

A Comment on Mr. Tanselle's Paper

G. THOMAS TANSELLE'S EXCELLENT essay divides naturally into two major parts. On the one hand, he offers suggestions and exhortations for strengthening research on the history of the book in America. All that he has to say on this subject seems to me hardly debatable and certainly should be heeded without hesitation. Several of the papers yesterday urged us to look at the individual book, to study the output of printers in detail, etc. On the other hand, Tanselle introduces some general strictures about procedures or methods in the use of sources in historical study, and this part of his paper is perhaps more open to question, at least for the sake of argument. I will say a few words first about his recommendations for furthering *l'histoire du livre* and then move on to some of the 'juicier' questions implicit and explicit in his essay that in fact extend to matters beyond the aims of this conference, strictly defined.

The paper in general is a cogent and eloquent plea for the uses of bibliographical analysis, for the close study, that is, of the physical characteristics of individual copies of books. When performed on an extensive scale, by many researchers, this task may lead to surprising findings and new insights into the history of the book in America. This kind of study, Tanselle urges, is 'a wide-open field, in which it is still possible to be a pioneer.' Such bibliographers of American books will be working 'in the shadow of the bibliographers of English literature,' but the result will be 'discoveries that will affect the thinking of all who have occasion after them to be concerned with American printing history.' 'As detailed studies of individual printers and publishers . . . begin to line up on the shelf,' Tanselle

This article, in slightly different form, was read at the conference on the history of the book in American culture as commentary on the paper delivered by Mr. Tanselle.

writes, studies, that is, based on close analysis of the books these printers and publishers produced, they will form a 'foundation for various additional kinds of work.' In one of the strongest statements of his essay, one that constitutes almost an article of faith, Tanselle writes, 'Considerations arising from the examination of physical evidence (of individual books) lead directly into the broadest concerns of economic, social, and intellectual history.' We all know, however, that such has not always been the case, yet I do believe that the imaginative scholar can make it so. The same would apply even more, as Tanselle notes, to studies arising from the printing, publishing, and textual histories of a particular work, as opposed to the study of an individual book.

I did not prepare specific examples of the worth of this concrete approach, but my instincts are that it is sound advice. There will be many frustrations and dead ends, of course, when the leads that are buried in the physical book cannot be followed up because so many records of printing, publishing, and distribution have been lost. But, as often happens in historical study, a small beginning with a set of concrete cases or documents—in this case, the surviving copies of a book are the documents—can widen out exactly as Tanselle has presented the case, bringing surprisingly rich and broad results. At the risk of being trendy, I see here an instance in which the methods of the archaeologist, anthropologist, and the historian can be utilized together to study an object or a series of objects—the book as an artifact of the past enmeshed in a culture. We are more accustomed to speaking of books in general as cultural artifacts. It is less common to do the same with individual titles, to ask, Where does this particular book come from? How is it constructed? How was it used?

The techniques to be employed to make such discoveries are essentially those that have become standards for bibliographical study, as described by Philip Gaskell, for example. But what can carry this kind of study beyond the merely biblio-

graphical—forgive the ‘merely’—is the alertness and imagination of the historian of the book who is determined to study this object in its broadest cultural setting. Thus, for the *historian of the book*, Tanselle’s paper can only be regarded as a great encouragement and a great guide and stimulus, one of the most persuasive such statements that we have.

We come, however, to the larger claims of Tanselle’s paper, where my enthusiasm lessens slightly. Tanselle has become in recent years a formidable—even a terrifying—critic of the methods of textual editing generally practiced by historians, and in this paper I see the same *ideal* standards being carried over to historical method in intellectual history, or even to history in general. This kind of criticism, by one so clear-minded, firm, and learned as Tanselle, leaves me unnerved and trembling for my sins—I know I could be more fastidious about my use of printed sources, and I know I could know them better, as we all could. But I am also left a bit divided. I end up oscillating between the ideal that Tanselle upholds and the practical, realistic, ‘cost-effectiveness ratio’ that we are in fact usually guided by. In reading Tanselle’s critical essays on method, such as the one at hand, I am moved both to protest and cheer at the same time. I want to protest because there are occasions, we all know, when the pursuit of the ideal, of the best and the purest, can delay or even destroy practical progress; I wish to cheer because none of us should tolerate methodological laxness either in textual editing or in our application of the principles of bibliography to printed sources.

