

Digital Editing and “Experience [. . .] looked upon as a kind of text”

A Provocation in Three Exhibitions

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ABSTRACT

This provocation argues for a form of digital creative-critical editing to serve as a pragmatic complement to the dominant “depth” models of traditional scholarly editing. What results is a pan-relational praxis of editing that focuses on connecting edited texts to new contexts and literary experiences with new tools, instead of using a depth model to offer the correct description, representation, or data model of those texts. Creative textual criticism could then be considered ongoing and incomplete, partaking of an iterative process of close reading and distant analysis, and redescrptions of textual criticism that are embedded in the creative process and other aesthetic experiences. These ideas are demonstrated in three brief exhibitions of Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, and the abolitionist Mary Anne Rawson, all of whom are loosely connected to Arthur Schopenhauer, who once posited in Counsels and Maxims that “Experience of the world may be looked upon as a kind of text, to which reflection and knowledge form the commentary”. Such “commentary” inspires a new mode of pan-relational “reflection” and networked discourse which can only be implemented with digital technologies. What digital editing can do, then, is to give space to competing and alternative discourses and processes of the same text and to connect that text to other aesthetic contexts.

SCHOLARLY EDITING HAS LONG OPERATED UNDER WHAT COULD BE called a “depth” model that overlooks the role of experience. This model is best exemplified by two important concepts in textual scholarship: the archetype and the copy text. The goal of the critical editor is to “reduce error” by collating versions of existing documents to bring about a work that comes closest to a presumed archetypal text, whether it is a missing ancient document or the work that the author finally intended. In either case, the depth model suggests that there is only one ideal reading of the text, because there is only one possible master version, but also one authoritative way to represent it. And *representation* is key: the critical editor represents textual objects accurately, yet much work in philosophy has shown that any

attempt to get a representation right assumes problematic binaries between objective and subjective, and essential and accidental properties (RORTY 2021, 87). In some ways this dynamic already played out between stemmatic and “best text” approaches in late-nineteenth and early-nineteenth century philology, but Housman’s “Application of Thought to Textual Criticism” (1921) offered a new and sophisticated depth model for establishing critical texts based on judging individual variants between witnesses, which informed the copy-text theories of McKerrow, Greg, Bowers, Tanselle, and many others in New Bibliography. Yet even the detractors to New Bibliography that followed really offered alternative depth models themselves, from the genetic editors who study the minutiae of authorial revision and see textual criticism as a means toward establishing the final genetic reading text, to the social editors who suggest that we ought to describe readers and institutions to understand the textual condition.

These depth models are all teleological accounts, attempting to publish the truest representation or description of the textual condition. These models have been reflected in prevailing digital methods, as texts are encoded hierarchically within a document, thereby “going deeper” into the text by enriching it with layers of complex interpretations with semantic markup. However, many digital editors eventually realize that they can typically use only one depth model per document. One depth model cannot capture all available interpretations, and encoding multiple depth models in one document usually leads to unwieldy or broken XML (e.g., structural encoding of a poem cannot easily co-exist with linguistic or analytic encoding because the XML will no longer be well-formed).¹ Meanwhile, these sophisticated forms of text markup are still needlessly difficult to publish into user interfaces, and users do not gain enhanced appreciation of the context of these editorial interpretations rendered in semantic tags.

Whereas depth models have long been a valid and important means for establishing reliable texts, they have often limited the reader’s ability to form aesthetic judgments about the creative process, or, for that matter, editorial practice. A pan-relational mode of editing is a pragmatic complement to these dominant modes of critical editing. Instead of seeking only the correct description, representation, or data model of texts,

1. To be fair, some editors (myself included) have sometimes resorted to “stand-off” markup approaches to connect multiple TEI data models to the same text (to render a diplomatic and a reading text, e.g.), but there is no generalized publication software that can handle editions with stand-off markup, so it is not a practicable solution for the average editor. See also VIGLIANTI 2019.

