

## *Introduction*

### THE CONTEXT OF SCHOLARSHIP

Not so long ago, it appeared that the Age of Theory in literary criticism was destined to last. Inevitably, this had important effects for the close study of texts. Some cavalier theorists even implied that close study was a distraction, if not a positive impediment for the faithful. Wiser minds recognized that their theoretical pursuits relied, one way or another, on exceptionally close textual analysis in tandem with the hermeneutic. Only by such deep searching could theorists probe beneath the overt operation of texts to the subtler functions upholding a particular theoretical approach. Feminist, psychoanalytic, new historicist and postcolonial criticism – to take four pre-eminent schools – all explore the covert intricacies of texts, commonly overlooked and often paradoxical.

This explains – or is explained by – the specially wide and persistent currency of two bodies of more basic theory devoted specifically to the constitution and function of texts: the structuralist and the poststructuralist, the latter above all in the deconstructive, palimpsestic explorations of Jacques Derrida. All such approaches made use of particularly close, detailed, even esoteric dissection of texts – as in Barthes's *S/Z* or Derrida's 'Plato's Pharmacy' – in ways that were dramatically innovative, yet that recalled the practice of Renaissance humanists if not earlier scholiasts and scholastics.

The theoretically guided analysis of language-at-work had little close engagement with textual and editorial agenda of a more conventional sort. Perhaps the only major outcome was a new readiness among editors, from the 1950s onwards, to affirm the presentiment of generations that different texts of a work might be independently and simultaneously valid. Not only could we talk of two *King Lear*s, we could print them separately within the covers of a single volume. The origin and progress of a text testified not only to its history but to its textual identity: every text unfolded a narrative

that had nothing to do with the fictional stories some of them might tell. The text became less an object than an embodied process. It might implicitly be seen as a living thing. A notable approach to the formation of texts is known as 'genetic' criticism. New, complex collation softwares adapted the screen interface of programs mapping the living cell and the DNA molecule.

I will resume the story in a minute, especially with respect to the computer revolution. But it is no longer the same story, for, in literary scholarship, the Age of Theory has yielded to the age of the material text and its fortunes. 'Material text' might seem a tautology, but many ages (including our immediate postmodern predecessors) would not have found it so. A sign system, or an exercise employing it, may be (and commonly is) studied with an eye to what is signified rather than to the means of signifying it. Elusive meaning is valued over the concrete sign, rather in the way that abstractions of mathematics are extracted from (or applied to?) concrete natural phenomena. Inasmuch as the mathematics of complex phenomena is nuanced and infinitely variable, there was something mathematical in the structuralist exploration of semiotic design, the unfolding algorithms of deconstructive analysis.

That postmodern order has been dramatically displaced since the 1980s by the practical quantifications of book history and publishing history; by the history and sociology, even more than the hermeneutics, of reception; generally speaking, by a new focus on texts as material objects and the pragmatics of their production and dissemination. Alongside this, new prominence has been bestowed on the old pursuits of editing, documentation and literary archiving. The growth, circulation and reception of the material text, as opposed to the meaning encoded in it, has become an object of primary attention as never before.

I can now resume where I left off two paragraphs ago. The change is largely activated by the universal spread of the computer and online communication, the electronic text and the World Wide Web. This makes it possible to record, compile and disseminate vast quantities of documents, and to process the data they contain – quantitative as well as textual – in ways and at speeds undreamt-of even in the near past. This facility, in turn, allows us to put questions never asked before, perhaps because they could not be formulated before. But (as I will argue in this book) the electronic text and its electronic processing and circulation are most valuable not because they enable us to do what we absolutely could not before, but because they let us do more cogently and successfully, on a vastly greater scale with vastly more precision, what humans have been doing to and with

texts since the origin of structured speech. The electronic text crystallizes the way all texts work, allowing us to view the process more clearly. This implies that, in some measure, it simplifies the process. The computer has not said the last word about texts: it might merely have served to unlock our tongues to new discourses.

What will those discourses be? The full sweep of bibliographic, editorial and book-historical concerns over the last half-century, if applied conjointly, holds promise of a uniquely rich understanding of the way texts are made and the way they work. The crucial condition is that these approaches, succeeding one another in critical vogue, should be amalgamated, adjusting their insights to each other and deriving mutual support. All of them rise among the same epistemic springs of postmodern thinking about language. At the same time, they can draw much strength from conventional descriptive and analytic bibliography, and from editorial pragmatics that may have shifted from Lachmannian stemmatics but still uphold its basic aims and conventions.

