

The Present, the Past and the Work

PAUL EGGERT

TO EDIT IS TO PRESENT, to make the text of a work present for readers. Something so simple in principle ought to be straightforward in practice, but it is not. A partially documented past and the variousness of the present are tricky to keep in a sensible relation to one another. This is true as much for conservators of art objects and historic buildings as it is for scholarly editors of literary works and musicologists editing musical scores. It is a matter of articulating, before one can begin sensibly to balance them, the competing demands of the past and the present in the moment that the editor or conservator intervenes between them.¹

The following poem nicely localises the general problem. Published in 1902 in a volume entitled *Poems of the Past and the Present*, 'The Self-Unseeing' is deceptively simple. It was written by a man in his early sixties, Thomas Hardy, famously the author of the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The poem is about returning to his childhood home, a large thatched cottage in Dorset. Hardy's father had been a successful builder locally; but he could not be considered a gentleman. Hardy's mother was determined the son would do better. So the young Hardy became an architect and worked in London; as a professional, he rose in the world. This younger Hardy, the architect, specialised for a time in the restoration of medieval churches.

The later Hardy, the novelist and poet, ceaselessly returned in imagination and spirit to the scenes of his childhood and young manhood. He breathed deeply of the air of the past. He was at his most alive there. But he refused the tempting consolations of nostalgia and sentimentality as delusions. This refusal of easy familiarity is evident in the poem. Its attempt to bring the past into the present is riddled with paradox, even though at first reading the situation seems simpler than that:

The Self-Unseeing

Here is the ancient floor,
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet walked in.

She sat here in her chair,
Smiling into the fire;
He who played stood there,
Bowing it higher and higher.

Childlike, I danced in a dream;
Blessings emblazoned that day;
Everything glowed with a gleam;
Yet we were looking away!²

The sense of place is wonderfully firm. It is registered with the firm trochaic beat on the opening word 'Here'—a confident note repeated at the beginning of the third line. Security of place in the old family home prompts the experience of the past. But time is nowhere near as obliging as place. Rather,

Background:
Portrait of Thomas
Hardy by William
Strang; Signature of
Thomas Hardy on a
letter to James M.
Barrie, 1924.

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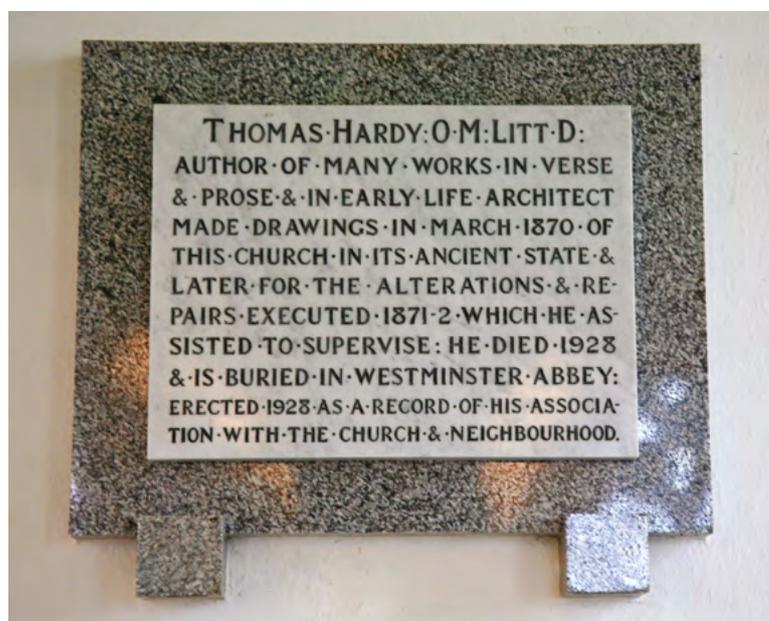
► Fig 1. St Juliot's Church, Cornwall.

IMAGE: SUE TULLOCH



▼ Fig 2. Thomas Hardy memorial tablet, St Juliot's Church, Cornwall.

