

Book Review

Daniel Ferrer (translated by Rachel Bowlby)
Genetic Criticism and Its Logics: The Draft and the Text

(Edinburgh University Press, March 2025, 168pp.)

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The original French version of Daniel Ferrer's *Genetic Criticism and Its Logics: The Draft and The Text*, one of the representative works in the heyday of genetic criticism, was published in 2011. Related publications that systematically introduce the school to the English-speaking world include the milestone "Drafts" special issue of *Yale French Studies* in 1996 and the anthology of representative works, *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-textes* in 2004. In the 2010s and the 2020s, we saw the subsequent waves of notable results. Finn Fordham's *I Do I Undo I Redo: The Textual Genesis of Modernist Selves in Hopkins, Yeats, Conrad, Forster, Joyce, and Woolf* in 2010 and Dirk Van Hulle's *Textual Awareness: A Genetic Study of Late Manuscripts by Joyce, Proust, and Mann* could be considered the natural next steps. Fordham's work is as much about the creative process, the process of making, remaking, and unmaking, in the words of the author, as it is about genetic criticism. With essential caveats, the same balance or dynamics between relevant aspects characterizes Van Hulle's work too. In his case, the scrutiny of manuscripts and creative traces inspired by genetic criticism should also consider textual criticism and the practical work of creating editions.

At the beginning of the 2020s, several works came out in quick succession. These include *Genetic Criticism in Motion: New Perspectives on Genetic Criticism* (2023), *Genetic Narratology: Analysing Narrative across Versions* (2024) and *A Comparative History of Literary Draft in Europe* (2024). It suffices to say that they all represent diversification, if not a re-imagining of genetic criticism in the most immediate decade. If we look at the publication of *Genetic Criticism and Its Logics* in translation in 2025, more than a decade after its initial appearance, as participating in and responding to an ongoing conversation of which the work itself and the recent works mentioned above are also part, its full significance can be better grasped.

Genetic Criticism and Its Logics is an intensively theoretical, reflective, and self-reflexive work on the basics of genetic criticism condensed into the short space of 170 pages and the nexus of crisscrossing issues is discussed in thirty-four chapters. The compact and occasional vignette quality of the work, serving as a counterpoint to its persistently dialogic or heterologic nature, to borrow from Bakhtin, a figure invoked by the author, should provide enough clues for us to attend to the inherently dynamic and constantly evolving nature of genetic criticism and its subject.

Two issues that link the beginning and end of the book are those of the personal experience of the author in the face of drafts and the strictly abstract modeling of genetic criticism brought to bear on the same. Emblematically, we are given a glimpse and a sense of the work by the example of Étienne-Jules Marey, whose nineteenth-century invention, “chronophotography,” captures the multiple still images of an object in free fall, which were then turned into a series that animates the images into a short film by the curator of the exhibition on Marey. The uncanniness aside, the emotional jolt is related to the role of genetic criticism and its practitioner: genetic criticism seeks to “restore the unfolding of writing or the movement of literary creation in a way that is somehow cinematic, starting from the fixed shots that constitute writers’ working manuscripts” (2). This experiential aspect, together with examples from various fields—cinema or installation in this case—and literary and other creative events throughout the whole work, serves as an essential counterpart to the rigorous theoretical task of defining and differentiating that are also at the heart of the project: “So I imagined—initially for my own use—a series of models that would try to do justice to the issues involved in genetic criticism” but the “models are the traces of what felt for me (sic) the *experience* of being immersed in writers’ manuscripts” (2). In the concluding chapter, “Worldmaking,” the theory of the possible world (in particular, the theory of Nelson Goodman with regard to possible world as an endeavor to project a DIY world, i.e., by “repurposing” the existing ones), representing the third and the final modeling effort, is considered not only in its strictly logical sense but also understood as akin to one of the main aspirations of genetic criticism: “Bolstered by their deep familiarity with the mechanisms of the genetic process as studied in the narrow worlds of drafts, they do have something to say about the construction of the vast worlds that Goodman is talking about, in other words about the elaboration of our way of seeing the world” (137). The reader has not strayed too far away from the beginning where the feeling of the uncanny and the urge to model the initial shock of the spectacle of the working drafts appear. By linking genetic criticism with how we approach and are approached by the world, we are at the scene of animated still images of Marey, except here it is more specifically called *l’expérience génétique*, and by the models discussed, it can be linked to not just literary drafts but also artistic activities and more generally “the study of invention in our daily lives, and even of the invention *of* our daily lives” (137).

