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Jason A. Snart College of DuPage, snartj@cod.edu

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## H. J. Jackson's Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia (Book Review)

H. J. Jackson's 2005 Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia provides for the scholar or general reader an ideal introduction to the topic of marginalia. Perhaps most surprising to those who have not explored this fascinating topic will be the degree to which writing in books is--or at least was---so often a social, if not outright public, act. This surprise will be especially acute for the contemporary reader, since our general conception of "reading" and "writing" tends to posit these activities as mutually exclusive; one either reads or writes. The contemporary idea of reading often imagines a solitary and very private act. Likewise, as Jackson writes, "we nowadays assume that readers who write notes in their books are in a tiny minority of all readers, and that they do it out of habit--bad habit" (251). Nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to the history of reading, however, as almost all of the many examples in Jackson's work show. Throughout marginalia we find annotations directed specifically to a "reader," as well as numerous addresses to a "you," which the annotator must imagine to be some future reader, be it one specific individual or a more generalized auditor/lector. One begins to see that book sharing, particularly for the period between 1790 and 1830 that Jackson covers in Romantic Readers, may have been then what music file sharing is today. Any given book was no more a completed work, necessarily, than a digital playlist is today; on the contrary, both might circulate among a group of participants, each of whom effects changes as he or she pleases.

Though his work as an annotator is in many ways, as Jackson suggests, "quite in keeping with the habits of his contemporaries" (157), William Blake is, I think, a uniquely interesting annotator because he was himself a maker of books, in addition to his being a poet, painter, and engraver. His experience of conventionally printed books, which was always part of what happened when he annotated, may have actually influenced his own experiments in designing and making books that operate very differently from those books he annotated. The final aphorism in John Caspar Lavater's 1788 volume entitled Aphorisms on Man, translated by Henry Fuseli and with a frontispiece engraved by William Blake, reads "If you mean to know yourself, interline such of these aphorisms as affected you agreeably in reading, and set a mark

to such as left a sense of uneasiness with you; and then shew your copy to whom you please" (quoted in Jackson 156). The copy that Blake himself owned is, by relative measure to his other books at least, heavily annotated. Blake seems to have taken to the volume to such a degree, in fact, that he has inscribed his own name next to Lavater's on the title page and enclosed both in a heart. This likely strikes the contemporary reader as rather overdramatic, but it reflects the kind of engagement with books--particularly as might be practiced by a poet and bookmaker himself--that is part of the very different dynamic between text, author, and reader than what we are now used to.

If there is a consistent drive in Jackson's work on the subject of readers writing in books, it is to open the contemporary reader up to this very different dynamic and to explore its various implications. And while such exploration does, to some degree, participate in a tradition of scholarly interest in "the margins" (taken literally and figuratively) and in the book as an artifact/object, it should be pointed out that Jackson treads mostly new ground in this tradition in her attention to marginalia as manuscript additions to printed texts; in other words, the bibliographic interest in margins has heretofore tended to retain the primacy of printed matter over manuscript in its attention to editorial glosses. Jackson's attention to text of the hand (manuscript) as opposed to text of the machine (print) moves the tradition of bibliographic studies in an exciting direction.

Equally valuable is her attention to various motives for manuscript annotating--i.e., the many auspices under which it is undertaken--for as she makes clear, we should be careful to keep in mind the myriad reasons that readers write in books. Today, one imagines that most annotating is undertaken for "professional" as opposed to personal reasons: for example, I annotated Jackson's Romantic Readers to write this review, students annotate a biology textbook in preparation for an exam, etc. This is often quite different from the marginalia in which Jackson is interested, which can be motivated less by a specific goal (a review or exam) than by a consistent habit of reading that is a simple part of how one encounters a book. "Many readers," she argues, "[...] acquired the habit of writing in books early and extended it to books not assigned by teachers. It must have felt like a natural thing to do" (61). This form of habitual

annotating is the primary focus for Jackson's work, and it is (sadly, she argues) the form of annotating that is by and large no longer with us.

