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## *Review of The Work of Revision by Hannah Sullivan*

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Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 349 pp.  
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The vibrant field of genetic criticism has received recent momentum from the growing interest in book history and, particularly, the rising number of digital archive projects, finally pushing aside some old critical dogmas and taboos, such as the intentional fallacy and the death of the author. A studious, astute contribution to the study of manuscripts and composition histories of modernist writers, *The Work of Revision* focuses on post-compositional change, claiming that second thoughts are as important and creative as original inspiration.

Sullivan's book explores the link between "a text's thematic or formal concerns" and its genesis (5). As Sullivan makes clear, the form of a work does not determine its method of composition and revision. Eliot's composition of *The Waste Land*, for instance, was not fragmentary because the poem itself is fragmented; nor is the poem fragmented because the writing was disorganized and unstructured. In that sense, the thematic and formal concerns of the work do not depend on its genesis. James Joyce's revise-and-expand technique of lifting words and phrases from his notebooks and adding them to his text was very deliberate, systematic, and linear, and therefore stands in contrast to his radical forms of experimentation. Moreover, his technique didn't change with the increasingly complex linguistic pyrotechnics of his later writings. The composition of *Dubliners* and *Stephen Hero* show vestiges of having been written in the same manner. Yet Sullivan rightly states that different modes of revision produce different effects, and she examines those effects with clarity and insight.

Concentrating on a practice that by its very nature "fall[s] short of a theorizable routine," she sets out to provide "a historically attentive, comparative reading of manuscript materials" (10). In essence, Sullivan considers three modes of revision: the first represented by Henry James, who mostly revised by substituting new writing for old; the second by James Joyce, who swelled his texts by endlessly embroidering his sentences and weaving in new ideas; and the third by T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore, who refined their texts by chipping away excess words and phrases to create something crisper. In adumbrating these modes, Sullivan skilfully analyses the revision practices of numerous twentieth-century writers, including W. H. Auden, Allen Ginsburg, Ernest Hemingway, and Virginia Woolf, and concludes by considering revision in the digital age. Her impressive range serves the book's comparative purpose; even where substantial ground has already been covered by previous scholars—as is the case with James, Woolf, and Joyce—Sullivan still has lots to say that is original and of interest.

The most interesting part of Sullivan's book, and the most intelligent discussion of that topic so far, is her discussion of *The Waste Land* drafts. Sullivan treats the manuscripts and typescripts as evidence of the poem's gestation, not as a somehow failed poem or (as it is often erroneously called) the "1921 text." The materials that survive are not a single text, not even a single document, but a set of papers produced over a period of time that at some point were bundled together and passed on to posterity. Sullivan rightly observes that in Valerie Eliot's facsimile this historical differentiation between documents is barely visible. I would add that the original documents now at the Berg are already a construct insofar as Eliot *chose* to preserve but to exclude (or discard) other draft materials.

Sullivan takes a fresh, detailed look at Eliot's "retentive practice" (125), by which she means Eliot's habit of Eliot's practice of assembling previously written poetic material into new poems. This form of creative assemblage kept the borders of the poem fluid and contributed to the poem's fragmented state. An essential part of this process was the decision, discussed at length with Ezra Pound, about what should go in and what should be left out. Should he cut Phlebas? Could he add "Gerontion" as a preamble? Whatever was left over might be recycled and put to use for a later work. These considerations lead Sullivan to comment on the dynamic between Eliot and Pound, the tension between Pound's cancellations and Eliot's "two-stage process of production by accretion and substitution," which she likens aptly to "watching someone sculpt wet papier-mâché" (128). Most valuably, Sullivan addresses the vexed notion of how Pound allegedly saved *The Waste Land* from mediocrity. She asks: "Why have critics been so confident that the final version of the poem is best?" (121). She observes that Pound did not so much intuit as ignore the aesthetic principles of the early drafts, preferring the poem's lyrical aspects over the narrative ones. In that respect, Pound's hand contributed to the poem's iconic form. She reverses the received opinion, however, that gives Pound responsibility for bringing out themes and symbolism only latently present in the drafts. Sullivan instead argues that Eliot's revising of the poem's aural and musical qualities complemented Pound's attempts to purge the poem. The overall process played itself out along a "compositional counterpoint" between "excision and accretion, economy and synthesis" (11, 145).

I do find myself disagreeing with the book's claim to identify a particularly modernist mode of revision. Sullivan maintains correctly that the tools authors use affect how they write and revise, and specifically that the widespread use of the typewriter as well as the often extravagant supply of page proofs influenced the process of revision. The typed or printed text offers psychologically a more "stable" text than a handwritten text, but the time-consuming job of copying a long text out by hand will limit the desire to produce multiple versions. In my view these changes in the way literary texts are produced did not by themselves produce a specifically modernist form of revision. For one, Sullivan does not fully test the changes she describes against the earlier periods from which they allegedly differ. It is manifestly untrue, for instance, that Dickens and Tennyson "worked in manuscript until the 'bon à tirer'" (8). Obsessive, elaborate revisers in their own right, they relied heavily on proofs to get their work into shape. Similarly, printing history doesn't support her argument that economic factors made (mostly non-commercial) publishers more open to providing successive runs of proofs and accepting late and extensive revisions. Changes to text already set up in type were ordinarily costed by the number, so someone had to foot the bill for those multiple proofs. Lastly, Sullivan posits that the typed page and page proof provided a "better spur to rewriting," resulting in greater textual fluidity and thus stylistic and aesthetic modernity (8). But the opportunity and means for revision are separate from effects that the author introduces during revision. Here Sullivan not only reads the finished product (and certain a priori expectations of what modernism is) back into the process, but also goes against her own subtler position elsewhere in the book. Aesthetics and the material means of revision constitute a single process that hinges on authorial agency, but the link between them is idiosyncratic rather than deterministic.

These objections aside, Sullivan deserves praise for introducing the material and economic conditions of book history into the discussion of literary genesis; too often our focus on text ignores the circumstances and conditions of production. An outstanding piece of scholarship, *The Work of Revision* valuably offers broad, comparative treatment, fascination with the complex process of

revision, and rich, detailed analysis of manuscripts and versions. Sullivan has a knack for elucidating intricate matter, without ever losing the bigger picture or getting lost in overwhelming detail.