

# *Illusions Will Not Sustain Antiquarian Bookselling*

By Bennett Gilbert  
Portland, Oregon  
bennettbg@yahoo.com  
9<sup>th</sup> December, 2009

## I.

In arranging my recent recession from antiquarian bookselling, I found myself thinking hard about its tradition and current situation. I have written about old books as such but hitherto not about book selling and specifically about its present problems and prospects. Its current situation comprises many kinds of dealing in rare books, some of which I admire and some of which I loathe. By “tradition”, I mean that substance of it which, having been formed by the booksellers and book buyers of the past and being at this time still alive, responds to present challenges and helps to carry it into the future. This “substance” includes the practices, standards, beliefs, hopes, habits, needs, fears, assumptions, and passions of those who professionally buy and sell rare books.

Rare book dealers constantly worry about their business. They worry about whether people are or will be interested in owning old books or rare books, due to cultural changes and to the digitization of texts; and they worry about these things both with respect to their private businesses and with respect to the trade as a whole. I have long thought that there is good reason to worry about these things. But I have not seen what I regard as a proper analysis of these forces as they weigh upon the trade, nor have I seen anything like a correct orientation by dealers of themselves and their trade toward these forces. A better analysis and a better orientation give specific possibilities for the success of the trade. What follows is my view of what these are.

I closed my business after several difficult years. These difficulties were

external, having to do with changes to the structure and to the cultural environment of the trade; and they were internal, having to do with the limitations of my taste and clientele and, perhaps above all, of my personality. Others found great success in these years, better adapting to the culture or being at different stages of their lives. Over a couple of years I determined that I had other things I wished to express and that I desired to participate in my society and culture in other ways, long thought about.

In turning to these new projects, I much underestimated the emotional effort needed to leave the book selling trade. It is a tribute to its spiritual strength that most antiquarians are lifers. I felt myself and every other member of the trade, regardless of his or her style of book selling, to be part of a professional and intellectual tradition that began in Greco-Roman antiquity. This tradition has as its nearer genesis Cosimo de' Medici's commission of Vespasiano da Bisticci to augment the library of the monastery of San Marco in Florence, the first library designed to be open to the scholarly public; and in the booksellers sent on the road by Peter Schoeffer, down the Rhine and across Germany, one of whose handbills survives.

Door-to-door book selling was practiced in America, often by women. The salespersons took blank books and sample books of useful knowledge and of literature across the growing country. The last itinerant booksellers were probably the schleppers of plush Catholic home Bibles in the 1960's, documented by the Maysles Brothers in their marvelous sad film, *Salesman* (1969). Of course, publishers and antiquarians still travel to sell, but on different bases. The real traveling today is done not so much in person as on the Web, where hundreds of thousands of dealers and buyers travel around the world every day in search of what they want to read and to collect. But, even when electronically selling books, every member of the trade still partakes of this long heritage.

It sometimes does seem that many of those who now enter antiquarian book selling through the Web do not have the same kind of attachment—that they, evanescent as the electrons on their computer screens, can take up and leave off this trade and that their attachment to it is as modular as the cable connection between computer elements. Anyone who entered the trade before digitization or who by some grace has a felt connection to old books will learn, upon retirement, how rich and encompassing a practice rare book dealing is.

When I started, the only “web” was a spider’s web of friendships the center of which was a large, low round table in front of a great fireplace, at which my employer, Jake Zeitlin, sat every day, and which stretched all across the Americas to Europe and Japan and elsewhere. It was made up of telegrams, telephone calls, and, chief of all, the skein of personal relationships Jake had built with colleagues and clients in all these places. Sitting at this table, across from the fireplace, in a high-back windsor chair, spilling cigarette ash on everything, he talked and talked to anyone who came by or called. Any of you who met him saw in his face that he lived every one of his relationships in the book world and in life. I used to feel that even by cablegram nothing with him was truly at “long-distance.”

To that kind of web antiquarian book selling has now added the World Wide Web. I don’t say one has replaced the other. Many relationships within the trade and with clients do take place in a disembodied, electronic dimension our predecessors would not recognize, but booksellers stay resilient and alive within their tradition by collegial friendships. It’s the human way; and everyone, everywhere must rely on or face these, no matter how wired his trade or life. So, as I found through the experience of my own recession from the trade, the traditions at its heart still live. I can see this in the antiquarian booksellers I know.