'Editorial theory' may seem like an oxymoron, for is it not the editor's task to grapple with solid details of the text and their material embodiment in manuscript, print or other record? Theory based on editorial experience must necessarily be, in the wise phrase, grounded theory. It conceptualizes the findings not only of textual variance and transmission as recorded by traditional bibliography, but of the novel pursuits of book history and reception studies. At the same time, attention to variance and historical provenance, to the semiotic and contextual dimension of the editorial exercise, opens up a hermeneutic angle and raises wider issues of semantics, semiotics and theories of language. Simultaneously, electronic processing not only allows data compilation and access across this range of studies, but trains the mind to think across them and relate the insights particular to each.

D. F. McKenzie staked out a new textual discipline along these lines when the electronic text had just started to assume its present role.<sup>1</sup> To name any later practitioners is invidious; but we must acknowledge the union of theoretical insight with the practical concerns of editing, bibliography and book history in the work of G. Thomas Tanselle, D. C. Greetham, Jerome McGann and Peter Shillingsburg, among others. The rewarding application of this 'grounded theory' to a historically specific study is illustrated in David McKitterick's *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order* as effectively as in any other work. I repeat that any choice of

<sup>1</sup> McKenzie, *Bibliography*.

examples may seem arbitrary where so much intensive activity has taken place in an innovative area in (relatively speaking) so short a time.

We may still feel that too little attention has been paid by editors and bibliographers to the more visionary prospects opened up by postmodern theorists of the text,<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida in particular; and that while subaltern ideological perspectives – the feminist above all, but also the postcolonial and the gay/lesbian – may be reflected in bibliographical and historical exercises, their more speculative insights have not found place in general textual and editorial studies.

In fact (as I suggest more than once in this book), we may find a nagging contradiction between the editor's agenda and that of the free-ranging textual theorist, rather like the tussle between proof-reader and historian as described by José Saramago (to which too I allude: see Chapter 6). However widely he may trawl, the editor must focus on a demarcated text or group of texts, and within these bounds (more often than not) on a copy-text. He must freeze the text at the editorial instant, and see all its earlier states as so many more frozen moments of time. He cannot let them dissolve in his hands into the stuff of other texts before, after and around it. The most imaginative stemma can only record descent and transmission, not osmosis. (Again one gropes for an adequate biological analogy, which the false etymology of 'stemma'<sup>3</sup> evokes only to deny.)

#### THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

We read texts in more or less stable states captured in time. (Even a variorum edition represents such a state in a more complex incarnation.) We can cite these stable states to oppose a more problematized notion of the text, as Dr Johnson refuted Berkeley's idealism by kicking at a stone. But the text, like the stone, was not always in that state; and its formation can only be explained in terms of other forces and other orders of being. If we are not to take a naïvely creationist view of the text, we must probe its stable exterior (if there be such) to trace its process of formation, compare other outcomes of the process – other states of the text – and assess its future course.

<sup>2</sup> The outstanding exception, of course, is D. C. Greetham's *Theories of the Text*, which considers general theory extensively in its application to textual and editorial theory. There is brief recognition of wider theoretical premises in Bryant, *Fluid Text*, pp. 10–12; Shillingsburg, *Resisting Texts*, ch. 2; and most recently in Eggert, *Securing the Past*, ch. 10.

<sup>3</sup> The word means 'garland' or 'crown' rather than 'stem'.

Hence the title of this book. Quite simply, I wish to look behind the text that meets our eye in order to see what makes it up and how, as a metaphysician investigates what makes up the apparent reality of our experience. I wish to do so not only by studying related texts – i.e., by editorial and historical methods – but in terms of a vastly more complex intertextuality and cross-signification. Also, I consider the material identity of the text as an ontological factor of its being.

A familiar critical term may help to define my plane of interest. When we talk of a *meta-text*, a text that refers to and examines its own being, in what terms do we conceive of its function? What features of its core identity as text, and what factors determining that identity, are illuminated on the meta-textual plane? Those features and factors, though we cannot always specify – let alone delimit – them, define the plane of textual being to which ‘textual metaphysics’ relates.

I see those component features as forces and processes rather than rigid material constituents: not determinant forms, still less a specific theme or content, but actions and functions underlying various forms and themes. Their nature will, I hope, emerge in the course of discussion; but it may help to outline some of my principal ideas in this introduction. This will also serve to bring out the design of the book.

