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## Reading Typos, Reading Archives

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# ARCHIVISTS WITH AN ATTITUDE

## READING TYPOS, READING ARCHIVES

Steven Mailloux

**A**rchivists with an Attitude” sounds like a complaint to an old-style historian and like a redundancy to a newfangled theorist. A complaint to the historian because archivists don’t have attitudes, they have methods, and copping an attitude is inappropriate for any disciplined researcher. A redundancy to the theorist because being an archival researcher *is* an attitude, perhaps a problematic one but nonetheless an acknowledged practice within an intellectual tradition, and taking an attitude goes with the territory—it’s not an optional stance but a necessary condition. However, between the scolding historian and the trivializing theorist, straw men both, there are archivists with *rhetorical* attitudes toward history and theory and their interrelation. In what follows I will talk about one such “attitude”: something I call rhetorical hermeneutics. The little history I tell is a rhetorical replay of a rather brief and hardly noted confrontation between two archival practices: scholarly editing and deconstructive reading. Doing this history allows me to make certain theoretical points about archival research and to do so from a rhetorical perspective. That is, I use rhetoric to practice theory by doing history (see Mailloux, *Reception Histories*).

To be more exact, I’m going to discuss the exciting topic of reading typos as an example of archival work. As I present it here, reading typos is a practice within textual scholarship, the material and interpretive history of textual documents, which is a rather venerable if now somewhat overshadowed tradition of humanistic research and pedagogy. I begin with two examples of typo reading and then quickly pass on

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to some general claims about editing as a paradigm for critical interpretation. In the rest of my remarks, I develop only a couple of these claims by discussing in more detail the second of my opening examples of reading typos, an example that is part of my history of an archival confrontation between editing and deconstruction, textual scholarship and poststructuralist theory.

My first example of typo reading is among the most famous in editing lore: F. O. Matthiessen's 1941 tour de force in the *American Renaissance*. In his interpretation of *White Jacket*, Matthiessen praises Melville for his surprising trope, a "soiled fish of the sea," and claims that "its unexpected linking of the medium of cleanliness (water) with filth (soiled) could only have sprung from an imagination that had apprehended the terrors of the deep, of the immaterial deep as well as the physical" (392). As many of you know, Matthiessen makes a rather egregious scholarly error here, for he carelessly reads a typo for the truth. Melville almost certainly wrote "coiled fish"; this is what appeared in the first edition, and it was some unknown compositor who mis-copied this as "soiled fish" for a later reprint of *White Jacket*. Matthiessen's archival negligence in relying on a popular reprint edition has often been used by textual scholars as a warning to would-be interpreters who ignore the textual history of the version they are using in their critical studies. Note that the Matthiessen passage ends with a distinctive binary: "the immaterial" versus "the physical," a figurative opposition that is more generally important to archival research, as I will attempt to show.

My second example of typo reading employs some of the same rhetoric as its more famous predecessor. Here I quote from G. Thomas Tanselle's 1990 essay, "Textual Criticism and Deconstruction," published in *Studies in Bibliography*. In a footnote to his discussion of Paul de Man's essay "Shelley Disfigured," Tanselle points out a possible typo in the sentence "Is the status of a text line the status of a statue?" He notes:

It seems unlikely that de Man meant to say "Is the status of a text line the status of a statue?", for a "text line" would seem to mean a unit or building block of a text and would therefore not be parallel with "statue," a whole work. The matter must remain uncertain, however—as indeed, the constitution of all texts of works is uncertain. (31 n. 16)

In this qualified way, Tanselle proposes amending "line" to "like." Later, I will return to this proposal and the theoretical argument of which it forms a part, but for now I wish to build on the next sentence in Tanselle's footnote: "This typographical error, if it is that, illustrates the necessity for deciding on the makeup of the text as a part of the act of reading."

Tanselle's claim nicely fits a general argument I want to make about textual editing as the paradigm for critical and historical interpretation. If "deciding on the makeup of the text" is an unavoidable act within every reading, then can we not say that a kind of editing takes place—by omission or commission—in every textual interpretation? It has always been a mistake, I think, for textual scholars—including

those who cite the Matthiessen typo reading—to argue merely that responsible editing is a necessary *preliminary* to sound criticism. Rather, it would be better to say that editing *is* criticism and history, both in the sense that editing is an extension of the same rhetorical activity of interpretation that results in published arguments establishing a text's literary and historical meaning *and* in the sense that editing provides a model for understanding many of the most important aspects of all interpretation, the rhetorical establishment of textual meaning. I agree with the view—shared by such different editorial theorists as Tanselle, Hershel Parker, Jerome McGann, and D. C. Greetham—that editing involves interpretation and not just some mechanical process of scientific reconstruction. Indeed, editing is perhaps the best example of interpretive practice we have. It explicitly demonstrates several characteristics of the interpretive process: (1) its materiality; (2) its embeddedness in traditions of theory and practice; (3) its institutional and cultural locations; and (4) its involvement in rhetorical politics constituted by arguments over ideologies, professional and other.

