Material text, immaterial text, and the electronic environment[1]

Kathryn Sutherland
St Anne's College, University of Oxford, UK

Abstract

Digital modes of editing ask us to re-examine the past century of editorial theory and to situate emerging editorial approaches within this history. Using the computer as a new textual medium has brought about a renewed interest in the conditions for representation. This article concerns itself with how books and computers, respectively, represent texts, and how critical editing mediates or organizes those representations. It was written in 1997 as a critical response to J.J. McGann's essay 'The Rationale of Hypertext'.

Correspondence:
Kathryn Sutherland,
St Anne's College, Oxford,
OX2 6HS, UK.
E-mail:
kathryn.sutherland@
st-annes.ox.ac.uk

This essay was written in 1997. It has not been significantly updated but reflects that particular moment in the debate on electronic text

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It seems timely to situate certain aspects of our current preoccupation with the electronic storage and manipulation of textual states within a larger and older debate about texts, and to do so as part of an attempt to reflect upon the determining conditions of electronic representation. A great deal is said nowadays, in celebratory and alarmist style, about the computer as a new machine of knowledge; what is proposed for consideration here is something less heady: how a renewed interest in the conditions for representation, which the computer as a new textual medium inaugurates, might be made to serve a critical understanding of the structures of representation. As a topic for examination, this has more to do with the question of what are computers (or books) good for than with the implied question to which the celebrants and alarmists alike respond—are computers (books) good? I invoke the book as representational medium alongside the computer because, just as it is no mere coincidence that our relatively new attention to the History of the Book is co-eval with our recognition of the computer as a text processor and not just a number cruncher, so our attempts to comprehend just how computers represent texts are highly dependent on an understanding of how books do it. This is reinforced by the fact that when we create an electronic text, we are still quite likely to be determined in our representational choices by the representational filter of the book—most obviously in the form of some physical instantiation of the text which we have in front of us, in a book, and which functions as the Thing to be represented, the Real Thing (rather than as an alternative representation); more subtly, as the notional reality or meta-form of an original intention which has been compromised in its commercial production, a slippage occurring, as it were, between the book in its conceptual or ideal and its vehicular states. We may know that a writer's relation to the printed and published book is not identical to a painter's relation to a completed canvas, but we have tended to assume that it means to be. The subjects I want to touch on, then, have to do with representation—with how books represent texts, with how critical editing mediates or organizes those representations, and with how computers represent texts, and whether they are all representing the same Real Thing, with varying degrees of success or failure.

Literary and Linguistic Computing, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2009.
doi:10.1093/llc/fqn033

My starting points are two opposed positions on the modern textual condition which in fact share a fundamental assumption. One is the unself-consciously elitist and unregenerately Coleridgean thesis propounded by George Steiner in his book-length essay of 1989, *Real Presences*; the other is the more generously socialized and liberal formulation variously offered in the course of the 1990s in the critical writings of George Landow, Robert Lanham, and Jay David Bolter, and in the editorial statements of electronic archivists Peter Donaldson and Jerome McGann. Steiner's belief is that the electronic representation and therefore wide (Steiner assumes a connection here that is not in fact unproblematic) promulgation of literary texts destroys their aesthetic power in the interests of a false immediacy of delivery; the Lanham, Donaldson, and McGann view is that to computerize is to transcend the contingencies of circumstance and to gain access to a fuller textual (and perhaps aesthetic) record. For Steiner, for whom 'real presence' is theologically rooted in the condition of 'real absence' or more properly in 'the real absence of that presence', what is at stake in the electronic storage, retrieval, and circulation of culture in the form of literary texts is our capacity to imagine their absence and so to internalize their meanings (what he refers to as the 'ingestion' as distinct from the 'consumption' of texts). He writes, '[t]he danger is that the text [in the computer] . . . will lose what physics calls its ''critical mass'', its implosive powers within the echo chambers of the self.'[2] As this quotation suggests, Steiner's argument is impelled by the now familiar terms of the critique of postmodern critique and poses a challenge to consumerism as socially and individually determining in the form of a belief in the integrated self, which is all the more urgent because it may only be through the encounter with great works of art that self comes into being.

For the celebrants of the new textual environment, it is the computer's capacity to store text as what cultural historians call 'thick' representation (and text encoders might call 'rich' or 'deep' representation) and to enlarge and proliferate the textual grain in various ways (through multi-versioning, enhanced digital imaging, interactive collation, etc.) which constitutes a new understanding of 'real presence'. Writing of the polytextual and multimedia Shakespeare Electronic Archive then under development at MIT, and as if countering the danger Steiner forsees, Peter Donaldson argues that the 'dynamic, transformative quality of the composite environment of the computer screen makes against passive immersion in illusionist space', through its '*oscillation* between abstraction and realistic representation'; while in another essay, 'The Rationale of Hypertext', Jerome McGann challenges the selective editorial principles of Walter Greg and the New Bibliography with a new agenda, one which, he argues, is more faithful and accountable to the productive conditions (and reproductive limitations) of multiply-intended documentary states as well as to the internal and external relations of certain textual works. As befits an essay in consciously revisionary relation to a 'general theory of copy-text', McGann's hypertextual rationale depends upon the proliferation of discrete examples which themselves share no common features. He cites the example of Emily Dickinson as an author whose work is badly served by what he calls a 'typographical edition' because 'the genres that determine the aspirations of her work are scriptural rather than bibliographical', and he cites the example of William Wordsworth as one whose complex revisionary practices are impossible to reproduce adequately in the context of a 'codex-based scholarly edition'. Both, he argues, are among those many authors (he cites Blake, Burns, and the unlikely Laetitia Landon) whose work is 'seriously hampered' in its edited representation 'by the limits of the book as a critical tool'.[3] All will be better served by the hypermedia electronic archive. I return to the cases of Wordsworth and Burns later.

