Has editing had its day? A Dutch publisher recently described to me how a British author had sent her the first draft of his new book. Though a great admirer of his work, she felt that this time he hadn't done justice to his material. So they sat down together and mapped out a different perspective and storyline and he went away and rewrote the book. It's not often you hear publishers speak of being so frankly interventionist — and I wondered if that was why the author had sent his book to a Dutch editor, because this kind of intense collaborative process between author and editor no longer exists in Britain.

A novelist friend, hearing the story, said: ‘When I hand in a book, I've usually been working on it for several years, so I like to think there'll be little left to do to it. But if I did need editing, I'm not sure, these days, I could get it.’

A graduate student of mine at Goldsmiths College expressed similar nostalgia in an email: ‘I have a notion of editors in days of yore,’ he wrote, ‘being straight-backed and terrifying, all integrity and no bullshit, responding to a vocational calling and above all driven by a love of the word, brave enough not only to champion the best but also to tell their authors whatever might be needed to improve the work. And that now such personalities are as distant a myth in publishing as yer Shanklys and yer Cloughs are to football, that sharp-dressed corporate beasts run the show, reluctant to make decisions of their own, and ill-equipped to challenge those who rule a star-led system, so that everyone from JK Rowling to David Eggers suffers from the lack of scissors that might have been to their benefit.’

Just after getting that email, I read about a literary conference at which both writers and agents were complaining that, because of the pressures they're under, modern-day editors simply don't have the time to edit. A news item about an initiative by Macmillan to encourage first novelists left a similar impression — the authors will receive royalties but no advances; however, if their books needed significant editing, they will have to pay for the services of a freelance editor, since no one can do it in-house.
If editing is in decline, that's bad for literature. History suggests that while some authors work alone, more or less unaided, the majority benefit from editors — and that a few are utterly dependent on them. Take Thomas Wolfe, not the white-suited New Journalist and author of Bonfire of the Vanities, but the other Tom Wolfe, his outsize predecessor, a man of 6ft 6ins, who used to stand up while he was writing, using the top of a fridge as his desk. Clearly standing didn’t inhibit Wolfe's productivity. The typescript of his first novel, as submitted to Scribner in New York, was more than 300,000 words — what a contemporary publisher would call ‘fuck-off long’. But a young editor at Scribner, Maxwell Perkins, agreed to publish it, if Wolfe agreed to cut 90,000 words, and between them they did the job.

Soon Wolfe was working on a second novel. By early 1933 it was four times as long as the uncut version of the first — and growing at a rate of 50,000 words a month. ‘I think I'll have to take the book away from him,’ Perkins told colleagues, and invited Wolfe to gather all he'd written and bring it into the office, since he was sure the skeleton was already there. Some skeleton. There were jokes about the typescript being delivered by truck. The bundle stood two feet high — more than 3,000 pages, unnumbered — and this was only the first part of the novel. They began working together, two hours a day, six days a week — then nights, from 8.30 onwards; then Sunday nights as well. It was like painting the Forth Bridge. Wolfe would be asked for a short linking paragraph — and return a few days later with 10,000 words. In the end, while Wolfe was out of town for a few days, Perkins had the typescript set — all 450,000 words. It was published as Of Time and the River, and though another of Perkins's authors, Hemingway, said it was ‘something over 60 per cent shit,’ it became a bestseller. Wolfe later wrote an account of its composition, ‘the ten thousand fittings, changings, triumphs and surrenders that went into the making of a book.’

There was a sad end to the Wolfe story. First rumours circulated about all the help he’d received, then a damaging piece appeared in the Saturday Review alleging that any organisational skills and critical intelligence in his work were down to Perkins. Wolfe grew resentful and paranoid, and in a letter accused Perkins of wanting to destroy him (the letter, characteristically, ran to 28 pages). ‘Restrain my adjectives, by all means,’ he wrote, ‘moderate ... my incondite exuberance, but don't derail the train, don't take the Pacific Limited and switch it down the siding towards Hogwart Junction,’ Shortly afterwards Wolfe ditched Perkins and went round telling people: ‘I'm going to show them I can write my books
without Max.’ It didn’t happen. There wasn’t the time for it to happen. Wolfe died of TB and pneumonia, at 37.

