

Textualization¹

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The text is so much at the centre of what students of literature do that they feel no need to define it. It is remarkable how little space is devoted to its definition in glossaries of literary terms - as a rule it is not even mentioned (cf. Preminger; Cuddon); in books carrying titles like *The Reader in the Text* (Suleiman and Crosman) or *Textual Analysis* (Caws) the notion of 'text' is taken for granted and need not be discussed in the introduction. The text seems to be the equivalent, in literary studies, to the black box in engineering - an apparatus of unknown internal design that performs intricate functions.

Text is used—often by one and the same literary critic—in at least three different meanings. It refers to the arrangement of certain shapes in black ink on the page (as distinguished from the illustrations). It also refers to a mental entity that we derive from these shapes as signs, one that survives reprintings even in modernized form—we might call this the «literary utterance». This meaning distinguishes between what is of the essence from what is supplementary (the text vs. the notes). Finally, *text* is used to refer to something that seems to carry its interpretation within itself and therefore has authority over those who use it (think of statements like “but this is not what the text says”).

In discourse analysis the notion of text is of course more developed. Brown and Yule, for example, define *text* as “the verbal record of a communicative act” (Brown and Yule 6). Written texts “may be differently presented in different editions, with different typeface, on different sizes of paper, in one or two columns, and we still assume, from one edition to the next, that the different presentations all represent the same 'text'” (Brown and Yule 6)—the second meaning mentioned above. They are ready, however, to include typography in their notion of *text*: “Where the writer is deliberately exploiting the resources of the medium, it seems reasonable to suggest that that manipulation constitutes part of the text. (Brown and Yule 7). They concede that the objectivity of their notion of *text* may only be apparent, but they eliminate this problem by taking it for granted that “readers

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of a text or listeners to a text share the same experience.” (Brown and Yule 11)

Two assumptions need to be questioned here: the unstated one that the author’s intention can be determined and should be privileged, which reflects a romantic notion of authorship; and the assumption that readers, or listeners, share the same experience, which is difficult to maintain for a contemporary audience, and is all the more dubious with texts that under changing circumstances have been read or listened to for centuries.

Two extreme views of textual authority have been articulated. One of these is the notion of *text* as something fixed and unchangeable: in the words of E.D. Hirsch, “an entity that remains the same from one moment to the next” (Hirsch 46). It is derived, in western culture, from metaphysical stability assigned to the Bible as a revealed text, the Word of God.

It may have been in opposition to this notion that the other tendency has developed, especially in pragmatic criticism. This dismisses the text as having no authority whatsoever, as entirely determined by what has come to be called, by an act of retributive justice, context. A passage notorious in this respect is Stanley Fish’s definition of “interpretative communities”: They

are made up of those who share interpretative strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (Fish 171)

As a reaction to formalist (and deconstructionist) textualism this may be attractive, but it cannot, in the long run, be satisfactory. It reminds one of *Tristram Shandy* (Book IX, Ch. 38), where we get (or rather do not get) the description of the widow Wadman:

To conceive this right,—call for pen and ink—here’s paper ready to your hand.—Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—’t is all one to me—please but your own fancy in it.

There follows a blank page, which is impossible to quote here—a fact pertinent to my argument. Then Sterne continues:

Thrice happy book! thou wilt have one page, at least, within thy covers, which MALICE will not blacken, and which IGNORANCE cannot misrepresent. (Sterne 330–32)

Can an empty page be a text?

The only solution to the conflict of authorities indicated here is for us to accept that, because texts are only accessible via readings,

we never have a text *per se*—we only have our readings. It is impossible to know how much our interpretive community shapes our readings versus how much the text itself guides us. But we can certainly say, against Stanley Fish, that the marks on the page must have a role to play, otherwise we could as well sit in front of an empty page, “writing” the work of verbal art as we are supposed to do by Sterne.

Under these circumstances we have to take seriously the collaborative nature of textuality—including not only authors and readers, but all those who have intervened between them (editors, printers, distributors, teachers, etc.), and its history. In the following discussion I shall therefore only take for granted the first meaning of *text*—the arrangement of shapes in black ink on the page—and try to suggest how other meanings may have formed in the course of history.

