Introduction: Textual Materialism

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YOU COULD SAY THAT THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK IS A FIELD that helped to provide literary criticism with historical, archaeological relief from theory. But you could argue instead (Price; McDonald) that the field has in fact affirmed the concerns raised by the most iconic of theorists: concerns about paratexts, frames, folds, borders, margins, authorship and authority, typing and printing, gathering and dispersion—the "materiality of the signifier," a phrase most forcefully invoked by literary critics when the matter in hand was always meant to matter. Thus, Johanna Drucker, both a book artist and an art-book historian, writes that Guillaume Apollinaire's presentational poetics required him "to short-circuit the transparency of the linguistic signifier, to call attention to its materiality and to insist on this materiality as a primary element of the signifying process" (147). Stéphane Mallarmé's poetics of presentation repeatedly engaged Derrida. And yet deconstruction could be coded as a kind of "materialism without matter" (Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon" 350); a figural materiality—"*figures* of the book," those "metonymical, synechdochic, or simply metaphorical movements"—provoked the suspension of closure, the deferral of determination (*Paper Machine* 4). By contrast, book history draws attention to those determinants (from questions of layout to questions of law) that worked to stabilize the semantic experience for a specific readership in a specific time and place.

The following cluster of four essays, addressing a lively range of artifacts, is tangential to the history of the book. Indeed, to the degree that the history of print culture has been a study of how print achieves authority and reliability (Johns), these essays veer off course, invested as they are in idiosyncratic disruptions in the economy of discourse. They nonetheless share the field's textual materialism, an attention

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to the artifactuality of texts, while bringing artifacts other than books into sharp focus: not the codex but the billboard; not pulp paper but metal, stone, and bark; not the printed page but the typed transcription. Even as Mike Chasar locates the Burma-Shave advertising campaign in the history of avant-garde experimentation, arguing on behalf of its significance for scholars of American poetry and poetics, he emphasizes the "driving encounter," where families delighted in the verse on roadside billboards. Deriving her frame for a premodern poetics from a late modernist poem, Seeta Chaganti both distinguishes among different material manifestations of the *Dream of the Rood* tradition (stone, metal, and manuscript) and discloses their vestigial, intermedial presence in the Vercelli Book, where the text summons up the interactions between inscription and performance in Anglo-Saxon culture. In an extended assessment of the use of birch bark for the pages of the booklets that Simon Pokagon sold at the Columbian Exposition, Jonathan Berliner encourages us to see how Pokagon intimates that nature itself serves as the medium for the Indian's words, however compromised those words may be by language (English) and by print. Paul Benzon, arguing against Friedrich Kittler's notion that the typewriter terminated the writing subject, offers a "poetics of error" attentive to the contingencies and instabilities (the typos) that linger in standardized composition and that Andy Warhol dramatically exploits in *a: A Novel*. Whereas in 1890 the narrator of "The Strange Tale of a Type-Writer" finds the machine diligently composing a story by itself (Olwell 49), in 1968 *a* foregrounds human presence in its curious mode of textual production. Distinct as these four essays are, together they bid us to extend textual materialism beyond the manuscript and the book and to expand the ways of locating physical detail in a sign system, which is how we make matter mean.

As a critical strategy, textual materialism—a mode of analytic objectification that focuses on the physical properties of an embodied text—only makes sense if you're willing to grant that, for instance, a book is a "material object" whereas a text is a "sequence of words" (Price 10). In Nelson Goodman's well-known (and intricately qualified) distinction between the autographic and the allographic, calligraphy may generate a work that "is an individual inscription," but the literary work is more generally a "script" or "text"—differently incarnated—while remaining one and the same work (210).

> Let us suppose that there are handwritten copies and many editions of a given literary work. Differences between them in style and size of script or type, in color of ink, in kind of paper, in number and layout of pages, in condition, etc., do not matter. All that matters is what may be called *sameness of spelling*: exact correspondence as sequences of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks. (115)

For the textual materialist, size matters, style matters, color matters. But despite the fact that readers can only experience a text as it is materialized in one form or another (Chartier), the literary work (like the musical work and unlike a painting or a carved sculpture) can be said to "transcend" the object (Genette 10–11). The experience of *Great Expectations* is a different experience as mediated by its serial publication in *All the Year Round*, its illustrated serialization in *Harper's Weekly*, its three-volume publication by Chapman and Hall, the six-volume interpoint braille edition, and the most recent Penguin edition, let alone your Kindle, your iPhone, your headphones. But we're still generally willing to say that each experience is the experience of *Great Expectations*. Across those very different mediations, the novel in some sense remains the same; and, indeed, different experiences of the novel may have less to do with the edition than with the individuated habit of reading or the particular scene of listening.[1]

