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artful  
The edit

On the practice of editing yourself

Susan Bell

"Short, helpful, original."

—William Safire, *New York Times*

V  
SERVANTS, DICTATORS,  
ALLIES: A BRIEF HISTORY  
OF EDITORS

*But who shall be the master? The writer or the reader?*

Denis Diderot, *Jacques le Fataliste*

“The function of an editor,” Gardner Botsford, then editor emeritus at *The New Yorker*, once told me, “is to be a reader. Really, that’s all it entails.” He swiped the air with his hand to preempt the fuss I might make about what he did for a living. Reading is important, “every writer in the world needs somebody to read the stuff before it’s published,” but not *that* important, he implied, and certainly less so than writing.

Botsford’s noble modesty, however, misrepresents the real work of an editor. An editor doesn’t just read, he reads *well*, and reading well is a creative, powerful act. The ancients knew this and it frightened them. Mesopotamian society, for instance, did not want great reading from its scribes, only great writing. Scribes had to submit to a curious ruse: they had to downplay their reading skills lest they antagonize their employer. The Attic poet Menander wrote: “those who can read see twice as well.” Ancient autocrats did not want their subjects to see that well. Order relied

on obedience, not knowledge and reflection. So even though he was paid to read as much as write messages, the scribe’s title cautiously referred to writing alone (*scribere* = “to write”); and the symbol for Nisaba, the Mesopotamian goddess of scribes, was not a tablet but a stylus. In his excellent book *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel writes, “It was safer for a scribe to be seen not as one who interpreted information, but who merely recorded it for the public good.”

In their fear of readers, ancients understood something we have forgotten about the magnitude of readership. Reading breeds the power of an independent mind. When we read well, we are thinking hard for ourselves—this is the essence of freedom. It is also the essence of editing. Editors are scribes liberated to not simply record and disseminate information, but think hard about it, interpret, and ultimately, influence it.

The greatest challenge for editors has always been just how far to influence a writer’s work. At what point does aid turn into meddling and, worse, betrayal? With dead writers, editors have had a long leash. With the living, editors have needed to learn to relinquish control. As centuries have unfurled, the best editors have learned to balance editorial queries with a writer’s interests.

Like the best professional editors, self-editors need to balance the writer and reader roles. The reader and writer inside us vie for power yet, ideally, remain equal. In American society, though, we are led to see our reader-half as pedestrian, secondary, servile; and our writer-half as primary, precious, and ingenious. We are not generally taught the glory and creativity of reading, but the utility of it. By defining successful writers as celebrities, for instance, our media, publishing industry, and educational system train us to view readers, in contrast, as nerds, and reading as functional—a

service we offer up to the author, who appears to cook up a book by putting his brilliance in a pot and stirring. We are rarely told that it is the nerdy reader in every serious writer that makes the ultimate creative decisions.

The more we view writers as icons, the more we unduly belittle the reader's power. When, for example, at the age of eighty, Günter Grass, the distinguished author and critic of fascism, admitted he had joined the Waffen SS at seventeen, most Germans, and many non-Germans, were outraged and went so far as to retract their love for his books. Yet Grass's moral debacle, as well as his formerly sterling reputation, are irrelevant to our reading of his writing. Nothing can change or dictate our experience of reading *The Tin Drum*, not even disillusionment with its author.

Reading, at bottom, has very little to do with writers. The celebrity author is a farce, because writing can only mean something once the author has removed himself from it. As Manguel puts it,

in order for a text to be finished the writer must withdraw, cease to exist. While the writer remains present, the text remains incomplete. . . . Only when the able eye makes contact with the markings on the tablet, does the text come to active life. All writing depends on the generosity of the reader. . . . From its very start, reading is writing's apotheosis.

Writers stop writing a text at some point, with the knowledge that something, if only a word, might still, might always be changed for the better. Readers, not the writer, then finish the work, again and again, with their interpretations of it. When we

honor a reader's true impact on writing, we begin to understand how to edit ourselves well. To make a work come close to what we want it to be, we have to finish writing as a reader.

In the short history that follows, we will see how reading can hurt as well as save writing. Editors have evolved over the centuries from constricted to authoritative to collaborative, with variations in between. They have been helpful and destructive by turns, and on occasion, simultaneously. Ego and fear in an editor have mangled writing, whereas other texts have been enhanced by an editor's sensitivity, erudition, and sense of adventure.

May this chapter encourage us to purge ego and fear when we edit ourselves, and to cultivate our sensitivity, erudition, and sense of adventure.

#### TENTATIVE BEGINNINGS

In ancient times, scribes were obliged to take dictation and recite, but, as noted, refrain from really reading the words they wrote. With the medieval era approaching, they began to liberate their inner-reader. Medieval monks copied religious texts with the diligence of Xerox machines, but fatigue and ambition corrupted their output. The sleepy scribe would accidentally skip or alter words; the arrogant yet lucid would rewrite an obtuse passage; the zealous would interpolate. Scribes had begun to mess with the message—by accident or will—and, in so doing, take the first step toward interpretive freedom. They affected text now, and no longer just relayed it.

