

## *Intro\Retro*

If such, in prospect, are the main concerns about to be developed – the variable cognitive and tactile overlaps of book, its text, and the latter’s medium – what about them? This is to ask, first of all, what about them invites comparative inquiry? With its scope extending across graphic, plastic, and literary examples, what this one book is finally about emerges from just such interplay. On a sliding scale of association, it is about what the material dimension of the printed and bound support (or its vestige in the e-book) puts us in touch with regarding the different but still palpable materiality of written text, including its phonetic substrate – and about what this brings out, in turn, regarding the linguistic materiality of an entire medium. Given the escalating pressure of computerization in reshaping the cultural imaginary of verbal communication at large, in vocal as well as lettered forms, the question of reading itself is much contested of late. It may thus need no further explanation to suggest that for the particular issues variously constellated, by visual artists and writers alike, around the depicted as well as actual reading of booked language – and pursued here, in and against the digital, under both a theory of mediation and a philosophy of language – it is about time.

Time not just *for* such attention, either, but as part of it. Reading takes place and time together. In the all but simultaneous stages of tangible access, page gives way to print, in the available form of text, on medium’s way to meaning. What we are thus setting out to read is reading itself: its paper (and now screen) sites, its imagined mental sightings filtered through the weft of lettering and enunciation, its formative linguistic incitations – or, in that last case, as first condition, its very possibility as a channeled verbal potential. One broad path has already been well cleared. To ask in retro fashion – not necessarily in nostalgia but within an unavoidable historical frame – whether a book is still a book when, with its “paged” words only digitally manifest, no ink has flowed into their linguistic reservoir, is not the purpose of this particular book. That topic has been

fully pondered elsewhere, and many times over.<sup>1</sup> For three decades at least, the fate of reading per se, along with that of the book, has been worried and adjudicated in scholarly and popular commentary, with literary culture's inherited formats lamented in passing – or actively revamped. A modest irony, of course, rears its head. At least in published book form, as with *Book, Text, Medium*, such studies confer a certain measure of extra longevity on their very topic. But this investigation is aimed otherwise. Rather than scrutinizing, in marginal regret or not, the new forms of electronic mediation in the delivery of text, these pages look precisely to what holding the original physical platform in mind (if no longer in hand) – and thus holding it to tactile account – in the traditional case of book reading can begin to suggest, by material association, about the play of mediation more generally, in everything from codex binding to algorithmic code.

In the traditional case, the “bulk” (originally cargo hold) of a book lends paradoxical weight to the lift-off into imagined scene or exposition. Material apprehension, that is, has a certain welcome contagiousness in the move from the tooled object of imprint to the language it puts into circulation. The more we're used to feeling the page beneath our fingers, the better the feel we may have for the textures of wording. To exaggerate this point, on the one hand, would be to curtail the intended scope of the present book, which reaches into digital poetics with a stress on verbal texture that, even on screen, has by no means foresworn a material dimension to its phrasal effects when produced in subvocal comprehension. To deny the point about a broader associative range for the tangible grain of language, on the other hand, or in other words to sever all sense of literary wording from the paper material that once traditionally backed it, would be at least as damaging to readerly intuition. Literature has survived the partial decline of the codex without eschewing a history wed to just such bookhood.

Welcome contagiousness, to be sure: any association between the heft of the book and the density of text – welcome and suggestive, though it doesn't in any sense level the playing field. Certainly there's no denying the heuristic use of computer-manifested sentences, like these I'm currently (or was once) word-processing, in helping us to spotlight the difference between verbal delivery systems – the bound page versus the flow, not of ink, but of the liquid crystal screen – even while one remains alert to shared lexical functions in the textual generation of each reading mode, syllable by syllable. Lending attention to those gathering syllables – in the phonemic basis of their graphic shapes – is the purpose of this study's central phase, “The Grip of Inscription,” its textual evidence stressed in the process (both

senses) as inseparable from the medium such writing both divulges and exploits. This emphasis follows from an opening look – in the first paired chapters ahead – at the surface of inscription itself, graphically displaced in painting, volumetrically in sculpture. This move from such physical inscription to its literary grip is thus completed by a third and incumbent level of attention in “The Give of Medium.” Under analysis there is precisely the verbal current maximized in literature, often equivocated in the process, and open – beyond any phenomenology or stylistics of reading – to further inquiry into the ontology of language as medial performance. Again the triadic frame: what is mostly denied us in the materially represented (let alone defaced) book, and made available in a book’s own internal representation, has a materiality all its own as medium: one that the middle term of text brings out without using up for consideration.

