

# Texts, Readers, and Enacted Narratives

Brian Stock

*Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto*

*My paper is about writers, readers, and the enactment of roles in society. My point of departure is my notion of the 'textual community', which is essentially a group of people who have a common understanding of a text, spoken or read, and who organize aspects of their lives as the playing out of a script. I discuss the meaning of 'text' in this context, the problem of reading, and some of the behavioural principles which lie behind the personal or group narratives.*

One of the most persistent problems in the contemporary field of communications is the relationship between writers, readers, and the enactment of roles in society. Everyone who has thought seriously about the problem agrees that the three are connected in some way. But there is little agreement on just how.

What follows can best be described as an interim report on my own reflections. It is a summary of a spoken rather than a written paper: by the very nature of the genre, it clarifies a few questions but leaves many others unanswered. I am aware that the intellectual landscape is changing: research in progress in psychology and cognitive science may profoundly modify the manner in which we think about texts, minds, and brains; and there is an active debate in philosophy on how these empirical and experimental findings affect our notion of representation. The complexity of the field compels one to shrink from generalization. Yet the attempt to provide a working summary of one's thoughts is not entirely without value, even if the value relates chiefly to one's own previous work (Stock, 1983).

---

**the "textual community" is the union of literates and non-literates around the message of a text, written or spoken, with subsequent implications for behaviour.**

Let me begin then with a notion I myself have employed, the 'textual community'. My use of the term as a historian was intended mainly to be empirical and descriptive. What I was talking about was a situation which historians of different times and places had encountered but which to my mind they had never isolated and designated as a 'type'. This was the union of literates and non-literates around the message of a text, written or spoken, with subsequent implications for behaviour. My favorite example of this phenomenon is a group of medieval heretics whose beliefs were transformed into action by textual means. But there are instances closer to our own experience: religious orders, which govern lives by means of 'rules'; revolutionary movements, which organize their members around a 'manifesto'; or even the technocratic ideologies of some less developed countries (in which utopian charter and practical achievement are often tragically far apart). The norms of a bureaucracy, even the agenda of a meeting, can be a 'textual community', depending on the relationship between texts and action. Such 'communities' are not unusual; they are rather common. And being common, they all the more deserve our attention.

The notion of a textual community presupposes that we understand what is meant by a 'text'. Or does it? It was owing to structuralism that the notion of the text replaced that of the work, which was thought to contain a conceptual bias. But neither structuralism nor post-structuralism have produced a satisfactory definition of a text. And definitions may not be the best place to begin. Trying to move from the text to the textual community is like moving from the philosophy of language to the everyday uses of language. It imposes a scheme that is too restricted for the varied nature of living reality. It is not important that we hold to one or another idea of a text. It is important that we recognize a linguistic fact about all texts: once we learn to read and write, we automatically acquire an abstract notion of a text which is independent of our knowledge of particular texts. This notion is also independent of any functional relationship between speakers, readers, or hearers.

The relationship between speakers and hearers brings me to a second issue. We are all too used to employing the speaker/hearer as our sole criterion for understanding broader semantic matters. If we take oral language as our model, we are tempted to assume that problems of meaning can be addressed through the analysis of speaker/hearer relations. This too needs to be questioned.

In the first place, there is never any such thing as 'only the words spoken'. All major linguistic theories — Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Chomsky — recognize a distinction between the phonic surface of language and subsurface thoughts or principles. Even in oral societies there is a difference between outer and inner significance. In literate societies the central issue is articulated versus unarticulated texts. What is expressed or unexpressed, and why? What is public, what private? When does naming imply necessity? What conventions govern perception: when, for instance, is king Dagobert seen wearing his imaginary clothes?

There is a second reason why the speaker/hearer analogy may be questioned. What I call a textual community is in superficial respects like a set of speakers and hearers, inasmuch as most of the communication takes place by word of mouth. But, on closer examination, it appears to be more like a group of readers, even if, in the context of early modern history, most of the reading is done aloud by a few literates addressing a great many non-literates.

The speaker/hearer and reader/listener relationships are not the mirror image of each other, as is often assumed. They operate in somewhat different ways and possibly overlap. It is normally assumed that the speaker/hearer connection is limited to the aural circumference of the words spoken. It would appear that the sphere of activity is restricted to the time and place in which it occurs. (It can be recreated by being reperformed, but this presupposes a script.) Yet, to describe the speaker/hearer phenomenon in this way is to commit the same sort of error as takes place when one puts the philosophy of language before language use. Has communication of such a contextless kind ever taken place? Normally, one is tempted to say always, the speaker and hearer are in a relationship of mutual understanding *before* any words are spoken. That is why they readily understand each other.

