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Vibrant Material Textuality: New Materialism, Book History, and the Archive in Paper

THE EPIGRAPH TO WASHINGTON IRVING'S 1819 SKETCH, "THE ART OF Book-making," is drawn from Robert Burton's 1621 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: "If that severe doom of Synesius be true—'It is a greater offence to steal dead men's labor, than their clothes,'—what shall become of most writers?"¹ The sketch itself is a meditation on this question, observing the work of "authors . . . in the very act of manufacturing books . . . in the reading-room of the great British Library" and reflecting on their use of the archive.² The narrator observes writers dipping into "one of these sequestered pools of obsolete literature," seeking to "swell their own scanty rills of thought" by copying the work of previous writers into a pastiche of their own without respect for the integrity of the originals. Particularly troublesome for the narrator is the "kind of metempsychosis" that the original works undergo in the hands of writers who borrow without paying respect to a source's genres and styles. For example, "what was formerly a ponderous history revives in the shape of a romance."³ Subsequently, Irving's narrator falls "into a doze" during which he has a vision of the reading room wherein books are transformed into "garment[s] of foreign or antique fashion" and out of which authors (now a "ragged threadbare throng") clothe themselves by taking "a sleeve from one, a cape from another, a skirt from a third . . . decking [themselves] out piecemeal."⁴ If it is

1. Irving, "The Art of Book-making," *The Works of Washington Irving*, vol. 2 (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849), 95.

2. Irving, "The Art of Book-making," 97.

3. Irving, "The Art of Book-making," 97, 98–99.

4. Irving, "The Art of Book-making," 99–100.

worse to steal a dead man's labor than his clothes, then these writers double down by decking themselves in "the patchwork manner" of both.⁵

In Irving's sketch, the reading room of the British Library is transformed from a space of reading and writing text, to a "book manufactory" and authors become rag pickers and assemblers of apparel.⁶ Surely, Irving is out to satirize the unoriginality and inaccuracy of writers who cut and stitch from the archive with less than meticulous attention to context or detail. Additionally, however, Irving's figuring "book-making" as the work of assembling text from rags is a reference to the technology of papermaking. Like the motley attire assembled by the authors in the narrator's daze, almost all paper was made from collected shreds of rags until the last third of the nineteenth century. Perhaps not all authors stole the labor of their predecessors, but all texts on paper wore the clothes of the dead.

I begin with the central device of Irving's "The Art of Book-making" because it raises questions about agency and the archive that link both contemporary theory and contemporary book history's investments in materiality. First, Irving's characterization of writing as "manufacture" in the act of "book-making" illuminates a central question of material textual studies. That is, "Book-making" stages a fantasy about the relationship between the material embodiment of a text and its linguistic content, querying how material form makes meaning. If books in the archive contain the labor of writers in their words, what do they archive within the raggy content of paper? And, to bring the language of new materialist theory to bear on material textuality, what force does that raggy content have on the reader who not only reads the words of the dead but also touches their clothes? The tradition of book history, stretching back through philology and textual editing as well as through the present, has long been concerned with certain elements of a text's materiality. Following bibliography's traditional attention to material instantiations of texts to construct an idealized work, however, book history has tended to look to things like paper *in service of* a linguistic work printed on it.⁷ Instead, here I look at the ways material textual studies might be prompted by, and improve upon, thinking in new materialism. The result is that paper could be read for how histories and narratives seep into the paper record and require accounts of agentic materiality lest they be lost or muted.

5. Irving, "The Art of Book-making," 101.

6. Irving, "The Art of Book-making," 97.

7. For an account of the interrelation of bibliography, book history, and literary studies see Meredith McGill, "Literary History, Book History, and Media Studies," in *Turns of Event: Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies in Motion*, ed. Hester Blum (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 32–34.

In what follows, I use stories about rag paper as points of departure for thinking about the material turn in both contemporary theoretical discourse and book history together. Both, I think, attempt to understand the meanings and effects of material actors. Taken together, however, I think they can provide greater insight into the meanings of texts as objects, and a more complete sense of what is in our archives. Finally, I argue that book history's disciplinary habits of moving between a text's material presence, or bibliographic code, and its linguistic code, might provide a model for literary critics pondering current theoretical work in new materialism and the agency of things.⁸ If the material text is a site where we regularly encounter and interpret things that act in the world through both materiality and language, then they are key sites where humanists make sense of things and their meanings.

