In Praise of the Variant

A Critical History of Philology

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There are several words in this carefully conceived text which are far from common in French, among them textuaire, orature, and écranique. I have made little attempt to conceal their unusual, even jarring, nature in English because each has a meaning that would otherwise require circuitous phrasing. When new ideas come into a language they tend to bring their words with them, and it is my strong belief that a translator’s overdomestication of their difference does neither the writer nor the reader any real favors.

Textuaire, which does not appear in either the Larousse Lexis or the Petit Robert, is translated here as textuary—a word appearing in the Shorter OED and both the American Heritage and Webster’s New World dictionaries, all of which provide a somewhat more limited definition than textuaire requires. Once or twice phrases such as “of a textual nature” or “characteristic of texts” could convey its sense easily enough. But it is clear that Modernité Textuaire—the first chapter heading—is not sufficiently translated as “Textual Modernity” or even “Modernity of the Text,” which translate French phrases that the author carefully did not choose. The chapter unfolds to make it more and more plain that modernity and the notion of text are almost one and the same; that text is literally modernity; that modernity belongs to the text; that text formed and forms modernity; that there is something that legitimately may be called textuary modernity.

Orature is of recent origin and has some currency among both English- and French-speaking scholars interested in the forms of oral tradition as they are compared or contrasted with those of literature.
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(which word is usually to be found nearby). In this context, though somewhat unusual, it is perfectly comprehensible. 

Écranique is also a recent coinage, an adjective used to describe something whose characteristics are determined by a screen—in this case texts. Screenic seemed the most useful English equivalent.

Introduction

The manuscript, which has long been pushed to the margins of legitimate reflection and sometimes even obliterated—the abominable trace of some positivist concern—is now the latest object of analysis. These days one hears terms (textual criticism, draft, variant) that only a few unobtrusive specialists of ancient or medieval languages or members of the old guard had preserved out of conviction. This absence, however, has not come back as a pendulum swing or a backlash, not as some posthumous vengeance on former studies, its ghost leading the shuffling cotillion of disenchanted semioticians. This renewal of interest is a movement whose magnitude cannot fail to impress. Genetic criticism (criticism directed at the genesis of a piece of writing) is now coming in like a desired and overwhelming tide after several years of low water, when we had all but gone back to literary history. The diversity of this phenomenon is also striking. It is the locus for a rediscovered dialogue among disciplines and professions (librarian and critic, theoretician and editor), a fortunate harmony that might remind us of the harmony formerly called Humanism. In short, methodological attention here goes hand in hand with a concern for practical validation. Once again, criticism makes reading available in its strongest sense because the final goal of analysis is publication. None of this is the result of chance or of the past. The present interest in the handwritten trace, the modalities of expression, the meticulous attention paid to the preparation of the work, as well as to the precariousness of writing, reflect a sort of impatient longing in the presence of the written text. This extremely anxious scrutiny of the genesis of a piece of writing is an attempt to escape the shackles of the fixed text by destabilizing inscriptions.
Introduction

Such an approach can emerge today, of course, because it is perfectly inscribed within the critical thought that has been brought to bear upon texts for two decades. It extends them, it is their culmination and their complete realization. The reading that genetic analysis offers is no longer a coherent construction of one of the work's senses; it is a reading that concretely participates in establishing the letter of the work. By creating a printed object that makes an act of writing available to readers, it provides a precise picture of the dynamics of this act. What is usually called the pre-text (all the drafts, manuscripts, etc.) constitutes a textual elsewhere, the elsewhere of writing that is the locus of all determining factors, the space of every traversal: drives, desires, prefabricated ideologies, horizons of expectation. The work exhibits in its attested preliminaries those things that determine it in various ways. Genetic study clearly meets two requirements that the literary theories of modernity have voiced, sometimes in contradictory terms: to return to literature its wealth by assuming the preeminence of writing, and to point out what, on the order of being or of society, conditions this writing. From this perspective, the unique moment in which the publishable form emerges from the mass of preparatory writing becomes increasingly important. This cesura fixing into a text the plurivocal and multidimensional machine of writing is crucial. The almost topological fixation of literary discipline upon a nodal point where two heterogeneous and asymmetrical spaces take their bearings, the point that makes analysis possible, is a very precise indication of its historicity. The vital gesture that marks the advent of a text is somewhat reminiscent of the signature on a final corrected proof.

The name affixed to the page destined for the printer authorizes. If it orders and allows the multiplication of a single fragment of writing by itself, it gives this fragment the status of a text. It equips it with an author, that is, with an origin and an entitlement; it endows it with a canonical form, that is, with a stable conformity. Preparatory writing of any sort ends only in the gesture that affixes the name. The signature is the ultimate writing for which the pre-text constitutes the protean preproduction. It is at once an institutional and a legal gesture, a technical gesture, and the gesture of the printing press in its heyday. The text, the industrial press, and modernity act as one. It is precisely because of the dissemination of the unity of a single technique that, incidentally, the literary text gives meaning to the halo of writing surrounding it.

Criticism is increasingly fond of whatever is unstable, multiple, and precarious, whatever temporarily goes beyond the enclosed immobility established by the machine. Note that this is happening at the very moment when the computer, the new technology, is producing floods of a writing that is mobile, various, and fluctuating. Does that mean that the written work is itself at stake? One might think so because of the extent to which orality now enjoys favor. A thundering uproar exists in this realm, and it has qualified itself as the avant-garde with such self-satisfaction that the attention directed toward revolutions in writing could be considered quite negligible and insignificant. This because it is writing, by and large, that is now expected to vanish before long. Although it is possible to distinguish a bit of good from the worst elements in this chorus as it spreads (the conventional and empty apologia from the media and the communications industry), one should hardly spend much time doing so. We shall not take a stand here on behalf of the oral, the body, or the voice. The promotion of orality within a great many critical discourses is of course a symptom, but a symptom that is deceptive; research, with great fanfare, is entering a blind alley. The technical, hence cultural, mutation that we are part of does not call the written word into question once again—quite the opposite. Information technology is a technology of writing. On the one hand, it is amazingly effective at fulfilling the universally positive and progressive functions of the written word (registering, classifying, relocating, and expanding forms of knowledge). On the other hand, it consumes, produces, stocks, and diffuses vast numbers of inscriptions. In short, it introduces new processes of writing and reading. It is within the written word that our intellectual habits are becoming most deeply fractured.

What has pointed the way to this renewed approach to manu-
scripts has been vaguely perceived by those who idolize the oral, and it is now demonstrated to us by information technology: our conception of textuality is at stake. How a text is ordinarily thought of, a conception upon which both the simplest daily practice and theoretical statements are based, is revealed to be thought representing enclosed conformity and authorized stability. It is our usual notion, mental paraphernalia that is so robust and convenient that no one particularly thinks about it; we forget that it has a history and that this history is a recent one. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, extremely diverse phenomena of order, nature, and evolution all seemed to converge, forming a coherent semantics connected with the practice and study of texts. Philology is the most significant expression of this coherence. Its history is the history of our spontaneous philosophy of the textual.
Lucien Febvre, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, examined his conscience as the young historian he was and formulated a litany of textual studies:

In the realm of modern studies, young men formed intellectually by a culture based only on texts, studies of texts, critical analyses of texts, moved with no break in their habits from secondary schools, where it was solely their abilities as students of texts that ranked them, to the École normale, the Sorbonne, and the other Faculties where the same work of studying texts and analyzing texts was assigned to them.¹

There are certainly a thousand ways of characterizing the nineteenth century from which to choose; we intend, for our part, to examine this religion of the text which so rightly annoyed the recalcitrant apprentice; for a historical positivist education is thoroughly representative of this trust in the factual nature of texts, this confidence in their being established, this desire that they be the basis of critical thought. Starting from reliable texts, or ones that have been made so, in order to construct a superior theory of commentary, is a procedure that theoreticians of contemporary “textuality” of every
sort would be unable to reject completely. Whatever the point of view one may take to examine it, the text as a stumbling block seems one of the moral principles of our modernity. It is the origin of critical discourse because the text itself asks the question of origin in a vital manner (Who formulates or transmits it; under what conditions and to what ends?). And it is the challenge and guarantee of commentary because it is materiality itself (published under the supervision of the author or the philologist, printed, added to the sacred treasure of the library).

The phenomenon of the text gets so much credit for many reasons; for us it is important to show here that technical and legal breakthroughs have not been immaterial. The relationship, which probably could be formulated, among these breakthroughs of various sorts is less important than their massive and seemingly inevitable convergence at the end of the eighteenth century.

The Unique . . .

The notion of a reliable text, or one whose reliability can be ensured by establishing it, is interdependent with the printing industry’s reaching a state that finally provides satisfaction: what came from the press was in keeping with the desire of the author, whatever that might be, now definitively fixed within the two-dimensional limits of the page and infinitely reproducible in its integrity. The text took on supreme importance, accessible to everyone in precisely the form wished by the final writing hand upon delivering it to the press. In this state it would act from now on as the reference and authority.

There can be no doubt that this represented immense progress and the realization of an old dream, one probably formulated when writing was born: the faithful copy. Every copy is alteration; it is necessary, however, to reproduce carefully, word for word, certain founding legal or sacred utterances. Transcribing is treacherous because the human hand finds it very hard to give up the elusive possession of sense. In cases of deliberate revision as well as in careless mistakes, something is at work to restore life to inert inscription; the language lures the copyist, whom it catches in its snare and sets up as subject. Whence the other dream: the machine. To turn the scribe into the objective mechanics of transcription, achieving this through discipline and punishment: the untouchable sacred and the supervisor. Who is the better scribe? The one who does not understand and reproduces signs, or the one who understands everything but respectfully adheres to it? The ideal worker is an average person, a terrorized half-scholar.

The printing press did not fulfill this desire for a machine at the outset. On the contrary, we know that the scriptoria of the late Middle Ages had achieved a quality, if not a reliability, of reproduction that was far superior to the first print shops. The success of the press is due to other irreversible factors: the lowering of costs, the speed of composition, the multiplication of print runs, and so on. The progressive conquest of what is ordinary today—the immutable multiple—must be read according to the rising curve of this new technology from 1530 to the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Literary genetics is thoroughly representative of the modern conception of the text; it explores the polymorphous activity of writing which precedes the final gesture of the hand that has the final power to attest to the conformity of the proof, the hand that gives permission for reproduction but with no possible intervention. The final corrected proof is what separates writing from text, writer from author, freedom from law. The watershed of the literary process, its north slope, always deeper and more shadowy, is probed by genetics. If the preparatory instability of signs and forms takes on such great value for analysis, it is because the fixation of the literary object seems both impossible to ignore and natural: the two dimensions of the printed page delineate its inexorable fate. A cruel fate it is, no doubt, which transfigures a production of sense by immobilizing it, but it is a fate so pleasant that one resigns oneself to it, except in a vague search, as in genetics, for some earlier dynamics in its preparatory stages. Because this immobility, which we see as being imprinted upon the textual phenomenon, referring every written word back to mechanical reproduction’s objectified immutable, necessarily accom-
panies finally guaranteed control. It took several centuries for that to happen; the text that is standard and definitive in its multiplicity dates from the very end of the eighteenth century.

It would be good to write a history of the correction of things that have been printed. In the very technical and partial studies devoted to this particularly daunting subject, the birth of the modern author and his work can be read. Anxiety comes first, a fear so great that the technical progress extinguishing it at the dawn of modernity seems to bring history to a halt. When the first works were entrusted to the press, the last scribes were not working so badly and people stayed with them in the homogeneous and reassuring space of writing by hand; the print shop, a frenetic microcosm, concentrated the disquieting novelties of the technical hand, of specialization, of the machine. The agent (author or editor) entrusting the press with the work, if he were attached to the letter of it, had the feeling of turning it over to dispersal and lack, turning himself over, ill equipped, to some perverse doubles of himself: typography, which made mistakes, the impudent proofreader, who invented them. The printed text was anything but certain: grievances were commonplace, and old books repeat a long litany of “Errata, si quae occurrent, benevolus Lector,” to plead not guilty in a rather offhanded manner that represented little respect for what was being published. Generally speaking, until the second half of the eighteenth century, there was no coherent and conscious intervention vouching for the letter, other than grievances, in answer to the very relative faithfulness of the text. Specifically, the diversity of reactions, situations, and methods did not form any homogenous concept of the author defined in relation to his text. These last two ideas come later and are interconnected.

For that matter, what place does the new technology give the author? A famous engraving by Holbein represents a print shop. In the foreground is the master printer seen from behind, huge, organizing the space as he distributes the work. All around him, bustling and merry, are the workers of Humanism: running the press, washing the type, drying the page. In the background is a table where a man is calmly reading: the proofreader. Finally there is a little fellow who vehemently addresses some supervisor who is hardly listening. That is the author—somewhat ridiculous, somewhat out of place, or, at least, he has not yet found his place, his status. Reactions from that time on were individual and in every shape or form. There was the haughty refusal, at one end of the scale, to go to the print shop or participate in any way at all in proofreading (even if this meant slipping in a spiteful preface that spoke of “correctorum errata emendare,” etc.). At the other end, we see an almost military and somewhat maniacal occupation of the shop, as by Erasmus, who spent eight months in Venice in 1508 while Aldus Mucius printed his Adages, or as by Jacques Peletier du Mans, who promptly moved in with Michel de Vascosan to oversee the printing of his Oeuvres poétiques in 1547. However, and this is more important, any desire for control was blighted by correction procedures that were awkward and annoyingly diverse throughout the course of the book’s production. Until the dawn of the nineteenth century, the supervision of conformity, when it existed, had little to do with any sovereign gesture or final command at the press. Corrections were made during the printing process—indeed, even afterward; and the bad-tempered presence of the author in the shop seems of a piece with this constant manipulation of the text. There were corrections during the print run (with the result that copies from the same edition can be different, which, for us, negates the primary role of the printing press), and there were corrections at the end of the print run (by the addition of inserts, the gluing in of strips of paper, or corrections by hand). This last procedure was rare but very important: as the author took back his book, he seemed to triumph over the machine and imposed upon it the sovereignty of writing. A pathetic power, in fact, it was exercised everywhere and resided nowhere. Paradoxically, it was his exclusion that gave the author a semblance of status. He finally had a place: at home.

Of course, the notion of the proof as being corrected by the hand of the person who vouches for its letter is very old, and we have evidence of it starting in 1530; this proofreading, however, took place at the shop itself, in the space and during the time of production. When
did proof begin to be read in town? This question probably seemed of little interest to the specialists; however, from their work one can draw the conclusion that it was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that there is any evidence of proof being sent home and that it was in the course of the eighteenth century that this practice spread and, indeed, became established. The best presses, such as Oxford University Press, decided once and for all, as Percy Simpson puts it so well: “to keep the author off the premises.”

By sending him away and by discharging upon him the responsibility for the text (what he considered true to his words will be multiplied), the printer acknowledged that the author had a power and a right. At his table, the very same as the one on which the work was developed, the author would transform this work into a text that was immutable and vouched for by him alone. Accompanying the final game of proof, the act of passing for press, in which writing culminated and absolutely abolished itself, became widespread at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It marked the birth of the modern text, for it established the deep and defining break between pre-text and text. Of course, evolution in this specific realm—the proofs for a preindustrial and then an industrial press—was slow and lethargic, and as a result extremely instructive. We know that, from Voltaire to Stendhal, it was customary not to put the finishing touches on the manuscript but to amend and correct on successive proofs, “on the metal.” The proof was very much part of the pre-text; it was the final draft. In the secular battle against the author, conducted in the name of rational work and economic interest, the printer once again had been on the side of the text. Of course, evolution in this specific realm—the proofs for a preindustrial and then an industrial press—was slow and lethargic, and as a result extremely instructive. We know that, from Voltaire to Stendhal, it was customary not to put the finishing touches on the manuscript but to amend and correct on successive proofs, “on the metal.” The proof was very much part of the pre-text; it was the final draft. In the secular battle against the author, conducted in the name of rational work and economic interest, the printer once again had been on the side of the text. Though the restriction of “corrections by the author” seemed to destroy a privilege, it put the finishing touches on the distinction between the space of writing and that of mechanics, opposing a shifting and polymorphous personal element to a public one that was immutable and multiple. Modernity’s corrected proof, reduced to a certificate concluded by a signature, is this watershed that can be crossed with a single step but where the hillside slopes away in opposite directions and the waters divide.