IMAGE: ROGER MECHAN, SHUTTERSTOCK



it shifts, extends, withdraws, as the gaze of the visitor-poet to his old home wanders across the scene, which becomes both present and past simultaneously. There is, there can be, the poem seems to say, no clear temporal differentiation since the past is only available in the present.

The quandary is apparent in the very first line where we read that ancientness 'is': 'Here

is the ancient floor'. This is odd. The floor that is 'footworn and hollowed and thin' is in that condition in the poem's present. On the other hand, the door is now a 'former door', but is it formerness in the present or in the past? Chronology half falls into place, but not quite, when, in the following line, it is troubled by this dislocating locution: 'Here was the former door / Where the dead feet walked in'. It is a chastening, grim, almost horrible thought. They were not dead as they walked in, but yet they are now; and feet standing in for people is dehumanising, suggesting that a stoic refusal of connection to the dead is happening here. Coarsening the expression in this way evidently helps the poet, in the act of writing, to steady himself so as to keep at bay an unbidden wave of sentimentality that might otherwise cloud his vision.

Despite this instinctive precaution, the threat of the past remains in place, and the present courts its return. As we soon see in the next stanza, defended against or not, the past will not be walled in, even if entry to it has to be earned. Here we are granted the simplicity of the ordinary past tense, with the domestic

scene of memory now uncomplicatedly in the past. It is a welcome and touching release after the sombreness of the first stanza:

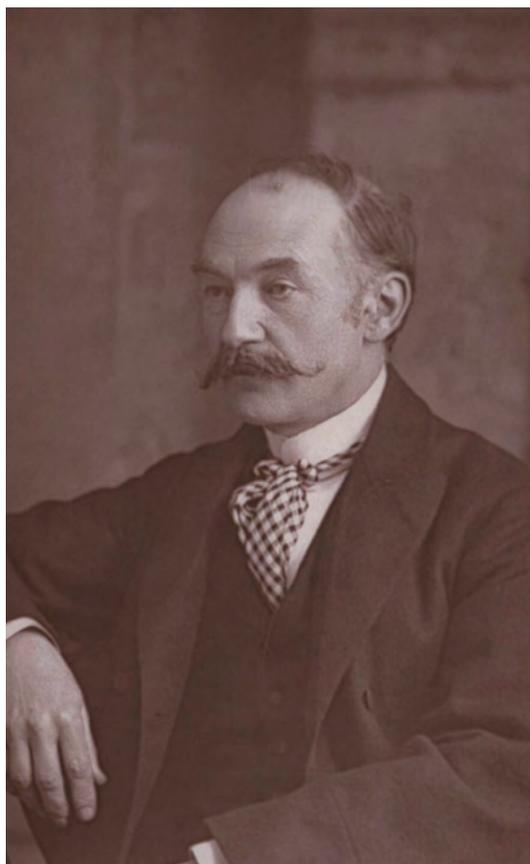
She sat here in her chair,
Smiling into the fire;
He who played stood there,
Bowing it higher and higher.

Hardy's father, in fact, was an amateur musician. He played at weddings and harvest festivals as part of a village group in a still essentially pre-industrial Dorset. Hardy's own roots were firmly in that past. He returned repeatedly to it for the subject matter of his novels and poems. When he gave up architecture in London and returned to live in Dorset, he took up his abode in a modern house that he had designed himself: this one had plans and was of the Victorian present. It served as his staging post for his forays into the past of Wessex, the locale he invented and gradually elaborated in his novels based on Dorset and its surrounding counties.

Hardy had already begun cultivating antiquarian interests, reading Hutchins's *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* in the late 1870s. When he moved back to Dorset permanently in 1883, he joined the local antiquarian club, served on the governing board of the Dorset County Museum, and read systematically through the *Dorset County Chronicle*, starting at 1826. Then, in autumn 1888, he undertook a walking tour to explore the countryside where *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* would be set.

