

The Transmission of Greek Texts from the Author to the Editor of Today

Jean Irigoien

A recent publication was the starting point of this discussion, whose purpose is to demonstrate the interest of a comparative history of the philological traditions of diverse cultures.¹

In the papers resulting from this discussion, and published in this issue of *Diogenes*, the absence of Rome and Latin literature may be surprising, for classical antiquity formed a whole for half a millennium. This absence is justified for two reasons: Greek literature started much earlier and Latin literature was modelled upon it, even down to some aspects of its transmission; on the other hand, for more than a century papyrological discoveries – whether unedited texts or works already transmitted through Byzantine manuscripts – have revitalized and enriched our understanding of the classical book, from the fourth century BC to the Arab conquest of Egypt.

Let us begin with an obvious, but fundamental statement. Every book, manuscript or printed, bears witness to the interest displayed in a literary, religious or technical work at a specific time or place. The copy or printing of a book presupposes someone behind it who needed this text and asked for it, rarely the scribe himself, or potential customers. Even if the copyist argues that the writing lasts much longer than the hand that penned it and will soon rot in the tomb, his labour did not aim to transmit a work to subsequent generations, his sole objective was to respond to an order, paid or unpaid. It is to us, centuries distant, that the fact of transmission is evident, but it remains the secondary effect of a specific operation.

To facilitate easier comparisons with other major scholarly and literate cultures, a chronological plan is indispensable, divided into three sections or, rather, three stages:

- Antiquity, with the fundamental role of Alexandria and the early stage of Attic culture, less well known;
- the Byzantine Middle Ages, so different from the medieval period in the West;
- and, finally, the half-millennium that stretches from the Renaissance, with the beginnings of printing, to our own times.

The scope is vast: nearly thirty centuries in time; in space, the Mediterranean world with extreme points northwards and to the East.

Rather than condensing general notions about the history of Greek texts, I shall confine myself here to indicating some lines of research, more or less novel.

To start with, it should be remembered that philological enquiry unfolds in the opposite direction to the course of time, from what is known to the unknown. It is a

progressive climb back into the tradition with a view to reaching the text in its original state, the original edition, if you like. The tradition is represented by direct sources (Byzantine manuscripts, Egyptian papyri) and indirect sources (citations in classical authors, translations into other languages).

This ascent along the tradition is made possible by means of the study of the text and the variants which the manuscript sources present (Lachmann's method, errors in common and specific errors). It is pointless to insist on what is well known and learnt long ago. It also functions by taking the *realia* into account:

- the history of Greek writing, with the transition from the classical majuscule to the Byzantine minuscule (a delicate operation which the specialists call 'transliteration' and the traces of which are often highly instructive);
- the history of the book, with the transition from roll to codex – the book with pages which is familiar to us – and the consequences of the transfer from the one to the other.

Combining this philological, palaeographical and codicological evidence, it is possible to arrive at or: to reach? a state of the text represented by the archetype of the tradition. In favourable cases, it can be dated and, sometimes, localized. Papyrological fragments make it possible, for the parts of text to which they relate to reach in part an archetype much older than that to which the Byzantine manuscripts refer. But in every case, for ancient and classical Greek authors, the archetype is located before an 'intersection' (*næud*), the Alexandrian edition, made by one or other of the scholars of the Mouseion of Alexandria in 280–150 BC. I speak of an 'intersection' because the Alexandrian edition, source of the tradition, is itself the product of the unification of various exemplars gathered at the library of the Mouseion.

In this journey back in time, the Alexandrian intersection is located one or two centuries, if not three or more, ahead of the original edition. This should never be forgotten. As for the gap in time between the reconstituted archetype and the Alexandrian edition which constitutes this intersection, it is extremely variable, going from two or three centuries in favourable instances to more than a thousand years.

It is of little significance, some would say, since the Alexandrian edition resulting from various sources remains an unsurmountable obstacle: how could the delicate thread leading back to the original text be reconstructed from a text unified and normalized by the scholars of the Mouseion?

