

Reaching Out to the Reader

The Audio Guide as a Tool in Digital Genetic Editions

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ABSTRACT

When designing a digital genetic edition, one of the most challenging and demanding tasks, upon which the success or failure of the editing venture lies, is the ability of the editor to communicate the transformations of the work that took place during the process of its writing in a comprehensible, reliable, and simultaneously attractive way. In this paper we suggest supplementary tools that may appear valuable in designing a digital reading environment suitable not only for the expert but also the common — motivated — reader and address some matters that appear crucial for reading and interacting with digital genetic editions. The challenge to reach out to the reader of the digital genetic edition and seek tools to improve her reading experience stems from our engagement with D. Solomòs' manuscripts and incomplete works and, more particularly, from the implementation of a digital scholarly edition of his manuscript corpus that will also include genetic editions for some of his works.

THIS PAPER ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS THE CRUCIAL BUT OFTEN neglected matter of the reader's engagement with the digital genetic edition and suggests the introduction of new tools — namely the audio guide — to support a more effective communication of the course of literary writing. The idea of including audible information in a digital genetic edition comes from the challenges set by the “Digital Solomòs” project, which is the digital archive of Dionysios Solomòs, the Greek national poet and an important figure of 19th century Romanticism in Greece. The archive apart from the digital scholarly edition of the poet's draft manuscripts will also include genetic editions of some of his major works. Solomòs is in fact a very challenging editorial case. The poet published very few of his works during his lifetime. His most important and influential poems were left unfinished and survive only in untidy, bilingual draft manuscripts. After his death, his work was accessed and read only through eclectic editions until the publication of (almost) the entire corpus

of his manuscripts in an extraordinary, for its time, printed diplomatic edition (POLITIS 1964). This edition fueled the production of several interesting critical and editing research projects which shed light on the poet's work and writing habits.

When designing Solomòs' digital archive our aim was to give the reader — not only the expert, but also the common, non-specialist reader — the opportunity to approach the poet's unfinished works, not (only) through the eclectic, critical editions that hide fluidity in favor of a stable, "readable" text, produced through the mediation of an editor, but (also) through genetic editions that reveal the fascinating process of writing, analyzing, and interpreting the various stages of composition instead of creating a text that never existed. Acknowledging the fact that reading a genetic edition is ergodic (ARSETH 1997) we researched ways to reduce the intellectual effort required and to stimulate the reader's motivation. In the digital genetic edition of "Funeral Ode II" ("Νεκρική Ωδή II") featured here we experiment with and explore the potential use of audio data as an alternative means of conveying information about the writing process of the work to the reader.

As it has already been mentioned, digital genetic editions are sophisticated and complex editing projects that aim to handle and present textual fluidity (BRYANT 2002) and writing processes. For this purpose genetic editors employ a variety of digital methods. The main part of a digital genetic edition is usually constituted by digital surrogates of the draft manuscripts accompanied by their topographic transcription where meaningful (for the editor) material features of writing are annotated and reproduced. Through the observation of these material characteristics of writing (writing tools, hands, layout, cancellations, additions, metamarks, etc.) it is possible to reconstitute the temporality of writing. In other words, the material signs of writing, once interpreted, can be translated into consecutive writing acts that form the writing process (D'ORIO 2010; GABLER 2016). Nevertheless, more often than not this interpretation of the materiality of the manuscript is offered to the reader through tools outside the diplomatic edition. Therefore, in order to fully comprehend how writing has developed through time, the reader is forced to leave the environment of the digital surrogate and enter a different reading environment where the observation of the manuscript — its physical characteristics, its content, and its topographic layout — is no longer possible.

In the digital edition of "Funeral Ode II", we draw inspiration from the "Proust Prototype" (PIERAZZO AND ANDRÉ 2012), a project in which information on the temporality of the manuscript is embedded in the reading

environment of the digital surrogate by making use of animation.¹ Thus, the materiality and temporality of writing are represented in the same display mode without increasing the ergodic effort already required to make sense of the complicated phenomena of literary genesis. In order to further explore, evaluate, and expand the potential of such editing tools, as well as the appropriateness of new tools, we thought it would be meaningful to turn our attention to the reader of the digital genetic edition and attempt to define the parameters that constitute her experience once inside the virtual reading environment of a digital genetic edition. Moreover, we tried to research the basic characteristics of reading in the digital environment (RASMUSSEN 2016). Using this approach, several observations from the recent, cognitive, cultural, and anthropological study of reading behavior proved to be illuminating (HOU et. al. 2017).

