

The Accidentals Tourist

Greg's "Rationale of Copy-Text" and the Dawn of Transatlantic Air Travel¹

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, editorial theorists and proponents of 'unediting' have chipped away at W. W. Greg's "Rationale of Copy-Text", speculating that the accidental/substantive division is deceptively reductive, as even minor variants can have major implications. This essay contextualizes debates over Greg's "Rationale" by recognizing that his theory of accidentals was a practical affordance designed to ensure that a copy-text (and often a specific document) could be reconstructed by working backwards from a scholarly edition — a vital bibliographic resource in an age before scholars were easily able to fly across the Atlantic Ocean in order to check variant copies. By considering shifting editorial values alongside the rapid development of the technologies of travel, 'The Accidentals Tourist' demonstrates that theoretical texts — and the subsequent revisions and corrections of them — are the products of the affordances of their own historical moments.

Asks to borrow Rowe's 2nd edition for *The Merchant of Venice*, along with the Praetorius facsimile of Q2 and perhaps the Furness Variorum. If he sends Q1 she can paste it up herself. Discusses stops in stage-directions, and suggests clarifying certain collation notes on punctuation for the sake of the printer. Asks why he uses a pump instead of a water-softener.

—Summary of letter from Alice Walker to R.B. McKerrow,

24 May 1937

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1. In 2017, I began to wonder about the ways that New Historicist methods could be applied to critical works of the 20th century. I'm grateful to Andrew Keener and Claire M. L. Bourne for giving me a chance to apply some of these early speculations to a history of editorial theory in their seminar on "Edition/Copy" at the 2020 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America.

The design of the Hinman [collator] constitutes a wonderful example of late-1940s and 1950s futurism. Its hulking, metal exterior reminds us that it was invented in a great age of rocket ships, robots, and other types of imaginative technology — so much so that one would not be surprised to find it featured on the cover of *Astounding Science Fiction* or some other futuristic fantasy rag. Nor would it also be completely out of place in the appliance section of a mail order catalog.

—Steven Escar Smith, 2000, 146

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ON SEPTEMBER 8, 1949, A PAPER BY W. W. GREG TITLED “THE Rationale of Copy-Text” was delivered to the English Institute. In a delightful irony for the initial publication of a work that has since become one of the most significant bulwarks of authorial intention, Greg himself was not there; the paper was spoken on Greg’s behalf by J. M. Osborn — the same J. M. Osborn whose collection of English literary and historical manuscripts now forms much of the Beinecke Library’s excellent materials for studying the behavior of early modern English readers.² After its initial recital in fall 1949, Greg’s paper was soon republished, this time in print, in the 1950/1951 issue of *Studies in Bibliography*, the new journal edited by Fredson Bowers at the University of Virginia.³ The provenance of Greg’s talk thus mirrors a sequence intimately familiar to editors of English Renaissance drama: the text of an initial performance, delivered by a non-authorial agent and the details of which are now lost, eventually becomes a printed document whose existence in multiple copies enables the text to be the subject of a great deal of scholarly analysis.⁴

Greg was unable to deliver his English Institute talk himself, because, as far as I am currently able to determine, he never set foot in North America. In 1949 he was 74 years old and about to be knighted for his lasting service in the study of English literature. His editions of Henslowe’s *Diary* and Edward Alleyn’s papers had seen print over forty years before; his *Dramatic*

2. More information about the Beinecke’s Osborn collection can be found at <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/curatorial-areas/early-modern-british-european-and-osborn-collections>.

3. The first issue of *Studies in Bibliography* was published as *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia* in 1948.

4. No doubt simply to delight editorial geeks writing footnotes *even more*, Greg’s essay was later reprinted in slightly revised form in his *Collected Papers*, edited by J. C. Maxwell; see GREG 1966, 374–91.

