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New publishing manners and outdated editing methods: a time bomb

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Introduction

In scholarly editing, a great deal of status has up to now been accorded to when and how an author reveals his text. The text has made the transition from the private to the public domain. This act acquired high symbolic value, with well-nigh biblical connotations. Publication was seen as a turning point for a text. The editor's most important decision is which version of a literary text to follow for an edition. This decision used to flow from recognition of that particular turning point. However, the methods which may be used to publish a text have over past decades changed so much as to necessitate our revising that recognition. Publication methods have altered to such an extent that one can no longer speak of a single act of publication, but rather of many forms of publication.

Development of scholarly editing

The year 1971 saw the publication of *Texte und Varianten*, a collection of essays on textual editing, variants, and their interpretation.¹ This work influenced greatly the development of scholarly editing in German-speaking countries and in the Netherlands. It coined standard terms which are still in use today. Hans Zeller made his famous distinction between “Befund und Deutung” (Finding and Interpretation) in connection with the study of manuscripts. Siegfried Scheibe defined the historical-critical edition and gave a precise definition of authorial authorisation. In 1995 the principal essays of the volume were translated for an

¹ Gunter Martens und Hans Zeller (Hg.), *Texte und Varianten: Probleme ihrer Edition und Interpretation* (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1971).

American readership and proved to have lost little of their value.² After 25 years and with little alteration they are still relevant in scholarship today.

Importance of the act of making public

One much-quoted essay from *Texte und Varianten* was the one written by Miroslav Červenka. Červenka was one of the Prague structuralists who carried out spectacular semiotic studies during the Prague Spring. In his essay he raised the important point of “der Publikationsakt”, or in plain English “the act of publication”.³ From a semiotic point of view, the moment when an author makes a text public is a big turning point. At that point a text changes from a private matter to a public statement, and the transition from private text to literary text takes place. The text enters the public domain, and thus turns into a cultural-social fact with a specific status. This turning point forms an important moment in the literary process (Červenka speaks of a “Knotenpunkt”, ‘nodal point’) and the metamorphosis is studied by literary scholars. It is called an “Akt”, or an *action*, because the publication remains linked to a *conscious* decision by a subject. This is usually the author, who chooses one particular publication method from the range available in his own culture.

The concrete aims of the author who makes a text public may vary: they may be social, cultural, or material. More important however is that the “public-making subject” (the structural semiotic term for an author) and his publication enter into a semiotic game with pre-determined rules. Whether consciously or not, the writer gives the outside world the right to place his work within a particular system of symbols which is applied to all works which have been made public. The act of making public also brings about the transformation of a “person” into a “personality”: the author loses his private nature and becomes a more or less abstract entity, to be studied as a semiotic symbol. In less structuralist-semiotic terms: an author who brings out a book knows that for publications there are particular forms and rules. He subjects his book to reviews, for example, and he uses a publishing house as a medium to determine the design of his book. At the same time he realises that both he and his book will become public property.

² Hans Walter Gabler, George Bornstein and Gillian Borland Pierce (ed.), *Contemporary German Editorial Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

³ Miroslav Červenka, “Textologie und Semiotik”, Martens und Zeller, pp. 143–163, especially pp. 144-145; Miroslav Červenka, ‘Textual Criticism and Semiotics’, Gabler, Bornstein and Borland, pp. 59-77, especially pp. 60-61.

For scholarly editing the “act of publication” proved to be of great significance. The choice of the base text (the version of a literary work on which an edition is based) is directly affected by it, and all theories on authorisation have their origins in the importance accorded to the act of publication. The transition from the private to the public domain is of great significance for a text with regard to its genesis and history.⁴

Červenka’s act of publication is in line in many ways with autonomist conceptions of literature, which recognise that a text can detach itself from the producer; that it can become independent of him, and that it should also be regarded as such. The “act of publication”, at the very moment when it takes place, becomes a sort of ritual cutting of the umbilical cord, and the autonomists naturally favour such a separation.⁵ From the moment of publication onward the text is public property.

