What is a text?: On the limits of a text as an object of knowledge

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Abstract
A critical reading of a text can reveal much about the many meanings contained within the text. The different lenses of feminism, post-modernism, Marxism, Russian formalism, and many more, reveal the small nuances hidden in every text, which can drastically alter the way the text is received. What however, does this tell us about the text itself? Does the text exist in an objective sense, as Blanchot contends, where every reading is a subjective interpretation of an object which exists independently of the reader? In which case the text-in-itself would exist behind the reading, like the Kantian *noumena*, able to be apprehended in a reading, but never fully realised as an object. Or does the text exist entirely on a subjective level, as Bayard would have it, only as a result of the impressions and readings that people have of it? This, in turn, would mean the text is fluid in its nature; subject to the readings and opinions formed of it, its nature changing with each reading. This paper will consider these questions, which revolve around the content and meaning of a text, and go further to enquire into the nature of the text as a thing in itself. Looking at Derrida’s ideas on translation, is it possible to see a path to a reconciliation of these philosophies, or are we left asking further questions concerning the fundamental conundrum: What is a Text?
What is a text?: On the limits of a text as an object of knowledge

What is a text? Or, to put it differently, what are the limits to a text? In what manner does the text exist as an object of knowledge, as something that can be known and commented on? How can a text be seen by some as resistant to readings, while still having prolific amounts of scholarship on it? How is a text seen as containing a meaning and where does this meaning come from?

These questions are essential to an understanding of literature, of how literature can have meaning, of how we can read a literary text. It is essential to understand the limits of a text in order to see where the text ends and the reading begins. Without such knowledge it will be impossible to demarcate the limits of a reading; what meaning is derived from the text and what meaning we are adding as readers.

This paper raises these questions not with the hope of answering them, for it is problematic to assume that they might ever be fully answered. Instead, I hope to delineate the boundaries of these questions, to note where the answer, if indeed there can be an answer, would exist. To point out that what is essential is that we are aware of and affected by the possibility that there might be an answer. In order to define the limits of these questions, the limits of a text, this paper will address the work of Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Bayard and Jacques Derrida.

Many schools of interpretation, such as Russian Formalism and the Prague School of Structuralism, do not focus on the nature of the text, its being as an object-in-itself. Instead they focus on what the text says/does not say/can be made to say/can never say. Blanchot differs from these schools, turning the focus back onto the nature of the text itself. Drawing on the work of Levinas, in particular ideas of alterity and the *il y a*, Blanchot sees literature as the site of alterity, the site where all possibilities and meanings are opened endlessly.

Blanchot postulates the existence of two slopes of language at work in a literary text. Firstly, there is the slope that belongs to and is part of our culture; this is the slope that critics can comment on. The second slope has the text speaking with its own voice in a new language we can never understand, no matter how hard we try to. The second slope of the text is the slope where the centre retreats from our gaze.

Blanchot (1995: 332-333) writes:

> Literature is divided between these two slopes. The problem is that even though they are apparently incompatible, they do not lead toward distinctly different works or goals, and that an art which purports to follow one slope is already on the other. The first slope is meaningful prose. Its goal is to express things in a language that designates things according to what they mean...But still on this side of language, there comes a moment when art realises that everyday speech is dishonest and abandons it. What is art’s complaint about everyday speech? It says it lacks meaning: art feels it is madness to think that in each word something is completely present through the absence that determines it, and so art sets off in quest of a language that can recapture this absence itself and represent the endless movement of comprehension.

In conveying meaning and concepts, the first slope of language negates the actual object for the idea of the object, creating an absence of the object, which is replaced by a sign:
I say, “This woman.” Holderlin, Mallarme, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvellous. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, “This woman,” I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being – the very fact that it does not exist (Blanchot, 1995: 322).

The second slope of language brings in a ‘double absence’. This double absence is the key to understanding what Blanchot sees as the difference between the two slopes. Where the first slope of language exists to be a reference to objects existing in reality, the second slope, what Blanchot refers to as ‘writing’, has less relation to reality. In writing, the concept of a chair is not referring to and describing a real chair that exists, rather, it is creating a new, imaginary chair. Even if the chair described is based on a chair from the author’s life, the moment the concept enters writing it loses the connection with the physical object. Unable to refer to the thing anymore, words and concepts find themselves only able to refer to each other. The centre of the text, its meaning, finds itself constantly deferred by this literary language, even displaced from the literary text itself. Thus the second slope of literature, through the absence caused by its self-referentiality, cannot have a fixed meaning.

