Epilogue: Falling Asleep over the History of the Book

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TEN YEARS AGO, IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HIS EDITED COLLECtion *The Future of the Book*, Geoffrey Nunberg predicted, "If we take the book in its broad sense to refer simply to bound, printed volumes, then most books will likely disappear soon." Imagining the prospect of electronic books, of devices that would present text not just on a screen but on something "almost the equivalent of paper in [its] weight and flexibility," Nunberg looked forward to a time when printed pages would no longer be the primary bearer of textual information (12). That time has not come. The e-book never seemed to make it, either as a viable technology or as an attractive commercial product. More bound and printed volumes are being made and sold than ever. And the history of the book as an academic discipline continues to grow—not out of a sense that books *are history* (in the colloquial sense of that phrase) but out of a conviction that they are here to stay and that to know their future we should know their past.

When first issued, in 1994, the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* had little to say about books. In the second edition of this volume, however, published in 2005, "book history" gets an entry all its own. This entry, a model review of the discipline complete with a full bibliography, makes clear that the history of the book is now a central part of literary criticism and theory and the pedagogy of humanities departments. We find meaning in the physical appearance of the page, in typographic layout, but also in handwritten marginalia. The sociology of taste and temperament can be recovered from the economics of the book trade. Cognitive science looks to histories of reading. And old, traditional pursuits—library science, paleography, book collecting—have been charged anew with the convictions, in the words of the *Guide*'s contributor, "that the

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status and interpretation of a word depend on material considerations, that the meaning is always produced in a historical setting, and that the meaning of a text depends on the differing readings assigned to it by historical, rather than ideal, readers" (Bishop 131).

This tension between the historical and the ideal reader has provoked in the last ten years the rise of what I would call the biblio-autobiography: the life shaped by acts of reading. Alberto Manguel's best-selling *History of Reading* is as much human story as it is a tale of books. Francis Spufford's *The Child That Books Built*, in addition to its personal account of growing up with certain volumes, argues that learning how to read is a lifetime, and life-defining, experience: "We can remember readings that acted like transformations. There were times when a particular book, like a seed crystal, dropped into our minds when they were exactly ready for it, like a supersaturated solution, and suddenly we changed" (9). Books such as Manguel's and Spufford's (and there are many of them) go beyond merely recording the tastes of families or individuals to ask just how the author, as a historical reader, can become an ideal reader. How can we, through the act of reading and the care of books, live best in our historical condition and, at the same time, grow into what we think of as our ideal selves? The history of the book is our own history.

And it will be the history of our children, too. Just look at the success of the Harry Potter series. It is not simply that these volumes are best sellers. It is that they argue passionately for books in children's lives. They make reading an adventure, and they offer in their characters book-hungry children, denizens of libraries, readers so needful of the page that they would risk the censure of their Muggle guardians or the very bite of *The Monster Book of Monsters*.

When Leah Price and I began to think about this special topic in *PMLA*, we asked ourselves a set of questions largely grounded in our own library denizenship. What is the relation between the book as artifact and the aesthetics of the literary imagination? How can the history of reading be recovered from the traces on the text? How do books mediate relations between the public self and the private? And, in the end, is the modern conception of literature inseparable from the conception of the book as the physical, commercial artifact we know?

I began my career as a medievalist and early modernist; Price has worked in eighteenth-century and Victorian studies. Our professional foci may thus have influenced at least some of the submissions we received in British literature before 1900. Several of the essays in this issue, for example, attend to the ways in which authorship found itself in early print. Jody Greene looks at the minor seventeenth-century author, translator, and autobiographer Francis Kirkman in order to make a major point about print and authorial identity: "In prefatory material, authors consistently figure themselves as physically and ideologically separate from the marketplace. To safeguard their modest selves from the violence of publication, they figure their works' entry into print as a loss or separation. . . ." Coleman Hutchison addresses the first printing of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* to expose how the "textual and thematic abnormalities" of this quarto edition raise questions about just what constitutes "intention" in the making of the early printed book. Paula McDowell illustrates how Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* contributes toward an early-eighteenth-century "hierarchy of forms of communication with print at its apex." How does, she asks, print culture absorb orally transmitted narrative; how does the individual author filter social rumor?

