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## "Verbatim et Literatim"

Arthur S. Link  
*Princeton University*

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# ADE NEWSLETTER

News of the Association for Documentary Editing

Volume 1, Number 2

May 1979

"VERBATIM ET LITERATIM"

By Arthur S. Link  
Princeton University

[The introduction to Volume 31 of the Papers of Woodrow Wilson provided President Arthur Link with an opportunity to repeat some of his editorial rules. Their relevance to

some recent pros-and-cons voiced on literal transcribing and other facets of editorial decision-making make these excerpts from Link's most recent volume appropriate.]

. . . We have never and do not intend to print critical, or corrected, versions of documents. We print them exactly as they are, with a few exceptions which we have always noted. We never use the word sic except when words are repeated in a document; in fact, we think that a succession of sics simply defaces a page.

As we have said, we repair words in square brackets only for clarity and ease of reading. Our general rule is to do this when we ourselves cannot read the word without stopping to determine its meaning. Jumbled words and names misspelled beyond recognition of course have to be repaired. However, we are usually able to correct the misspelling of a name in the footnote identifying the person.

However, when an old man writes to Wilson saying that he is glad to hear that Wilson is "comming" to Newark, or a semiliterate farmer from Texas writes phonetically, we see no reason to correct spellings in square brackets when the words are perfectly understandable. We do not correct Wilson's misspellings. For example, for some reason he insisted upon spelling "belligerent" as "belligerant." Nothing would be gained by correcting "belligerant" in square brackets.

We think that it is very important for several reasons to follow the rule of verbatim et literatim. Most important, a document has its own integrity and power, oftentimes particularly when it is not written in perfect literary form. There is something very moving in seeing a Texas dirt farmer struggling to express his feelings in words, or a semiliterate former slave doing the same thing. Second, in Wilson's case it is crucially important to reproduce his errors in letters that he typed himself, as he always typed badly when he was in an agitated state. Third, since style is the essence of the person, we would never correct grammar or make tenses consistent, as one correspondent has urged us to do. Fourth, we think that it is obligatory to print typed documents verbatim et literatim. For example, we think that it is very important that we print exact transcripts of Charles L. Swem's copies of Wilson's letters. Swem made many mistakes (we correct them in footnotes from a reading of his shorthand books), and Wilson let them pass. We thus have to assume that Wilson did not read his letters before signing them, and this, we think, is a significant fact. Bryan had one abominable stenographer. In letters in this volume, he spells the name of the steamship Falaba as Fabala and "principle" as "principal." (We did not correct these and similar errors.) We think that it tells us a great deal about Bryan, who was himself a sloppy speller and writer, that he should have let such letters go to the President of the United States. Finally, printing letters and typed documents verbatim et literatim tells us a great deal about the educational level of the stenographical profession in the United States during Wilson's time.