

Preface : on the ampersand

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Preface: On the Ampersand

Writing & Culture: Both *writing* and *culture* invite commentary; but it would need more space than a short preface can offer. Therefore neither term will be discussed here. Instead I shall concentrate on the word linking them (which one tends to overlook), on *and*. *And*, according to the *OED*, can be defined as "*conj. coordinate*. (Introducing a word, clause, or sentence, which is to be taken *side by side with, along with, or in addition to*, that which precedes it.)" *And* juxtaposes, sets against each other two terms (it is etymologically related to *end*, in the sense of border); by doing so, it turns mere contiguity into a loose relationship between the two terms, and foregrounds those aspects that they have in common. Can it be the editor's task to go beyond this, and to impose unity on a collection the strength of which he sees in its variety? Certainly, in all the essays we find writing *side by side with, along with, or in addition to* culture. We can even go further. All the contributions concern, explicitly or as illustrative examples, the relationship between, on the one hand, literary studies and linguistics, and cultural studies, on the other.

Writing & Culture: It is no coincidence that the two terms in the title are linked by an ampersand.¹ The "&"-sign is, in the terminology used by Sampson, one of the few logographic elements that have survived "on the periphery of our own [phonographic] writing system." (34) Its shape suggests a knot that ties together the terms on its left and right; but it is apparently derived from a decorative combination of the letters *e* and *t*. Nowadays, we are mainly familiar with it in the names of firms (*Faber & Faber, J. M. Dent & Sons*). It occurs where brevity and visual display are a

¹ What a poetic name for such a device! It is a corruption of "& *per se* and," according to the *OED*, formed like *A per se, I per se, and O per se*, used for the respective letters when standing by themselves, especially when making a word (*OED, A IV*).

crucial consideration ("Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies." on the title-page of the Folio edition, for example, but not in its table of contents).

In literary texts the ampersand has been used in a way that takes us directly to a central issue of this collection. We find it in Blake's illuminated books, where it is the common manner of writing *and*.² Along with the designs of which the texts are part it testifies to the inadequacy of phonographic writing in rendering vision; in one case, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he seems to use the ampersand as a symbol of plenitude (Erdman 119). Phonographic writing, especially in its printed form and the reading it suggests, fixes words in definite shapes, orders them in strict sequence, and seems to objectify their meanings. The resonant inflections of the voice and of meaning, so important to visionary discourse, are suppressed.³

In twentieth-century American poetry, non-phonographic writing has again become important, for the reasons mentioned. Logographic, even semasiographic writing has become common again — after all, Pound might have begun *The Cantos* with an ampersand. Especially the rediscovery of the voice and the oral in the tradition of the New American Poetics, going back to Charles Olson, led to a return of the ampersand (along with other non-phonographic elements); often it was re-introduced as a deliberate gesture towards Blake. In the writings of poets associated with ethnopoetics, like Gary Snyder and Jerome Rothenberg, the ampersand is no longer a sign surviving on the periphery, but one forcing its way to the centre.⁴

Writing & Culture: The use of the ampersand thus reminds us of some general distinctions that can be made between the contributions in this volume. Some are mainly interested in how the technology of writing can affect, even transform culture (in the widest meaning of the word). Others take the technology for granted, and are interested mainly in how its products, the texts, shape culture (usually in a more restricted sense of the word), or, even more narrowly, how cultural matters are dealt with in texts.

² Except at the beginning of lines.

³ Note: "In early texts *a vision* cannot always be clearly separated from *avision*." (OED, under *vision*).

⁴ To the extent, in the case of Rothenberg, of becoming a mannerism.

Suzanne Romaine's article discusses literacy in New Guinea not in terms of familiar Western patterns of interpretation, like orality and literacy, but of the traditions and needs of a developing country. Her contribution, and H. H. Meier's survey of writing in the Middle Ages, which follows it, map the possible varieties and specificities of the role of writing in different regions and at different historical moments. They open perspectives on literacy (and thus also on literature) which have not been commonly accepted in our culture. The next two articles discuss facets of writing in the Middle Ages. Françoise Le Saux deals with the interesting case of an illiterate woman's book. She considers it mainly in terms of power relationships, of the male scribe's authority versus the subversive insistence of the illiterate woman on that of the voice. Margaret Bridges discusses Anglo-Saxon cosmography, and shows how its view of Europe was affected by Classical mythology and Christian lore. Neil Forsyth, in a wide-ranging essay, studies the motif of the tree being felled and its association with civilization, from Gilgamesh to Appalachian folk-tales; writing here seems to be understood as what endures. John Blair, turning to American literature, uses Melville's meeting the cultural Other to account for both the motivation and the character of his writing; generalizing his argument he sketches the vision of a holistic discipline of cultural studies. Paul Taylor considers the problems of Native American writers in translating/transposing oral myth into their English writings. Hartwig Isernhagen then raises the issue of intercultural writing in general terms, and uses it for an incisive critique of the notion of power in recent literary criticism. Adam Piette studies the surprising stability of intertextuality in Beckett and its implications. James Boon, finally, offers an anthropologist's experimental paper on the close and complex relationship between literary studies and anthropology. His "essay-talk" illustrates in its form what it discusses; he might also have used the ampersand throughout.

The articles are based on a selection of papers delivered at a conference organized by the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English (SAUTE). It took place in May 1991, at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, which is located on the border between the French and German speaking parts of the country. The conference closed with a round table discussion that tried to sum up results; an edited version of it also closes this volume. Where would the sum be found? Interestingly, the *locus*, which writing seems to overcome so easily, became important here. The discussion ranged over magic, spelling and power, then focussed on

English, on the teaching of English in an international context — on English as cargo, as a pass to something, &c.

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