creative-critical editing can focus on connecting texts to new contexts and aesthetic experiences with new tools. There are as many contexts as there are purposes for literature, and no depth model can fulfil all of those aims. Different methods are therefore required to deal with these aims. Creative-critical editing then offers new ways of creating new connections by undertaking new descriptions of texts which are tethered to whatever purposes are needed for a given situation or audience. The disadvantage of a privileged "vertical" or "depth" model of textual editing (in print and digital) is that it forecloses the varieties of aesthetic experience by focusing its energy on a correspondence between material text and data which is not achievable. To borrow Barthes's distinction between knowing the world as an object and as a writing practice, the depth model privileges knowledge of the textual object instead of its relational aesthetic practices in the world (BARTHES 1989, 289). And, as Richard Rorty said, principles should "serve our purposes better": rather than assigning deeper knowledge of their underlying concepts, the creative-critical editor would consider the best way to "cope" with the varieties of potential experiences in literary practices (RORTY 2021, 83). This mode of thinking resists privileging print-based editorial theories as much as it resists technological determinism. Creative-critical editing must open the text to experience.

I made experience a central concern of my recent work, which calls for a methodological pragmatism that is attentive to the central role of experience in editorial choices and publication. My sense of "experience" is indebted to pragmatist thinking (particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, and Paul Grimstad) that concerns *composition*, not only as a recording of perceptions but as an experimental, interdependent circuit of creative writing and reading (OHGE 2021, 18). *Composition*, not only as the "energies" of writing — as John Bryant aptly put in *The Fluid Text* — but the nature of text making itself, from creation to publication and editing to reading. Tying *experience* to *composition* opens up the editorial enterprise to include the full range of creative-critical practices. Composition can literally mean drafting, revising, setting type (i.e. with a "composing stick"), publishing, editing, encoding, and reading. What digital editing can do is to give space to competing and alternative discourses and processes of the same text and to connect that text to other creative contexts. I have always appreciated Peter Shillingsburg's idea that editorial practices have "interpretive consequences" (SHILLINGSBURG 2006). Even that valuable idea focuses on criticism *ex post facto*, whereas my principle is that editing itself is partly a creative act that is embedded in a circuit of

other creative experiences of writing and publishing. What I did not have the scope to do, however, was to explore the *creative-critical* implications of “experience”.

One inspiration for my sense of creative-critical editing comes from Peter McDonald’s account of creative criticism. Borrowing from Maurice Blanchot’s “exploration of the possibility of literary experience” in “The Task of Criticism Today”, McDonald posits a creative criticism that “engages experientially with innovative forms of literary writing” in order “to emerge from the experience with a transformed critical language attuned to, as well as expressive of, the new ways of writing, reading, thinking, and knowing” (2021, 95). What McDonald outlines relates to John Dewey’s principle that art is “nature transformed by entering into new relationships where it evokes a new emotional response”, and it is the purpose of criticism to be embedded in the stuff of these relationships (1987, 85). “He fables, yet speaks truth” (Matthew Arnold, *Empedocles on Etna*): this principle of art as experience partakes of *poïesis*.

Creative criticism resists being trapped in narrow definitions because it is *generative* — that is, ongoing and incomplete, and a process of close reading and redescriptions of textual criticism that participate in the creative process, and in that participation it becomes its own textual history (McDONALD 2021). Scholarly editions are well-placed to facilitate these experiences because they show the traces of artistic intentions in texts that require our attention. What matters, then, is not the distinction between “intellectual” scholarly editions and “aesthetic” works of literature, but rather *aesthetic* and *anaesthetic* forms of editorial engagement (DEWEY 1987, 47). Forms of attention, redescriptions of texts and principles, new metaphors for literary composition — these are horizontal, non-hierarchical, pan-relationalist modes of creative-critical editing.

1. *Editio* and Aesthetic Experience

[*Editio*] A bringing forth, a birth. A putting forth, publishing of a work. A statement, representation. An exhibition.

—A Latin Dictionary [. . .] by Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and. Charles Short, LL.D, 1879

Exhibition: Thomas Hardy

Thus I; faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.

Thomas Hardy's "The Voice", one of the great poems he wrote after the death of his first wife Emma, also contains a chestnut of aesthetic experience. Channelling Sappho's poem 31 ("as if my tongue is broken"), Hardy explores how the poet wrestles language into communication. Yet, like the Aeolian Harp, much is lost in the "calling" — or the tallying — of language and nature. "Poetry is emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art" (HARDY 2011, 78). The broken tongue lingers behind Hardy's aesthetic experience in the draft manuscript of another poem with "emotion put into measure", "A Singer Asleep" (originally titled a "A South-Coast Nocturn") (See Fig. 1).²

V.

