“Authorial Intention”: Some Thoughts on a Noble Lie of Scholarly Editing

Abstract

“Authorial Intention”: Some Thoughts on a Noble Lie of Scholarly Editing

The article addresses the practice of critical editing in Poland. The author, Paweł Bem, calls for an evaluation of theoretical thought underlying the practice of establishing critical editions meant to reflect an author’s intention, and promotes the New Philology paradigm for scholarly editing. The New Philology perspective provides a methodological background for handling each text as a unique artifact. Bem also advocates for respecting original spellings and opposes standard modernization practices in scholarly editing.

Keywords: scholarly editing, new philology, textual criticism, authorial intention, critical edition

Text: “a string of written words and phrases that make up a whole expressing specific content”¹.

An ancient wise man – it’s not worth debating exactly which one – taught us the principles that enable discussion. There are only three rules, but successfully conducting a dispute requires compliance with all of them. These are substantive preparation, participation in discussions and deference to other debaters. A willingness to prepare for the discussion below on overinterpretation in literary research – that is, overinterpretation of a literary text – leads us to respond initially to the term “text”, the definition of which is by no means obvious today, of course². Interpreting what each of us call a text will probably not be the same or common to all participants. Each of whom has the right to define their own text – yet for a constructive discussion, it will be important that each

² David Greetham’s monumental book Theories of the Text (Oxford 1999) proves this very emphatically.
then has a sufficient, rational and convincing justification. One that would not be an overinterpretation.

Considering the problem of “overinterpretation of the text” from the perspective of scholarly editing – that is, the discipline dealing with “establishing the text” (using means including “textual criticism” and “textual investigation”) – we shall first focus on what is understood by a text in the Polish tradition of scholarly editing. As we will see, a short terminological reconnaissance suffices to prove both how problematic interpretations of this term are in theoretical editorial discourse, and to provide an account of activities of overinterpretation in editing that result from these definitions, with very serious consequences for the history and reception of literature, as needs to be pointed out right away.

A review of university-class syllabuses devoted to scholarly editing and of references in the literature on the subject and scholarly editions prove the legacy of Konrad Górski to be among the most important points of reference for Polish editors. In Górski’s book published some forty years ago, Tekstologia i edytorstwo dziedzi literackich (1975, second edition 1978), reprinted in 2011, he formulates two definitions of a text:

1. the text is the final linguistic shape given to the work by the author as a result of a creative process and expressing the realization of the creative intention which was achieved thanks to the conditions of the work’s creation and the writing possibilities of the author;
2. the text is a graphic fixation of the above-defined linguistic shape, i.e. simply a written record of the linguistic and sonic layer of the work [...] 4. (14)

When giving his definitions, Górski warns the reader against the “tendency to identify a text only with a record”, calling such a predilection “a derailment of theoretical thinking” (15). For obvious reasons, Górski has to accept the existence of the written text, but his further remarks prove that for him the text is first and foremost a physically elusive entity, the shape of which does not always respect the authorial record and becomes the responsibility of the editor. The arguments which foreground such beliefs and actions, according to Górski, seem somewhat dubious. First, as he proves:

The text as “written record” cannot be [...] put to the fore as the main meaning of the term for two reasons. First, because in any language of the world to date there are no such ways of writing linguistic work that could be considered adequate. (16)

Deriving the simplest conclusions from Górski’s argument, one can recognize that a book as a realization of a text-record is a defective form of conveying a linguistic work existing in an immaterial form. His beliefs regarding the reconstruction of this “work” are disturbing:

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3 By Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika in Toruń (the very interesting preface is by Mirosław Strzyżewski).
4 Górski quotations follow this recent edition; location of citations is indicated in parentheses.
very often the textual record made by the author turns out to be wrong and we are then forced to recreate the linguistic shape of the work in accordance with the author’s real creative intention, running counter to his own record. (16)

Górski’s epistemology, then, is quite specific: according to his postulates, the editor must have special cognitive rights allowing him or her to grasp “the real [sic] creative intention”. Real, or rather unreal, for as Górski argues, these exist in the unreal world. This nomenclature should not be dismissed.

