



# *The Hypertext 'Thaw': Paths along Soviet Literature and Culture after Stalinism*

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*The Hypertext 'Thaw'* is a educational application about contemporary Soviet literature and culture, implemented with the hypertext software Storyspace™ at the Ca' Foscari University in Venice. It allows a non-sequential navigation through a vast range of interrelated documents of different nature by lots of referential and organizational links. Its net, formed by more than 1500 links, connects over 300 documents in Italian and Russian. They present passages from literary works and essays, but also images, film clips, songs and passages from musical works. The application owes its name to the so called 'Thaw' period in the Russian history and culture, dating from 1956: the election of Khrushëv as secretary of the Soviet Communist Party after the "frost" of Stalinism. The following political and cultural renewal in USSR justifies the meteorological metaphor. The new generations of writers and poets fight against the antidemocratic principles of the Socialist Realism and deal with new literary themes, thus widening the narrow literary horizon of their country.

*The Hypertext 'Thaw'* intends to mark the general aspects of this cultural renewal, especially from a literary point of view, and to point out the intersections among the different disciplinary fields. In its author-version, the application is meant for students of Russian language and culture as an opportunity to strengthen and deepen their already acquired knowledge. In this way, they can continually refine and bring up to date the existing materials and enrich them with new ones. This is a particularly interesting opportunity for such a young literature. According to this view, *The Hypertext 'Thaw'* is meant as an operative model and as the first element for creating a

"memory-base" about Russian literature with broad cultural and historical ramifications, organized in hypermedia paths. Moreover, the application is essentially designed to cope with two usual problems faced by students of literature in a University:

1. the separation among the different disciplines forming the historical and cultural context of a literary work;
2. the difficulty of balancing the need to study a given subject in great detail across the modular components in one or more chronologically arranged courses.

As a navigation tool (Storyspace reader), *The Hypertext 'Thaw'* is meant for people interested in the subject and, more generally, for students who wish to come in touch with the literature of that period in a more stimulating and conceptually effective way. By facilitating exploration and self-management in the learning process, it allows the navigator:

1. to learn from the experience of others, following one's own attitude and interest;
2. to use the proposed materials for writing compositions and research papers about the Russian 'Thaw'.

Many of the works included in our application are implicitly hypertext, even as paper literary works. For example, reading the poem *Baby Jar* by Evgeny Evtushenko, a careful and culturally prepared reader may picture in his own mind the links defining the hypertext structure. He would recall the Nazi slaughter of Jewish Ukrainians in 1941, at the pit of Baby Jar in Kiev; he might remember the first part of the *Thirteenth Symphony* by Shostakovich, setting

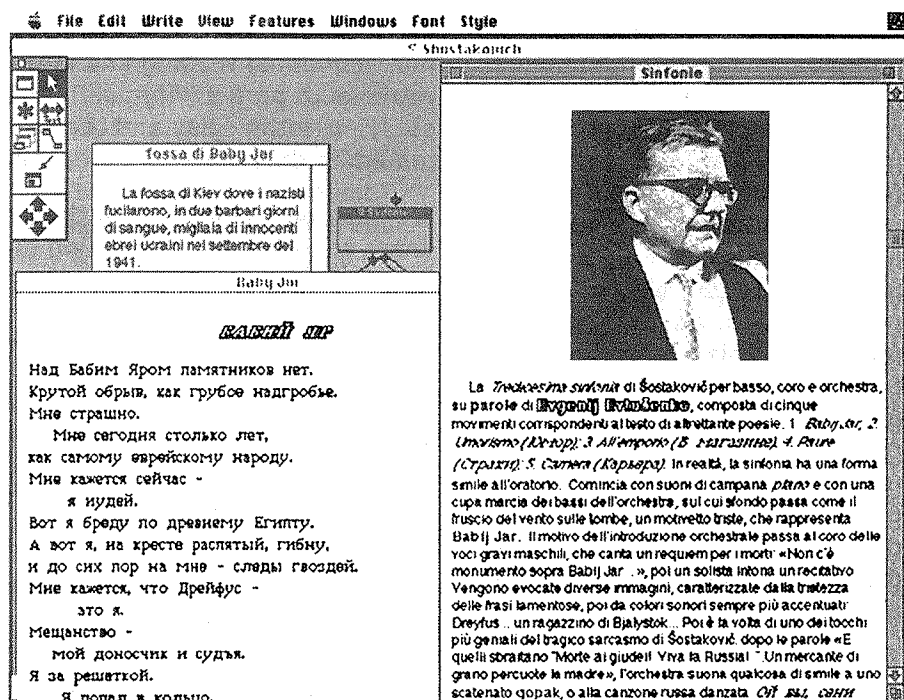


Image 1: a hypermedia path along history, poetry and classic music.

