Mise en texte

‘A writer only begins a book. A reader finishes it.’

Usually attributed to Samuel Johnson, this quotation highlights the plurality inherent to the concept of mise en texte and foregrounds the interweaving of the processes of reading and writing. However, it invites debate since it suggests that the act of writing is a linear process, which starts with a clearly identified action – the author’s writing – and concludes with the readers’ reception. Yet it could be argued that the creative act of writing starts long before the jotting down of words on a page, when the minds of authors are nourished by their own reading. Moreover, it might be more accurate to say that, although readers continue the writing of a book, they do not bring it to a final conclusion.

The etymology of the word ‘text’ reflects the complexity of the object it refers to. The Latin ‘textum’ denotes a woven object, which would not exist without the numerous threads of which it is composed; it therefore seems important to recognise the interactions of the various elements which combine to give the concept of mise en texte a circular nature. The early modern period lends itself particularly well to these palimpsestic effects, when authors sprinkle their writings with more or less implicit references to their reading of older texts. The prefaces and introductions of early modern essays, novels or travel narratives often include intertextual elements derived from the classical narratives of Antiquity or borrowed from the Bible, as a means to display the erudition of the authors, and to endow them with a form of authority over their readers. At a time when the progress of printing and the relative democratisation of reading meant that written content circulated more widely and more freely than before, texts increasingly borrowed their references from contemporaneous publications, in the shape of allusions or quotations which would have been easily identified by their readers, but which have become more difficult for 21st-century readers to apprehend without the help of explanatory notes.

The early modern period is characterised by deep changes, linked to multiple factors including the evolution of writing and reading practices, the rise of new genres such as the novel, and an increased focalisation upon the individual through tales of personal experience or (auto)biographies, whether authentic or fictional. Those changes imply experimenting with specific writing processes and occasionally manipulating reality to serve literary and commercial ends. Yet the process of mise en texte frequently fails to express the rich tapestry of life. Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, for instance, shows how the complexity of an individual’s life can never be fully reproduced through its mise en texte.

Over the next two years, our early modern seminar will explore the notion of mise en texte. Since it would be impossible to cover so complex a concept in its
entirety, our team has chosen to approach the topic through two distinct and complementary perspectives. During the first year of our two-year cycle, we shall consider the notion of *mise en texte* to refer to the fashioning of a narrative in which the choices of authors and editors shape their particular representation of a moment, an experience, a life or a fictional world. We will continue our exploration of the topic during the second year, this time viewing the notion of *mise en texte* through the lens of norms and codes, examining the ways in which the various agents involved in building a narrative (including the readers), reinvent the conventions which structure our relationship to and interaction with texts.