AHRC ICT Methods Network Expert Seminar on Music

EXPERT SEMINAR ON LITERATURE: TEXT EDITING IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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Rapporteur's Report by Sharon Ragaz, Oxford University

The seminar was intended as an appraisal of the current state of digital editing, and to provoke discussion and debate about its benefits and drawbacks in the presentation of complex editions. With the exponential expansion in the number of digital editions over the past decade—accompanied by significant advances in the preparation and presentation of the editions—there is a felt need to re-assess the situation in particular with regard to the disconnect between such important changes on the one hand, and the conservatism of the academic establishment which continues to resist according digital scholarship an equal status with more traditional forms. In the introduction to the seminar by Marilyn Deegan, other issues were noted, including the persistence of 'the book' as a durable and culturally valued medium for textual presentation; the relationship of the book with the more transient but also more flexible and capacious digital edition; and the distinction (if there is one) between readers and users. Underlying concerns for the seminar, and for electronic editions generally, are the issues of what we mean by a text and how do we assess what people want from texts. Despite the popularity and evident usefulness of electronic texts in terms of serving functions that cannot be addressed (or only with difficulty or at great expense) by print editions, there is also a discernible and continuing resistance to their full acceptance as the scholarly (and popular) equals to print texts. One goal of the seminar is to think about the origins and causes of this resistance—and the modes of best addressing it. This involves thinking strategically and creatively about electronic editions from the viewpoint of both production and reception.

Kathryn Sutherland's paper, Being Critical: Paper-based Editing and the Digital Environment, inaugurated the seminar by calling for a salutary and historically-grounded skepticism. Sutherland began by stressing the basic fact of the centrality of the edition to literary criticism. But, although literary judgements are inevitably based on texts, the assumptions underpinning those texts remain remarkably invisible or unexplored by users and readers. Even editors themselves fail to engage with theoretical issues, or with the textual criticism that underpins literary criticism. Moreover, the fluidity or evanescence that characterizes literary criticism contrasts sharply with the expectation that editions will endure. Sutherland cited the example of R.W. Chapman's 1923 Jane Austen edition which continues to serve as the textual ground for literary judgments without any accompanying interrogation of the editorial principles and assumptions underlying it—as if Chapman's text were somehow neutral, a benign or pure representation of the author's intentions. Sutherland gave a summary of the development of 'New Bibliography' which attempted to stabilize a text against the adventitious processes of its transmission through time, producing an ideal or 'clean' text purged of corruption and made up of various textual states according to the editor's judgment about the intentions of the author. Subsequently an increasing interest in cultural studies led to an acceptance of the equal validity of different textual versions according to their production at a particular moment in time. Simultaneously technological developments made it possible to electronically archive such states, with no single version being hierarchically privileged over another. However such developments were not accompanied by adequate attention to the question of how texts exist, how they mean, and the modes of textual engagement they produce or facilitate. Sutherland suggested that electronic materiality may actually hinder the kinds of engagement prompted by print versions, and that we have not yet thought hard enough about the purposes electronic editions might serve, nor what assumptions about texts underlie their production. We urgently need an electronic equivalent of textual theory that will take into account the essential difference between print texts and digital texts. Some texts lose an essential aspect—their 'bookishness'—by translation into an electronic variant; in some cases the reading experience seems inseparably related to the physicality of the book as an object and assumptions about the advantages of electronic editions have left such issues unexamined.

While one of the underlying arguments of Sutherland's paper is that users have more resistance to electronic editions than their producers care to believe, it was precisely this resistance and an attempt to find a solution that formed the topic of Dino Buzzetti's discussion. Responding to Sutherland, Buzzetti began Digital Editions and Text Processing by stating that his goal was to develop a semiotics of digital text rather than a sociology of text. He argued that it is necessary to transfer to the machine part of the reader's 'competence', and that attempts to do this using, for example, XML semantics have not been thoroughly successful because the role of markup itself has been understood

in only limited and fairly mechanical ways. The relationship between markup and a string of characters can more profitably be understood as dynamic rather than as passive. Currently markup practices tend to be used conventionally, and the assumption is that markup is no more than a technical tool whose use is rather limited. This needs to change, and humanities' scholars specifically need to engage with the challenge of developing tools that allow for the multidimensionality of markup to be exploited to its fullest scope. Thus Buzzetti, like Sutherland but from a quite different perspective, argued that users (that is, here, humanities' scholars) must imaginatively engage with the question of the purposes served by electronic editions in order to ensure that such texts serve their needs and, thus, gain wider acceptance.