Documents from the Elizabethan Stage (1931) and *English Literary Autographs* (1932) were nearly two decades old; his 33-year long career as the general editor of the Malone Society had come to a gentle close. Greg had, at the beginning of the war, retired to a house in Sussex, yet at the time of his writing “Rationale”, he had not slowed down by any means: both his multi-volume *Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration* (1939–1959) and his edition of *Doctor Faustus* (1950) were well underway, and soon to come were his *Editorial Problem in Shakespeare* (1951) and detailed study of *The Shakespeare First Folio* (1955) (WILSON and WOODHUYSEN 2004). During his lifetime the time needed for a speedy transatlantic crossing from Liverpool to New York had halved from eight days to a blistering four,⁵ but in the fall of 1949 W. W. Greg was simply too busy (and perhaps too old) to spend any of his remaining days aboard ship.

In “Rationale”, Greg offered an extended defense of an editor’s right to deploy critical judgment along with a cogent articulation of how an editor might best approach the documentary witnesses that form the basis of an edition (1950/1951, 19–36). Greg outlined a new, deceptively simple editorial theory in an attempt to free scholarly editors from what he called “the tyranny of copy-text” that plagued “best text” editions, restricting them into accepting all the variants of a particular copy.⁶ By separating out textual variants into the distinct categories of “accidentals” (punctuation/spelling variants) and “substantives” (variants which altered syntax or meaning), Greg surmised that it is the former category of readings, rather than the latter, that should ultimately determine the text selected as copy. Once this base text is chosen on the basis of its accidentals, eclectic editors are free to evaluate and select substantive readings from alternate authoritative editions or witnesses in accordance with their larger editorial policy.

It’s worth remembering that Greg’s 1949 “Rationale”, including its measured investment in the contingencies of individual documents, found its origins in the rationale of Malone Society. The society, established in 1906, maintained that “every generation will need to make its own critical editions to suit its own critical taste, but that work of permanent utility can

5. On the timing of the transatlantic crossing, see RODRIGUE 2020; also accessible at https://transportgeography.org/?page_id=2135.

6. In McKerrow and later Greg’s formulation, I should point out that what is being described as “copy-text” is not necessarily a literal material form but an ideal, a copy of a reconstructed corrected edition that may or may not have ever existed. In short: the collation of copies of printed documents produces an ideal copy-text that only corresponds to existing documentary forms so long as any modifications are recorded.

be done by placing in the hands of students at large such reproductions of the original textual authorities as may make constant and continuous reference to those originals themselves unnecessary”.⁷ “Originals”, in the case of the Malone Society’s founding goals, corresponds to the manuscript and printed documentary witnesses that could serve as the basis for scholarship into the texts of the English Renaissance. While originals were confined to library or private archives, edited copies of these documents, reproduced by experts in paleography or bibliography who painstakingly transcribed and translated the texts, could provide valuable surrogates that might spare the originals unnecessary handling. Though “copy-text” is best understood as a term that refers to an abstract concept, W. W. Greg’s “Rationale of Copy-Text” effectively extended the Malone Society’s practical concern for disseminating data about individual copies into the more theoretical realm of textual scholarship writ large.⁸ When coupled with collation notes and the scholarly apparatuses later devised by Fredson Bowers for the Center for Editions of American Authors, Greg’s “Rationale” offered a mechanism that could simultaneously represent the unique features of multiple individual documents alongside a considered, information-rich scholarly artifact.

G. Thomas Tanselle has called Greg’s 1949 “Rationale” a “watershed”, the culmination of Greg’s thinking alongside other New Bibliographic pioneers like R. B. McKerrow and A. W. Pollard, figures whose work served to recognize that “the texts of printed books, like those of manuscripts, are affected by the physical processes of their own production” (TANSELLE 1987, vii). The New Bibliographers were forensic historians, archeologists of the technologies of text, who used their knowledge of book manufacture (whether in the hand press or machine press periods) to inform the emendations they could and did make as they constructed scholarly editions. What we now call “analytical bibliography” — the study of the forensics of book-making — is thus central to the New Bibliographic attitude towards textual criticism as an inherently practical enterprise.⁹ Editorial theory

7. See <http://malonesociety.com/about-2/>; accessed February 9, 2020.

8. “‘Copy-text’ refers to that form of a literary text which an editor has decided, on whatever grounds, is the best one for him [sic] to follow as the basis for his edition”; see TANSELLE 1970, 192.

