

EGGERT, Paul. 2019. *The Work and the Reader in Literary Studies: Scholarly Editing and Book History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. x + 242. ISBN 9781108485746, Hardback \$99.99. ISBN 9781108621922, eBook \$80.00.

Are scholarly editions of literary texts arguments addressed to readers, as Paul Eggert proposes? Or — Samuel Johnson’s “Let us now be told no more of the dull duty of an editor” ringing in their ears — do editors aspire to be more like window washers whose meticulous labors leave no trace (EGGERT 2019, v)? Both, of course, depending on the text, context, occasion, and readership on behalf of whom the edition is undertaken. But in this critical moment for literary studies, with library budgets slashed, scholarly presses under severe economic constraint, and few new positions to replenish the ranks of literary scholars and critics, the legacy of modern textual criticism seems at some risk of being buried, even as the massive shift from print to digital media presents new challenges. After a golden age of modern scholarly print editions fostered in large part by the establishment of the MLA Center for Editions of American Authors (CEAA) and Center for Scholarly Editions (CSE) in the 1960s and 1970s, textual editors confront the expansive possibilities, challenges, limitations, effects, and implications of digital editions.

In a 2012 article in this journal, Amy E. Earhart surveys the uneven borderlands between the Greg-Bowers-Tanselle editing methodology (see BOYDSTON 1991, 141n67) and the digital medium, from editorial skepticism towards the consequences of reducing literary treasures embodied in material artifacts to ephemeral ones and zeros to the groundbreaking brilliance of the *Electronic Beowulf*, the prizewinning *Blake Archive*, and the superb *Lili Elbe Digital Archive*. “Textual studies theories, forms, practices, and methodologies have been and are interwoven into the digital humanities”, Earhart writes; indeed, “There is good reason to consider textual studies a central pillar of digital humanities work” (EARHART 2012, 24–5). Yet, while scholarly editors engage in intensive, fine-grained debate on how best to conceive and enact “best practices” for presenting reliable texts in the digital environment, to exploit the medium’s potential for “value added”, “better-than-print editions”, and to relate to the new reading-effects that the digital medium makes possible, “many practitioners of digital humanities lack an understanding of the theories, methodologies, and history of textual studies” (EARHART 2012, 20, 24, 22, 24). On the cusp between print and digital media, one pressing question for the future of literary studies and its textual objects is how to foster mutual appreciation and fertile

common ground between scholarly editing and the “relatively unregulated life of literary criticism and theory” (EARHART 2012, 25, quoting Leroy Searle). It is high time for scholarly editors to emerge from the basement of literary studies to proclaim the fundamental importance of their work for literary studies and its future.

In *The Work and the Reader in Literary Studies: Scholarly Editing and Book History*, Paul Eggert draws on editorial theory and practice over the past several decades to argue for closer commerce and greater mutual awareness and exchange between scholarly editors and readers. For Eggert, the limitation of the Bowers-Greg-Tanselle approach to scholarly editing “is that it consigns the work to a category of its own, over and apart from readings of it, despite the fact that, empirically and historically, reading is part of every phase and stage of a work’s creation, production and reception” (32). Notwithstanding W. W. Greg’s description, back in 1932, of the *text* as “not a fixed and formal thing [. . .] but a living organism which in its descent through the ages, while it departs more and more from the form impressed upon it by its original author, exerts, through its imperfections as much as through its perfections, its own influence upon its surroundings”, Eggert argues that Greg’s definition of *textual criticism* as the analysis of transmission failures explicitly excludes reading from the scholarly editor’s evidence-based labor; in theory, an editor ignorant of its language could edit a document devoid of meaning (EGGERT 167–9, quoting Greg). On the other hand, what limits the close-reading paradigm that René Wellek and Austin Warren made fundamental to postwar literary studies is that “the object of literary study” is “‘the concrete work of art’, not the biographical or contextual considerations routinely invoked by the belles-lettristic critics of the previous generation” (EGGERT 168, quoting Wellek and Warren). To encourage interchange between the rigorous, evidence-based analytic methods of scholarly editing and acts of reading in the era of digital media, Eggert proposes a “new literary studies” modeled on the concept not of the “text” but of the living, organic “work”, broadly conceived as all the documents, texts, variants, and agents comprised in its “production-consumption continuum”, from genetic texts tracing the work’s creation to its ongoing reception in facsimiles, versions, editions, translations, and adaptations in cinematic, graphic, musical, digital and other media (178).

Eggert’s elastic, open-ended concept of the living work as a “regulative idea” that functions to “contain and police the boundaries of relevance” (33) embraces Foucauldian “discourse and other kinds of analysis, including any that may emerge in the future [. . .] to fertilise and generate new perspectives and fresh thinking” (178). The digital medium especially invites

the building of bridges between bibliography, book history, textual editing, and literary studies; unlimited cyberpages permit ongoing collocation of scholarship, criticism, and interpretation produced by any and all methods and approaches. Such a “work-oriented book history” or “book-historically oriented literary studies”, Eggert urges,

is the most obvious way forward if we are to unlock the history of meanings, including, importantly, our own. Each embodied work attracts and absorbs them [meanings?], a fact that in turn positions the work to be studied as an index of broader social and cultural change. But the embodied work concept equally legitimates *our* acts of reading, and hence close reading [. . .]. Reoriented in this way, the exclusions of Greg’s conception of bibliography and Wellek and Warren’s idea of the literary work may be overcome at last.