I cannot develop such observations in detail here, but let me make just a few explanatory comments. Whether based on replicating a communally published artifact or on reconstructing the author's final intentions, the concrete text produced in editing exemplifies the materiality of all interpretation. To interpret is to translate materially one text into another. Such acceptable and approximating translation is the exact description of the editing process (see Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*). This process always takes place within a tradition represented materially by the archival evidence being used to establish the latest editor's text. This editor's activity is embedded in an interpretive history, which includes the textual history of the work, and he or she carries out the act of editing within this history while located within the specific disciplinary context of editing procedures, beliefs about authorship, assumptions about discursive practices, views of publishing, and so on (see Rosmarin; Fish; Mailloux, *Rhetorical Power*). And, finally, the interpretive act of editing is unavoidably situated not only within the rhetorical politics of debates about, say, a writer's biography or stylistic development, but also within larger ideological controversies involving race relations, class hierarchies, and gender differences (on the rhetorical politics of reception, see Machor; Cain). Editing as archival work instances the more general political claim made by Derrida in his recent *Archive Fever*; and I will presumptuously allow his deferral to stand in for my own. He writes:

Of course, the question of a politics of the archive is our permanent orientation here. . . . This question will never be determined as one political question among others. It runs through the whole of the field and in truth determines politics from top to bottom as *res publica*. There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation. (4 n. 1)

Now, let me try to develop a couple of my points about editing and archives by returning to the typo pointed out by Tanselle. You will remember that Tanselle proposes correcting “line” to “like” in de Man’s sentence, changing it to: “Is the status of a text like the status of a statue?” Tanselle follows the amended sentence with the remark: “If [de Man] had pursued this question, he might have extricated himself from his confusion, for he would have recognized that the medium of literature, unlike that of sculpture, is not tangible and that no tangible rendering of a piece of verbal communication can be the work itself” (9). Here Tanselle is elaborating on the central opposition used in his critique of deconstruction, the opposition between “text” and “work,” which is in part dependent on a more basic distinction between “material” and “immaterial.” Tanselle argues that a literary work is immaterial while a work of sculpture is material and further that texts (arrangements of words) in material documents are the instructions for constituting immaterial works. He criticizes de Man and the other contributors to the famous 1979 collection *Deconstruction and Criticism* for not respecting these distinctions, and in this particular passage he criticizes de Man for failing to pursue a question about poems and statues that might have clarified the distinction between immaterial works and material texts.

Let’s look a little more closely at Tanselle’s rhetoric, beginning with his antithesis of text and work. Tanselle’s central claim seems to be that the text of any document is not the work itself. The text simply gives instructions for each reader to reconstruct the ideal entity in his or her mind that was, for example, intended by the author. Thus, for Tanselle, the text of any particular verbal work does not necessarily exist as such in any single documentary text. There are weak and strong versions of this claim. The weak version is that every text of a document must be read by a reader to be understood, and the experience of this reading is different from the text itself or more exactly from the experience of simply perceiving a document ready to be read more thoroughly as a text. The weak version of Tanselle’s text/work thesis is simply the useful reminder that there are different temporal moments in the reading process, e.g., perceiving a document, reading its text, establishing its meaning as a work, and so forth.

I note in passing that the definition of text and work assumed in this weak version of Tanselle’s claim almost exactly reverses several semiological and post-structuralist uses of the terms. That is, whereas here text=material object and work=immaterial interpretation, some critical theorists claim that work is the material and text the interpretation. In 1971, for example, Roland Barthes wrote in “From Work to Text”: “the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language” (157). Twenty years later, Peter Shillingsburg established a similar distinction when he noted that Barthes’s term “work” corresponded to his own term “Material Text” and Barthes’s “text” to his “Reception Text,” the latter being “conceptualized by the reader in the act of reading” (56–57 n. 31; 81; see also Mowitt).

Nevertheless, despite this history of contrary usage, Tanselle's redefinition of terms does not vitiate the weak version of his argument.

