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Author, Editor, And Critic

Donald A. Ringe

Few persons, one may suppose, are much concerned with the textual purity of the novels they read. They simply accept whatever the publisher provides. Few publishers, however, especially in the mass reprint market, pay much attention to the texts of even the classic works of English and American literature that they offer for sale. All too often, they simply print a corrupt nineteenth-century version of the text, further corrupted, perhaps, by an attempt to make the accidentals—the spelling and punctuation—conform to modern practice. Most readers of such books—including a large number of college students who use them in their courses—are simply not aware that what they are reading may be different in important particulars from what the author actually wrote. So widespread, indeed, is the ignorance of what modern editorial practice is about, that even if the text our hypothetical reader acquires has been competently edited, he may be only vaguely aware of that fact, and he is probably not at all clear in his mind about what the editor has done, or why he has done it.

In some circles, moreover, especially in departments of English in American universities, there is often more than a little hostility toward the editorial profession. Everyone admits, of course, the need for edited texts of early writers, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, for the initial transmission of their texts through variant manuscripts or carelessly prepared printed versions makes the work mandatory. It is generally admitted, too, that more recent editions, prepared as new evidence has accumulated, are superior to those that had been produced in the past. Thus, although many critics generally look down upon the work of their editor-colleagues as somehow less important than their own, they nonetheless accept the need for competently prepared editions of the poetry and drama of the older periods. They have no other choice. The issue between editor and critic is usually drawn only when editors turn their attention to novels. The amount of work required to properly edit

a nineteenth-century novel is enormous, and some believe that the outlay of energy is disproportionate to the results achieved. A novel is so huge, the argument goes, that the correction of a few words and marks of punctuation can have only a minimal effect on the meaning of the book. Why, then, expend so much time and effort for results that really do not matter?

The editor, on his part, finds this a strange argument. The critic says, in effect, that he is willing to accept corrupt texts in the novels he reads, writes about, and teaches; that he is, moreover, willing to let those texts become increasingly corrupt as they continue to be reproduced without adequate scholarly supervision; that he is, further, willing to incur the risk of making serious errors when he closely analyzes a text either in class or in his professional publications. Since the advent of the New Criticism some forty years ago, novels have been given close scrutiny, almost equal, at times, to that accorded poems and plays; patterns of imagery have been traced through entire books; and critical interpretations have sometimes hinged on the meanings of very specific passages. One would expect, therefore, that critics involved in such close analysis would demand the most accurate texts that can be prepared. Only with these texts might they hope to avoid the kind of critical blunder that can result when corruptions are taken for the author's words and interpretations are based upon them.

For blunders can be made, and by first-rate critics in important books. Everyone working in American literature knows the famous error made by F. O. Matthiessen in his interpretation of Herman Melville's *White-Jacket*. In his discussion of *White-Jacket's* plunge from the mainmast into the ocean near the close of the book, Matthiessen found in the phrase "soiled fish of the sea" evidence for a peculiarly Melvillean vision of reality, and he went so far as to say that few besides Melville could have created the frightening effect that comes from the use of the word *soiled* in this particular context.¹ Actually, of course, Melville did not write *soiled*, but *coiled*.² Matthiessen was using a corrupt text of *White-Jacket* and based his interpretation on a printer's error. Once this fact is known, the critical passage becomes meaningless.

Dramatic as this example may be, however, it does not fully illustrate the problem faced by the critic when no properly edited text is available. Whichever old or reprint edition he selects, he incurs the risk of serious error. If the work was a popular one and ran through a number of editions and issues, the possibilities for

error become large. Both author and publisher may have contributed to the problem. Nineteenth-century novelists sometimes altered their own work, making stop-press corrections while an edition was being printed, or taking the opportunity to revise an early text when a new edition was wanted. Later editions of these works may fail to pick up the corrections or revisions. In making a second revision, moreover, the author might fail to include some revisions made earlier, or the publisher might choose as the basis for a new edition, an uncorrected and unrevised copy of the text. Indeed, the publisher probably added some corruptions of his own, revising not only the accidentals, but also the substantives—configurations involving meaning—to bring the work into conformity with his own styling practice, or to meet what he took to be the proper standards of correctness and taste.

