Abstractions or Constructions? The Materiality of the Literary Work in Textual Criticism

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The task of textual criticism is to clear authorial texts of corruption and error introduced by careless scribes, compositors, editors and other collaborators and middlemen in the process of publication, scribal or printed, so as to produce as close an approximation of the text intended by the author as possible.

Because of the nature of their work (which often goes unnoticed by theoretically inclined scholars) textual critics have believed for a long time, as James Thorpe explains in his Principles of Textual Criticism, that only the intentions of the artist "distinguish the work of art within the class of aesthetic objects, which must be protected in order to preserve the work from becoming a collaborative enterprise" (Thorpe 1972, 48–49). What is to be protected is the "integrity" (Thorpe's term) of the work of art, which can only be given to the work by the author. Literary works are not "collaborations", according to this aesthetic: they are the private property of an individual creator.

Editorial work is necessary, we might go on to argue, because errors in texts can often prove fatal for interpreters, who ought to be reading texts as writers wrote them and not as someone else mistakenly presented them. The story of F. O. Mathiessen's reading of Melville's Moby Dick is (almost too) often told as an example. Seeing "soiled fish of the sea" in the edition which he consulted, Mathiessen produced an inspired reading – but his was not to prevail, since Melville had originally written "coiled fish". We might even speculate that this compositorial mistake, first noticed by John W. Nichol in 1949, was a contributing cause to Mathiessen's suicide in 1950.

Mathiessen, though, lived in another era, a fellow scholar might object, a time when exact, authoritative readings mattered. Why should a contemporary scholar (or even a common reader) brought up in the age of deconstruction, the indeterminacy of meaning, the death of the author and the rise of the historically, culturally and politically contextualized text care about such incidental details? At most they are only interesting as material proof of the ungrounded and mutable nature of literary texts and the ability of readers to project meaning – to invent meaning – where no author intended it. And even

if sometimes conflated, corrupted or otherwise flawed texts become received texts, as in the case of Shakespeare's King Lear, what of it? Isn't it more interesting to study the reception history as it happened rather than claim that one's interpretation is better because it is based on a text that is more accurate?

The short answer is: exactly because we live in the age of deconstruction, the indeterminacy of meaning, the death of the author and the rise of the historically, culturally and politically contextualized text. The most reasonable rationale for having new critical editions of texts (and preferably for each scholarly generation) is not to protect the integrity of the work as it was intended by the author or to provide us with more accurate texts (although that is a major concern when received texts deteriorate into nonsense), but exactly to understand the social and material history of the texts we have received better, so that their place in the convoluted history of "what what they do when we read and write them does do" might be explained, to paraphrase Michel Foucault's dictum in Madness and Civilization.

If a critical edition can provide us with an exhaustive account of the provenance of our texts, then such editions can be called definitive, and the rationale for doing so has been explained by Fredson Bowers in this way: "Editions that are definitive must exist for every major author in order to set the standard, to provide each scholar with maximum information about the text and its formation in order to satisfy all the various needs that scholars have for approaching a text, ranging from the linguistic to the aesthetic." (Bowers 1970, 8) But just what is the "maximum information about the text and its formation" which a critical edition must give of a work? And what are literary works, and how are they formed?

The roots of modern critical editing in the English-speaking world lie in the work of many talented editors such as A.W. Pollard, but the largest credit goes usually to W.W. Greg (1875–1959). He endeavoured to create a sound methodological ground for the production of critical editions, and became famous for his distinction between accidental and substantive features of texts.

According to Greg, “we need to draw a distinction between the significant, or as I shall call them ‘substantive’, readings of the text, those namely that affect the author’s meaning or the essence of his expression, and others, such in general as spelling, punctuation, word-division, and the like, affecting mainly its formal presentation, which may be regarded as the accidents, or as I shall call them ‘accidentals’, of the text.” (Greg 1950, 21)

The approach was, of course, motivated by the need to get as close as possible to the authorial text, but it was also driven by pragmatical concerns. The distinction between accidentals and substantives was introduced by Greg in order to streamline the editing of early modern English texts. The variation in orthography during this period is famously wide and lacking in any kind of regulation. Therefore, any editor attempting to edit a Renaissance text has to ask which copy one is to follow in reproducing the accidentals and substantives of a text.

