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## The Power of Positivist Babble Or, Two Anecdotes Declining Toward a Conclusion: Review of *Literary & Historical Editing*. Edited and with introductions by George L. Vogt and John Bush Jones.

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# *The Power of Positivist Babble Or, Two Anecdotes Declining Toward a Conclusion*

*Literary & Historical Editing*. Edited and with introductions by George L. Vogt and John Bush Jones. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Libraries, 1981. Pp. 95. \$6.00.

When asked how a person manages to remain friendly with both G. Thomas Tanselle and some of his vocal critics, an editor of my acquaintance remarked, "Tom and I would need to spend three years defining terms before we could argue." The quip, I think, suggests an urgent agenda for today's documentary editors. Whatever may be the case among other scholars, the definitions of key terms are woefully outdated and inadequate in the common working parlance of most American historians. As one result, American historical editors are crippled in their attempts to explain what they do (often well!) and are reduced to incoherent babble when pressed to defend the rationale of the craft of history. Of course this affliction is rampant among nonediting (but otherwise creditable) historians, as is evident, for instance, in the gobbledygook recently committed by James A. Henretta, Darrett B. Rutman, and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., in the "AHR Forum," *American Historical Review* 84 (1979): 1293-1333. Indeed, for those of us who came of age just as the world was learning that there was an intellectual (not employment) "crisis in the humanities," documentary editing seems to be a dimension of the historical craft with some prospect of forcing American historians at large to clean up their sleazy thinking about evidence and the nature of historical knowledge. The intellectual crisis in the humanities, after all, was a failure of nerve that predated the so-called job crisis.

At scholarly conventions one often learns more in saloons than in formal sessions. In a cocktail-lounge, two demographic historians were describing their fashionable, computer-assisted, community-reconstitution research in progress when (in a flight of ecstatic rhetoric compounded by too many Perriers) one partner observed that they hoped not only to describe and analyze the past but to be able to "predict!" Knowing glances darted

about the table as the other partner quickly changed the subject, but it was as though E. F. Hutton had spoken and revealed himself to be a nineteenth-century positivist. Having never met a nineteenth-century positivist (except for sociologists, I had thought them dead) I was surprised to think that I'd heard one. Several months later on a Saturday in Williamsburg I listened in astonishment as otherwise able historians rose from the audience and utterly failed to explain what they do, or why. Apparently the dialogue had been more nearly lucid at the University of Kansas in 1978, and the five papers from that conference published as *Literary & Historical Editing* should be required reading. Still, it seems clear that if intelligent dialogue between editors is to continue, historians especially must heed Don L. Cook's call "to look into our own disciplines and find for ourselves what are the essentials and what are simply matters of tradition that we never examined closely enough" (p. 11).

The seven components of *Literary & Historical Editing* are three introductory pieces (two by the editors and the third, a survey of modern literary and historical editions, by James Thorpe), essays by George C. Rogers, Jr., and G. Thomas Tanselle on textual editing, and two discussions of annotation. Martin C. Battestin's suggestions about literary annotation—which have also been published in volume 34 of *Studies in Bibliography* (1981)—struck me as sensible and clear, especially if one may accept at face value his disclaimers: that he is *not* "trying to do for the literary annotator what Greg has done for the textual editor," and "that there can be no single rationale of literary annotation that will prove universally practicable and appropriate" (p. 59). Charles T. Cullen's survey of annotation practices in modern editions of historical documents is, in my estimation, our first substantial published discussion of the question. Feigning surprise "that even [editors] do not agree on a set of principles of annotation" (p. 81), Cullen himself eschews any definition of rarefied principles and advocates sound editorial judgment, moderation, and a clear "focus on the subject of the publication" (p. 91). By reporting what historical editors

have thought they were doing during the past thirty years, Cullen also places in high relief a few of the confused assumptions and professional insecurities that marked historical editing during the third quarter of the twentieth century (and that still limit the working vocabulary of a rising generation of historians). If I read them correctly, both Battestin and Cullen doubt the existence or desirability of any theory of annotation applicable to all cases. Clearly, annotation is among the applied rather than the pure sciences.

My friend George C. Rogers, Jr., says significant things about the applied science of textual editing—and implies some theory, as when he compares two editions' handlings of an Adams letter (p. 32)—but his sprightly essay remains in that thirty-year-old tradition of the generation whose great achievement was to formulate working policies to support the publication of their modern historical editions. Ironically, as the so-called literary editors push for more thoughtful handling of textual evidence, they are forcing all scholars to confront the fundamentals of *historical* method. "For Tanselle readability is of secondary importance," Rogers shouts in a note: "The text, the text, it is always the text!" (p. 33). Well, shucks, maybe not *always* (I mean we do other stuff, too, ya know). But uh, yeah, I guesso, establishing the text really is the *sine qua non* of editorial scholarship, ain't it?

One irony is that for Tanselle all scholarly editing is, by definition, *historical* editing (historical in a Kantian sense, not because it deals with the muniments of dead statesmen). In volume 34 of *Studies in Bibliography* (1981, p. 60), Tanselle defines scholarly editions as those "in which the aim is historical—the reproduction of a particular text from the past or the reconstruction of what the author intended." The point is inherent in all of Tanselle's essays on editing, and in *Literary & Historical Editing* he reminds us that "the useful distinction . . . is not between literary editing and other kinds of editing but instead between the kinds of documents that editors—regardless of their fields—have to deal with" (p. 37). Clearly, at the 1978 conference someone stuck Tanselle with the title "Literary Editing," giving him cause to explain why there can be no "established or accepted method for distinguishing 'literary' works from other types of communication" (p. 36). No wonder historians had such a time of it in Williamsburg on the morning after Halloween 1980: their own ordinary parlance could not sustain clear thinking about the nature of historical knowledge and the star "literary" theorist turned out to be a closet historian! How come nobody caught on?

