

Introduction

A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's *paratext*,¹ in keeping with the sometimes ambiguous meaning of this prefix in French² (I mentioned adjectives like "parafiscal" [a "taxe parafiscale" is a special levy] or "paramilitary"). For us, accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border,

¹ *Palimpsestes* (Seuil, 1981), 9.

2 And undoubtedly in some other languages, if this remark by J. Hillis Miller, which applies to English, is to be believed: "'Para' is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, ... something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in 'para,' moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them and joining them" ("The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. [New York: Seabury Press, 1979], 219). This is a rather nice description of the activity of the paratext.

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction

the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*,³ or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an “undefined zone”⁴ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, “a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.”⁵ Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). To say that we will speak again of this influence is an understatement: all the rest of this book is about nothing else except its means, methods, and effects. To indicate what is at stake, we can ask one simple question as an example: limited to the text alone and without a guiding set of directions, how would we read Joyce’s *Ulysses* if it were not entitled *Ulysses*?

The paratext, then, is empirically made up of a heterogeneous group of practices and discourses of all kinds and dating from all periods which I federate under the term “paratext” in the name of a common interest, or a convergence of effects, that seems to me more important than their diversity of aspect. The table of contents of this book undoubtedly makes it unnecessary for me to list these practices and discourses here, except that one or two

³ [The French title of this book is *Seuils*, which means “thresholds.”]

⁴ This image seems inevitable for anyone who deals with the paratext: “an undefined zone ... where two sets of codes are blended: the social code as it pertains to advertising, and the codes producing or regulating the text” (C. Duchet, “Pour une socio-critique, ou Variations sur un incipit,” *Littérature* 1 [February 1971], 6); “an intermediary zone between the off-text and the text” (A. Compagnon, *La Seconde Main* [Seuil, 1979], 328).

⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Seuil, 1975), 45. What follows this phrase indicates clearly that the author was partly aiming at what I am calling paratext: “... name of author, title, subtitle, name of series, name of publisher, even the ambiguous game of prefaces.”

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

terms are provisionally obscure, and these I will soon define. As far as possible, my approach follows the order in which one usually meets the messages this study explores: the external presentation of a book – name of author, title, and the rest – just as it is offered to a docile reader, which certainly does not mean every reader. In this respect, my saving everything I call “epitext” for the end is no doubt especially arbitrary because many future readers become acquainted with a book thanks to, for example, an interview with the author (if not a magazine review or a recommendation by word of mouth, neither of which, according to our conventions, generally belongs to the paratext, which is characterized by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility); but the advantages of putting the epitext at the end will, I hope, turn out to be greater than the drawbacks. In addition, this overall arrangement is not so strict as to be especially coercive, and those who ordinarily read books by beginning at the end or in the middle will be able to apply the same method, if it is one, to this book, too.

Furthermore, the paratextual messages inventoried here (in a preliminary, condensed, and doubtless incomplete way) do not constitute a uniformly unvarying and systematic presence around a text: some books lack a preface, some authors resist being interviewed, and in some periods it was not obligatory to record an author’s name or even a work’s title. The ways and means of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition, with varying degrees of pressure, sometimes widely varying: it is an acknowledged fact that our “media” age has seen the proliferation of a type of discourse around texts that was unknown in the classical world and *a fortiori* in antiquity and the Middle Ages, when texts often circulated in an almost raw condition, in the form of manuscripts devoid of any formula of presentation. I say an *almost* raw condition because the sole fact of transcription – but equally, of oral transmission – brings to the ideality of the text some degree of materialization, graphic or phonic, which, as we will see, may induce paratextual effects. In this sense, one may doubtless assert that a text⁶ without a paratext does not exist and never has existed. Paradoxically, paratexts without texts do exist, if only by

⁶ I now say *texts* and not only *works* in the “noble” sense of that word (literary or artistic productions, in contrast to nonliterary ones), as the need for a paratext

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction

accident: there are certainly works – lost or aborted – about which we know nothing except their titles. (Some examples: numerous post-Homeric epics or classical Greek tragedies, or *La Morsure de l'épaule* [published in English as *The Shoulder Bite*], which Chrétien de Troyes takes credit for at the beginning of *Cligès*, or *La Bataille des Thermopyles*, which was one of Flaubert's abandoned projects and which we know nothing else about except that the word *cnémide* [greave] was not to have appeared in it.) These titles, standing alone, certainly provide food for thought, by which I mean they provide a little more than many a work that is everywhere available and can be read from start to finish. Finally, just as the presence of paratextual elements is not uniformly obligatory, so, too, the public and the reader are not unvaryingly and uniformly obligated: no one is required to read a preface (even if such freedom is not always opportune for the author), and as we will see, many notes are addressed only to *certain* readers.

