

BOO

ANDREW PIPEK

WAS

READING IN ELECTRONIC TIMES

THERE

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ONE

Take It and Read

What I must chiefly remember *are the hands*.

DELACROIX [*diary*, april 11, 1824]

...we were / hands, / we bailed the darkness out...

PAUL CELAN ["flower"]

The meaning of the book could begin with St. Augustine. In the eighth book of his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the moment of his conversion to becoming a Christian:

In my misery I kept crying, "How long shall I go on saying, 'tomorrow, tomorrow?'" Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this very moment? 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 and read."

Augustine is sitting beneath a fig tree in his garden, and upon hearing the voice he takes up the Bible lying near him and opens a passage at random and begins reading (Romans 13:13-14). At this moment, he tells us, "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."¹ Augustine closes the

book, marking his place with his finger, and goes to tell his friend Alypius about his experience. His conversion is complete.

No other passage has more profoundly captured the meaning of the book than this one. Not just reading but reading *books* was aligned in Augustine with the act of personal conversion. Augustine was writing at the end of the fourth century, when the codex had largely superseded the scroll as the most prevalent form of reading material.² We know Augustine was reading a book from the way he randomly accesses a page and uses his finger to mark his place. The conversion at the heart of *The Confessions* was an affirmation of the new technology of the book within the lives of individuals, indeed, as the technology that helped turn readers *into* individuals. Turning the page, not turning the handle of the scroll, was the new technical prelude to undergoing a major turn in one's own life.

In aligning the practice of book reading with that of personal conversion, Augustine established a paradigm of reading that would far exceed its theological framework, one that would go on to become a foundation of Western humanistic learning for the next fifteen hundred years. It was above all else the graspability of the book, its being "at hand," that allowed it to play such a pivotal role in shaping one's life. "Take it and read, take it and read" (*tolle lege, tolle lege*), repeats the divine refrain. The book's graspability, in a material as well as a spiritual sense, is what endowed it with such immense power to radically alter our lives. In taking hold of the book, according to Augustine, we are taken hold of by books.

Nothing is more suspect today than the book's continued identity of being "at hand." The spines, gatherings, threads, boards, and folds that once gave a book its shapeliness, that fit it to our hands, are being supplanted by the increasingly fine strata of new reading devices, integrated into vast woven systems of connection. If books are essentially vertebral, contributing to our sense of human uniqueness that depends upon bodily uprightness, digital texts are more like invertebrates, subject to the laws of horizontal gene transfer and nonlocal regeneration. They, like

jellyfish or hydra polyps, always elude our grasp in some fundamental sense. What this means for how we read—and how we are taken hold of by what we read—is still far from clear.

Aristotle regarded touch as the most elementary sense. It is how we begin to make our way in the world, to map it, measure it, and make sense of it. Touch is the most self-reflexive of senses, an insight affirmed by the German researcher David Katz, who established the field of touch studies in the early twentieth century based on his work with World War I amputees.³ Through the feeling of touch, we learn to feel ourselves. Touch is a form of redundancy, enfolding more sensory information into what we see and therefore what we read. It makes the words on the page richer in meaning and more multidimensional. It gives words a geometry, but also a reflexive quality.

To think about the future of reading means, first and foremost, to think about the relationship between reading and hands, the long history of how touch has shaped reading and, by extension, our sense of ourselves while we read. After completing his early masterpiece *Dante and Virgil*, the great French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix wrote in his journal, “What I must chiefly remember *are the hands*.”⁴ As Delacroix said of painting, so too of reading.

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Ever since its inception as a pair of wood boards bearing wax tablets bound together by a loose string, the book has served as a tool of reflection. There is a doubleness to the book that is central to its meaning as an object. With the pages facing each other as they face us, the open book stands before us as a mirror. But even when closed, the book is still informed by a basic duality. The grasped book is not only a sign of openness and accessibility, as it was for Augustine. It can also be an affront, closing something (or someone) off in the name of opening something up.

Consider Adolf von Menzel’s *Man Holding a Book* (fig. 1.1), one of the most sensuous depictions of the relationship between



[FIGURE 1.1] Adolf von Menzel, *Man Holding a Book* (1864).
 Courtesy of bpk, Berlin/Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin,
 Germany. Photo: Bernd Kuhnert/Art Resource, New York.

a hand and a book I have ever seen. In it we see the grasping hand almost entirely consume the image, excluding the man named in the title from view, but also the book—*so that we cannot even be sure it is a book anymore*. Grasping closes in the name of reopening. For Augustine to reopen himself to the world, anew, he must first close himself off from the world by opening his book. Books are objects that conjoin openness and closure together, like the hands to which they belong.

