Introduction: Justifying a Retrospective Approach

Jean-Gabriel Ganascia & Jean-Louis Lebrave

Today, with the digitisation of texts, sounds and images and their circulation on the Internet, we are deploying new techniques for storing knowledge which will increasingly supplement and even replace older memory recording systems, such as books, vinyl discs, and photographs on celluloid. It looks as if the extent of these changes will be far reaching. And if, as many believe, the practical methods of inscribing thought have an impact on the way it is developed through the writing and reading process, we can understand why the changes now taking place could profoundly affect our ways of thinking. Here we have gathered together specialists* in ancient means of recording memory – clay tablets, papyrus rolls and manuscripts – along with experts from the electronic age – originators of man-machine interfaces, enterprise knowledge management systems, hypermedia and intelligent agents – with the purpose of elucidating the present by reference to intellectual technologies of the past.

As a result of this elucidation, we believe we are in a position to identify the continuities, to note the breaks and to measure the scale of current developments. Firstly, we wished to compare ancient recording media, (chronicling, typography and library) with contemporary techniques (hypertext, multimedia) while trying to understand the concomitant development of the activities of the scribe, author, editor and reader. Going beyond a straightforward, scholarly presentation, this reconciliation of the very ancient with the very modern, even with the 'post-modern' should, in our opinion, lead to a better to understanding of the scale of changes now taking place.

Rationale

It must be stated first that many comments about new information and communication technologies, whether presented as favourable to or critical of them, simply give voice to established opinion without being based on tangible arguments. So, conventional statements and platitudes about the Internet revolution, the disappearance of the book or the 'graphosphere' will be subjected to detailed analysis. Equally, all hasty comparisons, which see in current transformations an equivalent to the birth of writing or the early stages of printing, seem to be well off the mark.

Specialists in hypertext studies regard the French neo-structuralists as precursors of the upheavals to come: Michel Foucault announces the death of the author, Roland Barthes recommends the fragmentation of texts into individual lexical items, Jacques

Derrida wishes to break with the traditional arrangement of text on the page and the linearity thereby imposed. In the same way, the fluidity of text available at all times on the net permits a multitude of ways to read it, eluding for the most part any control on the part of the author.

Jean-Gabriel Ganascia shows that the proximity between French thinkers on the 'super-text' and the 'hypertextuality' theorists is based on a misunderstanding: 'over-reading', which for the former enriches the texts, corresponds to 'under-reading' by the latter, that is to say a kind of pre-digestion which facilitates assimilation. To avoid making similar mistakes, we have decided to base our thinking on practical experience and on knowledge of the history of information recording media. This requirement has governed the content and presentation of this issue of *Diogenes.*

The three oft-quoted phrases mentioned above, namely the fragmentation of the text, the death of the writer, and the abandonment of linearity, ring out the clarion call of modernity. In what way will this fanfare guarantee the originality of our world? When we examine these phrases closely, and study them in the light of historical facts, we see a re-emergence of their proximity to the practice, the techniques and the uncertainties of the past.

Spoken or recorded words

Are writing and speech integral to one another? If so, the emergence of hypertext, apparently an extension and an externalisation of memory, would signify a break: writing no longer transcribes speech but links items of knowledge together. Here all reading traces a path, more or less adventurously, between fragments of knowledge. Every reading of hypertext establishes new links between items of knowledge. (Note: in the original French a parallel was drawn between the French word *lire,* to read and the Latin *legere,* which means to assemble.) Now the desire, demonstrated here, to externalise our memory is not new, any more than the distance placed between the written and spoken word.

Having reminded us of the importance of the chronicler's skill in the intellectual education of scholars in the Middle Ages, Mary Carruthers shows how, before the invention of printing, they exerted an influence over the spatial organisation of text on the page. Here the writing is not simply recording the spoken word and following faithfully the speech being uttered. The disposition of the text breaks the one-dimensional thread of the words to facilitate the mental processes of recording. Therefore, the fragmentation of text as practised by medieval scholars presages the fragmentation of text in today's hypertext.

Staying with the Middle Ages, Elena Llamas Pombo considers the visual construction of the word in the medieval book. She describes the increasing frequency of speech indicators and clarification marks shown by spaces between words and punctuation marks. It is worthy of note that this transformation was taking place just as reading was becoming a silent activity and when comprehension of a text was no longer dependent on its being read aloud. Lack of visible marks denoting speech made it necessary to read the text aloud, their presence frees us from it. In every instance there was a clear gap between the spoken and written word.

Looking beyond texts and their fragmentation, there is their collection into books, rolls, volumes and then the assembling of these in a unique edifice. Christian Jacob attempts to discover what the first great collections must have been like. With him, we visit the great library of Alexandria. He describes the rolls, the shapes of the racks, the layout of the aisles, and how the catalogue was organised, and draws attention to the similarity between a map, an image in abbreviated form of the entirety of known space, and this library which lets us glimpse our collected knowledge. There too, the collected writings did not reproduce any speech, even polyphonic. They wrote down items of knowledge in order to build up a record.

