

THE TIMELESS AND THE TEMPORAL ELECTRIFIED

Astrid Ensslin. *Canonizing Hypertext: Explorations and Constructions*. London: Continuum, 2007. Pp. [viii], 197. \$104 hardcover.

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“. . . a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together . . .” —T. S. Eliot

It is not surprising that Astrid Ensslin quotes twice from T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in her book, *Canonizing Hypertext*, for Ensslin is nothing if not committed to both promoting literary hypertext with its attending cyber and post-modern features, as well as establishing it as very much within the continuum of “traditional” literature. For those of us immersed (if not concretized) within the comfortable confines of print literature, Ensslin’s book may require a paradigm shift or three, but not threateningly so. Indeed, Ensslin presents a lucid argument that literary hypertext is an extension of the centuries old development of literature worthy of critical study and the literary canon as a thing worth adapting.

Before progressing into the corpus of Ensslin’s book, perhaps it will be helpful to clarify the sort of hypertext Ensslin is discussing. As it happens, Frankenstein and his monster provide us an ideal means of delineation. Mary Shelley’s original tale, of course, takes the form of a print novel with its characteristic linear construction, although it makes a nod at the concept of hypertextuality in its allusions to topics as varied as mythology, contemporary scientific thought, and naval exploration.

The advent of the computer, and even more so of the world-wide web, brought the development of a seemingly revolutionary iteration, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (F. M. P.). This cybertext is an example of what is often thought of when the terms “literature” and “hypertext” are wed. What Stuart Curran has done in the F. M. P. is, in effect, to create an electronic, web-based, variorum edition of the novel. The entire texts of two editions of the novel are contained in the F. M. P. along with hyperlinks to the full text of over two hundred critical essays on the novel. Not only that, the F. M. P. electronically links individual portions of the novel – what Curran calls frames (53) and Ensslin refers to as lexias (5) – to portions of critical response that refer to those particular portions. In this way, a reader of the F. M. P. could, by following the appropriate links (more than 6000 of them), access any or all of these responses. Jack Lynch, in his article on the project, notes that such linking is not new; annotated texts date back hundreds of years. What is new is the scope and immediacy that electronic linking and publication provide.

However, the F. M. P. and works like it are not Astrid Ensslin’s concern. Contrast the F. M. P. with the critically acclaimed literary hypertext entitled *Patchwork Girl, or a Modern Monster*, one of twenty-three such works which Ensslin includes in her canon. In this work, the author Shelley Jackson builds on Mary Shelley’s conception in order to create a new piece of fiction in an electronic medium. It features a female monster on a post-modern quest for identity. This text has several features in common with the F. M.



P., the most notable of which is its electronic format and deep layering made possible by hyperlinks. The difference is its genre. Jackson's work is creative fiction; Curran's is exposition. Some features that characterize this work's hypertextuality are its antilinear narrative (it has five possible starting points), its multimodality (it utilizes a variety of fonts and contains interactive illustrations), and its self-reflexivity (it contains not only frequent reference to Shelley's original *Frankenstein*, but links to scholarly articles on feminism and deconstruction, and the use of both the quilt and the monster as metaphors for the piecing together that is hypertext). This is the sort of hypertext--literary hypertext if you will--which Ensslin proposes canonizing.

In order to support such an argument, Ensslin employs a dense style with a wide scope. Within this slim volume she creates an historical context and a poetics for hypertext (chapter one), explores the nature of a literary canon and the considerations necessary for creation of a hypertextual one (chapter two), and presents a brief evaluation of twenty-three titles for inclusion in such a canon (chapter three). She then goes on to present constructionism as the theoretical, educational basis for the use of hypertext as a learning tool (chapter four) and concludes with details of an action research project the author conducted to test her constructivist theories (chapter five).

The audience for the book is clearly an academic one. (Ensslin refers to over sixty primary works and several hundred secondary ones.) Specifically, as a lecturer at the University of Wales, Bangor, Ensslin's immediate concern is making, to the powers that be, a clear and convincing case for the inclusion of literary hypertext within the National Curriculum of England and Wales. This explains the dual focus on both literary and educational theory. The book is valuable, however, for anyone interested in an articulate and meticulously researched justification for the inclusion of literary hypertext in a canon and implications of such for a literature curriculum. Since my focus is literary rather than educational, what follows is a look at those chapters addressing the literary value of hypertext.