TEXT VERSUS CONTEXT

The consequences of ascribing authority to the literary text have often been described as “decontextualization,” and the aims of literary pragmatics as “recontextualization”. The relationship between *text* and *context* is therefore crucial. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, where the letter C appeared between 1888 and 1893, only lists one meaning of *context* as contemporary:

The whole structure of a connected passage regarded in its bearing upon any of the parts that constitute it; the parts that immediately precede or follow any particular passage or “text” and determine its meaning.

It is this meaning of *context* that still appears in the essays of the New Critics, whom we now clearly identify with decontextualization (Brooks 209). This older meaning makes it possible for historians of literary criticism—much to our surprise—to characterize their practice as “contextualism” (Wellek 151, 203)

On the other hand, *contextualism* as “the policy or practice, in literary criticism, of setting a poem or other work in its cultural context” is first listed in the 1972 Supplement to the *OED* for 1955. The conflict between the two meanings obviously became so awkward that in 1964 M.A.K. Halliday suggested the distinction between *context* (the situation) and *co-text* (the surrounding language) (*OED* Supplement 1972). This seems to clarify distinctions, although the lines remain blurred where the boundaries of texts are concerned: is an allusion a reference to context or co-text?

No matter how we use the terms *text* and *context*, however, their juxtaposition makes the two complementary, and therefore clearly distinct from each other. Even though insisting on the importance of situational context seems to be a move in the right direction, we

should be aware of its undesirable consequences. Speaking about the contextualization of texts implies, and thus shores up, the notion of the autonomous text (as something that can or should be contextualized). At the same time, the very choice of words assigns the text priority over context.

The distinction between text and context, though it may be useful in certain historical situations (like ours), should not, therefore, be made on principle, because as such it is counter-productive.²

TEXTUALIZATION AND REPETITION

If we want to get beyond a pragmatics that is based on the distinction between text and context, we should not, then, speak about contextualization, but about *textualization*, about how, as part of certain events, a text comes into existence, or, more specifically, how a work of verbal art may become a literary text. These events should not be mistaken for those of production as charted in a communication diagram.

Textualization has many facets; but in its process repetition is always crucial.³ An act being performed has been performed before in the same manner and will be repeated in the future: perception of this fact gives it the predictability that figures in Hirsch's definition of *text* as "an entity that remains the same from one moment to the next."

In literary studies we commonly consider repetition as a structural phenomenon *within* texts, one that can be described in terms of syntactic relations. But repetition is more interesting in terms of pragmatic relations, of social action, as the repetition of utterances. This type of repetition is frequently overlooked because it has always been taken for granted as constituting textuality. Such repetition is the most important, because the semantic and syntactic sign-relations are subordinate to the pragmatic one; after all, it is the user who links (or fails to link) words with each other and with meanings.

There are several, closely related possibilities here. A piece of verbal art may be used by many people at the same time, i.e. made public—like plays in theatrical performances, and novels and poems in books or public readings, not to mention the multiplication of experiences that the electronic media have made possible. This distinguishes them from private events, like the writing and reading of one's own diary. But this is not enough: the

² Text, of course, has a history which is at least as complex as that of context, one even more difficult to summarize in a few paragraphs; and I shall not try. That this history has not yet, at least to my knowledge, been written in detail shows how little central notions of a culture are subjected to historical analysis.

³ There is a ritual aspect to textualization, which I cannot discuss here (but see Engler (*Poetry and Community*)).

piece of verbal art also has to be repeated at different times; this distinguishes it from the newspaper item. As a German saying has it, a book that is not worth reading twice is not worth reading once either; and the longer the period in which such repetition is supposed to have taken place, the higher and more clearly defined its status will be.

At this point, the historical dimension becomes crucial. Depending on the situation, repetition takes place in different forms, and leads to different perceptions of verbal art. With oral art, occasions, materials, and the application of certain poetical rules are repeated. As soon as there is writing, words and the use of the object that contains them—the manuscript—can also be repeated. In print culture, finally, repetition seems to engulf verbal art: not only the material, the words and the book can be repeated, but also the exact shape of letters and the arrangement of words on the page.

