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## The Short Happy Thesis of G. Thomas Tanselle

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# The Short Happy Thesis of G. Thomas Tanselle

DON L. COOK\*

You will be relieved to know that the sheaf of pages I hold in my hand does not constitute the paper I intend to inflict upon you this morning. It is instead a Xerox copy of Tom Tanselle's article "The Editing of Historical Documents" as it appeared in the 1978 volume of *Studies in Bibliography*. I display it in this way for two contrasting reasons. First, it provides the physical evidence of one salient fact of Tom's critical scholarship. That is, when he writes on a topic he writes on *all* of it. There is an encyclopedic quality to his treatment of any subject. Whether you seek information on Greg's Theory of Copy-Text, on the Bibliographical Description of Paper, or on Principles of Editorial Apparatus, you find that reference to an article by Tom Tanselle not only presents his reasoned views of the current state of knowledge, but also makes you master of all the best and much of the worst that has been thought and said on the subject over the years. And any information omitted from the text will surely be referred to in the notes.

I make this point not by way of compliment or complaint but to draw attention to the fact that in the fifty-six pages of the article under discussion, no fewer than fifty-five editorial projects are considered, in almost exactly equal ranks of the elect and the reprobate. In fact, the first forty-one pages of this fifty-six page article are devoted almost exclusively to a survey and *quotation* of the editorial policies announced in these fifty-five editions plus Clarence E. Carter's *Historical Editing*, published as Bulletin #7 of the National Archives, and Samuel Eliot Morison's chapter on "The Editing and Printing of Manuscripts" in *The Harvard Guide to American History*. While editions are grouped so as to focus attention on the similarity of their policies, there is little discussion or advocacy of particular policies.

This observation brings me to the second of my contrasting reasons for displaying the article and to the rationale for my semi-plagiaristic title. The first forty-one pages do not contain a thesis. They contain a catalogue of an-

nounced editorial policies, often in the words of the editors themselves. The Tanselle Thesis—to the extent that it is either a thesis or Tanselle's—is contained in less than ten pages, including the ample footnotes. Thus I think it is, self-evidently, a short thesis. That it is a happy thesis I hope to persuade you with the argument that it is indeed a happy experience to encounter a few simple ideas that will deliver us from error and misconception. The principles of textual editing upon which Tanselle rests his hope of improving our practices are neither numerous nor complex. They are in fact simple and basic in the way that truly radical ideas always are. But I do not think that it has been the radical nature of his ideas that accounts for the prolonged, and sometimes heated, discussion accorded this article among editors.

The most frequent remark I have heard when the article is mentioned is some variation on "Well, we came off pretty well" or "Well, he certainly gave it to the X edition, didn't he?" To an evaluative report, such an initial response is probably inevitable. When the annual evaluation of teaching is published by the student government at Indiana University my first reaction is to check my own ratings and then compare them with the ratings of colleagues who teach similar courses. But there is this difference in the two publications. The students' rating of our teaching is neither a survey of the teachers' own statements of why and how they teach nor is it followed by a carefully reasoned discussion of the principles upon which the teaching proceeds. My point is that the *Consumer Reports* mind-set with which many of us have read this article has tended to focus attention almost exclusively on the first forty-one pages and to exhaust our power to attend or respond before we reach the final ten pages. So today I would like to focus on those final ten pages and, by restating, in blatant, unadorned, unfootnoted simplicity, a few basic ideas I find there, I hope to locate and clarify the "Tanselle Thesis."

Brevity is not the inevitable handmaiden to clarity and in attempting to focus and simplify I may have oversimplified or even misrepresented some of Tom's points. If so, I welcome correction. But I hope that the six propositions that I have drawn from Tom's article will serve to focus attention and to stimulate discussion on some of the more controversial and basic issues he has raised.

The first proposition reads—

In discussing editorial method, the necessary distinction is not between historical editing and literary editing but between "works intended for publication and private papers." "Letters, journals, published works, and manuscripts of unpublished works fall into both fields; all of them are historical documents, and any of them can be 'literary'" (p. 46). "In the case of notebooks, diaries, letters, and the like, whatever state they are in constitutes their finished form,

\*Don L. Cook is with the English Department of Indiana University. This paper was presented to the Association's 1980 meeting in Williamsburg to open a session entitled "The Tanselle Thesis," which included two papers and a comment by G. Thomas Tanselle, author of "The Editing of Historical Documents," *Studies in Bibliography* 31 (1978): 1-56. Robert Taylor's paper is printed below.

and the question of whether the writer 'intended' something else is irrelevant" (p. 47).

