

What Good is an Old Book in the Age of Google?

Homecoming Weekend, Friday, November 6, 4-5 PM

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What does it mean to talk, or worry, or think about “originality”? Why might it even appear to be a problem? Is anything wrong with an online digital facsimile from Google? After all, . . . (as Steiner’s July 5, 1993 New Yorker cartoon noted long ago, “On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.”

Many books have been digitized by Google -- or by Penn or The British Library -- and are now freely available (for example, Shakespeare’s 1623 First Folio). What’s not to be grateful for?

Consider Hartmann Schedel’s (1440-1514) book, ordinarily known as the *Liber Chronicarum* or the *Nuremberg Chronicle* but, more formally, called the *Registrum huius operis libri cronicarum cu[m] figuris et ymagi[ni]bus ab inicio mu[n]di* [Nuremberg: Printed by Anton Koberger for Sebald Schreyer and Sebastian Kammermeister, 12 July 1493]. This is what it looks like in an image from the book which comes from Google image:



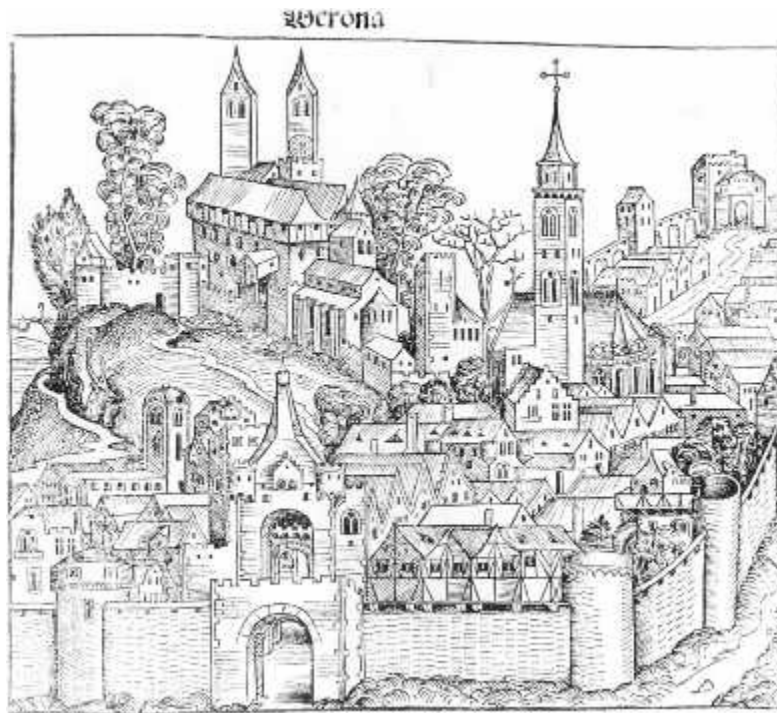
There it is credited as follows:

Liber Chronicarum (Nuremberg Chronicle). Author: Hartman Schedel (1440-1514)
 Illustrators: Michael Wolgemut (German, 1434/37-1519) and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff (German, ca. 1460-1494) Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1493.
 Woodcut illustrations with printed text; bound volume: 17 ¾ x 12 ¾ in. (45.2 x 32.5 cm). George Khuner Collection, Gift of Mrs. George Khuner, 1981 (1981.1178.29). Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art[.]

The credit line suggests that, at least at the Metropolitan Museum of Art -- and *surely* they should know? -- a third illustrator thought to have worked on this book is granted no credit for it: Albrecht Dürer. How *do* they know that? And how would anyone who wished to disagree with -- or even merely to confirm -- the Met's apparent denial of credit to Dürer proceed? (Penn says "Hartmann"; the Met says "Hartman": does that matter at all? ["let's call the whole thing off"])

What do these images, on screen or off, reveal of the book's size? Does *that* matter?

Also from Google, here is another image -- Verona -- from the *Nuremberg Chronicle*:



Does it look just like or differ from the original? In what way or ways? It might not be the *very* best photograph in the world: clearly, someone failed to flatten the book as much as it might have been flattened in order to reduce distortion (very visible as the image gets smaller towards the right-hand side). Nonetheless, here is the image -- is there any problem with it? Does the original *really* do *anything* that the image above doesn't do?

These are the questions for this afternoon, and the *Nuremberg Chronicle* is one of the exemplary texts for today.

Efforts to answer these questions have a long history. Their *modern* history begins with Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), who wrote an essay called, in English, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Perhaps among the best-known critical essays of the entire twentieth century, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" appears (in German -- we all know that *translations* are never *quite* the same as works in their original language) in a volume of Benjamin's essays called *Illuminationen: ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, [1961, c1955] -- the 1961 collection of this title is Unseld's selection from Benjamin's *Schriften*, ed. Theodor W. Adorno and Gretel Adorno, 2 vols., Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955]). The essay appears in English in Benjamin's *Illuminations*, ed. and intro Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), a volume often reprinted, e.g., New York: Schocken, 1969, a paperback edition that itself needs to be used cautiously since Schocken introduced some changes without telling its readers that it was doing so, most notably by excising some passages that contain highly uncomplimentary references to . . . well, to Schocken, that is, to itself. ("Most notably";

but were those the *only* changes Schocken made? How would anyone know?) Those passages gave Harcourt, Brace & World no difficulty at all. (This may, or may not, be another story for another time.) Re-translated, the essay appears again, and in a number of earlier and later versions, in various volumes of *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Michael W. Jennings, gen. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press / Belknap Press, 1996- [in progress; 4 vols. to date]).

Today's presenter has written on related issues, for instance, in an essay now so old as to be practically antediluvian: it does not even mention the existence of digital full-text reproductive databases such as Early English Books Online and Eighteenth Century collections online. "What Good Is an Old Book?" -- for anyone who might have wondered where this afternoon's title comes from -- appeared in *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship*, 7:1 (1992), 26-42., was reprinted in *Book Source Monthly*, 9:12 (March 1994), 14-17, and gave birth to a sort of "Readers' Digest-condensed" version, under the title "Garbage or Treasure? The Case for Acquiring Rare Books," that appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 13, 1993), p. A48.

Several other people with Penn connections have, two of them just last month, published books whose very titles indicate that libraries are far from alone in confronting these questions.

(1) **Steven Conn** teaches at the Ohio State University but earned his Ph.D. at Penn (History). He is the son of Peter Conn, former interim Provost and currently the Vartan Gregorian Professor of English at Penn. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) -- surprisingly lucid for a book written by an academic -- raises questions likely to interest anyone who is here this afternoon and shows that the stakes are broader than those that face libraries alone.

(2) **Robert Darnton**, a former history professor at Princeton and now at Harvard, still teaches history but is also the Director of the Harvard University Library. Last week, his *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009) appeared.

(3) In March, **Anthony Grafton**, still a history professor at Princeton-- and, like Darnton, a Rosenbach Fellow in Bibliography at Penn -- published "Codex in Crisis: The Book Dematerializes" as the concluding chapter in his *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 288-324; a shorter version appeared in *The New Yorker* (November 5, 2007), pp. 50-54, and as a separate publication with the same title (New York: The Crumpled Press, 2008).