Then came the great and irreversible leap. Printing was

invented in Germany in the late fifteenth century to replace magnificent, but painstaking, script. And the stylus-wielding scribe, guilty for his opinions, metamorphosed into an editor who traded in them.

### EDITORS OF POWER AND RENOWN

The sixteenth century gave editors more prominence than they'd ever had or would have again in the history of editing. With the celebrated authors of the day (Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch) having died over two centuries earlier, editors supplanted writers as the creative literary figures of the day.

In the absence of writers, readers and reading took center stage. In the 1500s, unlike today, reading was understood as an activity you did, not fast, but with varying levels of quality—an editor read well, okay, or poorly. Book buyers cared, in other words, how sensitive, frank, penetrating, and selective an editor was when he read. The quality of an editor's reading and how well he packaged a book had as much importance as how the book was written. Editors had "increasing prominence as individuals," writes Brian Richardson in *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy*, "each with his own distinctive approach to the shaping of a publication." In the clearest sign of this, the public sought out an editor's name on a book, not simply an author's.

It was an electric period of literary industry, and Venice, publishing's hub, brimmed with entrepreneurial drive and talent. Guiding this new world of print were the original freelance editors. Among them were Franciscan monks, teachers, law students, and writers. In a few short decades, the book industry was so successful that freelancers could live by editing alone. They helped publishers do several difficult jobs. Editors first had to locate and

authenticate old manuscripts. Then they had to correct grammar, which, at the time, was a highly complicated task, since the Italian language was still forming itself. Once editors had decided a work was worthy of print and had copyedited it, they oiled its entry into the world with an exegesis—today's flap copy or scholarly introduction. These first industry editors created a tacit manifesto that still guides many editors today: be savvy enough to find good manuscripts, suave enough to navigate their ambiguities, and erudite enough to discuss them persuasively.

The grammar battles of the period demonstrate how linguistic erudition and the editors who wielded it carried real power in society. With Italian vernacular an inchoate mixture of Latin and regional dialects, editorial disagreements abounded about spelling, syntactical style, and a newly invented system of punctuation. Dialects were doing ferocious battle to become the single national language. Florence and Venice sparred for national prominence, and editors held the politically loaded role of deciding which flag the Italian vernacular would fly. In the poem *Italia mia* by Petrarch, for instance, editor Pietro Bembo restored the Tuscan spelling of "bavarico" and rejected "barbarico." He found "bavarico" more elegant. Merely by choosing a Tuscan *v* over a Venetian *b* for one of Italy's most celebrated poets, Bembo helped shape standard Italian language and therefore the identity of his nation.

Among Renaissance editors, the big debate was how much to homogenize a text. Editors had to decide whether to water down classical Latin into pedestrian speech, so it would be understood by a general, uneducated public, or render it into a more sophisticated vernacular. Should an editor talk down to an audience—and offer facile pleasure—or press an audience to educate themselves? To spoon-feed or challenge readers, that was the ques-

tion, and remains an important one in our era. Editor Francesco Robertello, taking an unusually honest and generous tack, did both: he made significant alterations, but published his conjectures, so the reader would know exactly how and how much he had altered a text. The edit became a tutorial.

Uneducated printers and copiers stirred the debate by changing the words of a text on a whim. Richardson reports that Florentine editor Vincenzo Borghini cautioned, in words that still resonate today: "Editors should beware of the tendency of scribes and printers to substitute rare words with a *lectio faciliior*. . . . For editors, a little knowledge was a dangerous thing: they should be either ignorant, in which case they would not interfere with the text, or well informed, so that any changes were justified."

By 1546, warnings against editorial abuses could sound bitter. Take, for instance, Francesco Doni's: "one editor corrects in one way and another otherwise, some delete, some insert, some flay [the text] and others damage its hide. . . . [Beware] stubborn editors, because they don't follow what is written but carry on in their own way." Then, as now, depending on his scholarship, worldliness, humility, alertness, and delicacy of ear, an editor respected or diluted a piece of writing.

By the end of the 1530s, works by living authors were getting published, and for the first time, editors had to figure out how to treat writers not only writing. The inevitable question of control arose. Who controlled a book—the person who wrote it or the one who made it possible for people to carry it around and read it at their leisure? In a situation that continues to this day, the editor held the writer hostage to his desire to reach a lot of readers. Against logic, it somehow became easy to think that a writer needed an editor more than the other way around.

The exchange between editors and writers in the early days of publishing appears to have been cooperative, but writers were not in control. Editors tended to dictate rather than collaborate. According to Richardson, Giorgio Vasari, author of *The Lives of the Artists*, was advised in 1550 to hire an editor and, in a bout of optimism, took on four. He requested they standardize his spelling but leave his style alone. Someone, however, ventured beyond turning his *ts* into *zs*, and tried to upgrade his original clumsy phrase "other temperas which time made them disappear" with "other temperas which, in the course of time, time made them disappear." Sometimes the medicine is worse than the disease. In a second edition, in 1568, the phrase was improved: "which in the course of time faded." The writer, though, had no say in all this. Because of deadline pressures, overextended publishers did what few would try today: they often skipped showing writers their final galley proofs.

