“Dear Mr. Whitworth/Dear Professor Fox”: Ode to an Editor and to Editing

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“A fine editor’s work is so hidden”...¹

Although in the course of my long academic career I had published eight books and many articles and essays, it was not until I became involved in writing an autobiographical account of my life as a sociologist² that I had the experience of working intensively with a personal editor. From time to time I had wistfully, and rather romantically, wondered what it would be like to have an editor like the most fortunate of “real writers” do: an editor who had a close relationship to my manuscript, to the creative process by which it was coming into being, and to me; who understood my intentions; who was both critical and empathic; and who was endowed with the technical skill, the artistry, and the discernment to know what to do, and not to do, to make my writing better. However, in the spheres of academic journal and book publishing in which I moved, my contacts with editors had generally been confined to those aspects of their roles that pertained to the screening, review, and the so-called production of manuscripts, and to a limited form of copy editing, executed impersonally by someone who usually remained anonymous, and did not exhibit either a feeling for language or a masterly command of grammar.

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¹ Judith C. Watkins, personal communication, June 29, 2010.

² Renée C. Fox, *In The Field: A Sociologist’s Journey*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2010.

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From the outset of my decision to undertake the writing of an autobiographical work, I was convinced that I would need an editor who could help me to meet some of the challenges that I anticipated authoring such a book would entail. The book that I envisioned was what I thought of as an “ethnographic autobiography,” rather than a conventional memoir. It would draw on the very large corpus of “thickly descriptive”³ field notes in my files that emanated from my professional lifetime as a participant observer whose primary genre of sociological inquiry had been firsthand field research. It would chronicle where that research, and the trajectory of my career as a sociologist of which it was a part, had carried me — inwardly, as well as outwardly — and how that “journeying,” and my vocation as a sociologist, were connected with my origins, and with key events in my personal life history. I planned to combine narrative and expository writing by lacing certain themes through the “story” dimension of the book in a way that I hoped would contribute to its structure and focus and, without becoming too didactically explicit, would provide some analytic perspective on the events that I recounted. The “audience” for the book that I had in mind was more general than a strictly academic, or a social scientist, readership.

As I proceeded to write, it quickly became apparent that a major kind of editing help that I needed was assistance in cutting my manuscript. Because of the detailed “thickness” of my field notes, the many decades that they spanned, the retentiveness of my

³ The concept of “thick description” was coined and developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his essay, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 3–30.

memory, to which my participant observation had contributed, and my rather prolix writing style, my manuscript became more and more voluminous. What was called for, I felt, was not only shortening and excising sentences and paragraphs, and perhaps even whole sections and chapters of the manuscript, but also shaping the book that was emerging so that it was more thematically centered. The fact that I had not yet found a title for it seemed to me to indicate that it was not sufficiently taut. At the same time, I was concerned about whether the “titleless” state of the book might be a symptom of its excessive egocentricity: its failure to open out onto happenings and issues that extended beyond the boundaries of myself.

* * *

It was through the intermediary of the author and editor Anne Fadiman that I was introduced to an editor of stature who eventually agreed to work with me on my manuscript. I had come to know Anne by reading her luminous, nonfiction literary writing,⁴ and through my association with her when she was the editor of *The American Scholar*, the quarterly magazine published by the Phi Beta Kappa Society. During my term as a member of the *Scholar's* editorial board, I had had the opportunity to directly observe her highly intelligent and perceptive skills as an editor, and her capacity to work with a wide range of writers and fellow editors; and I had also been the personal beneficiary of the subtle, incisive editing that she had done on an essay I had written that was accepted for publication in the *Scholar*.⁵ She was highly qualified to help me find an excellent editor for my book, I thought, and when I asked for her assistance in doing so, she responded rapidly, and with warmth. There were two possible candidates she had in mind, she said, the foremost of whom was William Whitworth, who had worked at *The New Yorker* for fourteen years, where he had been an associate editor, and who subsequently became the editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*, a position that he held for twenty years, after which he was named its emeritus editor. Anne described Mr. Whitworth, who had collaborated with her in editing

numerous *Scholar* pieces, as “a spectacularly good editor... and also a spectacularly nice man.”

On August 19, 2008, after Anne had approached Mr. Whitworth on my behalf, I sent him an e-mail in which I told him how privileged I felt to be contacting an editor whom Anne had characterized as “spectacular,” to ask whether he might be willing to take on my book project. “Don’t be fooled by Anne Fadiman’s enthusiasm,” he replied the next day. “I might be of no help to your book. But I’m pleased to be considered for the job, and you and I can discuss the possibilities at your convenience.” He offered to telephone me from his home in Little Rock, Arkansas (the city in which he had grown up, and to which he had returned, following his years editing *The Atlantic*), to discuss the matter further. After this call had taken place, I e-mailed him to say how much I had learned from his comments about the craft of editing — especially about the attributes of different kinds of narratives, the rhythm in which an editor does his work, and its synchrony with the characteristics of the writer and of the text. I told him that in response to his request, I was sending him a sample of some of the chapters I had thus far completed, including the introduction to the book and its first chapters, for which he had specifically asked. I also gave him the best estimate I could of the manuscript’s eventual length, and assured him that since I still had quite a few chapters to write before bringing the book to a close, it would not be a problem for me if he could not turn to my manuscript until he had completed the editing job in which he was currently engaged.