Words written in preparation, consequently, became important whether considered as, in turn, divine inspiration, creative genius, or blind processes of writing; above all, they took on value. How long have writers been saving their drafts of printed works before they or their heirs turn them over either to the market or to some devout amateur or to a library? Here too, an obscure but fundamental history remains to be written, that of the notebook, the tear-out, the scrap of paper. The “author’s manuscript,” researched and studied, is apparently a modern idea. Louis Hay notes that the first manuscript collections date from German Romanticism, when national tradition was glorified. An enlightened and patriotic group of sponsors began gathering together documents that related to German literature, primarily manuscripts and drafts. Private or public foundations served as depositories and research centers, culminating with the Goethe-und Schiller-Archiv in the Weimar Republic. We can see that it was during the nineteenth century that the author’s manuscripts acquired status and social recognition (either for their commercial value or as a specific institution) and that this followed a rapidly rising curve. Toward the middle of the century there were more than a hundred important collections in Germany (four times more than the number in France). This Germanic advance implied that philology, that pioneer from beyond the Rhine, played a role here. Despite the difference then assumed to exist between ancient or medieval manuscripts and modern manuscripts—the former something like a remnant, the latter a rough sketch—it was the same taste for the priceless traces left by a hand that was attractive in both cases. This was a Romantic taste, of course, for things of the past, glorifying the poet of genius right down to his most minor scribblings. Even so, this interest was never possible, much less intense, until the day that the machine, which for about two centuries had been bringing the notion of text into line with the image of the final printed page, increased the value of the writing by hand that went before, whether in the history of humanity or in the history of an individual. The draft became desirable when the text became fixed and its author had rights.
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... and His Property

This second aspect is well known, and only its historical convergence with other notions of the text interests us here. It was at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the idea of literary property acquired the force of law. At that time the law stated that every text was first of all something belonging to the person who conceived it: origins and paternity. In other words, as Michel Foucault clearly saw, the idea of the author took hold at the center of the notion of text, which became constituted as the “work of”: the modern text is genitive. It is certain that, as usual, the legislature translated into legal terms something that people already thought of as a fact, namely, the complete and apparently definitive emergence of the notion of the literary author.

Evolution was slow, from the autumn of the Middle Ages until the end of the Enlightenment. It ended with modernity, which it helped to found, and it forms a meaningful parallel with the history of printing, which we mentioned earlier. The invention of the printing press was far more a psychological than a technical revolution, that is, a stuttering and inconvenient one, certainly, but one that, in reality, implied a different relationship with the text. After all, as Elizabeth Eisenstein remarks, Erasmus could try to put things to rights and obtain a correct edition by publishing errata, but Saint Jerome and Alcuin could not do so. The fact is that the idea never dawned on them. Gutenberg's desire, for all its novelty, was not fully realized until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Things went along as if these techniques of the written word were the bearers of radically new ideas, and for a long time people saw them as offensive. The same had been true for the invention of the codex, and it is true today with computer word processing.

The author is not a medieval concept. We shall come back to that, and, although the emergence of the figure and practice of the writer can be shown starting in the fourteenth century, what looks like a functional anachronism is attached to the expression medieval author. As with the printing press, the Renaissance set new ideas in place, securely albeit in a half-light. The emergence of the author in the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is a complex but well-known phenomenon that falls into the realm of what might be called “internal literary history.” The importance of the postclassical notion of belles-lettres, which developed as the old rhetoric became fractured, is part of this history. Having lost one after the other, pronuntiatio and memoria (to the theater), then inventio and dispositio (shifted to logic), and finally reduced to elocutio alone, that is, to a purely ornamental art, rhetoric, which had now become belles-lettres, highlights the unique talent of somebody who knows how to say, like nobody else on earth, what everybody thinks. Obviously, the emergence of the author is also a matter of external literary history. The slow waning of royal patronage; the ups and downs of private sponsorship; the first demands during the 1720s for financial, not to say professional, autonomy, coming mainly from the humble rank and file of writers—who asked at most to get some profit from the sale of their books; the conflicting relations with the booksellers' profession; and finally (though not before the last quarter of the century), the obtaining of rights over print runs and later editions—all of these need to be mentioned.

We prefer to emphasize the paratextual aspects of the phenomenon, and once again the history of the book is very instructive. Our perfectly ordinary (but highly standardized) title page, which Lucien Febvre described as the “registry” of printed works, was slow to become established. The printed text of the first books began, as did manuscripts, on the recto of the first page, introduced by a few brief words (no doubt the former incipit) indicating the subject of the work and occasionally—only occasionally—the name of the author. There was a very material reason for the origins of the title page: because the recto of the first page was particularly likely to get soiled, it became usual to begin printing on the verso of this page. The unprinted recto, therefore, could have a number of things on it: an illustration, the printer's stamp, the address of the bookseller, the title—more and more comprehensive (there was plenty of room) if not, indeed, an outline of the work—and finally, in establishments run by
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Humanist printers, the author's name. One cannot follow the progress made by this last item during the sixteenth century simply in terms of its absence or presence; the reason for mentioning it was also important. The decorative function of this first page turned the surname into what was, apparently, an element of illustration demonstrating the skill of the engraver in a complex game of masking and light (framing it voluminously, setting it in infinite regression, etc.). The title page, with the author's name as a component, purely typographical and informational in nature, seems to have become established fact (if one excludes baroque editions) in the first third of the seventeenth century. It would be nice to have the same sort of information about bindings (at what date does the piece of leather glued to the back of a book bear not only the title of the work but also the name of its author?), and about libraries (at what date do books begin to be organized upright so that the spine is showing? when does cataloguing according to surname appear?). Our way of doing these things apparently goes back no earlier than the eighteenth century. We can agree, therefore, that displaying and defining the printed work under the authority of the name of the person to whom the immutability of the letter is attributed is a rather recent custom.

In short, this genesis of the concept of author, as it forms de facto our notion of the text, had a legal aspect. This all came about in the final years of the eighteenth century, principally through the reduction of the privileges of the booksellers' corporation. In 1777, the year in which, following Beaumarchais's wishes, the Society of Dramatic Authors was founded, the privileges granted booksellers were limited by the decrees of 30 August, inspired by the anticorporation politics of Turgot. Specifically, publication rights became legally transferable to the author, who wanted to exploit his own works. Legal procedures set in place by the Revolution completed this development. The law of 2 March 1791 extended the abolition of privileges into the economic domain, and hence the rights of booksellers as well as the ownership of authors lost all legal basis. Published works fell prey to counterfeiters in a period when the market for printed material experienced enormous growth. Following a preliminary report in which Lakanal proposed a "declaration of the rights of the genius," the decree of 21 July 1793 granted authors (and their heirs) the exclusive right to sell, cause to be sold, and distribute their works or to surrender, wholly or partially, ownership of them. Thus a noble idea, seeing in the "fruits of thought" the most sacred and most personal of properties (very belatedly acknowledged and honored, it is true), gave the author a "sovereign power," an indefeasible moral right and a patrimony. Obviously, what was granted to the author exceeded anything that could be expected from a reasonable and fair settlement of the dispute with booksellers, on the one hand, and counterfeiters, on the other. We are face to face with a change in the way people thought, which went deeper and moved faster because of the revolutionary upsurge. This can be verified in other ways: the 1793 decree of the revolutionary assembly is still the basis of the French legal system as far as literary property is concerned; revisions and extension that came later (the Berne Convention, inspired by France in 1886; the law of 19 May 1925, etc.) were executed in relation to the principles and sometimes in the terms of the decree of 1793. A memorable law, it should be inscribed on the frontispiece of every textbook of literature: it announced to the world the birth of the modern author.

Clearly, many notions that, either in theoretical vigilance or in the semiconfusion of practice, we connect to the idea of text result from a technical, mental, and legal upheaval that took shape at the dawn of the nineteenth century—that is, if we employ a broad synchrony and bear in mind that there are multicentury evolutions, with their inherent rhythm and intensity, coming to an end. All the same, we can pinpoint a convergence that is sufficiently marked for it to constitute one of the definitive instruments of our thought. Or one of those presumed to be so, for computer word processing, which we see now spreading far and wide, demands our urgent attention. It poses thorny legal problems, and this time it does not seem possible to resolve them in the spirit of 1793. Word-processing technique, despite an inert relatedness by vocabulary, bears no resemblance at all to the printing press: the screen represents vast numbers of pages; a printout is not a proof.
In the nineteenth century the idea of the text as it was thus constituted came into its own and gave birth to a particular and fundamental science: philology. It is a modern science to our minds, even though, since the 1950s, a young, impatient, and fractious body of critics has attempted to throw off the yoke. A modern science of the modern text, philology is applied to ancient objects. We shall examine how it relates to medieval works, where the historicity of its principles and, put simply, its very peculiar anachronism are most clearly apparent.

There are legitimate reasons for examining nineteenth-century philological practice in its application to medieval manuscripts written in the vernacular rather than in its relationship with the ancient works or sacred texts for which it had been created. Displaced in this manner, or, to risk a metaphor, uncalled for, this practice plainly reveals its dynamics. Moreover, in a new translatio studii, medieval culture now takes precedence over Greek and Latin culture, formerly the matrix of references, identifications, and illusions, as the locus of our intense examination. There are, to be sure, many reasons for keen interest in the Middle Ages. The media have worked some minor miracles, which no doubt merged with the excellence of a historical school as well as with anxieties born of industrial society and its crisis: this is, in short, the vast legacy of Marc Bloch and bucolic nostalgias. Nonetheless, interest that is focused equally on food and the fine arts, on feudal ideology and on trivial everyday acts, is a sign that this examination holds a great deal of meaning for a world in which some founding otherness is acknowledged.

Study of the first texts written in French, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, examining their most material aspects according to the specific features of this writing activity, is part of an in-
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quiry that reveals discontinuities at the heart of something that has been accepted as an almost ontological continuum. It thus represents an archeology of our own mental structures—all the more true because we are in a pioneering field that serves as a model.

The Stakes of the Written Word

The page that was blank from the sixth century to the millennium would be first written on again in Gallo-Roman territory. The fate of scholarly culture and written works—that is, Latin—is well known; for several centuries it flickered as the final flame of ancient culture, a night light kept burning where people worshipped. Precarious support for it came from the church, thanks to several schools, and above all thanks to the liturgy, which reinforced the specialized, ritual aspect of the Latin language. The language of religion, Latin was also an extremely useful medium of communication for the very few scholars, as well as the vehicle for the production, or rather, reproduction of knowledge. It cut itself off from the rapidly developing vernaculars rooted in it, in a break reinforced by the Carolingian renaissance and especially by the Latin pronunciation proposed by Alcuin, which further separated the regenerated Latin that was taught from maternal, everyday languages. What little writing took place was in Latin; nothing expressed in the vernacular was worthy of being inscribed and certainly not worth slaughtering a few sheep over.

None of the conditions existed which would allow the development of a literature in a vernacular language, the first such condition being an audience. There were circles of scholars and their pupils, but they did not constitute this cultivated audience required by literature. Erich Auerbach, a faithful disciple of Curtius, noted its absence and saw in it long centuries of drastic impoverishment of the ancient heritage.1 From this point of view, the revival around the millennium, a joyful and rapid expansion (masked by the "millenarian terrors" of Romantic historiography), was stupendous. Development of cities and commerce, safer roads, land clearing, the first court societies, and bourgeois money all opened the way for a cultural revival. Latin, sloughing off the old rhetoric, made progress in the twelfth century, enlisting logic, or dialectics, on the side of modern thought and abounding in neologisms: scholastic Latin, swaggering before it ossified.

The written word made progress that was decisive, with no going back. For, though men of letters (able to read, perhaps even write, and knowing Latin—one implied the other) remained in the minority (unless the overestimation of medieval illiteracy is, once again, a fantasy of the nineteenth century), they were the bearers of positive and legitimate values that constituted a system of reference. This was critical. The change that took place between A.D. 1000 and 1100 was, on the one hand, in the mere quantity of inscriptions of every sort produced by medieval society (measured by the consumption of manuscripts and ink as well as sealing wax). On the other hand, the greatest change was that the written object was beginning to be institutionalized. In England, for example, the least baronet would soon be required to read and sign (or to possess a seal), as would more than one of his newly rich serfs.2

One can grasp the start of a new mentality that accompanied and facilitated (not to say, permitted) the great renewal of the twelfth century. It constituted a deep, rich humus of craving for the written word, new layers of visual capacities, and a conception of knowledge that would be the ground for the culture of print after its break with the practice of writing by hand. The appearance of this new "technology of the intellect," as Jack Goody calls it, among all the technical inventions of the millennium, had widespread and diverse consequences. It constituted a set of mental tools very well described by Brian Stock.3 There was a new sense of temporality together with a different perception of space and its organization (the structural links between scholastic thought and gothic architecture are, moreover, well known).4 With this came the notion of exchange at a distance and communication, in short, an intellectualism enhanced by reflection and knowledge. The written word, even if it eluded most people, was the new figure of authority; it was the basis of both commitment and debate, constituting the inalienable reference and permitting
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positive criticism. Abelard’s *Sic et Non*, bringing apparently contradictory fragments of sacred texts together to link them logically, is an admirable example of the progress in reasoning made possible by writing. Even more, reflection on the sign, whether by grammarians or philosophers, was promoted by the written trace through its role as intermediary between concept and reality, as well as by the setting down of discourse on the page, showing relations as a whole that could be mastered. The written word, though it might be precarious and scarce, was a basic value; acknowledged as such, it stood surety for the exchange of ideas just as money, whose parallel development was spectacular, made possible commerce in merchandise and property.

The symbolic stakes in this passage to writing (or toward writing) which affected medieval society are understood but still need to be correctly evaluated. As it happens, the estimates of widespread illiteracy in the Middle Ages and the dubious consequences drawn from this have misled research somewhat less than the simplistic manipulation of the opposition between oral and written, no matter which pole, moreover, was favored. Between the seventh and eleventh centuries, the vigor and significance of oral practices were the concomitant side of the tenuous preservation of writing. Nor should one bring into consideration here the very short-lived opposition between scholarly and popular cultures. Some writing was protected, technical, and professional, but beyond that, human conduct as a whole, from the most modest to the most official, as well as the transmission of social knowledge, had the spoken word for its basis, its reference and its vector.

After the millennium, oral expression was certainly no less widespread, but orality began to lose its authoritative character. In other words, the written word robbed the spoken word of its authority but did so in a mode more typical of cultural revolutions, through shifting and replacing values rather than through breaks and upheavals. This was a decisive change, moving medieval society from an oral and preliterate status to a mixture of oral and written (according to a subtle typology of illiteracy, near literacy, and literacy). And it was an irreversible change because it represented progress. Writing and reading as techniques became associated now, as we have mentioned, with the development of trade. In addition, futures were opening up and new social groups emerging (among which great importance would be accorded the scholars, who held all this knowledge and its tools). The oral or, to use Jack Goody’s terms, the contextualized use of language was suitable to a regional and particularist society that was more concerned with inherited forms of status than with the dynamics of social roles. Finally, it is a simple fact that oral language is conservative, wherever or whenever it exists. Written language, by contrast, as the appropriation of a decontextualized knowledge, can be a factor (one to be exploited, as Jules Ferry and the republicans did) in progress and freedom. And though the view that writing runs through all of medieval society is modern and anachronistic, it is inappropriate to wax nostalgic over a medieval orality that was sincere, free, and of the people, as the victim of clerical and scriptural oppression.

The appearance of writing in the vernacular provides the best proof of how vigorously this change in habits and references took place. The exclusive bond between Latin and writing became looser, opening up—briefly at first, but the move was decisive—to the vernacular. This innovation, though usually reduced to an archeological curiosity, mere beginnings, scattered bits, should be granted its full importance. It has been our usual habit to trivialize this inscription of French, which, even if it is indirect and incomplete, represents a tremendous conquest: the vernacular language had to conquer a legitimacy, and this conquest had to include the instruments of that legitimacy. (For the scribe this was no mean, grammatical feat: new sounds had to be transcribed into the Latin alphabet, the statement had to be broken into segments, etc.). The historical linguistics of French attaches little value to this writing process, which it considered important only in that it finally permitted the establishment of reconstructions on some attested language. Ignoring the fact that ethnologists have widely and confidently proven that the passage of vernacular languages into writing has many consequences, historical linguistics puts few questions to the attestations it collects. Following an extremely scholarly philology, its criticism implies that they are seen
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as clumsy and scarcely reliable documents of language as it was spoken. This point of view forgets, on the one hand, that writing, which decontextualizes language and makes it audible to more than one person, is always in common usage and very quickly judged to be “good,” because it surrounds itself with prestige: these few traces preserved in folios are the first monuments of literary language, providing evidence of the earliest workings of writing. On the other hand, such a point of view underrates the extent to which the written word turns around and influences language itself. Basically, no one has studied this influence; the idea of doing so is beyond historical linguistics (for which writing is merely evidence and proof); it is unthinkable for those who believe that the essence of medieval cultures lies in their orality; it goes against good sense (reminding us how rare this written vernacular is). Studies far and wide have confirmed, however, that such an influence exists, and French provides such a good illustration of the phenomenon that it deserves to figure in textbooks of ethnology—an illustration so overwhelmingly obvious that no one has noticed it.

