

Introduction

Provocations Toward Creative-Critical Editing

Mathelinda Nabugodi and Christopher Ohge

ABSTRACT

The guest editors of this special issue, Mathelinda Nabugodi and Christopher Ohge, describe the rationale of creative-critical editing.

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE AROSE FROM A VIRTUAL SYMPOSIUM THAT WE ORGANIZED at the Institute of English Studies, University of London, in April 2021. The symposium, consisting of a roundtable and a practical workshop, was oriented around four key terms: intentionality, annotation, translation, and embodiment. The terms were chosen to call attention to different facets of the editor's task: the need to establish a relation to the author's intentions when preparing the text, and to annotate this text in a way that serves both author and reader. The concept of translation highlighted the transformations that a text undergoes as it moves from manuscript page to proof, and then onwards to a succession of print and digital editions. Embodiment, finally, reminded us of the physical experience of engaging with texts, be it at a desk in a literary archive or by listening to an audio component in a digital edition. The symposium generated dynamic and lively discussions and we are deeply grateful to one of its featured speakers, Marta Werner, for offering us the chance to expand some of these discussions in this issue of *Textual Cultures*.

Most of the authors in this special issue participated in the symposium, while others came on board as the issue was already underway. Each author has been encouraged to draw on their own experience of editing in preparing their contribution, privileging concrete problem-solving over abstract theorizing. In this way, we hope to survey the wide range of practices — ranging from commercial to scholarly, and from purely print to purely digital — covered by the concept of “editing”. We were especially interested in those moments when editorial practices take on and exhibit various and noteworthy aesthetic forms; when the edition begins to take

on literary qualities of its own. Much editorial debate is permeated by a language of division that privileges one form or method over another. In print scholarly editing you see skepticism about the role of interpretation and creativity, and definitions that seek to promote “scholarly” or “critical” editing as against unscholarly or uncritical forms of commercial or adaptive (or even instrumental) editorial work in publishing. In digital editing, you see a dismissive attitude towards the publishing industry and print editions, and definitions that distinguish “real” digital editions as against those print editions that are “merely digitized” (and therefore not “real” digital projects worthy of the Digital Humanities Community; see, e.g., SAHLE 2016 for an argument that creates hierarchies between different types of editions). The problem is, as John Dewey would say, nearly all distinctions like these are inherently invidious: they risk precluding the insights that unfamiliar contexts of editorial *experience* and *labor* may bring (see GREENBERG 2018). Any attempt to create a hierarchy among types of editing belies the fact that all editing is a polyvalent practice.

The most innovative theories over the last few decades have shown that many forms of editing are indeed important scholarly and critical enterprises (e.g., Hans Walter Gabler, Hershel Parker, Elena Pierazzo, Peter Shillingsburg, G. T. Tanselle), that readers, institutions, and adaptations matter as much as authors (e.g., John Bryant, Paul Eggert, Jerome McGann, D. F. McKenzie), and that digital methods create new forms of engagement. That said, all of these undertakings have been decidedly intra-disciplinary struggles that argue for the scholarly integrity of editing. Much like James Thorpe did in his discussion of the “aesthetic grounds” of all textual decisions and composite authorship in “The Aesthetics of Textual Criticism” (1972), we think textual scholarship could be galvanized by engaging in questions of creativity more broadly defined and looking to disciplines less certain about their scholarly credentials: fine art, creative writing, drama, and performance, all areas of intellectual inquiry that have become incorporated into the academic institution in the last few decades — around the same period that the above-mentioned editorial theorists have sought to reconsider the functions of editing. In the process of entering the academy, creative practitioners have been forced to confront questions such as: What does it mean to apply academic forms of evaluation to literary and artistic products and processes? Can we conceive of practice *as* research? More specifically, can we conceive of creative practice as a critical method? A distinct way of identifying and solving problems? It is our contention that these questions are just as pertinent for editors as they are for arts-based researchers. The practice of editing is its own distinct and autonomous way

of identifying and solving textual problems that escape the hermeneutic models of literary criticism. To approach a text as an editor means to question it in a different way than when the same text is approached by a critic (even if, as is frequently the case, the editor and critic are the same person).

