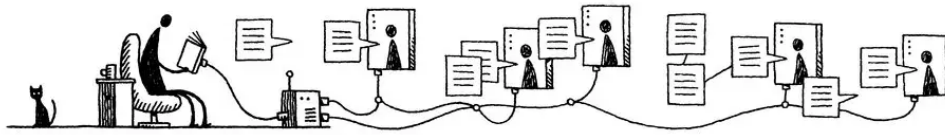


# ‘What I Really Want Is Someone Rolling Around in the Text’



*Credit...Tom Gauld*

One day in college I was trawling the library for a good book to read when I found a book called “How to Read a Book.” I tried to read it, but must have been doing something wrong, because it struck me as old-fashioned and dull, and I could get through only a tiny chunk of it. That chunk, however, contained a statement that changed my reading life forever. The author argued that you didn’t truly own a book (spiritually, intellectually) until you had marked it up.

This hit home for me — it spoke to the little scribal monk who lives deep in the scriptorium of my soul — and I quickly adopted the habit of marginalia: underlining memorable lines, writing keywords in blank spaces, jotting important page numbers inside of back covers. It was addictive, and useful; I liked being able to glance back through, say, “Great Expectations,” and discovering all of its great sentences already cued up for me. (Chapter 4, underlined: “I remember Mr. Hubble as a tough high-shouldered stooping old man, of a sawdusty fragrance, with his legs extraordinarily wide apart: so that in my short days I always saw some miles of open country between them when I met him coming up the lane.”) This wasn’t exactly radical behavior — marking up books, I’m pretty sure, is one of the Seven Undying Cornerstones of Highly Effective College Studying. But it quickly began to feel, for me, like something more intense: a way to not just passively read but to fully enter a text, to collaborate with it, to mingle with an author on some kind of primary textual plane.

Soon my little habit progressed into a full-on dependency. My markings grew more elaborate — I made stars, circles, checks, brackets, parentheses, boxes, dots and lines (straight, curved and jagged). I noted intra- and extratextual references; I measured cadences with stress marks. Texts that really grabbed me got full-blown essays (sideways, upside-down, diagonal) in the margins. I basically destroyed my favorite books with the pure logorrheic force of my excitement, spraying them so densely with scribbled insight that the markings almost ceased to have meaning. Today I rarely read anything — book, magazine, newspaper — without a writing instrument in hand. Books have become my journals, my critical notebooks, my creative outlets. Writing in them is the closest I come to regular meditation; marginalia is — no exaggeration — possibly the most pleasurable thing I do on a daily basis.

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All of which means I’ve been feeling antsy over the last five years, as I’ve watched the inexorable rise of e-readers. I sympathize with the recent wave of public teeth-gnashing about the future of marginal notes. The digital book — scentless, pulp-free, antiseptic — seems like a poor home for the humid lushness of old-fashioned marginalia. You can’t even write by hand in an e-book — at least not comfortably, not yet. As John Dickerson recently put it on Slate, describing his attempt to annotate books on an iPad: “It’s like eating candy through a wrapper.” Although I’ve played with Kindles and iPads and Nooks, and I like them all in theory, I haven’t been able to commit to any of them. As readers, they disable the thing that, to me, defines reading itself. And yet I’ve continued to hope that, in some not-too-distant future, e-reading will learn to take marginalia seriously. And it looks as if that might be happening right now.

According to the marginalia scholar H. J. Jackson, the golden age of marginalia lasted from roughly 1700 to 1820. The practice, back then, was surprisingly social — people would mark up books for one another as gifts, or give pointedly annotated novels to potential lovers. Old-school marginalia was — to put it into contemporary cultural terms — a kind of slow-motion, long-form Twitter, or a statusless, meaning-soaked Facebook, or an analog, object-based G-chat. (Nevermind: it was social, is my point.) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the undisputed all-time champion of marginalia, flourished at the tail end of this period, and his friends were always begging him to mark up their books. He eventually published some of his own marginalia, and in the process even popularized the word “marginalia” — a self-consciously pompous Latinism intended to mock the triviality of the form.

It’s probably natural, here in the 21st century, to fret over the future of literature — to worry that, in an era in which everyone wants everything to be social and interactive, serious reading will be impossible. Yet books are curious objects: their strength is to be both intensely private and intensely social — and marginalia is a natural bridge between these two states. It might end up serving equally well as a bridge between online and literary culture, between focus and distraction: a point of contact that could improve both without hurting either. Digital technology, rather than destroying the tradition of marginalia, could actually help us return it to its gloriously social 18th-century roots.

Because this yearning for social reading persists. I recently let a friend borrow my copy of David Foster Wallace’s “Infinite Jest,” one of the more compulsively annotated books in my library. Midway through her reading, I needed it back, so she switched to a virginal store-bought copy. The fresh one, she told me afterward, felt a little lonely by comparison: she missed the meta-conversation running in the margins, the sense of another consciousness co-filtering D.F.W.’s words, the footnotes to the footnotes to the footnotes to the footnotes.