For *Tess*, surface detail and local colour would have sufficed for his urban readers, but Hardy had too great a respect for the truth and its disconcerting paradoxes to take the shortcut. He knew well that the old way of rural living was fast slipping away, but, doggedly, Hardy would not give in to the allure of nostalgia, to merely subjective yearnings for that past or to a watery Romanticism about the beauties of a capital-N Nature in Dorset.

In his living and in his imagination he was obliged to shuttle continually between a still-potent past and the unignorable present. As a young architect responsible for making decisions about the repair and restoration of



◀ Fig 3. Thomas Hardy, by W. & D. Downey, carbon print, 1894, 4 x 21/2 in. (102 x 62 mm) image size, acquired Harrison Collection, 1952, Photographs Collection, NPG x17360

IMAGE: © NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

medieval church buildings (see figs 1 and 2), he would have had in mind the self-conscious historicising that such influential figures as Augustus W. N. Pugin, George Gilbert Scott, William Butterfield, and George Edmund Street imposed in England and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc in France. But Hardy was sceptical of its benefits and in later years would become scathing about its effects. He must have lived the modern quandary of the simultaneous retrievability and irretrievability of the past, one that extends down to us today. The poem is just a case in small of this general condition to which he was acutely sensitised.

Despite its blessed simplicity, the poem reveals some sophisticated lessons. The already noted use of the simple past tense in the second stanza is complicated in its second and fourth lines by the use of present-continuous forms—'Smiling', 'Bowing'—which refuse to remain in the past. At first they seem to reach forward into the present of observation, out of the past: but that illusion of their continuing presence, or present-ness, cannot survive as the last stanza pulls back from the intense recollection of that scene. It retreats to a more

generalising description where the past is, reluctantly, put back in its bottle:

Childlike, I danced in a dream;
Blessings emblazoned that day;
Everything glowed with a gleam;
Yet we were looking away!

The distinct end-of-line pauses enacted through their semicolons counteract the potential for a consoling flow of recollection, giving us instead a series of staccato realisations.

The poem's conclusion, 'Yet we were looking away!', marks a sobering retreat into reflection in the present. But the awareness itself, although of the present, is paradoxically about an entrapment in the past. Then, in the past, one could have the moment but could not know its meaning; now, in the present, one can know the meaning but cannot have the moment. It is a double helix of choice, like flypaper on which we are stuck and cannot break free. The past refuses to remain there. It haunts a present that cannot help but gravitate towards it. We are implicated in the past; it is implicated in us, now.

That, I take it, is what the poem, at its most general, is saying. At the end of the day it is the object or the building, or perhaps the landscape, which carries one back. In other words, the material object is the past's lifeline to the present. But it requires human agency to activate it. There are ways, and ways, of doing it. The mute testimony of objects can be redeemed by our mode of address to them. At its best, conservation, communicated by curation, is one of those modes. None of them is straightforward or unproblematic.

Normally we assume that a poem, as an intangible work, may simultaneously take variant forms—versions—without affecting its identity. In fact, this one was originally called in manuscript 'Unregarding' before Hardy changed the title to 'The Self-Unseeing'. In contrast, and again traditionally at least, we tend to think that tangible artworks or buildings have a fixed physical identity, that the work is the object. As an architect and church restorer faced with the realities of

buildings' decay, Hardy knew that their identity was not stable. Similarly, in the poem, he cannot help registering the fact, as he returns to his childhood home, that a door, once in this position, has since been filled in. As Stewart Brand has eloquently reminded us, no house remains the same. Indeed, all architectural forms are in a slow process of change.³ Important public buildings decay, are repaired or not; a fortunate few are restored or adapted to new uses. Paintings darken with age, are damaged, remounted, repaired. Their earlier versions may be revealed by X-radiography and other techniques. Their identity is thus never fixed, just as Hardy's younger self both is and is not him, now, in the moment of writing the poem. Tangible and intangible works share this fate. Performance art, oral literature, dance, and drama have especially fluid identities and yet may be apprehended as the same work. These conclusions are what I now wish to tease out. They are what link conservation, curation, and scholarly editing.

