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Digital Editions: Scholarly Tradition in an Avant-Garde Medium

Andrew Jewell

I come to you from the digital world. I am president of the *Digital Americanists*; I recently received a *Digital Humanities Start-Up* grant; I edit a *digital* archive on the life and work of Willa Cather; I am a faculty fellow at the Center for *Digital* Research in the Humanities; and I even have the word “*digital*” in my official job title: Assistant Professor of *Digital* Projects. I don’t begin this way in order to impress you with my credentials, but as a confession: my current professional identity is absolutely entangled with the digital medium. That said, I want to confess something further: I am neck deep in the digital not because I have any particular interest in computers, but because our present—and future—academic environment is intertwined with this medium. The computer is a tool and a way to seize an opportunity to be what I really desire to be: an editor, a scholar, and teacher of literature.

In this way, I come from the digital world not really for idealistic reasons, but for circumstantial and pragmatic ones. In our current professional environment, there is a lot of energy and attention paid to the digital humanities and the dreamy new world it is ushering in, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to finance and publish large, sophisticated scholarly editions in print. Funding agencies are now demanding that editions be published in digital format, and the success of certain editorial projects in drawing in funds and attention—Ken Price’s *Walt Whitman Archive*, for example—suggests that future developments in the field will likely require sophisticated engagement with computers.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding the new medium, however, is misleading, as it suggests the world as we know it is being *fundamentally* transformed. For example, a talk given by Brett Bobley, director of the NEH’s Office of Digital Humanities, calls the presence of technology in the humanities “game-changing.” The transformational rhetoric is important to the agendas of funding agencies and university administrators who need to convince constituents of their bold visions. And, to some degree, it is true: the digital medium does

indeed transform important elements of our scholarly work. However, it is also possible to see the trend toward digital humanities as a reclamation of scholarly traditions. G. Thomas Tanselle, in his insightful foreword to *Electronic Textual Editing*, writes:

Even those engaged in textual criticism and scholarly editing have sometimes been swept along by the general euphoria and lost their sense of perspective. Their concerns, after all, are at the heart of the new developments, for what the computer offers . . . is a new way of producing and displaying visible texts. It can be of such great assistance to editors and other readers that they would be foolish not to make use of it and be excited about it. But when the excitement leads to the idea that the computer alters the ontology of texts and makes possible new kinds of reading and analysis, it has gone too far. The computer is a tool, and tools are facilitators; they may create strong breaks with the past in the methods for doing things, but they are at the service of an overriding continuity, for they do not change the issues that we have to cope with.

Tanselle's point has been borne out in my own educational and professional experiences: my work with digital editions has simultaneously forced me to learn new technologies and established traditions. It has been an act of learning how to put a contemporary tool to the service of an established scholarly need. In fact, it was the digital humanities that introduced me to scholarly traditions that had no visibility in my undergraduate or graduate work in literary study. Until I worked applying XML markup to Walt Whitman's poetry manuscripts as a Graduate Research Assistant and engaged in debates about proper editorial policies, I had not been asked to confront elements of textual criticism: What is the role of authorial intention? What textual features are worthy of special editorial apparatus? What is the most effective form of annotation? How does one determine document order when leaves have become physically separated? Or, even more fundamentally: what is the most accurate transcription of this messy, handwritten document? The dominance of cultural studies and other theoretical models in the literary studies curriculum I encountered meant that work with texts and textual history was largely invisible. In fact, I'm embarrassed to say, I did not even know what a scholarly edition was until my graduate work was well under way.

Though my evidence is anecdotal, I believe that the excitement surrounding digital humanities has enabled a small surge in textual scholarship. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where I work, one of the best-funded and most often-celebrated humanities initiatives is the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities. The institution expends significant resources to produce scholarly

works in a digital medium. Though these works of digital scholarship are widely varied, in most cases they involve some degree of documentary editing: transcription, markup, page scanning, proofreading, and more. The growth at UNL isn't unique, of course: digital humanities centers are popping up around the world in different forms, funding agencies are prioritizing digital work, and University presses are looking (sometimes boldly, sometimes not) to reclaim their sagging bottom lines and sense of purpose using digital technology. In that sense, the digital medium is creating an atmosphere in which more people are engaging with textual and documentary editing; or, to put it crassly, digital technology has helped people rediscover that textual work is really cool.

