

**“A BOOK ABOUT THE MARGIN”:**  
**PERSONAL MEMORY AND THE FATE OF LIBRARIES**  
**IN ANDER MONSON’S *LETTER TO A FUTURE LOVER***

Ander Monson. *Letter to a Future Lover: Marginalia, Errata, Secrets, Inscriptions, and Other Ephemera Found in Libraries*. Graywolf Press, 2015.

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Not to brag, sound defensive, or in need of approval from the get go, but I suspect Ander Monson would approve of how I prepared to write my review of what he describes as “a book about the margin.” I defaced his margins with inky traces in my own hand and from my own brain. In fact, Monson encourages readers—whom he addresses in Whitman fashion as the “you” who “will find me here in time” while “I will wait right here for your reply,” or as the “Future Lover” whose task it is to revive authorial presence by imagining deep reading as a literary séance—to leave residue of one’s interactions with his text. My annotation of *Letter to a Future Letter* included coffee stains, smears of cherry jelly and roll crumbs, beard hair, discarded skin cells, carpet lint, lists of potential influences (Whitman, Borges, Pynchon, the Williams of *Paterson’s* “The Library,” the Stevens of “The Snow Man” and “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the Rich of “Diving into the Wreck”), and quibbles on the margins. “The margin note is a spark of snark, the reader irritated enough to inscribe the space,” notes Monson in the entry “HOW TO READ A BOOK,” itself a snappy riposte to the University of Chicago Great Books advocate Mortimer Jerome Adler’s *How to Read a Book* (1940), which offers conventional (and, from Monson’s point of view, ludicrously reductive) rules about the significance of paraphrase as meaningful reader response. Unlike Professor Adler, Monson compels readers to treat his text as if it were a palimpsest: “Write in this book. Use this page. Here is a blank to fill.” Another mini-chapter, “Reader Response Kit,” similarly, offers a blank page of ambiguous significance. Is it intended as a blank wall upon which to spray graffiti ala Jean-Michel Basquiat in his SAMO phase? A Northern Michigan blizzard? Or how about an abstract painting consisting of a white plane framed by a thin black vertical bar along the left margin and a shorter thin black horizontal bar, which comes close to touching the upper part of the vertical bar, but does not, by a Russian supremacist such as Malevich?

Like Gison and Burroughs cut-ups from 1960 and Fluxus movement

participants from the same era, Monson interweaves creation and destruction, text and embodiment. Recalling Walter Benjamin's commentary on revolutionary violence in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (*Critique of Violence*), as well as his statement, "there is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism" in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Monson observes not only that commentary is inherently political—"stories are written on, over, or inside others' stories"—but the way history and its key terms are catalogued in libraries is not an impartial matter: "It takes some provocation to prompt a beast that big to shift, to get the Library of Congress subject headings moved from 'Sexual Perversion' into 'Sexual Deviation,' and to liberate 'Homosexuality' from the container into the wider world of 'Sexual Life.'"

Monson goads readers into vandalism in "Reader Response Kit," but in five (of the collection's approximately seventy-five) chapters—each of the five is entitled "Dear Defacer"—he does, however, set ethical limits on writing in a book one has not authored and in a copy one does not own. He critiques a rhetorically challenged homophobe who scribbles taunts at Emily Dickinson and Greta Garbo, both of whom appear in a *Gay & Lesbian Biography* (1997). "I was somewhat fond of her books 'before,'" scrawls The Defacer about Dickinson. The Fluxus influenced author's dark twin, Defacer's interventions are less motivated by anarchistic impulses or a wish for connection with the author, as in Monson's case, than by closeted desires, sexual insecurity, and childish (rather than childlike) resentment. Besides evaluating marginalia, a fundamental epistemological, as well as aesthetic, issue for Monson is how to deal with all that white space. It signifies, but ambivalently. White space embodies the failure of inscription to protect us against the Stevensian "nothing that is." It represents a tantalizing format to reconstruct neurological activity as exchanged between author and reader, but it also embodies our vanishing memories. Figuring white space as snow is apt given that Monson was born in 1975 in the unforgiving (but from his point of view, memory-laden, and even beloved) Upper Michigan Peninsula where "Everything is underground or undersnow."

