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Where We Stand Now and Where We Might Go

ARTHUR S. LINK*

I want to thank you for the honor that you conferred upon me last year in electing me as the first president of The Association for Documentary Editing. It has been for me a real privilege and pleasure to make a small contribution to the launching of this growing and vigorous organization. I want, particularly, to thank Charlene Bickford for her ever-cheerful and unflagging support, without which our affairs, now very much in order, would be very much in disarray. I want to thank, also, Bob Rutland, for getting out, promptly and inexpensively, those interesting *Newsletters* and Lester Cappon and his committee for organizing this stimulating program.

I had it in mind to say that the profession of documentary editing has come of age with the successful organization of the ADE. But I then remembered Saint Paul's admonition that one should not think better of oneself than he or she is. Historical and textual editing is the oldest scholarly discipline in the world. We do not know when it began in ancient times, but two examples remind us of its antiquity and its important contributions to the great traditions of western civilization. One was the work done by unknown scholars in Greece, most probably at some time in the sixth century B.C., in establishing the text of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* from earlier incomplete texts and oral traditions. These scholars not only preserved for future generations immortal epics but also helped to establish the canons of the classical Greek language. The other example was the incomparable work of Saint Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin from numerous variant Hebrew and Greek texts in the late fourth century A.D. and early fifth century. His so-called Vulgate version, although revised over the centuries, remains as probably the greatest achievement of scholarly editing in history, and certainly the most important.

I mention these examples for two reasons. First, let us be careful lest we think that we represent the apogee in the development of our profession. I doubt that any of us could equal the unknown Greek scholars and Saint Jerome in their skills as textual editors. My second purpose is to

remind us that we are merely the current generation of practitioners of a profession that stretches back more than two millenia and has done more than any other single group to preserve the values and traditions of western culture.

However, enough of such ruminations! I think that it is appropriate, and accurate, also, to say that the successful organization and launching of the ADE marks an important milestone in the progress of our own discipline in the United States. For the first time, an organization exists that can draw together scholars who have been working for years separately and without any effective means of communication—epigraphers, paleographers, those who work in classical and medieval texts, literary textual editors, those who work with twentieth-century documents, and so on.

I have thought a good deal about what I should say tonight. I concluded very early that this is not the time or place for a scholarly discourse upon some aspect of documentary editing. I was tempted to describe the prodigious and varied editorial work that is going on in this country now. It is very great, and there is nothing anywhere in the world to compare with it. I was also tempted to say how important this work is, for it *is*, in my opinion, the most important scholarly work being done in the United States, and, if well done, it will be the most enduring.

Although I feel very deeply that all these things are true, I did not yield to the aforementioned temptations. Incomplete though my own knowledge and wisdom are, this is the time, above all others, when we need to take a hard look at ourselves and what we are doing and not doing; that what we need is honest if unpleasant self-scrutiny, not self-congratulation. The love of God is the beginning of wisdom; but we can neither love God nor acquire wisdom until we are honest about ourselves.

Let me hasten to say that the following observations about our deficiencies as documentary editors apply exclusively, I think it is fair to say, to those of us who work in materials relating to American history. When I talk about the absence of even basic agreement on methodology or methodologies, I do not refer to epigraphers, classicists, Arabists, medievalists, and literary textual specialists. I will say more about them later and about the contributions that they could make to this organization.

* Arthur Link, past-president of the Association for Documentary Editing, delivered this presidential address at the Association's first annual meeting in Princeton, New Jersey, on 9 November 1979.

My first observation is that it is shocking that the most productive scholars in the field of United States history who, I say again, are doing the most important scholarly historical work in this country today, have failed to formulate a methodology by which to go about their work. It is true that most of us have been trained, more or less rigorously (and I am afraid *less* during the past two or three decades), in basic historical methodology. But as editors and scholars we face more numerous problems, both technical and otherwise, than do our colleagues who are not editors. How, for example, does one attempt to correct an obviously corrupt transcript made by a stenographer of another person's speech when the only extant transcript is the corrupt one? There is a method, and a good one. The point is that this is a problem that has probably never been addressed in an ordinary course in historical methodology.

The most sensitive and controverted methodological problem that we historical editors face is of course the rendering of the transcript. I do not suggest that there is a single correct way to produce a transcript. But I am sure that there are right ways and wrong ways, and ways in between. And surely decisions about these matters of transcription cannot be made on the idiosyncratic basis of every editor doing his own thing.