What is at stake, on screen and off, appears to be the possibility of a heightened textual encounter (for Steiner, in the heart and mind; for McGann, on the computer screen/*via* the computer memory) which is premissed in each case upon the capacity to overcome the material constraints upon text and to reconstitute its immanence under controlled conditions of material absence. Both McGann and Steiner are concerned in their arguments with the book as vehicular form and with the conditions for the *reception* of text, not of its creation. However, for

Steiner the book as textual container implies none of the threat to 'critical mass' that computerized dissemination raises; while for McGann the limitations of the book form as analytic tool mean that it can be deeply inauthentic in its textual dealings. Interestingly, the difference points to an important continuity between the traditional paper and the electronic investment in texts—what might be formulated, crudely at this stage, as a concern with the relation of parts to wholes, of material parts to ideal wholes. Getting close, getting closer, getting even closer to the represented thing is what the cultural commentator, the literary critic, the text editor, and the electronic archiver all tend to believe lies behind and, of course, justifies, their diverse procedures.

2

I want to turn now to one obvious shared ground for these apparently opposed positions over the conditions for textual representation: romantic ideology, whose concern for the unitary subject finds expression in the ironic logic of the fragment, the simultaneous site of failed textual recuperation and of aesthetic transformation. Romantic literature can be described as detail on the grand scale, an absorbent detailism which through careful local deployment subsumes those conceptual wholes which prescribe its ambitious philosophical or aesthetic agendas. This project involved romantic writers in a revaluation of the detail. In the literature of romanticism, detail (as presence) is legitimated by a rule of appearance through which it annexes the whole (as absence) to itself. Many statements of what we recognize as the romantic case in literature can be read as rescue bids, attempts to override the debasing material gravitation to the detail—as mere detail—through recourse not to an objectivity, the other pole of a dialectic that opposes the transcendent to the immanent, the general to the local, but to a subjectivity which is total in its situatedness, thoroughly rather than contingently grounded—a detailism that is neither relative nor disconnected but co-extensive with the whole. Accordingly, among the main devices of the romantic case are the fragment and the symbol, which through an ironic failure of representation succeed more powerfully than representation. They substitute—in the recuperative ideation of the fragment, in the intensity of the symbol—an assumed totality for the less effective, the compromised, work of realized production.[4]

It is worth reminding ourselves that the deeply held resistance to the tyranny of social-fashioning lying at the heart of this idealizing procedure is often figured in romantic writings as an associated annexation or rejection of the book as a suspect instrument of knowledge. This highly defensive strategy, born of a material recoil, has been much rehearsed, within romantic and contemporary argument, as the consequence of a series of changes in the conditions of cultural production occurring in the course of the eighteenth century and involving, among other factors, improvements in the dissemination of literature and in the means of its mechanical reproduction, in the growth of mass reading audiences, and in the commodification of cultural relations.[5] Romanticism positions itself in critical relation to all these.

The romantic writer acknowledges the hegemony of literature but deplores the consumer cachet of the printed text, the partiality, as he sees it, of its contents, and the suborned agency of its structures, through which the to-be-known is pre-empted by the already known and truth is bartered for accessibility or superficial variety—so much so that he situates his creative labour outside the economy of books. This is a recurrent, if somewhat curious procedure, in which the incarnational written text repudiates in advance its vehicular print form. In Book 12 of the 1805 *Prelude* (Book 13 of the 1850 version), a continuation of the previous Book, 'Imagination, how impaired and restored' ('Imagination and Taste, how impaired and restored' in 1850), Wordsworth sets the instructive power of the poet's 'intellectual eye' against the intoxications of a world of 'present objects', and the naturalizing properties of 'a work of mine/ Proceeding from the depth of untaught things' against 'books [which] mislead us . . ./Effeminately level down the truth'.[6] This bibliographic recoil, itself the sign of a conjoined unease about mass

literacy and the seductiveness of the mere detail, has an Enlightenment and (predictably) a gendered ancestry. In Book 5 of *Emile* (1762), Rousseau equates femininity and reading as twin aspects of a contingent socialization that jeopardizes and confines the abstract powers of the male; in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Adam Ferguson opposes the book as instrument of knowledge to the activity of understanding: '[T]he knowledge of books', he claims, shackles the intellectual energy in a commercial society and inhibits the freedom of 'the inquisitive or animated spirit', which impels writing.[7] For Ferguson, at the other end of the continuum from Derrida, it is the beginning of the book that signals the end of writing. For Wordsworth, it is only the naturalization (as opposed to the socialization) of knowing that resists commodification (as feminization and confinement) by grounding the work of writing in the revisionary subject, the self sustained over time through the authenticating act of rewriting. His deferral of publication—of being brought to book—is well-attested, as is his sister Dorothy's substitutory practice of copying and recopying manuscript versions.

For Hazlitt, in essays like 'On Reading New Books' and 'On Modern Comedy', the task becomes one of negotiating between a pre-linguistic integrity of vision, the direct outcome of 'personal and local attachments', and a centralized distribution of experience through books which fetishize words by removing them from—substituting them for—their referents.
He writes:

> It is, indeed, the evident tendency of all literature to generalize and *dissipate* character, by giving men the same artificial education, and the same common stock of ideas; so that we see all objects from the same point of view, and through the same reflected medium;—we learn to exist, not in ourselves, but in books;—all men become alike mere readers—spectators, not actors in the scene, and lose all proper personal identity.[8]

Coleridge's attack, in Chapter 2 of *Biographia Literaria*, upon the printroom, scene for the stereotypic replication of surfaces, in which a levelling iteration deputizes for individual knowing/the knowing individual, is familiar. Less familiar, because undeveloped, is his early proposal to Joseph Cottle, the Bristol publisher of *Lyrical Ballads*, for 'an Essay on the Metaphysics of Typography'.[9] One of the many essays Coleridge never wrote, it suggested itself at a time when he and Wordsworth were actively engaged with the typographical features of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* (negotiating for ink quality, depth of margins, lines to the page, etc.). It can be imagined as an extended enquiry into the possibility of reconciling intellectual and material text, incarnational and vehicular form, whereby bibliographic codes ideate *and* substantiate the 'One Text', something like a resolution of the classic twentieth-century textual critical opposition between the specificity of the social text and the conceptual integrity of the ideal text.