I still can hear the brabble & the roar
At those thy tunes, O still one, now passed through
That fitful fire of tongues then entered new!
Their power is spent like ~~wind upon~~ ^spindrift on^ this shore,
Thine swells yet more & more.

That Hardy habitually destroyed his manuscripts makes this poem draft even more important as a piece of holographic evidence and one which enhances our appreciation of Hardy's experience-as-composition. In this poem the "fitful fire of tongues" contrasts with the broken tongue of the poet ("faltering forward"). Hardy's creative precision shows in the substitution of "spindrift on" for "wind upon", suggesting the continuous spray of criticism instead of a gale. The irony of the swells being at once more yet "spent" works better with the dissipation of the mist of language, like the "Wind oozing thin". In revising, Hardy's abstractions become concrete: a "Nocturn" becomes a "Sleeper", the wind becomes spindrift,

2. I am unaware of the location of this manuscript, which is likely in private hands. I accessed the image from a Bonham's auction catalogue (lot 197) in 2015 at <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20922/lot/197/>.

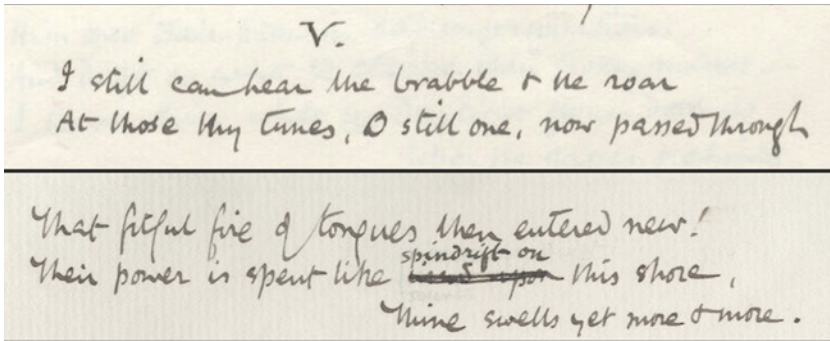


Figure 1. Manuscript of Thomas Hardy's "A Singer Asleep" (present location unknown).

the song becomes the poet. The language itself creates more friction by becoming identified with felt experience, and only the manuscript transcription allows us to see these kinds of creative transformations and connections.

The manuscript of the poem is at once in dialogue with the element of "oozing" wind in his own poem "The Voice" as well as with his contemporary Algernon Charles Swinburne, to whom the poem (which could be fairly called an elegy that is guilty of "faltering forward" with a different kind of grief) was dedicated.

The sundawn breaks the barren twilight's bar
 And fires the mist and slays it. Years on years
 Vanish, but he that hearkens eastward hears
 Bright music from the world where shadows are.
 ("To Sir Richard F. Burton", lines 5–8; SWINBURNE 1904, 3: 258)

Hardy ends his elegy: "I leave him, while the daylight gleam declines / Upon the capes and chines."

But Hardy's "spindrift" is figurative language that looks not only backwards but forwards; it is generative. It was to be a metaphor for what Dylan Thomas, a keen reader of Hardy, would later characterize as the written page itself:

Not for the proud man apart
 From the raging moon I write
 On these spindrift pages.
 ("In My Craft or Sullen Art", lines 12–14; THOMAS 2014, 389)

An editor with a broad (or liberal) definition of annotation may be criticized by scholarly editors for attending to these creative connections while reading the poems closely during the preparation of a transcription and commentary for an edition. And yet, as Eva Dema has recently pointed out, this kind of rare manuscript evidence in Hardy has been neglected, and the connections between the wind/spindrift revision and other poems would be lost unless an editor were assessing such evidence and then bringing it to readers' attention.

