

“the answer, as well as a technique”

A Reflection on Editorial, Creative, and Critical Labor

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the way that the practices of copy-editing technical journals, composing poetry, and ecocritical research can complement one another, drawing on individual professional, creative, and academic experience. It reports on an exercise devised to generate material for a poem by collating edits from technical copy, and works through this to compose a piece based on the UK government's 2018 environment plan. Critical reflections are then offered on the resultant text and the value of the process, with some proposals for further application.

WHILE I HAVE WORKED IN HOUSE OR FREELANCE AS A SUB-EDITOR or editorial assistant for more than twenty years, I have also pursued an academic career that — not for want of trying — has largely been conducted outside the academy since the successful completion of my PhD some years ago. My research specialism is ecopoetics, which broadly speaking concerns the way texts engage with the natural environment, and environmental crisis in particular. This interest brings together my own practice as a poet with issues covered by the publications on which I have worked: I began my career subbing periodicals for the renewable energy and waste management industries, and I have more recently worked on journals covering the built and natural environments.

Grounded

For six months of 2020 I was put on furlough from my job as a journals sub-editor, and this enabled me to devote time to an ongoing literary research project. By chance, it meant that time I might have spent editing material by land professionals was instead put to use researching the

georgic poetry of Vita Sackville-West, for an article since published in the journal *ecozon@* (GRIFFITHS 2021b). The georgic is a mode that attends to human engagement with nature, traditionally in the form of agricultural labor as in the original *Georgics* by Virgil, or Sackville-West's *The Land* (1926), although other species of georgic deal with the horticultural, as in the latter's *The Garden* (1946).

It was not lost on me that I had been granted the chance to reflect on literary work while many others were having to work much harder. I was recalled from furlough in autumn 2020, and subsequently reflected how I might quantify the work I do as my employer's only dedicated sub-editor. This reflection coincided with an invitation to submit poems for *ecozon@*'s creative section, also focusing on the georgic. As my reference point for current UK agricultural practice is my organization's own publications, I considered how I might generate new work based on the material I read professionally.

It struck me that there may be potential in compiling a list of the edits I would have made to articles published while I was on furlough, and then to read those from a literary rather than technical perspective, as though they formed texts in themselves. I thus reviewed several articles and noted for each the revisions I might have made. I limited myself to emendations to clarify meaning, make copy easier to read, and conform with house style, rather than restructuring material or raising queries as I would ordinarily do: the exercise was an experiment, and no changes would be made to the published articles. The results of my labors were four texts that I then decided needed further work to become poems or poem-like compositions.

The *ecozon@* editors had stipulated a maximum number of lines for my poetry submission; so, in order to allow room for my other pieces, I subbed text that was effectively already my subbing. Cutting material to fit a given space on the print page is a skill I have developed as a copy-editor working in desktop publishing software. Once the designer has laid out edited copy, positioning any excess text — overmatter — to one side, it has been my job to delete, paraphrase or rewrite copy to fit. Although the transition to digital publication, which has been accelerated by the pandemic, means there is now no hard limit to copy, it is still regarded as good practice to keep articles to the point, to minimize effort for the reader. Judith Butcher remarks in *Copy-Editing: The Cambridge Handbook for Editors, Authors and Publishers* that one of the “aims of copy-editing [is] to remove any obstacles between the reader and what the author wants to convey” (1992, 2). In this respect, a copy-editor puts in work so the reader does not have to.

Two of the four poems that resulted from this process appear as *Common* and *Aeration* among my *Five Neo-Georgics* in *ecozon@* (GRIFFITHS 2021a),

their titles reflecting the topics of the source material as well as an intimation of the means I used to generate them; the title of the present article is drawn from *Aeration*.

Fertile field

The technique represented a new and exciting means for me to generate text: although I have argued in my criticism that fragmented, avant-garde poetics can be more productive in engaging with environmental emergency, I have myself tended to practice a relatively conventional lyric–realist approach in my own poetry.¹ But Richard Kerridge contends in "Climate Change and Contemporary Modernist Poetry" that "neo-Modernism, and the cut-up method in particular, can bring into poetic space kinds of discourse not normally available to the personal lyric" (2007, 133).

