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Joel Myerson

University of South Carolina, myersonj@mailbox.sc.edu

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Nothing Left to Lose: or, Changes in Literary Editing and the Decline of Civilization as We Know It

JOEL MYERSON

My title is somewhat facetious, but not completely. There has been a profound shift in the direction and underlying assumptions of editorial theory and practice during the thirty years in which I have been practicing this craft, and my purpose here is to make some general observations on this topic.¹ I start with a warning, though: most of my comments apply to textual or literary editing, not to documentary editing as it is practiced by literary editors.

The state of current documentary editing is just fine, assuming that you can get your edition published in today's marketplace. Any serious editor of a major writer recognizes that the ways in which the writer inscribes his or her letters and journals are, in many cases, just as important as what the writer says. Accordingly, the practice of reporting authorial and editorial revisions and changes in the manuscript is widespread. The only real debates among literary documentary editors these days seem to be in three areas. First, does a particular author require the type of full-dress editorial treatment granted to a Melville or a Hawthorne? Second, should the editorial apparatus be within the text (that "barbed wire" that Lewis Mumford so famously and fatuously complained about in the splendid edition of Emerson's journals)² or should it appear in notes or at the back of the book? And, third, what is the best use of the possibilities offered to us by electronic media? These are all intelligent questions, and they presuppose a shared desire to present texts accurately, and as closely as possible to the way in which the author wrote them.

JOEL MYERSON, Carolina Distinguished Professor of American Literature at the University of South Carolina, is the editor of works by Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Walt Whitman. He presented this paper at the 1998 annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing in St. Louis.

But the state of textual or literary editing, as best demonstrated in the presentation of a work published during the author's lifetime and intended for a public audience, is less stable. The teleology of how texts are produced and published, and what the author's role is during this process, has become less clear over the past thirty years. The distinguished literary editor Speed Hill has already felt the effects of this process, as described by his friend and colleague David Greetham:

Speed once remarked to me that by the early 1990s he felt like a textual Rip Van Winkle, someone who had been so focussed on the scholarly requirements of a specific project that when he awoke from that project's completion he discovered that the world had changed. . . . He had been raised in and worked hard promoting a system of scholarly production that at the time had looked permanently ensconced as *the* way to do things Having emerged with distinction from that production, he felt almost betrayed by the academic and intellectual shifts that had occurred in the meantime. Not only were old philology and new bibliography now both in retreat before the monstrous regiments of post-structuralists, post-marxists, post-feminists, and post-colonialists, but also the very rationale of the editorial project—the fixing of an utterance with some degree of historical authenticity—was now being called into question, and perhaps worse, no longer being accorded its proper status in the academy.³

In some ways, we started the 1960s with a fundamentalist view of the text as the construction of a single author, with W. W. Greg as our chief prophet, and Fredson Bowers as our chief priest, assisted at the altar by G. Thomas Tanselle. No longer Trinitarians, we end the 1990s as cheerful proponents of Unitarian Universalism, led merrily on our noncreedal way by Jerome McGann, who proclaims that the author is but one of many agents acting upon and creating the text, which, in turn, may be edited in many different but correct ways.

How did we get here? Some history is in order.

W. W. Greg's article on "The Rationale of Copy-Text" in the 1950–1951 *Studies in Bibliography* set the stage for at least two generations of editors. Greg's theorizing grew out of the editorial practices for editing the literature of the Renaissance, a period for which very few authorial manuscripts survive. Reacting against the then-current practice of automatically choosing the last text published in the author's lifetime as the text to be reprinted, with only minimal tidying-up of obvious errors, Greg proposed a new way to look at things. On the principle that every time a text is printed more errors get introduced, Greg proposed, as a general rule, that we should choose the form of the text closest to the now-lost authorial manuscript as the base text—what he called "copy-text"—from which editorial emendations were to be made. Rather than a straight reprinting, the copy-text was to be emended by the editor on the basis of authorial intention, as well as cleaning up obvious errors. That is, by comparing various editions and printings of a work, as well as through a close reading of the text itself, the editor would attempt to bring forth an eclectic text that would represent what the author intended to do before the influence of external forces such as censorship, house styling, or printer's errors caused the text to be changed.⁴