I assume, like most thinkers in the field today, that the material medium of the text contributes integrally to its meaning – hence each new material embodiment alters and extends that meaning. I bring this notion into accord with another, that the represented text has a conceptual, abstract being, separate from its material vehicle yet defining itself in material, even sensory terms: implicit locations, spaces, time-planes, relationships between the parties in the discourse (reader, purveyor, author *et al.*) – most basically, the assumption of something spoken/heard or written/seen integral to any verbal exercise even in its most dematerialized and conceptual state. I have employed the term ‘material metaphor’, popularized by N. Katherine Hayles, in a variety of uses to bring out the interplay between the multi-layered material and conceptual identities of the text.<sup>4</sup>

This interplay between the actualized states of the text and its total, ‘ultimate’ being I work in with another range of relationships: between the actualized, material operation of language (spoken/heard or written/seen) and the conceptions to which the words refer; and between those conceptions and the ‘real’, external entities to which they are held to relate. (I am drawing here on Ogden and Richards’s ‘semantic triangle’ of sign,

<sup>4</sup> Hayles, *Writing Machines*, esp. ch. 2.

thought and external referent.<sup>5</sup>) In other words, I see an unbroken chain of signifying functions, from those fundamental to the resources of language, through those activated by marshalling those resources in a formal text, to those implicit in embodying that text in specific material forms and disseminating the text in those forms. The philosophy of language, the pragmatics of linguistic process, the concerns of bibliography, editing and text-processing, of book history and reception studies – all these pursuits enmesh in a total enquiry into the nature of verbal constructs. Such an enquiry takes on board every participant in the textual process:

- the originary users of language who determine its operation and corpus
- the privileged author or ‘author-function’ credited with the specific text
- innumerable participants who process and disseminate the text: editor and reviser, printer and binder, bookseller and librarian, Amazon and Google Books, reviewer, scholar, blogger, pirate
- last but not least, the readers, hearers, surfers or other recipients and consumers.

To cover this range of functions, I have used some terms which I explain in context but may briefly outline here. For the most part, they relate to the ‘sociology of texts’ popularized by Don McKenzie’s classic account, and its salient component, the more specific ‘socialization’ in material terms familiarized by, among others, G. Thomas Tanselle and Jerome McGann.<sup>6</sup>

I propose the inclusive term ‘participation’ to cover the engagement with texts on both the ‘individual’ and the ‘socialized’ plane: the line between the two is often hard to draw. All the functionaries mentioned in the bulleted list above are participants in the text. Such participation I see as a dialectic of two functions, the *additive* and the *integrative*: respectively reshaping and extending the text, and seeking to give each new configuration a stable, seemingly conclusive identity. Derrida’s concept of the ‘supplement’ – an extra yet essential part of an earlier whole that is not a whole, filling up a gap that yet remains a gap – is relevant here, if in a context very different from Derrida’s.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, I have found Derrida’s concept of *différance* a useful tool to convey many aspects of the unfolding of texts – again, by sometimes using the word in senses not usual in Derrida.

I also trace certain paths or lines of engagement between participants and texts that I call ‘trajectories’. Some of them follow the external (ultimately generic) structure of the work, which is reflected in (though it may not scrupulously match) the material form it assumes. Within that external

<sup>5</sup> Ogden and Richards, *Meaning of Meaning*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Tanselle, *Literature and Artifacts*; McGann, *Textual Condition*.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Grammatology*, pp. 144–5.

structure, each text contains a unique and intricate web of components, like the methodically tangled wires and ducts under the shapely, marketable bonnet of a car.

Interacting with all these distinctions is the fundamental one between oral, written and, now, electronic texts. Orality and writing I regard as notional states or modes, not necessarily reflected in the physical mode of transmission. It is time we accepted 'electronicity' (preferably in a more elegant synonym) as a third mode: the acceptance of hypertextuality as a factor of all texts, not only the electronic, is a big step in that direction.

Another distinction running through the book is that between manuscript and print. Though both mediums involve a high degree of socialization, the former *notionally* (as 'material metaphor') suggests the individuated physical presence of an author. The manuscript/print distinction, like the oral/written one, is not only material or historical but conceptual and symbolic: the two modes imply different relations between the origin and the end-state of a text, two different transmissional curves.

Finally, there is the formidable interface between verbal texts and a range of other modes and codes. I choose three. The first is translation. Here both codes are verbal, but we can see what escapes through the gaps, as it were: the meaning-that-cannot-be-signified because it is not incorporated in either, or any, code. The second is the theatre, the physical enactment of a verbalized base-text. The third is the interface between language and visual form: language, itself visualized in the written or printed word, can enhance that visual identity through other forms. Looking beyond pattern poems and the singular creations of William Blake, I focus on the still more singular manuscript doodles of Rabindranath Tagore. I devote a chapter to Rabindranath's doodles not only for their intrinsic appeal (and novelty for readers without Bengali), but because they seem to me a unique foray into the far-flung frontiers between text and non-text.