That proposition addresses the very existence of an Association for Documentary Editing, for unless we embrace with sincerity and intellectual conviction the commonality of our responsibilities as *documentary* editors as opposed to historical or literary editors, there is little hope of our progressing very far beyond the 1978 conference at Lawrence, Kansas, sponsored by the NHPRC and the NEH. At that conference we began to acknowledge our mutual interests and to explore the possibility of mutual understanding, but we left Kansas still speaking of *our* methods and *their* methods. It was the founding, and, even more, the naming of the Association for Documentary Editing that formally acknowledged and encouraged the belief that our division along literary/historical lines was an artificiality and that when we functioned as editors of documents we were all engaged in the same discipline. To the extent that we doubt that fact or hesitate to embrace its scholarly implications, we retard the full and frank exchange of professional views. We must avoid any self-protective parochialism that would cause us to cling to traditions learned through imitation rather than refining our methods and clarifying our principles in rigorous debate with our fellow workers.

But that debate can be useful only when we feel confident that we are all talking about the same undertaking. Too often editors of fiction, poetry, essays and other published works have assumed that scholarly editing begins only when the bibliographic complications of copy-text editing are encountered. But as Tanselle points out, "the question of whether the writer 'intended' something else" becomes irrelevant as soon as one recognizes that the letter, as posted, the journal, as left, warts and all, represents the fullest expression of the author's intention in that document. And we should also note that the authority of that unique document is not increased by its being edited and published. The scrupulosity with which some editors respect the published document is in remarkable and quite illogical contrast to the modernization and correction they visit upon the unpublished document. I believe this is a prime example of our most common failure as documentary editors, that is the failure to think through the *principles*, as opposed to the methodologies of our discipline.

The second principle certainly flows from the first—

Because archaisms, inconsistencies, violations of convention, even careless slips are integral to the *private document* in which they occur, to modernize, to regularize, or even to correct what the modern editor regards as an author's error, is, by definition, to violate what we know of the author's intention. "The position that the text of a *scholarly* edition of any material can ever be modernized is indefensible" (p. 48).

If the position seems extreme, it is nonetheless the log-

ical result of the view that the author's intention with regard to the form and content of a private document resides within, and only within, that document. Did the author habitually rely upon an editor or compositor to regularize his punctuation or correct his spelling? Would he have clarified his meaning and resolved ambiguities before publishing his own letters or journal? These are irrelevant questions, for what we edit is what he left, not what he did elsewhere nor what he might have done in a longer life. If he left the meaning ambiguous, that ambiguity is part of the document and of the author's mental state. If the meaning is so confused that changes in punctuation or wording are required to clarify it, how do we know the meaning, thus clarified, is the author's and not the editor's? Confusion can be pointed out without being editorially resolved.

The convenience of the reader is frequently invoked to justify the modernization and regularization of spelling and punctuation. But who is this modern reader that voraciously consumes volume after volume of letters, diaries, documents, and dispatches, but has never learned to cope with archaic or inconsistent spelling and punctuation? Ought an editor to be tyrannized by so irresponsible an audience? Must we sacrifice the authenticity of the document to the willful incompetence of this putative reader? Or is this putative incompetent a straw man invented in order that we *may* regularize idiosyncratic usage and thereby remove peculiarities that might look like typos in the published volume? The clearest text is not necessarily the most informative, and surely no one would claim that any reader is better served by legible simplifications or handsome suppressions.

Williamsburg is an appropriate setting for the discussion of all aspects of documentary editing, but for none more than for proposition number three—

So far as resources of type permit, an edited private document should recreate for the reader the experience of confronting the original, including the evidences of the process of composition. The author's deletions and corrections are part of the document and best recorded where they occur, within the document. "Simply to leave them out, as is often done (or done on a selective basis), is indefensible, since they are essential characteristics of private documents" (p. 50).

One of the interesting questions in historical restoration is whether one aims at a final product that is exemplary of the builder's, cabinetmaker's, potter's art, a kind of spanking new catalogue model, or whether one should retain as much of the original material as possible, complete with its worm holes, stains, fades, and patches. Is it only the product that interests us, or do we desire to understand the work and materials that went into the product? Tanselle certainly comes out for retaining all evidences of composition in private papers.

