Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature

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Peritextual Disposition in French Eighteenth-Century Narratives

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Introduction

The study of the so-called transnational novel has demonstrated the variety of practices of rewriting inside and across linguistic borders in the eighteenth century Europe (see e.g. Montandon, 1999; Stewart, 2009). Original works from the period are hard to distinguish from translations, translations of translations, pseudo-translations, authorial revisions, free adaptations, impostures, crudely abridged editions and other versions (Stewart, 2009, pp. 164-65). According to Coulet (1992), French authors were particularly busy revising their own works. Significant changes in narration and plot were common. Well-known is marquis de Sade’s transposition from first-person narration in *Justine* (1791) to third person in *La Nouvelle Justine* (1799). In the edition of 1763 the protagonist in Gaspard Guillard de Beaurieu’s *L’élève de la nature* is confined to live in a cage as a punishment inflicted at his parents; eight years later the confinement is, on the contrary, a part of an educational experiment approved by them.

Instead of these glaring cases of authorial revision, my focus in the following will be in cases in which significant changes – authorial or not – concern the texts framing narratives rather than narratives framed. More precisely, I shall pay special attention to interactions between the main narrative, its framing texts and the acts of revision in eighteenth-century French works. My hypothesis is that these interactions present theoretical and analytic challenges far from being exhausted in the study of narrative.

Theoretically, my starting point is not completely new: to really meet the challenge, a *rapprochement* between the theoretical and historical study of narrative is needed. Such an approach has, of course, repeatedly been called for in ‘postclassical’ narratology (see e.g. Nünning, 2000; Fludernik, 2003; de Jong, 2014) as well as in the historical study of eighteenth century fiction (see e.g. Richetti, 2011–12). In principle I agree with Richetti, who argues that ‘the eighteenth-century novel... is very much a proper object of cultural as well as more strictly literary studies, since novels were part of an emerging consumer culture, a response to audience needs as they were perceived’ (Richetti, 2011-12, p. 158). After all these proposals it is, however,
still relevant to ask: under what conditions would the study of narrative effectively undermine the separatedness of the theoretical and the historical, the cultural and the literary approaches to eighteenth-century French texts?

In the following, Gérard Genette’s (1987) theory of the paratext will be transformed into a meeting-place for literary historical and narratological approaches to eighteenth century revisionist practices. The theory has potential for several reasons: although synchronic in emphasis (see Genette, 1987, p. 18), it is designed precisely to highlight the interplay between textual and contextual features in reading a literary work. Further, it is better attuned to the connection between an individual text, the history of the book and the development of print technology than the major theories of narrative, including Genette’s own structuralist narratology. Lastly, as paratexts were the privileged place for foregrounding of the problematic of revision described above, focusing on them we can temporarily bracket the main text, usually in the centre of the analysis of narrative and, by so doing, get a sharper view of the consequences of revision to the layers of eighteenth century works.

After a mapping of what I will call ‘peritextual dispositions’ in eighteenth century French prose, two analyses will follow which show how the rapprochement of history and theory, text and context works in practice. I will conclude by discussing the consequences of my analyses vis-à-vis certain tendencies in narratology.

Peritextual Dispositions and Narrative in the French Eighteenth Century

By ‘paratext’, Genette refers to the various ways a text is presented as a book to its audience; its subconcept, ‘peritext’, gathers together ways to delimit a text inside a book (Genette, 1987, pp. 7, 10), such as titles, generic labels, prefaces and appendices. Although Genette developed his theory in the 1980s, paratexts have only recently become objects of extended study in literary history as well as in media studies (see Calle-Gruber and Zawisza eds., 2000; Berger and Massai eds., 2014; Desrochers and Apollon eds., 2014). The shift of focus to the boundaries of texts has been particularly called for in the context of eighteenth-century novel. The importance of prefaces and other prefatory materials has long been noted in the study of the period (see May, 1963). Over the past fifteen years, an excellently rich basis for a comparative study of French uses of peritext has been created, among others, by Jenny Mander (1999), Jan Herman (1999), Christian Angelet (2003)
and Elisabeth Zawisza (2013). Zawisza even dubs the eighteenth century as the ‘golden age’ of peritext in French literature; Angelet (2003, p. 9) calls it, less jubilantly, the age of its inflation. The studies mentioned also offer ample material for theoretical reflection. Following Angelet and Zawisza, I will transform the Genettean problematic by discussing peritextuality as effects instead of paratexts as objects.

My approach to peritextuality stems from problems in Genette’s theory. Genette distinguishes between five dimensions in any paratext: spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic, and functional (Genette 1987, pp. 10-16). Spatially, the question is to what extent the ability of a textual unit to mark the boundary of a work is dependent on its location. Temporally, the peritextual set-up can change from the first authorial versions to later editions. The question concerning substance is how peritexts are mediated, by linguistic or other means; pragmatically, the question is who communicates them to whom and what is communicated. Aside from the principal function of peritexts to present the main text, they may serve various other purposes. Genette (1987, p. 17) posits the subsidiary functions primarily as objects of an empirical and inductive research, but, in my view, the functions – the principal function included – are not simply there to be observed and categorized. To identify a textual unit or feature as peritextual requires interpretation which takes into account factors inside and outside the work and, at the same time, requires reflection on how the boundary between them is constructed.