This gave me an epiphany — a grand vision of the future of social reading. I imagined a stack of transparent, margin-size plastic strips containing all of my notes from “Infinite Jest.” These, I thought, could be passed out to my friends, who would paste them into their own copies of the book and then, in turn, give me their marginalia strips, which I would paste into my copy, and we’d all have a big virtual orgy of never-ending literary communion.

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It was a hopelessly clunky idea: a vision right out of a Library Science seminar circa 1949. It occurred to me later, however, that this embarrassingly analog fantasy should actually be possible, fairly simply, right now, with digital technology — that this sort of hypercharged marginalia might be one area where the e-book can actually improve on the tree-book.

The most interesting writing I’ve found about all of this has come from a tech-lit thinker named James Bridle, proprietor of a blog called [Book Two](#). Bridle argues that in a world in which we’ll no longer own books as discrete physical objects, the only really meaningful thing we’ll own will be the reading experience itself. Our current e-books, he writes, are fine at the basic function of letting us read a text. They’re very bad, however, at something that physical books are good at: gathering “metadata” about our reading — broken spines, dog-eared chapters, marginalia. This metadata is crucial. It is, as Bridle puts it, “where our experience of the book lives.” (To this end, Bridle has started a site called Open Bookmarks, a discussion forum on which people can hash out the basic rules of capturing electronic metadata.)

Last month, Amazon announced what could be a landmark in electronic marginalia: public note sharing for the Kindle — Coleridgean fantasy software that will make your friends’ notes appear (if you want them to) directly on your own books. This is exciting but still a few leaps away from my ultimate fantasy of e-marginalia: the ability to import not just your friends’ notes but notes from all of history’s most interesting book markers. Imagine reading, say, “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” and touching a virtual button so that — ping! — Ernest Hemingway’s marginalia instantly appears, or Ralph Ellison’s, or Mary McCarthy’s. Or imagine you’re reading a particularly thorny passage of “Paradise Lost” and suddenly — zwang! — up pops marginalia from a few centuries of poets (Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Emerson, Eliot, Pound), with their actual handwriting superimposed on the text in front of you. (If someone’s handwriting gave you trouble, you’d be able to toggle between script and print.) You could even “subscribe” to your favorite critic’s marginalia — get,

say, one thoroughly marked-up digital book every month. Or, if you preferred to keep it contemporary, you could just read along with your friends in an endless virtual book club — their notes and your notes would show up on one another's e-readers the moment they were made.

Some people, of course, hate marginalia, and would be happy to see it die off. (My wife, for example, occasionally gets irritated when she reads a book after me.) After all, isn't reading supposed to be our great refuge from cultural noise? A rare haven of total focus in a culture plagued by distraction? I understand the objection, but in the world of e-books, marginalia would be purely value-added, appearing and disappearing at the touch of a button. It would be like the option of watching a film with the directors' commentary — a nice bonus but also easy to ignore. And it would allow a whole new wave of readers to discover the pleasure of the words in the margins.

This, it seems to me, would be something like a readerly utopia. It could even (if we want to get all grand and optimistic) turn out to be a Gutenberg-style revolution — not for writing, this time, but for reading. Book readers have never had a mechanism for massively and easily sharing their responses to a text with other readers, right inside the text itself. Now, when the Coleridge of 21st-century marginalia emerges, he should be able to mark up the books of a million friends at once.

Last December, an online magazine called *The Millions* asked me to contribute to its annual "Year in Reading" series. I sent a post called "[A Year in Marginalia](#)": scanned images, organized month by month, of the writing I did in books throughout the year. It struck me as the best possible documentation of my actual year in reading — not a vague memory or an idealized portrait, but the moment-by-moment experience itself. The response surprised me. People online seemed excited by marginalia: they liked the idea of it as a medium, a practice, a form.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have been surprised. Marginalia — with its social thrill of shared immersion — is what the culture is moving toward, not away from. We are living increasingly in a culture of response. Twitter is basically electronic marginalia on everything in the world: jokes, sports, revolutions. The best parallel in critical writing might be online episode recaps of TV shows: a viewer rolling around in a work of art, noticing it deeply, not just (as critics too often do) resorting to distant acts of intellection. Marginalia is literature's TV recap, although even more satisfying: real-time commentary happening in the core of the thing being commented upon.

I've long been frustrated with the "distance" between criticism and reading itself. Most critical energy is expended in big-picture work — situating texts in history, talking about broad themes — all of which is useful but hardly touches the excitement of actual reading, a process of discovery that happens in time, moment by moment, line by line. What I really want is someone rolling around in the text. I want noticing. I want, in short, marginalia, everywhere, all the time. Suddenly that seems deliriously possible.