One form of textual materiality has unusually strong metaphoric value: the hypertext. I repeatedly use the hypertext as 'material metaphor' because of its implications for time, order and intertextuality. One can proceed from any point of a hypertext to any other, irrespective of chronology or provenance. In the same way, texts cross-inseminate each other through the intricacies of reception, as also through the process of loss and recovery (objectively, as physical, or subjectively, as memorial). The challenge to chronology is the most obvious consequence of the permeability of texts. Every text originates in an indefinite group of other texts; every text generates other texts in turn. But equally, later writers can influence (or even initiate) the reading of earlier ones. Later technology can radically alter

the material guise and transmission of a text, and thereby our assumptions about its mode and structure.

Hence the value of Walter Benjamin's inspired term, the 'afterlife' (*Nachleben*) of texts. Texts ceaselessly alter and extend their form; eventually they pass into, or turn into, other works where the 'original' work persists as a 'presence', the old moon in the new moon's arms. The electronic text gives the 'text as presence' a new substantiality: it lurks behind a hyper-link, ready to be foregrounded in full array and not merely evoked in the memory.

Thus, we may argue, all texts are made up of other texts. This could be taken to imply that all texts *are* other texts. Yet of course they are not. We encounter the conundrum of the one and the many, instancing the traffic of the innumerably many.

Cetera consimili mentis ratione peragrans,  
 invenies igitur multarum semina rerum  
 corpore celare et varias cohibere figuras . . .

Quin etiam passim nostris in versibus ipsis  
 multa elementa vides multis communia verbis,  
 cum tamen inter se versus ac verba necesse est  
 confiteare alia ex aliis constare elementis; . . .  
 sic aliis in rebus item, communia multa  
 multarum rerum cum sint primordia, verum  
 dissimili tamen inter se consistere summa  
 possunt . . .<sup>8</sup>

Then go through all other things in a like mode of reasoning, and you will find them to conceal within them seeds of many things and to contain various shapes. . . .

Moreover, throughout my own verses you see many elements common to many words, although you must confess that both verses and words are different and consist of different elements. . . . So in other things also, although many first-beginnings are common to many things, yet taken one with another they can make up a whole quite unlike . . .

In this passage, Lucretius is comparing the transactions of language and text to those of the elements of the physical world. They call for the same knowledge of beginnings and ends. The link, I would argue, is not purely metaphorical. I will start my first chapter with another story about the knowledge of beginnings and ends, again involving the traffic of words. The study of texts truly leads us to a metaphysical plane of enquiry.

<sup>8</sup> Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 11.676–8, 688–91, 695–8; Loeb Classics edn, pp. 148–51.

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PART I

*General Metaphysics*

## CHAPTER I

*The heron in the water: textuality and  
 the shapes of discourse*

The title of this chapter alludes to an anecdote from early Buddhist history.<sup>1</sup> Ananda, the Buddha's eminent disciple, was shocked in his old age to hear a young monk reciting some verses from the *Dhammapada* in a highly original recension. As he uttered them, they went: 'It is better to live a single day having obtained knowledge of the heron in the water than to live for a hundred years without knowledge of the heron in the water.' 'My son', said Ananda, 'you are making a grave mistake. The word you are taking as *udakabakam*, the heron in the water, is really *udayavyayam*, beginning and ending. The knowledge being talked of is the knowledge of first and last things.'

The embarrassed youth rushed to his teacher, an elderly monk, and reported what the holy sage Ananda had said. The senior monk replied that the holy sage was in his dotage, and the correct reading was indeed 'the heron in the water'.

Like the youth's mentor, I believe that the heron in the water is an image of great purport. Hence this chapter, and this book.

## VERBAL CONTEXT, TEXTUAL SPACE

We speak (and hear) words, or we write (and read) them. When we write or read, we harbour a trace of spoken or heard words: at some level, we mentally utter or hear them. Similarly, when literate people speak or hear words, at some level they mentally write or read them. Each of our two chief verbal modes is subtly influenced by the other.

It follows that literate and illiterate persons do not apprehend even the spoken word in the same way. A community without writing will conceive of language and speech very differently from one possessing a

<sup>1</sup> I have taken this account from Bhattacharya, 'Lipipramad', pp. 109–10. Bhattacharya cites *The Gandhari Dhammapada*, ed. John Brough, Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 45–7.