One thing builds on the other – precisely in how different their “thingness” is: from sewn or glued paper through deciphered markings atop it to the underlying roots of human speech in all its potentially materialized (and even corporealized) forms. Things add up only in our bearing down: physical book; silently enunciated phonetic text produced by the reader’s passively engaged body; latent medium of writing or speech. The threefold rubrics don’t divide up a convergent domain of exploration, compartmentalizing it, so much as cross-section the issues at an increasing, yet still interactive, degree of generalization. What takes shape are categories of analysis: consubstantial even in their material discriminations. They mark, it might be said, stages in a receding immanence to be traced – in reverse order of manifestation – from a given if not grounding medium (Part III) up through text (Part II) to its conveyance by the physical book (Part I) or by some newer reading platform for the display of text. But it is part and parcel of this threefold distinction, in its interlocking nature, that the categories can be engaged (wherever attention takes you first) in any order of interpretive – and historical – priority. Unlikely as it might seem, a decision to read these chapter pairings back to front, for instance, and thus to sample their encounter with linguistic ontology well before their instanced disruption of it in gallery art – with literary writing, in between, as the very dimension of bookhood rethought by philosophy and missing from conceptual sculpture – would not be unworkable. Instead, it would only be to connect, from a different perspective, with the argument’s ultimately inextricable concerns. Where medium is among the perceptions delivered by message. And where the implicit paratactic syntax that might hold *Book, Text, Medium* together in loose if unified grammar

of perception derives from the correlated angle – or bias – by which one’s readerly imagination cuts aslant across the book/text/medium system in the first place.

In that threefold constellation, it would be wrong for book studies to see its discipline relegated to some cultural periphery by strictly linguistic concerns. Book/text/medium: book abuts text in that template by supporting its operations, whereas medium emerges otherwise to recognition, from within rather than beneath writing and its surfaces. The codex is *not* the medium of text per se, as opposed to that of script, where ink and paper carry the reading matter. Books are, instead, the vehicle of such matter, which is why my study of the unreadable museum *bibliobjekt* turned on the notion of “demediation”: an idea contested in print at the time from the ranks of book scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The return to this question on my part for a fuller look at the material spectrum at stake is in no way meant now, anymore than before, to deny book studies its mandate in my more dedicated turn to verbal analysis. Precisely the opposite. When the linguistic medium is sensed working overtime as the channel of meaning, its true verbal materiality – its audio-visual skein – draws metonymically on codex and page for its own disclosed version of tangibility, its attenuated weight and grain, in any fully engaged “passage” from graphemes through phonemes to literary mimesis.

Discussion thus directly intersects book history when it explores sculpted forms executed under the notion that to some extent books “are history” (in the idiomatic rather than scholarly sense). But these emphases do not necessarily augur a book, yet another one, on electronic reading – as we are no doubt destined to know it from here out, if never so much again from *here on in*, layer by layer, page upon tactile page. At play, instead, is a consideration pitched *between* codex history and media theory: again between medieval *bookes* and proliferating *e-books* in the long reign of the bound volume. What we’ll find should help to confirm Christina Lupton’s intuitions about a parallel between mid-eighteenth-century anxieties over print dissemination, on the one hand, and the regimes of circulation in our own digital moment, on the other. Enlightenment sparring in philosophical discourse over the matter(s) of paper surface and typeface at the rise of mass printing offers, on her account, not just a distant anticipation of deconstruction in regards to the arbitrariness of the signifier, but something more. Involved in these issues of worried materiality is not just a detachment of scriptive signification from referent, but the foretaste of a later unrest in contemporary culture about screen rather than paper surfaces – including their retinal alphabetic arrays – in the revolutionized mediality of our own data delivery systems.<sup>3</sup>