But what can computation do? The depth model would suggest that we represent the text with semantic tags: "~~wind upon~~ ^spindrift on^" becomes in TEI XML

`wind upon <add>spindrift on</add>`

which adds an explicit designation of what the textual phenomenon is. However, despite its being "descriptive", and even if I were to add attribute values to make further distinctions, I would still not be able to gauge from the data model what is interesting or significant or generative about that phenomenon. The meaning, the intentions — the aboutness of the author and the reader — of the data remain abstruse. Moving beyond representation, then, I can also think of Hardy's corpus as a new kind of tool for poetical experience. How might I creatively visualize my key terms of attention from this miniature editorial enterprise with a collocation graph: wind, fire, tongue, spindrift (see Fig. 2).³

What creative modes of reading can be applied to these different views of text and composition? One thing I can say for certain is that "tongue" and "spindrift" are rare terms that do not have any significant connections — and "spindrift" is a hapax legomena (a word that only occurs once in Hardy's 1923 *Collected Poems*) whereas "wind" is a high-frequency term (58 occurrences) that often connects to "fire". *Why?* How might we account for this phenomenon?

That requires imagination and experimentation, or a collage of potential reading and aesthetic exhibitions stemming from archival and editorial practices. But what is clear in the graph above is that I have moved from a deep analysis of two poems (with a nod to Sappho in between), a consideration of variants and genesis in one poem, and a horizontal,

3. Collocation is the frequency of words that tend to occur together or near each other. The visualization was produced using the LancsBox software (<http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox/>).

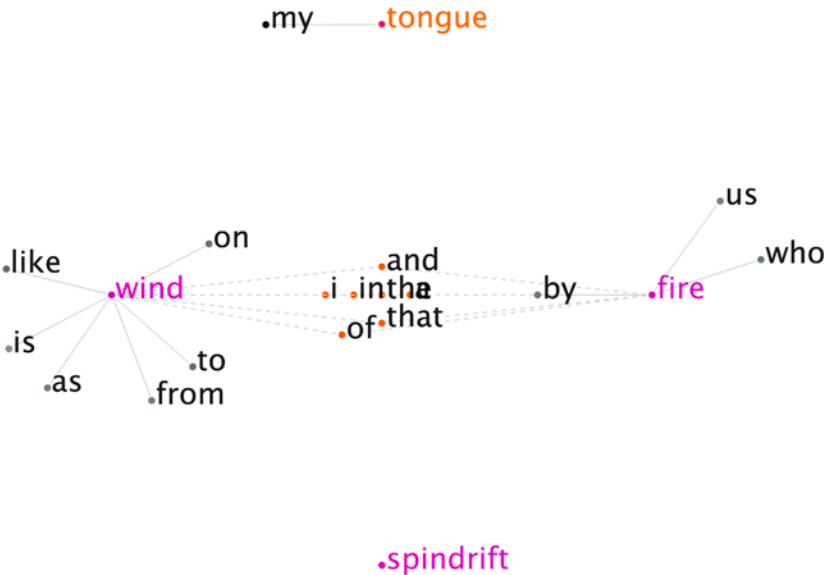


Figure 2. Collocation graph of the terms “wind”, “fire”, and “spindrift” in Thomas Hardy’s *Collected Poems*.

network-oriented mode of reading. By doing so, I have queried the corpus to consider new contexts based on clusters of suggestive words. These experimental practices illuminate the Latin root of editing: *editio*, or various kinds of exhibitions, not merely books.

2. Editorial Pan-Relationalism

Exhibition: Herman Melville Reading Arthur Schopenhauer

Experience of the world may be looked upon as a kind of text, to which reflection and knowledge form the commentary. Where there is a great deal of reflection and intellectual knowledge, and very little experience, the result is like those books which have on each page two lines of text

to forty lines of commentary. A great deal of experience with little reflection and scanty knowledge, gives us books like those of the *editio Bipontina*, where there are no notes and much that is unintelligible.

—Arthur Schopenhauer, *Counsels and Maxims*
(marked by Herman Melville in 1891).

One form that creative-critical practice can take is annotation (or commentary). The epigraph from Schopenhauer not only makes an apt comparison between experience and the text, but also concerns a moment of literary experience that is reflective of my and Schopenhauer's point. Herman Melville marked that passage in 1891, in the last year of his life, as he was finishing, or trying to finish, his novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* (he never finished it). Schopenhauer's commentary on reading and allusion, and his comparison to the nature of editions, became a focus of attention for Melville-the-reader.

