Proofs of Genius
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Introduction

This book originates from my interest in the history of literary editing, particularly in how it has shaped my own field of American literature. How has the way we organize, package, and represent literature impacted the culture in which it is produced? The subject of editing seems straightforward, and to its critics even dry, but editorial choices have stealthily shaped the American literary canon for centuries, forging authorial legacies, producing regional and national propaganda, and generally working as a determinant for what and how we consider American literature. There are many kinds of editing, of course, including commercial editors who work with authors to publish their texts in magazines or books for the first time, consultants who improve the readability of a work, scholars who treat historical materials, and so on—editing is really a broad term that includes a range of labor that has grown increasingly specialized, from the early stationers who edited, printed, and sold books in one shop to the highly segmented scholarly and commercial markets of today. But through the radical transformations of the American literary marketplace from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, one kind of editing has held firm as the gold standard, as the way we assert the lasting value of an author and his or her works within the canon: the creation of collected editions.

From the earliest days of the Republic when printer Francis Bailey helped produce a collected edition of Philip Freneau, “the Poet of the Revolution,” to the digital age, when scholars at research universities collaborate to create a dynamic and ever-growing collected edition of the works of Walt Whitman, collected editions have powerfully but for the most part silently helped shape the way authorship and textuality have been viewed in the American cultural imaginary. This book examines how collected editions
have helped shape American literature, erecting monuments to individual people on the cultural landscape. My study does not attempt to be comprehensive, but instead examines several important periods and cases in the development of the genre within the American national context. In doing so it looks at how representative authors, editors, publishers, and readers have used the collected edition to build national and regional cultural identity, to assert intellectual property, to market books, to construct feminized and private literary marketplaces, to manage authorial reputation, to influence the humanities, and to construct the field of digital literary scholarship. A more encyclopedic, international examination of the collected edition—a massive undertaking—would also be valuable to book history, but my focus on American collected editions allows this study to more clearly examine the way the genre has functioned within a specific national literary economy, helping to forge an American literary canon and providing an aspirational standard for professional and amateur authors, as well as publishers and editors, as those roles were becoming defined and redefined. This introduction will describe the book’s working definition of “collected edition,” discuss how the concept of genius provided a motivation for many of the volumes, and offer a brief overview of how the collected edition has helped build a national literary identity.

1. DEFINING “COLLECTED EDITION”

Historical shifts in the genre of the collected edition demand that any wide-ranging study work with a flexible understanding of the form. Except when they provide illuminating examples, I have omitted collected editions of theological, political, and historical materials, limiting this study to literary texts. Even with that limitation, I find “collected edition” tricky to define. Today we think of collected editions as complete collections of a single author’s writings (with “writings” itself being a fraught category with nebulous boundaries) professionally published after his or her death. But almost none of the features in this definition have been historically obligatory: some collected editions were conspicuously incomplete (usually omitting works that were deemed so minor as to not affect the edition’s comprehensiveness), sometimes they collected works by more than one author, sometimes they were published while the author was still alive and productive, and sometimes they were published by friends, family, enemies, or the author himself.

Even though there are few characteristics that all collected editions have
in common, and certainly none that can be considered the “essence” of the collected edition, they tend to share several of the following overlapping features: a large gathering of texts, published as a single entity or uniformly bound set of volumes, centered around the identity of an author, purporting to be comprehensive, and edited posthumously or at the end of an author’s career. Despite variability, something about these volumes seems to bind them together as a literary form, and because of the variability of the collected edition, the form has been flexible and responsive to developments in authorship, printing technology, and intellectual property.

