Harvard Libraries 2008

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**On the Cover:**
**Detail from the plate in John Harvard's copy of *The Christian Warfare Against the Devill, World and Flesh* by John Downame. The book is among the holdings of Harvard's Houghton Library.**

Photo by Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard News Office

# A Message from Robert Darnton

When I was a freshman at Harvard in 1957, I discovered that undergraduates were allowed in Houghton Library. Summoning up my courage, I walked in and asked if, as I had heard, they possessed Melville's copy of Emerson's *Essays*. It appeared on my desk in a matter of minutes. Because Melville had written extensive notes in the margins, I found myself reading Emerson through Melville's eyes—or at least, attempting to do so.

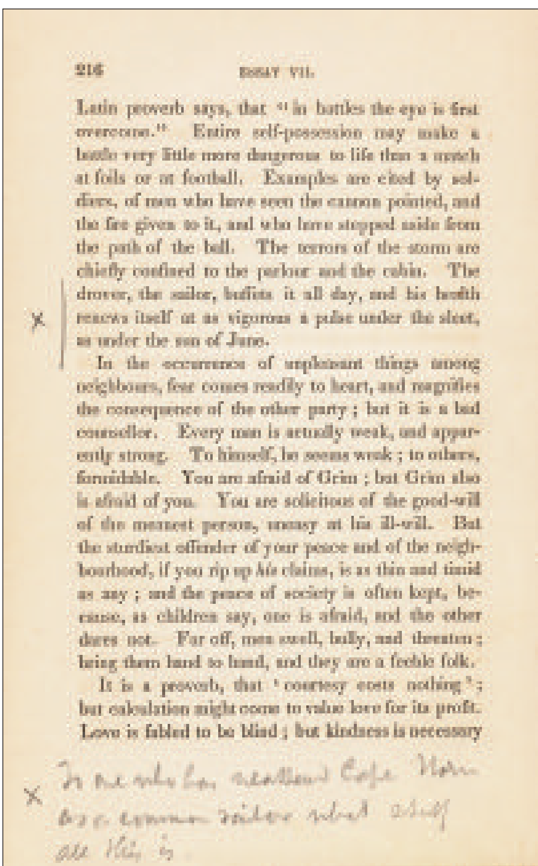
One bit of marginalia has remained fixed in my memory. It had to do with Melville's experience of rounding Cape Horn in what must be the roughest water in the world. At that time I thought the world in general was pretty rough, so I was primed to sympathize with a caustic note next to a passage about stormy weather. Emerson had been expatiating on the world soul and the transient nature of suffering, which, as any sailor could testify, would blow over like a storm. Melville wondered in the margin whether Emerson had any idea of the terror faced by sailors at the Horn. I read it as a lesson about the polyannish side of Emerson's philosophy.

Back in Harvard a half century later, the memory suddenly surfaced, accompanied by a question: Had I got it right? Never mind about all the appointments on the calendar. I hived off to Houghton again.

The opportunity to experiment with déjà vu does not come often. Here is the result, a passage on p. 216 of "Prudence" in *Essays: by R. W. Emerson* (Boston, 1847), which Melville marked in pencil with a big X:

"The terrors of the storm are chiefly confined to the parlour and the cabin. The drover, the sailor, buffets it all day, and his health renews itself at as vigorous a pulse under the sleet, as under the sun of June."

At the bottom of the page, Melville scribbled another X and wrote: "To one who has weathered Cape Horn as a common sailor, what stuff all this is."



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Latin proverb says, that "in battles the eye is first overcome." Entire self-possession may make a battle very little more dangerous to life than a match at foils or at football. Examples are cited by soldiers, of men who have seen the cannon pointed, and the fire given to it, and who have stepped aside from the path of the ball. The terrors of the storm are chiefly confined to the parlour and the cabin. The drover, the sailor, buffets it all day, and his health renews itself at as vigorous a pulse under the sleet, as under the sun of June.

In the occurrence of unpleasant things among neighbours, fear comes readily to heart, and magnifies the consequence of the other party; but it is a bad counsellor. Every man is actually weak, and apparently strong. To himself, he seems weak; to others, formidable. You are afraid of Grim; but Grim also is afraid of you. You are solicitous of the good-will of the meanest person, uneasy at his ill-will. But the sturdiest offender of your peace and of the neighbourhood, if you rip up *his* claims, is as thin and timid as any; and the peace of society is often kept, because, as children say, one is afraid, and the other dares not. Far off, men swell, bully, and threaten; bring them hand to hand, and they are a feeble folk.

