



AN ENTANGLEMENT

Ancient Texts, Old Marginalia, and Contemporary Art

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This essay pivots around the practice of marginalia—notes written in the margins of books and other texts—and also navigates through the practice of my art, with its combination of research, chance occurrence and aesthetic experimentation. It is also a bit of a story, an exploration of how intellectual curiosity and visual fascinations can lead a person onto a new path that has no known destination. Though the practice of art usually produces end products in physical form, art is a process, not a goal, an exploration of ambiguity, not a determination of fact, an opening up of new possibilities, not a pinning down of definitive knowledge.

First, a brief look back is in order, at one particularly intriguing ‘marginalia moment’ that came in the 1630s. A French mathematician wrote a marginal note detailing a theorem in his copy of the *Arithmetica* of Diophantus, following it with:

I have a truly marvelous proof of this proposition
which this margin is too narrow to contain.

—Pierre de Fermat (1601–1665)

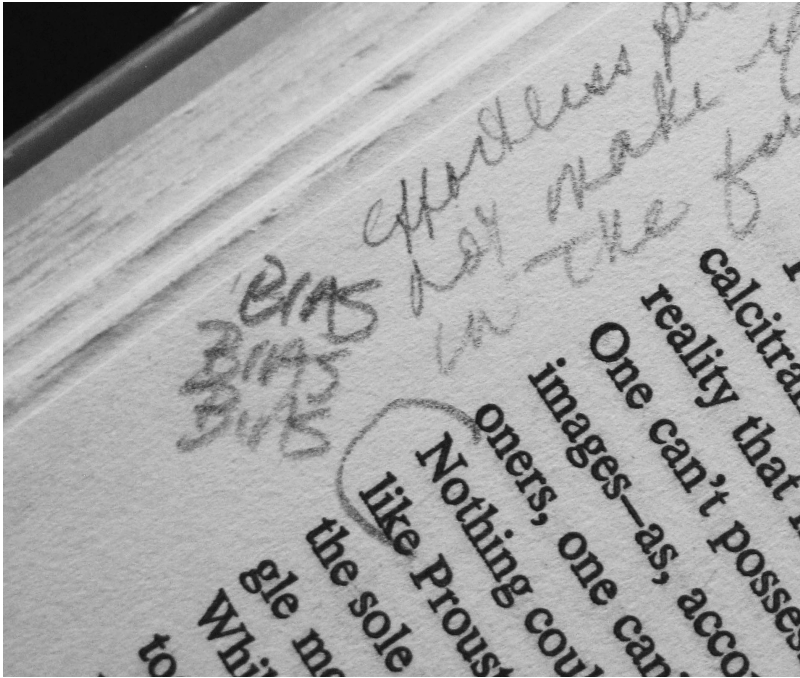
Most margin writers are writing for themselves alone, never expecting (or even wanting) to have their words made public. Fermat’s proof was never published, and has not been found;

perhaps it never existed. Some have speculated that, if it did exist, it was incorrect. Years after Fermat's death, however, his marginal notes in the *Arithmetica* were discovered and published by his son, and eventually these words became an international challenge. It was well over 300 years before a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem was published that was generally (though not universally) considered to be correct, a proof that was the work of Andrew Wiles, a British mathematician. Though Wiles has noted that his proof and Fermat's could not be the same, due to Wiles' use of mathematical techniques unknown in Fermat's time, perhaps a larger margin could have shaved a few years off the centuries that separated the two proofs.

New York Times essayist Sam Anderson offered a prosaic, if trendy, description of marginalia as "a kind of slow-motion, long-form Twitter." Many years earlier, Edgar Allan Poe had written about the pleasure he got from the practice of marginalia, while noting what he called the "circumscription of space" (Fermat's "narrow margin"). Poe felt this spatial constraint discouraged diffuse thought patterns, forcing what he called "Tacitus-ism," after the Roman historian Tacitus, who often favored a terse expression of ideas that still managed to be intensely meaningful (though ironically, *tacitus* in Latin means "silent"). Whether Twitter's limitation on comment length is leaving a legacy on the power of brevity in any way similar to that of Tacitus, I leave to you to decide on your own.

In undergraduate school, I had, somewhat naturally, come to practice my own kind of marginalia. I was not then in art, but was a classics major, studying ancient Greek, struggling through translating one complex sentence at a time. My marginalia was a student's—not the argumentative type, but the explanatory, the helpful, the kind that reminded me of things I had looked up but was likely to forget when called on in class.