All of the labor required for digitizing has meant that significant numbers of undergraduates, graduate students, library staff members, and faculty members in a variety of departments are engaging in some aspect of documentary editing. Though it would go too far to claim that each person who encounters one of these projects gets a full education in the subject, it is true that hands-on work with texts, which necessitates some level of intellectual engagement with issues of textuality, is happening broadly, and with many, especially faculty and upper-level graduate students, it is happening deeply. The act of marking up a text in Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) conformant XML requires the encoder to decide what features of the text need markup and to provide an accurate transcription. In my interactions with students who are collaborating with me on my projects, we regularly converse about such matters as proper name regularization, placement of annotation references, and identification of structural markers in nineteenth-century newspapers. I can say with certainty—and there are failed grant applications to prove it—that digitization and the cultural cache that came with it made those conversations possible. Without the draw of the digital, my students and I would not be engaged with the same editorial issues. The enthusiasm engendered by the promise of new digital models of scholarship is what drew the students and resources to these projects. Tanselle counters this enthusiasm for digital technology with a crucial reminder of what it is we are doing when we engage with texts in the digital medium: “We should be enthusiastic about the electronic future, for it will be a great boon to all who are interested in texts; but we do not lay the best groundwork for it, or welcome it in the most constructive way, if we fail to think clearly about just what it will, and what it will not, change. Procedures and routines will be different; concepts and issues will not. . . . We will be spared some drudgery and inconvenience, but we still have to confront the same issues that editors have struggled with for twenty-five hundred years.” Tanselle articulates an important point: the trend toward digital humanities is a *boon* for textual work, but it is not a fundamental remaking of it.

However, even if the fundamental intellectual issues are the same, the details are markedly different in the digital age. For an edition I'm working on,

the first complete, annotated edition of Willa Cather's extensive journalism, digital technology was not selected just to make it tenable in the current academic marketplace. Digital technology was selected because it made the edition better and more effective at communicating its content. These texts, for the most part, appeared once in Cather's lifetime, and that original publication exists only in the newspaper microfilm reels of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Additionally, these texts, though vibrant and highly readable to a modern audience, are choked with references to late nineteenth-century theater and popular culture, people and titles so well-known in 1894 that mere mention of the name was rhetorically adequate. With our digital edition, Kari Ronning and I can present the full texts of each of the 600 articles in an easily readable and searchable diplomatic transcription; we can provide a high quality page image of the original publication, which provides an authoritative image of the text and a glimpse into the fascinating context of the page; and we can provide thousands of annotations complete with images and, potentially, other media. The content of our edition of Cather's journalism could not exist in a print volume.

The edition of Willa Cather's journalism is only a part of the bigger digital project which I edit, the *Willa Cather Archive* (<http://cather.unl.edu>). This project is not exactly, or only, an edition. It is, more formally, what Carole Palmer calls "a new genre of scholarly production," a thematic research collection. Thematic research collections are, in Palmer's words, "digital aggregations of primary sources and related materials that support research on a theme" and are made because "[s]cholars have recognized that information technologies open up new possibilities for re-creating the basic resources of research and that computing tools can advance and transform work with those resources." It contains not just texts, but image galleries, interactive tools, and initiatives to organize communication among the community of Cather scholars. It is a project without a defined ending point that depends on collaborations with a wide range of people: undergraduates, graduate students, technical specialists, administrators, and scholars around the country. The thematic research collection is, in its most ambitious form, an attempt to digitally gather all the basic materials for one subject together in one place, to provide every reader, student, and scholar access to materials that traditionally have only been available to the privileged few that could afford to travel to archives around the world and carefully examine physically dispersed materials. Digitization can allow anyone with a web browser to see the documents only the elite have been able to see in the past.

This coexistence of a formal scholarly edition with other digitized materials under the same URL does perhaps blur for some the important distinction between "digitization" and "edition." The popularity of mass digitizing initiatives, from library-driven digital library projects to Google Books, have proliferated shabbily edited texts in electronic form, and this also suggests a possible threat to

the careful work of the editor. For example, textual scholar Wesley Raabe has tracked the way digital versions of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have transmitted inadequate versions of the texts, primarily by basing the transcribed, digital text on faulty reprint editions. And the digital versions have life beyond the screen, for the easy accessibility of digital editions appears to have made them the go-to texts for new print editions. As Raabe argues, "Print and digital traditions have become intermingled, and the status accorded to print editions in citation, when compared to the suspicion toward digital texts, is to misunderstand our contemporary textual condition" (Raabe 2008). Raabe's research provides an example of textual transmission concerns with a big text-digitization operation, one without particular concern for the specific content but instead interested in generating lots of electronic texts. The failure of mass digitization projects to provide excellent texts is unsurprising, and we understand that the motivation for the digitization—the "mass"—precludes rigorous copyediting.