Evtushenko's poem to music; he could recall other poems by Evtushenko, marking the contrast between the authenticity of his realistic lyrical ballads and, for instance, the artful optimism of one of his contemporary poets, Lebedev-Kumach.

These hypothetical paths inside and outside the literary text testify the need to expand the traditional book boundaries in a multilinear and associative manner. With regard to this need, hypertext technology allowed us to explicate and enlarge the intertextual and intratextual links the reader's mind would spontaneously create during the reading process. Moreover, the virtual presence of several connected documents in a single application reduces the traditional distance among separate printed texts, allowing an effective cognitive and visual reconstruction of knowledge in the explored field.

In fact *The Hypertext 'Thaw'* allows a free navigation through the above-mentioned matters, giving also the opportunity to listen to a passage of the *Thirteenth Symphony* by Shostakovich, to read the comment on the work, to

analyze the cuts by the Soviet censor, and to consider the Jewish theme in other works by Shostakovich (Image 1). Thanks to its *map views*, Storyspace™ enabled us to represent graphically the cognitive maps sustaining the proposed hypermedia paths and, as a consequence, to work on the cognitive processes they entail.

*The Hypertext 'Thaw'* includes numerous essays analyzing the connections among different authors and works of the 'Thaw' period, between them and other authors and works of the previous literary periods of the Russian cultural history. When they were moved from page to electronic form, the paper essays were divided into *lexias* or interlinked short sections in accordance with the needs of hypertext reading. The text files were arranged as short passages so as to exploit connecting hypertext potentialities at their best.

The general division of the printed texts into chapters, paragraphs, subparagraphs, quotations and notes substantially offered an operative model to create interconnected hypertext documents. Moreover, the intertextual and

intratextual references, naturally existing in essay writings, suggested the implementation of further *lexias*, such as the whole text of a poem whose verses were quoted or just hinted at in the original essay. We have even tried to keep the logical sequence formed by preceding and following sections of the linear printed text, so as to guard its original semantic organization. Anyway, we have realized the impossibility of having a faithful hypertext translation of the linear printed texts. For the above-mentioned reasons, it has been necessary to give up the idea of reproducing a unitary text on the screen—considered as a single object—and to replace it with the idea of a scattered text—considered as a complex system of interrelated elements or *lexias*.

In spite of their general linearity of exposition, academic writings often ask the student to leave temporarily the sequential reading of the main text to analyze its notes: the quotation from another critical essay, from a narrative literary work, from poetry. Because of its non-sequential and non-linear nature, hypertext reproduces electronically the general text structure of a critical apparatus like the specified one. That is why our educational application offers a

significant help to get students used to non-sequential reading and information retrieval, a particularly useful habit when studying anthologies and the critical materials they generally propose.

We have also realized that the loss of linear sequence in the reading process does not necessarily mean a loss of formal coherence. In our hypertext paths, texts have become flexible objects: we are able to recognize and visually decompose their constituent parts. In reading a printed linear text, we generally detach information from the page and unconsciously fix their units and related parts.

As a consequence, the fragmentation of essays into connected and coherent hypertext *lexias* has not engendered a loss of meaning, but it has simply represented a new and less strict organization of the text. Anyway, as the reading process itself is a personal experience inside the single *lexias* of a traditional text, hypertext has proved itself as an ideal environment to emphasize this possibility, also allowing an individualized and more stimulating learning. ♦

## Call for Participation

### International Hypertext Competition

Alt-X and trAce are pleased to announce their first International Hypertext Competition. We offer a single prize of One Thousand English Pounds for the best hypertext site on the web.

Deadline for entries:  
December 31st 1998

#### What is hypertext?

Ted Nelson, who invented the term hypertext over 30 years ago, described it as "non-sequential writing—text that

branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways." We prefer to see it as "multi-sequential" writing but are generally comfortable with his description here. Also, we're open to work that integrates other media as well (sound, images, Java, etc.) but it should be primarily text-based and easily accessible from the average web-surfer's home-computer.