Her underlying premises, moreover, are that reading is a "social act" (Romantic Readers xi) and that the marginal space is, ironically enough, the space of considerable textual power, even if it is not always actualized. In Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books Jackson notes that it is often in the printed gloss that we find the most explicit attempts "to restrain interpretive activity" on the part of the reader (51). The marking of manuscript annotations, as Jackson shows throughout her work, is equally a mode whereby a printed text can be contested, but the manuscript nature of the intervention, as opposed to its printed relative, does not carry with it the same sense of authorial/editorial control, and so does not present the same sense of completeness. When the reader intervenes directly and participates immediately in the power of the margin, he or she may not face a central text to which another author (in the form of editor) has already attached a gloss. Therefore, the evidence of profuse marginalia suggests to Jackson that "readers of the period [1790-1830] conceived of books in general as provisional, not permanent structures" (120). The writerly reader, especially from 1790-1830, was the rule rather than the exception. Jackson makes clear that the period she covers in Romantic Readers is inviting because "the press was extraordinarily busy, 'bibliomania' took off in Britain, extended literacy became a matter of public concern, and--perhaps not coincidentally-marginalia came out into the open" (xi-xii). William Blake's annotations in Lavater, cited above, provide a very good example of just what it meant for a late 18th-early 19th century reader to engage a book. (And it is a good example of just how materially complicated annotating can be.) Jackson implies that Blake's copy of Lavater was seen by Fuseli, though she notes that "under the circumstances, it is remarkable that he ever let it out of his hands" (156); however, there are other hands at work in the volume (unidentified in the major Blake editions), so he clearly did more than just show his copy to others, and they did annotate the already annotated volume. Robert Essick, in his The Works of William Blake in the Huntington Collections writes that "there are notes written in brown ink in an unidentified hand next to aphorisms 21, 280, and 384" (182). One could imagine a copy of such a book with multiple layers of annotations, each subsequent reader commenting upon the original text and upon the text(s) of previous

readers. In this way, the book becomes a communal point of shared experience, not by any means the static, closed and reified piece of property it is so often conceived to be today.

Jackson's Romantic Readers does an admirable job of outlining the degree to which books could circulate among readers/annotators--famous and otherwise--as a shared and quasi-organic entity, not to mention the degree to which annotation was (and still sometimes is, if we let it be) a particularly literal mode of engaging with the ideas that a book presents. Romantic Readers may in fact be most valuable for the impetus it provides to revisit authors whose work we thought to be familiar, though in the new light of their having been part of a social network of readers and annotators. The hundreds and hundreds of volumes that Jackson cites (upwards of two thousand) might be just the tip of the iceberg, only an indication of "the richness and variety of the book world at the time" (xiii). And a significant feature of Romantic Readers is the range of visual illustrations provided in the text (there are roughly twice the number of illustrations in Romantic Readers as were included in Marginalia). The images attest to the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words, for it is in the visual dimension of annotations on a printed page that the variety and the oddness of marginalia can really be appreciated. Blake himself has been described by Northrop Frye as a "victim of anthologies" (3) and it is no less true that attempts to describe in text the dynamics of a graphic space always lose something in the re-mediation.

Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia covers much the same speculative territory as Jackson introduced in her earlier Marginalia, though in her first marginalia book Jackson's examples ranged across the last three centuries of readers and annotators, whereas her recent effort concentrates, more usefully I think, on the British reading culture of 1790 to 1830. This narrower focus is productive since it allows Jackson to concentrate her study, and to pursue in greater depth an historicized understanding of annotating as a cultural activity with considerable implications beyond any individual reader's habits. The examples range from entirely unknown writerly readers to Romantic luminaries like Keats and Coleridge, as well as Blake. Jackson's attention to the range of issues surrounding marginalia and the act of annotating (i.e. she is interested in more than mere content) goes a long way to countering the sentiment embodied in such assertions as that of Jerome McGann, who argued in Towards a

Literature of Knowledge that Blake's marginalia, unlike the intellectual prose of Coleridge or Shelley, "[do] not command our interest or study" (16).

