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**TEXT AND AUTHENTICITY:  
EXAMINING THE TERMINOLOGY\***

THE SUCCESS OF RESEARCH in, and application of, a discipline such as bibliography depends crucially on the existence of a common vocabulary — a shared understanding of that special language we use. In bibliography we have no agreed definitions. For a variety of reasons, use of bibliographic terms is peculiarly characterized by ambiguity, misuse, and downright contradiction. Before we can even begin to talk with confidence about forgeries, facsimiles, and piracies — about licit and illicit works and documents, we need an agreed vocabulary with which to do it. My intention in this paper is not to supply answers — to provide a readymade lexicon — but to seek out the right answers: to interrogate a sample of our present vocabulary, to identify areas of limitation and weakness, and to ask how, or whether, these may be overcome.

My argument will consist of three parts. First: Etymology. I shall take some key words and examine their origin, noting how this has influenced our current usage, building in connotations which we take for granted. Second: Validity. From this examination I shall draw out some general conclusions on how we conceptualize Authenticity and question how appropriate these concepts are to the concerns of our discipline. Finally, I would like to put forward not definitions, but suggestions on how such an enabling terminology might be arrived at, if at all. If at times it seems as though I am hostile to the very idea of bibliographic investigation, be assured that this is only in my capacity of devil's advocate (a printer's devil's advocate, of course).

Let us examine the derivation of some of these words we use so freely.

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**Forgery**

The first sense quoted by the *OED* is naturally 'the craft of forging metal'. The second sense, by extension, is that of 'invention, the creation of a fiction or artifice', without any negative implication. Thus Wycliffe's 1382 translation of Ecclesiastes refers

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\*A revised version of a paper read to members of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand at their annual conference, 27-28 September 1991.

to ‘God, that is forger of all things’. It is only in the sixteenth century that the third sense is found, the fraudulent imitation of something, especially the falsifying of a document, and the principal source given is Blackstone’s *Commentary on English Law*, where he refers to ‘forgery or the *crimen falsii* . . . the fraudulent making or alteration of a writing to the prejudice of another man’s right’. We can immediately note two things about the term then. It originates as an act done to a manuscript. It thus presupposes that any document is wholly unique and that anything which pretends to that uniqueness is illicit. From this understanding has persisted into the Print Era, where it is much less appropriate, the association of validity with singularity. The second thing to note is that Blackstone writes not simply of ‘fraudulent making’ but of ‘fraudulent making to the prejudice of another man’s right’. In the tradition of English law, his first concern was with the concept of Property, and forgery was a crime for prejudicing this.

We should remember that well into the seventeenth century, at least, copying remained a principal means of transmitting information, for legal, administrative and commercial as well as literary purposes. It was only unique signed documents (that is, those with some financial value) which were thus regarded as forgeable. In the days before effective law enforcement and the keeping of central records, giving one’s word-of-bond — or its equivalent, the *authorizing* of a document by seal or signature — was a vitally important act. No wonder forgery was regarded as a hanging offence; it was not some dilettante white-collar crime, but one which threatened a basic transaction upon which society depended.

### Piracy

The primary sense of ‘robbery at sea’ dates from the 1400s at least, but it is the secondary sense which interests us: ‘the appropriation and reproduction of an invention or work of another for one’s own profit, without authority’. Once again this is of interest for two reasons. The term is a product of the Print Era. It concerns ‘appropriation and reproduction’. The earliest usage recorded in this sense dates only from 1771, and of the related term, ‘pirate’, from 1688. *The Tatler*, in 1709, wrote, ‘These miscreants are a set of wretches we call pirates who print any book as soon as it appears in a smaller volume, and sell it (as all other thieves do stolen goods) at a cheaper rate’. Like ‘forgery’, then, it is a term originally specific to a particular documentary form: the printed book. The second point of interest is also shared: piracy is described as unauthorized reproduction ‘for one’s own profit’. Once again, morality follows property. We should note, too, that ‘unauthorized’ does not necessarily, by any means, refer to the author of a book. Until the passing of the Copyright Act of 1709 at least, an author would commonly receive (if anything) a single payment from a publisher; thereafter, all profit accrued to the latter. Indeed, it was only with the Act of 1814 that authors were, for the first time, recognized as statutory beneficiaries of their products. Until the eighteenth century, therefore, it was mainly the pocket of members of the Stationers’ Company which was hurt by piracy, not the author’s living or — the gods forbid! — THE TEXT.

