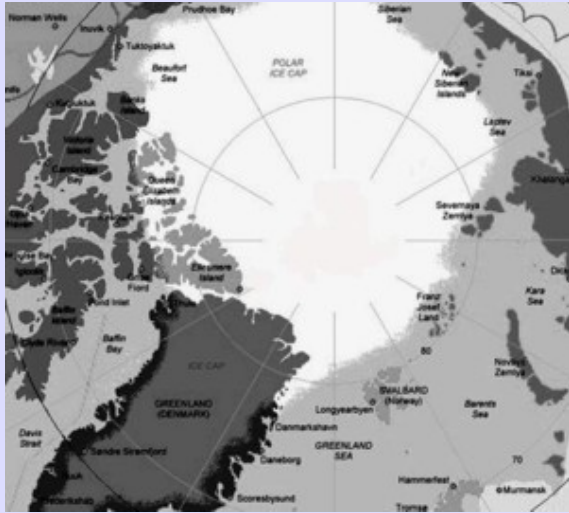# The Hyperliterature Exchange
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Fragments of Ice

The Way North

by Joel Weishaus

http://web.pdx.edu/%7Epdx00282/North/Intro.htm

reviewed by Edward Picot

One of the most obvious differences between hyperliterature and literature in print is the difference in how they look. For one thing, of course, hyperliterature is generally displayed on a screen lit from within, rather than a sheet of paper lit from above. But it also tends to be laid out differently.

Literature on the page frequently gives us visual clues which help us to identify the kind of text we are dealing with and how we ought to interpret it. The most obvious example is poetry. As soon as we see a ragged column of text in which every line stops well short of the right-hand margin, our expectations of what we are about to read are changed. We recognise it as a poem, and prepare ourselves for language which will be figurative, musical, allusive, oblique and perhaps difficult to construe rather than lucid, explanatory, argumentative, suspenseful or expository.

As a general rule writers of poetry are more conscious of layout issues than writers of prose. Should every line of a poem start at the left-hand margin, or should some be indented? Should each new line begin with a capital letter? Should the text be ranged left or should it be centred? Prose writers pay less attention to such details, and are more accustomed to thinking of their text as something molten, which can be poured into a whole range of different typographical containers with broadly acceptable results.

Yet even prose gives visual signals to the reader. An academic book is likely to have one long paragraph after another, occasionally varied by indented block-quotes from other sources. There may be maps, graphs or diagrams. There are likely to be little numbers or symbols hanging just above the text here and there, directing us to footnotes at the bottom of the page, or references at the end of the book. The book itself will probably start with acknowledgements, a preface and an introduction, and finish with a bibliography and an index. All of these things tell us, before we have delved into the text itself, that we are in the presence of learning and research. On the other hand a novel is unlikely to have any of this academic paraphernalia: instead the paragraphs will be shorter, and much more liberally-decorated with speech-marks and exclamation-marks. The visual difference between a page of lively dialogue and a page of densely-reasoned academic argument is enormous, and this difference affects the way we read.

Our reactions to printed text, in other words, are far more influenced by its layout than we usually realise, and our reactions to text layout, in turn, are influenced by a highly-developed set of conventions which often tell us what to expect before a single word has been absorbed.

In hyperliterature, on the other hand, unconventional layout is endemic. This is partly because of the way in