9. What made the New Bibliographers ‘new’ was not only their investigations into the mechanics of hand-press and machine printing technologies, but their application of demonstrable bibliographical evidence to the editorial project. As he attempted to explain the field to both granting agencies like the NEH and the general public during a period of vicious attacks from the likes of Edmund Wilson, Bowers would call this kind of work “textual bibliography”, though he is

exists to enable editors to make informed and consistent choices when confronted with the problems of textual transmission. In other words, in order to be a critical scholarly editor, one must first and foremost be a materialist, because before an editor can commence editing she must examine the documentary artifacts upon which her edition is based.

“Rationale”, a word used repeatedly throughout editorial theory, is largely taken to mean “a reasoned exposition of principles [. . .] an attempted justification for something” (‘rationale’, n2), as in the title of a 1657 work, *A Rationale upon the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England* (Wing S4828). But this use of “rationale” is relatively new in English, dating from the 1580s. Far older is the usage that was familiar during the reign of King Ælfred, when a rationale was the name for “the breastplate worn by the Jewish high priest, esp. that which Moses was commanded to have made for Aaron” (‘rationale’, n1). The word was used in Exodus by both the Wycliff and Rheims bibles, as well as in the works of Thomas Lodge. Aaron’s rationale was sometimes termed “the breastplate of judgment” because Exodus 28 explains that placed within it also resides the mystical products of *Urim* and *Thummim* that signify God’s will. In the Vulgate, these words are translated as *doctrine* and *truth* — words which we have long associated with the written word (the Yale University crest features *urim* and *thummim* on a book). What better philology could a watershed text of editorial theory ask for, really?¹⁰

Yet despite the valiant breastplate of Greg’s “Rationale”, in the intervening decades, the intentionalist editorial practice of the New Bibliographers has often been dismissed as positivistic, idealistic, and insufficiently historical, especially in contrast to the more relativistic activities of “social-text” editors like Jerome McGann. To some critics, the theories of McGann and D. F. McKenzie offer an opportunity for recognizing how texts are social

always careful to highlight how the various “catholic” elements of bibliography worked together: “It is a feature of bibliography that in practice the methods of its different disciplines frequently overlap. Thus *critical*, or *textual bibliography* will often call on the help of *analytical*, as will *historical*; or *analytical* will merge with *historical*, and *descriptive* with both” (emphasis in the original); see BOWERS [1952], 191.

10. I feel duty-bound to mention that if, in an unguarded moment, you ever find yourself investigating Old Testament cleromancy — the study of the casting of lots — you very quickly find yourself down a rabbit hole of rabbinical scholars arguing that certain interpretations of the materiality of the *urim* and *thummim* exist only because of editorial interference, enabling one’s research into the history of editorial theory to eat itself like an ouroboros.

constructs that create meaning in a “collective activity of literary production and reception” (Kelemen 2009, 105). Since the 1980s, proponents of “unediting” have likewise chipped away at Greg’s “Rationale”, speculating that its accidental/substantive division is deceptively reductive, as even minor variants can have major implications.¹¹ I wish to contextualize these later debates over Greg’s “Rationale” by recognizing that his theory of accidentals was a practical affordance designed to ensure that a copy-text (and often a specific document) could be reconstructed by working backwards from a scholarly edition — a vital bibliographic resource in an age before scholars were easily able to fly across the Atlantic Ocean in order to check variant copies. I’ve written elsewhere about how this notion of competing editorial approaches creates a false binary predicated on a later misunderstanding of the nature of New Bibliographic thinking; in other words, Greg’s “Rationale” is a product of its own peculiar technological age.¹² By considering shifting editorial values alongside the rapid development of the technologies of travel, I hope to suggest that even texts of editorial theory — and the subsequent objections and attempted revisions of them — are the products of the affordances of their own historical moments.