Ensslin is careful at the onset to demonstrate literary hypertext's debt to literary history. In chapter one, "Hypertextual Ontologies," she connects publication in the new media to ancient annotated copies of the Talmud, to Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as well as to such avant-garde techniques as montage, collage and intermediality. But she also distinguishes hypertextuality from these predominantly print works, pointing out the way literary hypertext uniquely represents post-structuralist theory. At the same time she disagrees that this medium confirms Roland Barthes' concept of the death of the author, instead agreeing with Roberto Simanowski that links are more limiting than empowerin, comparing the reader to an "unsettled traveler" (32). She raises intriguing avenues for further study. For instance, she notes literary hypertext's surprising connection with folk songs and ballads due to the fluidity and impermanence of both oral tradition and cyber-space. She touches on the potential hypertext has to impact narration since the medium can complicate point of view in new and surprising ways.

Ultimately, however, she establishes that literary hypertext is an extension of more traditional literary forms and that, as such, it does not require a new form of criticism, but an extension of current approaches that take into consideration the distinctive mediality of hypertext and its unique features: processuality, interactivity, multimodality and hyperlinks semantics. What Ensslin highlights as literary hypertext's distinguishing

aesthetic is also the basis for her adherence to reader-response theory. She privileges the issue of surprise, which requires of literary hypertext readers a continual “revis(itat)ion” of their assumptions providing an intrinsic motivation to continue reading “in search of greater knowledge” (42).

In chapter two, “Hypertext and the Question of Canonicity,” Ensslin rejects a narrow definition of canon, but maintains its continued usefulness. Ensslin makes her case that, in the twenty-first century, the concept of a canon “needs to take into account postmodern social structures, literary practices and the dictates of the digital medium” (47). Canon can no longer be static, nor can it depend upon the materiality of print and paper. Instead, Ensslin discusses two ways the concept of canon must be changed. First, it must be creative and evolutionary, continually undergoing integration and modification. Second, Ensslin notes that as society and the arts develop subsystems, it makes sense for these subsystems to have their own canons, maintaining that the concept of the canon be extended and modified to accommodate our expanding concept of literature.

Ensslin suggests four criteria specifically for the canonizing of hypertext. First, it should have a high production value, by which she explains that the technology should support the subject matter of the work. Second, it should produce self-reflexivity in the reader resulting in an expansion of the reader’s “horizon of expectation” (63). Third, the narrative should be antilinear, contain many link-connected lexias, and resist closure. Finally, hypertext works should have a record of reader reception indicated by professional reviews, awards won, peer-reviewed publishers and inclusion in anthologies.

Ensslin goes on, then, in chapter three, “A Hypertext Canon,” to apply these criteria to twenty-three literary hypertexts, which, together, might form a literary hypertext canon. This chapter is a rich resource. For the uninitiated, it is an introduction to specific texts; for the critic, it provides a condensed analysis of acclaimed hypertexts.

The great length Ensslin goes to to place her views within an historical and theoretical context contributes much to the sense of balance present throughout this work. It could easily be argued that the very idea of canonizing works as elusive and open-ended as literary hypertext is a dubious notion. Besides the theoretical objections that hold sway against any idea of a canon, there are practical objections. How does one review a literary hypertext when it is impossible for anyone ever to read the same work twice? And what of the exclusivity of literary hypertext? It is, by its dependence upon the computer, a “first world” medium. Not only that, but the preponderance of hypertexts written for the MacIntosh computer make them largely inaccessible to even European readers.

What of the act of reading itself? Ensslin notes that literary hypertext encourages reading behaviors such as browsing, “zapping,” and “playing” (136). These behaviors are antithetical to close reading, a skill which she admits is important and is certainly necessary for this monograph. In fact, she states early in the book that “research . . . has shown [that] information has to be communicated in a serialized fashion in order to achieve a maximum of conceptual intake, and hypertext critics will have to continue to present their research in as linear a way as possible . . . to make their voices heard” (26). In other words, there are good reasons to stabilize text as well as good reasons to enhance its fluidity and fragmentation. Questions such as these demonstrate that not only does *Canonizing Hypertext* provide an avenue, both theoretically and practically, into twenty-first century literary study, but the book suggests numerous side streets begging further exploration.



### Work Cited

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