In fact, when Wordsworth and Coleridge name the One Text, they describe, as postmodern thinkers will, a set of multi-form spatial relations—in this case, a building not a book. To Wordsworth the poem that became known as *The Prelude* relates to his great work *The Recluse* as 'the ante-chapel . . . to the body of a gothic church', while his 'minor Pieces . . . when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edificies.'[10] Coleridge, in a lecture of 1818 'On the Manners, Morals, Literature . . . of the (so called) Dark Ages of Europe', explains, after Hegel, how 'Gothic architecture impresses the beholder with a sense of self-annihilation; he becomes, as it were, a part of the work contemplated. An endless complexity and variety are united into one whole, the plan of which is not distinct from the execution'.[11] Unlike the hand-held book, the Gothic work holds, locates, the reader whose identity is absorbed and reconfigured within its expansive and transforming space and as a part of its vital, organic homogeneity, its reconciliation of part to whole. It is an incorporation which implies a new form of self-knowing through textual situatedness, or the presence of the self in the text.

3

Most of the theorizing that underlies contemporary practices of editing modern literary texts is informed by romantic ideology and responds to its driving concern with how parts represent wholes. There was a time, and not so long ago, when the question of literary ontology, the aesthetic problem of how a work exists, was answered in the Anglo-American tradition by a trans-historically applied recourse to an authorial or textual intention which owed much to our identification of the author with the Wordsworthian poet or revisionary genius. By extension, the editorial critical concern with how best to represent that existence established a theory and pragmatics of textual meaning which shifted, with the freight of its romantic assumptions about originality and its suspicion of socially mediated forms, between final and earliest versions. New Bibliography—or classic text criticism as it is now often called, to distinguish it from more recent reconceptions of the theory and discipline of text—is ennobled by an assimilation of editing to the romantic belief in the poet's work of ideal creation or the restitution of that which is lost. Emendation, the select but discrete display of variants, and the eclectic but shaped reading text, incorporating first and last intentions, are the procedures by which a unity of subject (an ideal wholeness which is both work and author) is excavated from its frail material witnesses, its contingent parts, and given substance in another such. The unitary text of the New Bibliographer is justified by recourse to intention rather than circumstance. It is both an intellectual abstraction (text raised to its highest level and evacuated of a certain kind of social determination, usually termed corruption) and a hypostasization, text given substance as concession to the physical.[12]

Impelled, on the one hand, by the attachments of locality and, on the other, by the vast communications networks that deliver and replicate our local desires, the combinatory energies of the postmodern consensus have an obvious relation to the situated transcendence of romantic subjectivity; but it is relation by inversion. What Terry Eagleton called the utopian function of the 'cult of the text'[13] within postmodern discourse substitutes the heterogeneous riot of the multi- and trans-disciplinary for the universalizing inwardness of the One Text. In labelling this rampant textualism utopian, Eagleton, at the risk of naivety, points to its illusory release of the signifier from the constraints of the real and the confiscation of energy (the energy for 'actual realization', for engagement, that is) that this implies: utopias, textual or otherwise, are of course 'no places' as well as 'good places'. The localism of the postmodern, like the local attachment of the romantic imagination, is defenceless against the charge of social disengagement; and this applies equally to the units of local meaning within the electronic textbase—the encoded transcription or the scanned manuscript image—which are not compelled into social relations with one another but forever isolated *and* promiscuously combinable. As in the romantic source, postmodern localism exists under the sign of irony, as a function of a larger imaginary synthesis, one that now replaces metaphysical universals and totalities with globally dispersed informatic systems. The effect is to reformulate the relation of detail to whole as one of detail to ever more detail.[14]

Arguing against both the dominant fashion for unrevised or 'primitive' Wordsworth and the call for a truly plural text (Jonathan Wordsworth suggested sixteen discrete versions of *The Prelude* prior to its 1850 publication),[15] Zachary Leader, in a study of romantic authors and revision, made a deeply unfashionable case for late versions and for an ethics of editing based on the reinterpretation of intention as a 'responsibility to persons'.[16] In this light, late Wordsworth, the revisionary author of the 1850 *Prelude*, is no longer the betrayer or falsifier of his own best intentions but a continually intending poet whose reworkings carry the moral weight of what would in law constitute a last will and testament, with the attendant obligation on the editor to respect these over all other readings. It seems highly unlikely that scholars will respond to Leader's reasoning; far more likely that they will continue to contest the very notion of authorial property in the literary text that Wordsworth himself fought to extend and that underlies a belated appeal to a textual ethics.

Why this seems such a lost cause is because in our postmodern understanding the romantic subject exists no longer under the sign of authorial thrift but of a textual plenitude that refigures the subject as a set of subject positions, interior to rather than anterior to or outside their textual transmissions, with no necessary priority given to one transmission over another, no determining sequence. It is in this way that the discursive postmodern text registers as depthlessness what once was discerned as authorial development, the shaped life. Our own subject positions, as inhabitants of the postmodern social text, mimic this shifting positionality. Not only is the unified author dead but so too is the unified reader and, with the reader, the need for a consensual critical distance from the field of textual production and reception. This is particularly the case in the electronic environment, where the One Text of romantic idealization (and eclectic text editing) becomes the textbase. As the utopian ground (or 'no place') of postmodern situatedness, the textbase is a digital quantification of what in the analogue realm (perhaps for no necessary reason other than economy) must exist under the sign of quality, by which I mean reasoned or justified choice. The textbase replaces conceptual (or economic) wholeness with what Marvin Spevack, in a witty article, described as 'hypertrophy', 'an abnormal increase in size, an excrescence which is essentially additive and cumulative in nature'.[17] Where the eclectic ideal-text edition presumed, in accordance with its Coleridgean antecedents, to tell us *how* to know, through a combination of abstracted and hypostatized textual states, the empowering of detail to the point of superabundance reveals an anxiety about *what* to know, and replaces the implied certainty of general principles with informatic excess, detail at the service of detail, in a hypothesized totality which assures us only of instability and impermanence. (I am, at the risk of provocation, assuming excess to be the *necessary* informing principle in the organization of electronic data—not because there are not some very elegant examples of organizational restraint in the presentation of materials in the electronic medium, but because restraint, like monotextuality or the selective representation of variants, is inauthentic in terms of the capabilities of the electronic medium.)