I invite you to observe the naive or first-time editor at work. Let us say that the editor is male. He is editing a play of Shakespeare's. He finds the first textual difference between two copies of the same early edition. And then he finds differences between this edition and another early edition. He is aware that his publisher requires him to come up with a single reading text, not multiple ones. Let us assume that he, as an experienced reader and a good literary critic, prefers one variant reading to the other because, say, it nicely completes the line as a perfect iambic pentameter. He accepts the missing syllable into his reading text and the line now scans. He has judged the textual variants aesthetically, according to poetic form. So far, so good.

His problem starts, however, when he strikes the second one, and then the third, until, somewhat aghast at the Pandora's box he has opened, he finds there are some hundreds of them. Will his aesthetic sense that he has privileged in his first decision hold him in good stead throughout? Unless he is another Dr Johnson it will not.⁴ It is not *his* taste that readers have come to the edition to engage with. So he will soon be slipping and sliding as

he tries to justify accepting this variant reading from the other edition but not those other few on the same page.

To avoid this fate he brings bibliographic method to bear. He engages in very close study of these early seventeenth-century editions. What is odd about the typesetting? Why is it cramped here but loose there? Why is the same word spelled in different ways? Why, in these early editions, do some characters exit the stage before they have made their entrance? Because Shakespeare's original manuscripts no longer exist, our editor tries to detect the habits of spelling of the individual typesetters in this period before English spelling had become regular. To the extent that he can do it, he may be able to discount those habits so as to reveal the original features of Shakespeare's lost manuscript.

Our editor still has to assess the larger changes in wording among the early editions and extant copies. In doing so, he appeals continually to the evidence their variant versions reveal of how they were transmitted from manuscript to stage to print and which parties may have affected this passage. By these means and others, bibliography and stage history rationally limit his aesthetic preferences. But he is in no doubt about his aim, which is to approximate as nearly as he can the state of the text as it left the author's hands. Therein lies its authenticity and thus, for him, its identity.

The methodology and the nascent theory that I have been describing correspond to the situation up until the 1980s. A single reading text that would most truly present the work was the assumed requirement. Publishers wanted it, general readers wanted it, and stage directors and interpreting literary critics wanted it so they could get on with their different jobs more confidently. The work was assumed to be an ideal object hovering behind the early editions. Its text could, in theory at least, be approximated more closely and reliably than before because of the more or less scientific bibliographic methods brought to bear on revealing and analysing the textual variation.

But then in the 1980s the tide shifted, not just in editorial theory but in musicology, archaeological theory, and ultimately in building and fine-art conservation. Was it obvious any longer that, say, faced with the ruin of a magnificent building like the Parthenon, one would automatically aim, if one were given the chance, to restore it to its original form as best one could? What of its two-and-a-half thousand years of worship, adaptation, military occupation, and other changes since? Was the evidence of those moments to be automatically effaced in favour of the original moment? In the literary sphere, was it obvious any longer that the Shakespeare editor should efface, rather than preserve, the evidence of those stage practices that had likely led to alteration in the lost manuscript sources of the widely variant early editions? And why exactly was Shakespeare-as-author the authenticating source rather than contemporaneous stage practice itself? His so-called 'bad' quartos, thought by previous editors to have been cobbled together for sale by actors anxious to make a few shillings, had been treated with suspicion as likely to be confusing and misleading. But if these memorial reconstructions were closer to the stagings that the actors had actually appeared in, were they not a better report of that stage practice?

This summary shows that the source of authenticity that the editor or conservator might appeal to in making decisions was shifting. So was the nature of the work's identity, which was no longer considered a reflection of some ideal. This was inevitable once the audience or the readership or the viewership was found to be not just relevant to, but actually constitutive of, the work. The Rembrandt painting or the Greek vase or the Shakespeare play was not identical with the object on the wall, or in the museum, or on stage, or as reported in this copy of Shakespeare's First Folio. Rather there was, in each case as well, a transaction, some interaction on the part of the viewer or reader. That involvement formed part of the life of the work across time. This was additional to the work's history of early composition or design or making, its revision and production, and

then its history of editing or conservation, all of which interventions formed part of, as they also informed, that reception history. Works were always already in process. To think of them as static products was to misrepresent their conditioned existence. That, in summary, was the breakthrough that we saw amongst the theorists and the more radical practitioners in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The new realisation, ironically enough, echoed John Ruskin's in 1849. He had railed against the nineteenth-century vogue of restoring the medieval churches in England:

[T]he word restoration ... means the most total destruction which a building can suffer ... a destruction with false description of the thing destroyed [i.e., that it is literally a restoration].... [I]t is impossible, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.... [T]hat spirit which is

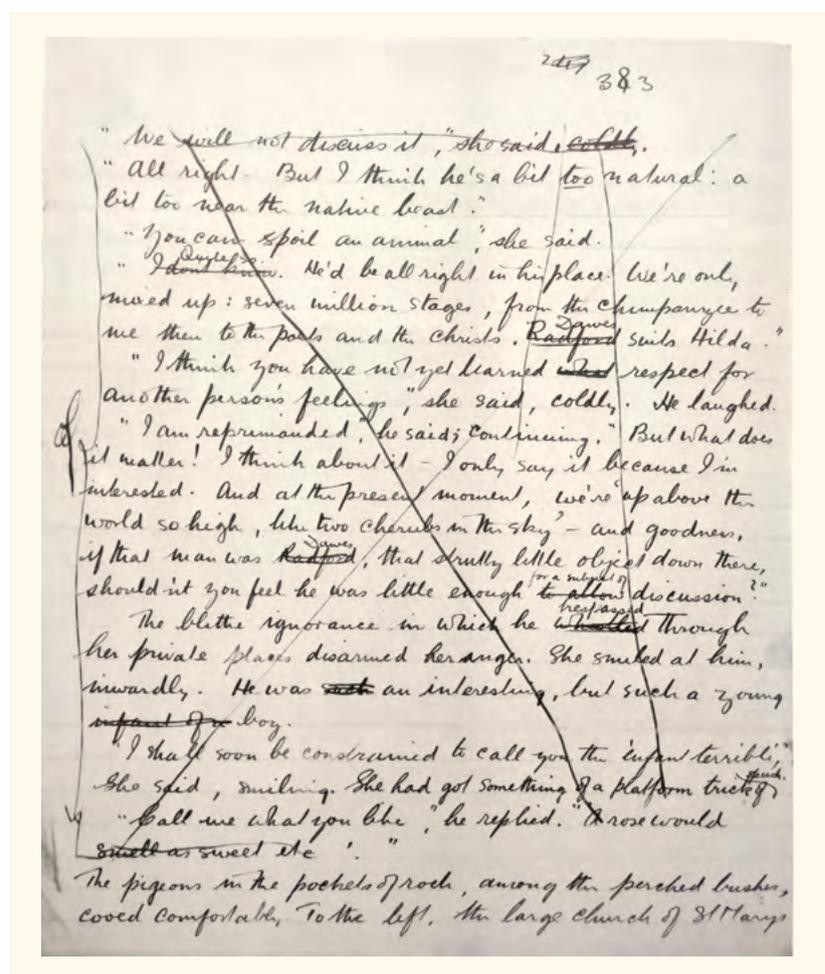
given only by the hand and eye of the workman, can never be recalled.... Do not then let us talk of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end.⁵

Of the buildings, he went on to declare: 'We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their right in them.' The walls 'that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity' only gradually acquire their living value—what he called 'that golden stain of time'.⁶

To think of the building or monument as a work unfolding over time rather than a static three-dimensional object is to recognise that its meanings are not fully determined in advance by builder or architect. They are also assigned by those who come into contact with the object.

► Fig 4. One of the deletions made by Edward Garnett to the manuscript of *Sons and Lovers*, with some earlier changes made by Lawrence also visible.

FROM D.H. LAWRENCE, *SONS AND LOVERS: A FACSIMILE OF THE MANUSCRIPT*, ED. BY MARK SCHORER (BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1977).