The chapter "Letter To A Future Highlighter," which invokes the radio receiver with lighted dials featured in Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950), asks, "What is a self but a receiver?" Monson imagines the self as a cyborg construct, a patchwork of current (as in electronically transmitted) and traditional codex imprints: "As such am I I or am I us (or am I Roman digits in film copyrights, so many Ms and Cs and Xs anachronizing up my brain), an amalgam of thought and sound and light?" He associates communication between reader and an author such as himself, who actively encourages mar-

ginal commentary, to communication “through air” via radio waves (and, of course, more contemporaneously, to virtually immediate exchanges that take place via Facebook or Twitter). He also likens seeking companionship through receiving sentences in books to a spelling-induced séance (or figurative passage-way to passed persons). His book is futuristic in its hypertextual stylings, but elegiac in tone and especially mournful in its thematic concern with the fate of libraries as vulnerable repositories for human creativity and the preservation of a collective intellectual endeavor. Counterintuitively, and quite delightfully, however, Monson argues, “Technologies just multiply our hauntings.” What he terms the monsoon-like (Monson-like?) digital threat to the codex is mitigated by the author’s embrace of the fluid dynamic between new and old technologies. Digital, after all, Monson reminds us, “summons finger,” and thus connects New Media to the human body, “which operates the machine” to assist the old school bibliophile in conjuring ghosts: “But how will you access the library’s catalog if you eschew computers?” he asks the aged poet Albert Goldbarth, who does not do internet. Monson investigates the continuum between reading and writing sentences, understood as “networks,” and our New Media environment in which hyperlinks are ubiquitous. “Reading networks sentences,” he writes, “memes them, beams them between brains in surprising ways: what’s kept, what’s stuck there, what’s stuck there, what’s lodged in a cul-de-sac after the rest has left.”

In a series of ironies concerning the relationship between old and new media addressed in “DEAR EMPTINESS,” Monson reproduces cut up pieces of old card catalog files. In combination with stubby yellow pencils lacking erasers, the cut up pieces are now used in libraries to jot down call numbers gleaned from computer searches. In “DEAR FUTURE LOVER” he duplicates an archaic paper punch card, which seems “an odd choice for a technology to be computer read.” He fuses analog and digital technologies by noting the historical continuum and intersection between paper and New Media. In another ironic reflection from “Time’s Revenge,” Monson describes his visit to the “Learning Games Initiative Research Archive” in Tucson, which he calls a “library of games, of video games, primarily, computer games secondarily.” He acknowledges his trouble reactivating video games because of the outmoded hardware needed to replay the software. Monson’s desire to collect and classify “the major gaming consoles of your lifetime and most of the minor ones” in a library setting is an especially poignant topic for him to address. Remnants of games, tough to reactivate in an archival setting, were, in the 1980s and 1990s, what occupied Monson’s waking life. Monson wasted precious hours in his teenaged years playing

with what Lou Reed called the “red joy stick,” but, one could also argue, losing himself in labyrinths of video games was how he coped with early trauma, most especially, the death of his mother when he was still a boy. Monson’s heartfelt commentary on video games as a way to act out and, potentially, work through early life disturbances also speaks to his perception of the uncertain relation of books in libraries to their fundamental charge of cultural preservation.

Throughout *Letter to a Future Lover*, Monson represents himself as fanatical about libraries and their classification systems. A bibliophile and compulsive list maker, he appreciates the strenuous efforts undertaken by librarians to preserve history’s fragile material traces. With a nod to Jean Baudrillard’s challenge to mapping information in *The System of Objects* (2006), however, he engages with gaps, erasures, missing and/or misfiled materials, and mold or burn damage, all of which challenge archivists to accurately conserve the past. “There is no home for this brokenness, how neither the Dewey numbering nor the Library of Congress system is continuous, so you’re always missing something,” he states in “Dear Afternoons.” We may compare Monson’s trouble in “Time’s Revenge” with quite literally replaying the past by hooking up game consoles in Tucson’s Learning Games Initiative Research Center to his meditation throughout *Letter to a Future Lover* on the fragile, often dissonant, and imperfect way we remember through objects. “Any structure will fracture under sufficient pressure,” he writes in “SOME CONSTRUCTIVE CORROSIONS,” an essay that points to limits of the Dewey and Library of Congress classification systems as these two approaches fail to account for all volumes in the University of Arizona’s libraries.

As Michigan’s blue-collar rocker Bob Seger has written in “Against the Wind” (1980), there remains the question, especially when under stress of “deadlines and commitments,” about “what to leave out/what to leave in.” This minor version of historical barbarism touches upon Monson’s life as iconoclastic archivist in the story he tells in “CRIME OF OMISSION” about choosing what to preserve of the manuscript detritus of Steve Orlen, a long time University of Arizona faculty member whose smoke-stained office Monson inhabits after his colleague dies from lung cancer in November 2010. One senses Monson’s ambivalent feelings about recovering Orlen. He seems emotionally overwhelmed by the task, as if he were charged with clearing out the parents’ apartment shortly after their deaths. Certainly Monson wants to preserve Orlen’s textual traces even though he didn’t think much of an unfinished novel that his colleague was struggling to compose at the time of his death. Monson is offended that no one else—no other

faculty or family member—cared enough about how to dispose Orlen’s literary remains. At the same time, he exhibits the tendency of the living to turn away from a morbid task, perhaps because the sad fate of Orlen’s discarded writings hits too close to home. Monson’s admission that he only “triaged” bits and pieces of the to-be-trashed archive because “I had dinner plans that night so I couldn’t dally long,” has about it a whiff of bad taste. He seems in too great a hurry to move on to more pleasant affairs.

