna Haraway, “feminist embodiment resists fixation and is insatiably curious about the Webs of differential positioning” (196).

In this particular eschatological age we cannot help hearing the present state echoed (or prefigured) in Haraway’s use of the word *webs*. Yet I would argue that the solipsistic perspective of self-selection which thusfar characterizes the brand-name World Wide Web (so-called in a time when even ketchup bottles have their own URLs) falls short of embodying the curiosity which drives the most of us to it. Also, and more importantly, the Web fails as yet to render the “differential positioning,” the moving perspective (pun intended) from which Haraway can claim that “There is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions.” The current web fills the sweet emptiness of space with static and keeps us static in the flow of time.

We are who we are and we stand beside a river. When my Vassar colleague and fellow Sherman Paul protégé, Dan Peck, told me the news of Sherman’s final diagnosis, he urged me to write him but wisely warned me against the elegiac in favor of newness and shared thinking. Despite Dan’s fraternal concern, it was unnecessary advice in the sense that I could not in any wise take it. In my mind, and given my own quasi-Irish predilections, the only news is our mortality and the nature of all shared thinking is elegiac. We are used to saying some things go without saying, but it is the saying which makes us what we are. “Whoever wants to write,” Hélène Cixous suggests, “must be able to reach this lightening region that takes your breath away, where you instantaneously feel at sea and where the moorings are severed with the already-written, the already-known. This ‘blow on the head’ that Kafka describes is the blow on the head of the deadman/dead-woman we are. And that is the awakening from the dead” (58).

My tone with Sherman had always been excessive and elegiac from our first encounter in his office where I begged admittance to his Olson/Creeley seminar claiming the survivor's rights of someone who had failed to honor Olson during a Buffalo youth and now felt the blow on the head. My recollection (very clear actually) was that Sherman shared his own story of (literally) overlooking Olson across Harvard yard, thus taking me into the seminar while surely more deserving, if not necessarily better suited, graduate students were left outside. Likewise Sherman's tone had always been a survivor's and one of shared perspective, looking outward like the figure of Olson's epic Maximus poems. While Sherman may not have used these terms exactly, he often thought about what Haraway calls "resisting the politics of closure" and "differential positioning." Thus when he came to collect (in *Repossessing and Renewing*) his introductory essay to *Walden*, he meditated upon survival and being, casting the question in terms of how we live open to a world in which we are enclosed by responsibilities and the demands of others:

Writing itself opens a space truly one's own, and when one enters it he is no longer moved by pressures of survival or ambition, but by the wholly different, imperious pressures of intellect and art. Personally, there was nothing paradoxical about my writings about Thoreau: it allowed me, as the classroom did, to live in my vocation, and gave me a way of being-in-the-world and the well-being without which the academic situation would have been less tolerable. (55)

This living-in is what constitutes location on Haraway's, Olson, or Sherman Paul's terms, and what Haraway means by an "embodiment [which] resists fixation." The paradox, of course, is that such an embodiment is bracketed by the saying which cannot go without saying, the elegiac voice which makes us what we are. "Could it be" Sherman wrote in the same afternote quoted above "that Life and our lives, the two words that enclose the [collected] introduction to *Walden*, were fortuitous?"

Not often an ironist, Sherman had a mortal ironist's retrospective sense of the tensional momentum of ambiguousness of the word, "fortuitous," with its paired qualities of happenchance and lucky legacy. He knew that the young man who by happenchance began his energetic scholarship with *Life* in the uppercase abstract had been lucky enough to live to a point (not then the end) where he could see the closure of life as lived and bracketed in ourselves.

It is this same bracketing that my old friend, Janet Kauffman means to summon in her novel *A Woman in Four Parts*, "Deprived of the elemental world—and who isn't, with a globe divided, the whole planet sectioned, roofed, cut and pasted—even its waters—what can a body do, if it is a body, but acknowledge, salvage, the elements in its own boundaries. Draw them out. Wring them out. House. Host. . . . [summon] its lost geographies" (12).

Writing to Sherman at a point which bracketed his mortal life, and thus marked the fortuitousness of my own, I was convinced of Kauffman's claim that "it is the dream of the body—to know a place bodily and to say so." (119)

That is, I was convinced that the important questions facing us as an increasingly technological culture will be played out in places like Vassar and similar human communities where we consider and profess the value added by (and embodied in) that community. In my last letter, I tried to tell Sherman how despite (or perhaps on account of) my modest role in its development, it seemed to me that the pervasiveness, immediacy and unmoored multiplicity of electronic culture will inevitably and increasingly throw us back upon human communities as sources of value, identity, and locality.