Wolfe’s dependency on Perkins was extreme. It's not so life-and-death with most of us. But all writers need editors.

A truism. All writers need editors. So why isn't the matter more discussed?

There are several reasons, I think. The editorial tradition, first of all, is for self-effacement. As human beings, editors may be far from self-effacing, but as workers their contribution goes largely unacknowledged — a nod in the preface or a thank-you from the author at the launch party and that’s it. They’re the ghosts in the machine, the secret sharers, the anonymous power behind the throne.

And when they do come out from the shadows to write their own memoirs, they tend to be bland and uninformative. This isn't true of Diana Athill's Stet or Jennie Erdal's Ghosting, both excellent and at times very funny books about working with authors. But Tom Maschler's recent autobiography is more typical in its unrevealingness. Maschler is an outstanding publisher, whose list at Cape includes Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, John Fowles, Kurt Vonnegut, Philip Roth — but none of the many anecdotes he recounts about drinks, lunches, dinners, parties and prize ceremonies sheds light on the process of editing. ‘I have often been asked to define what makes one decide on a particular book,’ he writes in the closing pages. Ah-ha, we think, here it comes. ‘The choice is so personal, so subjective ... To publish well the publisher must be passionate about the book for its own sake ... and for me to care I must admire it for its quality.’ Well, thanks, Tom, that’s really cleared things up.

Writers have done little to clarify the role of editors, either. Where the experience of being edited goes well, they’re grateful, but the more publicised cases are when the experience is bad. Henry James called editing ‘the butcher's trade’. Byron associated it with emasculation and, he said, would ‘have no gelding’. DH Lawrence compared it to trying ‘to clip my own nose into shape with scissors.’ And John Updike says: ‘It’s a little like going to ... the barber,’ adding, ‘I have never liked haircuts.’ Or listen to the condescension of Nabokov: ‘By editor I suppose you mean proofreader.’ There are, of course, many different kinds of editor — from fact-checkers and OKers (as they’re known at the New Yorker), to line-editors and copy editors, to editors who grasp the big picture but skip the detail. But in popular mythology they’re lumped together as
bullyboys, bouncers or, to quote Nabokov again, ‘pompous avuncular brutes’.

Those who can, write; those who can’t, edit — that seems to be the line. I prefer TS Eliot. Asked if editors were no more than failed writers, he replied: ‘Perhaps — but so are most writers.’

Behind hostile images of the editor lies the pressure of Romantic ideology, according to which the writer is seen as a solitary creative genius or Übermensch -and the editor as a meddling middlebrow. ‘Invisible behind his arras,’ one Victorian critic wrote, ‘the author’s unsuspected enemy works to the sure discomfiture of all original ability — this fool in the dark who knows not what he mars.’ What the editor is accused of marring isn’t just originality but that other cherished notion of Romantic ideology, ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’ By this measure, any sort of interference with a text is a violation. Even authors are castigated for tidying up their younger selves, as Wordsworth did with the 1850 Prelude and Auden did by revising or disowning poems he had written in the 1930s. But the real enemies are held to be a writer’s friends, family and publishers, whose suggestions can only dilute or contaminate the pure spring of inspiration. The accusation that Ted Hughes was ‘suppressing’ Sylvia Plath when he rearranged the original edition of Ariel and left out certain passages from her Letters and Journals, was connected to a suspicion that he had driven her to suicide — silencing her twice over. Something similar has been alleged against Percy Bysshe Shelley, for the changes he made to his wife Mary’s novel Frankenstein, changes which one commentator has described as ‘a kind of rape,’ a ‘collaboration forced by a more dominant writer on a less powerful and perhaps unwilling “partner”’. In fact, Mary seems to have been a fully consenting adult, who approached editing as she did parenting — ‘the good parent, like the good author, neither abandons its offspring nor seeks wholly to control or shape them’ — but the accusation that she was violated remains.

