ON TWO PROBLEMS FOR TEXTUALISM

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In the present paper I analyze textualism, a view that holds that a work of literature and its text are identical to each other. I raise two problems against it. The first one comes from the possibility of translating a text from one language to another that perfectly preserves everything that is significant of original text. The second one arises when textualism ignores semantics as a feature of the identity of the text.

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Sulla rena bagnata appaiono ideogrammi a zampa di gallina. Guardo addietro ma non vedo rifugi o asili di volatili.
—Eugenio Montale, Dopopioggia

I liked the tale myself, for much the same reason as my father liked the beginning: it was my kind of picturesque.
—Robert Louis Stevenson, Preface to Treasure Island

Consider the different origin stories of the Greek flower hyakinthos found in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. In Book Ten, Phoebus and Hyacinth play with the discus when Hyacinth is accidentally struck by it on the head and dies. The sorrow of Phoebus is so deep that he transforms the blood of Hyacinth into flowers that resemble purple lilies; but not satisfied with this he also “inscribed his grieving words upon the leaves, and the
flower bore the marks AI AI, letters of lamentation, drawn thereon.”¹ In Book Thirteen, Ajax quarrels with Odysseus on who is worthy to earn Achilles’ armor. When the Greek leaders favor Odysseus, Ajax becomes enraged and commits suicide with his own sword. Purple flowers sprouted from the blood spilled on the ground, bearing the letters AI AI on them, the initials of the Greek hero’s name. Thus, according to Ovid, the petals of the plant that sprouted in both occasions are inscribed with letters that serve a dual purpose: they remind us of the name of Ajax and also express the grief of Phoebus.²

That the same inscription can be used to convey a different meaning on different circumstances is apparently trivial. However, it is interesting to notice that although it was Phoebus who wrote on Hyacinth’s flowers, Ovid did not mention anyone inscribing the flowers of Ajax. They just sprouted from the hero’s blood bearing an inscription, or something that in any case could be understood as an inscription. That a random process may produce marks on a surface that resemble letters seems inconsequential. But what if Phoebus had inscribed a literary work, say, an elegy, on the petals of the flower, and that a flower with the same kind of inscription, but not caused by anyone, sprouted for Ajax? Phoebus would be the author of the elegy written on Hyacinth’s flowers. Should the similar marks found on Ajax’s flowers be given a literary status? The relation between a text and a literary work is a contended view. Whereas Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin see this relation as one of identity, there are others, like Gregory Currie, that dissent.

In what follows I will examine Goodman and Elgin’s (hereafter ‘G&E’) view and, after I have clarified some terminology, I will proceed to scrutinize two implications of

² Ibid., 257.
their claim that the relation between a literary work and its text is one of identity. In the end, I believe that each of those implications can be exploited to create problems to their view.

I. The Textualism of Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin

We would hardly disagree with someone who tells us that *Altazor*, *Macbeth* and *Lolita* are examples of literary works; but what do we mean by that? What exactly is a literary work? In “Interpretation and Identity: Can the Work Survive the World?” G&E invite us to ponder that question. It is not that we have that many options on their view, for everything seems to come into choosing between these two alternatives: either we identify a literary work (hereafter ‘work’) to a text or to the right interpretation(s) of that text. G&E opt for the first answer. For them, a text is an inscription in a language and it is sufficient that marks can function as inscriptions in a language in order to consider them texts. The identity of a text “is a matter pertaining solely to the syntax of a language —to the permissible configuration of letters, spaces and punctuation marks— quite apart from what the text says or otherwise refers to.” For instance, the inscription ‘chat’ written alone on a piece of paper can be read at least as two different texts, depending on whether we read the inscription in French or English. For G&E, *Macbeth* and all the other works are equivalent to the mere string of words that conform their text; that is, works are merely texts. Call this view textualism.

G&E are aware of the implications of textualism: If work and text are identical to each other, then work and text stand in a one-to-one correspondence relation. That is,

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“there is only one text for each work” and vice versa.\(^5\) In what follows we shall see if that claim stands to scrutiny.

