

UN-EDITING AND NON-EDITIONS: THE DEATH  
OF DISTANCE, THE NOTION OF NAVIGATION, AND  
NEW ACTS OF EDITING IN THE ELECTRONIC MEDIUM

*Abstract:* The logical and pragmatic outcome of social theories of editing, as has been suggested, is editions that take into account the materiality of the text to such a degree that they can exist only immaterially, in the electronic realm. This paper explores a juncture, one at which the accumulation of textual archival materials associated with social theories of editing meet their natural home in the electronic scholarly edition, and one at which large collections of materials in electronic form meet their equivalent in the world of the ever-growing body of scholarship, available in electronic form, that is associated with the primary materials that lie at the heart of the textual scholar's concerns. With the electronic medium embraced editorially, the next major concern to be addressed by those interested in the edition, especially those exemplary textual scholars who have invested significant effort accumulating digital archival material, is the proper navigation of that material.

The recent convergence of social theories of editing and the rise of the electronic medium has had a significant impact on the scholarly edition, to be sure. While it is unlikely that editors ever fully forgot that "the material forms of books, the non-verbal elements of typographic notations within them, the very disposition of the space itself, have an expressive function in conveying meaning",<sup>1</sup> literary studies was re-awakened to such significance by figures such as McKenzie and McGann in the mid-1980s<sup>2</sup> – and re-awakened at a time when efficient and affordable methods to store and disseminate such conveyers of meaning were coming into being. Such methods, tied to the rise of accessible computing beginning at approximately the same time, have brought about

<sup>1</sup> D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Text*, The Panizzi Lectures 1985 (London: The British Library, 1986) 8.

<sup>2</sup> See Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) and *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) among others.

significant change in the field of textual studies – perhaps most noticeably, as discussed by Schreibman, in the role of the textual scholar for the past decade; “the release from the spatial restrictions of the codex form”, Schreibman notes, “has profoundly changed the focus of the textual scholar’s work. Throughout the 1990s, rather than synthesising, the textual scholar accumulated.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to acknowledging the value of the electronic medium to editing and the edition, the recognition given to the products of such accumulation confirms critical recognition of the process of ‘unediting’ and an increased attention to the ‘materiality’ of the texts that are the objects of our consideration.<sup>4</sup>

Perfectly adaptable to, and properly enabling of, social theories of editing, the electronic medium has brought us closer to the textual objects of our contemplation, even though we remain at the same physical distance from them. Like other enabling communicative and representative technologies that came before it, the electronic medium has brought about a “death of distance” – a notion, as discussed by Paul Delany, that comes from a world made smaller by travel and communication systems, one in which we have “the ability to do more things without being physically present at the point of impact”.<sup>5</sup> The textual scholar, accumulating an archive of textual materials, does so for those materials to be, in turn, re-presented to those who are interested in those materials. More and more, though, it is not only primary materials, textual witnesses for example, that are being accumulated and re-presented. The death of distance applies to primary materials, the

<sup>3</sup> Susan Schreibman, “Computer-Mediated Texts and Textuality: Theory and Practice”, *A New Computer-Assisted Literary Criticism?*, ed. R. G. Siemens, spec. issue of *Computers and the Humanities*, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> See Leah S. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1996) 4–5 and *passim* and Randall McLeod, “UNEditing Shak-speare”, *Substance* 33.4 (1982): 26–55 for the possibilities associated with the term *unediting*; on *materiality*, see Margareta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993): 255–283 as well as Kathryn Sutherland, “Revised Relations? Material Text, Immaterial Text, and the Electronic Environment”, *Text* 11 (1998): 17–30.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Delany, “Virtual Universities and the Death of Distance”, *Text Technology* 7.3 (1997): 49–64, at 50.

direct objects of our contemplation, as well as to the objects that have the potential to inform further our contemplation.<sup>6</sup>

As a field that is at its heart concerned with evidence of communicative acts, to textual scholarship the observation of technology bringing about the death of distance may not be especially significant, for acceptance of such an observation is implicit to the discipline. Indeed, forms of writing, the scribe, and the printing press brought about 'deaths' of distance as well. And, further, one might say that much of the traditional work of the textual scholar – especially that concerned with the presentation of a text and representation of its variant versions – works towards a death of distance in itself, for the production of information associated with a scholarly edition (an extensive textual collation, for example) allows those who use that edition to accomplish much without requiring a physical presence at the various places that might house those materials represented in that edition. Diminishing distance as it does, such representation serves us well – for different reasons, certainly, than those materials presented in electronic editions based on extensively-accumulated materials, but such representation serves us well nonetheless.

One of the reasons that such representation serves us well is that we understand the tradition out of which that material has come; thus, we understand, almost intuitively, the end-product of the traditional scholarly edition in its codex form: how material is presented, what the scope of that material is, how that material is being related to us and, internally, how the material presented by the edition relates to itself and, further, to those materials beyond those directly presented (secondary texts, perhaps). This is not so, yet, for the scholarly edition in the electronic medium; at the moment, our understanding of these things as they relate to the scholarly electronic edition is just being formed.

My paper, the opening thoughts of which I have entitled "Un-Editing and Non-Editions", attempts to explore this critical junc-

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<sup>6</sup> For example, we welcome editions such as *Arden Shakespeare CD-ROM*, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and others of the same kind because of their ability to include, in ways that are not possible in print editions, a significant body of materials that assist in informing us about matters related to the works those materials intend to illuminate.

ture, one at which the accumulation of textual archival materials associated with social theories of editing meet their natural home in the electronic scholarly edition, and one at which such large collections of materials in electronic form meet their equivalent in the world of secondary materials, the ever-growing body of scholarship, available in electronic form, that is associated with the primary materials that lie at the heart of the textual scholar's concerns.

