

## D. F. McKenzie

### THE BOOK AS AN EXPRESSIVE FORM

My purpose in these lectures – one I hope that might be thought fitting for an inaugural occasion – is simply to consider anew what bibliography is and how it relates to other disciplines. To begin that inquiry, I should like to recall a classic statement by the late Sir Walter Greg. It is this: 'what the bibliographer is concerned with is pieces of paper or parchment covered with certain written or printed signs. With these signs he is concerned merely as arbitrary marks; their meaning is no business of his'.<sup>1</sup> This definition of bibliography, or at least of 'pure' bibliography, is still widely accepted, and it remains in essence the basis of any claim that the procedures of bibliography are scientific.

A recent study by Mr Ross Atkinson supports that view by drawing on the work of the American semiotician, C. S. Peirce.<sup>2</sup> It can be argued, for example, that the signs in a book, as a bibliographer must read them, are simply iconic or indexical. Briefly, iconic signs are those which involve similarity; they represent an object, much as a portrait represents the sitter. In enumerative bibliography, and, even more so in descriptive, the entries are iconic. They represent the object they describe. Textual bibliography, too, may be said to be iconic because it seeks, as Mr Atkinson puts it, 'to reproduce the Object with maximum precision in every detail'. In that way, enumerative, descriptive, and textual bibliography may be said to constitute a class of three *referential sign systems*. Analytical bibliography, however, would form a distinct class of indexical signs. Their significance lies only in the physical differences between them as an index to the ways in which a particular document came physically to be what it is. It is their *causal status* that, in Peirce's terms, makes the signs *indexical*. In the words of Professor Bowers, writing of analytical bibliography, the physical features of a book are 'significant in the order and manner of their shapes but indifferent in symbolic meaning'.<sup>3</sup>

I must say at once that this account comes closer than any other I know to justifying Greg's definition of the discipline. I am also convinced, however, that the premise informing Greg's classic statement, and therefore this refinement of it, is no longer adequate as a definition of what bibliography is and does.

In an attempt to escape the embarrassment of such a strict definition, it is often said that bibliography is not a subject at all but only, as Mr G. Thomas Tanselle once put it, 'a related group of subjects that happen to be commonly referred to by the same term'.<sup>4</sup> Professor Bowers virtually concedes as much in dividing it into enumerative or systematic bibliography, and descriptive,

analytical, textual, and historical bibliography.<sup>5</sup> The purity of the discipline which Greg aspired to is to that extent qualified by its particular applications and these in turn imply that the definition does not fully serve its uses.

The problem is, I think, that the moment we are required to explain signs in a book, as distinct from describing or copying them, they assume a symbolic status. If a medium in any sense affects a message, then bibliography cannot exclude from its own proper concerns the relation between form, function and symbolic meaning. If textual bibliography were merely iconic, it could produce only facsimiles of different versions. As for bibliographical analysis, that depends absolutely upon antecedent historical knowledge, for it can only function 'with the assistance of previously gathered information on the techniques of book production'.<sup>6</sup> But the most striking weakness of the definition is precisely its incapacity to accommodate history. Mr Atkinson is quite frank about this. Accepting the bibliographer's presumed lack of concern for the meaning of signs, he writes: 'we are left now only with the problem of historical bibliography'. He cites with approval the comment by Professor Bowers that the numerous fields concerned with the study of printing and its processes both as art and craft are merely 'ancillary to analytical bibliography'.<sup>7</sup> He is therefore obliged to argue that

historical bibliography is not, properly speaking, bibliography at all. This is because it does not have as its Object material sign systems or documents. Its Object rather consists of certain mechanical techniques and as such it must be considered not part of bibliography but a constituent of such fields as the history of technology or, perhaps, information science.

Such comments, although recent, and indeed advanced in seeking to accommodate bibliography to semiotics as the science of signs, are oddly out of touch with such developments as, for example, the founding of The Center for the Book by the Library of Congress, the American Antiquarian Society's Programme for the History of the Book in American Culture, or proposals for publication of national histories of the book, of which the most notable so far is *L'Histoire de l'Édition Française*.

I am not bold enough to speak of paradigm shifts, but I think I am safe in saying that the vital interests of most of those known to me as bibliographers are no longer fully served by description, or even by editing, but by the historical study of the making and the use of books and other documents. But is it right that in order to accomplish such projects as, for example, a history of the book in Britain, we must cease to be bibliographers and shift to another discipline? It is here, if anywhere, that other disciplines such as history, and especially cultural history, are now making demands of bibliography. Far from accepting that 'historical bibliography is not, properly speaking, bibliography at all', it is tempting to claim, now, that all bibliography, properly speaking, is historical bibliography.

