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 extolling 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 polyamorous 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 the results. The marginal remark was even sharper than I had recollected. But you can’t repeat the experience of rounding Cape Horn in 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, Kerkegaard, Sartre, and Camus. Whatever our religious views, those writers seemed to convey meaning to readers at different points in the past.

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The opportunity to experiment with déjà vu does not often occur. Here is the result, a passage on p. 216 of “Prudence” in Essays (Boston, 1847), which Melville marked in pencil with a big X:

“But the terror of the storm is chiefly confined to the sailor, buffets it all day, and his health renews itself as a storm. But the terror faced by sailors at the Horn.

The terror of the storm is chiefly confined to the sailor 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: 1820-2000, Contagion: Historical Visions 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 hurdle 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 a tethered 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.”

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Photo by Rick Friedman