The transition of Melville-the-reader to Melville-the-writer — or Melville-the-writer to Melville-the-reader — was itself an aesthetic experience that came and went. Gauging what happened in between is crucial, but it requires an aesthetic imagination; this imagining can only be a creative-critical enterprise because there is a mixture of evidentiary traces and uncertainties, as well as creative potentials involving experience. It is an experience requiring "reflection and knowledge" (imagination and facts in Schopenhauer's terms) — in short, editing — in order for us to grasp it in our "commentary". *Experience of the world may be looked upon as a kind of text, to which reflection and knowledge form the commentary . . .*

Experience is a teacher indeed; yet did Billy's years make his experience small; besides he had none of that intuitive knowledge of the bad which in natures not good or incompletely so foreruns experience, and therefore may pertain, as in some instances it too clearly does pertain, even to youth.

(MELVILLE 2019)⁴

... A great deal of experience with little reflection and scanty knowledge, gives us books like those of the *editio Bipontina*, where there are no notes and much that is unintelligible.

How can editors construct better "commentary" — narratives, metaphors, and connections, "free from cant and convention" — to

4. Chapter 16, Versions of *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Melville Electronic Library, <https://melville.electroniclibrary.org/editions/versions-of-billy-budd/chapter-16>.

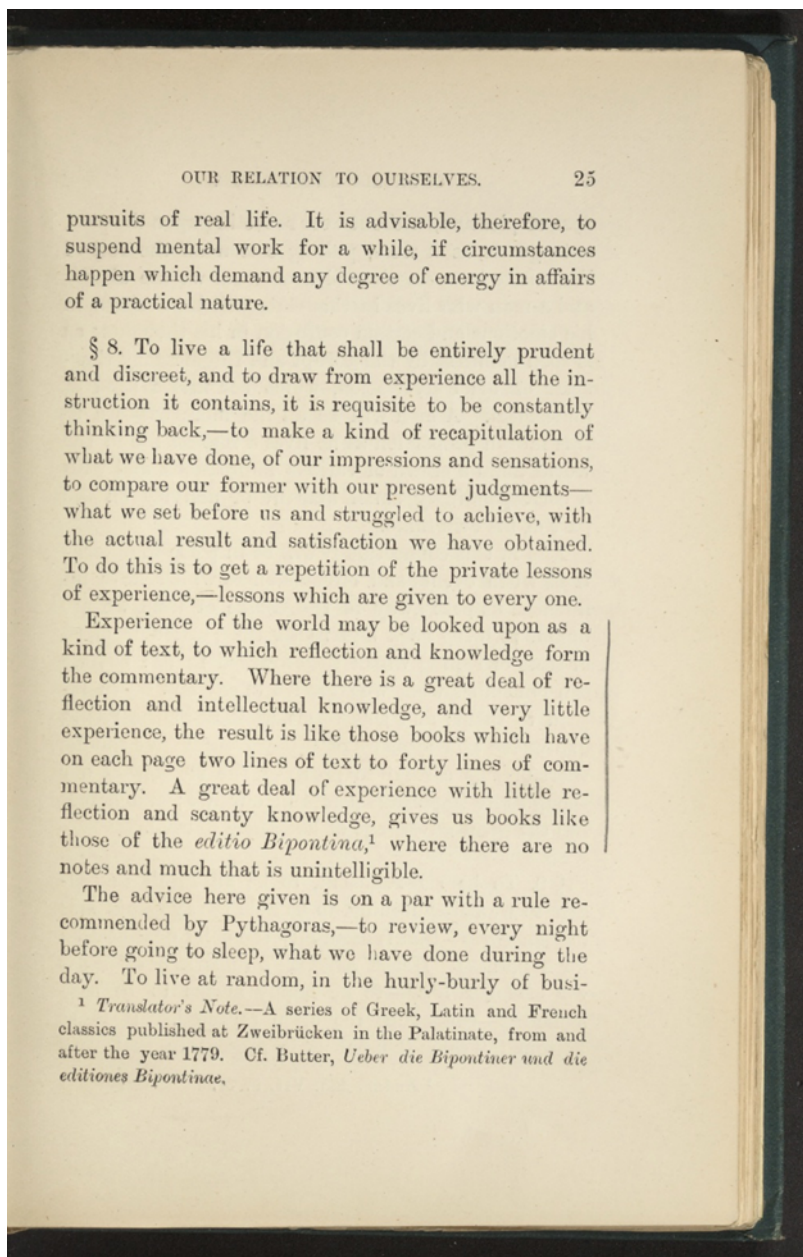
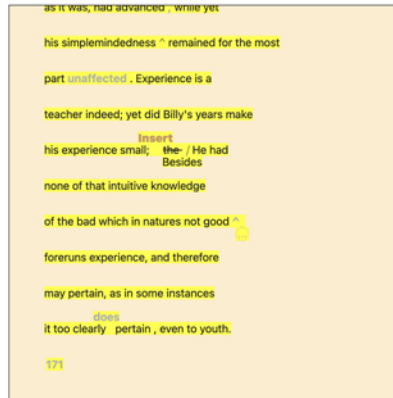
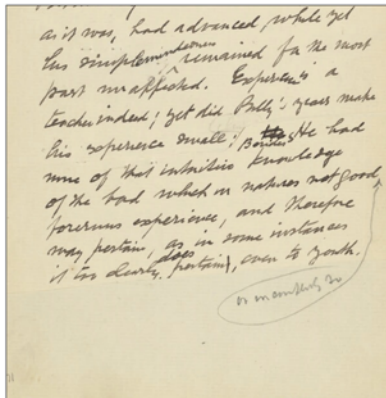
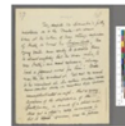


