
Tim Groenland’s *The Art of Editing* is an exciting new addition to the field of literary sociology, making a valuable contribution to a discipline which has seen a resurgence since the turn of the millennium. In his seminal early work in the field, John Sutherland traces the origins of this kind of publishing history to Robert Escarpit’s *Sociology of Literature* (1958), which he describes as the beginning of “modern, serious work” in considering the effects of the literary marketplace on the fiction of a particular era.¹ However, it is the first two decades of the twenty-first century that have seen the most significant growth in sociological studies of literary production, a trend that Alan Liu calls “the resurgent history of the book.”² This is a “resurgence” that Liu argues has resulted in “restoring to view … vital nodes in the circuit” of literary production, including “editors, publishers, translators, booksellers,” and many others. This recent growth in scholarly interest in the production and circulation of literary texts includes other significant figures such as James F. English, Mark McGurl, John B. Thompson, Loren Glass, Paul Crosthwaite, and David D. Hall.³


It is in reference to this body of work that Groenland positions himself in order to underpin his key claim and most valuable contribution to this developing area: that literary editors are significant critical cultural actors in their own right, and worthy of study on their own merits. Especially compelling here is Groenland’s demonstration of the profound impact that this often overlooked, frequently invisible literary figure can have not just on literary careers, but on the development of literature at large.

Yet this focus on the sociology of literary production is only one set of critical apparatus at play here. In his close examination of two famous editorial relationships, Groenland combines this sociological understanding of literary production with a precise and detail-driven genetic approach to manuscript criticism that draws upon, amongst others, Dirk van Hulle, Wim van Mierlo, and Michael Groden. By combining these two approaches, Groenland presents a convincing case not just for the importance of Raymond Carver and David Foster Wallace in the development of particular postmodern traditions in American literature, but also for that of their editors, Gordon Lish and Michael Pietsch. It is this productive combination of genetic reading and literary sociology that allows Groenland to cover impressive distance toward answering John Sutherland’s “urgent questions”: “How did writers pursue careers in the Republic of Letters? Did their economic and social condition have much effect on their writing?” and, perhaps most significantly, “Did [publishers’] ways of doing business influence the literary fare that reached their customers?”

To my mind, the most illustrative example of the productive understandings that can emerge from this combined genetic–sociological reading is Groenland’s examination of the work of Gordon Lish. Lish is a figure who has attracted no little attention over the last twenty years, certainly since the Christmas Eve 2007 New Yorker publication of “‘Beginners,’ Edited” revealed the extent of the changes Lish made to Carver’s work. In Groenland’s examination of Lish’s roles as an editor, creative writing instructor, magazine editor, and author, his importance, not just for Raymond Carver, but for literary minimalism itself, is affirmed anew and significantly expanded.

Early in the section dealing with Lish and Carver, Groenland observes that “Lish represents, at the very least, a significant footnote to any assessment of Carver’s career, while Carver threatens to dominate any conversation on Lish’s achievements” (38). This dual understanding—of Carver’s career as being perhaps unfairly dominated by his relationship with Lish and vice versa—helps to point us toward what is most new and significant here: Groenland’s assessment of Lish’s career as being just as important to the development of American literary minimalism as that of his most famous editee. Groenland seeks to illuminate the importance of Lish’s


4 Sutherland, 575.

own aesthetic ideas, concepts he traces to his time as a magazine editor and creative-writing teacher at Columbia and NYU. Groenland cites Tetman Callis’s recollection that “Lish has told his students that ‘the force of English lies in its vowels’,” and his urging of “them to ‘resonate the stressed assonances in your work, in a phrase, in a clause, a paragraph, a sentence’” as early evidence of the minimalistic, detail-driven approach to literature that Lish would bring to bear in his editing of Carver (70). Just as significant is Groenland’s engagement with “Lish’s own novel Peru [1986],” which he describes as a prime example of these techniques, demonstrating how his idea of consecution tends toward a recursive, introverted narrative style and, at a sentence level, often uses the same word or phrase as a turning point or a spoke on a wheel” (106). These are fascinating insights, which shed new light onto Lish’s career, and the origins of his approach not just to editing, but to literature.

