

Alistair Rolls and
Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan (eds)

Masking Strategies

Unwrapping the French Paratext



Peter Lang

Introduction: Unwrapping the French Paratext

As an introduction to an edited volume, this essay is a liminal space between the essays that constitute the collection entitled *Masking Strategies: Unwrapping the French Paratext* and you, the readers who are preparing to engage with them. Of course, the nature of this liminal space is to be both inside this collection and outside it; it packages the essays, effectively sells them to readers, enabling them to approach the collected texts through one, but not the only, paradigm. Thus, it is the readers' 'discovery' of the volume through the paratext that determines its meanings. This liminal essay represents, however, our responsibility as authors to produce a reading context for a new and productive exchange, between a here and a there constituted on either side of the paratextual portal, and an us and a them.¹ As an essay, the current text has a double function: it both resembles the essays that follow and, at the same time, introduces them, thereby becoming pulled into the paratextual apparatus. Indeed, the other texts, for the most part, do not speak to each other but directly to the readers, whereas this text speaks to them as a collection. It speaks to them and, at the same time, it enables them to speak (as a whole, with some degree of collective authority) to readers. So, as we speak to the essays, we contributors also speak rather differently here to them, or you, than we do when we divide into our respective individualities inside the body of the text(s) proper. It is this difference that is the realm of the paratext. And it is the study of this paratextual difference, of this differentiating space between text, author and reader, which we wish to interrogate here (and there) in this text (and in the texts that follow).

1 The 'us' represented here includes all the contributors to the present volume and those who contributed to the research workshop in an advisory capacity, especially Jean-Pierre Boulé. We have tried to express the spirit of the exchanges that took place as part of that collective process in this introduction.

At what point does the paratext end and the text begin? Clearly, this framing essay can only frame the debate. It is nonetheless a debate that informed several months of dialogue amongst the contributors, leading to an intensive two-day colloquium; it is also a debate that has been happening since Gérard Genette delimited the term in his seminal essay, *Seuils* (1987).² It is also, however, a debate that warrants further reflection, hence this book. Thus, with the word book, we make a move that closes the gap between the outside and the inside, bringing the paratextual element that is this introductory essay into the collective fold of these pages. But, of course, the book also has a weight that is made up of covers, and these are another matter. And they are also very much our matter here, as you readers will discover, with the majority of the essays that follow being to a greater or lesser degree interested in the covers that adorn and sell books. Covers are the material that both attracts and protects, helping readers to penetrate them and, at other times and often at the same time, complicating matters and rather surreptitiously masking the text within.

We are also interested in that space between the covers and the text proper, which is *this* space, unless you consider that the text has already begun. And if the text has already begun, then we are somehow in two or more space-time continuums at once: the now of composition (and now of editing), the then of the construction of the texts we read in preparing this volume, and the future of your reading. As you can see, the paratext is difficult to pin down in time and space, all the more so, given the ever-evolving realms of hypertextuality that have grown to mediate so many aspects of our experience of ours and other worlds since Genette penned

- 2 Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987). Subsequent studies include Philippe Lane, *La Périphérie du texte* (Paris: Nathan, 1992); and Mireille Calle-Gruber and Elisabeth Zawiszka (eds), *Paratextes: Études aux bords du texte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000). More recently there have been a number of calls for papers for special editions of journals and conference panels with a focus on the paratext, including: *Neohelicon: Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, 1 (2010), *Poetics of the Paratext*, guest-edited by R.-L. Etienne Barnett; and 'Duly Noted: Approaches to the Paratext', a panel to be convened at the 2011 conference of the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA).

Seuils. Indeed, self-alterity and liminal space are arguably less innocent and more complex concepts now that the virtual is so interwoven into our everyday networks.

Titles, too, are matters of concern to us in this volume. As you will have noticed, the title of this book is *Masking Strategies: Unwrapping the French Paratext*. It is written on the cover. This title says something of the present volume's contents, packaging them as something coherent that lies within. The title is metonymic, while also remaining metaphorical, of the book; it says what it is while also admitting that its relation to it is emblematic and ancillary. The title of the present essay is less encompassing; it incorporates the subtitle, and only the subtitle, of the full title. It thus says less than the cover title while also, we hope, saying more about the book. So, while you have moved deeper into the book, towards the text, as it were, you also seem to have moved further away from the purchase you have on the whole, losing the overarching perspective of the external and adopting the partial view of the insider. For, in addition to attracting, the paratext can also repel; the motion it represents and facilitates is two-directional, if not multi-directional.

