TEXT COMPARISON AND DIGITAL CREATIVITY: AN INTRODUCTION

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What are the effects of digital transformations in text culture on textual scholarship? What rules and guidelines are appropriate for the digital interpretation of text? What ‘virtual’ values do we turn to as the object of digital humanities scholarship? What is the role of viewpoint, language, tradition and creativity in quantitative text comparison? What connections exist between textual scholarship, interpretation, and e-infrastructures for research?

These questions were addressed at an international colloquium held in Amsterdam on 30 and 31 October 2008 on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The conveners, Ernst Thoutenhoofd and the undersigned, represented two institutions: the Virtual Knowledge Studio for the Humanities and Social Sciences (VKS), a programme of the KNAW; and Turgama, a research project at the Institute for Religious Studies of Leiden University, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The VKS aims to support researchers in the creation of new scholarly practices. Turgama deals with computational linguistic and comparative analysis of ancient texts. The colloquium was given the title ‘Text Comparison and Digital Creativity. An International Colloquium on the Co-production of Presence and Meaning in Digital Text Scholarship’. The contributions to the present volume were triggered by this KNAW colloquium.

The present chapter gives an introduction to the theme of the volume and explains what we mean by ‘text comparison’, ‘digital creativity’, ‘presence’ and ‘meaning’, and why these words figure in the title of this volume. It also highlights some of the issues that emerged in the colloquium discussions as being crucial for a proper assessment of the transformations in digital text scholarship, such as the question as to

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the status of digital research objects used in e-philology. This introductory chapter is followed by four sections, each of which explores the theme from a different perspective.

**Text comparison and digital creativity**

Within the broad field of ‘digital humanities’, the present volume zooms in on philology, which can be defined as ‘the study of literature, in a wider sense, including grammar, literary criticism and interpretation, the relation of literature and written records to history, etc.’ (*OED*). Philology provides a fascinating case study of the transition from ‘traditional’ research to computer-based research in humanities scholarship, because of the textual nature both of its objects of research and of the vehicle of scholarly communication and knowledge representation (see the section ‘knowledge creation and representation’ below). The present volume contains contributions from various subdisciplines of philology, but the chief focus is on biblical studies. This branch of philology has a longstanding history of traditional scholarship, witnessed some of the earliest attempts to create annotated databases, and is still an area in which pioneering initiatives in e-philology are taking place.

Text comparison, which figures in the first part of the title of the present volume, is at the very heart of philology. In textual scholarship we need instruments that allow us to compare various literary texts. The comparison may involve various sections of the same text (cf. Talstra’s reference to concordances), texts that are in some way ‘parallel’ (cf. Talstra’s reference to synopses), and texts that are more loosely related, containing, for example, motifs and themes that frequently recur in certain cultures, or other intertextual relationships. Parallel texts, texts that in one way or another are witnesses to the same composition, can be described as a continuum that ‘ranges from the extreme of extensive verbatim quotation, on the one hand, to the point where no relationship is discernible, on the other’.3

The philological activity of text comparison goes back to Antiquity. One of the means to compare texts was to present them in parallel columns, a usage that is attested, for example, in Origen’s third-century

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2 An author’s name between brackets refers to the author’s contribution to the present volume.