Where the first slope involves the everyday use of language, that of communication, the second slope contains what Blanchot refers to as a ‘double absence’. The first slope gives power to the word, gives it the capacity to refer to what it wants to mean. This capacity for meaning is in reality a right to death, as in the act of naming, objects are murdered by language and translated into literature (Critchley, 1997). As previously mentioned, in order to be able to say something, we take the physical object and annihilate it, cause it to be absent, in order to be able to speak of it. Thus the communicational side of language is, in a sense, a mastery of death.

The second slope seeks the moment of Being before the existence of the Subject and its subsequent negation. It seeks the moment of existence of the silence of things before they are murdered by the act of naming. Turning away from words as referents, looking away from physical objects into the absence left by them, language no longer has an object to annihilate. The double absence of both the object and the concept leaves language with no mastery over that of which it tries to speak. Surrounded only by absence, this second slope of language has no right to death, instead it is a world where death is no longer a possibility; it is the world of Levinas’ *il y a* (Critchley, 1997).

The *il y a* is Being removed from the beings that dominate it; in Levinas’ terms it is existence freed from existents. Levinas insists that in a world freed from objects/things/beings, there would be a kind of nothingness that would still be capable of being experienced. Levinas (1987: 46) calls this “an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence”.

It is easiest to understand the *il y a* as the night, but not the normal night. As Simon Critchley explains:

...the essential or other night for Blanchot is that experience towards which the desire of the artist tends. In the night, all familiar objects disappear, something
is there but nothing is visible; the experience of darkness is the presence of absence, the peculiar density of the void, where the uncanny things of the day disappear into an uncanny swarming of points. This is the night of insomnia, the passive watching in the night where intentionality undergoes reversal, where we no longer regard things, but where they seem to regard us (Critchley, 1997: 57).

This *il y a*, this second slope of literature, in its efforts to describe beings before the Subject kills objects as things-in-themselves, uncovers instead the possibility of a life without end, of the impossibility of death. It is from the dread of this discovery that Blanchot sees as the origin of writing (Critchley, 1997).

With the second slope of literature Blanchot does not only see the ideal of reaching words and concepts before the introduction of the Subject, he also sees a challenge to previous concepts of knowledge through death.

Blanchot disagrees with previous philosophers notions of death, and instead writes of the ‘impossibility of possibility’. Instead of death individualising us, Blanchot sees it as revoking the very subjectivity and individuality we use to control our lives, exposing us to an anonymous power that separates us from ourselves, making our death meaningless. Instead of death providing us with mastery over the world, the anonymity of death revokes any chance we might have had of mastery or control.

Blanchot writes of the two sides of death: one side reveals the world as being full of possibility, while the other side exposes us to passivity, as all of our possibilities are reduced to nothing (Haase and Large, 2005). So one side of death is comparable to the communicational side of language; as we see the world as full of possibilities and start to become active and exercise our control, we devalue the world by killing the physical objects for concepts. While the other side of death is comparable to the second slope of language, a side of death where we become aware of our impotence towards the world, where we have no mastery, not even over our own death.

These two sides of death reflect the two slopes of literature, and this connection can be summed up in the differences that Blanchot writes of between the ‘book’ and the ‘work’. The book belongs to the first side of death, as it is the author’s mastery over words and signs. The Work however, belongs to the second side of death; the Work is the un-sayable, is what the author is attempting and failing to say through his book. The book is a feeble attempt to gain control over the Work, yet the Work always eludes the author’s grasp. While the first side of death/slope of literature makes the author present the Work as a success, as his or her text, the reality of it is that the Work is what made the author write the book; the Work has mastery over the author.

