



# What is Textuality?

## Part II

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The text is an indecidable. The text's indecidability is elaborated in terms of and as an operative feature of its textuality. Indeed, the text's textuality is its indecidability. It is not that the text is one thing and that there is a problem of determining what that thing is—although an articulation of the status of the text is no easy matter and elucidating its textuality is not a simple procedure. The indecision is not a psychological state of the reader, although interpretation is usually necessary in order to make sense of the text's textuality. The reader often requires an interpretation in order to dispel any confusion that might arise in a reading, or *the* reading, of a text. However, the text's indecidability does not lie in the reader's confusion. Furthermore, the text's indecidability does not result from an indeterminacy of reference or a simple multiplicity of references. Many texts do exhibit a world in which it is often unclear as to what (if any) reality, what (if any) experience, what (if any) event is cited or invoked. And many texts offer various possible worlds which do or could suit the narrative offered in a particular text. But, neither of these features characterize the text's indecidability. The text's indecidability lies in its textuality or textualities through which the text (or a text) establishes its identity as a text.

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Textuality is that which constitutes a text as a text in a particular way. Textuality constitutes the text as an indecidable. The textuality of a text produces knowledge about the text. The knowledge that it produces is of a particular sort and in a particular way. Its indecidability does not lie in the knowledge that is produced but rather in the status of the text in which the production occurs. Textuality (in general) is produced in the textualization of the text. In rendering itself text, the text offers up a textuality which is indecidability itself. The text is an indecidable because its textuality is indecidable. Its textuality is indecidable because textuality occurs at the place where the text escapes definition, particular determination, specification, where the text effaces itself in favor of what Paul DeMan calls a "disfiguration." Textuality occurs where the text off-centers itself. The text is off-center (excentric); its textuality is its decentering in specific ways.

A reading of the text occurs *through* its textuality or textualities. The text is *what* is read, but its textuality or textualities is *how* it is read. An interpretation of the text arises in that the textualities are

understood as the meaning-structure(s) of the text. The interpretation of the text brings the textuality or textualities *in* so as to take them outside the text, so as to specify and determine the text in a particular fashion. The text is apart from its readings and interpretations. Its textuality or textualities are constituted in a reading of the text and identified through an interpretation of it. But, if the text is an indecidable and its textuality is its indecidability, then what can it mean to speak of a reading or an interpretation of a text? If indecidable, what sort of readings and interpretations are possible? If indecidable, why read or interpret?

In order to provide anything like an answer to these questions, both the nature of the indecidability and the place of the text will have to be assessed. By establishing the place of the text, the respect in which it is an indecidable will become evident. An assessment and elaboration of its indecidability will also be an assessment and elaboration of its textuality.

As Edward Said (1980, p. 89) has pointed out, textuality is a *practice*. Through its textuality, the text makes itself mean, makes itself be, makes itself come about in a particular way. At the same time, through its textuality, the text makes itself other than what it is in a particular way or ways. Through its textuality, the text relinquishes its status as identity and affirms its condition as pure difference. Because of its textuality, the text eludes itself, defines itself, or determines itself in particular ways. But, in that its textuality is other, the text "dedefines" itself, inscribes itself in a texture or network of meaning which is not limited to the text itself. By dedefining itself, the text offers the possibility of a definitive reading and a decisive interpretation. By the very nature of its textuality, neither the definitive reading nor the decisive interpretation succeed. Although the reading may define and the interpretation may decide, the text neither defines nor decides. The text remains operationally and fundamentally indecidable. Its textuality as a practice is the text dedefining itself and rendering itself operationally and fundamentally indecidable. The text is difference itself; its textuality is its differing from itself, making itself different. Each text is different. In differing, it defers; it produces a textuality which is consistent with and even identical to the textuality of other texts. Hence through its textuality, the text brings in, incorporates, and invokes other texts. But because the text is indecidable, its textuality does not determine once and for all which meaning or meanings, interpretation or interpretations, which reading or readings prevail and which ones do not.

The indecidability of the textuality of the text is different from the text as indecidable. The text as an indecidable is conditioned by the nature and function of indecidables. According to Derrida, indecidables are theoretical configurations which are marked and

located in writing as highlighted “words” or “concepts.” Derrida operates and employs a general strategy of deconstruction which “avoids simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics. It also “does not simply *reside* within the closed field of binary oppositions, for that would only confirm the binary field itself” (Derrida, 1981a, p. 41). Thus, indecidables perform a dual function. They keep notions from turning into a third term which synthesizes and thereby neutralizes oppositional pairs *and* they prohibit notions from occupying either one side or the other. In short, indecidables are not Hegelian *Aufhebungen* yet they also do not simply constitute antithetical (or oppositional) structural dyads. Indecidables situate themselves at the interface or slash between such oppositional pairs. They lean in each direction at once without affirming, with exclusivity, either one side or the other. Indecidables occur in the context of traditional metaphysical, philosophical, or literary terms and therefore within the general field of writing. Indecidables have no independent status apart from the general field of writing and the oppositional structures in which they take place. Furthermore, they are spread out—disseminated—throughout the general field of writing. They demonstrate the limitations of traditional notions and yet are inscribed within the very discourses in which such traditional notions are situated.

