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## Marginalia in the Classroom

### Historical Overview of Student Marginalia in the Classroom

Marginal notation in texts, or marginalia, has a long history of use as a means of engaging in dialog with a given text. The practice itself includes underlining, brief notation including question marks and stars, and, more recently, highlighting. Early printed books tended to imitate the physical format of manuscripts, many of which left ample room in the margins and between lines of text, intending the space for use by students in the writing of notations.<sup>1</sup> Many instructors of writing and literature in the Early Modern period not only encouraged marginalia but also required it as a means through which the student could learn to engage with the materials being studied. Students' efforts during this period were strictly monitored by the teacher, however, and students' were instructed in what to write in their notations,<sup>2</sup> leaving in fact little opportunity to individually engage the text. In the fifteenth century, Desiderius Erasmus encouraged his students to write in the margins of their texts. And in 1882, David Pryde, author of *Highways of Literature; or What to Read and How to Read*, advocated "a system of note-taking followed by written digests in the reader's own words"; without such note taking, argues Pryde, the reader becomes lost, for "how can you distinguish between [the remarkable and the commonplace] without affixing some distinctive marks?"<sup>3</sup> More recently, Vladimir Nabokov told his students to "Use space at bottom of pages for your notes."<sup>3</sup> Although separated in time, what these writers and teachers have in common is their association of the marking of texts with a means of students' forming judgment about the texts at hand.

These instructors' practices of encouraging or even requiring students to converse with the text through marginal notation provide some credence to H. J. Jackson's remark that "Writing notes in response to a text appears to be a habit acquired at school";<sup>4</sup> yet, Jackson goes on to make the point that "recommendations about writing marginalia constitute a minor theme in educational theory"<sup>5</sup> and as a result, one must surmise, a minor theme in pedagogy, as well. How and why this is the case remains unclear, except to say that it appears that many modern as well as current instructors appear to surmise that students need not be taught *how* or *why* to mark a text, simply that their texts should be marked or that marginalia is good practice.

Marginalia as classroom practice did enjoy an amount of attention in the 1970s and 80s along with reader response, largely as another facet of the loosely defined movement's emphasis of the "reader" as a significant component of meaningful textual analysis. That is, marginalia may be viewed as another means through which the authority of the text is displaced in favor of a collaborative effort between reader and author, the reader inserting her own interpretations into the "meaning" of the text. Reader-response criticism and its practices, which include marginal

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<sup>1</sup> H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001). 44–46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

response, are in part a reaction to hierarchical structures of writing and reading, or what Michel de Certeau terms “reading to passivity.”<sup>6</sup> Writing, then, is to “produce the text,” and reading “is to receive it from someone else without putting one’s own mark on it, without remaking it.”<sup>7</sup> The hierarchy that values writing over reading is thus collapsed in the form of marginal notation which both questions the text and asserts an authority over its interpretation, offering the reader more equal ground in the determination of a text’s meaning.

Marginalia as an aid to un-passive reading is advocated, too, in the work of David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, who offer marginalia as a way in which to assist the reader in locating meaning in the text, a task which “places a premium on memory.” According to Bartholomae and Petrosky, a text is not the sum of its individual parts but, rather, what a reader makes of the text, a combination of readerly authority and humility. Through underling passages in a text and making marginal notes, a student reader is provided “a working record of what, at the first moment of reading, [she] felt might be worth a second reading.”<sup>8</sup> This practice, then, calls attention to passages that, upon a second or third glance aided by marginal notation, might yield significant critical inspection.

### Current Classroom Practices

Yet while the benefits of marginal notation are clarified somewhat in Bartholomae and Petrosky, the formal classroom teaching of the practice of marginalia, common in the Early Modern period, though used to different effect, has been largely put aside both in terms of scholarly publications on the matter and in classroom pedagogy. In fact, current composition textbooks that discuss marginalia do so primarily in their introductions, often with a single paragraph of brief explanation. Further, the books fail to incorporate the practice into the assignments offered. Just as troubling, perhaps, is that few of these books offer examples of how a student might effectively mark a text for further perusal or critical examination.<sup>9</sup>

Thus a primary drawback of the practice exists in its lack of effective use in the classroom setting. Marginal notation as a pedagogical practice has been relegated, indeed, to the margins of teaching students how to converse with a text. However, books are no longer designed to hold marginal notations, either; as a result, a reader’s impulse is often to mark not in the margins but on a separate sheet of paper or card. This may somewhat appease the librarian or instructor who thinks it a sin to mark a book—book abuse, Jackson calls it—but the immediacy of the notation is thus lost in the reader’s necessary efforts to connect the separate sheet again with the corresponding page of text.

