New North Star, 2024; 6:1-6

Authorial Intention and Textual Fluidity in Douglass's Autobiographies

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A recent symposium at Indiana University Indianapolis celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the still-in-progress Yale University Press edition of the Frederick Douglass Papers. My essay celebrates (but also raises some questions about) the Yale Douglass Papers editions of the three autobiographies: the 1845 *Narrative*, published in 1999; the 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 2003; and the 1881, 1892 *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in two volumes in 2012. The Douglass Papers autobiographies are superb scholarly editions that provide expert historical introductions and annotations, as well as essential information for understanding textual issues in the respective autobiographies. Each edition also has distinctly useful primary texts, such as contemporaneous book reviews and letters.

My focus is on textual editing, and it should be noted right from the start that the editors who created the definitive texts for the respective editions of the Douglass Papers autobiographies followed what they call in their general introduction "modern editing practices." Those practices were inspired by Sir Walter Greg's influential writings on textual editing from the 1930s to the early 1950s, which asserted that the main goal of textual editors should be to find or recover the author's original intentions. I have problems with Greg's approach, which I've explored in essays about the Modern Language Association (MLA)-approved edition of Herman Melville's writings.[1] I wonder about the goal or even the possibility of recovering an author's original intentions, at least in some cases. That said, I'm prepared to concede that Greg's textual principles may be the best approach for a print-based edition that aspires to be definitive. I will say a few more words about the strengths of the Greg-inspired Douglass Papers editions of the autobiographies before raising a few questions about textual matters. I will then point to possible new directions for Douglass textual studies.

I begin with excellence: The 1999 edition of Douglass's *Narrative* has superb historical annotations, textual notes, and materials that help us to trace the *Narrative*'s reception history. I regard it as the best edition of Douglass's most widely read autobiography. The edition's main copy text is the 1845 printing by Garrison's antislavery organization, which makes sense, even though there are two subsequent printings in Dublin, where Douglass may have been more in control of the publication. The 2003 edition of Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* is similarly excellent. Again, we get historical annotations, a textual discussion, contemporaneous reviews, and an interesting add-on of marginalia from the annotated copy of *My Bondage and My Freedom* held by the great-grand-daughter of Aaron Anthony (who was perhaps Douglass's biological father).

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[1] *The Frederick Douglass Papers:* Series Two*: Autobiographical Writings,* Volume I, *Narrative*, ed. John R. McKivigan, Peter Hinks, and Gerald Fulkerson (Fulkerson is the textual editor) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), xiv. On textual problems in the MLA-approved Melville editions, *see* Robert S. Levine, "Why We Should Be Teaching and Writing about *The Literary World*'s 'Hawthorne and His Mosses,'" *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 5.1 (2017): 179–189; and Levine, "Editing Melville's *Pierre*: Text, Nation, Time," *Neither the Time nor the Place: The New Nineteenth-Century American Studies*, ed. Christopher Castiglia and Susan Gillman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 163–174. Sir Walter Greg's classic article on textual editing is "The Rationale of Copy-Text," *Studies in Bibliography* 3 (1950–51), 19–36. Greg initially presented this paper to the English Institute on September 8, 1949.

The 2012 edition of Douglass's *Life and Times* is extraordinary, and it is clear that there were extraordinary challenges in bringing this edition to publication. Multiple editions of Douglass's final autobiography appeared over an approximately twelve-year period, and Douglass did not have full editorial control over some or even any of those. The fifteen editors listed on the title page of the Douglass Papers *Life and Times* suggest the huge labor that went into this two-volume edition. We get an historical introduction; a basically new text of *Life and Times* that draws on manuscripts and five different editions; considerable textual apparatus; illustrations that Douglass rejected from an early edition; and around four-hundred pages of historical annotations, along with reviews and reader-responses from 1881 to 1893. This edition helped to revive interest in *Life and Times*, making it clear that this is a Douglass text we all need to take seriously.

Still, I have questions about textual matters in this and the other Yale Douglass Papers editions of the autobiographies, and I want to use the comments of *Life and Times*'s textual editors, Joseph McElrath, Jr. and Jesse Crisler, as a way into my discussion. McElrath and Crisler proclaim in their textual afterword to *Life and Times* that they aspired to present Douglass's words and not those of people in the publishing industry (such as editors). To do that, they had to create their own reading text of *Life and Times*, which they call "a reconstructed version of this work . . . for which Douglass himself was responsible as individual author."[2] In creating this version, McElrath and Crisler follow Sir Walter Greg's injunction that editors should do everything they can to recover and convey an author's original intentions.