Further facilitating this process, we shall now say something about the process that has led to the assembly of these essays. This is, of course, another paratextual step. And in describing it thus, we realize that all introductions to edited volumes are like this (for the simple reason that they are all paratextual). This one is only different by degree. As the introduction to an edited volume about the paratext, it is, if not more aware of, at least more focused on its paratextual status. It is, in this way, rather like some of the objects of study in the essays that follow: they too operate paratextually, as covers and introductions, but they are somehow more markedly, on occasion more self-referentially, so. And by positioning the spotlight on these telling examples of the paratext we hope to make them even more so.

It is also worth acknowledging (if we may interrupt the expected paratextual formalities) that this book began its life at a meeting of a university committee. It was the Kelter Hartley bequest committee and the university was the University of Newcastle in New South Wales in Australia. The decision made at this meeting was to set up a workshop, the Kelter Hartley Research Excellence workshop, designed to facilitate dialogue among

scholars on a particular topic, in this (the inaugural) case, the paratext. The workshop took place between 15 December and 17 December 2010. The process of editing this essay extends this period up to Sunday 20 December, and it is rather difficult to say whether the workshop has finished or not – we are in a liminal space, between before and after the workshop that generated the writing of these essays, including this one. On the one hand, the last collective act of the workshop was arguably the final group discussion, during which we discussed the last of the essays that are contained within, responding to it as a group and suggesting modifications that will happen between now (our time) and publication. On the other hand, to the extent that a (post-)workshop swim enabled conclusions to be drawn, we might consider the last collective acts to have included bodysurfing at Newcastle's beaches. Certainly, the appropriateness of the liminal space in which this bodysurfing took place, on a coastal strip between inland (in this case, urban east-coast Australia) and the sea, was not lost on us: with our feet on and off the ground, we also noted that we were discussing the event that had been while realizing that we were keeping it alive, commenting on it but also in it. In time and space then, our conclusion was markedly, self-referentially paratextual. And by preceding the collective writing of the introduction, it spoke volumes of the paratextual blurring of closure and opening, covering and uncovering. Indeed, while much of what precedes risks the indulgences of the self-referential, liminality remains resolutely political, with the physical border of the Australian state having enacted its own drama of attraction and repulsion in the days before the workshop. The tragic drowning of refugees seeking asylum on the shores of Christmas Island demonstrates how borders, and the crossing of borders, represent an enterprise that shapes, and in some cases, destroys lives.

The idea that the paratext uncovers as much as it covers, masking the work of the text (by replacing it with an attractive cover) as well as unmasking it (by talking about the authors' contribution), was one of the key points driving this volume. It also points to the investments made whenever we cross thresholds. We were struck not only by the wealth of possibilities for textual debate generated by Genette but also by the limits, in and of themselves ideological, that he puts around the paratext. By discussing and performing his famous taxonomy of textual borders,

his scholarship speaks of a structuralist approach to text that must have appeared almost reactionary at the time of its publication. For, to say that we have moved on from structuralism is also to forget that the move from structuralism to poststructuralism had already happened when *Seuils* first came out. But have studies of the paratext themselves moved forward in ways that permit new understandings of the politics, psychologies and post-millennial positioning that permeate our own oscillations between the text and *hors-texte* (which, as we all know since Derrida, may be an illusory distinction)? This volume will not provide definitive answers to these questions, but by picking the paratext up in a new context it enables them to be posed and grapples with what they might mean more than two decades later. Certainly, the focus of the discussion is one that more deliberately includes the role of the reader in the dynamics of the paratext. Our starting point is thus one that follows on from Genette's own paratextual elements: the beginning and end of *Seuils*. In particular, we are interested in the second footnote of that famous text,³ the way it extends beyond that essay's own parameters, connecting with the work of the Yale School of deconstructionist criticism and in particular J. Hillis Miller's famous study of *parasitism*. So, even as Genette begins his author-based consideration of what constitutes the limits of the text he enacts the intertextuality that sees limits between his text and other discourses both described and defined but also dissolved. By drawing this initial connection between his own work and that of a school that might appear so opposed to his own purpose, he sows the seeds for a reader-based counter-reading of his own authorial consideration of borders, opening the opportunity for cross-referencing with other theories of borders as contact zones and sites of osmosis.⁴ While Genette is, of course, not against osmosis, it is the possibility that the text's identity may be embedded within a collective that the author cannot control, although he might appeal to it and understand

3 Genette, *Seuils*, p. 7.

4 See, for example, Mary Louise Pratt, 'Apocalypse in the Andes: Contact Zones and the Struggle for Interpretive Power', *Encuentros*, 15 (Cultural Center, Inter-American Development Bank, March 1996); and Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).