

Text and Context in Transcribing Papyri

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IN this essay I should like to present certain points of view which can be helpful in approaching the interpretation and criticism of papyrus texts.¹ I shall take as a starting point the most obvious expression of papyrological method—the system of editorial signs. Very few of the texts printed in papyrus editions are free of these signs, and perhaps the most frequently used of them all is the dot which editors place under a letter to show that it is doubtfully read. The dot may therefore be taken as representing a state of mind in which editors often find themselves while transcribing papyrus texts, and we may reasonably make a beginning by asking what in fact this state of mind consists of.

What does an editor mean to tell us when he inserts a dot under a letter and so marks it as doubtfully read? May we say that a doubtful letter is a letter of which the transcriber is assuring us that he sees one or more remnants, but these are remnants which he cannot assimilate to any known form of that letter, or perhaps only to any form of the letter as it is written in his document? This is frequently the situation, but often enough the dot marks the presence of a remnant which is simply not characteristic of any one letter and could for this reason be adapted to the shapes of a number of different letters. Long experience of papyrus editions proves that we cannot be sure exactly what kind or degree of doubt an editor intends to express with a dotted letter, but the minimum intention is easy to establish: he is in some way disturbed about his identification of the remnants.

We are therefore entitled to ask: Since he is not satisfied with his interpretation of the writing as he sees it, why does he offer the letter at all as part of the document? In putting a dot under the letter he confesses that his palaeographic criteria are not adequate for coping

¹ The essay was presented as an introductory lecture to the papyrological seminar at the Institut für Altertumskunde, Universität zu Köln, 17 November 1965.

with the problem. He nevertheless proposes the letter as a probable solution. He is able to do this without exposing himself to a charge of frivolity because he has another standard of judgment which can be used to supplement the deficiencies of a purely palaeographic method.

We are here at the very heart of the mystery which constitutes the transcriber's art. The editor, in his rôle of transcriber, has a purpose which is quickly and easily stated. His aim is to make a faithful copy of the document which he has in front of him. His desire, as a transcriber, is to convert the ancient script into a modern script, reproducing it letter for letter. Accordingly, his eye must never stray from the writing of which he is making a copy. This is his inevitable position as a copyist; he cannot do otherwise. And yet he soon becomes aware that the position is a hopeless one. Even with the most devoted and single-minded attention to handwriting, he will not reach his goal. However long he continues his visual inspection of the writing, this will take him only a certain distance, will perhaps put him in sight of the end, but will not carry him clear through to his destination. He will be like Moses, who surveyed the promised land from the mountain top, knowing that he would not live to go down there. The palaeographic method, as we may call the attempt to read papyrus texts letter by letter, is predestined to failure because it does not meet the requirements of the problem.

The problem is posed by conditions which ought by this time to be familiar to all persons who use papyrus texts. The papyrus itself is often in a poor physical state. It may have vertical or horizontal tears, holes of any shape or size; the edges may be tattered or scalloped; whole strips may have become detached from the surface and lost; the left or right side, the upper or lower half may have disappeared. Where the papyrus is preserved, the ink may have been abraded by sand or faded by water, when it has not been reduced to unrecognizable blobs of sheer black substance. All of this is apart from the ever recurrent difficulties imposed by careless or rapid writing.

In the face of such discouragements, in whatever combination they may occur, the transcriber repeatedly finds that his most strenuous efforts to obtain a reading are frustrated. His only hope lies in supplementing his knowledge of handwriting with as full an understanding as he can get of the scribe's purpose in writing the text. He tries to take account of the text as a communication, as a message, as a linguistic pattern of meaning. He forms a concept of the writer's inten-

tion and uses this to aid him in transcription. As his decipherment progresses, the amount of text that he has available for judging the writer's intention increases, and as this increases he may be forced to revise his idea of the meaning or direction of the entire text, and as the meaning changes for him, he may revise his reading of portions of the text which he previously thought to be well read. And so he constantly oscillates between the written text and his mental picture of its meaning, altering his view of one or of both as his expanding knowledge of them seems to make necessary. Only when they at last cover each other is he able to feel that he has solved his problem. The tension between the script and its content is then relaxed: the two have become one.

In the light of this analysis, it is possible to see more easily than we usually do, that reading a papyrus is in fact only a special case of reading in general. Ordinary or casual reading, as we may call the reading of current books and newspapers, is essentially of the same nature but immeasurably more rapid. It has more than once been observed that in ordinary reading we supply from our own mental stock the major part of what we read. If it were not so, and we were under the necessity of moving along the page from word to word, perhaps even from letter to letter, we would not very soon make our way from the top to the bottom of the page, and long before we reached the bottom we would have lost beyond hope of recovery the thread of meaning along which the words are strung. It is our acquired capacity to predict the flow of language and meaning which permits the miracle that we call reading to take place. Successful reading depends on our ability to produce at incredibly high speed an apparently endless series of predictions.

