

## *The Ghost in the Book*

I am told that Waukegan is a town of ghosts. My friend Albert Fernandez told me this. He also invited me to give this talk. He has then invited me to speak to you amongst specters. I live and work in a world of specters, because I am an antiquarian bookseller. That is, I am a kind of priest in a weird little world of strange and violent passions ranked like crenellated castle towers around relics of the dead. So, however strange or twisted you believe your bizarre college in your bizarre town to be, I must thank Al for bringing me to a place in which I can be right at home. After all, stark terror as we uncover what really is around us is mere standard operating procedure.

For I think we all live amongst specters, even when we are not in Waukegan, because this is a world of unseen meanings and unseen powers. We must respect these, though they will drive us whether we respect them or not. But if we do respect them, we may find they grant us a little grace in our lives. The problem is that, due to their persnickety natures, the gestures of respect we must learn to make to them are light, small, delicate, simple, instinctual, semi-conscious and semi-visible. They require an attitude of the heart, not any special power of our own.

We expect ghosts and specters in the unexpected, but in fact they live mostly in the expected. It is in the normal that in the long run we find the largest oddities and the deepest meanings, the things that most astonish us, the verges that terrify us, and the truths to which we must adjust our hearts in homage. A ghost may be an incorporeal spirit, but what he throws at us are cups and saucers and books and sofas. He haunts our homes and our towns, just exactly those places where we are the most normal, the safest, everywhere we have nested. Well, something haunts our nests that we do not see when we calmly review the familiar. We are obliged to accept more mystery than any medieval peasant.

The particular haunted house I am a keeper of is the house of books. Books are the mystery I've been working on, and the ghosts I pursue are in books. By now, after twenty years, I can see them, but you cannot. I am going to try to get you squinting hard enough to start to glimpse the spectral shape. But the first step is for the familiar to become unfamiliar, just as plain old Waukegan has become a

haunted shadow world.

You are all familiar with books, but I can affirmatively assert that none of you here knows what makes a book a book. What is the essential part of a book, that without which it is not a book?

It is not the text, because some books have only illustrations. It is not paper, since pages can be made of many materials; nor is it “pages” generally, since a bunch of pages would just fly to the winds. Is it a writing material, such as ink? Well, no: there are lots of blank books. Is it the covers? But who hasn’t seen a book with its covers torn off?

The answer is thread. Thread makes a book a book. You see, to bind a book you stab a needle through gatherings of leaves drawing thread behind it. The thread tying each gathering of pages is looped around horizontal cords. These cords are also looped together, and they are anchored onto the covers. The threading is made very, very tight, so that a great pressure forces the gatherings to form a unit with a single dynamic of movement. This binding defines a codex, which is what a book is. The codex book is like a Slinky: it is a spring that expands and contracts. When the spring expands, the covers open up and the pages splay part. When the spring contracts, it pulls the pages in and the edges of the covers act as clamps to batten them down. In a sense, it liquefies and solidifies, or one can compare it to a bulb sending out leaves and flowers and then withdrawing it all into its core. Without thread, there is no spring, no binding, and no book. It was thread that enabled the codex to be invented and thereby to replace the scroll, about the third or fourth century A.D. (I should add that modern books are not in sewn bindings but rather are “perfect bound”, which involves glue in place of the thread.)

So a book is not a text or a bunch of pages or words or images. It is a hand-powered, spring-operated boxing mechanism. The spring operates the covers of the bindings, which traditionally were called boards. Because boards are a function of the spring at the heart of the book, they are vital to the book, since the whole purpose of the mechanism is protection; furthermore, they are mechanically necessary as anchors to the spring mechanism. They are as vital as what they protect, which can be protected in ways other than by being bound. The pages could, for example, be dumped into a box. The boards form a kind of box, but the

spring mechanism makes reading convenient and easy. So it is clear that binding is not the clothing of the book but its skeleton. Now these boards are often decorated, and their decor is their clothing, so this decor is a direct expression of the essential nature of the book.

Much of this decor used to be made by the application of gold leaf: first in patterns inspired by Islamic art, in Renaissance Venice; later in the architectural and arabesque motifs of the High Renaissance in France; in the complex, allusive style of European Baroque; and finally in the severe but lush motifs of neo-Classicism, in all its forms. The imagery used on bindings was usually abstract, or at the very least combined in abstract patterns. Why put gold on a board? Why put gold jewelry on the body? There are many reasons for jewelry, but surely one of them is erotic. Is there an eros of the book? Does this expression of beauty from the inmost structure of the reading machine refer us to a wider range of passions?