II. One Text for Each Work? Textualism and the Possibility of a Perfect Translation

G&E acknowledge that translations raise the question of whether there is more than one text for a single work. According to them,

[i]f a translation from English into French preserves work-identity, then that work has more than one text. Obviously no translation retains all that is significant in the original. Even if the two are coextensive, reporting exactly the same events in as closely as possible the same way, they will differ somewhat in meaning. For their secondary extensions — the extensions of compounds of the texts and of parallel parts of them — will not be the same. Moreover, they will inevitably differ, usually appreciably, in what they exemplify and express.\(^6\)

Given G&E’s claim that inscriptions in different languages amount to different texts and also their claim of identity between a work and its text, it follows that a text and its translations are different works. G&E regard translations as interpretations of works.

Although G&E do not state what a translation needs to accomplish in order to preserve work-identity, they immediately note that even the best translations do not preserve the whole meaning of the original text. Usually, translators have to decide what to sacrifice and what to retain from a text to be translated. G&E regard translations as interpretations of the original text in a different language. Thus all translations have their own unique texts, even while having the same common source.

But what if a perfect translation were possible? Would this change the status of textualism as a tenable view? Consider the following scenario: Somewhere in this

\(^{5}\) Goodman and Elgin, “Interpretation and Identity,” 570.

\(^{6}\) Ibid., 569.
universe there is Twin Earth, a planet which resembles ours in many aspects, even in the
cultures and civilizations that have flourished on Earth to date. The social interactions of
some of the Twin Earthlings produced *English, a language highly analogous to English.
The analogy between those two languages rests in that for every word of English there is
one equivalent in *English in matters of pronunciation, meaning, and in the plasticity that
syntax confers to it when arranged along with other words in order to create more
complex linguistic strings. The only appreciable difference comes in matters that
according to G&E pertain to syntax: the *English homologous of every word in English
appears to be one word in English to which an ‘*’ mark has been added at its beginning.\footnote{In
fact, ‘*English’ should be written as ‘English’ when translated into the language of this paper.
However, for purposes of distinguishing the way in which different symbols are combined to
produce linguistic strings in different languages, I will keep using the ‘*’ mark to differentiate
between the two languages.}

Let us also suppose that none of the inhabitants of either Earth have been aware of the
existence of the other planet. That is, until one day, and due to a happy coincidence, the
English speakers and the *English speakers came to know each other.

Under such circumstances a translation of Shakespeare’s Hamlet into *Hamlet, its
*English version, would be an easy task, if not a mechanical one, since the role of
interpretation while translating the text would be kept to a minimum. Besides, the words
and the sentences of each text would be parallel in terms of meaning and first and
secondary extensions. What else could we demand from a work to say that it perfectly
runs in two languages? G&E may easily reply that since an act of translation necessarily
involves two languages, it will also involve and result in two different texts; and, given
that they identify a text to its work, an act of translation will always involve two different
works. However, the implication of the English–*English scenario is that a work can have two different texts as its vehicles. This counters G&E’s view.

Even so, there are two ways in which someone may argue that *English and English are the same language. The first one (R1) is to claim that the definition of syntax does not take into account the spelling of the words of a language, but only the relations that words may have among each other. Given that the syntactic relations (the way in which they can be combined to produce longer strings of meaning) that the words of English can have among each other is the same as those of *English, we may claim that both are the same language. Another claim of identity between *English and English (R2) may be offered in terms of functionality. If, as according to G&E, an inscription is a text when it can be read in a given language, nothing prevents us from properly reading a copy of Hamlet at our public library, even if someone had vandalized it by marking the text with an ‘*’ mark at the beginning of every word. The characters would still function as an inscription in English. Likewise, someone may claim, an inscription in *English can easily function as one in English, and thus, we would consider them to be in the same language.