Nevertheless, we must neither give up nor abandon the task. It is possible to go back beyond the Alexandrian edition if one examines the working methods of the Mouseion's scholars and takes account of the practices of the Attic book trade of the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

The Homeric poems, and above all the *Iliad*, offer an excellent case-study in order to evaluate the editors' method. With recensions of diverse origins available to them (often local, from Marseilles to the west to Sinope in the east), the Alexandrian commentators never mentioned an edition from Athens. This was because they had available, as a base text, an Attic recension, a veritable vulgate, whose origin – as I shall demonstrate below – went back to the sixth century. The grammarians of the Mouseion virtually never touched

this text, of which they knew the antiquity. They satisfied themselves with indicating their opinion by placing critical signs which they clarified and justified in their commentaries, known to us via the marginal scholia of the famous Venetus A of the *Iliad*. The edition of the text and the commentary are written on two independent papyrus rolls. In the text roll, the critical signs give the reader a summary indication which will be clarified in the commentary; where the sign is succeeded by the first words of the commented passage, the *lemma*, which facilitates the search for the comment. The system works well, but the handling of two rolls simultaneously is not practical. The first of the critical signs is the *obelos*, a horizontal stroke placed to the left of the line: it warns the reader that, in the judgement of the editor, the line is not authentic. But, in contrast with many editors of the past and even the twentieth century, the Alexandrian scholar preserved the line in its place, leaving the reader the possibility of judging for himself. It is the method which nowadays consists of placing a line which one considers suspect between square brackets. The Alexandrian critic was as conservative as a restorer of works of art today: he did nothing irreversible. His prudence therefore allows us to go back beyond the recension of the *Iliad* established at the Mouseion of Alexandria and arrive at an Attic vulgate of three centuries before. Admittedly, that does not mean arriving at Homer's original text, but it means getting considerably closer. Another example of this prudence – an extreme instance of its kind – is that of an intrusive colon (c. 48: φιλέοντι δίΜοισσα) in Pindar's second *Olympian Ode*. Revealed by Aristophanes of Byzantium, who in c.200 BC realized the Alexandrian edition of this poet, it remained in the papyri and manuscripts for 1500 years, until the beginning of the fourteenth century, when Demetrius Triclinius completed his edition of Pindar from which the colon was excluded.

Much more recently, but no less significant of the respect for the text, is the example of the edition of Plotinus, of AD c.200. Plotinus had composed fifty-four treatises in the course of the seventeen years he taught at Rome (253–70). When, thirty years later, Porphyry undertook the publication of the work of his master, who had entrusted this task to him, he disregarded the chronological order and regrouped the treatises in six *Enneads*, according to subject. Nevertheless, he took care to inform the readers of the work about the order of composition of the treatises. And this makes it possible, seventeen centuries later, to publish these treatises separately from one another, knowing and respecting the order of composition.²

For the prose works of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the Alexandrian editors had a means of numerical control at their disposal. Using a unit of measure called a 'stich' (line), corresponding to 15 syllables (that is, the average length of a Homeric line), the booksellers of Athens (and probably also the copyists entrusted with the task of making a clean copy of the work of a historian, a philosopher or an orator) indicated the hundreds of stichs with a letter of the alphabet from A to Ω (with a maximum of 2499 stichs); every ten lines, a dot was written in the left-hand margin. At the end of the work, a summary was given in acrophonic notation (XXHHHΔΠ = 2315) and not in numbering with figures or letters ('BTIE'); the procedure is comparable to the use of roman numerals in the dating of printed books. These combined practices made it possible to check that the work was transcribed onto the roll in its entirety, without omissions or lacunae; they also justified its price.

The same system was applied to poetic works, to the songs of Homer which lay at the origin of this practice, as well as to tragic and comic verses.

Several manuscripts of the Byzantine Renaissance (ninth–tenth centuries) have preserved traces of prose stichometry: marginal notation for two of Plato’s dialogues, total amount of lines in acrophonic notation for the speeches of Isocrates and Demosthenes.

From these facts one can say that Alexandrian centralization – what I have metaphorically described as an intersection – had been preceded by Attic centralization: here are two successive intersections, the second being prepared by the first.

The tradition of the tragic poets – Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides – brings us a testimony of a different character as to the Attic origins of the Alexandrian edition. Admittedly, this is an obvious fact, since most of the tragedies of the three poets were performed at Athens, at the theatre of Dionysos. But the history of the transmission of these works will show us how the Alexandrian recension, far from being for the editor of today simultaneously an aim and an insurmountable obstacle, proves extremely faithful in the extreme to the Attic model.

