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LITERARY COMMENTARY

Writing in the Margins

Barbara A. Epstein

People have different ways of marking up their books.

Of course, most books don't get marked up at all. Composing marginal notes requires effort and implies an intention to re-visit the page being marked at some later time. For example, selected pages of my cookbooks are annotated with such practical observations as "needs much more garlic" and "takes a lot longer than you'd think." On one sauce-bespattered page, alongside a Julia Child roast chicken recipe which calls for 2 egg yolks and 1/2 cup whipping cream, I recently (and reluctantly) noted: "not *really* necessary." Teachers are accustomed to writing in the margins; the books we use in the classroom are filled with reminders of the points we consider most important. Research suggests that readers who take the time to write in their books understand and retain more than those who don't. Marginal notes may include key words and phrases, summaries of important points, questions, and judgments. Readers who become seriously involved in what they are reading may engage in a kind of conversation with the author, a conversation which leads to the discovery of their own attitudes and beliefs. Writing in the margins gives ordinarily silent readers an opportunity to assert their intellectual equality by talking back.

Writing in books most commonly takes the form of underlining or its newer variant, highlighting. Most Bridgewater students are veteran highlighters and some have raised it to an art form: a stroll through the library offers an opportunity to glance at open textbooks, their pages vibrant with dazzling green, yellow and pink stripes. Highlighting and underlining can be helpful in reminding the reader of what's important, but they are less valuable than written notes. Because highlighting requires only a minimal effort, it can be done in a mechanical, even mindless way; there's a certain pleasure in watching the bright colors appear on the page. Highlighting doesn't require the

reader to pause and reflect any longer than it takes to think "Hmm, this could be important; I'll check it out later," and then continue full speed ahead. It's the least interactive and least selective of the ways of marking one's books.

Readers throughout history have indulged the urge to write in their books. The margins of medieval manuscripts were, in general, far roomier than those of printed books, giving medieval scribes space to insert their own observations along the sides of the manuscripts they were copying. One of the scribes who worked on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, for example, couldn't resist noting, alongside the Wife of Bath's gleeful description of her many ways of tricking and manipulating men: "Women are indeed like that." Readers, too, felt free to write their opinions, and in some cases these marginal comments merged with the text itself, making it impossible, several centuries later, to know precisely what the original author wrote.

The all-time English-language champion of marginal note-taking, according to Professor H. J. Jackson of the University of Toronto, is Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Although Coleridge marked some passages with a simple "!" or "?" or a line drawn in the margin, many of his notes developed into essays which would begin on one page and continue along the sides of as many additional pages as he needed to finish expressing his idea. He wrote on every available blank space: title pages, fly leaves and at the ends of chapters. In Coleridge's later years, after he had become famous, visitors brought him their books to write in as souvenirs of their acquaintance. The first volume of the *Marginalia* in the Princeton edition of Coleridge's *Collected Works*, which covers only his notes on authors whose last names begin with A and B, fills 900 pages.

Coleridge also wrote marginal notes for some of his poems, most famously "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In this poem, as some readers may remember, the

mariner of the title forces a hapless wedding guest to listen to his tale of a sea voyage during which he shot an innocent albatross, bringing a curse upon himself and his shipmates. When it was first published in 1798, many readers found the poem bewildering and obscure; one critic, Dr. Charles Burney, characterized it as "a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence." This response is understandable given the fact that the mariner recounts such bizarre events as the appearance of a supernatural "spectre-bark" which fulfills the curse, bringing about the deaths of the "four times fifty living men," the mariner's shipmates; the apparent revival of this "ghastly crew" which turns out to be "a troop of spirits blest," angels who mysteriously sail the ship and, having steered it into the harbor, picturesquely appear on deck "in crimson colours." Coleridge took the complaints seriously and decided to revise "The Rime" and add explanatory marginal notes to a new edition published in 1817. But for many readers the notes, or glosses, only made matters worse; some found the commentary as murky and confusing as the ballad itself, while others felt that the glosses diminished the beauty and mystery of the poem.

Marginal notes played a more successful role in the development of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land." Eliot finished writing what he later referred to as "a sprawling, chaotic poem" in 1921, and showed his friend Ezra Pound the 19-page manuscript. Pound thought it was "a damn good poem" but much too long, and went to work, reducing it by half and scrawling blunt marginal comments like "too tum-pum at a stretch," "verse not interesting enough as verse to warrant so much of it" and even an occasional "bad." Far from being insulted, Eliot accepted almost all the suggestions and when the poem was published he gratefully acknowledged his friend's help, dedicating "The Waste Land" to Pound, whom he designated as "il miglior fabbro" [the better craftsman].

The Rime of The Ancient Mariner

PART I

An ancient
Mariner
meeteth
three
Gallents bidden
to a wedding-
feast, and
detaieth one.

The Wedding-
Guest is spell-
bound by the eye
of the old sea-
faring man, and
constrained to
hear his tale.

The Mariner tells
how the ship sailed
southward with a
good wind and
fair weather
till it reached
the line.

The Wed-
ding-Guest
heareth the
bridal music;
but the
Mariner con-
tinueth his
tale.

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"

The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din."

He holds him with his skinny hand,
"There was a ship," quoth he.
"Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!"
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.

He holds him with his glittering eye--
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed mariner.

"The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top.

The Sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he!
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea.

Higher and higher every day,
Till over the mast at noon--"
The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,
For he heard the loud bassoon.

The bride hath paced into the hall,
Red as a rose is she;
Nodding their heads before her goes
The merry minstrelsy.

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,
Yet he cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.

“Students are understandably reluctant to write in their books. Often, they are struggling simply to make sense of what they read, to follow the author’s argument and understand the point.”

Old marginal notes, however, can be embarrassing. Leafing through books read many years ago, I have occasionally come upon a comment that can only be described as — well, stupid. Could I have written that? For better or worse, marginal notes are a record of the kind of reader, and the kind of person, we were. Canadian author Robertson Davies once observed that nobody ever reads the same book twice. Reading a great novel like Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* in college, Davies explains, is a different experience from reading it as an adult. He recommends that, every decade or so, we “take another look at a great book, in order to find out how great it is, or how great it has remained.” Not only age but also gender, cultural background, personal life-experience and historical vantage-point affect a reader’s understanding of a book. One of my English Department colleagues confesses that before lending one of his books he always checks the pages in order to erase any old marginal notes which now seem — well, stupid.

Students are understandably reluctant to write in their books. Often, they are struggling simply to make sense of what they read, to follow the author’s argument and understand the point. They don’t presume to be intellectual equals of the authors they are reading and don’t feel qualified to “talk back.” There are other reasons why writing in books goes against the grain. Throughout school, they have been taught that textbooks and library books are public property and should not

be defaced. By the time they reach college, students are keeping their books clean from force of habit and in hopes of increasing their resale value at the end of the semester. In addition, many texts have skimpy margins which discourage written responses. My *Norton Anthology of Western Literature*, a standard text, is densely printed and its right margin is less than an inch wide.

In an effort to overcome these barriers and encourage reluctant students to try conversing with their books, I’ve recently turned to “post-its,” the little yellow squares of paper that are just sticky enough to adhere to the page, but pull off easily, without leaving a mark. Students can continue writing as long as they like, layering one post-it on top of another, a technique with obvious advantages for a prolific marginal note-writer like Coleridge. The detachability of the little yellow squares makes them easy to discard—which is as it should be. Upon re-reading, we discover that many of our marginal notes are no longer useful. With luck, we will find a few that are worth pursuing, notes that have the potential to transcend their marginal status and assume a position in the center of the page.

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