This close attention to Lish’s own background, both professional and aesthetic, makes Groenland’s later close examination of Lish’s editing of Carver—complete with reproductions of scored-through typescripts, a recurrent feature that makes Groenland’s genetic observations significantly easier to follow—much more compelling. Groenland’s central argument is that Carver’s work is “an uneasy balance between the aesthetic aims of Carver and [those of] his editor,” and the product of a working relationship that was “dialectical rather than harmonious … [involving] continuous arbitration between sensibilities and agendas” (109, 204). Yet Groenland is at pains to avoid collapsing “the distinction between author and editor into a vague notion of ‘collaboration’ … or to fold the entirety of the editor’s activity into an expansively defined set of authorial intentions” (204). Instead, Groenland argues that rather than simply expanding the authorial role to include the contributions of the editor, we need to develop an appreciation of the editor as a separate, but potentially critical, actor in the process of literary production, an understanding that should pave the way for future examinations of the role of editors in literary fiction.

There is ground here that seems ripe for further exploration. Especially intriguing is Lish himself, and the origins of his aesthetic ideals. It would have been fascinating to hear more about Lish’s own career as an author of fiction, his own works’ journeys to market, and in particular how he himself managed and negotiated the authorial–editorial relationship from the other side of Groenland’s “dialectic” during the publication of, for example, Peru. A closer examination of this kind would have strengthened Groenland’s claims for Lish as a practitioner and originator of minimalism. That said, Groenland does focus on Lish-as-editor here, and he does also point to David Winters’s “forthcoming biography of Lish,” which should provide a fascinating accompaniment to this first half of the book (105).

There is a contrast between the editorial approach of Lish and that of Groenland’s second case study here: Michael Pietsch’s editing of David Foster Wallace. Part of this difference, Groenland argues, comes from the contrasting styles of the editees. Groenland writes that, ultimately, “Every word counts in a [minimalist] short story,” but that “if a page—or even several hundred pages—is cut from a 1000-page-plus [maximalist] novel, it is less clear that the reading experience is altered in such a fundamental fashion” (229). The result is that Pietsch emerges less as the “equal partner in the dialectic of creation and destruction” that Lish was to Carver and more a “silent partner … [or] midwife” to Wallace’s maximalist texts, ushering these complex, lengthy works through the vagaries of commercial publishing (229).
As I outline above, Groenland is clearly keen to explore the origins of his editors’ aesthetic ideals as well as those of their business sense, clearly—and I think convincingly—making a claim for Lish as a key architect of minimalism itself. Meanwhile, “the key feature of Pietsch’s editing is surely the way in which he continually and successfully negotiated between commercial imperatives … and the author’s ambition and propensity for experimentation and textual abundance” (133). The key battleground in this second section is not so much between competing authorial and editorial aesthetics, but between authorial ambition and the realities of commercial publishing—realities which Groenland describes Pietsch as oscillating between enforcing and negotiating.

That is not to say that Pietsch did not contribute aesthetically to Wallace’s work. Early on Groenland cites the clear example of the “presence of endnotes” in Infinite Jest (115). “[L]ong understood to be one of the novel’s most distinctive features,” these footnotes, Groenland demonstrates, “arose, at least in part, from its editor’s insistence on readability and accessibility as necessary values,” clearly establishing the effect that publishing realities—and editorial strategies to manoeuvre around them—can have on the shape of challenging and avant-garde work (115). Indeed, some of the most significant observations in the second half of Groenland’s book come from precisely this editorial “middle management.” This is especially true in the case of Pietsch’s “trick” in marketing Infinite Jest, both inside and outside Little, Brown, “as a challenge: are you reader enough?” turning its length from a serious liability into a marketing strength (133–34). These case studies firmly establish the significance of an editor’s role not just in shaping a text on the way to a market, but also in shaping that market’s understanding of that text, adding another important aspect to our understanding of the editorial role.

Perhaps nowhere is this contrast between what, to my reading of Groenland’s text at least, we might term the ideological or aesthetic editing of Lish and the more practical editorial mediation of Pietsch clearer than in Groenland’s “Fragmento Unltd” section (151–63). Here we find what will be for scholars of Wallace’s The Pale King fascinating new insights into the most significant sections excluded by Pietsch in his assembly of the unfinished novel: “an elliptical series of vignettes set in ancient Rome during the first and second centuries” (151). Groenland does excellent work here examining these sections which were excluded from the published version of The Pale King and makes some striking observations about their symbolic relation to the text. These points are illuminating in their own right, and provide compelling evidence for Groenland’s argument that “the excision of material from an unfinished work will have an effect on its interpretation” (163). In particular, Groenland draws some compelling parallels between the self-sacrificing, self-editing characters of these sections and Wallace’s own attitudes to his mature work.