Perhaps I’ve been unusually lucky, but in my experience, editors, far from coercing and squashing writers, do exactly the opposite, elucidating them and drawing them out, or, when they’re exhausted and on the point of giving up (like marathon runners hitting the wall), coaxing them to go the extra mile. And yet this myth of the destructive editor — the dolt with the blue pencil — is pervasive, not least in academe. Perhaps the antipathy stems from the perceived difference between the publisher and the scholar: for whereas a scholarly editor, appearing late in the day and with the wisdom of hindsight, seeks to restore a classic, the publisher’s editor is the idiot who ruined it in the first place.
A good illustration of this antipathy is the Cambridge edition of DH Lawrence. ‘Here at last is Sons and Lovers in full: uncut and uncensored,’ the editors of the 1992 Cambridge edition crow triumphantly. Their introduction goes on to allege that in being reduced by 10%, the text was ‘mangled’; that the editor Edward Garnett's censorship was ‘coy and intrusive’; that Lawrence ‘reacted to Garnett's decision to cut the novel with 'sadness and grief,' but was powerless to resist’; and that when Garnett told him further cuts were to be made, Lawrence ‘exploded’ with rage.

Read Lawrence’s letters and you get a rather different impression. ‘All right,’ he tells Garnett, ‘take out what you think necessary,’ and gives him licence to do as he sees fit: ‘I don't mind what you squash out ... I feel always so deep in your debt.’ Lawrence was short of money, it's true, and had his mind on other things, having recently eloped with Frieda. Even so, when he writes that ‘the thought of you pedgilling away at the novel frets me’ (pedgilling, a nice coinage, a cross between pencilling and abridging), the fret isn't what Garnett will do to the text, it's that the task is an unfair imposition: ‘Why can't I do those things?’ And when Lawrence is finally sent proofs, he's not unhappy. ‘You did the pruning jolly well,’ he tells Garnett, and dedicates the book to him: ‘I wish I weren't so profuse — or prolix, or whatever it is.’

It's true that, just as some writers write too much, some editors edit too much. As the New Yorker writer Renata Adler acerbically puts it, there are those who ‘cannot leave a text intact, eating through it leaf and branch, like tent caterpillars, leaving everywhere their mark.’ When he edited the magazine Granta, Bill Buford was sometimes accused of being overbearingly interventionist — in his spare time he hung out with football hooligans, and it was said he brought the same thuggishness to editing, though personally I never found him brutal in the least. At the other extreme are the quiet, nurturing sorts, the editors who ease you through so gently that when they do tamper with the text you barely notice and can kid yourself they did no work at all. Frank O'Connor compared his editor William Maxwell to ‘a good teacher who does not say “Imitate me” but “This is what I think you are trying to say.”’

When people speak of writer's block, they think of the writer stalled over a blank page, or of throwing scrunched-up bits of paper — false starts — into a waste bin. But there's another kind of block, which is structural, when you've written tens of thousands of words, but can't figure out which are superfluous and what goes where. Something's wrong, but you don't know what it is, and that can make you pretty desperate, so that if some new acquaintance rashly expresses an interest in what you've written, as happens to
the Californian wine buff and would-be published author Miles in Alexander Payne's recent film Sideways, you foist your typescript on them, which in Miles's case means retrieving from the back seat of his car not one whacking heap of pages but two, and even though you know this will a) place the recipient in an awkward situation b) sprain his or her back and/or c) ruin a beautiful friendship, still, you do it anyway, because you're desperate.

And that's why editors matter, not as butchers and barbers, but because what's wrong with a book can be something the author has repressed all knowledge of, something glaringly obvious which, the moment an editor or other reader identifies it, you think yes, of course, Eureka, and then you go back and fix it. Editing might be a bloody trade. But knives aren't the exclusive property of butchers. Surgeons use them too.

Three major works of early 20th-century literature — Sons and Lovers, The Waste Land and The Great Gatsby — were transformed by the interventions of others. The uncut version of Sons and Lovers is the one in general use now, so we can see exactly what Garnett took out. Mostly, he pared back passages about Paul Morel's brother, William, at the risk of betraying the title of the novel, which declares this to be a book about 'sons', plural, but mostly with a gain in focus and narrative pace. The censorship, too, is largely innocuous. 'She had the most beautiful hips he had ever imagined,' Lawrence writes, when Paul sees Miriam naked for the first time. Garnett changed 'hips' to 'body', which seems to me an improvement, 'hips' being an odd thing for Paul to focus on and, I suspect, a euphemism, and at any rate not a major breakthrough in sexual candour.