Figure 3. Herman Melville's marking in Arthur Schopenhauer's "Our Relation to Ourselves", in *Counsels and Maxims* (Sealts No. 444). Image courtesy Melville's Marginalia Online, www.melvillemarginalia.org.



Chapter 16

Yes, despite the Dansker's pithy insistence as to the Master-at-arms being at the bottom of these strange experiences of Billy on board the *Indomitable*, the young sailor was ready to ascribe them to almost anybody but the man who, to use Billy's own expression, "always had a pleasant word for him." This is to be wondered at. Yet not so much to be wondered at. In certain matters, some sailors even in mature life remain unsophisticated enough. But a young seafarer of the disposition of our athletic Foretopman, is much of a child-man. And yet a child's utter innocence is but its **blank utter** ignorance, and the innocence **more or less** wanes as intelligence waxes. But in Billy Budd intelligence, such as it was, had advanced, while yet his simplemindedness remained for the most part unaffected. Experience is a teacher indeed; yet did Billy's years make his experience **small**. Besides **he** had none of that intuitive knowledge of the bad which in natures not good or incompletely so foreruns experience, and therefore may pertain, as in some instances it too clearly does pertain, even to youth. **as in some instances**



Figures 4 and 5. Above, a diplomatic transcription of the *Billy Budd* manuscript, and below, the reading text, from Chapter 16 of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Melville Electronic Library edition.

convey Melville's *composition*, or the intellectual and aesthetic decisions of constructing his tragic story of Billy Budd, reading the grandee of pessimism Schopenhauer in his final months, and revising *Billy Budd* to make Captain Vere a tragic figure whose flaw comes with a bookish metaphor, a "bias [. . .] toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world, naturally inclines"?⁵ How can these moments we edit into existence as documentary evidence be made available

5. Chapter 7, *ibid*, <https://melville.electroniclibrary.org/editions/versions-of-billy-budd/chapter-7>.

for readers to assess? A creative-critical practice that combines these imaginative snapshots of embodied creativity and intentions can be exploited in the digital space where digital facsimiles from multiple sources (in this case, from two web sites, *Melville's Marginalia Online* and the *Melville Electronic Library*) can interact with multiple reading and analysis interfaces (see Figs. 4 and 5). The forging of Melville's aesthetic can be presented with multiple exhibitions.

But then consider that we cannot know the extent to which Melville read Schopenhauer to generate new revisions in *Billy Budd*. Perhaps he was reading Schopenhauer, at least partly, for intellectual companionship and consolation. The experienced, bookish character is contrasted with a pure innocence that lacks knowledge, with neither being able to claim wisdom. Reading Schopenhauer brought Melville into communion with his earlier self and a great thinker who, like him, used metaphors of interconnected reading, commentary, and experience to generate new ideas.

3. Interconnectedness: Compiling and Networking

Exhibition: Mary Anne Rawson's anti-slavery anthology The Bow in the Cloud

It is a subject for thankfulness that so many have assisted in raising this memorial, which, though small in its dimensions & humble in its design, the Compiler believes will be found a structure in of moral & literary architecture in some degree worthy of the great occasion.

