Being a Book

I

> A book is a small, hard, rectangular object, whose pages are bound along one edge into fixed covers and numbered consecutively.

This description of a book is not mine. I borrow it from a lecture by tutor Eva Brann, who borrowed it from an essay by the novelist Paul Scott, who borrowed it from a talk on the BBC.[1]

It is better borrowed, I think, than improved upon, at least in clarity. Once Scott is done with it, this hard rectangular object has become "a canvass that doesn't exist." In other words, "a formless, almost indefinable area of consciousness." In still other words, "the area of contact for the meeting of minds, the clash, the confrontation of wills and visions, and of physical and intellectual impressions of reality—the writer's and the reader's."[2] Miss Brann is briefer but no less extravagant about the book's metamorphosis. In her words it becomes "a special kind of body made to be inhabited by a curious kind of frozen but fusible soul, a body fit to mediate its own peculiar life."[3]

I will not attempt my own metaphysics of a book tonight. But I do want to ask why a book admits of metaphysics, and perhaps even requires it. What makes the being of a book elusive when the book itself is so easy to grasp? We can pull one off a shelf, as if it belonged to the furniture of the world; yet when we open it up and begin to read we are carried somewhere else, as if the book were otherworldly. In one sense it may have remained a small, hard, rectangular object, with pages bound into covers and numbered consecutively. But all this has vanished in another sense. And what has taken its place, as the book being held is now being read, is difficult to describe.

Nor is this the only difficulty. Consider what becomes of the book being read if read, say, for seminar. Just before the seminar begins there seem to be many books on the table. Yet once the opening question is asked it is as if there is only

[1] Scott's borrowing of the description appears in "The Architecture of the Arts: The Novel (1967)" in *My Appointment with the Muse: Essays, 1961–75*, ed. Shelly C. Reese (Heinemann: London, 1986), 78. Scott credits the description to Bernard Bergonzi. Brann's borrowing appears in "What is a Book?" *St. John's Review* XLI, no. 1 (1991–2): 78. (Note: the *Review* sources this to a lecture given in September 1991, but a reprint of the lecture itself dates it August 30 of that year.) A version of it is also currently available on the website of the Imaginative Conservative.

[2] Scott, 80

[3] Brann, 88.

one book on the table. And in the conversation that follows, with a movement of its own that yet involves the text, perhaps the very idea of a book on the table is best given up. But given up for what? What happens to a book at this college every Monday and Thursday night?

Behind this question I have both a hunch and a hypothesis. The hunch is that St. John's is less committed to books, even the greatest books, than to the being of a book—*any* book. Put a different way: there is no Canon of Great Books at the College that we read each in turn; there is only the book in front of us, whatever it may be and wherever it may lead. I will come back to this hunch later in the lecture. But I begin with the hypothesis: The being of a book becomes elusive once the book contains words and in some sense is composed of them.

I say "in some sense" because *how* words compose a book will become the question of the lecture. But that there are words in a book at all seems already a source of elusiveness. If we could erase its words, making the book blank, then it might be but a kind of rectangle. We could count the number of books in seminar the way we might count the number of chairs and leave it at that. The trouble starts when the words go unerased: the book's pages left full of print, giving a reader something to do. Even the words on its cover, announcing the title and author, are enough to complicate what a book is. No longer just a book, it is now the copy of a book, in something like the way the chairs in seminar are copies of a model. We are all sitting in a Johnnie chair, with Homer's *Iliad* in front of us, even before the opening question is asked.

Yet it would seem strange to say we were all sitting in the same Johnnie chair, as if there were only one chair in the room. So why is it not so strange to say we all have Homer's *Iliad* in front of us, as if there were only one book in the room? Especially once the opening question is asked and more words from inside the book are read out loud? The answer, again, seems to be the words, making one book out of every copy in the room. And at least this much happens to a book every seminar night: a rectangle made of pages becomes a more elusive thing made of words.