Peter Robinson, in A New Paradigm for Electronic Scholarly Editions, addressed the question of yet another kind of resistance that continues to impede the development of digital editing. This is the lack of enthusiasm shown by conventional publishers for funding e-editions. Robinson noted that e-editions are actually more, not less, work thanprint editions and may therefore fail to be regarded by publishers as a viable commercial proposition. Nevertheless, Robinson's own experience tells him that such editions are indeed purchased by non-specialists and this fact is suggestive of a potential, still almost untapped, market. The core of Robinson's paper was, however, the problem of developing electronic editions with which the user interacts dynamically and constructively. Many editions have failed to progress beyond a fairly static model of textual representation where the form is determined (and limited) by the editor. Robinson advocated a contrasting model where the user assembles the text from the components contributed by scholars and individuals—or, indeed, in the 'Wikipedia' model, by the user herself. Following Peter Shillingsburg, Robinson referred to such editions as 'knowledge sites' that are fluid and collaborative. Robinson also claimed that one of the key limiting factors in the production of electronic editions of manuscript works has been the reluctance of libraries and archives to give permission for the digital reproduction of high quality manuscript images, and the high cost of both capture and permission fees.

Robinson's paper was followed by some discussion about the future of intellectual debate if there are as many 'editions' of a text as there are readers—that is, in a situation where there is no common ground for discussion—and about the underlying assumptions of users' level of knowledge that would allow them to work with materials in the ways he described.

In contrast to the speculative nature of both Buzzetti's and Robinson's papers, Charlotte Roueché's Digitizing Inscribed Texts was a practical review of her own discovery of the potential of digital presentation to serve as a vital tool for recording, preserving, and rendering accessible images and transcriptions of Greek and Latin inscriptions. Roueché stated that it could be argued that epigraphers 'invented' markup, and established the conventions by which texts are presented electronically. Epigraphers, she said, know that everything they do is compromise because they have to 'squeeze stones onto paper'. As witnesses to objects whose survival is fragile, they necessarily and constantly engage with questions of human decisions about what to record and preserve. The move to e-publication was made because its flexibility and capaciousness allows for the presentation of all material including images, which is simply not possible in print because of the prohibitive cost. She also noted an interesting but unintended result which is that while, in the past, classical studies had tended to regard inscribed texts as not literary in the same way as material preserved on paper, electronic publication has worked to change this, with overall benefit for scholarship. Roueché argued that any electronic project must grow out of an identified need and a full assessment of the purposes such a project would serve, and also who it is for. She also raised the issue of scholarly acceptance of such projects; for her own site, Roueché has secured an ISBN to facilitate library cataloguing. Other practical questions touched on included quality assurance, trying to encourage the reviewing of new sites in scholarly journals, the long-term sustainability of material, and how to express versioning as sites are updated or augmented.

While other papers discussed editions of published works, Daniel Ferrer in Avant-textes, Intertexts, Hypertexts: Editing Genetic documents considered electronic approaches to writers' working documents and manuscripts. Ferrer described print as a 'procrustean bed' when it comes to such documents. Being represented in print tends to confer a solidity or finality on working materials that is not intrinsic; careful consideration of how to present these materials in electronic form should enable the preservation of their dynamic and axiological qualities. Like Roueché, Ferrer started with an identified need or problem: in this case, the challenge of capturing the discontinuous nature of writers' working documents and representing these without falsifying the underlying and heterogeneous processes of their production. Such documents are not linear but accretive, and the essence of this can be captured electronically but not so easily in print. Ferrer did however argue for the usefulness of paper editions in representing some aspects of genetic archives but these are not traditional editions when supplemented by electronic materials. Electronic archives allow for the fullest representation of the internal logic of the writing process acting in dynamic combination with other events directly or indirectly impinging on this process (for example biographical, material, and political factors). The

researcher confronting such an archive can immerse herself in it, and potentially is also able to make direct comparison between working methods of different authors with reference to individual archives. Another important benefit of the electronic archive is that the instability or incomplete nature of the materials can be built in; if new documents are discovered or if material is mistranscribed, the archive can be augmented or corrected. Ferrer used the Buffalo edition of the Finnegans Wake Notebooks as an example.

Espen Ore in …they hid their books underground addressed the issue of electronic editing from a library or storage perspective. He contrasted the single edition book project that ends with the finished product and is typically very costly (Ore cited the example of the Ibsen centenary edition), and the electronic product that is intended as a basis for future work—the text archive that can be taken further and modified as new information becomes available. Books have the advantage however of being (relatively) inert; the electronic edition or archive can be plagued by the problem of the longevity of proprietary software. Electronic products must be stored in a way that their future use value does not diminish or that does not risk obsolescence. Libraries are the ideal resource for preservation; they can maintain, update, or provide user support. Ore also identified other storage issues, including that of harvesting web pages that have no physical manifestation but that will be lost as cultural products unless some attempt is made (as is being done in Norway) at storing and preserving them in usable form.