—Mary Anne Rawson, MS Preface to *The Bow in the Cloud*. John Rylands Library, University of Manchester (English MS 415/199a [2–5]).

In the spirit of Reformed Christianity in the early nineteenth century, the word was an important driver of abolishing slavery, illustrated by an explosion of print in the United States abolitionist movement in the early 1830s. That movement was itself inspired by British models of anti-slavery thinking and publishing. One such model that has been neglected is *The Bow in the Cloud* (1834), which was edited by Mary Anne Rawson, one of the founders of the Sheffield Ladies Anti-Slavery Society in Great Britain.

Rawson, who called herself the “Compiler” (an apt word for selection, assembling, editing, processing), engaged in the politics of creative-critical editing. And it is in her Preface that digital editing can demonstrate her praxis in several respects: *political*, in that this anthology protests against injustice; *aesthetic*, in that the Preface itself shows a creative process in three distinct versions which can be shown with digital facsimiles and transcriptions; and *computational*, in that the means of experiencing this work is not beholden to one data model or one methodology of textual scholarship.

The text from the snippet of the first version of the Preface above is confident; it was not significantly revised before publication and it aspires to an “architecture”, which implies solidity and long-standing significance. And yet it expresses diffidence with its self-awareness, its modesty *topos* of “small in its dimensions & humble in its design” (English MS 415/199a (1)). Investigating the archive further reveals that Rawson went through a process of self-justification as an editor as she undertook her compiling. In the published anthology, she is not named anywhere, and there is no reference to her gender. Yet in the archive, an unpublished note (see Fig. 6) for the draft Preface indicates

The Editor of this little volume ~~does not come before the public~~ ^{is not placed} in the awkward [^]predicament of many original writers, who feel it necessary to make an apology for (appearing before the public) or (for adding to the number of books already before the public). She has no apology to offer — nay — so far from feeling one needful ~~she thinks that she~~ and pleading for indulgence, she is enabled to take far higher ground — she feels that she has conferred a favour on the public especially the junior part of it, and she can unhesitating[ly] say, that she considers [these] a *most valuable* [^]& rare collection of original papers [. . .]

One can sense that original fire of protest, some of which is struck out on the page. The tongue, unbroken, sees no reason to hide her gender, her temerity to produce such a volume, her alienated majesty as the editor. This was not published, but it was saved, and I think there is an important element of intentionality in the two Rawsons on display in these manuscript versions, in addition to her important decision to compromise in 1834 but to save important materials that reveal a more nuanced story about the struggle for universal abolition of slavery in the 1830s. The texts themselves bear witness to Rawson’s intention to evolve. Do readers evolve when they have witnessed these texts?