What we seek to showcase in this special issue, therefore, are some of the ways in which critical and creative editorial practices function as research. To this end, the authors in this special issue come from several disciplines and a variety of career stages: established textual editors and literary critics, digital humanists, early career academics and graduate students, published poets and creative writers, and those working in publishing, editing, and translation outside the academy. What they all have in common is a dedication to the living words of text transmission — combining W. W. Greg’s principle of the reconstruction of the “living word” in its material forms with Richard Poirier’s ideal that “life may be created out of words” (GREG 1945, qtd in HOWARD-HILL 2009, 68; POIRIER 1998, 353). Such a principle embraces the myriad ways that words inhabit various forms, communicate intended meanings, become remediated over time, and are adapted. We deliberately included authors in this issue who would not typically be published in a textual studies journal. Poets, performers, and translators are grouped with digital editors; textual critics and academics are writing speculative and creative non-fiction; creatives are asking pointed questions of the academic discipline of editing — these characteristics all reflect our commitment to emphasizing diverse approaches to a discipline that has long been accused of insularity.

Sometimes that insularity may have been defensive. Editing, after all, had been dismissed by some literary critics as “mechanical” or “insufficiently theorized”. Before the pioneering work of Julian Boyd on the Thomas Jefferson edition, historical editors in particular had a tradition of separating the editors who transcribe sources from the historians who are able to analyze them. Yet these attitudes still linger in literature and history departments. Scholarly editors have long condescended to editors of the past for “corrupting” the texts of geniuses. Other times the insularity is reflected in what McGann once called “postmodern incunables” — scholarly editions with “[g]rotesque systems of notation” that only other scholarly editors could understand (2001, 79). The labyrinthine print edition is like a museum exhibition that only caters to a highly specialized “art world”, whereas a broader conception of the edition that exists outside the confines of a tightly defined curatorial space could enable new modes of criticism and appreciation. This is not to deny that editorial work is necessary for establishing reliable texts that are used in literature classrooms and

serious criticism. Rather, our aim is to expand our conceptual horizon so as to encompass the broadest range of activities that fall under the category of “editing”. We are inspired by Dewey’s notion of consummatory experience in *Art as Experience* (1934) to pursue an editorial practice that does justice to an aesthetic, experimental, and embodied notion of literary experience.

Whereas scholarly editing is still primarily a printed book enterprise, digital scholarly editing, often operating independently of traditional academic publishers, has been innovating and refreshing the discipline the past two decades and could be the most receptive to creative-critical approaches. The digital environment allows us to include and manipulate images of source manuscripts or early printed books, audio clips, diagrams, and other interactive elements that serve to reveal and contextualize the text in new ways. However, those in the digital editing community are still reckoning with the inefficiencies and uneven support for publication and maintenance, and they have particularly much more work to do to answer to the climate crisis — namely the carbon footprint of our digital resources. Is the innovation-at-all-costs ethos of digital humanities harmful to the planet, and should we not be aiming for minimalist solutions instead?¹ Nevertheless, digital innovations have not meant that it is easier to publish editions; indeed, digital editions require significant amounts of resources, they still have knowledge gaps between the subject matter experts and digital technologists, and traditional publishers have not supported them because of the expenses and complexities involved.² A revelatory survey undertaken by Merisa Martinez, Wout Dillen, Elli Bleeker, Anna-Maria Sichani, and Aodhán Kelly in 2017 showed that digital editors still lack straightforward guidelines for making editions accessible in terms of discovery, data sharing, and making adjustments for readers with disabilities. Two major problems confronting digital editions is discoverability and the ability to *take possession of the edition*. It is difficult to find digital editions because they are not associated with the traditional structures of promotion such as academic publishers, and they tend not to be cataloged in libraries. And it is difficult to take possession of digital editions because they tend to be curated as bespoke web sites the data of which is hard to download and make use of. These difficulties still present new opportunities to engage creatively with edition data.

