done so in the margins of their books—but they are unlikely to have done so in such a casual, colloquial way, as though in private conversation with the dead, and without regard to other readers of their own time or yet to come. Or is the apparent difference a difference of emphasis only, and do annotators read always with a divided mind, part attending to the text at hand and part to their own image? We assume that Webb was writing for his own amusement, but we cannot be sure: the book had had other owners before him and would most likely have others after. The next chapter considers not the history but the psychology of the annotating impulse.

MOTIVES FOR MARGINALIA

In 1892, Kenneth Grahame (of The Wind in the Willows) published a playful little essay entitled “Marginalia” in the National Observer, reminiscing about his own childhood love of margins as places for drawings and jokes; he whimsically spoke up for “the absolute value of the margin itself” and wondered when the world might hope for “a book of verse consisting entirely of margin.” This essay, reprinted in Grahame’s Pagan Papers, prompted an admirer to make him a present of a blank book entitled Margin, which he accepted with graceful, ironical thanks for “a copy which I understand exhausts the Edition & baffles the clamorous Public.”1 Not wishing to break a butterfly on a wheel or take a chainsaw to a birthday cake, I have to protest, all the same, that a book without text is a book without marginalia. The essential and defining character of the marginal note throughout its history is that it is a responsive kind of writing permanently anchored to preexisting written words. Chapters One and Two considered the spatial distribution of readers’ notes and their evolution over time, their geography as it were, and their history; they addressed the questions of where and when. This one turns to transhistorical (long-standing but not transcendent) features of marginalia, and asks the question, why?

Annotators are self-conscious readers, so we can begin with their own
justifications. They often plead irresistible impulse. Hester Piozzi’s words, already quoted, speak for many: “one longs to say something.” But that is hardly a searching explanation. Blake takes it a little further, writing in the margin of his copy of Johann Lavater’s *Aphorisms*, “I hope no one will call what I have written cavilling because he may think my remarks of small consequence For I write from the warmth of my heart, & cannot resist the impulse I feel to rectify what I think false in a book I love so much, & approve so generally.” Coleridge, annotating Schelling, likewise declares, “A book, I value, I reason & quarrel with as with myself when I am reasoning.” In a letter to Coleridge, writing about his cheerless social life, Charles Lamb confesses, “I can only converse with you by letter and with the dead in their books.” The vocabulary of conversation, friendly talk between equals, continues to be used of and by annotators, and although it is misleading in some ways, it reminds us that there are always at least two parties involved, the book and the reader, with some sort of give-and-take between them. The perception, widespread if not universal among annotators, that reading is interactive is consistent with recent theory and its emphasis on the reader’s role. Reading “allows the minds of two people to be more intimately joined than any other form of social contact.” The current orthodoxy puts to rest the old model of the passively receptive reader—supposing any reader ever actually believed in that model. But even the new view is too simple and self-congratulatory to deal with the complex reality of marginalia, which are not always friendly and not usually the product of a meeting of equals.

The writer of marginalia acts on the impulse to stop reading for long enough to record a comment. Why? Because it may be done and has been done; it is customary. Under certain conditions (subject to change) it is socially acceptable behavior. But it is seldom required behavior; not all readers write notes in their books. Those who choose to make the effort to register their responses must foresee some advantage for someone; so the question of motive resolves itself into another question, cui bono? For whose benefit is it done? And that in turn leads to the question of the addressee.

As far as conscious motive is concerned, most annotators appear to assume that there are just two parties, two “voices” involved, and that they (the annotators) are talking either to themselves or to the author. If Blake says, “Mark this,” or “Note this,” he is most likely talking to himself, making a minimal remark just one step up from a line or a cross, to assist his memory or to jog his attention upon rereading. If he says “Excellent!” or “Truel!” or “Well said!”—as he does sometimes even in the case of his enemy Sir Joshua Reynolds—there is an added element of congratulation to the writer, dead at least ten years by the time Blake annotated his work. But if he says, as he does in a copy of Francis Bacon’s *Essays*, “Villain! did Christ seek the Praise of the Rulers?” he seems to be forgetting himself and expressing his outrage directly to the author as though he were present. (John Holland, writing about marginalia, uses the apt phrase, “the dead whom we are shouting at.”)