II

How elusive is exemplified by the *Iliad*. Once upon a time the work existed only in song, and was first written down not in pages but on a scroll. In ironic recollection of this perhaps some of us prepared for seminar using an e-book or audiobook on the sly, getting through the work without turning a single actual page.

Then there is the question of translation. All of us, even tutors, likely read the *Iliad* for seminar in translation. The copies in the seminar room are mostly translations, each made of its own words throughout. In one the *Iliad* begins: "Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus and its devastation…." In another: "Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, murderous, doomed…." In still another: "Goddess, sing of the cataclysmic wrath of Peleus' son Achilles…."[4] These three beginnings, three of many, proceed word-by-word to their respective ends; yet they are all taken up in our conversation about the *Iliad* as if they *were* the *Iliad*. But what in that case *is* the *Iliad*? Or any book in translation? It would seem to be certain words in a certain order, without having to be only *these* words in *this* order. The same book might be made of different words in a different order. But how? How can a book be made of words in more than one way?

Perhaps we should insist, against this question, that translations of a book are merely translations. They are translations, that is, of some original text, composed of *those* words in *that* order. The first word of Homer's *Iliad*, then, is not "sing" or "rage" or "Goddess," nor indeed any word in English, no matter how well-chosen. The first word is μῆνιν, as we learn soon enough in the language tutorial. We also likely learn how some translations of a text are more literal than others—translations that sound like translations—and even learn to prefer them when the language of the original is out of reach. A good translation puts the original in reach, which is a different thing from replacing it. And translations, then, can be made of words in many ways, but the original only in one.

Even so, is this original what we mean, what we ought to mean, by the book? Or can a book still exist, and even thrive, in translation? The question put this way can sound almost rhetorical, as if books flourished in translation as a matter of course—across our Program's reading list. Where would we be if the translation of a book could *never* become the book? And in calling it a "translation" we distinguish it not simply from some original text, but from any paraphrase of that text. We distinguish it, that is, from any series of words merely about the text. The series we deem a translation, even if it differs from the text, has somehow become the text. Or at least become as close to the text, as joined to the text, as "at one" with the text, as words that differ from the text allow.

In translations, then, we confront just how elusive the being of a book can be. We also encounter one way—to recall my hunch—that St. John's is committed to

[4]The first is from the Lattimore translation, the second from the Fagles, and the third from the recent Emily Wilson translation.

this being, in its commitment to translations as books. Our copy of the *Iliad* can have the name of a translator on its cover; yet the author, we believe, remains Homer. The word "μῆνιν" can be replaced by "sing"; yet the book, we believe, is still Homer's *Iliad* rather than becoming Lattimore's. A book, so our Program claims, can be made of words in many ways, even if first made in one.

The word "first" in this formulation could also be questioned if we take a different view of good translations. On this view, translations should not sound like translations, lest they put the original forever out of reach. For the original presumably sounds original. Not that we could know what words in what order would compose the *Iliad*, say, in English, if this were Homer's native tongue. But we could guess, I think, that this *Iliad* would *not* sound like a literal translation from the Greek. And this suggests that good translations sound original. If so, then it seems a book can be made of words in many ways, where every such way is like the first.

III

Yet even this much elusiveness in a book can seem a special matter of translation. Consider the seminar night in several weeks, just after spring vacation, when juniors will walk in the room and put their copies of Jane Austen on the table.

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

These words in this order will begin the book in every copy, followed by the same words in the same order until the end. What could be elusive about that? The pagination might differ from copy to copy, but there seems nothing to trouble us in the words. And the words are enough to make every copy identical. In this case, where none of the copies are translations, it seems that a book is made of words in only one way.

But I think we can question even this. We can ask how a book is made of words even in one way, given something that just happened in my lecture. I quoted the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. The quotation, too, is made of those words in that order. So what is the one way the sentence in the book is made of them? Or if this sentence depends on the rest of the book, let the quotation be as long as the book, made of all those words in just that order. What is the one way the book is made of them, to distinguish it from its quotation? Why is a quotation of the book *not* the book?

