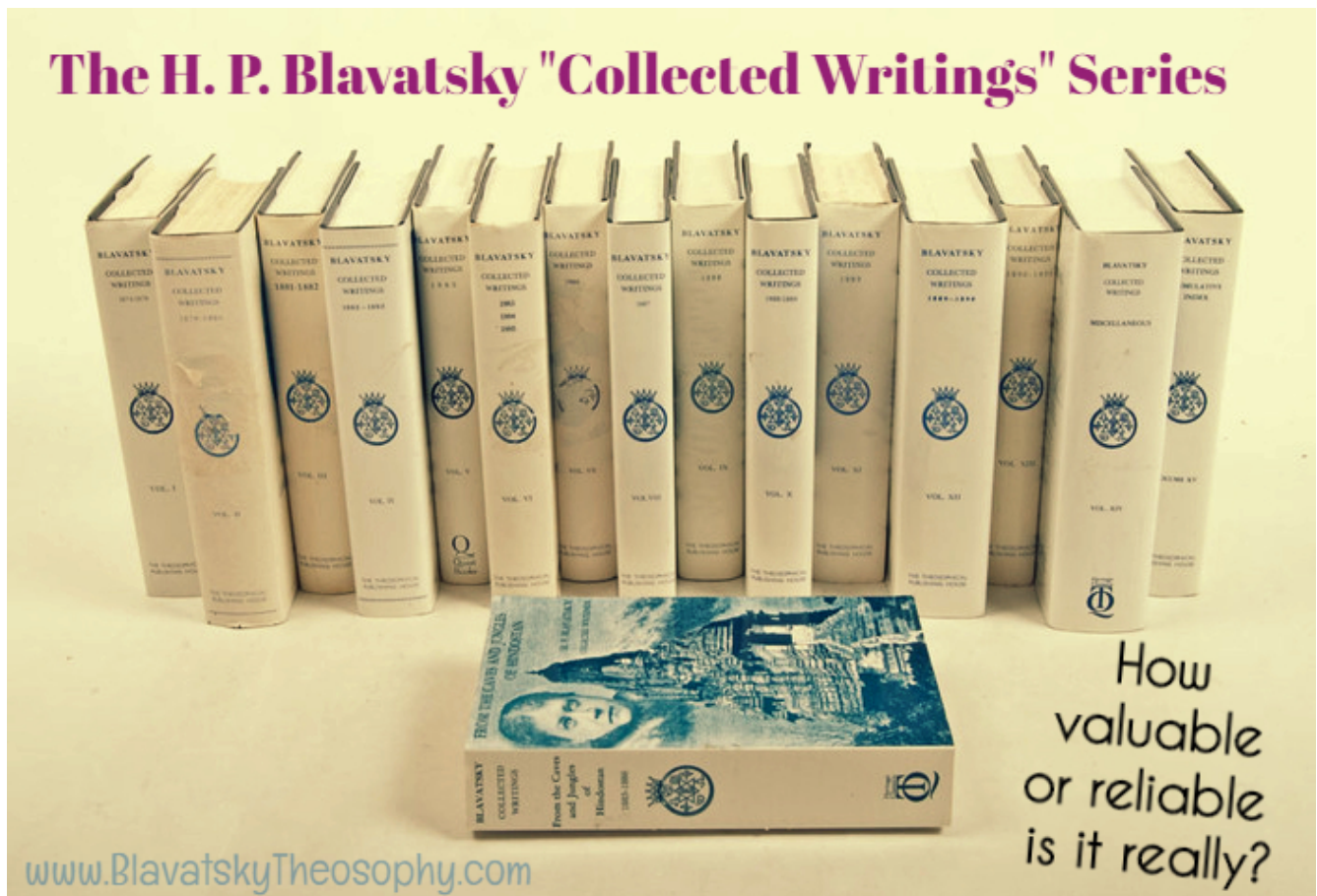


T H E O S O P H Y



Do Blavatsky's Books Need Rewriting?