Likened to Orpheus, the writer obeys the demands of the Work. The author is drawn to the Work through their desire to speak of the world in a manner more poetic than the communicational language, a language that does not murder the objects it speaks of. The Work, in attempting to capture the world before language, refers to something that cannot be said, and in doing so the book always falls short of the demands of the Work (Blanchot, 1982; Critchley, 1997; Haase and Large, 2005).
The writer is the one who listens to the Work and attempts to capture it in his book. Unable to express the voice of the Work, the Work remains forever elusive, unknowable to us. The second slope of language reveals that the heart of every text, its voice, is incomprehensible to both reader and writer.

Thus the two slopes of language are clearly distinct from one another. The communicational side, pre-supposing the existence of understandable and comprehensible signs, is clearly different from the second slope, with the ineffability of the Work and the inability of the book or written word to express it. While this moves some way towards theorising the limits of a work and of a reading, Blanchot’s theory has some significant problems inherent in it.

The most pressing problem concerns the different slopes, their relation to one another and to the text itself. If the first slope of language is the slope of socio-historical context, where does the second slope exist? Speaking in a voice not understood, the Work seems to exist independently of a background, providing a context would be to delineate it somehow and make it possible to be understood. I find it problematic to see the Work as existing in this kind of a priori, transcendental state. No text was made in a vacuum, and to see the Work as residing in one seems difficult to defend in the light of social and cultural theories on literature production.

There is also the problem of how the two slopes exist in relation to one another. How does the Work become the book? How close can a book come to being the Work? How is the reader ever meant to know of the existence of the Work, as the Work is not only spoken in a language that is never understood, but also is only spoken to the author, never to the readers themselves? How is literary criticism possible if there always remains a side of literature that is only recognised by the author, and never known by anyone else?

Posited thus as an ideal, literature, and all texts in general, becomes an almost abstract concept, a transcendental ideal that can never be fully realised in any material or physical way. This I think is Blanchot’s greatest problem. This theory of the ineffability of texts and writing is one example of an extreme position on a spectrum I theorise as existing on the idea of the existence of literature. To see writing as inherently and ultimately unknowable shows one position of how the text can exist as an object of knowledge. The theory proposed by Pierre Bayard presents a different view of the text; a view that, while not directly opposed to, is still comprehensively different to that of Blanchot.

Bayard’s theory is an example of reader response criticism, in that it focuses mainly on the role of the reader in shaping the text rather than on the text as an object independent from the reader. It is important to note, however, that there are many significant differences, namely in the intellectual/theoretical level and focus, between Blanchot and Bayard. Where Blanchot focuses on the idea of high literary theory or criticism to try and find and explore this ineffable second slope of language that appears only in and through writing, Bayard focuses on the more cultural side of literature, that is the cultural capital that comes with the idea of having read a book, and the difficulty defining exactly what it is to ‘read’ a book.

Bayard, reworking Freud’s idea of the screen memory, believes that when we talk on books, what we are discussing is not the book itself, but actually what Bayard refers to as a screen book. A screen book consists largely in what the reader already knows, or thinks they know, about the book before they even read it. Bayard explains:
As soon as we begin to read, and perhaps even before that, we begin talking to ourselves and then to others about books. We will resort thereafter to these opinions, while actual books, now rendered hypothetical, recede forever into the distance...They are all reconstructions of originals that lie so deeply buried beneath our words and the words of others that, even were we prepared to risk our lives, we stand little chance of ever finding them within reach (Bayard, 2007: 46).

The difficulties he perceives as facing reading, force Bayard to move away from that which is read, the book, and instead focus on the reader, in particular the role the reader plays in shaping the book as a work. More than merely seeing all texts as screen books, Bayard sees screen books as a fundamental part of the reader. He uses the term *inner library* to characterise the books around which our personalities are constructed. This inner library then shapes the readers relations to other books and other readers (Bayard, 2007).

The idea of screen books and inner libraries brings a personal focus onto the reader, and away from the book, as:

...it is that in truth we never talk about a book unto itself; a whole set of books always enters the discussion through the portal of a single title, which serves as a temporary symbol for a complete conception of culture...For we are more than simple shelters for our inner libraries; we *are* the sum of these accumulated books. Little by little, these books have made us who we are (Bayard, 2007: 73-74).