It is now something of a truism that the computer models and accelerates the deconstructive possibilities inherent in postmodern ways of knowing. As an archiving tool of immense (but often short-lived) power, it stores and gives access to particulars. It works in the service of that detailism which informs the current fashion for closely bit-mapped projects (computerized and not) across a range of micro-centres grouped loosely under the macro-context of cultural studies (and, of course, History of the Book is among these); in their close-grained, data-rich saturation, such projects have appeared to some textuists to give a new priority to the labour and detritus of text editing itself. But the computer also, of course, signals an end, not of editing, but of certain kinds of assumptions about editing. Even under the most idealizing principles, editing has always been the outgrowth of social assumptions whose adjustment then calls for new editions: works which are edited definitively for all time are works we no longer need. There is no reason to imagine, then, that editing will not continue into the computer age. However, the strictures of contingency are likely to operate more powerfully in the electronic environment because of its expansionist agenda—more manuscripts, more transcripts, more digital facsimiles, all the variant forms, etc.—the corollary of which is probably more editorial activity, and certainly more textual critical gestures informing the interpretations of non-editors, and perhaps a more informed selection of particular readings for provisional purposes, but in the service of a distributed model of editing and its aims: in other words, a reinterpretation of editorial activity in the service of local enrichment. This may in fact lead to that genuinely informed and mutually informing exchange that textual criticism and literary criticism have occasionally promised themselves they would work towards, now that the textbase and hypermedia archive together provide the conditions for combining the two activities.

4

As editorial or archival space, the electronic environment, so many of its exponents seem to suggest, implies a resolution of the dilemma of the idealist text critic confronted with the incompatibility of real parts and notional wholes. Electronic editors are increasingly intrigued by the potential to deliver texts whose publication in book form, as they see it, compromises their integrity or diminishes their textual range in some vital way. So argue editors of dramatic texts, like Peter Donaldson, who understands hypermedia resources as the occasion to represent the complex variance of text—written and printed, but also the performance text, the audially recorded text, and the reception text. Dramatic texts, we might agree, are a special case; so, too, though for different reasons, the customized iconic poetry of Blake, and again, for yet other different reasons, the scriptural, homecrafted designs of Emily Dickinson.[18] In the case of dramatic texts, it is the heritable variation of their cultural transmission which is at stake; in the case of Blake or Dickinson, it is the authorial limitation of the signifying process. In the one example, electronic representation maps textual receptiveness to evolution; in the other, it simulates resistance. Either way, electronic representation, it would seem, gets us closer to the real thing.

Where we used to idealize the text we now romance the text. Characterized as excess and as the conflation of high and low culture, romance is, as Henry James nervously remarked in the Preface to *The American*, liberational: 'the kind of experience with which it deals', James continued, is 'experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it'.[19] In generic terms, romance functions as a counter-discourse to history and realism, but also to the rigorous abstraction of the ideal. That process which, beginning in romanticism, caught up the detail in the transvaluation of the local, the anecdotal, and the autobiographical, might be said to have started the work of erosion whereby strategic detailism, after Foucault and Derrida, is now the privileged method of analysis.[20] The romantic concern with the detail simultaneously witnesses to the failure of textual representation (the failure to represent the text as it exists in the mind) and to the compensatory act of holistic creation following that failure: the recuperation of detail through the idealizing project of failed representation itself. Detail thus becomes the effective sign of wholeness, as in the architectural topos of the ruin or its textual equivalent, the fragment, which function as metaphors for the collapse of representation and through which representation is intensified and symbolically superseded. In a further act of displacement, the synecdochic power of the detail functions as its own self-legitimating episteme. Now, detail seduces us from our enquiry into wholeness, no mere substitute for but an annihilation (by which term Coleridge implied 'absorption') of order and shape in the service of an ever richer accumulation and a more privileged insight.

As romance is to idealism so is the practice and rhetoric of much current electronic archiving to eclectic text editing. In a 1998 article, Bruce Graver and Ronald Tetreault set out some of the principles and procedures determining their electronic edition of *Lyrical Ballads* then in development with Cambridge University Press. In Graver and Tetreault's description, the edition would include:

> full texts of all the authorized editions of *Lyrical Ballads* published in the poets' lifetimes, the full text of the unauthorized Philadelphia *Lyrical Ballads* of 1802, full transcriptions of the surviving printers' manuscripts housed in the Beinecke Library at Yale, and over a thousand images of manuscripts and printed pages, including complete sets of the pages of the authorized editions of the collection. Our texts will be fully searchable, according to a variety of criteria, and we will provide images of rare printed variants, such as cancels and paste-ins. No library possesses the range of copies that we will reproduce, and no exhibition, even in the bicentenary year of 1998, will bring them

> together in one place. But in the virtual space of our edition, they will all be present.[21]

Concerned to distinguish their electronic edition from the 1992 variant text printed edition of James Butler and Karen Green in the Cornell Wordsworth, Graver and Tetreault pointed to the absence of a single 'best' reading text and to the dynamic instability of their multiple reading texts as contributing to the new 'understanding of the mode of existence of a literary work of art'. In this view, they argued, interlinked electronic hypertext might provide a practical demonstration of Jack Stillinger's 'theory of ''textual pluralism'', in which a ''work'' of literature becomes an abstract organizing principle around which every physically embodied version (published editions, manuscript drafts, etc.) is grouped, as a text among texts to be viewed both separately and simultaneously with all its cognates'.