Critics of this view regularly complain that corrections and deletions within the text get in the way of the meaning. Such a response seems to me to be based on two misconceptions. First, it ignores the fact that an author's indecision or change of mind *is* part of the meaning in a private document. It is not only Emily Dickinson's indecision about the best noun or verb that is of interest. Surely the change of a word in a military dispatch may be as significant as the proverbial loss of a nail. And where will the author's decision between words be most revealingly recorded? Probably in the context of the sentence rather than in a distant appendix. A second, and very strange, misconception seems to prevail among some reviewers. That is the apparent assumption that corrections and deletions are an option, like power windows, that may be added to the standard model. But unlike the reproduced antiques that have the scratches, worm holes, and wear added in the finishing shop, our flaws and false starts are part of the raw material, and it is not retaining them but removing them that artificially alters and falsifies the original meaning.

The fourth proposition is double-barreled and ought to still rather than inspire controversy—

In editing a holograph document, the process of transcribing is the occasion for the exercise of the editor's best and most fully-informed judgment: "deciphering handwriting and understanding the content are inseparable" (p. 52). But the literal transcription of unique holograph documents does not logically preclude the preparation of eclectic texts of other documents that exist only in multiple, non-holograph copies. If the editor "attempts, so far as his evidence allows, to remove some of the nonauthorial features [from one selected non-holograph copy], he comes that much closer to offering what was present in the author's manuscript" (p. 53).

Tanselle's point here seems to me to throw revealing light on the attitudes we bring to our editing. Implicit in his entire article is the assumption that establishing a text and editing are synonymous terms. But it is my impression that there are editors, of statesmen's papers for instance, who would feel that no matter how reliably the text of a document had been established, the editing remained radically incomplete until its content was fully annotated. This difference of emphasis has led to some interesting discussions on NEH panels. Is a proposal to republish a text with new annotation an editing proposal or only a publishing scheme? Must a new text be established in order for a project to qualify as an edition? Seldom is the question so clear-cut, but the emphasis on annotation has sometimes led to inattention, by reviewers, if not by editors, to the centrality of textual reliability in any edition.

Tanselle's emphasis is on the importance of context for the decipherment of handwriting, an emphasis that some editors might regard as a case of backing into the question.

But it has the advantage of focusing our attention on the means of securing a reliable text, including the use of multiple copies to construct an eclectic text of a lost holograph. In this paragraph Tanselle comes closer than anywhere else in the article to raising the question of where the text resides: is it a particular document, or is it an abstraction imperfectly embodied in each of several documents? So long as we deal with unique holographs of private papers, that question may be comfortably ignored. But it is one of those ideas that a documentary editor needs to have thought through before he runs out of holographs.

Proposition five comes up because of Peter Shaw's article in the *American Scholar*—

An editor's respect for historical fact is evidenced less in his choice between a literal transcription and an eclectic text than in his scrupulous reporting of his textual data. It is desirable that a reader be "able to reconstruct the original copy-texts and [be] in possession of much of the textual evidence which the editor had at his disposal" (p. 54).

But the point has wider implications because it emphasizes two traditions in documentary editing. One is a genteel tradition in which an editor's reputation as a scholar is the warranty for the reliability of the texts he publishes. Massive erudition in the annotation has sometimes had the effect of de-emphasizing textual expertise, and the indifference of many reviewers to textual editing has reinforced this tendency. At the other pole is the tradition that looks upon the text offered by an editor as a subjective product, the result of a series of decisions and choices which, with no hard feelings, are open to review and perhaps reversal on the basis of the data that accompanies the text. Within this tradition the term "definitive text" is considered a logical contradiction: the best one hopes for is a definitive apparatus, that is an error-free record of the variant forms. Obviously the second tradition is more prevalent in the editing of published works and therefore of literary figures.

The invidious comparisons Peter Shaw's article contained took note of no such fine distinctions. But an understanding of these traditions and of their roots within the historical and the literary disciplines is important to the ADE. The way we address editorial theory and indeed the way we address one another, is colored by these two traditions. We are in more than one way the practitioners of our professions and while we are met on the common ground of documentary editing, almost all of us carry passports from other points of origin.

And that is why the simple declaration that Tom Tanselle makes in the final paragraph of his article is so freighted with importance—

"Editing is of course more than a matter of technique" (p. 56).

As all of us have learned who have taught courses in editing, students learn the techniques, the methodologies,

rather quickly. But two things essential to editing come slowly. The first is a sufficient understanding of the context from which the documents derive, the life and times, and modes of speaking and thinking. And the second is a bone-deep grasp of the *principles* behind editorial methodologies. Not the techniques for searching, filing, and

proofing, but an understanding of the essential differences between published works and private papers, of the assumptions an editor makes when he chooses to modernize, and why every attempt to perfect a text must also be viewed as an opportunity for a new corruption.