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The "Perfect" Text: The Editor Speaks for the Author

DAVID J. NORDLOH*

I'd like to offer two preliminary comments about the general topic of this session, the "perfect" text, and another about the aspect of that topic which I've been asked to discuss. On the general topic, our presentations may — indeed should — overlap; no aspect of textual scholarship, theoretical or practical, can be sensibly isolated from the others. And second, the placement of "perfect" in quotation marks in the title of the session is an acknowledgment of the virtual impossibility of the task: as editors we are frustrated by a multitude of conditions — I'll be describing a few of them in the body of my talk — from achieving a "perfect" text as the result of our work. About my topic specifically I'd like to add that I have interpreted it as a call to deal with texts rather than editions; I won't be concerned with the matter of selecting from an assemblage of texts to create the specific content of an edition.

Even though the perfect text eludes us, I think it worthwhile to begin with some notion of the ideal. The ideal of the text, the condition all of us would prefer, is that authors speak for themselves in their texts, and that the work of editors be not interpretation of handwriting and discussion of optional readings, but simply(?) annotation. But can and do authors speak for themselves? Or, to put the problem in slightly different form: what would be the characteristics of the perfect text insofar as our emphasis on the author of that text is concerned? It would be, among other things: 1) consistent with external fact; 2) devoid of mechanical errors in spelling and punctuation; 3) fully articulated, and thus free of apparent nonsense or elliptical confusion; 4) chronologically and intellectually whole, with no internal revisions, no undecided options for alternate words (I think immediately of Emily Dickinson's poetry manuscripts as the least perfect in this way), no incomplete statements; 5) unique, existing in only one copy — another form of intellectual wholeness; and 6) unmediated — that is, in the author's hand or at his hand at the typewriter, not processed or transmitted by scribes, secretaries, compositors, or editors.

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None of these six items specifies that a text be immediately comprehensible or visually intelligible — it can be in shorthand, code, pig latin, or a foreign language unfamiliar to the reader; perfection of the text as containing the ideas of an author is not a matter of its accessibility to the reader, though accessibility would certainly be of great concern to the editor for other, obvious reasons.

You may want to add other elements to this list, out of your own experience with editing. But though they might differ from my list, they would share with it a basic intellectual characteristic. They would represent means of assuring us of the *intentionality* of the text. And they would yield this assurance in predominantly negative terms; that is, they would eliminate any practical possibility that the author might have wanted to say something else than what is on paper. In practical terms, then, such a text as I'm describing here would raise no doubts about itself and its unity which would require solution. We might have our preferences for more even style, greater intellectual clarity, and so on, but we would be certain that these were the faults of the author and not of the text. I hope the *ad hominem* nature of this preliminary discussion isn't too discouraging. After all, a text is a human product, communicating the human mind and spirit, and I am concerned somehow to confine the human fallibility of the editor while also giving that editor the freedom to preserve the crucial human message of the text.

But most texts, alas, are not ideal. They typically invite sensible human doubt about themselves: they aren't saying what a sensible person would want them to say, they're incomplete, they say in one place what two ideal texts would ordinarily say. In what ways, for example, are texts *not* ideal? I'll offer a brief list of distressing possibilities. Many texts exist in more than one form, whether directly prepared by the author or not, or a textual message is conveyed by documents that simultaneously, on the same page, convey other textual messages — the most obvious example is a diary written at one time and corrected and revised for publication at another. Or a letter is represented by both journal copy and recipient copy; a speech exists in both draft and delivered version; any public document could exist in both manuscript and published form, or in two or more printed

forms; a text could exist in only one printed form — the simplest conceivable possibility — but, given the publication process, that printed form is the result of editorial and compositorial intervention in the now-lost original.

These conditions, and a welter of others more labyrinthine, stand between us and the perfect text, for the reason I've already suggested: they lead the editor to wonder about the clarity of the intentionality conveyed by the material. I must note that the matter of intention is unique to modern texts. As the result of historical condition and better archival instincts, we have documents from authors' hands or accessible to their eyes, evaluation, and revision, and so we're threatened by indefiniteness of intention or the possibility of multiple intentions. No such situation pertains to classical texts: we can't even ask what Aeschylus or Saint Paul wanted or approved or oversaw; instead, the only workable editorial end is the reconstruction of a hypothetical text which lies at the base of all the extant forms. And we have no way of connecting that *ur*-text directly to the hand of its author.