Greg's article gained enormous influence because the editor of *Studies in Bibliography*, Fredson Bowers, was himself a Renaissance literature scholar, and he immediately applied Greg's principle to his own editorial work. When the editors of nineteenth-century American authors began planning their editions in the late 1950s, they discovered that Greg's essay was one of the few intelligent and theoretically sophisticated discussions of textual editing available, and it thus formed the basis for much of their work. The first major edition out of the starting gate, Ohio State's edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne, had Bowers as the textual editor. One of the next editions, that of Herman Melville's writings, featured Tanselle as the textual editor. And when the Center for Editions of American Authors started to dispense federal monies for funding editions, its director was Matthew J. Bruccoli, who had done his dissertation at Virginia under Bowers. And one of the CEAA editions was that of Stephen Crane, which Bowers supervised. Moreover, as Bowers began to be involved with the editing of American

literary texts, he published a series of influential articles on all aspects of textual editing, using Greg as his basis, that were, in turn, followed up by a series of equally influential articles by Tanselle. As a result, what is now known as the Greg-Bowers-Tanselle school of editing came into existence.

But why the sudden interest in textual editing? The answer is contained in two words: "New Criticism." By the 1940s, critics were expressing frustration with the state of their craft: texts were approached either through genteel personal essays or as autobiographical statements. The new critical approach championed by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren argued that the text existed outside personal and historical forces, and was to be read as an independent aesthetic object; thus was born the practice of "close reading." And by making the text stand alone as a fit subject for interpretation, the New Critics created a demand for accurate texts. After all, if each word in a text was important, then that text must be untainted. For once, criticism and scholarship went hand in hand.

The application of Greg's theory by Bowers, Tanselle, and others to the editing of American literary texts was perfectly timed: government funding was available for editorial projects; technologies such as the Hinman Collator made possible sophisticated bibliographical analysis of texts; a wealth of biographical evidence was becoming available that assisted the editor in following the author's text from inception to publication; and, unlike in the Renaissance, numerous authors' manuscripts and other prepublication forms of the text were available for consultation. Most people were happy as the proverbial clam.

But along came Jerome McGann, and those happy clams were fried. In a series of works, culminating in the publication of *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* in 1983, McGann argued that most literary texts were the products of collaborations between the author and the author's friends, spouse, lover, agent, *and* the publisher, copyeditor, printer, and proofreader. The text, therefore, became a slippery thing indeed. The very idea of what Greg-Bowers-Tanselle called "the author's final intention" became obsolete. Rather than one text, we have many texts; rather than having a text with one author, we have multiple authors; instead of "authorial intention," we have what McGann and others called "socialized texts."

If the text was changed at every turn, then, we are faced with the question of intentionality. That is, did an author change a text because someone suggested a reading that was better with which the author agreed, or because someone else raised nonaesthetic issues, such as length or potentially unacceptable sexuality and language, to which the author reluctantly gave in so that the book would be published?

What resulted was a definite division in opinion on how we approach editing, the difference between a monolithic yet flexible approach that posited the author as the center of textual analysis, and a more decentralized approach that suggested multiple authorities for the text. The emphasis changed from reconstructing what the author created to a reader-response view of how the text was read. The difference also affected editorial responsibility. Clearly, people working in the Greg-Bowers-Tanselle school, if they were attempting to produce an eclectic text representing what would have been the author's final intentions, would arrive at a single text. The Center for Editions of American Authors and its successor, the MLA's Committee on Scholarly Editions, "sealed" these texts as "*a n* approved text," which unfortunately became interpreted for reasons of publisher's hype or simple misreading as "*the* approved text." And because the CEAA was in the business of funding editions before NEH took over that role, such a seal often had significant financial implications. But editors influenced by McGann would come closer to the European theory of "versioned" texts; that is, they would represent multiple authorized versions of the text, rather than a single one.⁵

And at this point technology rears its head. The easiest way to represent an edited text in a letterpress edition is to print one text with variants in notes or in apparatus at the back of the book. The Greg-Bowers-Tanselle approach was perfectly adapted to the print technology of the pe-

riod. But when computers came along, such people as Peter Shillingsburg proposed interactive programs that would allow us to see the text at each stage of its development, as well as all the variants, both forwards and backwards in time.⁶ McGann's approach, then, with its multiple authorities, was perfectly timed for the development of a medium that delivered multiple texts cheaply and easily.