The logical and pragmatic outcome of social theories of editing, as has been suggested, is editions that take into account the materiality of the text to such a degree that they can exist only immaterially, in the electronic realm. Once the electronic medium is embraced editorially, the next major concern to be addressed by those interested in the edition, especially those exemplary textual scholars who have invested significant effort accumulating digital archival material, is the proper navigation of that material.

*Shakespearean apparatus? Explicit textual structures and the implicit navigation of accumulated knowledge<sup>7</sup>*

Associating the concerns of the humanist with issues of technology, Northrop Frye commented over a decade ago that

three of the most seminal mechanical inventions ever devised, the alphabet, the printing press, and the book, have been in humanist hands for centuries. The prestige of humanists in the past came largely from the fact that they lived in a far more efficient technological world than most of their contemporaries.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I wish to thank the Killam Trust, and the University of Alberta, for its generous support during the time in which this article was written; "Shakespearean Apparatus" appears here with the kind permission of the editors of *TEXT*. Versions of this paper were pre-printed in *Surfaces* 8 (1999): 106, 1-34 <<http://www.pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol8/siemens.pdf>> and presented at the MLA Committee for Scholarly Edition's "Creation and Use of Electronic Editions" panel at the meeting of the Modern Language Association, San Francisco (28 December 1998); this paper also draws upon some material from earlier conference presentations.

<sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye, "Literary and Mechanical Models", *Research in Humanities Computing 1: Select Papers from the ALLC/ACH Conference*, ed. Ian Lancashire (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 3-13, at 7f.

The technologies to which Frye draws attention – the alphabet, the printing press, and the book – are, notably, associated foremostly with textual culture; his comments, which were presented as a keynote address at the 1989 joint international conference of the *Association for Computers and the Humanities* and the *Association for Literary & Linguistic Computing*, would contextualize that conference's consideration of comparatively recent computing technology with relation to its more established predecessors. While acknowledging that text and the machinery involved in its creation, manipulation, and dissemination have had a firm place at the centre of the humanistic identity, one of the main points of Frye's address is found in an argument that is directly associated with what is often acknowledged to be the source for the idea of *hypertext*: this is Vannevar Bush's "As We May Think", in its expression of the idea of "building a trail of many items" through textual materials.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think", online repr. from *Atlantic Monthly* 176 (July 1945): 101–108 <<http://www.isg.sfu.ca/~duchier/misc/vbush>>. During World War II, Bush was Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development in the United States. Writing in the July 1945 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, he outlined concerns about the increasing difficulty of managing the growing body of scientific knowledge. He states:

There is a growing mountain of research. But there is increased evidence that we are being bogged down today as specialization extends . . . Professionally our methods of transmitting and reviewing the results of research are generations old and by now are totally inadequate for their purpose . . . The difficulty seems to be, not so much that we publish unduly in view of the extent and variety of present-day interests, but rather that publication has been extended far beyond our present ability to make real use of the record. The summation of human experience is being expanded at a prodigious rate, and the means we use for threading through the consequent maze to the momentarily important item is the same as was used in the days of square-rigged ships.

His proposed solution is the oft-discussed memex, a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory . . . [which operates by] associative indexing, the basic idea of which is a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another. In his explanation of how this device would operate, he outlines that individuals build "a trail of many items" that tie together related documents.

Bush's discussion of the problems – specifically that of management – associated with the gross accumulation of scientific knowledge is re-articulated by Frye in a discussion of the Wissenschaft period of humanistic knowledge accumulation; on this period, Frye (1991) comments:

its great scholars amassed an awesome amount of information. Its imaginative model was the assembly line, to which each scholar 'contributed' something, except that the aim was not to produce a finite object like a motor car, but an indefinitely expanding body of knowledge. (4)

The problems associated with Wissenschaft-era accumulation have been more recently elaborated in the terms of the *new humanist* by Bill Winder, who concludes that our own period, the neo-Wissenschaft era, "brings with it . . . issues of retrieval and reuse", noting that the challenge for us is to be "as efficient at retrieving the information we produce as we are at stockpiling it"; we are to do so with the assistance of the computer, the "humanist's machine".<sup>10</sup>

My intention in tracing such a development – Frye's thoughts on the technologies of humanism and on Wissenschaft-era accumulation, Bush's earlier comments on much the same as well as the idea of hypertext, and Winder's argument about the new humanist's role and our own neo-Wissenschaft era – is to suggest an appropriate context for the concerns of this paper, a paper in which I tread a path others have walked before. The frame of reference for my paper is *text*, and the textual edition, with a promise in my title of discussing the navigation of textual structures and, presumably, hypertext. Within this frame of reference, it is especially important to note the appropriateness of the specifically-humanistic context into which Frye and Winder relocate the challenge presented by the more scientifically-oriented Bush. This is appropriate not only because of the way in which hypertextual theory has, in recent years, seen assimilation into a common humanistic understanding of what

<sup>10</sup> William Winder, "Textpert Systems", *Scholarly Discourse and Computing Technology: Perspectives on Pedagogy, Research, and Dissemination in the Humanities*, ed. R. G. Siemens and William Winder, spec. issue of *Text Technology* 6.3 (1996): 159–166 at 164 f. and also in *Computing in the Humanities Working Papers* (April 1997) <<http://www.epas.utoronto.ca/epc/chwp/winder2/>>.





























