Intro\Retro, yes. And we can take a further step back in looking, and then going, forward. One might think of the focus sought for here as comparable to the track-zoom shot in cinema, pulling back while zeroing in. In this sense, the enmeshment of the book/text/medium triad in a communications network is philological as well as historical. The genealogy of the English language, as enshrined in the Oxford English Dictionary, frames the whole question of mediality quite suggestively. In 1605, in his essay on the “Advancement of Learning,” Francis Bacon distinguishes the “Medium of Wordes” (given by the OED in its original early modern spelling) from other means of expressing “cogitation,” as for instance gestures or hieroglyphs or ciphers – other relations established between the “note” and the “notion.”<sup>4</sup> English usage waited two and a half centuries for the emergent modern sense of “medium” (first in connection with painting) in the Victorian era (1861 is the earliest OED citation). Bacon’s broader usage falls under the OED definition (and is cited there) of “intermediate agency, instrument or channel; a means; *esp.* a means or channel of communication or expression,” with the crucial added clarification that the word typically appears in such phrasing as “by (also through) the medium of.” In short: “by the means of.” That *of* is the key, if partly to a door as yet unlocked by philological development in Bacon’s time.<sup>5</sup> Still waiting until the mid-nineteenth century to emerge as idiom (in the manner of an equative genitive): the medium that *is* worded speech, a usage we’ll notice approached in stages by George Eliot and Oscar Wilde in Chapter 5. This lag time in nomenclature derives from the fact that the operations of language, let alone of literary writing, had not yet been fully separated out – under the pluralized umbrella of “media” in the evolved modern sense – as an inked form distinct from pigment or, down the road, from photography or film. That evolution is certainly presupposed in what follows, even as we will be tracking it back in the last chapter to a turning point at the end of Bacon’s seventeenth century: a pivotal moment marked by the rise of the novel, in unspoken medial terms, as both prose and mass print form.

Ultimately, we will have fast-forwarded across a vast historical transition. We will, that is, have traversed the space between the dawn of print – and of prose itself as we now identify it, a streamlined expedient facilitating the spread of such mechanical production – and certain contemporary arts of the codex. Book forms are lately rendered as unrecognizable by sculptors and conceptual technicians as if they were anthropological relics from a lost civilization. Centuries after Gutenberg, culture has arrived, in many cases, at the occlusion of the legible page format altogether: the foreclosure of

continuous print by the abstract configurations of recent book sculptures and assemblages. These constructs, as estranging bookworks, involve prototypical codex shapes reconceived now in cement, now in lead, sometimes in glass or straight pins or even vacuum-sealed human skin, including found volumes spray-painted or water-logged, slashed, singed, or cauterized. In between early modern dissemination and latter-day conceptualist irony, then, lies, by contrast, the career of the serviceable codex as we have known, and partly known our world through, its accessible pages. It is thus, in the central two chapters, that attention falls on the linguistically availed textual experience of such pages – especially when read over against those alternate devices designed for reading’s aesthetic arrest and prevention. With the aberrant physicality of the inert and unreadable bookwork as initial leverage, these middle chapters are out to discover, instead, what *sense of language itself*, as literary medium, derives from the tangible as well as linguistic *sensation* of the turned and discerned page as well as from the entrainment of lexical forms it regiments: a sensation, including a just-perceptible friction or resistance, that approaches the palpable in more ways than one – textural but also textual, physical and syllabic at once, haptic and subvocal.

So, in regard to the onetime dominance of the codex, let me rephrase my own title page by spelling out its descriptors in light of the level of investigation they elicit: material page/imprinted words/linguistic mediation – where only the third facet is retained unaltered by electronic text. And a word more, too, about what follows in the subtitle: “Cross-Sectional Reading for a Digital Age.” Not *the* age – monolithic and irreversible, and marked by the rhetoric of catastrophic upheaval – but instead any phase or stage of computerized writing and reading that may await. And *for* it, rather than just “in it”: *for* – on behalf of – its ongoing historical (both technical and philological) orientation. Yet our still-transitional moment can claim a certain special point of vantage within the ongoing. However ubiquitously electronic the labor of textual transmission has become, ours – as in fact the *first* digital age – is also the site of an inherent medial retrospect. For which, of course, the codex is the residual benchmark: codex as book and text together, so much together that, still today, volumes are spoken of as interchangeable with their contents – even in a query like “What book are you reading?” when asked of a Kindle “user.” *For* a digital age, then, in helping to understand, by contrast, where we’ve been for half a millennium until now – and doing so in direct light of the changed and changing media landscape we will continue to inhabit.