Largely unconscious, the inner book acts as a filter, altering the reception of books determining which of their elements will be retained, and how they will be interpreted. Coming between a text and its reader, whether singular or collective, the inner book is responsible for shaping the reading without the reader even realising it (Bayard, 2007).

This has a significant impact on the way we receive books, as Bayard explains:

The existence of the inner book, along with unreading or forgetting, is what makes the way we discuss books so discontinuous and heterogeneous. What we take to be the books we have read is in fact an anomalous accumulation of fragments of texts, reworked by our imagination and unrelated to the books of others, even if these books are materially identical to ones we have held in our hands (Bayard, 2007: 86).

When we read a book, it is not the physical book which is read; instead the book is a receptacle for our own ideas and beliefs. More than that, when talking about a book, it is not just a single book, but a collection of books. The book itself is, according to Bayard, a ‘shimmering prism’, through which we see the entire collection of books (Bayard, 2007).

Bayard had developed this idea of the reader’s involvement in the text in his earlier work, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd: the Mystery behind the Agatha Christie Mystery* (2001). Writing on the topic of delusion, Bayard writes that theory and delusion are closely linked, as the delusional person is one who looks beyond the reality for a deeper meaning, a sense of order to the chaos. This has significant effects on how a reader interacts with a text in the search for the meaning of a text.
The world of literature, of a literary text, is vastly different from that of our present day or historical reality. Firstly, it has closure in that there are a limited number of words and statements, from which the meaning can be seen or unearthed. Secondly, the world of a literary text is rarely complete. Bayard (2001: 105) explains:

...the world produced by the literary text is an incomplete world, even if certain works propose worlds more complete than others. It would be more correct to speak of fragments of worlds, made up of parts of characters and dialogues, in which entire swathes of reality are missing. And – a crucial point – these blackouts in the world of the work are not due to a lack of information that may one day be supplied by research, as in the case of historical texts, but to a structural defect, namely that this world does not suffer from a lost wholeness since it was never complete. Due to this fact, the text is not legible if the reader does not give it its ultimate shape – for example, by consciously or unconsciously imagining a multitude of details that are not directly provided.

This is why the reader plays such a large role in the formation of the text, for the text itself requires the reader to complete it. The delusional role of the reader is to provide this new reality for the text, this complete world that the characters can now live in and now use to fulfil the work.

Bayard is suggesting a two-fold element with his theory of reading; that both the individual and their culture significantly intervene in his interaction with the book. He is not bringing anything particularly ground-breaking or revolutionary to literary criticism when he mentions this, many schools of theory focus on the role of the reader in shaping the reading. It is a common theory that it is not possible to divorce a person from their cultural context, and as such their culture must play a significant part in shaping both the reader as an individual, and their reading of the text.

What is particular in Bayard’s case, and this is why he is of such importance to my enquiry into ideas of literature and the work, is the extreme position he takes after setting this groundwork. In an exaggeration of the position taken by reader response critics, Bayard leaves the physical book behind, moving towards an illusionary book that exists solely in our minds.

Bayard (2007) writes of the virtual library, which is where inner libraries of readers overlap with the inner libraries of the people they are talking/writing to. In these virtual libraries, the readers produce what Bayard calls phantom books, which is called into being when readers write, or talk, about a book. It is these phantom books that are spoken, as opposed to the real physical book.

These phantom books are important as they allow the reader control over the content. Bayard (2007: 131) writes: “Books are not insensitive to what is said around them, in fact, but may be changed by it in just the time it takes us to have a conversation”.

This idea, in contrast to the idea that books are fixed objects, proposes that books are in a state of flux, dependant on conversations that take place around them and about them:
...the books themselves are not at stake; they have been replaced by other intermediary objects that have no content in themselves. And which are defined solely by the unstable social and psychological forces that bombard them (Bayard, 2007: 144).

The book, by its nature, is not a concrete object that one can gain knowledge about. Instead the book’s ideas stem directly from the reader. When we talk about a book, we actually talk about ourselves.

At this point it must be noted that Bayard does not talk about there being two kinds of books, the physical book and the book we know. This reading would be similar to that of Blanchot’s, with the slope of language we can know and the other which we can’t. Bayard (2007) instead proposes the opposite; a book that is pure exteriority, where there is nothing inner, nothing hidden for the reader to find. Instead we find that a book can be known without ever having been opened; all there is to know about it is accessible as soon as we become aware of the book.