There are two reasons, I think, to consider this question more significant than it might seem at first. One harks back to my hunch about St. John's, and its commitment to the being of a book. The commitment, in this context, is to the way that any book escapes its own quotation. For where would we be if the quotation of a book could *ever* become the book? For us, the difference between unquoted words and quoted ones is the difference between the texts we read and the texts we don't. In the latter texts—call them secondary texts—the books we might read are merely quoted. So read them we do, to see for ourselves what they say. For us, therefore, the quotation of a book is definitively not the book.

Yet *why* this is so is also hard to say—a second reason to think the question significant. The question even becomes paradoxical if we frame it in light of our commitment to books in translation. For what is it about a book that allows it to become its translation but never its quotation? What prevents the book from being made of the same words in the same order, if it *can* be made of different words in a different order?

To make this question easier on myself, I revert to the form it took at first: why is a quotation of the book *not* the book? Even in this form I find the question hard to answer; I make three attempts in the rest of this lecture before giving up.

Attempt number one. A quotation of the book is not the book because the words in the quotation are borrowed from the book, while the words of the book belong to it. So much do they belong that if words are taken from the book without quotation we consider it an act of theft. This is another way we credit the book with being original: a source for the quotation like the source for any translation. Yet unlike translations, and the way they can seem original, quotations seem derivative. Quotation marks announce as much, as do the other ways we have—like indentation—to frame the quotation as derivative. Erase the frame and let the words go unquoted; it is now as if we have a copy of the text itself. And perhaps in this we find the one way a book is made of its words. The words can go unquoted in the book because they are original to the book. They have their origin in the book. They come from the book.

But something in this answer has gone awry. For how can words come from a book if it is made of them, and therefore comes from them? The words in a book must come from somewhere else if the book is to be made at all. And in one respect this somewhere else is prosaic. A book is made of words that separately come from the dictionary and together from the rules of grammar. In another

respect—at least for books that transcend the prosaic—the somewhere else is a mystery. If we believe the first line of the *Iliad*, the words in such books come from a goddess—and only after pleading. Even the greatest book has to beg for its words when none are good enough to borrow or steal. To seem original is to be inspired.

And while it might take a muse to write such a book, to print the book only takes a typesetter. The somewhere else in this direction is less a mystery and more a certainty. A series of words becomes a sequence of symbols: the letters of the alphabet and a handful of punctuation marks. What is possible in a book is thus reduced from something uncountable in words to thirty symbols or so. And this reduction effectively determines what the book can be in advance. If we count the symbols, assigning to each a different number, we have a way of counting their sequence in the book; and can translate the book into a number. There is no printable book that is not, in this sense, already a number. And one of them is a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. So while in another direction its words come from who knows where, in this direction its words come from a counting number. There is nothing original left for the book to be, despite how it seems.

But what then explains how it seems? The quotation of a book still looks made of borrowed words and the book made of words that belong. And this sense of belonging, again, is especially strong at St. John's. Let the words in all our books come from somewhere else; they still go into the books unquoted, as if there the words had found their home, and could only pay visits to other books in quotation. In this sense, we might say that the quotation of a book always belongs to a different book. But why? Or again: what makes the quotation of a book *not* the book?

Here is my second attempt to answer the question. If we read a book to see for ourselves what it says, perhaps what it says can never be quoted. There is another use of quotation to suggest as much. To begin with a simple example, compare the following sentences:

1. Annapolis is the capital of Maryland.
2. Annapolis is nine letters long.

In the second sentence, a copy-editor would want me to put quotation marks around "Annapolis,"

2. "Annapolis" is nine letters long,

to distinguish *the name* of the city, which is nine letters long, from the city, which is not nine letters long. But quoting a word, in that case, is not a way of saying the word; it is rather a way to speak of the word.

This use of quotation is not limited to single words. We can, for example, put *all* the words from the first sentence between quotation marks,

> "Annapolis is the capital of Maryland"

and now speak of the sentence rather than say it. Since the sentence is six words long, we can say that of it:

3. "Annapolis is the capital of Maryland" is six words long.