Rags Within Paper

In colonial North America and the United States from the late seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, paper was made from a pulp of cloth rags, not wood as it is today.⁹ Papermaking came to North America first by way of the Netherlands, but its spread through Europe came only after being long established in China and the Arab world.¹⁰ Because rags were both essential and usually fairly scarce, papermakers, printers, and booksellers issued frequent calls to readers to supply the industry with any used cloth they could spare. This means that not only were readers likely to be familiar with what went into the paper they read from, but they were also called to take an active role in its creation.

One of the most frequently reprinted calls for rags demonstrates how the rags in paper could be invested with meaning. On November 14, 1777, the *North Carolina Gazette* issued the following call and promise to young female readers. "The young ladies are assured, that by sending to the paper mill an old handkerchief, no longer fit to cover their snowy breasts, there is

8. Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 56. The bibliographic code, according to McGann, is complementary to the "linguistic code," the written, ideational, content.

9. The first paper mill on record in what would become the United States began operating outside Philadelphia in 1791. Wood pulp would not surpass rag pulp as the primary ingredient in paper until 1867. Rag paper is still manufactured today, though it is much rarer. For a history of papermaking in colonial America and the United States, see Lyman Horace Weeks, *A History of Paper Manufacture in the United States, 1690–1916* (New York: The Lockwood Trade Journal Company, 1916), and Cathleen A. Baker, *From the Hand to the Machine: Nineteenth-Century American Paper and Mediums: Technologies, Materials, and Conservation* (Ann Arbor: The Legacy Press, 2010).

10. See Lothar Müller, *White Magic: The Age of Paper* (New York: Polity, 2015).

a possibility of its returning to them again in the more pleasing form of a *billet doux* from their lovers."¹¹ What we see here is neither a simple expression of need (we need rags to make paper) nor an explanation of technique (this is how we will make paper from rags). Instead, paper is lent an erotic charge through the circumambulating network between a "fair lady's" body, specifically her breast, the paper mill, the lover, and the paper itself, which finally connects all these together. The handkerchief becomes soiled and worn through contact with the intimate parts of the woman's body. It carries the residue of her body to the paper mill, and ragged cloth has a certain force. The intimate residue carried within the rag and then the paper is such that it not only compels the resulting paper to return to the handkerchief's former owner, but the intimate relation to her body dictates that similarly intimate things, like a lover's note, may be written upon it.

This oft-repeated handkerchief to *billet-doux* trope is not the only instance in which the rags within paper are understood to carry forward the residual matter and experiences of people who handled or wore cloth. Two other notable, but by no means exhaustive, examples come from Lydia H. Sigourney and Herman Melville. In Sigourney's cloth poems, notably "To a Shred of Linen" (1838), the reader observes as a piece of linen absorbs the stories of women who work on it from flax field to bed sheet to paper. The linen sheet absorbs the stories (and fluids) of people who slept on it and those residues affect the kind of stories that will be printed on the resulting paper. In Melville's memorable "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," (1855) the ragged remains of London "bachelors'" shirts end up in a Massachusetts paper mill where they are handled by working-class "maids." The maids process the rags, shredding them and mixing them into a wet pulp. The maids, who we are to understand are brutalized and defeminized by the labor, inhale shreds of the bachelors' shirts, which both slowly sicken them and also represent the closest form of intimacy they have with men. Maids and bachelors are kept separate, confined to their respective "side" of this Melvillian "diptych." But the shirts off the bachelors' bodies cross from one "side" to the other as rags in the paper trade, entering the bodies of the maids and making them look pallid and "sheety."¹²

I have outlined these examples in order to demonstrate a peculiar quality of rag paper that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers found

11. Quoted in Dard Hunter, *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1978), 310. The earliest version of this soiled handkerchief to *billet-doux* narrative appears in *The Spectator*.

12. Melville, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," in *Herman Melville: Tales, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. John Bryant (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 162.