By that time we had moved to New Hamburg, one of the few towns along the Hudson where the railroad runs on the right side of town and not between town and river. Thus I was aware, as I also told Sherman in this last letter, that although we were only a block and a half away from the river, we were a lifetime away from understanding even the simplest of its rhythms. I was reminded of how in an almost identical context—discussing Barry Lopez's *River Notes*—Sherman had quoted the poet Charles Bernstein about the archaic and its “chastening lesson . . . of our own ignorance and the value in acknowledging it.” (1992, 85)

Sherman wrote me back on Easter morning. The crows, he said, had dusted the snow from the branches of the pines. He was feeling briefly better. “There is no assurance that this well-being isn't transient,” he wrote, “but isn't the transient, even miracles, which I am beginning to settle for, in the nature of things?” He had been able to walk out, he said, and “inspect the trees I've planted, some 35 years tall, and observe the emerging spring.”

He once wrote me that over the years he had planted fifteen thousand trees throughout the eighty acres at Wolf Lake in Minnesota. I do not think it was an exaggeration. In some sense I am among them.

### III WOOD

The crows dust snow from the pines.

What, finally, are we to make of the fundamentalist aspects of what seems a wood-pulp fetishism among the post-lapsarian (I won't call them neo-Luddites, Ned Ludd's fight is my fight as well: we are who we are, we have bodies which the machines cannot deny) critics of new writing technologies? Already, of course, my rhetoric barely hides its contradictions. Yet to convey and hide its contradictions in the same gesture is, of course, the purpose of any rhetoric, any tree, or, as we shall see, any screen alike.

We are “finally” to make nothing. Or rather we finally make only ourselves. Yet these selves are made of nothing lasting, wood or otherwise. In the face of such knowledge, or perhaps despite it, it seems that these contra-technologists—the post-lapsarian and eschatological wood sprites—long not to last but to be among the last. In an age of constant nextness, they long to set the limits: write here but no farther, write so that the mark is read in carbon but not in light. In an online exchange about “the cultural consequences of electronic

text” (which he contributed to by the faux network of proxy fax), Sven Birkerts seeks to set such end terms:

I catch suggestions of the death of the natural and the emergence of proxy sensualism, one tied up with our full entry into a plasticized and circuitized order. These synthetic encounters could only become real pleasures—objects of rhapsody—after we had fully taken leave of our senses (literally) . . . A utility cable will be beautiful (and not in the surrealist sense) because we will have lost our purchase on branch and vine and spiderweb. (1995 online)

The prose is felicitous and rings round like a vine, yet the thrust of what he circles becomes clear upon further viewing. This is a maypole ceremony, a self-garlanding. He seems at first to come (literally) out of the woodwork with the claim for fetish. His stance seems to be that the book, being vegetal (i.e., made of wood), assures that we will continue to inhabit a natural world. Yet the obverse claim, (i.e., that the book in its apparent naturalness has blinded us to vine and spiderweb), is not only equally likely and as easy to sustain but also has been made by both the great men Birkerts admires from Plato to Thoreau and by a woman whom he may and I do admire, Donna Haraway, whose “webs of differential positioning” are considered above.

What really underlies Birkerts’s argument, like most reactionary polemics, is I think a profound distrust of the human community and the future. We seem called upon to believe that, because there are apparently no naturally occurring polymers (let us put aside the natural origin of the copper—or the gold!—of the computer’s utility wire), Birkerts’s or my granddaughter will abandon the grape arbor for the World-Wide Web. I take another view. The so called “real pleasures of synthetic encounters” are just as likely (in a world in which we trust our progeny) to call them more strongly to the real pleasures of human community and the world around us. To claim that the natural world will necessarily be transformed beyond recognition is proxy sensationalism and impure fetishism. It is just as likely that the natural world will be transformed (which is to say brought back before our eyes) into recognition and that we shall gather there (by the river), not in rhapsodic flight from the net, nor in leave of our senses, but within the leafy garden of forking paths.

Though how we see ourselves as clothed in the natural world (whether shamed into fig leaves or in the splendour of the grass) is an old story and depends upon our understanding of tree and garden alike. In Haraway’s explicitly post-Adamic paradise, “Webs can have the property of systematicity, even of centrally structured global systems with deep filaments and tenacious tendrils into time, space and consciousness . . . knowledge tuned to resonance not dichotomy” (194-195).