“This work is written for the instruction of students of Occultism, and not for the benefit of philologists.”
(H. P. Blavatsky, “The Secret Doctrine” Vol. 1, p. 23)



(<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/blavatsky-collected-writings.jpg>)

Occasionally, some students of Theosophy will say that the writings of H. P. Blavatsky should be rewritten, for two different reasons:

- (1) To update, simplify, and modernise the language, expression, and structure, so that the most important Theosophical books can become more modern, popular, and appealing to the contemporary 21st century mind, albeit without altering the actual teachings imparted.
- (2) To make the most important Theosophical books more likely to be treated seriously and respectfully by current academics, scholars, and the intelligentsia, who prefer uniform, standardised, modern transliterations of Sanskrit, Tibetan, and other terms, and who do not usually take kindly to misspellings,

grammatical errors, misquotations, misattributions, or the occasional factual inaccuracy of a mundane nature, all of which do *very occasionally* occur in HPB's writings, since, as she reminded her readers, she was not infallible.

In the "H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings" series, Boris de Zirkoff attempted to implement the *second* point, by acting as editor of everything HPB had ever written.

But as we have said elsewhere on this site:

In his "Editorial Foreword" to the "Collected Writings" edition of "The Secret Doctrine," de Zirkoff acknowledges that he has made alterations to HPB's text, ranging from changing words, changing punctuation, changing spelling, adding words, altering quotations, adding references to authors who HPB quotes from, redrawing diagrams, adding lots of photos and pictures of people and places referred to in the text, and adding his own comments and criticisms in an editorial Appendix at the end of each volume.

One can thus compare page 1 of the de Zirkoff edition with page 1 of HPB's edition (which is published only by Theosophy Company and Theosophical University Press) and find no less than eight changes, just on one page. We do not have the time to compare every page of both editions but if eight alterations can be made on just one page, how many must there be throughout the whole two volumes?

This is something that students of the original Theosophical teachings have been aware of for quite some time; please see old online forum posts at <http://theos-talk.com/archives/200105/tt00144.html> (<http://theos-talk.com/archives/200105/tt00144.html>), <http://theos-talk.com/archives/200105/tt00152.html> (<http://theos-talk.com/archives/200105/tt00152.html>), <http://theos-talk.com/archives/200105/tt00123.html> (<http://theos-talk.com/archives/200105/tt00123.html>), <http://theos-talk.com/archives/200307/tt00195.html> (<http://theos-talk.com/archives/200307/tt00195.html>), for just a few examples of how de Zirkoff completely rewrites some of HPB's sentences, deleting words, adding words, and changing meanings, and usually without specifically identifying it as such, thus leaving the innocent reader unaware that what they've just read is not the way HPB wrote it at all but a modern day distortion.

As someone commented in the last post linked to above: "I felt always highly uncomfortable with Boris de Zirkoff's footnotes in the CW [i.e. Collected Writings series]. His arrogant tone in which he put himself above HPB, pointing out on every possible occasion that HPB "was half inventing" a text version of some obscure antique original source, or that she was "quoting in an imprecise manner", or insinuating that it was "doubtful that what HPB alleged as a source ever existed in that form" was ever a source of great sorrow to me, and I could never understand it. I kept asking myself, why would anyone think he or she knew better than HPB, and why would especially Zirkoff do that, the last living relative of HPB? But that he would have the audacity to go ahead and positively change what she wrote, would have been inconceivable to me."

Tony Maddock, an English Theosophist who we understand to be a member of "The Theosophical Society – Adyar," pointed out in another online forum post 20 years ago at <http://theos-talk.com/archives/199903/tt00024.html> (<http://theos-talk.com/archives/199903/tt00024.html>) that one of HPB's articles, "Reincarnations in Tibet," was subjected to *over 100 alterations* by de Zirkoff when preparing it for republication in the "Collected Writings"!

