Annotation as an Embedded Textual Practice: Some Further Comments in Response to Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff

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Abstract

The present article, in dialogue with Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff's recent article in *Connotations*, presents writing explanatory notes as an art, involving a feeling of what is right. In the first part, it discusses some of Linne and Niederhoff's points about how explanatory notes are read and their advice on composition that derives from this. A modification is suggested to their recommendation that notes should be "as self-effacing as possible" to that they should be simply "self-effacing," as some element of personality will always emerge. Similarly it is suggested that "as concise as possible" could be modified to "concisely-formulated." Their comparison of notes to a detour on a journey is a good guide to avoid excessive length and irrelevance, although even a longish note can be read without disturbance if taken at a natural break in the reading. The authors also mention the possibility of notes in the form of extended commentary between annotation and the critical essay, and to their examples another is proposed: the "annotated edition," inspired by *The Annotated Alice* of 1960.

The second part takes the examples from Dury (2005) quoted by Linne and Niederhoff to see how, guided by the authors' comments, these would be rewritten by Dury in 2020. The actions here involve greater concision, removal of interpretation, moving a note to a more relevant point of the text, and provision of additional information to clarify. In the penultimate example, a final interpretative comment in the area of genre conventions is preferred to leaving the reader with a

series of comments on ambiguity. In the last example, an accepted difference over interpretation is handled by using modality to present the explanation as not final.

In their recent article, Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff have made a valuable contribution to the study of the explanatory notes accompanying a literary text. From their comments it is also easy to extract a series of practical guidelines to the writer of notes, and in the second section of this contribution I will show what I have learnt from them in an exercise of rewriting some of the notes they cite that were written by myself (or, anyway, by "Dury 2005"). First, however, I would like to talk around, in an essayistic way, the idea of notes as embedded textual practice.

I.

Explanatory notes—well-written—are irresistible: they are the salted peanuts of an edition, and I have often read through them all at one sitting (or, in a bookshop, standing). The reader might see this as just the sort of thing an occasional writer of notes might do (and if the reader is French, they might well call it *déformation professionelle*).

Yet this habit of reading through a set of explanatory notes by at least one eccentric subject (the same who habitually starts a magazine at the end and works forward, for reasons yet to be explained) does suggest that readers are free to read the notes in various ways: quick consultation as the annotated word or phrase is encountered in the text, in a block after or before reading a chapter, or even before or after reading the whole text.[1] Walter Scott's long historical notes are probably not often turned to and read at the point in the text where they are indicated by a footnote but at some convenient moment when reading is suspended.

The notes are a part of the paratext, i.e. the titles, illustrations, introductions, blurb, etc.: the sections of a volume surrounding the text. Like all these other elements they can be read in any order. The introduction, though placed at the entrance of the volume, is, in fact, generally read last of all. In contrast, the text itself is an artfully constructed sequence

and is read through from beginning to end. The same eccentric subject mentioned above does often look at the first and last sentence of a narrative before starting, or turns over the pages to look at the illustrations, but this is rather like appreciating the bouquet of wine before drinking. What is important is that nobody reads the last chapter and works backwards or reads in any other way than in the strict sequence of the words in that complex linguistic structure that is a novel.

The authors call explanatory notes an "embedded textual practice" (49), an activity (as I understand it) of texts, written and read, that are dependent on another text. CliffsNotes are separate slim volumes but nevertheless are not read for the pleasure of their deathless prose. An eccentric reader may read through the notes in a scholarly edition in one go, but this will always be with reference to the main text in the volume, not for the joy of the random information they contain (or not for this alone). So far, the authors and I are in agreement. They offer an attractive metaphor: "If reading a literary text is like a journey, consulting a note is like a brief detour in that journey" (68). From this follow two recommendations: "a note should be as reader-oriented and self-effacing [and] as brief as possible" (69). The note should not distract through the writer's style and interpretative views nor interrupt the reading of the text for too long.