After a year of graduate school, I moved on from the study of Greek, still fascinated with it, but unsure that the field was the right one for me. Eventually I went back to school in art instead, but I took the principles of Greek rhetoricians with



Detail of marginalia in my copy of Susan Sontag's *On Photography*

me. Happily debating everything I read, I became a fierce practitioner of marginalia. When I read Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, I disagreed with her, in extensive marginalia, responding in a focused, vivid and totally engaged way.

Billy Collins' description of the practice, in his poem *Marginalia*, is the very image of my encounter with Sontag:

Sometimes the notes are ferocious,
skirmishes against the author
raging along the borders of every page
in tiny black script.

Studs Terkel once said that reading a book should be a "raucous conversation." By writing in the margins, I found a way for my own ideas to be voiced with equal force and equal weight in my own "raucous" counterpoint to Sontag's, creating a loud dialogue with the silence of the printed page. My artwork has,

for years, been about giving visual voice to the expressive silence of the past. Eventually, margins and marginalia became central to that process.

In 2008, I went to live in Athens, Greece for my sabbatical. My academic past in classics had become a thematic reference point and visual source material for my art, so this period of time in Greece was critical to my work. I had spent a year of study abroad in Athens during my first undergraduate degree, and had returned many times since then. This time I was determined to experience it all differently, to search for another way to look at what had become so familiar.

I decided not to climb up to the Acropolis for the first month I was there, but instead look at how the Acropolis and the Parthenon, were actually existing (as I would come to realize later) on the margins of day-to-day life in modern Athens. The Parthenon was a note from the past, now on the border. I made hundreds of photographs, many of a marginalized Parthenon. But I was not making art.

At the library at the International Center for Hellenic and Mediterranean Studies in Athens, I began doing research on recent feminist scholarship in the classics. I had a focus, but I did not know how this research would influence my art, or help me to create more, so I just kept pulling books from the shelves. I read and researched to find my way, rather than knowing my way ahead of time. Though this may seem an unusual process, the sciences have a parallel approach in what is called “curiosity driven research” (or “blue skies research”), a kind of research that does not have a clear goal, or an application that is immediately apparent.

One day, I started pulling out books that looked like the oldest ones on the shelves, mostly for the joy I felt in the object qualities of old books—the gilt edges, the stamped leather bindings, even the yellowed curves of pages warped by years of humidity and light.

I found a series of twenty Greek and Latin books, all originally owned by an American woman, Meta Glass. She had written her name and dates from 1909 to 1911 on the in-

side covers. Curiosity sent me to the Internet, though I had little expectation of finding anything. Instead, there was a great deal, as Glass had been a woman of note. She had gotten her Ph.D. in Latin and Greek from Columbia University in 1912 (a year after the last date in the books), and she went on to serve as the president of Sweet Briar College in Virginia from 1925 to 1946. I contacted librarians at Sweet Briar when I returned to the US, but they could not tell me how or why her books had ended up in a library in Athens, so that remains a mystery.

What was not a mystery was that Meta Glass was a champion of the importance of educating women, and of the continuing relevance of the classics. As a former classics scholar myself and as a current educator, I connected to her life and interests, and through her books, to her. She had made notations in the margins of nearly all of the Greek texts. As I paged my way through her books, I became familiar with her handwriting, her frustrations, and even her sense of humor.

At this time I was living right on the edge (perhaps one could say on the margin) of the spot on Mt. Lykabbetos at which the buildings of the city meet the tree line. I had only my digital camera with me—no photographic lights, no tripod, no high-resolution scanner. I would bring the books back to my tiny studio apartment and lay them down on the miniscule kitchen counter, to photograph them under the only bright light in the place.

