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“Where’s Your *Real* Book?”: Textual Editing and the Culture Wars

Wesley T. Mott

Here’s the view from a professor of English at a technological university where the PhD is given in engineering and sciences. Where the Humanities & Arts department is the second-largest department on campus, though we offer only the Bachelor’s degree. Where even our multidisciplinary department is split by culture wars. I am a proud alumnus of Camp Edit (Class of 1980). Although I do not work full-time at an editorial project, I hope that my experience is somewhat representative of what faces many documentary editors. [In fact, having seen drafts of my colleagues’ remarks, I think you’ll detect a similar angst afflicting us all.]

A younger colleague of mine approached his pre-tenure departmental review as the editor of a respected annotated bibliography of a world-class writer and a forthcoming volume in a critical edition of a major writer from a major press. He was asked by a member of the tenure committee, “Yeah, but where’s your *real* book, you know, something that shows how your mind works?” The same committee member subsequently asked me to suggest passages from *Walden* for an anthology on environmental writings that he was “editing” (he saw no irony there). He was grateful when I presented him with the citations, but when I suggested that he use the text from the Princeton Thoreau Edition, he looked at me as if I had semicolons streaming from my ears. He already had a thirty-year-old trade paperback, and he was about saving the world, not fretting over spelling and punctuation.

Though my department has only six or seven tenure-track faculty in English, surrounded, it sometimes seems, by hostile culture critics from other disciplines, we are a congenial group with a solid pound-for-pound record in textual editing. Now an editor of the Thoreau *Journal* in the Princeton Edition, I edited volume 4 of Emerson’s *Complete Sermons*. My colleagues Lance Schachterle and Kent Ljungquist have edited volumes in the Cooper Edition, Joel Brattin volumes in the Carlyle and Dickens Editions. We all have published additional article-length editions. Ironically, the image of textual editors at WPI fares better *outside* the department. Some years ago, a past president of WPI identified textual editing as one of a handful of what he called “Centers of Excellence” at the university. Merit pay doesn’t exist in the humanities for *any* kind of published scholarship. But textual editing is considered eminently worthy of sabbatical projects, and textual editors have won the annual trustees award for scholarship. Our science and engineering

colleagues, with whom we share committee work and project advising, seem to have greater respect than many in our department for those who work with primary materials of writers they recognize as famous or important. (The concept of the “Death of the Author” hasn’t caught up with them yet.) And the very appearance of a critical edition seems to resonate with engineers and scientists—they somehow appreciate textual notes, variants, and other kinds of apparatus as evidence of solid, perhaps even scientific scholarship. To which I say, Yes, indeed, without rehearsing the tedious debates we all have had about whether a mark is a period, a comma, or a flyspeck.

How do we convince our *other* colleagues of the importance of what we do? If we simply say, Without our labors, you’d have even less from which to spin your theoretical webs, they’d still be just as happy with their thirty-year-old trade paperbacks. They consider our work unimaginative because supposedly non-analytical, disengaged, and theoretically unsophisticated. Let’s face it: Our textual editing is a leaden exercise in transcription and correction to our colleagues in cultural criticism who are out to transform society with the latest *-ism*.

Great cautionary tales do exist, however, about the perils of using unreliable texts. John W. Nichol’s “Melville’s ‘Soiled Fish of the Sea,’” published in *American Literature* in 1949, was collected in Sheldon P. Zitner’s *The Practice of Modern Literary Scholarship* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966, pp. 380–81), which was standard reading for beginning grad students in my day. Nichols explains that the great F. O. Matthiessen selected a passage from the Constable Standard Edition of *White-Jacket* to show Melville’s artistry at work. Melville’s hero has fallen from the yardarm of the U.S. frigate *Neversink*. The Melville passage reads: “I wondered whether I was yet dead or still dying. But of a sudden some fashionless form brushed my side—some inert, soiled fish of the sea; the thrill of being alive again tingled in my nerves, and the strong shunning of death shocked me through.” And Mathiessen’s comment:

... this second trance is shattered by a twist of imagery of the sort that was to become peculiarly Melville’s. He is startled back into the sense of being alive by grazing an inert form; hardly anyone but Melville could have created the shudder that results from calling this frightening vagueness some ‘soiled fish of the sea.’ The *discordia concors*, the unexpected linking of the medium of cleanliness with filth, could only have sprung from an imagination that had apprehended the terrors of the

deep, of the immaterial deep as well as the physical.

What critical paroxysms might all this soiled tingling and shuddering have elicited from *Freudian* critics? But as Nichols points out, the Constable edition got it wrong: “Melville in all probability used the adjective *coiled* rather than *soiled* in describing his ‘fish of the sea,’ and . . . it was some unknown typesetter, rather, who accounted for the ‘shudder’ and the ‘*discordia concors*’ of the ‘unexpected linking.’”