Annotators often address the author directly. John Horne, later John Horne Tooke, gave his copy of Joseph Priestley’s *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777), a gift from the author, an attentive critical reading. It may be a sign of the intensity of his engagement with the book that from time to time, instead of referring to Priestley in the third person, he addresses him as “you.” This sentence from the Preface he first underlined and then commented on: “I have at this time by me several tracts, particularly Letters addressed to me, on those subjects, and which have been much applauded, which I have not looked into, and which I profess I never intend to look into” (p. xx). “Then why keep them by you,” Horne asks familiarly. In a more mocking spirit, whoever annotated the British Library copy of an eyewitness account of incidents during the French invasion of Ireland in 1798 regularly addresses the self-important author—not named on the title page but easily identifiable, on internal evidence, as Joseph Stock, the Bishop of Killaloe—with questions and sarcastic suggestions: “What is ye mean[ing] of this my good Bishop!” (p. 2); “What a surprizing fellow you are Bishop” (p. 54); “This[.] Bishop[.] is really extremely interesting.”—the Bishop has told how he and his wife and four children had to crowd into one room along with four neighboring children and their mother—“but you sho[uld] have added to the interest by giving us the names &
ages of the Children” (p. 133). When Macaulay took up his copy of Joseph Milner’s History of the Church of Christ in 1836, he reacted in the same way, chiding the author. “Your style and your chronology are on a par” (1:62), “I believe so on your system” (1:95), “You bolt every lie that the Fathers tell as gibbly as your Creed” (1:1410)—and so on until, halfway through the third of five volumes, most remarkably for the dogged Macaulay, he stopped, fed up with Milner’s company: “Here I give in. I have done my best—But the monotonous absurdity dishonesty & malevolence of this man are beyond me. Nov 13” (3:217).

For a modern example take a polemical political book that had to be withdrawn from the library system for mutilation—in this case, heavy annotation by several hands. René Levesque’s An Option for Quebec (1968) says, in passing, that “maximum size is in no way synonymous with maximum progress among human societies” (p. 17), and the annotator agrees: “no, that is very true, but you just finished saying that Quebec’s lack of progress in educ, sci, & technology was holding it back. The justification, here, is a compromising one, and not very rational.” The frame of mind in which a reader can address a book as though it were another human subject, and present, is one we must all recognize. It can be compared to the more often discussed dramatic illusion, our voluntary and habitual submission to the conventions of the stage. It is not that we are actually hallucinating, believing the actors to be the persons they represent, and as invisibly in their company. Nor does any reader believe the writer of the book to be speaking the words in it, and available for conversation. That fact does not prevent us from cherishing the illusion of intimacy, much as we do in the theater.

When annotators address books as personifications of their authors and call them “you,” does it mean that they expect their objections and improvements to reach the actual authors somehow? Do they write for their benefit? Only in those rare cases when the authors have specifically solicited commentary, and under those conditions annotators are likely to be circumspect. No; when Webb invokes “Jean Jacques” chummily in his copy of Rousseau, he is engaging in what Lamb called conversation “with the dead in their books”—that form of harmless fantasy, a common feature of the reading process, that sustains and rewards readers. They “speak” to us, and we reciprocate. Only of course there can be no real conversation or dialogue, since the author has no opportunity to answer back. Nor can a reader’s contributions properly be likened to collaboration, unless it is as a collaboration foisted on the original writer. Writing marginalia has much in common with letter-writing, and a great annotator often proves to be also a gifted correspondent (Piozzi, Walpole, and Coleridge are cases in point), but books do not answer readers in that sense either. Writing marginalia is not so much akin to conversation or collaboration or correspondence as it is to talking back to the TV set—and readers like it that way.

In an essay about the psychology of reading that has implications for marginalia, Marcel Proust disposes with characteristic subtlety of the cliché that reading is conversation with the best and wisest. “[T]he essential difference between a book and a friend,” he says, “is not their degree of greatness or wisdom, but the manner in which we communicate with them; reading, contrary to conversation, consisting for each of us in receiving the communication of another thought, but while we remain all alone, that is to say, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power we have in solitude, and which conversation dissipates immediately, while continuing to be inspired, to maintain the mind’s full, fruitful work on itself.” Proust’s revision of the “conversation” model as a “communication” model was and is refreshingly corrective; it will confirm readers’ intuitive sense of the difference between live social engagement and the enchanted mental space of reading. Proust describes communication of a strictly limited kind: the text expresses itself to the reader, who responds as culture, education, reading experience, and so forth permit. He gives the reader far and away the more active role in the relationship, the book being the stimulus to a process of reflection that soon leaves it behind. He puts the reader securely in command of the situation. This attractive scenario, however, fails to take into account either the different kinds of experience that most readers are aware of or, more critically, the ambivalences of reading. The relationship between book and reader may be as fraught as any close human relationship, with the special frustration of one partner’s being insensate and unchangeable. Theorists, in fact, maintain that the experience of reading always
involves an element of contest or struggle, and an oscillation between surrender and resistance, identification and detachment. Marginalia lend support to this view. Blake's copy of Lavater's aphorisms, for instance—"a book I love so much, & approve so generally," but in which he felt compelled to record points of disagreement—concisely illustrates the conflict associated with the normal business of reading, let alone with such overt hostilities as mark Macaulay's reading of Milner.