Monson’s formal decision to organize the book’s approximately seventy-five short essays by alphabetical order speaks to his aspiration to obtain a coherent, if random, sequence for a collection of writings that does not follow a linear narrative trajectory. He plays with alphabetical arrangement, however, by showing how title chapters are themselves subject to multiple meanings. The title of the second chapter, “AI,” for example, can stand for an homage to the late poet Ai, for the idea of the book as a low tech form of Artificial Intelligence, for a term for a sloth, which, like the book, lives in a habitat (the library) that is “constantly under threat,” as well as for an addendum to “A” as starting point of an analysis. As the book title predicts, many chapters are titled “Dear...” It is as if the entries were intended as letters (that is, correspondences) to readers imagined as long distance interlocutors. Correspondents are idiosyncratic, however, ranging from the titular “Future Lover,” to “Dear Defacer,” the grotesque alter ego to Monson who, like the author, responds to library books through marginal inscription, but, unlike Monson, does so in a distasteful way that reveals homophobic angst, to “Dear Squash” (yes, the vegetable; Monson recalls a childhood of being forced to eat the stringy overcooked version), to “Dear Errata.” Like his alphabetized chapters, which convey his rage for order and delight in disarray, Monson’s writings exist in several publication formats. His “Not A Memoir,” *Vanishing Point* (2010), for example, appears as a codex, but with “dagger” type footnotes inserted in the book to indicate terms that are glossed in an online format. *Letter to a Future Lover* itself exists in multiple versions including original publication “on a 6” by 9” card” and as a “limited edition, unbound and unordered in a deluxe box.” More than forty entries in *Letter to a Future Lover* previously appeared as stand-alone pieces in print and online publications. These journals are less important to note, however, than are the obscure periodicals that occupy his attention when haunting the University of Arizona library. Examples include: *Special Libraries: Official Journal of the Special Libraries Association* (April, 1940); *Railway Accounting Officers Association Agenda for Fortieth Annual Meeting* (May 1-4, 1928); *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* (August 14, 1948); *Specialists’ Meeting on Systems and Methods for Aiding Nuclear Power Plant Operators During Normal*

and *Abnormal Conditions* (Batonaliga, Hungary, 4-6 October, 1983)—in which Monson finds a check out card for Jack Rudloe's *The Erotic Ocean*—and the *Journal of Country Music* (1981), which lists recent death notices in the country music world. Monson commemorates obscure publications as themselves suffering neglect, and, like persons, he regards the journals as existing on the verge of being forgotten.

Monson is an archivist of libraries, but he expands our conception of what a library is or might be. Distressed that some “libraries are dying,” he celebrates a Human Library, “which offers people on loan to converse with.” In “Dear Squash,” he takes the Romanticist notion of organic form quite literally. He explains how one can “check out a pack of seeds to plant and grow” in the Pima Country Public Library Seed Lending Library” which conserves heirloom seeds. The project sounds progressive, but Monson’s observation that the library’s intent is to “prevent cross-pollination, hybridization” indicates his disaffection with agri/culture that resists the author’s tendency to embrace rhizomes and literary cross-pollination. For Monson, creativity is best served when a writer who is “all for fast, have always been, the speed of information never fast enough” decides to “troll through stacks for books I cannot find online” to embrace the library as “synonym for slow, a silent coil into the past’s dust.” In “Dear Soviet,” he recounts a trip to the “wreck of Lithuania,” a former KGB prison that today houses a cache of books in The Museum of Genocide Victims Library in Vilnius. In other chapters, he attends to the now-empty bookshelves of “Library Tower,” part of a futuristic Biosphere living community in Oracle, Arizona, to the idea of a United Airlines magazine pouch as a library—he fills two barf bags with snacks as a happy surprise for the next passenger to occupy Seat 10D—, as well as to Iceland’s Library of Water, which offers “twenty-four volumes, each a melt, an archive of a separate glacier or its future state.” Monson’s impulse to discover his obsessions by losing himself in the textual traces of other minds animates his fastidious tracking and retracing of obscure writings in his library excavations and essayistic mediations.