In such a world, Greg's definition of the theoretical basis of bibliography is too limited. As long as we continue to think of it as confined to the study of the non-symbolic functions of signs, the risk it runs is relegation. Rare book rooms will simply become rarer. The politics of survival, if nothing else, require a more comprehensive justification of the discipline's function in promoting new knowledge.

If, by contrast, we were to delineate the field in a merely pragmatic way, take a panoptic view and describe what we severally do as bibliographers, we should note, rather, that it is the only discipline which has consistently studied the composition, formal design and transmission of texts by writers, printers, and publishers; their distribution through different communities by wholesalers, retailers, and teachers; their collection and classification by librarians; their meaning for, and — I must add — their creative regeneration by, readers. However we define it, no part of

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that series of human and institutional interactions is alien to bibliography as we have, traditionally, practised it.

But, like Panizzi himself, faced with everything printed in a world in change, we reach a point where the accretion of subjects, like the collection of books, demands that we also seek a new principle by which to order them. Recent changes in critical theory, subsuming linguistics, semiotics, and the psychology of reading and writing, in information theory and communications studies, in the status of texts and the forms of their transmission, represent a formidable challenge to traditional practice, but they may also, I believe, give to bibliographical principle a quite new centrality.

The principle I wish to suggest as basic is simply this: bibliography is the discipline that studies texts as recorded forms, and the processes of their transmission, including their production and reception. So stated, it will not seem very surprising. What the word 'texts' also allows, however, is the extension of present practice to include all forms of texts, not merely books or Greg's signs on pieces of parchment or paper. It also frankly accepts that bibliographers should be concerned to show that forms affect meaning. Beyond that, it allows us to describe not only the technical but the social processes of their transmission. In those quite specific ways, it accounts for non-book texts, their physical forms, textual versions, technical transmission, institutional control, their perceived meanings, and social effects. It accounts for a history of the book and, indeed, of all printed forms including all textual ephemera as a record of cultural change, whether in mass civilization or minority culture. For any history of the book which excluded study of the social, economic and political motivations of publishing, the reasons why texts were written and read as they were, why they were rewritten and redesigned, or allowed to die, would degenerate into a feebly degressive book list and never rise to a readable history. But such a phrase also accommodates what in recent critical theory is often called text production, and it therefore opens up the application of the discipline to the service of that field too.

In terms of the range of demands now made of it and of the diverse interests of those who think of themselves as bibliographers, it seems to me that it would now be more useful to describe bibliography as the study of the sociology of texts. If the principle which makes it distinct is its concern with texts in some physical form and their transmission, then I can think of no other phrase which so aptly describes its range. Both the words 'texts' and 'sociology', however, demand further comment.

I define 'texts' to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography. There is no evading the challenge which those new forms have created.

We can find in the origins of the word 'text' itself some support for extending its meaning from manuscripts and print to other forms. It derives, of course, from the Latin *texere*, 'to weave', and therefore refers, not to any specific material as such, but to its woven state, the web or texture of the materials. Indeed, it was not restricted to the weaving of textiles, but might be applied equally well to the interlacing or entwining of any kind of material. The Oxford Latin Dictionary suggests that it is probably cognate with the Vedic 'tāṣṭi', to 'fashion by carpentry', and consequently with the Greek τέκτων and τέχνη.

The shift from fashioning a material medium to a conceptual system, from the weaving of fabrics to the web of words, is also implicit in the Greek ἕτος 'a web or net', from ἕπειν 'to weave'. As with the Latin, it is only by virtue of a metaphoric shift that it applies to language, that the verb 'to weave' serves for the verb 'to write', that the web of words becomes a text. In each case, therefore, the primary sense is one which defines a process of material construction. It creates an object, but it is not peculiar to any one substance or any one form. The idea that texts are written

records on parchment or paper derives only from the secondary and metaphoric sense that the writing of words is like the weaving of threads.

As much could now be said of many constructions which are not in written form, but for which the same metaphoric shift would be just as proper. Until our own times, the only textual records created in any quantity were manuscripts and books. A slight extension of the principle – it is, I believe, the same principle – to cope with the new kinds of material constructions we have in the form of the non-book texts which now surround, inform, and pleasure us, does not seem to me a radical departure from precedent.

In turning briefly now to comment on the word 'sociology', it is not perhaps impertinent to note that its early history parallels Panizzi's. A neologism coined by Auguste Comte in 1830, the year before Panizzi joined the staff of the British Museum, it made a fleeting appearance in Britain in 1843 in *Blackwood's Magazine*, which referred to 'a new Science, to be called Social Ethics, or Sociology'. Seven years later it was still struggling for admission. *Fraser's Magazine* in 1851 acknowledged its function but derided its name in a reference to 'the new science of sociology, as it is barbarously called'. Only in 1873 did it find a local habitation and a respected name. Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology*, published in that year, provides a succinct description of its role: 'Sociology has to recognize truths of social development, structure and function'.