If it is not for the benefit of the author personally, would it be fair to say that marginalia are written for the good of the work itself, impersonally? Yes, sometimes. All cases of authorial or editorial revision by means of annotation fall into this category, as do all corrections of press errors, statements of fact, supplementary information, and improvements of the line of argument that might find their way into a revised edition. Readers do not normally expect their comments to be turned to such practical use. They do, however, expect to keep the book on their shelves in its "corrected" condition, so their own copy would be, to their eyes at least, the better for their work with it. It has been customized for them—a dictionary with more words, a catalogue with extra entries, a polemical tract with a sounder position. But this reasoning leads us back to the reader again.

If there are two parties to the transaction but marginalia are not written for the benefit of the author to whom they are ostensibly addressed, nor for the work itself in any serious sense, then we need to consider advantages to the reader. These are many, and important, though readers themselves may be only dimly aware of them. I do not refer to the most obvious worldly advantages, to the ways in which books may be marked up for professional use by editors, reviewers, lawyers, teachers, auctioneers, et cetera. Those we may take for granted. I mean personal benefits to lay readers, and to the professionals when they are not in their professional mode.

The first experience most readers have of writing in books after they have learned to "listen" to the author, that is, to read, and so passed beyond the stage of seeing only blanks in books, comes with note-taking. (By "author" here and hereafter I normally mean not the actual writer but Wayne Booth's "implied author"—the person inferred from the text on the page, the one we have seen annotators address as "you."). Annotation used to be taught as part of the routine of learning. Marking, copying out, inserting glosses, selecting heads, adding bits from other books, and writing one's own observations are all traditional devices, on a rising scale of readerly activity, for remembering and assimilating text. Psychologically, these techniques seem to function by forcing the reader to slow down (or stop) and go back over the material, and by driving a wedge between the author and the reader. Critical marginalia, especially, typically arise over points of difference, oblige the reader to find words to articulate that difference, and thereby foster independence. But self-awareness is the key thing: conscious agreement and dissent alike contribute to the construction of identity. ("Construction" is the modish term, but "discovery" might be better: it generally feels more like discovery.) A marked or annotated book traces the development of the reader's self-definition in and by relation to the text. Perhaps all readers experience this process; annotators keep a log.

The reverse of the process happens when outsiders study marginalia for clues to the identity of the writer—"access to the inner life," as John Powell says, speaking of Gladstone (p. 13). Because we assume that marginalia express a reader's impulsive and unguarded reactions to a book, we consider them to be an exceptionally reliable guide to personality. Novelists have for many years exploited and thereby reinforced this somewhat shaky assumption. Maria Edgeworth's Belinda, for example, comes upon a copy of John Wesley's Admonitions in the worldly Lady Delacour's dressing room, "marked in pencil, with reiterated lines, which she knew to be her ladyship's customary mode of distinguishing passages that she particularly liked." When Lady Delacour realizes that Belinda has looked into her books, she pretends to have been reading the Methodists only to laugh at them; Belinda "concluded that the marks of approbation in these books were ironical, and thought no more of the matter." But the reader knows better: faced with a discrepancy between what one character says to another and what she says to her books, we trust the evidence of the books. In The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, again, marginalia tell the truth though they contradict the public persona: "There were several books on a shelf; one lay beside the tea
things open, and Utterson was amazed to find a copy of a pious work, for which Jekyll had several times expressed a great esteem, annotated, in his own hand, with startling blasphemies.” The postmodern twist comes when a character plants an annotated book “in the shelves with its spine to the wall,” to suggest that she had been contemplating suicide (as in fact she had been).10

But I digress from the subject of what it is that induces readers to expose themselves by writing marginalia in the first place. Using a notebook or keeping a reading diary might be neater, but it is a quite different procedure that increases the distance between reader and text and emphasizes the autonomy of the reader. Writing notes on the page takes less time than turning aside to a notebook and poses less of a threat to the reader’s concentration. In the long term, it has potential benefits for both parties. As long as the notes are permanently attached to the text, the text stands as a reminder of the source and a corrective check on the interpretation. Annotated books also constitute a ready-made filing and retrieval system. Readers know where to find their notes on physiognomy, church history, and Quebec separatism—in their Lavaters, their Milners, their Levesques. But they are reminded every time they go to them where their ideas came from: they arose out of intense mental involvement, amounting at times to complete identification with someone else. Coleridge’s introspective observation is shrewd: “A book, I value, I reason & quarrel with as with myself when I am reasoning.” The simplicity of the phrasing here should not conceal the sophistication of the insight, which manages to avoid either of the easy and insufficient answers to the question of the addressee. Coleridge does not claim to be talking to the author or to himself, but to the book as though to himself.

