

Genetic Criticism and Its Myths

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## Genetic Criticism and its Myths<sup>\*</sup>

Is it possible to conceive of a “science of origins” in literature—not at all in the Darwinian sense of a genealogy of literary “species” but, rather, in the sense intended by Valéry of a study of literary creation rendered scientific by new methods? That is the question that genetic criticism has posed over the past few years. For my part, it is from the outside—from the perspective, let us say, of a hermeneuticist or even a phenomenologist of literature—that I would like to consider how genetic criticism has established itself as a discipline, institutionally as well as theoretically.

It would undoubtedly be easiest to situate genetic criticism in relation to the status of “science” to which it aspires.<sup>1</sup> Genetic criticism has had an undeniable success in research institutions, which do not ordinarily welcome literary scholars and the type of work they do (for research is defined, organized, and encouraged according to criteria specific to the model sciences, the “hard” sciences). Finally, there is a literary discipline that satisfies the requirements pertaining to the methods of research demanded by these model sciences. Genetic criticism has at its disposal palpable materials to work on: the pre-textual documents of the great literary works (drafts, sketches, notes, etc.). It requires research teams to be assembled to conduct the vast deciphering and archival work necessary to its goal. And, in order to work upon the material it studies, genetic criticism can claim to need a sophisticated technological apparatus (scanners, data banks, computer-assisted reading stations, etc.). In these diverse fashions, it establishes its

<sup>\*</sup>From *Yale French Studies* 89 (1996): *Drafts*.

1. Pierre-Marc de Biasi gives the subheading “Vers une science de la littérature” to his presentation of genetic criticism in the *Encyclopedia Universalis* (1991).

status as a science with the research methods it adopts, whereas solitary, artisanal, and unverifiable critical work cannot be situated according to scientific criteria, rendering the latter form of criticism "invisible" in the former's institutional field. Inasmuch as it has accomplished this, has genetic criticism attained the status of "science"? One can remark that the palpability of the material under study does not necessarily imply the scientific status of that object, nor does the technological refinement of the research instruments guarantee in any evident way the rigor of the inquiry. Genetic criticism's institutional and technical arsenal does not in any way allow one to forget that its object of study escapes almost by definition the category of "science." Genetic criticism is searching for a phenomenon that is in effect unobservable, unobjectifiable: the origin of a literary work. Its object of inquiry is essentially unstable, or rather its object of study is the very instability of the "pre-text" (*l'avant-texte*), where explicit projects, unconscious choices, and the play between what is possible and what is dangerous are intertwined to the point of nonsense. Genetic criticism is admittedly contemporaneous with an age in which the study of opaque phenomena takes precedence over the study of those that are clear, in which the genesis of order is searched for in chaos theory, but only its imagination links it up with these complex disciplines. It is far from sharing their techniques and models.

The ultimate goal of genetic criticism evokes, rather, the concern of a branch of psychology from the late nineteenth century—literary creation—in such a way that it is sometimes difficult to situate it temporally. Sometimes we see in genetic criticism either the resurgence of a literary positivism of the last century or the proclaiming of a discipline "for the twenty-first century," whose activity will lead to a radical redefinition of the notion of the text and of creation, but there is probably some truth to both. If ambiguity is possible, however, it is because genetic criticism was created in a certain conceptual vagueness and imposed as a practice more quickly than it thought out its functions in the field of literary studies. In this respect, it relied perhaps hastily on false evidence. Therefore, it seemed obvious to genetic criticism from the start that it was destined to prepare, enrich, and complexify the interpretation of texts. In supplying the diachronic states of the manuscript, it would allow the confirmation or invalidation of the finished text's meaning and would thus function as an additional hermeneutic guarantee. In addition, genetic criticism envisioned it-

self as the foundation of a "three-dimensional" poetics, attentive to describing no longer only the immanent structures of the text, but the movements of variance and transformation that rule the different states of the text. However, it is not certain that the logic of its development led it to fulfill such promises. It seems to me, rather, that its premises led it elsewhere entirely. To believe the contrary is to suppose, moreover, that with new practices one renews old conclusions, those precisely of criticism and poetics. Thus, far from preparing the new age of criticism (to remedy what can legitimately be seen as a "breakdown" in critical thought), genetic criticism exacerbates the problem. It does not have the effect of shoring up new interpretations, but of inventing a link with the text that suspends the hermeneutic relationship. It does not have as its primary objective the reading of texts but rather the discovery of their origin. A look at its genealogy may allow us better to establish why.