Over the course of the next three months, we continued to exchange e-mails. Throughout this period, it remained unclear whether he would assent to be my editor, although he persisted in asking me to send him more and more chapters, which he said he was “reading hastily, not with a pencil in hand.” As he read and commented on them, he repeatedly raised several interrelated questions: how much and what kind of cutting my manuscript, which he described as “very clean,” really needed; whether it was the sort of line editing that he usually provided, or only copy editing; and above all, whether there was anything significant that he could contribute to it. “It may be the case that I have nothing useful to offer,” he recurrently stated, while assuring me that he was not “sitting in judgment” on my book, and that he considered me to be “an excellent writer.” “I’m encouraged for you, in that the book is fascinating, and the writing is lovely,” he commented at one point. “But I’m discouraged for the prospect of being of any assistance, since I’m seeing only small cuts.” He went on to say, “Long manuscripts are nearly always easy to cut when they’re expository, because most writers take too long to make their point, and say in a long book something that could have been said in a long article.... Narrative is more

⁴ Anne Fadiman is the author of three books: *The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997; *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998; and *At Large And Small: Familiar Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. She is also the editor of *Rereadings: Seventeen Writers Revisit Books They Love*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

⁵ Renée C. Fox, “Going Up to Oxford,” *The American Scholar*, Vol. 68, No.4 (Autumn 1999), pp. 91–110.

difficult to cut, unless it's filled with boring asides," he added. "You've committed the sin of living too interesting a life, with the result that holding down the size of the book will be difficult."

Another issue with which Mr. Whitworth seemed to be wrestling concerned the fee he should ask for if he agreed to work on my book — one that would adequately compensate him without, as he once colorfully phrased it, "bankrupting a retired professor" like me. When he finally made an outright statement about this problem he declared "after decades of lobbying for more money for writers, at both *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, it is deeply painful for me to accept money from a writer — a member of a vital class of workers who are routinely abused and underpaid." He went on to tell me that he was "almost always employed by a publisher, not a writer," and that his "discomfort" in my case was "especially great because of the economy we're in," which no doubt had punished my retirement funds, as it had his.

I kept Anne Fadiman informed about these Whitworth/Fox exchanges, remarking to her in one of my e-mails that an intriguing short story could be written about the prolonged correspondence that was taking place between a scrupulous, hesitating editor and an eagerly supplicating author. Anne was "guardedly optimistic" about its outcome, especially after a telephone conversation she had with Mr. Whitworth, "mostly about other stuff, but a little about you," she said. "He really likes your book," she reported, "thinks you're a good writer, thinks your life has been fascinating, and isn't sure he can contribute enough to be worth your while (though I told him that I thought what he might think of as 'not enough' might seem plenty by anyone else's lights). I'd say the chances are better than even that he'll take it on," she concluded.

Anne's statement to Mr. Whitworth about the more-than-adequate contribution that he could make to my manuscript may have had a catalytic effect, because a week after their conversation, he sent me an e-mail headed, "Latest thoughts," in which he affirmed that there had been "no question from the start that being asked to work with you is [an] honor. I'm certainly willing to undertake that work," he wrote, "if we can get past these potential problems." In an itemized list, he identified four problems. First, he would not be able to give his full attention to the project until mid-January, at the earliest (i.e., three months hence). Second, he worked "only with pencil and paper. I can't bear to read and correct on a computer screen," he declared, "and (so far) publishers have indulged me. This means that you would receive from me a marked-up manuscript, not a corrected-on-screen version that you could simply email to your publisher. It means further that you or your publisher would have to key in all the scores of commas and cuts and other fiddles — an annoying and time-consuming chore." The third problem might prove to be "the most important one,"

he conjectured: the fee that he was proposing for a book the size of mine. "If that is a difficult number, please say so," he urged. Finally, "I am still not convinced that you need me" is what he listed as the fourth problem. "You certainly would be better off financially to have me deal only with cuts...". "However," he added, "we can proceed if you like, if we get past Points 1, 2, and 3."

"It is I, rather than you, who should feel honored by the fact that you are willing to undertake the editing of my book," I immediately responded. "I unequivocally accept the conditions for working with me that you state under Points 1, 2, and 3. And as for your Point 4, I am completely convinced that I need you to deal with whatever line editing and shaping have to be done on the manuscript, as well as the cuts."

"OK, we'll proceed," was his instant reply. "I'll nibble occasionally now, but hope to actually go to work in mid- or late January."

