

EDITING DEFOE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THEORY AND PRACTICE

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In the late 1990s, my colleague P. N. Furbank and I were invited by the publishers Pickering and Chatto to become General Editors of a scholarly edition of *The Works of Daniel Defoe*¹. Defoe, as is well known, is not only among the most prolific writers in English, he also wrote about an astonishingly diverse range of subjects. To represent the range of his interests, we decided to select about 150 of his most significant writings (out of a possible 250 or so), and divided these into five sets making 44 volumes in all: *Political and Economic Writings*; *Writings on Travel, Discovery and History*; *Satire, Fantasy and Writings on the Supernatural*; *Religious and Didactic Writings*; and *Novels*. The agreement was that the edition would be published in batches of four or five volumes a year over ten years. It was a very large undertaking, involving about a dozen volume editors as well as ourselves, but we recognized from the outset that it was crucial that we establish a clear and workable editorial policy. We obviously wanted to present a well-edited text of works which in many cases had never before been given scholarly editorial treatment. Equally, we had to have a policy which would be enable us to complete the edition within the timescale agreed with the publishers.

To complicate matters, we embarked on this large editing project at a time when traditional assumptions about scholarly editing had been called into question, and when it was beginning to be argued that the traditional printed scholarly edition had had its day and should be replaced by editions presented in electronic form. In this talk, I want to discuss in particular the work of Jerome J. McGann. McGann's theory of «social textual criticism» represented a fundamental challenge to traditional «intentionalist» theories of editing, and he has become one of the leading proponents of the potential of electronic editions of literary texts. I am going to argue that the case of an author like Daniel Defoe reveals problems in adopting traditional methods of text editing, but it reveals equally serious

¹ *The Works of Daniel Defoe*, gen. eds. W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank, 44 volumes (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000–2009).

problems in adopting the «social textual» and electronic approach advocated by McGann.

Before I talk about my experience of editing Defoe, I will summarise very briefly the principles and working methods that had governed the work of scholarly editors up to the mid-twentieth century, so that the scale and nature of McGann's challenge to these principles and working methods can be understood².

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The traditional aim of scholarly editors had always been to produce editions of literary works that conformed as closely as possible to the text of those works as intended by their authors. For this reason, editors working in this tradition have been described as «intentionalist» editors. In preparing an edition, an «intentionalist» editor would begin by studying all the surviving documents that might carry textual authority, including the manuscript, if it still existed, as well as all the editions of the work that appeared in the author's lifetime. Editions published after an author's death would not normally be taken into account in the establishment of the text, because the author could have had no hand in the production of these. All the relevant documents would be collated with the purpose of identifying variants between them, and one of them would then be selected as the «copy-text» on which the scholarly edition would be based.

The question of how to select a copy-text was much debated. There was a long-standing tradition that the last version of a work to have been published in an author's lifetime should be regarded as best representing his or her «final» intentions for the work. This traditional view was rejected in a famous essay by W. W. Greg, «The Rationale of Copy-Text», first published in 1950³. In that essay, Greg drew a distinction between the words of a text (which he called the «substantives»), and its punctuation, spelling, capitalisation and such

² For a fuller account, see my chapter «Editing Literary Texts», in Delia da Sousa Correa and W. R. Owens (eds.), *The Handbook to Literary Research*, second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 69–86. See also D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (New York and London: Garland, 1994).

³ W. W. Greg, «The Rationale of Copy-Text», *Studies in Bibliography*, 3 (1950–1): 19–36.

typographical matters as the use of italics (which he called the «accidentals»). In the majority of cases, Greg argued, while authors might revise their work, changing words or whole passages in editions after the first they are unlikely to pay much attention to the accidentals in later editions. For this reason, Greg argued that the earliest version of a text should normally be chosen as the copy-text, on the grounds that it would be closest to the intentions of the author in the presentation of the accidentals. If an authorial manuscript happened to be extant, it would be chosen, but otherwise the first edition would normally be chosen, since this would transmit most accurately the accidentals of the manuscript from which it was set.