As I see it, that stress on structure and function is important, although I should resist its abstraction to the point where it lost sight of human agency. At one level, a sociology simply reminds us of the full range of social realities which the medium of print had to serve, from receipt blanks to bibles. But it also directs us to consider the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission and consumption. It alerts us to the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affecting the forms of social discourse, past and present. Those are the realities which bibliographers and textual critics as such have, until very recently, either neglected, or by defining them as strictly non-bibliographical, have felt unable to denominate, logically and coherently, as central to what we do. Historical bibliography, we were told, was not strictly bibliography at all.

A 'sociology of texts', then, contrasts with a bibliography confined to logical inference from printed signs as arbitrary marks on parchment or paper. As I indicated earlier, claims were made for the 'scientific' status of the latter precisely because it worked only from the physical evidence of books themselves. Restricted to the non-symbolic values of the signs, it tried to exclude the distracting complexities of linguistic interpretation and historical explanation.

That orthodox view of bibliography is less compelling, and less surprising, if we note its affinities with other modes of thinking at the time when Greg was writing. These include certain formalist theories of art and literature which were concerned to exclude from the discussion of a work of art any intended or referential meaning. They were current not only in the years when Greg was formulating his definitions but were still active in the theory of the New Criticism when Professor Fredson Bowers was developing his. The congruence of bibliography and criticism lay precisely in their shared view of the self-sufficient nature of the work of art or text, and in their agreement on the significance of its every verbal detail, however small. In neither case were precedent or subsequent processes thought to be essential to critical or bibliographical practice. The New Criticism showed great ingenuity in discerning patterns in the poem-on-the-page as a self-contained verbal structure. It is not I think altogether fanciful to find a scholarly analogy in analytical bibliography. Compositor studies, for example, have shown a comparable virtuosity in discerning patterns in evidence which is entirely internal, if not wholly fictional.

I shall return to that analogy with the New Criticism, but I am more concerned for the moment to emphasize the point that this confinement of bibliography to non-symbolic meaning, in an attempt to give it some kind of objective or 'scientific' status, has seriously impeded its

development as a discipline, it has obstructed the bibliography of anything – the study of the sign of course the starting of accounting for the whether by one reader

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development as a discipline. By electing to ignore its inevitable dependence upon interpretive structures, it has obscured the role of human agents, and virtually denied the relevance to bibliography of anything we might now understand as a history of the book. Physical bibliography – the study of the signs which constitute texts and the materials on which they are recorded – is of course the starting point. But it cannot define the discipline because it has no adequate means of accounting for the processes, the technical and social dynamics, of transmission and reception, whether by one reader or a whole market of them.

In speaking of bibliography as the sociology of texts, I am not concerned to invent new names but only to draw attention to its actual nature. Derrida's 'Grammatology', the currently fashionable word 'Textuality', the French 'Textologie', or even 'Hyphologie' (a suggestion made, not altogether seriously, by Roland Barthes) would exclude more than we would wish to lose. Nor is bibliography a sub-field of semiotics, precisely because its functions are not merely synchronically descriptive. Our own word, 'Bibliography', will do. It unites us as collectors, editors, librarians, historians, makers and readers of books. It even has a new felicity in its literal meaning of 'the writing out of books', of generating new copies and therefore in time new versions. Its traditional concern with texts as recorded forms, and with the processes of their transmission, should make it hospitably open to new forms. No new names, then; but to conceive of the discipline as a sociology of texts is, I think, both to describe what the bibliography is that we actually do and to allow for its natural evolution.

Nevertheless, I must now turn to consider the special case of printed texts. In doing so, the particular inquiry I wish to pursue is whether or not the material forms of books, the non-verbal elements of the typographic notations within them, the very disposition of space itself, have an expressive function in conveying meaning, and whether or not it is, properly, a bibliographical task to discuss it.

Again, I sense that theory limps behind practice. At one end of the spectrum, we must of course recognize that Erwin Panofsky on perspective as symbolic form has long since made the theme familiar; at the other end, we find that Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* has made it basic to media studies. In our own field, Mr Nicolas Barker, on 'Typography and the Meaning of Words: The Revolution in the Layout of Books in the Eighteenth Century'; Mr David Foxon on Pope's typography; Mr Giles Barber on Voltaire and the typographic presentation of *Candide*; Mr Roger Laufer on 'scripturation' or 'the material emergence of sense' are all distinguished bibliographers demonstrating in one way or another, not the iconic or indexical, but the symbolic function of typographic signs as an interpretive system.<sup>8</sup> Words like the 'articulation' or 'enunciation' of the book in this sense make similar assumptions. Discussions of the morphology of the book in relation to genre or to special classes of readers and markets assume a complex relation of medium to meaning. Journals like *Visible Language* and *Word & Image* were founded specifically to explore these questions. The persistent example of fine printing and the revival of the calligraphic manuscript, and numerous recent studies of the sophisticated displays of text and illumination in medieval manuscript production, also share a basic assumption that forms affect sense.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps on this occasion the simplest way of exploring some of these issues as they relate to the expressive function of typography in book forms, as they bear on editing, and as they relate to critical theory, is to offer an exemplary case. I have chosen the four lines which serve as epigraph to 'The Intentional Fallacy', the distinguished essay by W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley which was first published in *The Sewanee Review* in 1946.<sup>10</sup> It would, I think, be hard to name another essay which has so influenced critical theory and the teaching of literature in the past forty years. Briefly, they argued that it was pointless to use the concept of an author's intentions in trying to decide what a work of literature might mean, or if it was any good. And of course