Nowhere is this more the case than when we read. When we hold books while we read, our hands are also open. Reading

books, and this is no accident, mimics the gestures of greeting and prayer. In the Middle Ages, this marriage of reading and prayer was combined in one of the most popular book formats from the period, the diminutive “book of hours,” which individuals—those who could afford them—carried around with them as daily reminders of religious song and wisdom. In Jean de France, Duc de Berry’s *Belles Heures* (1405–8), one of the most lusciously illustrated examples of the genre (fig. 1.2), we see the patron’s wife with her hands in prayer before the book. The mirroring that transpires between her hands is then mirrored again in the medium of the open book before her, which is itself mirrored in the figure of God, who is depicted as a trinity grasping a book, the book of the world (although with four, not six, hands, as two are presumably reserved for holding the three of them together). Reading books, we are shown, is expansive, as well as inclusive. It is an act of calling out beyond ourselves, but it is also a symbol of reciprocity: in holding books, we are held together. Every time we hold a book today we are reenacting this initial bond between reading and prayer.

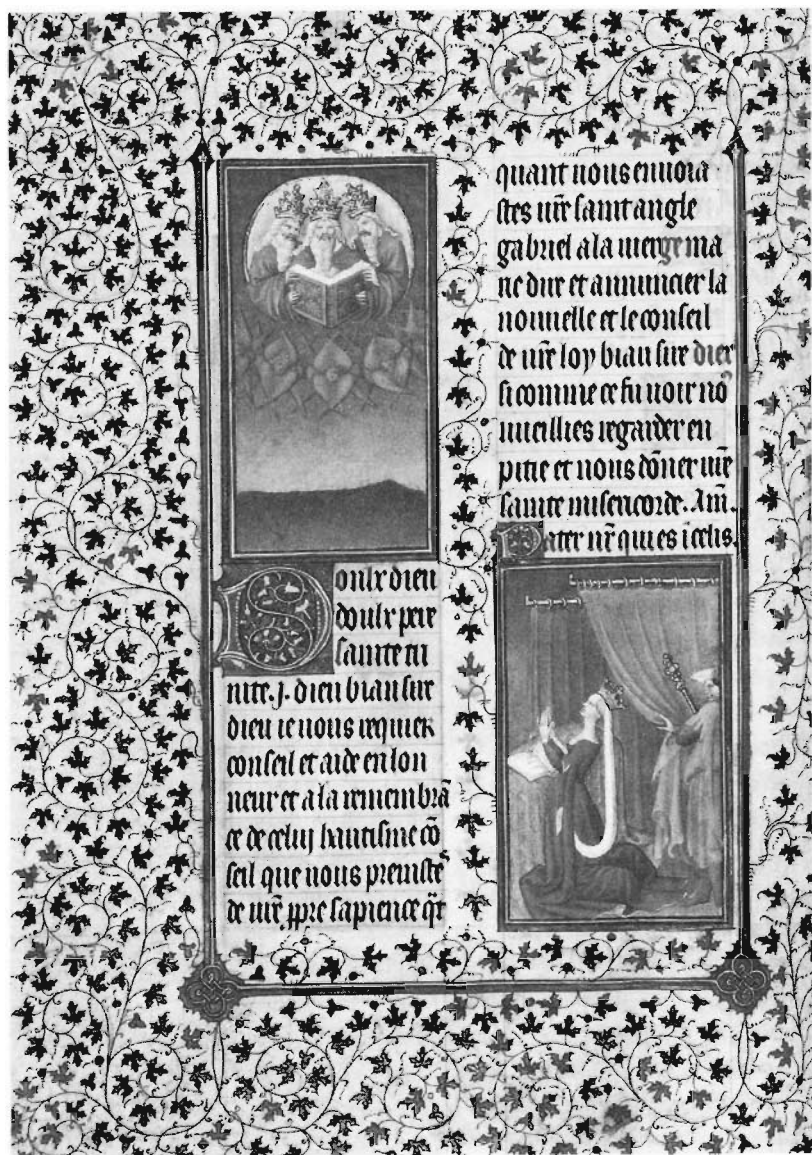
The open hand was the preferred sign of divine calling in both ancient and medieval art.⁵ Unable to be present, God spoke through his hand. We do not just call out with books, in other words, but are also called to. The open hand is a reminder that when we read books we hear voices, another sign of the book’s essential doubleness. The seventeenth-century physician John Bulwer, who wrote one of the first studies of hand gestures, noted that the hand “speaks all languages.” It is in many ways a truer form of speech. As Bulwer writes,