What Graver and Tetreault, in fact, proposed as the significant characteristic of the electronic edition is its demonstration of—as opposed to its abstraction of—variance, whereby what features in print as 'the difficult technical vocabulary of bibliographical description', the arbitrary *apparatus criticus* of substantive and accidental change, are given in full as opposed to being selectively schematized. What is interesting in practice about this procedure is the principle of organization it implies for the fully searchable multi-text edition. Where in the eclectic or ideal printed edition a copy-text is selected as the basis upon which to construct the single composite witness which, for the purposes of the edition, then functions as the only text of the work (all noteworthy departures from it being recorded in their textless state), in the electronic edition a 'variant map' substitutes for and inverts the concept of copy-text by anchoring the multiple full-text versions to a record of their identity only. The variant map still functions as a continuous, privileged reading text whose identity consists of a conflation of all witnesses, but it lapses into temporary nonexistence when its shared identity is no longer confirmed, and, importantly, it possesses heuristic rather than definitive status. (As if to emphasize its retained privileges, Graver and Tetreault position their map in the dominant reading position, in the left-hand portion of the screen, running continuously from top to bottom; furthermore, unlike their treatment of the full variant texts, they provide it with line numbering for orientation.) In other words, the variant map is a composite text with omitted as distinct from selected readings; variants are not recorded but described as a means of locating them in their respective full texts, where, of course, they do not function as discrete variants but holistically, as the aggregated textual record. This is not to jettison the principles of collation and emendation, but to turn them on their head, in the process inverting (but not abandoning) the New Bibliographical method of eclectic editing: now the composite text (formerly the physical instantiation of the 'work') functions as the fragment and the variant is given full-text status. This is ingenious both as a critique of the eclectic method and as a solution to its partiality. But it brings its own problems—in particular, problems connected with the degree of expansion that the refusal of a thorough-going system of abstraction requires.

Orientation between and within large masses of variant text makes great demands to do with presentation and searchability on the electronic editor, text-technician/encoder (who may or may not be identical with the editor), and the user (and we are dealing here only with the relatively short texts of *Lyrical Ballads*, not with a sixteen-version *Prelude*). At the moment, screen design (and size) allows for four variant texts plus map to be examined simultaneously in the electronic *Lyrical Ballads*, which means that the holistic variant context can only be viewed selectively, in stages. The method may expose the fragile authority of the eclectic text, but the eclectic text retains its privileged status, only now on the declared grounds of its fragmentariness as opposed to its critical completion. Having exposed, by its capacity for more, the partiality of the eclectic printed edition, the antitheoretic drive which shapes the critique of imagined wholes as the electronic relocation of full variant texts has little intellectual defence against the same charge of partiality, which can still and always be levelled. As David Greetham tellingly phrased the question, rehearsing arguments posed

by Foucault and others, 'how much is ''everything'', and what specific combination(s) of the components of everything engender(s) meaning?'[22] The problem does not go away.

Noting, quite properly, the accommodation between the hierarchized, abstract textual machinery of New Bibliography and the strictures of book as vehicular form, the electronic editor less properly assumes that the conceptualization implied by the one and the limits imposed by the other happily fall together. Consider now these two statements. The first is from G. Thomas Tanselle, the latest defender of the idealist, eclectic method in text editing:

> Verbal works, being immaterial, cannot be damaged as a painting or a sculpture can; but we shall never know with certainty what their undamaged form consists of, for in their passage to us they are subjected to the hazards of the physical.[23]

The second is from Jerome McGann's proposal for an audial hypermedia edition, with musical scores and sung interpretation, of Robert Burns's complete works:

> Burns's work is grounded in an oral and song tradition . . . What if one could have a critical edition of Burns's work in audial forms that allowed one to engage the songs in the same kind of scholarly environment that we know and value in works like the Kinsley/Clarendon edition? An environment allowing one to navigate between versions, to compare variants, an environment able to supply the central documents with a thick network of related critical and contextual information that helps to elucidate the works? What if one could do that? The point is, we can.[24]

What McGann here calls for is not so much an edition of Burns's works as a repository of the materials Burns worked with and from; substituting for Kinsley's printed critical text of Burns's hybrid fashioning of Scots songs an expanded audial archive of the materials at an earlier stage in their transmission, before they were confined, not by Kinsley (whose Clarendon edition is based in many cases on Burns's manuscript texts as he sent them to James Johnson for the *Scots Musical Museum*), but by Burns himself in what we must now view as an act of betrayal or compromise undertaken in regretful compliance with the limitations of the book, not merely as vehicular but as incarnational form. Such textual romancing—McGann's implication that we have found a remedy for Tanselle's Platonic lament over the 'hazards of the physical'—literalizes the highly manipulated disjunction between parts and wholes, the bibliographic resistance that functions as a trope of otherwise inaccessible textuality and that underlies romantic literary productivity *and* eclectic text editing.

McGann's argument by example, or detail, and Tanselle's argument despite detail are each other's obverse: the one founded in the materially resistant symbolism of linguistic signifiers; the other in the collusive interactivity of contextual meanings, specifically the mutual identification of bibliographic and linguistic codes. But relocated into the electronic environment the descriptive force of McGann's influential revisionary approach to textual studies loses something of its underlying rationale. It is not immediately obvious that the shift from book-bound editing to the electronic archiving of text will enhance our sense of situatedness, of text as locatable event, but this assumption is at least implied in the drift from new historicism and a socialized positioning of text to postmodern contextualism of many of its current advocates, McGann among them. Accordingly, the computer represents the most powerful contextualizer we can presently imagine. But the very seductiveness of this manoeuvre, useful at the level of practicalities (computers can store and allow retrieval of multiple versions, as digitized facsimiles, as transcripts, as photographic images, as representations of diversely principled and historically situated editions, etc.), is currently enabling us to ignore just how far the reproduction of the real is itself a source of disengagement or dislocation, or at the very least, of relocation within a technology that possesses its own determining (but so far largely unexamined) materiality. The shift may be from a composite witness of meaning to the freer textual play invited through the electronic manipulation of many witnesses, but at

some level this is merely to resituate the old problem of parts and wholes.