How are we to describe this pre-existent understanding? It is here that the reading analogy is useful. For, in contrast to a spoken text, a read text has an objective reality outside the mental world of the speaker. Words within his mind also exist objectively; in that sense they are no less a 'text'. But, in reading, one's perception invariably associates objectivity with externality. We know that the text of the

printed page exists whether we are fixing our eyes on it or not, and this perceptual certainty makes commonsense reality out of what might otherwise only have been nominal. Elementary logic or linguistics can prove just the opposite, namely that the objectivity of knowledge does not depend on whether it is oral or written. But it does not alter the normal association of physical reality and metalinguistic certainty.

We have failed to perceive these relationships because of our limited appreciation of what happens when we read. We do not really know what happens inside the head when we read, but experimental psychology has advanced at least far enough to disprove some of our more naive assumptions. Reading is normally thought to be a one-way street, in which the reader processes a visual message in letters and somehow transforms it into a meaningful message. Like all *tabula rasa* approaches to thinking, this notion of how we read is inadequate. Reading is a two-way street: graphic information is perceived visually, but syntactic and semantic information are supplied by the reader as he interprets what he sees. In other words, to read competently, the reader not only decodes visually transmitted letter arrangements; he must also have within himself the decoding instruments with which to carry out the transformation of alphabetized information into a language which the mind can understand. Paradoxically, to comprehend, he must already comprehend.

Reading, then, is like the textual community in being both private and public: the semantic information is within the mind, but it reflects a wider hermeneutic network which links individuals and groups. Otherwise, written and spoken texts, before they were enacted as behavioural patterns, would require lengthy processes of translation, which, in fact, is precisely the case when there are large-scale shifts in paradigms. Studies of children's reading habits suggest that they are learning to read from exposure to print in the environment long before they actually receive classroom instruction or are perceived to be literates by the adult community. Similarly, in the textual community, the verbal spread of textual material pre-

---

Reading...is like the textual community **in** being both private and public: the semantic information is within the **mind**, but it reflects a wider hermeneutic network...

cedes the actual communication of a text as a written statement. The hearers are programmed to handle the means of communication before the message is actually transmitted.

We may think of this relationship in a somewhat schematic form as follows. Whether we consider the matter in terms of speakers/hearers or, as I have suggested, readers/listeners, at either end of the spectrum of communication stands an unwritten or unarticulated text. We can crudely represent the situation as follows:

speaker/hearer		reader/listener
T <sub>1</sub> . . . .	T	. . . . T <sub>2</sub>

With the following consequences:

1. T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub> are implicit texts, categories of mind, or decoding instruments. These are the 'real' texts, although it is evident that, in calling them texts at all, we are making unproven assumptions about natural language and processes of thought.
2. T is the explicit text, the *scriptum*. It is a sort of middleman between T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub>, a medium between two invisible nexuses of meaning. The meaning of T depends upon a compromise between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning. We may therefore think of T as being composed of two parts, i.e., T (the written text) and T<sub>a</sub> (its meaning). Here we make another assumption, namely that there is an objective meaning for a text.
3. T, then, in Platonic fashion, is not the text; it is only the physical or graphic image of the real text, which is itself invisible and unable to be articulated into a single fixed text, that is, unable to be edited by graphics into one code from the many subtle shades of meaning which surround it. The articulated text, the edited version, so to speak, is something we can perceive: it has a reassuring objectivity. But we must not mistake sensual appearance for reality. We may think of T as the tip of a triangular iceberg, whose other two corners lie hidden beneath a sea of context.

With these thoughts in mind, let me return to the notion of the textual community and to the place of the text within it. As noted, the community needs only three things, a text, a communicator, and an audience. What happens is the influencing, patterning, or even determining of behaviour according to a script. Life becomes a narrative which is dramatically enacted. It is given a shape which is aesthetically coherent, and this coherence somehow gets mixed up in the actors' minds with ethical rightness. The rightness in turn appears to be a rationale for action: it is the means by which individuals explain

the why of activity to themselves. In that sense it is a type of rationality. Material factors are not excluded from the process, but they have no particular priority. In the perception of reality, mind and matter may not be clearly distinguished. What is essential is the subjective consideration of action: the members of a textual community will, intend, project, and shape their futures. They think they are determining their courses of action, and this thinking actually determines what they do.

