

The following is adapted from the conclusion of my forthcoming book, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (U of Chicago P, 2009).

Next to the Book:
Towards a Theory of Translational Humanism

i.

In July 1999 at a castle in Elmau, Bavaria, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk delivered a talk to an audience of Christian and Jewish theologians entitled “Rules for the Human Zoo: An Answer to Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism*.”ⁱ The theme for the conference was “Exodus from Being,” and at the heart of Sloterdijk’s polemical talk was the assertion that the project of humanism and humanistic learning had come to an end in a world dominated by mass media. For Sloterdijk, humanism had emerged out of and intimately depended upon a culture of the printed book. The book’s growing marginality signaled the waning power of the humanities to socialize individuals. “Social synthesis is no longer—no longer even apparently—primarily a matter of books and letters.”ⁱⁱ The future of the humanities, and by extension the human itself, were crucially tied in Sloterdijk’s vision to the future of the book.

Sloterdijk’s talk went on to become a sensation in the German press.ⁱⁱⁱ On the one hand, it was little more than a garden variety tale of the end of the book that was becoming increasingly popular by the mid to late 1990s, think of Sven Birkerts’s *Gutenberg Elegies* (1994) for example. But on the other hand, the talk’s peculiarly vibrant afterlife was driven by Sloterdijk’s original association of media technology and biotechnology, his assertion that the book had played a crucial role as an “anthropotechnology” of human domestication. In identifying the “humanizing power of reading classics,” Sloterdijk placed the book within a much longer trajectory of technologies of human engineering. “Reading and selection” (*Lektionen und*

Selektionen), Sloterdijk argued in words designed to get the attention of his German and German-Jewish listeners, “have more to do with one another than any cultural historian has been capable or willing to consider.”^{iv} The book was to be understood as a precursor of a (necessary) biotechnological future. As Sloterdijk later said in an interview, “Man has always been made.”^v Genetic engineering silently emerged as the implied successor to the vanishing book.

This paper, and the larger work on the history of the book from which it is drawn, is conceived as an answer to answers like Sloterdijk’s to the increasingly unsettled relationship between the future of the book and the future of the humanities today, between the shifting terrain of media, intellectual, and literary history. How we understand the history of the book will determine how we understand the book’s future role in society as a medium of both knowledge and creativity. As Sloterdijk vividly pointed out in his talk, the identity of the humanities and their pedagogical efficacy *are* intimately linked to the identity of the printed book. We simply cannot understand how modern societies have made knowledge—and made intellectual making itself, *poiesis*—without understanding the changing relationship between individuals and their books. But by reconceptualizing the history of the book not as a narrative of rise and fall but precisely as a series of social, historical, and technological *negotiations*, we can begin to see in a more critical light the negotiations that are underway today in revaluing our relationship to the book. Rather than prophesy (yet again) the end of the book, the point would be to rethink (yet again) the place of the book within the humanities, both as an object of study and a mode of communication. My aim is to reposition the “nextness,” in

Michael Joyce's words,^{vi} that suffuses media studies with a move towards the "next to," what I want to call a "translational humanism."

ii.

In the twelfth chapter of the eighth book of his famed *Confessions*, Augustine describes for us the moment of his conversion. "I was asking myself these questions when all at once I heard the singing voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain, 'Take it and read, take it read [tolle lege, tolle lege].'" Augustine will take up the Bible that is sitting near him and mimicking the popular activity of the *sortes Virgilianae* will open a passage at random and begin reading. At this moment, as Augustine tells us, "It was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled." The book's proximity, its being "at hand," was what allowed it to play such a pivotal role in shaping Augustine's life. "Tolle lege, tolle lege": The book's physical graspability stood in for the conceptual graspability of its contents – being next to the book was what allowed us to understand or grasp what was in a book, and it was this double proximity that allowed the book's contents in turn to take hold of our selves and our lives.

Augustine was making a powerful argument about the place of the medium of the book within human life, its placeness being precisely one of its most meaningful features (the random access it allowed and the storability of the page reference were two other key features on display in this scene that I will pass over). The *Confessions* would go on to become a cornerstone of the humanistic canon, a book that argued for the central place of the book in Western culture. What I want to do in the time that remains is take you

through three different examples of writers who have tried to *rethink* this Augustinian paradigm of the nextness of the book at precisely three key moments of bibliographic and media change. I want to do so in order to think through alternative ways of thinking through the book's being "at-hand."

