Marginalia

Sometimes the notes are ferocious, skirmishes against the author raging along the borders of every page in tiny black script. If I could just get my hands on you, Kierkegaard, or Conor Cruise O’Brien, they seem to say, I would bolt the door and beat some logic into your head.

Other comments are more offhand, dismissive – ‘Nonsense.’ ‘Please!’ ‘HA! !’ – that kind of thing. I remember once looking up from my reading, my thumb as a bookmark, trying to imagine what the person must look like who wrote ‘Don’t be a ninny’ alongside a paragraph in The Life of Emily Dickinson.

Students are more modest needing to leave only their splayed footprints along the shore of the page. One scrawls ‘Metaphor’ next to a stanza of Eliot’s. Another notes the presence of ‘Irony’ fifty times outside the paragraphs of A Modest Proposal.

Or they are fans who cheer from the empty bleachers, Hands cupped around their mouths. ‘Absolutely,’ they shout to Duns Scotus and James Baldwin. ‘Yes.’ ‘Bull’s-eye.’ ‘My man!’ Check marks, asterisks, and exclamation points rain down along the sidelines.

And if you have managed to graduate from college without ever having written ‘Man vs. Nature’ in a margin, perhaps now is the time to take one step forward.

Rosalind Edwards, John Goodwin, Henrietta O’Connor and Ann Phoenix - 9781784715250
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We have all seized the white perimeter as our own and reached for a pen if only to show we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages; we pressed a thought into the wayside, planted an impression along the verge.

Even Irish monks in their cold scriptoria jotted along the borders of the Gospels brief asides about the pains of copying, a bird singing near their window, or the sunlight that illuminated their page – anonymous men catching a ride into the future on a vessel more lasting than themselves.

And you have not read Joshua Reynolds, they say, until you have read him enwreathed with Blake’s furious scribbling.

Yet the one I think of most often, the one that dangles from me like a locket, was written in the copy of Catcher in the Rye I borrowed from the local library one slow, hot summer. I was just beginning high school then, reading books on a davenport in my parents’ living room, and I cannot tell you how vastly my loneliness was deepened, how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed, when I found on one page

A few greasy looking smears and next to them, written in soft pencil – by a beautiful girl, I could tell, whom I would never meet – ‘Pardon the egg salad stains, but I’m in love.’