This exteriority allows the text to alter to match the reader. While there is a physical book, that book is not different from the book we read; instead the physical book is superfluous to knowing it. Bayard (2007: 11) explains:

> The interior of the book is less important than its exterior, or, if you prefer, the interior of the book is its exterior, since what counts in a book is the books alongside it.

Just like Blanchot, the extreme nature of Bayard’s theory leads inevitably to more questions than answers. The first and foremost is the egalitarian view of reading and culture. In a world where reading and non-reading result in equal knowledge of a book or work, there is little point in reading anything. Critics, professors, authors, reviewers, all lose their relative authority in the literary sphere.

It is would no longer be essential to perform any deeper, more critical analysis of a work either, as one’s knowledge of a work remains relative to one’s individual values and those of one’s culture and society. As such, the work will reveal to them the same message regardless of the amount of interpretation invested into acquiring a meaning. The act of writing also loses its meaning. If the reader conjures up their own illusory work there is no point for the author to provide anything more than a title and a list of authors the work is similar to. Literature then falls into obscurity under the weight of these phantom works produced by culture and the individual reader.

Of more concern than this is the loss of meaning in language, even the loss of language itself. If the book is lost to some illusory book, then theoretically all texts will be lost in the same way. As we speak to one another about a book, the speech we are performing becomes a text, and as such capable of being interpreted by the listener any way they choose. Theoretically one would get the same message from this thesis had I written words or merely had a string of unintelligible syllables and words, forming some kind of pastiche of a collection of paragraphs and chapters.

The world then falls into doubt due to the severity of this position of reading. Unable to accurately communicate with one another, there becomes no real way of knowing whether we
experience the same world or not. The world itself would be capable of being transformed by our readings, and any hallucination or delusion would be just as valid an interpretation of the world as a rational scientific view. Bayard’s theory, then, is no more a solution to the question ‘what is a text?’ than Blanchot’s.

While similarities exist in both theories, for instance their focus on a kind of transcendental book created either by the work or by the reader’s values as opposed to the physical book held in the reader’s hands, there exists a distinct difference between the two. I see this difference as creating what I perceive as a spectrum of one instance of how a text exists. On one hand there is the theory of Blanchot, with its hierarchy of readings, its importance of serious literary scholarship, and its focus on the unknowability of writing, on the ineffability of the work. On the other side is Bayard, with his theory of the role of the book being not to inform the reader, but rather to simultaneously house the reader’s and society’s views while also allowing the reader to assume a position of authority over the work and the cultural capital contained therein.

The theorists did not write to openly contrast with the other, as they wrote many decades apart from one another, this does not mean that there is not a division that needs to be negotiated between the idealism of Blanchot and the subjectivity of Bayard.

The prominent question that immediately follows such a delineation of the possibilities of existence is: how do we navigate between these two positions in order to postulate exactly where the work exists on the spectrum? In order to attempt to answer this question I will look at selected writings by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Due to the brevity required by the nature of journal articles, I will not be able to go into Derrida in as much detail as I would like or indeed as Derrida’s writing deserves. While this means I will be unable to provide an answer via Derridean theory, I hope instead to merely show how Derrida opens up and shows the way towards spaces where the text might exist.

Dealing with the problem of how a work can exist, can survive beyond a reading, Derrida (2004: 82) writes:

A text lives only if it lives on [sur-vit], and it lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable... Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language [langue]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately.

Therefore a work must be readable in order to survive, but also to some extent be unreadable in order for it to exist as more than a collection of signifiers and traces. It must contain elements of Bayard’s theory, in that it is readable, but also elements of Blanchot’s theory, in that there is always something that resists the reading, the interpretation, of it.

There are two important points that are raised by Derrida. Firstly, his idea of how a work must exist by simultaneously existing on both poles of the spectrum. This is extrapolated further by his metaphor of the dredging machine:

No, I see rather... a sort of dredging machine. From the dissimulated, small, closed, glassed-in cabin of a crane, I manipulate some levers and, from afar... I plunge a mouth of steel in the water. And I scrape the bottom, hook onto stones and algae there that I lift up in order to set them down on the ground
while the water quickly falls back from the mouth (Derrida, in Critchley, 1997: 146).

