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Edited by Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias.

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The Risks of a Mammoth Edition: The Example of *The Complete Letters of Henry James*

Kevin J. Hayes

The Complete Letters of Henry James, 1855–1872. 2 vols. Edited by Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. Vol. 1: lxxviii & 391 pp. \$90.00. Vol. 2: xxxii & 524 pp. \$95.00.

Editing is a selfless act. This truism is never more apparent than when it comes to a mammoth edition of correspondence that will fill dozens of volumes, an edition so extensive that the founding editors cannot possibly live long enough to see it to completion. A mammoth edition is like a Gothic cathedral, a work that takes generations to finish. The medieval stonecutters had their devout religious beliefs to sustain them. Besides a deep commitment to the project and a profound belief in its importance, what keeps editors of such huge documentary projects motivated? The answer is their imaginations. They keep going because they imagine the completed edition as it will appear fifty or seventy or maybe a hundred years hence: each uniformly bound volume standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the shelves of every major library in the nation.

With *The Complete Letters of Henry James*, general editors Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias have undertaken such a mammoth task. In their editorial introduction to the first volume, which has been released simultaneously with the second, they explain that by the time it is finished the entire edition will fill at least 140 volumes. If the editors can maintain their two-volume-a-year pace—in itself quite ambitious—simple division tells us that it will take seventy years to finish the project. *The Complete Letters of Henry James* is one of those cathedral-like works whose editors will not live long enough to see the final product. They can only imagine what it will look like.

This edition marks an advance over the fullest previous collection, Leon Edel's four-volume *Henry James Letters*, which contains only 10

percent of James's known letters. Edel never made any claims to inclusivity, however. He looked forward to "further collections in the years to come."¹ *Complete Letters* demonstrates how much work still remained after Edel finished his edition. Its first two volumes contain fifty-two previously unpublished letters. Despite its inclusivity and its thoroughness, I cannot help but think that there is something seriously wrong with the approach the editors of *Complete Letters* are taking. Surely, James's letters need not fill 140 volumes. A comparison: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* will top out at fewer than fifty volumes and will have taken less than sixty years, ten years fewer than the estimate for *Complete Letters*. Franklin's *Papers* contains his correspondence (letters to and from) and his published writings. *Complete Letters* will contain James's letters only.

What have the editors done to make this edition so huge? To answer that question, let's take a closer look at their editorial method. In their introduction, Walker and Zacharias explain that they faced three basic options as they decided how to edit the letters: clear text, plain text, and genetic text. They rejected clear text, which Leon Edel had used for *Henry James Letters*, because it would omit too much information from the manuscript letters. They also rejected genetic text, arguing that a genetic edition requires its readers to memorize an elaborate set of symbols before mastering the text. Deciding against a genetic text, Walker and Zacharias made a good decision. Readers often meet symbol-laden texts with belligerence. Consider the animosity that met Emerson's *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* when its early volumes appeared. Since genetic text editions can be difficult to use, they are best reserved for intricate literary works, works whose critical interpretation can turn on the meaning of a single word, works like Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* or Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*.

The plain text method was pioneered by the editors of *Mark Twain's Letters*. When the University of California Press published the first volume of this edition, reviewers hailed its plain text method as a great advance in documentary editing, something far superior to the genetic text method. Jeffrey Steinbrink, for one, found it "gratifyingly free of the arrows, angles,

¹ Leon Edel, "Introduction," *Henry James Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974–1984), 1: xxxvi.

² Jeffrey Steinbrink, review of *Mark Twain's Letters*, Volume 1: 1853–1866, ed. Edgar Marquess Branch, et al., *American Literature* 61 (1989): 102.

and other gewgaws that fetter the older methods of transcription it ought to supersede.”² Walker and Zacharias decided that a plain text method of editing would best suit their purpose; that is, to make James’s printed letters closely resemble his manuscript originals.

The method devised by Twain’s editors does not precisely suit James’s letters, however. Here’s why: Twain’s training as a printer helped make his manuscripts crisp and clear. He punctuated his letters as if he were preparing copy for the press. If he wanted italics, he would underline. If he wanted small caps, he would double underline.³ The editors of *Mark Twain’s Letters* have followed their subject’s built-in directions. Since James’s directions are less explicit, Walker and Zacharias have had to make many more decisions on their own. The result is a text that is not nearly so plain as its editors claim it to be. Open the first volume of *Mark Twain Letters* at random. Now open the first volume of *The Complete Letters of Henry James*. In comparison, the so-called plain text of James’s letters looks more like a genetic text. Before reading its editors’ introduction, I thought this new edition of James’s letters was a genetic text.

Several editorial decisions contribute to the cumbersome look of *Complete Letters*. Though the use of printed italics to represent manuscript underlining is universal, Walker and Zacharias use underlining in the printed text to make it mimic James’s manuscript. There’s nothing technically wrong with this, I suppose, but there is something aesthetically wrong. Underlining uglies up the page. Italics would have been more graceful. Their decision to avoid italic text to represent James’s underlining frees it up for another use. They always place italic text in brackets, where it denotes conjectural readings where the original manuscript is illegible. The italics are redundant: brackets are sufficient to set off the text in these instances.

