Jerome Fletcher

As a contribution to the notion of  ‘beyond the book’ I will be presenting and reflecting on *Escape from the Temple of Laughter,* a multi-modal children’s novel which I published in the mid-90s. Starting from a consideration of the book as both a container and a site for writing, this children’s book was one with very porous boundaries. Its contents literally spilled out of it, escaping the totalising control of the codex. For example, rather than a series of maps being illustrated within the text itself, they exist as a set of separate objects. And the same is true of machines, games, devices. mini-books and stickers. These elements could be thought of in the same sense as an ‘exploded view’ of the book which asks the reader to establish the shifting relationships between these elements and the narrative itself. At the same time, each ‘escape’ in itself constitutes the possibility of a new text, taking the reader further and further from the main narrative. This brings to mind Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy,* .

‘ Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading!—take them out of this book, for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them;—one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it;’

At the time of publication, pre-Web 2.0, *Escape from the Temple of Laughter* was already a hypertext work. The book is now in the process of digitisation and the second half of the presentation will consider what this means to recontextualise the book in this way. Is it a genuine move ‘beyond the book’, or merely an alternative mode of dissemination? Does digitisation add anything new to the text, or is it foregrounding certain features which are already inherent in the print version? Is digitisation a rupture with print culture or a move across a spectrum? Will the book ‘dematerialise’ as a result of digitisation or will it take on a new form of materiality with different signifying qualities?

40 minutes presentation and 20 mins q and a.

15 mins on the book and sequel = 25 mins of reading

25 mins = 2.5 – 3.0k words

Presentation:

Outline of the book.

* explanation of the compositional process. Structure of the book.
* Link to hypertext. [This was pre-Web 2.0 at time when the book on CD was being seen as the future].

Centrality of the narrative.

Central metaphor of ‘escape’ – one which is taken up with the sequel; a series of narratives about imprisonment and release, linked together by a central narrative about imprisonment and release. So it’s worth considering the notion of ‘escape’ in this context.

In this book, and in all books-within-boxes, there exists the possibility for the contents and, by extension, the narrative to escape from the totalising control of the codex. This brings to mind such works as B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates,* or Anne Carson’s *Nox*  although the latter is actually a concertina book within the box*.*

- Hypertext. I want to make a distinction between the analog and the digital here, one based on the writings of Anthony Wilden. I asked a student recently what made her e-book digital and she replied that it needed electricity to run, which was a less than satisfactory response.

Hypertext as an escape from the narrative.

It is a well-attested phenomenon that of clicking on a web page to open it and immediately looking for the means of escape. This behaviour can be demonstrated using eye-tracking technology. (Andrew Roberts) This is possible with the footnote or the endnote in books. But that is a different process. It is always intended that the reader returns to the main body of the narrative and it is aimed at increasing readerly absorption in the text when one returns. It is not intended to send the reader off in a totally new and unpredictable direction. [As an aside, it’s worth noting that a large number of video games are posited on the notion of escape too; not only escape from predation but escape from the various levels around which the videogame is structured].

Thinking about hypertext in this way, leads one inevitably to consider a notion of ‘forces’ within the text. What are the forces which compel or encourage the reader to leave the orbit of the narrative, to seek another? Is this purely a technical question?

I want to consider what might be thought of as two forces or vectors within the printed text and the augmented book. These forces are respectively ‘centrifugal’ and ‘centripetal’, the former moves outwards and away from a centre and the other is attracted inwards towards a centre. I’m not keen in general on binaries, so I will also be looking at ways of combining these two into a third term, such that the original binary disappears.

I would argue that centrifugal narrative is a characteristic of the digital and centripetal is a characteristic of print-based narrative. So let’s start by looking at two examples of where that doesn’t happen. I would argue that *Escape from the Temple of Laughter* is centrifugal in its use of extraneous material that pulls the reader away from the main narrative. But that conversely each extraneous piece constitutes itself as the beginnings of a new narrative.

Who has done this before? Classic example is *Tristram Shandy.* Digression – the sunshine of a book. Hypertextual = digressive.

Other theorists of the centrifugal/-petal narrative. Northrop Frye is one. He makes a distinction between centrifugal and centripetal texts, although the distinction he establishes is between texts which centripetally focus on the aesthetic function of literature, and those which centrifugally move toward it social function and external considerations. This is a different use of the terms from the one I am considering here.

Are we dealing with a model of narrative as circular, emanating from a central point, rather than linear? (Gerard Genette – le germe?) Analepsis and prolepsis. No longer enough to account for the narrative direction.

Are we also dealing with force within the narrative? What is the force that draws the narrative into or away from the central point? How is it measured?

Gravitational pull? The strange attractor?

What about ‘escape’ as a metaphor for the vectorial force? Escape velocity – the point at which an object escape gravitational pull altogether. Escape velocity is something that can be measured, however, and I am not suggesting that there is a way of measuring these forces within a narrative. There are too many variables, and one could only specify *that* an escape had taken place; not how or why.

The writing/speaking machine as the centre . How many narrators here? Two – the reel narrator and the speaking machine. The narrative always returns to the speaking machine.

So rather than a line of narrative, perhaps we need a delimited *area* of narrative with a centre of attraction around which the reader orbits. An orbital theory of narrative. But what is the centre? What is there? And the theory needs a concept of force – what are the forces which pushes the reader away from or drags them in towards this central point.

The navigational model of hypertext. – Hypertext takes you somewhere. Where do you want to go today? – Microsoft web campaign. Netscape Navigator. Internet explorer. Surfing. But this is a delusion. You don’t move anywhere – the web is a technology of invocation. You ask is to fetch stuff and re-assemble it in digital form. It comes to you. You don’t move. You don’t go anywhere. On the other hand, if you are dealing with a database, the metaphor still holds. This is how Charles W. Bachman sees it. He was the recipient of the 1973 Turing Award and in his acceptance address, entitled *The Programmer as Navigator,* he explains how this metaphor can be sustained.

(The rhizome as metaphor of hypertextual narrative process. Not appropriate in this context.)

An orbital model of narrative. If the reader circles around the narrative, there is a question of proximity and distance. Is there any way of measuring this? With a linear narrative there is the page number which tells the reader how far along you are. But here we are measuring something different. This is not a physical distance so much as a psychological or emotional distance. Or an imaginative distance.

Does hypertext work like this? It can cause a complete rupture in what might be until that moment a perfectly coherent narrative. This is not a question of being distanced but rather one of finding oneself having to reorient in relation to a new narrative.

To take this metaphor further, what determines the gravitational pull of an object is its mass; the greater the mass, the greater the centripetal pull. The question then arises, what would constitute the ‘mass’ of a narrative, and again how does one measure such a quantity?

Charles Bernstein in his *Artifice of Absorption* deals with this effect albeit in a poetic context. Firstly, what he sets up is a tension between absorption and X. These could be equated to the two forces I have been referring to. Secondly, he appeals to a notion of ‘artifice’ as that which absorbs or otherwise the reader in the text. In other words, the greater the extent to which the text makes apparent its own artificiality, its own status a construct, the less ‘absorbed’ the reader becomes in the text. Another way of saying this is; the more the text draws attention to itself as artifice (note the use of the phrase ‘to draw attention to’ – a metaphor of attraction) the greater the centrifugal force away from the narrative as a place of absorption.