Górski, in providing examples of this necessity to reconstruct an author’s immaterialized intentions, quotes a line from the Cyprian Norwid poem “Chopin’s Grand Piano”: “A w tém, coś grał – i co? zmówił ton i co? powie”... [“In what you played – and what? asked the tones – and what?” Trans. by Danuta Borchardt, Poems, Archipelago Books, 2011]. Górski’s comment is significant:

The autograph of Vade-mecum is full of such question marks next to words including if, well, why, where, which begin relative, not interrogative sentences. But there is no consequence in this, either. [...] Let us consider distortions in the reception of the work that such punctuation must cause. The word with a question mark is taken out of context and imposes the intonation of a question expressing surprise, and thus the rest of the sentence becomes an unintended answer to this question, an answer also marked by some surprise, a statement of something we did not expect. Well, probably no one will prove that such a record expresses the work’s linguistic shape in accordance with the author’s creative intention. If we wanted to respect such punctuation as an alleged feature of Norwid’s language, we would only achieve a caricature of a given text, not that intended linguistic shape of the work, unrealized by the poet. (18)

In other words, Górski knows with certainty that Norwid did not write that which his intention dictated. Interestingly, the scholar takes into account that by this particular sign the poet had “some thought in the rhythmic fragmentation of the text”, but, as he acknowledges, then used the wrong sign for this purpose. For the editor, “inaccurate” or “incorrect” characters open the field of expression, which will help an author to express the unverbalized text, according to the definition above – “the final linguistic shape given to the work by the author” (in that author’s mind, ultimately, not on paper or by another medium):

[...] respecting the author’s intentions may be achieved by using some other graphic symbol expressing a pause in the speech stream [...] in this case, the editor must find a way to preserve the author’s artistic intention, but cannot preserve those properties of the author’s graphic approach which are contradictory to the semantics of graphic signs used in a given epoch. (19)

Górski, therefore, strives to persuade the reader that a work’s “final linguistic shape”, established by the editor, should be translated into the language applied by the editor, who otherwise, as we have been informed, will not be respecting the author’s intentions. This is not the only paradox in this reasoning. For an editor, having reached
the “text” hidden behind “incorrect signs”, does not present it to the reader with the help of a record that, as Górski has pointed out, is not – because there is no such thing – “adequate” for consolidating a mental linguistic work? How then, lacking tools for recording an author’s final intention, are we able to convey it?

The logic of Górski’s argument, as it might seem from the viewpoint of fundamental changes taking place for decades now in text theory, does not need more extensive commentary. So why is his book still one of the basic textbooks in the Polish editing profession? Without denying the author’s great erudition, it can’t be overlooked that his book’s theory of the text presented is both embarrassing and, more importantly, extremely dangerous, for it instills the false perception that an editor’s task is to recreate a nonexistent, unverifiable entity: “the linguistic shape of a work and its final form consistent with the author’s creative intention” (20). Procedures Górski describes come from specific views on a reader’s perceptual abilities. Textual interventions are determined by that projected reader’s habits and customs and an assumed a priori reluctance to take up the trouble inherent in contact with a textual record differing from that which the reader is familiar with. The editor wants to make the record readable for the reader at any cost and therefore reduces everything that sounds bizarre and incomprehensible to a generally applicable standard, while referring to the author’s presumed intention.

The postulate of selecting the “linguistic shape” hidden in the creator’s mind as the goal of scholarly research, so proud in its essence, is troublesome for many obvious reasons; most of all, however, it is a dangerous invitation to editorial adepts to co-create the world of false authority: those scholars whose medium is correction, cleansing a work of “errors” and thus perfecting it, obtaining for it, thanks to the editor, as Górski claims, though it does not exist in a physical way – and here is a fundamental paradox – its “ultimate form”. I call such a hypocritical theory a “noble lie”: noble, for I believe Górski had the best intentions, and a lie because it isn’t true that an editor’s mission is to rummage in people’s minds or that knowledge they may have serves to determine something’s final form that, due to its nature, had not yielded to its final arrangement. If someone today still expects scholarly editing to produce literature in a “canonical” and “definitive” form, those expectations are based, in my view, on a vision of tasks editors invented and imposed on themselves long ago.

In order to reformulate those tasks, it is urgent to revise this theory of the text on which Polish scholarly editing remains based, in large part. Scholarly editions don’t have to provide established knowledge once and for all, and should show instead the truth of the record, which as we know can be chaotic, incorrect, disordered and incomprehensible – an editor must present all these features to the reader then explain them as far as possible. The textual record to be edited is always a big problem, yet the solution is not replacing the author’s marks, adapting them to one’s idea of that author’s intention. In using Górski’s methods, we make authors of other epochs speak our language or, more often, the language of our phantasm. The problem is at least two-dimensional, but both dimensions are related to the belief that an author held a specific intention:
according to Górski’s definition, scholars emend first, by referring to an intention the author had not attained; second, they modernize the text to express that intention in an understandable form. Textual scholarship today must acknowledge that in these actions there is too much reverence for the nonexistent and too little respect for what is in front of our eyes.