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Derrida’s deconstructive strategy practices a “double writing.” This double writing which he elaborates in the essay on the “Double Session” indicates the respect in which writing operates in two places at once. The double writing is also a double science, a double séance, a double scene, and so forth. The double writing is the inscription of a binary oppositional structure within the general field of writing. Within that general field, with its traditional metaphysical concepts, hierarchies assert themselves. The deconstructive strategy produces and provokes an overturning or reversal of the hierarchy as affirmed within the tradition. In order to accomplish such an overturning, it is necessary to locate the relevant oppositional terms within the general field and thereby to locate the indecidables as well.

Derrida identifies a wide variety of indecidables: *communication*, which is neither what is given nor what is received; *difference*, which is neither temporal deferral nor spatial differing; *pharmakon*, which is neither remedy nor poison, neither speech nor writing; *hymen*, which is neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor the unveiling; *supplement*, which is neither accident nor essence, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside; and so on (Derrida, 1981a, p. 43). The strategy, then, is to operate at the indecidable interface between the “neither” and the “nor.” The indecidable is not a third term, nor, is it resolvable into either of the two sides. If now the text is an indecidable, it should be more readily apparent in what sense it is so.

The text is “exorbitant” (Said, 1980, pp. 93-94). The text goes out beyond itself. The text demonstrates its supplementarity by being something more than what is there. What is there sets limits to itself, establishes its own boundaries, margins, borderlines, frontiers, circumscriptions. Yet at the same time the text spills over those boundaries, frontiers, and circumscriptions. The text spills over into one or another definition of itself. It cannot and does not remain pure difference. There is always a remainder according to which the text affirms an identity for itself. The text tends to fall on one side or the other of a whole complex of binary oppositions. In this sense, the text is (a) neither visible nor invisible, (b) neither inside nor outside, (c) neither present nor absent, (d) neither text nor context, (e) neither one nor many. By considering the respects in which the text is located at the interface of these oppositions, it shall become evident where the text’s textuality occurs and how specifically it tends to spill over onto one side or the other as a resolution of one sort or another of its indecidability.

### Visible/Invisible

The text is always hiding something: something of itself, something which it is not. As Said points out, unlike Foucault’s view in which the text is invisible, there is something to be revealed, stated, brought to a certain visibility. For Derrida, however, the more that is grasped about the text, the more detail there is of what is not there (Said, 1980, p. 89). The view proposed here is that what is invisible or hidden in the text comes into view in terms of its textuality, but *qua* text the more that is affirmed about the text in terms of its textuality, the more the text effaces itself, evades definition, escapes visible determination. The text is visible in that it offers a narrative, discloses a world, opens up a clearing in which sounds, ideas, rhythms, and stories are made evident. But the text also tends to hide its very textuality or textualities. It tends to cover up its meanings and meaning structures. Readings only disclose the surfaces; interpretations are required to reveal its meaning, rendering its enigmatic and indecidable character more evident. It cannot be decided whether the text is visible or not. To opt for one or the other is to render its textuality determinate—though its textuality remains fundamentally indecidable. A text might be an epic novel or it might be a fragment, it might be a long poem or it might be a screenplay. The limits of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are clearly outlined in repeated triadic form: from the canzone to the canto and the canto to *terza rima* verse, from Hell to Heaven through Purgatory, from Virgil to Beatrice through Statius, and so on; yet much of autobiographical textuality, historical textuality, and poetic textuality are hidden from view. The poem’s triadics makes certain features of its theological textuality visible and open for inspection. Although at the fringes the trinity turns into a unity, ninety-nine cantos engender a hundredth, along with a Hell,

Purgatory, and Paradise, there is also a Rose or Empyrean which englobes them all. What could be said about the trinity, about controversies among realists and nominalists, about the function of religious allegory in secular medieval romances, about Dante's inventions of a cosmological *Weltanschauung*, is not visible in the text. To take them as hidden and to claim that they constitute the text in some fundamental way is to decide on its theological textuality at a level where it is not decidable, where it operates at the border between what is visible and what is not visible in the text.

### Inside/Outside

If it could be determined what is inside the text and what is outside, then the textuality or textualities of the text would also be decidable. Are the varioria to Shakespeare's plays inside the text or outside? Is the concluding portion of the *Roman de la rose* written by Jean de Meun and added onto Guillaume de Lorris' poem inside or outside the text? Is *Stephen Hero* part of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in the ways in which Kant's A and B versions are part of (inside) the *Critique of Pure Reason*? Are the spaces between the aphorisms in Nietzsche's *Gay Science* inside or outside the text? What is indecidable about each of these texts is also indecidable about *the* text. The text is neither a work nor a series of words, neither a book nor the content of its pages. The text is off-center, located where the intratextual meets the extratextual and dedefines its borders. Its textuality is precisely the condition of not setting clear lines of demarcation between the intratextual and the extratextual, between what counts as part of the text and what does not. Its textuality is also the practice of upsetting specifications as to where the borderlines occur. As Said puts it, the text "bursts through semantic horizons" (Said, 1980, p. 108). The practice of textuality is to traverse those limits of meaning and particularly those which arbitrarily set boundaries to the text.