To this purpose, there is the subtitle's intended further suggestion of "cross-sectional reading" in the associated plural sense of test-case readings (analyses). The scope of such reading(s) entails a broad account of the deciphering act across the registers of platform, text, and medium, but one anchored in and by a certain considered interpretation of the structures, verbal or plastic, that call it forth. Some *intensive* reading for a digital age, then: that's the plan – as well as the cross-sectional design (as contrasted with, though not "opposed to," the *extensive* reading that goes lately under the name of digital humanities in the "corpus stylistics" of literature). Attention in these chapters ranges from the hinging of the codex to the contingencies of textual inference and on (or down) to the propellant force (whether tactically constrained in visual art or fully elicited in literature, and brought to emphasis either way) of the verbal medium itself. This amounts to observations for an age in which the end of paper's necessity rescinds none of the elusive *linguistic materiality* intrinsic to both the serial inscription of text and the time-based subvocal (and thus somatic) responses that were, together and inseparable, once reserved primarily for the portable codex rather than the mobile screen and its remote access. The purpose of what follows, in short, isn't to assess new electronic protocols for reading in the age of digital reception, but instead to offer – *for* readers of just this era, and contextualized first of all by book art's address to such changing times – a closer account of the interplay between material basis and textual experience in any period. Books thus help in assessing their own texts, one materiality in support of another – just as text can offer a reading of its own medium.

But not, certainly, at just any, let alone every, moment in the reading act. No readers in the thick of comprehension have their eye on each facet or echelon of verbal transmission at once. No one traverses these three zones or levels of manifestation (book/text/medium) in the same breath of subvocal processing, alert equally not just to meaning but to material platform and the magic of language alike. Part of that magic, after all, is that it largely disappears – into sheer functionality – in normal and absorbed decipherment. With bookhood and linguistic ontology mostly edged to opposite ends of the spectrum in standard practices of reading – sidelined, suspended, repressed, and thus making way for their own ends – that's exactly the functional latency that cross-sectional *readings* are intended to recover. In traversing these layered aspects of realization, such readings may be performed by graphic artists of one stripe or another (in bookworks or wordworks), by the ingrown pressure of literary expression upon its own fungible words (the reflexes of textuality), and in



response to either or both, of course, by interpretive analysis. The interplay among the separate “media” entertained in the process of that analysis in the coming chapters – including painting, sculpture, and the rhetoric of drawn language on museum walls or their displayed canvases – is perhaps most surprising when it reaches out to include moving-image mediation as well. Yet it is there, in Chapters 3 and 4, that a recent theoretical exploration of written words on the film screen helps establish an unusually clear distinction between the inwardly variable temporality of alphabetic script and the otherwise time-based flow of filmic imaging in its automated lockstep. And this emphasis has the additional result, for our purposes, of stressing that what a semiotics of film, in its heyday, would have meant to identify as “the film text” is thus to be distinguished in such cases, and with broader implications too, from “text on screen.”

So a word more on that sometimes partisan word “text.” In this book’s interleaving of levels, there is, on first pass, nothing out of the ordinary in the strictly common-sensical use of that term, no theoretical abstraction, no agenda. Text is meant in the same everyday sense as is book, with no poststructuralist pressure on the term itself – whatever indeterminacies may be incurred in a given reading event by a particular instance of such text.<sup>6</sup> Centering the threefold distinction invoked here, text is simply what books offer up on their written pages when print is activated by attention: the meaningful inscription, the reading matter. Genre by genre, we may identify this textual matter as the story, the lyric, the dossier, the so-called play text, what have you: whatever form the linguistic medium takes in the case at (and in) hand on the tangible page. With the added advantage that the term tends to cover, even at first blush, a whole range of digital inscription as well. In any event, everything the complexities of literary theory might think to posit or interrogate by the name of text and metatext may well come into play when the engaged verbal mediation of any one instance is put to the test – but not as stressed up front by the more straightforward use of this study’s titular middle term. Since the physical book (or platform) is not the essential “medium” of printed writing in any but the simplest understanding of conveyance, “text” is merely a better name for verbal mediativity’s primary *manifestation* in delivery, otherwise parsed in this triadic form: book/writing/language – where it may seem all the clearer that localized features and force fields are therefore a matter, once again, of pre-positioning. *Within* a book, the page *on* which writing is found locates the potentially triggered scene of reading *through* which, as text, the medium can alone make itself, as well as anything else but the page surface, felt. I don’t hesitate to dispel any aura of technical abstraction



around the term “text,” any halo of the rarefied, in spelling this out. That the three linked terms – book and text and medium – should seem obvious going in doesn’t rob the coming distinctions of their force, but simply grounds their cross-sectional opportunities in advance, including the new theoretical pressure to be placed upon their common-sense interplay.