The turn from dichotomy to resonance is not easy and requires us to see ourselves proprioceptively, i.e., inside out. Regis Debray seemingly makes a more reasoned case for the fiber book as symbolic object rather than a fetish,

Written text converts the word into surface, time into space; but a single graphic space remains a planar surface. Written text, like screened text, has two dimensions; a parallelepiped has three, like the world itself. The memory of the world, materialized in the book, is itself the world . . . A volume of paper and cardboard is a resilient and deepening microcosm, in which the reader can move around at great length, without getting lost in its “walls.” The book is protected because it is itself protective . . . One can take one’s lodgings there so to speak, even curl up comfortably.” (147)

Yet to a feminist critic, this microcosm where the homunculus “can move around at great length, without getting lost in its ‘walls’ . . . [and] curl up comfortably” must sound (in the root sense) familiar. It is the place where the family is formed, the inside-out which makes us who we are. To paraphrase the title of Irigaray’s famous essay, this book which is not one is the multiplicity of the room as womb, not the tome as the world’s tomb. The memory of this world, materialized (and maternalized) in ourselves, is itself the world. We are who we are.

Debray’s claim (or my appropriation of it here) requires that we read ourselves from without (our lack is that we are one) and thus open ourselves to who we are within (where the difference between who and whom—and womb—here is everything). This requires a sense of not merely our not-oneness but our doublenesses. Doubleness of course recalls Irigaray’s “This Sex Which Is Not One,” in which “within herself, [woman] is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other” (Irigaray 24). In this doubled sense our memory of the world—and thus of what the book means to enact and the screen aspires toward—is neither an occupying gaze nor a phallocentric taking up of lodgings but rather the to-and-fro flow of meanings in which “the geography of . . . pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined” (103).

“While the noun screen connotes an outer, visible layer, the verb to screen means to hide,” the poet Alice Fulton writes in a meditation on the nature of electronic texts (in a collection edited by Birkerts):

The opposing definitions of screen remind me of stellar pairs, binary stars in close proximity to one another, orbiting about a common center of mass. Astronomers have noticed a feature common to all binaries: the closer the two members lie to one another, the more rapidly they swing about in their orbit. So screen oscillates under consideration. (111)

The place where binary stars lie is, of course, a bed. We are embedded in our differences and we oscillate under consideration. “Genuine books are always like that: the site, the bed, the hope of another book,” says Cixous,

The whole time you were expecting to read the book, you were reading another book. The book in place of the book. What is the book written while you are preparing to write a book? There is no appointment with writing other than the

one we go to wondering what we're doing here and where we're going. Meanwhile, our whole life passes through us and suddenly we're outside (100).

In that sudden, we read ourselves from without and thus open ourselves to who we are within. What has happened to the wood? the reader might ask. We might misread Shakespeare but not necessarily our natural grain to think that we are as much born into the wood by our mother Sycorax, as born from it by our stepfather Prospero, whose words and books are after all our only evidence that we were trapped there. In any case, whether we are fathered by tempest or a grim fairy tale, our truest nature (or at least our dream) is that we have to move. "In order to go to the School of Dreams," Cixous says

something must be displaced, starting with the bed. One has to get going. This is what writing is, starting off. It has to do with activity and passivity. This does not mean one will get there. Writing is not arriving; most of the time it's not arriving. (65)

Not arriving, where have we come to? We can respond affirmatively, even enthusiastically, to Debray's claim that "The technological ecosystem of the textual relates back—in the same way as any microsystem—to the wider scale of cultural ecology," and even accept the proposition which he suggests leads from it as "something that bears a strong semblance to an anthropological constant: human communities *need* a unique defining space to belong and refer to" (148, his italics). However doing so does not, I think, oblige us to submit entirely to his further, enigmatic claim to "formulate it all too laconically: *no culture without closure* (and time alone as the defining medium of anything) *cannot close it off*" (148, his italics).

There is a closure which does not close us off but which, while leaving us open, encloses us. "Skin wraps body into a porous and breathing surface through which a variety of exchange takes place," the artist Heidi Tikka suggests in her essay "Vision and Dominance—A Critical Look Into Interactive System" (1994). Tikka suggests a notion of *inter/skin* as a correction to the penetrating phallic gaze of *interface*. Skin, she says,

covers the face as well, but the communication skin participates in: touch, secretion, receptivity and sensitivity—when blushing, having goose pimples, shedding tears or sweating—remains the underside of human communication. The incalculability of these signs prevents them from being valid currency in the phallic exchange. In the economy of phallic representation skin does not count, it functions as a material support. (online)