The reading of a papyrus follows the same pattern, but here the level of speed is brought so low that the transcriber is every moment in danger of losing contact with the language as well as the meaning. From such text as he has transcribed he predicts a text for the portion that has resisted transcription. If the prediction enables him to read what is written on the papyrus, it ceases to be a prediction and becomes a reading. If it does not help him, he discards it and tries to construct another. Such predictions are inferences from context; they are exercises in meaning. They closely resemble what the student of classical texts calls conjectures. A scholar who proposes a conjecture is predicting that if a good text of the author is ever brought to light,

it will contain his conjecture. There is, however, a significant practical difference between the conjecture made by a classical scholar for the text of an author and the conjecture made by a papyrologist for a papyrus document. The classical scholar does not seriously hope to live long enough to see his conjecture confirmed, even though it is true that many conjectures have been confirmed by new manuscripts. The papyrologist, since he is using conjecture as an aid to transcription, puts his guesses to an immediate test. For him, conjecture is a familiar tool which he manipulates daily in the hope that it will solve his problems.

There is nothing extraordinary or astonishing in the use of conjecture as a means of dealing with corruption in literary works or of transcribing papyrus texts. Not only is conjecture an essential accompaniment of all reading, even the most casual; it is also an essential ingredient of all thinking. It implies the formation of a hypothetical view of our materials. The hypothesis is deduced from the materials and then tested on the materials with a conjecture or prediction. What I am saying here was once put by the philosopher Bergson in the form of a rhetorical question: "Or, comment résoudre un problème autrement qu'en le supposant d'abord résolu?" Bergson went on to expand his question in the following words: "On se représente . . . un idéal, c'est-à-dire un certain effet obtenu, et on tâche de composer entre eux les moyens par lesquels l'effet s'obtiendrait. On se transporte d'un bond au résultat final, à la fin qu'il s'agit de réaliser: tout l'effort d'invention est alors un travail pour combler l'intervalle par-dessus lequel on a sauté, et arriver de nouveau à cette même fin en suivant cette fois le fil continu des moyens qui la réaliseraient."²

Bergson's thought can be put in another way. When we are at work on any subject, numerous pieces of information accumulate. Sometimes they give the impression of not being parts of the same picture. We feel that they ought to be related, but we do not see how this can be. Some of them may even seem to be in contradiction. For days, if not weeks or months, we pass these facts, as we call them, through our minds, trying one arrangement, then another, and still another, hoping that we may find points at which they impinge on one another. Then, if we are lucky, comes a startling moment when consciousness is filled with a comprehensive idea which seems to iron

² Henri Bergson, "L'effort intellectuel," *Revue philosophique* 53 (1902) 16.

out all our difficulties. We feel that we have solved our problem. Where has this idea come from? How has it been formed? To these questions there is no ready answer. Such ideas, which strike us with the abruptness and excitement of revelation, seem to float up from subconscious levels of thought. They are constructed for us by an obscure process in the depths of the brain. For our conscious minds they can have only the status of conjecture or prediction, and they may prove to be true or false. But even when they are false, they provide a means of testing our information and an incentive for gathering more information.

According to the conception that I have sketched, the transcriber's approach to his text is dominated by two factors—the handwriting and the meaning it was intended to convey. The ancient reader of the same text never thought of the writing and its meaning as two factors, any more than a reader of the present day thinks of script and meaning as distinct. At most, an intelligent reader may occasionally remind himself that writing is a system of signs to which his mind replies with coherent meaning, but he will not think of a series of unintelligible signs as writing in any proper sense. For the present day reader of a modern language, as for the ancient reader of Greek, reading and understanding are the same thing. Only the destructive accidents of time have placed the modern transcriber of ancient Greek in his equivocal position, and in order to escape from the distress of words without meaning and meaning without words, he exerts Herculean efforts to restore the original identity of script and meaning.

Part of his method is the system of editorial signs, in which dots under doubtful letters play a notable rôle. When passages are liberally sprinkled with dots, we may suspect that the editor has strained his palaeographic, linguistic, and logical resources to maintain a smooth and continuous flow of meaning through the text. It is precisely in these passages that the editor has probably used dots to bolster what is almost surely a reconstruction, and not what we usually call a reading. It is perhaps here that he has sacrificed his palaeographic conscience to his human need for meaning. At the same time, it is possible that in a given case we need not reject his sacrifice, knowing as we do that consistency of meaning is the surest guarantee of correctness that we have.