I photographed every marked page in the Glass books, working with a documentary zeal. I also made lists of the marginalia, and found that they created a kind of poetry in this form. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Glass's notes are a spare but vivid inventory of the play's substance and intent, of the playwright's eloquence and nuance:

Doer of this insolence
My pain where it is
Work oneself weary
The resourcefulness/a sort of wisdom
Often used of getting what one wants
An afterthought

Possess
Side by side
When men are guided aright
A deed to be proud of
Intellectual powers/stretch
The delicacy of the passive

From Meta Glass' copy of Sophocles' *Antigone*

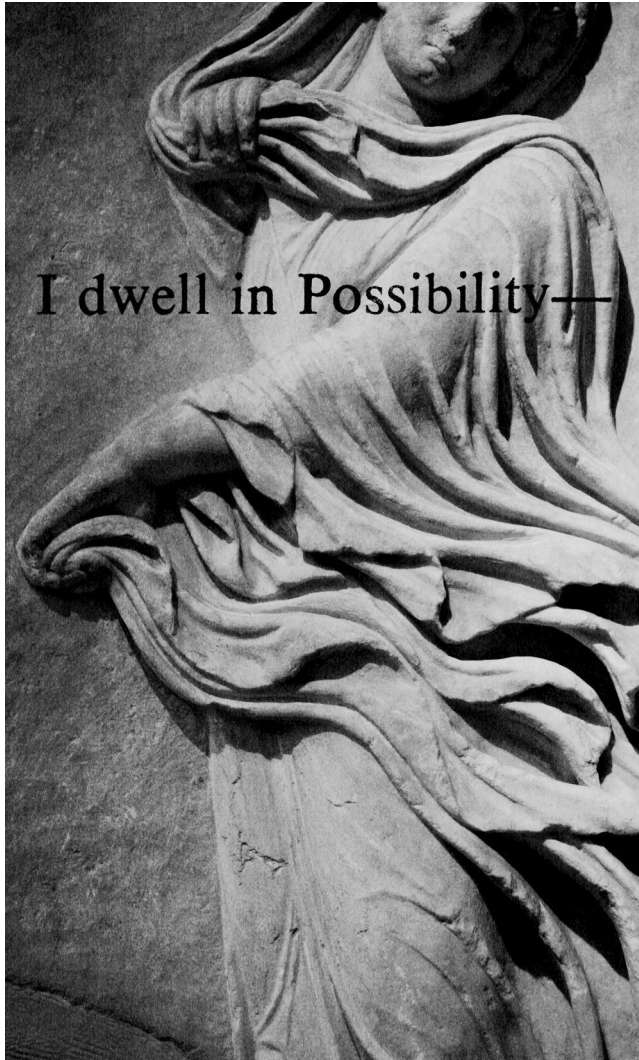
I made one thousand, two hundred and forty-four photographs from the Meta Glass books, and began the work of transforming this raw material into art. Before I move on to that art, I will briefly detour to the work I had been doing prior to this, a contrast that reveals how the chance intersection with marginalia has altered my art.

For one series, I had found unexpected inspiration in prosaic grammar books, which managed to explain verb tenses in terms both exceptionally precise and magnificently poetic. In *Imperfect of a Truth Just Recognized*, the text suggests a reading of the sculptural gesture as the moment of recognition, the raised hand carrying the same surprised acknowledgement as the verb tense implied, a moment that was imperfect yet true.

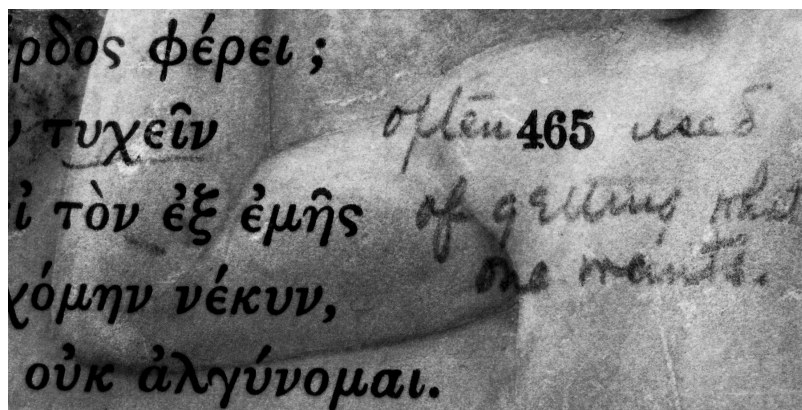
Realizing that others did not have the same fascination with the intricacies of Greek as I did, I started working with English texts, extracting single lines of poetry to pair with the spare elegance of ancient art. With *I dwell in possibility*—, I altered the visual mood of the original photograph of the sculpture, intensifying the soft colors and flat light, trying to con-



Imperfect of a Truth Just Recognized, from the *Greek Grammar* series



I dwell in possibility—(Emily Dickinson),
from the *Poets* series



Getting what one wants, from the Marginalia series

nect, through aesthetic form, to the eternal potential in Emily Dickinson's phrase. I carried this transformative aesthetic into my new work.