But McElrath and Crisler themselves point to two problematical aspects of Greg's ideas about textual editing. First, how does one definitively determine an author's original intentions, or the work an author is "responsible" for, if that author is no longer with us? And, second, why are "original" intentions—what the author sought to do before his or her text is supposedly corrupted by editors—better than what emerges when authors share their manuscripts with friends, colleagues, and editors? I ask this question for all readers of this essay who recognize that the final printed version of their own writing, after it circulates to colleagues and editors, is just about always better than their earlier drafts (their original intention). Influenced by Greg, McElrath and Crisler adopt a different perspective, which is conveyed in the question they ask about the print versions of the five editions of *Life and Times*: "which were Douglass's corrections, and which were the enhancements made by another or others?" Implicit in this question is the idea that publication in some ways is a corruption of original intentions. The editors, even with their odd choice of the word "enhancements," respond to their own question like this: "[N]o answer to this question is available."[3] In other words, these Greg-inspired editors concede the impossibility of their task. Nevertheless, they choose to privilege surviving manuscript pages over print pages, as if Douglass had nothing to do with any of the editing leading to publication, and as if Douglass may not have been pleased by some of the editorial changes between manuscript and book. Of course, Douglass himself may well have made some of those changes. Overall, what these textual editors achieve in their edition of *Life and Times* is quite impressive. But we have to keep in mind that when we read the text of *Life and Times* in the Douglass Papers edition, we are reading a version of *Life and Times* that did not exist until 2012. For historicist-oriented critics who find it important to take account of the texts that were actually being read at the time, that's a problem.

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[2] *The Frederick Douglass Papers:* Series Two: *Autobiographical Writings:* Volume 3: *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass:* Book I: *The Text and Editorial Apparatus*, ed. John R. McKivigan et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 485.

[3] *Frederick Douglass Papers: Life and Times*, 496.

I now want to turn to the MLA-approved Melville edition, co-published by Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, to examine what I regard as an egregious, even irresponsible, example of Greg-inspired textual editing. Be assured, there is nothing in the Douglass Papers on par with what I am about to describe. But this example, precisely because it is an extreme case, helps to highlight what is problematic and limited about the imperative of recovering an author's original intentions.

In 1850, Melville published in the New York *Literary World* a celebration of Hawthorne's short fiction. The essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," has become one of Melville's canonical texts, appearing in most American literature anthologies. At a key point in the essay, Melville makes an American literary nationalist claim that an American writer can be as great as Shakespeare. Maybe Melville was referring to Hawthorne, or maybe he was thinking about himself. In any case, the famous line in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" goes like this: "if Shakespeare has not been equaled, he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born."[4] With this pronouncement, Melville imagines an American writer greater than Shakespeare! Such a statement has an obvious appeal to American literary nationalists, both then and now. This American literary nationalist proclamation appears in the standard Northwestern-Newberry edition, in the Norton Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick* and other editions of *Moby-Dick*, and, at least until 2017, in every American literature anthology, including the 2007 and 2012 editions of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, which I edited.

But there's a significant problem here: Melville never actually published this sentence. I discovered this serendipitously in 2015 as I worked on the 2017 edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* and thought it was time to review the original printing and not rely on the Northwestern-Newberry edition. Let me repeat the line from the essay that appears in the Northwestern-Newberry Melville and subsequently has been widely reprinted: "if Shakespeare has not been equaled, he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born." But this is the phrasing in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" as originally published in the 1850 *Literary World*: "if Shakspeare [sic] has not been equaled, give the world time, and he is sure to be surpassed in one hemisphere or the other."[5]

With this phrasing, we have a global Melville for our times, not a narrowly American literary nationalist. Why did the Northwestern-Newberry editors choose to print a sentence that wasn't ever published? There are at least two answers to this question. First, following Greg's principle of original intention, the editors decided to go with the American literary nationalist version of the sentence because it appears in a surviving manuscript page of the essay, which they take as Melville's original intention. Second, the editors themselves are American literary nationalists who are suspicious of moves toward transnationalism and globalization in American literary studies, so the manuscript version suited their predilections. Choosing to privilege the manuscript version of "Hawthorne and His Mosses," the editors work on the assumption, with no evidence at all, that the editors of the *Literary World*, not Melville, made the change from American literary nationalism to a more global perspective. That assumption makes little sense because *The*

[4] Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 246. Melville met Hawthorne for the first time in the Berkshires on 5 August 1850; his anonymous essay about Hawthorne's short fiction appeared in the17 August and 24, 1850, issues of the New York *Literary World*.

[5] Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *Literary World*, 17 August 1850, 145.

Literary World was an American literary nationalistic journal and Melville himself mocked American literary nationalism in at least two of his novels, *Mardi* and *Pierre*.