No matter what their orientation, treatises on the subject of French phonetics are in agreement in dating the major phenomena that give French its specific phonic color (the dropping of unstressed vowels, the diphthongization of stressed syllables, the sounding then dropping of intervocalic consonants, palatizations, etc.) between the third and the tenth centuries. In the tables, diagrams, and synopses included in these treatises, there is nothing afterward other than phenomena that are clearly only reductions and simplifications. In other words, the phonetic evolution of French became stable and sorted itself out during the same period as it acquired a written form. This, we consider, is no coincidence, but rather the proof, disturbing perhaps, of the effects of the first written documents on proto-French. We need, therefore, to submit these effects to an inquiry, which we know will be simultaneously difficult, far reaching, and disconcerting.

Numerous reasons have been advanced to explain the development all at once of a written vernacular. Certain very specific circumstances should not be overlooked. Thus, according to Auerbach,
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tomarily used for presenting the Scriptures. But now the words were in the language used for how one approaches existence and comes to understand its meaning, the language that was the basis of interdependence, the one used to express most deeply one’s desires and sufferings. The mother tongue, for the first time, confronted all the risks and possibilities of everything that literature specifically is. What basis exists for the use of this term, however precarious its object, lies in the conflictual contact between meaning linked to the constituent language as it is practiced and the constraints and possibilities of its written formulation; in the conviction that this will result in a specific aesthetic experience that is new in process as well as in effect; in the desire to preserve this experience, varying and going back over its effects. When the mother tongue learned writing (in its inseparable technical and aesthetic senses), it involved a double break on its part.

First, it broke with Latin and very rapidly emerged from its shadow. It may be noted that, even in its first expressions, French literary language demonstrated very few Latinisms, and its stylistic forms (the decasyllabic and octosyllabic lines used at first; then the prose that appeared at the end of the twelfth century) owed nothing to Latin forms. More generally, we can see that its models were not taken from Latin literature (ancient or medieval); French literature invented its genres, from the epic poem to a form destined for some success, the romance.

Second, it broke with orality. Though a symbolic break, it matters to us. Of course, one can surmise that orature in the vernacular language, though losing some of its legitimacy, remained very vigorous and produced an abundance of works: for a long time to come (forever, probably, in poetic practice), aesthetic experience in the mother tongue remained physically articulated. Actually, human speech intervened in various ways at the very heart of this attempt at literature proper with which we are concerned. And it did so in very different ways; this literature was traversed by multiple voices: in the oral composition of certain *chansons de geste* (to the extent that this genre did not mimic in writing the formulas and processes of *orature*); in a stage of oral transmission which occurred for certain texts (*fabliaux*, for example) at the heart of manuscript transmission; in dictation to a scribe (not to mention the “interior dictation” of reading something—probably aloud, moreover—and writing it down slowly); and in the convivial and almost professional reading of nearly all of this literature (as a playwright nowadays writes words to be spoken). But all these interventions by the oral were fragmented, kept at a distance, and confirmed in their heterogeneity precisely by the activity of writing. Whether or not the work was composed and transmitted orally, whether or not it was later interpreted, it was linked, for a moment, to the gesture of the hand, it yielded to the linearity of the graphic signifier, and it confronted the decontextualization and virtualization of meaning, its variation and deferral, its *différence*. Here we are putting our finger on the specificity of the first literature in the French language. This was a literature not yet forced into the shackles of established forms of the written word (the author as the tutelary origin, textual stability, etc.), which were very late in coming, as we have seen, and it shows us in an exemplary manner the euphoric appropriation by the mother tongue of the gesture that transcends it.

This appropriation found expression in an essential variance, which philology, modern thinking about the text, took to be merely a childhood disease, a guilty offhandedness or an early deficiency of scribal culture, whereas the variance was, quite simply, joyful excess.

The Alterity of the Manuscript

Everything about medieval literary inscription seems to elude the modern conception of the text, of textual thought. Still, if one considers this inscription to be part of our patrimony, informing us about an aesthetics, or continuing to provide enjoyment, we need to make it available to readers by publishing it, that is, by editing it. The nuance is important, because we shall take care to refuse the always latent temptation (from Romantic typography to the love of first drafts demonstrated by certain literary geneticists) of the facsimile.

In the often stated and sincere desire not to reduce what is believed to be the immanent truth of the object but to deliver it in
abundance, the alluring facsimile, which represents an abdicated responsibility for thought and, in this case, a dreadful illusion, is turned over to the machine. There is no end to the boundless desire for a "restoration" and an imaginary possession (from the reproduction of colored writing to the vellum format). The perfect facsimile is something out of Borges—it is the original work itself. Editing, on the other hand, is choice: one must cut and know the reasons for this challenging gesture. In other words, given the difference between our established attitude toward the written word and that of the Middle Ages, it is important to keep whatever in the medieval disposition makes sense and ought to be saved at a possible cost to everything else. The editor chooses what he considers to be the specificity of the work, what is for him its truth, and makes it understood. That being the case, it is clear that every edition is based on a theory—often implicit—about the work. The methodology of editing, no matter what work it is applied to, always puts a literary theory into practice. From this point of view, medievalist philology, which is based on textual thought, has opted for maximum reduction of the manuscript to a contemporary textual object and to its accompanying notion of literature.

When the fantasy of absolute reproduction or the solely documentary project of fidelity to the manuscript (which is not a reading) is abandoned, from that moment on, editing becomes an activity with increasing choices and privileges. Thus simply transcribing the inscription on the manuscript into the type characters of our Roman alphabet ("diplomatic" editing), necessarily entailed some graphic representation of the wording (breaking it into words), and punctuation to be legible. Words had been cut apart in Latin manuscripts starting in the eighth century (scriptio continua being hard to decipher), which no doubt represented some progress in silent reading in private. More profoundly, this segmentation was quite certainly connected with the Carolingian revival of the teaching of Latin, which we know consisted mainly of morphology. In the absence of any grammatical instruction in the vernacular language, and with the ad-

Pronouns and articles are considered to be clitic in both manuscripts; they are almost always enclitic in H, proclitic in C. Whereas a study of the syntax may discover something to think about here, this sort of layout obscures any other way of looking at it. Such an arrangement, dividing the forms in a graphic series, so that this is how the reader first perceives them, is more strange and disconcerting than what makes each of the old forms and the modern ones different from each other (peseit for pesait, apele for appelle, etc.). Consequently, this needs to be scaled down. The editor, Jean Rychner, did so by joining elements that the scribe differentiated:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manuscript H</th>
<th>Manuscript C</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Norman mid-13th century</td>
<td>Anglo-Norman end of 13th century</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ne1 ensouvient</td>
<td>ne lensouvient</td>
<td>did not remember him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nel enpeseit</td>
<td>ne lenseït</td>
<td>did not trouble him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nel apde</td>
<td>ne lapde</td>
<td>does not summon him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nel emplensist</td>
<td>ne len plensist</td>
<td>did not pity him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nel alasse</td>
<td>ne lalass</td>
<td>would not go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>del amur</td>
<td>de lamur</td>
<td>of the/with love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>del estencele</td>
<td>de sa estencele</td>
<td>with the/with its spark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>un kil or servi</td>
<td>un que lour servi</td>
<td>one who had served him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>de ces kil out avilee</td>
<td>de ce que lour avilee</td>
<td>because he had outraged her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sil apela</td>
<td>se lapela</td>
<td>and called to him/her</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and differentiated what had been joined:

determiner and substantive:  
laventure [the adventure, the event]  
samur [his / her love]  

preposition and substantive:  

despine [of the thorn]

This editing, which imposes the canonical segmentation of contemporary written French upon medieval discontinuity, which is taken to be random, recalls somewhat, all things being equal, the difficulties encountered in editing a tape recording of spoken French, a signifying series that we perceive as opaque. If the act of editing imposes the modern definition of the word, it does the same thing on a higher level with the definition of the sentence (which, in the final analysis, is merely what one prints beginning with a capital letter and ending with a period). What is disconcerting to modern eyes is not so much that words have not been separated as that they have been separated differently. In the same way, medieval manuscripts segmented the broad units of French wording but according to a logic displaying its difference right from the start. We could compare, for example, this (semi-) diplomatic transcription (with the words separated) of an extract from the Somme le roi by Brother Laurent (1279), which Jacques Stiennon provided in his manual of paleography, with one possible way of editing this extract. The manuscript under consideration makes use of several capital letters and a period (transcribed here as *) half-way up the characters.

Diplomatic Transcription

*C'est la vertuz que li dons de sapience plante ou cuer contre l'outrage de gloutenie, quar sapience enseigne sobriët, si comme dit Salemeons. Sobrietez est uns arbres moult precieux, quar il garde la santé de l'arme et dou cors, si comme dit li Escriptrue. Et de gloutenie et d'outrage de boivre et de meingier vienent souvant moult de granz maladies, et souvant la mort soudeinnement, si comme l'en prant le poisson à l'ameçon, c'est a dire le morsel en la bouche. (Frère Laurent, La Somme le roi. Paris: BN, fonds français 938, fol. 145)

Edited Version

C'est la vertuz que li dons de sapience plante ou cuer contre l'outrage de gloutenie, quar sapience enseigne sobriët, si comme dit Salemeons. Sobrietez est uns arbres moult precieux, quar il garde la santé de l'arme et dou cors, si comme dit li Escriptrue. Et de gloutenie et d'outrage de boivre et de meingier vienent souvant moult de granz maladies, et souvant la mort soudeinnement, si comme l'en prant le poisson à l'ameçon, c'est a dire le morsel en la bouche.

Translation

[It is the virtue that the gift of wisdom places in the heart against the sin of gluttony, for wisdom teaches sobriety, as Salomon said. Sobriety is a very precious tree for, as the Scriptures say, it protects the health of the soul and the body. Great illnesses and often sudden death frequently result as much from gluttony as from excess of drink just as one catches a fish with a hook, that is, the morsel still in its mouth.]

We can see that the sign * corresponds sometimes to our period (ending a sentence), sometimes to our comma (ending a proposition or a long constituent), and sometimes breaks something that seems to us a syntactic connection (plante * ou cuer). Rhythmic punctuation, it separates parts of the statement, (syntagm, proposition, or phrase), cutting apart the “elements of reading” with a logic that can be examined only after having rid oneself of the presuppositions and prerequisites of phrasal syntax. Reading, however, accustomed to the structure provided by commas and periods, becomes disoriented and out of breath because it cannot relocate its usual pattern. Consequently, the editor needs to punctuate, though indeed with a light touch, thoughtfully and sparingly. It is clear that editing obscures the segmentation of medieval literary exposition, at the level of words as well as at that of larger elements, whether it is hesitant or innovative or follows a model. Thus, for certain forms of research, innumerous facts are lost, not to say the object itself. This cannot be made available to readers (except at the expense of making the published text
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obscure for the benefit of a few) and can hardly be put into a note (except by adding to the impenetrable jungle of the hyperscholarly edition), yet one simply ought to be able to regain it.

The transfer, the manipulating and ordering of a medieval work that is represented by modern publication, can be seen more generally when a scribal inscription becomes a book. The materialization of a text intended for readers—which for us, out of cultural necessity, amounts to making a printed book—obeys rules that bring into play a finite set of pertinent elements (from format to author's name, from epigraph to subheadings) whose typology and functioning were described very well by Gérard Genette in *Seuils*. A synchronic and structural analysis of the "paratext," it opens the way for a historical survey of moments of genesis and rupture. In this history the situation of French medieval manuscripts is exemplary from more than one viewpoint. Initially, through their slow conquest of literary status for the vernacular, they were less quick to innovate and stayed premodern, so to speak, longer than Latin manuscripts, which, transcribing legal, philosophical, or theological texts, were closely linked to the transmission of knowledge and, hence, to its appropriation. For the latter, one can follow the appearance of a critical peritext in keeping with the technological progress of the written word, progress that the printing press would prolong: the alphabetical layout of the *Elementarium doctrinae Erudimentum* of Papias (ca. 1053), the classification by symbols, the separation of text and commentary, and then, during the twelfth century, the invention of a functional layout: running heads, subtitles in red, initials alternating blue and red, or decreasing in size, and so on. 8

The genesis of this medieval paratext is a good illustration of the tabular and type foundations of "graphic reason": the written word is not simply a deposit of knowledge; it is above all an incomparable means of classifying and retrieving it. In this sense computer word processing, as a tool for information storage and search, is linked very basically to the written word. French manuscripts, whose task was less to preserve information and references than to bring into being a language, participate obliquely in this development, more tentatively and in a manner deserving of interest. This being the case, what is disconcerting to the modern eye (just as it was in the way words were separated and punctuated) is not the absence of a paratext. It is, rather, that its paratextual practice differs even more markedly from ours than does that of Latin manuscripts but gives no signs of doing so. From that point on, editing very clearly and concretely must reduce what is before it to the model of the modern paratext, that is, to textual thought. An extremely simple example of this may be seen by going back to the *Lai de Lanval* and the very remarkable edition of it that Jean Rychner provided. 9 It consists of a small book made up of this one text, which gives it its title. On the cover, in bold letters (called quite appropriately *titulaires*), the name of an author, Marie de France, whose work consequently goes on the shelf between Malraux and Maupassant, and who takes her place in the homogeneous and reassuring paradigm of French authors.

The *Lai de Lanval* took the material form of a unique, entitled, attributed, and closed text occupying edge to edge the space of a book (called, to be exact, a volume). Its medieval form was very different. The *Lai de Lanval*, a work that we think of as a unit, appeared in four manuscripts with important and numerous variants. That is the first difference—its essential plurality—to which we shall later return at greater length. Next, the manuscript privileged by Jean Rychner, and upon which he based his edition, is a codex preserved in the British Museum (Harley 978). Along with *Lanval* (fol. 154v–159v), it contains the twelve lays attributed to Marie de France (fol. 139–181—exceptional in that it is the one "complete" manuscript from our point of view); but it contains also a treatise on religious music (in Latin), a Roman calendar (in Latin), the *Sept signes de mort*, the *Synonymes des plantes*, recipes for medicine, a letter from Hippocrates to Caesar, the *Isopets* of Marie de France, twenty-two Latin texts, the *Doctrinal sauvage*, the *Bestourne* of Richard, the *Mariage du père et de la mère de saint Thomas Becket*, and a treatise on falconry. 10

Like most medieval codices in which French literary works can be read, the Harley 978 collects texts in a manner combining ill-assortment and composition following a logic that is, at the very least, hard...
to detect. Until the arrival of the printing press, the medieval manuscript in form, and probably in function, was an anthology, a collection. Always a higher unit than the work (whether this was a poetic piece or one of the longest romances, which we bind into large volumes), the codex was the open space of a confrontation, a gesture that brought together. We know that the paratextual practice of the codex, when it existed, was something entirely different, serving primarily to distribute and give rhythm to this space of writing. Thus the three other manuscripts in which the *Lai de Lanval* appears present this rubric:

P c’est de Lanval [it is about Lanval]
S c’est le lay de Lanval [it is the lay of Lanval]
C Ici comence le lay de Lanval [Here begins the lay of Lanval]

which we can certainly take as the ancestor of our title. Its function, however, as *incipit* clearly distinguishes it from the thematic (or rheumatic) finality of the modern title overhanging a work installed in its absolute singularity by being made into a book. Finally, there is nothing in folios 154v and 159v of the Harley 978 manuscript that attributes the *Lai de Lanval* to an author named Marie de France; nor is there anything formally attributing to her the collection of lays found there. No title, no rubric; one just reads at the beginning of the first lay:

Oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie
Ki en sun tens pas ne s’oblie (Guigemar, v. 3–4)

[Here begins the lay of Lanval]

Critics connect this textual (and not paratextual) note to the epilogue of the *Fables* attributed to the same author:

Al finement de cest escrit
Qu’en romanz ai traitié e dit,
Me numerai pur remembrance:
Marie ai num, si sui de France

(Éd. Warnke, v. 1–14)

[at the conclusion of this writing
That I have said and produced in popular language
I will name myself for remembrance’s sake;
Marie is my name, and I am from France]

As well as another passage from *Espurgatore saint Patrice*, which is also attributed to her:

Jo, Marie, ai mis en memoire
Le livre de l’Espurgatoire
En romanz, qu’il seint entendables
A laie gent e covenables

(Éd. Warnke, v. 2297–2300)

[Io, Marie, have put into memory
The book of Purgatory
In popular language so that it will be understandable
And suitable for lay people]

“It is generally believed that these three Maries are one and the same,” Jean Rychner wrote in his edition (85), “a woman who lived in England during the time of Henri II.” We are obliged to observe that these three Maries exist only as a few brief textual effects. From these three separate marks of an intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator (to use Gérad Genette’s terms), an author has been created and endowed with the beautiful name Marie de France (constructed, we must note, from start to finish on the basis of “Marie ai num, si sui de France,”) and turned over to the inexhaustible hordes of conjectures and speculations.