Figure 1: A piece of unshredded rag visible within page 171–72 of Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650). Courtesy of the Library of Congress. Library of Congress PS711.A1 1650 (Rare bk. Coll.).

worthy of exploration. That is, without regard to what might be printed or written upon it (and sometimes actually dictating what might be written upon it), rag paper was thought to retain traces of the people it touched or the experiences it “witnessed” while a piece of cloth. Readers were prompted to think of a circuit between the clothes on their body and the public or private sphere of material textual exchange, all mediated by the paper manufactory. And while this was sometimes exploited by writers who used this sense of an intimate archive of cloth within paper to great effect for a story, the raggy content of paper was often visible within texts. Readers of texts from the hand moulded paper period may recall a time when they saw a shred of rag within a page. This page from Anne Bradstreet’s *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) shows how a large piece of rag could remain visible within the page, inserting itself into the experience of reading printed text, and demanding a reading of its own (fig. 1). Drawing attention into the depth within the surface of the page, the raggy shred brings its possible history as clothing, bedding, or diapering to be pondered by the reader.

These examples briefly illustrate how the materiality of texts on paper can be as involved in its meaning-making processes as are the words written or printed upon them. This could be a two-way process, involving actual sheets of paper and rags as well as imagined, literary rags. Early and nineteenth-century American writers frequently worked at the intersection of real and imagined materialities of paper. They knew that their readers’ clothes might literally be within the paper they read from, but they also knew that such literal material linkages were unlikely. It is possible, though unlikely, that one’s handkerchief could return within the paper of a letter. But figurative language could bring such unlikely materialities and agentic potentialities into being.

Bibliographic and book historical knowledge can help us understand how an actually-existing material text such as Anne Bradstreet’s *The Tenth Muse* was created through the study of its printers, papermakers, sellers, and readers by following the sociology of texts represented in Robert Darnton’s communication circuit.¹³ It may be, however, that we need other frameworks for understanding how the materiality of texts is at work in the *imagined* circuit between sweat-stained handkerchief and lover’s note. In the billet-doux example, the actual paper mill and actual rags matter less than the relation between bodies and texts at once imaginary and grounded in material fact. In the next section, I explore how new materialism and material textuality together help us understand the capacities of

13. See Darnton, “What is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 68.

material texts to make meaning and to enter into relationships with humans and other objects.

Material Turns

We are in the midst of the material turn. Philosophical and theoretical projects, different yet related, including actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, thing theory, new vitalism, and speculative realism, have brought renewed interest to bear on the status of material objects. For humanists, a primary challenge of these new materialisms has been to think outside of subject/object dualism in order to regard the agency of things without appealing to personification or the value of objects for human subjects. Doing so, we might reveal the networks, assemblages, and relations that form without human input, perhaps even indifferent to it. Humans, in fact, might find themselves posthuman objects in assemblages with other objects.¹⁴

At the same time, the language of materialism has also taken hold in the field of book history. One is increasingly likely to find scholarship employing methods that are recognizable as part of the domains of book history or print culture studies under the banner of material textual studies. Major centers, fellowships, and university press series have adopted the “material text” as their organizing object. See, for example, the Centre for the Material Text at Cambridge University, fellowships in material textual studies at UCLA and UPenn, Penn’s “Material Texts” seminar, the “Material Texts” book series at Penn Press, and the newly founded University Seminar in Material Texts at Columbia University.¹⁵ One motivation for this terminological change is to separate the methods of bibliography and book history from the tendency to privilege the book and print as designated objects of study. Book history’s methods were always useful for the study of texts beyond those in strictly “book” form.¹⁶ Another is to foreground the material embodiment of texts as a crucial aspect of meaning making. As Margreta

14. For a review, and critique, of the recent robust interest in new materialisms see, Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies,” *minnesota review* 80 (2013): 106–18.

15. For more about these institutional sites, see the Centre for the Material Text at Cambridge University, <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cmt/>, fellowships in material textual studies at UCLA and UPenn, <http://www.c1718cs.ucla.edu/content/postdoc-sup.htm>, and <http://www.mceas.org/dissertationfellowships.shtml>, the “Material Texts” book series at Pennsylvania University Press, <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/series/MT.html>, and the University Seminar in Material Texts at Columbia, <http://universityseminars.columbia.edu/seminars/material-texts/>, all accessed December 2017.