The editors’ treatment of cross-outs is what really makes *Complete Letters* resemble a genetic text. Again trying to make the printed text resemble manuscript, they use the same number of horizontal lines to strike out a cancelled passage of text that James used. Where James crossed out a word with one line, the editors cross out the word with one line. Where

³ Robert H. Hirst, “Guide to Editorial Practice,” *Mark Twain’s Letters*, Volume 1: 1853–1866, ed. Edgar Marquess Branch, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xxvi.

James used two lines, the editors use two. Where James used three, so do the editors. And where James completely blotted out words to make them illegible, the editors print big, ugly black blotches: pock marks on the face of the printed page.

The editors supply additional cross-outs of their own. In what may be their goofiest editorial decision, they devise what they call a “conceptual solution” to treat overwritten text. Here’s an example showing how this conceptual solution works. In one instance, James accidentally wrote the word “disappointment” where he meant to write “disappointed.” Upon realizing his error, he corrected it by overwriting “-ment” with “-ed.” A clear text approach would simply print “disappointed.” Walker and Zacharias transcribe the entire word, “disappointment,” cross it out with a horizontal line, and then provide the intended word, “disappointed.” To complicate matters even further, every time they correct an overwritten word in this manner, they append a textual note to the letter to explain what they have done. Every time.

Besides the underlining, cross-outs, and blotches, the only other nonverbal symbols in the text of *Complete Letters* are diamonds and carets. The diamonds designate illegible characters for which the editors have no conjecture. For illegible words that James crossed out, they place a line of diamonds roughly equal to the length of the passage and strike through it with one or two or three lines. Roger Waters might call these crazy diamonds. A caret indicates the start of an interlinear passage of text; a bracketed caret usually indicates the end of an interlinear passage of text. In an effort to avoid excessive symbols to designate the textual eccentricities of each letter, the editors provide much additional explanatory material in the notes: too much. Take James’s misspellings, for example. James was a good speller, not a great one. Thankfully, the editors avoid the bracketed “sic” to signal a misspelling, but their solution is scarcely an improvement. Every time James misspelled a word, the editors provide a textual note explaining that James misspelled the word. Every time. All these superfluous notes make the editors look insecure. With each note they seem to be saying, “This misspelling is not our mistake. James did it. Not us.” One sentence in the editorial introduction explaining that James’s misspellings have been retained could have eliminated every single textual note about the misspellings.

With all their special features, Walker and Zacharias gave the designers at the University of Nebraska Press quite a challenge. Nebraska’s

award-winning designers rose to the occasion to create a page layout that is absolutely luxurious: a narrow page width, wide margins, generous leading, and plenty of extra white space to enhance legibility. But the designers seem to have forgotten one crucial aspect of this edition: its profound scope. Their luxurious layout would be fine for a one- or two-volume edition, but for an edition that will run into dozens of volumes, it is inappropriate. By conserving white space, the designers could reduce the total size of the edition by several volumes.

Let's not make the designers too culpable: the editors' special features demand way too much space. The carets, especially the bracketed carets, require much more leading than would otherwise be necessary. With so many textual and historical notes, the editors decided against cluttering the letters with superscript note numbers. Instead, they place line numbers on each page of text. These distracting line numbers take up precious space, further narrowing the already narrow page. The unjustified right margins further minimize the amount of text a page can hold. These margins suit the editorial purpose—that is, they help make the printed text more closely resemble the manuscript letters—but they are misleading. The editors make no attempt to preserve the integrity of James's individual lines, but the unjustified margins make it seem as if the printed text is preserving the original lines. Overall, the narrow page width, unjustified right margins, and line numbers combine to make the text look more like poetry than letters.

Taken together, the editorial complexities, luxurious design, and extensive notes mean that each volume of *Complete Letters* can include a fairly small number of letters. The first volume, which fills a total of 469 pages, contains only 83 letters! The second volume is even more decadent. It fills 556 pages and contains only 80 letters. In other words, the letters receive an average of more than 6 pages each. With more than ten thousand surviving James letters, no wonder *Complete Letters* will take 140 volumes or more to complete.

Walker and Zacharias justify devoting so much space to each letter because they want to provide as much information as possible. Take the cross-outs, for example: James used different cross-outs for different reasons. Using only a single line to strike through a word, he left the cancelled word legible, letting his correspondent read the word and allowing himself to use the cancellations for humorous purposes: *double entendres* and the like. To prove their point, the editors offer an example of a

Jamesian joke resulting from a cross-out in their introduction. The example takes too much explanation to repeat here. Besides, it is not even very funny. Worst of all, the letter they use for the example comes from 1894. The second volume of *Complete Letters* only goes through 1872. In other words, the editors must skip ahead more than two decades to find a good example to make their point. While their impulse to preserve the maximum amount of information is well intended, it is simply not worth the effort.

The whole situation comes down to a matter of minimizing risk. From the perspective of Walker and Zacharias, it is better to make the letters long and cumbersome than to risk losing information. They could save much space by editing the letters in clear text and simply explaining the jokes in the notes, but even this approach they find too risky. They apparently do not want to run the risk of missing the jokes themselves. Better to print the cross-outs and avoid the risk of missing anything.