This metaphor is for Critchley to explain how, no matter how much a philosophical hermeneut may wish to elevate a work to give it a meaning or coherent interpretation, parts of the work, the water and silt, will always slip through and remain (Critchley, 1997). Critchley continues:

Derrida writes, in a formulation difficult to translate, ‘la matrice transcendental laisse toujours retomber le reste du texte’. That is, whatever transcendental, metalinguistic or hermeneutic key is employed to unlock the text, such a matrix will always let the text fall back and remain as remains (Critchley, 1997: 146).

Despite one’s efforts no one reading can be such that it incorporates all the text, leaving nothing behind. In order for a text to be seen as a text, there must be some remains of it that are allowed to remain once the reading has lifted the parts of the text that it desires to explain. No one reading is capable of absorbing a text, for as Derrida (2004: 67) writes: “...no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation”.

While this might sound a similar position to that of Blanchot, I see there as being crucial differences between the two theorists. The most important of these is in the nature of the second slope of language versus the nature of the remains. Where the second slope talks of a side of language that can never be known or even comprehended, I see Derrida’s remains as fundamentally different from this. Instead of a side of the text that can never be known, I see Derrida as showing that a single reader, no matter how hard they try, can never completely know the text and own the reading. There is always a certain element that slips away; exactly what part of the text slips away is dependent on the reader themselves, on their socio-economic and historical context. So Derrida’s position combines the unknowability of Blanchot with the idea of the remains, with Bayard’s subjectivity of the reader in regards to what part of the text it is that ‘remains’.

The second important issue raised by Derrida in the earlier quote is that the question of the limits of a text is really a question of the limits of translation. Every reading is, in its essence, a translation of the text. As the text must live on beyond the reading, the reading can never be said to be definitive. As such no reading is ever a true reading of the text; it is, rather, a translation of the text. Thus in looking for the limits of a text, the limits of a reading, we must in reality look towards the limits of translation.

When a text is translated, even by the original author, it is problematic to assume the two texts are the same. Taking Samuel Beckett’s *En Attendant Godot*, theorists such as S.E. Gontarski (1954) point to the many differences between the French and English versions. Can the original author translate the text with full fidelity? Can the author perform the truly comprehensive and inclusive reading or translation?

This is where Derrida’s dredging machine metaphor comes in. Once a text is written, iterable or capable of being repeated, it lives on beyond its author. From that moment on, no one, not even the text’s original author, is capable of completely dredging the work, capable of completely raising and knowing the contents of the text. This is why the English version has
to differ to the French version; no one, not even Beckett, no matter how hard he tries, can have complete control over the entire text.

Where are the limits to a text then, the limits to translation? How much of a text are we capable of knowing, how much will always escape our grasp? In translating, is the word more important than the idea the word signifies? Are their ways of getting more from a text than a regular reading would? Is there a hierarchy of readings, with some better, more ‘correct’ than others? Where does the text end and the reading begin? Where exactly does the meaning of a text lie?

When we perform critical interpretation, be it from any school – Marxism, structuralism, modernism etc. – these are the questions we must think about in our reading. When we see words and phrases as conveying some idea or ideology, we must ask ourselves, who is speaking? The text, the author or us as the reader? What does this reading say about the text itself, is it shaping it to fit our own reading, or are we merely commenting on a side of the text and ignoring all other sides and possibilities.

This article attempts to move forward through an engagement with these problems. By demarcating one of the scopes of the literary text’s existence, we can find ourselves slightly closer to understanding the elusive object that is the literary text. We can no longer see the text as translatable, but neither is it untranslatable. It is not an either/or, but rather a both/and; the text is both translatable and untranslatable at the same time.

An awareness of these limits can allow a reader to see more of the text, to see past their own limited reading towards the possibility of the innumerable readings the text presents. As they dredge the text, a reader must be aware of that which resists their interpretation, which escapes their reading; the silt and water that rush from the mouth of the dredger. This is the important and necessary thing which highlights how a critical interpretation can illuminate the highly elusive question: What is a text?

Bibliography