The authority of the copy-text is not absolute, however, because it will almost certainly be faulty in various ways, and the author may have made significant changes in later editions. An «intentionalist» editor would therefore emend the copy-text with the aim of fulfilling as completely as possible the intentions of the author, as far as these could be discovered or surmised. Such emendation of the copy-text would involve not only relatively simple changes like the correction of obvious printer's errors, but would include also the incorporation of revisions appearing in later editions which it seems likely were made by the author. It could also, in some cases, include the replacement of readings in the copy-text with new readings for which there may be no documentary authority, but which in the judgement of the editor represent the author's intended meaning more faithfully than the reading of the copy-text. This approach to editing is often described as an «eclectic» one, in the sense that variant readings from other editions which seem likely to have authorial sanction and emendations made on the authority of the editor alone are incorporated into the copy-text. It is this emended copy-text that is subsequently reproduced in the scholarly edition. The editor would provide a summary of what is known about the composition and publication of the work, a defence of the choice of copy-text, textual notes setting out all variant readings and substantive emendations to the copy-text. The purpose of this textual apparatus is to enable any reader to evaluate and reconsider the textual decisions made by the editor.

The most influential exponent of Greg's editorial principles throughout the second half of the twentieth century was the American scholar Fredson Bowers⁴, and what is sometimes called the «Greg-Bowers» approach became the dominant one in Anglo-American scholarly editing. It would not be right to give the impression that it was an entirely unquestioned orthodoxy. Scholars like James Thorpe, Philip Gaskell and Thomas Tanselle variously questioned and modified some aspects of the theory. Philip Gaskell, for instance, argued against the idea that the manuscript should normally be chosen as the copy-text, pointing out that authors frequently seem to have expected their accidentals to be corrected and regularized by the publisher⁵. Nevertheless, these and other debates about specific details of the procedures of copy-text eclectic editing did not seriously undermine the dominance of this method in Anglo-American textual scholarship.

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This situation changed with the publication in 1983 of Jerome McGann's *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, in which the assumptions and practices of traditional «intentionalist» approaches to editing were challenged root and branch⁶. As his starting point, McGann questioned the focus on authors' intentions, arguing that these are often very difficult to discern, and in some cases they may change so radically over time that a later version becomes to all intents and purposes a different work. More specifically, however, he rejected the way in which intentionalist editing accorded special privilege to the isolated author over all the other agents who contribute to the production of a literary work. He argued, instead, that «collaboration» between authors and the house editors and other people working for publishers as a crucial part of the production of literary works: «Because literary works are fundamentally social rather than personal or

⁴ For examples of his approach, see Fredson Bowers, *Bibliography and Textual Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964); *Essays in Bibliography, Text and Editing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975).

⁵ Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (1972; Winchester and New Castle, Delaware: St Paul's Bibliographies and Oak Knoll Press, 1995), pp. 339–40.

⁶ Jerome J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983; Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992). Page references are to this edition, and are included in the text in parentheses.

psychological products, they do not even acquire an artistic form of being until their engagement with an audience has been determined» (pp. 43–44). He does not completely rule out consideration of the author, or what the author's intentions may have been. It is simply that, in McGann's view, «The fully authoritative text is . . . always one which has been socially produced; as a result, the critical standard for what constitutes authoritativeness cannot rest with the author and his intentions alone» (p. 75). All this led McGann to argue that attempts to produce single, «eclectic» texts of literary works should be abandoned in favour of editions of multiple versions, recognising these as products of specific historical circumstances which acquire meaning not solely from the originating author but through the processes of their transmission and reception.

In subsequent writings, McGann has developed further issues touched on only briefly in the *Critique*. One of the most important of these is the extent to which the physical format in which a work is published may play a significant part in the construction of textual meaning. In a book published in 1991, *The Textual Condition*, McGann argued that bibliographers, textual editors and literary critics should pay attention not only to what he termed the «linguistic codes» of a work (that is, its words, punctuation, etc.) but also to what he termed its «bibliographical codes» (that is, the format, typography, layout, paper, circumstances of publication, etc.)⁷. Here again, as in the *Critique*, McGann shifts attention away from the individual and towards the social process, because although the author may be the chief, if not the only authority for the linguistic codes, the bibliographical codes are usually the product of the larger group of people who arrange for the initial and subsequent publication of a work. Those responsible for the physical format and appearance of a book contribute to its meaning along with those responsible for its words.

His developing interest in the importance of «bibliographical codes» and in matters such as visual illustration and the interrelationship of some literary works with other media has led McGann to question the suitability of the traditional printed book for the presentation of editions of literary works. In one of his most important essays, «The Rationale of Hypertext», published in 1997, he

⁷ Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

has argued that the physical constraints of conventionally printed and bound scholarly editions meant that the works of many authors were represented very inadequately⁸. He cites Robert Burns, William Blake, Emily Dickinson and Letitia Elizabeth Landon as authors whose artistic achievements are fundamentally misrepresented in traditional typographic editions. In his view, the codex edition should be abandoned and replaced by what he calls «hypermedia archives». The article includes illustrations drawn from his own pioneering project, *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Research Archive*, which is now freely available on the internet⁹. It was designed to bring together digital images of Rossetti's manuscripts, printed texts, sketches, oil paintings and other documents in a decentralised hypermedia structure, in which no part would be privileged over another, and in which the reader would be encouraged to make, rather than find order.