Those expressions of degree "as possible" and "too [long]" are in alignment with Battestin's dictum that "annotation more nearly resembles an art than a science" (7). Self-effacement of the author and concision are matters of tact, a feeling of what is right. But concerning self-effacement, I think, in slight disaccord with the authors, that some kind of personality will often be perceptible[2]: the choice of what to annotate and what to say about it will reveal an individual hand. And while it is true that reader-friendly organization of the note involves a restraint on the annotator's views and personality, the understanding of what will be interesting to the reader and the graceful manner of its formulation creates a relationship of gift and gratitude between the two that does not exist in those inept notes assembled by copy-and-paste, performed almost as a penance rather than a pleasure. I am not in disagreement

with the authors in principle, just think that "self-effacing" would be a better guide than "as self-effacing as possible"—a matter of fine-tuning.

Similar thoughts are stimulated by the idea of the note as detour that should be as short as possible. It is true that interruptions make reading difficult, but it is the interruptions that come from others that break the intense concentration required to read a sentence or a paragraph. (This is something that other people do not seem to understand.) In contrast, a text read in sections that are divided by self-chosen interruptions is not only the normal but the only way that anything but the shortest texts are read. It would be good to understand how exactly we are able to read a book over days, weeks or (in the case of Proust) even years; how are we able to interrupt our "journey" through the text and pick up again without any problem? From common experience, we seem to be quite resilient to this kind of interruption; we can leave off and take up a book again later: it is something everyone does with no problems, as long as the interruptions are not too frequent and the period between reading sessions not too long. Reading even a long-ish note on a recent word or phrase at a natural pause in the text soon afterwards should not cause any problem to the activity of reading.

The important thing is that the note should aim for concision, should not stray into irrelevant matters and so become uninteresting, and should not lose itself in interpretation. The note should not be as short, but as *concisely-formulated* and as *interesting* as possible. Interesting information is unexpected, encourages thought, provokes curiosity, gives pleasure; it cannot be created by copy-and-paste.

On this point, I would like to take up a fascinating idea that (like many fascinating ideas in other texts) is found among the footnotes. The authors report in endnote 11 that, in the discussion following the talk at the *Connotations* Symposium (referred to in n1), "participants suggested that there are intermediate forms of critical discourse, situated halfway between the annotation and the critical essay". The authors then give some examples: short articles on a word or phrase of a literary text in *Notes & Queries*, a whole article of normal length on a point of particular difficulty in a text, or an edition with occasional notes on a section of the text, such as an edition of Shakespeare with

longer notes on a whole scene. I would like to add here another example: the edition often given a title beginning *The Annotated*, which gives prominence to the notes and includes among these illustrations, cross-references, variants found in manuscript drafts, the annotator's interpretations and reference to the interpretations of others. The model for these is Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice*, first published in 1960.[3] This is organized in pages of two columns, the slightly narrower outer columns on the two-page spread dedicated to notes in a smaller font, which occasionally occupy two columns on the same page for exceptionally long notes (Gardner excludes notes, however, on "allegorical and psychoanalytic exegesis" [xiv]). The note numbers are prominent: bold and larger than normal[4]; the choices of note type and length, of number format and pagination clearly encourage the reading of the text and the notes in a fluid back-and-forth manner and promote the note to an essential and important part of the edition. The reception of this edition depended very much on the reader, as Gardner reports:

> Several reviewers of *AA* complained that its notes ramble too far from the text, with distracting comments more suitable for an essay. Yes, I often ramble, but I hope that at least some readers enjoy such meanderings. I see no reason why annotators should not use their notes for saying anything they please if they think it will be of interest, or at least amusing. Many of my long notes in *AA* [...] were intended as mini-essays. (xxx–xxxi)

The success of *The Annotated Alice* suggests that many readers have enjoyed Gardner's notes.