The Tongue and Heart th’ intention oft divide:

The Hand and Meaning are ever ally’de.⁶

The book’s handiness is a sign of its reliability. Unlike tongues and hearts, books are things that can be trusted, a fact that has much to do with the nature of their tactility.


In the *Codex Manesse* (1304), one of the most comprehensive



[FIGURE 1.2] Limbourg Brothers (Herman, Pol, and Jean), *The Belles Heures of Jean de France, Duc de Berry*, fol. 91v (1405–8).

Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

illustrated books of medieval German love songs, we see how the open hand speaks here too, but this time in the form of the scroll, a common medieval device (fig. 1.3). As a sign of speech, the scroll holds medieval readers (and listeners) together. The scroll (old media) communicates what the book (new media) cannot. Reliability is a function of redundancy, of saying something twice. The use of multiple channels—speech, scroll, book—is the best guarantee that a message will be received, that individuals will arrive at a sense of shared meaning. Like the book's ability to conjoin the different faculties of touch, sight, and sound into a single medium, according to the tradition of the Codex Manesse the book itself is imagined to reside within a more diverse ecology of information. When we think about media death, about the idea of the end of certain technologies, we do well to remember this medieval insistence on the need for redundancy, the importance of communicating the same thing through different channels.

Hands in books do not just speak, they also point in a more literal sense, like Augustine's finger that was used as a bookmark. Books, like hands, *hold* our attention. As early as the twelfth century, writers began drawing hands in the margins of their books to point to important passages.⁷ Such a device gradually passed into typescript and became a commonplace of printed books. It looked like this: . The pointing hand in the book stood for the way books themselves were like pointers, making the world graspable. If books open us out into the world, they also constrain. They bring the world down to size, inoculations against the problem of patternlessness.

The child's first drawing is often of his or her own hand. The footprint may be the first mark we make in the world (for hospital records), but the handprint is the original sign of self-reflection, of understanding ourselves as being in the world. The "hand-book" or "manual"—the book that reduces the world into its essential parts, into outline form—is an extension of this art of measurement. It is one of the oldest types of books, dating back to Epictetus's *Enchiridion* (second century AD), a short repository of nuggets of wisdom. In the eighth century, the Venerable

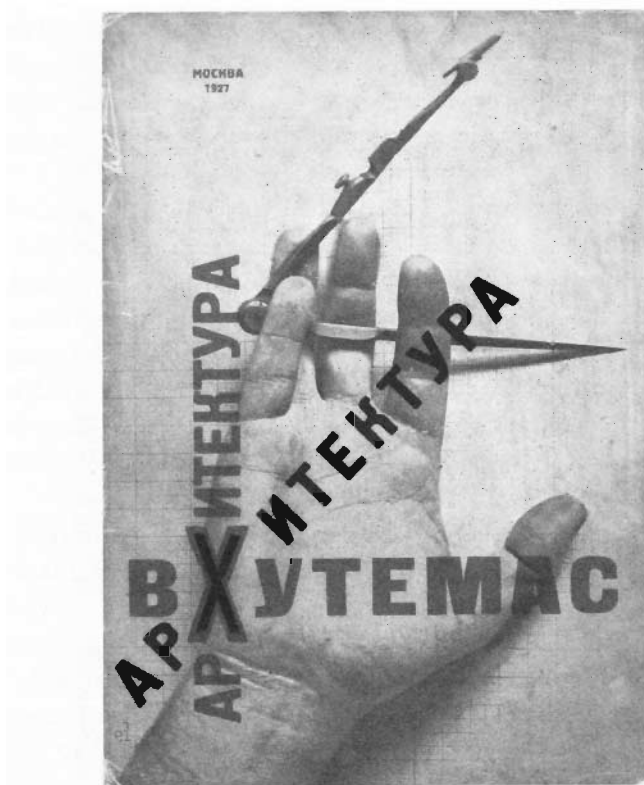


[FIGURE 1.3] Image of the poet Graf Otto von Botenlauben, who is entrusting his *Minnesang*, or love song, to a young courier. From Codex Manesse (1304), Cod. Pal. Germ. 848, fol. 27v. Courtesy of the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.