McGann's ideas have been followed up by Peter Shillingsburg in his book *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts*, published in 2006¹⁰. Shillingsburg prefers to speak not of electronic editions or of hypermedia archives but of «knowledge sites» and his ambitions for these are very large indeed. They would be the work not of individual scholars, but of whole teams, and would not be fixed or closed, but be capable of continuous development and open to many different modes of use. They would include four main categories of data and tools. The first would be «textual foundations», by which Shillingsburg means digitised images and transcriptions of all the relevant documents, with full bibliographical and textual analysis of these. The second would be what he calls «contexts and progressions», which would include a vast range of biographical and historical information, explanatory annotation, links to relevant sources, analogues, et cetera, and detailed linguistic and stylistic analysis. The third would be «interpretative interactions», presenting the history of the reception and adaptation of the work. The fourth would be «user enhancements»,

⁸ Jerome J. McGann, «The Rationale of Hypertext», in Kathryn Sutherland (ed.), *Electronic Text* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 19–46.

⁹ See: <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>

¹⁰ Peter L. Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

which would allow readers to mark up texts, emend them, and add information and quotations drawn from other sources¹¹.

There is no question that projects like *The Rossetti Archive* and similar projects like *The William Blake Archive* or *The Walt Whitman Archive* are of enormous benefit and value to scholars¹². They offer the possibility for readers to refer quickly and easily to a mass of information, and not just to one edited version of a work but to a whole series of edited versions attempting to represent authorial intentions at various stages of a work's production, or later public manifestations of the work which are of importance in charting its historical presence and influence. In a recent essay, «Electronic Archives and Critical Editing», published in 2010, McGann offers a vision of the future of scholarly editing in an electronic age, when developments in software capabilities will mean that electronic editions will no longer be confined to textual documents alone, but will encompass «the entire social context that comprises the cultural work». Over the coming decades, he says, the entirety of our cultural inheritance will have to be digitally reconceived and re-edited¹³.

This, it may be agreed, is a vision of work on a heroic scale, and it is impossible not to admire the intellectual effort and imagination and labour expended in the construction of electronic editions of the kind built by McGann and others like him. Such scholars may well be right in their belief that the shift now taking place from paper-based text to electronic text will come to be seen as a revolution comparable in its scale and effects to the shift from manuscript to print, and that the future of scholarly editing will be an entirely electronic one. Nevertheless, the sheer immensity of these electronic editing projects, and the enormous financial and human resources that will need to be devoted to them raise questions and doubts in my mind. In the final part of my talk, I want to air some of these doubts and to argue that in certain important respects neither the traditional Greg-Bowers «intentionalist» approach nor the McGannian «social textual» and

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 101–2.

¹² See <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/> and <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/>

¹³ Jerome J. McGann, «Electronic Archives and Critical Editing», *Literature Compass* 7/2 (2010): 37–42.

«electronic archive» approach is appropriate in the case of an author such as Daniel Defoe, and other authors like him from the long eighteenth century.

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The first general point I would make is that theories of textual editing have always tended to suffer from what we might call delusions of perfection or completeness. This was certainly true of the Greg-Bowers school, with its ambition to create «definitive» texts of literary works, based on a collation of variant readings so thorough and exhaustive that the editorial work on that text could be regarded as complete, never needing to be done again. It seems to me, however, that we can detect a similar urge towards «completeness» if not «definitiveness» in McGann's notion of an electronic edition which would offer readers access to all the manuscripts and published versions of the work at every stage of its development, publication, adaptation, and appropriation, and to all the relevant contextual material for each and every one of these manifestations of the text. As with the Greg-Bowers «definitive» critical editions, no expense is to be spared in the production of such electronic editions, nor is there any limit on the time it may take to complete and sustain them. In this sense, it might be said, electronic editions are simply replacing one vastly expensive system of text editing with an even more expensive and time-consuming one.