Gardner continued his new kind of annotated text in *The Annotated Snark* (1962) and *The Annotated Ancient Mariner* (1965), and meanwhile the idea caught on with an increasing number of similar publications.[5] Genre and fantasy fiction seem to have attracted annotated editions,[6] suggesting that writers and readers of some of these editions belong to a fan community who just cannot get enough of the text that unites them. However, annotated editions of central literary texts have also continued into the present century: *Pride and Prejudice: An Annotated Edition* (2010, and then all the other Jane Austen novels), *The Annotated*

Waste Land (2006), *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin* (2007), *The Annotated Peter Pan* (2011) and *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (2012), *The Annotated Emerson* (2012), and so on.

These editions all have "annotated edition" in their title or subtitle, while in the citation form of the normal edition the existence of notes is associated with information on the second author, typically in a phrase like "edited with an introduction and notes by." It is therefore easy to separate out "annotated editions" from normal editions with explanatory notes. In the latter, the notes occupy less space, are clearly subordinate to the main text and do not impose themselves visually on the reader.

Notes, it is clear, can range from the most concise bibliographical references and the curtest glosses, where the pleasure of the note is absent, to the running commentary of an "annotated edition" where everything depends on the reader's relationship with the commentator. The situation in the later case is similar to following the guide to a cathedral or an art exhibition: both are interposing themselves (standing in front of the painting), yet we know from experience that the guide can supply the most mechanical of repeated phrases or be someone who transmits enthusiasm and knowledge and creates a memorable communicative experience.

The analysis of the authors refers to the suitability of notes to the typical students' edition. It should be said, not in defence or justification, that Dury (2005) is slightly different from the other two editions taken for comparison. It has in fact a two-level title: "*The Annotated Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde: Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson / edited with an introduction and notes by Richard Dury." The longer and even interpretative notes therein might have a justification, but let us not quibble over definitions: the authors compare notes from all three editions to reveal a difference of approach and judge their suitability to the familiar kind of edition. In this context, the notes in Dury (1993) are useful as extreme examples. Nor do the cited notes merely give an example (and warning) of what would be indulgent length in a normal edition, for the analyses also reveal that Linehan, in a briefer set of notes, has the perception to identify many more biblical allusions—

of obvious relevance in a work with a hypocritical protagonist given to reading "a pious work," which his alter ego has "annotated [...] with startling blasphemies." Let us leave behind the inviting detour of Hyde's own annotations, and move on swiftly to an examination of something more practical: what I have learned from the authors' guidelines in the writing of explanatory notes.

II

In their article, Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff take three sets of notes accompanying the same text, Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and compare them in terms of lemmas chosen and of a taxonomy of such notes, taking into account the aim to convey as much information as is necessary to allow the reader to gain a literal understanding of the text. As one of the three editions is Dury 2005, perhaps it may be of interest to learn what Dury 2020 has learnt from the article, and how that person might rewrite some of the cited notes in the light of the authors' comments. The authors justly observe that "fabricating the evidence for one's own claims is a questionable procedure" (49). What follows hopes to avoid justification, except in an occasional passing comment, and tries instead to learn from the observations, and adjust criticized notes, before commenting on any aspects worthy of debate.

1. *No. Never heard of him*

Here is one of the notes from Dury 2005 that the authors comment on:

> *"No, never* [sic] *heard of him"*: Lanyon's denial of knowledge of Hyde can be seen, in a psychological interpretation, as a repression of certain aspects of his own personality. Further rejections of Hyde are made by Poole ("He never *dines* here," 108), and by Jekyll himself ("I do not care to hear more," 112; "I am done with him," 124). (Dury 2005, 99n6)

I agree with the authors that Lanyon's answer presents no difficulty in understanding, and the note contains a psychological interpretation

(here joining notes covering the other main traditions of interpretation) that would be out of place in a standard edition.

On consideration, I would now shift a modified version of the note to a passage that follows in a later chapter: "'I wish to see or hear no more of Dr. Jekyll,' he said in a loud, unsteady voice. 'I am quite done with that person; and I beg that you will spare me any allusion to one whom I regard as dead'" (Dury 2004 (henceforth JH) 35). Here is the proposed new note:

> *I am quite done with that person*: Lanyon's rejection of Jekyll is later echoed by Jekyll's rejection of Hyde (again addressed to Utterson): "I am done with him in this world" and "I am quite done with him."