The one serious misjudgment Garnett made concerns the scene where Paul and Clara go back to her mother's house, after a night in town at the opera. Paul is invited to stay over and use Clara's bed while she sleeps with her mother. He hopes to have sex with Clara, nonetheless, and it's only when her mother refuses to leave them alone together that he reluctantly makes his way upstairs to Clara's bedroom and undresses. Garnett cut the following:

Then he realised that there was a pair of [Clara's] stockings on a chair. He got up stealthily, and put them on himself. Then he sat still, and knew he would have to have her. After that he sat erect on the bed . . .

A braver editor might have allowed Lawrence both his double entendre — 'erect' — and the authentic resoluteness of a man on heat ('he would have to have her'). But the real censorship
concerns those stockings. Too kinky, Garnett must have reasoned. The sensible Clara might have thought the same, had she known what Paul was getting up to in her bedroom, and not responded to him as warmly as she does when he creeps back downstairs and finds her naked in front of the fire. (Garnett trimmed a paragraph from this scene too, including a reference to Paul holding a large breast in each hand, ‘like big fruits in their cups’.) Still, for us it’s an insight into Paul — a clue to his feminine side, perhaps, or closet transvestism, or masturbatory male heterosexuality, or, on a deeper level, his need to know what it feels like to be Clara. The modern reader wants the stockings, and will wonder why Garnett didn't dispense with the Mills & Boon stuff instead (‘She gave herself. He held her fast. It was a moment intense almost to agony’). But this is now, and that was then, and by making Sons and Lovers a novel which, unlike The Rainbow, escaped moral denunciation and legal writs, Garnett did Lawrence a service — as also did Frieda, Jessie Chambers and Louie Burrows, all of whom read the book in draft and made suggestions.

Thanks to the discovery of the original typescript of The Waste Land, in the New York Public Library in 1968, Ezra Pound’s part in the poem’s composition is well-known. Most of his comments are plain and workmanlike — a fellow maker offering sound advice. ‘Verse not interesting enough,’ he scrawls in the margin; ‘Too easy’, ‘Inversions not warranted’, ‘rhyme drags it out to diffuseness’. He’s particularly severe whenever the poem teeters into Prufrockian tentativeness — ‘make up yr mind’, ‘Perhaps be damned’ and ‘dam per'apsez’, he complains. Other cuts are motivated by ear, not logic — Eliot at this point was using quatrains, and Pound chastised him for such old-style regularity. But taste comes into it, too, as when Eliot describes the young man carbuncular, leaving the typist he has just seduced, ‘delay[ing] only to urinate and spit’: as ‘probably over the mark,’ Pound says, and takes it out, as he also does a chilly, misogynistic account of a woman having a bath.

It’s good, practical stuff. But not infallible. And Eliot was far from slavish in following Pound’s advice. If he had listened to Pound, we would not have the lines about the young man being someone ‘on whom assurance sits / as a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.’ Nor would we have those tense snatches of conversation from a couple in bed in Part 2 of the poem: ‘My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. / Speak to me.’ Pound objected that this was mere ‘photography’, but Eliot stuck to his guns, preferring to rely on the opinion of his wife Vivienne, who thought the passage ‘wonderful’. 

Pound wasn’t a Redeemer, any more than Garnett was a Mangler. Both had good advice to offer but the integrity of the work —
someone else's work — remains. Maxwell Perkins's editing of The Great Gatsby is exemplary in this way, too. He had edited Fitzgerald's previous two novels, but Fitzgerald wanted this one to be a more ‘consciously artistic achievement,’ and Perkins helped in numerous ways. For instance:

1) The title. Fitzgerald's running title was Among the Ash-Heaps and Millionaires. His second choice was Trimalchio in West Egg. Perkins didn't like either. Nor plain Trimalchio. Nor plain Gatsby. A month before publication day, Fitzgerald cabled in a panic from Italy to suggest Gold-Hatted Gatsby. Perkins held firm. The Great Gatsby was best.

2) Ideas: At an early stage, to spur Fitzgerald along, Perkins showed him a possible dust jacket for the book — two gigantic eyes, brooding over New York. The jacket inspired Fitzgerald to develop a key image and motif in the novel — the billboard of optician Dr TJ Eckleburg.

