

Confessions at Twilight: Variations on Michael Joyce's *Twilight Symphony*

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In which reading Michael Joyce's Twilight: A Symphony requires me to confess several loosely related things about my changing relationships to text and hypertext.

Confession: I have not finished reading *Twilight*

I have a confession to make: I have not finished reading *Twilight: A Symphony*. In fact, I can promise you that I'm never going to finish reading *Twilight*.

But it's not for lack of trying. Over the past month, I've spent countless hours in front of the computer screen, navigating my way across the densely tangled terrain of this text, hoping, like some seventeenth-century colonial explorer, to see and to map these new lands, to regale you with stories of my conquest. If that were possible, you'd be reading a much different essay.

There is something oddly liberating in this confession, however. In my struggles with and within *Twilight*, I've come to a different understanding of how stories function, how they and we make meaning, not once and for all but again and again. I confess I enjoy the never-ending seduction of this text that claims to be about beginnings and endings, the past and the future, about sex and death. But death never arrives, and sex is constantly somewhere just scrolled off screen, more potential and memory than presence. The story is about lack of closure.

By way of introduction to the story, author Michael Joyce offers us a brief synopsis as well as some cautions about the text. "As in most stories," Joyce writes, "a lot has happened before you got here. And, as was always true but increasingly true in stories like these, a good deal more will happen now that you are here."

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In *Twilight*, we may discover—and I say “may” because what we discover depends on how we read—we may discover that the story is about a man named Hugh who has kidnapped his son Obie and fled to Pleasant Lake, New York.

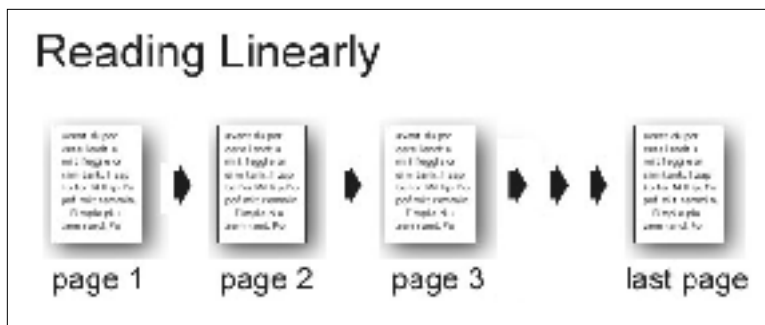
There they meet a Polish activist émigré and his wife, Magda. (I must also confess here that I never was able to discover the name of the émigré; I assume it’s in there, somewhere, but it did not emerge during the hundred hours I spent with the text.) The émigré and Magda, themselves already living in poverty, take in Hugh and Obie and shelter them.

This part of the story (we may eventually learn) took place in the past. In the space of *Twilight*, the past lies to the East in the United States, while the future lies in the West. To the east or in the past is life, to the west or in the future lies death.

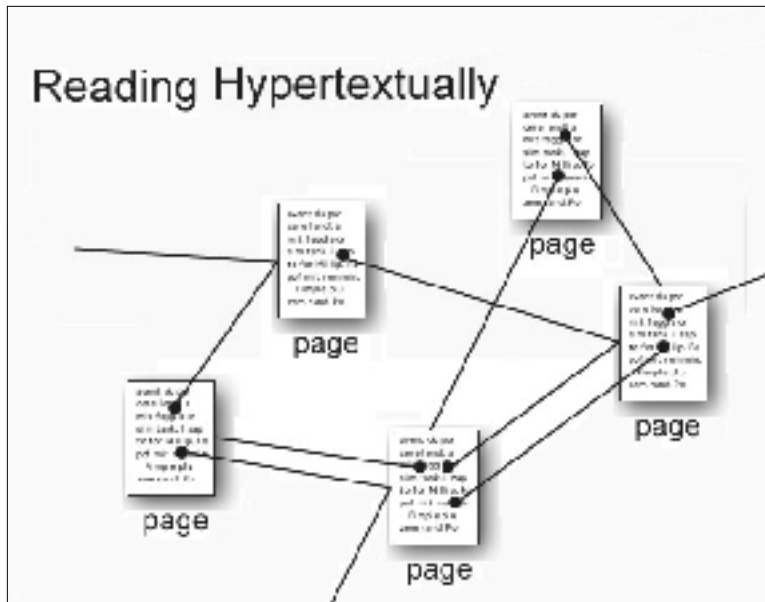
We may also discover—and discover is becoming a hard word to use here, because in some sense we *make* the story rather than discover it—we discover that, in the future, Hugh and Magda reunite, as Magda, now suffering from a terminal illness, searches for the elusive Dr. Twilight, a Kervorkian-like character who will help her find an end to her suffering. The past and the future are interconnected, with nodes of the past story leaking into future nodes, and future nodes calling back nostalgically to history.