Skin is screen. "I think about these things we create—these hypertexts—as part of our skin," Martha Petry argued in her essay, "Permeable Skins, "as permeable and open as the eyes on our faces . . . what we see here . . . is the outer membrane, the surface layer, the rind or peel of fruit, a film on liquid." (1992,1) Tikka evokes Irigaray explicitly—and both Petry's and Donna

Haraway's notions of permeation implicitly—in arguing that “an inter-skin has a great sensitivity and completion for receiving a variety of signals from the environment and capability of changing its state accordingly.” This is a literacy which offers us both well-being and the being in the world that Sherman Paul summoned from Thoreau; one which rather than leaving us in Birkerts terms “fully taken leave of our senses (literally)” instead for Tikka sensually “connects with other surfaces and conducts and circulates information in a network of similar surfaces.”

In the place of Debray's laconic formulation “no culture without closure,” we are faced with a Lacanian counter-proposition of encompassed enclosure. Birkerts's fear that we will take leave of our senses is posed as a fear that we will lose sight (of ourselves). Yet it really is a fear that we will lose touch with parts of ourselves. “The contemporary pressure toward dematerialization, understood as an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence,” N. Katherine Hayles suggests,

affects human and textual bodies on two levels at once, as a change in body (the material substrate) and a change in the message (codes of representation). Information technologies do more than change modes of text production, storage, and dissemination. They fundamentally alter the relationship of the signified to the signifier. Carrying the instabilities implicit in Lacanian floating signifiers one step further, information technologies create what I call flickering signifiers, characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions. (1993, 76)

The fear of losing the world is a fear of dismemberment, we close ourselves off into the zipped, conservative ground of the male gaze and colonial vista alike. Against such a fear of loss, there is the countervailing play of surfaces, the joy of several worlds at once, passing and multiple. The “inherently diffuse surface” of skin, says Tikka, “changes identity, sometimes dissolving itself into another surface in a way that makes the identification between the two impossible . . . [and] refrains from the production of a fixed subjectivity.”

In place of the male orgasmic rush of rhapsody, there is the fugal female orgasmic of not-arriving; in the place of Birkerts's “purchase on branch and vine and spiderweb” (where “purchase” is a verb of knot and lever and gather), there is the weave (the textus) of unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, dispersions and the unmoving silence upon which Ezra Pound ends his *Cantos* (1972):

I have tried to write Paradise  
Do not move  
Let the wind speak  
that is paradise.  
(Canto CXX)

## IV. LIGHT

We hear the wind through the trees as whispering music but we read it as varieties of light. In the play of inherently diffuse surfaces we hear the world speak.

Before the book of fiber, there was the book of skin, whether the vellum of the codex or the earth's own skin, clay tablets worked in dampness and dried in wind and light. The mediums of exchange for the skin are light, air, and water. Let us examine them in order, or rather as if they had an order.

The woodpulp fetishism of post-lapsarian critics seems at first a mistrust of the eye and a privileging of the hand. Their longing for the "resilient and deepening microcosm" of paper and cardboard seems a wish to touch the wound of culture and in that gesture heal over the openness which is its possibility. Yet there is a sense of reading which seems to favor the eye and mistrust it in the same gesture. In fact it mistrusts gesture, which is after all the work of surface, and thus demands to inscribe it in the mark.

A year ago, the wind of descending helicopters spoke through the bare winter trees upon the campus where I teach, and thereafter I saw this mistrust in action. My Vassar College colleague, Don Foster, in the course of using computer tools to establish Shakespeare's authorship of *A Funeral Elegy* had drawn international media attention. Now the media had asked him to turn his attention to another, then more notorious, anonymous authorship, that of the political satire, *Primary Colors*. In writing about Shakespeare's text, Foster says

*A Funeral Elegy* belongs hereafter with Shakespeare's poems and plays, not because there is incontrovertible proof that the man Shakespeare wrote it (there is not) nor even because it is an aesthetically satisfying poem (it is not), but rather because it is formed from textual and linguistic fabric indistinguishable from that of canonical Shakespeare. Substantially strengthened by historical and intertextual evidence, that web is unlikely ever to come unravelled. (1082)

Yet what served for Shakespeare and brought Foster his scholarly reputation and media notoriety alike did not serve entirely for the author of the political satire. The helicopters had come because Foster all but conclusively identified the author as the *Newsweek* writer, Joe Klein, a story which CBS News and *New York Magazine* reported in February 1996. Yet it was not until the following July, when *The Washington Post* engaged a handwriting expert to examine handwritten emendations on the galleys of the novel, that Klein and his employer owned up.

