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Letters to the Editor--September 1982

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Letters to the Editor

In the May 1982 *Newsletter*, p. 9, I was happy to see Joel Myerson's notice of my system for transcribing manuscripts (*Studies in Bibliography* 29 [1976]: 212-264). I should like to add a few comments on what I take to be the peculiar virtues of this system as against the so-called genetic-text system using various symbols, not all of which are agreed upon by editors and which strain a lay reader's memory if my own difficulty in reading such texts is any guide.

First, if the ideal of an editor of a text is to present the author's final intentions as represented by the last corrected and revised state of the manuscript, it seems to me important for the reader to have this final text readily available as the major one, with an alterations account subsidiary to it. This is the method I advocate, whereas the genetic-text form of transcription has no choice but to present the original uncorrected and unrevised text as the major transcription, so that the final authorial intention can be read, not connectedly (skipping bracketed material) but only by penetrating to the end of the thicket of symbols that can accumulate. Thus to dig out the final text can involve a considerable amount of hard work and concentration, and any attempt at "reading" such a text really calls for the user to make his own clear-text transcript or be provided by the editor with an additional clear-text version.

Second, the genetic method is inflexible in that it can accommodate only one form of the text; that is, one with the alterations presented within the transcript. On the other hand, any transcription that will appeal to a reader interested mainly in the content (in its final form) and only occasionally for specialist reasons in the alterations that produced this content from an earlier state, must be presented in a clear text. The editor then has his choice of adding the list of alterations, keyed to the line numbers, as footnotes, or as a separate comprehensive appendix list only for those who require the information and are prepared to make some effort to secure it. They will always be a minority of the readers.

As an editor of widely varied materials, I have found it convenient to have the option whether to account for alterations within the transcript or else separately. For example, in an edition of so-and-so's letters it seems to me unwise to make every reader run the obstacle course

of a genetic text when most users will come to the edition for the reading text itself, whereas in a commentary note quoting from some letter it would be most convenient to include the alterations within the transcribed text. I recall that many years ago when the University of Chicago Press was contemplating the publication of the Hayford and Sealts *Billy Budd* mentioned by Mr. Myerson, my advice was requested. The whole transcription had been completed according to the genetic method. My first impulse was to recommend that it be thrown out as unreadable and a more practical text be substituted, else precious few copies would be sold. But the advanced state of the negotiations would have complicated such a proposal, and so I suggested as a means of salvaging the situation that the genetic text be accompanied by a reading text in its final form, a proposal that was accepted. This was an expensive and unnecessary duplication, of course, a duplication that could have been avoided from the start had the clear final text been presented (with an appendix listing of the alterations in their various stages) for the benefit of the majority of the purchasers, and in only one volume.

In my view we come, then, to the conclusion that any system of manuscript transcription that contains the alterations inserted within the transcript of the text is useful chiefly for limited and specialist purposes and is thus not suitable for all occasions and certainly not for general scholarly editions. In the William James edition, as in *Some Problems of Philosophy* for example, we use a clear text for manuscripts printed as part of the regular text, with an appendix list of alterations keyed to page-line numbers; but in appendices that transcribe independent early drafts of the material we usually transcribe the alterations within the text since specialists will be the chief readers here.

In these days of programmed word processors it is perhaps of small account that the genetic system requires a specially keyed typewriter (or a lot of painful drawing-in of symbols by hand) whereas the system I prefer can be managed with any typewriter equipped with square brackets. (The necessary inferior brackets can be indicated to the printer by a check mark above the regular typewriter bracket.)

It is perhaps niggling of me to suggest that Mr. Myer-

son's transcript of the Emerson passage (p. 9) does not, in fact, correspond quite exactly to my system, as implied. According to Mr. Myerson, Emerson's final form was, "But he, at least, is content." In the manuscript, Mr. Myerson states, Emerson wrote 'But lie there the'; deleted 'lie there the'; interlined 'he can'; wiped out 'can'; continued interlining 'at [over where 'can' was] least, is content.'; and added a comma after 'he'. Mr. Myerson's formulaic rendition is: 'But ['lie there the' *del.*] *he, **at [over wiped out 'can'] least, is content.' *intrl.*; *comma after 'he' added.* The difficulty here is that I prefer to use the term *deleted* isolated within brackets only when there is no substitution by interlineation, as in such an example as: "I was ['going to' *del.*] coming to that." Here 'going to' was deleted before 'coming to' was written, continuing the text on the same line. I describe interlined substitutes as *above deleted*, and words written over others, with or without wiping out, as *over*. Thus there is a crucial distinction between *above* and *over*. An example would be: "I *am [*ab. del.* 'have been'] not at all *certain [*ov.* 'positive'] that I agree."

In Mr. Myerson's transcript, thus, I should not understand immediately that the interlineation 'he, at least, is content.' was written above deleted 'lie there the' but instead was, somehow, an independent interlineation following in space after the deletion. I am not sure, also, that I like the account of the added comma after 'he' being inserted at the end without brackets instead of in its proper place after the 'he,' itself, although I understand that Mr. Myerson is attempting to give the chronological order of alteration, insofar as that is ascertainable with certainty,

something not always practicable. Thereupon it would be much clearer to distinguish the internal brackets '[over wiped out 'can']' from the main brackets for the interlined entry by putting them into inferior type, as for clarification I do with all brackets within brackets. Thus my own preferred version of the transcription according to my *SB* article would read: "But *he, [*comma insrted.*] **at [*ov.* 'can'] least, is content. [*ab. del.* 'lie there the']". I suggest, however, that in this particular case the doubled asterisk may be omitted before 'at' since there can be no ambiguity as to what word the following bracketed information refers. Moreover, it may be a matter of choice whether it is essential to note that 'at' was written over wiped-out or over undeleted 'can' since the act of writing one word over another must imply revision. The one virtue of specifying *wiped out* would be to distinguish the alteration as made during the course of initial inscription, but in fact the context requires this interpretation.

If this were a clear-text transcript, the text would read 'But he, at least, is content.' and a footnote would take the form of:

00 he. . . content.] *ab. del.* 'lie there the'; *comma insrted.* aft. 'he'; 'at' *ov.* 'can'

I am, of course, partial to my own baby but I cannot help remarking that the above seems to me to be both simple and accurate. And easy on the reader.

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