Very quickly, the book you all know appears to be something different from what you've known it to be. What I've described is not a thing you read at length, but rather a medieval machine covered in bizarre abstract symbols representing strange hidden passions. This piece of antique technology decked out in and filled with antiquated iconography is, of course, vastly more complicated than a needle and thread.

The invention of the bound book, such as I have discussed, known as the codex, was a change in the technology of information storage and retrieval. That is, in moving from the scroll to the codex we moved to a form of information storage that had greater capacity, modularity, mobility, and indexing flexibility. The invention of the printing press did not change this, since printed books were bound into codices as manuscripts had been. This was, instead, a change in the technology of the dissemination of information. The next change in the technology of information storage was the hard drive, and in the networked computer we had a revolution in both information storage and information dissemination.

The press then helped to create the book as we have come to know it from the threaded codex I described. Whereas the codex answered the question of what is the book, being at the heart of the book, it is to the milieu of the press that we must look in order to start thinking about who made the book. I want to outline

the makers of the book in the hand press period, which ran from the invention of the printing press and moveable type, in about 1450, to about 1820.

The printer was similar to the head of a motion picture studio in the heyday of the studio and star system in Hollywood. The studio boss didn't write the films or direct them. He set the tone for the business, secured financing, gave it general direction, secured and disciplined the stars, organized distribution, and oversaw production. The printer, especially the successful ones, set the tone for their business and worked to secure financing and established vast and complex networks of book distribution. Some were tremendous capitalists, like Koberger in Nuremberg in the fifteenth century and Plantin in Antwerp in the late sixteenth century. Others were men of scholarly nature, like Aldus in Venice and Amerbach in Basel, who was Erasmus's friend and heir. Erasmus lived in his house while seeing his books through the Amerbach presses. Most printers, though, were poor, and through an ingenious variety of schemes and scrapes, and in a trade marked by continual failure, bankruptcy, and disaster, a trade that impoverished nearly everyone who touched it, created the world of print culture that has sustained our intellectual and social lives.

Printers were craftsmen and the employers of craftsmen. Above all, they employed other printers. Often these were relatives, and numerous houses were carried on by sons, brothers, nephews, widows, and the families they married into. These men learned their trade in a kind of apostolic succession, directly from the mouth of Johannes Gutenberg himself down the towns of the Rhine up until today. From the first day of printing they achieved a standard of virtual craft perfection. If you ever set type by hand, you will know how difficult this. They had a guild proud and rigid with rules, that reflected in its requirements of apprenticeship and skill their sense of the social import of their work. Printers were city folk, almost always. They lived in the whirl of commerce and ideas, of booksellers and authors, feeding on the scraps of money circulating in book selling.

Printers needed type. Type was made by some of the greatest artisans who ever lived. These were geniuses, whose minute decisions structures the look of the letterform today and until the end of time. Working only by natural light and without magnification, they made nearly microscopic steel sculptures, in which infinitesimal variations of line thickness, proportions, curves, and tiny serifs and kerns---the little ornaments all over typefaces---made vast, profound differences in

legibility on the massive scale of the world in print. You don't know most of their names: Le Bé, Arrighi, Tory, Feliciano, Garamond, Fleischman, Didot, Bodoni, Baskerville, Caslon. But their works of art confront you innumerable times every day of your lives.

Printers also needed paper. Making paper from linen or cotton rags was an art imported from Islamic culture first into Spain and then into Italy by the twelfth century. As Europe committed fewer things to memory and more to paper---switching from a memorial to a documentary culture---papermaking spread wherever there was a good strong stream to run the mill, especially along the Rhine. In America it grew throughout the Delaware River Valley. More strange names: Compagnoni, Galizian, Heusler, Van den Zonen.

Paper was often decorated. By the eighteenth century, specialized craftsmen in Italy and Germany above all, but also in France and Holland, were producing staggeringly sophisticated abstract and representational designs through a variety of techniques---from woodblocks to finger-painting---in rough harmony with textile production.

Paper was the most expensive part of the hand press book, so that in the earliest decades paper makers often were investors in publishing enterprises. Printers needed money, so one of the makers of the book was the capitalist who provided the backing. Some were famous bankers, such as the Fuggers; others, just the very rich, who are famous today only because they were brave enough to lose their money supporting a great printer, such as Aldus' patron Peter Uglheimer.

Printers needed ink and presses, but we know much less about the people who made and supplied these goods. Printers needed binders, whose work tells us part of the story of the ownership of books. Some we know only by their tools, such as the Pecking Crow Binder; some, by their patrons, such as the Queen's Binders A and B; others were famous enough to become fashionable brand-names, like Padeloup, Derome, and Bozérian.

