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Some Heuristic Presuppositions/Limitations

1) There is no clear boundary between the "material" aspects of literature and the "immaterial." The two are necessarily (and fatally) bound up in one another and indeed so they seemed through the mid-18th century. Yet the late 18th and 19th centuries decisively altered the picture, such that any reconstructing the material foundations of literary meaning-production must be viewed against the backdrop of the dematerializing aesthetic discourses that powerfully shaped the humanistic fields from the time of Hegel forward. *Geist*-based historiography is one obvious example, suppressing as it does all material particularity in the dogged pursuit of "spirit" (defined as all that which binds together peoples, human experiences, mind and world; individual and universal history).

Example 1: "It is not content itself in this formal ideality of art that demands our attention, but rather the satisfaction of intellectual creation. Representation must appear naturally. Not what is natural as such, but creation, *the annihilation of sensual materiality and external conditions*, is the poetic and ideal in the formal sense." From Hegel's Aesthetics.

Example 2: "The poem, the oration, the book are superhuman, but the wonder is out when you see the manuscript." From Emerson's Journal A (1834).

2) The lack of an absolute boundary between the material and immaterial history of literature, however, may be belied by the presence of an increasingly sharp gap between a "craft"/production side (involved with generating materials of/for writing) and an authorial/readerly side of literary systems (involved instead with shaping words and investing them with "spirit," "style," etc.). For instance, in the course of the 16th centuries and after, a highly technical discourse of typography arises that increasingly becomes the special province of a "craft" specialist as opposed to authors. Likewise, the rise of increasingly complex word processing technologies reinforce the rift between the builders and users of writing machines. Even in antiquity, the preparer and inscriber of supports was rarely the author (in the modern sense of "author"): the author was, typically, a "dictator" and the inscriber a slave or secretary. The "manual" labor of inscription was viewed as debased in comparison with the "mental" labor of composing, dictating, reciting, and speaking.

This is only true, however, of writing-based forms of literary production. In the case of orally-based models, the opposite tends to be true: the craftsman is almost always the author and vice versa.

But: these separate domains are constantly being folded one into the other, particularly at key transitional moments. Examples:

- the progressive transformation within ancient rhetorical theory of an art of oration into an art of writing
- the medieval *arts dictaminis*
- Boccaccio's Teseida

3) The oral/written dichotomy is at once necessary and inevitably self-collapsing *on some level*. Oral forms and written forms of literary culture set up differing sorts of material constraints (although all are linked through the human body). Each relies upon a different hierarchy of bodily functions: one privileging the voice, the other the eye. But even here the same set of terms is constantly being transposed and all oppositions are deconstructable. In no case can the oral be thought of as the immaterial and the written as the material.

4) The material history of literature is inherently the reconstruction of a *distortion*. The ontological fact of writing's relative permanence vs. orality's impermanence means that the principal institutional relays of power have favored writing in the transacting of a relation to the past and future (libraries, schools, monuments). But this doesn't mean that institutions of comparable importance could not be developed around oral performance (*viz.* rhetoric). Rather it is simply that the historical record --indeed the entire notion of a historical *record*-- has for tens of centuries implied the idea of writing as the normative technology of recording. (Like oral performances themselves, the institutions for training speakers, technologies, are inherently difficult to reconstruct and they lend themselves to distortion -- ex.: mnemotechnics and vocal *techne*). Has this picture been changed by the rise of a new "technorality" (based on magnetic recording media)?

5) The "matter" that such a "material" history ought to be founded upon cannot be assumed to be stable. Rather, as contemporary electronic media suggest with a special urgency, the "matter" of literature is both variable and variably conceived within different literary systems and epochs. Matter as lack, phenomenality, domain of simulacra (Platonic metaphysics) or as natural medium shaped by forms and forces of corruption and generation (Aristotle); matter as realm of loss, transformation, and potential recovery (Christianity); matter as stable ground of cognition for the reconstruction of laws and meanings (17th-19th century sciences); matter as energy, actual/potential force, caught up in the dynamic of generation and degeneration (19th century post-thermodynamic historicisms); matter as volatile/translatable electronic information-pulses (late 20th century). The one guarantee of consistency is the human body which lies at the center of these variable "materialities." And the material history of literature is therefore reducible to the history of this body's signifying labor: its transformative action upon various sets of materials, including its very own faculties.