Twilight: A Symphony is not a traditional novel, but what’s called a hypertext fiction. It comes not as a printed, bound book but on CD-ROM. Part of a growing genre, *Twilight* offers the reader not a single, linear path through the text, but a vast space of overlapping nodes or brief chunks of text connected by multiple threads into a network.

This may seem a little clearer written out structurally. In most printed works of fiction, readers are offered a straight path through the document: Start on page one, go to page two, then three, and so on until the last page. We can, of course, violate this rule—skipping ahead to the end to find out who the murder is—but by and large we choose to obey the convention of reading in a line.



In a hypertext, however, readers are required to make choices about where in the text they want to go next. At the end of the first page or node of text, readers are offered multiple choices. Although page numbering doesn't make sense here, it's as if at the end of page 1 a reader can choose to go to page 2, page 27, or page 312. The operational structure of the text resembles a network more than a line.



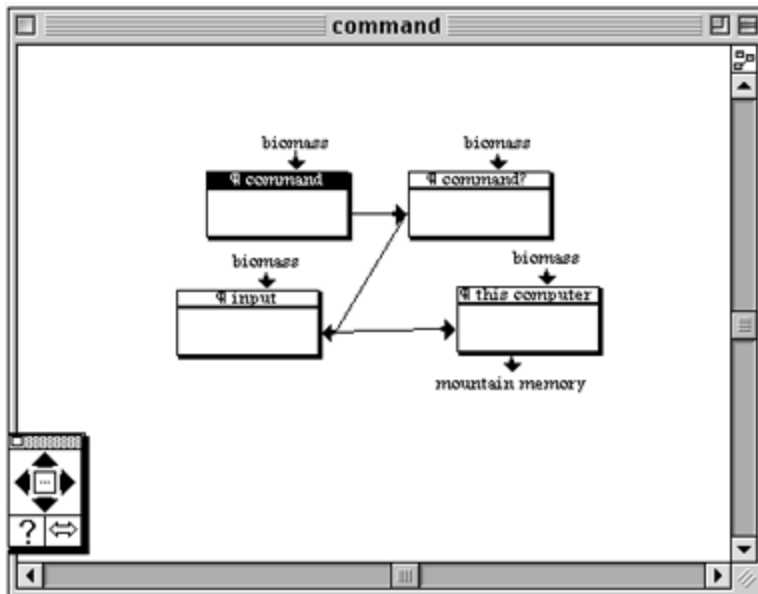
This structure, as you might guess, does some odd things to the act of reading, not the least of which is that I find myself forced to confess that I haven't finished reading *Twilight*. To be honest, it is absolutely impossible to finish such a text: the text is rewritten in slight—and sometimes drastic—ways every time I enter it. I cannot exhaust the meaning of the text; I cannot know it complete.

This idea of shifting structure and unrecoverable meanings is not new—postmodern authors have experimented with the concept for quite a while. Cortozar's novel *Hopscotch*, for example, ends each chapter by offering readers at least two choices about which chapter to read next. And literary theory over the last few decades has insisted that the meaning of a text is never completely recoverable; to take Derrida's formulation, there is nothing outside of the text, there is no final resting-place for meaning.

