

## THE RHETORIC OF PERFORMATIVE MARKUP

---

**Julia FLANDERS**

*Women Writers' Project, Brown University*

---

In the classic account first proposed by DeRose et al. (1990) and subsequently developed by Renear et al. (1996) and finally by Renear (2001), text markup of the sort typically practiced by humanities computing scholars is a reflection of reality. It seeks to express observations about the nature of the text, rather than giving orders to a processor. Markup of this sort—labeled as “logical indicative” markup in the most recent formulation—is widely familiar in the scholarly community, instantiated in markup languages like TEI, EpiDoc, and other languages intended for the transcription and preservation of primary sources.

What we think of as logical indicative markup, however, is almost never that simple. Although markup in the indicative mood claims to advance a simple statement of fact (“This is a paragraph”), the actual intellectual activity being undertaken is often much more complex. Despite the early claims of the OHCO theorists that markup observes what text “really is”, it is only under tightly constrained circumstances that indicative markup truly makes something approaching factual observations concerning textual features. Within a given disciplinary community the identification of a paragraph or a line of verse may be uncontroversial (so that one would appear to be quibbling if one paraphrased as “I believe this to be a paragraph”). Within a digital library context the encoding may be so slight that its claims about the text carry almost no information (so that marking something with may mean only “this is a block of text”) and hence no information with which it would be possible to disagree. But if we broaden the context at all—using markup to communicate between disciplinary groups, or to describe more complex documents—we enter a very different and less factual terrain. For any early work where the modern generic distinctions are not yet solid, identifying a passage of text as, variously, a paragraph, a verse line, an epigraph, or some other less determinate segment is not an act of factual observation and correct

identification, but of strategic choice. The question is “how does it make sense to describe this textual feature?” rather than “what is this feature?” And implicit in the idea of “making sense” are qualifiers such as “for me”, “now”, “for my present purposes”, “here at this project”, “given my constraints”, and others that can readily be imagined. The choice of the phrase “making sense” is not casual here: the act of encoding is indeed an act of making sense, creating conditions of intelligibility.

Renear, in his essay “The Descriptive/Procedural Distinction is Flawed,” extends the earlier taxonomy of markup types by adding the dimension of “mood”, by which markup may be characterized as indicative, imperative, or performative. Where indicative markup is the kind described above—making factual statements about the textual world—and imperative markup is the kind that issues a command (for instance, to formatting software), performative markup is a less familiar domain, which Renear identifies with authoring. As his phrase “markup that creates” suggests, this domain has to do with calling text into being and in particular with naming and effecting the structures through which that text expresses meaning. It is tempting to make a clean distinction between this kind of “authorial markup” and the more familiar indicative markup on the basis of the type of document concerned: authorial, performative markup being what we use when we write new documents, and ordinary indicative (or perhaps “editorial”) markup being what we use when we transcribe existing source material. However, having noted this distinction we must immediately trouble it: first, because these categories are often intermingled (for instance, annotations and commentary in a scholarly edition are “authored” in this sense). But more significantly, even with content that is not “new”, markup does not exist solely to name what is there, but also serves to express views about it, and the expression of these views constitutes an authorial act just as surely as the generation of a sentence of commentary. Authorial markup brings a structure into being just as writing brings words into being, and in some cases the two may be isomorphic. Adding the TEI element amounts to the same thing, informationally speaking, as adding a note whose content is “this sentence is unclear in the source; we believe the reading to be X.” To extend Renear’s terms, can be either an indicative, editorial statement (“this passage is unclear”) or a performative, authorial statement (“I make this assertion about unclarity”, “I create this

meaning with respect to the unclear reading”).

This authorial dimension to markup systems like the TEI is unfamiliar, little used, obscure. But it crucially amplifies our understanding of the rhetoric of markup, and of the kinds of meaning it can carry. Most importantly, it suggests that Jerome McGann’s assertion that text markup cannot represent “the autopoietic operations of textual fields—operations specifically pertinent to the texts that interest humanities scholars” (2004, 202-3) reflects a very limited sense of the potential rhetorical operation of markup. In characterizing the TEI as “an allopoietic system” which “defines what it marks...as objective”, McGann draws on markup’s own conventionalized account of itself. This account, which as we have seen locates systems like the TEI firmly within the indicative realm, deals solely with the editorial rhetoric of statement and description—not with interpretation and certainly not with performance. It ignores the extent to which even this indicative markup can make statements which are not simply factual: which represent local knowledge, perspective, contingency, belief, positionality, uncertainty, purposiveness, and even deception.