Or in a less contrived example, I might speak of the sentence as something that amused me when I heard one of my daughters say it:

4. "Annapolis is the capital of Maryland," my five-year old explained, as if she were a tour-guide during our walk downtown.

Or to move from the invented to the actual in a last example, consider the first use of quotation in *Pride and Prejudice*:

5. "My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"
   Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

Austen quotes the question but not the reply, artfully turning the reply into a kind of comment on the question, leaving the impression of a knowing husband and unknowing wife.

None of these examples involves the quotation of one text in another text, but the abstraction from speech in textual quotation is arguably the same. The quoted words are never said, only spoken of. Perhaps the clearest example of the effect at St. John's is in a seminar paper too full of quotations. The quoted passages start to look like filler, saying nothing, even when the unquoted passages are central to the book, saying everything. Another example of the effect is in the typical Friday Night lecture that includes quotations. It is tempting to put the quotations on a handout, or even on a screen—as if a quotation were meant to be seen rather than said.

In light of this account, we can revisit *Pride and Prejudice* and distinguish the book from its quotation definitively. Consider the first sentence again.

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

In the book, those words in that order are not just a sentence but an utterance. In quotation, however, the sentence is separated from the utterance, allowing us to carry the sentence out of the book. There is no difference, then, between quoting the first sentence and calling it the first sentence: in neither case is the sentence said; it is only spoken of. Similarly, there is no difference between quoting every sentence in the book and calling the book by its title: the title is another way, if briefer way, to speak of every sentence in turn. Only in the book is every sentence in turn not spoken of but said, in an act of narration rather than quotation.

We can generalize this difference to encompass any book. The quotation of a book is not the book in the same way the title of a book is not the book. In both, the book has yet to speak. This is why we have to read the book to see what it says. This is also why a book can become its translation but never its quotation. The one way a book is made of its words is in being made of words that can speak. These might become different words that can speak—the goal of any good translation—but quotation renders the words speechless.

Yet something in this answer too has gone awry. For one thing, it is hard not to read quoted words as spoken words, especially in a narrative like the novel. Consider again the first use of quotation from *Pride and Prejudice*, but lengthened to include the quoted words of Mr. Bennet—as if he were finally forced to speak in reply to his importunate wife:

> "My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"
> Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.
> "But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."
> Mr. Bennet made no answer.
> "Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife, impatiently.
> "*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."
> This was invitation enough.

Not only do the quoted words seem to speak, they seem to speak in the voices of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. It is as if quotation made speech possible in a written text.

This is underlined by the final line of narration—"this was invitation enough." For this is an invitation to speak but in the form of quotation: wife replying to husband as husband has replied to wife. To speak in reply, moreover, is to speak of what was said. At least in conversation, then, to speak of what was said is not an abstraction from speech; it is a condition of speech.

The abstraction from speech in this example rather lies in the unquoted words of narration. For in what sense is *the narrator* invited to speak? Who *is* the narrator, and where, to speak of what either spouse has said? At what place or time, for that matter, and by whom, are the unquoted words in a book ever said? It seems they need no speaker to say them; they need only be written down and read. But in that case perhaps the unquoted words in a book are never said. A book would then be made of words that can never speak, in being liberated, once inside the book, from every circumstance of speech.

Consider, too, how if the words in a book could speak—literally speak—there would be no point in learning to read. Every book would be an audiobook as soon as we opened it. It is because the opened book is silent that reading becomes a need. And learning it, for most of us, is not like learning to speak. The task is difficult enough to need schooling and important enough to seem liberating. In these respects, learning to read is arguably the first form a liberal education takes. It may even be the only form, if a liberal education is made of books. But books, in turn, are made of words that have to be read to be heard. In this sense, at least, a book does seem made of unspoken words.

We might identify these words with the silence on the St. John's campus as a seminar book is being read, before it can be discussed. In discussion, by contrast, the book is not read but quoted. This again suggests something gone awry, even backwards, in my second attempt to distinguish quotation from book. For quotation now looks like a kind of speech, leaving the book in a kind of silence. But *what* kind of silence? And distinguished from what kind of speech? Or again: what makes the quotation of a book *not* the book?