The rejection of Melville's complex statement for something rather simplistic seems to me a wildly wrongheaded application of Greg's textual theory of original intentions. It took a Melvillean, John Bryant, who has written critically about the Northwestern-Newberry edition, to develop an alternative to Greg that he has already put into practice to create a different sort of Melville edition. Bryant's textual theory, I submit, could inspire a different, complementary edition of Douglass's autobiographies that would further energize Douglass studies.

Bryant set forth his ideas about textual editing in a punchy 2002 book called *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen*. Influenced by Jerome McGann's work on social texts, Bryant argues that the only definitive text of a work is "a multiplicity of texts, or rather the fluid text." As he elaborates, "A poetics of the fluid text is a poetics of revision, whether that change is induced by an individual writer, a social demand, or as often the case, a combination of the two."[6] If there are two or three or even more versions of a text, whether published or in manuscript, Bryant argues, editors should resist trying to create a putatively definitive single text but instead work with all versions to create what he calls a fluid text. Bryant rejects the vague and often unrecoverable notion of authorial intention as the sole rationale for creating a working text, and he rejects the idea that editors, publishers, friends, and colleagues are "bad" in the way of corrupting the so-called original intention. In his book, he offers two possible ways of creating fluid texts. One seems to me ineffective, but the other is potentially quite useful for creating new textual editions of Douglass's autobiographies.

What doesn't work all that well is this: creating a print text that includes what Bryant calls revision moments. By using boxes, inserts, and lots of diacritical symbols, a fluid-text editor, Bryant argues, can represent revisions and alternative textual phrasings on the printed page itself. Bryant gives examples of how to do this in his book, and what you see is a hard-to-read jumble. He subsequently published a "fluid text" edition of *Moby-Dick* which incorporated both the British and American versions, along with other evidence of textual fluidity. That edition got a mixed response. Some greatly admired the way it made readily available on the page different versions of the novel; others, like my students, found the many revision moments on the page (with diacritical symbols and boxes) overly distracting.[7]

But Bryant has a better second approach to textual fluidity, which is that editors could create websites with all published versions of the work under consideration, along with pdfs of all useful manuscripts. He and a group of collaborators are in the process of doing just that for Melville's writings, and it's quite promising and useful. Instead of creating a single definitive text of *Moby-Dick*, for instance, the editors of the website post both the British and American versions. The designers of the website have also ingeniously developed ways of moving back and forth between different versions and highlighting textual changes. For *Billy Budd*, Melville's posthumous novella which has been published by various editors from manuscript (it was not published during Melville's lifetime), this new Melville website posts images of the actual

[6] John Bryant, *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 2, 62. Jerome J. McCann has published widely and influentially in textual studies; *see*, for example, his *Social Values and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgment of Literary Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[7] For the fluid-text edition, see Melville, *Moby-Dick: A Longman Critical Edition*, ed John Bryant and Haskell Springer (New York: Pearson, 2007). In *the Fluid Text*, Bryant provides examples, which are almost impossible to decipher, of how he would represent textual fluidity on the page (*see* 164–172). The fluid-text edition of *Moby-Dick* is much clearer, but still would be distracting for most readers.

manuscript pages, the version of the novella they created from the manuscript, and ways for students in a classroom to work with the manuscripts, and with what they learn from the textual editors, to create their own version of "Billy Budd." For "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Bryant and his coeditors have posted both the 1850 *Literary World* publication and the extant manuscript pages. Bryant and his collaborators call their website MEL (Melville Electronic Library).[8] Imagine the possibilities of a DEL (Douglass Electronic Library) for the future study of Douglass's autobiographical writings.

For example, consider the case of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative.* The Yale University Press edition works mainly with the 1845 Boston publication, but the textual editor, Gerald Fulkerson, makes changes from that publication based on his idea of authorial intention. To give one example: The 1845 edition, as published, has Douglass stating early on, "I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday." Fulkerson drops the "of," and goes with "tell his birthday," in large part because the 1846 Dublin edition has "tell his birthday."[9] His argument is that Douglass made that change, but he offers no evidence for that. Maybe the Dublin printer preferred "tell his birthday" to "tell of his birthday"; I prefer "tell of his birthday," and I especially prefer that because that's what American readers read in 1845.