It is true that again the meaning is clear, but the note is now focussed on an important patterning that the reader might not notice. Of course this is a text of multiple patternings, many of which will not be commented on, but this does not seem a problem: like the art exhibition guide going beyond names and dates, annotators, when moving beyond definitions and identification of allusions, necessarily have to choose aspects that they feel to be the most important and most interesting for their audience.

2. *Cain's heresy*

The authors comment on the following note:

> *Cain's heresy*: a refusal to admit responsibility for others (cf. Genesis 4:9). Utterson ironically suggests that if he interfered, it would only be to make the other person go to the devil in another way (i.e. he does not claim an absolute knowledge of truth). (Dury 2005, 86n4)

They say (rightly) that the mere reference to the source would be better replaced by a paraphrase of the biblical episode which quotes the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" At this point the authors enter into the fascinating exercise of perfecting an explanatory note and thereby make a valuable contribution to understanding Utterson's own gloss on "*Cain's heresy*," "I let my brother go to the devil in his own way":

> If there is a contemporary context for Utterson's allusion, it is Thomas Carlyle's biography of Frederick the Great, published in 1858. One of the famous pronouncements of the Prussian King, who was a freethinker and a patron of Voltaire, concerns his tolerance in matters of religion: "In meinem Staate muss jeder nach seiner Façon selig werden." Carlyle's English version of this reads, "in this Country every man must get to Heaven in his own way." (60)

Following the recommendations of the authors, here is my rewriting of the note, which I now feel is better dealt with if split in two:

> *Cain's heresy:* Cain murdered his brother and when asked by God where he was replied "I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9).
>
> *I let my brother go to the devil in his own way:* i.e. I prefer non-interference, I let everyone go to the devil in the way they prefer. This is Utterson's self-deprecating version of the narrator's judgment that he preferred to help those who had committed misdeeds rather than reprove them. This formulation seems to be a witty variation on the dictum of Frederick the Great "in this Country every man must get to Heaven in his own way" (Carlyle's translation in his 1858 biography, III.290). Identifying this preference as "Cain's heresy" adds to the strangeness of the text, since it is Cain not his brother who "goes to the devil" through sin.

I have replaced the longer comment on irony with "self-deprecating," which is more concise, and because it is self-irony that seems dominant. I originally thought of putting "self-deprecating (and heavily humorous) version" but then thought that Utterson's ponderous wit did not require pointing out.

3. *Dr. Jekyll Was Quite at Ease*

Although the authors approved of this note, I now see it would be far too lengthy for a normal edition. The authors quote 161 words from the 438 in Dury (2005). If I was now to write it as a normal explanatory note, this is what I would put:

> *Dr Jekyll Was Quite at Ease*: The past tense of the verb in the title is unusual (so unusual that it is occasionally translated with a present tense). It would be possible in the form "Tells How Dr Jekyll Was Quite at Ease," or if it were a direct quotation from the following chapter, or even if it could be taken as the

> following narrative's first words. But it does not quote any piece of text, nor does it connect coherently with what follows: indeed, the following chapter is about how Dr Jekyll was *not* at ease. Apart from its disallowed past tense verb and its problematic relationship with the following text, the title is itself ambiguous: it could mean "Dr Jekyll felt quite at ease," or "looked quite at ease"; and *quite* could mean "entirely" or "to some degree." After the shocks of the first two chapters the reader of a sensational tale is expecting a relaxing interlude: for a moment, the title holds out a promise of this.