Leisure Air Travel and the Pursuit of Copy

“Because,” said Morris Zapp, reluctantly following, “information is much more portable in the modern world than it used to be. So are people. Ergo, it’s no longer necessary to hoard your information in one building, or keep your top scholars corralled in one campus. There are three things which have revolutionized academic life in the last twenty years, though very few people have woken up to the fact: jet travel, direct-dialling telephones and the Xerox machine. Scholars don’t have to work in the same institution to interact, nowadays: they call each other up, or they meet at international conferences. And they don’t have to grub about in library stacks for data: any book or article that sounds interesting they have Xeroxed and read it at home. Or on the plane going to the

11. While the 1986 *Oxford Shakespeare* separated emendations of accidentals from substantives in the *Textual Companion*, it is indicative of the persuasion with which the uneditors have argued their case that the *New Oxford Shakespeare* of 2017 lists both kinds of emendations within the same sequence of notes in the *Critical Reference Edition*. See also JOWETT 2017, xlix–lxiii.

12. See NEVILLE 2014, 91–112.

next conference. I work mostly at home or on planes these days. I seldom go into the university except to teach my courses.”

—David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984)

As the novels of David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury make clear, academic air travel straddles a dividing line between the business and leisure markets. While some among us have distinguished colleagues who will only fly if they do so in business or first class, the rest of us plebeians have to make a point of showing our university business services department an economy class ticket before we can get reimbursed for travel. Even legendary Jane Austen scholar Morris Zapp, the American hero of Lodge’s *Changing Places* (1975), gets a bargain on his first-ever flight to England by purchasing the international airfare secondhand from one of his former students.

Contemporary editors come honestly by their ignorance of the practical concerns of W. W. Greg considering trans-Atlantic travel in 1949. The world has changed a great deal in the intervening seven decades.¹³ Between 1950 and 1984, the number of air passengers increased over twenty-six fold, from 31 million passengers to 832 million passengers; as transport historians note, this increase puts the social changes wrought by mid-twentieth-century air traffic on par with those of the railways on Victorian Britain. The Second World War had left Anglo-America with a surplus of pilots and of flying machines — while also offering a sizable middle class of returned civilians who were experienced in traveling overseas.

There had been some commercial international flights prior to WWII, but these interwar travelers were by and large bureaucrats and missionaries, not bibliographers — those whose undertakings were either financially or spiritually significant enough to be worth the considerable risks and hassles of flight. Initially, international and domestic air travel was government subsidized and plane building was a political exercise; it wasn’t until 1952 that scheduled carriers would eventually introduce a tourist class. By 1958, airlines had also introduced an economy class that was 20% cheaper than tourist class, eventually paving the way for the careers of countless university travel officers through the present day.

Technological developments led to better engines and bigger planes, which necessitated the creation of an increased passenger demand — as the prices of plane tickets came down, the leisure traveler was created to

13. Much of what follows is indebted to Peter J. Lyth and Marc L. J. Dierikx’s 1994 article, “From Privilege to Popularity: The Growth of Leisure Air Travel Since 1945”. *The Journal of Transport History* 15.2: 97–116.

fill this void. And much to readers' delight — and David Lodge's imagination — the high-flying academic scholar who writes his talk on route to the conference was soon created, too. Between 1957 and 1962, the market share of jet engines increased from 7% to 43%, shifting the smaller and less powerful piston-engined aircraft down market to independent, charter airlines. This glut in turn pushed down the prices of air travel still farther, making way for the nascent vacation package tour industry.

