

CONGRATULATIONS TO COOPER AND THE COOPER EDITION:  
SOME REFLECTIONS ON CRITICAL EDITING

This occasion is a double celebration. It marks the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Spy*, signifying, through our attention, the continuing importance of Cooper after two centuries. It also offers a moment for saluting the ongoing achievement of the Cooper Edition, reflected in its recent revised edition of *The Spy*. The Cooper Edition is a survivor: it has weathered vicissitudes and has never wavered in its purpose or its standards. When I think of the Cooper Edition, my thoughts go back to its beginnings, in the early days of the CEAA, and to Jim Beard. I was fond of Jim and have welcome recollections of our conversations, which covered everything from editorial principles to our contrasting feelings about big cities (I like them, Jim didn't). Jim would be proud of the outstanding work his successors have produced and would be delighted to see the handsome SUNY volumes that are now appearing, under the effective leadership of Lance Schachterle.

Looking backward over the history of the Edition leads to reflections on what has happened in the world of scholarly editing during those years. Perhaps the first thing many will think of is the questioning of authorial intention that took place for a while. What it accomplished was to produce more widespread recognition of the importance, for historical study, of all the texts of a work that existed in the past. Though they were likely to vary greatly in the extent to which they reflected their author's intentions, they were the texts that were available to be read and thus were the texts that influenced readers' responses and the author's reputation. Understanding the value of every text that has ever existed does not, of course, invalidate the activity of producing new texts that attempt to reconstruct what their authors intended at particular times. This is another approach to history, which--like all forms of

historical reconstruction--depends on informed judgment. It is the approach that has the widest appeal, for most readers are interested in texts as communications from individuals in the past. Although readers can obviously enjoy and appreciate texts without a concern for fidelity to authorial intention, most readers at some point do wish to make the connection. There will never be an end to the need for scholarly reconstructions of authorially intended texts.

Another development over the same period that has had a practical effect on editing is the growing prominence of computers in humanistic scholarship, one result of which is the ability to digitize texts. I say a "practical" effect because it has not altered editorial theory or the issues that editors have to deal with. (How could it?) But it has had a great impact on the ease with which we can manipulate data and transmit texts. Because the storage of digitized texts does not pose a space problem, we can now have electronic archives that bring together all relevant documents for the study of works by a wide range of authors, canonical and noncanonical, and make them easily available to everyone. Each such archive should strive for completeness as a long-term goal: that is, not only all the manuscript materials (including the author's marginalia, with associated texts), typescripts, and related documents but also multiple copies of every printed edition, subedition, and impression (with their constituent issues and states) of each of the author's works from the first edition to the most recent, every periodical and anthology appearance, and as many copies with readers' marginalia as can be located. Access to all of this in searchable and linked form facilitates the process not only of following and interpreting the author's revisions but also of studying and understanding the history of reading and criticism (since it is essential to see the texts that were being responded to). Electronic archives also provide the setting for multiple new critical editions, reflecting different editorial goals and

accompanied by multimedia annotation. And an editorial presence is imperative, in the form of transcriptions of manuscripts, lists of variants (with links to the texts), physical descriptions of manuscript and typescript material and printed books, and historical and textual commentary (which could include the texts of previous scholarly and critical studies and bibliographies, or links to them). None of this, however, should cause us to think that we do not have to see the originals of manuscripts and typescripts or of multiple copies of printed editions: they always surprise us with additional information and put us in the position of knowing in detail what was being looked at by the eyes of the past. Nor should we think that scholarly editions in printed form are superseded by this technology. However easy it is to click buttons on a computer keyboard, it is easier for some purposes to turn the leaves of a book. At the moment, the sales of printed books are reported to be increasing and those of ebooks declining. No one can say what the future trend will be, but it seems likely that a great many people will continue to prefer texts on paper over any of the electronic forms, especially for continuous reading and some kinds of reference and browsing. There is no reason why the two cannot have a productive coexistence--or, indeed, why such coexistence would not be more beneficial for literary appreciation than the existence of one alone.

The third development I want to mention is not as easy to notice, and perhaps it does not exist, but I think I have been able to detect it: a growing recognition of the danger of the "tyranny of the copy-text." If it exists, it may or may not have been influenced by my 1994 essay called "Editing without a Copy-Text"; but I hope the essay can be a help in the wider spread of this recognition. The wisdom of Greg's "Rationale" is underscored by noting his inclusion of Paul Maas's phrase "tyranny of the copy-text" (which Greg also called "the mesmeric influence of the copy-text"), pointing to the possibility that editors might tend to give undue weight to readings in their chosen copy-

texts. This point is a way of stressing the fact that critical editing (that is, the critical reconstruction of an intended text representing a particular point in a work's evolution) depends on judgment--informed and considered judgment, but judgment nonetheless. The essential advice of Greg's rationale is that a carefully selected copy-text is something to fall back on when there is no other means of deciding what reading should stand at a given point in a text. In other words, critical judgment takes precedence over fidelity to the copy-text: when one has convincing reasons for selecting a reading other than the one in the copy-text, one should do it. The point sounds simple, but its implications undercut, to some extent, the distinction between substantives and accidentals, for one must ultimately take the same approach to both. Greg's distinction is valid as a generalization about how people have tended to regard the two categories. But accepting it does not mean that stronger reasons are needed for changing an accidental than for altering a substantive: convincing reasons are convincing reasons when applied to either one. The presence of a reading in a copy-text is naturally one of the factors to be taken into account, but not necessarily the overriding one. The editor who is hesitant to change a reading simply because it is in a copy-text is no longer being a critical editor. There are situations, after all, in which no one text has a strategic genealogical position; but even without the safety net of a copy-text, one can still responsibly construct a critical text by making a reasoned judgment at every point.

These reflections have been occasioned by the Cooper anniversary. With them go my congratulations to all the Cooper Edition editors past and present, and my best wishes for the Edition's continuing success.

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