Editors of collected editions have had to balance two seemingly opposite concerns: gathering in and sorting out. Historically, they have struck different balances between these two impulses, but generally the genre has evolved to include more and more, partly to justify the publication of new collected editions, and partly because technological developments have made inclusion more practicable. After the industrialization of the book starting in about 1830, uniform binding reinforced the suggestion that a set of works written by a single author were figuratively and literally bound together, and the author became a convenient organizing principle for combining multiple works, reinforced by and reinforcing the Romantic conception of the author as the best way to understand literature. Conversely, authors began to see the collected edition as the height of accomplishment, a way of gathering and enshrining a life’s work. Andrew Nash has argued that by the end of the nineteenth century “a collected edition was the summit of Parnassus.”

The canonical giants of the United States thought so, but this book will also trace how the collected edition was an aspirational form for amateur poets and their families, resulting in complex and nuanced applications of the genre. The collected edition appealed to authors at all stages of their careers because it harnessed so much about modern authorship: it drew on a broadening middle class to produce and consume intellectual property, new legal commitments to protect that property, and new technologies to disseminate it, and it catered to authors’ and readers’ patriotic interests in attaching a biography to a career of works.

2. GENIUS AND THE COLLECTED EDITION

Many of the authors honored by collected editions were lauded in the volumes as geniuses, such as Joseph Brown Ladd, M.D., killed in a duel in his youth, who is referred to as a “genius” some seven times in the introductory
materials of his posthumous collection. “Genius” is a nebulous and historically rich term that deserves discussion here, as it partially motivated so many of these volumes.

“Genius” in a sense resembling how we use it today—though not so intimately associated with intellect then as now—became a popular concept by the end of the eighteenth century, yoked to the rise of the bourgeoisie. In his study of genius, Darrin M. McMahon argues that the concurrent rise of professional authorship bolstered the concept of genius: authors benefited when the public saw them as unique minds outputting special intellectual property. The collected edition became an effective way of packaging this genius, connecting all the author’s works to his biography and name, and creating a salable product so the literate classes could own that genius for themselves.

In the nineteenth century popular understandings of genius took on added dimensions, with some intellectuals asserting that a genius was consciously or unconsciously connected to the eternal, to what Shelley called the “universal mind” and Blake referred to as “Universal Poetic Genius.” When American readers beheld an American genius—enshrined in a collected edition honoring the fruits of his creative labor—they beheld evidence of God’s blessings on the new nation, evidence that the country was capable of producing minds with a divine connection and prosperous enough to develop them.

Place was crucial to some Romantic understandings of genius. McMahon traces how some people in the nineteenth century came to think that a genius “could not be conceived apart from the people and nation in which he was rooted, for the genius was like a plant that grew in the soil of a particular culture and place.” Collected editions tend to embrace this understanding of genius, putting forth their subjects as evidence of the fertile intellectual climate that produced them, as when George Beck's widow tried to sell volumes of his writing as “exhibit[ing] to the world a proof of Kentuckian genius, and the existing and progressive state of the Arts in the Western country.”

The nineteenth century also continued a long history of viewing madness as one of the by-products of genius—poets and artists who brushed too close to the source of genius did so at the risk of their sanity. This dimension of genius was particularly emphasized in the introductions and biographies of many collected editions of amateur women writers, who were often depicted as dying young because genius had sapped their health, or
because divine mercy would spare them a descent into madness that was likely to come if their genius reached maturity.

When scholarly editing rose as a profession in the twentieth century, it continued to honor literary genius through collected editions. During the Cold War, the elaborate, quasi-scientific apparatuses of government-funded Cold War editions conspicuously demonstrated that we didn’t just have national geniuses, we also had the resources to invest in highly technical humanities scholarship. When digital editing rose in the late twentieth century, it expanded the kinds of texts that a collected edition might include as well as their presentation, but still usually relied on the individual genius as the foundational principle for the work.

What has counted as a work worth including in a collected edition has been historically malleable. In the eighteenth century and through most of the nineteenth, a collected edition could be uncontroversially considered comprehensive if it included all the texts by an author that a reader of good taste, represented by the editor, found worthwhile. Juvenilia, rejected materials, and other marginal texts were regularly excluded from collected editions. As the form evolved, markets for larger sets of volumes developed, and the inclusion of texts previously seen as inconsequential now came to reinforce the importance of the author and his genius: whereas early collected editions tended to disseminate texts primarily suitable for reading, later ones demonstrated that a particular author was of such stature that we should want to own even his discarded jottings.

