Central Concepts in Editorial Theory

What Is a Text, Attempts at Defining a
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circumscribe terminologically the experience of editors that a work of recent literature is almost always transmitted in multiple form. The text of a work presents itself to the editor in multiple revised versions; it must therefore be understood and editorially interpreted “as an historical process,” with all textual versions achieved within this process being in principle equally valid. To emphasize this insight, pivotal to all editorial activity, Scheibe argues that indeed for the author no such equal validity exists; every textual version achieved during the development of the work shows “the work in each case in the state in which the author wanted it executed or was capable of executing it.” However, with the author’s death, his or her value decisions are superseded by the “historical dimension,” within which the editor must consider author and work. The editor surveys the “entire process [of development of the work] comprehensively” and then “breaks it down into concrete steps.”

With this argument Scheibe relieves the editor of the allegiance to the author’s final decisions, which, inevitably canonizing the “final revised version” (*Ausgabe letzter Hand*), tend to obfuscate—as the example of Goethe amply teaches—the historical access to the earlier works in an oeuvre. Russian Formalist Boris V. Tomashevsky already emphasized this historical dimension and played it off against the speculative nature of authorial intention: “It is not important where the author aims, but what end he reaches.”

For Tomashevsky, the text as an “historical fact” carries its significance in itself. Correspondingly, there can be no development of the work aimed toward a final goal, no “best text.” All stages of a work’s development are in principle equal; “Every stage of a poetic work is in itself a poetic fact.” At the same time, every transitional stage of a work remains bound within the textual development, and is part of the text as dynamically conceived. Just as any given stage incorporates preceding stages, so does it generate continued development. With this argument Tomashevsky became one of the most important forerunners of modern editorial theory; without explicitly establishing the connection, Scheibe’s reflections logically continue this position, which no editorial activity today can afford to overlook.

Nevertheless, the advocates of the first notion of text have not fallen silent. Contrary to Scheibe’s definition of text, Friedrich Dieckmann contends—in a controversy over the “Berliner Ausgabe” of Friedrich Schiller’s collected works—that it lies “in the nature of the work, that it, as a work, always exists in only one single version.” All transmitted variants belong to the single, closed text that the editor has to edit—and they must hence appear in the apparatus to the edited text. Against the idea of the equal validity of all versions Dieckmann pleads for the “more developed product” and, in a later “Response,” cites Schiller: “All that is human must first become and grow and mature, and shaping time leads it from form to form.”

Karl Konrad Pohlemann also utilizes such appeal to a classical ideal of beauty (clearly enough betraying its origin in the biological metaphor) in his polemical debate with the genetic editorial school: “Little suited to the aesthetically minded reader, the genetic text is just as unsuitable for the interpreting researcher who must, after all, begin from one version.” Pohlemann sees in a dynamic or even historical concept of text the “rejection of the text as a valid poetic work of art.” In his opinion proponents of such conceptions fail to recognize that “the basis for aesthetic interpretation” is only a single, closed version: This “basis [...] I call the *aesthetic* text.” Yet the notion of aesthetics posited here has little more to justify it than the reference to reading habits in perceiving literary works of art. Admittedly, an editor must not disregard readily ways of perception, grounded as they are in intellectual history; yet the model of editing derived from an expanded concept of text takes precisely this fact into account. Just as undeniable is the editor’s duty not only to secure the received record, but also to mediate new impulses to aesthetic perception. The playing off of an “aesthetic” against a “genetic” concept of text—especially in view of a rather unreflected argument about the “aesthetic” character of a literary work—bars an approach that a historical-critical complete edition can open. What follows will show how genetic editing frequently presents the aesthetic aspects of a text, its guiding poetic laws, more clearly than does a closed version.

Pohlemann’s appeal to the reader contrasts with that of Herbert Kraft, whose position Pohlemann rejects. Although Kraft both regrettably neglects to define explicitly the central concept of text in his “Theorie der Edition” and accepts as his guiding principle the “historicity of literary texts,” text for him means not the entirety of the received records for a work, but rather the isolated form of an individual textual version. Kraft also appeals to the aesthetic character of the text when he emphasizes that in principle the editor must edit a fixed text and separate off variants into the apparatus. Only the “text” printed on its own can represent and render practically visible the artistic form: “Artistic form is only perceptible and realizable in the ‘text,’ because only the ‘text'
sion of meaning is perceived (that is, interpreted) at the same time. The implications of every semiotically grounded concept of text is all the more valid within the narrower circumference of editing. Indeed, the consequences for a determination of editorial activity are still more far-reaching: The concern here is not, as in the acts of normal reading and interpretation, to construct a dimension of meaning for a given text carrier, but rather exactly the opposite, namely to constitute the text carrier from the assumption of meaning. Be it a case of subjecting to textual criticism a corrupt printing, or of constituting a text from a manuscript sheet covered with scarcely legible drafts, the text, and thus the text carrier presented by the editor, can be established only on the basis of interpretations of meaning. The dialectics of the concept of the sign, manifest in particular in the Peircean interrelationships of sign carrier, interpreter, and object, make fluid in editorial activity what is otherwise considered fixed: the text carrier.