Reading a genetic edition, although it may also be considered as a playful and rewarding activity, is a very demanding intellectual task. Its ergodic nature lies in the fundamental characteristics of genetic reading for which the simultaneous activation of different sets of reading skills, those required for literary reading, as well as those required for informational reading, is necessary. In order to gain access to the ever fluid literary text the reader has to scaffold it through the sometimes complex information provided by the editor on paleographic features and writing scenarios.

Ergodic, nonlinear, educational, and playful are not only fundamental characteristics of genetic reading, but also words often used to describe the contemporary reading experience and practices especially in digital reading environments. Findings claim that when reading on a screen the reader is generally less likely to remain concentrated for a long period of time and more likely to be distracted compared to when reading a printed book, although findings tend to vary according to different age groups (SCHWABE et. al. 2021). As a result, the digital reader tends to avoid reading long texts on screen. However, she is more and more willing to use her auditory skills that are being developed anew in the digital environment.

Bearing in mind these considerations we tried to design a user friendlier reading environment for the digital genetic edition of Solomos' "Funeral Ode II". This short unfinished poem that survives only in the poet's draft manuscripts, is emblematic of both the reader's deceptive perception of Solomòs' unfinished works and the genetic editor's high responsibility to offer

1. *Versions of Billy Budd: A fluid text edition* (BRYANT, KELLEY, and OHGE 2019) should also be mentioned for representing temporality and materiality within the same reading environment.

the reader all the aids required to approach the work without concealing its fragmentary state or filling in the gaps in the manuscript through eclectic editing. In previous eclectic editions, the poetic fragment of “Funeral Ode II” is presented as a poem of three stanzas (POLYLYAS 1859). However, the drafts of “Funeral Ode II” reveal that Solomòs planned to write a much longer poem, an ode of fifteen stanzas, and worked quite intensively on six stanzas drafting both in Greek verse, as well as Italian prose, before abandoning the whole project. Furthermore, it can be inferred that “Funeral Ode II” is a hymn or an ode to a dead young woman sung by the angels who have come down to accompany her soul to heaven. But we don’t get to hear the hymn directly from the angels. It is being relayed to us through the poetic voice. Therefore, the poem is articulated in two distinct parts: the narrator’s part and the angels’ part.

The sequence of these two parts within the poem seems to have troubled Solomòs, who is examining both possible successions, during the elaboration of the poem. On folio 7v of his small notebook we read the following remark:

*Bisogna assolutamente
far l'inno cominciando
ex abrupto senza dire
chi lo facesse. E in ultimo
si dirà «ετζί στο δωμα
et.*

*It is absolutely necessary
for the hymn to start
ex abrupto without revealing
who sings it. And in the end,
it will be revealed: “thus inside the room
et<c>.*

However, in the last writing stage, the poem starts with the stanza in which the poetic voice announces *a priori* the resonance of songs inside the room where the young woman is lying dead inside her coffin, dressed in white and decorated with white flowers.

*Το δώμα τ' ολομόναχο
βροντούσε από τραγούδια·
στα χέρια και στο μέτωπο*

*επρέμαν τα λουλούδια
της κορασιάς οπ' έλαμπε
σαν τ' άστρο της αυγής*

*The lone room
resonated with songs
on the hands and on the forehead
shivered the flowers
of the Girl who shone
like the morning star.*

The angels' hymn begins from the following stanza, i.e., the second stanza and closes at the last one. Although the poet's indecisiveness between the two versions is clear in the drafts, none of this information is accessible to the reader of an eclectic edition of this unfinished poem.