#### COMMERCIAL MOTIVES

Renaissance editors worked, in the main, for companies, no longer oligarchs, and had a stake in their employer's success: if the company went under, the editor would lose his job. So despite their inclination as men of letters, editors now had commercial, not just literary, motives. "If a printer was to be more successful than his competitors," Richardson says, "then careful thought had to be given to the needs and expectations of a varied and widespread public." Accessible books naturally brought in more money than difficult ones. If contemporary publishing caters too much to the masses, it did not invent the practice. Four hundred years ago, editors were altering texts to make them easier for people to read. Sometimes their alterations were sensitive adaptations

that allowed laypeople the pleasure of reading a classic; other times, editing obliterated the original.

How editors and living writers worked together from the late sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century is, for the most part, woefully undocumented. The Catholic Church held strict rule over art for most of that time, and a suite of prudish popes and draconian Councils turned editing largely into censorship. Publishers and editors were preoccupied with trying to stay out of jail.

In the nineteenth century, the enduring business, with a capital B, of literature was faithfully depicted in George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street*. In his ruthless portrait of Victorian publishing in London, an editor's main role was to increase profits. The character Jasper Milvain, a journalist and aspiring editor, compared himself to his novelist friend Reardon and found his friend lacking. Reardon was incapable of being practical. He wrote to the order of his muse and could not bring himself to edit the few precious words he managed to eke out each week:

He is the old type of unpractical artist; I am the literary man of 1882. He won't make concessions, or rather, he can't make them; he can't supply the market. . . . Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost

of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetizing.

The purist artiste refused to have his work bowdlerized and suffered financially (Reardon), whereas the "player" who edited his work or allowed it to be edited to please the public reaped fame and fortune. Milvain's pandering self-editing is a warning against the temptation to please others and, in the process, lose our dignity as writers. But the novel does justice to the truly complicated nature of editing. Milvain respects editing, but misuses it. Reardon scorns editing, but really needs it. Reardon's writing is indulgent, not just pure; the reader's respect for the "real" writer's dignity is mixed with disappointment in his lack of discipline.

#### EDITORS AS CENSORS AND USURPERS

The white-knuckled grip of censorship slackened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but laws differed from country to country. Censorship would continue in fits and starts with the banning of works in America by such luminaries as James Joyce, Aldous Huxley, and Ernest Hemingway. For the most part, though, in Europe and the United States strict governmental monitoring abated as modern times advanced.

But by the time various laws were relaxed in the 1800s, the English, French, and Americans, in their very different ways, had become automatic about censoring. Editors kept a censorship mentality even after they were legally free to relax it. Fearful editors would immunize themselves from prosecution by plucking out what they considered potentially offensive phrases.

American and English writers needed a thick skin against the knife of paranoid magazine editors. Thomas Hardy, Charles

Dickens, Mark Twain, and others were heavily edited with puritanical hands. Hardy's words were daintified, for instance, for *Far from the Madding Crowd*: "lewd" became "gross," "loose" became "wicked," "bawdy" became "sinful." Emily Dickinson, too, ran into an editor's squeamishness. Her poem "I taste a liquor never brewed" was first printed in 1861 in the *Springfield Daily Republican*. In that paper, the first stanza read:

*I taste a liquor never brewed,  
From tankards scooped in pearl;  
Not Frankfort berries yield the sense  
Such a delirious whirl.*

These, however, were not Dickinson's words. Her stanza was more brazen and forthright. It carefully omitted a beat in the third line, which braced the reader for the fourth, where there was no facile rhyme (pearl/whirl) or anodyne phrase (a delirious whirl). Here is the real McCoy:

*I taste a liquor never brewed—  
From Tankards scooped in Pearl—  
Not all the Frankfort Berries  
Yield such an Alcohol!*

With only a few extra words and a switch to common punctuation, the editor made the poem more ladylike and acceptable to a mass public. Dickinson wondered, understandably, "how one can publish and at the same time preserve the integrity of one's art?"

In the first decades of the twentieth century, when America

was convulsing from modernist rebellions against Victorian decorum, editors were a largely conservative lot tethered to old polite customs. To their writers' dismay, they deleted controversial words or scenes to please a priggish press and public. In 1929, even Max Perkins, despite his disgust for censorship, partook. "If," he argued to Ernest Hemingway about *A Farewell to Arms*, "we can bring out this serial [in *Scribner's Magazine*] without arousing too serious objection, you will have enormously consolidated your position, and will henceforth be further beyond objectionable criticism of a kind which is very bad because it prevents so many people from looking at the thing itself on its merits." Perkins's uncharacteristically strained plea ignored what he and his author both knew: fiddling with a word here or there was no light matter. Hemingway protested Perkins's plan to remove vulgarity from the text but, in the end, yielded.

