

Foreword

THE PENUMBRAL WORLD OF THE PARATEXT

According to Bishop Butler, to whom the epigram is attributed, “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.” But is that always or necessarily the case? Think of a painting, be it on canvas, linen, board or some other surface. More often than not it will be framed: minimally, ornately, discretely, bombastically, playfully...The frame, whether made of wood, metal, plastic or some other material, acts as a boundary object, enclosing and protecting the artist’s handiwork, separating the image, figurative or abstract, from its immediate surroundings. A well-chosen frame complements, buttresses, challenges or converses with that which it contains. It may be gilded or plain, personally selected and perhaps embellished in some way by the artist. Occasionally, the frame becomes an extension of the artwork itself, an intentional blurring of boundaries—the spillover paintings of Howard Hodgkin, where the painting sometimes incorporates the frame, come to mind.

Once framed, a painting demands wall space. Where and how it is hung, whether covered with glass and of what kind (bulletproof if the work is priceless or a national treasure) and how it is illuminated provide the viewer with additional information. The *mise-en-scène* matters greatly, too; think, for instance, of how Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre in Paris or Picasso’s *Guernica* in Madrid’s Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia are showcased. More generally, by placing a *cordon sanitaire* around a painting along with a “Do Not Touch” sign, curators and gallery directors are making a statement—in the case of the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia a gratuitously officious statement—about a painting’s pecuniary and/or art historical significance. We learn even more about a painting when we see how it is exhibited in a museum or gallery alongside other paintings, whether, how, and exactly where it is signed (and dated) by the artist. The hanging of paintings in relation to one another, the didactic intertextualizing of images, is a way of inviting the viewer to make comparisons, whether on the basis of genre, subject matter, iconography, period, form, color palette, technique, or materiality. In short, the painting itself is only part of what we view, only part of what we are being encouraged to consider. Once framed and exhibited, a painting acquires context, which can be refreshed and augmented. Over time, for example, its exhibition and saleroom history become an increasingly important aspect of its identity, public persona and commercial value. Such accretions effectively become part of the painting, what might be termed the para-painting.

Let us turn our attention now from the plastic arts to the world of *belles lettres* and scholarship; from paintings to books. As with paintings, so, too, with literary artifacts. Indeed, in some cases, the distinction between an artwork and a bibliophilic treasure becomes very blurred. Think for a moment of the *sanctum sanctorum* in the Old Library of Trinity College Dublin, the hushed, dimly lit home to

the glass-encased *Book of Kells*, past which some half-million visitors file annually in near reverential fashion. The physical context in which the illuminated manuscript finds itself is a way of signaling its historical importance, reifying, one might say, its cultural iconicity. In this instance, the text is heavy—burdened almost—with context. It has achieved celebrity status and like any star, the *Book of Kells* expects to be treated with deference if not awe. At this point we have moved into the realm of semiotic theater or (para)textual performativity.

But context is more than the ambient conditions that shape our perceptions of a famous painting or a rare manuscript. Most scholarly scripts, printed or digital, carry with them embedded elements of one kind or another (bibliographic references, to take an obvious example) that sometimes go unnoticed or are simply taken for granted. Elsewhere I have labeled these features “rhpos” (from the Greek meaning “trifles” or “petty wares”) and referred to their systematic study as a form of rhopography—an art historical term that refers to everyday items depicted in still-life paintings (Cronin, 2008; see also Vila-Belda, 2004, on the idea of “*lo nimio*,” the everyday, the ordinary in literary criticism). Yet, as Fuller (2005, p. 131; see also Cronin, 1984, 1995; Grafton, 1997, and Zerby, 2002 in this regard) wryly observed: “Academic texts are usually more interesting for their footnotes than their main argument—that is, for what they *consume*, rather than what they produce” (italics added). In the literary and scholarly worlds, the text is certainly not the whole story; there is an accompanying backstory/side-story, so to speak, what Genette (1997, p. 1) referred to, seminally, as “paratextuality.”

The paratext provides the reader with cues and clues about the text itself and both the author and publisher’s intentions, whether the text is a monograph or a research article in a journal. The paratext is the textual equivalent of the painting’s frame, albeit a subtler, more complex version. It is a way of priming and presenting the “naked text” (Genette, 1991, p. 261). To fully appreciate a text we need to decode the context and engage with the paratext—all those ancillary elements that coexist and comingle with the text proper. For printed books and scholarly articles, the paratext will likely include at least some of the following facets: table of contents, references, preface, dedication, footnotes, abstract, figures, tables, endnotes, author affiliation, illustrations, acknowledgments, appendices, and even section headings. These and other “paratextual mechanisms” can be said to “configure” a text (Mak, 2011, p. 34), conferring on it shape and additional meaning. In the case of, say, books, the list can be extended to include information from the book’s cover or dust jacket, such as blurbs, photographs or biographical notes, material that serves to influence the reader’s impressions prior to coming to grips with the text *qua* text (Cronin & La Barre, 2005). It may thus be helpful to think of three more or less discrete forms or layers of documentary paratext: embedded (e.g., section headings, endnotes), surrounding (e.g., dedication, table of contents) and extraneous (e.g., blurbs). It also seems clear that the paratext, broadly construed, performs a number of discrete functions. These are: (a) interpretative (helping the reader understand the text); (b) navigational (helping the reader orientate himself and move through the text); (c) commercial (signaling value to the reader). In the words of Birke and Christ (2013, p. 68), who first proposed this trifurcation, the paratext “manages the reader’s purchase, navigation and interpretation of the text.”