My complaints here have one main goal: they are an appeal to precede the discussion on overinterpreting texts with a general discussion on methods of scholarly preparation of texts. We must remain aware that by accepting the intentionalist methodology still in use, we are consenting in many cases, though not in all, of course, to discussing overinterpretation of something that itself is a product of extreme overinterpretation of reality. Understanding and interpreting a text is at the basis of editing, whether we like it or not, but let this be an interpretation of what is present, not what is presumed.

Text, and especially printed text, is a socially conditioned phenomenon, the effect of actions of many people and factors. Of course there have been supporters of the view that the process of text production should be regarded as a process of corrupting an author’s intention, and they are not only in Poland. The tradition of Anglo-American editing, which for most of the later twentieth century was dominated by the intentionalist theory of the text, radically deformed many literary texts essential to American and British culture and left their devastation irreversible. In brief, to “bring back to life the author’s final intentions” for the need of a “definitive” edition, which is to say one containing the “final” text, various fragmentary readings of a given work in which an editor found the highest expression of the author’s intentions, were contaminated. By this procedure, the editor created a text that had never existed before – a combination of various evidence and editions – but which in his or her opinion fully reflected the author’s final intention. Critical editions combined readings collected from different editions and sources in the name of reconstructed intentions and were called eclectic. As products endorsed by the scholarly institutions established to set editorial standards (the Center for Editions of American Authors, then the Center for Scholarly Editions), they were to serve as models of editorial practice and provide the basis for reprinting texts in popular paperback editions. In this way and in this form, works by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman and others have been disseminated. Or, more precisely, works by editors of their legacies.

To realize the problem’s significance, it is worth mentioning one example of practical consequences to which this noble lie of scholarly editing can lead. Those consequences are very tellingly illustrated in the creation of the eclectic edition of Typee, Melville’s first novel. The novel was first published in England by John Murray in February 1846. The book turned out to be an immediate bestseller and was released on the US market in March, with minimal changes to the British edition: mainly the omission of a few passages that the publisher John Wiley found inappropriate. The American religious

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press did not like the book’s criticism of missionaries’ activities in South Pacific regions (the novel was written after Melville had spent several weeks in the Marquesas Islands). In response to that perception and after consultation with the publisher, Melville removed the controversial passages in part, softening their indictment. On this occasion, more than thirty pages were deleted (one chapter was cut, with large parts of several other chapters and numerous sentences and phrases). At Melville’s request, a short chapter was added to the new (“revised”) edition to continue the storyline in the first edition. He also conveyed this request to his English publisher in a letter, commenting on his changes to the criticized passages: “These types of passages are completely alien to the described adventure […] their removal will certainly be useful”. John Murray, however, refused to take the changes into account, agreeing only to add the new chapter in the next English edition, contrary to what the author had created for the novel’s second edition. As a result, different books with the same title were read on either side of the Atlantic.

In the late 1960s, as eclectic editions began celebrating triumphs in American editing, the scholars Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and Thomas Tanselle prepared a critical edition of the Melville novel, in accordance with the prevailing methodology. Perfectly aware of circumstances that had led to the existence of several books entitled Typee, they created another: a hybrid consistent with the “final intention of the author”. In practice, this meant using the first English edition as the copy-text — that is, restoring what Melville deleted from the book’s second edition — then introducing changes from subsequent American editions, intended to reflect the author’s intention without external pressures: “what Melville actually desired rather than what he acquiesced to at the publisher’s request”\(^6\). As explained by Tanselle, the fiercest defender of the theory and method adopted in this edition:

> There is no question that Melville is responsible for the changes, and in this sense they are “final”; but they represent not so much his intention as his acquiescence. Under these circumstances, an editor is justified in rejecting the revisions and adopting the original readings as best reflecting the author’s “final intention”; in fact, to accept the readings which are final in chronological terms would distort that intention\(^7\).

However, changes that in the three editors’ opinion had not been introduced due to political or religious pressure should be preserved in their critical edition, regardless of what the author had done. Tanselle was unconvinced by the original authorial text and, surprisingly, by surviving evidence (including letters) confirming Melville’s authorization of changes introduced in the second edition. The author’s opinion about his work and about changes he has made, in Tanselle’s reasoning, is external to his intentions, and the editor must treat it like anyone else’s claim:


\(^7\) Tanselle, The Editorial Problem of Final Authorial Intention, 194.
in the same way that an author may make revisions which do not reflect his ultimate wishes about his work, he may also make statements which, for various reasons, are less than completely candid. In the end, one cannot automatically accept such statements at face value; as in any historical research, statements can only be interpreted by placing them in their context, by reconstructing as fully as possible the course of events which led up to them. The publisher, in the case of Typee, and not the author, initiated the revisions, and there is no evidence, internal or external, to suggest that they are the kinds of changes Melville would have made without pressure from someone else; even his statement implies that the revised work is in a sense a different work, stemming from a different set of programmatic intentions [...]. After these considerations, an editor need not feel that Melville’s statement makes the case for rejecting the expurgations any less strong.8

The noble lie of editing manifests itself in Tanselle’s argument in an obvious way: if the first role in textual investigations is played by intention, which we get to know by taking as one of our editorial tools a programmatic distrust of the author’s textual record, an author’s text always becomes secondary, and the edition shows what might have happened, not what actually happened.

Circumstances described by Tanselle confirm a simple fact: books don’t exist in a vacuum. Their life can be difficult. Authors are criticized, succumb to critics, change their books, adapt to their needs and to market needs, and have differing, changing intentions. Their decisions are determined by external factors, they are constantly influenced by phenomena that often mark their work. To consider these factors’ influence "corruption" of a text is to do battle with literature’s fundamental social condition.

Konrad Górski, like Melville’s editors in the 1960s, did not accept laws of the creative and publishing processes. According to him, the author allowing changes to the text at subsequent stages of the book’s production acts counter to his own intentions:

This positive and conscious will of an author’s actions, however, should be distinguished from these situations when the creator – for one reason or another – does not react to changes introduced to texts of his works by people to whom he entrusted the care of the published work. If these changes distort in some way either the content or the authentic form of the language of a given work, we cannot consider a lack of protest on the author’s part an expression of his creative intention or positive will. [...] Instead of carrying out laborious investigations into the authenticity of every detail, it is obviously simpler to say that since the writer did not protest against some foreign inclusions, the form of the text published during his or her lifetime and with his or her partial participation in proofreading is an expression of his or her original intention and will. (28–29)

Simpler? Or maybe, as decisions by Górski and Tanselle indicate, it is more difficult to curb editorial ambitions, respecting an author’s right to participate in a social event,

8 Ibidem, 195.
9 Tanselle spent many years, in numerous articles and books, upholding this concept, which has been used for critical editions of dozens of other literary texts. He repeats his arguments about Typee thirty years later; see his „The Text of Melville in the Twenty-First Century”, in: Melville’s Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays, ed. by J. Bryant and R. Milder (Kent & London: Kent State University Press, 1997).
that right to make changes suggested by publishers and readers or under the influence of new concepts? The paradox in this type of editorial practice is obvious: on one hand, the editor is governed by the imperative of achieving the author’s authentic text, uncorrupted by “foreign interventions”, yet on the other, these interjections are necessary to correct places where the author “made a mistake”, or wrote something in the language of the time or on his or her own, where changes were made that didn’t reflect his or her own intention.

The trouble today being that the intentionalists’ concepts are no relic of the past. It isn’t hard to find those who are continuing along with Górski’s thinking. Editorial postulates among scholars still using this legacy range from the reconstruction of authorial intention and the modernization of original spellings. Both approaches are often put into practice by editors of medieval and Renaissance literature who are sometimes working only from copies of lost texts, as we know. The most common solution in such cases in Poland remains the practice of reconstructing history:

But what if the original has not survived and we have many copies that differ from each other? Is it then not worth considering the use of the stemmatic method and trying to recreate the archetype (with proper care, close to the original), instead of choosing one of the preserved copies arbitrarily, with its mistakes and copyists’ modernizations? A kind of fetishization of the original may blind the publisher to the purpose of the edition: if someone wants to know the original, he or she should get to it, weigh it in their hand, look at it from different angles, smell and listen to the rustle of the pages of the relic; even the best edition will never give them that.

I believe that the exact copying of the text does not allow us to fully reach even its elementary meaning. And yet the sources are also texts in which it is not only about the message: many of them are clearly persuasive, the authors using rhetorical art to sway the audience.

