

The edition of fragmentary texts: scattered remarks

by

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The very first duty of an editor of fragmentary texts is realism: a lost writing is lost. It is possible, sometimes, to rediscover works or part of works that were believed irreparably vanished, like the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia* or Menander's *Dyskolos*: but this kind of recovery is very rare. With basically no exceptions, philology cannot reconstruct what time has destroyed. This preliminary note could appear obvious. But anyone who has edited or commented a fragmentary work is well aware of the subtle temptation to bridge the gaps in the tradition, in the hope to give back, if not the whole body, at least the simulacrum of the *deperditum opus*. Particularly for texts that have survived in dozens or hundreds of fragments, it is easy to be deceived by the illusion to stand at short distance from the original, with the catastrophic consequence to fill with conjectures the empty spaces between a passage and the other: the result is to assemble a sort of patchwork that, in the course of time, will be considered (even by specialists!) roughly equivalent to the lost work.

In some ways, the editor of fragmentary texts is like an archaeologist, who must work with the remains of a monument, in order to bring it back to light; what he touches is contaminated forever (hence the importance of the excavation journal). Also the philologist can adulterate the texts which he works on, if he doesn't take certain precautions, because his edition can achieve success, become canonical, and therefore influence the interpretation of an author – and even of a whole literary genre – for generations.

Even when (or rather, especially when) hundreds of fragments of a given writer have survived (as in the case of Hecataeus, Theopompus, Philochorus, Timaeus, etc.), the editor has to remember continuously that he has at his disposal, in most cases, an insignificant amount of the original work. If this consciousness lacks or is unclear in the editor's mind, the reader will probably keep as a proven fact what is simply speculation – no matter if a likely one or not.

As a consequence, the editor has above all the tricky responsibility to evaluate if the corpus of extant fragments is representative, and in which measure, of the lost work. To do that, he will consider several factors: the nature of the transmitting sources; the derivation of remarkable groups of citations from a single intermediate source; in case of writings articulated in several books, the fragments allocation within the books; the literary genre and his conventions; the coherence of the quotations with the data inferable from the *testimonia*; finally, the history of the tradition of the text (the so called "fortune") in the centuries.

As regards the relationship between the fragment and the transmitting source, it is illuminating the concept of "cover-text" enunciated by Guido Schepens, one of the most important living scholars of Greek historiography: «First of all, the intermediary texts *preserve* passages drawn from works that are no longer extant; very often, too, they more or less *conceal* the precursor text (form characteristics such as the original wording and style of the precursor text are no longer discernible; often, also, fragments seem to 'hide' in the cover-text, so that one can only guess where a paraphrase begins or where a quotation ends); and,

last but not least, the cover-text *encloses* the precursor text (it is inserted or enveloped in a new context, which may impose interpretations that differ considerably from the original writer's understanding of the text)» (cfr. G. Schepens - J. Bollansée. *The Shadow of Polybius. Intertextuality as a Research Tool in Greek Historiography*. Leuven - Paris - Dudley (MA) 2005, p. X).

The same caution and measure are fundamental when writing the commentary. Sometimes, the advancement of studies can benefit more from an honest admission of ignorance than from a hazardous conjecture. In any case, the commentator's insistence on the fragmentary status of the documentation – and thus on the frailty of our reconstructions – will perhaps result boring, but never inappropriate.

The only landmark, to judge about the validity of the operations made by the editor/commentator, is the documentation itself: the method is imposed by the object. A scholar of Atthidography, for example, can say very little about the style of the *Atthides*, since nearly every fragment of this production has been paraphrased or heavily epitomized: and also because of the scarce quotations transmitted *verbatim*, we are by no means sure that the transmitting source has not adapted its quotations as far as style and content are concerned; conversely, in other cases linguistic analysis can fruit a lot. What's equally important, the reader must be informed on what the editor/commentator wants to do and why.

A last remark, of an empirical nature. In editing a fragmentary writing, the most easily feasible progresses consist in a better understanding not of the writing itself nor of its author, but of the development of the literary genre to which it pertains. To study Craterus the Macedonian, Istrus the Callimachean, or Didymus of Alexandria can, surely, bring us to a deeper knowledge of these three authors, but much more to rethink the contribution of some Hellenistic centers of culture, like the Peripatus or the library of Alexandria, to the evolution of Greek historiography.