I would argue, further, that McGann's social textual approach shares with the Greg-Bowers intentionalist approach two basic assumptions which lead into delusions of perfection and completeness. The first assumption is that the most usual and natural situation in the editing of any literary text is that the editor will have large quantities of documentary evidence to deal with. These documents will often include manuscripts, but will certainly include multiple states and versions of works before and after publication, each of them bearing traces of authorial revision and other changes that must be exhaustively collated before a copy-text can be chosen. McGann cites the case of Byron's poem *The Giaour*, which exists in a holograph draft, a fair copy, a trial proof, and fourteen editions, four of which Byron corrected for the press making many changes to the text and to the

accidentals, and often accepting changes made by others. These facts, says McGann, «demonstrate that the very concept of final intentions has only a minor relevance in this situation». At least as regards treatment of the accidentals, he says, «one can reasonably doubt that Byron ever had any final intentions, or whether his intentions were determinate at any point in the process of the poem's production». The textual history of this poem by Byron, McGann claims, «reveals the systematic transformation which *all* literary works undergo in their production» (my emphasis)¹⁴. The abundant evidence of such a transformation within the production and dissemination of a literary work must be made available to readers for inspection and analysis, whether by means of exhaustive variant readings listed in a printed edition, or by having all the relevant documents presented in facsimile in an electronic edition.

The second assumption, which follows on from the first, is that the most important and valuable thing about a scholarly edition is its focus on the text. In the case of the Greg-Bowers approach, the point of producing an edition is to establish a supposedly definitive text of the work from which all errors have been expunged. In the case of McGann's social textual approach, it is to present not a single text, but a collection of materials to enable the fullest possible study of all the extant texts, including texts produced after the lifetime of the originating author.

Now of course there are authors where these assumptions may hold true, where there are lots of manuscripts, marked proofs, authorial revisions in many published editions, and so on, and where the text is so difficult to establish or of such complexity and interest from a scholarly point of view that this becomes the prime focus of the editor's work. What I want to argue, however, is that, in the case of many authors from the long eighteenth century, these two assumptions do not hold true and because of this these authors seem to require a different kind of editorial treatment. One such author is Daniel Defoe, but a similar argument has

¹⁴ McGann, *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, pp. 59–63.

been made by Alexander Pettit about Eliza Haywood and other women writers of this period¹⁵.

Let us consider the two assumptions in relation to Defoe. The first one, that an editor will have large numbers of manuscript and printed documents to analyse, does not apply to Defoe. Although he was a prolific writer, very few of his manuscripts have survived. Those that do survive are full of idiosyncratic abbreviations and contractions, the work of someone writing at speed. Furthermore, Defoe very seldom revised his works or took much interest in them after the first edition. Many of them appeared as cheaply produced pamphlets, but even book-length works, with only a few exceptions, were poorly printed and full of typographical errors. There is none of the authorial tinkering and revision and correcting of the press that the Greg-Bowers and McGannian models of literary production assume.

For these reasons, it was clear to us that the levels of textual scrutiny and elaborate collation of texts and recording of variant readings required by the Greg-Bowers approach were simply not appropriate in the case of Defoe. But it was equally clear that the assembly of a vast electronic ‘«Defoe Archive»’ of the McGannian kind would not have been appropriate either, even if we had felt equipped to undertake such a project. This was not simply because of the time it would have taken to edit each of the works of such a prolific writer in the Greg-Bowers way, or because of the expense involved in digitising and placing on the web multiple copies of the often frequently reprinted works by Defoe. It was more that neither method would have worked as a way of dealing with a situation where the textual history of this author’s works was for the most part a succession of inconsequential variant readings of no textual authority.

The editorial policy we adopted for Defoe was therefore a significantly modified version of the traditional Greg-Bowers approach. We decided to use as copy-text the earliest available edition of each work, incorporating only added matter and revisions appearing in later editions for which there was good reason to think that Defoe was responsible. We took the view that the readers of a scholarly

¹⁵ Alexander Pettit, «Terrible Texts, ««Marginal»» Works, and the Mandate of the Moment: The Case of Eliza Haywood», *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 22/2 (2003): 293–314.

edition of Defoe were unlikely to be interested in lengthy lists of variant readings based on collation of editions over which there was no reason to think that the author had any control. For this reason we recorded only substantive emendations to the copy-text. In general, our approach to the text was a conservative one. The period in which Defoe's works were first published did not place a very high value on consistency in matters of spelling, grammar and so forth, and so although we did not hesitate to correct egregious errors, we did not attempt officiously to tidy up the texts where the sense was perfectly clear as it stood.

I will give just a couple of examples of the textual problems Defoe presents. As I have said, in the vast majority of cases there is no evidence that Defoe had anything to do with later editions of his works. This is certainly true of *Robinson Crusoe*. In Defoe's lifetime, seven editions (not counting pirated or abridged versions) were published. These have been extensively studied and collated by a succession of textual scholars. It has been calculated that although there are more than 14,000 textual variants, including almost 1,500 substantive word changes across the seven editions, there is no reason to think that any of these variant readings are the result of authorial revision. They are to be explained, instead, as the kinds of changes that occur as compositors set successive printings of a popular text, with corrections being made but further errors being introduced.