Clearly, this edition, the creation of a canonical text, has taken, enclosed within the space of a book, and assigned to a memorable individual a segment of the written word, borrowed from an uninterrupted column, running through several folios of a codex manuscript. This has important consequences for us concerning the very composition of the utterance as well as its language.

In Rychner’s edition, the *Lai de Lanval* begins:

L’aventure d’un autre lai,
Cum ele avint, vus cunterai.
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Faiz fu d'un mult gentil vassal:
En bretanz l'apelent Lanval.

[The adventure of another lay,
As it occurred, I shall relate to you.
It was made about a very noble vassal:
In Breton they call it Lanval.]

The construction of the sentence occupying the first two lines is worth noting: the nominal group that is the verb's object is placed first, followed by a circumstantial subordinate (with a pronominal repeat); then comes the verbal group. There is a widespread belief that in Old French, word order was free; but the reasons advanced for this freedom, though sometimes those of grammar, are groundless (the supposed declension of substantives indicating in the earlier language the syntactic functions that modern French distinguishes through a fixed order in the wording), sometimes metaphors of childhood (the genesis of the language) or of disorder (a mosaic of dialects, variance among the manuscripts). It is our thinking that, on the contrary, the order of the words in Old French was, basically, already that of modern French. (What is different about medieval syntax is generally not located where people thought it was.) In the subordinate, the anteposition of the subject is constant; it is in the principal proposition that the anteposition of other elements, words detached and emphasized, is encountered. These various thematizing processes, which gradually were eliminated from the classical written sentence, are discursive phenomena that are all the more visible in medieval French because it is a literary language. Therefore they are always meaningful and have to be explained. In the passage just quoted, the nominal object group is, on the one hand, anteposed and, on the other, detached by the pronominal anaphora of line 2, which often is the equivalent of discursive articulation; if one adds the expression "autre lai" (other lai) from line 1, one sees that this introduction is particularly anaphoric, turned towards something said earlier but which eludes us. Now, in the Harley 978 manuscript, upon which this edition was based, an "other lai" (called de Bisclaveret) precedes the Lai de Lanval, though they are not necessarily continuous. However, in fact, they are read continuously in folio 154 (we reproduce here the diplomatic edition provided by K. Warnke):

Laventure ke auez oie
Veraie fu nen dutez mie
De bisclaveret fu fet li lais
Pur remembrance a tur dis mais
Laventure dun autre lai
Cum ele auent v 9 cunt' ai.

[The adventure that you have heard
Was true don't doubt it at all
About the werewolf the lay was made
For the sake of remembrance from now on
The adventure of another lay
As it occurred I shall relate to you.]

The passage gains a striking unity and becomes possible to analyze grammatically. The construction detaching and anteposing the nominal object group ("Laventure d'un autre lai / Cum ele avint") is definitely a thematizing articulation, which picks up again the word aventure used earlier, where it functions, moreover, as an anteposed subject ("Laventure ke auez oie / Veraie fu"). Adventure and Lay become the highlighted theme of the opening statement of the Lai de Lanval; there is no solution of continuity:

Laventure ke auez oie . . .
De bisclaveret fu fet li lais . . .
Laventure d'un autre lai,
Cum ele avint, vus curterai.

[The adventure that you have heard . . .
About the werewolf the lay was made . . .
The adventure of another lay,
As it occurred, I shall relate to you.]

What we see here is a unique and multipropositional discourse solidified by a dense network of anaphora. For this discourse the edi-
tion substitutes one autonomous and closed sentence, with its
anaphorical elements and functions disconnected.

We need to stress one other major aspect of the work by means of
which it concretely eludes our methods of approach and clouds
analysis whenever it is reduced to the printed form, though it can it­
sel¢ provide us with a wealth of material and constitutes something
that must be given greater importance and visibility because it is the
basis of this writing: that is, its essential variance.10

In the Middle Ages the literary work was a variable. The effect of the
vernacular's joyful appropriation of the signifying nature suited to the
written word was the widespread and abundant enjoyment of the
privilege of writing. Occasionally, the fact that one hand was the first
was probably less important than this continual rewriting of a work
that belonged to whoever prepared it and gave it form once again.
This constant and multifaceted activity turned medieval literature
into a writing workshop. Meaning was to be found everywhere, and
its origin was nowhere. Usually an anonymous literature, its ony­
mous state is a modern fantasy (we saw that the name Marie de
France was an invention of editors) or else an admirable medieval
strategy: the name Jean Renart was an expression of cunning, Chré­
tien de Troyes (the Troy of an ancient culture revealed to faith) ex­
pressed the cultural ambition of the Middle Ages, namely translatio
studii. In this way it is a literature that is in conflict with the authen­
ticity and uniqueness that textuary thought connects with aesthetic
production. Of course, genetic literature has somewhat undermined
the closed stability of the modern text as well as the simple and tele­
ological vectorization of its production; nonetheless, though it is use­
ful to associate a space of scribal elements (advance projects, drafts,
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revisions, etc.) with the text, this space takes its bearings and stitches itself together at one point: the completed version, ready for the press, authenticated and authorized. It is the break in writing activity through which the text happens and for which genetic literature is really a regret. The medieval situation is a fine example of the premodern. Consequently, it is disorienting to a philology that originated at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the text gained its almost perfect and immutable reproduction, attested contents, and legal paternity. In the generalized authenticity of the medieval work, all that philology could see was a lost authenticity. Medieval philology is the mourning for a text, the patient labor of this mourning. It is the quest for an anterior perfection that is always bygone, that unique moment in which the presumed voice of the author was linked to the hand of the first scribe, dictating the authentic, first, and original version, which will disintegrate in the hands of all the numerous, careless individuals copying a literature in the vernacular. It is the desire to reduce the troubling image of the other to a primordial sameness which is endlessly afforded by the writing of variance through its extreme instability of detail.

That instability of medieval works in the vernacular is a clear illustration of what is particular to both the written manuscript and, more generally, scribal culture. As Gerald Bruns points out, in such a culture notions of originality, imitation, and plagiarism would have a completely different meaning from the one they would have in the culture of the printed word (besides which, we should note, they make no sense at all in an oral culture, in which the work is absolutely its enunciation). The work copied by hand, manipulated, always open and as good as unfinished, invited intervention, annotation, and commentary. Confronted with an earlier piece of writing, it constructed itself and sustained itself simply with the distance it assumed in relation to the utterance that was its basis. The scribal work was commentary, paraphrase, supplementary meaning, supplementary language, brought to bear upon a letter that was essentially unfinished. We can see that the term text is hardly applicable to these works. There was only one text in the Middle Ages. Du Cange notes that, starting in the eleventh century (i.e., at the moment when the written word attained full development), textus was used more and more exclusively to designate the codex Evangiliorum. Attested around 1120, the French word tiste, changed then to texte (a scholarly word), means "the book of the gospels." This text was the Bible, the immutable word of God that may, of course, be annotated, but not rewritten. An utterance that is stable and finite, a closed structure: textus (the past participle of texere) was something woven, braided, interlaced, constructed; it was a weft, a framework. The past perfect form of the verb tisser, textus possessed a connotation of fixity, of structural completeness, which textuary thought would then provide with full semantic power, that is, as denotation. Medieval writing, on the other hand, was a reprise; it put things together, constantly and again and again wove works, worked endlessly, striving like those three hundred princesses who were prisoners and weavers, the riddle encountered by Yvain in a castle:

qui diverses œuvres feisoient:
de fil d'or et de soie ovroient
chascune au mialz qu'elle savoit.
(Chrétien de Troyes, Le Chevalier au lion,
ed. Roques, v. 5189–91)

[who were working at various tasks
they were working with thread of gold and of silk
each one doing her best.]

A writing workshop. It was later understood, a trait particular to scribal culture, that originality for such an aesthetic lay more in the form of the narrative than in what was narrated. It was a formal literature throughout, a writing that grew out of itself; and that was its greatness and its joy, inventing its forms and playing with them on the basis of some earlier utterance. Everything had always already been said. By the ancients: translatio studii, textual translation, and the proud progress of writing in the vernacular—through some predecessor whom one went back to, continued, pretended to finish. The medieval corpus is composed of innumerable Continuations (Contin-
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ations de Perceval, Roman de la Rose, etc.), explained by critics by means of biographical fantasies (one premature death after another), without seeing that continuation was the first principle of this literature. Was not the predecessor, in fact, a necessary fiction for scribal writing? Finally we understand the astonishing repetitiousness of this writing. It has been thoroughly studied in the chanson de geste, which is constructed according to an algorithm of stereotypical expressions (formulas and motifs), bringing into play or staging the techniques of oral composition and memorization. However, a formulaic style may also be easily found at the other extreme, in eighteenth-century prose, though clearly this is a matter of the written word, one no doubt inducing a solitary, even silent reading: a closed system of articulation for the sentences of the narrative, a strict and calculable grammar for the integration of discourse. What we perceive as the heavy-handed repetition of this prose participated in the aesthetic of return which lay at the basis of vernacular writing.

No matter what genre is considered (from the epic to the fabliau, from verse narrative to prose fiction), if one pays close attention, ridding oneself of the modern scorn for needless repetition, a whole collection of processes, figures, and motifs whose sequence is meaningful becomes apparent. A humble formula for spring, an expression for riding a horse, a figure for surprise, speaking one’s grief, and so on, all repeat and vary so that we should neither be surprised by them nor have to work out some outrageous justification for them. The question we must ask of every work in the vernacular concerns the specific forms and the reasons for their occurrence. In other words: “Tell me how you repeat yourself and make use of your repetition.”

Writing that was paraphrastic in essence, it thus presents the syntactician with a wealth of material as soon as he takes into account that he is still dealing with literary works and their particular qualities. This language that is worlds apart from us comes alive (its rules and flow) if we take it at face value. Such an aesthetics of return, the pleasure in sameness and difference, was the result of a number of phenomena: the slight influence of Latin models and, correlatively, the scrupulous and constant establishment of vernacular forms; human memory, whose abilities were exercised in a way that is now inconceivable to us; oral practices to which we have become deaf but whose effects moved into the written word, which amplified and made use of them; the power of rhetoric, a mental structure, the habitus shared by the huge collection of literate, half-literate, or para-literate people who saw topical repetition as a creative act. In an aesthetics of return, where pleasure lay in variance, writing made minute shifts in what was already known, and the acts of reading and listening lent themselves to the vicissitudes of recognition and surprise.

This variation is longitudinal, so to speak, running throughout the work, and though it bothers modern critics and troubles the editor (terribly tempted to correct it), it does so far less than do the proliferating lateral variants. Here the philological mind becomes seriously alarmed. Philology, created for editing the ancient and sacred Latin and Greek works that were reproduced especially during the Middle Ages, is a measured and patient practice of comparison; it compares manuscripts separated only—this is axiomatic—by the changes specific to the act of copying. When tradition (i.e., all of the manuscripts that have come down to us) presents different readings (i.e., lessons from lectio: what one reads) at a certain point in the text, there is a variant (philology sometimes calls it innovation, as a reproach), and one needs to make sure which is the good text (for the “good reading,” etc.). When this practice turns to medieval manuscripts in the vernacular, the philological automaton gets carried away and panics. There is so much variability in number, extent, and nature of the readings that the work is immense and success illusory; the whole, vast undertaking seems maddening and humiliating. A poor, rather disenchanted relative, blind to the positive effects of writing in action and thus ignorant of its treasures, Romance philology attempts to salvage and promote some of the beauties of a literature that, basically, it considers to be a bit childish and carefree. In good company, that is, among Bédiéristes, one cannot really escape this scepticism except by taking a radically different perspective.

Variance is the main characteristic of a work in the medieval vernacular; a concrete difference at the very basis of this object, it is
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something that publication should, as a matter of urgency, make visible. This variance is so widespread and constitutive that, mixing together all the texts among which philology so painstakingly distinguishes, one could say that every manuscript is a revision, a version.

Setting forth what seems to be a conventionally unorthodox principle does not, of course, keep one from later proposing a typology of variants, if only to examine the degree and nature of variability specific to each work, or each type of work. One can distinguish among the genres; thus, the epic, because it is closely or distantly rooted in oral composition, seems to carry with it the maximum number of variants (the epic genre "exists only in variants," said Ramon Menéndez Pidal). The seven complete manuscripts of the *Chanson de Roland* represent as many versions, realizations of this epic, and the genetic branchings that stem from an original archetype with which philological editions are adorned are touching fictions.

One can analyze the genre itself; thus, in his study of the fabliaux, Jean Rychner carefully brought to light the impressive number of interventions (slight variations, innovative copies, revisions, etc.) to be found in this corpus. The meaning and value (whether the effect is truly literary or rubbish, etc.) of these can be gauged: "in these operations everything—style, versification, narrative organization and coherence, intention and spirit, can all be changed" (132).

Finally, one can examine a single work in itself. Such a study is simultaneously one of the most frequent (it accompanies the working out of a critical text) and extremely rare. A work is usually examined from every angle to retain its "good readings" and reconstitute an archetype rather than to observe the semantic and textual drift affecting it. Doing this would break up the unity of the work, the uniqueness of its composition, the perfection of the masterpiece and would traumatize our notion of the text. It is hard enough to get used to the idea that there might be more than one *Chanson de Roland*, all of them authentic. But does one have to put up with, for example, several true *Perceval* by Chrétien de Troyes—the most famous romance of the European Middle Ages? Think how appalled a cultivated, Anglo-Saxon audience is when confronted with the editions of Shakespeare provided by the cheerful proponents of the *New Bibliography*.

These critics, on the one hand, demonstrate that the various editions of Shakespeare published during his lifetime, the ones he could be said to have been in charge of, present very important variants (which philological edition, starting in the nineteenth century, carefully erased). On the other hand, they explain that these variants reflect the mobility of a text constantly revised by its author (or the person who published in his name) following performances (idiosyncratic improvements, some good idea an actor had liked, etc.). Then finally they prove that to reduce this plurality into one unique and supposedly established text loses something that is there in Shakespearean works (images, vocabulary, language characteristics).

This is a critical notion, forcing one to think, for example, that the quarto (1608) and folio (1623) editions of *King Lear* are not two corrupted states of a perfect (and unfortunately lost) original, but two versions of the same play, each one authoritative. There are, therefore, two *King Lear*s (that need to be laid out in a parallel edition), and one of these distinguished iconoclasts authenticates five *Macbeths*. Shakespearian writing is no longer presented as a closed, original, and seminal utterance; it is constant and multiple production. When our literary presuppositions have become sufficiently unhinged that Shakespeare is affected, it is not hard to conceive of the disturbance gradually spreading to most of premodern writings.

There are certainly two *Perceval*s, at least. This romance, it should be noted, could provide a good counterexample to our assertion. It was very famous and its influence was far-reaching as well as long-lasting; it is reasonable to think that it was copied with great care (which, in a sense, is true). However, it does fall within the province of this writing of variance which we are discussing. Because variance, until the end of the thirteenth century, was the basis of the medieval literary aesthetic, this aesthetic is the perfect antithesis of modern aesthetics of the text.

The fifteen manuscripts that have come down to us constitute a
“particularly confusing and obscure” tradition, as Félix Lecoy describes it in his edition (99), leading us to understand that scribal activity was particularly heavy (in philological terms: crossings, borrowings, contaminations, exchanges, rewritings, and alterations). None, of course, is autographic; all (and this remains true until the fourteenth century) came later than the hypothetical date of what is, supposedly, the first writing. This break obviously emphasizes the appropriative process of copying. Like all literary works in the vernacular, Perceval was rewritten prolifically. From our point of view, this rewriting is not basically different from the numerous continuations to which it was subjected (Chretien’s work was unfinished, which, for that matter, resulted more from an ethics of writing than from a sudden death); nor is it any different from the prose versions or the cyclical revisions afflicting it in the next century. All make the same gesture of completing the sense.