Drawing on an ambiguity of a term used in law and rhetorics in the eighteenth century France, I propose that in all of its dimensions, peritextuality is to be conceived as dispositional. The term combines the semantic fields of the terms ‘(the act of) ordering’, ‘arrangement (of objects or parts)’ and ‘predisposition or susceptibility (to act or change in one way or another)’: what I am after is the interplay of authorial and other determinations, textual arrangements and readerly stances in a literary text always taking its place in a process of production, mediation and reception.1 In this view, in peritextuality it is not a question of empirically describable features of certain textual methods but of effects across the boundary of text and off-text, determined partly by individual textual features and partly by

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1 See Encyclopédie, ‘disposition’. The ambiguity of the term is in conscious use, for example, in Diderot’s novel La Religieuse: by describing herself as disposed of her liberty before she is allowed to dispose of any sum of money (Diderot, 2004, p. 285), Suzanne wants to dispose the audience of her narrative to empathic response (ibid., p. 296). My approach to the term is closer to Foucault’s (1994, pp. 299-300) dispositif as dynamics of power relations than Palmer’s (2004, pp. 108-12) disposition as cognitive potential forming the background of behavior.
contextual factors and always requiring interplay with the reader. On the one hand, the effect of separation between text and off-text can be created by verbal and other methods at one’s disposal that highlight what is crucial in the text, what is marginal in it and what can be disposed of without changing the identity of the text. The author and others responsible for producing and reproducing the text may use peritexts to dispose the reader to a certain frame of mind. However, the same textual methods can have the contrary effect of disposing the producers of the text to lose control of it.

If we understand peritextuality as dispositional effects, we are more ready to face connections, transformations and hybrid forms inside different dimensions of peritexts and across Genettean distinctions. This requires us not to lean in advance on the logic of either-or implied in separation. Genette does emphasize that paratext as a threshold is a place of transition and interaction between text and context and between writer and reader, and not simply a place where these pairs are separated. However, he maps the dimensions of paratexts – except the functional – with exclusive alternatives: according to him, a preface, for example, is either by the author, or by an editor or by someone else; it is located either inside or outside a given work (see 1987, p. 17). In the context of eighteenth-century literature, this is too categorical; the studies of collective and collaborative writing have sufficiently shown, for example, that the question of authorship is more complex even empirically (see, e.g., Paku, 2007).

Next I will clarify what I mean by peritextual dispositions with examples from eighteenth-century French novels. Following Zawisza, the discussion is divided roughly in three parts: the extension of the main text, the status of the author, and the distribution of narrative features.

Peritexts can help to separate the main text from its surroundings, but, on the other hand, they allow the text to exceed its limits and thus destabilize its closure (Zawisza, 2013, p. 4). Here the boundary between fictional, the ‘pseudofactual’ (Paige, 2011) and factual is often at stake, as on the title page of de Cahousac’s *Grigri* (1749), where it remains to be interpreted whether the place and time of publication (Nangazaki, Klınporzenkru, year 59749) is motivated by the contours of the fictional world, by the pressures of censorship in the real world of the author, by both, or by something else altogether. The reader of eighteenth-century French literature is wise to be alert to the world-constructing effects of censorship, which go beyond the traditional masking of the world and the author with a fictional veil. On the other hand, since the pseudofactual posture of the text as an authentic document had already enjoyed a long history at the beginning of the century, the possibility of parody should not be forgotten. This applies, among
other things, to the more than common use of *histoire* (‘true story’) in the subtitles, as in Voltaire's *L’ingénu: Histoire véritable* (1767). Again, *Grigri* is not only presented as a translation of a translation but as ‘the last edition less correct than the previous’ (de Cahousac, 1749, title page).

The degree of integration of peritexts with the main text varies greatly, even to the point that their principal function of foregrounding is threatened. Prefaces and postfaces can be relatively detached from the text they seem to introduce or comment, and titles can be in contradiction with the text that follows, as the satirical entries in Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* show. The preface can usurp the main role in the book and postpone the beginning of the main text excessively. It may also be difficult to determine where the text ends and a postface begins: the ending of Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste* is much commented in this respect. In all these cases, the spatial definition of peritext proves to be insufficient; it is a task of reading to determine whether or not the texts framing the main text are actually used to mark the difference between the outside and the inside of the work, and if not, what we are to do with them.