The last sentence possibly crosses the line of interpretation, though it is essentially drawing attention to a genre convention, so I would like to ask the authors to be indulgent. I felt that the reader would be disoriented if just left with a note on the title's strangeness, incoherence and ambiguity. Remove the final sentence and the note seems to come with the comment "Make of this what you can." Adding the comment rounds off the note and offers the reader some help. It might be said that there are other interesting aspects of the title: a division between the narrator and the author of the chapter titles; a linguistic disorientation; and no doubt others. That last sentence, however, does not seem to impose an interpretation: it is a passing comment to stimulate thought that still leaves the reader free to work on interpretation. In addition, generic expectations are a first tool we use when following and interpreting a narrative, and notes on them fall into the authors' category 4 of "parallels and genre conventions": not essential problem-solving matters that enable understanding (the chapter title is, indeed, easy to understand) but nevertheless notes that add to understanding.

4. *the man trampled calmly over the child's body*

The last note in Dury 2005 that the authors comment on involves a two-stage detour as it refers to a passage in the introduction, given here below the note:

> *the man trampled calmly over the child's body*: an example of Stevenson's indeterminacy (see p. 29). The collision of the two bodies can be seen as an example of a chaotic event in the modern large city, where individuals meet by chance, like elementary particles in an electromagnetic field. (Dury 2005, 91n3)

> [p. 29] In the account of Hyde's brutality to the girl he knocks down (Ch. 1) the familiar meaning of *trample* ('to step repeatedly and heavily [on something] and so flatten') does not fit in with what comes before and after. We could understand '*the crowd* trampled over the child's body,' or 'the man *stepped* over (or: *stepped on*) the child's body,' but not 'the man trampled over the child's body.' (Dury 2005, 29)

The authors raise a critical eyebrow at the characterization of the collision as "a chaotic event in the modern large city etc.," and Dury 2020 agrees that, while of interest, it is not "so compelling that it needs to be brought to the attention of the reader" (67). I remember that the note was influenced by the recent reading of a study of connections between modern science and the modern worldview. The note might be more appropriately applied to Utterson's dream-version of the event, which focuses more on the modern city: "if at any time he dozed over, it was but to see [the mysterious figure] glide more stealthily through sleeping houses, or move the more swiftly and still the more swiftly, even to dizziness, through wider labyrinths of lamplighted city, and at every street-corner crush a child and leave her screaming" (JH 15). But, even then, it seems to enter too far into the territory of interpretation.

The second point they raise concerns the alleged strangeness of "trampled over"[7]: "It would appear that 'trampled calmly over the child's body' is not a deviation from common usage," they write, "as we have found some parallel instances in nineteenth-century texts" (67). Their examples, however, do not constitute a clear case: first, "great [boys] trample over the dead [i.e. over the graves] with callous indifference" (67n10)—could still be an act of flattening by a group. True, you could say "the boy trampled over the grave" but this would involve several heavy steps along the length: one foot placed by one person while crossing over, for me, would not be "trampled over." Then, "the peculiar feel and sound produced by trampling over the bilberry bushes" (67n10; continuing in the source with "as we wander through the solitude of the forest")—refers to several people flattening bushes with their feet (in order to get past and through them).

The ambiguity here of *over*, either "above and from one side to the other and proceeded on his way" or "along the surface of," leaves the

reader unsure of what has happened. It is an ambiguity in the event that has been remarked on by readers from Bentzon in 1888 ("insufficiently described"),[8] to Punter in 2013 ("not […] easy to imagine. It lingers in the memory, but only because of its strangeness" [4]).

The authors propose a literal interpretation: "What is so extraordinary about Hyde is his complete lack of emotion. He walks over the girl as if she were part of the pavement" (62). This would be an unproblematic interpretation if Stevenson had written "Hyde tramped over her," but the verb "trampled" involves flattening. It is also difficult to understand why overturning and then walking over a girl, for all its shocking lack of humanity, could make the bystanders want to kill Hyde and enable them to extract from him the equivalent of a workman's annual wages after he accepted voluntary overnight custody with them until the banks opened. It seems this is a point on which we will have to agree to differ.

But my comments on the article on explanatory notes is turning into an article about *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Let us return to our subject and to a more interesting task: how would I rewrite the note for a standard students' edition?