We might mark this down as a minor mystery, a passing event in the history of literacies and the further adventures of a premier Shakespeare scholar and technologist, were it not for what it suggests about the post-lapsarian insistence upon the place of marks. Foster couches his own methodology in a positivist science in which "researchers can now test . . . matters [such as authorship] objectively, by mapping the recorded language of an archived

writer against the linguistic system shared by a community.” (1083) We can put aside for the moment the question of authors whose works are not archived (or indeed whether archives of pulp or of light are likely to be more lasting than Horace’s bronze), and we can even defer the question of where and how we find the marks of community, to ask a more fundamental question.

Does the mind leave a mark?

This question is of course another way to address our mortality, the mark we leave upon the world. Is the person in the physical mark or the mind’s mark?

Foster’s screens played across the body of text and yielded light. The methodology for Shakespeare was the same methodology used for the lesser scribe, locating “an extraordinary match between the distinctive vocabularies [as] a function not principally of verbal richness but of individual preference or habit . . . [as well as] fairly ordinary nouns used as only [the author] is known to have used them” (1083). We can of course see neither match nor preference, neither habit nor the idiosyncratic and thus not either the extraordinary ordinary, in a single screen or even any sequence of them. Unlike the characteristic whorls and slants which are the handwriting analysts stock in trade, the mark of the extraordinary ordinary flits across a screen in instances of light whose recurrences mark Foster’s web of “textual and linguistic fabric.”

A liar may not own up to a fabric of light (itself another name for skin). Nor, it seems, might a post-lapsarian. Both however seem susceptible to certain carbon forms, dried pulp and the etched mark. This mistrust of light on the computer screen is, I would suggest, a variety of our mistrust of the body in and of itself. To the extent that light and its dimming and recurrences mark the temporal, it is likewise a mistrust of our own mortality. Finally, it seems a mistrust of the locus of meaning which, as Foster’s methodology suggests, is shared by a community. We cannot be sure what we see except in community. For what we see, as René Angelergues suggests, is itself woven with what we have not been able to see:

Perception, hallucination, and representation are part of the same process. The object to be perceived is in no sense an ‘initial condition’ that creates a causal chain ensuring the object’s imprint (image or information) in a focal centre, but rather a complex and conflictive process that mingles and opposes knowledge and recognition, discovery and familiarity. (461; cited and translated by Ottinger 26)

I believe the mind leaves its mark in the light filtered through the snow-dusted branches of thirty-five year old trees. In some sense, I am among them.

## V. AIR

We are afraid to find ourselves in air. Dreams do this to us, as do leaps, journeys, syntax, the weave of perception, hallucination, and representation, the book the Web and the network as well.

Wind is sound. Recurrence is the sounding of memory in air. Air is spiritus, breath, whisper, ghost.

We have talked about all this before. We are who we are. We are used to saying some things go without saying. This does not. For it is the saying which makes us what we are. Recurrence is the sounding of memory in air.

This is child's play. Anyone who has read my writings about electronic texts recognizes a characteristic, not to say obsessive, rhetorical stratagem in them (and thus here). The recurrence (sometimes what we call "whole cloth" though we mean patchwork) of a phrase or paragraph (and at various times as much as a page). Self-plagiarism is proprioception. Anyone who has read my writings about electronic texts recognizes the recurrence of Horace's phrase from *Ars Poetica* in them (and thus already above here): *exegi monumentum aere perennius*. "I have built a monument more lasting than bronze."

"As children," write Cara Armstrong and Karen Nelson, "we experience space through all our senses and we have an intimacy with place. Through monuments and rituals we try to recall this intimacy and awareness." (§1)

The mark of light is sounded in recurrence. That sounding is the body's surface. These short sentences form a pattern not an argument. Its monument is what Lucy Lippard terms overlay:

It is temporal-human time on geological time; contemporary notions of novelty and obsolescence on prehistoric notions of natural growth and cycle. The imposition of human habitation on the landscape is an overlay; fertility—"covering" in animal husbandry terms—is an overlay; so are the rhythms of the body transformed to earth, those of sky to the land or water. (1983, 3-4)

Overlay likewise offers a sense for understanding what, in a discussion of a student's (Ed Dorn's) work in terms of *his* mentor and teacher (Charles Olson), Sherman Paul discovers (he writes this book, *The Lost America of Love*, in short sentences that form a pattern not an argument) in Olson's sense of *Quantity*. Olson says it used to be called *environment* or *society*. He doesn't elucidate. Perhaps he suggests enough when he says it's the present time, characterized as it is by an increase in the number of things, by the extension of technology and "the increase of human beings on earth." Quantity as a factor of civilization, modern culture, cities: "the dominant, prevailing culture within which—against which—the deculturized [*dispossessed*] must learn to survive" (1981, 134, his italics and brackets).

