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The DLB at Thirty

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The editorial director of a literary reference book has no business trying to shape the canon. But he does it nonetheless because the selection of entries and the wording assigned are personal decisions. The editors bring to the task their taste, judgment, standards, biases, values, and all of their reading experience. When Dr. Johnson was asked if his reports of parliamentary debates were fair, he replied that of course they were fair; but he made sure the rascally Whigs didn’t get the best of it. His monumental Dictionary is personal and idiosyncratic. An impersonal reference book — outside of the sciences — isn’t possible or even desirable.

The DLB inevitably reflects the convictions of the outside volume editors and contributors. BCL editing endeavors to impose an objective tone on the entries: first-person enthusiasms are tranquilized, and insightful lit-crit is purged. Writers I regard as over-rated or even worthless have been accorded the space their inflated reputations require. The function of the DLB is to record literary history — not re-make it. Nonetheless, the authors I believe in get the best of it: thus the Documentary volumes for James Gould Cozzens and John O’Hara, both edited by me.

I don’t edit or vet all the DLB entries, although I should. I work on the entries for the authors I care about as well as the entries I’m uneasy about. In order to produce 390 volumes, Richard Layman and I have necessarily relied on in-house BCL editors and outside academic editors. Some 20,000 contributors have written DLB entries.

The DLB volumes are not written in-house; they are planned by outside editors who assign the entries. These volume editors are supposed to vet the entries and reject the hopeless ones or return the unsatisfactory ones for revision; but many of them accept everything that comes in. The pre-production vetting process occurs at BCL; about 25% of the entries are returned for revision and about 10% are killed. Some DLB volumes have been ghost-edited by BCL staff editors because the outside editors were irresponsible and failed to do their work. There have also been fakers who signed contracts and never delivered. They probably never intended to: they just wanted to talk about their work-in-progress or claim departmental credit for it. The abort rate for DLB volume editors and contributors has run 20%.

BCL does what it takes to publish trustworthy volumes. At least three months of in-house editing, revising, and checking every entry are required to make a volume publishable in DLB. Plagiarism is a steady concern. Publishing reference books and scholarly books requires doing the caring for people who don’t care what they put their names on.

It gets harder every year to assign DLB volumes and to obtain publishable entries. Senior professors don’t want to take on the work required. It doesn’t pay enough, and they don’t want to do it for the satisfaction of the work. Junior faculty are unwilling or unable to edit a DLB volume or write entries, because literary history is not “relevant.” Relevant to what? These ill-trained or under-trained academicians want to commit lit-crit. During the thirty-year life of the DLB, at least three generations of graduate students have been damaged by emulating incompetent and undemanding teachers without professional standards. Students who do not learn to use reference books and scholarly books require the training of language; they just wanted to talk about their work-in-progress or claim departmental credit for it. The pre-production vetting process occurs at BCL. But many of them accept everything that comes in. The pre-production vetting process occurs at BCL; about 25% of the entries are returned for revision and about 10% are killed. Some DLB volumes have been ghost-edited by BCL staff editors because the outside editors were irresponsible and failed to do their work. There have also been fakers who signed contracts and never delivered. They probably never intended to: they just wanted to talk about their work-in-progress or claim departmental credit for it. The abort rate for DLB volume editors and contributors has run 20%.

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The erosion of literary reference books required the collaboration of the librarians who have restyled themselves information scientists and have accordingly immunized themselves against contamination by books. They don’t waste acquisition funds on volumes that have to be catalogued, shelved, and even evaluated by them. They aspire to reference rooms without reference books.