There is something else, too. In a lucid and ground-clearing essay, 'Polymorphic, Polysemic, Protean, Reliable, Electronic Texts', Peter Shillingsburg reached two 'basic conclusions' about works of literary art that for the purposes of his argument he couches in negative terms. He writes: 'first, a work of art is NOT equivalent with a linguistic text of it and therefore changes every time it is embodied in a new medium even though the linguistic text is copied accurately; and, second, a work of art is NOT equivalent with a best version of it but rather is made more accessible in each of its versions by having alternative versions presented in conjunction with it'.[25] Both propositions are compelling, and both can serve to legitimate the electronic as the appropriate, even preferred (in the case of the second proposition) environment for new scholarly editions. Particularly important is the reminder that electronic editions, like their book-bound antecedents, carry codes other than the purely linguistic, and that these are meaning-expressive too. Electronic editions are in themselves newly meaning-expressive and are not simply a means to access the linguistic work in its multiple previous expressive forms. The challenge here is in understanding that representations are never identical and that they cannot be prioritized according to their nearness to a pre-representational (or a previously represented) original.

There is no such possibility as the exact iteration, the exact reproduction of a text: even facsimiles of book texts are no more than an illusion of iterability, in their attempt to displace temporality, to repeat a set of historical configurations. Considered in terms of the social approach to editing, facsimiles are the least satisfactory form of transmission, since their means of production, the network of transmission in terms of which textual meaning is deduced, is deliberately obscured through the intention to present one set of socio-historical circumstances, one textual event, as another. (In this sense, the composite or eclectic text is more honest, in its constitution of a text that never was.) Stated another way, the question is whether the descriptive model, validated through the continuously signifying social process of textual realization, can itself be modelled either abstractly in the shape of a theory or performatively as a demonstration of social editing which is not itself a new edition but a reinstantiation of a particular interaction of the linguistic and bibliographical text. It is tempting to suggest that McGann, recognizing the impossibility of a theory or rationale of social editing, is using the storage capacity of the electronic medium to model a social practice as the antithesis of theory, as excess rather than abstraction. But not only are representations of representations not identical; by McGann's own argument for the power of bibliographic codes to reinterpret a stable linguistic text,[26] the symbolic and signifying dimension of the computer, as physical medium, must resignify the linguistic *and* the bibliographic codes by which text is embodied when that text is imaged or digitized as part of its reproduction outside print culture. From her/his plangent relation to the 'hazards of the physical', the traditional eclectic editor might persuade us that an electronic textbase contains all the documents for the transmission history of a particular work, but a socially sensitive textual critic cannot. For the social critic, to whom the entire field of a work's social production is of concern, the appropriate first step must be the enquiry into the socio-historical ground, the 'determinate circumstances', of the electronically constituted text and how those circumstances refashion meaning. Again, the problem is one of iterability: in what sense the electronic environment can represent hypertextually the heteroglossia of the textual event, or whether it merely archives simulations within a *musee imaginaire*, the textual equivalent of a theme park. There is some appeal in viewing the volatility of the electronic environment as the occasion to evade the deterministic materiality of contexts and instead to experience 'realities' phenomenologically and as a means to share in their social legitimation. But fundamental to a social view of representation must remain representation's non-iterability, its unavailability to re-representation as opposed to new representation. We have yet to see whether our current fascination for textual romancing will take us into new fields of textual knowledge or whether, in truly gothic fashion, we will, with a few rare exceptions,

be content to ghost or hypertrophy the work of its idealizing other.

5

So, then, what are computers good for? I want to answer this by raising a problem of representation and then by countering it with a positive example. While the electronic edition does instantiate its own expressive extra-linguistic codes and can, in some senses, represent the expressive extra-linguistic codes of print-based and manuscript forms, there is a kind of bibliographic meaning that resists electronic representation but yet may be considered as meaning-constitutive. It consists in the meaning generated through implied aesthetic resistance to bibliographic form itself, and it inheres in the availability of the material book as matter; as such it is an area of meaning inaccessible through the digitized representation of page on screen or the stored electronic facsimile.[27] Once certain kinds of resistance are removed, specifically the linguistically informing principle of resistance to bibliographic form, then a potentially vital level of meaning is also removed. In almost all cases, the substitution of one containing vessel for another liberates new meanings in a literary work, but it also closes off others. This can constitute an impoverishment—even an inauthentication—of meaning. This will be the case for those romantic works, like *The Prelude*, where bibliographic resistance is a complexly articulated structuring principle, a condition for hypothesized wholeness; in such cases bibliographic resistance is also a condition of meaning at the linguistic level, for where the physical limitations of text are removed an area of meaning becomes pointless, even inaccessible.

> Oh, why hath not the mind
> Some element to stamp her image on
> In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
> Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
> Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

So complains Wordsworth in the opening lines of Book 5, entitled 'Books', of *The Prelude*. Expressions of desire for and proposals for an electronic scholarly *Prelude* are regularly articulated, and on occasion they draw inspiration from Wordsworth's own hypertextual longings quoted above. When in 'The Rationale of Hypertext' he declares that the *Prelude* volumes of the Cornell Wordsworth have 'put a period to codex-based scholarly editing', McGann is specifically concerned with the editorial advantages of the electronic environment for the display of complex variant forms and not with the potential for liberating the poet's ideational processes.[28] The advantages in terms of polytextual presentation and a complexly searchable assemblage of multiple versions are clear. It will be possible, through word and phrase searches across the many versions, to trace the evolution, at the lexical level, of bookish resistance even as its meaningful condition is banished from the texts. But in divorcing vehicular from incarnational form we will also have unpicked the work's ironic structure, its informing failure of representation. In keeping with his socialized view of text McGann tends to see the computer as storer and representer of bibliographic codes, but he is in danger of denying the book itself its status as bibliographic signifier. For some scholarly purposes this may be of little concern, but it is a significant failure of representation within a definition of electronic text as text which raises to a higher level the expressive potential of text, what McGann likes to call its status as 'metabook'.[29]

This example, based on an integrative or synthetic view of representation, is one that must seriously engage the literary scholar: not only what I here term bibliographic resistance but also bibliographic accommodations (as in the case of the novel) are integral features of the linguistic meaning of texts. If, however, we take an analytic view of representation, things are different. Now each representation—manuscript, printed, electronic—performs the function of analytical leverage over, rather than commentary on, 'realistic' representation: they relate as different definitions of representation rather than as represented copies, and thus provide vantage points on text rather than simulations of text objects.

