

May 1, 2007

To the Editor:

In a column analyzing his own inaccurate quotation of a definition of the ideal college, David Isaacson reveals himself a serial offender.

In the course of his argument that accurately understanding and conveying the meaning of a quotation is more important than knowing who said it or the exact words that were said—particulars that are sometimes difficult or impossible to pin down—David Isaacson misquotes Samuel Johnson:

I am tempted to assert rather than argue, to kick a stone, as Samuel Johnson purportedly did when told that Hume didn't believe the real world existed, and reply to those who insist that all of these Hopkins quotations are in some sense correct, "I refute you [sic] thus."

Isaacson gets most of the words right, but not quite, and he gets the context wrong. Johnson, speaking to his friend and biographer James Boswell, is quoted by Boswell in *The Life of Samuel Johnson* as saying, "I refute *it* thus" (emphasis mine) in regard to the theory of George Berkley, not that of David Hume.

In light of this mistake, the difficulty with citing "familiar" quotations seems, often as not, to lie in not being very familiar with the quotations rather than in any epistemological problem with the concepts of authorship, text, or meaning. Quotes that are carried around and passed from person to person until they become familiar not only expose us to the danger of inaccuracy, they unintentionally convey a false erudition to our readers or listeners. When I was in graduate school, and one of my professors quoted a great writer, I was always impressed, naively believing that the quotation surfaced naturally from an intimate knowledge of the work

or at least from the professor's own commonplace book. I was soon disillusioned to find that many scholars pass around by word of mouth, as one might pass a good joke, quotations from books they have never opened.

A familiar folly that resulted from this kind of quotation is the old saw that "Eskimos" have dozens of different words for snow. Of course it turns out that Inuit prefer not to be called Eskimos, that they do not in fact have dozens of words for snow, and that the article scholars had been vaguely citing does not exist. Scholars could avoid these embarrassments by refraining from citing a quotation unless they find it and at least read it in its original context, even if they do not read the whole source.

I make no claim to be a scholar, merely a community college teacher, but my hopelessly old-fashioned liberal education taught me this much: when in doubt, look it up, and if you write it down for publication, check it against the original.

Sincerely,
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Mr. Isaacson's Reply

May 9, 2007

Mr. Ball has "hoist me with my own petard." As he shrewdly, but diplomatically, observes, I am indeed (unwittingly, but carelessly) guilty of the very peccadillo I take others to task for. In the future, after being so delightfully corrected, I shall try harder to observe the distinction between a scholar's responsibility to strive for accuracy and a pedant's obsessive need to dot every "t" and cross every "i" (sic).

David Isaacson
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