exactly the same objection must apply, if it holds at all, to the interpretation of a writer's or printer's intentions in presenting a text in a particular form, or a publisher's intentions in issuing it at all.

Let me say at once that my purpose in using an example from this essay is to show that in some cases significantly informative readings may be recovered from typographic signs as well as verbal ones, that these are relevant to editorial decisions about the manner in which one might reproduce a text, and that a reading of such bibliographical signs may seriously shape our judgement of an author's work. I think it is also possible to suggest that their own preconceptions may have led Wimsatt and Beardsley to misread a text, that their misreading may itself have been partly a function of the manner in which it was printed, and that its typographic style was in turn influenced by the culture at large. My argument therefore runs full circle from a defence of authorial meaning, on the grounds that it is in some measure recoverable, to a recognition that, for better or worse, readers inevitably make their own meanings. In other words, each reading is peculiar to its occasion, each can be at least partially recovered from the physical forms of the text, and the differences in readings constitute an informative history. What writers thought they were doing in writing texts, or printers and booksellers in designing and publishing them, or readers in making sense of them are issues which no history of the book can evade.

'The Intentional Fallacy' opens with an epigraph taken from Congreve's prologue to *The Way of the World* (1700). In it, as Wimsatt and Beardsley quote him,

He owns with toil he wrote the following scenes;  
But, if they're naught, ne'er spare him for his pains:  
Damn him the more; have no commiseration  
For dullness on mature deliberation.

WILLIAM CONGREVE, Prologue to  
*The Way of the World*

Congreve's authorized version of 1710 reads:

*He owns, with Toil, he wrought the following  
Scenes,  
But if they're naught ne'er spare him for his Pains:  
Damn him the more; have no Commiseration  
For Dulness on mature Deliberation.*

It has not, I think, been observed before that, if we include its epigraph, this famous essay on the interpretation of literature opens with a misquotation in its very first line. Wimsatt and Beardsley say that Congreve 'wrote' the following scenes, but Congreve was a deliberate craftsman. He said he 'wrought' them. Since the words quoted are ascribed to Congreve, I think we are clearly meant to accept them as his, even if the essay later persuades us that we cannot presume to know what Congreve might have intended them to mean. By adopting that simple change from 'wrought' to 'wrote', Wimsatt and Beardsley oblige us to make our meaning from their misreading. The epigraph thereby directs us to weaken the emphasis that Congreve placed on his labour of composition: he writes of the 'Pains' it cost him to hammer out his meaning. The changed wording destroys the carefully created internal rhyme, the resonance between what, in the first line, Congreve said he 'wrought' and, in the second line, its fate in being reduced to 'naught' by those who misquote, misconstrue, and misjudge him. Congreve's prologue to *The Way of the World* put, in 1700/1710, a point of view exactly opposite to the one which the lines are cited to support.

Less noticeable perhaps are the implications of the way in which the epigraph is printed. For Congreve's precise notation of spelling, punctuation and initial capitals, the 1946 version offers

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a flat, even insidiously open form. Congreve wrote that 'He owns' – comma – 'with Toil' – comma \* – 'he wrought the following Scenes'. In their performance of the line, Wimsatt and Beardsley drop the commas. By isolating and emphasizing the phrase, Congreve may be read as affirming his seriousness of purpose, the deliberation of his art. Wimsatt and Beardsley speed past it, their eyes perhaps on a phrase more proper to their purpose in the next line. What their reading emphasizes instead, surrounding it with commas where Congreve had none, is the phrase 'if they're naught'. By that slight change they highlight Congreve's ironic concession that an author's intentions have no power to save him if an audience or reader thinks he is dull. Congreve, without commas, had preferred to skip quickly past that thought. Wimsatt and Beardsley allow us to dwell on it, for in their reading it would seem to justify their rather different argument.

