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CLASSICS REREAD

ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF AN EXTRAORDINARY BOOK

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ANTHONY GRAFTON, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 256 pp. ISBN 978 0 674 30760 5 (paperback), £20.95

Footnotes are peculiar things. All scholars use them to demonstrate that the statements they make in their work are not arbitrary, but based on a careful consideration of data, sources, and research findings. Inserted in greater or smaller numbers at the bottom of the page or sometimes at the end of the piece, or in sociological and scientific work as ‘parenthetical references’ in the text, they are not particularly well-liked, however. Generally set in a smaller font size than the main text, footnotes are for many people a chore that they like to ‘crack lazy jokes’ about, but which they need to attend to nevertheless.¹ Stringent argument, explanations based on evidence, and good writing in the main text constitute the tour de force that allows authors to demonstrate their skills (at least in the humanities). This is where they can put on display their specific knowledge, capacity for innovation, and ability to express themselves—where they can prove their expertise. Footnotes, by contrast, are something owed to ‘the discipline’. In other words, while the main text demonstrates individuality, footnotes document a team effort. They call up data, sources consulted, and what has already been discovered about the

Trans. by Angela Davies (GHIL)

¹ See Georg Stanitzek, ‘Zur Lage der Fußnote’, *Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken*, 68/776 (Jan. 2014), 1–14, at 4.

subject. To put it differently once again, footnotes point to what is possible, what makes the text dance. This is what the modern epistemic regime expects. Its professional adepts are ‘tuned in to an automatic questioning of the footnote apparatus . . . What does this person know? Have I been mentioned? Have I missed anything? Is there any evidence of theoretical imagination at work? What does this person permit themselves? What *can* they permit themselves? In short, how do they work?’ And the passage continues: ‘one can see almost at first glance whether it is fear and obedience, or freedom and generosity that are expressed in the use of footnotes.’²

This lovely quotation is from an essay by Georg Stanitzek, a German literary scholar who, without using any footnotes at all,³ precisely analyses the present state of the footnote. Stanitzek complains about the lack of academic reflection on the footnote, about which, he claims, ‘there is little empirical research worth mentioning’⁴ But, he says, there is one exception to this: Anthony Grafton, ‘a giant of research on footnotes . . . from whose shoulders one can take a look around’.⁵ In 2014, when Stanitzek’s musings on the state of the footnote were published, Grafton’s book *The Footnote: A Curious History* was already almost twenty years old, as the first German edition had been published in 1995.⁶ The revised English edition of 1997 (slightly expanded by comparison with the German version), translated into French (1998), Portuguese (1998), Spanish (1998), Italian (2000), and Turkish (2012), is among the Princeton professor’s most successful

² Ibid. 3–4.

³ But another essay by Georg Stanitzek which looks at the footnote in light of relations between the essay and academia around 1900, published two years later, is richly equipped with interesting footnotes about the footnote and its history: ‘Geist und Essay um 1900: Typografische Beobachtungen’, in Michael Ansel, Jürgen Egyptien, and Hans-Edwin Friedrich (eds.), *Der Essay als Universalgattung des Zeitalters: Diskurse, Themen und Positionen zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Nachkriegszeit* (Leiden, 2016), 319–37.

⁴ Stanitzek, ‘Zur Lage der Fußnote’, 2.

⁵ Ibid. 11.

⁶ Anthony Grafton, *Die tragischen Ursprünge der deutschen Fußnote*, trans. H. Jochen Bußmann (Berlin, 1995). One year earlier, the basics of the book had been published as an essay: Anthony Grafton, ‘The Footnote from de Thou to Ranke’, in id. and Suzanne Marchand (eds.), *Proof and Persuasion in History*, special issue of *History and Theory*, 33/4 (1994), 53–76.

books.⁷ At a little over 200 pages long, the slim volume was praised internationally in numerous reviews, and reached a wider readership than a specialist academic one alone.⁸ Among other things, the strong response it evoked is demonstrated by its own lasting career as a footnote. Why has it been so successful? What sort of story is told by *The Footnote: A Curious History*?

In his quest for the origins of the footnote, Grafton consulted many printed and unprinted historical sources. But it is only the combination of a solid basis in the sources with a sparkling narrative that makes the book into a *Curious History*. Grafton's writing is vivid, rich in metaphors, and sometimes also ironic. And by not allowing his story to progress in a straight line towards a goal, he undermines the usual path of historical reconstruction, preferring to tell his story in reverse, before ultimately going 'back to the future'.⁹ The book begins with a sort of epistemological phenomenology of historical footnotes. Starting with Leopold von Ranke, Grafton traces a path back to Edward Gibbon and Jacques-Auguste de Thou, and thence to collections of early modern antiquarian and ecclesiastical sources and their prototypes from antiquity. Arriving at Pierre Bayle, a surprising end point, the narrative goes forwards again in the direction of modernity ('The Cartesian Origins of the Modern Footnote'). The arc of the story is often broken by digressions – typical of essays – relating insightful anecdotes drawn from different cultures and periods of historiographical documentation. Grafton casts light on the historical role of annotations and evidence by discussing examples in illuminating detail, thus bringing the working methods and techniques of his protagonists to life, but also their passions, politics, strategies, and carelessness.