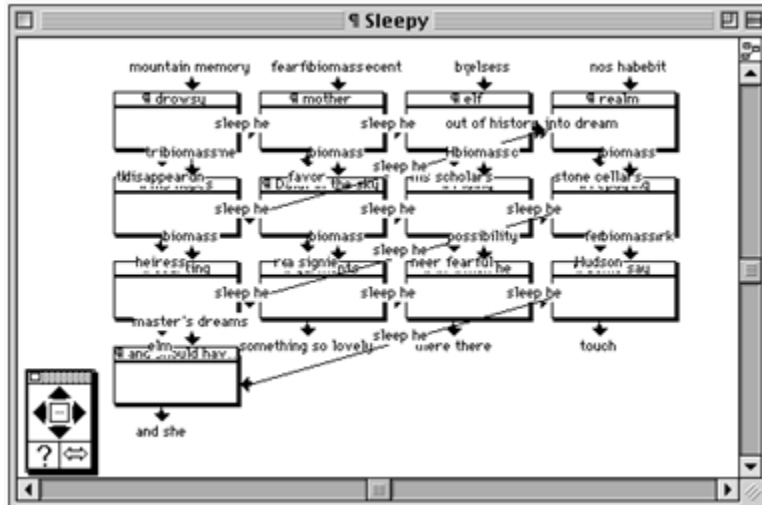
But a text such as *Twilight* pushes hard at those concepts, makes them more visible than they've ever been.

Confession: This is not a story any more

I must confess again, this time not for myself but for the text. Reading a hypertext fiction is *not* reading a story. The activity is much more like participating in a series of overlapping and contradictory stories. Or, rather, reading a hypertext fiction is moving within a postmodern space. I wrote earlier that I started to think of myself as a stereotypical explorer, visiting strange new lands and colonizing them by laying out their meanings in my own master text. But such colonialism is no longer feasible; the empire has been replaced by the corporation and the indigenous people are now consumers rather than subjects. Space itself has been transformed, digitized, mediatized.



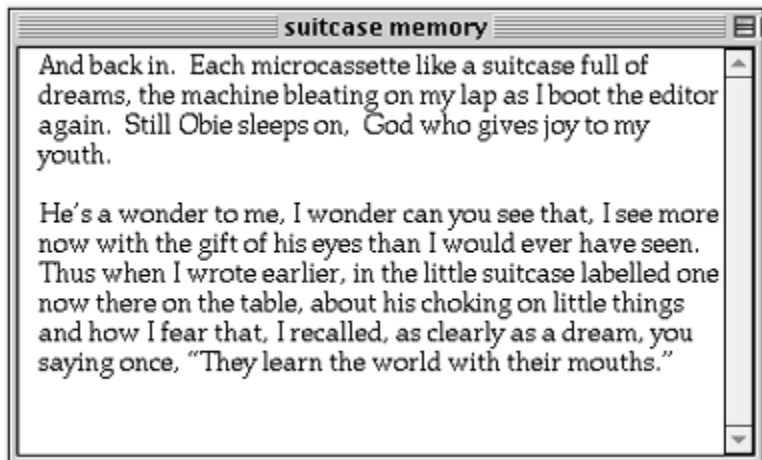
The postmodern space of *Twilight* is technically constructed of 389 nodes or pages of text held together by over 1,300 connections. The interconnected nodes form a dense and overlapping network of story that readers navigate through. In the screen here, we can see a small portion of the structure of *Twilight*. Each of the four boxes contains a screen or so full of text; they are the nodes of the story. The lines between the nodes represent connections or links, paths that readers follow when they click on various words in the text. Some spaces of the text are more dense than others, but all spaces contain multiple paths through them.



Each screen of text offers multiple paths to different “next” nodes. Because the unfolding experience of the text is based on the reader’s choices, each reader in effect constructs a different text.