Digital photographic fusions help me create images that are saturated with the past, but materialized in the present. The relief sculpture used in *Getting what one wants* suggests the visual articulation of male power, both physical and conceptual, and is cropped down to emphasize the bicep. I overlaid a text where Meta Glass had noted that a particular word (*tychein*: happens, occurs) is often used for its nuance, because it not only points out an occurrence, but that this occurrence represents that a person is getting what he or she wants. Intensification of the color and contrast brought out the textural qualities of the paper, thickened the lines of the Greek letters, darkened the soft penciled English words, further emphasized the swell of the muscle, and made a small brown mark on the paper glow red. The intensity of the colors, contrasts, and textures moved the image from cool distant classicism to a vision of arrogant presumption.

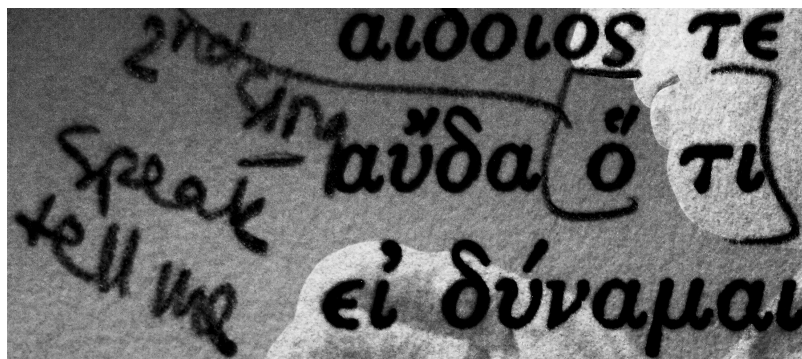
Translation is an act of connection. Working through a person's words, you try to figure out what was in his or her mind. You try to infuse yourself into someone else's thought processes, experience, vision. Ultimately, you end with your

own version. In my visual translation, one layer is the intent, content and expressive form of the Greek text. Another layer is the original Greek sculpture, now removed from its original significance. Then there is Meta Glass's marginalia, ambiguously interpreting, not directly defining. The English text becomes a hinge that bends back and forth on the edge of meaning, opening it, closing it, allowing things in and keeping them out. The final artwork melds these disparate elements, morphing them into my meaning, my emotional content, my 21st century perceptions of power and promise, of essence and energy.

Another tangent, a brief look back to my first encounter with ancient Greek, explains a bit more about my fascination with marginalia in connection with Greek text. Waiting in line to register for my first semester of college, I was handed a flier touting an educational experiment—a class in ancient Greek taught on the computer. I was apparently an early adopter before that term existed, and I jumped in. The computer we used resembled a teletype machine—there was no monitor, only printed out text and continuous rolls of paper. The texts were transliterated from the Greek into English letters. It was intriguing and oddly fun, but I was soon to find out that it was educationally disastrous, an experiment gone very wrong.

The first day of my second class in Greek, a different professor wrote a simple word in Greek letters on the blackboard, and asked the students what the word was. Not one of us could answer, as we had never seen the word in the Greek alphabet. We had learned Greek as if it was learning English words that we just didn't know before. From that moment, a mix of dismay, annoyance, and embarrassment, I went on to become immersed and obsessed with the Greek language—with its beautiful letter forms, inky curlicues of intrigue; with the accents and breathing marks, that could totally change a word's meaning; with the incredible depth of thought that could be expressed by both the form of the sentence structure and the elaborate compound words. I took these fascinations with me when I became an artist.