My second observation is that, of all the scholarly books that are produced, the documentary historical series are subjected to the least scholarly review before they are published. How many of us send out manuscript copies of our volumes for rigorous review before publication to specialists in our field or on our subject? Very few, I suspect, except, perhaps, for our first volume. The university presses that publish most of our volumes also share the blame in this matter. They go to extreme lengths to guarantee a high level of scholarly accuracy and achievement in the monographs that they publish, and usually with excellent results. Perhaps some university presses do send out the manuscripts of documentary volumes for prepublication review, but I do not know of one that has done more than send out the first volume in a series. And I dare say that many university presses do not even do that.

To make matters worse, very few of our volumes receive rigorous review in the great scholarly journals. To begin with, the editors of these journals send our volumes for review to general specialists in our fields. These specialists are naturally primarily interested in what our volumes tell them about their periods and subjects. They are generally very kind to us. Some reviewers have had the courage to criticize the publication of trivia or annotation that is inappropriate or does not meet high scholarly standards. But most reviewers are interested in the general contents of our volumes, and not the methodology that we follow, whether our transcriptions are accurate, and so on. I might add that I have seen in all the journals in American history only one rigorous review of a volume of historical

documents, and that review was written by an editor.

My third observation is that it is a startling fact that there is no systematic program for training persons in the craft of editing. And it is a craft which requires advanced skills that can be acquired only through rigorous training. The NHPRC's summer institutes represent a laudable beginning, but, given the limitations of time and money, they cannot possibly do the necessary job. A few senior editors in a few universities offer a course or courses in editing, but they are often ephemeral and usually available only to students in the university where the course is offered. For example, I have offered a basic and advanced course in historical editing for several years. It is open to students in all departments of my university and to students in the institutions with which Princeton enjoys reciprocal relations—Rutgers University and Princeton Theological Seminary. But there the university draws the line as far as enrollment is concerned.

I am not condemning anyone. The senior editors who began the great new modern editorial enterprise some thirty-odd years ago have worked hard to establish a methodology and teach it to their junior editors. They in turn have become the senior editors of today, and I am sure that they work hard to train their young editors in the skills of the craft. But all editors, older and younger, still work too much in isolation. And, given the absence of any canons of methodology, our present system of training is haphazard, to say the least.

My fourth observation is that it is nothing less than remarkable that our profession, and here I would include most documentary editors, does not seem able to agree upon what constitutes appropriate annotation for general or special series, or even single volumes. I am sure that we would all agree that our most important task is to reproduce accurate and trustworthy transcripts—no easy task! But where should we go from there in the matter of annotation? Should there be no annotation at all, as used to be true of the great *Foreign Relations* series, on the assumption that we ought to leave something for journeymen scholars to do? Should annotation merely explicate the document so that a person can read and understand it without recourse to a major research library? Or should we go further and use the documents as vehicles for, say, trying to write the history of our periods? I think that my own views on this subject, insofar as large biographical series are concerned, are well-known to you. However, I claim no special wisdom.

My fifth observation is that it is, again, a remarkable fact that we do not seem to enjoy a consensus in our profession concerning general principles or guidelines of selection that can be applied and used in all fields of documentary editing. I think that it is now safe to say that there is general agreement that editors cannot and should not print everything, particularly editors working on subjects and in fields in the eighteenth century and onward. For

editors working in the twentieth-century materials, there is no dispute whatever about the necessity to be selective. And this is equally true of editors of large series dealing with eighteenth-century subjects. It is probably also true of earlier fields about which I know very little. I dare say that my favorite editor, Saint Jerome, selected his texts very carefully.

My sixth and final observation relates more directly to our own organization, the ADE. I am sorry to say that, in spite of our efforts thus far, we are still too much of a group composed of persons who work with documents relating to the history or literature of the United States. Documentary editors in other fields work with different kinds of documents, to be sure, but we are all doing basically the same thing and face basically the same problems. In my courses on historical editing, I have had students who worked on Arabic texts, medieval manuscripts, literary sources, Reformation tracts, and so on. I have learned more about dealing with variant texts from my colleagues who work with Arabic and medieval materials than I have learned from my colleagues in United States history. The medievalists have taught me most of what I know about the correction of corrupt transcripts. I would say that we need our co-workers in related fields more than they need us. Let me be blunt and say that editors in the classical and medieval fields have been at their business a lot longer than we Americanists — in fact, have blazed the trail, devised a scientific methodology, and set high standards that we editors who work in more recent periods would do well to emulate.

I suppose that it is only realistic to conclude that the ADE will probably not have large numbers of members among the documentary editors in the premodern fields. They have their own venerable organizations and academies, annual meetings, and distinguished journals. They have long since established authoritative canons of methodology and review each other's works rigorously. But I do hope that the ADE can maintain close and cordial relations with these co-workers. One small beginning would be to invite them to present papers at our annual meetings.