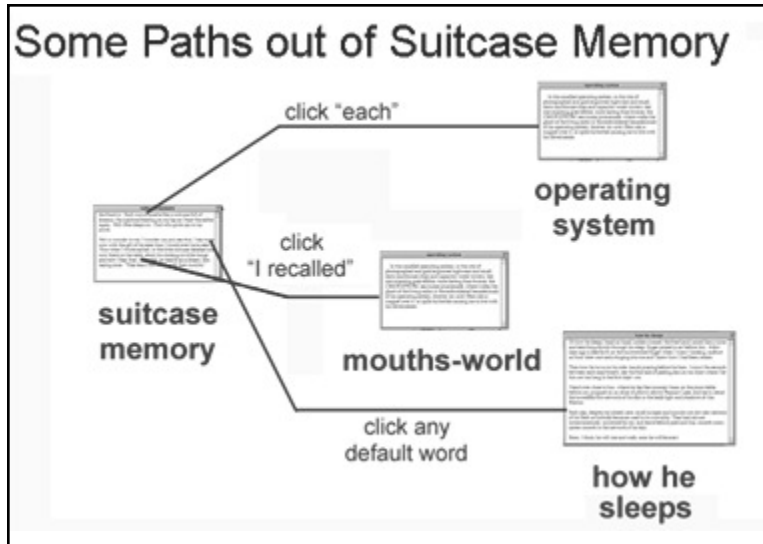
In this node, titled “Suitcase Memory,” the narrator, Hugh, writes to his lover, Magda, while contemplating his sleeping son, Obie.

At this point, readers must double click to move to one of numerous next nodes. Structurally, there are three different paths leading out of “Suitcase Memory”; which one a specific reader takes depends on which word they double click in the text.



Clicking on the word “Each” in the first line brings up the node “Operating System”:

In this so-called operating system; in this city of photographed and gold engraved highways and small, dark ranchhouse chips and capacitor water towers, lies one imposing grey edifice, more lasting than bronze, the CMOS EPROM, sea mossy promenade, where walks the ghost of the living sailor in the embroidered hexadecimal of his operating system, forever (or until Obie runs a magnet over it, or spills his bottle) causing me to live with his cleverness.

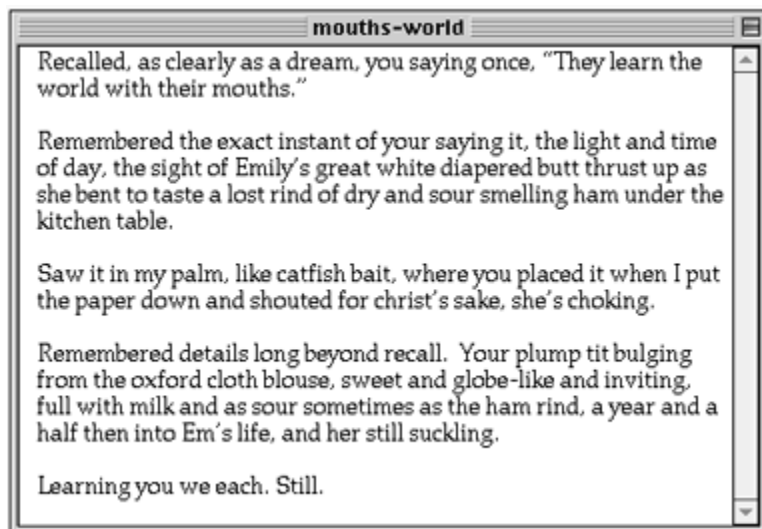


However, if the reader had instead selected the phrase "I recalled" in the last paragraph of "Suitcase Memory," they would instead move to the node "Mouths-World", in which Hugh recalls his young daughter Emily choking on a dropped piece of food.