Printers also needed illustrators. At first, these were illuminators who did in books what they were doing in manuscripts. In time, though, an army of largely anonymous woodblock artists created tens of thousands of small works of art for printers throughout Europe. This was the first publicly available, widely

distributed, and cheap body of imagery, which then served as the patterns for lacework, porcelain, carving, painting, and most other decorative arts. We know them by such eponyms as “the Master E.S.” In time, engravers largely replaced the woodblock cutters, adding their signatures. They developed the intensity and sophistication of text illustration. A world of artists with names like Eisen and Zucchelli and Engelbrecht made their livelihoods in this way. It was through printing technology that other types of graphic imagery were invented, such as the mezzotint, which was the first dot-printing, and ultimately the many forms of lithography.

Of course, printers needed authors. Sometimes these were their school friends or relatives of patrons. Sometimes they were noblemen and politicians. Sometimes they were profound friends, the two forming a partnership of historic proportions, like Erasmus and Amerbach; other times, they were just scribblers, creatures from a very large and very deep swamp of writers who barely ate, each of whose lives remains a heartbreaking tale of poverty and ambition. Yet it was just these who wrote most of the literature of each age, who wrote the chapbooks and the tales ordinary people read. Their work, the other 99% of our heritage, is preserved by the work of the printers. For example, the log of the press of the monastery of San Ripoli in Florence records in 1476 accepting a pile of blankets as payment from “Bernardino who sings in the Piazza” for printing a broadside of the songs he sang.

Finally, printers needed booksellers. Many were booksellers. But in time these intrepid entrepreneurs of literacy formed a worldwide commercial network of their own. Without benefit of telephonic or electronic communication, without benefit of most financial instruments, including checks, they succeeded with stunning efficiency at moving ideas quickly throughout Europe and America and around the world. You’ve never heard of Pieter van der Aa. But it was he who made Europe aware of the revolutionary ideas in Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*.

There were also librarians and bibliographers. Bibliographers were really nothing other than persons who thought about how to organize knowledge, so that the history of bibliography parallels the history of epistemology. Once books began to multiply, librarians began to think about how to make them accessible.

All of these persons were necessary to produce and distribute and use books. It is the case that the production of each book was a unique business enterprise, a partnership of people from all these crafts and trades. The partners all changed around for the next book, especially in the first century of printing. Given the difficulties of technology, the virtual hopelessness of the commerce, and the infinite human difficulties, it is a wonder that any books at all were printed. Yet 40,000 appeared in the first half-century of printing, which in their many copies comprise some tens of millions of objects. In the next half-century, from 1501 to 1550, more than 100,000 titles were published.

These enterprises, and all of these entrepreneurs, needed one more party: readers. The book did not spring into existence in 1455. It precipitated a deep change in Western consciousness and was in turn affected by the responses of readers to books. For example, we think of the printed book as establishing fixity of text, but it did not. A long struggle between texts and readers, between readers and printers, and between printers and authors, in which nothing was assumed, slowly created the text as we know it, with all its fluidity. In the crucible of a complex commercial world, the unconsolidated boundaries of print were tested. The book emerged only as a social context around it coalesced. A new world was created by the press, but it was only the efforts of all the kinds of persons I have referred to that called this world to order: low-lives and philosophers, shysters and noblemen, all of them by their work helped to make print culture a reliable medium for the production, storage, and dissemination of knowledge and idea. We may one day look back at the “computer revolution” to describe it in simple terms as an event that enabled people to create and move texts, but we in the middle of it in these days know that it is a mess giving birth to a new world. It was the same in the wake of the printing press and throughout the centuries of its dominance.

This was print culture. Ideas, craft, and money all flowed through it from every quarter of Western civilization. It existed not as an appendage to its culture, not as a utility like the power company, not as a public service, but as huge, international nexus, based on innumerable stories of bravado and ambition, that shaped what it was given into what it produced. This vital enterprise was an ineluctable part of every intellectual development. And yet it was inhabited by a cast of characters you’ve never heard of. I’ve been at pains to name names to you, even though they mean rather little, in order for you to gain some sense of this.

There are more, too, many more: LucAntonio Giunta, Antonio Zatta, Thierry Maartens, Claude Jombert, Richard Wenssler, Peter Schoeffer. You don't read about them in intellectual and social history, but they were leading figures in the process by which we have grown and defined ourselves.

