Entrenchment and the Editor

Vera Tobin

Abstract

Broadly speaking, there are two major professional approaches to the curatorial and editorial status of texts in Anglo/American editorial scholarship. The first of these is the "final authorial intention" tradition associated with W. W. Greg and Fredson Bowers, in which the job of the scholarly editor is to come as closely as possible to producing a definitive text reflecting an author's final intentions. G. Thomas Tanselle's work grounds the Greg-Bowers methodology in a theory of texts that distinguishes between a "work" and "expressions" of it. The "work" is an abstract entity, the form of a piece of literary art that exists only as an ideal. Any realized instantiation of an artwork—in print, performance, manuscript, or otherwise—is merely an "expression" of that ideal. By its very nature, then, every reproduction is a mere approximation of the true, ideal work. In this school of textual criticism, the job of the editor is to approximate the ideal as closely as possible.

More recently, editorial theory within the academy has largely come to favor a "social text" approach, associated most famously with Jerome McGann, in which authority rests not with a solitary author but in a social process of textual production involving editors, typesetters, proofreaders, censors, anthologists, and others. This approach differs from the former not only in its fundamental conception of the nature of a "text," but also in the final products that it aims to produce. The goal of editors working in the Greg-Bowers-Tanselle school of textual criticism is to construct a single, stable, and readable, authoritative edition. (McGann criticizes these editions as "eclectic texts" that have no historical counterpart.) Editors who favor the social text approach advocate, instead, a "variorum," an account of an unstable textual history, with attention to the social and material contexts of all the variants of a given work.

The social text approach is philosophically appealing, in that it captures the complicated nature of authority and textual construction. It suffers, however, from its attempt to legislate a conceptualization of texts that is at odds—I argue—with deeply entrenched patterns of thought.

Conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) argues that our understanding of the world is crucially structured in terms of several vital relations. Reducing complexity to a conceptually manageable scale involves frequent *compressions* across those relations: from many elements to few, from diffuse connections to tight.

When we imagine our current selves answering an old criticism, we are compressing over time, so that events separated by many years can be conceptualized as nearly simultaneous in the compression. When we see an actor on stage and say "Hamlet is dead," the link of representation between the thing being represented and the thing representing it is being compressed into uniqueness.

While we still understand perfectly well that the actor and Hamlet are not one and the same, we can think about and refer to the situation as if they were.

I focus on one particularly common pattern of compression, in which disanalogies between members of a group are conceptualized as change in a unique individual. For example, the normal interpretation of a sentence like "My tax bill gets bigger every year" is the product of a conceptual blend in which analogies between many specific individuals are compressed into an identity relation, producing a unique individual in the resulting blend. Disanalogies across those different tax bills are then understood in terms of changes to the unique individual in the blend.

It is very common to refer to a literary work as a unique entity that undergoes change. What is interesting about these Unique Change compressions is that they are often much less transparent to introspection than, for example, the compression underlying "Hamlet is dead." Hearers of "My apartment gets bigger every time I move" are not deluded into thinking that the speaker's office is "really" growing. It is less obvious that "Poe shortened the poem for every new edition" does not, in fact, refer to an individual entity that has "really" changed.

I review a number of significant grammatical symptoms of the degree to which the compression to uniqueness is entrenched for the content domain of texts. Hearers of sentences like "My tax bill gets bigger every year" can easily decompress the underlying compression to Unique Change in the moment. Certain grammatical constructions do not admit, or do not encourage, that decompression.

For instance, normally, monolexemic change predicates in English do not license the expression of Unique Change compressions. This constraint is the reason that (1a) but not (1b) can be easily used to describe a situation where the speaker is referring to a series of different offices, each larger than the last.

(1)   a. My office gets bigger every year.

        b. My office expands every year.

In certain domains, however, monolexemic change predicates are the norm for expressing this relationship:

(2)   Poe shortened the poem for every new edition.

Similarly, these compressions are unusually amenable to use with monolexemic, adjectival predicates that denote a significant change to an entity's physical or essential form. Thus, Hugh Kenner (1967) can refer to the five-stanza version of Marianne Moore's poem "Poetry" as "the one scarred by all those revisions". In this conceptualization, the many variations published under the title "Poetry" are compressed into a single, concrete entity that the poet has altered many times. This entity is also metaphorically characterized as a living body, and the alterations that remove material from that body as violent mutilations. In this way, even a new,

intact printing of an earlier version can be "scarred" by the publication of shorter variations.

The use of these constructions constitutes evidence for a certain degree of entrenchment of the compression in the relevant domain. What's more, for domains where the compression is moderately entrenched, such constructions can be used rhetorically to influence conceptualization.

I discuss a number of practical ramifications of this entrenchment. Librarians and legislatures alike are eager to codify precisely when revisions to a document do and do not constitute the creation of a "new" text. Similarly, they must decide and enforce how members of the profession are to treat mechanical reproductions of a document. If certain conceptualizations of these relationships are strongly entrenched in grammatical structure and social practice, however, it is little surprise that approaches that clash with these conceptualizations will be difficult to put into regular practice.