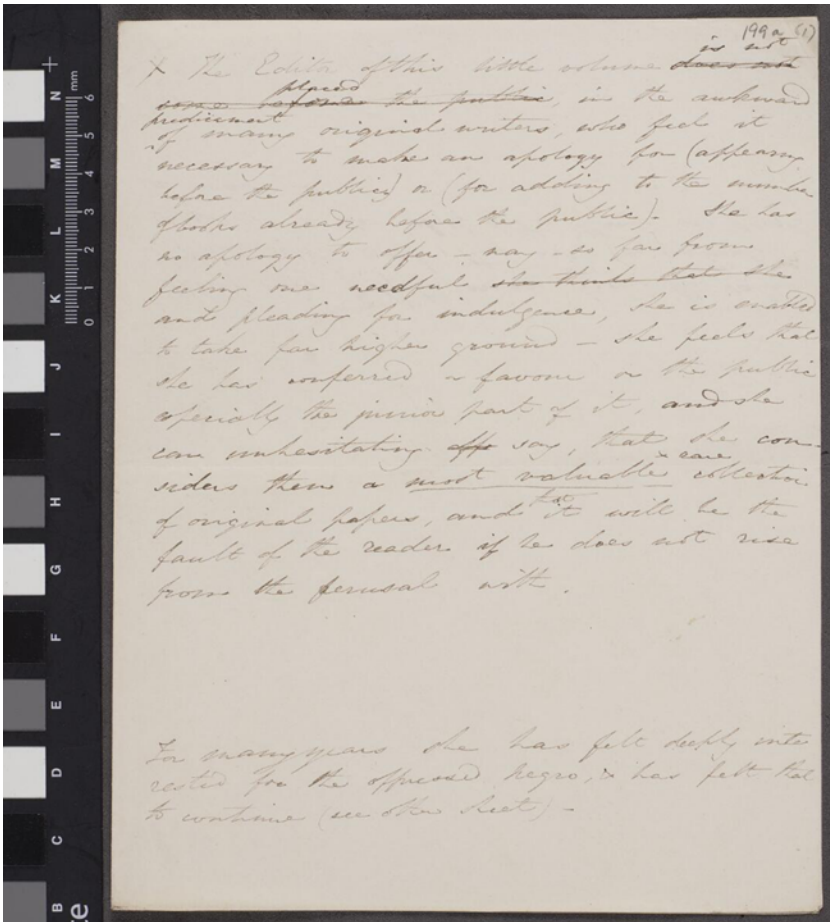


Figure 6. Unpublished note from Mary Anne Rawson's Preface to *The Bow in the Cloud* (1834). John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, English MS 415/199a (1).

Making unpublished documents machine readable gives researchers more access to the varieties of work and aesthetic exchange that went into the publishing of this anthology, as well as the connections among the documents that will form the basis of network analysis tools which themselves are meant to create new aesthetic experiences of texts and archives. Digital editors create models for the texts they are working on, but for several decades we have been tied to the document paradigm, which then leads to a depth model. As scholars at the University of Chicago's CEDAR project explain about their OCHRE database, the "database paradigm" organizes

“atomized” information that can “be interconnected in more complex ways, allowing for a multi-dimensional representation of texts” (see <https://voices.uchicago.edu/cedar/rationale/>). Using this paradigm, the text reveals itself through exploration with the database and its textual elements, or what CEDAR would call “a multi-dimensional space of possibilities” existing in a network.

Conclusion

What are the aesthetic links — or “multi-dimensional space of possibilities” — between these three exhibitions of editorial attention and intervention? One possibility is a new kind of creative textual discourse: for example, my chain of interdependent associations that revolve around my creative criticism of Schopenhauer facilitates a redescription: there is documentary evidence that Hardy and Melville were influenced by Schopenhauer (at roughly the same time, incidentally, shortly after T. Bailey Saunders’s English translations of Schopenhauer’s works were first published), but Schopenhauer was also fervently opposed to slavery. In *Religion: A Dialogue*, he explicitly alludes to another British anti-slavery publication that Rawson was associated with (vis-a-vis the London Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840), *Slavery and the internal slave-trade in the United States of North America, being replies to questions transmitted by the British Anti-slavery Society to the American Anti-slavery Society* (London, 1841). He reflected on that book with an indictment of American slave-holders and their supporters: “those devils in human form, those bigoted, church-going, strict sabbath-observing scoundrels, especially the Anglican parsons among them, treat their innocent black brothers who through violence and injustice have fallen into their devil’s claws” (SCHOPENHAUER 1891b, 46). Herman Melville marked this passage in his last year (Sealts No. 445).

Six degrees of Arthur Schopenhauer? Maybe. These connections may be coincidences (they were to me), but they matter because they suggest a tradition that can only be explicated in a web of discourses about nature, art, and subjugation. Or, perhaps, the spindrift of language on an imaginary page. The poet Charles Bernstein once characterized it as his “world semantic system”, and Rabindranath Tagore simply called it “a world” which is “ongoing” and “incomplete” (quoted in McDONALD 2020, 88). A pragmatist position is that everything is potentially related, depending on one’s purposes: “There are, so to speak, relations all the way down and all the way out in every direction; you never reach something which is not just one more nexus of relations” (RORTY 2021, 81). As Miller Prosser (a

scholar who works on OCHRE) has reminded me, this type of networked and distributed data recalls Ted Nelson's idea of "intertwingularity" — that all data could be shared, normalized, and reused across networks. Digital technology (currently in the form of linked open data and/or database models) can begin to accomplish this digital *Weltliteratur*; this technology nevertheless requires editors to focus on making these texts and connections machine-readable, not confined to printed books. Ideally I could then compile my own digital anthology of literary experience for creative-critical purposes. All three examples use creative textual criticism to attend to composition, or the literary text's generative potential through situated creativity — experience [. . .] looked upon as a kind of text.

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