We come to my third attempt to answer the question. This time I return to where I began the lecture:

> A book is a small, hard, rectangular object, whose pages are bound along one edge into fixed covers and numbered consecutively.

Words go unmentioned in this description of a book, as if it were blank. Yet the book is not blank: its pages are numbered consecutively. It is as if a book were

made of numbers rather than words. But is it not made of words—my hypothesis all along?

Perhaps not. Consider what a book can become in the act of quotation:

> "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."
> Mr. Harrell, where are you quoting from?
> Oh. This is Hume. His *Treatise*. Page 266.
> Mr. Harrell, I don't have your edition.
> Oh. Let's see. I'm quoting from Book 2, Part 3, Section 3; the second-to-last sentence of paragraph … 4.

Something like this happens every time we quote from a book in seminar. We take words out of the book to form the quotation, and what is left in the book is their location. In this sense, a book does seem made of numbers. The quotation, in turn, is *not* made of numbers. It is made of only words—the words that quotation has dislocated from the book. Could this be why the quotation of a book is *not* the book? The quotation is made of words, while the book is made of numbers.

This answer to the question is more plausible, I think, than it might sound at first. For one thing, it makes sense of a book's silence, in the unspoken but countable order of its words. For another thing, reading is arguably an act of counting. What else explains the puzzling thing that happens in every seminar? Sooner or later someone will read words from the book out loud. And while the rest of us could just look up and listen, many of us do not. We try to find the words *in* the book and read them for ourselves, even as they are being read to us by someone else. And the numbers in a book get us only so far. Page 266; or for those with a different edition: Book 2, Part 3, Section 3, Paragraph 4—the numbers allow us to reach the page of the words, even the paragraph. But to get any closer, we have to stop counting by number and start counting by letter. Yet what is counting by letter but *reading* the words the letters form? And once we reach the words being quoted, counting by letter means reading those words for ourselves. A book would then be made of numbers even when made of words. Could *this* be the one way a book is made of its words? It is made of words we count—those words in that order, from a first word to a last.

As much as I like this answer, it too arguably goes awry by having lost the plot. True, the letters printed in a book may come in countable order to form the words, just as the words come in countable order to form the sentences; as

do the sentences to form the paragraphs, the sections, the chapters—and finally, the book. Nonetheless, when we read all those words in just that order, it is not to count them but to understand them. Or at least try to understand them; for it is possible not to understand them, or to misunderstand them, prompting us to read them again. But we read them again to understand them better.

We even have a word—interpretation—for the act of understanding that reading involves. The two are so close that "reading" has become almost a synonym for "interpretation." In this sense, reading a book elicits a reading of the book. And reading a book at St. John's means having a reading of the book to talk about. Or even readings, plural—the one way, perhaps, there remain many books on the seminar table. Here is how we put it in our *Statement of the Program*:

> The books speak to us in more than one way. In raising the persisting questions, they lend themselves to different interpretations that reveal a variety of independent yet complementary meanings.[5]

Notice too, on this account, how the books are able to *speak*. A speaking book, even if we take it metaphorically, suggests something else gone awry in my answer, where it was the quotation that speaks, leaving the book in a kind of silence. But *is* there any difference between silence and speech when it comes to understanding the book? Those words in that order remain the same, written or spoken. And our understanding of them might well be improved if someone else is doing the reading, allowing us to close the book and truly listen to what it says. What else explains why we call the audiobook a book, and even use it to get our seminar readings done? Or how we fell in love with certain books as children, even before we learned to read?

But where does this leave us, then, with the book's quotation? Perhaps it is not really different from the book, after all. At least if by "quotation," we mean anything in the book that *can* be read out loud, and more or less understood. Let our act of quotation remove all of this from the book. What is left for the book to be? Perhaps nothing.