Those shifts of meaning which result from the variants noted are, I believe, serious, however slight the signs which make them. But there are more. In his second couplet, Congreve writes:

*Damn him the more; have no Commiseration  
For Dulness on mature Deliberation.*

Again, it suits the purpose of the epigraph to remove Congreve's irony, but as irony is crucially dependent upon context, the loss is perhaps inevitable. Reading the words literally, Wimsatt and Beardsley must take them to mean: 'If you really think my scenes are dull, don't waste your pity on their author'. But you will note that Congreve gives upper case 'D's for 'Dulness' and 'Deliberation'. Those personified forms allow two readings to emerge which tell us something of Congreve's experience. The first is that these abstractions have human shapes (they were sitting there in the theatre); the second alludes to the age-old combat between Dulness and Deliberation, or Stupidity and Sense. By reducing all his nouns to lower case and thereby destroying the early eighteenth-century convention, the epigraph kills off Congreve's personified forms, and by muting his irony, it reverses his meaning. Where Congreve's irony contrasts his own 'mature Deliberation' with the 'Dulness' of his critics, their meaning has him saying the reader knows best.

If we look again at the form and relation of the words 'Toil', 'Scenes' and its rhyme-word 'Pains', we note that they, too, have initial capitals. The convention thereby gives us in print a visual, semantic and ultimately moral identity between Congreve's own description of his labours ('Toil . . . Pains') and their human products who people his plays. The text as printed in the epigraph breaks down those visual links by depriving the words of their capitals. One set of meanings, which stress a writer's presence in his work, is weakened in favour of a preconceived reading which would remove him from it.

Small as it is, this example is so instructive that I should like to explore it further. It bears on the most obvious concerns of textual criticism – getting the right words in the right order; on the semiotics of print and the role of typography in forming meaning; on the critical theories of authorial intention and reader response; on the relation between the past meanings and present uses of verbal texts. It offers an illustration of the transmission of texts as the creation of the new versions which form, in turn, the new books, the products of later printers, and the stuff of subsequent bibliographical control. These are the primary documents for any history of the book. By reading one form of Congreve's text (1700/1710), we may with some authority affirm certain readings as his. By reading other forms of it (1946), we can chart meanings that later readers made from it under different historical imperatives.

I may believe – as I do – that Wimsatt and Beardsley have mistaken Congreve's meaning; that they have misconceived his relation to his tradition; that they have misreported his attitude to his own audience and readers. At the same time, their misreading has become an historical document in its own right. By speaking to what they perceived in 1946 to be the needs of their own time,

not Congreve's in 1700/1710, they have left a record of the taste, thought and values of a critical school which significantly shaped our own choice of books, the way we read them and, in my own case, the way I taught them. The history of material objects as symbolic forms functions, therefore, in two ways. It can falsify certain readings; and it can demonstrate new ones.

To extend that line of argument, I should like to comment briefly on the word 'Scenes'. We recall first that Congreve's 'Scenes' cost him 'Pains'. Next, we should note that his editors and critics have, almost without exception, replaced his meaning of the word with a commoner one of their own. They have defined them by geography and carpentry, as when a scene shifts from a forest to the palace. For Congreve, by contrast, they were neoclassical scenes: not impersonal places in motion, but distinct groups of human beings in conversation. These made up his scenes. For him, it was the intrusion of another human voice, another mind, or its loss, that most changed the scene. The substance of his scenes, therefore, what he 'wrought with Toil', were men and women. Once we recover that context and follow Congreve's quite literal meaning in that sense, his rhyme of 'Scenes' with 'Pains' glows with an even subtler force. What he hints at is a serious critical judgement about all his work: beneath the rippling surface of his comedy there flows a sombre undercurrent of human pain. In a more mundane way, that perception may direct an editor to adopt a typography which divides Congreve's plays into neoclassical scenes, as he himself did in his edition of 1710.

With that last example, it could be argued that we reach the border between bibliography and textual criticism on the one hand and literary criticism and literary history on the other. My own view is that no such border exists. In the pursuit of historical meanings, we move from the most minute feature of the material form of the book to questions of authorial, literary and social context. These all bear in turn on the ways in which texts are then re-read, re-edited, re-designed, re-printed, and re-published. If a history of readings is made possible only by a comparative history of books, it is equally true that a history of books will have no point if it fails to account for the meanings they later come to make.

Though at times they may pretend otherwise, I suspect that few authors, with the kind of investment in their work that Congreve claims, are indifferent to the ways in which their art is presented and received. There is certainly a cruel irony in the fact that Congreve's own text is reshaped and misread to support an argument against himself. Far from offering a licence for his audience and readers to discount the author's meaning, Congreve is putting, with an exasperated irony, the case for the right of authors, as he says in another line of the prologue, 'to assert their Sense' against the taste of the town. When Jeremy Collier wrenched to his own purposes the meaning of Congreve's words, Congreve replied with his *Amendments of Mr Collier's False and Imperfect Citations*. He too had a way with epigraphs and chose for that occasion one from Martial which, translated, reads: 'That book you recite, O Fidentinus, is mine. But your vile re-citation begins to make it your own'.