‘I writ this book, and this book improves me [*me fait*] every day’, writes Abbé Bordelon (1706, p. v), introducing his study of language: paradoxically, the author is not an author before she has written the text, and the text does not come into existence without a subject of production. For the writer, peritexts such as the preface promise ways, as Flint (2002, p. 635) succinctly puts it, ‘to appropriate a degree of authority often attributed to the supposedly impersonal process of the printing trade’. However, peritexts may associate the authorial voice with a series of more or less fictional discursive agents – in Angelet’s terms, allographic and actorial instead of autographic\(^2\) – and, by so doing, distance the author from the main text.\(^3\) On the other hand, the realities of book trade disposed the eighteenth century author to new kinds of error (see Angelet, 2003, p. 11). In the process of publishing the first edition of *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously insisted that the title of the work

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\(^2\) Angelet (2003, p. 10; comp. Genette, 1987, p. 182) divides prefaces in three categories: autographic and authorial, i.e. read as serious statements of the author; allographic and fictional, with the subject a fictional author, editor or publisher who has chosen the following texts, translated or otherwise transformed them; and actorial or figural, written by characters in the story as in autobiographical fictions.

\(^3\) These associations also create possibilities of identity confusion and metaepsis, strange loops between narrative levels as when a real-world writer meets a fictional character she has invented. On the uses of metaepsis in French literature from Bordelon’s *Gomgan* (1711) to Aude’s *Diderot à Versailles* (1804), see Kahan 2004.
should be divided onto two title pages to emphasize the first name in the title. In later editions and translations, however, the insistence was ignored, and ‘Julie’ was dropped altogether; even in official editions, the work has often gone by the name *La nouvelle Héloïse*, which presents the work and its heroine first and foremost as a rewrite of a symbol of passionate love (Stewart, 1997, pp. xiv-xvi).

One of the challenges eighteenth-century texts present to narrative theory is in the ways the distinctions between narrative sources and identities become blurred. Flint (2002) shows how Irish and British authors such as Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne used the framing methods offered by printing technology (asterisks, dashes, notes, empty spaces, etc.) to create ambiguity in the medium of expression (speech, manuscript, print) and in the source of utterance (character, narrator, editor etc.). In France, the avoidance of autographic framing produced comparable results. In a lucid early criticism of Genette, Keskinen (1993, p. 171) argued that there is no reason why the ‘implied author’ – the rhetorical subject of the work silently communicating over the narrator’s discourse – could not be held responsible for quotations such as epigraphs. On the other hand, also according to Keskinen there are ‘more often than not’ reasons to attribute peritexts to an agent he proposed should be called ‘the editor-narrator’, hierarchically located between the implied author and the principal narrator, and responsible for ‘present[ing] a given text to readers as a finished product, complete with the peritextual thresholds’ (ibid.). The odds are difficult to tell in the context of eighteenth-century literature and in general, as well. However, the most tenable result of Keskinen’s analysis is that a peritext cannot be anchored to a certain context of utterance before reading, and therefore it is wise to keep the question of agency – and its relevance, in the first place – open for interpretation.

In de Mouhy’s *Lamékis* (1735-38), it is hard to tell to what extent the complexities of narrative agency follow an overall authorial design: in the text, the reason is that the figure of the author and the writing of the text is connected with the fantastical turns in the story. In ‘The author’s preface’ we are told that the first three parts of the book are based on what he heard from an Armenian. At the end of the fourth part – not the third, as one would expect – the author-narrator tells us that he is unable to continue the story of the philosopher Déhahal because of a lacuna in the manuscript (de Mouhy, 1788, pp. 339-40). After a series of surprises by which the author has, among other things, to answer for his narrative choices to protesting characters from the story of Lamékis, he receives a manuscript including the continuation of the story of Déhahal. The manuscript is, however,
written in an unknown language, and thus the narrator is unable to retell its story (1788, p. 381). The problem is solved when the manuscript itself begins dictating the translation, and the author’s pen automatically writes it down (de Mouhy, 1788, pp. 383-84). After a month and a day of dictation, the rest of the work is finished starting from Part 5 – the one in which we have been reading all this. In Laméris, the continuation between narrative levels is constructed in a way that ridicules the pseudofactual posture in the preface: the author who has pretended to recount only what he has heard is first condemned for his inventions by the characters and then deprived of the ability to tell the story, to transform it, or to translate it altogether. Here we have an extreme case of mimetic narration in the Aristotelian sense, in which the lack of authorial intervention in the mediation of the text hardly makes the narrative more convincing.

Eighteenth-century uses of peritexts invite a study of the interaction of narrative, argumentative and other discourses without raising any one of them to the master position in advance. For example, there are various reasons why we should be alert to the problems in the use of the attribute ‘narrative’ in a totalizing way to cover the entire text. A classical prescription was to read a novel as exemplifying an argument, and sentimental variant in Samuel Richardson’s works presented sensible details, identifiable characters and visually concrete scenes as media for edifying empathy. In either case, the explication of the poetics of the novel and other genres in the peritexts was often apologetic and ironic – the anonymous author of Justine arguing for his edifying purposes is a case in point – and thus the degree of integration of the narrative text and peritexts vary greatly. On the other hand, peritexts seemingly preferring argumentation often use the same narrative techniques as the main text, such as dialogues, dramatic scenes and independent narratives (Angelet, 2003, p. 9). We may have, then, two more or less narrative texts commenting on each other rather than a clear distinction between, say, a narrative text proper and its genre-critical metatext.

