The book that is the subject of this essay is, at first glance, an unlikely candidate for such attention. Published in 1597 in Tournon, a city in France about two-thirds of the way from Avignon to Lyons, it is entitled Virgiliī . . . opera in locos communes digesta – the text of Virgil, that is, processed into commonplaces.¹ The work is anonymous, but a little bibliographical research reveals that it is attributed to Michel Coyssard, a Jesuit who lived from 1547 to 1623. Coyssard had expanded a shorter Virgilian commonplace book published in 1587 by F. Petit to make this version, which in turn was expanded again into his Thesaurus Virgiliī in communes locos digestus.² The final version was published in 1683, so in one form or another, this book stayed in print for almost a hundred years.

Why would anyone break up some of the finest Latin poetry ever written into a collection of aphorisms and proverbs under headings like “appropriateness,” “danger,” and “madness”? And why, over four hundred years later, should we care, one way or the other? To try to answer these questions, I shall use this book as a tool to clarify the reading practices that generated it – practices that are quite different from ours today. I shall then meditate briefly on what effect all this has on our understanding of Virgil in Renaissance culture. Finally, I shall step back a bit to consider how what we have learned should, I suggest, affect the way we pursue studies in Neo-Latin literature.

The title page says clearly that the book is directed toward younger readers, and that it was published by the Typographus Universitatis, so

¹ PVB[LII] VIRGILII / MARONIS OPERA, IN / LOCOS COMMVNES DI- / GESTA, RECOGNITA, ET / abundè locupletata. / In gratiam Turnoniae Juuentutis, & / omnium poëtices studiosorum. / [ornamental device] / TVRNONI, / Apud Claudivm Michaelem / Typographum Vniversitatis. 1597. / Cum Privilegio Regis. References to this book will be placed in the text.

² Petit’s Opera in locos communes digesta was published in Lyon by I. Phillehotte in 1587. Coyssard’s initial revision was first published in Douai by Balthasar Bellerus in 1595 and published a third time in Cologne by Bernardus Gualtherius in 1601. The final revision, Thesaurus Virgiliī in communes locos digestus, was published in Paris in 1683 by Petrus Esclassan and the widow of Claudius Thoboust. Biographical information on Coyssard is difficult to come by, but a few lines on him can be found in Friedrich August Eckstein, Nomenclator philologorum (1871), revised by Johannes Saltzwedel (Hildesheim: 1996, 205).
it seems logical to start our inquiry in the environment of the schools. One of the most influential of the early Renaissance schoolmasters was Guarino da Verona, whose son Battista Guarino summarized his father's methods in his *De ordine docendi et studendi* (1459). Guarino taught his students to make excerpts of what they read, as a memory aid. In particular, he encouraged them *inter legendum ex variis libris sententias quae ad eandem materiam pertinent adnotabunt, et in unum quendam locum colligent* (“in the course of their miscellaneous reading to note down maxims pertinent to a given topic and collect them in one particular place”).

First, that is, maxims, or commonplaces – concise bits of wisdom, easily remembered – were noted, generally in the margins of the book being read. Then the student was to “collect them in one particular place” – that is, into a commonplace book. Attention should be directed to two areas: style and content.

Anyone who has looked at a large number of early printed books has seen the signs of this reading practice, which was normative throughout the Renaissance. As an example, I refer you a page from bk. 2 of the *Aeneid* as it appears in an edition of Virgil’s works that was printed in Frankfurt in 1616, in a copy that was annotated vigorously by a German schoolmaster named Rector Hesse. Rector Hesse did exactly what Guarino had recommended over 150 years earlier: At the top of the page, in the upper right margin, one can see an annotation that reads *simile de subito pavore*.

Similes and metaphors were crucial to the stylistic extracts, as Coyssard noted in the introduction to his commonplace book: *si [quis] comparationes venetur, & similitudines, nescio unde plus praesidii ad eam rem possit*.

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4. Baptista Guarinus, *De ordine docendi et studendi*, 268–269. For more information on how excerpting was done in the Renaissance, see Alberto Cevolini, *De arte excerpendi: imparare a dimenticare nella modernità* (Florence, 2006).

5. *PVBLII / VIRGILII / MARONIS / MANTVANI / Opera omnia, / CLARISSIMORVM VRM VIRO- / RVM NOTATIONIBVS IL- / lustrata, / Opera & industria / IOANNIS A MEYEN, BERGI- / ZOMII BELGAE. / Editio prioribus emendatior, / [printer’s device] / FRANCOFVRTI, / Ex Officina Typographica Nicolai Hoffmanni, Im- / pensis haeredum Iacobi Fischeri. / M. DC. XVI, p. 161*. The printed commentary in this edition is the one by Ioannes à Meyen that was first printed by Aldus Manutius in 1576. The copy of the book annotated by Hesse is in a private collection. I have not been able to discover any information about who Rector Hesse was or where he lived and worked. Valuable information on marginal annotations in early printed books may be found in Bernard M. Rosenthal, *The Rosenthal Collection of Printed Books with Manuscript Annotations: A Catalog of 242 Editions mostly before 1600 Annotated by Contemporary or Near-Contemporary Readers* (New Haven, 1997); and see also William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia, 2008).