It is a proverb, that 'courtesy costs nothing'; but calculation might come to value love for its profit. Love is fabled to be blind; but kindness is necessary

*The Houghton Library copy of Essays: by R. W. Emerson (Boston, 1847)*

The marginal remark was even sharper than I had recollected. But you can't repeat the same experience in reading any more than you can step into the same stream twice.

When I had first encountered Melville, I was swept up by what Harvard professors like Harry Levin and Perry Miller called "the power of blackness." As students, we were pretty serious in those days. We—meaning me and my immediate circle of classmates—read Reinhold Niebuhr, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus. Whatever our religious views, those writers seemed to offer us a way to grasp the horrors of World War II and the self-inflicted suffering of humanity. As a senior, I gained admission to Miller's famous class on "The Classics of the Christian Tradition." It was the last time he taught it, and I remember his account of blackness and "the belly of the mind" when we discussed the *Confessions of St. Augustine*.

Since then, my own mind, and my belly as well, have acquired a fuller contour, and the same must be true of most people from the class of 1960. I've learned to appreciate the value of laughter, whether Rabelaisian or Voltairean or anything in between. But I haven't lost my conviction about the value of books—real books, printed on paper, preferably old, and, best of all, marked up by other readers. Not that I have anything against digitization.

On the contrary, I am devoting most of my energy as director of the library to the attempt to scan Harvard's books and make them freely available on the web. Thanks to powerful search engines, a reader can compile all the references to Cape Horn in thousands of texts. But there is nothing like holding an old copy of Emerson's *Essays* in your own hands and working through it from cover to cover, while situating Cape Horn in the mental geography of transcendentalism. To do that, you have to go to Houghton.

Of course, Houghton's reading room can hold only a few dozen readers, and there are thousands far from Houghton who might like to attempt reading Emerson as Melville did. With proper digitizing, we can make that thought experiment possible. Better yet, we can bring whole swaths of Harvard's special collections within the range of readers.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Arcadia Fund, we are doing exactly that. Harvard's Open Collections Program, now six years old, makes its richest holdings accessible, online and free of charge, by aggregating them around themes such as *Women Working*, *Immigration to the United States: 1789–1930*, *Contagion: Historical Views of Diseases and Epidemics*, and *Expeditions and Discoveries: Sponsored Explorations and Scientific Discovery in the Modern Age*.

Our newest project will be reading itself. We will digitize antique primers from the Gutman Library in Harvard's Graduate School of Education, which show how reading was taught; diaries from the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute, which capture the intimate experience of reading; registers from the Andover–Harvard Theological Library at Harvard Divinity School, which reveal reading habits of students; commonplace books from Widener, which include extracts of passages that readers considered especially significant; and books with marginalia like Melville's from Houghton.

Reading has become one of the hottest subjects in the humanities, perhaps because it seems especially intriguing now that so much of it has shifted from the printed page to the computer screen. It can be studied best at points where disciplines converge—in history, literary theory, sociology, educational psychology, and cognitive studies. Several Harvard professors—David Hall in the Divinity School, Ann Blair in the History Department, Leah Price in English, Susan Suleiman in Romance Languages—have made reading a central theme of their research; and they have incorporated their research in their teaching. You have to hustle if you want to reserve the seminar room in Houghton, because it is a favorite place for professors who use books as pedagogical tools—that is, as physical objects crammed with clues about how they conveyed meaning to readers at different points in the past.

We have progressed from book learning to learning about books. Our libraries are not museums, where books can be admired under glass, but centers of research and teaching, where they can be used to unlock the mysteries of reading.

If Emerson and Melville are looking down at us from some cloud, I think this kind of study would delight both the transcendentalist who wrote "The American Scholar" and the sailor who noted in *Moby Dick* that "a whale ship was my Harvard and my Yale."


**Robert Darnton**
*Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and Director of the University Library*

*Robert Darnton: "Our libraries are not museums, where books can be admired under glass, but centers of research and teaching, where they can be used to unlock the mysteries of reading."*

Photo by Rick Friedman