16. For recent criticism questioning the utility of the disciplinary frames of “book history” and “print culture,” see Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media Theory of Documents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass observed in an early articulation of the field, bibliographers and book historians had long studied texts as objects, but usually did so in order to reverse engineer an author's intention or an ideal text.¹⁷ In another framework, however, material texts are objects that "demand to be looked *at*, not seen *through*."¹⁸ Further, material textual studies foreground what Jerome McGann calls the "bibliographic code," or the meaning-making dimensions of the physical text itself: "the symbolic and signifying dimensions of the physical medium through which (or rather *as* which) the linguistic text is embodied."¹⁹ Not only is the materiality of the text interesting in its unique embodiment of a work, but, along with the linguistic code, it also contributes to the work itself.

Do these material turns have anything in common, or are their engagements with materiality essentially different? At the outset, we might hypothesize that they share a certain aim to reorient our sense of the agency of matter, to challenge a Cartesian divide between body and soul. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost position new materialism through its "insistence on describing active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which humans are apart." While new materialism "sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality," material textuality seeks a similarly post-Cartesian approach to inscription.²⁰

Though engaged in a very different sort of project from that of Margreta de Grazia, Peter Stallybrass, or Jerome McGann, Jacques Derrida has advanced a view of the material text in his theoretical writing about paper that usefully deconstructs the way Cartesian dualism structures the encounter with text. Derrida certainly approaches this area from a different intellectual tradition, but one that is, nonetheless, also interested in the mechanisms of signification and the often unstable assumptions behind acts of

17. de Grazia and Stallybrass, "The Materiality of the Shakespearian Text," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44, no. 3 (1993): 255–83, and Margreta de Grazia, "The Essential Author and the Material Book," *Textual Practice* 2 (1988): 69–86. It is unclear whether Stallybrass coined the term "material text," but his uses of the term and his institutionalization of the Material Texts seminar certainly are key early moves away from "book history" or "print culture" as organizing concepts. The earliest documented use of "material texts" in Americanist book history appears in Michelle Moylan's and Lane Stiles's 1997 edited collection *Reading Books: Essays on Literature and the Material Text in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997). In it, they define the "material text" as the "collapse [of the] distinction" between "material form and textual content" (13).

18. de Grazia and Stallybrass, "The Materiality of the Shakespearian Text," 257.

19. McGann, *Textual Condition*, 56.

20. Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.

communication. "On this commonsense view," of vital subjects and passive objects, Derrida writes, "paper would be a body-subject or a body-substance, an immobile and impassible surface underlying the traces that may come along and affect it from the outside, superficially. . . . Heavy with all the assumptions that, not accidentally, are sedimented down into the history of the substance or the subject . . . of relationships between the soul and the body."²¹ On the one hand, the material text is often figured as the material accident of the linguistic or ideational content placed upon it. On the other hand, however, the material text can be something that "carries semantic weight," and "returns as [an] active agent" in a relation between text object, linguistic code, and embodied person.²² Derrida is not identifiable as a new materialist as such; for him the page, not the event itself, is the *differance* that destabilizes signification.²³ But his routing of paper and work through the Cartesian framework helps us to see how both new materialism and material textuality seek to undo erasures of agency enacted by strict hierarchies of subject over object and writing over support. They both opt to discover or theorize the active and agentic capacities each applies equally upon the other.

Thinking about the new materialism is also important for scholars of the material text because it bears critically on the encounter between researcher and material text in the archive. What forces do material texts exert on us as their readers, and how do we account for them in our scholarship? Are the haptic impressions of their size, heft, color, smell, and composition made upon us as readers in reading rooms similar enough to those made upon readers in the past whom we seek to historicize and contextualize? These are similar to questions about history and the archive that Carolyn Steedman has raised in *Dust: The Archive in Cultural History*. Steedman memorably traces the force of the material text on the archival reader when she outlines how dust particles from decaying leather bindings enter into the bodies of readers through their respiratory systems, creating at once literal and figurative relations between embodied text and embodied reader, past and present. Steedman's archival "philosophy of dust" is resonant with new materialism's attunement to the immanent vitality of matter. Steedman shows how the particulate matter of the archive "speaks of the opposite of waste and dispersal; of a grand circularity, of nothing

21. Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 42–43.