What followed next was an e-mail dispatch from Mr. Whitworth in which he presented me with what he called "a dry run of cuts" that he had made in the Introduction and Chapter 15 of my manuscript, accompanied by short explanations of why he had made them. Showing them to me was "only part of an exercise," he said. "If suggestions of this sort are painful or wrong-headed, you must say so, because a politeness contest would waste your time and mine."

"The cuts are perfect!" I replied with exuberant appreciation. "What you cut from the Introduction removes some pretty prose, but you are right when you say that what you excised was 'just throat-clearing.' I was trying to work my way into starting the book, and stating what kind of a book it would be. I was also making too much of an effort to justify writing it.... What you cut from Chapter 15 needed to go. When I wrote what you removed, I sensed that [it] added nothing to the text except a dreary detail. But at the time, for no good reason, I could not bring myself to delete it."

At the end of November, in keeping with the arrangements that we had made, I mailed a first installment check to Mr. Whitworth for a sum that constituted half of the fee on which we had agreed. In his acknowledgement of the arrival of the check he informed me that he was putting it in a savings account "until our work is done, in case our efforts are disappointing."

* * *

The next time that I heard from him was in mid-January 2009, when he sent me a note to say hello, wish me a happy new year, tell me that he was planning to get to work on my manuscript around the middle of the next month, and to inquire how the writing was going. I suggested that we catch up with each other via a telephone call. It was in the course of our ensuing conversation that I ventured to ask him

whether he thought that now that we would be working closely together we might cease to address each other as “Professor Fox” and “Mr. Whitworth,” as we had throughout our five month-long correspondence, and move on to the first-name basis of “Renée” and “Bill.” He readily assented, and then proceeded to tell me that during all the years that he had worked for, and with William Shawn, the legendary editor of *The New Yorker*, and his revered mentor, they had always called each other “Mr. Shawn” and “Mr. Whitworth.”⁶

* * *

In the end, it was in early March (2009) that Mr. Whitworth — now “Bill” — ceased what he called “nibbling” on my manuscript, and began to work full-time on it. During this process, which lasted until the end of July, I received periodic e-mails from him. They were usually written in his characteristically pithy style, always courteous, gentlemanly, and modest in tone, sometimes self-deprecating, and often dryly witty. They consistently contained encouraging messages about the quality of my writing, chapters of the book he especially liked, and what he adamantly insisted was the “very light” editing that my manuscript was requiring. Occasionally the messages that I received from him concerned an editorial matter about which he sought my opinion or collaboration: if I agreed to a cut that was more than minor, for example; or whether we could assume that the publisher would allow us to make cuts, and move sections in the galley proof because, he explained, “My experience from the beginning of my career is that no matter how much work you do in manuscript, and no matter how good that work is, cold clean type inevitably shows you that there is more work to do.” He also wrote to me at greater length, and more emphatically than usual, about the importance of formulating a definition of “ethnography” and inserting it in the text. “I think it’s imperative that we come up with an unlabored, fairly brief definition [he declared] (not for academics, of course, but for civilian readers), especially because this isn’t just a word but a method that has been so important to your whole career, and that comes up over and over in the book.”

I was acutely aware that as Bill read and edited my ethnographic autobiography, he was learning more and more about me, whereas in comparison I knew little about him other than what Anne Fadiman had told me, and what I had gleaned from the few entries that I had found by Googling “William Whitworth.” However, from time to time, something that he

came across in my manuscript led him to share some personal reflections with me. For instance, in an e-mail that he signed “Bill, pulling us both off course,” he told me that as he was looking back over some early chapters, and reading about the writers I had read in college, he was wondering if I had ever had time to read Edith Wharton, whom he characterized “as somewhat of an anthropologist herself; the tribe that she studied...was that of the rich in New York. And what a writer!” he exclaimed. “Some of the descriptions in *Age of Innocence* make me laugh out loud.” I answered his question by saying that unfortunately, I had never read this novel, and asked him whether he thought I would enjoy reading it now. “Renée, I don’t think we know each other well enough for me to say with any certainty that you would enjoy *Innocence*,” he replied. “But I’m guessing that you would, because it’s subtle, insightful, and beautifully written. I’ve read it two or three times....” He went on to say that like me, he had had a “strong dose” of 19th century British and American literature in high school and college, but also quite a bit of 20th century American literature, and Shakespeare, and “a wonderful course on the Bible (King James) as literature.” He then proceeded to share an anecdote with me about how in his junior year in college he had gone home for Christmas expecting to be told by mail that he had earned an A in the Bible course. “A week later,” he recounted, “I received a postcard from Professor Raines, who thought I hadn’t worked hard enough, that read: “‘Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.’ 1 Peter 5:8 — B+”. I replied with an e-mail informing Bill that I had ordered a copy of *Innocence*, in which I included the comment that, as he knew from my manuscript, I had never had a teacher who thundered at me biblically the way that Professor Raines did at him. Although I still remembered the B+ that I had received on a paper from my freshman English teacher, he had delivered it to me “in a more gentle, less awesome way.” This set of exchanges between us ended after I wrote to Bill about how much pleasure I had experienced in reading *Innocence*. He responded by saying that he was glad that I did, and agreed with me that it was “very touching and very wise,” as well as “witty.” “Wharton was just a beautiful writer,” he continued. “I enjoy the novel technically, too. She understands narrative, knows how to manage the passage of time.... [She] can get briskly out of a scene — knows that we don’t have to see the characters putting on their coats and saying goodbye; she just jumps to the next chapter.”