The poet's hesitation, as well as other defining writing acts of the genesis, can be witnessed particularly on two facing pages of the small notebook (see Fig. 1). Due to the crucial role that these pages represent for the genesis of the work, we will use them as an example to illustrate the potential benefits of including audio data in the genetic edition. The text that appears on the two-page writing surface, as is often the case, was not written in the sequence dictated by its linear reading. On the contrary, it shows signs of discontinuity, but also of fragmentation and bilingualism. In order to present the sequence in which the different zones of this surface were written, we adopt the model and the code of the "Proust Prototype" which favors, as mentioned above, the representation of the temporality of writing within the representation of the materiality of the manuscript. Following the model, when the reader enters the reading environment, a digital facsimile of the two pages of the manuscript appears. When the reader clicks on the digital facsimile, the transcription of each of the zones appears in the order in which, according to the editorial interpretation, they were written.

As the zones appear in transcription successively, vital information on the genesis of the work is conveyed to the reader: the text of the surface is divided in blocks that constitute distinct writing acts and the sequence of their appearance imitates the sequence in which they were written according to the editor, thus providing a basic reconstruction of the writing process in a quick and intuitive way. But however valuable, this information is not sufficient for the reader to fully perceive the genetic processes that have taken place on this two-page surface. It is

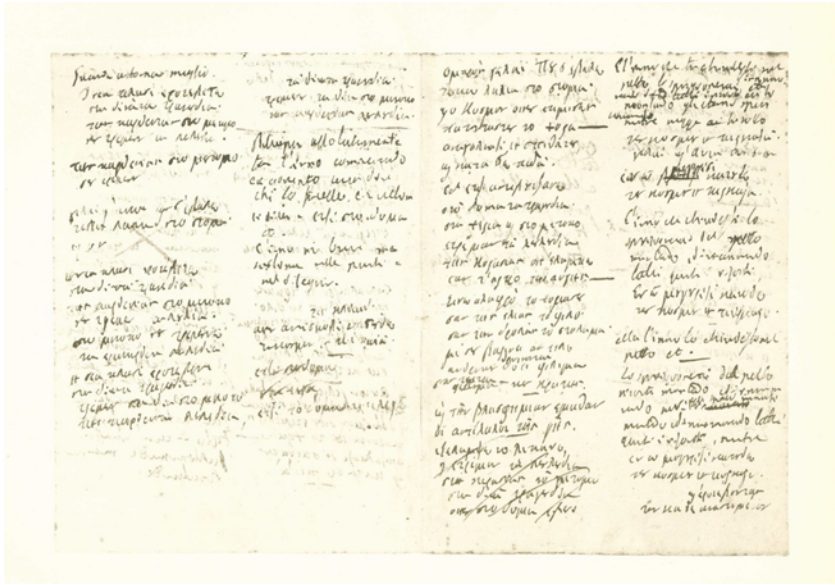


Figure 1. Pages 7v and 8r of Notebook AA1 (Ακαδημίας Αθηνών 1).

necessary to take a step further and also supply her with an interpretation of the writing acts that are presented, ideally without redirecting her to another reading environment.

For this purpose, an audio guide is attached to the text areas — the zones of the manuscript page — which are numbered to allow quick reference. When activated, the audio guide informs the reader of the role that each specific segment plays in the course of writing, thus highlighting the writer's decisions and focusing on the most important writing events that occur on the writing surface (see Fig. 2). The reader can activate the audio guide by clicking on the audio symbol that appears on each manuscript zone and also deactivate it according to her needs and rhythm of reading. In addition, the text of the audio guide is displayed on the side of the screen and can be hidden at will. Before, after, or while listening to the editorial comment, the reader is free to study the transcribed text and observe the material aspects of the manuscript page through the digital surrogate. The transcriptions of the zones remain on the surface, but the reader can move or minimize them in order to consult the manuscript image, check or verify the claims of the editor.