With that thought in mind, I should like to pursue one further dimension of the epigraph's meaning which is not in itself a matter of book form. It nevertheless puts Congreve in the tradition of authors who thought about the smallest details of their work as it might be printed, and who directed, collaborated with, or fumed against, their printers and publishers. One such author is Ben Jonson. As it happens, Wimsatt and Beardsley might with equal point have quoted him to epitomize their argument that an author's intentions are irrelevant. This, for example:

*Playes in themselues haue neither hopes, nor feares,  
Their fate is only in their hearers ears . . .*<sup>11</sup>

It chimes in perfectly with the very end of Congreve's prologue although, here, his irony is too heavy to miss:

To link Congreve with the author's prescriptive homage to his merit right not to be misread against the usurper for a time virtually the dull asses hoofe

Congreve's ironies are more than Jonson, he did I am convinced that his meaning informs his prologue. I found he could not give words Congreve uses gives, we can, if we feel his pain.

In that long series of authors, 'The Intention' follows its feat of misreading a new cause; it is, rather, been generated by that. With what seems the epigraph has been resistant to any further of the argument which our own time.

Yet if the fine do signify in the way, as books are to typography, so strange as it might if they have any content the way Congreve's Victorian printing style had a clean, clear, inner

This newly prescriptive theory of the imperfection on the page became inner coherence, which



*In short, our Play shall (with your leave to show it),  
Give you one instance of a Passive Poet.  
Who to your Judgments yields all Resignation;  
So Save or Damn, after your own Discretion.*

To link Congreve with Jonson is to place his prologue and what it says in a developing tradition of the author's presence in his printed works. In that context, Congreve's lines become a form of homage to his mentor, an acceptance of succession, and a reminder that the fight for the author's right not to be mis-read can ultimately break even the best of us. For not only had Jonson inveighed against the usurpation of *his* meanings by those of his asinine critics, but he was a dramatist who for a time virtually quit the public stage to be, as he put it, 'Safe from the wolues black iaw, and the dull asses hoofe'. Jonson's rejection of free interpretation is venomous:

Let their fastidious, vaine  
Commission of the braine  
Run on, rage, sweat, censure and condemn:  
They were not meant for thee, lesse, thou for them.<sup>12</sup>

Congreve's ironies allow him a more tactful, more decorous, farewell. Less tough, more delicate, than Jonson, he did leave the stage, sensing himself expelled by the misappropriation of his works, convinced that *his* meanings would rarely survive their reception. The imminence of that decision informs his prologue to *The Way of the World*. It was to be his last play. On '*mature Deliberation*', he found he could no longer bear the deadly '*Dulness*' of his critics. By respecting not only the words Congreve uses – a simple courtesy – but also the meanings which their precise notation gives, we can, if we wish, as an act of bibliographical scholarship, recover his irony, and read his pain. \*

In that long series of Pyrrhic victories which records the triumphs of critics and the deaths of authors, 'The Intentional Fallacy' has earned a distinguished place for the argument which follows its feat of misprision. Its epigraph is no celebration of Congreve's perspicacity in foreseeing a new cause; it is, rather, an epitaph to his own dismembered text. A vast critical literature has been generated by this essay, but I am unaware of any mention of the textual ironies which preface it. With what seems an undue reverence for the tainted text printed by Wimsatt and Beardsley, the epigraph has been reproduced in reprint after reprint with exceptional fidelity, its errors resistant to any further reworking of a classic moment of mis-statement, resistant even to the force of the argument which follows it. It is now incorporate with Congreve's history and with that of our own time.

Yet if the fine detail of typography and layout, the material signs which constitute a text, do signify in the ways I have tried to suggest, it must follow that any history of the book – subject as books are to typographic and material change – must be a history of misreadings. This is not so strange as it might sound. Every society rewrites its past, every reader rewrites its texts, and, if they have any continuing life at all, at some point every printer redesigns them. The changes in the way Congreve's text was printed as an epigraph were themselves designed to correct a late Victorian printing style which had come to seem too fussily expressive. In 1946, 'good printing' had a clean, clear, impersonal surface. It left the text to speak for itself.

This newly preferred form of printing had conspired with shifts in critical opinion. Eliot's theory of the impersonality of the poet affected to dissociate the writer from his text. The words on the page became what Wimsatt called a 'verbal icon', a freestanding artefact with its own inner coherence, what Cleanth Brooks was to call (as it happens) a '*well-wrought Urn*', a structure

complete in itself which had within it all the linguistic signs we needed for the contemplation of its meaning.