This affects the way in which the work of verbal art is perceived. In an oral culture it belongs to all those who share its knowledge and participate in its performance. In print the author seems to have gained total control over his or her own work; verbal art comes to be viewed as pure expression. At the same time certain forms of use are taken for granted: the author's supposed control and the authoritative uniformity of the text seem to guarantee the uniformity of the way it is "received", as the process is commonly called. The collaborative aspect of verbal art comes to be neglected; instead, the autonomy of the text is asserted—and where this presents problems, it is either simply denied or verbal art is redefined. But the problems this creates cannot be forever suppressed. After some time, the point is reached where re-contextualization becomes an issue.

Perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon comes from the field of drama. With theatrical pieces, we either tend to describe performance as something derivative, realizing the author's intentions as embodied in the "score" of the text, or we deny the work's proper "literary" status. But texts change in the course of history. In Elizabethan times, plays as a rule were only published after they had been produced (if they were published at all), performance being considered the proper way of making them available to the public. Already in the Restoration, production and publication usually took place at the same time. In the early nineteenth century, there was a dissociation between the theatre, which was no longer considered to be literary, and literary drama, which was not supposed to be staged. Later still, with a dramatist like Shaw, the printed text definitely came first, and production afterwards, and the dramatist tried, at the same time, to force his view of the play on the theatre, i.e. to make its production less of a collaborative effort.

THE ORALITY OF READING

Beginning with textualization rather than contextualization, we can offer a better-grounded account of reading, one that does not turn one particular, historically determined notion of textuality into a general principle, but starts at the other end, as it were, where there are no texts: in oral culture.

As may have become clear already, I do not consider orality and literacy to be mutually exclusive types of culture. I should thus challenge the accounts of Lord and McLuhan, which are still influential in literary criticism because they are themselves products of the high culture of the print-age. Orality and literacy are not two culture-types that exclude each other, but mind-sets which can coexist beside each other, which may affect each other, and between which people can also to some extent switch. As Robert Pattison has put it: “All cultures are by definition oral cultures. When men learn to write they do not then forget how to speak” (Pattison 24). We still tell jokes to each other—that we do not consider this to be a high-cultural activity is another matter. Indeed, literate culture cannot exist without an oral basis. Learning to read, and recognizing a text when one sees one, is an essentially oral activity; there are no Teach-Yourself-Reading books.

Orality and literacy are usually juxtaposed in the following manner. In an oral culture originality and individualism are not admissible, because they endanger the tradition, the passing on, of values. Writing, on the other hand, makes it possible to exteriorize memory and to store knowledge in objects, like books. Because of this, meanings come to be regarded as objects that can be stored and retrieved. In an oral culture, on the other hand, it is not possible to separate mind and knowledge in this way. Meanings exist in particular situations among human beings; they are events that have effects on the situation in which they are used (Ong 32–33).

Reading, as it has been studied in recent years, is *per definitionem* a literate phenomenon; but it retains many characteristics that we associate with orality: there is no fixed text (in the third sense mentioned above) - there is only the printer’s ink on the paper. The work of literature is re-created during each performance, i.e. each reading. Meaning is not, therefore, “contained” in the text, but is rather an event in a particular situation. Finally, readers, in dealing with the material in front of their eyes, obey certain rules and practices. And what is most important: its transmission is problematic in the same way that tradition is in an oral culture.⁴

⁴ There are differences, of course, between a purely oral culture and one that has writing. Unlike the person participating in the event of oral poetry the reader is alone. In terms of oral poetry, the reader is both singer and audience, and the division between die two, to the extent

In the history of textuality, conventions have emerged, along with the notion of *text* familiar to us, which signal to or remind readers of how texts are supposed to be used—for example, whether they should be skimming, pacing, halting, repeating, or studying (see Engler, *Reading and listening* 45–52). These conventions may have to do with the size of the book—as with duodecimo novels versus quarto poetry in the eighteenth century (Bronson); but the rules of reading may also be reflected in the black marks on the page, though here too we have to remember the historical dimension of these signs. Spelling, punctuation, and typography, in particular, may be employed for this purpose. There is little consistency in dealing with these in literary criticism; and often they are just neglected. This is probably due to the assumption that, unlike the words, they are not necessarily in the control of the author (i.e. do not appear in the manuscript). In traditional textual criticism, it produces the telling difference between substantive and incidental variants.