Greg provided editors with a methodological rule: in editing the accidentals, follow the usages in a chosen copy-text, preferably a particular copy of the earliest good edition. The text’s substantives could then be edited eclectically, which simply means: by using as many different sources as necessary in the critical reconstruction of the text. Such an approach suggested itself because authors might revise or otherwise affect the texts of later editions, or later printers might have better manuscripts at their disposal, but the copy-text should be nearest to the original authorial holograph, this usually being the earliest good print edition.

Greg’s simple rule led Fredson Bowers (1905–1991) to develop a complete editorial theory based on it, the so-called theory of final intentions, which became known as the defining idea of the ”New Bibliography”. Bowers took Greg’s rule and generalized it: in every situation where an editor has to choose between texts which seem equally authoritative, an editor must choose the one which is closest to the final intentions of the author. This formulation led Bowers to always prefer the latest manuscript draft, or the nearest equivalent, because all the errors and corruptions introduced by editors, printers and compositors had to be removed from the text of a proper critical edition.

The final intentions of the author? Am I really talking about such nonsense in this day and age. Well yes, I am. It should, however, be noted that ”intention” as it is meant in textual criticism does not always or explicitly mean the same thing as it means in literary theory, analytical philosophy or phenomenology.

For instance, the first thing that a literary scholar probably thinks of when discussion turns to intention is the intentional fallacy. The classic formulation is, of course, found in the almost embarrassingly ancient essay “The Intentional Fallacy” by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley (1946 rev. 1954): “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”

In its classical formulation (and not the post-structural one, which is very different and more radical), the intentional fallacy is just a special case of the general distrust that philosophy and criticism has felt towards what writers have to say about their own creative process ever since Socrates questioned the inspiration of the poet Lysias in Plato’s Phaedrus. They are simply not to be trusted when it comes to a critical evaluation of their efforts, or even if they were, most of the time we cannot ask for their intentions since the authors are dead or otherwise unavailable.

Any talk of authorial intention by textual critics is bound to bring such topics up. But as Peter Shillingsburg has noted, critical editors cannot exactly be accused of committing the intentional fallacy, since ”[t]he intentional fallacy involves valuing a work as the author intended it to be valued, or judging its success as the author intended, or believing that the text succeeds in meaning what the author ‘had in mind.’” (Shillingsburg 2006, 56)

The idea that intention, as understood by textual critics, has something to do with ”having something in the mind” seems to me the central mistake which literary critics often commit when discussing the concept of intention with textual critics. It is not so. Critical editors in general do not equate any kind of ”innate ideas” with authorial intentions. Nor do they think of intention in the sense of Husserl’s intentionality, which conceives of the human experiences of perception, thought, memory, imagination, proprioception and even linguistic and social activity as structured in a directed way towards the world. ”Intending something” would then be a kind of self-understanding or self-

consciousness; that one is intending, or conscious about being conscious of or about something.

For the purposes of textual criticism, such accounts of intentionality are pretty useless. No: even such a staunch defender of the role of authorial intention as G. Thomas Tanselle has proposed that "the kind of authorial intention that is relevant to textual decisions" is "the author's wish, in the act of composing, to have a particular word or mark of punctuation at a given place in the text." For textual critics, intention is always a material act, or at least inescapably bound up in its materiality, for good or for worse.

But what about the post-structural and cultural-studies formulations of intention, specifically theories of the social constructedness of meaning and such like?

The Greg-Bowers -line of editorial theory held sway in Anglo-American critical editing for decades, due to the institutional position of Fredson Bowers and his followers in the MLA. But times changed, and coinciding with "the death of the author" and the birth of the "social text" in the literary theory and cultural studies of the 1970s and 1980s a similar interdisciplinary movement arose in textual circles. D. C. Greetham has called it "textual scholarship", a movement incorporating a new kind of attention towards the history of books, the nature of texts, critical editing, authorship and literary production.

The Greg-Bowers theory of final intentions drew considerable criticism from these new figures, and the central figure in much of the debate was Jerome J. McGann, who was not the first but has come to be considered as the most effective of the Greg-Bowers -critics.