### THE GENEALOGY OF GENETIC CRITICISM

In historical terms, genetic criticism was probably born out of a desire to supersede the structuralist poetics of the 1970s. At the end of that decade, textual theory suddenly found itself constrained by the analysis of the immanent structures of the text, caught in the trap of the dogma of closure, and imprisoned by its games of reflexivity. Critics then questioned if it would not be possible for the "real" to be reinserted into a literary analysis that seemed to be distancing itself from just such a move. How was the text to be reopened to the Other (Life, History, Culture) without a return to biography, historicism, or "source studies"? In fact, some ideas already offered poststructuralist perspectives that distanced themselves from the model of immanence: for example, "writing" (Barthes), the "opening" of a work (Eco), and Julia Kristeva's "intertextuality" and "semiotics." But these notions seemed more like escape routes away from poetics than the foundations of a new poetics. The future practitioners of genetic criticism, concerned with returning in a more concrete fashion to the stuff of literature, began by offering the creation of a more broadly defined poetics.

In this respect, Raymonde Debray-Genette's article "Génétique et poétique. Le cas Flaubert"<sup>2</sup> seems to me a foundational moment.

2. Raymonde Debray-Genette, "Génétique et poétique. Le cas Flaubert," in *Essais de critique génétique*, Louis Aragon et al. (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 21–68.

Barthes's notion of writing (for Barthes, a dialectical space where "language," which is to say memory, and the detour of this language rise to the surface during the event that is the work) is the object of a reappropriation by a nascent genetic criticism that hoped to create a "poetics of writing." In truth, this cannot occur without bending the notion of "writing" that finds itself henceforth identified with the pre-textual process of the work. Certain of Barthes's formulas can suggest a proximity between "writing" and the genesis of the text, as in the following definition of literature, given on the occasion of his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, as the "complex graphic symbol of the traces of a practice: the practice of writing." But the context of this passage, which is in fact quoted by Raymonde Debray-Genette, eliminates the possibility of such a relationship: there is no reference to the preparatory work on a text, only to the "fabric of signifiers." Barthes notes as well that the words "literature, writing, or text" can be used interchangeably. The site of "writing" for Barthes is clearly the "text," conceived, it is true, as a site where the play of signifiers is given over to reading its own *poiesis*, which is entirely different from its real genesis. In the same way, Umberto Eco, in *The Open Work*, defines poetics as the study of "the manner in which the work *is made* allowing one to determine the way in which the author *wanted it to be made*."<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, the question of the positive genesis of a work is subverted from the start. It is impossible to measure the distance between a genesis and a finished text. Perhaps, though, it is possible to measure the distance between a *poiesis* and the work in which it appears, since Eco foresees the possibility of a distortion between the implicit poetics and the work: this distortion is then discovered at the heart of the work itself, functioning as a structural imbalance, and not as a confrontation of different projects and rough outlines with the finished text. It is therefore necessary to recognize a fundamental displacement in the redefinition of "writing" by genetic criticism. "Writing" is no longer understood as a dynamic process that is immanent to the text, but as a pre-textual process. Henceforth, "writing" and "text" find themselves separated by a logical and chronological relation of succession. There is no longer a "writing" of the text but only of its genesis.

In the transition to genetic criticism, the notion of "writing,"

3. Umberto Eco, *L'oeuvre ouverte* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 11. [The passage cited here is from the introduction to the French edition. This introduction appears neither in the original nor in the English translation—Translator's note.]

strongly metaphorical for Barthes, becomes literalized. It serves to designate the material generation of the work over the source of a specific period of time. And in the same manner, one can observe in the foundations of genetic criticism a rereading that literalizes the theme of the "open work." In his book by the same name, Eco calls for a poetics that is less strictly structuralist and turned more in the direction of the "consumption" of the work. The "opening" in question thus follows from an acknowledgment of the programs of reception that are inscribed in all texts. However, this "opening" is more readily apparent in certain texts where a strong will to maintain the mobility of structures is evident, texts that have "the project of a message endowed with multiple interpretative possibilities." Nevertheless, this opening has its limits, a fact to which Eco draws our attention:

Thus, even an art that upholds the values of vitality, action, movement, brute matter, and chance rests on the dialectics between the work itself and the "openness" of the "readings" it invites. A work of art can be open only insofar as it remains a work; beyond a certain boundary, it becomes mere noise.<sup>4</sup>

The relative closure of the work is therefore, according to Eco, the necessary condition for its opening. Here, once again, when genetic criticism appropriates the idea of the "opening" of the work, its meaning is completely different from the one Eco proposed. One can no longer consider the modes of destination inscribed in the structure of the work; one must rather proceed to a *literal* opening of the text onto the textual nebula that is its genesis. It would be this structural indeterminacy that would characterize open "writing" in opposition to the text. Debray-Genette writes, for example:

If text is defined as anything that shows a certain aptitude to an internal structuring strong enough to resist the forms of preexisting structures (linguistic, social, psychological . . . ), writing, on the other hand, is defined as open, fluid, permeable to all outside interventions, both outgrowths and degenerations. ["Génétique et poétique," 48]

Thus one can see genetic criticism putting forth a translation of post-structuralist themes in a material and positive way, "writing" ultimately referring to the handwritten form of the text, and "openness" referring to the expansion of the text to include its pre-textual documents.

4. Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 100.

This operation of opening brings with it, moreover, a choice of options that are not always clearly distinguished by practitioners of genetic criticism. In effect, genetic criticism can keep as its privileged object either an open form that is witness to a process of genesis ("writing" or, better yet, the "pre-text"), or the articulation of the relations between this open form and the closed form that is the text. In the first case, genetic criticism is not interested in the text but in "writing," which can be considered on its own, without any teleological relation to the final text (unless the final text is itself considered to be homogeneous to the pre-text, the final creative trace).<sup>5</sup> Genetic criticism therefore seeks in the first instance the very process of creative thought, using the traces of its wanderings, its deletions, its resumptions. In this sense, it is fairly close to a Valérien poetics that is as interested in the expressions of the productive "mind" of literature as it is in literature itself. But we are dealing with a poetics renewed by semiotics and that describes precisely the process of textual production: "the combination of transfers, substitutions, expansions and refractions that the manuscript puts forth in order to locate and systematize the collection of genetic operations: programming, textualization, transformation" (Hay, 152). In the second case, genetic criticism confronts a process and a product, and sets its sights on an interpretation. This is clearly the route Debray-Genette intends to use in "*Génétique et poétique*" ("Genetic Criticism and Poetics"), where, after a methodological exposé, she attempts an application on a description culled from Flaubert's "*Hérodias*":

In more general terms, genetic criticism, inasmuch as it studies the production of the text and the "signifying process," is forced to take into account the double presence of the "genotext" and the "phenotext," the one an "unobstructed route," the other a structure that obeys the rules of communication, stopping at some point the signifying process. ["*Génétique et poétique*," 42]

It is evident that it will therefore be possible to divide the practitioners of genetic criticism, depending on their sensibilities, into two groups: "geneticists of writing" and "geneticists of the text."

Regardless of which option is chosen, however, the pre-text presents serious methodological problems. For if the production of the text truly constitutes an "unobstructed route," an open form, how

5. This seems to be Louis Hay's inclination in his article "*Le texte n'existe pas*," *Poétique* 62 (1985).

then to transform it into a corpus without distorting it? The formation of the "pre-text" amounts to textualizing that which rightfully should survive as an eternal pre-textuality, fundamentally heterogeneous to the fixed nature of the text. To present a pre-text for reading is obviously to inaugurate it as a text, as Francis Ponge demonstrates in a practical fashion in *La fabrique du pré*. In this sense, a pre-text cannot be read and still remain a pre-text. It is not only materially difficult to assemble an exhaustive pre-text,<sup>6</sup> it is also logically impossible to close it without betraying its essence. It must be added as well that, besides this problem of logic, an exhaustive pre-text is hardly conceivable for reasons that are linked in this case to its "originary" character. It is not only that we are kept from the discovery of another condition of the text that would undermine all known data, it is rather that the traces of "writing" are necessarily incomplete in relation to the process of mental creation (a neuronal writing?) to which they refer and of which they are the irregular evidence.<sup>7</sup>