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### Presence/Absence

The text is neither present nor absent, neither scription nor diction, neither writing nor speech. The text is neither the graphic writing nor the spoken sounds. The text is neither a substitute for something absent nor the immediate form of something present. What Derrida calls writing (*écriture*) is the indecidable between the present and the absent, between writing as graphic sign and speech as verbal sounds. Like *écriture*, the text operates at the interface between the oppositional polarities. Although there are specific texts, Derrida also says that there is a "general text" which "practically inscribes and overflows the limits of a discourse" entirely regulated by essence, meaning, truth, consciousness, ideality, etc." Derrida goes on to write that "*there is* such a general text everywhere that this discourse and its order (essence, sense, truth, meaning, consciousness, ideality, etc.) are overflowed, that is, everywhere that their au-

thority is put back into the position of a *mark* in a chain that this authority intrinsically and illusorily believes it wishes to, and does in fact, govern. This general text is not limited to writings on the page" (Derrida, 1981a, p. 60). The general text is not fully present in any particular text. Indeed, just as there is no way of deciding what is *in* a text, there is no way of deciding what is present in the text. What is present in the specific text is also present in the general text, but what is absent in the specific text may not be absent in the general text. Features of the general text permeate the specific text, render themselves clear and present in the specific text, but in that they are also directly and explicitly absent from the text; they cannot be said to be present.

The text is a performance, a speech act in a sense. As a performance, the text renders itself present, but what is rendered present is strictly absent. Lodged perhaps in the general text, what is absent is spoken and even written rendering what is absent present. Cartesian notions of clarity and distinctness are performed in Madame de Lafayette's novel *Princesse de Clèves*, theories and conditions of alienation are spoken in Brecht's *Mother Courage*, in the general text, Kafka's *The Castle* exhibits a search for an ego ideal which Freudian psychoanalysis had identified in the culture. The textuality of texts incorporates as present what is also absent; incorporates these elements in such a way that there is no way to decide whether they are present or absent—only that they are in play, in the play of differences which constitute the text.

### **Text/Context**

The text sets its own limits. In setting its own limits, it also establishes what goes with it and what does not. But is a text distinct from its context? The context is what accompanies the text. It is also what is outside and therefore other than the text. In its otherness, it is context only in that it is signaled in the text as that which goes with it. As Derrida (1977) points out in "Limited Inc. a b c...", context in French can be heard as "*qu'on texte*"—that which one texts. In other words, the context is that which is rendered text. It includes the neologistic verb "to text." Context, then, is the making part of the text that which is not part of the text and that which remains other than the text. Context may be political, historical, literary, cultural, social, and so forth. Although many of these features are typically regarded as extrinsic to the text, outside the text, other than the text, nevertheless they accompany the text and are "texted," in that they are the context for the text in question. In that they are "texted," or with respect to their textuality, "textualized," they are also intrinsic to the text. The second world war is textualized in Sartre's *Chemins de la liberté* (*Roads to Freedom*) novels, the American Civil war in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. The condition of blacks in America is textualized in

Ralph Elliston's *Invisible Man*; apartheid is rendered text in Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. Early twentieth century social structure among the upper bourgeoisie is textualized in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* with respect to England and in Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* with respect to France. In these cases, what is offered is not the representation of the outside world in the text, though the textuality of the text can be interpreted as such. Rather, although separate and other, the generalized context or milieu is incorporated into the framework of the text without thematization and specific identification.

Along with contexts, texts have intertexts. Although intertexts are texts which go along with texts, they are also identified and specified in texts. Intertexts, are included within texts in that they become part of a complex of texts which constitute the text in question. Because intertexts span the boundaries between text and intertext, there is no way to decide whether they are inside or outside, part of or separate from the text in question.

### **Textuality: Unity or Multiplicity?**

60 Textuality is the indecidability of the text. The text is situated at the interface between visible/invisible, inside/outside, presence/absence, text/context. The text is an indecidable. The text falls on neither side. It cannot be decided on which side it falls. Its indecidability is its textuality. Its character as difference is its indecidability. The textuality of the text is both a condition of the text and the practice of the text. Textuality, however, is not single. For each text, there many textualities. These different textualities are read and interpreted. Textualities are not tied to particular texts. They are part of the general text. Yet particular texts exhibit, manifest, and operate particular textualities. Autobiographical textuality occurs in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and Thoreau's *Walden*, but also in a more restricted domain in many biology textbooks or in psychological research papers. Historical textuality appears in texts as diverse as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, and Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, but it also enters into Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Scientific textuality, psychological textuality, gastronomic textuality, and so forth operate so as to produce the indecidability of texts. Certainly not all texts exhibit and practice all types of textuality. Some achieve dominance where others hold a minor status in specific texts. Particular textualities can be characterized and qualified apart from texts, but they achieve their practice and function in terms of particular texts. From their multiplicity they contribute to the indecidability of the text and acquire their own status in the place and places of difference.

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