

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

I wrote the first edition of this book in various foreign locales—airports, hotel rooms, on a tropical beach or two—in the mid-to-late '80s. I had to do it away from home, because there was no time to work on it in New York, where my time was largely consumed by the job this book describes: editing novels.

Just possibly there was also a faint element of sheepishness about writing a book that said most of my editor-colleagues in the industry don't know what they're doing, and I was giving myself a bogus sense of detachment from such betrayal by doing the scribbling in that modern no-man's-land, an anonymous European departure lounge.

It was originally published under the three-word title *The Fiction Editor*. Within weeks, feedback from the field revealed that the vast majority of the buyers were, perhaps predictably, not editors, but writers. So we seized the occasion of the first reprinting to change the title to *The Fiction Editor, the Novel, and the Novelist*.

In the years since then, I've learned a good deal more about the book and the subject I believed I was finished with. After editing novels for thirty-five years, I retired to move to the other side of the desk: I became a writer, not of novels, but of plays. Before I began *The Fiction Editor*, I had supplemented my own experience by reading scores of biographies and memoirs of writers and earlier editors, and a bookcase-full of popular how-to-write-fiction instructionals. Now I was expanding my range: In addition to what I was picking up in the on-the-job training of writing plays, I was reading play-scripts, and books by and about playwrights.

All of this was supplemented further by an unexpected re-visiting of my school days. I conceived the beginnings of a play in which one of the main characters was a philosophy professor; his specialty was aesthetics. To prepare myself, I became happily embroiled in an online Philosophy of Art forum, which forced me to do extensive reading—initially in aesthetics, but quite soon in more fundamental disciplines such as philosophy of language, of mind, and ontology. It was—and is—dense, sticky stuff, but less alien to me than it might sound because my undergraduate and graduate work had been in philosophy.

So since the '80s my education has been extended by those three experiences: the feedback from readers of the book, including reviewers during the fifteen years it was available; the immersion in a nominally new world—theater—but which ultimately has at its core the same preoccupation as publishing—storytelling; and a developing grasp of the insights and confusions of philosophy today as it talks about language and “art”.

When the book finally went out of print here and in England, I sighed, because I'd felt it had some useful bits in it. Then Paul Dry came to me with a proposal to reissue it. I quickly assented. He planned to reset the book, so, he said, incorporating any changes or corrections would be no problem. Neither he nor I realized what that would get me into. What I originally thought would be a weekend's work—writing this new introduction—has lasted much, much longer.

A few sections have remained fairly intact, like the opening remarks about sensibility, and my later energetic growl about the concept of “theme” and its use in teaching “literature appreciation”. But my extended education has had its effect almost everywhere else in this revision. Even the recent four years of unlikely advanced “graduate work” in philosophy have had an impact: The “three stages of an act of art” are now effectively four stages, and I've become far less tolerant of that would-be philosopher, T. S. Eliot, in his guise as literary analyst.

I've sharply reduced the number of neologisms that I invented back then to label new concepts, and I've worked to

clarify those that remain. At first I was dismayed to sense I was paradoxically making the book less cluttered but more untidy. But as I reviewed the immense variety in the method and product of the great novelists, I concluded that any book pretending to reduce the art and craft of novel-writing to a nice neat package was obviously getting it wrong.

There are still more new concepts and ideas in this second edition—a quick comparison of the tables of contents will corroborate that. Which probably means if I could live another fifteen or twenty years I'd be able to improve what's here, and come up with still more novel stuff. Fifteen years from now I'd do a better job—an assertion that, given my age, I presume will never be proved or disproved. I'm both proud of and embarrassed by that first edition and this second edition. I wish they were better.

One motif recurs throughout both Editions: The profession of novel-editing needs a textbook, an instructional manual of sorts. I picture it as being an organized compendium of the working wisdom of the best editors, past and present. It can never tell much about the art, but it can preserve a great deal about the craft of being an editor. I'm convinced that would be worth doing because I still believe in the lines on the prefatory page coming up—enough so that I want to repeat here the most romantic of those lines:

The fiction editor who has the needed talent and skills can be a combination doctor, teacher, coach, and conscience who could benefit any writer who ever lived.