COPYRIGHTS AND REPRINTS

Sir:

It is high time that learned societies and professional associations of scholars took cognizance of a growing and, I should say, evil practice on the part of college-text publishers, of making up books out of other people’s writings. These are so-called “books of readings” or “introductions” to this or that discipline or combinations of disciplines; they are clip and paste jobs with sometimes a pat on the head, of two or three lines, for the original author and sometimes no more than a cavalier nod in his direction in the form of a footnote.

In any case, this is easy money for the compiler and the publisher and a poor way (as regards scholarship and teaching) of getting a book together.

But what I wish to protest against is that apparently the practice is developing among publishers of not even asking the authors for their permission to appear in these collections, some of which are very sorry performances indeed; they simply ask their fellow-publishers (despite the fact that usually copyrights are held by authors) who, because they are in the same cheap game themselves, readily give their consent. The defenseless author does not know he is being used until he comes across the work by accident. Needless to say, in this kind of flim-flam, no one bothers to talk of compensation for reprinting.

Time was when compensation was the ordinary and honorable procedure with permission first obtained from the author before the publisher (simply as a matter of courtesy) was approached.

I recently had an outrageous experience in which I found myself reprinted three times in a mélange which purported to be an introduction to the social sciences. This was done without my knowledge, consent, or, of course, any compensation. In fact, the publisher resented my asking for three free copies of the book and, after an exchange of a number of letters, ended up grudgingly by sending me one, and that one a paperback.

I am calling upon learned societies to protect their members against this sort of high-handed treatment and to formulate rules for permissions and compensation. It is all very well—and proper—to protest against the Russian piracy of American books; but piracy at home is equally reprehensible.

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