I am moved to protest especially when Tanselle takes issue with the statement by Lawrence Wroth which, on the surface, seems so eminently sensible: ‘In the treatment of Americana the reward of this procedure [a minute analysis of the make-up of a book] seldom compensates for the pains required to carry it through.’ It is undeniably a prime rule of historical method that we must be skeptical of our sources. Let us suppose, for example, that I set out to write an article on an eighteenth-

century event involving polemics or the transmittal of ideas. I need to read an essay or sermon or treatise by one of the personages involved with the event, and I find a copy in a rare book library—or maybe on an Evans microcard. My whole argument may revolve around a few paragraphs or sentences found in this book, and yet I have looked at only one copy, or worse, perhaps a microform version of a single copy. That copy could well be corrupt. I know it. A whole paragraph could have been dropped, or a paragraph added. I may not even know whether I have an earlier or later printing that does or does not contain some crucial passages. I may assume that I am working with the first printing, but there may be earlier unrecorded printings. The work as a whole could be a plagiary from an earlier book by another author.

I will cite one famous example. In each of the first four printings of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the great philosopher changed the text, sometimes in fundamental ways. The modern editions of Locke all make this perfectly clear, so the historian is duly warned. But let us suppose that no bibliographical analysis has been performed on the work I am using, and I naively write my article at a level of generalization that is entirely flawed because of my own inattention to bibliography. Clearly, this is bad method, and the result will be bad history. When Tanselle says, in reference to bibliographical analysis, that 'I cannot think of any other area in which responsible scholars are so careless in their handling of historical evidence,' we hear words that truly should make historians reproach themselves for their frequent lack of caution about the exact nature of their sources.

In an essay written a few years ago that has become an instant classic, sometimes referred to as 'the Tanselle massacre' Tanselle brilliantly exposed the inconsistencies and the potential dangers in the 'modernizing' methods of textual editing used by virtually all of the great *historical* documentary projects of the post-war period—the Jefferson, Adams, Madison,

and Franklin papers among others. Could Tanselle also, if he had the time and energy, similarly review the best historical monographic literature of the past fifty years and show that the absence of bibliographical knowledge or bibliographical sensitivity has resulted in false conclusions again and again? Perhaps such a review would not find serious errors. Most historians, I think, are sufficiently suspicious of their sources, when those sources are being called upon to play crucial roles in their arguments, to take the time to discover something about them. But the warning is well made. Certainly, much more attention should be given in graduate school to bibliographical analysis as an essential component of historical method. I think it is generally true, as Tanselle observes, that 'intellectual history and bibliographical analysis are indissolubly tied.' One of the ways we can determine how influential a book was, for example, is to note the number of printings it had. But even that, in itself, can be a difficult bibliographical problem.

For all this, however, the common sense of the matter is on the side of Lawrence Wroth. Our rule must be to use the method in each case that is appropriate to our purposes. Here is where I think Tanselle is in error in practical terms, if not in principle, and this applies to his strictures regarding textual editing as well as bibliography. It is Tanselle's apparent insistence on *uniform* method—as opposed to *appropriate method*—that we may quibble with.

There are occasions, certainly, when attention to the physical character of an individual book or the printing history of a work is of the utmost importance. But there are many more occasions when one can safely play the odds and trust, for example, that there are no significant variations from copy to copy. Every researcher must gamble this way; otherwise, we would never get our research done. Of course, such casualness is especially appropriate when a work is being used only in a very general way, as is often the case in historical rather than literary, research. When a whole book is being reduced to a

few paragraphs of summary in the historian's narrative, who cares about variant editions?

Tanselle has persuasively made the case more than once that there is no way one can distinguish consistently between the treatment that so-called *literary* works deserve, both in textual editing and bibliographical analysis, and the treatment that 'other', 'non-literary' historical documents deserve. Yet this blanket identification can be questioned. It appears sometimes that Tanselle would have every book and every text subjected to the same minute analysis as that applied to Shakespeare folios. I personally do not think this is an unworthy goal. Indeed, I believe it is the kind of interesting, delightful, and possibly fruitful task that scholars will be assigned to in the eternal afterlife. But on earth we must assign priorities.