Conservators' new acceptance of the authority of history casts further doubt over the old aesthetic ground for decision-making and the longstanding assumption about the objectivity of the work. These two bedfellows, long in uneasy alliance with one another, were now granted their divorce.

But there remained—there remains—a problem. If the grounds of identity of works are expanded, if every stage of a work's history is to be valued, if every generation's rights in the work are to be respected, if every adaptation of it serves as historical evidence of that work-in-process, then what ground does the editor-conservator now have for changing anything? A hundred years after the restorations Ruskin was protesting against, and that Hardy was also unhappy with, Victorian additions to the medieval churches now take their place in the long history of adaptation of those same buildings. At the time, they necessitated a destructive intervention in the building's history, but who would remove them now?

So also in literary studies. Scholarly editors realised that, for instance, the version of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* that nearly everyone from the 1960s until the 1980s read at school or university was actually an abridgement by a gifted publisher's editor, Edward Garnett. The young Lawrence, grateful the abridgement had been done for him so that the novel could be published and he could be paid, revised the proofs of the abridgement. Generations of readers who had engaged with the novel had their right in the abridgement that they had read, and legions of literary critics wrote impressive and sensitised essays on the abridgement, assuming it to be the whole thing. Yet surely there should be grounds for restoring the version he originally wrote, for insisting on its primacy?⁷

Therein lay the new dilemma, which is still with us today. What firm ground can editors or conservators appeal to, if they believe in their heart of hearts that this thing needs altering? In their decision-making they do not want to be convicted of inconsistency. If they flip-flop as they make their hundreds of decisions about the words and punctuation of the new reading text or about cleaning these passages but not

those in a darkened or damaged painting, their readers and viewers will be ill served since they will not know how to read what the editors and conservators have done. The edition-as-work or the object-as-work will have become illegible. A more general model of the work is clearly needed, one that will acknowledge what has been learnt since the 1980s and that will, coherently, offer scope and justification for what conservators and editors feel the need to do now.

To achieve this, we first need to distinguish, more firmly than the old idealist and objectivist assumptions required us to do, between the material form and the meanings it acquires—in the literary context, between the dimensions of document and text. They are forever locked together: each needs the other to secure its linked but different identity. There can be no text without document, but paper and ink do not become, for readers, a document until they begin to raise meaning from it. Once the meanings (the textual dimension) are acknowledged as relevant to the editorial purview, then the reader who realises those meanings becomes unavoidably part of the equation.

In this process of becoming, the edition runs parallel to conservation and curation. Understood as a single continuous activity, the edition's contents (reading text, apparatus, textual essay, and commentary and explanatory notes) document and support one another. In effect, they argue one another's case. Together they present the work to the reader. Curation and conservation are less intertwined. Their disciplinary bases are different and there can be tensions between the two; but the two fields are not completely separable in practice. This is because they must address one another's findings to ascertain the viable argument (object and interpretation) that the exhibition presents to the visitor. The legibility of the object-as-work depends on this successful act of communication, this transaction, with the viewer. Because the work is completed, is realised, in the act of viewing, the conservation cannot be considered only as an act of homage to its maker, or as being in the service of some transcendent ideal conception of the object.

Neither conservation nor curation can work in ignorance of this fact. Although object-directed in its methodologies, conservation is ultimately in the service of the object's viewership, both present and future. Curation draws out the object's meanings, in display texts and catalogues, by bringing to bear those contexts of interpretation currently deemed appropriate. Curation articulates the conservation. Together they present the work in its newly conserved state. The conditions of doing so are enabled but also constrained by available resources and current understandings. Thus the act of presenting the work implicitly envisages future, different arguments: new states of the work yet to come.