This brings us to the third word I’d like to examine. Whereas ‘forgery’ and ‘piracy’ carry with them the baggage of past usage, there is another term which —

more than any other — seems to acquire a new meaning every time it is used: ‘text’. One never knows how it is being used. And if we cannot agree on ‘text’, how can we agree on ‘what-is-not-the-text’? And I am certainly not the only one who feels this way. Witness Louis Hay’s essay, ‘Does “Text” Exist?’ The question sounds facile, but in fact is very difficult to answer. We are all familiar with the growing nomenclature of the copytext, the version-text, the genetic text, the production text, the pre-text, and — inevitably — the apres-text. And, as Hay writes:

Invoking the social aspect of the text means placing it within an historical context, which at the same time brings into question the fluctuation of cultural norms and the variations of our own criteria. We now accept, as texts, many works which in the nineteenth century would have been regarded as mere files . . . rough drafts . . . or collages of quotations.<sup>1</sup>

We have come to accept, too, the notion of other media — of films, maps, even the Australian and New Zealand landscapes — as texts. Hay can even write of the text as a near-mystical presence, as ‘a necessary possibility, as one manifestation of a process which is always virtually present in the background, a kind of third dimension of the written work’.<sup>2</sup> (I wonder what Walter Greg’s comment on that would have been?) But there is more to it than proliferation of meanings and terms. There is a genuine and dangerous confusion of meaning, which subverts, even corrupts, scholarly activity. This was scathingly exposed in Thomas Tanselle’s ‘Textual Criticism and Deconstruction’,<sup>3</sup> in which he took essays by five notable deconstructive critics (including de Man and Derrida, *inter alios*), and showed how each hopelessly misuses the word, even on their own terms, and renders it useless. Yet even Tanselle’s understanding of ‘text’ here has been taken to task and contradicted by Jerome McGann. If two such established and influential bibliographers cannot agree on this core concept, what hope do the rest of us have? Let us turn in desperation to the *OED*’s description:

The wording adopted by an editor as (in his opinion) most nearly representing the author’s original work; a book or edition containing this; also, with qualification, any form in which a writing exists, or is current, as a *good, bad, corrupt, critical, received text*.

This begs more questions than it answers; there are so many qualifications and riders, it reads as though it were written by a lawyer! This singularly unhelpful entry is of interest, however, for the prevalence of manuscriptal examples. In fact it is as late as 1891 before a recognizably modern, secular usage is recorded. Before that it seems to have been used exclusively in Biblical and Classical research to denote the pristine, corruption-free versions scholars were attempting to establish. Thus ‘text’ carried, and indeed still carries, a connotation of absolutism: the pursuit of the Holy Grail, or the Mare’s Nest, of the original text. This association is surprisingly difficult to discard. No one is more closely associated with the concept of the genetic text — some would say notoriously — than Hans Walter Gabeler, editor of the Garland synoptic edition of *Ulysses*. Yet for all his years of work recording the metamorphosis of the novel through successive versions, what he ultimately produced was another single authoritative text which displaced — temporarily as it turned out — the former one. And we find Gabeler writing in his introduction that he believes

this edition represents most closely what Joyce actually wrote. Is Gabler really claiming here that his final text corresponds to those actual marks on the page made by Joyce when writing what he *really* meant? No, what Gabler means by 'what Joyce actually wrote' refers to an ideal, hypostasized text — one that Joyce never actually saw. One suspects it means the *Ulysses* Joyce would have written if only he'd been tidier, preferably with a professional bibliographer at his elbow to point out the 'mistakes'.

If we look at how these three key terms in defining authenticity have been, and continue to be, used, the following general observations can be made. First, they emphasize the notion of *Exclusivity of Texts*. That is to say, they set up an often misleading and simplistic opposition between the good text and bad, corrupt, inferior, and generally naughty texts. Second, they emphasize *Singularity of Authority*. It is common-sense that most literary works are written by a single author, but there is a sense in which this fact can become a cult — as though this were always the most important thing about a work, defining how all other aspects of it are judged. And third, their basis is in *Establishing Social Power Relations* — whether by straightforward commercial advantage, or by the privileging of version-texts which reinforce the dominant ideology of the period.

