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Anne's Diary Papers

Is Anne Frank at Last Taken Seriously as a Writer?

Laureen Nussbaum - 2004

In 1998, the emergence of five unknown pages written by Anne Frank once again focused attention on her diary. Despite the fact that the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation had unravelled the history of Anne's diary in "The Critical Edition" (Dutch 1986, 2001; English 1989, 2003) and had printed all available texts in parallel, readers were confused. This was partly due to Mirjam Pressler's so-called 'Definitive Edition' of 1995 in which the strands, that had been so carefully separated in the Critical Edition, were once again tangled. A brief review of the different versions of Anne Frank's journal may be helpful in establishing a context for the five complementary pages.

The red and white checkered diary

On her thirteenth birthday, June 12, 1942, Anne receives her favorite gift, the original red and white checkered diary. She makes her first entry that very day, expressing the hope that she will be able to confide completely in her diary and that it will be a great support and comfort to her. During the subsequent weeks she reports about her birthday, about her fellow students and events at the Jewish Lyceum (academic high school) and about the few fun things that Jewish youngsters were still allowed to enjoy that spring. Early July 1942, Margot, Anne's sixteen year old sister, receives a call to report 'for labor in Germany.' The next day, the whole Frank family goes into hiding on the upper floors of the back quarters of 263 Prinsengracht, Mr. Frank's business premises. Mr. Frank had made sure that, in name, the firm would no longer belong to him. Soon the Franks will share their hiding place with the Van Pels family and, a little later, dentist Pfeffer will join them.

Letters to Kitty

The first weeks in hiding are so difficult for lively little Anne, that she cannot even write about it in her diary. Late September, after reading one of her favorite books, Cissy van Marxveldt's 'Joop ter Heul,' which is written as a series of letters, Anne adopts the idea of addressing her future diary entries to members of an imaginary club of girl friends, of whom Kitty is dearest to her. These diary letters are, in part, childlike and gushy. They contain allusions to figures and situations from 'Joop ter Heul,' some riddles and jokes, but also Anne's day dreams and remarks about her reading and about her experiences in hiding. Between these letters, addressed to

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fictional persons, there are two directed to her real friend, Jacqueline (van Maarsen). They were, of course, never sent.

Two versions: a-version and b-version

By the end of 1942, the original checkered diary was full, except for a few open spots. Anne subsequently filled a number of notebooks with her diary letters. Not all of these notebooks have been preserved. Hence, we do not know when Anne decided to address her letters exclusively to Kitty. There is no doubt, however, that a call issued by the Dutch Secretary of Education, Culture and Sciences in Exile via Radio Orange from London, prompted Anne to rewrite her original diary entries during the spring of 1944 in order to publish them after the war. May 20, 1944, she starts her thorough revision. In ten weeks, she manages to fill 324 loose sheets with her careful rewrite. In the Critical Edition, the original text is called the a-version; the rewritten text the b-version.

“The Diary of a Young Girl”: the c-version

The eight hidens are betrayed, and on August 4, 1944 the secret police storms in and arrests them. After they are gone, two faithful helpers, Miep Gies and Bep Voskuijl, gather as many of Anne's manuscripts as they can find. A year later, when, sadly, it is evident that only Otto Frank has survived the death camps, Miep Gies hands him his daughter's writings, a selection of which he publishes in 1947 as 'Het Achterhuis.' This is the original version of 'The Diary of a Young Girl' (1952), which is reprinted in the aforementioned Critical Edition as c-version.

“Very few passages”

Otto Frank was well-read, but he lacked experience in the mores of publishing. In the original printed version of 'The Diary of a Young Girl' there is no acknowledgment that he had edited his daughter's writings nor that, in preparing the book, he had time and again made choices between two very different versions of Anne's diary entries. The very brief, unsigned epilogue simply reads: 'Apart from very few passages, which are of little interest to the reader, the original text has been printed.' Otto Frank stood by this fiction until the end of his life in 1980. When asked what sections he had left out, he would answer steadfastly that he had eliminated 'nothing essential, just passages about Anne's physical development and nasty remarks about her mother.' With this standard reply Otto Frank created a false perception that has survived him to this day. Mirjam Pressler banked on it for her new edition of 'The Diary of a Young Girl,' despite the fact that a careful reading of the Critical Edition refutes Otto Frank's assertion.

More self-critical and introspective

It's not easy to second-guess why Otto Frank never let on to the existence of two primary--albeit fragmentary--versions of Anne's diary. Did he think that a quasi-unedited, spontaneous diary of a young girl would have a stronger appeal to prospective readers? What were his guiding principles when, preparing the first edition, he made his choices between a- and b-texts? For the year 1943, he only had Anne's revised manuscript, the b-version, at his disposal, since the a-version was lost. For that period of time, the reader gets the best insight into the kind of texts Anne had prepared for publication: vignettes about the daily routine in the "back-quarters" and witty descriptions of keenly observed special episodes that interrupt that routine. Anne has kind and appreciative words for the helpers, especially for Miep Gies, but she also reports about the food shortage, about the many unpleasant quarrels in the tense atmosphere of the cramped quarters, and about the news from the outer world, particularly concerning the rounding up of more and more Jews and the progress of the war. Towards the end of 1943 her entries become more self-critical and introspective.