New publishing

Since hypertext alters access to the text, without regard to a pre-established reading order, its function differs from that of the original roll. This was designed to be read in a continuous manner, from beginning to end. Hypertext calls for ferreting and roaming. The texts contained therein show quite different organisational rules from those of books. The medium therefore alters reading. The publisher is the intermediary linking up the pieces of writing, he is the architect designing the work for the reader, but his function is changing. The rationale is clearly different. The new techniques present numerous possibilities. They help communities of readers or researchers to form around texts. Original forms of publishing, unfeasible with the printed page, are now a possibility. In short, they offer more to read, more easily.

Paolo D'Iorio describes an attempt to coordinate the activities of a group of researchers on a site, called significantly, HyperNietzsche. What they set up was an authentic virtual electronic library. Accessible from all over the world, it is a collection of Nietzsche's work, the manuscripts, the various editions, and especially other work relevant to his *oeuvre,* for example archive material, Wagner's operas and learned, critical commentaries on philosophy. It is a repository of great appeal to researchers. Apart from the access to sources and the work of their peers, scientists will have the opportunity to make numerous comparisons of source material and interpretations. The practice of Philology is now possible. Its principles have been in existence for a long time, but up until now, the physical obstacles to any practice were too great.

In the same line of thought, Aurèle Crasson presents a hypermedia genealogical dossier. This contains all the notes with all the preliminary drafts, all the mistakes, all the alterations, all the rough jottings and all the manuscripts from a work of Edmond Jabès. Here too the accessible and available sources can instantly be juxtaposed and compared. This is enormously helpful to the critic and the literary genealogist. In short, thanks to opportunities now open to us, new procedures for interpreting texts are likely to become known and develop.

Although exciting for researchers, there is no guarantee of the economic viability of such publishing projects. Quite the contrary, after sensational predictions and insane promises, some electronic publishing projects have been curtailed, temporarily at least. Jean-Michel Ollé and Jean-Pierre Sakoun can testify to that. They take the opportunity to detail and reflect upon the challenges and changes that the literary world is now undergoing.

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Who is writing – authors or producers?

This last question does not concern reading or how a work is received, but how it is produced. Who is writing and how? This is what Michel Foucault was referring to when he predicted the death of the author. Industrialised production of knowledge and texts imply the same. This then is an epitaph, a résumé of the life of the presumed dead author, from birth to official recognition. But is the author dead?

Going back to the origins of writing in Mesopotamia, Jean-Jacques Glassner refers to the first individuals, who, born into the class of scribes, could be considered as the first authors. The quality of their writings reveals their unusual characters. Their work was not anonymous, but signed. From the first appearance of writing, we are witnesses to the birth of the genus author, even if these inspired scribes confined any revelation to written form.

Having looked briefly at writers from ancient times and emphasised the differences between the writer on wax or clay tablets and the author. Florence-Marie Piriou draws our attention to the legal status of the modern author, as established in the 18th century. She explains the difference between the American idea of copyright transferable to a third party and the French concept of moral right, which cannot be ceded and is essentially immutable. She then shows how the use of Internet challenges the inalienable right of the author over his work as it does not keep to the original page layout and allows all sorts of copying, dissemination, deductions and cuts.

We have explored ancient practices and recalled the individuals, authors or publishers who created books, we have described the new forms of publication in which works of literature are appearing. Now Guy Boy takes us into some of the recondite realms of progress. As a designer of interfaces and of information systems and an engineer specialising in human factors, he speaks about a new kind of author: the engineer. The contemporary technical expert is both man of action and writer who records his own deeds in an electronic laboratory notebook. His ideas, decisions, rough drafts and indecision must all be noted in external memories so that they can be recovered ten, twenty or thirty years hence when a plane or a rocket's equipment, having become obsolete, has to be replaced. Hypertext stores the traces of the idea for a technical work in the same way as it stores the genetic dossier of a work of literature.

Jean-Louis Lebrave is a specialist in textual genealogy and therefore familiar with literary rough drafts. He has been working for some time in an attempt to reconstitute the preparatory stages in literary works of the past by evidential reference to jottings in notebooks. In conclusion, he refers to an investigation now running on the practices of contemporary writers and on the changes they are undergoing because of the new electronic tools now at their disposal. In short, if the computer, word processing, spelling and grammar checkers and electronic dictionaries are making important changes to the cognitive environment of writing, what exactly are the consequences for the works themselves? Only through an exact evaluation of these transformations to the work of the writer can this be measured.

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Translated from the French by Kate Miles

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