(178–9)

While scholarly editors will agree that readers may — and should — “legitimate” acts of reading by the use of reliable editions, it is less clear that non-specialist readers can be expected to assume the burden of making comparative evaluations of the editions-as-arguments that Eggert envisions co-existing on the digital platform. Moreover, in a cultural moment when the internet offers every user a “Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden” mirage of knowledge” along with “an inexhaustible supply of ‘facts’ to feed any confirmation bias” (GIBSON; see NICHOLS), Eggert’s messianic fervor to “unlock the history of meanings” through the “work concept” may raise eyebrows among scholars trained in exacting editorial principles and procedures and strike others as almost blindly idealistic, not to say utopian. Would not Eggert’s digitally-mediated “work” still require skilled readers to articulate focused and limited contexts within which to evaluate and choose among the possible edited texts, arguments, and interpretations that it comprises?

Overstatement aside, Eggert’s promotion of an expansive work-concept that would relate editions, whether of genetic texts, facsimiles, versions, or critical texts, to other modes of literary study on a digital platform is a serious and valuable response to the problem Earhart highlights. Eggert envisions the aesthetic work as the center of a microcosm that would document its ongoing historical life in the hands of every kind of agent — author, printers, editors, readers of all stripes and persuasions. Here, his framing of editions as arguments addressed to readers (chapter 5) comes into play. To imagine editors emerging from their secure library burrows to present argu-

ments about texts to invisible readers in the wilds of cyberspace is to picture the internet as a virtual agora where readers might routinely encounter editorial theories, principles, procedures practices, and histories as central pillars of any digitally-mediated work. By integrating textual studies within “the work” in this way, Eggert’s model invites readers, and especially Earhart’s “practitioners of digital humanities” who may be unfamiliar with textual studies, into a dialogue that would not only cultivate appreciation of the editor’s task but inspire debates, experiments, and creative thinking on how best to adapt editorial standards, principles, and procedures to serve “the work” and “the reader” in the digital medium. With its central textual-studies pillar in prominent view, the work-concept itself might function, in a way at once modest and ambitious, as a bulwark amid electronic seas of “likes”, fake “facts”, and unmoderated opinion that now threaten to erode the very basis of functional citizenship.

In Eggert’s model, the literary text remains substantially, though not solely, grounded in the Bowers-Greg-Tanselle editorial tradition even as his work-concept assimilates book-historical social contexts. Eggert notes Peter Shillingsburg’s argument that, “in practice, *the sociology of texts*” as defined by Jerome J. McGann and D. F. McKenzie “*has no editorial consequences*” (4). Rather, the de-idealizing epistemological move from the editor’s aim to produce a “definitive” text to the recognition that the editor’s task is to analyze the archive of the text and its transmission shifts the ontology of the literary work from a transcendent ideal to the phenomenological realm of its open-ended material embodiment in documents, editions, and readers. Editors must still argue the principles and analyses on which they base their editions, and an archive might support different editions based on differing analyses.¹

1. My dissertation, “Groundwork for an Edition of *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*” (University of Chicago, 1977), suggests that Shillingsburg’s rule must be tested case by case. My prototype genetic and editorial texts for Pound’s epic poem, which appeared in segments and individual cantos in four countries over some fifty years, follow CEAA guidelines, which anticipate the CSE’s broadly formulated editorial standards: no “detailed step-by-step editorial procedure” but the requirement that editors possess thorough knowledge of the applicable editorial scholarship, relevant documentary texts, and “circumstances attending the composition and production of all forms of the text” so as to design, justify, and execute appropriate editorial procedures (BOYDSTON 1991, 143n73, quoting the MLA’s “Aims and Services of the Committee on Scholarly Editions” [1991]). Yet even guidelines deliberately elastic enough to accommodate specific problems posed by any given case are pressed to the limit by Pound’s documented approval

In this light, another aspect of Eggert's vision of the work-concept comes to the fore. In "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", to which Eggert briefly alludes, Bruno Latour — noting, after Martin Heidegger, the etymology that links the words for *thing* and for "a quasi-judiciary assembly" in "all the European languages" — challenges critics to move beyond iconoclasm and to reorient the critical mind and spirit toward creative community (LATOUR 232–3). Bringing Latour's proposal to bear on the matter at hand: What if we were to conceive the literary text as a Thing, a gathering, an assembly, and the critic as not "the one who debunks but the one who assembles" — who summons a social world, a gathering, to debate its common purpose, use, form, meaning, value (246)? We can imagine Eggert's digitally deployed work-concept as such a Thing: an assembly in cyberspace-time, a gathering of minds around a matter of common concern. Wouldn't it make all the sense in the world for scholarly editors to take a leading role in such a transformative reorientation of literary studies, for who better than laborers in this "unfashionable" (EGGERT ix) vineyard to attest that, "if something is constructed", it means not that belief in it must be blasted to smithereens but that "it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution" (LATOUR 246)?

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of certain kinds of error introduced by printers, other social actors, and not least himself. My *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Ezra Pound's Cantos* (1984) frames this editorial conundrum surrounding error within the errant wandering (*errare*, to wander) intrinsic both to the epic genre and to the ever-contingent textual condition, thus integrating the critical text, the work, and interpretive "reading" in a print exemplar of the shift from a transcendent to a phenomenological textual ontology that grounds Eggert's digitally mediated work-concept.