A young writer

For the first part of 'Het Achterhuis,' that is for the second half of 1942, Otto Frank had both Anne's spontaneous entries of the a-version and her rewrites, the b-texts, composed almost two years later. While Anne's b-version starts out with a rather literary introduction, dated June 20, 1942, Otto preceded it with two older, childlike descriptions of her birthday and a transitional sentence. However, Anne's fascinating description of the consternation on July 5, when Margot received her summons to report for labor and of the subsequent quick decision for the whole family to go into hiding, he took completely from the b-version. The same is true for the precise description of all the rooms in the hiding place, which Anne included in her rewrite in order to lay a base for her later entries. This, she knew, would help the reader imagine the surroundings in which her subsequent experiences would unfold, the

place where under the pressure of the circumstances she was soon to develop into an autonomous person and a young writer.

Prevailing myth

When Anne revised her texts, she left out most of her outbursts against her mother. In the light of the prevailing myth, it is interesting that Otto Frank restored several of them in the c-version, for instance in the entry of October 3, 1942. He did the same with a sentence in the a-version in which Anne expresses her longing for her first menstruation. Anne left it out in her rewrite, dated October 29, 1942. Her father reinstated the passage in the c-version.

Lachrymose passages

For the period of December 22, 1943 till March 29, 1944, Otto Frank again had both Anne's a- and b-texts at his disposal. The process of Anne's growing critical introspection can be readily observed if one compares the two versions of her description of a Christmas eve visit by one of the helpers and of the emotional turmoil this visit invokes in her (December 24, 1943). Anne's longing for freedom and a carefree youth has not diminished, but in the b-version her language is more poetic than in the original entry. Moreover, she now adds that she should stop feeling sorry for herself and she ends on a brave and positive note. Here and in subsequent entries Otto Frank deemed it necessary to reinstate the more lachrymose passages Anne had cut out and, occasionally, he even added a sentence or two from other entries Anne had eliminated. As a result much of the coherence of the compositional set-up of Anne's b-version is lost.

Reinstated sections

The development from a- to b- to c-version can be readily followed by studying a long entry of January 5-6, 1944. In the a-version Anne tells about a psychological wound her mother inflicted on her several years ago. It still hurts, when she thinks of it. In the b-version she eliminates the whole episode and she does the same with another passage of this entry, dealing with her developing body, her menstruation and her 'terrible urge' to feel her breasts at night in bed. Otto reinstated both sections of the entry in his c-version, which is again totally at variance with the often repeated statement that he had only left out passages in which Anne had expressed negative feelings about her mother or in which she had written too freely about her own body.

Tales in 'The Diary'

In the c-version of the texts of early 1944, Otto time and again would include Anne's emotional outbursts of the a-version, which Anne had partly eliminated, partly converted into fictional stories. During 1943, Anne wrote a number of tales parallel to her diary entries. These short prose pieces were meant for a separate book of tales. Toward the end of February 1944 Anne sublimated the vision of her beloved maternal grandmother (a-version, December 29, 1943) into the comforting story, 'The Guardian Angel' and, subsequently, she transposed her infatuation with Peter van Pels into the hopeful tale, 'Happiness' (see Anne Frank's 'Tales from the Secret Annex'). Since some of the stories in this collection of tales deal with events in the hiding place, Otto Frank originally selected a few of these texts for inclusion in the c-version of the diary, for instance, 'The best little Table' under the date July, 13, 1943.

Matured at an accelerated pace

By the time Anne was revising her entries of early 1944, she had read a number of good books, particularly biographies, which had helped school her mind and her style. She had matured at an accelerated pace and had outgrown her infatuation with Peter, who could not hold the candle to her with regard to either strength of character or intellectual prowess. Hence, she cut out most of her gushing Peter-passages and toned down some of the shorter texts in which Peter figured. Anne concludes the b-version of her retrospective of March 7, 1944, by declaring her inner independence from her parents and by bravely affirming her autonomy. Her previous references to Peter she eliminates. Father Frank undid these revisions. Apparently, he wanted to preserve, both for himself and for the reader, the image of his beloved, tempestuous little Anne and did not know how to deal with the more objective, spiritually more autonomous young writer.

Eliminated text

From this period date the three most striking pages of the five loose sheets that emerged in the nineteen nineties. During the last year of his life, Otto Frank had

entrusted these five pages to Cor Suijk, then a staff member of the Anne Frank Foundation. In the meanwhile, a new Critical Edition of 'The Diary of Anne Frank' appeared in 2003 (based on the new Dutch edition of 2001), in which these three pages, the b-version of the diary entry of February 8, 1944 are included, together with 47 lines of the original a-version under that same date. The latter had been eliminated in the Critical Edition of 1989 at the request of the Frank family. The passage contains Anne's reflections about her parents' marriage.

