HYPERTEXT: THE REVISION OF CRITICAL INTENTIONS AND STRATEGIES IN WRITING AND CRITICISM

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Introduction

The emergence of hypertext, a specific text structure, comprising textual and/or multimedia (visual, sound, animation etc.) blocks, connected by electronic links and characterized by the essentially open textuality, has produced a remarkable shift in the ways of creating and disseminating knowledge. According to Landow, one of the key figures in hypertext research, this paradigm shift "marks a revolution in human thought" and "has profound implications for literature, education, and politics" (Landow, 1997). In the absence of linearity, typical for most genres of written discourse in the form of printed texts, hypertext offers multiple points of entry, which then lead to the multiple points of exit (resolution, completion). As such, hypertext does not comply with the conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity, which are replaced with those of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks.

With the appearance of the first electronic novel *Afternoon* by Michael Joyce (1990), the principles of hypertext have been increasingly utilized by many contemporary writers, and within the last three decades hypertextual fiction has become a recognized phenomenon of the modern literary process. In a still broader context, hypertextual literature is an indispensable component of the whole culture of hypertext, an essentially open and non-hierarchical system, which generates a new unprecedented knowledge system. An American researcher R. Lanham in his paper *The Electronic Word* states that the subculture of hypertext presents a renewed interdisciplinary culture, which merges together all arts and all sciences into one entity, reminiscent of Plato's idea of the unity of all knowledge (1993, p. 11).

Reverting to hypertextual literature per se it is worthwhile to recall that its material base rests on ever-increasing potential of new computer technologies and mass communication. Its philosophical foundations are formed, on the other hand, by the postmodernist response to the crisis of Western rationalism and concurrent with it crisis of artistic representation. Jean Baudrillard describes postmodernity as "a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals" (1995, p. 112). Thus, in its unique way, hypertextual discourse is reflecting the historic moment of transformation of the cultural paradigm, when, according to Baudrillard, everything in this world has got dissolved in information and communication (1983, p. 23).

Directly relevant to the above mentioned intellectual and cultural paradigm shift is an "open text" model, suggested by Umberto Eco, which embraces the idea of multiplicity in art, as well as new understanding of text, its interpretation and the role of the reader. For Eco, an open work is a text, which is not limited to a single reading or range of readings; it admits complexity and actually encourages or requires a multiplicity of readings. In *Opera Aperta* (1962), Eco argued that literary texts are fields of meaning, rather than strings of meaning, that they are understood as open, internally dynamic and psychologically

engaged fields (Eco, 1989). Hypertext literature realizes the idea of open work perfectly, to the degree that "we have a problem with hypertext because in a real sense the narrative is never finished, and there are more ways of navigating the available paths than a reader can pursue in a lifetime" (Boardman, 2005, p. 14). The way hypertextual narrative puts into a new perspective the esthetic principles of literary text and the relationship between writer and reader has attracted focused attention of literary criticism and research. Scholars and critics register the essential change of textual strategies of a writer and a reader in a literary work, on the one hand, and profound interrelationship between narrative structures and modern ideological concepts, on the other. Understanding of the fact that ways of constructing new art forms are reflecting the way contemporary art perceives and reproduces reality has become a starting point in the study of the unique esthetic and cultural phenomenon of hypertext literature.

A novel perspective in the study of hypertextual narrative is realization that hypertext challenges not only the traditional understanding of the role of a writer and a reader, but that of a critic as well. This article attempts at the analysis of the hypertextual novel seen as a crossroads of literature, computer technologies and critical theory in the intellectual discourse of the new millennium. While some ideas on reading strategies in dealing with hypertext and other non-linear literary texts are presented in the earlier paper (Averianova, 2013), the focus of the current analysis is on the strategies of a writer in creating a hypertextual literary narrative and those of a critic in interpreting it.