Let us recapitulate our semiotic grounding of the editorial text: Text, as a complex sign, as an inseparable relation of signified and signifier (Saussure), or as a dynamic structural relationship of sign carrier, interpreter, and sign object (Peirce), is always in fluid motion, and, from the point of view of the interpreting recipient, is never completely fixable. This is true in the field of editing as well as in all other areas in which literary texts are the object of analysis. The closed text, printed in isolation, is a state lifted out of a virtually infinite process, an establishment based on a specific interpretation (by the editor or also, as we shall still see, by the author) in an act which is necessary but always unsatisfactory. Especially in the case of the textual version, established or given prominence by the editor, the "text matrix" printed in the edition, despite the philologist's efforts toward objectivity, is inevitably shaped by a given interpretation. Just for this reason the editor does well to re-capture the variability of the text in the edition whenever possible, despite the necessary fixations. An author's labor on a work may itself be considered as the articulation of the dynamic relationship between text carrier and meaning. The process of textual formation visible in the corrections and revisions of variant textual versions would then be interpretable as the precipitation of a textual meaning in constant flux.

The above definition of the concept of text as a sign sheds light on the inevitable dialectics of text carrier and textual meaning. Consequently, it seems logical to lead up to and supplement the definition of the editorial concept of text by Scheibe (in this volume):

Text from an editorial point of view is a sign whose structure is characterized by a dynamic interrelationship between text carrier and textual meaning determined by the user of the sign and by the respective associated field. The changes that a text carrier undergoes in the course of the revision of a work by the author are the expression of this dynamic interrelationship in the text. The text of a work consists therefore of the texts of all versions...

This expansion makes it no longer sensible to speak, as hitherto, of the editing of manuscripts, of printings, and so forth. Manuscripts and prints are only the carriers of the received record, the "witnesses," they provide the basis for establishing texts. The editor constitutes the text from them on the basis of the available materials. Not only the establishing of the so-called "edited text," but every editorial processing of the material contained in the witness documents is "text constitution" in terms of the concept of text developed here. Scheibe has very clearly described the text-constitutive work of the editor in his fundamental essay on the concept of text:

An editor's capability manifests itself in the ability (which is also a duty) to envisage a manuscript covered with corrections in its pristine condition, as a blank sheet of paper, in order to recognize and establish as far as possible how this sheet was, step by step, covered with letters and symbols, with "text," and how and why some parts of this text changed and others remained constant. The editor must therefore see the concrete development process—that is, be able to retrace and comprehend it; the editor must also interpret it—that is, be able to describe and present it.

Such reasoning also makes clear that the interpretive activity of the editor extends over two different areas. First, it means the comprehension of the textual meaning; without attempts at interpretation the individual "letters and symbols" on the sheet cannot be read and—above all—cannot be determined as belonging to one text combining all individual signs in itself. From the point of view of the recipient, reading as a perception of the text is nothing other than an assigning of meaning; only through this act can the editor separate texts on one sheet as belonging to different works, for example. Secondly, in the editorial analysis of a witness document, genetic interpretation of what has been
becoming." The sign system is opened up again and again and transferred into the infinite movement of "signifying," the giving of meaning, through the organized nature of the text that finds its expression in the continual exceeding of the "classical prohibitions," in the exceeding of linguistic law and of logic. When as a result the text is described as a "coexistence of monological (synthetic, historic, descriptive) discourse and a discourse that destroys this monologism," there appears behind this functional model not only a Bakhtinian "dialogism," but also Jan Mukařovský's characterization of the aesthetic literary function as a "dialectical negation" of the communicative function of language. This dialectical base-structure of Kristeva's semiotic model above all enters into the idea that the text functions on the basis of its ambiguity, its inherent opposition of "phenotext" and "genotext." The "phenotext," the surface level that fully displays the laws of the predicative language of everyday communication, through exceeding the "prohibitions," breaks open the fixed structure to the openness of "signifying," producing thereby its own negation, the "genotext," which is "production, that is significature itself as 'operation of the production of the phenotext.'" Kristeva establishes in summary that "the specificity of the text is based on the fact that it is a translation of the genotext into the phenotext, demonstrable in reading through the opening of the phenotext towards the genotext."

Kristeva's critique of the concept of the sign in relation to the concept of text has become the starting point for many spokesmen of recent French literary criticism and philosophy. It reflects a marked discontent with strictly defined order and structures, and the critique's often extreme positions—as Michael Werner has made clear—can be explained only in terms of the specific intellectual and cultural tradition in France. For the study of texts it has led to a privileging of the writing process (écriture) over the finished product of the writing (écrit), to the establishment of a "critique génétique" that positions itself alongside traditional textual interpretation. Louis Hay has described the consequences for editorial theory in an essay with the provocative title "Le texte n'existe pas."