It is bad enough for an editor to prune provocative phrases or ideas from a writer's work out of fear they will offend; when writers do this to themselves, one might wonder why they write at all.

#### AN EARLY EDITORIAL COLLABORATION: MARRIED AND FRAUGHT

One French writer, with the help of her editor, would triumph over censorship by writing sensualist novels without apology: Colette. For Colette, the fruits of editing were bittersweet, and included wise counsel and betrayal, intimacy and degradation.

Colette's editor was her husband, Willy, born Henri Gauthier-Villars. Willy was a writer, editor, and impresario who ran a ghost-writing factory, where he hired writers to make books from his ideas, which he would edit. Colette both benefited and suffered from Willy's industrial view of editing. She was a protégée of his

seasoned methods for creating a compelling narrative. Yet even as his editing enhanced her talent, his commercialism warped it.

Their editing relationship began with Colette's first novel, *Claudine at School*. Willy had read it in draft and deemed it worthless, then, a few years later, reread it and changed his mind. In 1900, once a publisher had been secured, Willy edited the book with, Colette later recalled, "urgent and precise suggestions." This was the first of many collaborative books to follow.

The nature of their collaboration—how much Willy edited or wrote—has long been a juicy topic of belles lettres discourse. Judith Thurman, in her formidable biography of Colette, *Secrets of the Flesh*, writes, "There is no serious question about the true authorship of the *Claudines*. Colette wrote them, and they are in every sense, including morally, her intellectual property. Willy edited them; helped to shape them, influenced their tone."

One might wonder, for better or worse? Thurman concludes,

Colette . . . claims that Willy's contributions vulgarized her work, but a careful reading reveals that they sometimes refined it. . . . [Willy] was a seasoned writer and editor who took her first manuscript in hand. It is apparent . . . that he helped her develop the characters both on and off the page; that he fine-tuned her prose; that he supplied references and opinions; that he added words, sentences, even passages.

The lessons of self-editing can come from unexpected sources; even a belligerent and uncouth editor might make a fine contribution to a book and to a writer's education. Willy taught Colette much about how to edit herself, but did so with all the delicacy

and deference of a vaudeville producer. Years later, Colette impersonated his editing style to an interviewer: "You couldn't . . . warm this up a bit? . . . For example, between Claudine and one of her girlfriends, an overly close friendship . . . (he used another briefer expression to make himself understood). And then some rural slang, lots of rural slang. . . . Some girlish high jinx. . . . You see what I mean?" Willy's crass commandeering alienated Colette. She would eventually refuse his suggestions—both because their personal relations had deteriorated and her prowess had matured.

It would be a mistake to think Colette's final, fiery rejection of Willy's editing was the fallout from a failed marriage alone. As so many writers do, she had invested a lot in her editor, who, to complicate matters, happened to also be her husband. It is not uncommon that writers—from Colette to Thomas Wolfe to Raymond Carver—grow up, personally and artistically, only to jettison the editor who helped them to maturity. The parental aspect of editing cannot be overstated. Editing mentorships can become stifling, and, to tinker with Freud's Oedipal theory, writers have to kill their parent to become mature writers (and self-editors) themselves.

#### EDITING AS COLLABORATION: THE GOLDEN PERIOD

As the twentieth century took wing, editing acquired a new creativity and grace. To listen hard to a writer and work *with*, rather than *on*, him was a modern concept.

Max Perkins, an editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, whose writers included Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe, epitomized the modern ideal of collaboration, where an editor would engage energetically, but never invasively, in a writer's



work. As one of his writers, Mozart biographer Marcia Davenport, put it, Perkins's "essential quality was always to say little, but by powerful empathy for writers and for books to draw out of them what they had it in them to say and to write." Alice (Roosevelt) Longworth was a good example. Perkins agreed to publish a memoir of her saucy life as the president's daughter and Washington socialite. But like many people, Longworth was better in conversation than on paper. In her writing, she told trivial things that didn't matter and held back those that did. Perkins read her first batch of reminiscences and wrote to a friend, "I was really cold with panic." The panicked editor did the only thing he knew to do. He set to work. Perkins studied Longworth's every sentence with her. He gave her ongoing advice, including to slow down and "make every person a character and make every action an event." In *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*, A. Scott Berg writes, "As [Longworth] wrote she imagined Perkins standing over her shoulder, asking her questions. Within five or six months, Mrs. Longworth's writing had improved. . . . What began as a bloodless work of disconnected memories took on definition and shape and even got somewhat tart." Perkins told the friend to whom he'd earlier confessed panic, "we made a silk purse out of a sow's ear with Alice Longworth's book—or she did." She did it, with his indispensable help; yet, Perkins taught her a way to edit that she could keep and use again without him. With Longworth, he achieved what can be one of an editor's most satisfying tasks: to teach writers to self-edit.

