

# Miguel Barretto García

## The Poem Annotates Power

THE BODY—WE RUN OUR FINGERS through the elaborate illustrations of human bodies found in *Gray's Anatomy*. We marvel at the vast network of vascular, muscular, and nervous systems. We explore, curate, and study bodies of land, water, and outer space. Throughout human history, the body has been the location for mapping and examining. We name bodies and parts of bodies. We comment and annotate on them. We pencil, strikethrough, and edit bodies of text. Various iterative annotations of T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, are found in textbooks and websites. Prior to the abundance of these references, Eliot had his own endnotes. *The Waste Land* is pregnant with multicultural references spanning from the Hindu Upanishads to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Here, annotation is the metatextual Virgil holding the reader by the hand, guiding them through the decadence of literary provenance and the decrepit state of rebuilding post-war London.

Throughout the centuries, the body of the poem has been interpreted, remarked, marketed, elevated, and contested by annotation. Michael Edson offers a glimpse of the dynamic publishing decisions that underlie annotation in 18th-century poetry. Annotation brought readers closer to the distant and obscure literary materials the poet used to construct their work but, simultaneously, annotation is also excluding. The presence of annotations signalled specialist requirements in language, education, and pedigree often distant to working-class readers or those without the prerequisite cultural capital. Interestingly, annotation had a commercial function, as well as an aesthetic one. In the 18th century, annotations enhanced the work's marketability, and the density of notes could 'swell...volumes into costlier sizes.' Poets and publishers were constantly debating whether annotations should take the form of footnotes or endnotes. Footnotes are more proximate to the text and reader-friendly while endnotes are distant but 'more beautiful' because they dissuade distraction.

Today's poetry collections are largely free of either, and the endnotes that do appear are short captions of the whole poem, rather than an extensive analysis of each line or line break. Both Edson and Gérard Genette observe that annotations are indeed intrusive, distracting readers from reading verse, but they also hold poetry accountable. Poetry after the 18th century, however, became hostile to annotation, as it sought to craft 'timeless statements beyond the factual and topical concerns of history and other prose genres.'

Nevertheless, the poem is still annotated outside publishing. Readers circle and underline words that move or provoke them; they add reflections and comments in the margins of their notebooks; and for some, annotations can shape and form the poem. Poetry mentors are constantly armed with a pencil to provide feedback and commentary. Ezra Pound's annotations were fundamental in shaping the final form of *The Waste Land*. The facsimile and transcript of *The Waste Land*, later edited by Eliot's widow, Valerie, and published by Faber and Faber in 1971, contained a version of the poem which was twice its eventual length.

The power of annotation to shape the form of a source text motivated me to scrutinise annotation as an art form that spoke to larger power structures...