In the following I set out to analyze the peritextual dispositions in two pairs of eighteenth century texts, in versions of Les deux amis de Bourbonne (‘Two Friends from Bourbonne’, 1770) by Denis Diderot and Les liaisons dangereuses (Dangerous liaisons, 1782) by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. Both works foreground the problematic of textual revision in their peritexts in a variety of ways, and both were revised in subsequent editions. With Diderot, I will focus on the extension of the main text and the distribution of narrative features; de Laclos’s novel will deepen the view on the problematic status of the author.
Narrative as an Attachment: Diderot’s *Les deux Amis de Bourbonne*

Denis Diderot, who began his writing career as a translator, used a plethora of methods to highlight the adaptable and appropriable character of texts throughout his work as he constantly revised his own texts and inserted various framing structures into them. The originality of his texts and their authorial status are often complicated peritextually. Works are presented, for instance, as supplements to existing works, e.g. *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, or as parts of an open-ended series, e.g. *Ceci n’est pas un conte* (see Diderot, 2004, p. 1079, n. 4). *Jacques le fataliste* ends with editorial comments on documents on which the story was based and passes the task of supplementing the text to the reader (Diderot, 2004, pp. 881-82); the sovereignty of authorial narration hitherto celebrated in the text thus fades away.

In Diderot’s *Les deux amis de Bourbonne*, adaptability is an issue in the history of the revision of the text, in the peritexts of its different versions, and in the stories they frame. The first (private) version tells the story of the consequences of friendship between Félix and Olivier in two letters, one by an anonymous ‘Madame’ and the other by Papin, the vicar of Bourbonne. In the story, third wheels seem to bring in all the misfortunes: the harmonic alliance between the two men is broken by a shared love for a girl; Olivier dies after he has saved Félix from being hanged by a cruel judge; Félix is forced to leave his homeland after becoming involved in a dispute over the location of a boundary stone between two neighbours; and the bond of empathy between Madame and the widow of Olivier is broken by the vicar, who sees the story differently than all the others.

In his introductory presentation to the second (semi-public) version in *Correspondance littéraire*, the editor of the magazine Melchior Grimm claims that, originally, the text was composed as a part of collective past-time storytelling in which he and Diderot had joined two lady friends of theirs in a game of ‘mystification’ by letter, of narrative make-believe. The story was sent as an attachment in a letter to a mutual friend of theirs with a tendency to believe touching stories (Diderot, 2004, p. 463). Grimm’s introduction guides the reader to see through the pseudofactual posture to the comic ambiguity of the textual methods employed: in addition to the ideal couple in the story, ‘two friends’ in the title can be read as referring to the real-life collective process of writing the text (see Diderot, 2004, pp. 463, 1048–49). Furthermore, it can be read in relation to the moral tales of ideal friendship published around 1770 in France, including *Les Deux amis*
(1770) by Saint-Lambert, and also to the epistolary exchange in the text, as there are two letter-writers from Bourbonne involved in the fates of the characters. Grimm's presentation playfully complicates the choice of the primary frame of reference for the various dual relationships in and around the alleged kernel of the story.

If the reader does not compare the two versions, she may miss the emphasis of the peritextual set-up in the latter. In the first version, Madame tells the short story of the ideal friendship after responding to things in a previous letter by her addressee, nicknamed ‘little brother’, and before she moves on to other subjects. The story is thus delivered as a by-product, among other things. The continuation to Félix's story is told in the letter by the vicar Papin in response to another letter by Madame omitted from the text. Although Papin expresses his indignation towards the impious and criminal nature of the main characters, it is he who reconstructs the touching scenes of terror and pity in the first version.

By cutting the letter date away, the second version allows the reader to identify with the narrator's audience before it is revealed that the narrator is a certain she addressing a certain he, the ‘little brother’ (Diderot, 2004, p. 439). The reader is first invited into the storyworld with a straightforwardly conversational way of recounting; then this frame is interrupted and the reader may note how the events are mediated by writing in the storyworld. At the same time, the illusionist use of the pseudofactual is downshifted. Diderot’s later decision to leave out Grimm's introduction altogether from his (public) authorial version downplays the comic ambiguity and gives more weight to the poetic and critical supplements in his own postface. The first part of the postface sets out to develop a classification of types of conte – ‘tales’, i.e. shorter pieces of narrative fiction – a theory which would then locate the means and purposes of the story just read. However, it does something else. Paige (2011, p. 154) has good reasons to argue that Diderot is, in fact, applying the classic distinction of epic, comic and tragic to the art of narrative in general, and not only to shorter fiction. In particular, he is criticizing his fellow ‘historical storytellers’ for failing to transpose tragedy into prose, as they preferred exotic sentimentality and sententious wisdom over visually concrete and believable scenes (see Diderot, 2004, p. 450). In the quest for a more convincing sentimentality, Diderot pushes the classic criticism of mimesis to a paradox: even the most natural way of telling a story is an art of rhetoric which persuades the reader by certain means, and therefore the hierarchy between the narrative genres cannot be constructed on oppositional distinctions between truthful discourse, histoire and immediacy on the one hand and lies, mystification
and mediacy on the other. Instead, immediacy could even be seen as an effect of mediacy.