1. See, for example, The DH Climate Crisis manifesto at <https://dhc-barnard.github.io/dhclimate/> and the ongoing initiatives of the Digital Humanities Climate Coalition at <https://www.cdcs.ed.ac.uk/digital-humanities-climate-coalition>.

2. See Chapter 5 of OHGE 2021.

§

Creative-critical writing, creative criticism, post-criticism, post-critique.³ These terms have gained traction in literary studies in recent years, though in many ways they serve to name a mode — and perhaps a mood — of writing that has been around since Plato, writing that engages with its form (in Plato's case, the dialogue) to convey its theoretical content. That these terms emerge in the twenty-first century academy is in many ways a response to a growing sense of dissatisfaction with how the institution works as intellectual labor becomes oriented towards targets: student surveys, grant capture, number of citations, service on various committees. While such tools can be useful for capturing some of the value produced by academic research, they have little to do with the motivations that inspired individual thinkers to pursue humanistic inquiry. This instrumental mode of conducting business, moreover, brings with it a flattened-out, standard-issue prose style, more driven by the need to produce entries on a CV than the desire to share the fruits of slow and careful thought. As against these developments, growing numbers of critics are turning to the creative or post-critical to explore new ways of thinking and writing.

This turn has been anticipated by twentieth-century theory — thinkers and writers such as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Hélène Cixous, Anne Carson, Claudia Rankine, and others who have employed literary techniques to bring home their philosophical points. An equally important harbinger is the emergence of Creative Writing as a distinct division of English Literature departments, which has forced scholars and critics to acknowledge that literary writing can be a valid research method. It is also notable that the introduction of Creative Writing is often a response to student demand: young people are drawn to literary studies because they want to learn how to write, not how to critique. Of course, learning to write literary texts means learning to appreciate that the creative and the critical cannot be neatly separated: imaginative writing requires critical insight, while criticism will be condemned to arid irrelevance if it is not infused with creative energy. Furthermore, as noted above, concurrent developments in practice-based research in fine art, theatre, and performance studies have further expanded our notion of the creative affordances of research practice. In this respect, we may think of

3. See, e.g., BENSON and CONNORS 2014; ORLEY and HILEVAARA 2018; CALLUS and CORBY 2015–; FELSKI 2015; ANKAR and FELSKI 2018; and MAJUNDAR and VADDE 2020.

what might be called “documentary” art ranging from Jenny Holzer’s *Protect! Protect!* (2007) to Robin Coste Lewis’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015) to Don Mee Choi’s *DMZ Colony* (2020), all of which turn historical documents into new artistic and poetic works. Art is catching up to editing, but is editing catching up to art?

These ideas put pressure on the notion of criticism as it has been understood since its inception as an academic discipline in the first half of the twentieth century. In this special issue we ask ourselves: what kind of pressures do these developments put on the concept and practices of editorial scholarship? Our contention is that the arrival of practice-based research on the academic scene has the potential to reset the terms of the by-now tired conflict between “pedantic” scholarly editors and “incisive” literary critics. Practice is, after all, a term common to anyone who does something — creative practice, critical practice, and editorial practice all share the sense of doing things with texts and using imagination and creativity to fill in evidentiary gaps. This is what this special issue seeks to highlight. We are not making the case for a particular kind of editorial method that we term “creative-critical”; rather, we hope to open up a space for new departures, interventions, redescriptions, and innovations in several media environments. This is why we have asked our contributors to write “provocations” — short pieces designed to challenge the status quo both with regards to the impasses of editorial theory and to our understanding of editorial practice more widely.