Through the 1950s, getting across the Atlantic by air in either direction meant using a scheduled government carrier — a considerable expense, and one that was far beyond the means of most agencies willing to fund academic travel. But in the 1960s, after deregulation, cheaper charter flights gained a greater market share, paving the way for jet-setting bibliographers to investigate the peculiarities of an overseas copy. This is the context in which W. W. Greg wrote 'Rationale of Copy-Text' in 1949, mailed a copy to be read at the English Institute, and arranged for his essay to appear in *Studies in Bibliography* 3 in 1950.

Theory and Practice

As G. Thomas Tanselle notes, in writing "Rationale" Greg himself was motivated by recent history: "the focus of the essay, it must be remembered, is historical: a new approach to editing is set forth as a corrective to what had been developing over the previous century" (1975, 181). In examining Greg's 1949 lecture (and its initial printing and later reprinting in 1950 and 1966), Tanselle is careful to place Greg's thinking in the context of his career up to that point, finding that in order to best understand the essay, a reader needs to appreciate its "historical framework" (1975, 171). Further, Tanselle points out that it is crucial for readers of Greg to "distinguish between theoretical and practical concerns", because "it is no aid to ordinary thinking to treat purely practical questions as if they involved theoretical issues" (1975, 169).

As he conceived of it in "Rationale", Greg's theory of copy-text refers specifically to the establishment of old-spelling editions, not to the modernized editions with which scholars of early modern drama are more familiar. While a modernized edition can anchor its spellings to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an old-spelling text must rely on some existing document because there are philological difficulties in establishing the regularized spelling and punctuation habits of a particular author at a particular time. At the time of Greg's writing "Rationale", research by his contem-

poraries like Alice Walker and Percy and Evelyn Simpson were attempting to establish norms and distinctive habits for early modern authors, scribes, and compositors, but this work was still relatively untested. (Later scholarship would call such definitive tests into question altogether.) In the meanwhile, however, an existing document with an established authoritative provenance enabled an editor's assurance that there was some historical ground for a scholarly edition's accidentals. After all, compositors and scribes are far more familiar with the possibilities for early modern English spelling and pointing than modern editors ever could be.

Greg's thus is an applied solution to a technical problem. Tanselle makes the point that the words "accidentals" and "substantives" are not "happy choices", yet what is crucial is not their monikers but their relative treatments by the editor — one of these things are observed by default, the other is not (1975, 173).¹⁴ As Greg himself remarks in a 1950 footnote: "The distinction I am trying to draw is practical, not philosophic". He writes that copy-text is selected "on grounds of expediency, and in consequence either of philological ignorance or of linguistic circumstances" (1950, n4). Here's Tanselle again: "[i]n somewhat blunt language, Greg's theory amounts to this: it tells the editor what to do when he otherwise does not know what to do" (1975, 179). In a modern analogy, what Greg suggests for editors in his "Rationale" is more or less what I tell my undergraduates about where they should put a topic sentence in a paragraph: you can put it anywhere you like, but if you don't know why you want to move it, it should be at the beginning, where readers usually expect to find it.

Greg's theory of copy-text provides a rationale for attending to accidentals, because, unlike substantives, editors often have very little evidence on which to base changing them. Moreover, accidentals are more likely to be changed by non-authorial agents in the process of textual transmission than substantives, and authors are generally presumed when they revise to pay less attention to accidentals than they do to substantives.¹⁵ Fredson Bowers's 1953 edition of Thomas Dekker was the first to be produced according to Greg's "Rationale". When Bowers later enumerated the

14. Tanselle's "Editing without a Copy-Text" (*Studies in Bibliography* 47 [1994]: 1–22) goes even further, offering an explanation of how Greg's "Rationale" opens up new avenues for thinking beyond documents and making the editorial process one of selection rather than emendation.