What could be expanded upon here, however, is Pietsch’s motivations for leaving—or taking—the Roman sections out. This is a clear case study of editor-as-author, and therefore a potentially very rich seam to mine. There are parallels—or contrasts—to be drawn here between one editor’s devotion to an aesthetic ideal in Lish’s near-enforcement of austere minimalism on Carver and another’s championing of his writer’s aesthetics in Pietsch’s selling of Wallace’s maximalism. In light of these excluded sections, Pietsch’s position as one of the prime movers of fragmented maximalism is thrown into potential doubt or can at least be cast in new light as an economic rather than aesthetic decision. Essentially, to me, Pietsch emerges as a highly effective supporter and salesman of literary maximalism, prepared to strongly advocate
it to potentially uncomprehending audiences inside and outside Little, Brown, but it seems harder to make the same case for him as one of maximalism’s architects as one might with Lish and minimalism.

One possible explanation for this disparity is the differences between the two editors themselves. Lish is a figure who has attracted far more attention than Pietsch from critics, biographers, and even the editors of the Paris Review, who, as Groenland explores at length, made the editor the focus of their second “Art of Editing” feature. Lish also emerges as a man of many talents, engaged in a range of cultural activities, from book and magazine editing to teaching and authoring books himself. Indeed, so strong is Groenland’s work on Lish and his preexisting commitment to minimalism that there is—almost by necessity—comparatively less on Pietsch and his life, career outside editing, training, and commitment to Wallace’s maximalism. More information on Pietsch’s own aesthetic ideals, their origins, and how his career developed before and after Wallace would give some valuable additional insight into the evolution not just of his approach to editing but also of his significance as an originator—as well as marketer—of literary maximalism.

That said, the clearest evidence that Groenland does offer for Pietsch as an architect of at least late-career Wallacean maximalism lies in his conception of the internalized editor, “This anticipation of editorial opposition” which “feeds back into the work as the writer internalizes the dynamics of the editorial process” and, in the case of Wallace, manifests itself in a growing ability and willingness to cut his own work (204). This is a rich concept, and one that allows new insights into the idea that “editing leaves a mark,” not only on paper, but also in authors’ approach to their work, with authors internalizing the feedback and ideals of their editors—for better or for worse—as their career progresses (214). Groenland’s internalized editor is a potentially incredibly useful way of conceptualizing the effects of editorial aesthetics, and again makes it clear that editors themselves are influential literary actors worthy of greater scholarly attention.

Groenland’s idea of internalized editorial influence is one that is further developed by his examination of the effects of editorial reputation. Invoking John Bryant, Groenland argues that, from the beginning of their careers, editors are “emissaries of social power,” not only holding the keys to publication, but also anticipating—and doing their best to shape—the future reception of the texts and authors they edit, further freighting the relationship between author and editor with symbolic and social capital (128). This perceptive understanding of the importance of editorial social and symbolic capital—not just for their writers, but for the careers of editors themselves—is exemplified in Groenland’s examination of Chad Harbach’s decision to give up $80,000 in additional advance “so eager [was he] to enter a working relationship with Pietsch … the editor of Infinite Jest” (135). This is a clear example of the power of the social and symbolic capital clearly wielded by that strangest of all literary actors, the famous editor.

It should be said that Groenland is—rightly—cautious throughout the book of doing what he cites Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson calling “the tendency to construct ‘an overarching historical theory from a small number of examples’” (228). Groenland is clear in acknowledging that the editorial relationships he examines are specific, unique, and perhaps above all privileged by having evidence of them preserved in archives at notable universities. Despite these caveats, however, Groenland does present a clear, detailed, and extremely productive call to examine more closely the distinct role played by editors of literary fiction. Early in the text, Groenland
bemoans the fact that “book-length treatments of editorial figures … are extremely rare” (viii). This book not only makes a compelling case for the need for such future work; it also provides an excellent model for it, and reaffirms the critical importance of appreciating editors as literary actors worthy of attention in their own right.