But the strong version of Tanselle's thesis is another kettle of soiled fish altogether. It claims that there is an immaterial ontological existence to a work that transcends its representation in any material object. For Tanselle the work somehow exists in an ideal realm independent of its textual manifestation in a published or unpublished archival document. Moreover, Tanselle goes on to suggest that scholars cannot be certain they have reached this ideal realm of works in the way that, apparently, they can be certain about the material realm of documents. I find this textual platonism difficult to fathom. The commonsense view that different material texts do seem to represent contrasting versions of the same work can be acknowledged without resorting to an ideal realm of the immaterial Work. For example, one might agree with Shillingsburg when he claims that "The term *Work* and the title *Moby-Dick* do not refer to a thing, an object, but rather to a class of objects." He adds that "a Work is in important ways both plural and fragmented" (47–48). Or one could go even further in rejecting Tanselle's idealism and agree with Jerome McGann, who has said that "far from representing an 'alien' condition for messages, it seems to me that 'the physical' (whether oral or written) is their *only* condition" (qtd. in Greetham 9 n. 14).

Be that as it may, Tanselle attempts to support his material-text/ideal-work distinction by a related one: the difference between verbal works, like literature and criticism, and physical works, like painting and statues. Unlike verbal works, statues are material entities in which material texts and immaterial works occupy the same space, according to Tanselle (*Rationale* 21–33). I realize that this difference sounds right at first hearing, but it is just as problematic as the text/work distinction. All we have to do is start noting examples of etchings or bronze statues produced in multiple versions. But even if we talk about single paintings or statues, differences in time and place make for differences in works, that is, differences in interpretations and experiences of these artifacts. I see no qualitative difference between a manuscript or book existing in one copy and a statue existing in one copy. All have to be interpreted and experienced by readers/observers. "Is the status of a text like the status of a statue?" Yes, sometimes it is.

Which brings me back to reading the de Man typo. In his commentary on Tanselle's essay, D. C. Greetham argues for the reading "text line" over "text like." Or rather, he rereads Tanselle's reading as "humorous" and then carries on in the same vein. He writes that Tanselle's footnote on the emendation of "like" for "line" is

both salutary, and in its irony, very funny, a play with the text reminiscent of the elaborate textuality of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. And entering further into the spirit of this editorial play on the text in the deconstructive essay, one could perhaps suggest that, according to the classical doctrine of *lectio difficilior probior est* ("the more difficult reading is the more moral"), the "text line" reading, because of its seeming opacity (but not complete implausibility) is more likely to be authorial than compositorial. (12–13)

Let me use this pseudo-controversy over reading a typo to conclude these remarks. “Is the status of a text [line or like] the status of a statue?” I have already employed de Man’s question to punctuate my questioning of the usefulness of the work/text and the verbal-text/material-statue distinctions in theory. But what about in practice? Is Tanselle right in claiming that texts of verbal works are finally indeterminate because one cannot be as certain about them as texts of statues? Is Tanselle’s decision to amend the de Manian text any less determinate than placing a statue in a museum and calling it “the work”? He seems to claim as much when he says that the correctness of his proposed emendation of “line” to “like” “must remain uncertain, however—as, indeed, the constitution of all texts of works is uncertain” (31 n. 16).

I would suggest a different conclusion: “Certainty” is relative to rhetorical context. That is, certainty about the correctness of Tanselle’s proposal depends on the argument made for the emendation proposed, the disciplinary protocols holding in the community in which the argument happens, and a host of other rhetorical factors. Accordingly, I would make the following argument in support of Tanselle’s proposed emendation and against Greetham’s playful defense of the first published version.

De Man was on sabbatical from Yale in 1978 when a staff member of his department typed the manuscript of “Shelley Disfigured.” This typescript was sent to an editor at Seabury Press in New York for inclusion in the volume *Deconstruction and Criticism*, which was published in 1979. The typescript contains corrections in de Man’s own hand, and the typescript version of the problematic sentence reads “like” instead of the first published edition’s “line.” When “Shelley Disfigured” was then reprinted in de Man’s posthumously published *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, the sentence again reads “like,” even though the printer’s copy for the essay was the publisher’s version in *Deconstruction and Criticism*. What happened? De Man died in December 1983, and proof sheets of the essays were sent to Andrzej Warminski and two other colleagues in March 1984. They used the original typescript to correct the proofs of “Shelley Disfigured” and changed the page proofs’ “line” back to the original typescript’s “like.” Case closed. At least for the moment. Playfully or not, I claim that this historical evidence, including an archival typescript that is as material as any statue, helps me to settle the dispute between Tanselle and Greetham and settle it in as determinate a way as any setting up of a statue in the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. You see, it’s all in the rhetoric, whether theory or history, texts or typos.

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