This exercise gave me a chance to take a similar approach while drawing on my editorial skills. On the one hand it generated wording distinctively mine, honed over two decades of editorial experience on copy drafted by experts who are not themselves professional writers, helping them convey their knowledge more clearly. On the other, my edits are guided not only by the substance of a specific article but also by my adoption of a technical discourse not my own: this language works me as much as I work it. An edited article only works if it is a coherent text in which any changes are read as part of the author's writing — that is to say, they are not read as changes at all. My exercise instead abstracts those changes, drawing attention to them and the discourse they help constitute.

I am interested here in the way that my professional and creative practices differ, as much as they have in common. For one thing, it is incumbent on me as a technical editor to put the reader to no more work than is necessary by ensuring clarity and consistency. As a poet, however, I leave the sentence fragments that I have generated to the reader to interpret.

Sub stance

To assess the wider applicability of this method, I performed a similar exercise on professionally written and edited material. I read "Our new approach to managing the environment", the 15-page introduction to the

1. As evidenced among the *Five Neo-Georgics* by *Mowing* in particular.

UK government's 25-year environment plan (2018). This plan has been subject to some scrutiny by the land professions.

Where it struck me that the text would benefit from a change, I made a note of my proposed alternative, resulting in a list of edits. As with the earlier exercise, I limited myself to emendations that would clarify meaning, make copy easier to read, and ensure a consistent style, rather than restructuring or raising queries. My edits include technical corrections such as hyphenating attributive adjectives or positioning a footnote before the punctuation, as seemed to be the standard style, as well as discretionary changes such as replacing phrasal verbs with single-word alternatives or selecting synonyms such as "provide" for the buzzword "deliver".

While I do not identify the exact place for each correction, I have tended to begin and end each with one or two words that remain unchanged, with the substance of the revision or addition between these; though I have taken some poetic licence even at this stage. Reference to the source document can help place these in their original context, as well as giving an idea of the tone of current UK environmental policy.

My list of proposed edits is as follows:

indeed provide calculable
debt to them, and are thus moral
themselves; but they
Strategy, with the aim of transforming
and encouraging green innovation
world more responsibly, we
benefits that we enjoy from thanks to the natural world
and a reduction in the demands
and lower-income homes
turn, more people will want
processes, but the way
purpose; we have not always been aware
change poses the threat of unpredictable
Everyone should play
citizens, by strengthening
to put the UK at
Strategy, the UK intends
approach over coming years to help
services they provide is
lock up and store
not recorded in traditional

help ensure benefits
be better informed by a
policy, but a
state than it was handed to us.
of ozone-depleting substances
2016, to reduce hydrofluorocarbon
or are managed in such a way as to ensure that they recover
now more than 2,000 breeding
policies that will
invite organisations and people
The lists below set
already legally binding
the continuous reduction of
waters include rivers
network⁵,
by the end
generate for a given amount of raw
Substantially reducing litter
that originated on land
(POPs) being destroyed

At 41 lines long, the exercise generates roughly the same number of lines from 15 pages as the 39 lines from the original 1,500-word article on which I drew to create *Aeration*. I take this relatively small number of corrections to reflect the drafting and editorial labor of government staff; in other words, a professionally produced text needs less subbing.

I have edited this further into the following text, with the working title of *Our shared vision*:

indeed provide calculable
debt to them, and are thus moral
themselves; but they
world more responsibly, we
turn, more people will want
purpose; we have not always been aware
change poses the threat of unpredictable
Everyone should play
citizens, by strengthening
to put the UK at
services they provide is

lock up and store
 not recorded in traditional
 policy, but a
 state than it was handed to us.
 of ozone-depleting substances
 now more than 2,000 breeding
 policies that will
 invite organisations and people
 already legally binding
 the continuous reduction of
 waters include rivers
 by the end
 generate for a given amount of raw
 Substantially reducing litter
 that originated on land
 (POPs) being destroyed

The principle behind my edits was to suggest but not enforce a cadence. I was also guided by an emergent sense not entirely that of the original. I retained lines where syntax was fortuitously enjambed, as in “Everyone should play / citizens”, “more than 2,000 breeding / policies”, and most strikingly “the continuous reduction of / waters”. I was also minded to retain a line that resonated with the nature of the exercise itself, namely “generate for a given amount of raw”. But I also cut lines to make a verb of “world”, as in “they / world more responsibly”, and again to enable “we / turn, more people will want / purpose”. The lines “we have not always been aware / change poses the threat of unpredictable” leave a missing noun, “unpredictable” itself in this context, and I kept lacunae and disjunctions of this kind, as well as irregular or incorrect punctuation, capitalization, and grammar to ensure the text would still call attention to its origins and difficulties.