A technical vocabulary should surely reflect the needs and preoccupations of its users. Ours, it is surely fair to say, are either the content or the documentary form of texts (as objects of study for literary analysis, the history of the book, and of human communication). This being the case, we must ask whether it is appropriate to continue using, without stern re-examination, a terminology largely defined by those with quite different preoccupations: namely, the monopolistic, establishment-supporting congers of the Stationers' Company; and those for whom the one true text is a platonic ideal, unsullied by the sordid circumstances of publication.

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Having arrived at these three attributes of our terminology, let us open up the argument, and use them to question how valid is our conception of authenticity. What of this Exclusivity? The intentional authority of legitimate editions by no means always has empirical support. Comparison of 'authoritative' first editions with the holograph copy from which they derive will frequently show wide disparity in spelling and — more importantly — punctuation. George Bernard Shaw once said that the strongest urge in humanity wasn't sex, wasn't to fight, and wasn't even to eat; it was to alter someone else's copy. This is an urge which seems to be particularly strong in printers. We should remember too that illicit editions may on occasion reach a wider audience than their legitimate counterparts. Think of the period after the 1709 Act, from which Ireland was exempted. Dublin publishers produced a veritable armada of pirated editions which made their way across the Irish Sea to compete with the proper London editions. These Irish books were deliberately designed as cheap reprints of popular editions, to appeal to as many people as possible (the same policy, after all, as that of Aldus Manutius, or the paperback pioneers of the nineteen-thirties). This motive, and the subsequent effect on

typography and design, on production and distribution, makes the Dublin piracies of particular interest. While recognizing the narrow, contemporary, legal status of legitimate editions, therefore, we should be wary of according them exclusive authoritative status beyond that criterion.

What of the second attribute of authenticity: Singularity of Authority? We are quite properly concerned with who wrote a particular book, but how we interpret and use this is another matter. Undue emphasis on authorship necessarily focuses attention on misleading assumptions of intentionality, and distracts attention from other contributors to the meanings of a work: editors, publishers, censors, printers of course, and — most importantly — readers. Where there is mis-ascription or forgery, this should naturally be taken into account, but these factors placed in the framework of that text's existence as a public document. In contrast to the black-or-white view of who did or did not write a book, it is instructive to see how the authenticity of paintings is graded by art experts. At the major auction houses, a kind of sliding-scale operates. A work is not simply *by* or *not by* an artist, but is described in one of up to a dozen ways. The *Sotheby's* list of Cataloguing Terms is fascinating:

*By Giovanni Bellini.* In our opinion, a work by the artist. This is an opinion only, not a statement of fact.

*Attributed to Giovanni Bellini.* In our opinion, *probably* a work by the artist.

*Studio of Giovanni Bellini.* In our opinion, a work by an unknown hand in the studio of the artist, which may or may not have been executed under the artist's direction.

*Circle of Giovanni Bellini.* In our opinion, a work by an as yet unidentified but distinct hand, closely associated with the artist, but not necessarily a pupil.

And so the list goes on: *In the style of . . .*, *In the manner of . . .*, *After Bellini*. This displacement of attention from the author to the work is humorously, and revealingly, considered by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story: 'Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*'. In this tale, Borges's hero sets out to write Cervantes's novel again, but as his own original twentieth-century work:

He did not want to compose another *Don Quixote* — which would be so easy — but *the Don Quixote*. It is unnecessary to add that his aim was never to produce a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce pages which would coincide — word for word and line for line — with those of Miguel de Cervantes . . . Menard . . . has enriched by means of a new technique the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading: the technique is one of deliberate . . . and erroneous attributions.<sup>4</sup>

Is Pierre Menard to be considered a forger, a plagiarist? With a completely straight face, Borges quotes exactly the same passage twice — once from Cervantes, once from Menard — and draws two utterly different readings from it (or is it 'them?'), because

of the quite different connotations of words and concepts in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. He usefully reminds us here that the author's identity has to be less important than the content of the text and how it operates at different times, under different circumstances. Exploitation of, and borrowing from, other people's work is as old as literature itself, of course, and far predates the self-conscious practice of it by post-Modernist authors. One recent work is worth drawing to your attention, though, published in 1985 by the New York novelist Kathy Acker: *Don Quixote*.