The unprecedented rise of English studies and the decline of classics made quite new demands of teachers of literature. At one level, the critical analysis of set texts was an efficient way to teach reading from what was irreducibly common to a class, the text itself laid out on the page in a kind of lapidary state. At another level, it brought into sharper focus than ever before the fact that different readers brought the text to life in different ways. If a poem is only what its individual readers make it in their activity of constructing meaning from it, then a good poem will be one which most compels its own destruction in the service of its readers' new construction. When the specification of meaning is one with its discovery in the critical practice of writing, the generative force of texts is most active. In that context, the misreading of Congreve in 1946 may be seen as almost a matter of historical necessity, an interesting document itself in the nature of reading and the history of the book.

And it is a physical document. We can date it; we can read it; we can locate it in the context of *The Sewanee Review* and the interests of its readers; we can interpret it reasonably according to the propositional intentions of the anti-intentionalist essay which lies beneath it. It is, I hope, unnecessary to multiply instances. This scrap of prologue, this fragment of text, raises most of the issues we need to address as we think about books as texts which have been given a particular physical form.

But as a dramatic text, it was originally written to be spoken, and so other questions arise. Can we hear the voice of Thomas Betterton conveying orally the ironies we now read visually? Congreve's autograph letters show no concern for the niceties I suggested in the form of the epigraph. Am I therefore reading an interpretation of Congreve's meaning by his printer, John Watts? Is Watts merely following a general set of conventions imposed at this time, with or without Congreve's assent, by Congreve's publisher, Jacob Tonson? Who, in short, 'authored' Congreve? Whose concept of the reader do these forms of the text imply: the author's, the actor's, the printer's, or the publisher's? And what of the reader? Is a knowledge of Jonson, Betterton, Congreve, Watts, and Tonson a necessary condition of a 'true' reading? Does my reading betray a personal need to prove that a technical interest in books and in the teaching of texts, is not radically disjunctive, that bibliographical scholarship and criticism are in fact one? Visited by such questions, an author disperses into his collaborators, those who produced his texts and their meanings.

If we turn to the 1946 epigraph, similar questions insist on an answer. Does its removal from context entirely free it from irony? Do the slight changes of form alter the substance? Are they no more than a case of careless printing in a new convention? But the crucial questions for a history of reading, and the re-writing of texts, are these: did the intentions of these two authors (something extrinsic to their text) lead them to create from Congreve's lines a pre-text for their own writing; and, if so, did they do it consciously, unconsciously, or accidentally?

To venture into distinctions between conscious and unconscious intentions would be to enter upon troubled waters indeed. The probable answer is, I fear, banal, but as an illustration of the vagaries of textual transmission it should be given. The anthology of plays edited by Nettleton and Case, from which Wimsatt would almost certainly have taught, includes *The Way of the World*, the prologue to which in that edition inexplicably reads 'wrote' for 'wrought'. We must therefore, I think, relieve Wimsatt and Beardsley of immediate responsibility, and we should certainly free them from any suggestion of deliberate contamination. But I wonder if they would have ventured to choose the lines had they been more carefully edited.<sup>13</sup>

The case, however, is not altered. If we think of the physical construction of Congreve's text in the quarto of 1700 or the octavo edition of 1710, and its physical re-presentation in 1946, then at least we begin by seeing two simple facts. One gives us the historical perspective of an

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author directing one set of meanings in a transaction with his contemporaries. The other gives us an equally historical perspective of two readers creating a reverse set of meanings for an academic – indeed, a scholarly – readership whose interests in the text were different. Each perspective can be studied distinctively in the signs of the text as printed. Those signs range in significance from the trivial to the serious, but far from importing the author's irrelevance, they take us back to human motive and intention. In Congreve's case, they reveal a man of compassion whose scenes record the human struggle they spring from as the very condition of writing.

In one sense at least, little has changed in critical theory since 1946. New Critical formalism and structuralism on the one hand, post-structuralism and deconstruction on the other, all share the same scepticism about recovering the past. One of the most impressive objections to this critical self-absorption, to the point of excluding a concern for the complexities of human agency in the production of texts, is Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. I can only agree with his judgement that 'As it is practised in the American academy today, literary theory has for the most part isolated textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work'.<sup>14</sup> Commenting upon Said in his most recent book, *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes pursues the point: 'At the present time there are two major positions that can be taken with respect to this problem, and . . . it is extremely difficult to combine them or find any middle ground between them'.<sup>15</sup> Scholes describes those two positions as the hermetic and the secular.