There were others in Perkins's time who edited with gumption, such as Horace Liveright, whose firm Boni & Liveright published Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Djuna Barnes. Liveright spearheaded the loud, inventive marketing of fine and unconven-

ditional literature. Editors Eugene Saxton and Elizabeth Lawrence at Harper & Brothers, who worked with Betty Smith on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, were also highly regarded. But for getting deep in the trenches with writer after writer, Perkins was the man. It was as if editing had to keep pace with breakthroughs in arts and letters, and Perkins saw this. Alongside Marcel Duchamp and Picasso in the visual arts, writers such as Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Ford Madox Ford, James Baldwin, and Fitzgerald revolutionized the literary vernacular. Editors had to listen very hard now to understand and help a writer—harder than in centuries past, when most unconventional writers still followed certain rhetorical codes. Now the codes themselves were being reworked or shunned. Perkins responded to the elasticity of modern prose by rejecting editorial rigidity and becoming elastic himself.

#### THE WRITER AS EDITOR

Although Perkins was the first at Scribner's to edit so deeply, Ezra Pound had already edited to the bone in 1921. Pound, the renowned poet, magazine editor, and literary liaison, edited *The Waste Land*, for which, years later, T. S. Eliot would pay him tribute: "He was a marvelous critic because he didn't try to turn you into an imitation of himself. He tried to see what you were trying to do."

But according to scholar Donald Gallup, Pound was not as open-minded as Eliot says. For one thing, Eliot loved theater and wanted to use theatrical elements in his poem; Pound ruled theater out for his protégé, calling it didactic, "bad," and unsuited to poetry. A second interdiction arose when Eliot wanted to use prose as a transitional link for verse. Pound protested that prosaic interludes weakened a poem's intensity. While another editor

might have overlooked his differences with a writer to help improve what the writer set out to do, Pound rejected Eliot's ideas outright. "Pound's major deletions in the central poem," writes Gallup,

. . . reflect a lack of sympathy with some of the experiments that Eliot was trying to carry out. The poem which resulted from the Eliot-Pound collaboration was in some respects quite different from that which Eliot had had in mind. At least part of what the central poem gained in concentration, intensity, and general effectiveness through Pound's editing was at the sacrifice of some of its experimental character.

It is impossible to know if Eliot's poem could have succeeded with both "concentration" and a more "experimental character." Eliot did approve Pound's edit. It is hard, though, not to wonder what *The Waste Land* would have been like if its author had edited it more independently.

Is it possible that Pound's luminous personality blinded Eliot? Unlike the self-effacing Perkins, Pound spoke with the boom and lilt of a Shakespearean actor, and had stone-strong opinions. Eliot was, at the time, periodically sick, poor, and struggling to find his way with his work—artistically and financially. It is easy to imagine that a writer unmoored will grab on to his editor's views, as a tired swimmer to a raft. When we edit, we should take care not to overpower a writer who may be vulnerable. And if we are that writer, we should beware domineering editors who, without malice, may mislead.

Despite his authoritarianism, Pound was, Gallup concedes, an

editorial genius: with *The Waste Land* he cleared away the brush and helped recycle poetic debris into the central poem. Himself a writer above all else, Pound was no doubt extra finely attuned as an editor. "Certainly there is no more useful criticism and no more precious praise for a poet," writes Eliot, "than that of another poet." To further the point, he says, "I wished . . . to honour the technical mastery and critical ability manifest in [Pound's] . . . own work, which had also done so much to turn *The Waste Land* from a jumble of good and bad passages into a poem."

It would be easy to believe that writers best understand the mechanics of writing and therefore make the best editors. Many writers do make superb editors. But then again, many do not. Many do not have the patience to investigate another writer's work—they would always rather be investigating their own. Or they see another's words through the lens of how they themselves would write them. Pound appears, at times, for instance, to have edited *The Waste Land* as if he were writing it. Or take Edith Wharton, who in her response to *The Great Gatsby* wished that Fitzgerald had "given us [Gatsby's] early career . . . instead of a short resumé of it. That would have situated him, & made his final tragedy a tragedy instead of a 'fait divers' for the morning papers." Wharton would have edited Fitzgerald's novel, in other words, so that it came out sounding like her own.

#### HOUSE STYLE: *THE NEW YORKER*

There are and always have been great editors who are naturally sensitive to writing and writers, without being writers themselves. Perkins, who limited himself to eloquent missives, is a prime example. Several others worked at *The New Yorker*.

*The New Yorker* was, from its inception in 1924, renowned for

its zealous editorial approach. In Ben Yagoda's chronicle *About Town*, the current *New Yorker's* famously strict editing can be traced back to founder Harold Ross's "notorious insistence that the circumstantial elements of a piece, fact or fiction, be identified or 'pegged' in the first one or two paragraphs." *The New Yorker* wanted a story—fictional or factual—to be immediately clear, at the start and throughout. Ross's editorial protégés, such as Katharine Angell (later White), E. B. White, and William Shawn, would, with occasional resistance from writers, carry out Ross's dictum to render writing smooth and genial for the reader.