Nonetheless, the two previous responses are not available for G&E. Somewhere else Goodman defines a text as “a character in a notational scheme” and we learn more about the syntactic requirements of his textualism: “What then constitutes a notational scheme? Any symbol scheme consists of characters, usually with modes of combining them to form others. Characters are certain classes of utterances or inscriptions or

marks.” Consider the character ‘mouse’, which occurs in the text of *Hamlet*. Strictly speaking, the English syntax qua English syntax does not contemplate any word formed by the mark ‘*mouse’. Likewise, the *English syntax qua *English syntax does not contemplate among the combinatory rules for its simple characters any composite character represented by the mark ‘mouse’, for a syntactic rule of *English is that all words should begin with the ‘*’ character. R1 is not available to G&E, because that would make identical two syntaxes that are distinct in virtue of their rules. G&E would be committing to the claim that ‘*mouse’ is and is not a character contemplated by the English syntax. It is true that in our everyday usage of texts we are accustomed to see characters to which other characters or symbols have been added. We would not consider a word to which a small numeral in superscript has been added at its end to indicate a footnote insertion to be an example of bad syntax. However, we would not wish to claim that a character such as ‘mouse²’ is an example of a word in English either. What we normally do is to treat the additional character or symbol as something merely accessory to the character that our syntax allows. Thus, the character previously mentioned is read as the juxtaposition of two different characters, or ‘mouse’ immediately followed by ‘²’.

In the example of the vandalized copy of *Hamlet* we are able to read the text in English because either we can ignore the ‘*’ marks at the beginning of every word or because we can treat those marks as something merely accessory to the characters in the English syntax, just as we do with characters or symbols that indicate footnote notation. That texts in *English and English may be easily understood by users of either language, provided that they make the proper functional adjustments while they read, is just a

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⁹ Ibid., 131.
matter of luck in our scenario. Our twin earth scenario demands a translation from English to \( ^* \)English. An act of translation presupposes, among other things, the syntaxes of two different languages. If G&E were to follow a reasoning similar to R2, however, the \( ^* \)English user would not be dealing with the syntax of English at all, but he would simply perceive some marks that could be read in \( ^* \)English if the character ‘\(*\)’ were added in many places. R2 cannot account for an act of translation because in this strategy there is only a single syntactical system involved.

The possibility of a perfect translation of the text of a work into a different language is not the only problem that G&E’s view faces. There are also difficulties that may arise if two works can have the same text as their vehicles. Now we will turn to consider that possibility.

### III. An Argument by Gregory Currie: Different Writers and the Same Text

If work and text are identical to each other then an instance of a text can only be the medium of a single work. But can there be two different works that have the same text as its medium? What has inspired some philosophers to think that this is possible is the case mentioned in Pierre Menard Author of the Quixote, a short story by Jorge Luis Borges. The story describes a French writer who, though living some centuries after Miguel de Cervantes, engages in what attempts to be a genuine act of literary creation that results in the production of two chapters that are word for word identical to those of the Quixote of Cervantes. The story can be read as implying that the properties that the work of each writer has are different, even if the text of the relevant chapters is the
same. Nonetheless, Gregory Currie grants that “Borges’ tale involves certain complexities of plot made much of by recent writers intent on showing that the story presents no counterexample to textualism” and proceeds to formulate an argument from the following hypothetical situation:

Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* in 1803 as a burlesque of the Gothic novel. Imagine that a hitherto unknown manuscript by Anne Radcliffe, entitled “Northanger Abbey” (circa 1793), and word for word the same as Austen’s, turns up in the attic, that we conclude ... that this is in fact a coincidence, that Austen had no knowledge of Radcliffe’s work, and that, far from being a satire, Radcliffe’s *Abbey* was meant as a serious contribution to the genre. ... [I]t is not plausible to say they are the same work; there are so many judgments appropriate to the one but not to the other. There are implicit references in Austen’s *Abbey* to certain other works in the genre ... But it would be anachronistic to see implicit references in Radcliffe to these other works, since ... she did her writing before those other works were composed, Austen’s work is suffused with an irony not to be found in Radcliffe’s. And so ... there are two works here, but a single text between them.

