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# Notes--The Times They Are A-Changin': Literary Documentary Editing in an Electronic Post- Structuralist World

Joel Myerson

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

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# Notes

A section dedicated to providing useful information to promote scholarship in the field.

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## **The Times They Are A-Changin': Literary Documentary Editing in an Electronic Post-Structuralist World**

Joel Myerson

I began working as a literary textual editor in the summer of 1968, my second year of graduate school at Northwestern University. At that time Northwestern housed The Writings of Herman Melville and I was taken on board as a trainee. I will always remember the shining moment when I realized that I had mastered the Hinman Collator and that a great future awaited me because of it. I spent the next three years working there, and in the next decade got up to speed on my own. I served as a vector for the Center for Editions of American Authors, which, incidentally, sealed over one hundred volumes between 1966 and 1976, which gives you an idea of how exciting things were at this time in the editorial field. Later, I began work on my own editions of Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller. Let us now go back, briefly, to those glorious years, when there was truly a textual moment.

Imagine, if you will, a school of criticism (the old "New Critics") that believed the text should be interpreted without reference to biography or historical circumstances, and, because of this, it was essential to have accurate texts in order to interpret what the author actually wrote.

Then imagine, that to meet this need, universities housed and generously supported editorial projects, and that many of the people working on these projects were graduate students, and that they could choose among many courses offered in bibliography and textual editing, and that many of them wrote dissertations that were editions of volumes in that edition, and that they were competitive on the job market because the scholars of this time (many of them knowledgeable about Renaissance and Shakespearean editing) knew that textual scholarship involved not only drudge work, but also a keen knowledge of the author's life, the times in which he or she lived, the social circumstances of authorship and publication, the book trade in general, and, of course, the ability to read a text critically.

Then imagine that a new federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, was brought into being, and that one of its goals was to fund editions.

And then, imagine that print runs were 1,000 copies because the government gave grants to libraries to purchase books, and that many of these books won scholarly book awards, and that scholarly journals regularly reviewed editions, and—perhaps this is the hardest of all to imagine—that professors actually bought the books themselves.

Believe it or not, this really happened, I am not making it up. In the present day, all of us know the dire straits in which the editing profession finds itself, so I would like to briefly suggest some reasons for what has happened in literary editing and in English departments, in addition to such shared concerns among historical and literary editors as the drop in book sales, lack of federal funding, and the like.

The landscape of the literary profession has changed enormously in the forty years that I have been observing it. The old “New Criticism” had been replaced by the new “New Criticism,” which, at various points in its manifestations, has declared that the author is dead, a point of view that essentially asks why we should worry at all about the text that the dead, usually white male, author wrote, when we can create whatever meaning we wish from that text; and, this, of course, means that the decision about whichever text we choose is far less important than is our own desire to create meaning in that text. English departments have increasingly become worlds of intellectual McCarthyism, where the party line must be followed—even if it shifts as the wind does—and in which editors have become second-class citizens. Scholarly journals reinforced the perception that editing is irrelevant when they decided not to review textual editions any more.

Then, too, technology has proven a double-edged sword, suggesting to university presses that as much as possible can be placed on the web without much cost—to them, that is, not us—and they have been wary about publishing print editions of any kind.

Another problem is that nearly all the A-list authors have been edited and it is virtually impossible now to make a case for a print edition of a B-list author simply on literary, as opposed to cultural, merit.

The final trend in the literary profession I would like to mention is the death of the single-author dissertation, to be replaced by studies containing four or five short chapters, each discussing one or two books by an author, that deliver the definitive word about some general theme. If critics like

these just parachute in and then move on to their next assignment, then they will reach for whichever text is handy.

Thus, to come back to the beginning, the old paradigm that was in place for the generation before mine is broken: that of scholars deeply knowledgeable about the lives and writings of an author who then learned about editing in order to present accurate editions of that author's writings.

In closing, I will try to be upbeat by quoting Henry David Thoreau as, I believe, he would comment on the world that today's literary editor finds in the new "New Criticism" English department: "It is not all books that are as dull as their readers."