While avoiding these little risks, Walker and Zacharias unwittingly run a much greater risk. Though, as I have suggested, editors of mammoth editions stay inspired by imagining how the completed edition will look once it is finished after their deaths, the future of a mammoth edition can be imagined in other, less optimistic ways. Imagine what happens as the two-volume-a-year pace slackens: The original publisher loses interest in the edition and withdraws its support. Future editors must find another publisher. The later volumes do not approach the quality of the earlier ones. The bindings do not quite match. The cloth is coarser, and the dyes are noticeably different. Inside, the paper is not so creamy, the typeface not so crisp, the margins not so wide. The edition gets finished, but the final product is not nearly as nice as the founding editors imagined.

Even this scenario is fairly optimistic. There is another possibility: The edition sells few copies, and the original publisher discontinues it. Future editors lack the profound commitment to the project shared by the founding editors. They cannot find another publisher willing to undertake the project. The edition languishes for a time and is ultimately abandoned. Imagine its appearance in the library stacks then. It fills a couple shelves but ends two or three decades before the author's death, before even getting to the period of his greatest works. Devoting so much attention to minutiae, editors run the risk that their mammoth edition will never make it to completion—which would be a shame. Cognizance of this risk should guide their editorial decision making.

With the format of *The Complete Letters of Henry James* now established upon the release of the first two volumes, Walker and Zacharias may be reluctant to make any changes, but I sincerely hope they will consider the risks they face and reconsider their editorial approach. Several modest, reasonable alterations would improve the edition greatly. Their plain text format just does not work; it is not very plain at all. They need to switch to clear text. Doing so would make the letters more readable and save much space. Eliminating the carets would allow them to reduce the leading considerably. The clear text would minimize the textual notes and thus render the line numbers unnecessary, saving more space and making the page look more elegant. Justifying the right margins would save further space and eliminate the illusion that this edition preserves the integrity of James's individual lines.

The editors' extensive historical notes should be trimmed, too. These explanatory notes are so lengthy that they give the illusion of being exhaustive; they are not. James's considerable literary knowledge and his ability to toss off oblique references with aplomb means that many of his allusions are lost even to today's most sensitive and knowledgeable readers. Already others are starting to identify allusions the editors of *Complete Letters* missed.⁴ By trying to annotate James's letters fully, as Leon Edel suggested, "one could end up writing a history of all civilization."⁵ There is no reason the notes need to be exhaustive. The emphasis of this edition should be on getting the letters into print. For future volumes, the editors might follow a method of annotating established by the editors of the *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw*, which provides a single eloquent explanatory paragraph after each letter.⁶

If Walker and Zacharias really feel strongly about preserving all the underlining, cross-outs, and overwritten passages and including all the textual and historical notes, then they should arrange with the University of Nebraska Press to put the plain text version online at a later date. Or, even better, they could do an online project along the lines of the excellent *Family Letters Project: The Correspondence of Thomas Jefferson's Family Members*, which presents facsimiles of the letters and plain text

⁴ Alan Hollinghurst, "Travelling Hopefully: Henry James's First Lone Trip to Europe Provided Fascinating Material for His Letters Home," *Guardian*, 3 February 2007, "Review" section, p. 7.

⁵ Edel, "Introduction," 1: xxxv.

⁶ See, for example, Bernard Shaw, Theatrics, ed. Dan H. Laurence (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

transcriptions. This online project promotes itself as a companion to the printed edition, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, published by Princeton University Press. Now that online projects serving as adjuncts to published editions are both possible and acceptable, there can be no justification for a 140-volume edition of Henry James's letters.

When it first announced plans to publish James's letters in 1997, the University of Nebraska Press said the edition would take thirty volumes and be completed in fifteen years.⁷ Now that Walker and Zacharias have announced that the edition will take 140 volumes or more, others have simply accepted its gargantuan proportions. Peter Kemp, for one, ended his enthusiastic review of the first two volumes of *Complete Letters* saying, "The sooner the next 138 or so volumes appear, the better."⁸ I cannot accept so easily the idea of such an unwieldy, costly, and time-consuming edition. I would like to see the editors of *Complete Letters* revert to their original thirty-volume plan. Leon Edel averaged more than 250 letters per volume, and his volumes were comparatively small. By making the changes I have suggested, *Complete Letters* could average more than three hundred letters per volume, instead of the paltry eighty-one and a half it is averaging now. The ten thousand surviving James letters *could* fit into thirty volumes. In professor-years, Walker and Zacharias are both still young men. If they are willing to scale back their editorial apparatus, they will not have to imagine what the finished edition will look like after their deaths. They could live long enough to see *Complete Letters* finished. And wouldn't that be sweet?

⁷ "University to Edit Letters of Henry James," *New York Times*, 16 February 1997, section 1, p. 39.

⁸ Peter Kemp, "Stamped with Literary Genius," *Sunday Times*, 22 July 2007, "Features" section, p. 43.