I must linger a little longer, with details designed for the Greek scholar rather than other readers, on the case of the official exemplar of the tragedians. By the terms of a law made on the initiative of the Athenian orator and statesman, Lycurgus, it was decided, soon after the year 338, to erect at the theatre of Dionysos bronze statues of the three tragic dramatists who had become classics, and to establish an official copy of their tragedies which would be preserved in the public treasury with the archives; the secretary of the city would make sure that the text of the actors conformed to the official text. Lycurgus’ law has not come down to us; it is the *Life of Lycurgus*, in the series, *Lives of the Ten Orators* attributed to Plutarch, which supplies this information in 841 f. We can only deplore the fact that nothing is said about the way in which the official text was established. On the other hand, for the task entrusted to the secretary in respect of the comedians, the word used, *παράναγι(γ)νώσκειν*, is a technical term which is documented among orators and in some inscriptions (at Magnesia of Meander, in particular). The procedure consisted of reading aloud, paragraph by paragraph, the proposed enactment and the corresponding law to demonstrate, before the vote of the people, that there was no incompatibility between the proposed enactment and the law. The verb employed is not one of the verbs with a dual verbal prefix so abundant in the Greek language of the imperial period. Ἄναγιγνώσκειν in the sense of ‘read’ is treated like a simple verb, here preceded by the verbal prefix *παρα-* (in the sense of the preposition *παρά+* accusative: ‘along’), whence the notion of parallelism: ‘to read side by side’, ‘read while comparing’.

The verb is used in this juridico-administrative sense by several orators of the fourth century: Isocrates, Aeschines and Demosthenes. In the latter, one particular usage is pregnant with meaning: he makes an allusion to Lycurgus’ decree, which the commentators do not appear to have observed. In the discourse *On the Crown*, Demosthenes recalls, as he had already done, the beginnings of the career of his rival Aeschines: a comic actor with a beautiful voice, but lacking in talent, the latter had only been able to get third-class roles and had renounced his acting career. At the moment when the testimonies on the liturgies (that is, the official functions) were to be read aloud, which he himself carried out, Demosthenes (§ 267) invited his rival to have read in parallel (*παράναγιγνώθι*) the tirades which he mangled on the stage at the time when he was an actor. Demosthenes thus cites as an example the first line of Euripides’ *Hecuba* and the opening line of a messenger’s speech from an unidentified tragedy. How can one possibly not see in this a joking, and even comic, allusion to the very recent law of Lycurgus on the testing, by means of a

παράναγωσις, of the conformity of the text the comic actors had learnt by heart with the official text just established at that date: the law of Lycurgus is placed after the battle of Chaeronea, in September 338, and there must have been some delay before it was carried out; the discourse, *On the Crown*, dates from the summer of 330.

I have expatiated at some length on the exceptional character, in the transmission of Greek texts, of the constitution of the official text of the three tragedians, because the exemplar preserved in the archives at Athens came to Alexandria. Borrowed by Ptolemy III Euergetes (247–21) against an enormous deposit (15 talents) to be recopied at the Mouseion, it stayed there; the king had the copy sent to Athens and renounced his deposit.³ We are thus assured that the Alexandrian scholars had available the most authentic Attic text there was for their edition of the tragic dramatists. The comments I have recently made on the *numerus versuum* of the parts of the tragedy in dialogue⁴ demonstrate the absolute fidelity, from this point of view, with which the Alexandrian edition reproduced the official text.

Furthermore, the concept of an official text was no novelty in the Athens of Lycurgus' day. Two centuries earlier, during the reigns of Peisistratus and Hipparchus (middle and second half of the sixth century), an official recension of the Homeric poems had been established for public recitations at the Panathenaic festival. This recension was the source of the Attic vulgate, itself the origin of the Alexandrian text of Homer.

These two examples show that, in auspicious circumstances, the editor of today can go back beyond the Alexandrian text and reach a state very much closer to the original. We can surely draw strength from this.

Jean Irigoin
École pratique des hautes études, Paris
(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

Notes

1. Jean Irigoin (1997) *Tradition et critique des textes grecs* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres).
2. As P. Hadot has done, from 1988 onwards, in his edition of Plotinus, *Les écrits de Plotin*.
3. Galen in *Epid. III* [2, 4] CMG v, 10. 2. 1, Leipzig, 1936, p. 79. ed. Wenkebach-Pfaff.
4. J. Irigoin (1998) La composition architecturale du *Philoctète* de Sophocle, *Revue des études anciennes*, 100, 1998, 509–24; La composition architecturale des *Euménides* d'Eschyle, *Cahiers du GITA*, 11, 1998, 7–32.