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Abstract / Keynote

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Remediating Revision: Thoreau`s Walden and the Challenge of the Fluid-Text Edition

In considering how editions work as sites of mediation, it is helpful to remember that they are also sites of remediation — of translation, of transformation, of re-presentation. An edition mediates not only between editors and readers but among various instantiations of the text itself, presenting the text anew, if not an entirely new text. It is particularly important to keep this fact in mind when creating an edition designed to help readers understand how a text came to be. A genetic or fluid-text edition remediates repeatedly. Describing the manuscript's surfaces, transcribing the words on those surfaces, encoding description and transcription in a machine-readable language such as XML/TEI, producing a visual representation of that encoding for screen or printed page, and last — but decidedly not least — working up a reasonable narrative account of some sequence of revisions evident within or between multiple drafts of the manuscript, an account that might illuminate the author's meaning, intentions, and creative process: these are all acts of remediation, each with its attendant challenges. Collectively, they take both editors and readers successively farther from their source object even as they offer the promise of insight into the object's significance. An editorial team that sets out to remediate a text with a messy revision history will want to do so in ways that pay proper respect to the author, the text, the complexity of the revision process, and the needs of readers. How will their choices affect their ability to accomplish their aim? This lecture will not pretend to answer that question decisively, but it will describe how the team at Digital Thoreau has grappled with the question for its current project on the revision history of Henry David Thoreau's Walden.