Here I can offer only three illustrations of the ways in which so-called incidentals can be of interest to the study of textualization.

In the second half of the eighteenth-century *spelling* had been standardized; the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1754 is often considered to be a landmark in this development. Its standardization in a form that bears little relationship with the pronunciation of the period indicates that silent reading had become predominant (for other evidence, see Engler, "Deictics and the Status of Poetic Texts"). Standardization, at the same time, made deviation from it significant, as in the archaic spelling of Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) and Chatterton's poetry in the 1770s. In both cases spelling is used to draw attention to the history of textuality.

Capitalization in eighteenth-century poetry has attracted some study, but in editions it is not consistently reproduced. Usually, capital letters are ascribed semantic value rather than the function of guiding the reader's use of these texts as poetic ones. Taking capitalization seriously as a signal indicating the poetic status of a text also gives value to its absence—but we have lost sight of this, because we have got so used to lower-case spelling in poetry since the Romantics. Hazlitt's commentary on the effects of the French Revolution on English literature is of interest here, although his analogies between literature and politics may be a bit facile. He writes:

that it exists in oral poetry, is situated within one person. This is the source of the kind of self-consciousness Ong associates with writing Ong
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Nothing that was established was to be tolerated. All the common-place figures of poetry, tropes, allegories, personifications, with the whole heathen mythology, were instantly discarded; a classical allusion was considered as a piece of antiquated foppery; capital letters were no more allowed in print, than letters-patent of nobility were permitted in real life; kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry as they were decapitated elsewhere; rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished along with regular government. (Hazlitt 161–62)

In *punctuation*, finally, we can observe a movement from rhythmical-oratorical punctuation to grammatical-logical punctuation. As Mindele Treip and others have shown, this is a transition that took place at different times in different genres, but in general terms between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. The colon is perhaps the most striking illustration of these changes. Whereas in Shakespeare's time it often indicated a pause of a certain length (which of course tends to coincide with a grammatical break), it has come to be used "esp. to mark antithesis, illustration, [...] quotation or listing" (*COED*).

In very general terms we can say that the notion of text as autonomous, still so influential with us, came into existence in the late eighteenth century. The evidence of spelling, typography, and punctuation agrees in this with that of esthetic theory.

Many problems of textualization come together in the different versions of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or rather, and significantly, "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" in 1798. One of the intriguing elements of this poem, the addition of marginal notes, has often been discussed, usually in terms of the notes' relationship to the text (e.g. McGann 1981); but they are equally interesting in commenting on the process of textualization, and should therefore be studied together with other characteristics of the text: the modernization of spelling, the changes in typography, especially of indentation and of capital letters. But also, the poem's place in *Lyrical Ballads*, which shifted from first position in 1798 to one in its latter part in 1800, tells us something about the way it gradually developed its specific textuality.

DESIDERATA

For literary studies that take textuality seriously we need two things: a new type of edition, and research into the history of textuality—of how the use of texts, spelling, punctuation, and typography, etc., have changed in the course of history.

We need to base our study of literature on original editions or their facsimiles—not only of the first publication, but of all those that have played a role in the "reception" of a work of literature. These

editions should separate the text (i.e. the black marks on the page) from the editorial matter quite clearly—preferably by having them in separate volumes. The task of the editor would include research into the preparation of the editions, the audiences they addressed, and the reading conventions these took for granted.

Research into the history and use of spelling, punctuation, and typography exists; but students of literature take little notice of it, partly because this research has been done by scholars interested more in the history of language or of books than that of literature, partly because they themselves have never become aware that the “physical” characteristics of texts may be of interest to them.

Both the editions and the research proposed have to take into account the changing specificities of verbal art, and especially the medium of literature—print. For this purpose literature has to be re-read, and large amounts of material have to be studied, or restudied from a new perspective—with the aim not only of rewriting the history of literature as part of the general history of human communication, but also of establishing the complex history of textuality.

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