Sometimes we meet the contrary phenomenon. If a transcriber uses no dots in a given line, the only proper inference we can make is that

he has complete confidence in his reading. And yet, it has happened many times that a text presented by an editor as obviously correct has later been shown to be false either in whole or in part. Clearly, then, we cannot infer from the absence of dots that a text is necessarily a true copy of the writing on the papyrus. This ought not to surprise us because we know now that true readings and false readings are obtained in the same way. They both issue from the same mental process, which attempts to restore the continuity of meaning in a broken or badly written text by recreating the lost unity of writing and sense. If the editor's idea of the text happens not to conform to the ancient scribe's idea of his text, the result will be false readings.

One other observation on the use of dots is interesting and significant enough to deserve mention. Anyone who has examined other people's transcriptions with the papyri in front of him, knows how difficult, if not impossible, it is to agree on the distribution of dots. It is, in fact, not possible to agree with oneself from one day to another. Over and over again it appears to be a tantalizing question whether a letter is or is not doubtful. Judgments concerning the certainty or doubtfulness of letters tend to follow the psychological patterns of the transcriber's personality. And so, it often happens that transcribers cannot agree on which letters are to be regarded as certain, which as doubtful, even when they agree on the words of the text. When this situation arises, we do well to conclude that their agreement on the words, that is, on the meaning, since words are the carriers of meaning, deserves more confidence than their disagreement on the placement of dots.

All these considerations lead us to say that the editor's use or omission of dots does not serve to guarantee the accuracy of his transcription. They do, however, help us to grasp something of the editor's reaction to the writing that he saw on the papyrus, and such understanding can further help us when we are moving toward our own judgments on his text. This conclusion is valid not only for the dots, but equally for all the editorial signs. Their use is subject to the same personal variations as have been observed in the use of dots. Take, for example, the sign that is the least affected by the vagaries of a scribe's handwriting, the sign that we call "curved brackets." These are placed around the resolution of an abbreviation. They tell us that the transcriber has identified an abbreviation on the papyrus and is offering us his explanation. As I have shown elsewhere, tran-

scribers sometimes find abbreviations where the ancient scribe had no thought of abbreviation, or they fail to see abbreviations where they were intended.³ And where the abbreviation is genuine, the transcriber can resolve it only in accord with his overall view of what the scribe meant to say. If he has not caught the scribe's intention accurately, what he puts between the curved brackets has every chance of missing the mark.

If all that I have said is as obvious as I believe it to be, only one conclusion is available to us. The editor does what he can in a delicate and insecure situation, and it is incumbent on every user of his text to judge its utility. While it is true that the editor cannot escape responsibility for his text, the scholar who uses the text for some purpose of his own also has a responsibility. If he retains the editor's text as it is given in the edition, he is presumed to have judged it and approved it. If he changes the text, he must justify the change on the ground that he is bringing the edition closer to the papyrus. There is a criticism appropriate to the editor and a criticism appropriate to the user of a text. When these are at odds on any point the problem is resolved, if it can be resolved, at a third level of criticism which engages the responsibility of all competent scholars. This debate will again revolve around the two central factors of handwriting and meaning. If the debate lasts long enough, it is likely to bring into play contributions from all the areas of scholarship. And if a solution is obtained, it will again have the effect of unifying palaeography and logic.

What do these points of view, which I have tried to sketch briefly, mean to us when we use papyrus texts in printed editions? We must of course attach to the words of a text and to the editorial signs the full value that inheres in them, as coming from someone who himself saw the words on a papyrus and punctuated them with the signs in order that we might have a kind of picture of the papyrus as he saw it. But we must also keep in mind that the editor's transcription, his translation (if he was wise enough to give one), and his commentary have only the status of evidence about a piece of writing done long ago on a papyrus. In assuming the responsibilities that belong to us as readers, critics, and users of papyrus texts, we ought to pay the very closest attention to the edition for its value as evidence, but we must

³ Cf. H. C. Youtie, *The Textual Criticism of Documentary Papyri, Prolegomena* [*BullInstClass-Stud*, Suppl. 6] (London 1958) 43.

not make the mistake of identifying the editor's transcription with the papyrus original until we are satisfied that he has given a true copy. Our acceptance of a text as fit for use makes our responsibility for it equal to the responsibility already assumed by the editor.

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