The sort of fluid merging and separating that Coleridge identifies as typical of his own reading might account for an element of mimicry common among writers of marginalia. Though in one way they affirm their separateness when they write notes, in other ways they contradict themselves and seem to adopt the identity of the author. Difference and sameness are blended in their interventions: even Beckford’s extracts, described in Chapter One, that use the very words of the text, display by the nature of the selection and by verbal variation the distinct sensibility of the annotator. To some extent the imitative quality can be accounted for by the decorums of genre, as I have said before: cookbooks attract recipes, editions acquire manuscript notes similar to the printed ones.

The aphorisms published in the Berg Collection’s copy of Coventry Patmore’s collection *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower* (1911) are interspersed with aphorisms in manuscript by his son Tennyson. But the resemblance goes beyond the requirements of genre. Annotators often write their notes in the language of the text rather than in their mother tongue, this habit suggesting that they were thinking in the other language. Jonathan Swift, who annotated his Latin books in Latin and his French books in French, belongs to this camp. Montaigne, on the other hand, made a point of sticking to French, saying that whatever language his books spoke to him, he spoke to them in his own. Others, interestingly, vacillate. T. S. Eliot sometimes slipped into French in a French book, but on at least one occasion he used French in a Latin book, and no Latin.11 Mary Astell’s notes in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Bayle are all in English, but Lady Mary herself used French for some of the (relatively few) notes in her Montaigne.

Roland Barthes says of all reading that it is subject to the structure imposed by the text, it needs and respects it—but it also perverts it.12 This hypothesis is confirmed again and again by marginalia from readers of all sorts. Annotators like to declare themselves independent of the text, but they never really are so. It is curious, for instance, to find annotators responding to verse with verse. The penciled notes to *The New School of Love*, a tiny Scottish chapbook of the kind sold by itinerant peddlers to the poorest readers, were certainly made before the collection was assembled in 1828. This closely printed little book of just twenty-four pages is a guide to the arts of courtship, including the significance of marks on different parts of the body and the meaning of dreams. It includes model love letters, love songs, “Toasts, Sentiments, etc.” A cynical reader made use of such space as he (presumably, he) could find among the poems, in one case adding to the end of a plaintive poetical epistle from “a Love-sick Youth to a scornful Maid” and incorporating the heading of the next poem, her “ANSWER,” in verses of his own. The Youth’s poem ends, “I live to wear the chain, and live in pain /
And, 'till I know my doom, I must remain / Yours, &c. &c.' The marginalia follow on from "remain": "As large a fool as ever lacked a brain. / Now hear the ANSWER of the bitch again." It is not an uncommon reaction, parody: it is a way of criticizing from within. Its mimicry voices the usually unspoken uneasiness of the reader's relation to the text.

All annotators are readers, but not all readers are annotators. Annotators are readers who write. Annotation combines synthesizes, I should say—the functions of reading and writing. This fact in itself heightens the natural tension between author and reader by making the reader a rival of the author, under conditions that give the reader considerable power. The author has the first word, but the annotator has the last. Even in those cases in which the annotator appears most subservient to the text and probably felt quite innocently helpful, for example in filling up the names left blank or adding new references to bring the book up to date, the annotator is implicitly critical, presuming to know better and taking over authorial functions. As Thomas McFarland says, apropos of Blake, marginalia are always invasive.13 If political and military metaphors seem heavy-handed for so minor and so private a phenomenon, let me put it another way and propose that all marginalia are extensions of the ownership inscription, which itself expresses the primary impulse of claiming the book as one's own. Every note entails a degree of self-assertion, if not of aggression. The reader leaves a mark and thereby alters the object.14 Usually the implicit rival is the author, but not always. Ezra Pound, having acquired a copy of Algernon Swinburne's Laus Veneris already annotated by somebody else, took pains to dissociate himself from the other's views: "Some damn fool had this book before I bought it. I am not responsible for the notes in his handwriting" (p. 2). This note is superfluous—whatever would imagine Pound responsible for notes in another hand?—but emotionally it makes sense. Pound claims possession and dismisses the usurper.15