In 1983 McGann claimed that the theory of final intentions forced editors to construct texts which were merely new eclectic versions the works themselves. According to McGann, "the concept of the critical edition….clearly induces the illusion among scholars that the chief obstacles standing in the way of the reconstitution of an original text lie in the past, with

its accumulated corruptions and interfering processes. The critical editor enters to remove those obstacles and recover the authoritative original." But "such a scholarly project must be prepared to accept an initial (and insurmountable) limit: that a definitive text, like the author's final [89–90] intentions, may not exist, may never have existed, and may never exist at any future time." (McGann 1983, 89–90)

McGann also claimed that writers simply do not have final intentions for their works, but rather many, often contradictory intentions and wishes which change due to time and situation. McGann also attacked the idea that the integrity of works need to be protected from "collaborationist" corruption. Literary works are often produced in collaboration with friends, other writers, editors and other agents of production. A critical editor following the rules laid down by Greg and Bowers has to consider the work of these agents as errors, because the author must be considered an autonomous authority, and the editor must produce a text which this author, working autonomously, would have produced — even if such a text could never have existed.

Such a theory, McGann insisted, was the result of a romantic ideology preferring the mentality of the artist's process over the materiality of the work or the sociality of reception, which amounts to a critical misunderstanding of the relations between authors, literary institutions, worksand the audience. Literary works are social, not psychological products. They do not exist as art before they come into contact with their audience.

I suppose the doubt with which "normal" literary scholars approach issues of authorial intention is due to the fact that literary criticism is often about "the text itself" and its meaning, even if one studies their historical etc. embeddedness. But there is no such thing. What the last twenty or so years have taught us with the rise of the reader and various forms of reception aesthetics from cognitive literary studies to the new materialism is that no text can mean anything without a human agent authorizing that meaning. As Jerome J. McGann has tirelessly pointed out, "texts" do not mean anything by themselves. They can only exist as literary works in human networks of

productive agency. Variation in meaning is just variation in authorship, and authorship comes in many forms.

McGann's "social versionism" is a theory of critical editing which has gained much ground in textual criticism lately. "These days", as the eminent historian of textual scholarship, D.C.Greetham has said, "it seems that all we have are competing texts and competing readers, and the list of textual critics accepting versions over fixed texts is emblematic of the change" (Greetham 1996, 342).

Versionism, as Peter Shillingsburg has said, claims that "a work of art is NOT equivalent with a linguistic text of it and therefore changes every time it is embodied in a new medium even though the linguistic text is copied accurately". It also claims that "a work of art is NOT equivalent with a best version of it but rather is made more accessible in each of its versions by having alternative versions presented in conjunction with it". (Shillingsburg 1993, 35)

Put another way "every new embodiment of a literary work of art is a new, additional, and altered embodiment of it". This is because a reader "cannot help being influenced in certain ways by the object that 'contains' the literary work." (ibid., 33)

But what, exactly, is an embodiment of a work of art, what do the scare quotes around "contains" mean and when, in the process of composition and revision and publication, does a work become a work? "Do we find poems in artifacts? Is a poem what appears in an author's final manuscript, or in a first printed edition, or in a revised second edition?" "[W]hat is the relation between the reading of the various documentary texts of a poem and the experiencing of the work, or are they all separate works?" (Tanselle 1989, 12–13)

In Shillingsburg's opinion, one can begin to answer these questions only when it is admitted that "a desire for a single best text is not consonant with the facts about the production and existence of literary art" (Shillingsburg 1993, 34), but not all editors agree with such versionist ideas. Some textual critics vehemently argue against versionism, like G. Thomas Tanselle, an important defender of the Greg-Bowers line and the one asking the questions I have

quoted above.

What is a literary work of art? Tanselle's answer in his The Rationale of Textual Criticism is that "verbal constructions are abstractions" and that "literary works do not exist on paper or in sounds".Therefore the task of the textual critic, according to Tanselle, depends upon "receiving a message from the past", and "entails the effort to discover, through the text… .the work that lies behind" (Tanselle 1989, 15, 18).

In his article "Editing without a Copy-Text" he goes further to claim that a literary work does not equal its documental manifestations. For him, "version" does not connote the work but a kind of corrupt manifestation of an idea. The actual material documents (the manuscripts, the printed texts) are not the work itself but its versions, and literature must therefore be a wholly intangible art, like dance or music (a choreography does not equal a single performance of a dance piece).