which it is created. HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), the language in which web-pages are written, is a markup code, which means that one of its primary functions is to take unformatted text and indicate how it should be displayed. Markup codes are based on the idea that form should be separated from content - in other words, the actual text of a sentence may be fixed, but the way it's displayed is almost infinitely malleable, depending on how it is marked up. Paradoxically, the effect on hyperliterature of this separation between content and form has not been to divorce the job of writing from the job of web-page design, but to make writers working with HTML much more conscious of design issues. Partly this is because self-publication is very much the norm with hyperliterature, whereas with printed literature it is still the exception. Writers working in print do not usually take final responsibility for the appearance of their words on the page – issues such as font-size and typeface are usually settled by editors and publishers - whereas for those working in hyperliterature, the author's responsibility for the whole package, down to the last decision about how to display a link, is generally taken for granted.
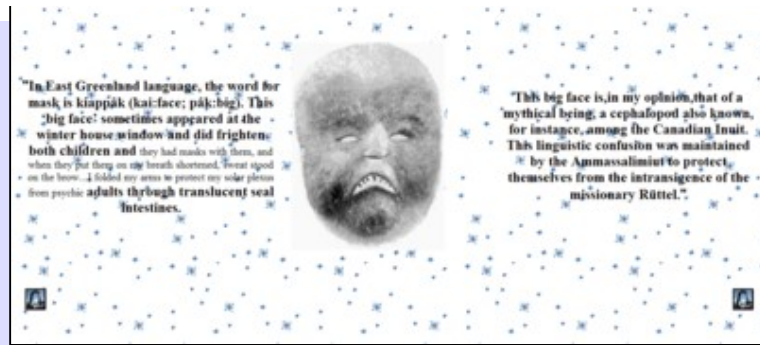
Another factor is that hyperliterature, by definition, exploits the creative possibilities of the digital medium to go beyond what could be done on the printed page - and what this boils down to, in one form or another, is taking text and manipulating it, presenting it to the reader in unusual ways. The design potential implicit in HTML is only the tip of the iceberg in this respect: once writers start to work with other codes then possibilities such as interactivity and text-generation begin to open up; but even HTML by itself allows text to be combined with other media (sound, images and simple animations such as rollovers) in all sorts of interesting ways. And all of these experiments involve decisions about presentation - how the contents of the web-page will be displayed, whether those contents are pure text or multimedia. So hyperliterature, like all other literature, is constantly sending out visual signals to its readers: but whereas with printed literature these visual signals are generally governed by well-recognised conventions, and therefore comparatively easy to interpret, with hyperliterature they are often very unconventional, and therefore rather puzzling.

Joel Weishaus's *The Way North* is a case in point. This is a sizeable project (25 web-pages long) about the arctic, its mythological and symbolic meanings, its culture, its ecology and its history. It is written in a deliberately-fragmented style, and the way in which the text is laid out on the page draws attention to its fragmentation. Weishaus's most characteristic technique is what he calls "invagination", by which he means the interruption of his own text by fragments from other sources. He describes this technique as follows:

> *My idea... originally was to have quotes within quotes, each in a smaller font, until they disappeared and then returned back out, font by font, to continue the original sentence. But this... evolved into, usually, a single interruption, a way to introduce other voices into the body of the text.*

Here is an example of the technique at work, from North-4/text-3 of *The Way North*:

> **Around 1000 C.E., Paleo-Eskimos, the so-called Dorset People, were disappearing from Greenland. Out-tooled and out-weaponed by more recent immigrants, perhaps they intermarried into the dominant tribe. At the same time,** even in summer, conditions in the Arctic are harsh and unpredictable. All life hangs by a thread, In order to survive, each living creature must mesh together with all the others in mutual dependence. The ecological balance is so delicate, that **across the southern Colorado Plateau and the upper Rio Grande drainage, Anasazi civilization was reaching its height.**