22. George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1; de Grazia and Stallybrass, "The Materiality of the Shakespearian Text," 257.

23. Thank you to Sonia Hazard for this insight.

ever going away.”²⁴ This is the kind of archive of matter posited in the handkerchief to billet-doux paper mill advertisement, too. Instead of sending rags to the paper mill to be dispersed, intimate contact with the body is archived within paper and propels it not only to return to the handkerchief’s former owner but also to produce writing that brings the intimate archive from the inner depth of paper to its surface.

Book history in its “sociology of texts” or analytical bibliography mode does little to shed light on what is happening here, except to suggest the unlikelihood of the situation. Strictly speaking, while it is physically possible for one’s handkerchief to return in the form of a lover’s note, it is highly unlikely. And even if one received a piece of paper that included some of one’s old rags within, it is not clear how, short of a visible distinguishing mark, one would tell. A traditionally-defined book history is also not equipped to show how the raggy content of paper would dictate what would be written upon that paper. This is, ultimately, because these are literary stories employing bibliographical knowledge for the purpose of demonstrating the relationships between embodied people and embodied texts. We are more in the realm of “book historical fiction” than book history proper. And yet, these stories work on a certain level because, however unlikely, they are founded in the material facts and practices of paper-making.²⁵ These literary stories bring an almost enchanted sense of material possibilities of texts to the material facts of texts. They emerge where material book and literary narrative meet.

New materialism can offer important leverage here, especially in its emphasis on speculative materialisms. From the perspective of new materialism, rejecting or minimizing the agency of rags within paper is too anthropocentric; it suggests that because a phenomenon is imperceptible by humans it is insignificant or unreal. If we reject the “selfishly anthropocentric,” asks Ian Bogost, “how do we deal with things that are also complex structures or systems crafted or used by humans?”²⁶ Following Quentin Meillassoux, speculative realism/materialism rejects correlationism, or the

24. Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 167.

25. For evidence that the kind of rag/paper/text relationship imagined in the billet-doux advertisement is not beyond the realm of possibility, see the Combat Paper Project, Peace Paper Project, and Panty Paper Project—all of which use meaningful human-cloth relationships (for example, that between a soldier and his or her uniform or a survivor of intimate-partner violence and her intimate undergarments) to create paper and use it to write about experiences “archived” within the clothing/paper. See <http://www.combatpaper.org/>, <http://www.peacepaperproject.org/>, and <http://www.peacepaperproject.org/pantypulping.html>, all accessed December 2017.

26. Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What’s It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 29.

view “that being exists only as a correlate between mind and world.”²⁷ Speculative realism tries to open space for thinking about the possible forms of being in the actual world even if they seem to exceed human perception. So, while, according to human perception, the rags within paper seem to have no relation to one another or to other actors, the knowledge that they come from flax, could have once covered a woman’s “snowy breast,” or became stained by the blood of a soldier allows us to speculate on possible relations and assemblages they may form. The erotic circuit between the body, cloth, paper, and writing is both fantastical and possible.

Thus, the media archaeologist Jussi Parrika describes a new materialist media theory that seeks “intensive excavation of where and when . . . is the materiality of media.”²⁸ Media archaeology as a field at the moment seems more interested in the history of computing, leaving it up to others to figure out what new methods might mean for other periods, technologies, and literary forms, but Parrika’s application of new materialism to the play between the “hard contexts” of computing (rare earth minerals, silicon chips) and the “soft contexts” of computing (signs, meanings) . . . what negotiates between them, frequencies, signals, vibrations . . .” are left for scholars of media and the materiality of texts to interpret.