Therefore the "work" which is reconstructed by the textual critic does not, in effect, have to be based on a "copy-text" but is actually brought to being by the editor – this is how an edited text can be closer to the actual, ideal work than any of its other versions or manifestations.

But Tanselle fails to see that they are constructions before they are abstractions; that their constructedness is a condition for their ability to function as abstractions. Granted that it is true that "arrangements of words" can exist in the mind without being uttered or otherwise expressed, this does not entail that "works do not depend on those vehicles for their existence" (ibid. 16–17), unless one agrees with Tanselle and accepts that works are abstractions. But if one does not, there is no necessary causative relationship between these statements.

And even if literary works can be materially lost but still remain in someone's memory, this does not prove that works are abstractions rather than constructions, since memory too is a kind of writing, a material, electro-

chemical trace produced by neurological activity. And memory too does err like any scribe or pen, for it too is a version, a text which is corrupted by time.

Another question one might ask of Tanselle is, what is this abstraction like, and where and how does it exist? Say that one goes to the theatre, and sees a play, but for one reason or another it does not fix itself in the consciousness. Afterwards someone asks you what the play was about, and you cannot answer. Details are blurred and actions seem to overlap. But you have an idea of the play nevertheless - what does this idea consist of?

Most would answer that it would be a kind of essential distilling of the themes of the play, like a paraphrase of what the play was "about", or perhaps a short summary of the major events of the plot. What if three different people had these different ideas of the work in their heads? Can the intangible idea itself exist in many versions like this? To me this just seems like a needless multiplication of existents, something all idealist ontologies from Plato onwards have suffered from.

I am criticizing Tanselle's ontological definition of the literary work because it leads to a theory of intention and a methodology for critical editing which I find harmful, because it is in truth fairly sophisticated. According to Tanselle, "[e]very verbal text, whether spoken or written down, is an attempt to convey a work. [The act of preserving the documents of works only preserves] evidences of works." (ibid. 68–69) Therefore texts, as evidence of works, "must always be suspect", and "we never have enough information to enable us to know with certainty what the works consist of" because "the uttered words" "subverted it" (ibid. 69).

I am not totally opposed toTanselle's thinking. His idea of the work as an abstraction which cannot be reduced to any of its copies tells us exactly what a work is: it is a multiple object existing in many places at once. My claim is simply that such an object cannot be produced by one person alone, ever, and that the abstract concept of a work is not transcendent but subject to change according to context.

McGann – similar to Tanselle – separates the literary work from its text, but with a wholly different emphasis. For him, a poem is not just a text, a literary artefact, but a social act. This leads to McGann's rationale for textual criticism. A properly historical criticism, according to him, needs to establish a dialectic between the work of art's point of origin and its point of reception, and to "determine the significance of a poem at its point of origin demands that we study its bibliography". This is because a poem comes into being - becomes a social act - only when it begins to circulate. At this point of origin "intentions are codified in the author's choice oftime, place, and form of publication" or withholding publication altogether.

Intentions also appear in an author's statements about his or her work. Studying the circulation states of a poem, as the poem passes from the author into critical history, the analysis develops into a study of "the social relationships between author and audience which the poem has called into being", as responses modify an author's purposes and intention and remain a part of the poem's process of reception.(McGann 19??, 23–24)

It is not merely the "uttered words" which "subvert" works, as Tanselle would have it. The sociality of literary work changes the very notion of what a work is about, how to read it and why. A work is a combination of all the social acts bestowed upon the world. Therefore a definition of the literary work as an abstraction cannot be reached by describing its ontological structure, because it does not have one, or it has too many.

A literary work, as an abstraction, is formed of activity: it is a work that works. The debate in editorial theory surrounding versionism and authorial intention is largely a debate about the ontology of literary works, whether they are mental or social in nature. To be frank, this ontological debate is not that interesting to me. I think the most radical thing about social editing theory is the idea that any version is relevant and important from the point of view of a work's social history. This raises the troubling question of what variant readings are more important than others and how – and beyond this, the question whether errors are actually valuable and not corruptions at all.