[...] If the editor finds that linguistic products (texts), apart from informative functions, also fulfill others, they cannot be indifferent to the matter of text transcription, that is, spelling modernization, to put it simply. [...] the transcription of the text is in many cases necessary because, by leaving spelling and punctuation practices of old epochs, we actually prevent even specialists from reaching those added meanings making the text a persuasive, commendable, intimate statement, which is to say somehow shaped artistically. By transcribing, we do not fulfill the role of popularizers, but pay respect to the author of the text who wrote in a way that was possible in their own time, yet misleading for today’s reader as to the intention.\(^\text{10}\)

This dilemma – an archetype or a copy – was resolved in the early 1990s by the New Philology school, whose representatives, mostly editors of medieval literature, concluded that it was better to treat the reader seriously, not protectively, and offer him or her a portion of the complicated but factual history of literature, which from the very beginning has been shaped by the influence of various kinds of foreign (non-authorial) interference. An editor who wants to familiarize the reader with a text’s content

\(^{10}\) Janusz S. Gruchała, „Kilka myśli o obowiązkach edytorów”, in Edytorstwo źródeł – ograniczenia i perspektywy, ed. by A. Pertakowskiego (Kraków: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze „Historia Iagellonica”, 2015), 46–47.
and meaning doesn’t have to do it by transcribing it into “his or her” language: the necessary knowledge for the reader, about the author’s language, about “errors”, text irregularities, established deviations from the authorial record, will be provided by the editor in an appropriate commentary, with the text present in the form of diplomatic transcription – imperfect, but more faithful to the record. It will prove beneficial for a person interested in culture to approach it in the forms in which it has survived: bearing the evidence of time. Thus in New Philology’s optics, each copy is called the original: not only as a relic, but also as a text that existed, was unique, had its own specificity, was read and had its reception\textsuperscript{11}. Today we no longer have to ask which copy to edit; electronic editing allows us to edit them all\textsuperscript{12}. In this situation, do we still prefer to read refined text archetypes instead of reading difficult and cognitively resistant texts? We have lost much evidence irretrievably, but this loss must be accepted – gaps in the history of literature are immanent and may finally be seen.

Literature is a difficult object of cognition; anyone reaching out for it must take this into account. An editor will not help a reader tame these difficulties if in a scholarly edition they present an old text prepared speculatively, with modernized spellings and newly introduced punctuation. Will we then revise these texts with each change in spelling norms? The editor makes it easier for the reader when problematic places in the existing textual evidence are left in an edition. That edition then exposes the bizarreness of the text, and should explain that literature abounds in sui generis quirks, and should also say what is needed to try to understand this particular set. In scholarly editing, manipulating an authorial textual record always winds up as the same thing: a noble lie.

Examples and statements cited above concern various problems (various interventions, various operations on different texts), but all are related to the theory of the text and the editor’s actions based on it. The controversial practice of compiling editions (and more broadly: evidence) has been presented – practice that is used in work on texts of all eras (based on a theory developed for editing Renaissance-era texts\textsuperscript{13}). Second, the issue has also been raised of text emending, based on scholarly hypotheses – which still remain informed guesses – and of the problem of modernizing early modern and modern texts in which various forms of writing make contact with the text difficult, not only for nonspecialists. The fundamental question raise by all these issues remains and needs to be answered honestly: do we want to teach (and to learn) a history that happened or a history that, according to our findings, should have happened? Do we want, in the name of alleged history, to lose unique traces of times, places, events, customs, practices and objects? Intention, reconstruction, modernization: three concepts that made the greatest careers in scholarly editing require verification today.

\textsuperscript{11} To learn about New Philology’s postulates, readers may refer to the special issue of Speculum, vol. 65, no. 1 (1990).
\textsuperscript{12} I wrote about this in more detail in „Dlaczego polskie edytorstwo nie istnieje”, Teksty Drugie 1 (2016).
Considering what has been said so far, it is worth asking if participants discussing overinterpretation of, let’s say, *Typee* (though it is a universal problem) know what the actual source is on which this discussion depends? A discussant using a translation of the novel has to face an additional difficulty: which text was used for that translation? If a reader finds information in the translated edition they are reading about the specific edition on which the translation was based, it will not be a big help. Today the fact that it was primarily published in England does not necessarily mean that the British edition was also the basis for printing. Perhaps an American edition was used by the modern British publisher? And the American edition was perhaps based on the critical edition – the work of Tanselle, the most authoritative, in the public view?

The popular case of *Typee* is not an exception in literary history – on the contrary, it is rather a typical example of textual turmoil among works that for centuries have shaped the world’s cultures. Have we ever required textual collages, editorial creations arising from omniscient scholars’ bizarre beliefs? In Polish scholarly editing, the practice of contaminating texts was and is much rarer than in Anglo-American editing, happily; yet it will not remain free from the noble lie if its goal is to continue exploring products of its own speculation: specifically, the authorial final intention. It will gain that desired authority, though, should it recognize the simple interpretation of the text presented in the *Dictionary of the Polish Language* as closer, more familiar and more true than Konrad Górski’s romantic definition of the term. Then, perhaps, these discussions about overinterpretation of texts will need less preparation in textual scholarship.

This article in Polish version was published in *Tekstualia 1 (48), 2017, 66–76*.

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