Pound's note also implicitly endorses the view that marginalia express personality. (Though the previous owner reveals himself a fool, Pound wants to make it plain that he is no fool and has no patience with fools.) If the early practice of annotation supports the development of a distinct personality, the full-blown habit serves to maintain and strengthen it. A case in point is Samuel Clemens's Tacitus, full of notes disparaging the ineptitude of the translator: "Execrable English" (1:122); "Doubtless this translator can read Latin, but he can't write English" (1:202); "To quote a man puts the man's remark in the first person, but this fossil doesn't know that" (1:215); "This book's English is the rottenest that was ever puked upon paper" (2:101). The level of complaint implies that the annotator could do better; the flamboyant style proves it. Clemens's self-consciousness as a reader is comically paraded later on, when he reads about the appointment of Arretinus Clemens as commander of the praetorian guard, a post his father had held with honor before him. "The same name," Tacitus explains, "would be welcome to the soldiers; and Clemens himself, though a member of the senate, would be able to discharge the duties of both stations." Clemens the reader underlines the name and comments wryly, "An error of judgment. There was never yet a Clemens who could creditably fill two stations at the same time."2:247.

Marginalia can be used to construct and to monitor identity. Victor Plarr was so troubled by misogynistic remarks in his friend Ernest Dowson's marginalia that he had to suppose that those remarks, and those only, had been written to fulfill the requirements of a pseudonym (p. 46). Closer to home, the experience of coming on one's own notes written years before may be chastening or it may—as it did for Blake—confirm integrity of character (fig. 4):

Burke's Treatise on the Sublime & Beautiful is founded on the Opinions of Newton & Locke on this Treatise Reynolds has grounded many of his assertions in all his Discourses I read Burke's Treatise when very Young at the same time I read Locke on Human Understanding & Bacon's Advancement of Learning on Every one of two Books I wrote my Opinions & on looking them over find that my Notes on Reynolds in this Book are exactly Similar. I felt the same Contempt & Abhorrence then; that I do now. They mock Inspiration & Vision Inspiration & Vision was then & now is & I hope will always Remain my Element my Eternal Dwelling place. How can I then hear it Contemned without returning Scorn for Scorn—17
This comment of Blake’s applies two criteria for constancy of character. Besides strongly asserting personal identity by opposition to what one is not (in this case, not Reynolds or Edmund Burke or John Locke), it requires emotional consistency—“I felt the same Contempt & Abhorrence then that I do now.” This remark highlights another of the blessings of annotation to annotators, namely the outlet that it gives them for expressing their feelings—their joy when the author says exactly what they think, their dismay when the bond with the author is broken, and their fluctuating reactions to the course of an argument or narrative. It is a cheap and convenient form of therapy.

Annotators who “long to say something” can have the satisfaction of saying it. The records are, in consequence, especially rich in abuse that was perhaps expected to be kept quietly shut up inside the covers of the book. Now and then, inevitably, it gets out. Evelyn Waugh’s books, many of them annotated as reviewers’ books tend to be, were acquired by the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin. Alan Bell reports that after Cyril Connolly, passing through Austin, saw the notes Waugh had written in a copy of Connolly’s book *The Unquiet Grave*, “He was deeply upset, and soon after sold many of his inscribed Waugh first editions at Christie’s.” There was also some consternation (and some glee) in the publishing world when Graham Greene’s books went to Boston College, for he was a habitual annotator and his books were known to contain sharp remarks about contemporary authors. By way of example, the summary note at the end of the first volume of his copy of Malcolm Muggeridge’s *Chronicles of Wasted Time*—a presentation copy inscribed “affectionately” from the author—says, “And yet after reading this absurd, not very honest, badly written volume, I still find an affection for the clown, Malcolm—his absurdity produces a sort of affection as one might have for an only dog. I have, like him, used too many adjectives—his last paragraph of 28 lines contains 37 adjectives.”

Greene’s comment on Muggeridge would appear to be a clear-cut case of the note written purely for the annotator. It articulates the feelings of the moment and finds an original image for them; it makes a critical observation of a technical kind that at one blow disparages Muggeridge and acknowledges a weakness that Greene himself knows he ought to be vigilant about. So it vents feelings, demonstrates and improves self-awareness, and constitutes a permanent record of the reading experience. It was certainly not intended for the eye of the author of the book. (It may seem surprising that presentation copies like this one often contain distinctly ungrateful notes by the recipients, but after all they—the recipients—did not ask for the books and yet feel obliged to read them—a situation that is not conducive to charitable reading.) But private documents do run the risk of becoming public, especially when the writers are celebrities. Greene knew that, and so did Waugh. Marginalia had been published before. Does the impulse to “say something” overwhelm all caution?

