

Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden, eds.
Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-textes.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
vi + 258 pp. \$55 U.S. cloth.

Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-textes introduces the French revolution in textual criticism to the English-speaking world. Unlike traditional textual criticism, genetic criticism is not devoted to establishing a stable, published text that strictly follows only the authorial intention as its guiding principle. The book, an historical introduction and eleven translations of previously published essays, represents a new critical movement in France that seeks to discover new interpretive possibilities in the history of a given text, “turning manuscript study,” as the dust jacket tells us, “into a recognized form of literary criticism.” Genetic criticism explores the interpretive possibilities of what they call the “avant-texte,” which, again, the dust-jacket blurb describes as “a critical gathering of a writer’s notes, sketches, drafts, manuscripts, typescripts, proofs, and correspondence.” With the explicit goal of institutionalizing a critical movement, the introduction to the book provides an excellent account of the history or genesis of genetic criticism and the way it co-operates with other forms of literary analysis such as linguistics, psychoanalysis, socio-criticism, and deconstruction. What makes this book such a stimulating read is that it shows the way genetic criticism defers the material closure of a book or work and the effects of that deferral.

The critical sophistication of genetic criticism strikes the reader of this book right away: the essays, generally speaking, move back and forth from theoretical discussions of the methodology of genetic criticism to studies of individual authors, like Marcel Proust, Henri-Marie Beyle Stendhal, and Gustave Flaubert. While reading the book, nevertheless, one begins to notice various attempts to avoid the charge of naïve positivism, despite the book’s repeated appeals to science. For instance, Pierre-Marc de Biasi’s essay, “Toward a Science of Literature: Manuscript Analysis,” argues that genetic criticism requires the establishment of a defined object in order for its empirical imperative to be fulfilled. Other essays in the book are similarly haunted by the occasional intrusion of scientific positivism that attends the careful treatment of material objects such as a writer’s notes and manuscripts. Philippe Lejeune’s essay, on the other hand, is the most explicit attempt to restrain the geneticist’s move toward a “science of literature” by appealing to “metaphors of detective investigation, archaeology, and psychological novels for genetic research” (205). The

introduction by Daniel Ferrer and Michael Groden, furthermore, admits that genetic criticism can never be a “Galilean empirical science” but, instead, belongs to an “indexical paradigm”—a model that bases itself on the interpretation of clues rather than the deduction of universal laws and on qualitative rather than quantitative assessment” (10). The context for this ambivalence regarding the scientific drive toward knowledge lies in the various archival institutions outlined in the introduction. Genetic criticism owes its existence as a movement to institutions like the Centre d’Analyse des Manuscrits (CAM), which later becomes the Institut des Texts et Manuscrits (ITEM), and ITEM is encouraged by the support of the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). As Ferrer and Groden explain in the introduction, the scientific orientation in the supporting institutions fostered an early interest in “computer-assisted genetic editions and hypertexts” and “keeping genetic criticism in touch with the materiality of the manuscript” (9–10). The book, however, does not reflect as much as it needs to on the contradictory relationship between the materiality of the text and the elusive object of the creative process, and one significant reason for this oversight may well be the influence of the scientific institutions that allowed genetic criticism to flourish in its European environment.

However admirable in its wide range of theoretical approaches, neither the introduction nor this book adequately confronts the principal contradiction that drives genetic criticism. I would like to identify this contradiction in genetic criticism, following Jacques Derrida, as “archive fever.” Genetic criticism’s impossible, because immaterial, object of desire is a return to the origin of literary creativity through the very material traces of the writing process that alienate the origin. A further irony is that a death drive manifests itself in the critical pursuit of a work’s genesis. In the archival desire to discover the origin of work in the creative process, genetic criticism suspends interpretation by eroding the boundaries, or relative closure, of the literary work. Addressing this contradictory set of drives, which Derrida calls “mal d’archive,” or “archive fever,” will help us understand the significance of this inaugural text on genetic criticism.

To get to the heart of the problem that the materiality of the text poses for genetic criticism, we must focus on why genetic criticism has been called, as Ferrer and Groden note, “an esthetic of the possible” (6). An esthetic of the possible places the published literary work against the background of its “avant-textes,” the potential versions that exist in the archival drafts and sketches. Opening the “finished” version of the work to the infinite play of signs, which came to be known as poststructuralist

“textuality,” or simply, the “text,” challenged the control of author as the primary repository of a “work’s” meaning. Although this process was well begun in the 1950s under New Criticism, it is not until Roland Barthes’s sensational proclamation of “The Death of the Author” that the closed boundaries of the work were opened up enough to allow the reader to actively participate in the production of the text. Genetic criticism takes this historical development a step further by actually challenging the published version as the finished version and placing the latter alongside the alternate manuscript versions to better trace the “movement of writing” (2). The most fascinating and well-written illustration of this aesthetic of the possible is Raymond Debray Genette’s essay “Flaubert’s ‘A Simple Heart,’ or How to Make an Ending: A Study of the Manuscripts.” By studying twelve different steps that Flaubert took to find sufficiently ironic representations of the cultural model of the “mystic death” or “beatific death” (75), Genette shows just how many possibilities present themselves to an author before he or she finally lets the writing pass through the threshold of acceptance. Unfortunately, Genette does not give enough attention to the significance of the different versions and the relation of this excess to what Jacques Derrida calls the “anguish of writing,” where all the possible meanings push against each other to get through “the necessarily restricted passageway of speech” (*Writing and Difference* 9). The pure possibility of the choices faced by the writer needs to be actualized through the necessarily violent act of writing. In order to generate something meaningful from the possibilities pressing down upon the writer, the writer requires a material support provided by the act of inscription to actualize those virtual forces.