> *the man trampled calmly over the child's body*: This incident is not easy to visualize: the verb "trampled over" could suggest Hyde walking over and in some way flattening, or stepping over and going on his way. The first would correspond to the reactions of the bystanders and the substantial compensation; the second to the doctor's comment that the girl was more frightened than hurt. Something about the incident, it seems, is missing, possibly suppressed. Jekyll later calls the incident "[a]n act of cruelty," but in the draft at the same point he says Hyde was "detected in an act of infamy" (JH 64, 149), and Enfield's account, it seems, contains details with connotations of both versions of the event.

I started with the pleasure of reading notes, and, after this exercise in re-writing, I should say a few words on the attraction of writing them. The pleasure of writing, we know, lies mainly in the phase of editing the draft: the pleasure of testing alternatives, cuts and additions, in balancing phrases—in shaping and making form. The note is a short text that allows a focussing on this creative and poetic process. It has some

affinities with the short poem: it is self-contained and is consciously worked so that the message is communicated with the most elegant and suggestive concision. For giving me the opportunity to experience this pleasure in re-writing notes, as well as for their insights into the well-formed note, I would like here to convey to the authors my thanks.

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NOTES

[1]As Montaigne says of the essay-like works of Plutarch and Seneca, "They both have this notable advantage for my humor, that the knowledge I seek is there treated in detached pieces that do not demand the obligation of long labor, of which I am incapable. […] I need no great enterprise to get at them, and I leave them whenever I like. For they have no continuity from one to the other" (II.10, 364).

[2]For Battestin, each editor will annotate "according to his interests, competencies, and assumptions—according, indeed, to his temperament and sensibilites" (7).

[3]In 1990 Gardner published a sequel, *More Annotated Alice*, containing additional notes, a new set of early illustrations, and a chapter written but omitted from the published text of *Through the Looking-Glass*. In 2000, *The Definitive Edition* was published combining the notes from both works. In 2015, *The Annotated Alice: 150th Anniversary Deluxe Edition* was published, combining the previous works of Gardner and expanded by Mark Burstein with more than 100 new or updated annotations and over 100 new illustrations. A similar form of point-by-point commentary is found in the scholastic text surrounded by a frame of marginal glosses and commentaries, the product of teaching through "lessons" (i.e. "readings") of a text accompanied by explanation. The modern "annotated edition" of a literary text, however, is clearly influenced by Gardner's example.

[4]In *The Definitive Edition*, note numbers were changed to conventional format.

[5]William S. Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Mother Goose* (1962), Edward Guiliano's *The Annotated Dicken*s (1968), P. Van Doren Stern's *The Annotated Walden* (1970), and Alfred Appel's *The Annotated Lolit*a (1971).

[6]William S. Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, (1968, second ed. 1979), Leonard Wolf's *The Annotated Dracula* (1975) and his *The Essential Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: The Definitive Annotated Edition* (1995), Martin Gardner's own *The Annotated Innocence of Father Brown* (1987) and *The Annotated Thursday* (1999), and

Douglas A. Anderson's *The Annotated Hobbit* (1989), and so on, up to Leslie S. Klinger's *The Annotated Sandman* by Neil Gaiman (2015) dedicated to a cult fantasy comic book "epic," and all the fantasy and dark fantasy texts now heavily annotated on wiki sites.

[7]"An Internet search for 'trampled over' produced 3650 hits, with (apart from instances of this text) no other example used literally of a physical act with a single agent and a single person affected; all the thousands of others involved a crowd of people or animals as the subject and something like a flower-bed or a fallen body or bodies as the object, or were used metaphorically to mean 'humiliatingly defeat (another team)' or 'violate (the constitution etc.)'" (JH xlix).

[8]"L'acte de cruauté commis par Hyde, au premier chapitre, envers la petite fille qui se trouve, on ne sait comment, la nuit, au coin d'une rue déserte, semble bien insuffisamment indiqué" (Bentzon 680).

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