The dismantling of the classic oppositions has bearings on the narrative form of Diderot’s story as well, even though he does not continue in that direction in *Les deux amis de Bourbonne*. The formulation of the way out of the paradox is curious in this context: according to the postface, the most persuasive storyteller focuses not on ‘the thing itself’ but, metonymically, to what is attached to it, ‘il parsèmera son récit de petits circonstances si liées à la chose [...] que vous serez forcé de vous dire en vous-même: Ma foi, cela est vrai, on n’invente pas ces choses-là’.4 There is no denying that this reads easily as a poetics of reality effect via detail; however, can it not be read as concerning narrative form and mediation, as well? In both versions, Madame has heard the story of Olivier from his wife; in the second, Madame receives the continuation to the story of Félix – which, in fact, constitutes the majority of the text – from a certain monsieur Aubert, whose version is preferred to the one expected from the vicar (Diderot, 2004, p. 441). Aubert, in his turn, has heard the story from the widow of a coal merchant, and he ends his story by attaching a letter from the vicar in which the latter suggests finding less impious objects of Madame’s charity than the widows of Félix and Olivier. The story can only be constructed from a montage of rewritings of hearsay material by narrators who have not witnessed the events they recount. Instead of ‘the thing’, then, we have its effects in the narratives by people attached in one way or another to the chain of events. This is what stays unchanged in the two versions of the text. To dispose the audience to certain reactions, it seems not best to tell the story of the thing itself – whatever it might be, ideal duality in friendship, perhaps – but, instead, to present it in its absence, displaced to the marginal, in its narrative effects.

In *Deux amis de Bourbonne*, as well as in Diderot’s other shorter prose from the 1770’s, a reading of the moral of the story is complicated by the narrative form. In Diderot’s text, the narrative seems valuable in its ability to dispose its audience to morally good emotions: it raises Madame’s pity towards the widows and poor families without fathers. On the other hand, it can also fail in the task, as Papin’s pitiless answer to Madame shows: she even thanks the vicar for clearing her mind to see how the story was ‘well done for seducing a honest and sensible soul’ (Diderot, 2004, p. 448). However, it can be argued that it is precisely this failure Madame uses to

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4 ‘the little circumstances so connected to the thing [...] that you have to say to yourself: by Jove, this is true, these things cannot be invented’ (Diderot, 2004, p. 449). The translations are mine.
dispose her addressee, the little brother, to a certain response, to indignation towards the vicar, for example. This rhetorical strategy is comparable with the epistolary double-play in Diderot’s *La Religieuse* (1760): Suzanne, the sentimental heroine, is not simply a naïve victim in the mercy of more cunning plotters, but also a writer who constructs images of herself as a naïve victim to dispose her correspondent to certain feelings and actions. And what would be more convincing than a narrative of a double failure, a naïve representation of naïveté? However, in difference to *La Religieuse*, in *Deux amis de Bourbonne* we do not get to know about the rhetorical success of the organization of the narrative, as no response from the little brother is quoted in the text, and thus the text does not end by celebrating the symmetry of responses in a dual relation – or the seductive power of narrative.

The changes made by Diderot to the versions of *Deux amis de Bourbonne* show his awareness of the importance of peritextual effects in a narrative text. Ending the text with a postface where a third party interrupts the epistolar exchange foregrounds a structure of attachments which enables narrative persuasion but, at the same time, delimits narrative authority. In *Deux amis de Bourbonne*, narrative emerges in a chain of attachments, ever disposed to being relocated among other things.

**Authors in Response: De Laclos’s Liaisons dangereuses**

The first published work by Choderlos de Laclos was a dramatization of Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni’s novella *L’Histoire d’Ernestine* (1762). Riccoboni was one of the most-read authors in the late eighteenth-century France, popular for her epistolary novels, but also for her sequel (1761) to Marivaux’s *La vie de Marianne*. Both facts are echoed in de Laclos’s epistolary classic *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782): the adaptability of texts is an object of constant reflection on all the levels of the work, and when de Laclos took responsibility for the work as a novel, he did it, significantly, in a correspondence with Riccoboni attached to the 1787 ‘Nantes edition’ of the novel.