But for other content-focused projects, the thematic research collections, the blur between digitization and editions is more complex and subtle. For many texts on the *Willa Cather Archive*, we make no claim to scholarly edition, nor do we even use the word "edition" to describe those materials. For other parts of the site, however, we are doing a full-on scholarly edition with full apparatus. This means that users are given different reading experiences for different texts: sometimes only a digital transcription is presented, more often users get a digital transcription combined with full-color page images of the original publication, and in one section users get the transcription, the page images, and extensive annotations.

This variety may trouble some, but the *Cather Archive*, though it is based largely on a collection of texts, does not consider itself at heart to be a big "scholarly edition." Instead, it *contains* such editions within a broader thematic research collection. It is meant to be a meaningful site for students and scholars studying Willa Cather, and the needs of those users—and the wide variety of multimedia materials available—means that, for some materials, a scholarly edition is required, but for other materials, it is more important that we provide access to forms not readily available (for example, our collection of Cather short fiction texts is made up predominantly of digital forms of her original periodical publications, complete with the accompanying illustrations which most readers of Cather have never encountered before.) I provide this description to reflect the way digital technology is allowing an edition to coexist with other materials not traditionally wedded so closely to it. Though to some the thematic research collection appears to be new world, in many ways this profusion of forms under one URL—images, sounds, video, interactive visual tools, and texts—is simply a multiformat extension of the drive behind documentary editions. The *Cather Archive*, though it may exist in different forms, is only trying to bring the pri-

mary materials important to its subject before as many people as it can in the most intellectually responsible and appropriate way possible.

In his opening paragraph of his essay on documentary editing in the *Electronic Textual Editing* volume, Bob Rosenberg is unequivocal about the connections between digital editions and their print forebears:

The most important point to be made about any digital documentary edition is that the editors' fundamental intellectual work is unchanged. Editors must devote the profession's characteristic, meticulous attention to selection, transcription, and annotation if the resulting electronic publication is to deserve the respect given to modern microfilm and print publications. At the same time, it is abundantly clear that a digital edition presents opportunities well beyond the possibilities of film and paper.

I want to end today with some brief thoughts about what kinds of opportunities I can see with digitization, some of which will be entirely familiar, and others of which might be more unusual, but all of which I believe emerge out of the same concerns and desires that brought documentary editing into existence in the first place.

One of the most obvious benefits of digitization is the elimination of certain kinds of boundaries inherent in print volumes. In the digital environment, editors need not be so selective, but instead can contain all the texts they have the resources and moxie to produce, and they can present those texts as both searchable transcriptions and high-quality color images. In the presentation of texts, editors can choose multiple interfaces instead of just one: for example, if the text is encoded properly, one can alternate between a revision-ridden diplomatic transcription and a critical clear reading text with a click of a button. Or, one can allow users to browse edited documents chronologically or alphabetically or by any other arrangement that makes sense to the material being edited. The dynamism of the interface gives editors the chance to rid themselves of the tortured symbolic systems used in print to indicate various elements of the manuscript page and variants in different readings. Though rendering complex textual relationships is rarely straightforward, the digital environment's accessibility to color, animation, photographs, and space expands options considerably and allows us to dream of intuitive reading interfaces for our editions.

Once the texts are created, digital technology also allows readers to do more than just read them. Textual analysis gives users access to quantifiable data about the texts, information about word usage, phrase patterns, and grammatical choices. Willa Cather's readers can go to the *Cather Archive* and, thanks to Brian Pytlik Zillig's TokenX text analysis tool, gather unprecedented information

about the complete corpus of her fiction. They can see, for example, that she used the words “edit,” “document,” and “text” less than 20 times in her fiction, but used “book” or “books” hundreds of times (426 to be exact), or they can locate the most commonly used words and phrases used in sample texts. The value of these numbers will, of course, be determined by the value of the searches made and the interpretation of the numbers provided; the information does not replace interpretation, but gives the interpreters another piece of evidence to evaluate. One day, we hope to allow users to use increasingly sophisticated versions of this tool to track her language usage across time and across genres, to compare her language usage to her contemporaries, and to introduce part-of-speech analysis.

All of this, though, is simply an extension of an old motivating force: we want to give as many people as possible reliable and contextualized access to quality materials we consider important to the study of our subjects. Even the cutting-edge text analysis, though perhaps confounding for some modern literary scholars, would be recognizable to medieval monks who toiled on the first biblical concordance. In fact, the afternoon my colleague Brian Pylik Zillig showed me a recently generated list of all of the words Cather used in her fiction, I remarked, “Congratulations, Brian. You’ve just accomplished in a few minutes what some scholars used to take their entire careers to do.” The tools we now use may be more complex and sophisticated than tools used in the past, but they are still at the service of the same basic scholarly challenges.

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