The Concept of Author in Hypertextual Literature

The nature of hypertextual literature has called for a profound reinterpretation of the identity of a writer in accordance with the postmodern concepts of authorship suggested by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacque Derrida, and others. In hypertextual narrative, the perception of an author has acquired certain duality. On the one hand, the author still retains all individual characteristics: his/her* name is registered both in printed and electronic formats and his existence, as a real person is a given fact. Besides, the writers of hypertextual narrative are assumed to be knowledgeable about computer technologies and have an adequate programming background. On the other hand, hypertextual narrative, being an essentially open system both in terms of structure and interpretation, deprives the author of the key function to suggest the closure or finale of his work. The author cannot predict, nor even envision the story's development and culmination, as those are formed in the course of each individual reading. The fragmentation of a plot reaches its logical absolute limit; therefore the ability of the author to model any finite version of the story is minimal. A Russian scholar of postmodern aesthetics Michael Epstein has even introduced a new notion of "hyperauthorship" (2010). According to him, authorship in modern narratology is dispersed into multiple potential, "virtual," authorships, which cannot be condensed into a single real individual one. Hyperauthorship in relation to traditional, discrete authorship is similar to a sum of possible positions in relation to an elementary particle, which resists the effort of quantum mechanics to locate it and stretch it into a wave (Epstein, 2010).

The other researcher of hypertext Raine Koskimaa addresses the problem from the perspective of the narrative nature of literary hypertext. According to his concept, hypertext novel is a narrative composed of lexias, or meaningful textual blocks, more or less independent and complete. The writer of a hypernovel is the author of all these lexias and he suggests his variant of their connection. However, unlike traditional printed literature, which requires linear reading, in hypertext narrative lexias can be read in any random sequence. The author still controls, to a certain extent, the process of reading, as it is he himself who has

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* Further on in the text, only the masculine pronoun *he/his* will be used for general reference, with the realization, however, that both writers and critics also comprise women.

programmed a variety of reader's choices. Thus the writer still remains the creator of the text as a whole. But then the question arises of the role of a reader. According to Koskimaa (2003), he becomes not a co-author, as was suggested by some researchers (e.g., Bolter, 1990), but a co-narrator.

Seymour Chatman offers still another narrative relationship in hyperfiction: real author − implied author − narrator (s) − narratee(s) − implied reader − real reader (1988, p. 371). In this scheme, "real author" and "real reader" exist beyond the realm of the text, while "implied author" and "implied reader" are categories of the text. The concept of "implied author" was initially suggested by Wane Booth (1961), who treated it as a "figure of an official scripter." Implied author manifests realization of the complete meaning of the text, rather than its source.

A Swiss researcher Marie-Laure Ryan focuses her attention on the category of narrator in hypertext. Having followed narratological discussions about the mandatory presence of narrator in a literary text, she offered the following summary: Narrator's discourse is manifested by one thing − his ability to tell a story (1981, p. 518). In literary hypertext, however, that particular function is essentially transformed. The hyper literary reader has gained an access to the formation and development of the story, as a whole, and to the choice of reading routes, in particular. Thus he also becomes a narrator, a co-narrator, after Koskimaa (2003). Analyzing the role of a hyper-reader, Koskimaa addresses the category of interactivity and distinguishes two types of it − interactivity per se and proactivity. The ability of the reader to create his own story bestows the interactive role on him, but he cannot become a proactive author since it is beyond his power to change the ontological nature of the text.

A closer look at some literary hyperfictions may provide some clarification to this distinction. The novel, which is considered to be the first artifact of literary hypertext, is *Afternoon* by Michael Joyce (1990). Here, the range of visual devices and navigation tools is relatively limited, their functions being those of textual additions and technical means of "turning" the "pages," or getting access to textual blocks. The latter are arranged in a manner, which does not provide any special connection between the characters, time or setting of action. This lack of immediate temporal sequence and causative connection allows the reader to choose the blocks randomly. But this randomness is an illusory one since the author has laid out the reading routs, which allows both readers and critics perceive the novel as a stable, though quite tangled, story similar to non-electronic, printed modernist fiction. This perception of the novel is confirmed by the analysis of the separate individual lexias/textual blocks, some of them comprise only one or two words and are similar to postmodernist experimental texts. Take, for example, Joyce's metatextual comment in one lexia where he compares his manner of writing to that of composing music since it can affect our senses directly without resorting to our mind first (Joyce, 1992).