In the story, rewriting is what the libertines Valmont and mme de Merteuil do: they appropriate other people’s messages and transform them into instruments of seduction and revenge. Their skill in carrying out their wicked plotting consists of an ability to detach from expressing their true views on the events and to foresee how the others – their victims and helpers – react and respond to them. The libertines present themselves to each other as masters of narrative détournement, capable of turning the message around against the original writer’s intentions.
The connection of the peritextuality with the libertine art is created by an analogue between a written work and a human subject in the much-commented letter 8i by de Merteuil. There she describes her skill in combining ‘à l’esprit d’un Auteur, le talent d’un Comédien’ (de Laclos, 1951, p. 179). Before one can be a successful author, reading is indispensable. Novels and works by moralists have given her material with which she has learnt to build her outward appearance convincingly and to detach it from her true designs hiding behind it. De Merteuil wants Valmont to celebrate her systematicity in carrying out her poetic prescriptions: ‘[Q]uand m’avez-vous vue m’écarter des règles que je me suis prescrites, et manquer à mes principes? […] ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions ; je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage’. However, the very letter aimed at demonstrating that she, as a piece of work, really follows her self-prescribed poetics turns against her as Valmont passes the text on to Danceny, who then allows it to circulate around Paris.

In the texts framing the correspondence, a similar logic of appropriation and loss of control can be seen at play. The fictional editor (rédacteur) tells that in principle he has obeyed a request from above to preserve the authentic letters as they are, but then he admits in fact having left some letters out and organized the rest into a meaningful whole by putting them in to a sequence and commenting on them (de Laclos, 1951, p. 6). Like de Merteuil, the editor emphasizes his control of the work by demonstrating how he has manipulated the text to produce a certain effect for the ‘instruction of some others’, as the subtitle to the work says. Again, it is questionable in what sense the work follows his prescription. Does it do so by quoting de Merteuil on how to read fiction to know how to deceive others? Or does it do so by showing how the written text is disposed to be re-framed, appropriated and turned against the intentions of its original – or previous – author? The last footnote to the correspondence further undermines the editor’s initial claim of the completeness of the correspondence: there (de Laclos, 1951, p. 399) the publisher (éditeur) presents the end of the ouvrage contingent

5 ‘[T]he spirit of an Author, and the talent of a Comedian’.
6 See the post scriptum in Mme de Merteuil’s letter to Cécile Volanges, the girl who is ignorant of her role in de Merteuil’s revenge to her former lover, where the former guides the latter to conceal her real thoughts from everybody else except her trustee (de Laclos, 1951, p. 249). What Cécile does not know is, of course, that the post scriptum itself is written in accordance with the principle it is prescribing.
7 ‘When have you seen me stepping back from the rules I have prescribed to myself and neglecting my principles? […] they are the fruit of my profound reflections; I have created them and I can say that I am my work’ (de Laclos, 1951, p. 176).
and the possible future completion of it dependent on the response by the reading public. By this intervention, the publisher questions the alleged authenticity of the correspondence and recommends reading it as a novel. Even if the work were based on real letters, he writes in his preface, they are most likely from another time and place, adapted to ‘our clothes and our customs’ but foreign to the enlightened French people (de Laclos, 1951, p. 5).

De Laclos’s initial choice to stay tacit behind the prefatory texts and allographic writer figures calls into question any linear development of novelistic authorship in the eighteenth-century French novel. The prefaces in Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), one of the key developments in the ‘emergence of the author’ in the eighteenth century, show, by their proliferation, the authority in constant need of further support and dependent on the education of an audience that would recognize the author as the master of his domain. In the French novel, the authority of the author had comparable delimitations. Montesquieu had originally presented *Lettres persanes* (1721) as an authentic collection of letters and posed as its editor; however, in the 1754 edition, he admitted being the author of what he then characterized as a well-designed novel with a beginning and an end (Zawisza, 2013, p. 70). As the pseudofactual preface of the former edition was retained in the latter, no decisive leap in authorship had taken place from allographic editing to autographic creation of a fictional novel. De Laclos can be read as rewriting the tension in *Lettres persanes* of 1754 allographically, using the figures of the publisher and the editor. He wrote even less in his own name than Rousseau had done in *Julie*: the title page of the first edition of the novel bore only his initials (‘Par M.C….. de L…’), and the epigraph quoted Rousseau’s claim of being only the publisher of the letters.

The question of truthfulness and usefulness of the text, discussed in the prefaces by the publisher and the editor, reappears in a complex way in the revised edition of 1787. In this edition, enter the figure of the ‘bookseller’ (*libraire*) who repeats the editor’s gesture as he claims to be publishing letters not originally intended for public use; this time the reference is to the correspondence between Riccoboni and de Laclos (de Laclos, 2011, p. 6). On the other hand, his irony points at the whole enterprise of revising editions with new prefaces and other peritexts: the new edition is designed especially for those readers who are not interested in the novel but want to find, in a condensed form, what can be said for and against it. The correspondence

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8 The Nantes edition adds a bookseller’s preface, the correspondence between Riccoboni and de Laclos, and a collection of de Laclos’s poetry to the text of 1782, and changes the initial order of the publisher’s and editor’s prefaces.
is presented as an answer to this call and thus as a device with which to avoid reading the narrative altogether (de Laclos, 2011, p. 5).