⁷ See the precise bibliographical data in C. Philipp E. Nothaft, 'Anthony Grafton: A Bibliography to 2015', in Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing (eds.), *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 2016), i. pp. li–lxxvii, at li–lii.

⁸ Despite the general admiration, the longest review (as far as I know) was critical of Grafton's historical reconstruction of the footnote (in the German version): Martin Gierl, 'Gesicherte Polemik: Zur polemischen Natur geschichtswissenschaftlicher Wahrheit und zu Anthony Graftons *Die tragischen Ursprünge der deutschen Fußnote*', *Historische Anthropologie*, 4/2 (1996), 267–79.

⁹ Chapters 5 and 6 are headed: 'Back to the Future 1' and 'Back to the Future 2'. See Grafton, *The Footnote*, 122 and 148.

But in this work Grafton is interested less in the origins of footnotes or endnotes in the narrow formal (typographical) sense, than in how the bottom part of the page came to be primarily the visible expression—the footprint, so to speak—of what is known as critical historiography. Taking the footnote as a small but revealing object of observation, Grafton wants to understand how modern historical criticism came about and to identify how it was different from traditional historiography: ‘The appearance of footnotes—and such related devices as documentary and critical appendices—separates historical modernity from tradition.’¹⁰ On his way ‘back to the future’, Grafton demonstrates that the principle governing the modern historical footnote—that is, to make historiography transparent in terms of the sources and research on which it is based—had a protracted development in the early modern period. Critical history did not start with Ranke, who successfully dramatized himself as the founder of critical historiography without any existing model.¹¹ Grafton shows that modern historiography was composed of many layers of tradition, with the footnote serving as a sort of palimpsest for this. His exposure of earlier layers of historical criticism undermines the superiority with which modern historians from the nineteenth century onwards have programmatically set themselves apart from their premodern colleagues. As a student of the great Arnaldo Momigliano and a profound philologist himself, Grafton, author of the seminal *Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*,¹² widened a narrow, disciplinary perspective out into the history of historiography. In his search for the origins of historical criticism, he was able to include the whole spectrum of early modern European scholarship, not least in its interaction with the new (natural) sciences. What came out of this is a reconstruction of the ‘origins of modern history’,¹³ which is still one of the best studies that the history of historiography has produced.

Footnotes did not always convey a serious impression of academic criticism, and this is still true today. Numerous revealing anecdotes recounted by Grafton make this clear. And there has long been some

¹⁰ Ibid. 23–4.

¹¹ Ibid. 37, 56–7.

¹² Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1983–93).

¹³ Grafton, *The Footnote*, 149.

resistance to using critical notes, as Ranke confirms, calling footnotes 'distasteful things'.¹⁴ With the establishment of the footnote, whose 'high social, if not typographical, position' was legitimated by the marriage between 'history and philology, its parents',¹⁵ narrative in the main text could no longer unfold as freely and independently as it had in the traditional history-writing of antiquity, but had to be restrained. While the text on the top part of the page presents the past as a complete, finished image, the lower part indicates that it is, strictly speaking, accessible only in a fragmentary form. Its investigation is incomplete and it is soon likely to become outdated, when historical criticism discovers new sources or new research suggests that the narrative requires revision. In this way footnotes always document the incompleteness of narrated history, and constantly issue a certain democratic appeal for scholars to undertake more careful research themselves in order to confirm the impression given by the top of the page, or to revise it where necessary. Grafton approves of this, finding it enlightened, democratic, and social, and thus ends his book with praise of the footnote: 'Only the use of footnotes enables historians to make their texts not monologues but conversations, in which modern scholars, their predecessors, and their subjects all take part.'¹⁶

Michael Bernays, a German literary scholar and author of 'Zur Lehre von den Citaten und Noten',¹⁷ had a similar view at the end of the nineteenth century. Grafton, who owes much to this work by Bernays, praises it as a 'pioneering essay on the history of the footnote'.¹⁸ Georg Stanitzek, too, mentioned above as an admirer of Grafton's book, is not only a precise analyst but a great friend of the footnote, and complains in his essay about the lack of interest in, and indeed, disdain for it. Footnotes tend to be replaced by pictograms and information boxes in introductions to academic courses for German students today.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid. 64.

¹⁵ Ibid. 24.

¹⁶ Ibid. 234.

¹⁷ Michael Bernays, 'Zur Lehre von den Citaten und Noten' [1892] in id., *Schriften zur Kritik und Litteraturgeschichte*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1895-9), vol. iv: *Zur Neueren und neuesten Litteraturgeschichte; Zum deutschen Drama und Theater; Zur neuesten Litteratur; Zur Lehre von den Citaten und Noten*, ed. Georg Witkowski (1899), 253-347.