This does not of course mean that the later editions can be ignored by an editor. They can occasionally provide evidence of how a contemporary compositor or corrector of the press dealt with a textual problem. For example, there is a passage in the first edition of *Robinson Crusoe* that makes little sense as it stands. Crusoe tells us that he often pondered how he might find a way to get to the land he could see in the distance from one side of the island: «fancying the seeing the main Land, and in an inhabited Country, I might find some Way or other to convey my self farther, and perhaps at last find some Means of Escape». This clearly erroneous wording is followed in all of the first six editions, but in the seventh edition, published in 1726, it was emended to: «fancying that seeing the main Land, and an inhabited Country . . .» – a reading which makes much better

sense and which we adopted in our edition¹⁶. There is little point in appealing to Defoe's «intentions» in a case like this, except that it is reasonable to assume that he would have intended what he had written to make sense.

There is another quite weird textual problem in the novel *The Fortunate Mistress*, now usually known as *Roxana*. Our copy-text was the first edition, the only one published in Defoe's lifetime. The problem was that this first edition was littered with redundant hyphens on practically every page. Here is an example where you can see what I mean.

I thought he had been gone indeed, and so that
 he had been in jest; and by the way, thought either
 he had no-mind to the thing, or that he never
 intended it; so I shut my Door, that is, latch'd
 it, for I feldom lock'd or bolted it, and went to-
 Bed; I had not been in-Bed a Minute, but he
 comes in his Gown, to the Door, and opens it a
 little-way, but not enough to come in, or look in,
 and says softly, What are you really gone to-Bed?
 Yes, yes, says I, get you gone: No indeed, says he,
 I shall not begone, you gave me Leave before, to come
 to-Bed, and you shan't say get you gone now: So he

No other work by Defoe exhibits such freakish use of hyphens, and it seems highly unlikely that he was responsible for them. We therefore decided to emend the copy-text to remove them, and we think the Pickering and Chatto text of this important novel is much more readable as a result¹⁷.

As these examples suggest, our approach to the text of Defoe's works was, essentially, a pragmatic one, responsive to the particular features of those works. We had a set of basic editorial principles which worked in most cases. In cases where they did not, we adopted a different approach, explaining this to readers. So, for example, we set aside our rule of adopting the earliest known edition as copy-text in the case of *The Family Instructor*. This was one of Defoe's most popular

¹⁶ See *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, in *The Novels of Daniel Defoe*, gen. eds. W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank, 10 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009–9), vol. 1, ed. W. R. Owens, p. 149, and see p. 307n.

¹⁷ See *The Fortunate Mistress*, in *The Novels of Daniel Defoe*, vol. 9, ed. P. N. Furbank, p. 126.

works (second only in popularity to *Robinson Crusoe*). For reasons that are not entirely clear, the first edition was published in Newcastle by Defoe's friend Joseph Button, but this was a very badly printed edition, full of printer's errors. The second edition is explicitly stated on the title page to have been «Corrected by the Author», and it is clearly the fruit of a thorough revision by Defoe. It would have made no sense to have based our text on the first edition, and so in this case we adopted the second edition as copy-text¹⁸.

Although we certainly took pains to produce a responsibly edited and reliable text of Defoe's works, we did not regard this as our only responsibility as editors. In producing an edition of works which in many cases were little known, and in some cases had never before been edited in a scholarly way, we thought it important to provide full introductions setting out the historical circumstances of the production, publication and reception of the texts, and extensive explanatory notes. Defoe was extremely widely-read, and it seemed valuable to attempt to trace the sources of his quotations and allusions. Similarly, we thought that readers should be given information about his references to matters such as politics, law, religion, trade and commerce. Our aim, in short, was to make the full range of Defoe's writings available to modern readers in a scholarly form that was convenient to use, and that helped readers make some sense of them.

It seems to me that in the case of a writer like Defoe – and he is by no means the only writer from the long eighteenth century of whom this is true – the needs of a wide range of readers can be adequately served by a printed edition produced within a reasonable time-scale, and to a scholarly standard appropriate to the particular case. It still strikes me as a more practical solution than either a full-dress critical edition, or an electronic archive, however appropriate these may be in the case of other writers.

¹⁸ See *The Family Instructor, Volume 1 (1715)*, in *Religious and Didactic Writings of Daniel Defoe*, gen. eds. W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), vol. 1, ed. P. N. Furbank, p. 331.