As can be seen, the text-fragment which interrupts the main sentence is concerned with a related subject - certainly related to the larger themes of *The Way North*, if not to the immediate concerns of the passage into which it intrudes. As can also be seen, Weishaus draws attention to the interruption by displaying it in a different font, instead of leaving us to sense the change of voice for ourselves. He also provides a reference: if you hover over the words "even in summer", a citation appears a little further down the screen ("S. Hall, *The Fourth World: The Heritage of the Arctic and its Destruction*. New York, 1987"). In this way, we are given visual clues which help us to understand what's going on. The change of font-size warns us of a disjunction in the text. The on-hover citation confirms this by telling us where the "spliced-in" material has come from, and thus seems to go some way towards legitimising the interruption. Yet at the same time there is already a confusion of tone or register. What kind of text are we reading? The passage starts off sounding like something from a history-book, but what kind of history-book allows itself to be suddenly interrupted in this way? And the interruption seems to come from an ecologist or a naturalist - we have not only jumped from one voice to another, but from one discipline to another, and incidentally from one tense to another. We are also confronted with the problem of how to read this interrupted sentence - should we skip over the interruption, to the point at which the "outer" text resumes, finish our reading of that, then go back and absorb the "invaginated" material afterwards? Or should we try to read right through the interruption, accepting it as an integral part of the text despite the change of font-size and the fact that it makes the sentence very difficult to construe? (Weishaus himself favours the second option.)

Further down the page, beneath an image of a black driftwood mask, we find this:

I am snug in a tent of skin stretched over an armature of bones stuffed with muscles and organs supplied with channels of pulsing blood, and a mind that dreams—

Trapped an unidentifiable man against a rail overlooking
a precipice, ordered him to take off his shoes and toss
them into the void, then sent him flying after them.
Awoke thinking: *I murdered someone.*
I killed which part of myself?

Reflective, rather poetic prose, followed by something which reads like an extract from a dream-diary: part personal reminiscence, part philosophy, part psychological self-analysis. And again, the change of tone when we come to the dream-section is underlined by a visual signal: a change of font from sans-serif to serif, and a change of alignment from left-aligned to centred. The page as a whole, in other words, is giving off all sorts of different signals about its content, and the experience of reading it is dominated by moments of transition, from one voice to another, one type of discourse to another, and one text-style to another. The overall impression is that this is not the kind of smooth, homogenous discourse we are used to reading in print, but the text equivalent of a collage, mixing together different forms and textures as well as material from different sources.

The technique of invagination has been one of the most characteristic features of Weishaus's style, particularly in his larger projects, since *Reality Dreams* (1992-1995): but although in *The Way North* it remains one of the most immediately-noticeable aspects of his writing, it is actually only one element in a whole array. North-1/text-2, for example, doesn't have an invagination in sight. Instead, the middle of the screen is occupied by a short poem about the arctic. At the top of the screen, the title/first line of the poem - "On a flow of ice" - is in white three-dimensional letters which begin to move as soon as the page is opened. They float off into the distance, apparently leaving icy fragments behind them as they go, on a curving paths which eventually carries them across the top of the screen and back round to their original position. The effect of this is to extend the page into three dimensions - four, in fact, since the movement of the animated text is clearly time-based. The page background is midnight-blue, and as the letters move across it we revisualise this flat colour as the cold surface of the arctic ocean, extending away from us. The short poem in the middle of the page isn't as simple as it seems, either: if you mouse over it, various words change colour (from purple to white), and hidden blocks of text pop up all around the outside.

Other pages have sound-files attached to them: the Introduction, for example, opens to the sound of a wolf howling; there are fragments of radio programs; the sound of arctic wind on one page, and the sound of running water on another. North-1/text-4 has a white background with blue snowflakes tumbling across it, and in the middle of the page is a grotesque Inuit mask which changes shape slightly once every few seconds. Sometimes bits of extra text appear gradually after the page is opened (North-5/text-4, for example); and North-2/text-5 has a single word in white, "star", which initially seems to belong in the middle of a poem, but which, when you mouse over a certain area of the page, floats off by itself into the top right-hand corner of the screen.

Not all aspects of the layout are infallibly successful. Weishaus warns at the bottom of the Introduction page that the screen resolution should be set to 1024x768. Many visitors to the project will probably ignore this instruction - and there may be some, with very old monitors, who are unable to comply with it - but *The Way North* simply doesn't function correctly at other screen-sizes: texts overlap each other, pop-ups obliterate lines of poetry instead of appearing alongside them, and sometimes areas of black text become invisible because they are rendered over the top of almost-black images. Also, there are places where, to my eye at least, the design of *The Way North* goes beyond being individualistic and challenging, and becomes jarring and garish: the combination of glaring red, acid green and a spiky font-face in North-4/text-1 strikes me in this way.