The biographical content of collected editions also expanded over time. When private memorial volumes—often called “poetical remains” or “literary remains”—were published to commemorate dead amateur authors in the nineteenth century, they typically included a biography of the author that was presented much like a eulogy. Eventually, as collected editions gathered more and more content around the nucleus of authorial identity, more biographical material was included, too, sometimes including separate volumes of correspondence to help illuminate and honor the genius at the center of the collection. In the present decade, some digital collected editions attempt to gather unprecedented materials that shed light on the life and times of the author, most notably the Whitman Archive’s inclusion of historical and contemporary criticism on Whitman, all known photographs of the poet, and even three thousand documents he wrote as a clerk in the attorney general’s office.
3. WHAT COLLECTED EDITIONS DO

The collected edition has developed differently in different national contexts. In England’s long literary history, collected editions stretch back to 1526 with Richard Pynson’s collection of Chaucer, and were responsive to that country’s political and literary development. In Germany, editing vernacular German texts was within the academic purview of philologists beginning in the nineteenth century, whereas the United States did not professionalize the editing of its literature until the mid-twentieth century. Editorial approaches to British and American literature converged in the Cold War era (concentrating on recovering final authorial intention), while Germany developed alternative principles for editing modern scholarly editions (focusing on offering a picture of the text’s history).

This volume focuses on the development of the collected edition within the unique cultural and political history of the United States. The nation’s founding and early political development roughly coincided with the industrialization of the book, so the United States offers a rare case study in how a late-arrived national literature developed alongside the modern industry that materially produced that literature.

The American collected edition has functioned as an ideological sponge, absorbing changing conceptions of who is an author, what is a work, what constitutes American cultural accomplishment, and who should be reading or consuming American literature. George Bornstein has argued that collected editions “permeate our culture to an extent that makes them seem somehow natural,” which largely results from the genre’s versatility. At various points in its development, the collected edition tells us much about the culture that produced it. When Helen Masterson died in the early eighteenth century, her family gathered her intellectual property into a scrapbook and labeled it “litterary [sic] remains,” a genre that would evolve over the next several decades to eventually include Emily Dickinson’s first posthumous collection. This largely feminized subtype of the collected edition developed alongside the grandiose public monuments that male public poets came to view as the crowning achievement of a life’s work and the guarantor of a lasting legacy.

The cultural work of such volumes is evident not only in their content, but also in their material forms. As collected editions developed over the nineteenth century, they became ways for consumers to populate home libraries with conspicuous, space-consuming displays of their own education.
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and good taste, much like Dr. Eliot’s Five Foot Shelf of Harvard Classics. Unlike those classics, however, American collected editions were evidence of patriotically minded reading habits, with handsome editions of Lowell and Whitman prominently asserting the owner’s familiarity with American literature. The volumes were conspicuous enough to function as furniture, a decorative household object that combined utility with taste and social position. In one of the few studies of historical American collected editions, Michael Anesko has argued that at the end of the nineteenth century the form became a hybrid of cheap mass production—the uniform bindings and pricing were made possible by industrialized printing—and preindustrial, handcrafted touches, such as handwritten limited edition numbers or even tipped-in manuscript pages. Together, these helped the form combine highbrow culture with mass-market consumerism.10

This blend of the popular and the rarified continued through the twentieth century, when American literature was reedited into weighty collected editions that combined a hoped-for mass audience of students and scholars in the postwar and post–G.I. Bill academy with the new and specialized profession of scholarly editing. Similarly, in the digital age, digital collected editions are created by academics with extremely specialized training at the intersection of the humanities and computer science, typically using editorial standards developed for and by a niche market of academic labor, even though the editions themselves often serve as widely used public humanities projects.