Print culture controlled and determined public knowledge. As it fed information back to readers, the public could use the knowledge to study and to learn more. In the seventeenth century, coffee-houses kept copies of printed flyers with daily currency exchange rates, so that the merchants at the dockside and market cafés could act upon current information. Today we do this by electronic transmissions, but the principle is the same: knowledge builds upon knowledge to reach critical mass, and with each new stage thus achieved the curve sharpens its ascent to a steeper angle. This geometry was caused by and may be studied through print culture.

Thus print culture, I would argue, is an essential part of the theory of mind, for it was a determinant of the development of critical thought. It is part of our nervous system, a factory created by human intelligence for its own propagation. In the last analysis, the whole of print culture---from authors to type founders to paper makers to printers and booksellers and readers---is an aspect of human intelligence, an intellectual system as much as it is material culture.

Viewed in this way, each old book has a symbolic message as well as the message conveyed in its contents of text and illustration. Each book is a symbol of all the processes that went into creating the ideas it explains or the events it narrates. Since it is normal for us to create symbolic and archetypal and other psychological associations with the circumstances in which we experience meaningful events, and since books are the vessels for so much verbal and iconic discourse of the greatest meaning in our civilization, then books as such are an access-point to the deeper processes of the formation of values and meaning. Each book is an expression of all the values put into it by its creators and users because each book, in its intended and resultant physical states, is a set of instructions for and results of reading---that is, decoding the verbal work in the text of the book.

In other words, I think there are ghosts in the books. Not unlike the ghosts haunting the houses and streets of Waukegan, we must attain a state of delicate vibratory sensitivity to perceive them. For hand press books in particular, it is necessary to achieve a receptivity to the combination of material, emotional, and

intellectual messages each comprises.

These “ghosts” derive from a very hard, corporeal fact. When we are reading a text, we must always ask ourselves what is the authority of the text we are reading? The authority can only be the chain of artifacts that preserve the verbal work. This chain includes manuscripts, printed books, and hard drives. All of these are material artifacts subject to error in transmission and mutation over time. They do not “reproduce” the text. They give a version that must be read critically. Today, when we think that verbal works exist in various artifacts, and when we think that they can be transmuted from one format to another, such as microform or photocopies or digital formats, without any thought as to the soundness of the text, we are just like lemmings at a cliff side. All texts are physical objects that exist in artifacts that condition the verbal work they represent. Each artifact, digital or three-dimensional, is a set of instructions for the recreation of the work. The work itself cannot be assumed to exist in each and every text, any more than an art historian believes a reproduction of a painting is the painting itself. If we ignore this, how will we know when we have a correct text?

This is not a concern over editorial minutiae. What will happen when those who control databases, through error or intention, change or lose texts that are precious to us if we do not know to study the texts of each artifact?

You have doubtless noted a delicate, if not dodgy, combination of the intellectual and the corporeal in the way I have been discussing hand-printed books. But what is a ghost if not an incomprehensible reification of the incorporeal and etherealization of the material? What is a ghost if not an expression, a symbol, of a mystery of transubstantiation, of incarnation, of immanence and eternity, of life and survival that we do not really understand? To study objects and to study ideas are not separate activities because when we study objects we are learning about the tangible ways humans have devised for transmitting meaning and about how these media affect the messages they transmit and preserve.

The “soul” part of the book is not the text, and the “body” part of the book is not the physical object. It is rather less simple than this. For the verbal work is entirely independent of the book. It is, as economists say of money, fungible. If there is one thing the digital revolution has taught us, it is that verbal works may be commuted into any form we like and made to appear at any place we choose. If we regard the verbal work as the “soul”, the essential reality, of the book, then the

physical book, as the “medium” for this “message”, is reduced to “information studies.” But in fact the book has more powerful and deeper role in the development of ideas and values. Works, in fact, exists nowhere: no one appearance of the text is “the” work, any more than any other appearance. It is not this copy of a book that is really where the fungible text lives, any more than it is that copy of the same edition. We have seen that the book has much more going on it than text. So if we cannot view the book as the medium and the message, and that therefore its text is not the ghost, then what is the ghost in the book?

In one of the most famous sections of his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant asked if there would be any difference between a real flower and an artificial flower that looked, smelled, and felt just exactly as does the real flower. The real flower decays at a different rate and in a different manner from the artificial flower because it is made of different substances. Its decay, and all its particular changes at their particular speeds, are the signs of its life. It is precisely on the singular nature of living reality that Kant’s question founders.