3) Length: One week before he thought he'd finish, Fitzgerald estimated Gatsby at 50,000 words, more a novella than a novel. Perkins encouraged him to fill the story out, and Fitzgerald spliced in about 20 passages, adding up to 10,000 words. I've never heard anyone complain the book is too long.

4) Character: Perkins thought Gatsby himself too vague: ‘The reader's eyes can never quite focus on him, his outlines are dim ... Couldn't you add one or two characteristics, like the use of that phrase “old sport”.’ He also thought readers would want to know how Gatsby got his wealth. Fitzgerald agreed: ‘I myself didn't know what Gatsby looked like or was engaged in ... I'm going to tell more.’ And he did.

Fitzgerald had written three drafts of Gatsby before Perkins intervened, but then, he said, ‘sat down and wrote something I was proud of.’ Perhaps there's no better example of the proper balance between author and editor. One little mystery concerns the last page — the blue lawn, the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, and ‘the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.’ ‘Orgastic’ isn't quite a neologism but it's extremely rare; whereas ‘orgasmic’ and ‘orgiastic’ are common enough. Was it a typo? Neither Perkins nor Fitzgerald was good at spelling: after This Side of Paradise was published, spotting the typos — there were more than 100 — became a parlour game in New York book circles (without his secretary, who saved him time and again, Perkins might have become infamous as The Editor Who Couldn't Spell). But ‘orgastic’ does work. Perhaps it was conscious artistry.
The years 1912 to 1925 seem to have been the golden age of editing. Most of the publishers I've talked to, both young and old, say it's impossible to do such editing today. However diligent you are, the sheer speed at which books have to be pushed through prevents it. These days you have to be an all-rounder, involved with promotion, publicity and sales — all of which are crucial but mean that when a writer is trapped in a wrong book you don't have the time to sit down together and find a way out. One editor spoke of a colleague who had managed to do brilliant work purely because, having small children, she was allowed to do most of her work at home; were she in the office all day, having to attend meetings and fend off phone-calls, she'd never manage it.

Meanwhile, most people say the real editing of books is now done by agents, since agents offer authors stability, whereas publishers' editors are nomadic, moving from house to house.

Does it matter? Books still come out, and if writers these days moan about being edited too little, where once they moaned about being edited too much, well, writers will always moan. By common consent, two of the outstanding debut novels of recent years, Zadie Smith's White Teeth and Monica Ali's Brick Lane, were insufficiently edited - but that hasn't stopped them achieving commercial and critical success. And who wants to see the return of what Lawrence called the ‘censor-moron’, cutting whatever he deems improper for us to read?

But think for a moment of another kind of culture, where nothing is edited. A culture where we're all so logorrheic we haven't time for each other's words or books or blogs, where everything goes into the ether — and there's no sign that anyone reads it all. A culture that doesn't care about editing is a culture that doesn't care about writing. And that has to be bad.

It seems no coincidence to me that there should have been a massive growth in creative writing programmes in Britain in recent years. That the reason so many aspirant writers are signing up for MAs and PhDs is to get the kind of editorial help they no longer hope to get from publishing houses. If Perkins were alive today, would he be editing texts for Scribner? Or teaching fiction to creative writing students at Columbia University?

‘But can you really teach creative writing?’ people ask. I like to think so — that certain skills can be passed on. But maybe it's the wrong question. Better to ask: ‘Can you teach would-be writers to edit?’ Yes, absolutely, yes. Walk in on a creative writing class and
you'll hear the kind of babble you might have heard from Garnett with Lawrence, or Pound with Eliot, or Perkins with Fitzgerald: why not think of losing that, or moving that there? Give the reader more signposts. Stop bombarding us with so many characters. Don't parade your research, integrate it. Show, don't tell. Get in and out of the scene more quickly. Is that simile really working? And so on.

Perkins warned editors against delusions of grandeur. ‘Don't ever get to feeling important about yourself ... an editor can get only as much out of an author as the author has in him.’ He's right. When a book appears, the author must take the credit. But if editing disappears, as it seems to be doing, there'll be no books worth taking the credit for.