Yet everyone knows that the Web has introduced structural changes to the trade. I would urge the trade to consider, with equal attention, the cultural changes, incited by the evolution of electronic data, in the world around it. The society in which dealers act is changing, and everyone is in a political engagement with those changes. Booksellers think of themselves, in a way, as out of time, perhaps because of their tradition. Yet by virtue of participating in a tradition of cultural transmission and advocacy, every rare book dealer is a political actor. Every sale of a rare book has a political, or we might call it a universal, dimension. That tradition which gives strength to the trade grew in concert with the great intellectual, scientific, commercial, and social movements of the modern world, from the late Middle Ages forward. This includes the twenty-first century every bit as much as it included the twentieth century, when war, prosperity, class conflict, liberation movements, and chthonic new streams of thought pulled everyone on board, including rare book dealers, as the century sped by. Dealers have the strength to grow in new eras, but I am suggesting here that they must explicit and consciously think about what the changing environment of world

civilization means for the rare book trade, just as much as they diligently labor to put the new technology in service to their advantage.

The truth is that antiquarian book selling is part of a going concern: the development of the values by which a worldwide civilization lives. The tradition dealers live on is not there just for their benefit and support. It also contributes to a moral development that all humanity is engaged in, as it struggles with the ethical, ecological, and social challenges in our path. Were it not part of this movement, the trade would surely be doomed to de-racination and to irrelevance. That it is not so fated is a sign of the strength of this tradition, and this strength lies in its place within the larger culture. For many reasons, antiquarian booksellers hold a special place within our world. They deal with the artifactual vessels of a central part of its history, the text and its related imagery. This is not the place to spin out the ontology of this. But surely we can readily see that booksellers and the history their goods record live in symbiosis—and that when this history mutates there are existential consequence ahead for the rare books trade.

## II.

Antiquarian book selling is a tradition that lives within a larger universe. This tradition is comprised of elements that reflect the developments in the larger world. And, like every other activity, antiquarian book selling in turn influences the growth of the world around it. In order to continue both to be supported by the civilization and to contribute to it, as it must, the trade must grow in response to these larger determinants. That is how a tradition continues.

**I want, therefore, to specify three of the most important elements constitutive of the modern rare book trade and the changes they are slowly undergoing.**

*The first constituent is the material substrate, the codex.* This is a technology of later antiquity, invented around the second or third century A.D. At first it employed (apparently) leather thongs to tie tablets or leaves together. In time, this became the use of string or thread that, holding the leaves in tension, created a hand-powered, spring-activity boxing mechanism called the codex.

***The second constituent is what lately is called “print culture”*** or sometimes “the culture of the book.” It is a large continuous cultural context encompassing all activity around the printed book, itself part of the story of literacy and communication. As the codex book grew from manuscript to printed book to mass-produced object, it became the collective memory of science and culture. Deep feelings about everything from the self to the entire universe were projected onto the form of the book. Print culture grew from the ever richer structure of ideas, facts, and feelings born by the book after the invention of printing. In the centuries succeeding this invention, those within its reach—Europeans alone at first, then the Western Hemisphere, and finally to Africa and Asia—learned to write (or “author”), publish, illustrate, bind, read, and edit texts, to teach them and to learn from them, in richer and more complex ways. It was a feed-back mechanism that steadily increased human knowledge and ability. The process as it applied to seventeenth century Britain has been brilliantly described by Adrian Johns in *The Nature of the Book*.

***The third constituent is the effects of the modern financial and commercial macocosm:*** the stage of the fetishization of commodities initiated in consequence of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, from about 1800 or 1820 onward.

Most societies have been marked by the production of deluxe or otherwise prestigious coveted goods. In virtually all fields of decorative and fine arts, the Renaissance focus on beauty and meaning lead to keen collecting and pride of ownership. Books, even as rolls in antiquity, had long been coveted symbols of wisdom or of wealth. But the creation of vast new fortunes, the new industrial form of civilization, and mass markets bred new attitudes toward consumption and ownership. A group of these distinctively new attitudes were called “commodity fetish” by Marx, a new form of the fetishizing of objects that is a very early and old mode of our relationship to objects.. With the help of advancing scholarship throughout the nineteenth century, collecting of precious objects became more intense and specialized and also a refined, publicly prominent activity.

