

Gian Biagio Conte

Ope ingeni

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Experiences of Textual Criticism

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To Adriano Prosperi and Michael D. Reeve
friends, even if colleagues

Preface

I have imagined a museum. Not an enormous one like the Vatican Museums, the Louvre, the British Museum or other similar *thesauri* of art and human history, but just a private collection, created on the basis partly of taste, partly of whim, and partly also by chance. Something comparable, more or less, to the collections of the Galleria Borghese in Rome, the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan, the Frick Collection in New York, or the enchanting Pommersfelden Gallery in the castle of the Count of Schönborn-Wiesentheid, near Bamberg. These, and many others like them, possess a special kind of fascination, because they reflect and celebrate the soul of a person who has put together, one by one, only works selected with great care. That is what I have done in this short book: I have collected certain experiences of textual criticism, those that I remember best, those that struck me most, or that I admired most. In choosing them, I was conscious that they were going to serve as demonstrations of the nature and variety of our work as philologists: in a word, I wanted them to provide some practical teaching. *La leçon par l'exemple*, as the French might say. The route is empirical, learning to do it by watching it being done. An inductive kind of instruction, if you prefer: from the single case to the general rule.

Examples, though, need to be exemplary, in other words they need to be exportable, so that they will serve for similar cases and their validity will not be limited to the single occurrence. The work of the textual critic is no different from that of a craftsman, and likewise unites the ideas of a profession and talent with those of rules and a method. Although the solution to every textual problem is bound to be individual, the same route that leads to the solution of one case may be profitably followed in others. From one example, or rather, from a series of instructive examples, a method can be derived. After all, 'method' is simply the route after you have traversed it.

Several manuals of textual criticism exist, some very good: we all know them because we used them ourselves for our studies, and we have recommended them to students as a means of instruction. Most of them are normative, and it could not be otherwise. They present a well-arranged list of all the necessary notions of the technique of textual criticism, and record a wide range of case studies of the most commonly found corruptions. These manuals clearly possess the virtues of patience and a gradual approach: the patience with which the author dispenses his instruction, but also the gradual approach by which readers are introduced to a profession that is not at all easy. These two great merits are absent in my book, which throws all patience to the winds, and immediately sets before the reader a repast of critical masterpieces that have elicited my admiration.

Readers may ask: but can you teach something by starting from a reaction of admiration? I believe you can, as long as you succeed in communicating the reasons for that admiration, and in helping others to share it. For this reason, I have chosen to dissect every example, whether isolated or part of a series, analysing and explaining it so that the specific problem will emerge and the intellectual procedure that led to the happy solution will be appreciated. In reality, *la leçon par l'exemple* provides that the single case should not be merely an end in itself, but should offer instruction aiming to go beyond pure pleasure, becoming a method to be imitated. That is why my little book, which is not a manual of textual criticism, aspires, in a certain sense, to that definition: its purpose is to act as a training ground, a laboratory of experiments conducted *in corpore nobili*.

This book took only a short time to write, but the thinking behind it was lengthy: accumulated readings, conversations with colleagues and students, occasional card indexes, suggestions solicited or spontaneously offered supplied the building material. I share with many others the idea that although our texts have drawn great profit from criticism *ope ingenii*, they are still in need of restoration far more commonly than is believed. Several *cruces* that are still unsolved, but also numerous well-camouflaged crypto-corruptions await their challengers; the hope is that this book may help, as far as possible, to sound the alert.

The lengthy period of preparation has caused me to incur debts with many people who have generously shared their time and competence to discuss with me problems that are dealt with here: first and foremost James Diggle, Luigi Battezzato, Enrico Medda, Franco Montanari, but also Lucio Ceccarelli, Rolando Ferri, Luigi Galasso, Stefano Grazzini, Laura Micozzi, Filippomaria Pontani, Giulio Vannini: most of these latter are pupils of mine, those who have been, and still are, closest to me in my everyday work. Giulia Ammannati deserves special thanks for all the critical intelligence with which she has constantly succeeded in helping me. I also wish to acknowledge my debt for the sober elegance of the English version not only to the ability and competence of Ronald Packham, but also to the providential supervision of Anna Chahoud, Giovanbattista D'Alessio, Stephen Harrison and Luca Ruggeri.

The dedication to two very dear friends, and excellent colleagues, is also intended as recognition of a debt that has grown through the years: I believe that if others were lucky enough to have companions like them in their work, the academic world would be a far pleasanter place.

G. B. C.

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Preamble