For some time, information scientists have had a particular interest, both practical and theoretical, in certain paratextual components of the scholarly journal article, notably, bibliographic references and, more recently, though thus far rather less intensively, acknowledgments. It is no exaggeration to say that the scholarly communication system is a fertile site for paratextual excavation, as has been recognized: “[W]e can but speculate on the webs of sociocognitive interaction that are buried in the scientific literature’s paratext” (Cronin & Franks, 2006, p. 1916). Since the development of commercial citation indexes more than half a century ago, the automated harvesting of bibliographic references has

become commonplace (Garfield, 1955). Although the Science Citation Index (now Web of Science) and its successor products were intended to be used for the purpose of information retrieval, these and similar platforms (e.g., Elsevier's Scopus and Google Scholar) are now routinely employed in research assessment exercises and program evaluations. In short, a humble paratextual element (the bibliographic reference/citation) has become the very foundation of evaluative bibliometrics and, from the perspective of the professorate, a most desirable and increasingly important form of symbolic capital. Indeed, one might say that "the SCI turned the dross of literary convention into career gold" (Cronin, 2013a, p. 9). Such is the power of the paratext!

The history of the bibliographic reference/citation provides a compelling illustration of the largely unappreciated utility of the paratext. Once the references attached to scholarly journal articles became machine readable, it was possible to undertake deeper, richer historiographical and sociometric analyses of science, mapping the diffusion of ideas over time and across disciplines. On a more pragmatic level, administrators within universities, research councils and foundations now have the means at their disposal (commercially available citation tracking, plotting, and visualizing tools) to better measure and manage the inputs, outputs and impacts of funded research by identifying frequently cited authors, high-impact papers and the most productive research groups/institutions (Cronin & Sugimoto, 2014). If the bibliographic reference can be put to use in such unintended ways, might the same not hold true, to some extent at least, for the acknowledgment? The answer, I believe, is a qualified "yes." Although the acknowledgment is a close cousin of the bibliographic citation, use of the former is not as widespread, as frequent or as standardized as the latter. Nonetheless, it has been shown convincingly that acknowledgments do in fact testify to a variety of more or less significant contributions made by colleagues and others, contributions that need not or cannot be expressed through either co-authorship or conventional citation mechanisms (e.g., Cronin & Franks, 2006). Of course, it is undoubtedly the case that acknowledgments offer an opportunity for name dropping and strategic positioning ("I know X and X is famous, therefore..."), and, in that regard, they constitute an unedifying instance of paratextual performativity. However, as a general rule, "the humble acknowledgment can provide illuminating insights into the social and normative bases of distributed collective action in contemporary science" (Cronin & Franks, 2006, p. 1916; see also Giles & Council, 2004) and, for that reason alone, warrants closer scrutiny.

Of course, the idea of paratext is no less relevant in the online world, perhaps even more so. One need only think of, to take but a few examples, the metadata elements and tag clouds linked to digital objects, the supplementary materials and datasets that accompany scientific publications, and the extra-textual indicators of quality, trustworthiness and credibility that are built into websites. Another especially good illustration of an emerging paratextual genre is the cluster of article-level metrics (alternative metrics) that typically accompany papers published in a journal such as PLOS ONE. In this case, the reader has merely to click on the "Metrics" box on the bar above the full text of the research article to see the number of times it has been cited, viewed, discussed, and downloaded. Moreover, with advances in digital publishing and electronic scholarship, texts are becoming increasingly embedded in conversational threads/webs, morphing into what might be termed stretch texts or hypertexts, while also being linked with a variety of real-time usage data and social media indicators (download statistics, Facebook "Likes," etc.). Again, in the context of PLOS ONE, the interested reader can click on a box, "About the Authors," to find additional information about the contributions made by the various co-authors to the reported work or click on the "Comments" box to see what is being said about the publication, what kind of buzz it is generating.

Our idea of what constitutes paratext is broadening, as authoring practices and communication technologies evolve, and as the ways in which we construct, perceive, and engage with texts change. More and more, the text, as traditionally conceived, is just the beginning of the story. In extreme cases—one thinks of the near fetishization of (alt)metrics in some parts of academia—the paratext may itself become the story (Cronin, 2013b). Such an epiphenomenon surely deserves our attention and critical engagement.

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