Hence, the two alleged fallacies that Tanselle identifies in his paper I do not regard as truly being fallacies. Tanselle argues, first, that it is a fallacy to believe 'that analytical bibliography is tied only to textual criticism and scholarly editing.' He also argues that it is a fallacy to believe 'that analytical bibliography is a tool more appropriate for research on literature than other kinds of writing.' These statements, rather than being fallacies, describe certain essential links that will always be strong. In my opinion, analytical bibliography is *primarily* tied to textual criticism and scholarly editing, although not only to these, and secondly, analytical bibliography is a tool *usually* more appropriate for research on literature than other sorts of writing, although not exclusively so. And one could add that analytical bibliography is important in intellectual history, but not as consistently so as in textual criticism.

In conclusion, I want to make a general point. Ironically, the professionalization of textual editing that has occurred in the United States in the course of the past thirty years may not be all to the good. It is true that we have gone far beyond the textual mutilations that were characteristic of much nineteenth-century documentary editing, but the standards of documen-

tary editing have now risen so high that the kind of useful 'quickie' transcribing and publication of documents that formerly was commonplace has now nearly come to an end. Scholars have grown timid, fearful of criticism; every editing project must now follow the high and time-consuming standards endorsed by the NHPRC or by the Center for Editions of American Authors. Where would we be if E. B. O'Callaghan or John Russell Bartlett in an earlier era had been so fastidious? It is an undeniable fact that for many of the purposes of writing history, although not necessarily literary history, corrupt texts serve well enough. The quality of the textual editing simply has to be good enough to suit the purpose at hand—*a method appropriate to the purpose*. Often, that purpose is quite broad, and a poorly edited document is good enough. I do not want to encourage sloppy work, but this pragmatism is a way in which literary study and historical study differ.

By extension, the same approach applies to bibliographical analysis. How often do we need it? For the most part, I would shift the burden of proof on this matter to scholarly reviewers and critics. I hope we will be ready to pounce when a sloppy historian fails to do the bibliographical work he or she should have done and fails to learn what *must be* learned about the printing history of the work or the individual copy in question. But the burden of proof is on the critic or the reviewer.

It will not do, surely, for the critic of the future to feel emboldened to dismiss a monograph out of hand because there is no evidence in the notes that the author examined all nine or all twenty-five extant copies of the principal source he is using. If such a state of mind did take hold, we may find there is as much timidity and consciousness of vulnerability in historical writing as there now seems to be in scholarly editing. Is this the direction we want to go in?

In the end, the extent of bibliographical research will be guided primarily by vested interest, as most other things are, and not by ideals. Scholars who are adopting *l'histoire du livre*

as one of their fields, and who are going to speak about books as objects, had better do their homework. Tanselle's paper will undoubtedly prod descriptive bibliographers to include signature collations and similar details. Intellectual or cultural historians, too, should know whereof they speak when they cite a printed text.

In one area of research the vested interest in bibliographical analysis is of overwhelming importance, and in this area such analysis goes on daily. This is the rare book world, where the failure to realize the general truth that no two books are exactly alike can cost a dealer, or a collector, or a library thousands of dollars. It is for this reason that I think Lawrence Wroth was a poor choice of a foil by Tanselle. When it came to buying books for the John Carter Brown Library collection, I am certain that Wroth did not assume that painstaking and time-consuming study of the physical book failed to compensate for the pains required to carry it through. Any good curator of rare books wants to know everything that can possibly be known about each individual volume in his collection. Now, because what is known about a book is essentially comparative or relative to other existing copies, one is immediately confronted with the problem of the inadequacy or the absence of descriptive bibliographies that will provide just that comparative information. So here we have a nice convergence of interests among librarians, bibliographers, book dealers, and historians, each contributing according to his interest. The money that rare book libraries—or special collections divisions of libraries—are now regularly pouring into the cataloguing of rare books according to AACR II bibliographical standards, which are quite high, eventually ought to serve *l'histoire du livre* very well, somewhat along the lines that Tanselle has outlined.

I want to make one final remark. Despite the seeming contentiousness of this paper, I would like to use this public forum to acknowledge the extraordinary achievement of Thomas

Tanselle in the two fields of textual editing and bibliography. His accomplishments and contributions in these areas seem to me to be nearly unrivaled in this country and it gives me pleasure to say so.

Norman Fiering

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