But this is not a volume just of early British scholarship. Book history has had a profound impact on American studies. Matthew Brown engages with that impact to argue for "the cultural work of the codex format in

early New England" and to explore how the devotional reading of the period questions our preconceptions about "the social uses of aesthetics" and the "contingencies that construct the value of particular texts." Beth McCoy explores what she calls the power of the paratext to understand two landmarks of African American literature, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* and James Allen's *Without Sanctuary*. In doing so, she reveals how the African American experience of book culture leads to a unique constellation of relations between text and body, white page and black type. Detailing the processes by which Paul Bowles's *Sheltering Sky* saw print, Evan Brier reveals something new about the mid-twentieth-century "art novel." Bowles, Brier notes, signaled "that his manuscript was accepted only when the agent was bypassed"; he thus "links the story of the novel's publication with the mythical bygone era when publishing was gentlemanly and the author's relationship with the publisher was direct, personal, and concerned solely with art."

We hoped for studies, too, that focused on non-English-language literatures and theoretical positions, and we received them. Andrew Piper's essay on Goethe and Lorraine Piroux's on Françoise de Graffigny illustrate that book history is hardly an anglophone phenomenon. Piper excavates the vocabulary of the *Goethezeit*, in which a word such as *Präparat* (meaning an "object that has been chemically treated in preparation for anatomical observation") can "be read as a powerful metaphor for the literary work." Piroux shows how Graffigny's *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* takes as its theme the question of alphabetization itself: how does the non-European express language in writing, and how does the novel, as Piroux puts it, allegorize "the othering of literature in eighteenth-century book culture, if by literature we mean any written practice that deliberately resists or delays the recuperation of the material sign as pure meaning." And working from a tradition of French high literary theory, Peter McDonald argues that the intellectual source of much current book history may, in the end, be not just the traditions of bibliography and textual criticism but also the textual thematics of Derrida and the ways in which late-twentieth-century theoretical writing often manipulated the visual organization of words on the page (take Derrida's *Glas*, in particular).

A vivid sense of the diversity of book-historical approaches thus emerges from this volume. But what of literature? At times implicitly, at times explicitly, each of these essays raises questions about what precisely we mean by the literary. Piroux's definition, which I quoted above, seems to me among the most cogent. She associates literature explicitly with a written practice; she sees something deliberate about it; she finds in its workings a pattern of delay or resistance (in other words, literature uses language not to communicate transparently but rather to reflect on the estranged or etiolated quality of making meaning through signs).

Few of the other authors proffer a definition of literature as straightforwardly as Piroux. But many, I think, work with presuppositions about it. Among other things, what emerges from reading through these essays is a sense of the canonical. Shakespeare, Defoe, Graffigny, Goethe, Douglass, Derrida—they are all key figures from the syllabi of modern study. The others (Kirkman, Bowles, Ondaatje) are now emerging into not just scholarly analysis but also curricula of classrooms.

All this takes me back to the physical relation of books to canons. Many years ago, John Guillory argued that canons are not so much collections of texts as assemblies of values ("Canonical and Non-canonical" and *Cultural Capital*). No single work, in such a scheme, is canonical; rather, works take on canonical status as part of a literary system. While I believe that such a view of canonicity still holds, I think that an attention to the history of the book itself may qualify the

claim. Much speculation on the idea of the canon, and in fact much of literary history as a whole, still goes on as if literary works were somehow unbound to the physical objects that house them. Books *are* objects, though, and canonization is as much a process of selecting space as of selecting value. How can we fit the range of literature on the shelf? The physical, artifactual nature of the book has made the canonizing of the literary work into an act of space management. I think it is worth pausing over this suggestion to provide another lens for reading through the essays in this volume and, in turn, for thinking about the past and future of the book.