Such anecdotes aren’t likely to convert our obtuse colleagues. Keep in mind, though, the irony that, while many cultural critics profess to be liberators stripping away various kinds of oppression, their tone and jargon often render their work elitist, classically Orwellian obfuscation. Put cruelly, there is *no audience* outside the academy for contemporary academic literary criticism. Yet many are hungry for the stories that documentary editions and their editors can tell. I offer seven ways to tell our story:

1. Tell our colleagues and administrators that we write narrative and critical studies *as well as* prepare critical editions. Explain not only the importance of using reliable texts, but also the benefits of immersion in textual editing for *critical analysis*. In the late 1980s, as I was starting to edit volume 4 of Emerson’s sermons, I was finishing up a monograph on the sermons, “*The Strains of Eloquence*”: *Emerson and His Sermons* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1989), on which I’d been working in one shape or another for fifteen years. In one passage, I was lavishing praise on Emerson for his compelling, marvelous images of light, seeing, insight, and hearing, which, I was convinced, showed him moving toward a Transcendentalist vision. Had I not been working simultaneously annotating the sermons, I would have made an embarrassing mistake: The phrases weren’t Emerson’s—they were St. Paul’s, those of the Synoptic Gospels, and the translators of the King James Bible. Ever the creative appropriator of fine phrases and ideas, Emerson knew that his *congregations* would grasp the biblical echoes without notes, but I certainly didn’t.

Long ago I asked the late Merton M. Sealts Jr., the great editor of Melville and Emerson, if editing was held in high esteem by English departments. Mert, who also wrote several fine monographs, paused before replying deliberately that he thought that English departments sometimes did consider editing a “*major figure*” worthwhile. But he added emphatically, “When you edit the works of a writer, you really know your man.” Making allowances for the gender phrasing of Mert’s generation, he was right on target. (One

hopes too that the bias against editions of institutions, movements, and non-canonical figures is waning.)

2. Camp Edit teaches us that footnotes should not morph into mini-articles. But let's show how judicious, understated notes can be imaginative and tell interesting, even moving stories. One example: In editing Emerson's New Year's Eve sermon for 1831, I needed to identify the context for his repeated references to disease and cold. Were they generic end-of-year platitudes? The Boston *Transcript* for the preceding week revealed that cholera and smallpox epidemics had appeared, and influenza had killed 76 Bostonians that week. It was the coldest winter since 1798. The day of the sermon, a note appeared in the *Transcript*: "There will be religious services at Mr Emerson's Church this evening"—this immediately under a report that the temperature at sunrise that day had been 13 below. Emerson's year-end reflections on the fragility of life became chillingly immediate. I hope that my brief notes lead readers to feel that this sermon is no literary exercise and make them shudder at the bonechilling cold of that night, and to identify with his congregation seeking consolation as the outside world of misery tightened its grip.

3. Indoctrinate anyone who will listen about the differences between textual editing, managing editing, copy editing, and proofreading. Nobody except us knows the difference, or cares. Moreover, we get a bad rap from generations of course paperbacks by so-called "editors" who simply attached often very engaging and informative introductions and afterwords onto readily available, pre-selected texts.

4. Share with colleagues and administrators the textual, historical, and other introductions to our editions, showing the critical and interpretive contexts and significance of what we do, as well as *reviews* of our editions, proof that they are taken seriously in the scholarly world.

5. Explain our methodology to colleagues and administrators. When I file sabbatical and other required reports with my provost, I actually cut and paste the summary of my progress from periodic reports from the Thoreau Edition. This avoids the appearance of special pleading on my part and has the aura of external authority. (Remember, an "expert" is defined as a person who comes from at least fifty miles away.)

6. Bring our work into the classroom. Emerson's oracular style can seem off-puttingly cool and perfectly chiseled. But he should be an *example* to students. For all his trumpeting about inspiration, he *worked* hard at his craft, and hoarded and recycled material with the best of them, calling his journals

his “Savings Bank.” Students are encouraged to see facsimiles of heavily revised pages, which I include with the edited text of a sermon in my Concord Writers course. In a different project, four of my students critically edited the letters of a Union soldier as part of a Civil War exhibit they designed for a regional museum. Involve students as editorial assistants in various kinds of editorial projects—professional newsletters, for example, not just documentary editions—where they can learn to master a variety of editorial skills and abilities to make critical editorial decisions.

7. Proselytize wider audiences. Besides our campus administrators, colleagues, students, and funding sources, many “general publics”—churches, historical societies, public schools—are often excited to hear about the discoveries of documentary editing. The 2003 Emerson bicentennial gave countless such opportunities, including a huge observance at Emerson’s own Second Church, which was eager to hear how the recent edition of his sermons sheds light on his preaching career and his emergence as man, thinker, and writer. And at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering in Concord, which attracts 200–300 people—many of whom are non-academics—Beth Witherell and Sandy Petrulionis have captivated large audiences with illustrated lectures on editing Thoreau manuscripts.

To sum up, documentary editors aren’t proofreading zombies. We have stories to tell as exciting as those found in the most dazzling monographs. And for those who think we edit because we can’t write: Remind them in no uncertain terms that we do *both*.