Maddock compared the "Collected Writings" version with the original article as published by HPB in "The Theosophist" and the version of it published by Theosophy Company (the publishers for the United Lodge of Theosophists) in their three volume "H. P. Blavatsky Theosophical Articles" series (165 of HPB's most important articles) and found that the Theosophy Company edition had no alterations from the original but that, as just mentioned, the "Collected Writings" edition had more than a hundred. He proceeded to comment:

*"It is appreciated **some prefer the alterations for reasons of scholarship, wanting to be seen as being respectable, etc.** From the point of view of "eminent in holiness, Buddha-like, spiritual . . . the holy, spiritual land," the 100 odd alterations made in this particular article are very *physical*. Some of us prefer to read the article as HPB (with her *spiritual* insight) wrote it. . . . The spellings in "Reincarnations in Tibet" . .*

. in at least one case they are not uniform, and in HPB's writings generally, it can be said that the spellings are not uniform. In the altered version they are made uniform, and attempts are made to make it logical, by the soulless dead-letter approach, which doesn't take into account the subtler (more spiritual) elements. That denies the modern reader words like Lha-ssa, because it can now only be seen as the capital of Tibet (Lhasa), a geographical location. . . . **Are we to change her writings to keep scholars and "serious" "Buddhists," etc. happy, so that her writings become acceptable in certain so called erudite circles?** So that she might be taken seriously and accepted and not seen as a charlatan by the blind? If she had cared about this kind of trivia, she would hardly have called her magazine "Lucifer" at the end of the last century. . . . the least we can do is to pass HPB's original writings on for future generations. We really should not, as Theosophists, compromise HPB."

But de Zirkoff and others would maintain that they are not "compromising" HPB but rather aiding her, seeing as surely she would want even the slightest inaccuracy in her works to be corrected and revised. But when HPB herself is not around to oversee it, is it not ultimately a somewhat risky and presumptuous business to try to do it for her?

After all, HPB was not some sort of university professor but did her writing work as an initiated Occultist, whose books and articles were very often written under the inspiration of, and in some cases even directly telepathically dictated by, some of the Masters of Wisdom, her Adept-Teachers. "The Secret Doctrine" was repeatedly declared by the Mahatma K.H. and the Mahatma M. in Their letters to be the "triple production" of Themselves with Their "Direct Agent" HPB. For the details, please see **Who Wrote "The Secret Doctrine"?** (<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/who-wrote-the-secret-doctrine/>) and also **The Extraordinary Story Behind "Isis Unveiled."** (<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/the-extraordinary-story-behind-isis-unveiled/>)

In her last ever article, titled "My Books," HPB states:

"And what I say and maintain is this: Save the direct quotations and the many afore specified and mentioned misprints, errors and misquotations, and the general make-up of *Isis Unveiled*, for which I am in no way responsible, (a) every word of information found in this work or in my later writings, comes from the teachings of our Eastern Masters; and (b) that many a passage in these works has been written by me *under their dictation*. In saying this no *supernatural* claim is urged, for no *miracle* is performed by such a dictation. . . . Space and distance do not exist for thought; and if two persons are in perfect mutual psychomagnetic *rapport*, and of these two, one is a great Adept in Occult Sciences, then thought-transference and dictation of whole pages become as easy and as comprehensible at the distance of ten thousand miles as the transference of two words across a room."

There is also the matter of the presence of an "astral cipher" in many of the original Theosophical writings, those of HPB in particular but also her closest colleague and fellow Initiate William Q. Judge, as an important reason for those original texts not being altered, edited, abridged, "revised," and so forth. In "Light on the Path" (p. 29-30, 33) we read:

"There is another way of reading, which is, indeed, the only one of any use with many authors. It is reading, not between the lines but within the words. In fact, it is deciphering a profound cipher. All alchemical works are written in the cipher of which I speak; it has been used by the great philosophers and poets of all time. It is used systematically by the adepts in life and knowledge, who, seemingly giving out their deepest wisdom, hide in the very words which frame it its actual mystery. They cannot do more. There is a law of nature which insists that a man shall read these mysteries for himself. . . . The whole of "Light on the Path" [i.e. a Theosophical book dictated by an Adept to Mabel Collins and which is also partly derived from **the Book of the Golden Precepts** (<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/the-voice-of-the-silence-an-authentic-buddhist-text/>)] is written in an astral cipher and can therefore only be deciphered by one who reads astrally."