The large question is: what sort of causal mechanisms are at work? This is a difficult problem, and one is tempted to dismiss it in a skeptical manner by saying that there is no real causality at work at all. But this would be misleading, since, in social and cultural activity, men and women are most often directed by subjectively perceived causal relations, as Max Weber demonstrated. True, there is no necessary relationship between thoughts, words, and events. Reconstruction is the making of historical stories. The text which motivates action is only a mediator of contingencies. And the causality is largely retrospective. For the actors within the unfolding events interpret them as they take place and thereby build up a gloss on the patterns; and the ethnologist historian puts together another interpretive gloss using the events, what he knows of the subject's thoughts, and a mass of other evidence, whose selection depends on intellectual fashion.

These glosses are not the text. They are metatexts, even though they may attain a theoretical coherence of their own, and, as independent structures, influence subsequent behaviour in a manner different from the original events. Napoleon was not only defeated at Borodino; he was also defeated in the Russian and French interpretive structures after the event. Of course the cycle of thought and action is perpetual. We separate them by abstraction; and we frame them as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end through an adaptation of allegory. But new behavioural norms begin with the subjective selection and definition of a set of rules. They constitute an anti-Napoleon party based on the lessons of Borodino, now set up as a code. In this sense we may speak of a new text, whatever its obscure anterior chemistry. It is important not to be overwhelmed by *Quellenforschung*, and to assimilate forms of life into antecedent literary genres. What brings people together and makes them act is the articulation of a text within the group and the binding of the group's behaviour to the rules set forth in the text. Only a part of one's comportment in the world is affected; the textual community normally influences only one sector of behaviour, which it singles out as a key to overall ethical and moral norms. But it does transform a

language-game into a *Lebensform*. And what gains the members' commitment is not only the content of the rules but the manner in which they are communicated. Behaviour is in part a rhetoric of behaviour.

Individuals often describe and explain their actions to themselves as stories, but the historian or the anthropologist is not concerned with the privatization of experience as such. Nor does it matter for the historical analysis of textual communities whether one views all narratives as archetypes: personal stories may or may not incorporate external texts; or, if incorporating them, they may subordinate them to archetypal patterns whose origins are themselves psychological. The central issue is testability and verification, and the criteria which individuals adduce for both. We consider individuals to be 'normal' (i.e., functioning according to norms) if they possess the capacity to judge their narratives in the light of experience and to differentiate between 'truth' and 'fiction'. But normalcy, as Foucault has reminded us, is historically conditioned. In evaluating a narrative's coherence we must ask what sort of objective standards have been set up against it. What is subject, what object, and why?

In western society standards of objectivity and conditions for truth were transformed by the advent of literacy. Once again I stress that I am talking about perceptions, not realities, but about perceptions which were instrumental in determining patterns of behaviour over *la longue durée*. The crux of the matter was this: the permanence of the text, first on vellum or parchment and later on the printed page, offered a tangible analogy for the belief in an externally existing world of laws, principles, and relations. As is often the case with a new technology, its conceptual scheme was applied by analogy to diverse areas of thought and action. Texts thereby emerged as catalysts, not causes, of a momentous shift in mentality. To take a few examples: the basis of legitimate authority changed from the word of the individual to the transcript of a statement. Rules were separated from rulers; charisma waned and bureaucracy was born. Also, a science of the outer world led to a science of natural laws, and built upon the now assimilable heritage of the Greeks and Arabs. Above all, plans for living which were framed as stories ceased to be internal and individual and were assumed to have an historically verifiable existence. It is no accident that the same period which saw the rebirth of literacy also witnessed the revival of literalism in biblical studies. The literal and allegorical senses of the text appeared as if by magic: one was pegged to alleged events in the real world, the other to the equally real workings of the mind or soul. Long before Galileo displaced the earth as the centre of the universe, the text displaced man from the centre of his decision-making about his own behavioural norms.

The problems I have been discussing are complicated, and, in a brief review which has concentrated on my own modest contribution, I have doubtless sidestepped many issues. Among them is what happens when texts begin to play such a large role in our construction of reality that the direct evidence of our senses and even mental life is reinterpreted through them, the texts, so to speak, acting as a conceptual filter for experience. However, even within a brief sketch of the terrain, one subject emerges naturally as a basis for further reflection. The study of literacy should not be just an academic investigation of texts, their literary properties and relations. It should lead us to better understand relations between thought and action, and, in particular, between the ethical norms we associate with right reason and the narratives by which we accommodate our lives to a variety of aesthetically appropriate designs. We have all been taught to think of man as obeying blind economic directives, unconscious drives, and inner codes of kinship and family. We have paid less attention to outer shaping devices. The perception of interiority is itself a byproduct of the literate mentality, and it has led us to isolate many problems connecting the past and the present. But, ironically, the same mentality has imposed upon us a 'bias of communication' which must be overcome if new problems are to be solved.

### *Reference*

Stock, B. *The Implications of Literacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.