History of the act of publication: publication by performance

How has the publication of texts emerged? Would a writer of classical times or a medieval author have known when his texts were being transcribed and distributed on a small scale? Would he have taken pride in this? I imagine that as soon as a copy had been made that could serve as a basis for further copies, much went on without his being aware of it. In those days the author’s pleasure would have been more likely to derive from the act of publication through oral transmission. In those times, publishing was still linked in a very direct manner with “public”: as a presentation or a stage performance for a live audience. Literature was still oral, it was written down simply as an *aide-mémoire*. The significance of the oral line of publishing has decreased over the centuries, and it has so as a matter of course after the invention of printing.

And yet oral publishing did not die out. In the eighteenth century we encounter a new variety. The poets’ society, where practical exercises in the art of poetry took place, was then in its heyday, at least in the Netherlands. Poets became members of such societies in order to present, or rather to perform, their products to their fellow poets, for the oral tradition ruled here, too. The other members all gave their opinion and the poet went home with a list of comments which he then worked through, and only after he had done so did publication on

⁴ It was partly for this reason that I sided with Červenka in my textbook Marita Mathijsen, *Naar de letter. Handboek editiewetenschap* (Den Haag: Constantijn Huygens Instituut 1997).

⁵ For an autonomist view of literature see for example J.J. Oversteegen, *De Novembristen van Merlyn* (Utrecht: HES, 1983).

paper take place.⁶ The act of publication, therefore, was much less absolute than Červenka imagined. There appear to be various different stages of the act.

In the nineteenth century men and women of letters continued to read new texts aloud before having them printed. At least in the Netherlands the oral tradition remained in full bloom. With novels, recitation took place within the family circle. In addition there were many writers who regularly performed in public. For them this public reading was the *editio princeps*, the first public manifestation of a narrative poem, and in this sense it constituted the “act of publication”. In such a case the transition from private text to public text should not be located at publication, as Červenka would have it, but rather at the first public reading.

At least for as far as Dutch poetry is concerned, oral culture underwent a renaissance in the final decades of the twentieth century. There are various open platforms where poets declaim poetry especially written for the occasion, which they have learned by heart. Publication on paper may come later, the public reading is the object. The act of publication does not seem to take this group of literary men and women into account. The latest generation of poets is increasingly inclined to make its work public by means of performance or on a website. Publication in print may follow later. With these poets the metaphor of the cutting of the umbilical cord fails to match adequately the first publication. In their case it is rather a gradual process of growth from private to public.

History of making public: publication by printing

What about the act of publication in the early days of printing, even considered apart from the ongoing oral tradition? Here, too, the act of publication appears not to be so absolute as it became later. With early duplication by printing, there was little difference between the number of copies of a transcribed manuscript and that of a printed book. To some extent the author knew his readers: the network of a country’s cultured few. It would further seem that books were left in printed sheet form until an order came in.⁷ It was not the custom at that time to bombard the country with copies, as is now the case with the works of well-known authors. The limited status of printing is further confirmed by the fact that the publication of a book was often paid for by the author himself, with the effect that a book with a very small edition remained more or less in the private sphere, among friends.

⁶ C.B.F. Singeling, *Gezellige schrijvers. Aspecten van letterkundige genootschappelijkheid in Nederland, 1750-1800* Amsterdam: Rodopi 1991).

⁷ For a description of the early printing process and the relevant customs see: www.bibliopolis.nl [19 April 2007]

The limited edition and the private edition have not vanished from society. In the nineteenth century they even survived the mass production of books which then developed, owing to the emergence of the bibliophile edition. In the twentieth century a whole circuit of printing in small editions has come into existence, in both bibliophile and inexpensive versions, designed for kindred spirits.

A new paradigm

Over past decades the public domain has expanded enormously. People put themselves on show, purely as themselves, in the public domain, with no intervening product.⁸ They literally sell themselves, as for example in tv-programmes like *The Robinson Expedition* or *Big Brother*. The special nature of the public domain has accordingly decreased: public areas are nowadays taken over by private individuals, too. When disasters or the deaths of public figures are reported, the opinions of casual passers-by count for as much as those of politicians or experts. In the same context we may also mention the literature of self-exposure, which is concerned only with the writer's private life.