Most importantly, it ignores the authorial quadrant of Renear’s grid: the space of performative logical markup, in which an author brings meaning into existence either by creating new marked content, or by adding markup to an existing text and performing upon it a new set of meanings. This latter case would in fact resemble performative instruments like the Ivanhoe Game, which represent for McGann the archetypal scholarly textual activity: a performative apparatus, in effect, through which scholars express interventions in a textual field: “readings”, commentary, textual engagements that inflect the object text rather than simply standing apart from it. The extended version of this paper will expand on this point, exploring how performative or authorial markup might enact the kinds of textual engagements that McGann calls for as constitutive of humanistic textual study.

McGann is correct in identifying the predominant use of markup systems like TEI as “coding systems for storing and accessing records” (202). But this predominant use does not define the limits of capability for such markup systems, let alone for text markup in general. Our choice to use markup in this way derives from the collective

sense, within the humanities disciplines, that this is what markup should be for: a technological tool external to ourselves, rather than an expressive medium. In expecting, as McGann does, that markup cannot be made of the same stuff as poetry, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, we make markup in our own image—in the image of our own fears.

## References

- DeRose, Steven, J., David Durand, Elli Mylonas and Allen H. Renear.** “What is Text, Really?,” *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*. 1:2 (1990).
- Liu, Alan.** “Transcendental Data: Toward a Cultural History and Aesthetics of the New Encoded Discourse.” *Critical Inquiry* 31:1 (Autumn 2004), 49-84.
- McGann, Jerome.** “Marking Texts of Many Dimensions” in *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth. Blackwells, 2004.
- Renear, Allen.** “The Descriptive/Procedural Distinction is Flawed.” *Markup Languages: Theory and Practice* 2.4 (2001): 411-420.
- Renear, Allen, Elli Mylonas, and David Durand.** “Refining our Notion of What Text Really Is: *The Problem of Overlapping Hierarchies*.” *Research in Humanities Computing*, ed. Nancy Ide and Susan Hockey. Oxford University Press, 1996.

---

## The Rhetoric of Digital Structure

**Clifford WULFMAN**

*Modern Culture and Media, Brown University*

**T**his paper will examine the rhetoric of textual markup by relating it to mapping. I begin with the observation that markup is a kind of poesis, which is itself a species of mapping: to paraphrase Theseus at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it is the embodiment of form, the giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. I will discuss so-called “mapping art,” a digital

art form that uses data sources, or streams, or pools, or bases, and filters them to create works of art that are, in some way, connected to the source, if only functionally. I will focus on pieces that claim informational status and discuss the way rhetoric inevitably inflects the transformation/mapping of data into information. These pieces, I will claim, shed a new light on the rhetorical nature of textual markup.

This by itself is nothing new: we've long understood that all marking is interpretation. But I will extend this observation to discuss the relation of mapping and marking to information and reading. I will examine linguist Geoffrey Nunberg's discussion of the term "information," comparing it with Shakespeare's notion of poesis as (ex)formation, and consider the proposition that reading is information, and there can be no information without a map.

The argument turns at this point to consider the possibility that markup is not mapping so much as it is tracing: not the translation of data from one domain to another but a kind of delineation, a marking on the body of the text itself. Thus "informing the corpus" is replaced with "inscribing the corpse," and instead of Shakespeare's depiction of imaginative creation, we have Kafka's fascist nightmare In the Penal Colony.

Between these two poles must be a middle way of reading, and I will conclude by briefly considering how the Lacanian notion of the Phallus can help us understand the desire for markup, with a gesture towards Harold Bloom's anxieties of Influence and maps of misreading.

---

## The Rhetoric of Mapping Interface and Data

Elli MYLONAS

*Brown University*

**I**n this paper I want to continue to the discussion of the rhetoric of the digital monograph I presented at ACH-ALLC2005. That paper looked at past discussions of rhetoric as applied to scholarly hypertext and to the web.

As a continuation of this line of thought, I'd like to

consider the relationship of underlying "data" to user-facing "interface." Two significant current theoretical models of digital publication are the notions of the "digital archive" and the "database." Theorists like Daalgard and Moulthrop see the internet as a global archive; their choice of term privileges the function of the collection of data, its completeness and lack of a singular perspective or notion of truth. For them, the archive is specifically a very large collection of homogeneous or heterogeneous documents available in digital form, like the internet, or the NY Times archive. Lev Manovich uses the term "database" as the informing paradigm for the organization of new media productions; his terminology privileges the mode of interaction enabled by a particular technology. For Manovich the "database" is a more suitable replacement for "narrative" when discussing the potential and effect of digital art and other (constrained) websites. Like Moulthrop and Daalgard, Alan Liu uses the term "archive" for digital collections that are XML-based, as opposed to scholarly collections that are database driven, and views both sorts of collection as functionally equivalent.