¹⁸ Grafton, *The Footnote*, 4. On Bernays' footnote analysis, see Stanitzek, 'Geist und Essay um 1900'.

¹⁹ Stanitzek, 'Zur Lage der Fußnote', 2-3.

Despite the great response it evoked in its time, Grafton's book has hardly inspired any follow-up studies on the history of the footnote, apart from a few, mainly short exceptions.²⁰ Nor has similar work been done in other disciplines as far as I know. After all, annotations, whether as footnotes or in other formats, are not limited to history, the subject Grafton largely concentrates on. On the contrary, in all modern academic disciplines they are the essential instrument of a critical dialogue between those who write academic texts and those who read and critically evaluate them in light of the evidence they cite. But its historical method, which relies on 'technical practices' rather than on 'explicit professions',²¹ has made Grafton's book a model of its kind, and one which has further sharpened our view of the history of the footnote. Many historical studies undertaken since the publication of *The Footnote* confirm this. Like Grafton, instead of placing their trust in 'explicit professions', they analyse what is actually said in historical texts, and what they provide as evidence. But the practices of generating and securing knowledge are now attracting interest in wider fields. They have become the subject of investigation internationally in the history of knowledge and science, disciplines in which Grafton himself continues to work intensively.²² In a footnote in *The Footnote*, Grafton points to the lack of a 'history of note-taking',²³ a topic that has been increasingly researched in recent years,²⁴ along with practices such as reading, collecting, information-gathering, compiling, and

²⁰ Robert J. Connors, 'The Rhetoric of Citation Systems, Part I: The Development of Annotation Structures from the Renaissance to 1900', *Rhetoric Review*, 17/1 (1998), 6-48; and id., 'The Rhetoric of Citation Systems, Part II: Competing Epistemic Values in Citation', *Rhetoric Review*, 17/2 (1999), 219-45 deserve special mention.

²¹ Grafton, *The Footnote*, 26.

²² Most recently, Anthony Grafton, *Inky Fingers: The Making of Books in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2020).

²³ Grafton, *The Footnote*, 46, n. 19.

²⁴ I shall mention only a few publications here: Élisabeth Décultot (ed.), *Lire, copier, écrire: Les bibliothèques manuscrites et leurs usages au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2003); Ann Blair and Richard Yeo (eds.), *Note-Taking in Early Modern Europe*, special issue of *Intellectual History Review*, 20/3 (2010); Richard Yeo, *Notebooks, English Virtuosi, and Early Modern Science* (Chicago, 2014); Alberto Cevoloni (ed.), *Forgetting Machines: Knowledge Management Evolution in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2016); Elisabeth Décultot, Fabian Krämer, and Helmut Zedelmaier

the instruments, media, and institutions of processing and storing information. A small selection of recent work in relation to the early modern period testifies to the growing historical interest in the ‘technical practices’ with which Grafton contrasts the ‘explicit professions’ of Leopold von Ranke and his successors in *The Footnote*. It can be found – how could it be otherwise – in the final footnote of this small birthday tribute to a great book which was published twenty-five years ago.²⁵

(eds.), *Towards a History of Excerpting in Modernity*, special issue of *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte / History of Science and Humanities*, 43/2 (2020).

²⁵ Arndt Brendecke, Susanne Friedrich, and Markus Friedrich (eds.), *Information in der Frühen Neuzeit: Status, Bestände, Strategien* (Berlin, 2008); Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven, 2010); Martin Mulsow, *Prekäres Wissen: Eine andere Ideengeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin, 2012); Fabian Krämer, *Ein Zentaur in London: Lektüre und Beobachtung in der frühneuzeitlichen Naturforschung* (Affalterbach, 2014); Françoise Waquet, *L'ordre matériel du savoir: Comment les savants travaillent, XVIe–XXIe siècles* (Paris, 2015); Anthony Grafton and Glenn W. Most (eds.), *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices: A Global Comparative Approach* (Cambridge, 2016); Annette Caroline Cremer and Martin Mulsow (eds.), *Objekte als Quellen der historischen Kulturwissenschaften: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Cologne, 2017); Markus Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge*, trans. John Noël Dillon (Ann Arbor, 2018); Randolph C. Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe: Proof, Information, and Political Record-Keeping, 1400–1700* (Cambridge, 2019); Markus Friedrich and Jacob Schilling (eds.), *Praktiken frühneuzeitlicher Historiographie* (Berlin, 2019); Friedrich Beiderbeck and Claire Gantet (eds.), *Wissenskulturen in der Leibniz-Zeit: Konzepte – Praktiken – Vermittlung* (Berlin, 2021); Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton (eds.), *Information: A Historical Companion* (Princeton, 2021).

THE FOOTNOTE

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