It is a complicated issue, the privacy of marginalia, and it will come up again later. In this case, I think the answer must be that Greene was
not writing just to please himself, and that he probably knew it. He wanted to make a statement to clarify his attitude toward Muggeridge. As long as Chronicles of Wasted Time remained in his keeping, the notes would exist for him only, the use of them being under his control, but if he ever disposed of the book, at least his reservations would go with it. A colleague of mine once told me that he annotated his books so that no one should think he accepted what they said when he didn’t. It seemed to me just so much unnecessary labor at the time, but there’s something to it and for him it filled a need. I believe that like him, Greene also understood that as physical objects, books are likely to outlive their owners and therefore provide an opportunity, perhaps even a responsibility, for communication beyond the immediate conjunction of author and reader. Surely this is why memoirs and biographies seem especially to attract expansive, direct, indiscreet, often artful marginalia, designed to set the record straight.

A telling example is Harriet Martineau’s copy of Elizabeth Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857), now in the Houghton Library at Harvard. Martineau’s notes are all in pencil. Comparing this copy with a later edition, she notes some of the significant cuts that Gaskell had been induced to make (1:55–57). She confirms with her initials her authorship of a statement about Jane Eyre in the obituary of “Currier Bell” (2:11) and expresses her judgment of George Henry Lewes (“a Humbug,” 2:44). When Brontë is quoted as promising to try “diligently” to read Jane Austen, she comments, “She tried here, & cd not get on. Said nothing of any former controversy. H. M.” (2:56). But the notes are relatively scanty before Chapters 9 and 12, which include accounts of “Her Visit to Miss Martineau” and “Misunderstanding with Miss Martineau.” Here the text induces a rash of corrections and contradictions, especially of statements in Brontë’s letters. Martineau irritably underlines and interrupts the text: “I believe she is not at all conscious of her own absolutism. When I tell her of it (HM: ‘never did’), she denies the charge warmly; then I laugh at her (HM: ‘imaginary altogether’)” (2:199). “Stuff!” says Martineau, in the margin. When Gaskell maintains that Brontë was “disturbed and distressed” by the publication of Martineau’s letters, she denies it: “Her letters to H. M. say the contrary. Being be-

sought to let them alone she claimed a copy, & praised them for ‘reverence & earnestness’ &c, & asked, ‘Who cd be angry?’” (2:203). Gaskell’s assertion that “hundreds have forsaken her” she dismisses briskly as “Hallucination” (2:282). These notes may reflect the indignant impulse of the moment, but like others of their kind they were allowed to stand unrevised. Martineau did not need to defend herself to herself through the medium of marginalia, but she left the book as a record of her version of events. She can hardly have realized that the tone of the notes would only corroborate Brontë’s opinion of her “absolutism.”

The illusion of being alone with the author is so strong in many kinds of reading that when readers write in books they tend automatically to address their remarks to the author or to themselves. The theorists of reading likewise assume that they have only two parties to deal with. This easy assumption needs to be reconsidered, however—at least for the reader of an annotating habit. The ostensible addressee is not the only addressee. It is not only the sociable readers of Chapter Two, marking books deliberately to send to a particular friend or a circle of colleagues, who share their experiences with a third party. The physical nature of the book and the history of the circulation of books ensure that there always is a third party tacitly present at the writing of marginalia. When the reader takes on the role of a writer and leaves traces in the book, the communication between reader and text necessarily involves not only their two speaking parts but also the silent audience that will sooner or later witness the performance. It becomes a semipublic occasion on which annotators have an opportunity to show what they can do. One of De Quincey’s reminiscing essays complains about William Wordsworth’s cavalier handling of books and compares him unfavorably with Coleridge. Not only was Wordsworth seen to cut open a book with a buttery knife, but he “rarely, indeed, wrote on the margin of books; and, when he did, nothing could less illustrate his intellectual superiority. The comments were such as might have been made by anybody.”21 De Quincey appears to believe that marginalia are written competitively and that an annotator ought to demonstrate “intellectual superiority.” Over whom, and for whose benefit? The implication is, over the ordinary run of readers; and for the sake of one’s reputation
(which is to say, for one’s own sake, but by way of the opinion of others). De Quincey’s ideal writer in the margins foresees the possibility of publication.