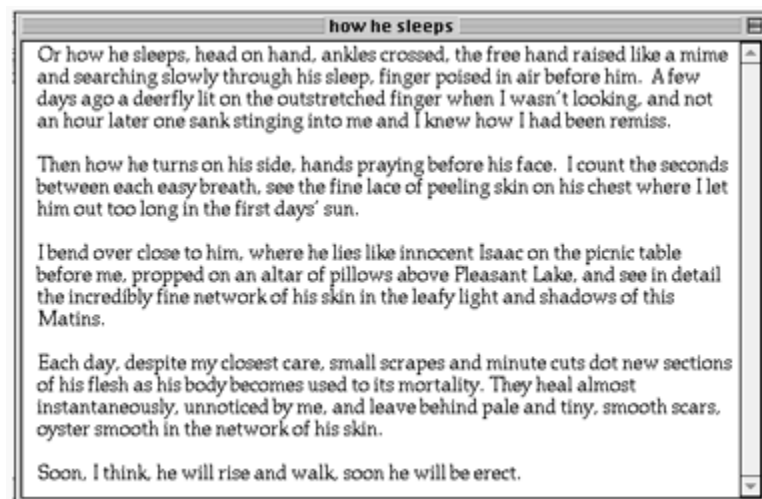
Or, if the reader of the original node "Suitcase Memory" had clicked on any other word in that node, they would find yet a third possibility, "How He Sleeps":

Twilight is not a story; I mean this in two senses.

First, there is not a single story here, but many: threads of nodes tangled and crisscrossing with each other. In one set of possibilities, the narrator envisions his computer as a place in which he haunts himself; in the second set of possibilities, the author is haunted instead by the memory of his child choking; in the third pair of nodes, the narrator reflects on his sleeping son while recalling his inability to protect him. All three possibilities bring forth



somewhat similar experiences, but each varies. Such minor differences accumulate in any reading of *Twilight*, in the end resulting in different texts.

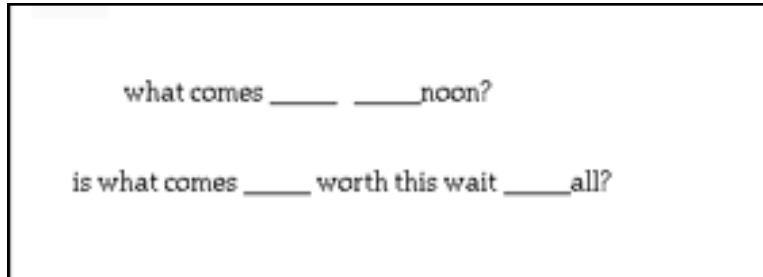


So in saying that *Twilight* is not a story, I also mean that this is not a story in the sense of a relatively passive and attentive reader being told a story by an all-powerful author. Instead, *Twilight* is always partially constructed in the interaction between author and reader. This, again, is true of any text, but *Twilight* makes that act more powerful.

Confession: I do not understand

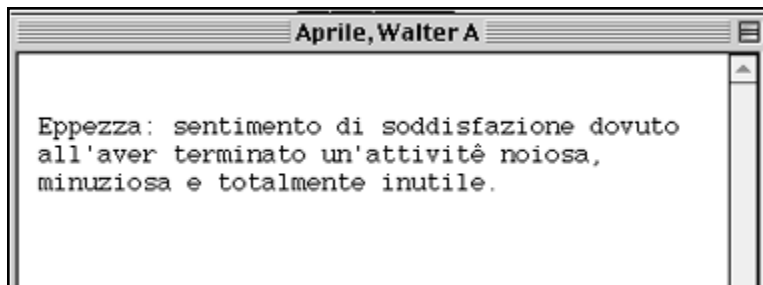
One would think that since I'm participating in the construction of the text, I could tell you what the text meant. But I have to confess—again—that I do not understand *Twilight*. The meanings in the text multiply beyond my ability to track them; I can't exhaust the possibilities for meaning in this text. For that matter, what is true of hypertext is also true, if less visible, in *any* text; hypertext offers us an allegory about deconstruction.

If we do not worry any longer about fully exhausting the meaning, let us revel in the pleasure of multiplying meanings. Take the most extreme example in the text, the node titled "After," where we have a riddle that plays a pun on the title of Joyce's first hypertext novel, "afternoon." "what comes ____ noon? is what comes ____ worth this wait ____ all?" Here, the blanks invite us to fill the space with the words "before" and "after.": "what comes before afternoon? is what comes before worth the wait after all?"