Nabokov was a persuasive resister. In the 1940s, he wrote a series of rebukes to the Rossian edit. The first, to Edmund Wilson, dealt with his story "Double Talk": "A man called Ross started to 'edit' it, and I wrote to Mrs. White telling her that I could not accept any of those ridiculous and exasperating alterations (odds and ends inserted in order to 'link up' ideas and make them clear to the 'average reader')."

Since the point was to be straightforward at all costs, "overwriting" and unconventional syntax were outlawed at the magazine. When White took over editing Nabokov, she had the good sense to adjust the rules for him. He wrote her more of his thoughts on editing:

I deeply appreciated your sympathetic handling of "My Uncle." It is the principle itself of editing that distresses me. I should be very grateful to you if you help me to weed out bad grammar but I do not think I would like my longish sentences clipped too close, or those drawbridges lowered which I have taken such pains to lift. In other words, I would like to discriminate between awkward con-

education

struction (which is bad) and a certain special—how shall I put it—sinuosity, which is my own and which only at first glance may seem awkward or obscure. Why not have the reader re-read a sentence now and then? It won't hurt him.

White, to her credit, evolved as an editor to meet her writer's demands. Two years later, Nabokov sent her "Lance," a futuristic, layered story whose style was antithetical to the magazine's. White took it anyway, and harking back to Renaissance editors, sent readers a one-paragraph exegesis to help them understand the story (which Nabokov applauded—it must have seemed preferable to having his prose disfigured). Another two years later, editor and writer had gone a distance together. Nabokov praised White—not without a tincture of irony—for her substantial edit of a chapter from *Prin*: "You have done a magnificent job. While reading your script I felt like a patient reclining under the glitter of delicate instruments. I am still under the spell of your novocaine and hastily return these pages before I start aching."

With Nabokov, *The New Yorker* broke its own rules for the sake of something grand. Self-editors should take note, and similarly break their own editing rules or patterns to create something fresh.

When William Shawn replaced Ross in 1952, he turned up the volume on the magazine's grammatical finickiness. In Yagoda's account, Shawn's greatest weakness was his quest for perfection where none was possible. Ironically, his fetishization of grammar turned *New Yorker* sentences inside out, from, at their worst, short and dull, to mazelike collections of "which"s and "that"s and commas; what Tom Wolfe satirized as "whichy thickets." The point was still clarity, but now the route there was to say everything, and

leave no clause unturned. The result was a caricature of "correct" writing, as found in Shawn's bible, Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.

One unfortunate result of both the Ross and Shawn reigns was that some writers, as Yagoda puts it, "internalized the magazine's approach and saw their prose lose liveliness, individuality, and grace as a result." Kenneth Tynan, for instance, worried that *New Yorker* editing removed "much that might have made [my piece] identifiably mine; also, when writing for the magazine, one automatically censors audacious phrases lest they should be demolished by the inquisitorial logicians on 43rd St." He referred to the queries the editor made on his proofs as "an artillery bombardment." For some writers, Shawn's approach felt like censorship. His inflexibility frightened their truest voice into hiding. The self-censorship Tynan describes mocks the very idea of a writer's voice. When writing is an art as much as a tool for transmitting information, the writer cannot edit himself with an editor's—or anyone's—systematic disapproval in mind. Auden's Inner Censorate, discussed in chapter one, can be an effective insurance policy against indulgence. But we must not pervert the Inner Censorate into an internalized linguistic police.

For certain writers, though, Shawn was a saint. He had one quality that every editor should have, but too many do not: Shawn knew how to listen to and trust writers through all the fumbling stages of their writing process. Some of America's finest authors worshipped him for this. J. D. Salinger dedicated his book *Franny and Zooey* to "my editor, mentor and (heaven help him) closest friend, William Shawn, *genius domus* of *The New Yorker*, lover of the long shot, protector of the unprolific, defender of the hopelessly flamboyant, most unreasonably modest of born great artist-editors." Salinger understood that an editor's job goes

far beyond grammarian and taste arbiter, and includes setting a tone for a writer's working life. An editor might, with attentiveness, compassion, and insight, secure a writer emotionally enough to free him artistically.

Shawn helped the writer John Cheever feel no less than "alive." In a letter to Shawn's wife, Emmy, Cheever wrote,

As for [*The Wapshot Chronicle*] I sometimes wonder if Bill knows how important he was. One always writes for someone and much of it was written for Bill. The advice he gave me and the advice he didn't give me was all brilliant and he wired when he read it which makes the difference between feeling alive and feeling like an old suit hanging in a closet.

Shawn tended his authors as a gardener his plants—some were cacti, some orchids, but all got their requisite water. An editor's attention goes a long way to soothe and motivate a writer, whose life can, in periods, smack of solitary confinement.

With his superhuman patience and focus that made writers believe their ideas, and, by extension, they themselves, were important, Shawn was the Perkins of his time. Writer Ved Mehta gives the most vivid description of what made Shawn a "great artist-editor":

I had never before had anyone in my life listen to me as deep a level as he was doing, with no wish to judge—with only boundless interest and curiosity. . . . Most people in conversation tried to impress you, hurried you along, had their own preconceptions or agendas, or were dis-

tracted by their own worries or cares. In contrast, he seemed to absorb words as a musician absorbs music.