I said at the outset that I thought that the organization of the ADE represents a milestone in the profession of documentary editing. It is a milestone because we do now have an effective means of communicating with each other and meeting annually for frank discussions of common problems, as we have been doing during this meeting. However, the organization of the ADE can constitute a major milestone, perhaps "breakthrough" is not too strong a word, if we use the ADE as an instrumentality to accomplish more ambitious objectives. Let me be specific.

Our most obvious need is an authoritative manual on documentary editing. The preparation of such a manual will involve many persons in various fields and require a long time for completion. But the task can be done.

Moreover, here again, is a matter in which I think we might have a good chance of involving our colleagues in the premodern fields.

We have to start somewhere, and I would suggest that we begin by appointing committees to address themselves to four of our most urgent problems.

The first is the problem of dealing with variant and corrupt texts. Here our colleagues who work in ancient and medieval materials can be of greatest help to us. They have wrestled with the problem of the stemma for more than a century.

The second is the problem of the transcript. I simply cannot believe that a group of experienced editors working in all fields will find it impossible to agree on guidelines for transcribing various types of documents. I am sure that they would agree on the basic methodology. And I am sure that they could provide alternative scientific methods to deal with various types of texts.

The third is the problem of appropriate annotation. Surely a group of reasonable people could agree on guidelines and lay out the alternatives of what is appropriate and inappropriate annotation, always depending, of course, upon the editor's objectives and the kind of documents that he or she is annotating.

The fourth problem is the matter of selectivity. Again, surely a group of reasonable people could at least lay down the guidelines and principles. And in this matter, as in the other three that I have mentioned, I cannot imagine anyone wanting to force anyone to lie in a Procrustean bed. There have to be alternative methodologies. I suspect, however, that agreement on principles and even methodologies will not be as difficult to achieve as we think. I seem to sense, already, the formation of an inchoate consensus at least on what constitutes appropriate annotation and the rendering of the transcript.

Reports, treatises, small monographs, call them what you will, by these four committees would of course be circulated, criticized, and discussed. And it seems probable that the final versions could constitute the beginning of the manual on documentary editing of which I have spoken. Meanwhile, other committees or individual specialists might be asked to write chapters on the history of documentary editing in various epochs, the problem of corrupt transcripts of speeches, the best means of quality control, and so on. What I am proposing is ambitious. But it *is* feasible and can be done if we have the will and determination to do it. And I am sure that it would not be difficult to find the money for such a project if we undertook it.

Since I am giving a lot of advice, permit me to add that, in my opinion, the ADE ought to address itself in the near future to two other subjects that I have mentioned. One is the problem of the absence of rigorous and critical reviews in scholarly journals. This is not an easy problem, and I am by no means confident about a solution. To

begin with, I doubt that it would be possible for a single quarterly to print reviews of all documentary volumes in all fields, so prodigious is the output. For another thing, reviewers of documentary volumes in journals devoted to classical history, Old and New Testament studies, Near Eastern studies, the medieval period, and work in literary sources do give careful attention to the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the books that they review. Consequently, the problem narrows down to reviews of documentary volumes in modern history and literature, and most particularly to documentary volumes relating to the history of the United States. One beginning would be to expand the *ADE Newsletter* to include reviews by editors with special emphasis on selection, annotation, and methodology. This would, I think, do more than anything that I can think of to set lively communication and discussion in motion and to improve our standards.

Charles Cullen has just been informed that a group of scholars at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York have matured plans for a journal to be called *Text*, which will be devoted exclusively to the problems of documentary editing and textual criticism in virtually every field of scholarship. Certainly, the new president and steering committee of the ADE will want to make contact with the group at the City University to explore the possibility of some fruitful relationship between the editors of *Text* and the ADE.

The second matter to which the ADE might address

itself is the matter of provision for systematic training of documentary editors. Obviously, we are not going to establish a national institute of documentary editing overnight. But I suggest that it would be well to begin to explore the problem, to determine whether the idea is wise and feasible, and to see what the possibilities are by way of personnel and funding.

I realize that all the foregoing constitutes a very large agenda for so young an organization. And it is very easy for me to stand here and reflect on our challenges and opportunities. We cannot do everything at once, but we can make a beginning. We now have the instrumentality for discussion, interchange, and action. We have enormous resources and creative power in our present membership—now more than two hundred. And these most important resources will increase in the future. We can, I am sure, find financial support for any undertaking that promises to strengthen and improve the documentary editorial enterprise now under way in the United States.

I look forward to the future with great confidence and the assurance that this organization has capacity to accomplish even greater things than we can envisage at the moment.

In conclusion, I want to say that, in Lester Cappon, we have a distinguished scholar and editor and a person who will give wise and vigorous leadership to all of us as we strive to move forward in accomplishing the high goals of the Association for Documentary Editing.