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This is simply to suppose that the experience of texts—be they mediated by books or boulders or billboards—amounts to a dialectical drama of opacity and transparency, physical support and cognitive transport, representation as object and as act.[2] Walt Whitman could bemoan the alienation of print, "chilled [by] the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us," but also write with the frisson of unmediated intimacy: "Whoever you are, holding me now in hand, / . . . thrusting me beneath your clothing, / Where I may feel the throbs of your heart, or rest upon your hip" ("Come" 89; "Whoever" 270). It is "quite possible to read without paying attention to the artifactual nature of the book, and even to imagine the reading process as antithetical to the material," as Bradin Cormack and Carla Mazzio put it in *Book Use, Book Theory* (6). That antithesis has been asserted in different ways by different readers (Price 10–11); Cormack and Mazzio cite Thomas Hariot's 1588 record of his interaction with the American Algonquins, in particular his explanation to them that "the booke materially & of itself was not of anie such vertue . . . but only the doctrine therein contained." Nonetheless, many in his audience were "glad to touch it, to embrace it, to kisse it, to hold it to their brests and heades" (6). Though Hariot's ideal of a "dematerialized medium" was impossible for him to impose (6), the critical act of rematerializing the medium can have, say, no less awkward results, as when Bruce Holsinger dramatizes parchment culture, especially the fact that "practically all medieval writing survives on animal skin": "Medieval literature is, in the most rigorously literal sense, nothing but millions of stains on animal parts" (619). The question about animals represented in medieval literature becomes a question about the animals that medieval literature is. What you could call the fully materialized discursive medium no longer serves a mediating function, which is why Garrett Stewart refers to "bookwork"—works of art that deploy books with no regard for the text—as "demediation."

If, proceeding in a different materialist mode, you're tracking the complex history of the "Negro head" tobacco that appears "in" *Great Expectations* (Freedgood, ch. 3), you do so engaging the text but ignoring the book. To witness the "democracy" of "men and things" enacted on the pages of Gustave Flaubert's fiction (Rancière 12), you have to exclude those pages from the political scene. But the study of objects in books clearly shares with the new study of books as objects an interest in determining how subjects are formed and transformed by the material world. Both have coincided with the much circulated claims about the effect of digital media on that world, what I've come to think of as the melodrama of besieged materiality, expressed with particular passion by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew, who in describing the "dematerialization of material culture" goes so far as to say that "physical, palpable material reality is disappearing, leaving nothing but the smile on the face of the Cheshire Cat" (185–86). By now, though, media studies has come to emphasize the materiality of communication, focusing on the material substratum of media, the human body's interaction with technology, and the socioeconomic systems that enable any medium to succeed. It's hardly surprising that such a focus has been accompanied by typographic experimentation, a new presentational poetics meant to confront readers with the specificity of the medium (e.g., Ronnell; Hayles).

If you have faith in Kittler's image of the homogenization of distinct media in the hegemony of the digital (1–2), it will be logical to suppose that the transitions from print culture to digital culture have provoked textual materialism in a nostalgic key. But that is hardly the case. Jerome McGann has argued on behalf of a "materialist hermeneutics" that would attend to "ink," "paper" (*Textual Condition* 15), "type-faces, bindings, book prices, [and] page format" (13); he has tracked the

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heightened significance of physical media and graphic form in a range of writing practices, from the craft of William Blake, Emily Dickinson, and William Morris to Susan Howe's "almost mystical involvement in the materialities of writing" (*Black Riders* 104); he has also gone on to champion the way a "hypermedia computerized environment" can resolve the "hitherto unsolvable editorial problem" posed by Dante Gabriel Rosetti's work, granting readers "access to all his original manuscripts, printed texts, drawings, designs, and paintings," access to the formal and material properties of documents, to the relation between semantic and bibliographic elements of texts (*Radiant Textuality* 13–14). From Kittler's point of view, the whole shebang would amount to a bunch of numbers.

Which is hardly to say that the experience of texts hasn't been altered, that it won't effect material and conceptual changes. Whereas, in *Writing Matter*, Jonathan Goldberg, studying the "materials and materiality" of the practice of handwriting in Renaissance England (1), all but began with the complications posed by Derrida's abandoned outline for a "cultural graphology" (2), it's hard to imagine a scholar in the distant future being able to write a history of what was once called theory without providing a short, materialist history of the components of the embodied text, such as paper, "the *basis of the basis*, the base figure on the basis of which figures and letters are separated out" (Derrida, *Paper Machine* 53). How else to explain the moment in 1967 when, questioning the unity of the book—of his books—Derrida gestured toward the rematerializing fantasy of stapling *Writing and Difference* between the two parts of *Of Grammatology* and appending *Speech and Phenomena* as a "long note" (*Positions* 4)? Thirty years later, he asserted that he had "never had any other *subject*" than "paper, paper, paper," the subject (if not the substance) that precipitated the themes of the mark, the trace, the fold, all circulated in an overarching "tenacious certainty . . . that the history of this 'thing,' this thing that can be felt, seen, and touched, and is thus contingent, paper, will have been a brief one" (*Paper Machine* 40).

Notes

1. Such convictions about the sameness of the text across different mediations also enable critics to call attention to the marked differences among texts—the different texts of *Common Sense*, for instance—that history (or, better, mythology) has aggressively elided (Loughran, ch. 2).

2. The dialectic fails to operate, of course, if the text, however materialized, confronts you with an unfamiliar alphabet.

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