Questions aggregate in this way around vernacular usages, like “book reading,” rarely interrogated. It is therefore important again to pose the question raised in the Prospectus. Does the codex platform take any ordinarily appreciable part, even if only by imagined vestige, in what we understand as reading’s medium? And if so, in what relation to the linguistic continuum mounted on it, in the form of text, from sheet to sheet or so-called page to e-book page? What is the difference, even within simultaneous encounter, between a book in its *relay* of text and text in its *transmission* of idea or reported event? These are just the sort of questions normally left aside in getting on with our reading – whether we call it, and loosely or not, the reading of book, page, or text; and whether we mean by page a uniform rectangle, either front- or back-lit, or its variably paragraphed content; and whether in turn, by text, we think of its manifested medial procedures or just its semantic take-away. In what follows, those *whethers* will be summoned to confront each other more directly than usual – not as alternatives but in their inherent correlation. Even while all those previously asked questions are to remain in play.

That field of play is ultimately my topic: a play among bound objects, read words, and an account of their conveyance as a multi-channel delivery system. Such is the particular cross-sectional perspective underway. Material culture, literary linguistics, and media theory (in its truest philosophical dimensions) are meant to cooperate fully in this triangulation, each disposed to speak more directly than usual to the other. Partly this disposition results from my own scholarly backlog, including more than one book of my own on each topic separately, now shelved together for consultation and cross-reference in the face of new evidence. So that the “retro” cast of this introduction is not just a looking back on the long tradition of the codex from the vantage of the digital, but on my own writing about what I think now to call its *codextuality* – as both pulped matter and impressed messaging. And on more than that, too. An anonymous press reader saw the draft of this manuscript – in its marked crossroads at the intersection of my longstanding critical interests – as a “kind of summa.” It wasn’t conceived that way, and certainly not as a deliberate retracing of convergent paths. But it can stand as such – summative – if that helps highlight the way that literary poetics, painted codex script, book

sculpture, conceptual works across a restless spectrum of transmedial irony, and the flux of cinematic temporality – attended in the shift from photographic to digital cinema – might helpfully join forces, both by analogy and contrast in varying ratios. In doing so, they would begin eliciting the micro-structures of a verbal textuality dependent at once on a physical support, a graphic surface, and the fluid materiality, sustained by variable sound waves, of an activated linguistic medium – in no way negated in screen text, but, in the pace of decipherment, thrown out of alignment with the optics of the moving image.

### The Digital Vantage

Computerized writing, let alone computer script at the level of code, highlights all that it must either depart from or claim continuity with. The textured heft of the codex and its impressed surfaces alike; the contours of worded text under exerted stylistic inflection; and, fusing them in process, the linguistic mediality of any lexical inscription when triggered by the eye–ear coordinations of reading; such is the normative overlap assumed and pursued in *Book, Text, Medium*. Leaving surface texture aside, the glazed feel of a so-called touch screen makes the same connection with text and medium, though of course not with sewn pages, as does the conventional book. The difference is largely what the sculptural bookworkers of Chapter 2 seek to annotate – and sometimes to archive by exaggeration – with their curious objects.

Highlighted there, yet again, in the material bookhood (or its simulations) of volumetric form, is the first of the three senses – by applied contrast – in which this particular book is “for” readers in “a digital age.” The other two entail convergent operations rather than divergences of form. Surely, any thought bestowed on the computer platform in its word-summoning function is not likely to blunt the everyday mystery of words on tap in that thing we term language, arising to use from equally unreckonable depths. The wonderment there is undefeatable. As it is for the wellsprings of binarism in the unseen depth of computer files. In contrast to the folded and seamed book page, for most of us the unreachable innards of computer code – hoarding its algorithmic syntax not merely out of sight but out of mind’s grasp – might thus seem to intimate its own ubiquitous technical allegory of the “linguistic” miracle itself in the broader semiotics of code. To intimate as much, perhaps, but not often to tantalize with it in any tangible form – as artists have done with the book’s emblematic shape in everything from Renaissance landscapes in oil, the