To return now to my larger theme: Greg's definition of what bibliography is would have it entirely hermetic. By admitting history, we make it secular. The two positions are not entirely opposed, for books themselves are the middle ground. It is one bibliographers have long since explored, mapped, and tilled. Their descriptive methods far surpass other applications of semiotics as a science of signs. In the ubiquity and variety of its evidence, bibliography as a sociology of texts has an unrivalled power to resurrect authors in their own time, and their readers at any time. It enables what Michel Foucault called 'an insurrection of subjugated knowledges'.<sup>16</sup> One of its greatest strengths is the access it gives to social motives: by dealing with the facts of transmission and the material evidence of reception, it can make discoveries as distinct from inventing meanings. In focusing on the primary object, the text as a recorded form, it defines our common point of departure for any historical or critical enterprise. By abandoning the notion of degressive bibliography and recording *all* subsequent versions, bibliography, simply by its own comprehensive logic, its indiscriminate inclusiveness, testifies to the fact that new readers of course make new texts, and that their new meanings are a function of their new forms. The claim then is no longer for their truth as one might seek to define that by an authorial intention, but for their testimony, as defined by their historical use. There was a year 1710 in which Tonson published Congreve's *Works*, and there was a year 1946 in which some lines from the prologue to *The Way of the World* were quoted in *The Sewanee Review*. Wimsatt and Beardsley might be wrong from Congreve's point of view, but, given their published text, they indubitably *are*, and it is a very simple bibliographical function to record and to show their reading – indeed, in the interests of a history of cultural change, to show it up.

Reviewing Scholes in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Tzvetan Todorov gave a blunt appraisal of the relation of the present American literary scene to the traditions of western humanism: 'If we wish to call a spade a spade, we must conclude that the dominant tendency of American criticism is anti-humanism'.<sup>17</sup> Bibliography has a massive authority with which to correct that tendency. It can, in short, show the human presence in any recorded text.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

- 1 'Bibliography – an Apologia', in *Collected Papers*, ed. J. C. Maxwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p.247.
- 2 Ross Atkinson, 'An Application of Semiotics to the Definition of Bibliography', *Studies in Bibliography* 33 (1980), 54–73.
- 3 *Bibliography and Textual Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p.41; cited by Atkinson, p.63.
- 4 'Bibliography and Science', *Studies in Bibliography* 27 (1974), 88.
- 5 Principally in 'Bibliography, Pure Bibliography, and Literary Studies', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 47 (1952), 186–208; also in 'Bibliography', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1970), III, 588–92.
- 6 Atkinson, p.64.
- 7 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, III, 588.
- 8 Nicolas Barker, 'Typography and the Meaning of Words', *Buch und Buchhandel in Europa im achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, ed. G. Barber and B. Fabian, *Wolfenbütteler Schriften zur Geschichte des Buchwesens* 4 (Hamburg, 1981), pp.126–65; Giles Barber, 'Voltaire et la présentation typographique de *Candide*', *Transmissione dei Testi a Stampa nel Periodo Moderno I* (Seminario Internazionale, Rome 1985), 151–69; Roger Laufer, 'L'Énonciation typographique au dix-huitième siècle', *ibid.*, 113–23; 'L'Espace visuel du livre ancien', *Revue Française d'Histoire du Livre* 16 (1977), 569–81; 'L'Ésprit de la lettre', *Le Débat* 22 (November 1982), 147–59; see also Barbara R. Woshinsky, 'La Bruyère's *Caractères*: A Typographical Reading', *TEXT, Transactions of the Society for Textual Scholarship* 2 (1985), 209–28. Those examples from the past, implying a consciousness of the non-verbal resources of book forms to enhance and convey meaning, may be paralleled with others from current research into text design. A useful recent summary is James Hartley, 'Current Research on Text Design', *Scholarly Publishing* 16 (1985), 355–68; see also James Hartley and Peter Burnhill, 'Explorations in Space: A Critique of the Typography of BPS Publications', *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society* 29 (1976), 97–107.
- 9 For an excellent example, see Michael Camille, 'The Book of Signs: Writing and visual difference in Gothic manuscript illumination', *Word & Image* 1, no.2 (April–June 1985), 133–48.
- 10 *The Sewanee Review* liv (Summer, 1946), 468–88; subsequently collected in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).
- 11 Ben Jonson, *The New Inne*, epilogue, ll. 1–2.
- 12 'Ode to himselfe', ll. 7–10.
- 13 I am indebted to Professor Albert Braummüller for suggesting the probable source of the error. In fairness to Wimsatt and Beardsley, whose matching essay, 'The Subjective Fallacy', warns against readings uncontrolled by the formal limits of the words on the page, it should be said that they might well have welcomed and accepted as constituting a more acceptable text the lines as originally printed.
- 14 *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p.4.
- 15 *Textual Power* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p.75.
- 16 Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures: Lecture One: 7 January 1976', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p.81.
- 17 'Against all humanity', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 October 1985, p.1094.
- 18 The photo-construction is by Nicholas Wade. It appeared in *Word & Image* 1, no.3 (July–September 1985), 259.

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