In the concluding chapter, the reader is reminded that in the last few chapters that dwell on different aspects of the theory of possible worlds, the referential aspect of the study of drafts is brought up as an inescapable dimension in connection with the equally undeniable virtuality of the drafts themselves. The theory of possible worlds is designed to deal with counterfactual propositions that involve what-if scenarios, such as “what if Shakespeare had a sister?” The virtuality of the drafts and parts of the related genetic dossier can be likened to a counterfactual scenario in relation to the actuality of the

complete work. As reminded by Ferrer, the theory of possible worlds can be useful in looking into the virtuality of the drafts. Equally importantly, we see also that Ferrer for different reasons returns the reflection of drafts to the question of the reference of the text (e.g., “reference is primary and that is what will serve as a basis for the genetic process” (115)). This is a very meaningful stance to take within the context of the ongoing history of genetic criticism in the broader moving picture of the study of working drafts and creative process in general. Looking back and forward, we can mention the understanding of the *avant-texte* as separate from the text (i.e., a forgotten self of Bellemin-Noël) and the view of the continuum from the draft to versions of the text. Ferrer responds to this core issue by proposing a distinct position insisting on the necessary role of the text and also the fundamental non-linearity of creative inventions. It is within this context that questions of accessibility (relations between worlds, between a preceding version and a later one) and necessity (in contrast to the virtuality of the drafts, in short, the text) in earlier chapters are put forward to further explore the inherently intransitive nature of the creative process and the role of the text as a site of the necessary.

In the context of the whole work, the referential question is preceded by two other overlapping modeling efforts. The first cluster of chapters elaborates models that focus on the structural logic. In addition to agrammaticality, diasystem, and path dependency, the discussion of the memory of context also belongs to this first series and occupies a pivotal place. Based on carefully curated samples, Ferrer aims to demonstrate that, while looking back from the final stage, due to drastic creative leaps, which we see in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, it is difficult or often impossible to retrace progress from one state to a later one, especially if the stages are far apart and the transgression grave. In short, genetic process is often characterized by discontinuity, transgression and intransitiveness (“if Y [i.e., a later state] is accessible from X, then it is not possible, from X, to have access to the worlds Za, Zb, Zc . . . which will be accessible from Y; and even less possible to have access to the worlds that will be accessible from one of the Z worlds”)(132). It is crucial to add that the idea of temporality and its “unevenness” provide a possible way to retrace: “[T]he path from X to Y that seemed to be forbidden by the rules of accessibility will cease to appear inconceivable if we succeed in defining a series of intermediate stages, X₁, X₂, (. . .), X_N”(132). The existence of these intermediate stages, best preserved in the draft, is understood by the author as temporality and traceability: “Stating the problems like this in terms of regimes of accessibility, taking account of the asymmetries and intransitivities, ought to make it possible to acknowledge the virtualities of the process of creation without having to deny its temporal dimension . . . By the intermediary of a spatial metaphor (accessibility of one world to another) we will be able to analyse the non-linear, non-continuous and uneven temporality of the genetic process”) (132). Spatial accessibility and intransitiveness graphically capture the

unevenness of temporality: accessible or inaccessible memory traces are projected as forking paths or dead ends.

A classic and handy example to illustrate how memory traces work in the creative process is Paul Éluard's poem "Liberty" ("Liberté"), as we are informed that the resistance poem was originally addressed to a woman, that is, it is a love poem at its inception. Together with other more extended discussions, the author points out that though the name which is inscribed on the pages, the trees and the snow originally belonged to a woman, its replacement by the abstract concept of Liberty does not totally cancel out the amorous traces: "The beloved woman, who is superficially absent, remains there, hollowed out; it is even possible to say that it is she who lends Liberty the force of its embodiment"(78). The woman's name may be hollowed out but its outlines, so to speak, shape the embodiment; therefore, the replaced expression or detail is "in some sense inscribed in the context, or to be more precise, it is the object of an inscription that is shared between the context and the substituted element." More pertinently for genetic criticism, this "is a similar mechanism that enables us, in the first instance, to explain that the text conserves the trace of its previous states" (78). Although it is replaced, the impression of the substituted object in the context remains, and this is the so-called memory of context. In addition, as shown in the second quotation, the traceable memory preserved in the context also defines the relation between the text and drafts (the previous states) and because of this gossamer memory running through, Ferrer is a position to highlight the "disturbing idea: ultimately, for us and, in a certain way, for the creator, it is not the genesis that determines the text, but the text that determines its genesis"(57). Of course, how or to what degree memory is traceable is a genuine question, as acknowledged by the author. Nonetheless, the tenuous and not always well-preserved link raises questions about the view that emphasizes the break between the text and its previous states, keeping open the question of how we can define exactly or even be sure about the relation. The debate between views that emphasize the fundamental difference between the draft and the text and those that do not, or those that seek to find a middle ground or alternatives, continues on the issues of the role of variants, versions, and the fluidity of the text.

