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The "Authentic" Witness: The Editor Speaks for the Document

WAYNE CUTLER*

For several years now literary and historical editors have been "talking shop" in their attempt to isolate what, if anything, they share of a common editorial method. Regrettably, the more we have talked the more defensive our thinking has become. David J. Nordloh's essay in the May 1980 issue of the *ADE Newsletter*, "The 'Perfect' Text: The Editor Speaks for the Author," demonstrated to my chagrin the occasional depths of our mutual misunderstandings. Hoping that subsequent commentary would obviate the need for my making a self-pleading rejoinder, I have postponed the present answer for some eighteen months. The *ADE Newsletter* of February 1981 carried excellent articles by Don L. Cook and Robert J. Taylor, but neither went beyond the examination of Tom Tanselle's essay, "The Editing of Historical Documents" (*Studies in Bibliography* 31 [1978]:1-56). What follows should not be regarded as a comprehensive review of Professor Nordloh's editorial principles. At most I would attempt to correct a single set of inferences that have arisen from his criticism of the Polk Project's editorial methods.

Some of our colleagues in documentary editing read the Nordloh article and concluded that the editors of the *Correspondence of James K. Polk* had printed a letter from Andrew Jackson to Polk, dated February 1, 1838, without including the letter's postscript. A few readers thought the Polk editors had taken leave of their senses, and still fewer looked up the letter to see the "sin" itself. Those responsible inquisitors found the letter in our fourth volume (Nordloh's citation was faulty), and two or three even read the annotations that followed the letter. Much to their surprise they found in the headnote the words of the fugitive postscript, printed in extenso. We had given preference to a signed draft of the letter over a copy taken by the recipient in his own hand.

Unfortunately, the letter sent by Jackson (presumably bearing his signature and his fugitive postscript) could not be found and published. Our next best choice, a draft in the handwriting of Andrew Jackson Donelson and signed by Jackson, would prove to the critical historian that the author had accepted as his own the words appearing above his signature; we noted the existence and location of the copy in Polk's hand, which would demonstrate that Polk had accepted the letter received as containing words from Jackson. The Polk editors had no dif-

iculty assuming that Polk knew Jackson's signature and handwriting; and if the same assumption could be made for all letters received by Polk, perhaps an argument could be made that preference should be given those "documents" purporting to be complete. Indeed, the copy in Polk's hand did carry the fugitive postscript not included in the signed draft. In his search for the "perfect" text, Nordloh would have had us prefer the more complete "document." Yet who would be so foolish as to claim knowledge of Polk's exact degree of familiarity with the many hundreds of different signatures and handwritings received by him. For the sake of consistency our necessary rule of preference had to be applied; we printed that version of Jackson's letter bearing the best proof of the writer's acceptance. Thus the historian's first test of external evidence must be that of "authorial acceptance," not "authorial intention" or documentary completeness. Besides, we carried the words of the fugitive postscript in quotations in our headnote.

Nordloh states his criticism of our work in irregular language. For example, he observes that Polk's copy of Jackson's letter "contains a postscript from Jackson, not printed in the edition." Nordloh then instructs us in the following words:

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. (*ADE Newsletter*, May 1980, p. 3)

Our language difficulties center on Nordloh's use of the terms "edition," "document," and "text."

The unsuspecting reader of Nordloh's criticism might be led to believe that the Polk editors omitted altogether the language of the postscript from their "edition" of Polk's correspondence. Nordloh probably intended to say that we did not print the postscript immediately below the author's signature. A more precise critic might have made a better word choice; a more generous critic might have mentioned that the wording of the postscript, as carried in Polk's copy of the letter, appeared in our headnote.

For the historian a "document" is a writing used for evidentiary purposes; the language used in that writing constitutes its "text." To say the least of it, I have found little application for Nordloh's second editorial principle, the language of which reads, "With respect to autho-

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rial intention, documents are not necessarily texts, and texts are not necessarily limited to individual documents." (*ADE Newsletter*, May 1980, p. 2) Such distinctions or specialized use of language may be required by literary editors for purposes of speaking for the author, but the historical editor speaks only for one document at a time. His discipline demands that he give preference to that document bearing the greatest measure of "authorial acceptance."

From the historian's perspective there are no documents without texts. Two or more documents may share identical word selection and order; they may possess equal "authorial acceptance," as in the case of signed duplicates sent by separate posts; but each writing must be counted as a discrete document. To the extent that any two documents are conflated without physical proof of "authorial acceptance," to that same degree the "perfect" *tertium quid* renders itself suspect for evidentiary purposes.

The real distinction between editing evidentiary materials and literary materials arises from the way in which the reader uses the published materials, not in some supposed private/public dichotomy. Every writing is in itself

an act of publication, whether for the closet or otherwise. Historical method requires physical proofs, witnesses that possess discrete physical identities, whatever the occasion or medium of their communication. Consider the source requirements for the literary historian. Were he to use a conflated version of a literary piece as evidence of a past trend in writing, he would be directing the reader to that which was not a primary or first-hand witness. If his analysis of the evidence were to be critical and his citations accurate, he would of necessity examine and cite the language of the piece as it was in the time of its witness. Like it or not, dating documents is critical for historical evidence, and conflation breaks down the time factor that is so important in linking written witnesses to particular past events.

To what uses literary critics may put bastard documents is for them to say, but the saying of the same will not likely change the historical discipline's rules of evidence and citation. I am far from being convinced that a common definition of terms would inform our dissimilar approaches to editing, for it may well be the case that on the subject of methodology we have little of consequence to exchange.