A sincere attempt

In previous entries Anne had repeatedly pondered her strained relationship with her mother. Under the date of January 2, 1944, she had acknowledged that she herself was partly to blame for the tensions. In the recently surfaced entry of February 8, Anne tries to explain her mother's harshness as a result of a deep sadness. During a previous conversation with her father, Anne had learned that, as a young man, he had not been able to marry his great love. Anne now thinks that mother Frank senses that her husband does not love her as passionately as she loves him, which cannot help but embitter her. Anne would like to extend herself more to her mother but the latter's coldness makes an approach impossible. Nonetheless, she is trying sincerely to do justice to her mother. According to chapter 8 of Melissa Müller's 1998 biography of Anne Frank (New York: Holt), Anne's surmise about the relationship between her parents is rather perceptive and not too far from the truth. Hence, it is only right that the newest British edition of 'The Diary of a Young Girl,' edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, contains the once eliminated entry of February 8, 1944 (Penguin, 2001).

'No sentimental nonsense'

Her parents' marriage kept occupying Anne's mind. In a most important entry of May 11, 1944, Anne expresses her wish to become a writer. She intends to publish a book after the war. The title will be "Het Achterhuis" and it will be based on her diary entries. As a second major project she mentions the completion of the novel 'Cady's Life,' in which the title figure will not marry her great love. Anne closes her outline with the sentence: 'This isn't sentimental nonsense for it is modeled on the story of Daddy's life.' Otto Frank did not include this last sentence in his c-version. Incidentally, the passage is not derived from Anne's revised text, since she was unable to complete her rewrite before the arrest on August 4th. The b-version does not extend beyond March 29, 1944, and, yet, in many of the spontaneous a-texts of the subsequent four months, it is evident that the young writer was thinking about publication. An excellent example is Anne's breathtaking account of a burglary on Easter Sunday (April 11, 1944).

Publication of the diary letters

This makes it hard to comprehend, why Otto Frank withheld two additional pages via Cor Suijk. They contain an alternative introduction to Anne's b-version, which is equally literary as the well-known one, printed under June 20, 1942. In both texts she plays down her aspirations as a diarist in order to whet the reader's curiosity. In the familiar version she states that 'nobody will be interested in the outpourings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl.' On the withheld loose sheets, she asserts that she will see to it that nobody will ever lay hands on her diary entries. Father Frank took this remark much too literally and, therefore, he was afraid he might be accused of having published Anne's writings against her wishes. Nothing could be farther from the truth since Anne revised her diary letters so assiduously in preparation of their eventual publication..

24 words

Even now, that we have the revised Critical Edition of 'The Diary of Anne Frank,' this 2003 volume is still not quite complete. In the entry of May 6, 1944, 'at the request of the person concerned 24 words have been deleted.' From the context it is safe to assume that the elision does not deal with Anne or her closest kin. Hence the eventual publication of those eliminated words will not likely cause a sensation.

Predating

Of more importance, it seems to me, is the fact that the editors of the newly revised Critical Edition clung to the controversial date of an important diary letter. According to a detailed explanation on page 192 of this edition, this diary letter, written by Anne for the b-version, was originally dated Saturday, October 30, 1943. This date, written with ink, is crossed out with pencil and replaced, again with pencil, by Saturday, November 7, 1942. Subsequently, these penciled in corrections were—at least partially—erased. Considering both the content and the style of this entry, it is

obvious, that its place is at the end of 1943, a particularly difficult year for Anne. Starting from an argument between herself and her sister, Anne ponders the relationships between the members of the nuclear family and evaluates her own position within that framework. She realizes that she cannot expect the guidance and encouragement she craves from either her mother or her father. She has to chart her own course, and writing in her diary is her only succor. Otto Frank chose the earlier date for this entry in his c-version, demonstrating once again that he was not sensitive to Anne's development from a fickle young teenager to an autonomous writer-in-the-making. It is unfortunate that the editors of the newly revised Critical Edition, while questioning the dating of this significant entry, did not see fit to choose the latter date, based on stylistic and (con)textual analysis.

'An homage to Anne Frank'

Yet, there is growing appreciation for Anne Frank, the writer. In 2001 a new Dutch edition of her short prose appeared, edited by Gerrold van der Stroom, one of the two editors of the newly revised Critical Edition of 'The Diaries' and published in the same format as the latter. This year a third volume, a collection of quotations Anne had copied from her wide readings, again edited by Van der Stroom has been added. The handsome Dutch series bears the motto 'An homage to Anne Frank.' It would be well, if Anne's b-version, the version of her diary she was preparing for publication even as she and her family were arrested, would be added as a fourth volume to supplement the series. Then, at long last, Anne Frank would be taken seriously as a writer.

Laureen Nussbaum is Professor Emeritus of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Portland State University in Oregon (USA). In the 1930's she fled Nazi Germany, arriving in the Netherlands where she met the Frank family. Thanks to a Christian grandmother Laureen passed for "half-Jewish" and survived the war. In 1947, Otto Frank was best man at her wedding. Ten years later she emigrated with her husband and three children to the United States.

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