Libraries are the spaces for our literature. But there is no absolute, essential way of cataloging books. We may order them by subject (as the Library of Congress catalog does), or we may order them by other means. The Cambridge University Library organizes books, at least in part, by size. The Marzian Library in Venice—much to my amazement when I visited it twenty years ago—organized its rare books by date of acquisition. Robert Cotton, the seventeenth-century antiquarian and book collector whose personal library became the core of the British Library, organized his books by ancient emperors. The Cotton Library was full of bookshelves set in alcoves, and in each alcove was the bust of a Roman emperor (and also Cleopatra). Each bound manuscript in this collection had a name and number determined by the imperial bust in the alcove, the shelf the manuscript was on, and its place on the shelf. Thus, the *Beowulf* manuscript was Vitellius A.xv, the manuscript containing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was Nero A.x, a *Piers Plowman* manuscript was Caligula A.xi, and so on.

The Cotton Library becomes a repository of English textual history, spatially organized around the heads of empire. What is the history of the book and the idea of literature embedded in such a plan?[1] It may be many things, but to me it is a profoundly Vergilian project: one that makes the literary text the voice of an imperial politics; one that affirms the deep past of an English literary history in the founding myths of Trojan exile and Roman foundation; one that, in other words, plays out bibliographically the kind of poetico-dynastic claims of, say, the opening of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: "Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye. . . ." All literature goes on post-Troy. Britain is "Britain" because of its supposed founding by Aeneas's grandson, Brutus. Our lives in reading take on the romance heroics of an ancient exile and his poet.

One of my favorite books is my late father's copy of F. O. Matthiessen's *Oxford Book of American Verse*. Published in 1950, this book canonized the tradition of American poetry under the imprimatur of the oldest university press. As Matthiessen put it in his introduction to the volume, "We have lacked until very lately a formed critical tradition in anything like the European sense. But we have produced by now a body of poetry of absorbing quality. If this poetry reveals violent contrasts and unresolved conflicts, it corresponds thereby to American life" (xxxiii). What strikes me most about this book, however, is not its absorption of the contrasts and conflicts of American life but its remarkably sustained control—its deep Vergilianism. Matthiessen locates the arc of American poetics along a classical axis. He opens with Anne Bradstreet and her invocation of the *Aeneid*: "To Sing of Wars, of Captains, and of Kings, / Of Cities founded, Common-wealths begun, / For my mean pen are too superiour things" (3). The book begins against the template of "Arma virumque cano." And it ends with Robert Lowell's "Falling Asleep over the *Aeneid*," a poem that had, at the time of the *Oxford Book*'s publication, only recently appeared, in the 1948 volume of the *Kenyon Review*. "An old man," reads Lowell's headnote to the poem, "in Concord forgets to go to Morning Service. He falls asleep, while

reading Virgil, and dreams that he is Aeneas at the funeral of Pallas, an Italian Prince." Concord is now a place of reading: not the site of Emerson's "Concord Hymn" (printed in Matthiessen 69–70) but a locale of leisure. The sun sets not on the landscape but on the book: "The sun is blue and scarlet on my page." And when the poem's narrator awakes, he has a vision not of worlds to conquer but of rooms of books: "for the bust / of young Augustus weighs on Virgil's shelf: / It scowls into my glasses at itself" (Matthiessen 1106). Much like the Cotton Library, where imperial busts ruled over English books, Lowell's poem sets the legacy of literary history under the gaze of ancient power.

Matthiessen's volume has an idea of literature as a history of the book—in this case, the *Aeneid*. America is the new Rome, and all its writers are its Vergils, ranged large and small within its compass. But Matthiessen's book shows, too, that there is no single Aeneadic text for America, no single epic that defines us as a people. Instead, it reveals that the best way to understand America is as an anthology, a collection of different voices, visions, and Vergilians. Is all literature really just falling asleep over the *Aeneid*?

