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A CONTRIBUTORS’ INTRODUCTION
Unwrapping the French Paratext

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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. 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).

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). 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.

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.

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 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 Kelver 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 Kelver 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 December 15 and 17 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, 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. 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 its mechanics, which seems to problematize the ostensible aims made in Seuils. This does not seem like an innocent act, given that this intriguing footnote appears in a text whose focus is paratextual apparatus, including such devices as footnotes. Thus, by appealing to deconstructionism, in the most external perimeter of its inner text, Seuils exposes a nihilistic reading of its own message. Another way of reading, another

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3 Genette, 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).
(writerly) reader is introduced, parasitically, into Genette’s (para)text, even as ‘intended’ (readerly) reader is crossing the threshold.

In addition to putting the reader back into discussions of the paratext, we also wish to pick up some other paratextual dimensions that Genette does not discuss, including, for example, translation. As we shall see, however, Genette once again manages to perform non-discussion within discussion, as if, in his text, he is deliberately both talking about it and not talking about it. One of his parting shots in Seuils is to suggest that had he had more time and space he would have developed a discussion about the paratextual function of the translated text. By making this point in the concluding pages of his text, that is to say once again in that outer perimeter of his diegesis proper, he emphasises, or reflexively enacts, the simultaneous saying of his non-saying, actively opening a debate that he has not got the time to open.\footnote{Genette, p. 372.}

Having opened with a footnote to a school of textual criticism that is about a different, and more radical, kind of opening out (and which has the potential to close him down before he has even begun), he closes with another opening. In this way, by taking up his suggestion that translation might be considered as a paratextual element, we are ourselves conscious of remaining within the (paratextual) discourse of Seuils even as we attempt to stretch its limits and, if possible, to go beyond it.

One of the areas of debate that we have found the most compelling in the production of this volume is the idea of (the) paratext as a liminal space, which can be considered as at once part of the text and separate from it, and thus pointing both inwards towards (the) text and outwards towards (the) hors-texte. If we consider the paratext as a zone of transition, as something that extends the text, not only marking its border but standing as its border, giving space and content to a place that might otherwise only be virtual, then it functions very much as the limen that Genette appears to have in mind, that is to say as a threshold area (vestibule, porch) which serves to ease the reader’s transit from physical reality into the sphere of text and imagination about to be revealed. This is not only a benign function of the paratext but also a Barthesian welcome to the pleasure zone, introducing readers, initiating them and, importantly, entertaining them. From a poststructuralist perspective, such a liminal function celebrates the text in its readerliness, making it reader-friendly in the sense of ‘easy to understand’. In such an initiatory paratextual structure, those elements most concerned with the hors-texte are characteristically placed in the outer layers (the generic markers of a collection or publishing house, quotes from reviews, etc.) while any epigraphs or prefatory material, being more related to text or authorial voice, tend to constitute inner dermal layers of this enfolding structure. The sequence of this progression is not only traditional but also necessary if the reader is to take pleasure in the initiation. This is the paratext as a kind of striptease, which is only as erotic as it is slow and clearly signposted. And to return to our geographical metaphor (or metonym), this limen is the stretch of beach between land and sea. To go to the beach is generally to swim in the water, but it is also potentially just about enjoying the sea’s invitation to step out (and in); one does not necessarily have to accept the invitation as pleasure is there to be had in the liminal space itself, which has volume.

A less innocent understanding of the paratext is one which reduces this volume. This is less pleasurable because it is more dangerous. In coastal terms, this is not the pleasure zone of Australia’s eastern beaches but, perhaps, the rocky shores of Christmas Island or that tropical space where inland Australia, the Bush, runs directly into the sea. As we shall see later in the volume, Darwin is typical of this space, its waters full not only of the sharks that embody our fear of the sea (and the water’s other side) but also crocodiles, those animals that symbolize the dangers of Australia’s bush fauna. In either of these examples then, there is no
lumen. Or rather, there is and is not one at the same time. It is too insubstantial, too sudden to be experienced as anything other than a threat of assault; for all its virtual violence, its absence, it is nonetheless active. Indeed, as a vector of change and as a gateway to radical otherness, such vanishing points are as much a paratext as are their more voluminous cousins.

As the essays in this volume reveal, regardless of the nature and extent of the paratextual periphery, there exists, too, a problematic, if not problematizing, function, one that lures the reader into paradox and impasse: the paratext as mask. Otherness is not explained here; rather, it is veiled, a trap into which the reader falls, unprepared. And yet, this disempowerment forces the reader to react and, then, to act. Such paratextual strategies, which disguise their intent, albeit perhaps disingenuously, make demands of the reader that result in a production of writerly text. It is therefore important that this paratext remain masked, for it is in this way that the text seduces the reader into taking responsibility for its (own) production. As a striptease, this fails to give pleasure but, to draw on Barthes’s terminology, its eroticism is only more blissful. This is the paratext as the text’s silent relationship with the reader, which must escape the author (even if the setting of the trap was a conscious authorial decision). Its presence takes the form of an absence, and its silence in the texts discussed in this volume speaks volumes of the writerly text that is implicit in all text. Again, the paratext signposts what all text does by reminding readers that they are there too, in the text.