As a result, this special issue encompasses a variety of approaches illustrating several different directions. Some provocations (Chernysheva, Griffiths, Mathews, Orley, Robinson) are self-reflective pieces by creative practitioners, critics, and translators who never set out to become editors. Instead, they found themselves editing in response to the literary and archival materials that they were working with. Other provocations (Bryant, McCarty, McGann, Petridou and Tiktopoulou, Portela, Van Mierlo) reveal the opposite movement: a scholar firmly grounded in established editorial theory and practice who stumbles on a place where conventional approaches fall short: cruxes in the source material or its transmission that require a creative approach. Yet others (Bassett, Bowman, Nabugodi, Ohge, Schad) take the nature of thought experiments: texts that meditate on editing while themselves almost becoming creative editions of the materials that they cite. The pieces cover a wide range of materials, touching on how to edit canonical works in different languages (e.g., by Herman Melville, Fernando Pessoa, Dionysios Solomòs), experimental engagements with great writers (e.g., with Guillaume Apollinaire, William Empson, Gerard

Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy), creative acts of archival recovery (e.g., the poetry of Cécile Sauvage, the UK Government's environmental plan, or a letter from the archives of the Church of England), and various digital approaches to editing.

The provocations have been divided into three sections, though there are many links across and between them. The first section, "Questions and Experiments", is devoted to attempts to expand how we think about editorial practice. Starting with Emily Orley's series of open-ended questions, the provocations in this section model different ways of confronting issues around ethics, self-reflexivity, and failure in editorial theory. The second section, "Creative-Critical Case Studies", has a more practical slant. Here the authors both show and tell how their materials brought their creative and critical practices into proximity with editorial scholarship. The final section, "The Aesthetic Experiences of Digital Editions", maintains the practical focus. It presents a selection of innovative digital editions in several languages. Editors take us behind the scenes of their working process, revealing the intersections between digital editing and acts of artistic curation. The section closes with a think-piece by Caroline Bassett in which she questions some of the fundamental premises of the Digital Humanities. Questioning, rather than providing answers, is thus quite literally the alpha and omega, the beginning and end, of this special issue.

Some might claim that this kind of self-reflective writing is not scholarly enough. Like Icarus steering too close to the sun, it crashes under the foolishness of its own ambitions. Yet our hope is that by loosening up some of the premises that govern academic argumentation — its fixation on objectivity, criticality, and scholarly rigor — we will be able to spark new conversations about what it means to edit a text. A useful analogy can be made to debates about the role of the translator that followed Lawrence Venuti's analysis of the translator's invisibility. Even though the translator is responsible for every word on the translated page, Venuti showed how we have become accustomed to overlook their presence: historically, the best praise for a translation has been that it reads as "as if" it were not a translation. In response to the issues raised by Venuti, translators and critics have explored different ways of making translators visible and acknowledging their crucial position as mediators between target-language reader and source-language author. "Visible" translations disrupt the illusion of immediacy and call attention to the interpretative labor that produced them. Along similar lines, we hope to encourage editors to see themselves not simply as invisible handmaidens to texts, but as artists who are not afraid of leaving their imprint on the materials they handle. After all, every word

on the edited page passes through the editor's hands. Even the editor who aims to do no more than capture the author's final intention must make choices that are, ultimately, grounded in the editor's interpretation of the textual evidence. Though they might have recourse to a set of editorial principles that keep subjective preferences in check, no such set of principles can obviate the need to exercise editorial judgment. Seen in this light, accentuating the editor's creativity and their interventions in the text is a way of being transparent about how texts are made and how they live on over time.