This essentially indefinite character of the pre-text hardly predisposes it to serving as the foundation of an interpretation of the text. Supposing nevertheless that we provisionally ignore the problem that its material formation constitutes, there remains, for the "geneticists of the text," to construct the relations between an open pre-text and a closed text, between a form that exists only in the dynamic of its transformations and a finished form. Faced with this irreducible heterogeneity, the construction of a poetics of genetic criticism, or a "three-dimensional" poetics, seems problematic. In any case, the problem would not be resolved by the descriptive tools of an intertextual poetics, for it does not deal with a relationship from text to text, except to select one stratum of the pre-text (such as, for example, the *Carnets de Flaubert*), which in effect reduces its dynamism and its openness. In truth, it is difficult to see how it would be possible to establish a relation with an identifiable meaning between a determinate and an indeterminate form. If genetic criticism, then, can hardly hope to prop up interpretation, it certainly has the power to suspend interpretation or render it indeterminate for reasons of a quasi-technical nature.

6. De Biasi, "La critique génétique", in *Introduction aux méthodes critiques pour l'analyse littéraire* (Paris: Bordas, 1990), 21. He sees here a task that in and of itself "could take several years of research and negotiation."

7. There is agreement on this point between Hay ("Le texte n'existe pas," 151,) and Michel Contat, "La question de l'auteur au regard des manuscrits," in Contat, ed., *L'auteur et le manuscrit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 24.



## THE SUSPENSION OF INTERPRETATION

One could claim, however, that it would be easy to show that genetic criticism has performed critical readings of important texts, and far from precluding interpretation, it has assumed all the risks involved. There is no doubt that, at the very least, it has attempted as much. But the authors genetic criticism favors and the types of readings it offers allow us perhaps to interpret genetic criticism more than to renew our understanding of these works. Let us begin by stating that genetic criticism is limited in theory to a specific literary period: the period during which manuscripts lose their communicating and distributing functions to become "the personal trace of an individual creation,"<sup>8</sup> that is from the end of the eighteenth century to the present, or, rather, a bit before "our time" when the widespread use of word processors relegated the draft to oblivion. This relatively brief period is also probably the richest in the history of literature, but, strictly speaking, most of the studies undertaken by genetic criticism are concerned with a restricted number of works composed between 1850 and 1920, primarily by Hugo and Flaubert (and secondarily Zola, Valéry, Proust, and others). But, in fact, this prioritization is no coincidence. It is a response to the structural or thematic characteristics of these works, either because they manifest in and of themselves a consciousness of formal indeterminacy (Hugo), or because they promote an aesthetic of semantic indeterminacy (Flaubert).

There is no doubt that Hugo waited for, hoped for, and even created genetic criticism. We are familiar with the codicil of his testament of 31 August 1881 in which he bequeathed "all [his] manuscripts and anything else found to have been written or drawn by [him]" to the Bibliothèque Nationale. This broad definition includes anything from ledgers to notes on erotic exploits. With this gesture, the first of its kind, Hugo transformed his pre-textual documents into something of value, into a precious deposit of the traces of genius at work. But Hugo was not aiming solely for the preservation of this inheritance. He fully intended to make it the force behind the deployment of his work above and beyond itself and from beyond the grave. Besides, in so doing he was simply setting in motion the editorial program handed down to him, during a seance held on 29 September 1854, by "Death," who advised him on how to tactfully create regular resurrections of his work through the expedient of posthumous publications. From this perspec-

8. De Biasi, "La critique génétique," 7.

tive, the legacy of the pre-textual documents would challenge the "grave" of the "Complete Works." It would serve interpretation less than it would the infinite vitality of a corpus without closure whose limits can always be redrawn through the integration of new pre-textual documents. In this, the great writer's desire to survive resembles the vitalist conception of writing promoted by genetic criticism. But, in addition to this posthumous narcissism, there exists in certain of Hugo's works (such as *Dieu*) the consciousness of an impossible completion.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in bequeathing the manuscript of these incompletable works, Hugo delegates to posterity the task of ordering this textual infiniteness. It is the responsibility of the "Science of Manuscripts" to present this infiniteness while dispelling the notion of the closure of "Complete Works" championed by some hastily compiled editions, even though this implies proposing other ones, more complete and more coherent, although no less provisional. Genetic criticism has then as its paradoxical task, at the very suggestion of the author, to prevent the closure of the work, and to ensure that it has infinite possibilities for renewal, not in an interpretative sense, but in a material one. The work here truly exists in the future and is always unattainable.

