



Berman, J., [Goldman, J.](#), Sellers, S., [Randall, B.](#) and Detloff, M. (2018) Editing Woolf. In: Wilson, N. and Battershill, C. (eds.) *Virginia Woolf and the World of Books*. Series: Virginia Woolf Selected Papers Series. Clemson University Press, pp. 241-252. ISBN 9781942954569

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Deposited on: 19 April 2019

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Editing and Companions to Woolf roundtable

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My contribution focusses on editing Woolf in the context of the many other new editions of modernist texts currently underway, drawing on discussions held at the three meetings of the New Modernist Editing Network in 2016 and 2017 (<https://newmodernistediting.wordpress.com/>). This Network, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) arose from my own involvement with editing modernism, as co-General Editor and volume editor of the Cambridge University Press Edition of the works of Virginia Woolf, and as a volume editor of the forthcoming Oxford University Press Edition of the works of Dorothy Richardson. The Network was proposed as a response to the increasing numbers of new editions of modernist authors underway, not least as these authors come out of copyright, and the pressing need for those engaged with editing modernist texts to come together to share their experience. The Network discussions were of course wide-ranging, but in this particular context – for an audience of Woolf scholars – key questions that emerge from the concerns of the Network include: how can sharing practice and principles with colleagues working on other modernist authors help inform, sharpen, and refine our editorial work on Woolf? and which needs might modernist editions share, and where might they need distinct and bespoke attention?

My contribution, then, offers a few key insights and observations which emerged from the Network which speak in some way to these questions. Firstly: it was striking how many of the editors currently engaged in producing new editions of modernist texts have been ‘learning on the job’. The current generation of mid-career modernist scholars seems to have had very little teaching and/or training in textual scholarship, presumably in part because up until quite recently there were few modernist editions underway, and therefore there was no perceived need for such training as a key aspect of modernist scholarship – as might be assumed for, for example, Shakespeare scholars. This has meant that many modernist scholars approach editorial practice in an inductive rather than deductive way, working from specific examples in front of us in order to form our own general principles, rather than necessarily following established principles. There are of course both risks and opportunities to this approach, and both sides of this debate were covered in the New Modernist Editing discussions. But I have found this question as put by one Network participant particularly striking: if the sine qua non of modernist writing is its experimentalism, is it legitimate – indeed, perhaps necessary – therefore to have ‘experimental’ editing? This of course relates to what was perhaps the primary question underpinning the Network’s activities and one which resurfaced repeatedly at our meetings: namely, what is distinct (if anything) about editing a modernist text? And therefore, in this context: what’s distinct about editing a text by Woolf?

The Network provided no easy answers. This was perhaps entirely predictable, though I did, before we began, wonder whether anyone was going to come in and offer us the ‘correct’ way of approaching a particular problem (indeed there are times at which some of us might wish they had). There were very strong differences of opinion on how one might approach elements of editing – annotation in particular – and discussion of the implications of these choices, but if there was consensus on anything, it was that different kinds of editions, and different kinds of authors, enable, allow for, or require, different approaches. Of course, what this does is emphasise both the demands made of, and the opportunities open to, the editor of the modernist text.

Two specific examples will provide a little more detail on what I, as a practising editor of Woolf (and Richardson), got from the Network discussions – which, it should be emphasised, were structured very much as conversations rather than as providing bearers of knowledge with a platform from which to impart their insights to the uninitiated. Firstly, a number of editors shared their struggles with dealing with typescript – not a problem, of course, for that Shakespearean scholar or indeed anyone editing a text from before the late nineteenth century. Even those individuals who had

received some training in textual editing – such as Martin Stannard, editor of Evelyn Waugh – reported that dealing with typescripts had not featured at all. It seems clear that there are few established protocols for handling manuscripts in typescript, and that while this can be exhausting or even alarming for the editor, it also provides an opportunity for genuine innovation in approaches to textual editing; particularly, in a modernist context, in relation to the question of supposed ‘error’ but also in terms of how one pays attention to the specific material and technological production of a text.

Secondly, one particular Network member expressed the position of the reader of the scholarly annotation in a way which suddenly clarified for me what our aim should be in writing an explanatory note. Philip Horne, editor of Henry James, observed that it was not necessarily a question of always providing information that was completely new to the reader – although this might frequently be the case; in some instances, the reader may once have known what was being explained, but had at the moment of reading the text, forgotten. It is therefore our job as scholarly editors to remind, as much as to impart new knowledge. This took away for me much of the anxiety involved in navigating the potentially very wide readership of a major scholarly edition. While such editions will be used by the most eminent scholars, they may also be key reference works for, say, undergraduates in Taiwan; and as such also of the scholars of Woolf of twenty year hence. The editor must tread a fine line, in tone just as much as in content, avoiding either patronising the informed reader or alienating the relatively uninformed. In this way, the key to a successful edition can be established: namely, trust between editor and reader.