Annotators themselves display varying degrees of self-consciousness about the unknown prospective reader. Francis Douce, as we have seen, annotated books on purpose for future readers in the British Museum; Walpole, according to his biographer, wrote for posterity.22 But when Blake set about correcting Lavater, he too anticipated the reaction of the unnamed future reader who might “call what I have written caviling”: he felt compelled to justify himself to that third party. Clemens knew that his family enjoyed his marginalia, and he played up to them as he wrote. Why should Pound have made such a point of differentiating himself from the previous owner, unless he foresaw the day when the book would change hands again? Coleridge annotated many books at the request of friends, knowing well that there was no controlling the use of the books once they went back to their owners. Even his own books were liable to be lent out, or lost, or pawned or sold to meet pressing needs. His copy of *Quentin Durward* includes a note that reveals his sense of public responsibility as an annotator. Sir Walter Scott’s narrator has proposed that one of the advantages of foreign travel is that your purchasing power is missed at home—“my absence is both missed and moaned”—when otherwise the local shopkeepers might not care whether you were alive or dead. Coleridge comments, “For the sake of young Readers of this, my ever circulating Copy of Scott’s Novels I feel it a duty to say, that this is written in a bad spirit. Why should the Butcher, the Barber &c feel any deeper regard for a Customer, than as a Customer? Esteem and Love are due only for Esteem and Love. If my Butcher behaves civilly and serves me honestly, he has fully balanced my doings toward him, chusing him for my Butcher, in the belief that I should be better served by him than by an other.”23 In this case, as in many others, the impulse to write evidently involved three factors: the idea expressed by the text, the reader’s resistance to it, and the ghostly audience. Coleridge makes it clear that the audience tipped the scale; without it, the moment would have gone unrecorded.

Further complicating this three- or four-way transaction (text, reader, target audience, unknown future reader) is the variability of the reader’s mood and approach. It takes time to read a book. Circumstances change. Levels of engagement and concentration change. The reading may be a rereading, and marginalia may be written on different occasions for different purposes. Coleridge’s many notes to Jeremy Taylor’s *Poliecal Discourses* include some addressed to the author directly (“A sophism, dearest Jeremy!”); some to the owner of the volume, Charles Lamb; and some to a hypothetical other reader who might “need other illustrations” enforcing Coleridge’s argument.24 The same could be said of Blake’s Reynolds—he appears to address different people at different times—and of Urquhart’s copy of Mudford’s *Nubilia*, which shows the reader at some points quarreling with the narrator and at others thinking of his own “gentle” friend.

This sort of mixed use is more common than not. A Victorian edition of a legal classic, the *Institutes of Justinian*, shows signs of careful and laborious study, with an elaborate system of marking (underlining, bracketing, lines in the margin, multiple pointed brackets, etc.); heads for important terms and definitions; corrections to the translation; cross-references to other law books; and occasional comments on matters of history or interpretation. But a little more than halfway through this volume of 599 pages, all of them marked one way or another, comes a personal note: “Left off work at this pt to row head of the river 12th May 1864” (p. 338). The British Library attributes the annotations to Charles Wentworth Dilke, and I’d like to think they are right: he was seventy-four at the time and died later that year.

The Irish poet and playwright Denis Johnston left among his books (many of which are annotated) a copy of A. S. Eddington’s *The Nature of the Physical World* with notes that show how carefully he followed the argument step by step, sometimes addressing the author directly (where the text says, “Nor shall I discuss here how complete is the proof afforded by these experiments,” Johnston added, “Better not,” p. 5), sometimes letting off steam (“To hell with Fitzgerald,” p. 60), and sometimes stepping back to say something to himself (“A very disarming person after all,” p. 333, the last page). But he must have read the book more than once, and at some stage he wrote a set of notes that appears to
have been designed to guide another reader. These are generally less terse than his notes to himself. Eddington’s example of a pack of cards, for instance, gets first of all a simple contradiction, and then a fuller comment. On the subject of “The Running-Down of the Universe,” Eddington writes, “If you take a pack of cards as it comes from the maker and shuffle it for a few minutes, all trace of the original systematic order disappears. The order will never come back no matter how long you shuffle” (p. 65). “Yes it may,” says Johnston on his first pass. Then later: “A pack of cards is a very bad example & put me off the track of what he means for years. What the ‘order’ of the cards is is completely conventional, and shuffling has no significant effect whatever.” Johnston’s observation of particular cases of weakness in Eddington’s reasoning leads him to a generalization that might have been formulated either as a memorandum to himself or as assistance to the other reader: “Eddington is however basically right though a desperately bad explainer, making it worse by his illustrations” (p. 39). Here as elsewhere it is probably impossible to extricate from one another different layers of annotation and different levels of motivation in the annotator.