The intrinsic plurality of Perceval is demonstrated extremely well by the availability of two commercial editions of it. The one provided by William Roach (Geneva: Droz, 1956) follows manuscript fr. 12576 in the Bibliothèque nationale (MS T); Félix Lecoy’s edition (Paris: Champion, 1972–75) conforms to manuscript fr. 784 of the BN (MS A), copied at Provins around 1230 by Guiot the scribe, beloved son of the philologists (because, really, he was the first one of them). When one studies this manuscript, it becomes clear that it is two hundred and seventy four lines shorter than manuscript T and has at least five hundred variants that are worth noting, that is, one change every eighteen lines.7 This is not very many (Jean Renart’s Lai de l’Ombre has a variant every three words), and no doubt we are at the limit of variant writing—but still well within this limit. One becomes convinced of this after comparing the most intense, almost sacred, passage of the work in both manuscripts. Because it is the passage that sets one to dreaming and whose heritage is immense, it is the passage in which one would expect the copyists to exert their maximum accuracy: the first vision of the Grail granted to young Perceval. Ignoring graphical variations, the following shows in italics the variants that are strictly textual:

**Manuscript T**

Atant dui autre vallet vindrent
Qui candeliers en lor mains tindrent
De fin or, ovrez a neel.
Li vallet estoient molt bel
*Qui les chandeliers aportoient.*
En chascun chandelier ardoient
Dis chandeilles a tot le mains.
Un graal entre ses deus mains
Une damoisele tenoit,
*Qui avec les vallés venoit*
Bele et *gente* et bien acesmee.
Quant ele fu laiens entree
*Atot le graal qu’ele tint,*
Une si granz clartez *i vint*
*Qu’aussi perdirent les chandoiles*
Lor clarté come les estoiles
*Font quant solaust lieve ou la lune.*

(Roach, ed., v. 3213–29)

**Manuscript A**

Et lors dui autre vaslet vindrent,
qui chandeliers en lor mains tindrent,
de fin or, ovrez a neel.
Li vaslet estoient molt bel
cil *qui* les chandeliers portoient.
An chascun chandelier ardoient
.X. chandoiles a tot le mains;
un graal antre ses .II. mains
une dameisele tenoit
et avoc les vaslez venoit,
bele et *jointe* et bien acesmee.
Quant ele fu leanz antree
a tot le graal qu’ele tint,
une si granz clartez *an vint,*
ausi perdirent les chandoiles
lor clarté come les estoiles
*quant li solaust lieue, et la lune.*

(Lecoy, ed., v. 3201–17)
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Translation
[Then two other young men came
Who held candelabra in their hands
Of pure gold, wrought with black enamel.
The youths were very courtly
Who were bringing in the candelabra.
In each candelabrum were burning
Ten candles at the very least.
A grail between her two hands
A young woman held,
Who was coming with the young men,
Courtly and noble and beautifully adorned.
When she had entered inside
With the grail that she held,
Such a brilliance came in there
That the candles thus lost
Their own brilliance just as the stars
Do when the sun rises or the moon.]

The translation is of MS T. The variants in MS A will be translated below as they are cited. Trans.

There is, of course, no fundamental modification (along the lines of those listed by Félix Lecoy in the appendix to his edition), to be gleaned from this seventeen-line section, but there is enough to destabilize somewhat the textual sequence and permit us to sketch out a hypothesis covering specific instances and their recurrence. Thus it appears that manuscript T strongly articulates the sentence, employs more explicit and regular syntax than manuscript A (Atant, MS T; Et lors, MS A; atant being the most dearly beloved initial word in thirteenth-century prose), and makes strict use of relative construction:

Li vallet estoient molt bel
Qui les chandeliers aportoient. (T)

[The youths were very courtly
Who were bringing in the candelabra.]

Une dameisele tenoit,
Qui avec les vallés venoit (T)

[A young woman held,
Who was coming with the young men]

In the places where manuscript A detaches the antecedent and emphasizes it by repeating it again with a demonstrative:

Li vaslet estoient molt bel,
cil qui les chandeliers portoient. (A)

[The young men were very courtly,
Those who were carrying the candelabra.]

or else coordinates:

une dameisele tenoit
et avoec les vaslez venoit, (A)

[a young woman held,
and she was coming with the young men]

Manuscript T expresses consecutive relation with the conjunction que:

une si grans clartez i vint
Qu’ausi perdirent les chandoiles (T)

[Such a brilliance came in there
That the candles thus lost]

where A uses a simple paratax:

une si granz clartez an vint
ausi perdirent les chandoiles (A)

[such a great brilliance came from it
thus the candles lost]

In T the construction of comparison is explicit, making use of the substitute verb faire (to do):

Lor clarté come les estoiles
Font quant solaust lieue ou la lune (T)

[Their own brilliance just as the stars
Do when the sun rises or the moon.]

whereas in A the expression is less heavy-handed:
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Lor clarté come les estoiles
qant li solauz lieve, et la lune. (A)

[Their brilliance, just as the stars
when the sun rises, and the moon.]

(Perhaps the expression “ou la lune” in manuscript T may be seen as additional evidence for construing it as the “canonical” text. It is certainly more what one would expect than the turn of phrase “et la lune” in manuscript A.) But deciding which of the two syntaxes illustrated by manuscripts T and A reflects the supposedly original writing is both impossible and irrelevant. Similarly, there is no sense in wondering if this first version conformed with the canonical portrait of feminine beauty (“Belé et gente” [courtly and noble], MS T) or the more innovative one (“bele et jointe” [courtly and ?], MS A): analysis must be comparative, not archeological. This is all the more true because archeology reduces something that derives its meaning from difference into something that is just one. Thus it is important to keep the distinction between the supernatural light suddenly enveloping the scene and the Grail:

Atot le graal qu’ele tint,
Une si granz clartez an vint (A)

[With the grail that she held,
such a great brilliance came from it]

and the light welling up from the sacred vase:

a tot le graal qu’ele tint,
une si granz clartez i vint (T)

[With the grail that she held,
such a brilliance came in there]

In any literary or mythographic analysis this difference is important. Critics, one imagines, saw in the ease, the light hand, and the originality of manuscript A (Guiot’s copy) proof that it was good evidence of the ease, the light hand, and the originality that belonged, by definition, to the great writer of romances, Chrétien de Troyes. To this we can reply, with about the same level of presupposition (and, ultimately, less anachronism) that the great writer of medieval romances is the one who plays subtly with the canons, the models, and the topoi that he has inherited. Clearly, this debate is absolutely pointless. Because the question lies elsewhere.

The one concrete fact about literary objects in the vernacular is their excessive number of variant manuscript forms. Any study needs to be prefaced by a question somewhat like the one any linguist must ask when confronted with the heterogeneity that makes up a language: “How can one manage all this?” Whether one is a grammarian or has some reason to be interested in the medieval esthetic use of the vernacular, a sceptical and careful attitude concerning every edition should be adopted, inasmuch as the editor has always “managed it all,” reducing the excess of what he was copying to the unity of a text. Taking something and putting it into a book cuts into a continuous flow, as we saw earlier, and in this case, it is a multiple operation and more Draconian in other ways. What is eliminated from the readable, not to say thinkable, is the surplus of text, language, and meaning. One can well imagine how interesting methodological debate in this area might be.
The history of methods that have been proposed for editing medieval texts in the vernacular is strangely full of sound and fury. It is symptomatic of the stakes in laying the ground for what will be the subject matter of grammatical and literary discourse, making it available to readers and informing this reading. But these activities are also secretly formed by this subject matter: textual criticism, a dry and rigorous discipline, is the unspoken praxis of literary theory. And philology here is a force to be reckoned with: behind its mask of naïveté it manipulates the facts.

The Empirical

The first distinguishable period (1830–1860) in this recent history does not deserve to have been plunged into a state of nothingness by the generation of savants. It was a time, of course, of empirical editors, but these were editors who, when confronted with the alterity of the manuscript, were not content merely to reproduce editions printed in the sixteenth century, as had been done in the preceding century. They were pioneers who frenetically published a literature discovered by Romanticism, ones like Francisque Michel, a brilliant polygraph who, at the age of twenty-six, living on a stipend provided by Guizot, whom he had won over, got hold of the Chanson de Roland in the Bodleian Library at Oxford (Francisque Michel, Chanson de Roland ou de Roncevaux, 1837). This period saw the first institutional involvement (Francis Guessard launched the collection “Anciens Poètes de la France” in 1856, underwritten by the imperial decree of 12 February). Editing, however, was a matter of taste, the respect of novices, and the scrupulousness of students formed at the École des chartes (the recently founded Parisian school from which students of medievalism—a new discipline—now graduated; Latin and Greek philologists had a more traditional education). Editing was, in short, a matter of an eminent Romanticism. The language, which medievalists were not sure they understood, was hardly ever corrected; a manuscript they were so happy to have was hardly one to fiddle with, and in any case, its freshness represented their literary sense of the Middle Ages. Whenever their sources differed, they stuck with their favorite manuscript, even if this required notes or appendixes containing a multitude of variants (in 1835, Polycarpe Chabaille published Supplément, variantes et corrections to Méon’s edition of the Roman de Renart). Or else they would provide several versions (as when Eugène Hucher published the texts of the Saint-Graal in prose in 1875), inviting the reader to form his own judgment in an edition that looked more like a file. These works were respectable, and more than one of them can still be used.

The Positive

That remark would have brought a smile to philologists’ faces in the third quarter of the century because of a deep split marking off a second period (1860–1913) in the history of medieval philology. There were many different factors behind this break. Systematic and scientific perusal of libraries turned up vast numbers of manuscripts, multiplying the sources of each work and forcefully raising the issue of how to edit them. A medievalist establishment developed: chairs were created (Collège de France, 1852; Sorbonne, 1883) as well as revues
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(Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature, 1866; Romania, 1872), and societies (Société des anciens textes français, 1875), not to say institutions (École pratique des hautes études, 1868). Finally, though late by at least a generation, French medieval philology, having been highly motivated after 1870 by a fierce desire to avenge Sedan, caught up with German philology. The epistemological unity of these years is striking; while linguists finally had a sure method of classifying Indo-European languages and, like paleontologists, took on the task of reconstructing the primordial and perfect Ursprache, philologists adopted a rational method of classifying manuscripts which promoted the reconstruction of the archetype Urtext. It was a visionary reconstruction created by this half-century, in the shape of a tree fraught with lopped off boughs where improbable monsters sheltered their wretched, disparate nature.

The major figure in this field was Karl Lachmann, the mythic figure of a great, political, and worldly professor, an impeccable and extremely arrogant Prussian scholar. By his influence as much as by his work, synthesizing the methods used by Hellenist editors, Lachmann (who died in 1851) spread a method to which he gave his name, thus establishing the practice of "scientific" editing of old texts. The method consisted of reducing the editor's subjectivity as a factor in the choice of the good readings and using an almost mechanical method for reconstructing the original. Advances were achieved through the importance and precedence accorded, in the words of the Humanists, to the recensio (comparative study of several manuscripts) over the emendatio (one-to-one contact between a copy and a philologist): "recensere . . . sine interpretatione et possimus et debe­mus." Lachmann thus provided scholarly and renowned editions of the Greek text of the New Testament, of Lucretius's De Rerum Natura, and so on—ancient and venerated texts that the scribes of late antiquity and the Middle Ages had copied with respect. From that point on, Lachmann assumed that these copyists were guilty only of mistakes due to incomprehension, inadvertence, and fatigue and that these errors represented degradation. Every copy represented decline. This philology, in common with the first Indo-European studies, made use of comparatist methodology, the desire for reconstruction, but also the feeling of decadence. ("I walk in a field of ruins," said Schleicher, and Lachmann could have said it.) Lachmannian philology, a mechanical archeology of the lapsus, began by automating the scribe, who was denied any positive and conscious intervention. This philology could not, without collapsing, think that a scribe, when confronted with an uncertain reading, for example, might be able to improve it or indeed even rediscover the "original" reading. Otherwise, from that point on, the linear filiation demonstrated by constant deterioration would become unclear. The scribe was a machine, and this machine had to function poorly in order for the multiplicity and the excess of variants to fall into place, showing the slippery slopes of adulteration and delineating the genealogical branches of the manuscript family. Philology is a bourgeois, paternalist, and hygienist system of thought about the family; it cherishes filiation, tracks down adulterers, and is afraid of contamination. It is thought based on what is wrong (the variant being a form of deviant behavior), and it is the basis for a positive methodology.

Lachmann started from the principle that copyists do not separately commit the same error at the same place (though any minor schoolteacher who has regularly required exercises in dictation would have been able to tell this prestigious professor at the University of Berlin that certain linguistic sequences lend themselves to the same mistake). The results were twofold. First of all, the "shared wrong" could only be an inherited defect, and consequently it even represented a form of filiation; in other words, the manuscripts that show a shared wrong were copied, and only the thing copied, once distinguished from its copyists, was worthy of interest, because it allowed one to come closer to the original. Second, the agreement among several manuscripts against one other was a sure indication that they represented the good reading, because the mistake was isolated, or rather, isolation was the mark of the mistake.

Lachmann's method thus claimed to have the means of locating dependent relations among manuscripts and to show these relations by a genealogical tree (stemma codicum). Thanks to this tree model,
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showing simultaneously an origin (the archetype) and the hierarchy of relative positions occupied by the various preserved manuscripts in relation to the archetype, one could, by setting "two (at least) against one," reconstruct word for word (that is, drawing by turns on one or another manuscript) the archetype, the original figure.

That was the critique of readings, and it then remained to the critique of forms to make the archetype homogeneous. Composed of bits and pieces borrowed from manuscripts of various periods—a deformed diplodocus that didn’t hang together, designed by some mad scholar—it had to be made closer to the supposed original. To do so the language had to be unified according to what was generally understood about the history of Greek and Latin: that is, specifically, it had to be rewritten in the language assumed to have been that of the original (just as Schleicher wrote a fable in the Early Indo-European which he had reconstructed). But any error that could not be repaired by comparison would still be inaccurate in the homogeneous perfection of the archetype thus reconstructed. The primordial mistake committed by the first scribe, exemplary of the essential degradation represented by the copy and spread henceforth throughout the entire manuscript tradition, remained to be found.

Here the philologist showed his mettle. Using his knowledge and subtlety, he worked with the cunning of a seasoned sleuth, if we are to judge by Louis Havet’s masterpiece, which at the same time represented an insane amount of erudition, a treatise on criminology and a manual on the psychopathology of the scribe. This positive philology seemed to play the role of a very refined older sister (but one who could be effective when necessary: it was as a philologist that Louis Havet defended Captain Dreyfus) in relation to the young and rapidly developing science, criminal anthropology, whether the latter was more influenced by psychology (Cesare Lombroso) or sociology (Gabriel Tarde) or had a more technical orientation (Alphonse Bertillon). Moreover, we know that in the realm of fiction, as in Mérimée’s Lokis, the figure of the philologist could stand in for that of the detective.

That was Lachmann’s method, introduced with great fanfare by Gaston Paris at the end of the 1860s into the bosom of French medievalism. A daring innovation, it was doubly imported, first from a methodology thought up by the German enemy, whom Gaston Paris knew well (Paulin, his father, had sniffed “a little breeze from Germany in the air,” and had sent him to study with Friedrich Diez in Bonn). Then, also, it was a technique imported from a methodology conceived of for other ends and other texts. We have mentioned the intrinsic variance of the medieval vernacular work; even from Gaston Paris’s perspective, which saw a lost authenticity, the scribe acted with a freedom that made him more a reviser than a copyist; and what might be called conscious intervention (supposed to be infinitesimal in old texts) played a huge and absolutely incalculable part here. From our perspective, which sees authenticity as generalized, the production of a surplus of text and meaning is constitutive of medieval writing in the vernacular. What Paris did flatly negated this specificity: every variant was considered an error, and the positive method was applicable.

Yet applying it required a forcible takeover. Bédier was the first to spread the word that Gaston Paris, won over to the German method, set out to extend it to French literature of the Middle Ages. The reality was more complex and in another way more meaningful. Paris did not like Lachmann and made it clear in the text purportedly showing his adherence to Lachmannism. The text was a review of the (very Lachmannian) edition by Karl Bartsch of the Nibelungenlied. Let us skip the barbed remarks aimed at the person of Karl Lachmann (stubborn, disdainful, haughty, “no one dared contradict him,” etc.). They only demonstrate through their Prussophobia that the young Gaston experienced some difficulties with father figures. Remember that he was the son of Paulin Paris, one of the founders of French medievalism, and that he had the painful fortune of succeeding him at the Collège de France. (This probably explains Gaston’s desire for positive science, Paulin Paris having been the perfect example of the proper Romanist, all pleasant intuitions and Romanticism, who had published, in 1830, a well-chosen date, a little Apologie de l’école romantique.)
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It is important to note that the compliments Gaston Paris addressed to Bartsch's edition were based on a sharp criticism of the edition of the Nibelungenlied published by Lachmann himself. In fact, on the one hand, the Prussian scholar did not limit himself to philologia sacra but also worked on the German Middle Ages, editing some of its most important works: the Nibelungenlied, 1826; the poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide, 1827; Iwein by Hartmann von der Aue, 1843. Yet, on the other hand, Lachmann as a medievalist was far from Lachmannian. The complexity of manuscript traditions in this realm and the endless variability of the works had made him sceptical and circumspect; he thus contented himself with providing an image of the original, usually following a single manuscript (Bédiérism before the term was invented?) and intervening quite freely and intuitively in it (the return of a Humanist judicium?). This had been his approach to the Nibelungenlied. Conforming, on the one hand, to manuscript Q, he espoused, on the other, the theories of Friedrich-August Wolf about the popular origins of the Homeric epic. Convinced that the Nibelungenlied was only a collection of epic popular songs, he used the typography of his edition to distinguish the twenty “authentic” (and independent) songs that he had rediscovered at the heart of this “rhapsody.”