Indeed, it is not a correct question at all. For if everything about the artificial flower were exactly the same as the real flower, it would be a real flower. The question would not be asked if there were no differences. There are differences between real and artificial flowers, just as there are differences, however microscopic, between each and every thing in the universe. Leibniz was right to say that reality is infinitely individuated. Kant’s question is, I think, really just a convenient way to express all those differences between the original and the reproductive that I call: the presence of the authentic object.

The presence of the authentic object: this is the “ghostly” aspect of the objects around us. Things become more ghostly as data supplant them for usefulness, but in their gathering evanescence they have begun to speak more clearly, if more softly, to us. Our world now is one of data and objects. Whereas data have no history, objects are history. An old tool, for example, is no longer useful; but, detached from its utility, it seems to glow with meaning. We look at it strictly subjectively and even psychologically, phenomenologically if you will, in which its full nature and history are expressed in its presence, or in our sensitivity to its presence.

Old books have not only all the character and patina that other old objects

have, but they have also a unique element: the text. It is this singular and pre-eminent feature that exponentially complexifies everything in and about old books. My colleagues like to say that a book is primarily a text, and I like to irritate them by saying that a book is an object complicated by the presence of a text. To historians these are objects of supreme interest. Beside each of its physical aspects testifying to its composition, origin, and history, there is text, with its own vast and intricate history of composition, change, and reproduction, each element reflecting on all the others. And beside this, there often are illustrations, with subtle but critical interactions with the text and the graphic design of the book. Yet to us simply as persons and citizens, even if we are not historians, these old books are powerful messages from our forebears.

I will not be the last to defend to you the study of material culture or to recommend it to your attention. But I may be the only one before you to dwell with obsessive insistence of the singular and central importance of the old book as testimony in the scientific study of material culture and, furthermore, as objects whose special soulfulness has meaning to you as citizens of our civilization. It is possible to view them as a narrow bit of cultural history, a small slice chiefly from a few centuries in the life of a handful of Western European countries. But the texts they carry make them in truth a large and important thing, unlike old hammers and pitchers and even paintings, that happens to be defined by local decor and culture, just like every other object. To view them, to regard them, to sense the presence of these authentic objects is a way of connecting through them to the lives of many of our forebears, long ago and far away; to the history we all now inherit and live with; and to the rhythms of the cosmos, perhaps felt more directly by those in simpler times and often seen more clearly when looking back beyond our present needs and ambitions.

It is hard to bear hearing the common statement that digitization of texts frees us from the past of multiple ownership of objects into a future of easily transmitted and perfectly accessible texts. We aren't being freed from the past. We can't be, because we depend on it to know who we are, as we depend on artifacts to know what the correct text is. We are losing the past. And it is more, and worse than this. The impulse to eliminate multiple ownership of objects is, at heart, despotic. Private property, of books as of land, can protect us from those seeking to control us. Why do we call digitization the liberated future when it is in fact building Leviathan?---a world of plastic reproductions, in which what Walter

Benjamin called “the bent...of the contemporary masses...toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” removes us from factually verifiable and spiritually real experience. In these terms, the body of digitized texts is the theme-park, the tacky reproduction, of real texts and real reading.

I do not suggest that we stop working with computers. I suggest instead that we work, reverentially, spiritually, with awareness and thrill, with books as well, because working with books is a subversive act---rather like growing one’s own vegetables. It is something we should continue to do because it spiritually and emotionally nourishes us.

Anthony Stevens, in his *Private Myths: Dreams and Dreaming* (Harvard U.P., 1997), wrote:

To the primordial intellect humanity held a central position in the cosmic order, lived in a state of intimate participation with nature..., held a rhythmic, circular conception of time, inhabited a reality primarily located in the world of the spirit, accepted moral values as absolute, regarded life as eternal, and believed myth and ritual to be indispensable to the health and vitality of the spirit. By contrast, to the modern intellect, humanity holds a peripheral position in the cosmic order, lives in a state of objective separation from nature, holds a progressive, linear conception of time, inhabits a reality primarily located in the world of matter, accepts moral values as relative, regards life as strictly finite, and believes myth and ritual to be irrelevant to the problems of modern life.

The presence of the authentic object: this is something that can have a special value and provide a special spiritual nourishment for us in the unsensual world of whirling electrons. And because books carried text, the texts that made our civilization and made our world, they seem to me to have a special soulfulness, a certain richness for our study and our contemplation, unmatched by any of the other categories of vestiges from our past. If metaphysics is to learn through the physical what is immanent in it, we have no richer ground than old books for a moral contemplation of our world as it has come to be.

Bennett Gilbert  
Los Angeles, California  
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