From the time the manuscript left his hands, moreover, the author's text was subject to chance corruptions. Printers might misread his handwriting and set the wrong word in type, they might change his punctuation, or might even omit a word or a phrase. Such errors were frequently missed in proofreading and left uncorrected in subsequent printings, and when a later edition was set from an old one, the new printers might add errors of their own. It is perfectly possible, then, for a nineteenth-century novel to come down to us filled with every type of corruption. The author's punctuation may have been radically changed; some or none or all of the revisions the author made in later editions may have been omitted; and there may be readings that the author did not write at all. Through frequent printings, moreover, right down to our own day, these errors and corruptions may have been repeated or compounded. The critic cannot approach a text of this kind with any confidence, but in the absence of properly edited texts, there is very little he can do. Any choice he makes among competing texts can get him into trouble.

It was once thought proper to use the last edition printed during the author's lifetime, for, the argument went, it was most likely to include all the revisions and corrections that the author intended to make. Since these editions formed the basis for the collected sets of an author's work that appeared after his death, critics considered them authoritative and used them without question. The practice, however, is indefensible. Such editions do not reproduce the spelling and punctuation that the author preferred, and they sometimes contain significant errors. Until recently, for example,

modern reprints of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* reproduced an error that had crept into the novel in the second edition of 1850 and had been repeated in all subsequent editions, including the "standard" Riverside set of 1883 and all reprints derived from it. Because the misprint created a word that seemed to fit the context, it went unnoticed for over a century.

When, in Chapter II of the romance, Hester Prynne stands on the scaffold before the entire Puritan community, she is the focus of attention of the onlookers; and in all the older texts, she is said to bear up as best she might "under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom." The sentence seems hardly to need a second glance. It makes perfectly good sense, and thousands of readers have accepted it as faithfully reflecting Hawthorne's meaning. Only comparatively recently—in Harry Levin's 1960 edition of the novel³—has it been shown that *concentrated* is a printer's error. The word reads *concentred* in the first edition, and one can easily see how a printer could have misread the word and, by the simple addition of two letters, transformed it into quite a different, but seemingly appropriate one. The error may seem trivial, but it is not. It concealed an important element in the pattern of circle imagery that Hawthorne develops throughout the book.

The critic may not, however, fare any better with the first or some other early edition of the work. Though there will certainly be fewer corruptions in such a text, he will not avoid them all, for even in the first edition, copy editors and printers have already intervened between the author and his readers to leave their mark on the book. The critic who uses such an edition, moreover, cuts himself off from the various revisions that the author may subsequently have made in the text. With some writers, like Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, there is no problem of late revision in the romance. With others, however, like James Fenimore Cooper, revisions after the first printing of his early novels pose great problems for the critic. To read these books in a late edition—derived, let us say, from the Darley-Townsend set of 1859-61—is to risk the usual errors that appear in corrupt texts; to read them in an earlier one is to miss Cooper's final intention for his books.

The problem is easily illustrated. For many years, a popular reprint of Cooper's *The Pioneers*—the Rinehart edition—was based on the text of the 1825 printing, itself a revision of the first edition

of 1823.⁴ Though this modern reprint is no longer available, it was once so widely used in American university classrooms that large numbers of students and their teachers, it is fair to say, know the book only in this form, and many judgments about the novel—even in published criticism—rest ultimately on that 1825 text. Though Leon Howard, the editor of the edition, clearly stated in his textual note that Cooper had revised the book after 1825, few critics and fewer students, one may suppose, took the trouble to find out what those revisions entailed and what effect they may have had on their judgment of the novel. One need not be a textual editor to discern the extent of the problem. He need only compare the first paragraph of Chapter I in the Rinehart edition with that in the Darley-Townsend, or a modern reprint, like the Signet Classics edition,⁵ derived from it, to discover the difference between the early and late versions of the novel.

Leaving aside the changes in spelling and punctuation, most of which were probably made by copy editors, one immediately perceives important differences in language. Some words in the earlier version have been changed (*country* becomes *region*); some have been added in the later (*uniting* becomes *uniting their streams*; *romantic* becomes *romantic and picturesque*); and some words and phrases have been deleted (a whole phrase describing each of the valley streams: *now gliding peacefully under the brow of one of the hills, and then suddenly shooting across the plain, to wash the feet of its opposite rival*). These are only the major variants in less than half of one paragraph of a novel that usually prints out to well over four hundred pages! Thus, they clearly indicate the extent of the problem faced by the critic who wants to base an interpretation of the book on close analysis of the text. Whichever edition he chooses, he is at fault, and though he may with good reason select the later one, he cannot know whether a particular reading is a revision by Cooper or a printer's error. Only a trained textual editor with a wide knowledge of the author and his works can help him.