The methods of "critique génétique" show that the border between the text and its preliminary stages is fluid. The criteria of textuality (social validity in publication, linguistic coherence, "authorial intention," and actualization in the act of reading) can no longer be derived from a fixed point (the "text"), but rather encounter the variable field of the dynamic genesis of the text.

A series of editions prepared in France pay homage to Hay's canceling of the concept of text: The meticulously formatted reproduction of Paul Valéry's notebooks, or the large-scale project of the "brouillons proustiens" testify to this abandonment of the fixed text in favor of a reproduction of the flow of writing, and of the finished work in favor of the genesis of the text. In their editorial stance, the proposition of a dynamically grounded editorial practice that I made almost twenty years ago appears to find a retrospective justification.

And yet my concern in introducing the poststructural concept of text is different: For on closer observation the concept of the sign as such is not put in question by Kristeva's argument—she still sees herself as a "semiologist"—but rather only the development of Saussure's model in systematic linguistics. Kristeva opposes a semiotic concept of text to the rigid classification of signifiant and signifié, and, in her emphasis on "signifying," on the operation of assigning meaning, shows a certain affinity to the Peircean approach. But at the same time she goes an important step beyond Peirce's position when she describes the literary text as a dialectical interaction of diverging forces, a view that offers an interesting starting point for a clarification of the editorial concept of text. For Kristeva's does not abandon the static concept of text but rather makes it the basis of the new definition. Precisely because the text is a fixed sign in the traditional sense and at the same time breaks or negates the sign, and unfolds its productivity in this tension, it cannot be reduced to one pole of this dialectical movement. It is both static and dynamic, is itself a unity of opposites. And if Hölderlin described the "great word, the έξωθον ευτοκό (the one differing in itself) of Heraclitus" as virtually the "essence of beauty," the aesthetic dimension of such a dialectical structure of the literary work now emerges out of the competing static and dynamic forces. These reflections mean that, with regard to defining a concept of text for the purposes of editing, the question of choosing between the first or second notion of text is not properly posed. Neither conception precludes the other; together they form a unity in tension. Only a complex concept of text that expresses the combination of fixedness and unlimited motion, of syntagmatic closure and paradigmatic polyvalence, can do justice to the artistic nature of a text.
leading to a broader-based focused division of the child. One part
is however, the detection of the concept of text (thought not text)
and related to this is the division of the concept of text and
the verification of the concept of text. The second part
involves the analysis of the text, the exploration of the
textual relationships and the division of the concept of text

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to document the total textual development, the other to give prominence to the “fixed” texts, e.g., the textual versions privileged by the author in fair copies or printings. Yet the basis of every such edition is the genetic representation of the total transmission of the work. Only a complete working out of the textual genesis can justify emphasizing fixed textual versions derived from it.

In principle, the genetic documentation should also be reproduced in its totality in an historical-critical edition. The recently developed procedures of synoptic representation—used for example by Hans Zeller for Conrad Ferdinand Meyer’s poetry, or suggested by Gerhard Seidel for a future Brecht edition—offer the possibility of displaying the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes jointly within one system of representation, in keeping with the concept of text presented here. Where synopsis cannot be applied, for example in cases of wider variance between versions or of extensive repositionings, the syntagmatic connections always take priority over the paradigmatic variance of individual passages. In these cases the accompanying description of the textual development correlates the separate textual levels to inform the reader of the changes. In answering to the dynamic conception of text, the synoptic reproduction of textual development offers the additional advantage of leaving the text “in flux” and of not fixing it in structural relationships in situations where either the author came to no final decision, or else the record allows no clear assignation of variants to specific levels and stages. A good genetic edition must aim at bringing into view not only the temporal succession, but also the spatial insertion and juxtaposition of variants as trial formulations.

Though I myself represented it as such in an earlier essay, emphasizing an individual established form of the text is not just a concession to the reader accustomed to reading fixed texts. It also wholly corresponds—in a motion contrary to that of the flow of writing—to the tendency of texts toward fixity and final form. Almost every author will conceive of a literary work with a thought to relinquishing it, and during composition will intend a text sufficiently achieved to be published. The editor must document in an edition the author’s assessment of the work as “final,” as to be released for public distribution (even if such an assessment is often soon enough reconsidered), and must treat differently the textual versions singled out by the author, and the representation of the genesis of the text.