IV

Even if there were something, I am not, given the time, about to make a fourth attempt to distinguish the quotation of a book from the book. It is also true that

[5] *Statement of the St. John's College Program*, 2. The current statement is available on the St. John's College website.

the quotation of a book, like its translation, can seem like a special case. What could be elusive about a book if we leave it unquoted, as well as untranslated? Think again of those copies of Jane Austen that juniors will put on their seminar table in several weeks, every copy having the same words in the same order. In this identity, it seems we can tell the one way a book is made of its words, from a first word to a last, before this way gets obscured by the book's translation or quotation.

Even so, there is also the book's interpretation, which is not a special case. It happens as soon as we read the book, and make any sense of what it says. And we can ask what reading *does* to the book. In one sense, clearly nothing; the words remain unchanged. This is why we can predict that every copy of Austen will be identical, and why we can call it a copy of Austen, as if the words of *Pride and Prejudice* belonged to the writer of the book.

But in another sense, reading the book does something to it—something so radical that *Pride and Prejudice* will soon belong to its readers among the juniors. And copies on the seminar table—at least the copies not borrowed from the library—will likely bear the marks of this ownership, even before the conversation starts. Certain sentences underlined; a whole paragraph bracketed; a page-number circled; the page itself bookmarked. Then the marks in the margins: a question mark, a check mark, an exclamation point; even a word or phrase written out, a whole sentence crowded in, possibly several at the page's top or bottom. On a blank page in the front or back, we might even find an outline.

To this legible extent, we could say that reading the book *thickens* the book, at least by every reader with a pen in hand. But this is only prelude to how reading the book *lengthens* the book, once the opening question is asked. For at that point, we each put our reading of the book into words of our own. And unlike the words of the writer, which come in order from first to last, there is no such order from first to last in the words of the reader. Not that the outcome is chaos; the outcome is conversation. And after that, perhaps an essay on the book, followed by more conversation in the oral.

But this, then, is another way that the reader's words differ from the writer's: for the writer has the last word in a way that the reader never will. The book is lengthened by the reader to some indefinite point. We could even call it an infinite point—at least for any book about which there is always more to write, more to say, more to think. And with a book like *Pride and Prejudice*, we can make the difference in length precise. The words of the writer make this book about twelve hours long, using the average running time of an audiobook. But the book has been lengthened, since its publication date, by the words of every

reader, to make it two hundred and ten years long—and counting.

If we accept this difference in length as real—and I only have time enough left in the lecture to run with it—then it looks as if a book is always made of its words in two ways rather than one. One way is by the writer, whose words make the book a finite thing. But the other way is by the reader, whose words make the book an infinite thing.

This difference seems to hold even if the reader remains silent. For what happens, exactly, when we pull the book off a shelf, open it up, and begin to read? Are we carried somewhere else—my earlier way of putting it? Or are we glued to a chair with our nose in the book—which is how it would look to anyone else? And what of the book itself? Does it remain a small, hard, rectangular object, with pages bound into covers? Or does it become like a canvass that doesn't exist? The dichotomy in these questions is essentially between the finite and the infinite. Or if you prefer: between the bound and the unbound. And the difference is made by the words. Do they bind the book to its pages, and the reader in turn? Or do they free the book from its pages, and the reader in turn?

Suppose the answer is "yes" to both. Could this be how the words of a book make its being elusive—to recall my hypothesis? The elusive, in this case, would involve a contradiction in the words, and the way they limit the book at the same time they liberate the book. My hypothesis, put this way, also allows me to recast my hunch. Perhaps St. John's is committed to the contradiction in a book—the contradiction, more exactly, that *is* a book. If so, there ought to be signs of how we live in the contradiction.

Here are two, I think. One is the conversation of a seminar, which at our college replaces the lecture given by a professor nearly everywhere else. What makes this kind of conversation possible? What is it about a book that can prompt a discussion of what it means, *in place* of any account? One thing—to recall a claim I quoted from our *Statement*—is that the books speak to us in more than one way. We seem to rely on this in seminar. For what if a book could only say the same thing to every reader in the room? The conversation would be at best a quoting of the book back and forth.

