

The establishment and explanation of texts, philology in the old sense, is the oldest and most theoretically sophisticated area of literary studies. Its history goes back to the royal librarians of Ptolemaic Alexandria in the third century, B.C. Americans like the late Fredson Bowers and disciples and critics from G. Thomas Tanselle to Hershel Parker have continued to explore the theory of editing and actually to edit texts. Literary theorists write essays and collect those essays into books, but they do not edit texts or write commentaries. Recently Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, in *Politics and Value in English Studies: A Discipline in Crisis?* (1993), have noticed that the theory and practice of editing may provide for English studies, and the humanities as a whole, a way out of linguistic solipsism and theoretical aporia and a return to that fruitful interaction of theory and practice which is typical of creative periods in all disciplines. As Norris has shown about Baudrillard and other important postmoderns, theory has often been a way for the literary intellectual to talk his way out of matters he does not care to confront. One of the strong cases for textual studies as editing and commenting on texts is that, with all the theoretical disagreements and practical problems, there is no way to avoid re-

al problems. *Chronicles'* Theodore Pappas has shown in excruciating detail how the editors of the Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to avoid the implications of King's plagiarism, as theorists have avoided the implications of De Man's Nazi past and Foucault's exploitation and virtual murder of his American disciples. There is one important difference. Editing forms part of a millennia-long tradition, and the King editors eventually did their job. They verified and confirmed the massive plagiarism of M.L. King, while their literary critical colleagues were covering up and avoiding the ethical reality that lies behind the history of postmodernism.

It is said that one bright young theorist told his friends as he lay dying of AIDS, "I die happy, because I was infected by Michel Foucault." Those words could be, may yet be, the epitaph of the humanities in the United States. Unlike AIDS there is a cure for postmodernism. It will not come from quoting a few paragraphs of Derrida, or Said, or Kristeva out of the context of their entire careers. It must come from returning to the rich and lively and essential traditions of editing and commenting on the texts that are the basis not only of literary studies, but of our civilization, from antiquity to the present. e

A Pregnant Teen

by *Harold McCurdy*

When Mary with Joseph entered Bethlehem
To register for the tax, and drop between
An ox and ass what God had promised them,
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.

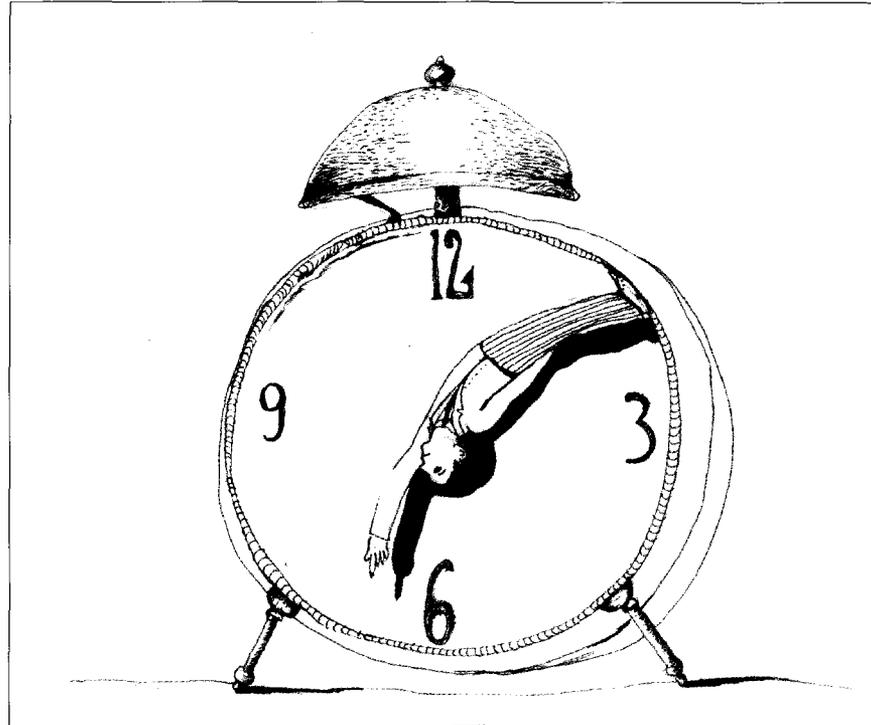
Fierce moralists and politicians now
Decry teen pregnancy as a thing obscene
(And costly to the State), forgetting how
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.

If history were controlled by governments,
And governments alone, they'd keep it clean,
Decree it was a capital offense
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.

Nevertheless, despite the paradox,
Before stunned shepherds blundering on the scene
Found very God between the ass and ox,
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.

Whig History and Lost Causes

by Jeremy Black



It is totally misleading to present history as if its course was inevitable. The past cannot be understood if the elements of chance and contingency are ignored. To assume that what happened was bound to happen—the teleological interpretation of history—takes away the options facing individuals, groups, and governments in the past. It is analytically suspect, and also morally suspect, because it is wrong to argue that the past belongs to the victors. That is a version of the “might is right” approach, the criminals’ charter of history, that reduces to impotence and inconsequence those who were, and are, weak or unsuccessful.

Both British and foreign history are littered with developments that were anything but inevitable. I will refer to some of the most important later, but first must note that the purpose of such an exercise is not simply to turn individual episodes on their head but, more generally, to call for a fundamentally different approach to history. The traditional Whiggish stance was one way of tackling what many saw as the purpose of history: explaining how “we came to be here.” This commonly assumed that “we” was unproblematic, that the identity and coherence of the English and the French were clear-cut. There was also a clear assumption that the course of history was a matter of progress, that a degree of triumphalism was appropriate: the past as a suitable and heroic reflection of the present. Dis-

cussing the past in terms of present values and concerns was a characteristic of this work. British popular historians explained how Britain had come to have a Protestant identity, respect for property, the rule of law, and a self-confidence combining a patriotic sense of national uniqueness with an often xenophobic attitude toward foreigners, especially Catholics.

History of this type presented a clear and obvious past, one that was ordered by the fact that it clearly prepared the way for the present. Thus British history was a seamless web that stretched back to Magna Carta in 1215 and the constitutional struggles of the barons in medieval England, and forward to the 19th-century extension of the franchise. These were seen as arising naturally from the country’s development, indeed as being the natural character of the progress of its people, an analysis that reflected the influence of Social Darwinism, ideas of human advancement that stemmed from the influence of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. But the past is never clear and rarely simple, which is the lesson that emerges most obviously from historical scholarship over the last century. There have been and always will be competing schools of thought, but they share a sense that the past is controversial, that the debates of the past over policies and events can be repeated in modern controversies over their analysis.

All too frequently, this level of controversy is neglected in general works and textbooks. This is understandable because writing such books involves a difficult process of selection, and the dictates of space encourage a schematic interpretation. Major events, or rather events that appear full of importance

Jeremy Black is a professor of history at the University of Durham, England. His many books include Eighteenth-Century Europe and The Politics of Britain 1688-1800.