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Introduction

According to Richard Rorty, “[i]n the last century there were philosophers who argued that nothing exists but ideas. In our century there are people who write as if there were nothing but texts” (139). The school of thought most commonly associated with the latter point of view which has been prominent in the late twentieth century is the so-called “Yale School” of literary criticism centering on Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man, and such post-structuralist French thinkers as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The great number of quotations and misquotations, uses and misuses of Derrida’s assertion that there is no *hors-texte* has been indicative over the last two decades of the liveliness and importance of the debate about textuality. On the threshold to the next century, thinkers are starting to probe the limits of an approach that implies a need to choose between either textuality or its rejection. Having learnt the lessons of the recent debates, we seem ready to break out of a dichotomy which, though having functioned as an enabling factor, needs to be challenged in order not to freeze into dogma. This reassessment of an issue which resists categorizations and definitive answers allows in particular a reconsideration of the extra-textual, that is of the relationship between texts and languages and the *hors-texte* of their users.

The essays published in this volume address these concerns from a variety of angles. They were first presented or, – when *force majeure* intervened – had been intended to be presented at a conference of the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English (SAUTE) on 28/29 May 1999 at the University of Geneva.

Tony Crowley’s investigation of the politics of language examines the use made by colonialism and nationalism of a certain conception of the connection between language, thought and identity. His analysis of Newspeak in *1984* enables him to show how Orwell’s naive understanding of the relationship between language and thought fails to recognize that language is “a site of contestation and battle rather than staticity and fixity” (22). Crowley demonstrates that post-colonial literature is dependent upon, shows awareness of and enacts this contestation.

Through an analysis of *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *Ulysses*, David Spurr identifies the limits of textuality at “those points where the text conceives of itself, or of any other text, as an object sent forth into a material world beyond its own boundaries” (27). In Proust’s and Joyce’s reflections on the nature of reading, Spurr perceives “the death of the reader as a certain kind of historical figure” (32). Also concerned with the impact of modernism, Bernard Schlerick conceives of the limits of textuality as the “chance encounters between reality and artistic creation” (51), showing how Manet, Breton, and others inscribe within their works the coincidence of desires, fantasies, and obsessions with the unpredictability of the *hors-texte*.

Contending that “the revisiting of naturalism in recent literary studies is in large part motivated by the problematic status of agency in contemporary critical theory” (53), Otto Heim argues that the concept of agency is best understood as a part of an action as opposed to a quality inherent in a subject. He questions the legibility of historical reality and its textualization, since historical agents can be unaware of “the unconscious and symptomatic articulation of the logic inscribed in their affairs” (56). In his exploration of Frank Norris’ fiction, he highlights the tension between a desire for control and for incorporation of disparate representational forces on the one hand and the acknowledgement of the limits imposed by unpredictability on the other. The central tension Margarita Chourova investigates in her essay on Iris Murdoch is that between the author’s explicit disagreement with the tenets of post-structuralist thinking in her theoretical writings and the display of features of post-structuralist textuality in her novelistic practice, in particular in *The Sea, the Sea*, “to an extent suggesting a deliberate textual strategy” (78). The textual strategy of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is, according to Boris Vejdovsky, that it is itself an exploration of the limits of textuality where “a thin and fragile narrative thread is drawn and stretched to, or even beyond, the limits of its possibilities and resistance” (95). Vejdovsky shows not only that *Moby-Dick* highlights its own texture, but also that it is the novel’s very closure which delimits the “outer non-textual, non-narrative, non-fictional, space” (95).

Comparing some of the most influential interpretations of Wordsworth’s lyric poem “A slumber did my spirit seal,” Ian MacKenzie shows the limits of readings that do not try to “co-operate with an author” (132) but instead invest the text with the critics’ own identity. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s relevance theory serves MacKenzie to show that “for literary communication to take place, a text must be inferentially combined with optimally relevant contextual assumptions – which are those envisaged by the writer”

(120). What underlies Lukas Erne's investigation of Shakespeare's possible Catholicism and the light it can throw on his early play *Titus Andronicus* is the belief that assumptions about a canonical writer inevitably inform (or distort) the criticism of his works. This creates the need for a careful reconsideration of the writer's biography (or mythography) that may have been shaped more by an ideological prejudice than by a disinterested evaluation of the evidence. Approaching Shakespeare from a different angle, Pascale Aebischer tackles the limits of that textually least stable of all literary forms, plays. She shows that the Shakespeare plays we read and watch today are the result of such multi-layered agency to render the notion of limits distinctly problematic. Believing that the discussion of modern performances "will continue to gain strength as a legitimate form of criticism" (170), Aebischer argues for a theoretically informed rather than an impressionistic approach for which she helps to supply an adequate critical terminology.

In her essay on the epistemological limits of such a phrase as "Quantum Textuality," Elizabeth Kaspar reflects on the incompatibilities that prevail between those discursive practices that treat the world itself as text and those which distinguish text from world more or less absolutely. When Max Planck, in 1900, solved the puzzle known as the black body radiation problem, he did not change a law of physics: he discovered and corrected a mistake or misconception "in the formulated human version" of a law "independent of, while ultimately accessible to, human observation and formulation" (179-80). Kaspar argues that the *how* of Planck's action resists narrative: his solution to the puzzle must be made "in the realm of pure mathematics, an emphatically unnatural world of constants and absolutes which eludes the very language that must be overturned in its service" (180).

Ranging from the textuality of Shakespearean drama to that of quantum mechanics, the topics addressed in this volume are constrained by few limits. This eclecticism seems significant insofar as the various contributions are united by critically engaging in one way or another with a concept of textuality that, though informing our thinking and writing, looks retrospectively like a self-imposed limitation. We may only be beginning, then, to appreciate the possibilities awaiting us beyond the limits of textuality.

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Guillemette Bolens

Reference

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980*. Brighton: Harvester, 1982.