To *listen* well—this was Shawn's gift and the high bar every editor, and self-editor, must try to reach.

### AN EDITING COLLABORATION IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

Shawn left *The New Yorker* in 1987. Since then, artist-editors have not, contrary to general opinion, gone extinct. In today's era of corporate-led expedience, there are some editors who remain conscientious and creative.

The following account of how Robin Robertson, editorial director of Jonathan Cape in London, edited Adam Thorpe's novel *Ulverton* (told to me through interviews), brings this brief history into our times; and demonstrates that since the epoch of scribes, editing has become, at its best, a creative and sophisticated act—if publishers would only allow editors enough time to perform it. Most do not. The following account provides a final portrait of first-rate editing, but most importantly, it is a final, rich lesson for editing ourselves.

Robertson's editorial approach, for instance, easily translates into a method for self-editing: *First pass*, he reads the entire text, with as few interruptions as possible—"as a reader would." He prefers not to read a book partially, "as the editor's eye should not—ideally—pass over the text too many times, for fear of losing the very objectivity the writer lacks." At this point, he says, he is "looking for the general shape: the rhythm, the consistency of the prose—feeling for slackening of tension, extraneous scenes or characters, narrative lacunae, etc.—and watching myself for the

first signs of inattention which may be occasioned by a turgidity or imprecision in the prose." Robertson will discuss his findings with the author, hoping that, "through this conversation, we both might close in on the faults. The crucial thing is to encourage the writer to see the problem himself, as he is the one best able to correct it."

Robertson will ask the writer to iron out the "larger structural flaws, extravagances and longeurs." Once that's done, he'll make a *second pass*. At this stage, he presumes "that the car has a chassis, four wheels and a working engine, but may still benefit from tuning, lubrication and a paint job—and, if required, some optional extras." In the *third pass*, he says, "macro cedes to micro."

A successful self-edit involves each step that Robertson describes, and hinges on self-surveillance: watching ourselves "for the first signs of inattention," watching ourselves read.

In 1991, Robertson bought and edited Thorpe's first novel, *Ulverton*, which would become a Booker Prize nominee that critic Richard Eder would call "almost literally transporting."

The novel tells the history of a fictional English village, from 1650 to 1988, through a series of self-contained but discreetly interlocking stories a generation or two apart. The book is about the land itself as much as the lives lived on and buried in it. Each chapter presents a different first-person narrative source. There are, for example, a farmer's diary (1712), letters by a noblewoman to her lover (1743), and a television documentary (1988). The result is a novelistic patchwork, with the thread of lineage connecting one end to the other.

The novel's dialogue brings to life, among others, a busybody shepherd, a gentleman farmer obsessed by new science, and a developer inadvertently digging up the town's bones. In the 1712 farmer's log, for example, we read, "The maid has taken to a fuller skirt. She appears robust. I have put aside already the cost of her carrying, which she agreed at 7s, which is indeed a princely sum for a natural task, involving as it did her pleasure, which I have asked the Lord His forgiveness for."

The *Ulverton* edit began when Thorpe sent Robertson individual chapters as he finished them. Though Robertson prefers not to read a manuscript partially, he agreed to read these chapters in isolation, for later, read together with their historical linkages, they would create a different effect. No actual editing was done, though, until the manuscript was finished. "Being edited at the end of the process was right," Thorpe says. "Working on the chapters before the whole was finished would have caused me to stumble, get distracted."

Once he had the entire manuscript, Robertson told Thorpe where he saw problems—mainly excesses and obscurities. Thorpe revised. The edit intensified when Robertson spent a few days at the writer's home in southern France "tying up loose ends." The visit was critical to the novel's development. Spending days together allowed editor and writer to go further with the book's details than if they'd edited entirely by phone. Thorpe recalls:

Robin read through two reworked chapters while lying prone in the garden because of a bad back, amid the shrills of cicadas. I looked down nervously from the study window—one of the chapters was the Molly Bloom-like monologue of the labourer, Jo Perry, written in broad dialect. (It was

entirely rewritten after both Robin and my agent found the original too long and dull.) "It's great," he said, emerging from the hot sunlight. "Much better. Very strong." Nothing, to my relief and astonishment, on its difficulty. "Could you read it OK?" I asked. "Sure. It'll lose you some support, and annoy the critics, but that's good." It had integrity, we agreed. That chapter probably screwed the commercial success of the novel, but integrity is worth so much more, and Robin recognizes that.

Your editor need not come into your home, share your food, and lie in your garden. This kind of bond is, for a variety of reasons, not always possible or appropriate. The risks of getting too close are many: the writer may lean too hard on his editor, ask for money, call at midnight with private woes; or the editor may become intrusive, read the writer's work as if it were his palm. There are, nonetheless, benefits to editing outside the usually officious and overworked atmosphere of an editor's office. "Staying with us," Thorpe says, "Robin could focus more clearly and relaxedly on the work in hand." If all goes well, out of intimacy comes trust; and trust is the foundation of a good edit.