Stuart Moulthrop, the author of *Victory Garden*, another classical hyperfiction novel, utilizes the capacity of the screen typography to a wider extent and resorts to much more visualization of textual cognitive space. He provides the reader with a navigation map, which serves, on the one hand, as a prompt or demonstration of available routes. On the other hand, it is also a metatextual commentary, essential for reading hyperfiction. Moulthrop himself points out that his map is a metaphor, it is not associated with completion or revelation, it is rather a push into unknown space (Moulthrop, 1991). Through maps, schemes and pictures Moulthrop tries to exploit the visual potential of hypertextual narrative to a higher degree than Joyce, still even he realizes that hyperfiction has certain limits of its own. None of the hypertextual products, he emphasizes, can realize the endless maze of Borgesian fantasy, referring to Jorge Luis Borges' *Forking Paths*, the potential for variation of which Moulthrop tried to activate through his electronic hypertext (Moulthrop, 1991). One can assume there might be a reader, Moulthrop speculates, who can realize all possible transformations of the given structure and reduce hypertext to a finite number of linear stories, but the aggregate of them will present quite an eccentric, yet a conventional work of fiction (Moulthrop, 1991).

At the end of 90's and the beginning of the new millennium, the status of a hypernovel as narrative

fiction was questioned and became less self-evident (Woodhed, 1990). The change was sparked by the appearance of Shelly Jackson's hypernovel *Patchwork Girl* (1995). The writer radically transforms the approach to the visualization of her hypertext by changing the text navigation system. Unlike the texts of Joyce and Moulthrop where the reader moves from one block of text to another, in Jackson's novel he navigates the text with the help of a map or a scheme towards another one of the same level, then, having chosen a certain narrative line, he can transit to another map or scheme of a "deeper" level. Thus, from the point of view of its structure, the novel is of multiple layers, the transfer to which is available only through the use of several maps or schemes the novel offers. This structure is enriched with illustrations and use of color, which create a "patchwork" effect.

In *Patchwork Girl* the reader is presented with four kinds of structured and hierarchically arranged cards, with the prearranged sequence of textual blocks. The first card opens immediately after the start-up of the program. It has a slight resemblance to a human body and is made of rectangular blocks, representing the parts of the novel. Arrows indicate possible routes of transfer from one block to another. These blocks have titles like chapters, while inside they comprise smaller rectangles, representing textual blocks, of which the "chapters" are made. By clicking on a block − whether bigger or smaller − the reader opens the relevant text and the activated block is highlighted.

Another kind of card is more hierarchical and less spontaneous, but it does not indicate the links between the textual blocks. This card determines the order of reading the hypertext even more strictly. Such means of navigation prevent chaos in the text and reader's disorientation; they facilitate reading by reducing stress, and exploration of such a system requires less patience from the reader. But the novel is still a puzzle, and the author expects the reader to solve it by putting together its fragments in order to achieve the only correct variant (with some minor variations) of the closure. Jackson confirms this impression in describing her artistic intention of writing a novel by patches and strands, creating a "brilliant hypertext parable of writing and identity, [which] generates both its themes and its techniques from the kinds of collage writing intrinsic to hypertext" (Landow, 1997, p. 198). The reader is dealing with a game, enormous, enticing, but still essentially linear in its parts.

Most parts of the novel have a clearly defined beginning and end. Thus, in the part called *A Graveyard*, in the first block of the text the protagonist encourages the reader to assemble her, and having wandered among the graves and collected all the necessary parts, the reader chooses the block *Exit*. According to Jason Williams, the graveyard section functions as a collage of "mini-narratives and fragmented character sketches" that serves as a "matrix for the meta-character and her story... The introductory and concluding lexias temporally frame the radial structure that unifies the part and facilitates passage to the more linear sections of the text" (cited in Landow, 1997, p. 200).