Flaubert offers an even more spectacular case of reflexivity between a critical approach and its object of study. One must first notice the exceptional consistency with which Flaubert's corpus, and certain texts within this corpus, have held the attention of the practitioners of genetic criticism. One of the *Trois contes*, "Hérodias," serves as a primary example, beginning in 1979 with Debray-Genette's analysis in the programmatic *Essais de critique génétique*, which was followed by Philippe Willemart's reexamination—still from the genetic perspective—in 1983,<sup>10</sup> which in turn was given a postscript in the same vein by Pierre-Marc de Biasi in 1993.<sup>11</sup> The story thus constitutes a sort of connecting thread across fifteen years of genetic criticism. Without a doubt, Flaubert involuntarily, but in proportion to his cult of literary labor, supplies the practitioners of genetic criticism with a

9. Jacques Neefs and Claude Mouchard effectively analyze this characteristic in "*Dieu, manuscrit*," in Béatrice Didier and Jacques Neefs, eds., *Hugo. De l'écrit au livre* (St. Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1987).

10. "Le désir du narrateur et l'apparition de Jean-Baptiste dans le manuscrit d'"Hérodias,'" *Littérature* 52 (December 1983).

11. Gustave Flaubert, *Trois contes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993).

particularly abundant volume of pre-textual documents that de Biasi scrutinizes at ten times the magnitude of the finished text. The monumental edition of Flaubert's *Carnets de travail*<sup>12</sup> is proof positive of this pre-textual richness. But this material predisposition of the works to genetic criticism does not explain everything. There is in Flaubert a strategy of meaning that resembles that of genetic criticism. Debray-Genette already remarked in 1979 that in "Hérodiade" the deletions "almost always go in the direction of obscurity and uncertainty." De Biasi echoes this remark in an article entitled "Flaubert et la poétique du non-finito" where he demonstrates, with supporting documents, how Flaubert devotes himself to the work of incompleteness at the very heart of the most completed form that exists:

The Flaubertian manuscript works to define, at each strategic point in the narrative, the zones of incompleteness programmed to become the partial space where the reader takes charge of signification.<sup>13</sup>

Hence the obsession with the finished form combines in Flaubert's case with the "demand of the nonconclusive." This result is both indisputable from the perspective of the Flaubertian aesthetic, as well as deceptive from the point of view of genetic criticism's contribution. In the case of Flaubert, the study of the text and the study of the pre-text effectively converge at an identical statement of the indeterminacy of meaning. In truth, a simple stylistic reading would be just as capable of establishing this in the immanent text, where the strategies of incompleteness can be formally located. Certainly, genetic criticism is able to do a precise genealogy of the deletions and demonstrate precisely which semantic formations (myths, symbols, rare terms) had been erased or rendered ambiguous by Flaubert. Nonetheless, the study of the pre-textual documents does not provide a fundamental corrective measure to the study of the text; both, in the end, reject totalizing conclusions and, in truth, any conclusion.<sup>14</sup> Given that the text had not guided us toward any certitude, the pre-text does not upset any interpretations, nor does it establish an incompleteness since one was already manifest in the final form. One can ask at this point why genetic criti-

12. Flaubert, *Carnets de travail. Edition critique et génétique*, ed. de Biasi (Paris: Balland, 1988).

13. De Biasi, "Flaubert et la poétique du non-finito," in Hay et al., *Le manuscrit inachevé. Écriture, création, communication* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1986).

14. Note also that the "refusal to conclude"—as formally marked as it is—does not necessarily escape from totalizing interpretations: it also has its historical interpretability that cannot be forgotten.

cism is so fascinated with the case of Flaubert since it is with this kind of aesthetic that it has the smallest chance of presenting original results.