David Gascoigne’s chapter has a programmatic function here insofar as it immediately stretches the boundaries of the paratext by offering an analysis of Paul Fournel’s Oulipian text Banlieue. Oulipo’s mission—to set rules that force texts to break traditional norms of literary construction—offers a tantalizing satire of the paratext, which is developed beyond all proportions in Fournel’s text. Indeed, as a liminal space it is extremely present, providing the reader with ample critical apparatus through which to read the text within. The text, however, is replaced by an absence, and it is this development of textual absence that becomes a key leitmotiv in this volume. For, if the paratext is all that there is in Fournel’s Banlieue, then it must be the text, at which point the questions that it elicits somehow take the place of the paratext, to the extent that an Oulipian puzzle must be predicated on the answers to its own riddles. The title itself, Banlieue, suggests just such a reversal. As Gascoigne points out, the outlying area that, historically, once received its meaning from the metropolitan centre is now what, like the paratext, gives meaning to the centre. The centre, in turn, is dissolved into absence, reversed into the periphery and, lastly, made meaningful by the paratextual clues that have now taken centre stage. Ultimately then, this satire of paratextual rules hints at some of the ‘other’ truths of the paratext, which subsequent chapters of this volume pursue. In terms of the deconstructionist other side of the paratext, at which we have already hinted, Banlieue exposes the absence that is the other side of any text. When a text is accompanied by such a vast paratextual apparatus, there is a way in which the readings presented must serve to highlight the text’s multiplicity. In addition to, rather than simply in place of, the text’s metaphysical reading, its overarching structure, there is also its other side, its nihilistic readings, which are the creative possibilities of that inevitable absence that sits in, around and between the lines of the present text.

Gemma Lemesurier follows on from the ludic elements of Paul Fournel’s Banlieue by revealing the dangerous side to the over-present paratext. In this case, it is the extensive paratextual trappings of Stendhal’s Armance that are taken to task. Lemesurier demonstrates that the metaphysical reading of this novel has been so forcibly sold to its readers by a mix of editorial and authorial strategies that the limits of text and critical apparatus have become blurred. This is a case where too broad and too heavy-handed a liminal space has almost erased the autonomy of the text, to the point where the text is present almost to echo and
justify the paratext. As Lemesurier points out, there is also a ludic process within this apparent flagship of the French critical and publishing tradition: the basis of the text’s scholarship seems to be predicated on a joke made by the author, a joke made potentially at the expense of readers and scholars alike. By revealing the joke in the text that then becomes the joke at once developed and lost in the paratext, new textual possibilities—of a highly reflexive text and a sort of proto-poststructuralist project—are suggested for *Armance*. The paratext is therefore shown both to be dangerous, inasmuch as it appears to strangle the text and render it as *impuissant* as its protagonist, and playful in the way in which it paradoxically points to its own willful *impuissance* and thus to its inability to control the text within.

The Barthesian framework drawn on by Lemesurier is also employed in Alistair Rolls’s chapter on Douglas Kennedy’s *Piège nuptial*. The concepts of readerly and writerly text as well as Barthes’s essay on the Parisian striptease are her used to develop a model of dermal textual layering, with the paratext functioning as a paradoxical striptease, both pulling readers in and provoking them, alerting them to the absence that will be the centre of their quest. The absence at the centre of Kennedy’s text will be at once the desert space of the Australian outback and the (reflexively staged) poverty of the plot of the novel itself. Absence will also be staged as the centre, potentially, of all text, especially when considered in the framework of the marketing strategies deployed to sell novels, authors and publishing series.

Considerations of Kennedy as French marketing phenomenon are further pursued in Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan’s chapter, in which Genette’s rather coy remarks about the paratextual potential of translated text are taken up in all seriousness. Translation theories, especially Skopos theory, are shown to have surprising resonances with the paratext. Translated and retranslated, Kennedy’s first, cult novel has become emblematic of the author himself who has been both an American in Paris, in much the same way as the first authors of Marcel Duhamel’s *Série Noire* owed their success to the marketing slogan *traduit de l’américain*, and now a self-styled French author in his own right. Translation can make an author and it can also style and control authorial identity. Here then, paratext changes text, but text also changes to reflect paratextual demands.