Rather frustratingly, we often find in new materialism and object-oriented ontology explicit expressions rejecting the literary. But the literary has long been, and may in fact now be, what we have needed in order to access and understand the frequencies, signals, and vibrations of nonhumans like books and paper. In *The Democracy of Objects*, Levi Bryant argues that we should stop prioritizing the human when theorizing ontology, arguing for a “flat ontology” where humans are simply one among many types of objects that act and perceive equally.²⁹ One of the key methods of this form of thought is intentionally trying to think outside of personification. In this line of thought, a tree’s senses are not knowable to us just because we can imagine how they might be like our human senses. Object-oriented ontologists often dismiss the literary way of knowing things as a form of obfuscatory humanism. Parrika explains that “new materialism is . . . about intensities of bodies and their capacities such as voice or dance, of movement and relationality, of fleshyness . . . and active meaning making of objects, *not reducible to signification*.”³⁰ But I think this rejection of the literary too quickly dismisses the possibility that vibrant material might signify, and that one way for humans to access, describe, and interact

27. Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 4.

28. Parrika, “New Materialism as Media Theory: Medianatures and Dirty Matter,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2012): 98.

29. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

30. Parrika, “New Materialism as Media Theory,” 96.

with material, and the material text, is through literature. It tips my hand a bit to say that writers and readers of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries knew well that the encounter with material texts like books was complicated by cacophonous exchanges of flax, rags, embedded experiences, ideas, signifiers, and figures. These movements between and across people and things happened over and within the site of the material text, and it was precisely the literary that could animate these relations as real, not imaginary. Literature is the mechanism through which the agencies of persons and things can be fully thought by humans, and the thingliness of texts has long been the site to do this work because it is there that the agency of a thing (book) and a human (reader) collide.

Literary Objects and Material Texts

As much as proponents of posthumanism and object-oriented ontology seek to decenter the human, the speculative work which makes these perspectives available calls upon the literary and imaginative capacities of humans. Jane Bennett, for example, speaks of “giv[ing] a voice to thing-power,” and takes an active role as a narrator who “will try to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality.”³¹ Bruno Latour writes, “to be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts.” Latour even goes so far as to say that things without an account lack agency (a claim that preserves some amount of anthropocentrism in the necessity of human interpretation): “They remain silent and are no longer actors: they remain, literally, unaccountable.”³² Literary writings about the materiality of texts, then, are well-positioned to explore the possibilities of vital material in a voice perceptible to humans. I recognize that I am using the work of new materialists primarily as leverage into questions about the materiality of texts that are opened in suggestive ways by new materialist perspectives. I pull selectively on parts of new materialist thought to better think about “book-making” as both an intellectual and material practice. As a historian of material texts and as a literary critic, my particular interests—in meaning, poetics, language, signification—represent my interpretation or application of new materialism and not necessarily new materialism’s self-definition.

The popular eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century “it-narrative” genre resembles this form of voicing, especially as it allows humans to consider the being of objects. The narrator of an it-narrative is an object invested with the powers of speech and observation who tells the story of being passed from one sector of society to another, often crossing social,

31. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2–3.

32. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79.

spatial, and temporal boundaries that humans cannot or will not cross. As Leah Price has recently pointed out, many it-narratives focus on the “lives” of books, papers, and other forms of material texts. It-narratives about material texts, Price argues, give “a history of the book that [represents] the whole range of transactions” in a text’s lifetime, including its “manufacture . . . [and] buying and selling, lending and borrowing, preserving and destroying.”³³ For Price, the form of the it-narrative promises to help book historians move the field beyond its earlier investments in ideal authorship, individual owner/collectors, and specific printers in favor of studying the relations within a broader field of human and non-human actors. “Instead of starting from a person and asking what books he owned, [the it-narrative model] starts from a book and asks into whose possession it came.”³⁴

Price’s attention to it-narratives and the agency of books aims to broaden the range of stories that book historians tell about books from manufacture to destruction. I am primarily interested, however, in how it-narratives of anthropomorphized material texts use the literary, the text’s linguistic code, to engage readers to ponder the material, the text’s bibliographic code. Like the billet-doux paper mill advertisement, the 1779 magazine story, “The Adventures of a Quire of Paper” details for readers the circuits between human bodies, material texts, and what is written on paper. This narrative, like the billet-doux advertisement, describes the processes of papermaking for the reader. The narrator recounts life as a flax seed and plant, then as linen and rag, and finally as a quire of paper. What concerns us for thinking about how material textuality and new materialism inform our readings is how “Adventures of a Quire of Paper” both guides readers through the technical processes of paper making and also speculates on the agency of the material text itself.