Genette’s essay exemplifies both the attractions and the risks of genetic criticism. Her essay demonstrates that a text’s unity and closure are supplied by the context surrounding it, but there is seldom enough explicit discussion of the tensions that force a text to exceed its original context while also trying to stay attached to that context. Daniel Ferrar and Jean-Michel Rabaté’s elegant and intellectually rich essay, “Paragraphs in Expansion (James Joyce),” questions the internal border of texts, but the essay refuses to consider the notion of a textual sublime even though it tantalizes the reader by looming over almost every page. One of the most compelling essays to read is Catherine Viollet’s “Proust’s ‘Confession of a Young Girl,’” in which she investigates the use of pronouns in Proust’s short story of a young woman, only to reveal a veiled confession of his own homosexuality. Viollet is careful to note the passage between autobiography and fiction. Yet Viollet typifies the genetic critic’s drive to seek the “reality” behind

the work through the textual archive of an author. Laurent Jenny, in his incisive essay “Genetic Criticism and its Myths,” calls this valorization of the archival, “pre-textual” material a “dream of the real” (20), a “dream of ... presence (24). Although he recalls Derrida here, Jenny makes no mention of Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. Derrida and Jenny seem to agree on many points in their analyses regarding the mistaken metaphysics of finding the “real” truth in archival research.

In fact, the book as a whole could have profited by a more careful consideration of Derrida’s contribution to the cultural significance of archives and archivization. Questioning the metaphysical assumptions of genetic criticism, so well supported by its scientific claims, does not mean that we must give up on the desire for truth, whether that truth is metaphysical or not. On the contrary, it is precisely such impasses or aporia in the archival search for truth, which genetic criticism exemplifies so well, that Derrida sees as productive. For Derrida, being caught between generating a new meaning for a work and suspending that meaning by destroying the boundaries of the work, is an unavoidable form of archive fever. If, as the introduction tells us, “genetic criticism is the study of textual invention” (*Archive Fever* 11), then it must set out to recover the singular moment of invention, despite the contradictory result that any such recovery is a repetition and therefore the destruction of that singular moment. The introduction clearly addresses Derrida directly by claiming that “genetic criticism confronts a dialectic of invention and repetition” (*Genetic Criticism* 11), but the significance of that dialectic is not merely the experience of swinging from one end of the opposition to the other at different points in time. Both ends of the opposition are always present for the genetic critic and must be faced in the form of some decision that goes well beyond the traditional textual critic’s choice between the accuracy and error of a given text, or writing about the “movement of writing” over a number of variant texts. At the very least, the genetic critic will always be confronted with the problem of determining the boundaries of a work he or she has just effaced, or destroyed.

Jean-Louis Lebrave’s comment in his essay “Hypertexts—Memories—Writing” testifies to the strange necessity of this destruction when he boldly states that “the work does not exist any more than the author” (228) because the repetitions within the manuscript traces overrun the singularity of the work. In Freudian terms, an archive, like an artificial unconscious, cannot perform its memorializing function without the “compulsion to repeat.” Derrida emphasizes that the act of inscription on an exterior, material “substrate” (*Archive Fever* 20) has the following

consequence: “[R]ight on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes it to destruction” (12). Never has this paradox of preservation and destruction, this simultaneous act of memory and forgetting, been more dramatically played out than in the virtual memory of computers and the hypertexts they generate. Beginning with the historical example of Pascal’s *Pensées*, Lebrave celebrates the handing over of textual agency to the receiver of the text by declaring hypertext to be the “new space of writing” (*Genetic Criticism* 228). As a random set of fragmented writings and aphorisms, the editor of Pascal’s *Pensées* could find no definitive order for the text, making the reception of the book by the editor also the place of the book’s production. Lebrave’s discussion of hypertext illustrates Derrida’s point about the “iterability” (*Limited Inc.* 53) of all forms of speech and writing, which is that the repetition permits both sameness and the possibility of alteration and difference, whatever the author’s original intention may have been.

I strongly recommend this well-bound, well-printed book for the issues it raises and for the clarity with which it establishes its own authority. The short introductions to each essay by Jed Deppman are an invaluable guide to the reader, and they do succeed in stimulating further reading. I must admit to having felt some of the symptoms of archive fever, and this book will doubtless be an effective carrier in spreading it around, even if the book sometimes forgets to warn its readers that the only way to fight off the mal d’archive is to have already been infected by it.

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