All of this is relevant to consider in regard to point #1 at the start of this article also.

It could be argued that surely the Masters would not have dictated or included in an astral cipher any

inaccuracies, misquotations, misspellings, etc., and that therefore *those* can be altered and updated without causing any problems. That is quite possibly true but why even run the risk, just to placate and impress some academics and scholars, who are really not that likely to give the slightest bit more credence to *Theosophy* just because the text of a book is well polished?

After all, "That which is given in these volumes is selected from *oral*, as much as from written teachings. This first instalment of the esoteric doctrines is based upon Stanzas, which are the records of a people unknown to ethnology; it is claimed that they are written in a tongue absent from the nomenclature of languages and dialects with which philology is acquainted; they are said to emanate from a source (Occultism) repudiated by science; and, finally, they are offered through an agency, incessantly discredited before the world by all those who hate unwelcome truths, or have some special hobby of their own to defend. Therefore, the rejection of these teachings may be expected, and must be accepted beforehand. No one styling himself a "scholar," in whatever department of exact science, will be permitted to regard these teachings seriously."

"One of the greatest, and, withal, the most serious objection to the correctness and reliability of the whole work will be the preliminary STANZAS: "How can the statements contained in them be verified?" True, if a great portion of the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Mongolian works quoted in the present volumes are known to some Orientalists, the chief work – that one from which the Stanzas are given – is not in the possession of European Libraries. **The Book of Dzian** (<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/the-secret-book-of-dzian/>) (or "Dzan") is utterly unknown to our Philologists, or at any rate was never heard of by them under its present name. This is, of course, a great drawback to those who follow the methods of research prescribed by official Science; but to the students of Occultism, and to every genuine Occultist, this will be of little moment." (HPB, "The Secret Doctrine" Vol. 1, Introductory, p. xxxvii, xxii-xxiii)

In the July 1927 issue of the ULT's "Theosophy" magazine, as part of a series titled "The Rising Cycle," the editors published a remark then recently made by G. R. S. Mead, who, 34 years previously, had worked with Annie Besant in producing **the "Third and Revised Edition" of "The Secret Doctrine,"** (<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/the-third-volume-of-the-secret-doctrine/>) which was later found to contain around 40,000 alterations (mostly very minor but some major) from HPB's own edition of her great work. Mead said about William Judge:

"W.Q.J. held strongly at the time I was revising the printed text of Vols. I and II, that the *S.D.* throughout, in all its parts and all its diction, was transcendently 'occult,' inspired verbally by the 'Mahatmas,' as he himself told me when he first saw the printed revised text. I thought he was utterly mistaken, and so I told him."

Mead was entitled to his opinion but it was entirely contrary to the opinion of those Mahatmas Themselves and They of all people ought to have known the real facts of the matter. But, as time would show, Mead ended up disbelieving altogether in the existence of such beings as the Mahatmas and developed a wholly negative and critical view of HPB, Theosophy, and the Theosophical Movement. His intellect was admirable and impressive but looking at his life it seems he raised it to a supreme position over all the other Principles of his being, the spiritual and intuitional included.

It is important to be aware that the late Dutch Theosophist Henk Spierenburg discovered and stated in print that Boris de Zirkoff had been too hasty in some of his "corrections" and annotations to the writings of HPB in the "Collected Writings" series.

One example from a not inconsiderable number is the following:

In "Isis Unveiled" Vol. 2, p. 286, HPB makes passing mention of "a succession of disciplines through refuge-heavens (called by the Buddhists *Zion*), . . . It is from the highest *Zion* that **Maitree-Buddha** (<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/maitreya-in-the-light-of-real-theosophy/>), the Saviour to come, will descend on earth; . . ."

Zion is a term usually only associated with Judaism and Christianity but, rather than consider that this

admittedly puzzling reference may have some legitimacy behind it, de Zirkoff in his “Collected Writings” edition of “Isis Unveiled” adds a note to this passage, saying that “There is some confusion at this point of the text, and no explanation seems possible with regard to the usage of the term *Zion* in connection with Buddhism.”