The narrative voice of the quire of paper is an exemplary instance of the it-narrative’s interest in privileging the unity of voice over the unities of time or space. That is, one quire of paper speaks with one voice even as its many sheets are broken up and dispersed into different locations. This device allows it-narratives to show a cross section of society through the connective tissue of the object. The quire of paper says, for example, that in the very moment it was

In all the flames and sufferings of a fop’s love letter, I was in one place pressed tenderly to a snowy bosom, and in another, in the form of an elegant definition of the graces, thrust full of Scotch snuff between the dirty leathern stays of a washerwoman and her dirtier bosom. Here, as

33. Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 107.

34. Price, *How to Do Things with Books*, 131.

a Birth Day Ode, Miss Fondler made me serve a shroud to her dead kitten, and there in the character of An Elegy on a much lamented Friend, I was carved into a pattern for Master Wealthy's christening cap. . . . In short, the scenes I have passed through have been as various as human nature, and as opposite to each other, as the vengeance breathing discourse in your hand is, to the gospel of meekness, humility, and universal good-will.³⁵

Shifting the reader's attention from the unity of space and time that would demand that a narrative voice be consistent with itself in one time and one place, the reader is instead reoriented toward the possibilities of materiality's speculative spaces and temporalities. This literary device is precisely the form through which human perception of a "flat ontology" becomes possible. Within the it-narrative frame, a quire of paper can have its sheets in many locations at different times and still speak from one consciousness with one voice. The human reader's frame of reference for organizing social structure is no longer the individual human's, but the material text's. Instead of a human-centered framing of the social, we are invited to consider how the world is organized from the perspective of non-human actors. In this case, the social order that humans perceive as highly hierarchical according to class, seems to have much more horizontal equality from the perspective of paper. Paper is equally present to the "snowy" breast of the elegant lady and the "leathern" breast of the washerwomen. The it-narrative attracts and sustains interest through its ability to reframe and reorganize human society—often unflatteringly—from the perspective of indifferent non-human objects. Here too, just as with the fair lady's lover's note, we see the linguistic code dictated by the material text, rather than by a human author. One piece of the paper contains a "Birth Day Ode" not because a human desired to write one, but because the paper will later be used as a burial shroud.

The speaking quire of paper also allows us to see "the archive" from the perspective of the material text. The narrator of "The Adventures of a Quire of Paper" offers a cautionary tale to the reader. The narrator, originally a burdock plant, originally wishes to be of greater use to society. Granted that wish, it is transformed into flax, linen, paper, and various types of paper matter after that. While some of the uses to which the quire finds itself put are lofty, others—as detailed in the excerpt above—are downright tortuous. The paper narrator's hopes for relief are raised when most of its matter is returned to the earth through burial, burning, and dispersal. Only when all of its matter is returned to the earth, however, will

35. "The Adventures of a Quire of Paper," *The London Magazine, or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, vol. XLVIII (October 1779): 451.

the tortured linen paper be allowed to resume an uneventful life as a burdock plant. The archive, however, is precisely what stands in the narrator's way:

The part of me that still remained in the stationer's shop, was at last pitched upon with more of its kind, as of a proper size and quality for printing a part of the Bishop of L——n's Translation and Exposition of Isaiah. Good God! what did I suffer at that moment! . . . I could not be ignorant that this would hand me down in my present nature to the latest posterity, and cut me off for ever from all hopes of being united to my other widely scattered and wretched parts, in my original form. . . . Learn from my history that envy, discontent, and pride never fail to bring their punishment with them, and are alike the children of ignorance, folly, and impiety.³⁶

While most of the quire of paper has found its way back to the earth, and thus respite from human purposes, the portion of the quire destined for use in an important book will likely find itself kept in a library, forever. The material text desires to reassemble its whole self, but human actors threaten to "elevate" it to the status of great book and to maintain its form for posterity. The speaking quire of paper reveals that material texts may have different goals or purposes from those of human actors. Within paper, in this case, is an archive of all these diverse experiences and desires—at once available to human readers and also at cross purposes with human desires for books.