* * *

Four months later, in mid-July, Bill alerted me to the fact that he would soon be sending the entire edited manuscript. He could have sent me more than half the book weeks ago,

⁶ William Shawn worked at *The New Yorker* for fifty-four years, from 1933 to 1987. He served as its editor from 1952 until his departure from the magazine. Although he is reputed to have been a very shy and self-effacing man, out of their extraordinary respect for him, most of his colleagues addressed him as “Mr. Shawn.”

he said, but “I haven’t wanted to let go of [a] part before I finished the whole. The chapters can interact with each other. When I reach the end...I want to at least look over everything from the start.... One advantage of my completing the whole manuscript before passing it on to you is that I’ll be free to handle your complaints and questions about all my scribbles.” He also informed me that he had hired his daughter Katherine (with no expense to me) to do a fact check of the manuscript, “because every time I’ve worked on a book that wasn’t checked I’ve eventually regretted being associated with a project that turned out to have little holes in it.” Bill assured me that she was “an accomplished checker, who has worked on two presidential biographies, an autobiography by a former chairman of the World Bank, and a baseball book by a *Sports Illustrated* staff writer, in addition to her magazine work.”

While he was in the midst of his final “run-through” of the manuscript, he wrote to forewarn me that no matter how careful he and his daughter were, there would be “errors of omission and commission.” This cautionary statement led him to describe to me in considerable detail what he called “the neurotic system” invented by Harold Ross⁷ and William Shawn at *The New Yorker*, which he had later installed at *The Atlantic*. In this system, as Bill depicted it, “each article was repeatedly read and revised by the editor of the magazine, the article editor, the fact checker, the galley proofreader, the author, and ‘the Page OKer’.... And still an error crept into the magazine process occasionally,” Bill declared. “As William Shawn famously said,” he concluded, “‘Falling short of perfection is just an endless process.’”

* * *

At what seemed to be this penultimate stage in the editing of my book, I reopened with Bill the unfinished business of deciding on a title and a subtitle for it. He proposed *In The Field* as one possible title. It had a double entendre that I liked, referring both to my being in the field of sociology, as a teacher, researcher, and writer, and as one whose research had been done primarily through field methods of direct observation and in situ interviewing. I, in turn, suggested something like “The Life Journey of a Sociologist” for the subtitle, with which he was discontent because in his view, “even a fairly well educated reader, browsing in a bookstore, has only the haziest notion of what a sociologist is, or does.... [A]s the reader scans the dozens of titles, how do we stop him and get him to look inside? I fear that ‘Life Journey of a Sociologist’ doesn’t

even hint at the bold, pioneering, swashbuckling, world-straddling, adventurous, intrepid life you have led. Perhaps we need a jacket photo of you in hip boots and pith helmet?” I playfully disabused him of this image of me. I thought he would be amused, I responded, if he could see the framed series of snapshots of me and my closest sociological colleague in the Congo, amidst the copper mines of the country’s South Katanga region, which I have hung in my study. I am wearing an immaculately pressed, somewhat stylish summer dress, hose, and pumps in those photos, I told him, and my hair is coiffed in a neat, page-boy style. There was an element of self-mockery that had led me to make a montage of those photos, so different from the image of me that he had constructed, and to put them on display. Needless to say, I informed him, no photo of me, clad in hip boots and a pith helmet, existed in my files that could be used for his imagined book jacket.⁸

* * *

On August 21, Bill informed me that the edited manuscript was en route to me. “You must be feeling liberated,” I replied. “Before me [there now] stretches what I anticipate will be an instructive and uplifting experience, seeing the work that a Master Editor like you has done on it.” “‘Uplifting?’” was the rejoinder that came back from Bill. “Please don’t expect so much, Renée. I told you from the beginning that you didn’t need me, and much of what I’ve done is extremely mundane — punctuation and small grammar points.”