Finally, a promising area of marginalia scholarship that Jackson has suggested but not developed in great depth is consideration of the "graphicality," or one might say the textual and material dimensions, of manuscript intervention into (or onto) the printed page. What is the visual dynamic of such intervention and how might it have influenced the visual imagination of any given annotator, especially where that annotator is him- or herself a poet or artist? How might the experience of "the page" have shaped the symbolic activities of reading and writing, not to mention characters who are depicted as readers and writers, in various artists' work? (One thinks again of Blake, for whom books, readers, and writers were powerful, though often ambivalent, symbols.) And how might the literal limitations of space have been shaped by physically constraining annotation? This is where the breadth of Jackson's discussion becomes useful as the starting place for more in-depth analyses.

For example, with recourse to typographic reproduction of marginalia we are getting just half the story. We should recall, for example, that Blake received the printed sheets of the Lavater volume before they had been cut into individual pages and bound in codex form, the evidence for which is offset marks caused by ink that had not completely dried coming into contact with an adjacent sheet. These marks are still visible in the bound volume, though they are no longer next to the print that had originally caused them. It is thus quite likely that Blake read the aphorisms out of their consecutively numbered order, since they would have been arranged in multiple pages to a single sheet. How might this odd situation have affected a "step-by-step" refutation? We can also observe that one of the first notes in the volume reads, "for the reason of these remarks see the last aphorism" (Erdman 583). One wonders if Blake read the entire set of aphorisms and then annotated. Or were reading and annotating combined at various times? And did Blake indeed read the aphorisms entirely out of order, but still annotating as he went? This is the kind of textual enquiry that seems very promising for further, concentrated study.

It is also this kind of material situation that can make discussion of marginalia so tricky, as I mentioned above. Though the case of Blake's annotations to Lavater is a remarkably

unusual one, it is indicative of just how radically the physical situation of annotating can shape what and how one writes in the margins. The inclusion of marginalia in major author editions can actually submerge this materiality in problematic ways, such that annotations, it seems, become for many scholars the expression of a fully worked out set of ideas (or even, as Jackson indicates, a more accessible expression of that which also occurs in more "public" work). One might even point out the degree to which annotations are occasional: they respond to a text at hand, and thus may not reflect a reader's "ideas" outside of (and certainly not unaffected by) that moment of reading and annotating. This is part of what Jackson describes as the "effect of the close attention that reading to make notes induces" (303).

In the case of Blake especially, perhaps because he was himself a graphic artist, the marginalia are important, not just for what they sometimes too conveniently seem to reveal about his ideas, but for what they represent as the trace of his engagement with the conventionally printed books of his day. His own books were such radical departures from the printed books that he owned (or borrowed) and annotated, that one wonders to what degree his marginalia were experiments in experiencing and affecting the bibliographic codes that otherwise guide so implicitly the practice of reading. His annotations to Lavater, to return to the example above, often direct the reader from one aphorism to another, sometimes distant, aphorism in the book, thereby creating a pre-digital hyper-text--in other words, a text built of links and fragments. This is an annotating practice that Jackson calls "the construction of networks of information by systems of cross-reference" (303). Admittedly, he may be a unique example, but Blake's annotating is as much about the graphic experience of reading as it is about the expression of ideas. Marginalia can be deceptive in this way, for they do not necessarily give us access to a more "true" version of an author (or a more trustworthy expression of philosophy) than any other artistic production, and marginalia are by no means valuable for their content alone.

Finally, while the wide public discussion of marginalia that Jackson called for as early as 1992 has not, I think, come to fruition yet, her continuing excellent work on the subject--first in Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books and now in Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia--along with wider discussion of reading as a social activity with deep cultural

implications, as in William St. Clair's The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period, is moving us closer and closer. One hopes that interest in the marginal will come together with the incredible advances we've seen in humanities computing of late such that scholars will have access, perhaps through digital collections, to the marginalia of a wide diversity of writerly readers, ideally in full graphic form.

By: Snart, Jason.

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