These are normally inaccessible to the human reader except when the material text is permitted to speak through the it-narrator, or, I'd argue, when attentive readers take notice of the raggy content of a page, or employ their bibliographical knowledge to think from the perspective of the material text. In the archive, in other words, we find the written labor of the dead, but we also find their clothes. In the shredded rags of their clothes we know untold stories lurk. Whose bodies, experiences, and desires are archived within the material text, and further, what significant impressions do we make on one another during our mutual encounter? What oils do I leave clinging to the rag paper when it returns to the archive? Whose centuries old sweat is sedimented into the rags in the paper, the dust which I take into my own lungs? What forms of reading, of material and figurative book-making, are under way here?

One final example might help us dwell in the encounter between the agentic qualities of rags within paper, human readers, and the literary. The colophon of *Old Ream Wrappers: An Essay on Early Ream Wrappers of Anti-*

36. "The Adventures of a Quire of Paper," 451.

quarian Interest, a 1968 artist book exploring the history of paper making, raises questions about the who, what, and when of archivization within the material texts we encounter. It reads:

To return to the business at hand, the one sheet of paper in this book which I did not make is a sheet of old Dutch paper supplied from a large blank book. This sheet is a wonderful example of the sort of paper that was used in ream wrappers. It is full of all sort of lumps, wool, wood, stones, plaster, etc. . . . The other colored sheet is something else again. This sheet is made from the collected shirts, underwear and handkerchiefs contributed by the following people, who are all active in the field of books, printing, or papermaking: James Anderson, Joseph Blumenthal, Herman Cohen, Jack and Remy Green, Leonard Schlosser, Norman Strouse and Henk Voorn. The pulp made from these collected rags was used by members of the audience at a talk I gave at Gallery 303 in New York City, on September 18, 1968.³⁷

What is the temporality of this book? Strictly speaking, its bibliographical data states that it was published in 1969. Yet the colophon, that special sort of writing that orients a reader to a text's materiality and making, gives us some complicating alternatives. These two sheets of handmade paper at book's end give other potential dates of origin. The sheet of old Dutch paper draws the text backward two centuries into the eighteenth century, and the sheet of paper made in 1968 predates publication by a year. The colophon orients us toward a longer and more complicated temporality for this book. When viewed as a material text, not simply a published book that comes into being at the moment of printing, we find multiple and deep senses of this object's time.

Pointing us to specific material inclusions within these sheets, the colophon text also asks us to consider what is available to be read on and within the paper. Observing the old Dutch sheet, we can plainly see all the "lumps, wool, wood, stones, plaster" described. These inclusions give us a way of touching the eighteenth century, and they prompt us to wonder what stories are embedded here. An it-narrative could do this work for us, but in our regular encounters with this page we are invited to notice and be present with these material emissaries of the past. The facing page made in 1968 invites us to touch the underwear of specifically named people. We are explicitly invited into a form of intimate contact with these strangers (or, if you happen to know these people, intimates) through paper. This encounter with the material text in an archive continually enacts a process

37. Henk Voorn, *Old Ream Wrappers: An Essay on Early Ream Wrappers of Antiquarian Interest* (North Hills, PA: Bird & Bull Press, 1969).

of touching and wondering across time, from the eighteenth-century Netherlands, to a New York art gallery in 1968, to the Special Collections reading room at the University of Wisconsin in 2018.

When Washington Irving opened “The Art of Book-making” with the question whether “‘it is a greater offence to steal dead men’s labor, than their clothes,’—[then] what shall become of most writers?” he posited “writing” as a mashing of many people’s work, clothes, and ideas. And though he set out to criticize those writers who unoriginally copied and pasted from other sources to create derivative works, he did correctly characterize the complexities of book “making.” Multiple human and material agents touch across time and space within a single sheet of paper, and there they become legible to us as readers. Within the contemporary literary humanities, even within the unlikely fellows of book history and “theory,” we find renewed interest in thinking about what “the material” is, and how to interpret its meanings and effects in the world. Within our literal archives we encounter books, print, manuscripts, and all the rags that make up paper. There we touch the words carried by the clothes of the dead. We leave traces of ourselves on these pages, we make notes and circulate our interpretive ideas, and we leave the oils from our fingers to circulate on those pages. We make meaning in ideas and things, always together, as the material text has shown us to do.

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