Compositional critique

The following observations move out of the disciplines of editing and composition and further into the critical. Criticism does already inform both practices: from my PhD onwards, my research has been prompted in part by a desire to reflect on how I write, while I draw on my close reading skills when copy-editing to identify and eliminate possible misinterpretations.

However, I wanted in this case to remove the compositional process from my conscious direction; it is here that I interpret *Our shared vision* more critically.

I am struck by the way that the discourse of environmental protection comes here to speak against itself, most obviously in that "the continuous reduction of / waters include rivers", but more broadly in the declared morality of providing "calculable / debt". The recognition that "they / world more responsibly" prompts the notional voice, the "we", to "turn", seemingly against "more people [who] will want / purpose", given that "change poses [a] threat" so "unpredictable" it cannot be named.

Abstracted from a source, the halting syntax begins to suggest the failure of language, or at least political discourse, to match up to phenomena or the moment (as also seen, around the time of writing, at COP26). The lines "Everyone should play / citizens, by strengthening" highlight the government emphasis on individual agency as an adequate response to environmental issues,² although "play" in this context connotes the performative quality of such citizenship. If consumer choice is "to put the UK at / services they provide", it suggests a nation conceived of as services (an economic understanding of work), but we may also care to read an elided "debt" after "at", given the "calculable" deficit of the first line.

This reading may overlap with a subsequent one: "services they provide is / lock up and store / not recorded in traditional / policy", which hints at covert powers of incarceration being "put at" the UK. The "state [. . .] handed to us", and the later reference to what is "already legally binding", suggest an establishment acting against those who refuse to "play / citizens"; but it is "organisations and people" that are "already legally binding", so there may perhaps be a dialectic in which they can exercise political agency over and against that "state".

A similar dynamic may be traced in the concluding lines. Although the tenor of "the continuous reduction of / waters include rivers / by the end" is hard to misread, what do those waters "generate for a given amount of raw"? Can the sense be pursued into "Substantially reducing litter", despite the capital S? The text in fact "generate[s]" sonic energy from persistent organic pollutants, the parenthetical "(POPS)" that the litter makes "being destroyed".

2. For instance, the claim that "Individual small choices — which coffee to buy and in which kind of cup; whether to drive to work or take the train — add up to a big impact on the environment" (HM GOVERNMENT 2018, 20).

Reflective reading

This reading, with so much reliance on intimation, can only be speculative; and, naturally, I cannot discount any biases on my part during composition. For example, my inference of arrests may well be informed by recent news reports of proposed powers to clamp down on environmental protestors (see RAWLINSON and ALLEGRETTI 2021).

Furthermore, in making small, local interventions in the text, the exercise offers only limited scope to critique the source; more may be made in formal ecocriticism, for instance, of the environment plan's reliance on valuing natural capital, that is, the assignment of economic value to ecosystem services such as provision of fresh air and water. But *Our shared vision* does at least pick up on the plan's valorization of individual responsibility, in the exhortation that "Everyone should play / citizens".

The reading also necessarily contorts the disjunctions between the original fragments, exhibiting a reader's tendency to try to make sense of the senseless — a tendency intensified in the practice of copy-editing. But I believe that as readers we are apt to read on through fragmentary text as far as we can. Perhaps a further stage of work would help to sub the fragments into greater coherence, but this would then downplay the work needed from readers, and in particular by critics.³ I have observed elsewhere in my research that our language cannot measure up to nature and bring it under control, which results in a "discontinuity between concept and phenomena" (GRIFFITHS 2017, 69); *Our shared vision* demonstrates this in its failure to sustain coherent sense, as well as identifying the proliferation of political discourse that environmental emergency requires, with its "2,000 breeding / policies".

At the level of an individual article, at least, an exercise such as this can expose tensions in types of discourse between what is read and what might be read, as well as rendering more clearly the biases one brings as an editor, or (re)writer, in responding to them. As creative–critical practice, the process I have outlined may be a productive teaching strategy: conducted as a class exercise, it would help students develop their skills as readers and editors. It also gives them grounds for experimental composition, and offers a fresh way of engaging with texts, whether historical or contemporary. As a thought experiment, we may ask ourselves: "What would this text

3. I would be interested in any alternative readings of *Our shared vision*, for instance.

look like if I were to edit it for a contemporary readership?", giving us an opportunity to reflect on the context of composition and our own interests and skills.

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