The edition by Bartsch (who was moreover a good Romanist and a friend of Gaston Paris) was based on an entirely different postulate: that there was a single original writing that reunited in one single poem, into one work, various different traditions or popular songs. This original writing was supposedly composed at one time (around 1140) and in one place (Austria). Above all, it was supposedly the work of one individual (Bartsch suggested a doubtful Konrad de Kurenberg). Gaston Paris was in complete agreement. For him the epic was not something “entirely primitive”; though based on earlier “heroic songs,” it transformed and combined them into an organic whole, he claimed, which assimilated these elements and was quite different from a chance collection of pieces patched together (187). Consequently, “the demonstration of the existence of a single author for the original poem of the Nibelungen is an event of the greatest importance for science” (186).

Clearly, apart from slightly undermining Wolf’s hypotheses, Paris’s demonstration proved that all the manuscripts of the Nibelungenlied derived from a single original, which came first, and that Lachmann’s method was perfectly applicable to them. If, moreover, such a positive philology could be practiced in this limited realm of the epic, a fortiori it could be brought to bear on every other genre (lives of the saints, fabliaux, romances, etc.) from the Middle Ages. Therefore it was now a matter of vigorously Lachmannizing French medieval literature and demonstrating to the Prussians (and to his father) that the French could do it better.

Allow us a digression. It has been generally agreed since Bédier (God save us from good disciples!) that it was Gaston Paris who introduced to France the Romantic theses attributing a popular origin to epics (cantilenas); Joseph Bédier, for his part, in Légendes épiques. Recherches sur la formation des chansons de geste (1908–13), strongly denounced this thesis and suggested that the French epic (especially the Chanson de Roland) be seen as a literary composition of the eleventh century. The antagonism typical of the clash between Paris and Bédier is perfectly exemplified here; it cuts medieval studies as a whole right down the middle.

Bédier, who succeeded Paris in his chair at the Collège de France, brought a new scientific paradigm into play and founded a new school. Consider, for instance, Lucien Foulet’s thesis, dedicated to Bédier, in which he demolished the notion that the Roman de Renart had its origin in folklore and buried it, rather, in the intertextuality of the clerical culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But whatever meaningful conflict may have existed, it was not really of that order.

Gaston Paris’s ideas were different, as we have seen, and they did not change from the time of his thesis (Histoire poétique de Charlemagne, 1865) all the way through his mature teachings (Littérature française du Moyen Age, 1888). Two points summarize these ideas:
IN PRAISE OF THE VARIANT

First, there is the fear of emptiness. Between what happened at Roncevaux (778) and the *Chanson de Roland* available to us (dated by Paris in the eleventh century), there must have been a persistent literature or rather, orature. Rejecting for political reasons any Germanic influence on the primitive epic in the vernacular, Paris nonetheless borrowed the idea of popular heroic songs, cantilenas sung by warriors. These had not been attested, of course, and they came along with all the pleasant fantasies of theories of oral transmission, but they came at just the right moment to fill in a gap of several centuries. For, and this is the second point, the theory advanced by Gaston Paris was based on a notion of decadence. Here it clearly contradicted Wolf and Lachmann: for the French Romanist, the period of cantilenas and heroic songs of a national poetry was over by the end of the tenth century; the genre lost momentum; it was collected by professionals, the *jongleurs*, who, with more or less talent assembled a work (the epic) out of songs that had come to have no idea or link in common, which “had lost their interest, often even their sense” (*Histoire poétique*, 12). This work was doubtless less grandiose, but it was unique; in other words, the *Chanson de Roland* that we have was the result of a synthesis brought about by one *jongleur*, a primitive composition entrusted to the written word, then subjected to the workings of the manuscript tradition; the manuscripts of *Roland* “seem to derive from a manuscript, and not from diverse oral traditions independently entrusted to writing” (*Littérature française*, 57). It was thus possible to apply Lachmann’s method—somewhat in spite of Lachmann.

Bédier’s criticism, in fact, focused on these two points. First of all, he saw no need to invent cantilenas to fill the void of centuries. The memory of Roland was enough to give birth to an epic literature in the eleventh century: a few legends, a sword and a horn they would show you, preserved in the churches along the road to Roncevaux. (In the beginning was the road.) Nor, consequently, was there any need at all to lament these cantilenas. “If *chansons de geste* developed, did this necessarily represent a movement of order toward disorder? Is one required to imagine a golden age in the beginning when marvellously logical and harmonious poems were in flower, later set upon by stupid men who rewrote them?” (*Légendes épiques*, 1: 332). Second, Bédier then showed the greatness that epics attained as literature (especially *Roland*), with their solid composition, their sure and beautiful language, and their very elevated poetry, sometimes extremely cultured in its inspiration (with Virgilian influences); these were the work not of mediocre *jongleurs* but of learned scholars who, like Tur­­old in the case of the *Chanson de Roland*, could be considered real authors. (In the beginning was the poet.) Paris and Bédier were in agreement, therefore, on what was essential—the epic’s unifying textuality. What separated them was secondary—and generational. Gaston Paris’s theory, with its leaning toward “fierce warriors,” echoed Indo-Europeanism and reconstructivist positivism; it was extremely close to the lyrical pages devoted by Renan to the primitive epic.6 Joseph Bédier represented a second stage and was a more “modern” figure at the heart of textual criticism. We shall find the same opposition in matters concerning the editing of medieval texts.

Thus it certainly was a forcible takeover when Gaston Paris made all of French philology (until Bédier) adhere to a strictly Lachmannian (or rather, super-Lachmannian) conception of medieval textual criticism. Aware of scientific progress as both a premise and an epiphany, this young man was one of the small number of *directeurs d’études* appointed in November 1869 to the École des hautes études, just a few months after its establishment (31 July 1868).

The extent to which this new branch from the trunk of the old Sorbonne would surpass the hopes invested in it is well known. Open to everyone, with no academic prerequisites, the *école’s* mission was to put into practice the new sciences: “exercizing young people in the practice of the labors of erudition, in critical and scientific methods,” doing this by means of a rejuvenated pedagogy that abandoned the authoritative lecture for *conférences pratiques* in small groups.7 As Gaston Paris remarked in the introduction to his edition of the *Saint Alexis*, these small lectures “alone are able to propagate the methods effectively and create what we are most lacking, a scientific tradition” (vii).

This insistence on method, on practice, and on the small group
was an obvious reference to the benefits and superiority of the German Seminar, of which France had just become aware. It was in this context of intellectual, scientific, and pedagogical revival that Gaston Paris listed his first course (January–June 1869), which he devoted to the Saint Alexis, a saint’s life from the eleventh century, an edition of which he and his students were preparing. Delayed by the war of 1870 (during which Gaston Paris, like several of his colleagues, gave a patriotic course on the Chanson de Roland), the project would appear in 1872 in the “Bibliothèque des hautes études.” Gaston Paris edited the eleventh-century version, and Léopold Pannier, “a student of the École,” worked on the revisions of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries.

This majestic edition, whether one reveres or mocks it, is the basis of French medieval philology. Gaston Paris was conscious of this and presented at length (138 pages) the method he followed as if it were a manifesto. He did so, moreover without even once mentioning the name of Karl Lachmann. This “attempt at an integral restoration of the poem” (vii) fitted into the mission of textual criticism, whether aimed at productions of the Middle Ages or those of antiquity. This comprehensive philology “has as its goal to rediscover, as much as possible, the form that the work to which it is applied had when it came from the author’s hands” (8); based on a transhistorical notion of the author—the origin of his work, whose meaning he controls—it was the response to a transhistorical demand for reconstruction. For this, medieval manuscripts presented conditions that were, compared to works from antiquity, at the same time better (usually being closer to time period of the author) and worse (because of their numerous inaccuracies and “changes”). Nonetheless, when the shared errors and readings were compared, it became possible to set up a classification of the French medieval manuscript tradition, “delicate, complicated and painstaking work, but indispensable, one upon which all scientific criticism rests”(11).

In fact, with this treelike classification, the criticism of readings was able to operate and, thanks to processes that are “virtually mathematical” (23), able to reconstitute the letter of the original poem. It made an ephemeral figure of an archetype appear from the jumble of lines, puzzled out word by word in the patient and industrious conviviality of the conférence pratique. By definition, this archetype is unlike the manuscripts that philology had at hand, the bits of parchment to be looked at, the scattered remains where hands search. Consequently, the fourth line of the poem (which expresses a laudatio temporis acti that is, moreover, very pleasing to the philological mind: the world is no longer what it used to be) can be read in the following fashion in all four manuscripts (L being for Gaston Paris the closest to the original):

- L (12th century, England)
  
  \textit{tut est muez perdut ad sa colur}
  [everything is changed, has lost its color]

- A (12th century, England)
  
  \textit{tut est muez perdu ad sa culur}
  [everything is changed, has lost its color]

- S (end of the 13th century, France)
  
  \textit{si est muez perdue a sa culour}
  [so is changed, has lost its valor]

- P (13th century, France)
  
  \textit{tot est muez perdu a sa colour}
  [everything is changed, has lost its color]

Gaston Paris edited:

\textit{Tot est mudez, perdude at sa colour}
[everything is changed, has lost its color]

a reconstitution that he further pressed home (even including a pronunciation) in the 1903 edition and to which he returned again in the inaugural series of the \textit{Classiques français du Moyen Age} (1911, vol. 9):

\textit{Toz est mudez, perdude at sa colour}
[everything is changed, has lost its color]
In Praise of the Variant

The text sent to the printers was even further removed from the information in the manuscripts, because the archetype had suffered the consequences of the second stage of the Lachmannian method: after the critique of readings, which reconstructed the archetype, came the critique of forms, which reconstituted the language. Gaston Paris devoted any number of pages to this second archeology, and it is important to understand what was at stake here.

In order to establish itself as a science in the nineteenth century, linguistics had to provide itself, through a process of reduction, with an object that was stable, simple, regular, and homogeneous. From this point of view Old French, to the eyes of the positivist scholars who set out to describe it, seemed to have a pronounced and constitutive heterogeneity. This was because, in addition to the endless textual variance offered by the manuscripts, there was an infinite variation in linguistic forms. The malleability of the earlier language set grammarians to thinking, as soon as they understood that this was something not always explainable by the absence of a normalized, or merely regular, spelling. The multitude of suffixes and radical vowel gradations showed a teeming and expansive morphology; the multiple constructions as well as the obvious sequential freedom made it clear that syntax was also a variety of different forms competing freely. As Sonia Branca demonstrates, the response of science was not to come up with a system for this heterogeneity but, rather, to dissolve or reduce it. The first attempts were to dissolve it and make it go away: Guessard, (an empirical editor who was as recalcitrant with Lachmann as he was deaf to Diez) dismissed Old French as a primitive babel (“the age-old and well-known story of the language of childhood, or a language in its childhood, which amounts to about the same thing”). Next they reduced it, according to geography (the multiplicity of forms going back to the diversity of dialects) or according to grammatical order.

In this regard, the discovery or the invention of declension in Old French constituted the most important act of the linguistic reflection. From Raynouard’s first intuitions to the splendid, inflected tables of fin de siècle historical grammars, the study of the two case system in the old language is the marker of Romanism at the height of its development. There are many reasons overdetermining the amount of attention focused on the question of morphology. Historical grammar found here its topic of choice. The existence of medieval declension clearly demonstrated where the language belonged (remember the arguments over the Celtic origins of French). Declensions were the visible trace left by Latin structure in French. In a manner that was simple and calculable, it showed the diachronic evolution (from six cases in Latin, to two in Old French, to none in modern French) and easily represented the alterity and the specificity of Old French, an inflected language, in relation to modern French. Moreover, since, in historical grammar, morphology was an extension of phonetics (it was phonic evolution that changed the forms so drastically) and phonetics was the perfect homogeneous subject as well as one that could be formulated, declension made it possible to think about the question of syntax—always a stretch for historical grammar—through a field that was certain (phonetics-morphology). Word order was free because the syntactic functions were substantially differentiated. The idea of declension, then, in a very concrete manner allowed one to put order in the disconcerting multiplicity of forms. Thus the final s curiously adorning certain singular substantives is explained not by a spontaneous graphic anarchy but by the declension of the first class of substantives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>murs</td>
<td>mur</td>
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<tr>
<td>murs</td>
<td>mur</td>
<td>murs</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Thus the double formations (sire / seigneur [lord], ber / baron [baron], suer / sorour [sister], etc.) which we find in certain words is made clear by constructing a second paradigm of inflection, showing a shift of accent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sire</td>
<td>seigneur</td>
<td>sire</td>
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<tr>
<td>sire</td>
<td>seigneur</td>
<td>sire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>object</th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
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<td>seigneur</td>
<td>seigneurs</td>
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<tr>
<td>seigneur</td>
<td>seigneurs</td>
<td>seigneur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IN PRAISE OF THE VARIANT

This theory of medieval declension, in the end, was identical with the notion of decadence. The manuscripts display such numerous “errors of declension” that analysis (and teaching) of Old French in this respect and many others is a discourse rotten to the core. The elegant and practical system of inflection had, in fact, sunk; and though there is no agreement about the date of the shipwreck, one can contend that it was earlier than any of the manuscripts we have, that is, before all written traces, documents, or bits of information. The grammarian has flotsam and jetsam to contemplate. And dreams on: the perfect beauty of (proto)-medieval declension derives from the impossibility of attesting it. The most effective means of reducing the heterogeneity sullying the old language is the fantasy of bygone perfection.

Here the philologist came to the rescue of the grammarian. The critique of forms provided the simple purity of original homespun to the archetype and its proscenium arch. Of course, as Gaston Paris remarked, such reconstruction is more tricky in the case of medieval French texts than it is for Latin manuscripts, which were written in a language that virtually never ceased to be taught and commented upon. But reconstruction was possible, nonetheless, and should be attempted so that the editing of medieval texts could be established as a science and the unification of general philology could be brought to completion.

The editor, whose basic mistrust led him to turn away from the multiplicity of forms before him, latched onto an elsewhere he did not have. He had three things at his disposal to make this undertaking successful. First, several concrete arguments essentially derived from versification; it became established as a principle (largely unverified, moreover) that renewals and rejuvenations never, or hardly ever, touched either rhyme or rhythm. Second, he could turn to paltry subterfuge: Natalis de Wailly, publishing l’Histoire de saint Louis in 1874, held that the scribe to whom Joinville dictated his narrative around 1306 must have been a member of the chancellery. This scribe, after closely analyzing the charters written in Champagne during the same period, rewrote the narrative in the language of the charters. This, after all, was a fantasy: the idea the editor had formed of primitive Old French, a language neither attested nor described, a pure object of speculation, the specular image that philologists and grammarians batted back and forth forever. And the most important characteristic of this language was its regularity and perfection.

The theory that the copy represents degeneration presupposes a flawless original; the author has no right to any lapsus. Similarly, the idea that language becomes degraded implies an impeccable origin: the author has no right to bad language either, or to dreadful puns, or, indeed, to the diversity of his way of speaking. By subscribing to this, philology surreptitiously annexed a literary theory—the theory of the genius. By magnifying a transcendent author it tied an authoritarian theory of the subject (the master of the sense as well as of the signifier expressing it) to the notions of origin and textual stability. The author, great by definition, and unique, the most pre- of pre-production by the unity of his conception, the opacity of his work (the argument of the lectio difficilior), and the quality of his language, stood in sharp contrast to scribal diversity, ignorant and purposeless, which pluralized the work, trivialized its expression, and impoverished its language. A truly metaphorical solution, by displacement.

Medieval philology, representative of the earliest thought about the text, attributed to a primordial subject the textual stability that it sought in the midst of variants. As Michel Foucault noted, “privileging the author,” which we view as the basis of positive philology, after Mallarmé, would in the main be transferred to the text and writing itself. This, then, would pave the way for the final textual epiphany of literary theories since New Criticism. Philology plots the curve of this evolution at the heart of modernity as it relates to the text.