Fortunately, some help is already at hand and more is on the way. Scrupulously prepared editions of major American writers are currently in preparation, providing texts that critics can use with confidence. The Hawthorne and Melville projects are already well advanced, and we now have reliable editions of both *The Scarlet Letter* and *White-Jacket*;⁶ the Cooper editors are just bringing their first volumes, including *The Pioneers*, into print in an edition that

will eventually include all of his writings; and other major projects are in various stages of completion. Such projects, of course, take years to complete and usually involve teams of editors scattered across the country, but when they are finished, American critics will have available accurate editions, prepared under proper scrutiny and with strict quality control, of at least our major writers.

The main advantage of these editions is that they are based on a set of principles designed to remove corruptions from the text, to recover what the author actually wrote, and to fulfill his intention in every detail.⁷ Because we know that texts become increasingly corrupt as they are reprinted, the editor goes back to the earliest form of the book for the copy-text—the one that will serve as the basis for the edition. That form—either the manuscript or, failing that, the first edition—most closely represents the author's practice in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. By this means, the editor effectively removes the corruptions in accidentals that always accumulate in reprinted books. Into this initial text he then inserts all the revisions that the author made in subsequent editions. The result is an eclectic text that precisely reproduces no single one that appeared during the author's lifetime; but which represents, as closely as can be determined, what the author intended his book to be.

Such a text must be prepared with care, and the conscientious editor goes to great lengths to accumulate the evidence he needs to make proper textual decisions. Though he may be aware when he starts his work that certain editions after the first contain authorial revisions, there may be others that he does not know about, and even some editions that have escaped the notice of bibliographers. He needs, therefore, to determine what editions and imprints actually exist, and with the help of rare book librarians, he takes a census of all known copies of all editions and imprints published during the author's lifetime and until about ten years after his death.⁸ For an early novel by Cooper, there may be as many as forty or fifty such imprints. He must also locate the manuscript, whatever proofsheets may have survived, and whatever annotations the author may have made in copies of his work. He examines the author's correspondence, especially that with his publishers and their replies to him; whatever contracts or publishers' records may still exist; and any documents, like late prefaces to the novel, which may yield information concerning conditions under which the book

was written and first seen through the press.

With all this material in his possession, the editor turns to his first major task, the sight collation of all new typesettings of the novel on which the author could have made revisions, against one standard of collation, usually the first issue of the first edition. This involves a systematic comparison—word by word and comma by comma—of each version with the standard of collation to determine the difference between the texts. The editor records all variants on collation sheets, writing in one column the volume, page, line number, and reading of the copy used as the standard, and, in a parallel one, the volume, page, line number, and variant reading in the other edition. A single collation may yield thousands of variants, and since the novel may have been reset for new editions four, five, or more times during the author's lifetime, and since each new setting must be compared with the standard of collation and all variants again recorded, the amount of data collected during this process can be enormous. The work is time-consuming and very demanding, but there is no other way to insure that all possible authorial revisions of the text will be discovered and recorded.

If the author's manuscript has survived, the editor collates it with the printed copy used as the standard, again recording all differences on collation sheets. He also records all additions and deletions the author may have made, and whatever printers' marks he may find. Because he must work with a photocopy at this stage of his study, many of the readings he records must be considered tentative. Before his work is done, he must visit the library where the manuscript is preserved to check his findings against the original.

The editor must also examine multiple copies of the first and all other editions revised by the author to determine whether stop-press corrections were made during the various printings. Since copies of one edition all derive from one setting of type and are, theoretically, identical, they may be compared on a Hinman Collator, which allows the operator to collate two pages without actually reading them. The reflected images of the same page in two copies of the book are superimposed by optical means, and when the pages are alternately illuminated by flashing lights, differences between them—even broken letters and missing marks of punctuation—become immediately obvious. If words have been altered, new passages inserted, or corrections made in the type, the

editor records the variants on the usual collation sheets. By comparing four or more copies of the book in this way, the editor may pick up additional authorial revisions, and if he does not, he has at least partial evidence for the internal consistency of the edition.

The collation machine is indispensable for another purpose. Starting in the 1820's, many books were printed, not from standing type, but from stereotyped plates which could be stored and later reused for additional printings. Thus, although a particular novel may appear with a new title page, labeled "New Edition" and with a new date, the text itself may have been printed from the same plates as another edition published years before. Since stereotyped plates could easily be altered, it is always possible that, during the author's lifetime, he may have directed that some revisions be made in them. To check this possibility, the editor need not examine every imprint. He need only compare, on the Hinman Collator, the first edition to be stereotyped with three or more later impressions made from the same plates. An imprint of the 1820's or 30's may thus be machine collated with those of a much later date. If there are no changes, the editor knows that there can be none in the imprints made between the two dates. If he does find some, he need only check the pages on which they appear in the intervening imprints to determine when the change was made.