But consider a second claim we make in our *Statement*—a claim that seems to contradict the first—to explain the point of seminar:

> The books can only repeat what they have to say, without furnishing the clarifications that we desire. To overcome this limitation is the goal of the St. John's seminar.[6]

[6] *Statement*, 2.

We also seem to rely on this in seminar. For what if a book could only say a different thing to every reader in the room? The conversation would be at best a trading of translations by sight. It can only be a conversation, then, if the book says the same thing to every reader in the room at the same time it says a different thing to every reader in the room. And we live in this contradiction every Monday and Thursday night.

But not only those nights. For a second sign of our life in contradiction comes from the book itself. This replaces the lecture of a professor even before the conversation begins. We read the book to see for ourselves what it says, with no need to hear it from anyone else. So peculiar is our commitment to the book in this respect that there exists in nearly every book we read an introduction we skip. But what makes this kind of reading possible? What is it about a book that can prompt a discovery of what it means, *in place* of any account? If we are not to read such an account, then it seems the book has to answer the question of what it means—completely. Yet if we are not to write such an account, then it seems the book has to raise the question of what it means—perpetually. Perhaps this explains the difference between the writer's words and the reader's. In the answer of what is meant, there is a last word in the writing of the book. But in the question of what is meant, there is no last word in the reading of the book. And when we are not living in this contradiction through conversation about the book, we are living in it through the book itself.

V

Or so the idea I have been running with would suggest of our commitment, if a book is always made of its words in two ways at once. There is no time left for me to question this final part of my lecture. But I do have time, I think, to question the whole of it—by way of conclusion. For have I really said anything about the being of a book? A book, that is, rather than a text? What is the difference, for example, between the books we read for seminar and the manuals we use for tutorial or laboratory? One answer is that the books are great—great in a way that our manuals, being manuals, will never attain. But if my hunch is right, calling our books "great" is no real answer. What then is the answer?

There is perhaps only one place in my lecture where I address books in their being as *books*: at the beginning, in fourth-hand words.

> A book is a small, hard, rectangular object, whose pages are bound along one edge into fixed covers and numbered consecutively.

Much of this description could apply a manual—or for that matter a senior essay. They are somewhat small and rectangular; and they can be at least as hard as a book in paperback. The pages are numbered consecutively; and we can bind them along one edge with rings, or a spiral, or staples.

But the pages, thus bound, are not fixed in covers. In this respect, one page remains separated from the next. In particular, the last page is separated from the first, by all the pages in between. Not so with a book. The last page forms a cover with the first, to contain all the words in between. In this respect, the first and last page are one rather than two. In practice, from the use of signatures, this only holds for the front and back cover of a book. But we can use these covers to imagine the perfectly-bound book, where the first page forms a cover with the last, the second with the second-to-last, the third with the third-to-last, and so on.

Perhaps you can see where I am going. The book is like any text insofar as the first page leads to the last; and this makes it finite. But in a book, and only a book, the last page leads to the first; and this makes it infinite. It starts to look as if the binding of a book allows the being of a book to be embodied. This being may remain elusive, even contradictory, if the book is finite and infinite at once. But the way a book is bound seems to allow the infinite *to emerge* from the finite. When we read the book once, as if it were finite, we are invited by the book to read it again, making the finite infinite. It is as if books were built to be read again, bound to be unbound.

In one sense, "books to be read again" can sound like a platitude, especially if we think the books in question are great. Those books are obviously built to be read again. But even here I think the platitude is really a paradox. Let the books be great—at a school where books are not simply what we read, but how we learn and come to know. It may still make sense that we can read a book once, then read it again. But what could it mean to learn something once, and then—as if we unlearned it—learn it again? Or know something once, and then—as if we forgot it—know it again? Even the greatest book we read on this question, Plato's *Meno*, leaves the answer—recollection—at the level of myth. Could being a book make it the truth?

Daniel Harrell
St. John's College, Annapolis
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