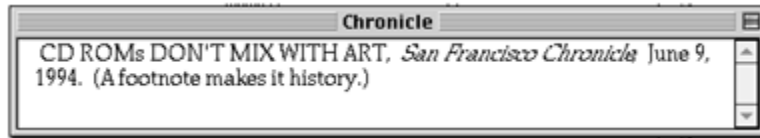
On first pass through this node, I clicked on the first blank (where the first "before" would go), which brought me to "Dateline."

Eventually, I passed through this node a second time, and clicked in the same spot. But rather than "Dateline:" I ended up at "Aprile, Walter A." Which surprised me, because I hadn't seen this node before, but I thought I was following the same path.



I quickly backtracked, clicked in the same spot a third time and then arrived at yet a third node, "Chronicle," which bears a head-

line from the San Francisco Chronicle, “CD-ROMs Don’t Mix With Art.” The text which was simply open to multiple threads before was now actively *changing itself*, apparently mutating while I read.



Although most of my reading at this point practiced a mental sort of dismantling, stronger measures were clearly needed. So I hacked the text. With a resource editor, I opened *Twilight*, erased the resources that made the file an executable program, and changed the filetype to match that of the program Storyspace, which Michael Joyce had used to author *Twilight*.

In Storyspace, I was able to open the link lists and find out how they worked, find out how I could run through the node “After” three times and end up at three different next nodes. I found out that three passes through “After” was a rather wimpy attempt at exhausting the meaning of that node. The node “After” has, in fact, 370 different links coming out of it. The text here makes clear that it cannot be finished, that it cannot be exhausted. But this impossibility isn’t just the result of the enormous number of links.

In theory (if not practice), I could backtrack through all 370 links and thereby—seemingly—exhaust the text and be done with it. But what happens when we add the possibilities of that node in to the other 378 nodes and nearly 1,000 links? Furthermore, even though I am reading a space I am trapped by time. Reading every node is affected by every node I read previously; I cannot step back into the same stream unaffected by the fact that I know I’m backtracking. I know what link I tried the first time, and knowing what I know I cannot know the new node without recalling the first node. And backtracking and choosing a third outlink forces me to recall the first two passes through “After,” a recalling that always colors my subsequent readings. Furthermore, these localized and discrete meanings sometimes contradict each other and war over meanings.

A moment ago, I was tempted to make a pun about ‘deconstructing’ the text by hacking it in software. But this makes the popular confusion between ‘deconstruction’ and ‘taking apart.’ *Twilight* is deconstructed not because I took it apart, but because after taking it apart I realized that it was internally contradictory, that it necessarily was at war with itself. In other words, I could not ever fully understand *Twilight*.

no longer experience time and space in the way we used to: we no longer travel through time; instead, we have spatialized time and now occupy it. Where Chaucer's storytellers took us down the winding path to Canterbury, texts such as *Twilight* offer us a space. Paradoxically, *Twilight* at the same collapses space, making it impossible—or rather pointless—to fix in time and map.

The linking facility among nodes means that any two points in the text can, in theory, be traversed with a double-click, no matter how far apart they appeared on screen. Operationally, the space of the text is flattened, despite the geometrical arrangements it might be configured in on the screen. Although Michael Joyce has arranged the nodes in small groups of one to ten nodes in each subspace, readers in fact move among the nodes as if it were flat. To give an indication of the operational density of *Twilight*, once I had the file into editing mode in Storyspace, I flattened the visual display of the text. The screen here only shows a small fraction of the resulting display, thirty or forty nodes out of the 389 nodes of the text. Even that small portion is so densely filled with links that the nodes themselves are nearly obliterated. The space between the text, the links among the nodes, are literally here as crucial as the nodes themselves.