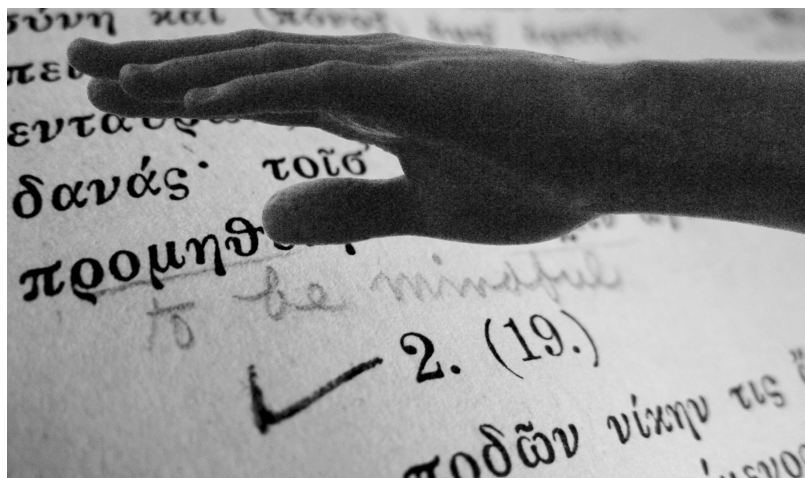
The actual print of *Speak, tell me* is large, nearly four feet



Speak, tell me, from the Marginalia series

wide, with a presence that suggests an oracular power. Brackets are placed around the mouth of the mute sculpture, begging it to speak. The background is an intense red; the Greek letters are a dense and velvety black. It is not crucial to know what the Greek words mean, but the English is critical, with its notation of the 2nd singular: “you speak, you tell me.” The two thousand year old Greek sculpture becomes an expression of that moment when one is about to speak, about to tell something of import. The page of Greek text overlaying the sculpture is thickly textured, obscuring the original surface of the sculpture and adding a new layer of visual richness, harmonizing the background and the sculpture with a single surface texture, visually fusing the centuries together.

To me, the formal beauty of this image is deeply important, but this image also express my intellectual fascinations with what ancient Greece can tell us through its art and its literature, with what Meta Glass was thinking as she read the same text that I saw, with the physicality of the book she and I both held, one hundred years apart. Each piece I do explores a different expressive moment followed through time—from thousands of years ago, with the original writing of an ancient Greek text and the carving of an ancient Greek sculpture, to the printing of a book in the late 1800s, to Meta Glass’s notations on meanings in the early 1900s, and finally, to my artwork and contemporary viewers’ responses to it.

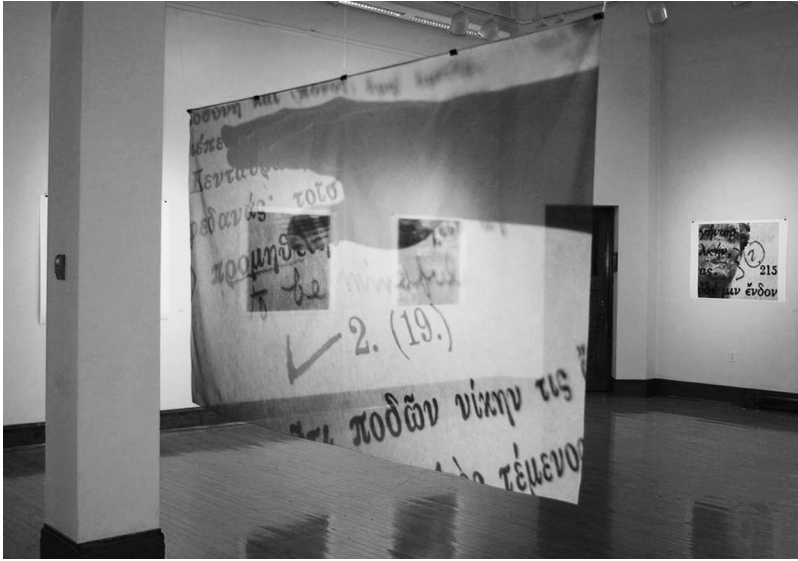


To be mindful, from the *Marginalia* series

The past can be in dialogue with the present. I want to join in on that conversation, in whatever century it started. This is no longer about debates, as I had with Sontag, but about exchanges and communication.

In *To be mindful*, the sculpted hand reaches out actively, while simultaneously remaining still. I saw a man striving, reaching, attempting to be conscious in his life and of his life. Then I worked through the hundreds of text images, searching for words that related. The next step was aesthetic—connecting them visually. The horizontality of the cropped frame emphasizes the stretching arc of the fingers, which echo and embrace the curls and contours of the ancient text, which in turn is grounded by the confirming check mark.

Dyed into translucent fabric, this image becomes a visual analogue for the complex ways in which the ephemerality of the past permeates the concreteness of the present, the infusion and intrusion of the ancient knowledge into contemporary experience. Conversely, the present is always a presence in our temporary retreat into the past; one cannot view the past in this artwork without also seeing the present in the world, emphasizing the value of interrelationships and associations over segmented isolation.