***Modern antiquarian book selling was created by applying modern commodity fetishization to the ancient technology of the codex book, and the product of this combination took its place within the culture of the book, altering it.*** The great modern antiquarian firms began to be created in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The market was flooded with books from the

Napoleonic Wars and from a new level of dispersion of old private and ecclesiastical libraries. A whole new kind of book collecting and book selling appeared, along with the scholarship that both benefitted it and supported it. Thus, social, economic, intellectual, and cultural forces from the entire universe of civilization in its changing forms gave birth to modern antiquarian book selling.

This result was, in a sense, the moment of greatest authenticity for the modern antiquarian book trade. The way in which booksellers and clients and others coalesced was comprised of shared values derived from the ancient authority of the book plus the cultural authority of the “rare book” built since the Industrial Revolution. That moment has now passed, largely because of the revolutionary intellectual and productive forces set in motion by the period that created the book trade and in which it later flourished. The authority of books remains, though weakened; and in the last decades scholarship has found new ways to use old books to connect us to our history. In the third section of this essay, I’ll discuss these in the context of the responses of book selling to the changes I’ve outlined.

### **Why have these three constituents changed?**

(1). *The first cause is technology.* From the time of the invention of the codex there was no news technology for the storage of information until the invention of the hard drive. Movable type and the printing trade it produced were changes not in information storage, which remained the codex, but in the distribution of information. This, too, has been revolutionized for the first time since Gutenberg by digitization.

Beside storage and distribution, the computer has revolutionized a third area: search and retrieval. Humankind long had primarily its non-documentary memory for this job until, from the Middle Ages on, indexing slowly developed. Out of this grew bibliography, itself a science of information retrieval. In my view, bibliography advanced roughly in tempo with the changing concepts of knowledge through advances in philosophy and science. Digital media provide entirely, fundamentally new ways to search and retrieve information, as both caused and effect of our changing epistemology.

This change is very large and hence very gradual as well as full of cross-currents. I have elsewhere suggested ways in which the change in the utility

of books for containing information can re-focus us on the aesthetic and spiritual values represented by old books. Although a new generation worldwide is growing up with a profoundly different kind of familiarity and facility with knowledge than the prior generations, as always in such revolutions old forms remain or are adapted. Changes in the deep structures of our minds happen in measured, organic ways. But basic conceptions of knowledge are changing, and the fundamental beliefs shared by the actors in making and using this knowledge also change. As people become accustomed to this, their relationship to objects will change along the whole moving front of knowledge, as the deepest suppositions of epistemology mutate. For the bookseller, it will be harder to address the common values that underlay the peculiar union of persons with the object-centered rare book world.

(2). *The second cause is a vastly larger movement affecting culture and personality.* It has been generated by the industrial and marketing forces that, along with creating the market for rarities and the modern idea of collecting, sped throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This form of commerce began to permeate society, creating what Theodor Adorno called “the culture industry” in 1936 and in many essays afterward.

“The culture industry is defined by the fact that it does not strictly counterpose another principle to that of (the) aura (of the traditional work of art or craft), but rather by the fact that it preserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist... What (seems preserved) by the culture industry is in fact all the more thoroughly destroyed by it” (Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, pp. 102-103). When marketing appropriates something, it is no longer so much the intrinsic use and spirit of that object or activity that has value as it is its cost that has value. The general movement toward replacing any other value by exchange value is an outcome of the same forces that started to make old books prized and costly two hundred years ago.

All dealers and their customers live inside a world dominated by the forces of appropriation and exchange value. Scholarship has indeed deepened our knowledge of history, and real creativity and thought exist throughout the civilization, pushing back against immoral, personally and socially destructive forms of society; but the antiquarian book trade, like every other business, is profoundly implicated in the culture industry. Like the buyers, dealers think differently than their predecessors did because of the exposure to industrial

marketing propaganda in the last century. The trade cannot pretend that the tradition in which dealers, readers, and collectors live is not so affected by this environment that, although the possibilities of enlightenment and understanding through the ownership of rare books certainly exist, they have been made much more difficult to achieve by this basic civilizational shift.