On his own, Thorpe tried to keep track of his multigenerational view of one large tract of land. He drew a fictional map of the village that he kept on his wall as he wrote. "It didn't help my imaginative grasp of the place," he says, "but it prevented confusion." Complication, though, if not confusion, abounded. Robertson's edit aimed straight at *Ulverton's* complexities:

On account of the multi-layered, interwoven nature of the book there was always the risk that some of the strands

might slip from view, that others might overpower, or that the desired connections might not be made. . . . I saw quite early on that the novel had to be edited like a poem, as each story and character and image had ramifications and concatenations; that everything connected; that nothing was there by accident. So, my job was to monitor the free-flow and encourage the connotative, but avoid any false or lost trails and guard against any sense of the inorganic or architectonic.

Adam made it very easy for me because he knew exactly what he was doing. I had a lot of regressive fun with colour-coded motif charts, but the car was almost ready; I just supplied the go-faster stripes.

Thorpe and Robertson put the text under an imaginary loupe to magnify the minuscule. They invented devices to track the book's countless symbolic details. Robertson, for instance, drew an intricate chart of leitmotifs (e.g., red ribbon, bedwine, angel, shepherds' ghost), and together they filled it in across the chapters. Where there were gaps, Thorpe inserted the leitmotiv, subtly weaving it into the story, he says, "to get a more even spread or livelier current."

Red ribbons, and ribbonlike bandages, for instance, work a symbolic spell throughout the text. They act, the author says, "as displaced erotic passion."

The ribbons prompted me, in each story, to show a hopeless passion. . . . I went back to the first story and had Gabby pull out the ribbons from his tunic—adding his speech about Anne wanting her hair to be "all up in silks."

. . . It is for me one of the most important moments in the first chapter, and is seminal to the theme of "hopeless hoping" in the novel. . . . Yet it wasn't there in the first draft written some years before.

Thorpe describes this process of sharpening the book's symbols as "refining the leit-motif table," recalling the green light Fitzgerald added to the beginning of *The Great Gatsby* after Perkins's edit. Thorpe nevertheless took care to let his symbolism breathe: "I had to resist too tight a weave of continuity, too easy a symbolic, literary continuum. The readers had to feel that they were discovering links for themselves, creatively. There are links that have grown organically since, that I didn't intend." Thorpe's generous discussion of the symbolism in *Ulverton* adds a great deal to our understanding of leitmotiv.

For Robertson, an editorial conversation with a writer should trade on "sensitivity, patience, doubt and certainty." Arrogance can have no part. The same qualities are essential to the conversation we have with ourselves when we edit. For Robertson,

the easiest aspect of editing is either working with a writer who knows precisely what he's up to, like Adam, or with one who doesn't have a clue but is receptive. The first requires the merest nudge; the second will allow you a breathtakingly free rein to re-write. . . .

The hardest aspect is when the author doesn't have an over-arching idea for the text, doesn't see when he is writing well or writing badly, and is not amenable to constructive suggestion.

The hardest aspect of editing is the hardest aspect of self-editing too. We can edit far on our own if we can find an overarching idea for our work, see where we are writing well or badly, and stay amenable to trying something new.

In the best of situations, the current publish-for-profit culture makes it impossible for editors to always give everything that a writer wants. Despite Thorpe's long standing with Robertson, for instance (they've worked on ten books together), Thorpe says sometimes a book of his is "too large to edit properly—it would demand two weeks' mutual attention and this is now not possible (or at least not for my work) in the busy professional field." Thorpe implies what is well known: editors are given time to straighten out a blockbuster, but not always a literary novel destined for relatively modest sales. Like every writer I know, Thorpe recoils at the publishing monolith, of which Robertson is an undeniable part: "I have to be armoured to take on Robin's professional side, and not to feel winded by the idea that I'm just another name on his long list. He's part of the literary army, I'm alone."

The *Ulverton* edit was ideal, but circumstances change with every book. Thorpe knows that in the long run, he has to rely most on himself.

In the last thousand years, editors have roughly gone from servile to celebrated to censorial to collaborative, and finally, to corporate. The most superb editors in any era cannot always come through for a writer. They may be brilliant, but coercive, like Pound; patient, but autocratic, like Shawn; or well intentioned, but squeezed for time, like most editors working today. Therefore,

we must read our own drafts with strict care and pride; the way we read, not just write, will matter immensely.

In our era, more than some others, writers must buck up and take care of themselves. And this isn't a bad thing. Veteran editor Gerald Howard has no patience for "the writer's idealization of the editor as his savior." The marvelous Max Perkins, he believes, corrupted generations of "naïve writers who feel that somehow if they can meet their Max Perkins, then they'll become Tom Wolfe." Howard rightly cries: "Become Tom Wolfe yourself!"