For Gaston Paris the language of the original Saint Alexis was ancient, regular, and homogeneous, and it was in this spirit that he created the reconstructed archetype. An example is the declension of substantives, which the editor did not doubt had been altered in the manuscripts and which, correlatively, in the original was perfectly correct. “Thus, the irregularities of our manuscript as regards spelling
must be attributed to the influence of Anglo-Norman habits, and one is justified in eliminating them and in reestablishing French declension in the form that it existed during the period in which the poem was composed throughout” (106). However, it is just as true today as in 1872 that there are plenty of areas within the standard theory of inflection where grammatical description is not very certain. In morphology, for instance, there are proper nouns that seem reluctant to accept the final s required by inflection in the nominative singular. For example, in manuscript L, considered to be extremely close to the original, the proper noun eufemien never appears as eufemiens when it functions as a subject:

*tut sul sen est eufemien turnet*  
[entirely alone Eufemien turned around]  
(L. v. 69e)

Manuscripts P and A vary in their practice; in S, which was later, the word is always given as eufemiens in this case. To the eyes of the grammarian, this is a paradoxical and extremely interesting situation, demonstrating a pronounced use of noun inflection at work in S (correct usage and hypercorrection). Gaston did not really worry about this very long; he corrected manuscript L (the one he was following for the line in question) and published the following critical text (where all the attributive characteristics of eufemien have been corrected):

*Toz sols s'en est Eufemien tornez*  
(Saint Alexis, ed. Paris, v. 69e) 
[entirely alone Eufemien turned around]

There is another example of an equally doubtful and paradoxical use of syntax. In Old French, the expression avoir nom, avoir a nom (to be named) is often followed by a proper name in the nominative—if not in texts, at least in the critical apparatus (where, luckily, the material prior to its correction can be read). Thus, in this phrase from Villehardouin:

*un saint home en France qui ot nom Folques de Nuilli*  
(La Conquête de Constantinople, éd. Faral, § 1) 
[a holy man in France, who was named Folques of Nuilli]

All manuscripts are in agreement: Folques OA, Forques B, Foukes CDE.

This is a phenomenon deserving our attention because it seems to go against the defective nature of the proper noun as regards inflection, as well as against our linguistic understanding (at least the official one): a subject marker has been added to an attribute of the object. It gives the impression that analysis of the ancient language is different. It extends the class of attributive verbs through an operation in which marks of inflection play a part. There are other examples:

*li empereres se fait e balz e liez*  
(Chanson de Roland, ed. Moignet, v. 96)  
[The emperor becomes both joyful and glad]

and the phenomenon, moreover is not unknown in modern French (*Elles ont l'air heureuses* [They(f., pl.) have a happy airs(f., pl.)]). Still, the important thing is that the medieval artifact must be made available to the reader. In this passage from the *Saint Alexis*, the three main manuscripts agree on a reading in which an occurrence of the expression avoir nom is included:

*li uns acharies li altre anories ot num*  
(L. v. 62b)  
*li uns akaries li altre honorie out num*  
(P. v. 62b)  
*li uns acharies li altre oneries out num*  
(A, shifted to v. 72b)  
[One had the name Arcadie, the other Honorie]

Except for the form honorie in P, there is complete agreement, therefore, upon a “good reading” in the nominative case (*acharies, anories, etc.*). Gaston Paris, usually so quick to distribute an inflectional s in order to restore faulty nominatives, here acted with equal swiftness, but this time in the opposite direction. The stability of a grammatical model organized according to classical canons is such that it can be applied to primitive organization following notions of what is natural. The editor removed from these proper nouns “an s to which they have no right, because when it comes after avoir nom (to be named) the proper noun is naturally put in the objective case” (107); in his edition it reads:
The problem vanished, and the grammars that came after, relying on this famous edition, were able to assert that the object's predicate in Old French, is "naturally" in the objective case. Then other editors, reconstructing other texts, took their authority from these grammars.

"I think it will be readily acknowledged that the text of this poem, as I present it, offers an acceptable example of good French as it must have been spoken and written in the middle of the eleventh century" (135). And as it is nowhere attested in the manuscripts of the Saint Alexis, which, like all the other works in the vernacular, date from the twelfth century at the earliest. Neglecting the linguistic abundance that was attested but "late" and muddled things somewhat, the philologist dreamed of an ancient language, pure and reedy, stripped bare and white, like a skeleton pulled from the desert, like an immaculate Romanesque church, to the taste of the Second Empire: "I have tried here to do for the French language what an architect would do who wanted to reconstruct on paper Saint-Germain-des-Prés as the eleventh century admired it."

Doubt

It was Joseph Bédier himself who inaugurated the third period, in a startling manner, republishing in 1913 at the Société des anciens textes français his earlier, youthful edition of a short verse narrative, the Lai de l'Ombre by Jean Renart (an edition strictly adhering to the Pariso-Lachmannian method).16 The new edition, however, expressed doubts about this method. Amplified and justified, these doubts were in the form of a long article published in 1928, which, in magnificent language and with the grace of a fine mind, laid Gaston Paris to rest.17

Somewhat regrettably, the ideas of Joseph Bédier became utterly successful in France and in Anglo-Saxon countries. Once they became acknowledged and put into practice, they no longer provoked any debate but, rather, initiated a sort of end to philological history which lasted more than half a century; the steady editorial activity was extremely peaceful, its sleepy thought sustained by a revealed truth.

Now, we should note that this truth is basically dubious and that it is far from being general. Bédier was no theoretician, and we must take into account that he was a rather Germanophobe individual who mistrusted the mathematization of a literature he knew marvelously well, a man who was always extremely clever, endowed with a keen intelligence and with a taste for being provocative. Did he not choose the Lai de l'Ombre, one of the rare medieval texts where, if one takes the traditional point of view, one can suppose that its author revised a later copy of it? Bédier, analyzing at length five readings shared by manuscripts D, E, and F of the lay, concluded that they are the work of a man who was "extremely intelligent, who spoke the same language as Jean Renart, wrote in the same style, used the same technique for rhyming and whom the Muses had endowed with precisely the same gifts" (65).

Of course, the application of medieval stylistic models, the constant interaction within coded forms of writings can bring forth a less simple and individual explanation. For Bédier, however, any such high praise for the reviser would lift him over the basic threshold separating copyists from author: endowed with such talent, this scribe could be none other than Jean Renart himself, and that, indeed, was what Bédier suggested. In this case, however, if the person who provided the perfect form and sense in some primordial time had vanished, then made the revision; if there was some later intervention by the author, then the origin splits in two, the stemma codicum spins on its axis, the beautifully organized arborescence turns into a disorderly and flaccid rhizome. Genealogical classification becomes impossible, and the reproduction of the archetype (now multiple) becomes impracticable. Such an argument, even though based on a case, is slender, and lateral.

Similarly, Bédier did not make a frontal attack on Lachmannian method. He said nothing about the critique of forms (devoting him-
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self to the critique of readings) and shared, as we have seen, the nostal­
gic and anachronistic ideology concerning authorial origin: “Is there any sure way of reconstituting a sufficient approximation of the contents of the first manuscript, presumably unsullied by errors, the one that Jean Renart, on the eve of publishing his poem, must have written in his own hand and then, to be certain the text was right, must have read and reread with his own eyes?”(2). Bédierism is basically the regret over not being able to give a positive response to that question. Rather than attacking the basic principles of the critical method imported by Gaston Paris, Bédier brought to light an odd imperfection linked to the practice of this method. In 1913 he had, in fact, discovered a “surprising law”: among all the editions he had consulted (among them, we should note in passing, the Saint Alexis edited by Gaston Paris), 95 percent of those that present the classification of their manuscripts in schematic form do so with a stemma that is split in two, with only two branches (that is, two supposed copies) deriving from the original (see diagram).

“A tree that is split into two branches is in no way bizarre, but a grove of two-branched trees, a forest? Silva portentosa” (12).18

Bédier provided two explanations for this surprising phenomeno­non, each a matter for a different stage of philological consciousness. The first was inscribed within the logic of the system: the Lachmannian method, fastidious and virtually fanatical in its indefatigable comparatism, was a force that worked by dichotomy until it ob­tained a perfect binarism (the original division into two families), that is, until it could go no further. There was also another and deeper reason driving it until the system was blocked. “Obscure forces, confined within the depths of the subconscious, exerted their influence” (15). (It is perfectly apparent what theories this worthy academician was echoing here, in 1928, two years after the French translation of the Traumdeutung). This was desiring man somehow taking revenge on the machine.

In fact, with classification in the shape of a tree, the archetypal was reconstructed, as Gaston Paris said, mathematically; the rule of “two against one” set in motion an automaton that, step by step, engendered the text. Now, though the classification is binary on the most general level, in every case in which two readings are irreconcilably opposed, the automaton “holds out to the editor . . . the offering of its two arms, which, though immobilized, are laden with variants” (14). And this editor is free to choose, with an entirely clear conscience, the reading that suits his taste and intuitions, not to say the venerable judicium. And, since almost all the classifications set forth are two-branched, Bédier lets it be understood that Lachmann’s method never had, in fact, been applied to French medieval works but had always been circumvented by philological cunning, which had the skill to weaken the automaton, the skill, indeed, to paralyze it completely. If, therefore, “scientific” method was secretly under­mined by desire, why persist in creating heteroclite monsters; why not go back to a “Humanist” conception of editing, conscious of one’s limits and one’s choices? The best idea was to accept a good manuscript (one in a favorable position within the stemma) and to stick with it, reducing and explaining the necessary corrections: “Consequently, the most commendable method of editing is perhaps, in the final analysis, one governed by a spirit of self-doubt, a spirit of prudence and extreme ‘conservatism,’ a vigorous will—almost a bias in favor of scribes, giving them the most credit and not touching the text being published except when there is an extreme and almost ob­vious necessity” (71).

Rejecting the Lachmannian edition of the Lai de l’Ombre which
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he had delivered in 1890 (adorned with a magnificent two-branched 
stemma), Joseph Bédier published, in 1913, manuscript A (“a good 
manuscript, published almost without alteration and accompanied 
by notes that mark a return to the technique of the old Humanists” 
[17]) and then, in 1928, another good manuscript, E, which “offers a 
lush and well-formed text of our poem” (66).

This is the Bédierism, in almost caricatural contrast to the basic 
assumptions circulating since Gaston Paris, which was adopted with 
almost no debate by French and Anglo-Saxon philology. Some 
adopted it out of laziness and many out of a general conservatism, 
but above all, this came about as an evolution in keeping with the 
spirit of the times.19 Despite what Bédier himself said, it was no re­
turn to square one, and the clash with Gaston Paris was not as it has 
usually been described but, rather, represented a remarkable 
aggiornamento of thought concerning the text.

Bédier’s criticism, as we have mentioned, picks up once more the 
postulates of nineteenth-century philology, and the lateral argumen­
tation that he developed shows that he had little room to manoeuvre. 
What was probably newest and, for us, most important about this 
theory was its committed bias in favor of the scribes, which gave 
them the most credit. Bédier turned his pragmatic attention to the 
data of philology, those manuscripts it was important to bear in 
mind, going through them with the eyes of an editor. Each is a seg­
ment of language that the scribe’s interventionism quite specifically 
homogenized or attempted to homogenize.20 It had been realized 
with a situation of effective literary communication in mind. It was 
something real. A living creature, in short, not flotsam, not jetsam, 
and not a fossil, but one realization among others in the midst of an 
evolving process. The three “good” manuscripts—A, E, and F—of the 
Lai de l’Ombre, were described by Bédier, in fact, as three “forms 
of the text” (“differently, but almost equally coherent and harmo­
nious” [68]).

The fossils found by Cuvier in Montmartre’s gypsum did not for 
him correspond to any contemporary living animal. He explained 
this phenomenon by the thesis of universal catastrophe that suppos­
edly destroyed all species then alive, so that we no longer have any 
knowledge of them except through scattered fragments, which, 
through patient application of comparative anatomy, can be pieced 
together by the naturalist.21

Gaston Paris’s philology was based on much the same thesis: the 
copy is a catastrophe that displaces and destroys the original work so 
that all that remains to us now are (Paris could have repeated Cuvier’s 
words) “isolated bones thrown helter-skelter, almost always broken 
and reduced to fragments” (58). We are right, therefore, to recon­
struct them by means of the meticulous application of comparative 
philology. Lamarck offered a solution to the problem raised by the 
fossils, but it went unheard until after Cuvier: fossils belong to still 
existing species, but they have since changed and ceded to the species 
that are currently living.22 There is no need at all to suppose that 
there was some universal catastrophe that came to topple everything; 
“nature works slowly and by successive degrees” (16). Against Cuvier’s 
creationism, the correlative to his notion of the catastrophe, Lamarck 
opposed a description of life forms which was simultaneously taxo­
nomic and diachronic: “Vegetable and animal types are not, for the 
most part, primitive, but they are derived, through successive trans­
formations, from other forms of which there are living or fossil re­
presentatives” (20).

Though something like a faint echo of Freud (or Charcot) runs 
through Bédier’s discourse, it is most unlikely that this traditionalist 
Catholic would have been interested in Darwin (translated in 1872 in 
France), who was commonly considered a profoundly antireligious 
thinker. By contrast, French thought, strictly biological (and not 
scribed within any philosophy of general evolution), constituted by 
the neo-Lamarckian transformism that was the rule starting in 1880, 
the period in which Bédier had been a student, could hold his atten­
tion and appeal to him. In his study on the manuscript tradition of 
the Lai de l’Ombre, Joseph Bédier, in short, introduced neo-Lamarck­
ian thought into philology: Manuscripts evolved like species, inher-
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ited acquired modifications (readings in common), differentiated themselves by successive speciations (manuscript families), and showed variations among themselves that were more adaptations than degradations. Though, of course, he might regret the primitive species (created by the author, meaning God), the task of the philologist, like that of the naturalist, was not to reconstruct this primordial unity but to compare all the different available species that are, of course, imperfect but alive.

From this point of view, Bédier's theory represented an important stage in philological thought, which was thus brought in line with contemporary science. We need to be careful not to simplify the picture and find reassuring contrasts: only one generation, as we mentioned, separated Gaston Paris and Joseph Bédier, but it was one that saw a break take place in the nineteenth century as it drew to a close. Philology was still well within the tradition of thought as it was formed by and concerned with text, with Bédier representing its final stage as far as the treatment of medieval texts was concerned; the good-natured, academic comfort in which Bédierism has dozed along ever since is one sign among others. Bédier's antimethod, as much as any other, reduced medieval works to the stable, closed, authorized texts of modernity. Of course, very fortunately this did not consist of relying on a ghost—the primordial subject, the guarantor of stability—for the process of reduction, pretending that there was a unity to its conception. But the notion of text was reduced to the manuscript, which was real, of course, but it was still considered unique, with complete disregard for variational space. It was as if one had had the same edition in its essentials ever since the Middle Ages, so the philologist merely used elaborate care in correcting any possible blunders. One can better understand, therefore, the particular fondness of Bédierists for the copy made by the scribe Guiot of the works of Chrétien de Troyes, which is the copy they faithfully reproduced. The language here is smooth and beautiful, its quality pleasant and distinguished, nothing sticks out, and nothing is surprising. It is a good manuscript; it is a good edition. Gaston Paris was suspicious of variants; Bédier loved them, to the point of editing them exclusively. But

Gaston Paris and the Dinosaurs

Bédierism provides no picture of the intrinsic variance that is medieval writing, only snapshots, which are, of course, preferable to illusory reconstruction. Like the latter, however, they leave this surplus of language and meaning in the place allotted to it by textuary thinking—in the margins.
The question could not be more concrete. Philology, a practical science, can be judged by its works: whatever the perspective adopted, whatever the method used, whatever the object chosen, it always comes down to manipulating pieces of writing, arranging them according to one's convictions, then making their calm, self-assured order available to readers. Medieval philology's affiliation with textuary thought is clearly seen in the works with which it has filled libraries, in its unveiling of these austere treasure troves. But in that case we need to answer, in a practical manner, the question in turn entailed, by our critical study: What is your philology?

In 1938, Edmond Faral provided a fine edition of La Conquête de Constantinople as told by Geoffroy de Villehardouin. This Bédériste edition followed manuscript O (Oxford, Bodleian Land. mix. 587), correcting very explicitly (introd., L) the only readings singled out by general agreement in the manuscript tradition. Thus one reads a good copy, a "document," as Faral would say, "which is of greater interest than an attempt at conjectural and partial reproduction." What about the other manuscripts, however, whose quality the editor has demonstrated and which are part of the textual production of this narrative of the crusade which the Middle Ages has left behind for us? Surplus worthy of note has been carefully placed in the critical apparatus. This deposit, nevertheless, though not a reject (it is arranged in order), by its very disposition takes on a prisonlike air. The patient and recalcitrant reader, dissatisfied with the unity provided him, can gain from it a few fragments, splinters, and scraps, but not the other of the text. The secret function of the critical apparatus is to dissipate this in silence.

The result is the following passage from paragraph 70, accompanied here by the corresponding extract from the critical apparatus, printed at the bottom of the page:

[This same Alexis so took his brother the emperor, so pulled his eyes from his head and made himself emperor in such a betrayal as you have heard.]

(l) Et cil B, Cil CDE. (m) Alexis si manque dans CDE. (n) l'empereor manque dans B. (o) et CDE. (p) Manque dans B. (q) emperoar de soi B. (r) come oës CDE.