His disclaimer notwithstanding, as I had anticipated, the editing that Bill Whitworth had done on my book was neither commonplace nor meager. Rather, penciled in his neat script along the margins of most of the pages of my large manuscript, were a myriad of editing and proofreading marks, and verbal comments, queries, objections, and suggestions. Bill had told me beforehand that I would find “hundreds of proposed changes — commas, em dashes, en dashes, hyphens, quotes, transpositions, deletions, etc.” — that he had written on the text. And indeed, this proved to be the case. Many of these changes concerned matters of grammar, punctuation, the appropriate use of capital and lower-case letters, and syntax. “It may seem that I’ve arbitrarily changed nearly all your ‘which’es to ‘that’s,’” he wrote in a letter that accompanied the manuscript. “I did make many such changes, but they weren’t arbitrary. They have to do with the difference between restrictive (or defining) and non-restrictive (or non-

⁷ Harold Ross was the founder of *The New Yorker*, and its editor from 1925 until his death in 1951.

⁸ *In The Field* became the title of my published book. I eventually opted for *A Sociologist’s Journey* as its subtitle. Although it is probable that Bill Whitworth did not think that the latter was the best choice I could have made, he was too polite to tell me so.

defining) relative clauses, as explained in Fowler (under “that”).⁹ “It also may seem that I’ve arbitrarily deleted many of your commas, arbitrarily moved others around, and arbitrarily given you new ones. Again, the changes are not arbitrary but are based on logic, as outlined (to some extent) in the *Chicago Manual*.”¹⁰

Other changes that Bill suggested concerned some of my word choices. For example, he recommended, “where my family and I *lived*,” rather than where my family and I “*resided*”; “the story I *produced*,” rather than “the story I “*construed*”; “cosmic *immensity*,” rather than “cosmic *enormity*”; “an *eminent* scholar,” rather than a “*reputed* scholar” (“Or some such,” Bill commented. “‘Reputed’ is not the same as ‘of repute’”); and “what was *happening*,” instead of “what was *transpiring*” (because “popular misuse [is] still disapproved.”)

Occasionally, he flagged an amusing lapse of logic in my phraseology — such as when I wrote about “the sound of a bugle blowing reveille,” to which he responded in a marginal note, “the bugle can’t blow.” He also astutely identified some of my stylistic quirks, among them my baroque tendency to embellish a noun by placing three successive adjectives in front of it, or to encumber a sentence with what he characterized as “three- and four- part lists,” and “doubles” — as I did in the following sentence: “My conviction that these were qualities and capacities that would be valuable to them in whatever course their future personal and professional lives might take was a major source of the significance and satisfaction that I found in teaching undergraduates at Barnard.” (Bill edited this sentence to read: “My conviction that these were capacities that would be valuable to them in whatever course their future lives might take was a major source of the significance and satisfaction that I found in teaching undergraduates at Barnard.”) In addition, from time to time, he advised me to make certain cuts: “Renée, please cut. A dead end. You say you’re going to the Plenary Assembly and then tell nothing about this. Too many abstract (and repeated) statements about worthy goals.”

The courteous and collaborative language that Bill used to convey the suggestions and corrections that he made was

as impressive as the meticulous intelligence of his editing. He never gave a command. Rather, he usually prefaced his instructions with, “Please,” or “let’s.” He was inclined to use inclusive and collective, first person pronouns, like “we” and “our,” in the way that he phrased his criticisms, thereby removing any accusatory implications from them, and implying that, as he once put it, “we are in this together.” He offered to discuss any changes he had made that were “puzzling and/or annoying” to me, and he repeatedly assured me that he did not expect me to agree with, or accept, everything he had proposed. Furthermore, despite the pencil-and-paper evidence of the extensive amount of editing he had done on my manuscript, he insisted that it had needed much less work than many others he had edited. And he continued to refer to me as a “good writer.”

* * *

I accepted virtually all of Bill’s editing. Although it did not involve many substantive changes or major cuts, his editing made my writing clearer and simpler, and also more precise and elegant. In subtle, but deep-structure ways, this had a felicitous effect on the entire manuscript. I was both elated and immensely grateful to Bill, and I told him so. By the third week in November, with the professional assistance of a colleague and friend (Judith Watkins), a research librarian, I had inserted all of his penciled changes into the computerized version of the manuscript, and was preparing to send it off to the publisher right after Thanksgiving. In the e-mail that I sent Bill containing this news, I mentioned in passing that I had been astonished to discover that the manuscript now consisted of nine-hundred-fifty-five typed pages. “955 pages!” he replied. “Hmmm. This will make a hefty book, though not an unusually large one.” He was looking forward to receiving the proofs, he wrote, but because he had moved onto other projects, he would have to share reading them with his daughter (Katherine). “Speaking as her editor, rather than as her father,” he attested, “I say that all will be well, because she has a very good eye.” He signed off by wishing me a happy Thanksgiving, and expressing the hope that the publisher would “design a pretty book” for me.

* * *

My sense of achievement and positive expectancy was very short-lived. At the end of the first week in December, immediately after he had received what I regarded as a completed manuscript, Irving Louis Horowitz, the chairman of the board and the editorial director of Transaction

⁹ What Whitworth termed “the authority for change” to which he referred here was Henry W. Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*, the second edition, lightly revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, published in 1965.