The novella entitled, "The Man of Fifty," by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, appeared initially in Johann Cotta's *Ladies Pocket-Book* in 1815 and then again in revised form in Goethe's final monumental prose work, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels* (1829). This short work was remarkable for the intricate way it reimagined textual communication during the historical juncture that Friedrich Schlegel would call "the age of books." The turn of the nineteenth century – what came to be known as the Romantic Age – is pivotal for understanding how and when the book began to seem like an overwhelming present media object and works like *The Man of Fifty* were integral in making sense of the book's ubiquity. At a key turning point in the novella, a guest of the so-called "beautiful widow" will reach for a book of poetry upon the arrival of the Major, the eponymous "man of fifty." The grasping of the book (*greifen* in German) that this scene staged replayed in familiar fashion for Goethe's readers the Augustinian paradigm of the book's "proximity." But in mirroring the complex drama of *social* grasping that was about to transpire between the seductive widow and the unsuspecting Major – she was supposed to marry his son and he had fallen in love with his niece – Goethe was taking the idea of the graspability of the book in a radically new direction.

The widow will subsequently request that the Major recite his didactic poem of "the hunt," which she has heard in parts from the mouth of his son. The Major politely declines and instead the widow hands the Major an embroidered letter case or portfolio

(*Brieftasche* in German) as a “deposit” so that he will return a *copy* of his poem inside of it. This case, so we are told, was made while the widow was listening to the conversations of others while dreaming about her memories of still other people, and the whole thing is in fact said to remain “unfinished” (it is called Penelopean.) Upon returning home and looking through his papers, the Major will place a “fair copy” of his poem (*Reinschrift* in German, also a term denoting a manuscript prepared for printing) in the case. He will then decide to place a verse translation of a passage from Ovid (about Arachne, the weaver of webs) as an epigraph to the poem and return it to the widow. In other words, the case that was composed while listening in on the stories and memories of others itself contains the story of another (about a man on a hunt), which has already been recited by another (the Major’s son), which is now framed by the *translation* of another’s text (an Ovidian passage about women and webs). Upon delivering this “bound object,” the Major wonders to himself whether his meaning has not in fact gotten away from him.

There is actually more to this scene, considerably more, than I can go into right now. But it should suffice to help us see how the figure of the textual container was being refigured by Goethe as an increasingly shared and syncretic textual space. In doing so, it marked a very clear challenge to the predominant Romantic notion of the book as a closed, complete, and ultimately socially isolating mediaspace, an understanding of the book that still largely endures today. Goethe’s project was very much dependent on thinking through how texts in books were participants in larger social dramas, the way their discrete specificity (the book’s being at-hand) was always mixed-up with social scenes of circulation, sharing and performance. The next time a book will be grasped in

the novella is when the Major's son reads a book of his manuscript poems aloud with Hilaria, who was supposed to marry the Major. What they read together is a collection of correspondence poems of a man and woman speaking that the Major's son had written in honor of the widow. As they jointly hold the book, and as she reads passages written by someone else intended for someone else, we are told that they gradually move closer to one another eventually with "their joints touching quite naturally in secret." Such medial proximity – grasping one another while grasping the book, reading the words of an other intended for an other – is, in Goethe, the bibliographic prelude to the love affair.

Just under one century later, Stephan Mallarmé will compose his final experimental book, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* [A Throw of the Dice Will Never Annul Chance] (1898, published 1914) that will become a key reference point for modernist typographic experiments of the Surrealists, Futurists and Dadaists between the world wars. In response to the representational paradigm of photo-journalism that had come to define late nineteenth-century reading experiences, Mallarmé was experimenting with the visual form of the poetic text and the material space of the bound book. Nowhere was this more evident than in his experiments playing with "the fold" between the verso and recto of separate leaves – the way the fold marked out both a line of continuity, a gap one seamlessly crossed (without seeing the seems of the binding) and that marked an invisible barrier, that captured the separation of leaves under the illusion of paginal continuity. On the second page of Mallarmé's poem, for example, we see in the upper left corner the opening word "Soit", the command "be," and then in the lower right the preposition "par" or "through." The key word that is visually bracketed by this argument of being-through the fold is "l'Abîme", "the abyss." Being next to the book

was adroitly being reformulated as being *through* the book, a kind of stretched sense of self and text (with due acknowledgment to Ted Nelson here). Again, there's more, like the way a few pages later the words, "Comme si" (as if) frame two facing pages so that the fold is now in the place of the word "abyss" – the fold *is* the abyss now, but only in a world "as if." Instead of the word simulating the book, the book simulates the word. Delightfully, the lines on either side of the page *almost* line-up, but not quite, so that one is left in a rather ambiguous state of whether to read down the page or across the fold.