In the correspondence, Riccoboni writes (de Laclos, 2011, p. 466) that she is having trouble, as a Frenchwoman and a woman, accepting Mme de Merteuil’s reality as the pseudofactual posturing of the work has invited her to; she is more inclined to take her as a fictional character, and harmful as such. Riccoboni’s criticism seems to provoke de Laclos to acknowledge responsibility for the work and, at the same time, to convince Riccoboni that it is following the author’s prescription well:

[J’ai pu, comme lui, ressembler dans un même personnage les traits épars du même caractère. [...] J’ajouterai cependant que Mme de M. n’est pas plus une Française qu’une femme de tout autre pays. [...] Si j’ai donné à celle-ci l’habit français, c’est que, persuadé qu’on ne peint avec vérité qu’en peignant après nature, j’ai préféré la draperie que je pouvais avoir sous mes yeux, mais l’œil exercé dépouille aisément le modèle, et reconnaît le nu (de Laclos, 2011, pp. 469-70).]

9 ‘I have been able, like [Molière in Tartuffe] to gather together into one person scattered traits of one and same character. [...] I add, however, that Mme de M. is no more a Frenchwoman than a woman from any other country. [...] If I have given her a French habit, it is because, convinced that one paints truthfully only by painting after nature, I have preferred the clothing I have under my eyes, but a trained eye easily undresses the model and recognizes the nude’.

10 See Vanpée’s (1996) fine analysis of how the correspondence between Riccoboni and de Laclos is related to the two prefaces.

Reading de Laclos’s response as a sincere description of his poetics is problematic for several reasons. De Laclos seems to discard the pseudofactual posture by reverting to the classical notion of poetic truth as probability. He presents himself as a reproducer and synthesizer of features from different sources and as adaptor of an already existing – natural – model to contemporary circumstances. According to De Laclos’s classical analogue, writing is divided in two, supplementary (cultural) clothing and the naked (natural) truth, a local and particular expression and universal meaning. The ethos of the poetics is made suspicious by the close resemblance between de Laclos’s description of the practice of creating a character by synthesizing scattered traits and de Merteuil’s way of constructing a deceiving facade to herself as her work. On the other hand, de Laclos’s analogue can be read as a rewrite of the publisher’s view of the novel as adaptation to local setting – a view made less convincing by the reference to the French people’s incapability to the wickedness displayed by the libertinés.
motivation of the description: de Laclos implies that Riccoboni is not included in the community of trained readers who can move easily through the preface of clothing to the naked truth of the narrative body text. There are, however, profound reasons to doubt whether anyone is. Does not the structure of the work with all its framings and reframings precisely complicate the boundary between the inside and outside of the work, and by so doing prevent any direct view to the thing, to the real nature of the characters, to what happens between them, and to the overall purpose of the story?11

The supplement of 1787 connects de Laclos to the chain of producers and compilers of *ouvrages* in the original edition who enter by responding to texts not written by them. De Merteuil, the editor, the publisher, the bookseller and de Laclos are all responding to texts they have read: the publisher has read the edited collection of letters; the editor has (supposedly) also read the letters he omitted, de Laclos answers Riccoboni's initial comment, and the bookseller comments not only their correspondence but the public debate and the publishing practices around the work, as well. Instead of being sovereigns who dictate conditions for entrance to the storyworld, the authors comment on the text and its reception in a figural continuum with other discursive agents. Their responses gain relative authority by subjecting themselves to the danger of losing that authority at the same time. The fact that the Riccoboni-de Laclos supplement was later detached from the work not only marks a retreat from the (mock-)classical to the pseudofactual but also further emphasizes the provisional nature of narrative authority as subject of and to peritextual dispositions. All this complicates the ultimate readerly position as subject to instruction given in the subtitle to the work. If there is a lesson in *Les liaisons dangereuses* it is that the text is not useful or harmful in itself but one or the other unless otherwise reframed.