The oscillation of within-which-against-which has become a familiar pattern for us, a ritual. "Who has seen the wind?" sang Yoko Ono, "Neither you nor I/But when the trees bow down their heads/the wind is passing by." We learn to survive our deculturization in overlay and passing-by as well as in what Cara Armstrong and Karen Nelson see as "carry over":

Rituals are determined modes of action and interaction which can expand a person's relationship to the landscape and carry over time; past merges with an already obsolescing present and projects into the future . . . As (re)w/riting and

(re)reading, ritual can be used . . . to exploit the gaps within a system determined by the patriarchal hegemonic culture . . . [and is] a response to a genuine need on both a personal level for identity and on a communal level for revised history and a broader framework.(¶5)

The web is now the place of quantity in Olson's sense, and its quantity here too is increasingly termed an environment or society. As a ritual space, the Web encourages us to seek some sense of Armstrong and Nelson's "revised history and a broader framework." Yet we are right to wonder whether in any sense (or in which of our senses) its ritual action offers the expansion of our relationship to landscape which Armstrong and Nelson argue carries (us) over time.

Though the verb for it is *surfing*, we rather wade into web, approaching as tentatively as someone's grandchild wades through bramble and approaches branch and vine and spiderweb. Though much is made (and marketed) of its search structures, the Web is not yet a monument enough for us. We as yet lack intimacy with its places enough to know where to look. We are as yet only at the first stages of its overlay, and our searches are thus repetitions like waves. These waves too are marks of mind and fall into a ritual pattern of what we might call confirmation, disclosure, and contiguity. We approach the space of the Web as water and reach into its shallows and its depths. Sometimes, we reach into this space seeking merely the confirmation that one or another part of the world/body is here too, whether a list of species of birds or a tea merchant's inventory of mountain tea. Other times, we seek disclosure, hoping to experience that an unanticipated part of the world/body is here, whether in the text of a poem about the wind or the homepage of a cousin. Once comfortable with this wave-like rhythm of confirmation and disclosure, we seek the broader framework of contiguity, the changing pattern of smooth stones beneath an ever changing surface. In contiguity, we confirm our sense that one or another part of the world is adjacent and contiguous from time to time by turns.

In this way, the Web transcends the inevitable spatiality of other hypertexts by becoming primarily ritual, nomadic and ephemeral and thus also richly overlaid with our sense of space and time and body. By circling round, our senses of confirmation, disclosure, and contiguity upon the Web, we find ourselves moving from the shallows and dropping off into sense. A recognition of traversal prompts my Vassar student Samantha Chaitkin to offer "a brand-new metaphor" in her critique of Storyspace and other Cartesian hypertext representations:

I'd rather . . . jump up into the air and let the ground rearrange itself so that I, falling onto the same spot, find myself somewhere different. Where am *I* going as I read? No, more where is the Text itself going, that I may find myself there. (unpaginated)

What is the place where we are if it is not the place where we think we are when we are there? Where is the text going if it is not the place where we are when we are on the network? Where do we wade and from what body? Where

is the whirl of the wind? (These short sentences form the pattern of an argument. Stones along a stream or seafloor.)

We are where we are. We fall into the same spot yet find its difference in ourselves. This cannot go without saying, and yet the apparent placement of the network, the puerile illusion of virtuality, tempts us to do so. The importance of our embodied placement, our actual reality, arises not despite but because of our increasingly networked consciousness. We are (again) called not to take leave of our senses but to repossess and renew them. "Only in a culture in which visuality dominates," says Heidi Tikka,

is it possible to assign a reality status to a visual representation in which some sound effects may enhance a non-tactile, tasteless and scentless world. Furthermore, the reality of the VR is not essentially visual, but . . . is made of a three-dimensional Cartesian grid in which the movement of the user can be traced as a series of exact coordinate points and which therefore locates the user as a punctual solid object among other solidly rendered objects. . . . The subject of the VR finds himself enclosed into a dataspace and deprived of a corporeal body. In the VR-space the abstracted vision becomes associated with a gesture. The pointing gesture moves the user forward in the constant state of erection. (online)