Even when the primary purpose of annotation is strictly professional, readers often prove unable or unwilling to pass over passages that interest them though they may be irrelevant to the task at hand. When Edward Gibbon set out to revise his History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, he went about it in the traditional way by marking up an existing copy with new wording and additional information. The process of revision seems to have got him thinking, and he started to write down his reflections at the same time.25 On the first page, as he corrects the account of his “design” for Chapters 1 and 2 for the printer, he asks himself:

Should I not have given the history of that fortunate period which was interposed between two Iron ages? Should I not have deduced the decline of the Empire from the civil Wars, that ensued after the fall of Nero or even from the tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus? Alas! I should: but of what avail is this tardy knowledge? Where error is irretrievable, repentance is useless!

On the next page, he provides a glimpse of a meeting one would like to know more about. Gibbon had asserted that the whole world was concerned in the consequences of the fall of Rome, but he has been brought to reconsider that assertion. “NB. Mr Hume told me that in correcting his history, he always laboured to reduce superlatives, and soften positives. Have Asia and Africa, from Japan to Morocco, any feeling or memory of the Roman Empire?” And so it goes. In this case, routine revisions intended for the press are accompanied by the author’s private reflections. The marginalia of reviewers like Macaulay, Waugh, and Edmund White, though written to supply raw materials for the eventual review article, always include comments that are not used—because they don’t fit in with the position adopted in the end, or because they’re too risky or too personal one way or another. Teaching notes prepared by eminent figures like Northrop Frye and Vladimir Nabokov often share the page with personal reflections and memoranda.26 Ramsay Macdonald, prime minister in Britain’s first Labour government in 1924, wrote reviews throughout his career. Unpublished remarks in his extant review copies and other books now in the Library of Scotland could supplement and perhaps clarify the record of his opinions, especially on political matters. His review of Olive Schreiner’s Woman and Labour (1911) for the Daily Chronicle, for example, is generally supportive, quotes generously, and only hints disapproval of the prose style, but his annotated copy reveals some areas of significant disagreement. Here it is probably safe to assume that the less diplomatic marginalia are closer to Macdonald’s actual thinking at the time, but it is also important to remember that the reading must have been influenced by the task at hand.

What I hope to demonstrate by these examples is that common assumptions about marginalia—that they are spontaneous, impulsive, uninhibited; that they offer direct access to the reader’s mind; that they are private and therefore trustworthy—fail to take into account inherent complexities of motivation and historical circumstance. I by no means propose the opposite—that they are calculating, corrupt, and dishonest—but wish simply to emphasize the fact that readers who write in their books are writers, subject to the conventions and expectations that govern this responsive kind of writing, and influenced by many of the
motives that drive other writers. Love, anger, pity, ambition, spite, emulation, partisanship—any and all of these may show up. On a scale of transparency from one to a hundred where a hundred constitutes maximum transparency, marginalia rank high but not all marginalia equally, for they are subject to the conventions not only of writing but of all human communication, which, as Stephen Pinker says, “is not just a transfer of information like two fax machines connected with a wire; it is a series of alternating displays of behavior by sensitive, scheming, second-guessing, social animals” (pp. 229–30).

For the collector who acquires an annotated book and for the scholar who wants to use the evidence of marginalia, it seems to me that there is a net gain in abandoning the notion that marginalia are innocent and transparent: if we have to let go a pleasing illusion, we end up with more human drama and come closer to the truth besides. Marginalia are the product of an interaction between text and reader carried on—since books are durable objects—in the presence of silent witnesses. They always have been both personal and potentially public, though the proportions of personal to public have changed from one period to another. And still every annotated book is unique. In this and the preceding chapters, I have attempted to establish the general framework in which marginalia were written between about 1700 and the present. In those that follow, I shall be exploring some remarkable particular cases.

Object Lessons

You acquire a book with marginalia—a message to an unknown fellow reader, like a letter in a bottle. What next? “Rub them out and say no more about it,” as I was once advised to do with new Coleridge material? Fair enough—it’s your book now—if the sight of notes offends you, or if upon examination you find them to be really of no possible interest. Perhaps the rule should be, not if or if, but if and if. Both conditions need to be met. If you are so fastidious that you could not bring yourself to give shelf room to an annotated book, then you ought to pass it on as soon as you can to someone who will give the notes a bit of attention—at the very least, read them through—before taking a life-or-death decision. For myself (of course I am partial), annotation is part of the history of a book and I would choose to leave notes alone: evidence of use is less depressing than the signs of a book’s having never been read. (Some extreme kinds of abuse, however, will be considered in Chapter Eight.)

At this point, in a more positive spirit, I introduce four case studies to show where the study of marginalia might lead. Although one of them turned out to be unexpectedly rich, these are not spectacular cases of the order of Gibbon on Herodotus, Coleridge on Luther, or Pound on Eliot; they were chosen to show what quite unassuming and even repulsive ob-