Spierenburg, when compiling his book “The Buddhism of H. P. Blavatsky,” researched this point and found that “Zian” (spelt slightly differently but phonetically the same) is indeed a term used in some Buddhist teachings in this context, and that HPB had not even been the first person to write about it in English.

Unfortunately, Spierenburg himself was not above mistakenly attributing error to HPB and also to T. Subba Row, in his compilation books of their writings, particularly in regard to their usage of certain Sanskrit terms, in which he seems to have misguidedly viewed himself as something of an expert.

In another forum post (<http://theos-talk.com/archives/199903/tt00026.html> (<http://theos-talk.com/archives/199903/tt00026.html>)), Tony Maddock’s words were responded to by Dallas Tenbroeck, a longtime ULT associate in Los Angeles, now deceased. He wrote, in part:

“I encounter now and then (and it drives me wild) statements like HPB wrote in “19th Century English,” or “Victorian English.” It means actually NOTHING. Only that the self-appointed critics give themselves an appearance of knowledge and wisdom they lack, and one of the lacks is: humility. . . . It is curious Karma to watch students who are well qualified and anxious to learn theosophy getting side-tracked in this cul-de-sac of literalism. **It is so easy to adopt and fear the power of the peers in Academia.** Well let them play, and in the long run who will profit the most? The VOICE OF THE SILENCE . . . also speaks of “the haughty fool,” perched in isolation on a tower on which he has climbed, “unperceived by any but himself.” Actually he may make a lot of advertising in the hope of being “recognized” and his “scholarship” attract the respect he so much desires. But does this help mankind on the whole or does it only please himself?”

That last question is a pertinent one, as the Master M. wrote to A. P. Sinnett through the agency of William Judge, “This is the age of the common people although you may not agree – but so it is.” (“An Old Message from The Master,” William Q. Judge Theosophical Articles Vol. 2, p. 309) And Mr Judge repeats in his article “The Closing Cycle”:

“The cultured classes are perfectly worthless, as a whole, to the Master-builders of the Lodge. They are good in the place they have, but they represent the “established order” and the acme of selfishness. . . . Not the cultured but the ignorant masses have kept alive the belief in the occult and the psychic now fanned into flame once more. Had we trusted to the cultured the small ember would long ago have been extinguished. We may drag in the cultured, but it will be but to have a languid and unenthusiastic interest.”

Additionally, in the article “Cautions in Paragraphs,” he advises, “Beware of the proposition that the rich or those in social life needing theosophy as much as the humbler ranks should therefore have special efforts made for them while they fail or refuse to openly help the Society with their countenance and effort.”

Of course, none of this means that we ought to adopt a negative attitude towards the academics, scholars, and intellectuals. They have their place and it is a good, valuable, and necessary place. But they ought not to be one of our primary priorities in Theosophical work.

“Theosophy is for those who want it,” is a point that was often repeated by the likes of Mr Judge and Robert Crosbie, the founder of the United Lodge of Theosophists. And those of whatever class, background, or profession, who are hungering and thirsting after Truth, after spiritual realities, in this world of suffering and sorrow, could not care less about a few misspellings or misquotations. What they care about is the teachings themselves, the Esoteric Philosophy itself, regardless of the outer garb.

HPB herself spoke critically of those who are “more careful to avoid errors in spelling, than to give

attention to the secret meaning” of esoteric texts and writings. (“The Secret Doctrine” Vol. 1, p. 521)

With regard to the question of rewriting the books to make them more modern, appealing, popular, and readily comprehensible, there are three main points to consider, other than those already discussed:

(1) If H. P. Blavatsky were *physically* here in today's world, she would not be a *popular* spiritual teacher or author. Those who *are*, such as the Eckhart Tolles, Deepak Chopras, and Rhonda Byrnes of this world, are those whose message and writings are almost entirely innocuous, inoffensive, and largely evasive about meaty metaphysical matters. On the contrary, HPB's message and writings are very hard-hitting, gritty, challenging, and sometimes extremely and directly critical of belief systems, social systems, religious structures, and so forth, which mislead and hinder the human race. She also provides solid, philosophically logical, detailed, coherent answers and explanations about some of the most metaphysical and intricate things, for humanity is in sore need of this. HPB rejected personal profit and popularity, for she knew she had a specific mission to perform, and was not prepared to compromise it in any way, regardless of how many enemies in high places she might make or how much slander, abuse, and ridicule, she may be subjected to. It is impossible to imagine her appearing on television talk shows with the likes of Oprah Winfrey in order to boost sales of a new book she might have written. Those modern day spiritual teachers who do such things are not necessarily “bad” but they are in an entirely different category to HPB and it would be most wrong to attempt to pull HPB down to their level by rewriting and revising her books to make them more like theirs. Full undiluted truth is never popular, at least not in the Kali Yuga.

(2) Regarding the way or method in which “The Secret Doctrine” is written, which some describe as overly complex or unnecessarily complicated, B. P. Wadia writes: “The end in view is to provoke thought. No one could translate the weighty contents of the two volumes into language which the man in the street can grasp without effort. It is necessary to point this out because of criticisms which have come to our notice. . . . And that brings us to her method of imparting knowledge. . . . It is evident that as an Occultist taught by Occultists her way of teaching is closely related to the manner in and by which she herself learnt. The deeper layer of the human mind has to be brought into use if *The Secret Doctrine* is to be comprehended to any appreciable extent.” (“Studies in The Secret Doctrine” p. 112, 15) And in the Preface to what is her most simply and clearly written book, “The Key to Theosophy,” HPB herself explains, “That it should succeed in making Theosophy intelligible without mental effort on the part of the reader, would be too much to expect; but it is hoped that the obscurity still left is of the thought not of the language, is due to depth not to confusion. To the mentally lazy or obtuse, Theosophy must remain a riddle; for in the world mental as in the world spiritual each man must progress by his own efforts. The writer cannot do the reader's thinking for him, nor would the latter be any the better off if such vicarious thought were possible.”

(3) There are people in “third world” nations, for whom English is not their first nor even their second language, who actively read, study, and comprehend, the teachings of Theosophy, including those in “The Secret Doctrine.” The point is, anyone who really genuinely *wants* to learn and understand Theosophy will be able to, because that want or wish will motivate them to make the degree of effort required. Very often those who make such points as #1 (at the start of this article) are Theosophists who themselves are not willing to make real effort in their studies and who thus develop a sort of resentment towards HPB for not making everything simple and easily palatable.

We say “very often” because it is not always the case. For example, the English Theosophist Harvey Tordoff studied “The Secret Doctrine” to such an extent as to be able to produce and publish a “modernised” and “simplified” version of the **Stanzas of Dzyan** (<https://blavatskytheosophy.com/understanding-the-stanzas-of-dzyan/>) and related passages from “The Secret Doctrine.”

His book “O Lanoo!” containing these was published a few years ago and as far as we know is the first and only attempt so far to rewrite HPB's own writings to suit the “21st century mind.”

If it popularises the teachings and thus brings more people in contact with them, it is not a bad thing, but unfortunately Tordoff also repeatedly tells his readers that HPB's renditions of these texts are “impenetrable,” a misleading assertion which thus inevitably puts many people off from even trying to

read the teachings the way *the Masters* gave them and also raises Tordoff to the position of an intermediary and interpreter between HPB and the masses.

We are sure Robert Crosbie would not have much appreciated Tordoff's work. In his article "The Position Assumed" he declares:

"If students are to receive the benefits of the teaching and example of the Masters, if they are to profit by the work of H. P. B. and W. Q. J., they must return to the Source. They must study and think. They must clear their minds of the rubbish of claims and pretensions of self-styled leaders and exponents. They must leave off going to the interpreter's house. They must inform themselves at first hand."

The task of presenting to the general public the teachings of Theosophy in as clear and comprehensible a way as possible is the task of all Theosophical lodges and groups, particularly in their talks, lectures, and online work. The worldwide centres of the United Lodge of Theosophists are dedicated to this: "the dissemination of the Fundamental Principles of the Philosophy of Theosophy, and the exemplification in practice of those principles," as the ULT Declaration puts it, and so are websites such as this one.