Even if the argument seems appealing, G&E may still resist it. For them, the way in which we come to grasp the identity of a work is as follows: Whenever we have a particular inscription that can function in the syntax of a language, we have a work. Whenever we have two or more instances of marks and spaces that function as the same type of inscription, we have the same work. Thus, in the Radcliffe-Austen scenario we cannot talk about judgments that are appropriate about one work but not about the other, for there is only one type of inscription in question, and hence only one work. If the work is the text, *Northanger Abbey* began to exist when the first inscription that functioned as

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12 Ibid., 328-9.

13 Although G&E do not offer their view in terms of text-types or tokens, there are some philosophers (see n. 17) that have made use of that terminology in order to interpret G&E’s claims. I am also using this terminology for the sake of clarity.
its text came into being. In terms of our contemporary authorship adjudicative practices, the author for G&E is whoever “produced the first inscription of the text,” in this case, Radcliffe.

But even if there is a single work with a single author in the Radcliffe-Austen scenario, how shall we interpret the work? A text per se may be subject to an infinite number of interpretations, but the problems of treating a work as mere écriture in a Barthesian sense have been denounced. According to Goodman, “knowledge of the origin of a work . . . informs the way the work is to be looked at or listened to or read, providing a basis for the discovery of nonobvious ways the work differs from and resembles other works.” In this sense, a right interpretation of a work is one that takes into account the context under which it was written. This may be understood, as David Davies does, that G&E “are most plausibly read as holding that the context of generation of the first token of a text-type does constrain right interpretation of the resulting work.” But surely G&E would disagree on this, for they would not want to say that the only right interpretation of ‘Fire!’ is the one that takes into account the conditions under which this text was first tokened in all the history of English. Even if we deal with the same work whenever the same text-type is tokened, it is clear that we may arrive at different right interpretations of the text if we pay attention to the context in which a particular instance of the text occurs. After all, ‘Fire!’ cannot always be rightly interpreted as an order to shoot. This is the reason why, in the Radcliffe-Austen scenario, G&E would say that

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14 Goodman and Elgin, “Interpretation and Identity,” 573.
17 David Davies, Aesthetics and Literature (Bodmin: Continuum, 2007), 28.
although Austen did not bring into existence a new work, she inspired new interpretations of the same work when she produced a new inscription under different circumstances.\textsuperscript{18}

But what about anachronistic interpretations? Currie claims that if both Abbeys are the same, they should be interpretable in the same way. But although it would surely be anachronistic to see the 1793 text as a satire, it would make sense to interpret the 1803 text in that fashion.\textsuperscript{19} How can they be the same work? G&E may merrily agree that the Abbey can be interpreted in the same way in either 1793, 1803 or any other time in which its inscription occurs, as long as the relevant language exists. Nothing in principle can prevent us, to borrow some examples from Borges’ \textit{Pierre Menard}, from reading “the Odyssey as though it came after the \textit{Aeneid}”, from “[a]tributing the \textit{Imitatio Christi} to Louis Ferdinand Céline or James Joyce,” or from attributing a work to the author to whom we normally attribute that work.\textsuperscript{20} Likewise, a little exercise of imagination could allow us to interpret the Abbey as a satire in 1793! Whether those interpretations are historically accurate, anachronistic or, needless to say, blatantly unacceptable, is a different matter. The words to describe our interpretations can keep piling up. What is important to notice is that we are casting our judgments upon interpretations, not upon the work. Thus, different judgments about interpretations of the work cannot be used to settle the issue between Currie and the textualist. But what if we cast our judgments directly upon the work? Instead of claiming that an interpretation of the work such as “it is a satire” is right or wrong, we would move to directly talk about the work.