At the start-up of the novel, the first link takes the reader to Jackson's opening web, a rich crossroads document that offers six paths out: "a graveyard," "a journal," "a quilt," "a story," "broken accents," and a list of sources. Each part can be treated as a separate literary text, independent in its concept, theme and style. The common feature of all parts, however, is the ironic playful tone, which permeates the novel of such a gruesome subject. Thus, in *Graveyard*, getting on one of gravestones the reader receives the whole list of body parts beneath it, and the traditional inscription "Rest in Peace" is quite appropriately paraphrased into "Rest in Piece."

Jackson's playfulness reaches the stage of black humor in the part titled *Crazy Quilt*, where the author creates a collage of various patches, various other texts, from theoretical to fictional to pop cultural. The quotes or paraphrases recognizable from other literary works help readers to patch together a character and a narrative: «Her limbs were proportional, and I chose her features to make her beautiful. Beautiful! Oh Lord!" (from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*); "Sometimes it is called a 'crazy-quilt,' because the patches and colors are so mixed up. When I found it, I said to myself that it would do

nicely for my servant girl, for when she was brought to life she would not be proud nor haughty, for such a dreadful mixture of colors would discourage her from trying to be dignified (from L. Frank Baum, *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*), and others.

The lexia *Body Parts* is written in a different style reminiscent of a stream of consciousness or inner monologue that displays more nonlinearity and a wider range of alternative choices. Here and in another chapter *A Journal*, the author develops her artistic concept through the lenses of the monster girl's history. Three perspectives are at interplay here, that of the girl-the creator, the girl-the creation and the outside observer of the creature. The creator is interested in every aspect of the creation: the way she eats, feels, studies or behaves. The observations are narrated through the use of quotes from Mary Shelley's famous novel, and Jackson's style is also resonant to that of Shelley's. Here, the patchwork girl tries to define her identity and fit into the surrounding world, but fails to do so. Therefore, she decides to abandon her friend and creator and go to America to start a new independent life. *A Journal* merges with *A Story*, where the protagonist travels, forges new friendships, and takes care of a pet. But it does not put an end to her suffering, as her body is still so different from others. Her internal turmoil leads to the beginning of her disintegration. She looses her leg in the traffic accident and has to use a wooden limb. Then she buys the past history from a stranger, but it doesn't help either − she is falling apart. Now, the reader faces two choices: either to stop here or choose the path "*or*," along which the patchwork girl realizes that it is more important to be what you are and not what you look like. This version of a closure allows Landow to characterize the novel as "stitching together narrative, sexuality, and self" (1997, p. 198). Also, the way Jackson uses hypertextual space and its components can be treated as her attempt to render the postmodern vision of the world as essentially fragmented and essentially plural.

Our brief analysis of different artistic means of using hypertext potential in three most notable hyperfiction novels shows that we are dealing with at least two perspectives on hyperfiction. The first one, as expressed by Landow, is that hypertextual narrative is characterized by "its non- or multilinearity, its multivocality, and its inevitable blending of media and modes, particularly its tendency to marry the visual and the verbal" (1997, p. 183). On the other hand, Aarseth argues that Landow's postulate rests on an unwritten but not so self-evident assumption that fiction and narrative are the same. These, however, are different, according to Aarseth, and independent of each other categories. It is clear that hypertext can be fiction and non-fiction, while hypertext fiction may not have narrative (1997, pp. 84−85). The critic suggests an alternative to Landow's concept: "that hypertext fiction calls into question only the idea of hypertext story and plot, not story and plot as such" (ibid., p. 85). He supports Bolter's comment on Joyce's *Afternoon*: "We could say that there is no story at all; there are only readings" (Bolter, 1991, p. 124).

This brings us to the transformed role of the reader, who becomes actively instrumental in the development of the novel (for more detail, see Averianova, 2013), a co-narrator, as suggested by Koskimaa (2003). Also, it calls into attention the transformed role of the critic, who also faces not a finite written work, but only the idea of a plot and a story, their various readings and thus, multiple interpretations.

The Concept of a Critic in Hypertextual Literature

The growing culture of hypertextual fiction, with the diversity of interpretation it offers, has set a new challenge before literary criticism. There is no given text anymore for all the critics to analyze; there are only its possible variations, which means that critical analysis of fiction has to develop new techniques and approaches when dealing with hypertext.