The approach we will take in studying each of these elements, or rather each of these types of elements, is to consider a certain number of features that, in concert, allow us to define the status of a paratextual message, whatever it may be. These features basically describe a paratextual message's spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic, and functional characteristics. More concretely: defining a paratextual element consists of determining its location (the question *where?*); the date of its appearance and, if need be, its disappearance (*when?*); its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*); the characteristics of its situation of communication – its sender and addressee (*from whom? to whom?*); and the functions that its message aims to fulfill (*to do what?*). This questionnaire is a little simplistic, but because it almost entirely defines the method employed in the rest of this book, no doubt a few words of justification are in order at the outset.

A paratextual element, at least if it consists of a message that has taken on material form, necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance. Within the same volume are such

is thrust on every kind of book, with or without aesthetic ambition, even if this study is limited to the paratext of literary works.

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

elements as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles or certain notes. I will give the name *peritext* to this first spatial category⁷ – certainly the more typical one, and the focus of Chapters 2–12. The distanced elements are all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others). This second category is what, for lack of a better word, I call *epitext*; it will be dealt with in Chapters 13 and 14. As must henceforth go without saying, *peritext* and *epitext* completely and entirely share the spatial field of the paratext. In other words, for those who are keen on formulae, *paratext* = *peritext* + *epitext*.⁸

The *temporal* situation of the paratext, too, can be defined in relation to that of the text. If we adopt as our point of reference the date of the text's appearance – that is, the date of its first, or original,⁹ edition – then certain paratextual elements are of prior (public) production: for example, prospectuses, announcements of forthcoming publications, or elements that are connected to prepublication in a newspaper or magazine and will sometimes disappear with publication in book form, like the famous Homeric chapter-titles of *Ulysses*, whose official existence proved to be (if I may put it this way) entirely prenatal. These are therefore *prior* paratexts. Other paratextual elements – the most common ones – appear at the same time as the text: this is the *original* paratext. An example is the preface to Balzac's *Peau de chagrin*, a preface produced in 1831 along with the novel it introduces. Finally, other paratextual elements appear later than the text, perhaps thanks to a second edition (example: the preface to Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* – four months later) or to a more remote

⁷ The notion of “peritext” overlaps with that of “périgraphie,” proposed by A. Compagnon, *La Seconde Main*, 328–56.

⁸ Even so, I must add that the peritext of scholarly editions (generally post-humous) sometimes contains elements that do not belong to the paratext in the sense in which I define it. Examples of such elements would be extracts from allographic reviews (see the Pléiade edition of Sartre, the Flammarion edition of Michelet, and so forth). [The word “allography” in its various forms refers to a text (preface, review, etc.) that one person writes for another person's work.]

⁹ Here I will disregard the sometimes pronounced technical (bibliographic and bibliophilic) differences among *first trade edition*, *original [limited] edition*, *editio princeps*, and so on, to summarily call the earliest one *original*.

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction

new edition (example: the preface to Chateaubriand's *Essai sur les révolutions* – twenty-nine years later). For reasons of function that I will elaborate on below, here we have grounds for differentiating between the merely *later* paratext (the Zola case just mentioned) and the *delayed* paratext (the Chateaubriand case). To designate elements that appear after the author's death, I – like everyone else – will use the term *posthumous*; to designate elements produced during the author's lifetime, I will adopt the neologism proposed by my good master Alphonse Allais: *anthumous* paratext.¹⁰ But this last antithesis is applicable not solely to delayed elements; for a paratext can be at one and the same time original and posthumous, if it accompanies a text that is itself posthumous – as do the title and the (fallacious) genre indication of *La Vie de Henry Brulard, écrite par lui-même. Roman imité du Vicaire de Wakefield* [*The Life of Henry Brulard, written by himself. A novel in imitation of "The Vicar of Wakefield"*].