Despite the superscript letters that dance their disconcerting ballet of occasional otherness along the line, this is a very simple example. The sentence is perfectly clear. (This same Alexis so took his brother, so pulled his eyes from his head and made himself emperor in such a betrayal as you have heard.) The variants, which are elementary and far from numerous, at first sight contrast manuscript B on the one hand with the group CDE on the other; nevertheless, it is obvious that a second, even dual view is necessary for a curious reader. How can such an arrangement, indeed, be read? And where does one begin? Let us stick with group CDE. One notices as the text progresses and as we come across them in the notes: a divergence in the demonstrative (icil "reinforced" in O; cil the "simple" demonstra-
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tive in CDE); the absence of a segment of text (Alexis si is lacking in CDE: a proper noun plus its coordinate; this segment, circumscribed in this manner, has no syntactic reality); another coordination (si in O; et in CDE); a change in tense (com vos avez oï / com oës). A bit of everything (grammatical elements and an agrammatical fragment), nothing that concerns the drive or the unfolding of the text, nothing that has to do with meaning. Slim pickings for the meekest of grammarians' analyses, which is the only one invited to authenticate its wealth, and which at the very most and in the most unremarkable manner can fill its trivial files under entries such as "demonstrative," "coordinate," "sequences of verbs." No syntax at all: the variants that have been noted in this sentence have been defined and classified according to a classical morphology, blind to the movements of the text.

If, however, one takes some distance (taking a piece of paper and a pencil, too) and regroups the variants in CDE, a structure appears—and its meaning:

Cil prist son frere l'empeor et li traist les iaulz de la teste et se fist empeor en tel trai'son com oës.

[This one took his brother the emperor and pulled his eyes from his head and made himself emperor in just such a betrayal as you are hearing.]

There are three simple propositions (the subject of the first is the pronoun cin) which are coordinated by et; the three verb predicates, thus balanced, are eventually linked on the level of enunciation (present indicative). Which suggests that we consider once again the reading (which we shall accept as being a complete utterance) of manuscript O; then we can detect the operations of thematization and rupture that it consists of:

Icil Alexis si prist son frere l'empeor, si li traist les iaulz de la teste et se fist empereor en tel trai'son com vos avez oï.

[This same Alexis so took his brother the emperor, so pulled his eyes from his head and made himself emperor in such a betrayal as you have heard.]
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Rejecting the traditional commentary on good authors and also the wider speculations about language and its origins, linguists took real languages and their history as their object. It was an object that could be enunciated (languages are bodies of sounds), represented (sounds evolve according to laws that are inescapable and blind to meaning), and calculated. This solved the age-old question of where our languages came from.

Progressing into the relatively homogeneous realm of Indo-European languages, linguistics brought positivist method into play with its factual thought and genealogical classification—at the cost, as we have mentioned, of an extreme reduction: language became reduced to its phonetics and, more specifically, since the phonic layer was not conceived of as a structure, to the individual nature of the sounds. This was, of course, an impressive gesture, enunciating laws at the very heart of what seems most personal in language (pronunciation)—which also, among the thousand characteristics of intonation which delineate a personality, showed what belonged to a group.

Phonetic law, however, has nothing to say about structure or system; it is about fate. Historical phonetics, the basis of historical and comparative grammar, details the evolution of each of the phonic elements that can be heard in the language. Because relationship with another sound is not systematic but accidental (conditioned transformation), the classification adopted by the description is of little importance—the first work done by Dietz on vernacular languages listed the sounds in alphabetical order. Moreover, a good phonetics manual is only a collection of laws, and it is strictly the linguist's business to discover them; articulatory factors, for instance, are simply attempts at explanation at a later date. Nineteenth-century linguistics, a science that was inherently historical, adopted the behavior suitable to the triumphant history of its era. Phonetics is a purely descriptive history of sounds; it establishes, documents, and arranges in chronological order the accidents that have happened to noteworthy individuals.

From that point on, a conception of the individual, the element, of what is noteworthy and guaranteed and fragmented, runs through-out the study of the language, unifying it. One can follow its trace from phonetics, the hard nucleus with its pioneering research, to historical and comparative linguistics, and from there to the ancillary science whose task it is to establish the data—philology. It is understandable that such an approach to language, based on the study of individual sounds, would scarcely venture beyond the lexicon (the study of individual words) and morphology (the study of their individual forms). Historical linguistics, a consideration of the element and not the system, has neither the means nor the desire to take syntax as its object. The latter remained in the margins of research, often in appendixes (the layout of historical grammars is revealing); it rarely goes beyond an impressionistic summary of curious facts, and it is equally given over to old prejudices and unverified hypotheses. The theories of Gustave Guillaume, which were deployed with some success among comparatists (Guillaume was one of Meillet's students), thus expressed the ambition to think syntax through by resorting to completely unfalsifiable hypotheses deriving from Bergsonian philosophy.

It is understandable that, throughout the field, there is a recognizable way of working, one in which the fastidious study of the noteworthy bit is given most importance; philology's great fondness for notes, short papers, and critical analyses is well known. In the bibliography of great philologists, besides editions, how many small notes devoted to a dialectal characteristic, how many brief remarks on three lines or on a variant are listed! And finally, one understands what is the persistent, steady basis of this critical apparatus, from Karl Lachmann to Joseph Bédier and his present successors. It is a critical apparatus both predisposed and functioning to link the way historical linguistics thinks (the variant is a word, an isolated form) with the textualuary will to provide readers a stable and unique text, by exploding and scattering the textuality surrounding it (the variant is part of the nontextual). The variant, a tiny bit, a brief note, the hysteria of detail, is simultaneously the sieve that retains nothing of the syntax except a lexicon and the curse directed at the adjacent, threatening, textual element, breaking and tearing it apart. Now, medieval writing
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does not produce variants; it is variance. The endless rewriting to which medieval textuality is subjected, the joyful appropriation of which it is the object, invites us to make a powerful hypothesis: the variant is never punctual. Paraphrastic activity works on the utterance itself, like dough; variance is not to be grasped through the word; this must be done, rather, at least at the level of the sentence if not, indeed, at the very heart of the complete utterance, of the segment of discourse. Remember that the variation *cilicil* in the earlier example, a local trifle marked by the critical apparatus, played a part in an overall and differently conveyed orientation of the utterance. Variance is the construction of a sense, of a sequence of writing. It is a syntax, the “building,” as Ramus called it, of a collection of language phenomena that take on meaning only through the link uniting them. It is in this way that variance is to be grasped and appreciated, that it is important to have it understood.

Because the variance of a medieval work is its primary characteristic, the concrete otherness of discursive mobility, the figure of a premodern written word, editions must give it priority, following it closely. We cannot, in fact, examine each critical apparatus or each manuscript from every angle and work out a restored textuality as we did with group CDE of Villehardouin’s manuscripts. Luckily, we have a good edition of manuscript B and can make a line-by-line comparison. With patience one could also do the same with the editions following different manuscripts for Chrétien de Troyes’s *Perceval*, or the *Roman de Renart*. That was basically what Bédier wished to do by publishing first A and then E of the *Lai de l’Ombre*. Is it necessary to multiply books in this manner? Or indeed to defract and proliferate the book, as did Jean Rychner with the *Lai de Lanval* and the fabliaux, Peter Dembowski with the *Vie de Marie l’Égyptienne*, Willem Noomen and Nico Van den Boogaard in their *Nouveau Recueil complet des fabliaux*, publishing the different versions of a work side by side in parallel columns. These were all good and very useful attempts, answering a need but unsatisfying in the end. Tempted by the diplomatic copy, these editions have been drawn into the fantasy of the facsimile, of honestly providing in the most complete form all the intact data, which will become the wealth of the reader. Because a loyal magnanimity was their only choice, they forgot that every edition is a theory: though one must show what is there, one must above all make it understood. Also, there is no way to leave the two-dimensional space of the printed page in these editions, where medieval writing is set before one’s eyes but not set in motion. The solution lies elsewhere.

The computer, a valuable aid and one worth considering, provides the obvious solution. Recently progress has been made in the way the computer visualizes and manipulates textual data on screen and the way it manages this data. Progress has been such that our most ordinary use of the computer brings us face to face with a form of written matter that can no longer be described as bookish; we shall call it a screenic presentation. Always in the process of further development and refinement by technicians, the screen is simultaneously dialogic (it offers a constant interaction between the user and the screen) and multidimensional (through the use of “windows,” it allows one to bring together and consult information belonging to separate entities). Utilizing these two qualities, one can conceive of the type of edition that would result from this assembling of separate entities represented by codices. In such an edition medieval works would no longer be subjected to the two-dimensional and closed structure of the printed page because a diskette accommodates varied textual masses, which the reader consults by making them appear in different ways on a computer screen. Certainly, it is possible to improve on the editions in parallel columns diffracting a book which we mentioned earlier because the computer executes a diffraction and proliferation of textual spaces: in each of the “windows” of the screen there appears an inscription that is saved in the computer’s memory. This inscription can be arranged or shifted, acquiring visibility and importance (linking, zooming in, etc.). As the articulation of a vast memory, the computer, with its instant management and multiple visualization, is the answer to the editorial requirements that we have noted. The use of the computer, because the effects and constraints of the printing press are irrelevant to it, thus allows the reader to see and consult not
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only the totality of the manuscripts of a particular medieval work but also the editions (empirical, Lachmannian, Bédierist, etc.) which took these manuscripts as their objects. Moreover, it can provide a great many minor bits of information, which should remain virtual so they will not get in the way of reading but which one needs to be able to locate: makers of concordances, frequency lists, tables of rhymes, every sort of calculation, codicological and paleographic data, and so on—everything that a printed edition usually abandons or from which it makes a painful choice, everything that the hyper-scholarly edition hypostasizes to the point of unreadability. It is not simply a question, however, of making what is an honest and upright fidelity even more magnanimous; edition must lead to a reading: it is the theory of the work.

Though information technology satisfies our need to be exhaustive, it also upholds the intelligence of the text, and this is where its most important and newest technical contribution can be seen: the computer is able to help us detect the dynamics of the text by making visible the connections prepared and suggested by the editor. It is less a question, therefore, of providing data than of making the reader grasp this interaction of redundancy and recurrence, repetition and change, which medieval writing consists of—and to do so according to the two axes that we have brought to light. Vertically, along the thread that leads through the work, it can bring back all the things that each noteworthy utterance constantly echoes but which modern memory no longer hears; the screen unrolls the infinity of memorable context. Horizontally, it can compare the utterances within a pertinent and chosen range of variants that are paraphrases of one another from one manuscript to the next, even indicating by some symbol or note what the characteristics of this relationship are. We would do well to hang the changing constellation of the medieval written word in the boundless space that technology offers inscription today. That truly would be publishing on a grand scale, editing on a scale never before realized, yet indispensable, and only the information technology of today can provide us with the means, probably even the idea, of doing so. Because the computer, through its dialogic and multidimensional screen, simulates the endless and joyful mobility of medieval writing as it restores to its reader the astounding faculty of memory—the memory that defines its aesthetic reception and is basic to the pleasure taken by a reader.

This simulation, however, suggests that the written word we have designated as screenic might very well escape from textuary thought. Mechanical writing is extremely flexible because of the way text is presented; reading on screen calls up, brings together, and arranges segments of writing taken from the vast, obscure, and inconceivable reserves of electronic memory. What the screen provides the reader is an always instantaneous grasp, the ephemeral visualization of different and mobile textual spaces, of texts that are no longer that palpable reality of ink on a page but are only the immateriality of a few electrical pulses. The two-dimensional stability of the text, attributed to an originating and controlling subject, no longer seems the basis for this new technology of the written word. Computer inscription is variance.

At first, people see a technology that brings new ideas as threatening. In the case of the written word, this phenomenon has taken place before, toward the end of the fifteenth century. The printing press had just been invented, and books that came off the press were considered as, at the very most, excellent manuscripts. Though we may think of the computer of our everyday intellectual existence as merely the most desirable of typewriters, there is something, perhaps, silently stirring in our conception of the text. There is some questioning of our spontaneous philosophy of the textual, which literary criticism, fascinated by the parts of writing that precede and exceed the reification of the completed work, may echo. There is some vague portent that textuary modernity—this convergence of progress in industry, in law, and in letters that is the mainstay of philology, the modern science of the modern text—might be coming to an end beneath this new surge of technology. The outlines of a post-textuary philology are appearing on the computer screen; it is a tempting opportunity to use the post-text instrument to provide some image of what was there before.
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So the page would be truly turned. Electronic writing, through its mobility, reproduces the medieval work even in its variance. Because information technology, beyond modernity, is rediscovering the path of an ancient literature whose trace the printing press had erased: and this is something to think about.

Chapter I: Textuary Modernity


Chapter 2: Mr. Procrustes, Philologist


10. This expression is to be distinguished from the excellent term mouvance created by Paul Zumthor to describe the “incessant vibration” and the “fundamental instability” of medieval texts (Essai de poétique médiévale [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972], 507). In effect, this notion, which followed the ever more “oralist” evolution of Zumthorian reflections, came to designate the effects of the nomadism of the voice, of the concrete and originating voice, on texts whose writing is no longer thought of as anything but secondary and reductive. Under orders to make an original voice heard, the written word is put in doubt, in a manner somewhat recalling the gesture that founded philology (La Let-

Chapter 3: The Joyful Excess


4. One expert recently remarked “In fact, without touching on the question of principles, and without a doubt, no scholar has ever succeeded in classifying beyond dispute the manuscripts of a French medieval work, whenever the manuscripts are the least bit numerous” (Félix Lecoy, ed., Jean Renart. Le Lai de l’Ombre [Paris: Champion, 1979], vii).


Chapter 4: Gaston Paris and the Dinosaurs


13. Earlier we said that it is nothing of the sort. Medieval inflection, to the extent that it exists, has no syntactic pertinence at all. Rather, it plays a rhetorical role as ornamentation, marking "proper usage" of the written language, as, for example, its connection to the quality and the beauty of the copy demonstrates. Consequently, we have to adopt an entirely different perspective toward it, specifically one that is diachronic: a certain late (and luxurious: Frossart) manuscripts present, in fact, a language that is extremely correctly "declined" (Bernard Cerquiglini, "Für ein neues Paradigma der historischen Linguistik: am Beispiel des Altfranzösischen," in B. Cerquiglini and H. U. Gumbrecht, eds., Der Diskurs der Literatur und Sprachhistorie [Francfort: Suhrkamp, 1983], 440–63.
16. Even with regard to the progressive Lachmannianism of Dom Henri Quentin (Essais de critique textuelle [Edoctique] [Paris: Picard, 1926]), which abandoned the troublesome notion of error in favor of that of the variant; classification was unbiased, working statistically, putting all divergences on the same level.
18. A neo-Lachmannian response attempted to prove that the predominance of two-branched stemmas was a statistically predictable result of using the manuscript as a means of transmission (Jean Fourquet, "Le Paradoxe de Bédier, Mélanges 1945, vol. 2, Études des lettres, Publications de la faculté des Lettres de l'université de Strasbourg [Paris: Klincksieck, 1946], 1–16; Arrigo Castellani, Bédier avait-il raison? La Méthode de Lachmann dans les éditions de textes du Moyen Age [Fribourg: Faculté des Lettres, 1957]). But this did not diminish the power of the argument set forth by Bédier.
19. Italian neo-Lachmannism is probably explained by the strong sense of continuity felt by intellectuals in Italy with their Middle Ages and by the almost internal way in which they perceive it (an example of this would be Umberto Eco's Nome della rosa). Their more immediate comprehension of the language, which has gone hand in hand with an uninterrupted series of commentaries and editions, provides them with an assurance that their French colleagues do not have. In France there was a dramatic break introduced by Classicism in the second half of the seventeenth century, fixing the language, instituting the belles-lettres, dumping everything that had gone before into alterity and suspicion. But it should be added that the neo-Lachmannian medievalist editors (Maria Corti, D'Arco S. Avalle, Cesare Segre, et al.) were, moreover, masters of Italian literary semiotics and well known to a wide audience for their works on Pavese, Joyce, and Pound. A connection can be seen between their editorial interventionism (which seems very much like a
return to positivism) and their well-founded conviction that literary texts are answerable to theory as well as to a strict methodology of reading and analysis. But the French editors of medieval texts hardly ever step outside their domain, put forth few general ideas, and are distrustful, to say the least, of contemporary literary theories. In everything they adopt the extreme “conservatism” advocated by Bédier—but without quotation marks.

20. For Cesare Segre, the manuscript represents the contact (as one would use the term about languages) between the linguistic system of the text and that of the copyist: it is a diatop. (E. Segre, “Critique textuelle, théorie des ensembles et diatopès,” Académie royale de Belgique, Bulletin de la classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques 62 [1976]: 279–92).


Chapter 5: Turn the Page


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