Confession: I do not know how to end

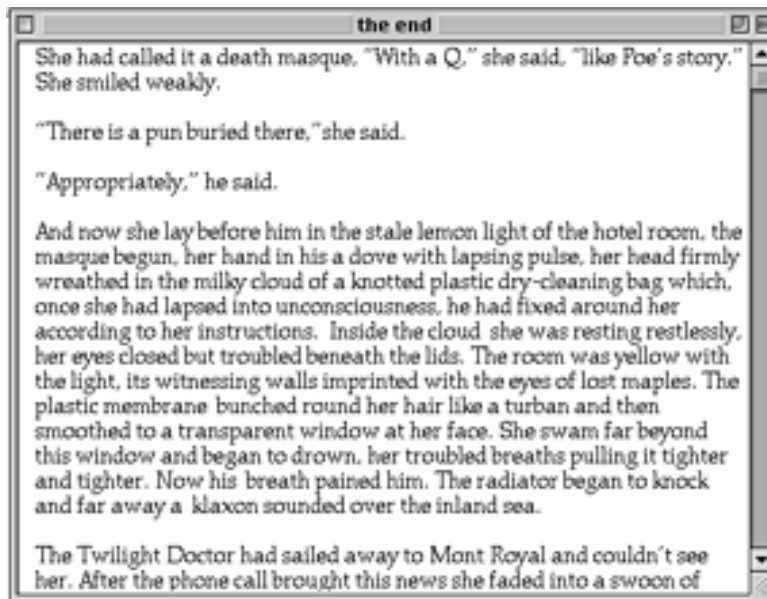
I must confess here that I do not know how to end. I thought, at one point, I had reached the end of *Twilight*—and I must also confess that, despite my proclamations about the radical openness of *Twilight*, about reveling in this postmodern space of multiplied, indeterminate possibilities, I must confess that I was thrilled when I came the node titled “The End.”

Here, Hugh and Magda have missed their connection with Dr. Twilight and, in the aptly named Canadian town of Marathon, make their own preparations for Magda's suicide.

I'm sure you can understand my morbid anticipation: death and sex (symbolically, at least) in the final node of the story. Hugh waits with Magda in the motel room in the aptly named Canadian town Marathon, and, obeying her instructions, sits with her until she loses consciousness and then pulls a dry cleaning bag over her head. Then Hugh waits—with both relief and sorrow—for the end.

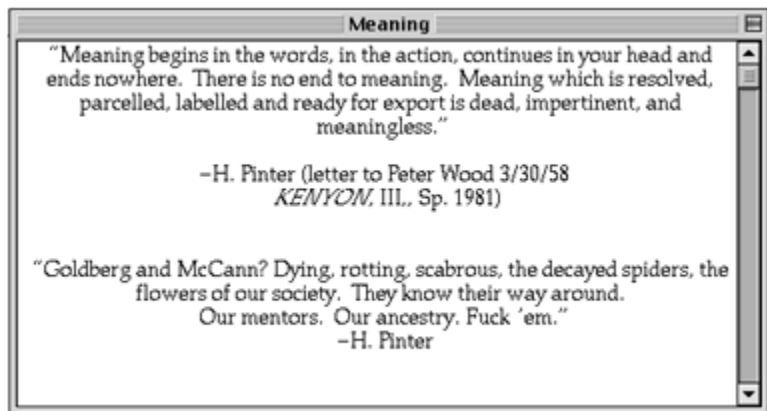
After a quick check of Magda's wrist for an apparently absent pulse, Hugh removes the bag from her head and calls the police to report the suicide.

But *Twilight* cannot reach its end so easily. Perhaps intentionally or subconsciously, perhaps because his senses were dulled by



grief, Hugh has announced her death prematurely. The paramedics detect the faint pulse and bring Magda back. I must make a last confession here, that this point in my reading I wasn't sure if I should cheer or curse Magda's return to the living.

But *Twilight* goes on, we move out of "The End" back into the text, forever into the text, to make and remake meanings. Never attainable within the confines of the story, Magda and Hugh's search for death parallels my own search for final meanings, for fixed understandings: it's always over the next rise or just under the next link. Death becomes the only chance to enclose meaning, for the act of making connections is what life is about. In a node titled "Meaning," Michael Joyce offers Harold Pinter's observation that:



Confession: I have not finished reading *Twilight*.

Works Cited

Joyce, Michael. *Twilight: A Symphony*. CD-ROM. Watertown, Massachusetts: Eastgate Systems, 1996.