I am now using the term 'work' where 'object' might have been expected. This is because it is the work-model that matters here. In my own field I have come to think of scholarly editions as embodied arguments about the constitution of the literary work. That is to say, editions are arguments in respect of something (typically original manuscripts or early editions carrying versions of the work) aimed at some contemporary audience. A new or altered material object is created—the new edition—and it takes up its place in the long history of the work. The new edition, aimed at an audience, enables the work to proceed into future decades—only, editors hope, in a better-informed way than before. The peculiar privilege and responsibility that editors and conservators share is to influence the terms of that transaction both through alteration and through curatorial or editorial explanation. Based on thorough research, a new edition or a new conservation procedure brings new information from the work's history to bear. The conservator or editor proposes and then embodies a new state of the work. The proposed argument must be able to withstand the usually disciplinary tests, with their many sharp edges. Reviewers and commentators soon tell us if we get it wrong.

When the conservator alters the fine-arts or decorative object, the alteration may not be fully reversible, even if that is the hope. Historic-building conservation is always in that predicament since the safety and other

needs of modern visitors have to be literally built into the conservation. Adjustments may be made later, but there is no going back to a moment that has passed. I think of these forms of conservation as more heroic than mine. As a scholarly editor, I aim to alter, for the better, the terms and conditions under which the literary work is encountered: I aim to extend its fruitful life by so doing. I do this in the knowledge that, whatever the shortcomings of my edition, at least I will not have altered the original manuscripts, typescripts, proofs, or early rare editions upon which I draw. This distinction between conservation and scholarly editing must be acknowledged of course; but it does not alter the fundamental parallel between them. They share a need for a model of the work to which both may appeal in justifying their interventions into its material condition or linguistic text. That model needs to acknowledge the ongoing life of the work, which in turn requires an acknowledgement of the role of readers and viewers—even passersby, as Ruskin says—in it. They realise—that is, they make real—the meanings of the work; and those realisations shift over time.

This awareness of meaning-making is, to invoke Hardy's poem, their moment of self-unseeing now seen. Participating in the work in this way as an active agent, rather than imagining themselves as enjoying an Olympian view above it, editors and conservators take on an ethical obligation to explain what they have done, to leave the viewer or reader in no doubt that what they now offer or present is not the so-called 'work itself'. But the work in its newly conserved state or edited version, understood as such, can and does emerge in a way that can be defended. Professional intervention to create it therefore must be recognisable via one means or another if viewers or readers are to understand what they are looking at or reading and where they now stand in relation to it.

Thus the conservation or the edition will never escape the contexts of its performance or of the capacities of the performer. They will forever inflect the meanings the material object or document acquires through our interventions. We should not despair at this conclusion. Works have lives: all being well,

those lives are the conserved object's passport into the future and they are ours into the past. That passport is not a constant, for works do not stand still. In his own way Hardy registered this over a hundred years ago and in the simplest and most telling of ways. He embraced the discomforting paradox with which we still struggle today. ¶

This article first appeared, in a longer form, as 'The Present, the Past, and the Material Object', in *The Explicit Material: Inquiries on the Intersection of Curatorial and Conservation Cultures*, ed. by Hanna B. Hölling, Francesca G. Bower and Katharina Ammann (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 64–79. It was originally given as a paper at Bard Graduate College for the Decorative Arts, New York, on 31 March 2015.



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1. For a more extended account of parallels between the conservation of artworks and historic buildings, and the editing of literary works, see Paul Eggert, *Securing the Past: Conservation in Art, Architecture and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For a similar approach as applied to music, see Paul Eggert, *The Work and the Reader in Literary Studies: Scholarly Editing and Book History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), chapter 2.
2. *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Samuel Hynes, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982–1995), i, 206. The original publication was in Hardy's 1902 collection, *Poems of the Past and the Present*.
3. Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (New York and London: Viking Press, 1994).
4. Samuel Johnson (and George Steevens) famously edited the works of Shakespeare in 1765.
5. John Ruskin, 'The Lamp of Memory', in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: George Allen and Sons, 1911), pp. 353–55. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* was first published in 1849 with a second edition in 1880.
6. Ruskin, pp. 358, 339, 340.
7. For one solution see D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, ed. by Helen Baron and Carl Baron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of D.H. Lawrence*. The editors return to the longer version for their copy-text but incorporate into it Lawrence's revisions of the abridgement's proofs—a debatable approach.