\textsuperscript{18} Goodman and Elgin, “Interpretation and Identity,” 573.
IV. The Work Without Meaning

According to G&E’s textualism, a work is an inscription than can function in the syntax of a language; nothing more, nothing less. We do not need to appeal to semantics in order to understand that we are in front of a work. It is enough that we acknowledge that the inscription can function in a given language, even if we cannot construe any meaning from it. A classic example showing the possibility of interacting with the syntax of a language without involving semantics is John Searle’s Chinese Room scenario. Searle makes us imagine a man who knows no Chinese locked in a room full of boxes with Chinese characters and a manual for manipulating the symbols. People outside the room pass the man some symbols, and he replies by sending out symbols following the manual’s directions. The man does not know that he is receiving questions and that he is providing correct answers to the Chinese users outside. Therefore, the man may be exposed to a work in Chinese and also acknowledge that he is interacting with a work, even if he cannot extract any meaning from it.

In order to work, Currie’s argument requires that we ascribe properties like “being satirical” or “being a serious contribution to the Gothic genre” to the very identity of the work. But how can we derive those properties from the mere syntax of text? There is no way in which an inscription in a language can be described as “satirical” if we pay attention to its syntactical features exclusively.

Once we incorporate semantics into a text, we can claim that the work is interpretable as a satire. However, the addition of semantics brings up the issue of


\[22\] Catherine Elgin, e-mail message to author, November 19, 2012. I must thank Elgin for drawing my attention to this point. Elgin implies that unless certain properties are directly derivable from the syntax of a text, they are not essential to the work.
interpretation. The Chinese Room scenario shows that semantics cannot be inferred from syntax. Semantics are incorporated to the syntactical string when we decide to interpret a character in a certain way instead of another. Thus, any time we use semantics in order to claim that a text should be read in a certain way, we are not talking about the text alone anymore, but about an interpretation of the text. In the Radcliffe-Austen scenario, G&E may claim that Currie’s attempts of deriving two works from the same text collapse into deriving two interpretations from the same text. Claiming that one Abbey is satirical where the other is not, amounts to the claim that the same work can be interpreted in two different ways.

G&E are safe from Currie’s argument if they do not commit themselves to understand a work as a text with a particular meaning or cluster of meanings. However, if semantics plays no role in the identity of the work, the work in its very nature lacks meaning. The only properties that we may directly ascribe to the work under G&E’s definition are those that pertain to the syntax of a text, anything else counts as an interpretation. But if the work itself is void of meaning, why should we be concerned about arriving at right interpretations of the work?23

The way we interact in daily life situations that involve reading texts (taking medication, signing contracts, taking tests, etc.) is by paying attention to the context in which the texts are immersed; not doing so may bring disastrous consequences and may even render social interaction impossible. In those circumstances, we attend not only to the syntax of an inscription in a language, but to an inscription embedded in a social and cultural context; and we care about construing the meaning of a text embedded in a social

23 Alexander Nehamas makes a similar point in “The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal,” Critical Inquiry 8, 1 (Autumn, 1981), 137.
context in a right way. If for G&E, the work is the text, then all inscriptions that function in a language count as works and we should also be concerned about construing right interpretations of those works according to the context in which they are immerse. Apparently, textualism makes provision for this when Goodman claims that we should inquire about the origin of a work in order to know how to look at it. Thus, apparently, context plays a role in the proper understanding of a work. Textualism, however, is unable to explain why this is so. If the historical context in which a work came into being is not related to the work’s identity, why should we pay attention to that context in order to determine the right interpretation of a work? If the context in which a work is created determines to some extent the identity of a work, then it is easy to explain why we are so concerned about paying attention to the circumstances in which a work comes into being. Ignoring the context of the origin of the work can amount to ignoring features of the work itself. However, the moment at which textualists claim that context takes part in determining the identity of a work they would be admitting that Currie is right. There may be two works that share the same text but are different in virtue of the historical context in which they are embedded. Thus, when asked about the relation between a text and its right interpretations, the textualist would owe us a proper answer.

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In an indirect sense, someone may claim that by paying attention to the syntax in which an inscription functions, G&E may be taking into account the historical features that are related to the existence of that syntax (e.g. an inscription cannot function in French if that language does not exist). However, if someone follows that line, she still has to explain why G&E would only consider some historical features about the syntax of a language per se as pertaining to the identity of a work, and not the meaning that a particular syntactical string may exhibit in a given historical context.