**Conclusion: Problems in Certain Tendencies in Narrative Theory**

‘How can we talk in more or less formal terms about works of prose fiction that are opportunistic and improvisatory and do not seem to adhere to any particular formal pattern? What sort of critical terms might be employed to explain

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11 Among the cinematic and theatrical dramatizations of the novel, Heiner Müller’s *Quartett* (1980) stands out due to its sensitivity to the mediatedness of the events in the original. Instead of being faithful to the story, Müller’s aim was to create a dramaturgy for the epistolary structure (see Müller, 1992, p. 317).
how such fiction possesses a sustaining structure that provides coherence and meaning?’ Above, this call by Richetti (2011-12, p. 158) is answered with a reading of peritextuality as dispositional in the context of eighteenth-century French prose. On the one hand, what Genette calls peritexts can surely be counted as stabilizing structures at writers’ disposal. They allow emphasizing that the contours of a narrative text follow the author’s prescription. However, even a brief look at eighteenth-century French novels suffices to show that they also created other effects than stabilizing the narrative genres: hybrid forms and fluidity between author, narrator, and other discursive agents; between narrative and other discourse types; and interactions on the boundary between text and context. This does not mean, however, that peritexts only follow the ‘opportunistic and improvisatory tendencies of the century’, to quote Richetti’s words (2011-12, p. 158); in my reading, peritextual effects can emerge from a systematic thinking of the specificity of written text as a medium of narrative as well as by a sum of coincidental and contradictory factors, in between the intentional and the unintentional.

In my analysis of Diderot’s and de Laclos’s texts, I have tried to show how peritextual effects emerge as boundary-crossing movements from story to narration and framing texts, in the positing of authorship, in the interplay of narrative features and other discourses, and in the ambiguous references to textual features and contextual factors. These are but two examples of the ample material eighteenth-century French prose provides to question the tendency to posit textual boundaries first and foremost as separators of the artistic text from its historical surroundings. The tendency can be seen at play in the structuralist neglect of reflection of what makes textual identity and self-sameness possible or impossible, neglect which was again manifested in the more or less confused debate on the concept of implied author (see Kindt & Müller, 2006). One counter-force to this tendency in the structuralist tradition is Doležel’s (1988) theory of literary ‘transduction’ in which written texts are ‘always already’ rewritings pregnant with their future revisions.

Though based primarily on literary material, structuralist theory seldom really focused on the particular features of written communication or reflected on the non-verbal means of utterance offered by print industry and book technology. A narrative theory best responding to ambiguities in the source of utterance and to particular effects of narrative medium in the eighteenth century would be one ready to see potential to disruption of communicative framings in any type of written narration, first-person included. In this respect, among the most promising recent developments is Nielsen’s (2011) theory of inventiveness in narratives, especially if this theory is seasoned with a historical view on fictionality such as the one provided
by Paige (2011). Furthermore, my analysis of peritextual dispositions could be continued in directions that narrative theories have not been willing or able to go, for example to the philosophical problematic concerning the roots of the ambiguities which haunt the narratological objective of anchoring textual features to a certain source.

The project of ‘natural’ narratology launched by Monika Fludernik in the 1990s set out as a large-scale attempt to map the historical development of narrative forms in English literature. While carrying out this enormous task, Fludernik has presented views on the differences between oral and written media that also deserve attention in the study of peritextuality: one is her noting the tendency of written narratives to blur the boundaries between text types such as narration, description and evaluative commentary (Fludernik, 2005, pp. 80-81), boundaries allegedly naturally separative in the basic forms of conversational storytelling. However, even if ‘natural’ narratology is better attuned to the historicality and mediality of narrative than structuralist narratology is, the specifically written means of narration are at times too easily translated into conversational terms.12 For example, for Fludernik (2005, p. 168) the authentication devices of epistolar narratives are reducible to the first-person mode anchored ‘in the personal witness function of the narrator’. My analyses of Diderot and de Laclos give more support to Mäkelä’s (2011, p. 200) counter-argument, according to which the core legacy of epistolar narration is, rather, the ambivalence of immediacy and mediacy in written experience.

In my view, the differences between versions of the same text, ‘authorial revisions’, as they are somewhat problematically called, should not be left only to textual criticism. Considered as acts of repetition and transformation which do not simply take place outside the text or the work but connect in various ways to the reflection of writing in and around it, these revisions create narratologically challenging communications between the main narrative, its framings, and cultural contexts.

The peritextual problematic discussed above is neither exclusively an eighteenth-century phenomenon nor limited to the genre of novel, or

12 On the diachronic orientation in cognitivist-oriented study of narrative, see also Zunshine (2011), who sketches parallels between the changes in cultural circumstances and narrative patterning. The project of unnatural narratology reacting to Fludernik’s diachronically oriented theory is still searching its stance towards the historicality of narrative forms: Alber, for instance, has been balancing between the ideas of a narrative situation unnatural *per se* and the history of the automatization of defamiliarizing narrative forms. Note, however, how he (Alber, 2016, ch. 2.2) argues for a radical difference between unnaturality in the eighteenth-century narratives and in the postmodernist questioning of representation.
even to books. A comparative study of literatures of earlier periods and non-European cultures could be begun with the aid of recent research on the global history of the novel (e.g. Moore, 2010). Transformations of peritextual dispositions offer a rich field of study in contemporary cross-generic adaptations of eighteenth-century novels as well. To end by quoting but one example: in a very eighteenth-century manner, Martin Rowson’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1996) omits, in its peritexts, the obvious – that it is rewriting a novel discussing the benefits and dangers of rewriting.

**Works Cited**