The many sight and machine collations yield a mass of data that must be put into usable form. Through a close study of the variants in each edition, the editor determines whether or not it is authorial, that is, whether it contains revisions made by the author, and he establishes the stemma, the "family tree" of the book, to show how each edition or imprint derived from one or another that preceded it. He then conflates the substantive variants that appear in all the authorial editions. That is, on a wide sheet of paper, he lists in columns the variants that appear in them, placing the reading from the standard of collation on the left, and, moving to the right, listing the variants in subsequent authorial editions in chronological order. When he is finished, he has before him the whole history of significant textual variations in the book.

At this point, the difficult editorial work can begin. The editor must select from this mass of material those variants that are authorial revisions and reject those that derive from copy editors and printers' errors. It is a job that demands wide knowledge and fine discrimination. He studies each variant carefully. He considers

the context, what he knows about the author's usual practice, the house styling of the various publishers, and the patterns of revision that have emerged from his collations. He then records his decision in one of two lists: an emendations list that includes all changes he makes in the copy-text and the readings they replace, and a rejected readings list that contains all substantive variants that are not considered authorial. With these lists before him, he prepares the copy of the eclectic text for the printer. When the edition is published, the lists appear as appendices so that every reader may see what the editor has done.

In addition to the text, the editor provides an historical introduction to inform the reader about the genesis, composition, publication, and early reception of the book; and he may, if the book warrants, include explanatory notes to elucidate difficult or obscure passages. He includes a textual commentary, explaining the selection of the copy-text, discussing the authority of the various editions, presenting the stemma, and explaining the textual problems in each edition. He includes a note on the manuscript, describing its characteristics and listing at least the major alterations the author made in it. He provides textual notes to explain particular problems not covered in the textual commentary, and he includes both the Emendations and Rejected Readings lists, and a list of all ambiguous end-line hyphenations in both the copy-text and the new eclectic edition in the forms that the words would have if they were printed within a line.

Before the book is printed, however, the editor's work is thoroughly checked by others. Comprehensive editions of major authors are cooperative jobs, and the editor of an individual volume is supervised by an Editorial Board, headed by an Editor-in-Chief, and including a Textual Editor, who reviews his work when it is completed. The volume is further inspected by a scholar unconnected with the edition, appointed by the Committee on Scholarly Editions of the Modern Language Association.⁹ If the work passes his scrutiny, it is labeled "an approved text," and an appropriate designation printed inside each copy of the volume assures the reader that the work has been prepared in accordance with the highest editorial standards.

It only remains, then, to get these works into the hands of those who should use them. The appended material makes the volumes both bulky and expensive, and they no doubt provide much more information than the general reader—or even the critic—really

wants. Though the books will find their way into the major libraries and the personal collections of scholars, other readers will prefer less complete versions, providing only the text and, perhaps, the historical introduction. Such editions are becoming available, at least for books, like *The Scarlet Letter*, that are widely read and frequently used in class. Some publishers of the scholarly editions issue the volumes in paperback, while others may contract for the rights to reproduce the texts in their own editions. Such practices, one hopes, will become increasingly widespread and eventually drive the corrupt reprints from the market. When that happy day arrives, the editor will have fulfilled his professional purpose: to serve the long-dead author by recovering and printing what he actually wrote, and to serve the critic—and the reading public at large—by providing texts they can trust.

NOTES

¹F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 392.

²John W. Nichol, "Melville's 'Soiled' Fish of the Sea," *American Literature*, 21 (Nov. 1949), 338-39.

³Harry Levin, ed., *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), pp. xxiii-xxiv.

⁴James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, Introduction by Leon Howard (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1959).

⁵The Signet Classics edition of *The Pioneers* is based on the Darley-Townsend edition, as reprinted in the Riverside edition of 1872. Spelling and punctuation are modernized.

⁶The Centenary edition of *The Scarlet Letter* was published by the Ohio State University Press in 1962; the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *White-Jacket* was published in 1970.

⁷A good discussion of modern textual editing is James Thorpe, *Principles of Textual Criticism* (San Marino, Cal.: The Huntington Library, 1972). For a detailed discussion of the actual practice of editing, see James Franklin Beard and James P. Elliott, *The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper: A Statement of Editorial Principles and Procedures* (Worcester, Mass.: Clark University Press, 1977). Most of what follows in my text is based upon the material in this manual and my own experience as a Cooper editor in applying its principles.

⁸The extended period after the author's lifetime is included because of the possibility that changes may have been made in his works in accordance with instructions or documents left at his death.

⁹Formerly, the Center for Editions of American Authors.