The third attribute of Authenticity we can identify is its implication in establishing power relationships in society, through commercial or ideological means. It is surely not making a controversial point to state that the main motive of establishing authentic, legitimate editions has always been to protect the income of publishers, and only latterly of authors. It is only common-sense, too, to accept that the versions of texts authenticated and promulgated at any time serve to authenticate, in turn, the ruling ideology of that period. This process is inevitable. The interesting thing to note, though, is that this aspect of authenticity is document-centered.

The Print Era is now fairly well-defined: from the third quarter of the fifteenth century to the third quarter of the twentieth century. Before this time, when communication was oral or manuscriptal, each text of a work was unique; each transcriber or re-teller added their own layer of meaning to the palimpsest. To speak of 'an authentic text' from before 1450 is, strictly speaking, an anachronism. In our own time, not only is most of the information we use in our daily lives already held in magnetic form, vast efforts are being expended to convert our literary corpus into this medium too, notably at the Oxford Text Archive. The advent of hypertext also means that multiple versions of a single work may be made simultaneously available, without privileging any one of them.<sup>5</sup> Once again, then, the authenticity of a particular text-version is becoming an anachronism, just as it was before 1450. What we must understand, then, is that our concept of authenticity belongs to a limited historical period and is dependent on a technical accident: that the print medium involved mass-production of identical, saleable artefacts — books — whose distribution could be closely controlled for reasons of profit and ideological conformity.

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We have now looked at a few important key words in defining authenticity, and seen that they share certain attributes. We have examined these attributes and seen how historically-dependent, highly qualified, and even misleading, the terminology can be. What can we do — finally and briefly — to make 'Authenticity' a more rigorous and useful concept? There can be no question that a far more exact terminology is required, not only to discuss the authentic, but for the whole field of bibliographic study. We could start from scratch and invent a whole new vocabulary, although there is surely enough jargon floating around already without adding to it, if possible. Another way is to seek out the concepts we need to use, in a pragmatic functional way, and then assign — as far as possible — appropriate existing terms to them:

codifying and promoting these definitions as agreed international standards. In an impressive recent essay, Peter Shillingsburg puts forward a whole taxonomy of texts, in which physical documents take their place within a framework of 'Text as Matter, Concept, and Action'.<sup>6</sup> This certainly seems the right direction to take, but more formal action is necessary if a nomenclature is to gain worldwide acceptance. There already exist other global bibliographic standards: IFLA's UNIMARC for the exchange of machine-readable records, and AACR2, the cataloguing manual agreed on by the Library Associations. Would it not be useful if the principal Bibliographic Societies, the Rare Book Groups of the Library Associations, and the Antiquarian Booksellers' Associations, formed a new committee for standards to sit alongside these others: establishing a common bibliographic terminology by which to register authenticity? Only then, perhaps, would a bibliographer in Canberra, a bookseller in Dunedin, a palaeographer in London, and a deconstructive critic in Chicago, all be able to write the word 'text' and all actually mean the same thing. If our knowledge of human nature — especially among bibliographers — makes us sceptical of such a project, there nevertheless remains value in raising these issues: for it is only by constant questioning of the words we use that they retain their utility and crispness as terminology, while participating in language's fluidity and marvellous, incessant re-invention of itself.

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#### NOTES

1. Louis Hay, 'Does "Text" Exist?', *Studies in Bibliography*, 41(1988), 64-76 (p.71).
2. Hay, p.75.
3. Thomas Tanselle, 'Textual Criticism and Deconstruction', *Studies in Bibliography*, 43(1990), 1-33.
4. Jorge Lois Borges, 'Pierre Menard, author of *Don Quixote*', in *Fictions*, edited, and with an introduction, by Anthony Kerrigan (London, 1965), pp.42-51 (45, 51).
5. Paul Morgan, 'Hypertext and the Literary Document', *Journal of Documentation*, 47(1991), 373-388.
6. Peter Shillingsburg, 'Text as Matter, Concept, and Action', *Studies in Bibliography*, 44(1991), 31-82.

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