All this has brought about a new paradigm, one that should lead to reconsideration of various assumptions. These are not concerned with scholarly editing alone. The literary sociologist and the book historian must accept that the changes in methods of publication have large consequences, particularly so for the producer of texts. The act of publication has become much less important in the process of a literary text than it was several decades ago.

Červenka and other structuralists had certain grounds for their thesis about the prime significance of the act of publication. What are they? In order to find out, we must investigate what exactly happens when a writer takes a text to a publisher, followed by publication of that text.

I shall now classify the principal shifts that occur to a text when it is transformed from a manuscript into a printed work — shifts that concern outward appearance as well as social-cultural aspects (see diagram 1). I deal first with the standard transformation of a (literary) text into a book by an established publisher. Using the same points, I show next how the familiar course of events is right now undergoing a major transition.

⁸ On this subject see: Daan Roovers, “‘Hij wilde mij vermoorden’. Interview Connie Palmen”, *Filosofie Magazine* 13.3 (2004), 12-15.

The traditional process

This is what happens when a manuscript is transformed into a printed text:

1. From private to public

A printed text is carried from the private sphere into the public domain. The text may take part in the debate, the *discours*, and it exists in that sense only when it has been printed and distributed.

2. From single copy to multiple copies

A text that takes part in the public domain generally consists of many identical copies. The text goes from single to multiple. This duplication is one of identical forms.

3. Dynamic versus static

As long as the text has not been printed, it is still capable of alteration, it is still, as it were, in motion. This ceases to be so at the moment when the text is printed and the symbols have become fixed. Alteration then become possible only with the next edition. For editors the genetic race-track ends at the act of publication; from that point onwards the history of the printed text begins.

4. From closed text to debatable text

There is a dividing line between influencing and being influenced. Before the act of publication the text absorbs influences and is therefore consumptive by nature. After publication the text exerts an influence and is accordingly productive.

5. From literary intention to literary recognition

It is particularly true of literary texts that the unpublished text with literary intent and potential turns into a text, which may or may not be accorded a literary reception.

6. Literary obstacle race

A private text is put through an obstacle race before it becomes a public text. It must surmount all sorts of built-in barriers before it is permitted to see the literary light of day. Publishers and editors determine whether a text appears in the public domain. These barriers are to a certain extent determined sociologically, economically, and culturally, and they are strongly linked with the institutions of literary life.

7. Public sphere

The author of a private text is a private person. As soon as the text has become public, the private person turns into a public person, who is accorded a particular status. The author allows certain aspects of himself to enter the public sphere.

8. Contribution to the economy

The text turns from a distinct object into a commodity, on which a whole network of producers depends. Publisher, editor, printer, binder, bookseller: for these and many more among those involved the book is a means of existence, and its cultural or symbolic value is sometimes less important than its economic value.

9. Differences in design

The act of publication involves a process of transmission. The outward appearance of a text undergoes a metamorphosis. Semiotically appropriate symbols must be found for the book cover, typeface, sort of paper, and format, each with its own power of expression and character, in harmony with the author's intention.

The list of shifts is impressive. It might indicate that an absolute form of the act of publication exists after all, such as has been assumed by Červenka, and which he regards as a conscious deed of the author. The most prominent theoretician of scholarly editing in the past, Siegfried Scheibe, grounds his preference for the first edition as the base text in the act of publication: after a long process of reflection, writing, and rewriting, the author has decided that a text may enter the public domain. This is why the first edition is the most important one for the literary, textual, printing, and authorial history of the book, and why it ought as a rule to be chosen as base text by the editor.⁹

The democratisation of the printing process

Even so, the practice of publishing is undergoing a major process of transition, so that nowadays one must speak of a much more gradual form of the act of publication, and of a much more diffuse borderline between private and public. The process can be described as the democratisation of the printing process. It was ushered in by such technical innovations as offset printing, laser printing, and computer typesetting. Publishing is no longer reserved for an elite which has to surmount formidable barriers before it can set a public printing process in motion. By means of the points mentioned above I shall now outline what changes have taken place over the last twenty years or so.