To find the reasons for this attachment, one must examine the specular relationship between the work of genetic criticism and Flaubert's work. When de Biasi evokes, in relation to the second volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert's project of "a totally original textual mechanism: an open system fully integrating the means of incompleteness in the internal economy of a new type of textualization" ('Flaubert et la poétique du non-finito,' 47), it is impossible not to think of the very principle of the important genetic editions that open the text to its own "archives," or that even, as in the case of Flaubert's *Carnets de travail*, textualize these archives, not without providing them with their own documentary and explicative apparatus. Obviously, a complete genetic edition (which is materially impossible in the medium of paper) should be both "horizontal" (taking into account a complete stratum of the elaboration of the text, such as we find in Zola's *Carnets d'enquête*) and "vertical" (at every moment in the text, producing all the pre-textual strata from the most embryonic to the most complete, such as the "sketches" in the Pléiade edition of *A la Recherche*), thereby constituting an "open book" in which the very process of its genesis emerges at the same time that the form becomes fixed. Hence the aesthetic that the writer was putting forth in the second volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* finds itself shouldered and taken over by the critic who becomes in his turn the producer of the open book. The work of genetic criticism, then, is not to establish the interpretations of finished texts through the expedient of an overload of documentary information. It seeks, rather, to undo these same texts and to suspend their interpretations. This can be verified by looking at any number of works of genetic criticism.<sup>15</sup> This is retroactive work that speaks of a new consciousness of the book (since Flaubert and Mallarmé) and propagates its representation over the entire literary field in one great critical movement. In the age of the "virtual" text, one by one all finished texts find themselves rendered potential by the gaze of genetic criticism. This opening of texts responds to a new

15. Debray-Genette already had a strong foreboding that this was the case when she wrote: "That which allows a genetic study to happen, as opposed to a study of the final text, is the fact that it brings to light a greater diversity of tendencies, possibilities, a greater structural opening, which can reach the point of indecision, uncertainty, undecidability" ("Génétiq ue et poétique," 37).

awareness of the contingent nature of the text as object ("The text does not exist"),<sup>16</sup> which has its own historical determination. Effectively, at the precise moment when the book in a paper medium sees its own materiality being contested by immaterial media, Flaubert's and Mallarmé's age-old utopia of the Open Book regains critical topicality.

From this point forward one must consider what the effects of such a metamorphosis on the practice of the Book are. Flaubert's and Mallarmé's open books announced a metamorphosis of reading itself (in rewrites with Flaubert, in ritual with Mallarmé). The "technical" opening of the Book that genetic criticism performs does not leave reading untouched either. In theory, genetic criticism is opposed to reading since reading is performed through the closure of signifying sequences. Reading only exists through partial syntheses and provisional punctuation. On the other hand, the ideal genetic edition defies the linearity of reading, and constrains it to paradigmatic markers (to which hypertextual software seems predisposed). It defers the material closure of the work indefinitely since it does not offer a text to be read, it seeks rather to offer the "real."

### THE DREAM OF THE REAL

To identify this "real," we must return to genetic criticism's valorization of the pre-text. From the start, genetic criticism proposed the dethroning of the text in the name of its Other, a pre-textual, eternally anterior, minor, primitive, raw, illogical, but also polysemic, free, and fecund Other. And each critic then gave a different name to this origin, which is irreducible to the text. In 1979, Debray-Genette evoked the "unobstructed route" of pre-textual signification, as opposed to the fixed and inert nature of the text, just as the genotext is opposed to the phenotext in Julia Kristeva's literary semiotics. For Jean Bellemin-Noël or Yves Gohin,<sup>17</sup> the pre-text is the privileged place where the "work of desire" can appear. The indecision of the pre-text preserves the mobility of the fantasy that necessarily reduces the final text.

16. It would work just as well if one were to reverse the formula so that it read "The pre-text does not exist," since the pre-text only takes form during the gesture of textualization.

17. See Jean Bellemin-Noël, "Lecture psychoanalytique d'un brouillon de poème: 'Eté' de Valéry," in *Essais de critique génétique* (103–150), and "En guise de post-face. L'essayage infini," *Littérature* 52 (December 1983), and Yves Gohin, "La plume de l'ange. Analyse du manuscrit d'un poème des *Contemplations*," *ibid.*