And of course the style in which Weishaus has chosen to write has its inherent dangers. It isn't easy to read. People who are unused to experimental writing may well give up in despair after a page or two. For those who persist, however, what will emerge is a surprising sense of coherence. For one thing there is a very clear architectural structure to *The Way North*. It's divided into five sections, and each section consists of five pages. This sense of structure is enhanced by the way in which Weishaus distributes his materials throughout the work. One page in each section uses an image of an Inuit mask. Pages with sound-files attached to them are likewise evenly-spaced, as are images of mountains and snow-fields. And although on any given page the transitions from history to anthropology to philosophy to personal experience to poetry may seem bewildering, when you read the work as a whole they come to seem familiar: the same mixture of styles is used throughout: and from this mixture there gradually emerges a strong sense of Weishaus's own voice - erudite,

philosophical, scrupulous, humane and poetic.

On top of this there is the work's unity of theme - or rather themes. *The Way North* is partly about the Arctic itself, but also partly about what it symbolises - an ultimate destination, an ultimate wilderness, an ultimate coldness and emptiness, a still point, a place where Man must confront Nature, beyond all directions and beyond all the consumerist trash and flash of twenty-first century life. But it is also about how twenty-first century life is encroaching on the Arctic both physically and psychologically. Global warming is breaking up the permafrost, which in turn is breaking up the Inuit way of life, and Western culture is breaking up the oral and shamanic traditions of the Inuit people. And on top of this, *The Way North* is also about a personal voyage, a journey into old age, across the uncertain ground of a changing world.

Once these themes have been recognised, the appropriateness of Weishaus's fragmented style to his subject-matter becomes apparent too. The breaking-apart of text is linked to the breaking-apart of icecaps and permafrost, which equates to a general loss of certainties and continuities, but which is also linked to the ageing process. The broken style has both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, once we have become accustomed to it, it starts to feel somehow more "honest" than oldfashioned "smooth" text: it doesn't pretend to be self-sufficient, it admits that there are other voices and other truths outside of itself, it doesn't attempt to sweep us along in a kind of hypnotic trance of agreement. Instead, it keeps tripping us up to shake us out of our complacency and make us think for ourselves, and in this sense there's a kind of moral toughness to it. It's rather like the demands placed on us by a path in the wilderness as against a smooth pavement in the city: we can't take things for granted, we have to work a bit harder, and in a Protestant work ethic sort of a way we therefore feel that it's better for us, somehow more "real". On the other hand, the broken, interrupted, distracting nature of the text also seems symptomatic of the broken, interrupted, distracting nature of modern life - the "heap of broken images" which is so important to modern art, the heap of broken traditions and failed beliefs which is so much a part of our society, and also the jumble of half-digested experiences and ideas which is constantly swirling around us because of modern technology in general and the Web in particular. There is a sense in which the broken style comes across as both a part of the solution and a symptom of the problems about which Weishaus is writing.

One last observation about *The Way North* is that it is a long way removed from the spoken word - it would be a very difficult text to read aloud - and in this respect, of course, it's like a lot of other hyperliterature. What makes this reading-aloud difficulty particularly ironic and poignant in the case of *The Way North* is the emphasis which Weishaus himself places on the oral traditions of the Inuit people. Literature and the spoken word are different things, but nevertheless two of the fundamental urges which drive us to create literature, just as they drove earlier generations to create oral stories and poems, are the desire to experiment with the sound-sense and the desire to reshape our experiences into stories. Hyperliterature occasionally seems far divorced from such fundamentals. But then again it is characteristic of the confused, difficult place in which we find ourselves that sometimes neither simple stories nor simple poems seem adequate to our predicament any more. Broken forms, difficult forms, forms which incorporate confusion and uncertainty, seem like a more accurate reflection of our reality.

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