Because textual editor Fulkerson follows Greg's notion of authorial intention, he presents Douglass as having full agency in the production of the 1845 *Narrative*. Greg's textual theory has little room for collaboration; his theory celebrates the inviolate author. Perhaps for that reason, Fulkerson tells us that Douglass made the decision to "place a daguerreotype of himself on the book's frontispiece and sign his name below," and he asserts the following: "Next [Douglass] preceded his text with letters from William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, who served as witnesses to his veracity."[10] But why would Douglass want to create what John Sekora influentially dubbed a "white envelope"—a slave narrative subordinate to its White sponsors?[11] My suspicion is that Garrison and his fellow White abolitionists, who funded the publication of the *Narrative*, had a lot to do with constructing the title page and including those prefatory letters. I see nothing wrong with that because in 1845 Douglass had a mostly friendly and productive relationship with Garrison; the two were collaborators. In his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass presents Garrison as analogous to a slave master, but that was ten years later; I wouldn't read back to 1845 from the conflicts that led to that 1855 characterization. In any case, it's worth underscoring that when Douglass worked to produce the two 1846 Dublin editions of the *Narrative*, he put his own freshly-written preface to the *Narrative* before the Garrison and Phillips prefaces. Maybe if one is going to create a single edition of the *Narrative* from the American and Dublin editions, one should include Douglass's preface, for the 1846 Dublin editions provide reasonably good evidence that Douglass did not want his account preceded by two White voices without a Black voice front and center. Maybe that's more important than dropping an "of" on the basis of the Dublin editions.[12]

All of this said, I am a huge admirer of the Douglass Papers edition of the *Narrative* and think it would be absurd to create a single text that combined the Massachusetts and Dublin editions. Readers today need to know what readers of 1845 were reading when Douglass published his first autobiography. But what I think would be great for Douglass studies is for the DEL

[8] *See* "Melville Electronic Archive," Melville.electroniclibrary.org.
[9] *See* the Douglass Papers *Narrative*, 13, 108.
[10] *See* the Douglass Papers *Narrative*, xxx, xxxi.
[11] *See* the Douglass Papers *Narrative*, xxx, xxxi.
[12] On the importance of Douglass's Irish editions of the *Narrative*, along with a discussion of the textual changes initiated by Douglass, see Robert S. Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), chapter 2.

(Douglass Electronic Library), the site I hope someone decides to set up in the future, to post the single U.S. and the two Dublin editions with ways of comparing and exploring the three. As of right now, only one of the Dublin editions is readily available, through Cambridge University Press; the more complex second edition is hard to acquire. Arguably, the Dublin editions best convey not Douglass's original but final intention with this particular work, as he adds not only his own preface *before* Garrison's but also new materials in the appendices. Over time, one could add to DEL other editions, translations, and the like.

Because there aren't significant textual issues with Douglass Papers *My Bondage and My Freedom*, other than the editors' odd decision to drop Douglass's table of contents, one could post the 1855 version as it appeared in 1855, plus possibly some later editions or editions published outside of the U.S. The DEL would be especially compelling for *Life and Times*, which exists in multiple editions over the period 1881 to 1893, and also partly in manuscript. Posting all of the editions as published, along with images of the extant manuscript pages, DEL for the first time would make it relatively easy to do a fluid text analysis of the five main published editions and the extant manuscript. We'd view the illustrations as they actually appeared in an early edition. We would get a terrific sense of how the published versions of *Life and Times* developed over time. With the help of the manuscript pages, we could make our own assessment of authorial intention in the editorial changes in the published versions. That said, authorial intention cannot be easily separated from collaboration, as the DEL would make clear, and editors and publishers are not always wrong.

The DEL, as I imagine it, could also provide us with significant new perspectives on Douglass's speeches. The wonderful print volumes of Douglass's speeches in the Yale Douglass Papers necessarily work with one published version of a particular speech, while providing bibliographical references when there are other versions. But what if the curators of DEL chose, say, five key speeches to start with that have major variants and could therefore be thought of as a fluid text? The speech I'd start with is Douglass's 1867 "Sources of Danger to the Republic." Douglass gave a version of the speech to a predominately Black audience in Philadelphia in January 1867 and then a month later delivered another version to a predominately White audience in St. Louis. The speeches are notably different because Douglass was a remarkable rhetorician who knew how to shape speeches for different audiences. The Douglass Papers prints only the February 1867 St. Louis version; DEL could post both.

A possible model for a future DEL could be the Colored Conventions Project, a web-based archive which has generated huge interest in nineteenth-century Black conventions and brought a MacArthur Award to its visionary director, Gabrielle Foreman.[13] The Yale Douglass Papers themselves are now available online, and that's great for all kinds of reasons. But I'd like to see something different develop over the next ten years or so that works in the spirit of what Bryant calls for in *The Fluid Text* and gets people excited about Douglass's writings in the way of the Colored Conventions Project. I can't guarantee a MacArthur to the person who chooses to get this site underway, but I am certain that such a site would bring new scholars and readers to Douglass studies. I am also certain that it would have as its critical foundation the superb editions of Douglass's writings in the Yale University Press Frederick Douglass Papers.

[13] *See* the "Colored Conventions Project," Coloredconventions.org.