How past traces can be reactivated in the present—another way of looking at the relation between previous states and later ones, a question linked to accessibility and uneven temporality we have discussed—serves as the jumping off point for the second cluster of chapters, where the dynamic (and implicitly the temporal) quality of the creative process is examined, in contrast to the more static logic of the first round of explorations (81). Bakhtin's dialogism, to return to an earlier reference, provides a crucial theoretical basis for a war of words that embroils the past and the present. In short, the traceability afforded by temporality can be applied to threads in the inner conversations. We are only left with our own present utterance impregnated with the

voice of the past, with which our present is inextricably linked, a relation reminiscent of the tenuous relation between the adored woman and Liberty in Éluard's poem. According to Bakhtin, the connection is a "hidden polemic" in which "the other's words are treated antagonistically, and this antagonism . . . is what determines the author's discourse" (qtd. "Bathmology and Dialogism" 84-5). Coupled with the idea of memory of context, which treats the integral connection, however implicit and in need of a combination of chance and dedicated pursuit, between the states of the creative process, the intrinsic dialogism of language and discourse effectively puts the separatism of the draft to rest; furthermore, as the text becomes the final depository of memory of context, having the final say concerning the preceding genetic processes, the text reclaims its arbitrating position. Because of this we can now better appreciate the full force of the statement quoted earlier, namely, that we need to come to terms with the "disturbing idea: ultimately, for us and, in a certain way, for the creator, it is not the genesis that determines the text, but the text that determines its genesis." Although the separate status of rough drafts is one of the foundations of genetic criticism, it is essential to examine that difference and delimit the anteriority of the drafts. Other related definitions of drafts and *avant-texte* throughout the book support this point too. For instance, in the chapter using music scores to capture the nature of the draft, we are reminded that it "is not a work but an operational protocol with a view to the completion of a work" (26). Just as scores are not musical performances, drafts are directives for the author to materialize in the final text. By painstakingly restoring the referential dimension and arbitrary status of the text, Ferrer brings to the forefront the necessity of the text, while stressing the unpredictability (e.g., Chapter 10, on the role of the fructifying accidental in the creative process), non-linearity, transgressiveness and inventiveness of the draft. This is a difficult position to take. Or, does the difficulty derive from the imperative to prioritize either the text or the draft, or do the memory of context and dialogism involve more comprehensively discourse, literary or critical, and reflection in general? Ferrer's ideas surrounding temporality provide a thread out of a maze of difficult choices.

To go back to the context that launched us into the review, that is, the 2020s, when we witness the publication of various realignments of genetic criticism, the same recent milieu in which *Genetic Criticism and Its Logics* appears, the relation, or the lack thereof, between genetic criticism and philology or textual criticism is still an issue under examination. If the concept of the *avant-texte* solidifies the division between the draft and the text, the fundamental distance between genetic criticism and philology needs to be affirmed too. In one of the chapters which deal with the fundamental difference between the two, "Repetition and Invention: The Philological Counter-model", Ferrer points out succinctly that philology is primarily concerned with the restoration of the origin state and this amounts to an order to replicate the same and to repeat and in

order to achieve this, errors and corruptions accumulated need to be weeded out. Keeping in mind what the author says regarding non-linearity and transgression that are the hallmarks of the creative process, we are not surprised to see that, in contrast, genetic criticism is interested in invention (15-16). Moreover, invention is described as a space of invention and by relinquishing the imperative of repetition, invention can be embraced for its affordance or capacity for diversity and unpredictability or transgression: “This space [of invention] includes the emerging text, but also all the dross, all the accidental bits that traditional philology tries to get rid of for the sake of a textual abstraction” (23).

In sum, uneven temporality and the space of invention constitute a framework to better portray the genetic experience of awe and uncanniness when faced with the wonder of creative events and their legacy. The concept of the memory of context engages the past and the present—of the draft and of the theory of the creative process—and a concept such as the space of invention marks out the terrain of genetic criticism and distinct kinds of activities that the former deems worthy of further reflection. For a work rich in lateral explorations across art history, arts, philosophy, and sociology, Ferrer shows considerable restraint in abstract theorizing. As a rule, issues of temporality and space in the sense of a creative environment, are linked to select cases that encourage economy. All this opens a line of thought for the future: whether and how to achieve a balance between laser-focused theoretical introspection and detailed study, or whether the priority of theoretical protocols over manuscript details is exactly the point, remains to be further explored.

It is fair to say that the publication of *Genetic Criticism and Its Logic* is timely because the issues discussed speak to their original context and the present and future development of the field. In addition, within the scope of the work, Ferrer demonstrates why multidisciplinary, diversity in materials, and theoretical experiments are essential towards a more comprehensive understanding of the creative experience.