The analysis of current works of literary criticism engaged in the study of hypertextual fiction and other literary hypertext projects allows us to perceive two major directions in this discourse. The first trend comprises articles by critics representing the school of academic literary criticism, such as Aarseth, Landow,

Koskimaa, Jeffrey Cocklin and others. For them, hypercriticism is a part of literary studies, specifically the part of it that deals with hyperliterature. The major distinction of this direction is its scientific (academic) foundation, as in their analyses, the researchers operate with the fundamental categories of literary theory and history.

The second direction is represented by the so-called interactive hypercriticism exercised within the realm of the Internet. Critical analysis is performed in the format of ongoing spontaneous discussion in specialized forums and online journals. This hypercriticism is anonymous in nature, which removes the issue of responsibility for opinions and publications. Critical contributions published online do not maintain any scientific or serious theoretical grounding and can be treated as hypertextual critical journalism.

Both directions of criticism have hypertext as the object of their analysis, but the main limitation often present in both is their focus on hypertext per se and negligence of the specific nature of hypertextual fiction as a part of mainstream fiction. As Koskimaa points out, hypertext is wider than hyperfiction (2000); on the other hand, we can add that hypertext literature is obviously not just hypertext. The convergence in hypertext literature of literary theory and computing manifests, according to Landow, a paradigm shift and presents scholars and amateur critics alike with a new intellectual challenge: "When designers of computer software examine the pages of *Glas* or *Of Grammatology*, they encounter a digitalized, hypertextual Derrida; and when literary theorists examine *Literary Machines*, they encounter a deconstructionist or poststructuralist Nelson. These shocks of recognition can occur because over the past several decades literary theory and computer hypertext, apparently unconnected areas of inquiry, have increasingly converged" (1997, p. 2). Still, with hyperfiction being different but essentially literary production, the object of hypercriticism should be the text as a work of art, and its function − the analysis of artistic and aesthetic properties of each specific hypertextual artifact.

Distinguishing two directions of literary hypertext criticism does not entail their differentiation as primary (academic criticism) and secondary (interactive criticism). It should be emphasized that the latter includes not only opinion sharing but also collective hypertext literary projects and has become an integral part of modern culture. Interactive criticism reflects that unique cultural and communicative transformation, or a shift, after Landow, which could not have happened in literature, its theory and criticism at an earlier stage.

Hypertext literary criticism basically follows the main foundations of postmodern literary theory, which has accepted the idea of an open text by Umberto Eco. Such a text, as seen by Eco, is a field of possibilities and choices that the reader has to realize according to his own knowledge and experience; it is a text in its development and it invites the reader to cooperate with the author in its creation (1984). A comparable treatment of open textuality is suggested by Roland Barthes in his book *S/Z* (1970), where he claims that hypertext precisely matches ideal textuality:

> In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. (pp. 5−6)

In a similar fashion, Michael Joyce praises hypertext fiction for awakening the activism of the reader: "Constructive hypertexts require a capability to act: to create, to change and to recover particular encounters within the developing body of knowledge. These encounters ... are maintained as versions, i.e., trails, paths, webs, notebooks, etc.; but they are versions of what they are becoming, a structure for what does not yet exist" (1995, p. 42). Thus, most hypertextual novels, like those analyzed above, present just one of

the reader's individual versions. Any reader's version does not approach the whole, completed story, neither does it exhaust all the twists and connections of the plot designed by the author. A hypertextual critic should essentially follow in the steps of a hypertextual reader and explore the whole multidimensional space of narrative alternatives and reading interpretations.

One more important characteristic of hypertext literature, and consequently, its criticism should be their metatextuality. The notion of "metaliterature," or "fiction about fiction" is not new for modern literary discourse. David Lodge (1992) used the term in reference to those literary texts where the attention of the reader is focused on the artistic value of the work of art, and its narrative and structural devices. The fact that almost all hypernovels provide explanations and comments on how to read the novel, how to follow narrative paths or how to develop a plot or a version of the story testifies to the metatextuality of hyperfiction. The critic of a hypertext fiction has to be a reader as well, but in his case, he has to be a multiplicity of readers and has to attempt realization of all possible versions. Then, each reading becomes a criticism of the previous one and its interpretation; thus, hypercriticism, like hyperfiction, is characterized by metatextuality.