Given the various possibilities for realizing this aspect of the concept of text, the editor must decide whether to incorporate the fixed textual form into the genesis of the text, or to reprint it in a separate part of the edition. The integration into the representation of the complete textual development—by typographical emphasis, even color printing of a specific textual state, or by a summarizing and emphasizing separation of a form of the text as achieved at a given point in time (as for example in the Frankfurt Hölderlin edition)—doubtless has the advantage of making the reader directly aware of the interrelation of the static and the dynamic. By contrast, reproducing the fixed text in a separate part of the edition in the hitherto customary way remains a concession to the recipient’s reading habits and will in practice amount to sacrificing the opportunity of opening up new ways of understanding. The editor will have to combat the danger of the reader restricting him- or herself to the perception of the finished text, and will have to invest considerable effort into comments and additional explanations to make clear to the user its dialectical connections with the textual genesis represented in another part of the edition.

It will not be possible to implement fully this theoretically based model of an edition of the text-genetic and text-arresting relationships in every case. Compromises will have to be made; foreshortenings of the comprehensive conception will be unavoidable. However, whatever the reductions, the double orientation of the text, namely the unity of balanced closure and of a simultaneous forcing open of this fixeness, should be represented editorially. In clarifying this double tendency of literary texts, the historical-critical edition has an opportunity that has hitherto rarely been realized. It can, through its design, alert the reader of texts to something that is not self-evident in today’s modes of literary reception. It would be desirable for this reception potential of literary texts to receive attention outside the narrow area of literary scholarship. The conceptual adoption of such editorial reflections in recent study and reading editions is a hopeful sign.

NOTES

Revised version of a lecture at the International Editing Colloquium in January 1989 in Berlin (DDR). I thank above all Klaus Kanzog, Michael Werner, and Hans Zeller for stimuli supplementing and clarifying the ideas presented here.


3. In differentiating terminologically between reading (Lesart) and variant I follow the widely accepted usage suggested by Siegfried Scheibe on several occasions. In the "Editorische Grundmodelle" that Scheibe put forward for discussion at the Berlin Editing Colloquium (1989) and that were to a large extent developed from the "Grundlagen der Goethe-Ausgabe," laid down in 1961 in manuscript, the terms are circumscribed by the following definitions: "Variants are deviations in and between authorized witness documents or between these witness documents and the edited text. They comprise words and punctuation as well as differences in form. ... Readings (Lesarten) are differences in and between unauthorized witness documents or between such documents and authorized witness documents or the edited text. They comprise words and punctuation as well as differences in form." On this distinction cf. also Siegfried Scheibe, "Von den textkritischen und genetischen Apparaten," in Vom Umgang mit Editionen: Eine Einführung in Verfahrensweisen und Methoden der Textologie, ed. Siegfried Scheibe et al. (Berlin [DDR]: Akademie-Verlag, 1988), 85-159, here 101.

4. For instance, Herbert Kraft: "Readings are, in relation to text, components of equal validity, and are themselves components of the text; they document the text at a specific point—the editor interprets that record. Variants, on the other hand, are components of a different text, they document its difference from the compared text" (Die Geschichtlichkeit literarischer Texte: Eine Theorie der Edition [Hebenhausen: Rutsch, 1973], 24).

5. Compare Siegfried Scheibe's definition: "Textual versions are completed or incomplete executions of a work that differ from one another. They are relatable to one another through textual identity and differentiable from one another through textual variance. ..." ("Zu einigen Grundprinzipien einer historisch-kritischen Ausgabe," in Martens and Zeller, Texte und Varianten, 17). Even after the Berlin colloquium devoted to this theme in particular, the precise discrimination "text/work" remains a desideratum.


8. Especially in his essay "On the Editorial Problem of the Text" translated in this volume. Cf. also the works of Scheibe cited in nn. 3 and 5.


11. Scheibe chooses this more extensive formulation in his reply to a criticism of Friedrich Dieckmann's, "Ein notwendiger Brief," Sinn und Form 36 (1984): 205-10 (here 207). For a criticism of this notion cf. n. 40.


15. "Poete! i kniga: Czech tektologii (The Author and the Book: Outline of a Textology)" (Moscow: Izkusstvo, 1928; 1959), 98ff. I thank my assistant Thomas Wigger for the translations from this fundamental work, which has unfortunately not yet appeared in a Western language.

16. The proximity of Scheibe's concept of editing to Tomashovsky's ideas is evident precisely in the rejection of an only speculatively ascertainable authorial intention: "The editor can only rely on that which has materialized from the intention of the author; it is impossible to reconstruct what the author only thought" (Scheibe, "Editorial Problem of the Text," 205). For Scheibe, nevertheless, the author is merely the principal of a work and thus always remains the point of reference for every scholarly edition.


22. Polihheim, "Ist die Textkritik noch kritisch?" 328.

23. On this topic see the argument in this essay, below.

24. In particular where Polihheim speaks of the author as "the aesthetic authority" (326). Apart from the fact that this argument is not further clarified, from an editorial point of view the author's "authority" is meaningful only