In this paper, I'd like to move between the larger and more generic archive and the database informed individual website. Manovich's idiosyncratic use of the term database to refer to any structured data can be confusing, but in this paper, implementation methods, whether XML markup, database, or some other technology, will not affect the discussion.

Alan Liu has described the change in user interface and in the role of the scholar/author as more websites become template driven. He identifies a shift from the craftsmanlike activity of early website creation, to a model where the interface and the underlying source data are intentionally separate, as are the roles of their collector and designer. Interface designers are designing pages with empty space into which data pours, over the content of which they have no control. The user interface is usually considered the locus of meaning in a website or in a digital publication. In the case of the contained, authored "monograph" the user interface is where an author can present a point of view and engender behaviors in the readers of the work. At first glance, even in a digital archive, the user interface determines what a user can do, or learn about the underlying material. However, the underlying data, which may be structured either as a database or using XML markup, also is inextricably linked to the interface. Rhetorical casts that have been inserted into the data interact with the

interface, just as the interface affects not only users' technical ability to manipulate the data, but their view of what manipulations make sense for that data.

This interaction occurs in the space between the data and the interface. That space contains the process enabled by a web site whose most important part can be described as a mapping between interface and data. This mapping necessitates an interaction of surface and infrastructure and can only be understood in the context of an awareness of the rhetoric that belongs to each side of the map. Part of this space is the domain of information designers and interface designers. They are the ones who plan user interactions, lay out the relationships of pages that a user sees, and are familiar with human cognitive ability and usability. But before one can draw the map of the presentation, the map of the content must exist, and this is also an intentional product. Because of this, at the most significant level, these decisions inhere in the scholar who is amassing the archive or who is authoring the monograph. The scholar can indicate what to markup, and what kinds of interactions a user should be able to have with the digital work.

The importance of the relationships between "source" and "visualization" or "content" and "presentation" has already given rise to a new genre of art, that explores these relationships in a playful way. Artists represent existing, often real-time, data streams such as internet traffic, economic or geophysical data using visual representations. Manovich suggests that one way to engage critically with such works is to look at how effectively the choice of mapping functions as a commentary on the data stream. This same approach may be applied to digital publications in order to evaluate and understand the dependencies between interface and data.

These theories will be tested by discussing some representative websites such as the Women Writers Project ([www.wwp.brown.edu](http://www.wwp.brown.edu)), documents in the Virtual Humanites Lab ([http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/vhl/vhl.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/vhl/vhl.html)) and Thomas and Ayers, *The Differences Slavery Made* (<http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/>).

## References

- [1] **Daalgard, Rune**, "Hypertext and the Scholarly Archive-Intertexts, Paratexts and Metatexts at Work", in *Proceedings of the twelfth ACM conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia* (14-18 August, Aarhus, Denmark). New York: ACM Press: 175-184
- [2] **Liu, Alan**, "The Art of Extraction: Toward a Cultural History and Aesthetics of XML and Database-Driven Web Sites." [http://dc-mrg.english.ucsb.edu/conference/2002/documents/Alan\\_Liu\\_Art\\_of\\_Extraction.html](http://dc-mrg.english.ucsb.edu/conference/2002/documents/Alan_Liu_Art_of_Extraction.html).
- [3] *Transcendental Data: Toward a Cultural History and Aesthetics of the New Encoded Discourse*. By: Liu, Alan. *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2004, Vol. 31 Issue 1, p49-84
- [4] **Manovich, Lev**, *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, 2002.
- [5] **Manovich, Lev**, *The Anti-Sublime Ideal in New Media*. *Chair et Metal* 7, 2002. <http://www.chairemetal.com/cm07/manovich-complet.htm>
- [6] **Moulthrop, S.** *The analog experience of digital culture*, in R. Koskimaa and M. Eskelinen (eds.), *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*. Jyväskylä: Publications of the Research Centre for Contemporary Culture, 2001. pp. 183-98.
- [7] **Moulthrop, Stuart**, "What the Geeks Know: Hypertext and the Problem of Literacy" in *Proceedings of Sixteenth ACM Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia*, ACM Press 2005, pp xx-yy.
- [8] **Christiane Paul**: Databases, data visualization and mapping in Christiane Paul: *Digital Art, Thames and Hudson* 2003, pp. 174-189
- [9] **Ryan, Marie-Laure**, *Cyberspace, Cybertexts, Cybermaps*. *Dichtung-Digital* 2004, issue 1. <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2004/1-Ryan.htm>
- [1] **Daalgard, Rune**, "Hypertext and the Scholarly