1. Nowadays, due to the many forms of private printing, the move from private text to published text is not nearly so clear-cut as it used to be. For a handful of euro's everyone can have a volume of poetry printed and distributed within their own circle

⁹ Siegfried Scheibe, "Zum editorischen Problem des Textes", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 101 (1982), 12-29. (Sonderheft: *Probleme neugermanistischer Edition*). Cf. also Mathijsen 1997, pp. 149-154.

- of friends. There are so many journals and little magazines that a twilight zone in the public domain has come into being. There is no longer one debate: there are many.
2. The move from one copy to many has also come about more gradually. Anyone can make small editions for private use in view of the easy methods of production and their modest costs. At the same time one also sees the opposite: the enormous print runs for novels by popular writers lead to devaluation by sheer force of numbers. A book becomes less desirable and has less allure when it has been printed by the million.
 3. Texts which have been published on the internet no longer have a static character: it is easy to make alterations. In the case of printed books, too, texts have become less static. There have been experiments with books with various possible endings, and there is one, in ring-binder format, that may begin on any given page. Printing techniques, too, have brought about a new dynamic. New editions can be produced so quickly that printer's errors are much less injurious to an edition. First editions have become proof copies.
 4. Though a text is still an alterable product, it remains consumptive in nature and continually undergoes new influences. Nevertheless, the small editions of the private presses have scarcely any influence on the public debate, and the shift from consumptive to productive does not take place.
 5. With regard to literary intention, things seem to have remained the same.
 6. Because of the many opportunities for publication, fewer obstacles are left to be surmounted. If a well-known publishing firm shows no interest, a writer can publish his own work. In addition there are all sorts of non-literary factors which have come to influence admission to the market, notably such trivial matters as the reputation or the appearance of the writer.
 7. The difference between the private person and the public person seems to have become blurred by the enlargement of the public domain. The act of publication no longer has any influence on anyone's behaviour: everyone plays a role in public, and at the same time there are no more limits to what a private person may admit into the public domain. In addition we now have the public domain of internet, which forms a wholly diffuse area between private and public.
 8. The economic factor, whereby a text becomes a product on which a branch of industry depends, does not apply to the twilight zone of the public domain. The little

magazines, brochures, volumes of poetry, conference reports and suchlike, which are produced in small numbers, have a less obvious economic significance.

9. In the field of graphic design there is still a certain stigma attached to the area between the semi-public and the fully public domain, for many privately printed editions are still distinguishable from the products of renowned publishing firms. At the same time, however, one sees that the most prestigious and valuable works of scholarship appear in the shoddy typography of academic publishers, because they have no chance of acceptance by big publishers, owing to their lack of economic significance.

Consequences for scholarly editing

What are the consequences of these changes for scholarly editing? The view that the first act of publication is the most appropriate for determining the base text can no longer be taken as normative. Other grounds must be found for selecting the version of a literary work that is best suited for an edition. This will not be an easy task. Publishing has become a relative rather than an absolute process, whereas on the other hand the base text remains an absolute concept with no place left for relativity. It is perhaps no longer possible to speak of a “most suitable version” for a basic text. More than ever, editors will have to find partly new ways and means to crystallise the dynamic of a literary work in an edition.

Conclusion

Recent and current changes in publishing are far from marginal. They are concerned with major transitions in the public and private domains, with the greater accessibility of the public domain for everyone, due both to altered means of production and to the change of mentality with regard to the public domain. These transitions are so far-reaching as to allow one to speak of a new paradigm of revealing a text, which entails the abandonment of the view that the “Act of publication” has an absolute status. Is that really so strange? After all, even God Himself chose to reveal his Word only gradually.

- **Diagram 1**

Before publication	After publication
private text	public text
single form (1 copy)	identical multiple copies
dynamic: alterable	static: symbols are fixed
open to influence	exerting influence
literary potential	may or may not have literary reception
not yet admitted into literary circuit	admitted into literary circuit
author is private person	author is public person
no economic significance	part of economic circuit
absence of semiotic design	semiotic design