If, then, a paratextual element may appear at any time, it may also disappear, definitively or not, by authorial decision or outside intervention or by virtue of the eroding effect of time. Many titles of the classical period have thus been shortened by posterity, even on the title pages of the most reliable modern editions; and all of Balzac's original prefaces were deliberately deleted in 1842 at the time his works were regrouped to form the whole known as *La Comédie humaine*. Such deletions, which are very common, determine the life span of paratextual elements. Some life spans are very short; to my knowledge, the record is held by the preface to *La Peau de chagrin* (one month). But I said above, "may disappear *definitively or not*": an element that is deleted – for example, when a new edition comes out – can always reemerge upon publication of a still newer edition. Certain notes in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, absent from the second edition, lost no time returning, and the prefaces Balzac "deleted" in 1842 are present today in all reliable editions. The duration of the paratext is often intermittent, therefore, and this

¹⁰ [Allais (1854-1905) was a humorist who wrote light verse, tales, and sketches.] *Anthumous* is the term Allais used to designate those of his works that had appeared in a collection during his lifetime. We should also remember that *posthumous*, "after burial," is a very old (and wonderful) false etymology: *postumus* is merely the superlative of *posterus* ["following" (compar. *posterior*: "following after"; superl.: "hindmost, last")].

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

intermittence, which I will speak of again, is very closely linked to the basically functional nature of the paratext.

The question of a paratextual element's *substantial* status will be settled, or eluded, here – as it often is in practice – by the fact that almost all the paratexts I consider will themselves be of a *textual*, or at least verbal, kind: titles, prefaces, interviews, all of them utterances that, varying greatly in scope, nonetheless share the linguistic status of the text. Most often, then, the paratext is itself a text: if it is still not *the* text, it is already *some* text. But we must at least bear in mind the paratextual value that may be vested in other types of manifestation: these may be iconic (illustrations), material (for example, everything that originates in the sometimes very significant typographical choices that go into the making of a book), or purely factual. By *factual* I mean the paratext that consists not of an explicit message (verbal or other) but of a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received. Two examples are the age or sex of the author. (How many works, from Rimbaud's to Sollers's, have owed part of their fame or success to the glamor of youth? And do we ever read "a novel by a woman" exactly as we read "a novel" plain and simple, that is, a novel by a man?) Another example is the date of the work: "True admiration," said Renan, "is historical"; in any case, it is indisputable that historical awareness of the period in which a work was written is rarely immaterial to one's reading of that work.

I have just tossed together the most unsubtle and patently obvious characteristics of the factual paratext, but there are many others, some more trivial and others more basic. Examples of the more trivial are membership in an academy (or other exalted body) or receipt of a literary prize. Examples of the more basic (and these we will meet again) are the implicit contexts that surround a work and, to a greater or lesser degree, clarify or modify its significance. These implicit contexts may be authorial (the context formed around, for example, *Père Goriot* by the whole of *La Comédie humaine*), generic (the context formed around the same work [*Père Goriot*] and the same whole [*La Comédie humaine*] by the existence of the genre known as "the novel"), historical (the context formed, for the same example, by the period known as "the nineteenth century"), and so forth. I will not undertake

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction

here to specify the nature or gauge the weight of these facts of contextual affiliation, but we must at least remember that, in principle, every context serves as a paratext.

The existence of these facts of contextual affiliation, like the existence of every kind of factual paratext, may or may not be brought to the public's attention by a mention that, itself, belongs to the textual paratext: a genre indication, the mention on a band¹¹ of a prize, the mention in a "please-insert"¹² of an author's age, the indirect disclosure of an author's sex by way of his or her name, and so forth. But the existence of these facts does not always need to be mentioned to be a matter of "common knowledge." For example, most readers of *A la recherche du Temps perdu* are aware of the two biographical facts of Proust's part-Jewish ancestry and his homosexuality. Knowledge of those two facts inevitably serves as a paratext to the pages of Proust's work that deal with those two subjects. I am not saying that people must know those facts; I am saying only that people who do know them read Proust's work differently from people who do not and that anyone who denies the difference is pulling our leg. The same is true, of course, for the facts of context: reading Zola's *Assommoir* as a self-contained work is very different from reading it as an episode of *Les Rougon-Macquart*.

The *pragmatic* status of a paratextual element is defined by the characteristics of its situation of communication: the nature of the sender and addressee, the sender's degree of authority and responsibility, the illocutionary force of the sender's message, and undoubtedly some other characteristics I have overlooked.

The sender of a paratextual message (like the sender of all other messages) is not necessarily its *de facto* producer, whose identity is not very important to us: suppose, for example, that the foreword of *La Comédie humaine*, signed Balzac, had in fact been written by one of Balzac's friends. The sender is defined by a putative attribution and an acceptance of responsibility. Most

¹¹ [The band is a strip of brightly colored paper – about 2-1/2 inches from top to bottom – that encircles a book or journal across its lower third. Some bands are unbroken and prevent the casual reader from flipping through the book or journal; others have a front and back flap that fold over the front and back covers of the book or journal. Printed on the band may be various kinds of publisher's information, as discussed in Chapter 2, "The Publisher's Peritext."]