So, will the buying and selling of rare old books help us to remember or to forget? To remember that every move toward peace, justice, freedom, and well-being is precious, achieved by the struggling and suffering of all humanity? That our every link with that humanity is a key to the treasure of their wisdom, experience, strength, and hope—and to their part, all those parts, wretched and glorious, of our story? That the past kept for us in a singular richness by the written verbal and pictorial record is as endangered as the flora and fauna of our besieged planet, both as to its physical survival and as to the ongoing moral struggle to which memory contributes one of the brightest-burning fuels? Or will it serve to help us forget that things, even things like great rare books, can cloud the mind with meaningless choices, will clutter our vision inside as well as out, that they stink of mortality? Will our books start to seem like every other kind of merchandise, regardless of provenance or of price, and then like every other kind of entertainment: yet another distraction from the moral forces washing over us every day from every corner of the world? Will they become more data, more sensation, more spiritually evacuated gratification? Will buying and selling these great and fine things be like buying and selling everything else? Will rare book collections in private hands become historical theme parks? Another kind of theme park? Casinos? Let us think about how the tradition of bookselling takes memory as its theme, so as to decide whether the substance of this trade will be kept or will be traded away.

### III.

Early in my book selling years, a colleague who briefly had been a lover of mine sent me a book I ordered from him. He said, “There’s a little present for you in with the book.” After opening the parcel, I looked everywhere for my gift. I was really excited and turned the box upside down. I searched through the bag and the bubble-paper and the book itself, repeatedly, but I couldn’t find it. I asked him if I had mistakenly crumpled it with the wrapping. He said that his present

was a kiss laid between the leaves of the book.

In some measure this episode did more to make me a bookseller than anything else. Something connected him and me. It was in and around the book, but it wasn't the book. Why did he think I would find his invisible gift? How did he know it could be conveyed by the means he had chosen for it—the act of bookselling itself? I came to feel that every book was full of these gifts, engrossed between the leaves. Did I get gifts or messages from past owners and readers? Each book, with its many gifts, was both question and answer: I had to ask questions of the book, and it had answers as to how the past was present in every part of our lives today.

The ownership, collecting, study, and vending of old objects are all about the same one thing: about the presence of the past, the agencies that make us what we are today---until we add to them and make of ourselves, our world, and our posterity something different. People acted in order to correct wrongs and to survive or to live better. When we cross a bridge to the past, it is not to escape the present but to find more of our own truth, in order to act upon it. I have never believed in selling nostalgia. The forces in Western tradition that fostered rationalism, enlightenment, justice, and philosophical inquiry were the same forces, as in every civilization, that yielded up crime, oppression, war, and injustice. When we look into the past, it is not to deny the present. It is to know it more honestly.

My dear colleague long ago passed away. With most every book I have received or examined since that day, I think of him. I think of Jake Zeitlin, too. I think of W. M. Voynich—desperate, nervous, brilliant, the predecessor who has most fascinated me---though I could never have met him. I think as well of Luc Antonio Giunta and his anonymous woodblock cutters, who drove my interest in the relation of imagery and text. I think of everyone in the book selling tradition whom I know or know of; of all the printers who turned the lead-heavy machinery of their art, through their nimble fingers, into compact flying messengers from one person to another and from one age to another, even into time-capsules and time-machines once we found better tools for understanding them; of all the authors and their friends, enemies, editors, and family, who struggled to figure out some little thing about our life in this world; and of the unseen millions whose needs for food and drink, love and sex, money and divinity have been the engine of

mankind's survival.

Antiquarian book selling is a complicated, delicate thing, connected, at its best, both to the past and to the present in a manner more intense and self-conscious, though no more real, than many other pursuits require. It is a part of whole—as I said earlier, of a going concern—which it must benefit just as it expects to be benefitted. I also have called the trade a political actor; it is a tradition of a special kind of recollection. Rare book dealing is in many ways about citizenship, with the capacity to kindle an awareness of the truth of what we are and how we came to be that makes people more conscious and less narcotized by the info-tainment industry or even by the pressures of daily life.