Creative-critical editing, whatever it may become, will not replace the need for conventional scholarly editions: rather, it aims to serve as a complement to established practices, and an inherently innovative and experimental mode of editing that is no less critical for being playful. Blake's representation of joy offers one way of imagining the creative-critical editor's ethos:

He who bends to himself a joy
 Does the winged life destroy
 But he who kisses the joy as it flies
 Lives in Eternity's sun rise
 (BLAKE 1978, 968)

Greedily trying to possess joy, to claim full authority over a text, will destroy it — for instance, by undermining interpretation and creative adaptation. Instead of owning the text, the creative-critical editor releases the text into its future, their labor but a momentary touch in the flight of its transmission history. If “kissing the text as it flies” is an oddly erotic image, in its strangeness it also gestures to the affective engagement that many editors feel towards the texts they work on. Another potential reference point for the creative-critical editor can be found in Thomas De Quincey's distinction between literature of knowledge and literature of power. Editing in the traditional mode has often functioned as a tool of knowledge, but what De Quincey describes as “power” is the kind of text that speaks “to the higher understanding or reason, but always *through* affections of pleasure and sympathy” (2003, 336). This power also relates to the reader's sympathy with the editorial process. Marta Werner similarly writes about the “intimacy” of editorial work on Emily Dickinson, evincing a “metamorphosis from editor to executant” (2021, 11). Creative-critical approaches have the potential to democratize editorial labor by curating editions that are inclusive of multiple viewpoints and voices. They can also make editing more appealing to

creative practitioners and others who might be intimidated by the dusty halo surrounding the term “Textual Scholarship” and yet who nonetheless find themselves immersed in the creative and critical practices of editing.

University of Cambridge
School of Advanced Study, University of London

Works Cited

- ANKAR, Elizabeth S. and Rita FELSKI, eds. 2017. *Critique and Post-Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- BENSON, Stephen and Clare CONNORS, eds. 2014. *Creative Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- BENTLEY, G. E., ed. 1978. “Writings in Conventional Typography and in Manuscript”. In *William Blake’s Writings*, Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Accessed on Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (2018). <https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198785323.book.1/actrade-9780198785323-book-1>.
- CALLUS, Ivan and James CORBY, eds. 2015–. *CounterText*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- FELSKI, Rita. 2015. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- GREENBERG, Susan. 2018. *A Poetics of Editing*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- HOWARD-HILL, Thomas. 2009. “W. W. Greg as Bibliographer”. *Textual Cultures*, 4.2: 63–75.
- MAJUNDAR, Saikat and Aarthi VADDE, eds. 2020. *The Critic as Amateur*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- MARTINEZ, Merisa, Wout DILLEN, Elli BLEEKER, Anna-Maria SICHANI, and Aodhán KELLY. 2019. “Refining our conceptions of ‘access’ in digital scholarly editing: Reflections on a qualitative survey on inclusive design and dissemination”. *Variants*, 14: 41–74. <https://doi.org/10.4000/variants.1070>.
- MCGANN, Jerome. 2001. “Editing as a Theoretical Pursuit”. In *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web*, 75–97. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- MORRISON, R., ed. 2003. “The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire”. In *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, Vol. 16. London: Pickering & Chatto. <https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9781138764972.book.1/actrade-9781138764972-book-1>.
- OHGE, Christopher. 2021. *Publishing Scholarly Editions: Archives, Computing, and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ORLEY, Emily and Katja HILEVAARA. 2018. *The Creative Critic: Writing as/about Practice*. London: Routledge.
- POIRIER, Richard. 1998. “Why Do Pragmatists Want to Be Like Poets?” In *The Revival of Pragmatism*, edited by Morris DICKSTEIN. Durham: Duke University Press.

- SAHLE, Patrick. 2016. "What is a Scholarly Digital Edition?" In *Digital Scholarly Editing: Theories and Practices*, edited by Matthew James DRISCOLL and Elena PIERAZZO. Cambridge: OpenBook Publishers. https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0095/ch2.xhtml#_idTextAnchor009.
- THORPE, James. 1972. *Principles of Textual Criticism*. San Marino: The Huntington Library.
- VENUTI, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.
- WERNER, Marta. 2021. *Writing In Time: Emily Dickinson's Master Hours*. Amherst: Amherst College Press.