¹² [The "please-insert" (*le prière d'insérer*) is what nowadays is called jacket copy. It is the subject of Chapter 5.]

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

often the sender is the author (*authorial* paratext), but the sender may equally well be the publisher: unless a please-insert is signed by the author, it customarily belongs to the *publisher's* paratext. The author and the publisher are (legally and in other ways) the two people responsible for the text and the paratext, but they may delegate a portion of their responsibility to a third party. A preface written by this third party and accepted by the author, such as Anatole France's preface to Proust's *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, still belongs (it seems to me), by the mere fact of this acceptance, to the paratext – which this time is an *allographic* paratext. There are also situations in which responsibility for the paratext is, in a way, shared: one example is an interview with the author in which someone else poses the questions and generally “collects” the author's remarks and reports them, faithfully or not.

The addressee may be roughly defined as “the public,” but this is much too loose a definition, for the public of a book extends potentially to all of humankind. Thus some qualifications are called for. Certain paratextual elements are actually addressed to (which does not mean they reach) the public in general – that is, every Tom, Dick, and Harry. This is the case (I will come back to it) of the title or of an interview. Other paratextual elements are addressed (with the same reservation) more specifically or more restrictively only to readers of the text. This is typically the case of the preface. Still others, such as the early forms of the please-insert, are addressed exclusively to critics; and others, to book-sellers. All of that (whether peritext or epitext) constitutes what I call the *public* paratext. Finally, other paratextual elements are addressed, orally or in writing, to ordinary individuals, who may or may not be well known and are not supposed to go around talking about them: this is the *private* paratext. Its most private part consists of messages the author addresses to himself, in his diary or elsewhere: this is the *intimate* paratext, so designated by the mere fact of its being addressed to oneself, regardless of its content.

By definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it, although the degree of responsibility may vary. From the language of politics I will borrow a standard distinction, one easier to use than to define: the distinction between the official and the unofficial (or

Cambridge University Press

0521424062 - Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation

Translated by Jane E. Lewin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction

semiofficial).¹³ The *official* is any paratextual message openly accepted by the author or publisher or both – a message for which the author or publisher cannot evade responsibility. “Official,” then, applies to everything that, originating with the author or publisher, appears in the anthumous peritext – for example, the title or the original preface, or even the comments signed by the author in a work for which he is fully responsible (for example, Tournier’s *Vent Paraclet* [a book of essays about Tournier’s own novels]). The *unofficial* (or *semiofficial*) is most of the authorial epitext: interviews, conversations, and confidences, responsibility for which the author can always more or less disclaim with denials of the type “That’s not exactly what I said” or “Those were off-the-cuff remarks” or “That wasn’t intended for publication” or indeed even with a “solemn declaration” like Robbe-Grillet’s at the Cerisy colloquium. There he refused outright to grant any “importance” to “[my] journal articles haphazardly collected in a volume under the name of Essays” and, “all the more,” to “the oral remarks I may make here, even if I agree to their later publication” – a declaration amounting, I imagine, to a new version of the paradox of the Cretan.¹⁴ Also and perhaps especially unofficial is what the author permits or asks a third party (an allographic preface-writer or an “authorized” commentator) to say: see the part played by a Larbaud or a Stuart Gilbert in the diffusion of the Homeric keys to *Ulysses*, a diffusion Joyce organized but did not publicly take responsibility for. Naturally there are many intermediary or undecidable situations in what is really only a difference of degree, but these shadings offer the author an undeniable advantage: it is sometimes in one’s interest to have certain things “known” without having (supposedly) said them oneself.

A final pragmatic characteristic of the paratext is what – making free with a term used by philosophers of language – I call the *illocutionary force* of its message. Here again we are dealing with a gradation of states. A paratextual element can commu-

¹³ [The French words are *officiel* and *officieux*. *Officieux* means indistinguishably “unofficial” and “semiofficial” and will be rendered “unofficial” except in contexts in which only “semiofficial” makes sense.]

¹⁴ *Colloque Robbe-Grillet* (1975) (Paris: 10/18, 1976), 1:316. [The Centre Culturel International of Cerisy-la-Salle was the site of a colloquium on “Robbe-Grillet: Analyse, théorie.” The paradox: A man from Crete says, “All Cretans are liars.” If the statement is true, he must be lying ...]