Antiquarians who wish to sustain their trade both for themselves and for posterity, should discern the factors in rare books that are fogged or forgotten in the midst of the narcotizing influences in society. Old books were fabricated by the creation of text and images plus the production of their printed form. They are used by readers and by collectors. Fabrication and use, creation and memory, are keys to why people collect books. One can view the purchase of a rare book as an act of remembering; the keeping or collecting of it as asking a stream of questions of that memory—to search it and to recollect some wisdom from it. Rare book dealers are the motor of this activity of recollection: they show it, start it, move it, advocate for it. In a world in which people will choose or not choose to re-form their relationship with the book, booksellers should constantly ask themselves: what do I want my clients to remember about our civilization? What questions are my books asking my clients and me? What do we learn when we hold in our ownership the creation of other people—such a complex creation as the printed book is? And what can my clients and I recollect from these objects, by asking ourselves questions through these intermediaries, about what makes us, what we ought to do and ought not to do, what happened that has given us life today, as citizens and as societies?

Therefore I have argued in this essay that booksellers cannot look on the digitization of information and the growth of the culture industry merely as a technical challenge or even as a market threat, and they must not in any way regard these as that outside themselves which they stand against. It is part of them and part of their clients; and the changes, both deep and daily, that these effect will increase over time. The way in which to offer a moral reflection on these changes,

and to join with the whole civilization in struggling to progress, is to do what distributors of books—publishers and booksellers of all kinds—did from the Renaissance forward: in the midst of making a buck, even for the sake of making a buck, they reflected upon their times and sought to contribute to them.

It is not accident that cultural changes revolutionizing the attitude toward books and the collecting of them threaten the livelihood of the antiquarian bookseller, nor will it be accident should the trade survive this threat. What happens to society, happens to booksellers. And the yet deeper connection between society as a consumer of information and the antiquarian trade is that there is moral link between the two. Booksellers serve not only as suppliers but also as an agent of reflection, change, and the growth of knowledge. When a rare book is sold to a collector, there is a chance to enlighten the buyer, as well as the seller, an opportunity that becomes harder to grasp as the pre-conditions of it, in its traditional form, change. But the possibility of wisdom still is there, maybe even to a greater degree as the shift in the status of the book from being an object of utility to an object of reflection grows, accelerated by the academic study of the history of communication and material culture studies. These deepen our grasp of the complex reality of the past and of the present. By being more aware of these studies than they now are by and large, dealers will be able better to respond to the forces within which we all live.

Booksellers no less than all others don't just use technology. They are changed by it. They don't just visit their culture. They are constituted by it. They are no less political actors, as booksellers, in their societies than is anyone else. The Web is not just a way to sell books, or a way to fail to sell them; the broad changes in culture are not just insults to the consciousness of craft and intellect that rare book dealers love. They are the current conditions of the tradition of book selling and book buying in general and especially of antiquarian book selling and buying. Their moral challenge is served up right along with their financial challenge. In this regard, the rare book dealer has opportunities widening just where the new bookseller has them narrowing: in how potent a locus for pleasure, reflection, connection, recollection, information, and wisdom is the object he deals under the new lights we can shine upon it. Conscious, learned, socially aware, morally pointed responses to these circumstances—the active use of rare books to make their owners smarter citizens and not stupider consumers—is the way to add another layer to the tradition of book selling lasting from antiquity

to our times. Not to take the trouble to do so is the way in which that tradition will hollow out.

Reading itself is an active art. Each reader adds to the body of interpretation out of which people live and learn. Book selling and collecting can be likewise active. One of Walter Benjamin's central insights in his view of the invention of modernity and the connection of modernity with the collecting passion was that the formation of a collection gives new birth to the possible meanings of every object in the collection. Every transmission of any part of a tradition is a blank page of possibilities. If it will look past the view of valuable books and manuscripts as toys or trophies, though they are these things too, the antiquarian trade can be an advocate in our evolving civilization.

The ownership of rare books is a moral statement, whether we are aware of it or not. This is because the books themselves reflect all the beliefs that went into their creation and because collecting books re-forms and renews our view of those beliefs and their meaning for the present. Within the context of digitized information and of consumerism driven by the culture industry, antiquarian book selling and book collecting have the conditions for making a deeper and stronger layer of reflections on the history they handle. They can make that history present, more present than it would be without them. And this can help make citizens, and even societies, more aware of their long struggles for justice, peace, health, and well-being, more aware of the nature and demands of the human struggle for survival than they would otherwise be. Engaging with it, the trade has a mission to enrich the world—and to grow its own tradition by this response to the unprecedented challenges of the changing nature of literacy and intelligence, amidst the quickening moral dialogues of a world-wide civilization.