Hence the pre-text is a repository of precious documents on the unconscious. Michel Contat, to take another example, is aware of the progressive temporal dimension of the pre-text (as opposed to the fallacious atemporality of the text): "That which has been traced has been traced *through time*, and it is time that allows us to see, or to reconstitute the manuscript."<sup>18</sup> The pre-text, then, would also be the repository for a duration that reading would have the power to revive by following the meanderings of creative thought. "Time recaptured" is here no longer in the text (produced by narrative figuration) but in the pre-text and as a result of a critical operation. For his part, de Biasi<sup>19</sup> proposes that the pre-text be recognized as "thought in the nascent state." This formula evokes a Bergsonian vitalism<sup>20</sup> and presupposes that a "genetic" continuity exists between the first stages of thought and literary drafts. Thus, all the critics above designate the pre-text as a site of semantic savagery and richness eventually reduced by textual structuring. The pre-text is not the figure but the *very trace* of the genesis of meaning—a positive and identifiable genesis. I would remark, to conclude on this point, that the diverse forms of alterity that are designated in the pre-text by the practitioners of genetic criticism are strangely close to those the critics from the 1970s sought to drive out of the very heart of the text: Kristeva's "signification," Bellemin-Noël's "unconscious of the text," or even Meschonnic's "the writing of lived experience." Nevertheless, in the transfer from the text to the pre-text, there was not just a simple moving of the "real" from one textual site to another. In the move toward drafts, the "real" deserted the text, cut it out of its semantic escape routes to harden it into a fixed and inert structure. The architecture of tensions and gaps that constitute all texts is no longer recognized as such, since the alterity of meaning is localized in a specific site, anterior to the work. As a result, this "real" is identified as positive material (Hugo's trunks full of manuscripts, Flaubert's sealed boxes containing his notebooks, etc.), as a "reality." From this point forth, genetic criticism owns this "reality" and must then transmute it into its editorial

18. Contat, "La question de l'auteur," in *L'auteur et le manuscrit*, 23.

19. De Biasi, "Avant-propos," in *Carnets de travail*, 23.

20. The same one that Julien Benda recognized (and denounced in the name of a rigid rationalism) in the taste his contemporaries had for incompleteness: "Let us note that our contemporaries have a proclivity for exhuming drafts and unfinished works, where the author has not yet invoked reason 'to alter his outpouring of emotion.'" Benda, *Belphégor* (Paris: Emile-Paul frères, 1918), 88.

equivalent and give it exposure in the voluminous and indisputable form of monumental editions.

New ways of presenting texts should imply new practices. Faced with this "proof" of creation, we are invited less to decipher documents than to participate in the experience of a genesis. Through reading, we must recreate in ourselves "a state of mind, a way of seeing, feeling, and thinking that entails bringing back all experience to that which is going to be written."<sup>21</sup> The genetic edition of Flaubert's *Carnets de travail* should therefore force us to recognize the profile of "the one through whom literature thinks itself and looks for itself prior to creating itself: a sort of mediation between the possible and the determined, between the always already written and the future of the work" (*Carnets de travail*, 13). De Biasi therefore allows us to witness in the pre-text the emergence, not of the man nor the author, but of an inextricably vital and mental instance, "the man-as-pen" ("*l'homme-plume*").<sup>22</sup> This recognition of the "man-as-pen" implies "a new form of reading." What is it? At the very least it displays a displacement of thematic interest: one considers with new curiosity "the secret of creation; what happens behind the scenes of the artistic enterprise." But this new form of reading goes far beyond that. It incites us less to construct meaning (an enterprise hindered by the complexity of the profuse, contradictory, and nonhierarchizable pre-textual documents) than to envision the real of a creation starting with the written traces. Hence, in relation to the material writing of a certain notebook of Flaubert's, de Biasi, the editor of the *Carnets*, writes:

The handwriting, jerky, often difficult to decipher, sometimes "seismographic" is clearly characteristic of the uncomfortable positions in which the author took his notes, naturally with a pencil. In certain places one can unmistakably recognize the shaking of the carriage going over cobblestones. [*Carnets de travail*, 49]

By following this seismographic trace, wouldn't readers also be able to return to that very shaking such as it was lived in the moment of a thought? Wouldn't they be able to redynamize the trace so as to relive the event? This is perhaps an allegory of the new pact of reading that genetic criticism proposes to us.

21. De Biasi, "Avant-propos," 12.

22. One might ask if the notion of "man-as-pen" in Alain Borer's edition of Rimbaud did not engender the no less composite notion of "work-as-life." What brings them together is the conjunction of the lived and the written in a single entity where the limits of the work are undone.