Murray Pratt’s chapter extends this analysis of the personality behind but also within the text. Reading Frédéric Beigbeder’s *99F* (both the novel and the film) within the context of the writer’s broader career and media persona, Pratt reveals an emergent paratextuality that comes close to branding—marketing, rather than masking, the strategies of both text and author. Any notion of the text as something capable of providing value or sense is disrupted by the repeated return to the individual personality as the only, yet the only impossible, site of entry into reading (the other). More than chronicling Beigbeder’s obsession with celebrity and hyper-luxury, however, Pratt’s response to the call to the consumer is one that queries the paratext’s power to set its own price or determine market demand. The paradox of the paratext, in this instance, is that the contracts with readers and viewers it negotiates, in line with an economics/ethics empty of reference, dislocate value from text to transaction.

In Hélène Jaccomard’s chapter, the central absence of the work of art is again placed centre stage. In this case, the history of the literary packaging of Yasmina Reza’s theatrical masterpiece « *Art* » is detailed in a close analysis of the paratextual covers that contain within them the published script, establishing theatrical success as an *objet d’art* in its own right. Unusual in that the script of this particular play has been so often re-published, the choices of cover vary considerably, with some following the conventions of the series and others extending the play’s own thematic concerns about how public perception precariously and tenuously ascribes value to works of art. In each case, the materiality of the work before its readers, directors, performers and producers is established by the visual replica of an
untouched ‘piece of art’ in the form of the cover, standing as icon for the tableau so central to the play.

The close-up on covers continues in Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby’s analysis of the strategies that can be inferred from the art used on the covers of Australian crime novels when they are marketed in translation in France. Fornasiero and West-Sooby’s comparison of ‘original’ and ‘French’ front covers and cover blurbs suggests a highly complex transfer and redeployment of cultural traditions and stereotypes. The power relations at play when a crime-fiction superpower translates and markets another national crime fiction by which its own readers appear fascinated make for a rich field of analysis, one lying at the intersection of translation, literary and cultural studies. Is French crime fiction a dominant paradigm first and then a centripetal force that pulls in texts to be translated, in a win-win scenario for both the French publishers and Australian authors? Or is French crime fiction, at its heart, a national success story based on translation and the cannibalization of other national crime fictions? Either way, the paratext is at its most strategic in what Fornasiero and West-Sooby describe as a cultural cover-up.

The concluding chapter in this volume is Françoise Grauby’s study of the covers and introductory passages of a number of French creative-writing manuals. While our ‘volume proper’ opens with an Oulipian take on the paradoxes of paratext as double space, of filling (complementing and commenting) and emptying text (pointing to a central absence or centre as absence), Grauby draws our volume to a conclusion by picking up a number of leitmotivs and opening space for new absences to be filled. As a whole, the creative-writing-manual phenomenon, a recent but burgeoning industry in France, operates like a paratext: rather than instructing readers on how to interpret a single text, the creative-writing manual instructs future writers on how to create any number of potential texts. While the paratext that encompasses a single text tends ostensibly to close down virtual possibilities (although, as we have seen, it also suggests their co-existence with the reading proposed by the author or editor), in the case of the writing manual as paratext it is precisely a virtual product (a writing as opposed to a reading, in this case) that is showcased. Again then, the text present in the manuals is almost entirely paratextual in nature and the object of the paratext, which is usually the text (inside), is notable as an absence, as a writerly reading always to be produced (outside). At the level of the individual creative-writing manual, too, the paratext is ambiguously charged. As Grauby demonstrates, the tension between ‘expressivism’, or writing as an act of individual imagination, and the collaborative process, or writing as dependent on a work ethic and thus open to all, is established as early as the covers, whose artwork opposes the myths and realities of the world of the writer. Once inside the introduction another opposition is set up, this time between the difficulties confronting the aspiring author and the strategies that allow these to be overcome. While the text serves to work through the problems, moving from inspiration to production, the paratext remains there, at the start and around the text, as a reminder to the reader that successful authorial production is the virtual outcome of this genre. In other words, the balancing out of text and paratext tempers the seduction of success with the shadow of failure.

In the same way, the most reflexive of paratexts is emblematic of all paratext: closure is only the companion of opening, and absence the counterpart of presence. Textual closure constitutes a field of study in its own right. Neither Genette, nor the present volume accord sufficient attention to those pages that come beyond La Fin, still less to the process of preparing for that final transition back from text. Yet, in their proliferation of formats for understanding the paratext, the essays that follow suggest strategic deployments of paratextuality capable of generating ways of reading around the text yet to come. Whether a well-sequenced liminal space or a highly charged virtual barrier, the paratext is never
innocent. As shown in Fornasiero and West-Sooby’s paper, the tropes of masking, packaging and covering are fundamental to the play of the paratext: it is the masking work of the cover that packages, while at the same time it is the cover’s packaging that masks.