¹⁰ *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Other references that Whitworth invoked included Garner’s *Modern American Usage* (edited by Bryan Garner), and Theodore M. Bernstein’s *The Careful Writer: A Guide to Modern English Usage*, in addition to Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* mentioned above.

Publishers, with whom I had a contract to publish my book, sent me a two-page letter, via postal mail, in which he informed me that primarily because of financial constraints in the present “volatile publishing environment,” it would be “impossible” to proceed with putting my book into print. The size of my manuscript exceeded “the limits of academic publishing,” he wrote — limits that “had to be observed.” He reminded me that a clause in my signed contract with Transaction stated that “the approximate length and illustrative content of the manuscript will be 300 book pages...in 12 pt. Courier type (or the equivalent).” According to his rough calculations, the manuscript that I had delivered to him would constitute a printed volume that was more than twice that number of printed pages. “We will not hold your hand to the fire, should you wish to explore other publishing options with the manuscript in its present form,” he continued. “But if you wish to take seriously the limitation of our house, and work within our guidelines... that would, of course, be the preferred option.” His letter concluded with “good wishes and congratulations on the completion of an amazing journey, even if it does not include publication by Transaction Publishers.”

In the e-mail that I sent to Bill about this distressing development, I told him that it would be a great help to me in thinking through how I should proceed, if I could talk to him about what had occurred. He responded immediately, and a telephone call was arranged for the following day. With the help of his guidance I made the decision to agree to publish a shortened version of my book under the auspices of Transaction. From the outset of our conversation, it became apparent that Bill regarded what lay ahead as a joint venture he would undertake along with me; that he assumed he would not only supervise, but actually do, a great deal of the drastic cutting it would entail; that he considered this job to be an extension of the substantial editing he had already done on the manuscript; and that he would tenaciously refuse to accept any additional money from me for the onerous extra work. In the letter that I subsequently wrote to Irving Louis Horowitz to tell him that I agreed to reduce the size of my book and publish it with Transaction, I informed him that Bill would be working with me — probably beginning in mid-January (2010). I also asked him if he would be willing for us to cut the manuscript down to four hundred, rather than three hundred, pages. That would be in keeping with the description of the book that had appeared in Transaction’s Spring/Summer 2010 catalogue, I pointed out, and “would help to insure that the cutting we do will not mutilate the book.” In consideration of what he referred to as my “flexibility,” Horowitz made this concession.

I involved Judith Watkins in the process that lay ahead. At Bill’s request, she reformatted the manuscript so that the page layout came closer to what a Transaction proof would

look like. Because this version contained more words per page than the original manuscript, it was more compact; but according to Bill’s calculations, in order to get the book down to four hundred printed pages, we would have to cut two hundred fifty pages, which he likened to “cutting a good-sized book out of your book.” The cutting went on until early March, when we finally reached a deleted-page count of two hundred and forty five, at which point Judith Watkins once again assumed the task of keying all the changes that had been made in the manuscript into the computer.

I had initiated the process of cutting while Bill was completing another editing assignment; but within the course of only a few weeks, he moved from what he called “glancing” at the manuscript to working on it full-time. A continuous stream of e-mail bulletins about the progress of the cutting flowed rapidly back and forth between us. At first, Bill expressed “alarm” over how many chapters were “gliding by [us] with no cuts at all.... Our problem, of course, is that if we are willing to cut only what we’d like to cut then we won’t cut anything.” Part of this problem, he wrote, was that certain chapters and sections “can’t be — or at least shouldn’t be, in my opinion — shrunk.... They’re too good.” By the time we had reached the third week in February, he was broaching the question of whether I could “even contemplate the possibility of deleting whole chapters.” He was “more and more convinced,” he stated, “that we aren’t going to reach our goal by cutting a page here and a page there — or even five pages here and five pages there. The math just doesn’t work out. I’m sure that some chapters are going to have to go and that it’s only a question of which ones.... Please think about this, and I’ll keep looking.”

“For a start,” the first two chapters that Bill “nominated” to be cut (all of chapters 25 and 26) chronicled my experiences in conducting field research in China during the summer of 1985. Those chapters were preceded by two others in which I extensively described the prior trips I had made to China in 1978 and 1981. “My reasoning,” Bill explained is: “First, they’re long enough to make a difference; we’d lose 48 pages. Second, they come after we’ve already given extraordinary attention to China. Third, the newness of China has worn off by the time we get to 25 — that feeling of almost being on another planet. Now it’s more routine.... I’m not knocking these chapters. I’m just saying that it’s impossible for them to be as fresh as 23 and 24 are. (And 23 and 24 are not only fresh, but very good — the writing, the characters, etc.).” We also mutually agreed to eliminate a chapter that dealt with invited lectures I had given, elected offices I had held, professional traveling I had done, and honors I had received because, in my opinion, it sounded too self-vaunting (an opinion that Bill tactfully supported with silent assent.) In

addition, either he, or I, or both of us found other candidates for substantial cuts in the excessive amount of detail that I was inclined to transfer from my field notes into the manuscript — for example, reproducing the menus of meals that were served at certain celebratory events (ranging from a banquet that took place in Beijing, to a luncheon held in Philadelphia to mark my eightieth birthday), or quoting exceedingly long passages from personal and professional correspondence, and from a variety of secondary, as well as primary, documents.