Yes, but you ask, who is winning and which approach is better? Being a good Emersonian, I will not answer that question. But, being a good academic, I do have some opinions. I do not think that anyone today would argue that texts are created by a romanticized author working in a garret turning out inspired prose, which is how many of McGann's followers have misrepresented the Greg-Bowers-Tanselle theory. At the same time, I do not think that most authors let other people write their books for them, nor do I run away from the concept that editors edit. Both theories have their merits, and following either would seem to lead to the two most obvious points in textual editing: each text is different, and blind adherence to any theory leads to ruin. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the history of whose texts may be traced from journal passage to lecture performance to printed page, can be edited with grace and effectiveness using the concept of authorial intention, as can much of Walt Whitman, who personally set the type and/or supervised the printing of many editions of his works. On the other hand, Theodore Dreiser, who was beset by advice from many friends—friends whom he expected to

advise him on the production of his texts—and who was under pressure about what was acceptable to print because of his subject matter and presentation of sexuality, can be edited with confidence by treating his texts as being socialized, as can F. Scott Fitzgerald, who expected his editors to correct his execrable spelling. Or to draw a presidential analogy:

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Joel Myerson at the 1998 annual conference of the Association for Documentary Editing. Photo by Sharon Ritenour Stevens.

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Harry Truman, who had a sign on his desk proclaiming "The buck stops here," presents a case of authorial intentionality; Bill Clinton, as we have recently seen, certainly appears to be working from a socialized text.

I do have one concern, though, and that is about technology. There is the editorial potential for Harry Truman's buck to become so pixelated as to be unrecognizable. That is, the obvious extension of McGann's theory in these computerized days is to make everyone their own editor, replacing the socialized text of the author with so many multiple texts that the term *editor* becomes a misnomer for their creators. I would not want to see the practice of literary editing replaced by an editorial Project Gutenberg; somewhere, sometime, there has to be a text produced by well-informed people that has some sort of authority.

As this brief history of modern literary editing will, I hope, demonstrate, there is a lot to be said

An Invitation to Charlottesville

James Madison, George Washington, and William James invite you to the Twenty-Second Annual Meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing at the Omni Hotel in Charlottesville, Virginia, 7-9 October 1999. In addition to stimulating papers and panels, the meeting will include tours of the University of Virginia, historic Charlottesville, and other attractions to be announced.

The local arrangements committee comprises Philander Chase (hotel lodging and reservations), Elizabeth M. Berkeley and Mary A. Hackett (hotel reception, banquet, WIN breakfast, and breaks), Frank E. Grizzard ("Academical Village" tour and reception), Robert F. Haggard and Mary Anne Andrei (transportation), Anne M. Colony and Martha J. King (touring and dining), Edward G. Lengel (meeting rooms and technical equipment), Mark A. Mastromarino (registration), and David B. Mattern (publicity).

Be sure to mark the date on your calendar, and look for details in future issues.

for being a documentary editor, for *our* only real textual decision is how best to represent what the author wrote.

Notes

1. For excellent surveys of editorial theory and practice, see *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research*, ed. D. C. Greetham (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995), especially the chapters by G. Thomas Tanselle on "The Varieties of Scholarly Editing," John H. Middendorf on eighteenth-century English literature, Donald H. Reiman on nineteenth-century British poetry and prose, Peter L. Shillingsburg on nineteenth-century British fiction, Joel Myerson on colonial and nineteenth-century American literature, and James L. W. West III on twentieth-century American and British literature.

2. Lewis Mumford, "Emerson Behind Barbed Wire," *New York Review of Books* 10 (18 January 1968): 3-5; and see the "Letters" in response, *New York Review of Books* 10 (14 March 1968): 35-36.

3. David Greetham, *Textual Transgressions: Essays Toward the Construction of a Biobibliography* (New York: Garland, 1998), 24-25.

4. The literature on this subject is vast, and the controversies may be followed most easily in Fredson Bowers, *Textual and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), and *Essays in Bibliography, Text, and Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975); G. Thomas Tanselle, *A Rationale of Textual Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), *Textual Criticism Since Greg: A Chronicle, 1950-1985* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), and *Textual Criticism and Scholarly Editing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990); and the essays in *Scholarly Editing*, ed. Greetham.

5. A classic statement of this concept is Hans Zeller, "A New Approach to the Critical Constitution of Literary Texts," *Studies in Bibliography* 28 (1975): 231-64.

6. See Peter L. Shillingsburg, *Scholarly Editing in the Computer Age*, 3d ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

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