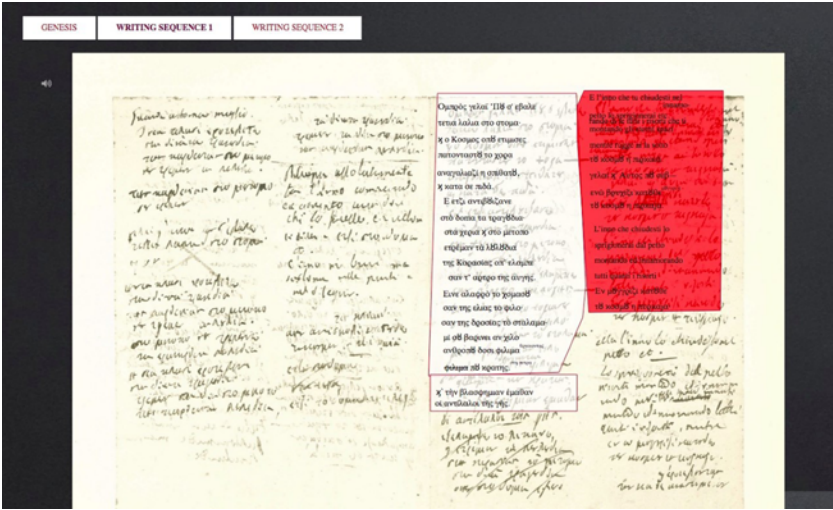


Figure 2. Screenshot from the Prototype of the Digital Genetic Edition of “Funeral Ode II”.

To give an idea of how the audio guide works, an excerpt is given below; it recounts the role of the note in Italian mentioned earlier and its connection to the process of writing:

The note in Italian written down in zone 5 strongly confirms the initial scenario of the poem “under construction”, according to which the poem should start abruptly (ex abrupto) with the angelic hymn (l’Inno) at the end of which the poetic subject takes over in order to explain the origin of the hymn and to wish the young girl to rest in peace. This initial scenario had been disrupted in the meantime, both in zone 1 and zone 4, where the reordering of the themes of the penultimate stanza suggests the thought of moving the whole stanza to the beginning of the poem.

The audio guide content typically includes elements of both narration and description that derive from the scholarly study of the manuscript. In some cases, the use of directions is also necessary when the editor senses the need to redirect the reader to another part of the genetic or the diplomatic edition or even encourage her to pass from the reading texts constituted by the editor (that will also be included in the genetic edition) to the digital facsimiles, a transition often necessary for Solomòs’ common reader.

In designing a digital genetic edition, the editor needs to consider the new forms of digital literacy and employ new editing tools to help the common yet motivated reader, whose reading habits are being challenged, to develop new reading strategies, so that she can approach the special knowledge and welcome the enjoyment that results from the experience of genetic reading. In particular, in order to mediate the phenomena of literary genesis and decrease the amount of effort required by the reader, the editor should keep the evidence of the writing of the literary text and the relevant information in the same reading environment where possible. Moreover, she could prepare a series of shorter and simpler than usual informative texts on the writing process of the edited literary text without sacrificing the scientific standards and objectives of the genetic editing venture. Furthermore, the editor can explore the use of audio data in digital editions since it seems to be both an attractive and effective alternative to written text and can enhance the simultaneous reception of informational and literary resources required in genetic reading by channeling each of them through a different medium. Additionally, the use of audio appears to be a valuable tool for presenting editorial doubt and ambiguity in cases where the writing sequence cannot be reconstituted by the editor with absolute certainty.² In the case of the two-page writing surface that we employ here as an example, two equally possible writing scenarios can be suggested and supported with manuscript evidence. In the edition of “Funeral Ode II”, instead of concealing this editorial hesitation, we choose to involve the reader by presenting her with the evidence that supports each scenario through the use of the audio guide.

The introduction of audio components for scholarly editions proposed in this provocation might also be considered as a first step towards opening up genetic editions to a wider non-expert community of readers. Although genetic editions are mainly scholarly products addressed to experts, we believe that literary genesis is worth communicating to the common — educated — reader as well, both for its informative and its enlightening value. Moreover, in the case of unfinished and unpublished works, the preparation of a user-friendly genetic edition appears not only as an attractive option, but also a necessary alternative or a supplement of approaching the work through a critical edition. In this context, new roles for the editor emerge not only as a privileged and highly specialized researcher of the author’s laboratory, but also as mediator between the author and the reader

2. The “Proust Prototype” expresses degrees of editorial certainty through color coding.

who ensures that the latter perceives the fluidity and writing process in an intelligible, intuitive, and playful way, while always maintaining scholarly quality and consistency.

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