These impart Theosophical principles to all sorts of people from all sorts of backgrounds, many of whom will never be inclined to study Theosophical books for themselves, but who can still benefit greatly from the little they may choose to hear or read. But for those who want to go deep and to really get to grips with Theosophy for themselves, *individual study* of *all* the writings given to the world by H. P. Blavatsky and W. Q. Judge becomes essential and unavoidable and the only wholly reliable way in which to do it is with the unaltered originals, which thankfully have been kept in print and available by the ULT and its Theosophy Company.

In the same article from "The Rising Cycle" series, we read:

"Mr. Mead, after pleading guilty to the actual offence of altering in many thousands of cases the text of H.P.B.'s writings; of doing it after her death; of concealing by silence and misrepresentation his literary crime; after making his plea in avoidance when very literally "brought to book" – Mr. Mead tries to psychologize his readers into believing that H.P.B. endowed him with posthumous authority to corrupt her life-work. Thus:

"Speaking generally, I should say that H.P.B. herself, at any rate, would now be the first to thank me for the pains I took in revising the non-essentials of her *Secret Doctrine*."

"Why not? If Mr. Mead felt himself authorized to take words *out* of her mouth, as he did, why should he not also put words *into* her mouth, as he has? In other words, H.P.B. is not to be trusted until Mr. Mead has "edited" and interpreted what she wrote – H.P.B. whom he charges with repeated categorical falsehoods, and, finally, with his own gross offence of "pulling" the facts to suit the necessities of the case in hand."

Sad to say, this also applies very much to the work of Boris de Zirkoff in the "Collected Writings," which, perhaps not surprisingly, are published under the auspices of "The Theosophical Society – Adyar," which is well known for its less than respectful attitude towards HPB.

This is one of a number of reasons why the ULT does not generally use in its work the "Collected Writings" series (other than having some of the volumes in some Lodge libraries) and instead has what is virtually its own equivalent, namely the "H. P. Blavatsky Theosophical Articles" series and other books containing her articles such as "Theosophy: Some Rare Perspectives," "A Modern Panarion," "Five Years of Theosophy," and "Theosophical Articles and Notes."

To return to the title of this article: "Do Blavatsky's books need rewriting?" We maintain that they do not but that they do need studying and practically applying, to the fullest extent possible, with both head and heart.

ONE LAST POINT (UPDATE, NOVEMBER 2022): While we do not support the *re-writing* of HPB's books

in the ways described above, it cannot be denied that HPB herself acknowledged that there were errors (of expression, attribution, quotation, and typographical) in “The Secret Doctrine” and never said or implied that it should remain forever unaltered. She spoke quite freely to Theosophists about the need to eventually publish a corrected/updated version and her wording in this regard suggests it was the task of Theosophists (rather than herself) to do so. Some of these errors she acknowledged were her own fault (“a mistake reproduced from a mistake of his . . . If I had paid attention to it, I would not have done it.”) but attributed many to oversights made by the proofreaders and unwarranted alterations of wording introduced by the editors. Typesetting errors made by the printers were also not uncommon in that era. She makes reference to these matters in her last ever article titled “My Books” and numerous times (p. 146, 218, 225-226, 415, 514, 492, 496) throughout the posthumously published “The Secret Doctrine Dialogues” which did not become available until as recently as 2014. We are led to understand that most likely in 2026, Theosophy Company – acting for the Parent Lodge of the United Lodge of Theosophists in Los Angeles – will be releasing a new version of “The Secret Doctrine” containing alterations and corrections made along the lines indicated by HPB herself and that this version will take care to avoid the mistakes that past “editors” of “The Secret Doctrine” – such as de Zirkoff, Besant, and Mead – fell into. For those associates and friends of the ULT who may understandably consider this an alarming or concerning step for the ULT to take, we would recommend taking a look at what HPB has to say in the “Secret Doctrine Dialogues” references just referred to and to withhold final judgement until the new “Secret Doctrine” has become available and accessible and one can directly assess it for oneself. We ourselves have no idea what it will actually be like.

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