To be mindful, installation view of dye sublimation print on fabric

Meta Glass was not always confident and self-assured, but sometimes questioned her own understanding, and perhaps the classics themselves. In *Question at lines 83-85*, the ruined surface of a sculpture, dug up after centuries buried in the ground, reflects the imperfections of human knowledge, but also its capacity for beauty.

Years of academic training in ancient Greek language and culture have given me a personal core of inspiration and knowledge, and a belief in the relevance of that knowledge. These past experiences—and experiences of the past—structure my creative process. I see the past as a series of stratified conversations that I can join in on, dialogues that can illuminate the present.

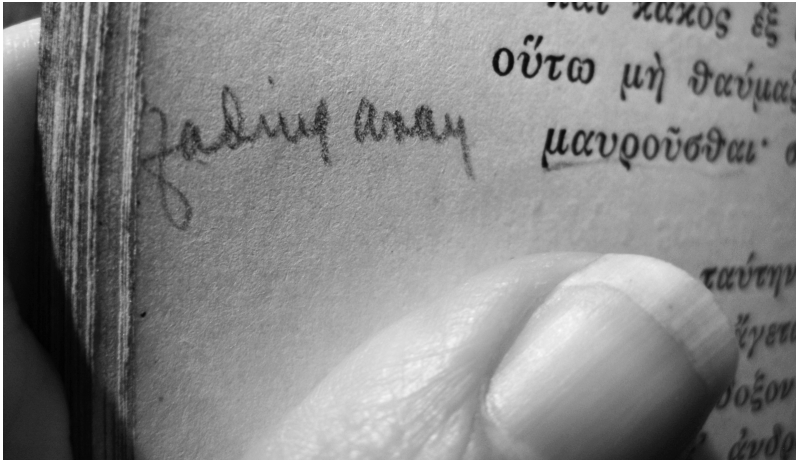
The ‘tiny black script’ I found in Meta Glass’ books may be marginalia, but it is not marginal. It ties me to others through the universality of the expressions of human emotions. Through this work I am finding a way to make both the Greeks and Meta Glass speak again, though with my voice. I do particularly feel Meta Glass’ presence—not like a ghost, but as



Question at lines 83–85, from the Marginalia series

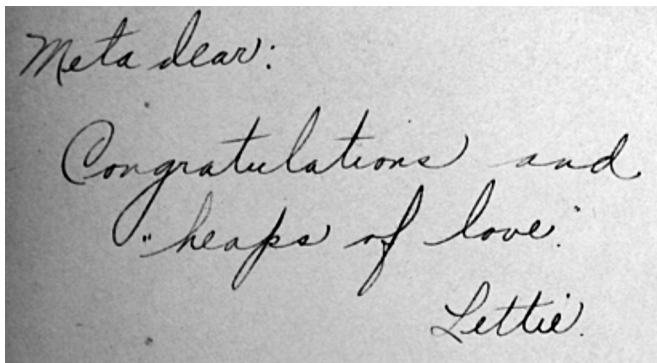
a real human being, who touched these books, held them in her hands, laid them flat to inscribe these words in them. Art is communicative, about making a connection, developing a rapport, finding a commonality.

My work explores my intrigue with qualities of books that are being lost on a Kindle or an iPad—the sensual physicality of a book as a three-dimensional object. The books I used represent, as well, a contemporaneous visual record of the workings of one woman’s mind, still vividly present after one hundred years. Sam Anderson wrote that “. . . [marking up books is] a way to not just passively read but to fully enter a text, to collaborate with it, to mingle with an author . . .” My artworks are my efforts to collaborate not only with the original author of the Greek text, but to mingle with Meta Glass, to celebrate, as Anderson put it, “the pleasure of words in the margins.”



Fading away, from the Pages series

I end with one last journey of coincidence, a book that I found two years ago in a bookstore in western Massachusetts, *Love and Friendship*, by Ralph Waldo Emerson, possibly the 1896 version. I opened it to find this dedication:



Stretching it just a bit, perhaps this could have been given to Meta Glass, on the occasion of her graduation from Randolph-Macon Woman's College in 1899. Or perhaps it was given to another Meta. But for me, it expresses perfectly my feelings about my growing relationship, my conversations with a woman who died over 40 years ago, but who lives in her books still.