The dynamic system of hypertext challenges literary theorists to look for new ways, methods and techniques of analysis. Traditionally, literary text is perceived in three aspects: a) text as reading (it is read and interpreted); b) text as writing (it is a message that defines its author, genre, and culture); and c) text as stability (it is a stable structure, the elements of which are unchangeable, as unchangeable is their sequence). The critics of hypertext, obviously, cannot rely any longer on this traditional scheme in their analyses of the text.

Furthermore, the very definition of the text is ambiguous as disciplines both within and outside of literary theory treat the word differently. Aarseth (1997) suggests a broad definition of the text as any object with the primary function to relate information. He understands "information" as a string of signs, which may make sense to a given observer. "It is useful to distinguish between strings as they appear to readers and strings as they exist in the text, since these may not always be the same. For want of better terms, I call the former *scriptons* and latter *textons*. Their names are not important, but the difference between them is" (p. 62). The main question with this concept of the text is reader activity, as "any text directs its user, by convention, mechanism, or social interpretation" (p. 74) to perform the main functions of exploration, configuration and interpretation. As no reader will perform any of these functions in the same way as the other, scriptons and textons do not overlap or coincide; thus the idea of the same text for all, the "original" as it is perceived in the traditional literary criticism does not exist anymore. Text is only a potential of multiple versions of realization, and not a stable, whole, or original entity.

Dealing with the notion of "original" in the meaning of "new, first, earliest" it is worth pointing out that postmodernism is permeated by the idea of intertextuality, and every new text, according to Barthes (1970), is a reaction to the preceding ones, thus it is hardly possible to create something entirely new or original. Following this logic, hypertextual criticism cannot be original either. First, it itself exists in the intertextual space of the postmodern culture and is interconnected with other texts, those of literary criticism included. Second, any analysis presents a single individual version as this analysis relies on individual reading experience, an individual realization of the unlimited potential of work of art. Any critic, just like any reader, in his reading experience will be "constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 3).

This new transformed kind of fiction puts a literary theorist into essentially different from the traditional approach conditions. To some extent, his analysis is similar to that of a theatrical critic, who deals not with a play as a finite work of art but with its current, immediate realization by actors and directors. Hyperfiction critic also deals not so much with the interpretation of the author's intention but with multiple individ-

ual reading interpretations. Openness, metatextuality, dynamics, absence of the "original" version define the new challenges before hypertextual literary criticism, which needs to develop innovative approaches and mechanisms to deal with these challenges.

Conclusion

Hypertextual literary activity, collective projects and the works of hypertextual fiction writers have become the focus of acute interest for modern literary criticism, as well as sociology and culturology. Hypertext novel has become an integral part of cyber- and hypertextual culture and reflects in many ways the sociocultural characteristics of modern society and dynamics of its development. The interactive nature of hypertext novel is a manifestation of profound convergence of information technology, mass media and humanities.

Even a brief analysis of some hypernovels by Joyce, Moulthrop and Jackson, presented in this publication, vividly illustrates the specific status of hypertext literature as an integral part of modern culture, as well as the need to develop a specific area of literary theory, which will offer an adequate typology of hypertexts and criteria of their analysis. This agrees with Coover's perception of the radical change in the ways fiction is written, published, read and criticized, as unlike printed text with its one-way movement of page-turning, hypertext is an interactive and polyvocal technology, giving preference to plurality of discourse (Coover, 1993). Ultimately, hypertext for Coover is a new arena, which is "indeed exciting, provocative, if frequently frustrating medium for the creation of new narratives, a potentially revolutionary space, empowered, exactly as advertised, to transform the very art of fiction" (Coover, 1992, p. 24). Transformation of the art of fiction has called into action changes in writers' methods of realizing their artistic intentions; it has revolutionized the role of the reader. Now, it should entail a profound transformation of critical thinking; and only such conformity can yield adequate understanding of current and future literary trends.

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