6) All communicative systems rely upon the system that immediately preceded them to establish the authority of an utterance. Machine-produced documents thus require hand-written signatures; the written codes of law require oral oaths; laws themselves constitute systems of meaning founded upon archaism, using a linguistically "dead" medium and/or archaic modes of reference, indexation, etc. This ensures a high degree of simultaneity within communicative systems: prior systems almost never vanish, but rather simply assume a new set of specialized meanings and functions.

7) Within this field of simultaneously coexisting communicative systems there is no inherent reason why historical changes should prove irreversible or imply some sort of continuity-based model of historical change. A high degree of randomness characterizes the media history of literature, the sort of "randomness" one finds in technological/media jumps like that which has rendered video the chosen medium of Amazonian Indians.

### The Body and the Text

1) Therefore, the material history of literature is the history of reproductions, prostheses to, excrescences of the human body. The scale of literary artifacts, their specialized vocabulary (of feet, hands, textual "bodies," "head" lines) founds an elaborate and usually analogical link between the human body and the artifact. Language exists only on the scale of the human body and is subject to its perceptual powers and limitations.

2) This link necessarily raises questions of (figurative or literal) self-reproduction through expression. Literary artifacts are thus always caught up in the dynamics of bodily self-expansion. To cite one commonplace, they are means of self-preservation or substitutes for progeny.

3) The material artifact is invested with body-like qualities: the emissary, love messenger, substitute body of beloved or enemy. It is always a symbolic site of bodily performance (even when such performative functions are "deferred" because of writing/scripting).

### Literature's Material History

1) The material history of literature is precisely that which must be repressed for the modern idea of "Literature" to become possible. Literature as a myth of transparent expression that exceeds the vehicle of expression is a modern "effect" of the industrialized book. To recover the material underpinnings is (perhaps inevitably) to deconstruct the fictions of presence that attach to any metaphysics of speech.

2) Until the growth of printing the basic presupposition of all readers, writers, copyists was that meaning was always already imperiled, and that it was therefore precious and to be preserved at all costs, irrespective of a text's context. Writing in and of itself is valuable and the older it is, the more valuable. After the growth of printing, the basic presupposition

shifts to one of qualitative judgment about each given text, its degree of accuracy, fidelity, etc. to an original. Such an original may be real or, as in the case of the Renaissance myth of the "buried Book," it may be imaginary. But what it accomplishes is to conjoin the entire and increasingly chaotic family of mere books. Under a printing-based regime, meaning is not always already imperiled, but rather always already recoverable.

Note the material consequences that ensue: increasing importance of ephemeral, evanescent forms of writing (epistles, broadsheets), fast "informal" scripts, notes, sketches. Diminution in the "authenticity" or authority of monumental scripts (funerary/memorial concepts of public inscription because of greater confidence that the collective record can be taken for granted).

3) This dialectic between a functional model founded on fixity vs. one founded on impermanence was first worked out in the context of medieval culture where vernacular models of culture arose alongside more authoritative and long-standing Latin ones. Guillaume IX's poem about nothing vs. Roman or canon law.

4) The study of literature's materiality is not a substitute for, but rather a complement to the study of literature's meanings. Signifiers will always produce meaning as one of their principal effects. The task is not to displace or replace meaning, but rather to reorient out interest towards those underlying constraints whose technological and performative potential has been too easily subsumed within the fold of interpretation (hermeneutics). The hermeneutic model is itself one *effect* of a given body of material-linguistic practices and the increasing "immateriality" of electronic media ought not be viewed as inducement to reach deeper into the hermeneutic bag of tricks.