Edward Vanhoutte in Every Reader his own Bibliographer: an Absurdity? began by asking 'who buys editions, and why?' He supported Sutherland's point that most users or readers are not interested in textual bibliography, and claimed that the reasons for consulting a scholarly edition is first for access to a reliable text, and secondly for the annotations and commentary. The issues of variants and genesis of a text rarely factor in the choice of an edition for readers. Vanhoutte argued that scholarly editing as a discipline is in disharmony with the importance of the scholarly edition as a cultural product (that is, these editions are important primarily as academic products). He further claimed that there is a notable scholarly resistance to production of a 'minimal edition': academic focus is on the 'maximal' edition, and although the two types serve different and equally valid purposes, they are seen hierarchically. Although electronic editions could follow a different model, so far they have notably failed to do so. They have not freed themselves from the layout economies invented for the printed page, and the kind of presentation of documentation agreed upon for that format. Like printed scholarly editions, they are of value academically but not culturally: that is, they do not provide reading editions but, rather, large archives including multiple documentary witnesses and images. In fact these archives are even less likely than scholarly editions to be used as reading texts because of the ease with which they present multiple texts or different states of a given text. Vanhoutte thus argued for the use of electronic scholarly editing as a mode for reintegrating (or integrating) the scholarly edition with the reading edition without any compromise of the academic value. The example he demonstrated was the electronic edition of the Flemish novella De Trein der Traagheid by Johan Daisne where the user is able to manipulate multiple variables in order to produce exactly the reading edition she requires; the site maintains a record of the user's interventions so that exactly the same edition can be reproduced (thus circumventing the problem of there being no agreed text on which to base interpretation or intellectual debate among multiple users).

The final paper, Digital Editing, Text Markup, and the Construction of Textual Reality, was presented by Julia Flanders. Flanders addressed the tension between editing, which is indeterminate, and the formal constraints of markup that focuses on the determinate. She asked if humanistic endeavour in all its variety and scope can actually be represented using digital texts, and urged scholars to 'think harder'! The real capacities of markup, she insisted, have not been realized; currently markup languages express only a structural understanding of textual research and the functions they perform remain superficial to the text rather than being deeply implicated at the level of meaning. However this is not an essential feature of markup per se; it is merely an aspect of how markup has been used to date or of the historical moment of its evolution. New systems are evolving to reflect changes in ideas about the potential of markup and its use. We need more complex and extended means of representing indeterminacy, and markup should mobilize rather than stabilize a text. In this light, Flanders also called for rethinking the role of the editor. With electronic archives, the role of the editor seems to retreat before the advance of the reader in decision making; is this an abnegation of authority on the part of the editor? There is a general acknowledgement that editorial policies play a role in the creation of the archive, but also that archives do not in themselves constitute an edition. There are qualitatively different intellectual processes applied to the material. In general, we must be aware of how humans synthesize information in order to develop the electronic edition to its fullest potential.

For the general discussion at the close of the seminar, the chairs and rapporteur (Deegan, Short, Sutherland, and Sharon Ragaz) identified overlapping questions and themes that had been reiterated throughout the day. The questions were:

- What is an expert? What is the expertise in?

- Who are the users/ readers? What do they want?
- Why are electronic editions worth doing? Should they proceed from an identified need rather than from, say, the development of a new technical capability?
- What do we call the product?
- Are we changing fundamentals about editing? Should this be a goal?
- Do we need to talk about markup (eg. its development as a more flexible, interpretive tool)?

Themes and issues tended to present as binaries which, on discussion, were less oppositional or mutually exclusive than they appeared. These were:

- Quantity versus quality
- Fixity versus fluidity
- Authority versus uncertainty
- Tradition versus innovation

What emerged from the concluding general discussion and summary by Ragaz is that we have entered a stage where the theoretical and practical dimensions of the enterprise of electronic editing are being closely re-evaluated. It is apparent that prevailing assumptions that digital editions are enhanced, multivalent versions of print texts should now be rethought: with such rethinking, matters such as the tendency for electronic editions to reproduce the formatting and appearance of print texts come into focus and can be addressed. If electronic editions are fundamentally (rather than merely technically) something quite different from print editions, then they can indeed change people's minds, or make us think in dynamic new ways about texts and how they mean. But, as yet, there remains a divide between users and producers; it is not, for example, at all clear that users want or need or have the required expertise to create their own electronic editions from assembled materials, and yet producers may think of this as an entirely desirable and useful outcome. Beside the visionary or experimental quality of some of the projects discussed during the seminar were those that began with a practical need to which electronic editing offered the best solution. Again, the two are not mutually exclusive binaries but, rather, approaches that must be brought into productive dialogue. The overarching concern, whether of print or e-texts, is to facilitate reading and improve interpretation: the question for either mode of presentation is how best this can be done.

A final but not insignificant element of the discussion was the resistance of the scholarly community to accepting electronic editions or projects as the equals of print editions or products. Such resistance may result from an inbuilt conservatism or it may be a function of a suspicion that electronic products are more ephemeral and perhaps less scholarly. While print texts can readily be placed in a scholarly hierarchy (for example, those issued by a university press may be viewed as 'scholarly' even before the contents are examined), this is less obviously the case for electronic products. One way of addressing this issue would be to promote reviewing of new editions and sites in scholarly publications; this would ensure not only that users would be alerted to the existence of new material but also that they could then approach it with an awareness of the goals and rationale informing its production. Reviews must address issues of both content and the structural integrity, ease-of-use, and dynamism of the edition. Critical examination and assessment of electronic materials would foster precisely the kind of fruitful exchange, cross-fertilization of ideas, dialogue and even scepticism evident from the seminar itself.