Nonetheless, Bill clung to the conviction that there were certain chapters that should not be touched — foremost of which were those that contained an account of my childhood, by which he repeatedly said he was “charmed.”

Gradually, Bill’s optimism about reaching our “magic number” of four hundred pages increased. “I’ve been all through the book, as of late this afternoon,” he reported. “Using the most generous count — that is, assuming that you would accept all my proposed cuts and also all of yours, including the ones you offered reluctantly — we now have about 187 pages in cuts.... The cuts...bring us down to a new total of 478 pages. This is very close...to our goal of 400 pages. Also, I would say that at this point we not only haven’t harmed the book but probably have improved it, from the reader’s standpoint. (That is, shorter is always better, except in the case of *Middlemarch*.)”

Working together on this daunting and stressful undertaking seemed to draw us closer together. “Renée, the changes you sent me last night for Chapter 4 matched word for word and line by line the ones that I had proposed on the manuscript yesterday afternoon. We must be in tune,” Bill declared (although when I enthusiastically confirmed this in my answer to him, he characteristically cautioned me not to “overdo this thought,” and expressed concern about the fact that “no doubt,” he was suggesting numerous cuts that I “wouldn’t want, or would at least find painful.” Throughout all the stages of cutting, he showed this kind of solicitude (“I hope this process isn’t too harrowing for you. If you focus on the fact that (as I see it, anyway) we haven’t hurt the book so far and that slimming down is an aesthetic virtue, then you can relax and enjoy the exercise of your extremely high-level professional expertise...”). He also provided me with constant support and reassurance (“Our problem isn’t complicated, it’s just difficult...” “I think it will work out if everyone remains calm.”... “We’ll make our number somehow.”...).

Finally, the day arrived when Bill felt he could write, “You might want to break out the champagne, or at least the ginger ale. By my rough (but pretty accurate, I think) count we now have 244 pages of cuts. That brings us very close to our goal of a manuscript of 400 pages. Though you may regard some of the cuts as unfortunate, I sincerely believe that the book is better as the result of our efforts.” When I

attempted to thank him for all that he had done for the book and for me “so generously, and with such skill and artistry,” he replied that it had been “a shared chore,” and that I had probably suggested as many cuts as he had, if not more. “No writer enjoys seeing her work cut,” he maintained. “Your effort has been heroic.... You have done unselfish, magnificent work.”

The manuscript that I mailed to Transaction Publishers in the first week of April was four hundred seventy-three pages long. It was accepted without further difficulty. In early May, I received the page proofs of the book from Transaction’s managing editor, which I read line-by-line, and that Bill “speed-read”(aided by his daughter), as he had promised. They looked “pretty good,” he said, although inevitably, he found “little fixes to make here and there.”

At the bottom of the last page of the set of proofs that he corrected and sent to me for my perusal, Bill wrote a final, penciled comment: “What a career. What a life!” With that statement, our work together ended.

* * *

This encounter of almost two years’ duration, between an editor and an author, had many dimensions. It began as a formal, “Dear Mr. Whitworth/Dear Professor Fox” relationship, and evolved into a more informal, “Dear Bill/Dear Renée” one. Within the professional framework and boundaries that it maintained, it grew more personal over time. But what the editor and the author came to know about one another was asymmetrical. From his work on the author’s manuscript, especially because of the book’s autobiographical nature, the editor learned more about the author than she did about him. On the other hand, there was mutuality in some of the other kinds of knowledge that they exchanged. The editor contended that his immersion in the content of the author’s manuscript had “introduced [him] to precincts that [he] had never visited before.” Reciprocally, via his e-mails and above all, through his countless penciled marks and comments on the pages of her manuscript, the editor taught the author about intellectual, grammatical, aesthetic, historical, and moral components of writing and editing that had been imperceptible, or unknown, to her before.

But analyzing this relationship in such an academically phrased, third-person way does not capture its human essences, its spirit, or its meaning. An event that took place after my book had gone to press comes closer to doing so.

Anne Fadiman had told me that she and Bill Whitworth had known each other for a long time, and had worked closely on manuscripts during the last four years of the seven years that she was the editor of *The American*

Scholar.¹¹ In speaking of Bill, she once described him as “the- best- friend- I have- whom- I- have- never- met.” All of their communication had taken place through e-mail and telephone, which was true of my relationship to Bill, as well. This was the genesis of an idea that I proposed to Anne in March 2010, when Bill’s editing of my book was approaching its end. I suggested that we make a trip together to Little Rock, Arkansas, to visit Bill in his hometown, where we could finally meet him in person. She responded immediately, with eagerness, and offered to approach Bill about the prospect on behalf of both of us. “Bill was really pleased,” Anne informed me, after she had contacted him. “He said he would love to have us.... I can always tell when he’s assenting to something out of his characteristic politeness, and when he really wants to do it. This is the latter.” And so it was that on July 6th, Anne and I embarked on a pilgrimage-like journey to spend two-and-a-half days with Bill Whitworth.