In the electronic environment, the real work of editing, as the modelling of the relation of a text to its parts or of a group of texts, has shifted from the

literary editor to the electronic encoder. In the electronic environment, text has to be constructed from a more fundamental level, and its composition and decomposition are the subject of more rigorous debate than need impinge on editorial activity in book form. Much like the system of analysis known as bibliographic description, text encoding is theoretically based and presupposes that there can be a science of description which operates by deducing from a range of specific examples and their necessary variations an inferred standard. Where a bibliographic description proposes to investigate and represent scientifically the medium of transmission, text encoding proposes to represent text itself. Both are concerned with how to represent what is absent as present, with how to construe the book/the text systematically in its absence, by a methodical comprehension of what it 'really is', through the observation and classification of particular phenomena. In both cases, it is the very dispersion of location, identity, and appearance that is so significant to the contribution made.[30]

It is the activity of the text encoder that provides the most persuasive (because the most powerful) model for the edition of the electronic era, for it is the activity of the text encoder that determines how the text appears and how it can be used. I wonder if it should worry us that so few literary scholars who will use and even assemble electronic editions will be their own encoders or will understand the rigorous theorizing about what text is that lies behind encoding? 'The most powerful editions of the electronic era', argues Julia Flanders, director of the Brown University Women Writers Project, will be those that use 'text encoding to create models of the text's structure', that use 'those models to morph the text, to reorder the words, align them with other versions, lemmatize them, and so forth'.[31] What she envisages is a conceptual shift, towards an algorithmic expression of textual variance and relationship, based on the structured search and analysis of data, far removed from the vague hypertextual longing, the quintessential literary condition, that we mistakenly attempt to literalize in the electronic medium.[32] In this view, the computerized archive is not so much a repository of full-text printed variants and manuscript transcriptions, the *musee imaginaire* of real presence, as it is the environment in which abstract representations can be generated according to newly determined analytical procedures. This will require us to revise our perspectives on text, to reformulate our theoretic and representational parameters in favour of a true metatextuality, distinct from the polytextuality with which we currently confuse it.

In the romantic articulation of the relation of parts to wholes, the fragment in declaring its fragmentary status brings into cognizance that which is missing, and co-opts it, in its absence, into the conceptual whole. Through the storage capacity of the electronic medium, what we conceived of as a conceptual whole is now declared to be no more than the fragment. Perhaps the next stage will be for the designers and users of electronic texts to reformulate the romantic dialectic of incorporation as part of an understanding of the determining conditions (and limits) for meaning in the electronic environment. The quantitative model for representation that Flanders proposes challenges us to conceive the nature and form of the electronic archive as something other than textual romance, something more like a return to or oscillation back towards (for the one is always invoked in the other), textual idealism or the abstract integrity (with its capacity to impose rationality on structure) of the fragment.

Notes

1 This essay was published as 'Revised Relations? Material Text, Immaterial Text, and the Electronic Environment' in *TEXT*: *An Interdisciplinary Annual of Textual Studies*, **11**; 17–39, 1998.

2 **Steiner, G.** (1989). *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* London: Faber and Faber, p. 10, 39.

3 **Donaldson, P. S.** (1997). Digital Archive as Expanded Text: Shakespeare and Electronic Textuality. In Sutherland, K. (ed.), *Electronic Text: Investigations in Method and Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 193; and **McGann, J. J.** 'The Rationale of Hypertext', in the same collection, pp. 19–46.

4 See **Schlegel, F.** (1957). Eichner, H. (ed.), *Literary Notebooks, 1797–1801*. London: Athlone Press, No. 921: 'even the greatest system is nothing but a fragment after all'. Compare Paul Hamilton's reading of romanticism, in which 'the collapse of

representation becomes its effective supplement when it is reread as the *symbol* of what exceeds representation. Romantic consciousness can now make the boast Marx thought defined ideology, that of ''really representing something without representing something real''. Appearance is always sufficient'. The Romanticism of Contemporary Ideology, in Rajan T. and Clark D.L. (eds) (1995). *Intersections: Nineteenth-Century Philosophy and Contemporary Theory*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p. 312.

5 Among the most comprehensive recent studies of the social and cultural significance of the circulation and possession of goods, and the related ideology of self as reflection of or resistance to social-fashioning, are the three thematically connected volumes gathered under the general title *Consumption and Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, editor-in-chief, John Brewer (London: Routledge, 1993–95).

6 The phrases remain the same in both 1805 and 1850 versions. *The Prelude*, Book 12 (1805), lines 57–59, 205–11; Book 13 (1850), lines 52–54, 206–12.

7 **Rousseau, J. -J.** (1762). *Emile, ou De l'education*, Book 5; **Ferguson, A.** (1767). *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Fania Oz-Salzberger (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 206.

8 **Howe, P. P. (ed.)** (1930–34). On Modern Comedy. In *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 Vols. London: Dent, Vol. 4, p. 12.

9 Coleridge wrote to Joseph Cottle on 4 June 1798, 'I meant to have written you an Essay on the Metaphysics of Typography'. **Griggs, E. L. (ed.)** (1956–71). *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Vol. 1, p. 142. For the poets' concern with the typographical features of *Lyrical Ballads*, see **Boehm, A. D.** (1996). The 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* and the Poetics of late Eighteenth-Century Book Production. *ELH*, **63**: 455–7.

10 'Preface' to *The Excursion* (1814).

11 **Foakes, R. A. (ed.)** (1987). *Lectures 1808-1819; On Literature*, 2 Vols, In *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Vol. 2, p. 60.

