

in confessing to certain limitations of her essay, as in exploiting on occasion the self-conscious dialectic between the text and its dependent notes that she deals with there, Benstock evinces a self-awareness that makes the kind of sophistry she presently succumbs to all the more disquieting.

Her very title is suspect in this regard; for by it she identifies the footnote with the marginalium, and for no reason beyond the one she implies in the note where she raises, but does not answer, the question of when the practice of footnoting began: that footnotes evolved from marginalia. Far more troubling, however, is the argument she resorts to for connecting *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Finnegans Wake*; that their “notations demonstrate ever more complex narrational structures” (205). Her claim, as her subsequent discussion makes clear, is that the *apparatus criticus* in these books—reflective of and correlative to the relation of the author to the text—becomes increasingly “complex” as one proceeds from Fielding through Sterne to Joyce; and such an argument, confined to those three examples, is surely as unobjectionable as it is neat. To suggest, however, that the functional meaning of footnotes becomes progressively ever more complex in the course of the eighteenth century is quite another matter; and it is in this respect that Benstock’s essay leaves something to be desired.

Nowhere in “At the Margin of Discourse” does she say anything to discourage the latter inference. Nor does she so much as mention the one example sufficient to belie it: *A Tale of a Tub*. The omission would pass as venial enough if Benstock’s silence did not have all the marks of deliberation. As it is, however, she appears to have been at pains to avoid naming Swift. Thus, in quoting at considerable length from *The Stoic Comedians* (n. 4), she never divulges that the text Hugh Kenner is referring to in that passage is none other than *A Tale of a Tub*.

Even if Benstock had not been familiar with Kenner’s perceptive remarks about the *Tale*-as-book, and even if she be unacquainted with Denis Donoghue’s consequent elaboration of Kenner in *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction*, it must naturally have occurred to her that any line of descent from the eighteenth century to Joyce should properly run through Swift. Yet if she did in fact mean to imply a linear development of “complexity” in the use of footnotes, the *Tale* would certainly prove an embarrassment; for the footnotes to the fifth edition, like the digressions of which they are the typographical analogue, complicate the tenuous and ironic connection of author to text in a manner not to be met with in Fielding or Sterne or, for that

matter, in Erasmus and Pope (to cite two other pertinent names that Benstock takes no account of).

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To the Editor:

Perhaps it is trivial to quibble with one of twenty-nine footnotes in Shari Benstock’s interesting essay, “At the Margin of Discourse,” but since the subject of that piece was, in fact, footnotes, one effect of the article was to make me perhaps inordinately sensitive to these “extraliterary” appendages.

Benstock cites Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* as one of three modern texts exploiting the notational tradition within wholly fictional works. In what seems a rather casual gesture of critical dismissal, she suggests that “The radical shifts between the speakers and writers of the text and the inconsistent use of pronominal indicators (*I, we, one*) illustrate the ways in which *Pale Fire* is at cross-purposes with itself, its author, and its intended readers.”

This comment seems to confuse the basic premises of an admittedly complex but extremely carefully crafted and consistent novel. *Pale Fire* is in the form of a long, chatty autobiographical poem entitled “Pale Fire,” by a Frostian poet named John Shade, and preface, notes, and index by a commentator, one Charles Kinbote. Both Shade and Kinbote are fictional creations of Nabokov. As the novel progresses, the reader comes to the realization that Kinbote is anything but an objective annotator on Shade’s text. Indeed, he uses his footnotes less to explicate “Pale Fire” than to tell his own story, namely, an apparently paranoid fantasy in which Kinbote turns out to be one Charles the Beloved, deposed and beloved monarch of Zembla. Fascinatingly, though, it turns out that the notes and poem do, on a larger novelistic level, have a clear thematic relation, and what seemed at first to be “cross-purposes” are in fact artfully blended into a bewitching and powerful study of loneliness, aging, the quest to understand death, the search for love.

At one point in one of his more frantic notes, Kinbote vows that “I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel.” But that magical transformation is exactly the tactic of Kinbote’s creator, the master illusionist Nabokov.

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