In short, we're confronted in the editing of modern texts with two crucial problems; the existence of texts, or versions of texts, which constitute the limit to our knowledge of identifiable intention; and modes of physical presentation of texts which engender questions about the reliability of their rendition of intention and about the singleness of intention.

I'm not about to presume a repetition, expansion, or refutation of published discussions of intention. But in light of the dilemmas I've mentioned, I'd like to attempt some working principles, principles which I hope will be clear and even possibly useful. The air of these principles is to encourage the editor to restrict editing to what is editable — the text — but also to provide some directed flexibility in the face of uncertainty about and variety of intention. And even here I'm trying to suggest my preference for allowing the author to speak for the author as uninterruptedly as possible.

Principle 1

What can be done in the editing of the text to "make" it what its author "wanted," to assure that it represents authorial intention, must be rigorously limited by the physical contents of documents. In this regard, editorial corrections of spelling and punctuation errors and repetitions of words in sequence can be justified because such details can't be conceived, in most ordinary language contexts, except as mistaken departures from sensible intellectual norms. They are recognizable failures of the document to reflect the author. But editorial normalization of spelling and punctuation on the basis of general usage or statistical superiority and other proposed continuations of intention in authorial revision are notions of intention neither found in nor supported by

documents, authorial usage, or general usage. Note again that this principle is meant to deal with the matter of authorship of a text, not with questions of the needs of readers of an edition — who may indeed require modern rather than Elizabethan spelling, for example.

I'll add to this principle a corollary and a hauntingly unanswerable question. The corollary is that the most significant appeal outside a specific text of an author to authorial intention is the other texts of that author, and especially manuscripts. The question: what do we do in the instance of an authorial comment, in a letter, for instance, about some other text of his that the printer, printer's compositors, friends, or lawyer should correct his grammatical mistakes, save or polish his French, refigure his mathematics, supply a missing name or date? In other words, by what process can we deal with authorial intention not authorially enacted? I'll add, more briefly, two other principles, closely related to each other.

Principle 2

With respect to authorial intention, documents are not necessarily texts, and texts are not necessarily limited to individual documents. An obvious example: Lafayette's later revisions of his own memoirs and letters in their pages constitute a different text than the originals in which they occur, even though original and revision appear in the same document. Or, rather than two texts in one document, two different intellects, the author's and the contemporaneous editor's: a letter written by an American with strong American preferences in spelling, published in the columns of the *Times* of London. Or, on the other side, the text of a novel deriving from a combination of manuscript and authorial corrections in proofs; in effect, from two different documents.

Principle 3

Departure from a document or combination of documents in the effort to represent intention is justifiable only insofar as that intention can be identified, intellectually and physically. And again a corollary: an editor can represent in his editing only one coherent intention per text. For example, an editor can't combine into one place Mark Twain's separate intentions for both American and English editions of *Innocents Abroad* or James Fenimore Cooper's early American and late English editions of *The Pioneers*. An editor can't combine the draft and delivered forms of an address if they had different aims. I'd also suggest that Principle 3 also means the editor has the responsibility to identify and describe general authorial intentions which dictate textual decisions, and that the editor is obligated to report all significant textual evidence bearing on the difference between text and document.

As a final effort at making sense of these principles, I'll offer two problematic examples for recent documentary

editing in history. The first involves Booker T. Washington's famous Atlanta speech. The editors of it in the new edition comment upon and fully record in notes "deleted passages" in the manuscript which "seem to suggest something of BTW's thinking as he prepared the address." I'd prefer that, if the editors are concerned with describing the progress of intention from draft to delivered address, they report deletions as well as additions. The second example, drawn from the first volume of the *Correspondence of James K. Polk*, concerns a letter to Polk from Andrew Jackson dated 1 February, 1838. The text printed is based on the copy written in "Andrew Jackson Donelson's hand and interlined by Andrew Jackson . . . it is a signed draft of the letter sent." A footnote indicates, however, that another copy, in Polk's hand, of the same letter as received contains a postscript from Jackson, not

printed in the edition. Here, clearly, the decision to report only a document does injustice to the text: Polk certainly didn't invent the postscript from Jackson which he records in his copy, and it ought to be included in the edition as part of the content of the text.

I'm afraid that, in the limitations of time here, my principles will give rather the impression of Zen sayings. But attention to them, and to the efforts they necessarily entail, should mean editing that reflects and defines the limits of its documentary basis, as well as the fallibilities and possibilities implicit in the original creation of that text. And they provide a means of conveying what the author has written while allowing us to also articulate what he or she did not write but did intend, and to identify the difference between the expression of thought and its often very complex physical embodiment.