Criticism, previously sworn to abstract work on signs and imaginary configurations, has finally touched an archival "reality" through the expedient of genetic criticism: it handles the boxes where the documents are kept, dusts off the manuscripts, scrutinizes ink blotches, compares the texture of different types of paper or the bindings of notebooks, classifies scattered pages left in inextricable disorder by negligent heirs. This archival "reality" that they have finally reached is also, as we have seen, the site of that which would be most "real" in literature: the very origin of meaning, pure creation materialized into concrete evidence. But this apprehension of the "real" is played out against an unsettling background of derealization. Derealization, as we have seen, is primarily concerned with the logic of the symbolic relations between the text and the pre-text. A pre-text derives its value from the consecration of the text that it precedes. But paradoxically, the establishment of the pre-text tends to dissolve the textual entity that was precisely the one that gave it this value. The pre-text is therefore constantly threatened with becoming the antecedent of something nonexistent (which could be formulated, for example, in the following manner: "Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* does not exist"). More concretely, at the moment when the "real" of literature is recognized in the pre-textual "reality," the latter appears in all its perishable fragility. In accordance with a structure that, in contemporary culture, characterizes all aspects of origins (virgin lands, preserved Nature, primitive peoples), their recognition as Treasures also signals their virtual destruction. Is it a historical accident that the great age of "drafts" that so interests genetic criticism is the same age in which the most mediocre and destructible paper was used, dooming the inheritance of modern manuscripts to imminent destruction? Faced with this eventuality, a genetic critic such as de Biasi reacts by advocating the transference of the archives onto numerical or optical media.<sup>23</sup> The remedy for the destruction of the materiality of the pre-text would therefore be its computerized dematerialization. Reality and unreality never stop fighting over the originary archive which, first conceived of as the true site of the "real," should soon metamorphose into its own hyperreal simulacrum, endowed with ubiquity and infinite reproducibility. The technique would effectively allow the subversion of the opposition between the original and the copy, be-

23. "Pour une politique d'enrichissement du patrimoine écrit," in *Trésors de l'écrit* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 1991).



tween the materiality and the immateriality of the archive. Immaterially downloaded, the original manuscript could travel along computer networks and allow the production of copies by means of a laser printer. De Biasi comments upon this:

A book or a manuscript is not necessarily an inert object that one must consult in the place where it is kept: it is also a series of images that can circulate at the speed of light, appear at the same moment in a hundred different places, and rematerialize there quite easily by means of a printed copy. ["Pour une politique," 30]

Technology appears here as the instrument of an archival Pentecost that manifests its luminous presence everywhere at the same time and offers the always renewed miracle of its material reincarnation. The binary encoding of the archive would not only make its infinite "transportability" possible, it would also transmute it into hypertextual data (leading not to a syntagmatic reading of signs but to a paradigmatic marking of the different documents that are downloaded). Ultimately, the archive could be seen on a screen (the necessary condition for a contemporary viewing), and would become an "image," an iconic appearance, that is to say an elementary form of cultural communication.

Genetic criticism dreams, then, of "presence" against a background of advanced technology. It emerges in a context that sees not only a contestation of the book by immaterial media, but, in the same movement, the dissolution of the text as a configuration of finished meaning, and the metamorphosis of reading into the processing of information. This entails a serious calling into question of the hermeneutic relationship that literary criticism maintains more or less with literature and that, to my mind, is its only justification. To question the configurations of problematic meanings and to elucidate how one experiences literary forms, to illuminate our own times through our queries, these remain for me the essential tasks of criticism—tasks that cannot be suspended while waiting indefinitely for the *absolute* establishment of the text and its beginnings. We must resolve to admit that each period invents its imaginary and always provisional library, because of the urgency of the questions it seeks to ask of it. It is obvious that genetic criticism, *in practice*, is not necessarily contrary to the work of interpretation. New editions inspired by its methods, and which we all use, bear witness to this fact every day. (It is nevertheless necessary to point out that these editions are only re-

ally readable to the extent that they renounce the total accomplishment of the genetic project.) Nonetheless, in *theory* and in the logic of its emergence, genetic criticism renders the critical relationship null and void. For more than fifteen years now, genetic criticism has engaged in enormous archival and methodological work and yet has remained astonishingly uninterested in the meaning of its own practice. We seek here only to break the silence.

—Translated by Richard Watts