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Editor's Notebook

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Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson (1824–63) was a West Point graduate, a decorated and respected Confederate Army general, a hypochondriacal advocate of hydropathic therapy, and an inveterate book marginalist. The first three of these characteristics made him, without doubt, an uncommon Victorian, but not so the fourth. The dozens of books in Jackson’s library, preserved and on display in the Stonewall Jackson House Museum (the only dwelling he ever owned, in Lexington, Virginia) demonstrate well his penchant for scribbling marks of emphasis, reminders, comparisons, and exclamations of disgust or approval in the margins of printed books. As the extant libraries of many of our famous and not-so-famous ancestors show, readers have long plunged into this sort of silent dialogue with their books, to engage ideas on the printed page, to have the “last word” in their myriad discussions with authoritative texts and published authors.

Isaac Newton was a committed marginalist; so, too, were Thomas Jefferson, Jane Austen, John Adams, Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, Sylvia Plath, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and David Foster Wallace. We know about these famous book defacers because their celebrity recommended the saving of their libraries and other possessions. But they were hardly alone. No less dedicated to the practice were

and are thousands of ordinary readers, including me. I admit it. I write in the margins of all of my books, though I make no great claim to writing in them anything enlightening, or even clever. My dirty little secret stared me in the face again recently when I considered thinning out my office book collection, only to conclude that hundreds of hours of erasing coded pencil marks and comments would be required to restore

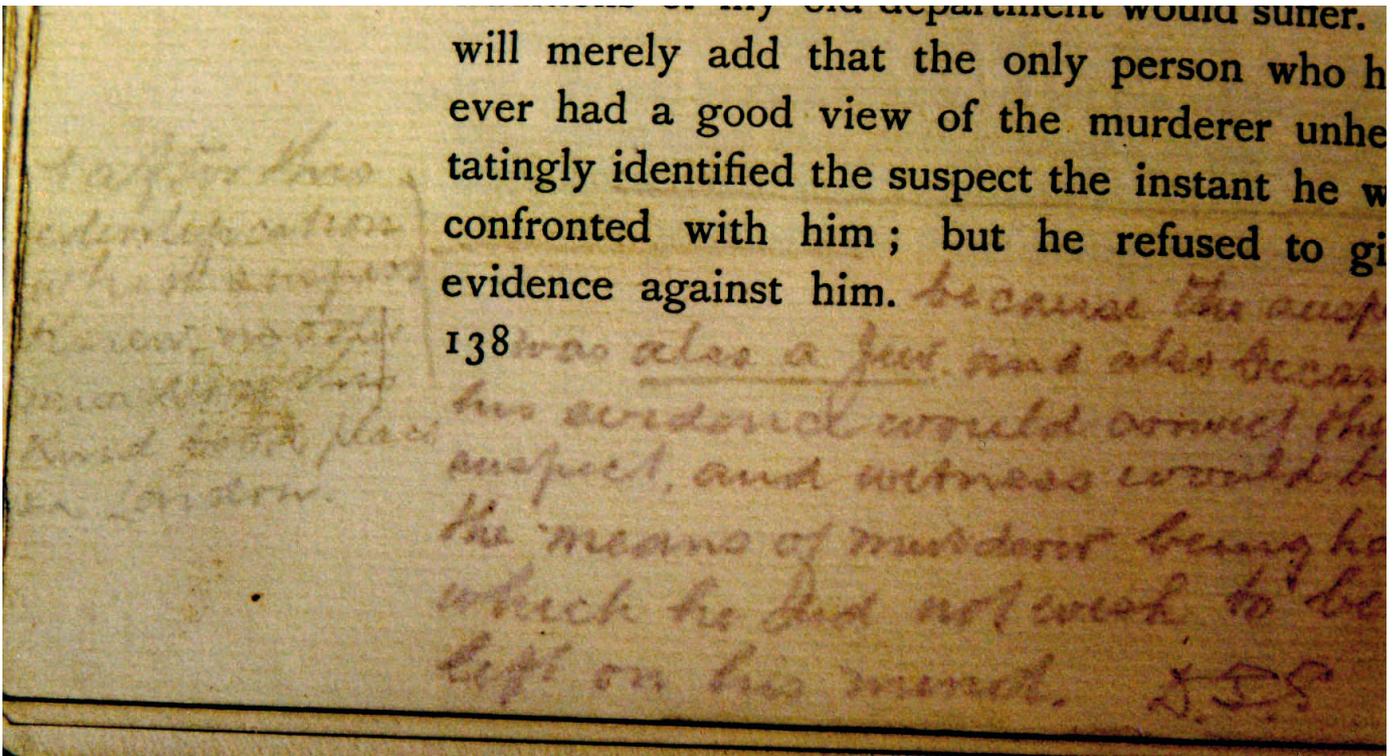
them to a state where the books might be re-sellable, or even reusable.

My secret is *dirty* because I was taught (by my school librarians and teachers, and my parents, if I recall correctly) to respect the sanctity of the printed page. The “thou shall not scribble in books” commandment must have had more to do with the protection of school property than anything else. But my take-away was also that *marginalizing* was seen as objectionable because it was an act of irreverence (a mortal sin for Canadians like me), one that could only lead to more offensive sorts of public commentary, such as graffiti on restroom stall walls, or worse, Twitter. Since then, though, I think I have come to terms with my proclivity to jot in white spaces. In fact, I embrace it warmly, and recommend it to my students with enthusiasm.

In academic life, marginalia has value in at least a couple of different ways. First, it has instrumental, pedagogical use. Marginal scribbling is, I am convinced, infinitely more effective in helping scholars and students remember what they have read and to challenge it, though it has not been the preferred mode of textual engagement for some decades—since 1963, to be specific, when the despicable “Hi-Liter” was invented by the Carter’s Ink Company. Since then, those fat little cylinders have been the scourge of the textual universe, leaving in their wake mindless rainbows on painted pages, the meaning behind those selected sections forever lost. For me, to consume a text (I mean really devour it) is to mark it up. To notate it is to love it.

But marginalia are valuable in a second scholarly way, beyond pedagogy. We have come to delight in reading *other* people’s glosses on and addenda to the printed text, and to invest them with meaning. Scholars who look at, say, Stonewall Jackson’s scribbling, do so because they expect to gain insight

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into what made the great man tick, and hope to find a comment or witticism entered in a key book in a key place, one that at long last figures him out, or challenges what we already know about him. And marginalia in famous authors' copies of their own work are doubly enticing. "Marginalia reveal much about ... the development of their ideas," Drew University librarian Andrew Scrimgeour wrote in a recent *New York Times* piece. "Researchers and biographers mine those annotations."

Of course, we need not merely wax nostalgic about this literary act. Though perhaps in decline in these

past decades, marginalizing is by no means dead. Indeed, its prospects look pretty bright, as Heather Jackson, University of Toronto professor and author of the 2001 book *Marginalia*, told a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio audience in November 2013. The rise of new internet-based forums that encourage annotation (especially weblogs and news media outlets that encourage readers to respond to articles and editorials) and new technology (such as e-readers and tablets) that makes marginalizing easy to do, cannot help but bring back the art. The dirty little secret is becoming respectable (I'll have to find another one).

So, go ahead. Go wild. Mark up the margins of this issue of *Bridgewater Review*. Cover it in scrawl. I know that there is plenty in the printed pages that follow that will delight, inform, provoke and otherwise exercise all of our readers. Engage your magazine and then express your response to it. But don't keep your scratchings secret. When you are done scribbling, write them up in a letter, send it to me, and share your ideas with all of us.



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