12 **Greg, W. W.** (1950–51) provided the most influential statement of the position in 'The Rationale of Copy-Text'. *Studies in Bibliography*, **3**: 19–36, where he outlines the procedures by which the eclectic text is to be arrived at. Subsequently, and through a long career (especially in his editorship of *Studies in Bibliography*) Fredson Bowers injected a moral scientism into Greg's approach; a late statement on eclectic editing can be found in **Bowers, F.** (1992). Notes on Theory and Practice in Editing Texts. In Davison, P. (ed.), *The Book Encompassed: Studies in Twentieth-Century Bibliography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 244–57.

13 **Eagleton, T.** (1996). *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 17–18.

14 The point has been made in several accounts of the postmodern turn in scholarship. See, for example, **Liu, A.** (1990). Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail. *Representations*, **32:** 75–113; and **Simpson, D.** (1995). *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

15 Referred to in **Wu, D.** (1991). Editing Intentions. *Essays in Criticism*, **41**: 3.

16 **Leader, Z.** (1996). *Revision and Romantic Authorship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 77; see also **Reiman, D. H.** (1993). Modern Manuscripts and Personalist Poetics, Ch. 6 of *The Study of Modern Manuscripts: Public, Confidential, and Private*, The Lyell Lectures in Bibliography, 1989. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. The charge of 'textual primitivism' has been levelled at recent Wordsworth editors by **Stillinger, J.** (1989). Textual Primitivism and the Editing of Wordsworth. *Studies in Romanticism*, **28:** 3–28. Unlike Leader, however, Stillinger calls for a destabilized editorial treatment of textual versions whereby 'early' or 'late' are not mutually exclusive choices but contributors to a 'more fluid notion of literary authority' (p. 27).

17 **Spevack, M.** (1996–97). The End of Editing Shakespeare. *Connotations*, **6**(1): 81.

18 **Donaldson, P. S.** Digital Archive as Expanded Text: Shakespeare and Electronic Textuality. In Sutherland, K. (ed.), *Electronic Text*, p. 181–3, especially: ' ''The text'', then, can be as capacious as all of its versions in all media and in all times and places' (p. 182); McGann's 'Rationale of Hypertext' relies heavily on the resistant practices of Blake and Dickinson.

19 **James, H.** (1909). 'Preface' to *The American*, in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, New York Edition. London: Macmillan, Vol. 2, p. xvii.

20 **Foucault, M.** (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 139–41, argues for a history to be written about 'the detail'; while Derrida's obsessive concern [see, for example, *Dissemination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981)] with the marginal details of

text—borders, epigraphs, post-scripta—provides a revaluation of textual detail that some critics have argued betrays a level of intellectual irresponsibility.

21 I refer here and in the next few paragraphs to **Graver, B. and Tetreault, R.** (1998). Editing *Lyrical Ballads* for the Electronic Environment. *Romanticism On the Net*, **9.** <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/electronicLB.html> and to the interactive prototype pages available at that site.

22 **Greetham, D.** (1996). Textual Forensics. *PMLA*, **111**: 44.

23 **Tanselle, T. G.** (1989). *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 93.

24 **McGann, J. J.** The Rationale of Hypertext. In Sutherland, K. (ed.), *Electronic Text*. p. 26.

25 **Shillingsburg, P. L.** (1993). Polymorphic, Polysemic, Protean, Reliable, Electronic Texts. In Bornstein, G. and Ralph G. Williams (eds), *Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 35.

26 See **McGann, J.** (1991). What Is Critical Editing? *Text*, **5**: 15–29, on the textual authority of bibliographic codes, their impact on meaning even when linguistic codes remain unchanged, and on 'the symbolic and signifying dimensions of the physical medium through which (or rather *as* which) the linguistic text is embodied'. The critical response to McGann's paper (and to his implied method) by **Howard-Hill, T. H.** Theory and Praxis in the Social Approach to Editing. *Text*, **5**: 31–46, is also pertinent—in particular, Howard-Hill's remark that the distinction between 'linguistic' and 'bibliographical' codes in McGann's argument is 'not precise' (p. 34).

27 Cf. **Nunberg, G.** (1993). The Places of Books in the Age of Electronic Reproduction. *Representations*, **42**: 15: 'it is precisely because these [electronic] technologies transcend the material limitations of the book that they will have trouble assuming its role'; and 18: 'A book doesn't simply contain the inscription of a text, it *is* the inscription.'

28 **McGann, J. J.** The Rationale of Hypertext. In Sutherland, K. (ed.), *Electronic Text*. pp. 37–8.

29 **McGann, J. J.** The Rationale of Hypertext. In Sutherland, K. (ed.), *Electronic Text*. p. 20.

30 Compare **Bowers, F.** (1949). 'the purpose of all full bibliographical description is to allow the reader to visualize an absent book with some clarity and precision, and to compare his copy of a book with the *ideal copy* as described by the bibliographer'. *Principles of Bibliographical Description* (repr. 1994), Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies; and **Pichler, A.** (1995) 'Machine-readable texts make it . . . clear to us what texts are and what text editing means: texts are not objectively existing entities which just need to be discovered and presented, but entities which have to be constructed', 'Advantages of a Machine-Readable Version of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*'. In Johannessen, K. and Nordenstam, T. (eds), *Culture and Value: Philosophy and the Cultural Sciences*. Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, p. 774.

31 From **Flanders, J.** (2008). Data and Wisdom: Electronic Editing and the Quantification of Knowledge. A paper presented at the 'Computing the Edition' Conference, Toronto, November 1997 and published in this issue (doi:10.1093/llc/fqn036).

32 There were several such analytic textbases in development in the 1990s (Peter Robinson's Chaucer Project, the University of Bergen's Wittgenstein Project, for example), but they shared the field of electronic editorial investigation with the presentational and image-oriented hypertextual model under construction by Graver and Tetreault and advocated in McGann's 'Rationale of Hypertext'. If the appearance of text and data in the hypertextual model is more familiar and 'friendly', its demonstrative design is in contradiction to the more rigorously conceptual functionality of the analytic edition. It is the designed abstraction of the latter model which is more likely to generate a true 'rationale' of electronic text.