Tanselle may have been stuck with his title, but I suspect that George Rogers chose his with exquisite care and a sly chuckle: "The Sacred Text: An Improbable Dream." Substituting a dash of *La Mancha* for the sneer in Charles A. Beard's "That Noble Dream," Rogers's subtitle recalls both the major theoretical debate among twentieth-cen-

tury American historians—the clash between adherents of so-called objective and of so-called relativist historiography—and the sophomoric terminology employed by all the outspoken parties to that debate. The crusaders against the older Germanic and positivist historiography, awed themselves by laboratory sciences, retained the word *fact* from the vocabulary of their adversaries and attempted to distinguish it from *interpretation*. And the muddle-headed sins of our fathers wreak holy havoc when historians try to explain the autonomy of our: a) art, b) craft, c) science, d) all the above. Notice how Beard used the terms in these passages from "That Noble Dream":

A book entitled *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, like every other book on history, is a selection and an organization of facts; . . . [another book] is also a selection and organization of facts, hence an interpretation or conception of some kind.

The distinction between particular facts that may be established by the scientific method and the "objective" truth of history must be maintained, if illusions are to be dispelled.

Carl Becker—a far abler historian, more felicitous writer, and nimbler thinker than Beard—had resorted to similar terminology in his 1931 presidential address to the American Historical Association, "Everyman His Own Historian," even though his vocabulary sometimes impeded his message:

The history written by historians . . . is thus a convenient blend of truth and fancy, of what we commonly distinguish as 'fact' and 'interpretation'.

[In the 1966 paperback edition of Becker's collected essays, the so-called accidentals of quotation marks were made to conform to the University of Chicago Press Style; I quote from the original text as published in the *American Historical Review* because, perhaps significantly, Becker used single quotation marks within terminal punctuation. Readers of this newsletter—scholars all—surely will want to determine for themselves whether Becker intentionally followed the convention common to works in philosophy and theology whereby terms with special philosophical or theological meaning are often placed within single quotation marks.]

To establish the facts is always in order, and is indeed the first duty of the historian; but to suppose that the facts, once established in all their fullness, will 'speak for themselves' is . . . peculiarly the illusion of those historians of the last century who found some special magic in the word 'scientific'.

[On the other hand, the editors of the *American Historical Review* in 1932 may have used single quotation marks as their house style—but wasn't it nice of me to let you see the evidence itself?]

Left to themselves, the facts do not speak; left to themselves they do not exist, not really, since for all

practical purposes there is no fact until some one affirms it. . . . To set forth historical facts is not comparable to dumping a barrow of bricks. A brick retains its form and pressure wherever placed; but the form and substance of historical facts . . . [have] a negotiable existence only in literary discourse. . . . It is thus not the undiscriminated fact, but the perceiving mind of the historian that speaks.

As early as 1910, of course, Becker himself had recognized that "the facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them" and that any distinction between facts and interpretation was untenable, but Becker's sophisticated reflections (in part because they relied on the same shop-worn terms) never entirely displaced Beard's polemic dichotomy in American historiography. Obviously this is no place to attempt a full exposition of historical method; the relevant matters are summarized intelligently (with convenient references to a vast literature) in Alan Richardson's *History Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia, 1964).

Just suppose that the rising generation of historians were to turn away from the old positivist terms and concepts entirely. We might start by accepting the definition of *fact* as a statement, or judgment, made from evidence and then shelving the term for three or four decades. Having done that, the absurd Beardian notion of *interpretation* would simply disappear because we recognize, as Sir F. M. Powicke did in 1944, that "the establishment of a fact is an achievement in deduction." We would see that good historians have never "interpreted" discrete "facts"; they have always studied evidence according to the highest canons of scholarship to formulate statements about a past reality. The basic intellectual process of interpreting historical *evidence* is no different when Julian P. Boyd attempted to distinguish *whole* from *whale* in a

letter concerning the taxation of one trade or the other (p. 13), than when another historian attempts to determine the median age at menarche in early modern France, whether the gentry was rising or falling, or whether Freud slept with his sister-in-law. The intellectual task, as G. R. Elton put it, "is not a question of interpreting fact but of establishing it." In this respect, for the historian preparing any scholarly edition, the published text supported by appropriate apparatus is the principal statement by which one reports one's judgments of the evidence (the documents) being studied; that the editor's text, in turn, is likely to be treated as evidence by other scholars—including, perhaps, some outspoken ingrate with tenure who is incapable of mastering practice or theory and who may never have touched a manuscript—is beside the point.

I found it interesting that nowhere in his published essays about editing, except in the relatively mediocre one about the problem of "external fact," does Tanselle resort to *fact*—he always talks about *evidence*. His readers look in vain, too, for recognition of the needs of nonscholarly readers, for concern about costs, for any willingness to entertain the distinctions between "significant" and "insignificant" textual details that some editors who think in terms of the *fact-interpretation* dichotomy raise in a futile theoretical self-defense, or for any sensitivity to some historical editors' insecure infatuation with annotation. Practical and professional considerations will always figure in the publication of scholarly editions, but they should not sully our understanding of historical method and of the proper handling of evidence. The text, the text, first of all the text and a good index!

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