Matthiessen's work is a product of his taste and of his times, and later volumes of American literature—the *Norton Anthology*, the *Heath Anthology*, and so on—have brought other voices into their ambit. But these volumes share with one another and, I think, with our special topic the role of the collection or the anthology in making the national or disciplinary narrative. Anthologies are forms of canon making. And in their structure they embed narratives of reading, taste, and power. To read through Matthiessen's *Oxford Book of American Verse* or, for that matter, a medieval manuscript assembly of lyrics is to find sequences that tell stories—whether they are the arc of a nation's response to a classical tradition or the sustaining of a metaphor, an image, an ideal in seemingly disparate texts (such stories are told, too, in the sequence of poems ranged under a single author in any anthology—one could imagine a productive graduate school assignment in which students look at the first poem of each author in an anthology and extract the critical presuppositions the selections may embed).

It is no accident that Leah Price and I have both worked on the history of the anthology, for we believe that anthologies trace out the histories of reading and the material life of books.[2] But more than looking at how anthologies record historical taste or personal preference, we are concerned with how the history of reading may be a history not of books themselves but of excerpts. What Price has called "a culture of the excerpt" informs acts of literary criticism, book reviewing, and classroom teaching. We rely on an ability to excerpt representative selections from longer texts. Such acts, Price notes, reveal our "assumptions not only about how to read, but about the structure of literary texts" (139). They create private anthologies, selections akin, perhaps, to the old "beauties" of an author's work, and in the process may reveal that all acts of reading are acts of anthology formation. To put it another way, we live not with books themselves but with our memories of books: the bits and pieces we recall, the pages we dog-ear, the lines we highlight.

What are the places of this reading? If the literary canon is as much a matter of space as it is a matter of taste, then the history of the book may be found in the human spaces we inhabit as we read. Robert Cotton's librarian or Robert Lowell's old man might open up his book under the gaze of marble emperors. Some of us read to avoid the public gaze of others—to lose ourselves in the press of subways or of airplanes. But many of us, I would bet, read best in bed. Reading in bed has been attested at least since the twelfth century. In the fourteenth, Chaucer opened his first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, with a scene of trying to read himself to sleep, and Harry

Potter keeps awake by reading his book under the covers.[3] The space of fiction has long been a space of sleep and dreaming. I can't imagine curling up with a computer—the very idea of curling up implies secure intimacy, though Geoffrey Nunberg sees the avowal "I'd rather curl up with a good book" as "a declaration that suggests social self-sufficiency and a lively imagination, one of the boxes that people always tick off on the personal profiles on singles sites" ("In Unread America").[4] I do not know if Nunberg falls asleep over an e-book. I can imagine falling asleep in front of a screen but not "over" one; the preposition *over* powerfully carries with it both the physical place of the reader and the imaginative space generated by that place. I can imagine curling up with this issue of *PMLA*—dipping into its many worlds of books and readers, arguing with its authors' potions and polemics. But having read its essays and engaged with all its arguments, I simply can't imagine falling asleep over it.

Notes

1. For the history and cultural implications of the Cotton Library, I am indebted to the forthcoming study by my colleague Jennifer Summit. For a review of the relations between bibliography and the rise of library cataloging, see Greetham 16–19.

2. See Lerer, "Medieval English Literature," and Price. I have explored some of the implications of Price's work on Victorian reading as it applies to the lexicography of *The Oxford English Dictionary* in my *Error and the Academic Self*, ch 3.

3. For reading in bed in the twelfth century, see the episode in Guibert of Nogent's *De vita sua* where he describes his love of learning as a student: "How often they thought I was asleep and resting my little body under the coverlet when my mind was really concentrated on composition, or I was reading under a blanket, fearful of the rebuke of others" (Benton 78; bk. 1, ch. 15). Compare the opening of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*: "It was nearly midnight and he was lying on his front in bed, the blankets drawn right over his head like a tent, a torch in one hand and a large leather-bound book propped open against the pillow" (Rowling 7).

4. Reflecting on the history of *curling up with a book*, Nunberg opines that this phrasing "may have had something to do with changes in domestic furniture" and that "it's hard to imagine any writer curling up with a book before Marcel Proust. . . . [I]t wasn't until the 1920's that adults started using the phrase to describe their own reading" ("In Unread America").

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