There is a sense of reading which mistrusts gesture, which is after all the work of surface, and thus demands to inscribe it in the mark rather than the gesture. Such mistrust is a maypole ceremony, its insisted mark a self-garlanding. Instead of this ceremony of erection I have elsewhere characterized hyper-text in terms of contour: "how the thing (the other) for a long time (under, let's say, an outstretched hand) feels the same and yet changes, the shift of surface to surface within one surface which enacts the perception of flesh or the replacement of electronic text" (280). We are where we are, and it is a mistake to claim, even in cyberspace, that we are anywhere else. "Interacting with electronic images rather than materially resistant text," N. Katherine Hayles writes

I absorb through my fingers as well as my mind a model of signification in which no simple one-to-one correspondence exists between signifier and signified. I know kinesthetically as well as conceptually that the text can be manipulated in ways that would be impossible if it existed as a material object rather than a visual display. As I work with the text-as-image, I instantiate within my body the habitual patterns of movement that make pattern and randomness more real, more relevant, and more powerful than presence and absence. (1993, 71)

The memory of the world, materialized in the body, for which both the book and the screen stand as repeated instances of embodiment, is itself the world. This is the nature of the erotic, another name for mortality and our presence in a real world. "Through ritual, individual, private actions can become part of a shared act," write Cara Armstrong and Karen Nelson,

Through repetition, actions can take on additional significance. Repetition can enlarge and increase an idea or purpose and may also suggest eroticism. Ritual, as shared acts, are potentially inclusionary. Ritual layers daily experience with the cyclical and the symbolic. (online)

We are who we are. We are where we are. Layered and overlaid, we make a world within our bodies.

#### VII. WATER OR THE BODY AGAIN

The mediums of exchange for the skin are light, air, and water. We examine them in order to see ourselves as who we are.

Water is the figure of the body as a medium of exchange. There is the formless place where the world is made. Heidi Tikka lingers like water over the smooth stones of the “continuous, compressible, dilatible, viscous, conductible, diffusible” qualities which Irigaray describes in “Mechanics of Fluids.” In that essay, Irigaray notes how fluid “makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical: . . . already diffuse ‘in itself,’ [it] disconcerts any attempt at static identification.” (111)

Mostly water ourselves, we are singularly plural and simply mindful of its complexity. In her own critical appreciation of Irigaray’s notions of fluidity, N. Katherine Hayles observes how “within the analytic tradition that parses complex flow as combinations of separate factors, it is difficult to think complexity . . . [P]racticioners forget that in reality there is always only the interactive environment as a whole” (1992, 21).

We read ourselves in ebb and flow within the whole of water. The space of our mortality is the singularity of water, which turns by turns from solid to liquid to air. We mean within a flow of meanings, ourselves the repeated eddy of erotic gesture, ourselves the screen which, in Alice Fulton’s phrase, “oscillates under consideration,” ourselves as well the moist and knowing eye, a flow over the skin or pulp of the page. We ourselves likewise mark and mean the repeated touch of surface to surface within one surface, cyclical and symbolic, which enacts the perception of flesh. Beyond next before us once again we ourselves discover the current flow of electronic text within a desert of silicon. In not yet published speculations, Alison Sainsbury, considers the reader as the literal (I am tempted to write littoral) site of inspiration, breathing out breathing in, and thus casts the act of reading in terms of lung or gill, the membrane and surface of vital exchange. She insists she means no metaphor but a cognitive theory; meaning is an exchange of moisture. Our selves and our cells argue as much.

A similar exchange prompts Carolyn Guyer to conceive meaning in terms of an estuary which

at any moment contains some proportion of both salt water and fresh, mingled north then south then north again by the ebb and flood of . . . tides. Right here is where I am. . . . The present is a place as much as it is a moment, and all things cross here, at my body, at yours. It is where I consider the past, and worry about

the future. Indeed, this present place is where I actually create the past and the future. (157)

She insists she means no metaphor but an actual ontology: "Nature is what we are, and so cannot be opposed to, or separate from, humans and their technologies." What comes beyond next is likewise inseparable and nothing less than what is before us: ourselves as expressed within time and space.

"When we get older," Sherman Paul writes about Robert Creeley's poem, "Later," we especially want the comfort of intimate space

Where finally else  
in the world come to rest—

By a brook, by a  
view with a farm

like a dream—in  
a forest?

We move toward the feminine, toward repose. We wish to enter the *gymnaeceum*, the house (always maternal) of all houses, that of our childhood. (1981, 62)

Because it is named as such, because it is cast as both a wanting and a wish, this space seems different to me (it is different) from Debray's protected and protective space where one "can take one's lodgings . . . so to speak, even curl up comfortably." Sherman Paul's space is explicitly not a return to room (or womb) but an older space beyond next before you once again.