Bill looked like the image of him that I had constructed in my mind from a photo taken when he was editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*, which I had found online, and from the glimpses of some of his personality and character traits that had come through in his editing, and his communication with me. He was a fit, fine-boned, slender man, of medium height, with neatly barbered graying, red-blond hair that framed his frontal baldness, a small, carefully trimmed beard and mustache, and bright-blue eyes. He appeared to be much younger than his age (seventy-three). His face was expressively intelligent and kind, his gaze both direct and shy. His mien was serious, but his sense of humor was visible when he smiled. He spoke softly, with a trace of an Arkansas-southern accent in his speech. Throughout the time that we spent with him, he was meticulously dressed in neat khaki trousers, and each day, in a fresh, open-necked, blue shirt. To these he added a bow tie and a dark-blue jacket when we had a festive dinner in a stylish local restaurant with him and his daughter, Katherine, on the second night of our visit.

Bill devoted himself to gallantly and systematically squiring Anne and me around Little Rock in his car to see its various old and new neighborhoods (in a city that has progressively moved west from its downtown area), and its historical sites (including the Governor’s Mansion, the State Capitol Building, the Clinton Presidential Library, and Central High School — which Bill attended — and which in 1957 became the confrontational site of the first test for the implementation of the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate schools.)

But for us, what was of surpassing personal significance were the afternoon hours that we spent in Bill’s home. This was more than a conventional social visit, because in inviting us into his house, and taking us from room to room to see it, Bill also gave us physical access to certain objects associated with personal aspects of his life, about which he spoke at some length. From a group of photographs on one of the walls of his front sitting-room (which included a picture of the great jazz trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie), and from Bill’s commentary on them, we learned about his love of music, especially of jazz, his experience as a trumpet player, and his membership and performance in a number of bands during his younger years. After he had played a choice selection of jazz for us that he picked from the collection of CDs piled neatly on a cabinet behind two large speakers, he ushered us into a small library, where we spent a considerable amount of time. It was in this room that many things associated with his career as an editor were displayed, or stored. The shelves that lined it were filled with books that he had edited. Hanging above them were a series of framed National Magazine Award(s) for General Excellence that *The Atlantic* had received during the twenty years that Bill was its editor.

In the course of our long conversation about editing that took place here, Bill showed Anne and me proofs from his collection of articles that had been published in *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* during his editorships on those magazines. Their pages were blackened by all the comments, suggestions, changes, transpositions, and rewrites that covered them. And for some of the articles, there was no less than a four inch-high stack of associated proofs!

* * *

Bill had insisted on picking Anne and me up at the airport upon our arrival in Little Rock, when he had expressed appreciation for “how perfectly” we had coordinated our flight schedules, although we were debarking from, and returning to, different places. But then, he had added, “I shouldn’t be surprised: two perfectionists.” On the morning of our closely timed departures, he drove us back to the airport where, with Anne’s camera, we took photos of what we had come to think of as our special “threesome.”

After we had left Little Rock, a flurry of e-mails went back and forth between us. Bill wrote to say how “pleased, amazed, entertained, and embarrassed he was by our trip to Little Rock.... You undertook a long journey despite the inconvenience and obstacles.... There are only two ways you could have improved my time with you — you could have stayed an extra day, and you could have let me pay for dinner. I’m not complaining, though. I’m more grateful for

¹¹ Anne Fadiman was editor of *The American Scholar* from 1998 to 2004. Bill Whitworth and she worked together during the years 2001 to 2004.

your trip than I know how to say.” And Anne and I wrote to each other about the way that the three of us had become more deeply connected — in part, through our mutual love of literature, writing, and words, and our appreciation of what editing of the highest excellence entailed and meant. This relationship, with its “tripod-like stability,” she reflected, “would be...hard...to explain to an outsider, since its intimacy is based on such an anomalous history: years of long-distance communication followed by fewer than three days of very close contact....and friendship-consolidation....The uniqueness of our structure makes it seem even more magical.”

* * *

It is not very likely that I will ever have another face-to-face visit with Bill Whitworth. I am eighty-two years old, and therefore travel less than I previously did. By his own admission, Bill is “seldom able (or willing) to venture farther away than North Little Rock.” But I will always

think of him as a supreme editor, and in a non-possessive way, as “my” editor.

If I am really lucky, I will have time to write the book that I am now contemplating, and “Mr. Whitworth”/“Bill” will agree to edit it.

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