This book examines five significant subtopics in the history of the American collected edition. The first chapter examines the early history of the collected edition in the United States. The first American collected editions frequently spotlighted the talents of authors who were meant to represent the potential of the new nation or specific regions within it. The first collection published in the United States, by Philip Freneau, emphasized his revolutionary politics and demonstrated that the new nation was capable of producing a national—and revolutionary—literature, while Joseph Brown Ladd’s posthumous volume showed that “genius and the labors of genius form an important ingredient in that glory of a nation, which the patriot is wont to contemplate.”

Because the books were organized around the identity of particular authors, they could represent the kinds of people that came from particular locales. These early collected editions were more flexible than the ones we know today, sometimes including multiple authors or writings by still
living authors. This chapter argues that the genre shifted in response to
Lockean conceptions of intellectual property that were solidifying in the
early Republic, evidenced by how women, children, and slaves, who had
less than full property rights, sometimes shared authorship of collected edi-
tions, which reflected their diminished claims to property in general. The
industrialization of the book contributed to the popularity of the collected
edition: as bookbinding became more homogenous beginning in the 1830s,
collections based on authorial identity became an uncontroversial way of
organizing materials for sale, which contributed to the standardization of
the form.

In chapter 2, I explore the phenomenon of literary or poetical remains,
which provided an important and mostly overlooked context for the post-
humous publication of Emily Dickinson's poems. Women poets, who of-
ten labored under the veil of modesty, keeping their productions private
throughout their lives, were sometimes rewarded after death with a vol-
ume of literary remains. These volumes, typically introduced by a respected
man of letters or community leader, were usually circulated privately as a
way of collecting and distributing the dead woman's intellectual proper-
ity to friends and family and honoring her talents posthumously with the
acknowledgment that she eschewed in life. Dickinson's first posthumous
edition was published in the pattern of these remains: gathered by friends
and family, introduced by the most prominent figure who could be enlisted,
paid for by her family, and received initially as an exemplar of the genre.

Likewise, Whitman's poetic career can be more fully understood by
considering the context of the collected edition. Chapter 3 argues that the
notion of self-collection was a guiding principle in how he published his
work. Whitman entertained two models of self-collection, each of which
corresponded with funerary arrangements: in the first, he would treat both
his body of work and his body organically, collecting and distributing his
work through *Leaves of Grass* and his decomposed body through actual
leaves of grass. In the second, he would construct a conventional, public
memorial for both his works, in the form of a collected edition, and his
body, in a mausoleum, which would serve as recognizable shrines to gen-
erations of admirers.

Chapter 4 studies the influential midcentury Greg-Bowers method for
editing texts, and examines how the professional, scholarly editing of Amer-
ican authors arose in the context of the Cold War academy. Government-
funded editions from this period helped produce a vision of an American
national literature and the American academy that was anchored in the Cold War political climate of the United States, exerting soft power as the United States attempted to concretize and spread its values. These editions, the first to apply rigorous, academic methodologies and apparatuses to American literature, were both embraced as cultural accomplishments that uplifted American authors by purifying their texts and vilified as pedantic enemies of traditional literary scholarship.

In the final chapter, I examine how even through the tumultuous theory wars and into the digital age, collected editions have served to silently and steadily reinforce authorship as the primary lens through which texts should be read, sometimes unreflectively reinforcing assumptions about authorship and canonicity. While the author continues to work quite well as an organizing principle and critical lens for many readers of many texts, it seems to have been emphasized in digital editing at the expense of developing methods that might better align with other ways we wish to read. I argue that technological limitations have contributed to the singular status of author-centric collected editions in the digital age, and conclude by considering some potential alternative digital methodologies that might more robustly support the heterogeneous approaches of the modern academy—alongside, of course, this flexible, powerful, underexamined genre that has silently shaped American literature.