15. Even Ben Jonson, the figurehead for much scholarly musing about contemporary authors' fussiness about punctuation, gave up correcting the punctuation of his 1616 folio.

requirements for collation notes for The Center for Editions of American Authors (CEAA), he drew on the “Rationale”’s practical utility. Collation notes on both substantives and accidentals “are essential for any reader who wishes to reconstruct the copy-text with which the editor worked and to examine the evidence on which the editor’s decisions were based” (Tanselle 1975, 193).¹⁶ My very minor contribution to this debate is to point out that the 1950 separation of accidentals from substantives in matters of editorial method has another practical expediency, one that we have since lost sight of in our age of the (relatively) cheap and accessible technology of air travel: scholarly trips to access individual copies of documents are now not only easier for editors to manage, but an expected part of the editorial process.

Conclusion

In her biography of Alice Walker, Laurie E. Maguire writes that for the bibliographer, “compositor identification is inevitably rooted in the personal — the identification of personal spelling characteristics; Walker talks not just about personal habits but about personality” (2005, 330). Maguire is writing in 2005; since then, methods of compositor identification have not only been “refined” (her words) but somewhat rebuked — Pervez Rizvi’s study in 2016 has caused editors to rethink their claims about the distribution of composing labor in the First Folio. I’m not invested here in litigating nearly a century of compositor analysis from Charlton Hinman onward — what I am more interested in pointing out, however, is that, just as Hinman’s legendary collator developed out of his military service in naval intelligence comparing aerial photographs during the second world war (and during the great age of American science fiction), Walker’s commitment to analyzing authors’, scribes’, and compositors’ characteristic orthography developed in a moment when textual scholars’ own epistolary correspondence was at an all-time high. The R. B. McKerrow papers now held at Trinity College Library, Cambridge reveal that an extraordinary amount of textual material was flowing between McKerrow and Walker from 1935 through 1939. Notes, “slips”, pasted-up copies of F1 and various play quartos, volumes of Theobald and Capell, letters, typescripts, carbon-copies, facsimiles, even detective novels rapidly passed between the

16. See also BOWERS 1972, 81–115.

pair. The letters between McKerrow and Walker are combinations of what we would now identify as textual technologies — sometimes McKerrow sent Walker notes that she would later type up and return to him; sometimes she asks for carbons, or sends them, and remarks that she wishes to annotate her own copies of his materials. In one she discusses a stool she uses to scoot between pasted up copies of folios and quartos.

Walker and McKerrow, in other words, were engaging with the material forms of each other's writing far more literally than do modern colleagues working on an editorial project. Did the everyday technologies of text that put them in weekly, sometimes daily, contact with each other influence what teleological possibilities Walker later saw in compositor analysis? To put the question slightly differently, in a world where all scholarly communiqué actually passed through living hands in the form of material documents, is it any surprise that the work of the New Bibliography focused so much as it did on overcoming the inherent limitations in the materials of production? This combination of typed text and handwriting enabled New Bibliographers to be intimately familiar with the relation of print to manuscript, of the creation of and the promulgation of error that results through the processes of textual transmission. (Even in the British Post letters and packages got delayed frequently enough that much of Walker and McKerrow's correspondence simply served to acknowledge receipt.)

In his critical work, David Lodge has espoused the idea that the great achievement of nineteenth-century fiction was its ability to balance private and public concerns, at once “rendering an individual's experience [. . .] while at the same time [making a reader] aware of a reality, a history, that is larger and more complex than [that] individual can comprehend” (1977, 38). G. Thomas Tanselle similarly suggests that a “the process of critical editing is the ineluctable, if unending, effort to surmount the limitations of artifacts in the pursuit of works from the past” (1994, 6). My musings in this article contends that we, late twentieth and early twenty-first century readers of editorial theory, have lost much of our awareness of the historicity of the New Bibliographers. In turning Walker, Pollard, Greg, McKerrow, and Bowers into titans, we have occasionally given them mythologies instead of historical and material realities. I conclude by suggesting that scholars of text technologies and textual transmission would do well to focus some of our energies in considering the technologies of transportation as well.

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