And here's my last example, an abbreviated one, from the period after the second world war that saw the ultimate triumph of the domestic mass media of television and radio. It's from Beckett's radio play, *Embers*, that ends with a poignant scene about the inaccessibility of the book. It's still there, but as in Mallarmé or even Goethe, it's there *through*, not next to us anymore. The book's proximity has been replaced by the book's own mediation. Let me read the final lines of the play as a preface to just a few concluding words:

Little book. This evening . . . Nothing this evening. Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . .
plumber at nine, then nothing. Plumber at nine? Ah yes, the waste. Words.
Saturday . . . nothing. Sunday . . . Sunday . . . nothing all day. Nothing, all day
nothing. All day all night nothing. Not a sound. (Sea.)

iv.

At the conclusion of his talk, Sloterdijk proposed that the future humanist would soon be nothing more than an archivist. Books that were no longer read could no longer be considered to be in circulation. Those who guarded over them were irrelevant, foolish, or just plain mad. For most, the book was no longer assumed to be "at-hand" and thus could

no longer be considered a valuable cultural medium. But for Goethe, Mallarmé and Beckett, the book was never durably proximate in the first place. It was always part of an intermedial drama between users and different media. By reenvisioning the book's history of next-to-ness not as a rise and fall of proximity, then, but instead as a series of such intermedial negotiations, I think we can sketch a very different idea of the bookish humanist than Sloterdijk and others have offered us. In place of the archivist, wiseman, or madwoman, I want to see the humanist as a *translatologist*, as a scholar who moves through the folds in and between media. Such bookish dramas of intermediation can stand as important reminders today as we think about conditions of new media not in terms of replacement but, in Lisa Gitelman's words, as renegotiation.^{vii} As Gitelman writes, "The introduction of new media is never entirely revolutionary: new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such. Comparing and contrasting new media thus stand to offer a view of negotiability in itself."^{viii} Instead of either separating or effacing the communicative differences between media, the humanist as translatologist studies the losses, breaks, ruptures, discoveries, additions, negotiations, and doublings that occur in interacting with a medium and moving from one medium to another. Instead of focusing our work on "after the book," on what comes next, I am interested in drawing attention to the history of the next-to, the way books have always been imbedded in dramas of medial and social negotiability. Such work would focus on conceptual frameworks like Mette Ramsgard Thomsen's "mixed reality" or Alan Liu's idea of "transliteracy." In place of Jerome McGann's concern with literature "after" the world wide web, or Friedrich Kittler's tripartite 1800/1900/2000 media paradigm of universality, differentiation, and

convergence, this kind of translational research would draw attention to the persistent recurrence of media differentiation *and* interaction over time. Translational humanism orients scholarship towards the study and practice of how different individuals translate themselves into different media in different situations at different points in their lives. It would seek out what John Durham Peters calls a “morphology of communication,” the attempt to “describe the communicative crafts that abound in our species.”^{ix} It would locate how the book has been – and will undoubtedly continue to be – part of this larger communicative drama.

Notes

ⁱ Later published as a special edition by Suhrkamp as Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark: Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 14. Sloterdijk says further: “If this epoch appears today to have expired irretrievably, then it is not because man is no longer capable of fulfilling his literary task due to a kind of decadent mood; the epoch of national bourgeois humanism has reached its end because the art of writing love-inspiring letters to a nation of friends, even if it is still professionally practiced, can no longer suffice to link together the telecommunicative bonds between inhabitants of a modern mass society” (13).

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Piper, “Project Übermensch: German Intellectuals Confront Genetic Engineering,” *Lingua Franca* (December/January 2000): 74–77.

^{iv} Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark*, 43. Sloterdijk is drawing on Heidegger’s association in his essay on “Logos” of the German *lesen* with its etymological root as an act of agricultural harvesting and gathering together, but also as an act of selecting out (*auslesen*) of the choicest fruits.

^v Andrew Piper, “Project Übermensch,” 74.

^{vi} Michael Joyce, *Othermindedness: The Emergence of Network Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 179f.

^{vii} As Paul Duguid has cautioned us, end-of-the-book narratives depend on an impoverished notion of media change. Paul Duguid, “Material Matters: The Past and Futurology of the Book,” in *The Book History Reader*, 2d ed., ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2006).

^{viii} Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 6.

^{ix} John Durham Peters, “The Gaps of Which Communication is Made,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11, no. 2 (June 1994): 135.