This orientation was something he wrote about explicitly, elegiacally, himself coming round again to the fortuitously bracketed senses of doubled life with which he began his scholarly journey. In "Making the Turn: Rereading Barry Lopez," Sherman accounts the body's exchange:

It is salutary to divide the day between the work of the mind and the work of the body—the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, the latter, as I practice it, *menial*, according to Hannah Arendt—and it is necessary. The work of the body, outdoor work, is *out*: To do such work is a primary way of being-in-the-world, of finding oneself in the cosmos, in touch with things, physically "at home." The work of the mind, indoor work, is *in*, doubly interior: To do such work is often a way of withdrawing from the world, of living with its images. I use the spatial distinctions (*in/out*) that accord with the dualisms of *mind/body*, *subject/object*, *self/world*, but these are dualisms I wish to overcome: when *out*, by a participatory activity of mind; when *in*, by a meditative activity that seeks in words to hew to experience. (68, his italics)

Inevitably, this meditation on Lopez turns to water, "to the natural relationships of the little-traveled upriver country." Lopez, Sherman says, has "undertaken an archetypal journey, a quest of the kind that distinguishes our literature, *The springs of celebration*."

How often have we sought them in childhood and a world elsewhere; how seldom in the heart of darkness. Yet isn't the significant aspect in this instance the extent to which [Lopez] has made ecological study serve this end? the extent to which he has gone *out* in order to come *in*? With him, it may be said, the discipline of ecology heals the psyche and the healed psyche serves the unhealed world.

Here he finds the anima and dances with her . . . This is told, appropriately, in the clairvoyant manner of dream or fairy tale, and it is recognized as such, as a mysterious occurrence whose moral meaning is nevertheless clear. *He dances and tells stories*: with these sacred gestures he celebrates the springs. (84-85, his italics)

Growing old with technology, neither opposed to nor separate from nature, we watch water as if it were a seduction. Here we find the anima and dance. Form forming itself. Form drawing us to ourselves.

The charms of hypertext fiction, my dancing stories and technology, are those of any seduction, the intensity of likemindedness, a feeling that the story (and its teller) somehow match the rhythms of the stories you tell yourself. The vices are likewise those of seductions. What you think you see as your own mind is, as always, another's. Things pass. The links are like comets on the surface of a pond, doubly illusory.

What comes next? Will the Web supplant or supplement the world or book? When we get older we move toward the feminine, toward repose. I'm a little tired of the supplant and supplement question (even if I am in some sense guilty of forwarding it). Linear and hypertextual narratives seem a polarity but are only opposite shores of a stream. Our literacy is *littoral*. There are no linear stories, only linear tellings or readings. *Supplant* is a strange word (the dictionary renders it in terms of "intrigue and underhanded tactics"); I prefer succeed, with all its senses. If the linear narrative, insofar as it is aware of itself as a form, has always wished to succeed itself (as it seems, at least by the witness of its practioners, it has), then it is unlikely that the hypertextual narrative will be any less ambitious.

Water does as much as it travels or eddies, changing change, successively taking the same form. What comes next? What next literacy, what next community, what next perception, what next embodiment, what next hope, what dance, what home, what next light.

We will have to watch. "It is through the power of observation, the gifts of the eye and ear, of tongue and nose and finger," Barry Lopez says

that a place first rises up in our mind; afterward, it is memory that carries the place, that allows it to grow in depth and complexity . . . [W]e have held these two things dear, landscape and memory. . . . Each infuses us with a different kind of life. The one feeds us, figuratively and literally. The other protects us from lies and tyranny. (188)

We will have to watch. Consoled by a belief that nature is what we are, it remains to be seen whether we can move enough toward the "clear space"

which Barbara Page locates within “the conscious feminism of the [experimental and hypertextual] writer.” What “animates her determination”

is not simply to write but to intervene in the structure of discourse, to interrupt reiterations of what has been written, to redirect the streams of narrative and to . . . clear space for the construction of new textual forms more congenial to women’s subjectivity. (¶26.)

As artists and thinkers and teachers, we long for animation, interruption, redirection and construction. What comes next is before us, in landscape or memory alike. What scours the clear space are the waters of repossessing and renewing. Ever afloat in a journey to the place beyond next, we begin to settle for transient miracles before us once again, whether the truth of crows on an Easter morning or the lines which end Sherman Paul’s *The Lost America of Love* and this essay as well:

We must go back to sets of simple things,  
hill and stream, woods and the sea beyond,  
the time of day—dawn, noon, bright or clouded,  
five o’clock in November five o’clock of the year—  
changing definitions of the light.