The fact that book margins no longer offer ample room to engage in notation might play another role in the lack of pedagogical practices concerning marginalia, as well. Student notations in miniscule margins may lead to miniscule, or relatively insignificant, comments on

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<sup>6</sup> Michel de Certeau, “Reading as Poaching.” *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (London: Longman, 1995). 150–163.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>8</sup> Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky. “Introduction: Ways of Reading.” *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999). 1–18.

<sup>9</sup> Two textbooks of note in this regard are Catherine A. Hoffman and Andrew J. Hoffman, *The Main Event: Readings for Writing and Critical Thinking* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005); and Stuart Hirschberg and Terry Hirschberg, *The New Millennium Reader* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006).

the text in question. Students may fail to see the point of a question mark in the margin or a starred passage when, upon returning to it, they do not notice what they initially found important about the passage. With quite little room to actually ask a question, provide a definition, or otherwise engage the text, students may come to see little merit in writing in a book that come the end of the semester they may want to turn in to the bookstore in hope of a refund. Instructors of writing and critical thinking, then, may in turn fail to see the merit in attempting to coax their students into writing in the margins, preferring other methods of engaging the class in critical analyses of texts. In this case, marginalia has the potential to be relegated, as it is in most composition textbooks, to a brief mention during the introduction of a course and little more. Perhaps the burgeoning proliferation of electronic texts will produce a new interest in marginal commentary.

#### Benefits

- Aids memory in finding relevant passages of text
- Helps to clarify meaning in text
- Helps to form meaning in text
- Fosters un-passive reading and interaction with the text
- Offers students a critical voice in the ability to ask questions of the text

#### Limitations

- Marginalia is not effectively taught in the writing classroom
- Students are often unaware of the purpose of writing marginal notations
- Book margins are shrinking, and thus space for effective notation

#### Incorporating Marginalia into Classroom Practices

- Conduct an in-class close reading of a brief literary or critical passage of a text, with the instructor's marks on the text visible on a document viewer
- Collectively mark a sample essay while in class, discussing different foci for marking pertinent words, themes, or passages
- Conduct a short group assignment during which each group's members must collectively mark a brief text and then report back to the larger class and explain what and why certain text was marked

## Annotated Bibliography

Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky. "Introduction: Ways of Reading." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 1–18.

The pedagogical approach offered in this introduction to a first-year composition textbook is one that advocates "strong, aggressive, labor-intensive reading" (5), rather than passive reading, in order to produce better writing in the composition classroom. Active engagement with the texts includes using marginal notations as "memory aids" in order to re-locate ideas in the text that might be worth further exploration. Further, Bartholomae and Petrosky explain the ways in which "an essay or story is not the sum of its parts but something you as a reader create by putting together those parts" (8).

Hirschberg, Stuart and Terry Hirschberg. "Introduction: Reading in the Various Genres." *The New Millennium Reader*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006. 1–27.

This introduction to a composition textbook, available in 2006, offers a "Basics of Reading Critically" section which includes marginal notation as a form of student learning through active engagement and analysis of the text. The volume also takes notation a step further than marginalia, suggesting that the student turn annotations into journal entries in order to facilitate extensive examination of both text and reader response. The process of turning annotations into journal entries will "produce surprising insights that will give [the student] a new perspective" (16).

Hoffman, Catherine A. and Andrew J. Hoffman. "Introduction: Reading Critically." *The Main Event: Readings for Writing and Critical Thinking*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005. 1–14.

This composition textbook's introduction provides both a context for student marking of texts and a fabricated example of the practice. Listed under the heading "Reading Critically," marginalia is tied to practices of assessing texts, alongside items such as "Look for topic sentences" and "Understand what you have read" (3–5). The authors suggest that in order to determine the main and subordinate ideas, a student should mark the text by "highlighting, underlining, or jotting notes in the margins" (5).

Jackson, H. J. *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001.

This comprehensive guide to marginalia presents a historical view of the evolution of marginal notation, as well as its purposes in both scholarly and professorial roles. Jackson notes, the "marginalia we see and write today are in a direct line of descent from those of two-thousand years ago" (44). This single-author examination of marginalia also contains a summary of the ever-shifting reception of marginal notation, among scholars, students, instructors, librarians, and literary figures. Currently, Jackson remarks, "we seem . . . to have made [marginal notations] taboo" (235).