Bede taught readers to count to a million on their hands in his *On the Reckoning of Time* (AD 725). By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the measuring hand would become the ultimate sign of our bibliographic relationship to the world, embodied in the new genre of the atlas. In its first incarnation, Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), the entire world could now be held in the reader's hand. The secular bravura on display in these books, where the reader assumed the divine view, cannot be overstated. The book was no longer simply a mirror, but a container and a lens at once. By the seventeenth century, the great age of wars of religion, palmistry and chiromancy, knowledge of and on the hand, would become major sciences.⁸ Handbooks seem to proliferate in periods of intellectual and technological uncertainty, much as they are proliferating today.

In the nineteenth century, readers witnessed the birth of reading *as touch*, in the form of Louis Braille's invention of a dot-matrix reading system for the blind in 1824. The method derived from an earlier request by Napoleon for a code that could be read by his soldiers at night in the field without the use of light. Braille's innovation was to make the dot-matrix representation of letters small enough to correspond to a single touch of the finger. It made reading digital in a very literal sense. By the end of the century, libraries such as the National Library for the Blind in Britain contained over eight thousand volumes in braille, one of many subsequent technologies that aimed to bring reading to the visually impaired.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of numerous experiments with the tactility of reading, both practical and impractical, culminating in the modernist revival of experimental books between the world wars.⁹ Books made of sandpaper, cardboard, cheap notebook paper, wood, and even metal were some of the many ways that artists experimented with the touch of reading. In the Russian artist El Lissitzky's celebrated *Architecture of VKbUTEMAS* (1927) (fig. 1.4), we see how the disembodied hand of the divine voice from the medieval book has returned, now in the form of the drafting hand of modern science. With



[FIGURE 1.4] El Lissitzky, *Architecture of VKhUTEMAS* (1927). © Estate of El Lissitzky/SODRAC (2011). Image courtesy of the Collection Centre Canadien d'architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

the compass needle seemingly woven into the hand's grip, we can see Lissitzky performing a subtle visual pun. The compass needle is imagined to stand in for the sewing needle, one of the original tools of bookmaking through the sewn binding of the book's spine. For the Russian avant-garde, the rectilinearity of modernism—the cube, plane, column, grid—was as much born from the book as it was the industrial Gargantua of the new machine age. The handbook was one of modernism's secret muses.

If the book's handiness has been fundamental to the way we have taken stock of the world, its ability to serve as a *container* has been another way through which we have found order in our lives. Books are things that hold things. They are proxies for our hands, much like the popular device of the clasp, which was initially used to keep the pages of books from expanding in the humidity.¹⁰ The book's meaning is tied to the way it relates, in an encapsulating way, to other objects in our lives. Scrapbooks—the books that record the sediments of our reading—are an integral part of the history of the book.¹¹ But so too are wallet bindings, introduced in the fifteenth century, which allow readers to place objects in a special front pocket, like pencils, eyeglasses, or notes, but also things like flowers and artificial flies (for fishing), as in *The Companion to Alfred Ronald's Fly Fisher's Entomology* (1836), which contains hundreds of flies hooked into its pages. Musical records, too, began to be tucked into the front pockets of books, as in the popular series Bubble Books That Sing from the 1920s. The trajectory of the “pocket book” from something that fit into your pocket to a book that had its own pockets to becoming a fashionable handbag is marvelous and strange and one deserving of its own history.

Things in books not only draw us into a broader world of everyday objects. They also show us how things impress us, the way *pressure* is an integral component of human knowledge, one that is deeply tactile in its origins. Pressing flowers between the pages of books, a popular activity through the ages for amateurs and experts alike, was not only a means of preserving specimens. It was a way of reflecting on how nature too could leave impressions behind to be read, one more link in the sturdy chain of the long-standing idea of “the book of nature.” In the nineteenth century, the Austrian printer Alois Auer pioneered a technique of “self-printing nature,” in which specimens were imprinted directly onto soft metal plates and from there inked and printed directly onto the page.¹² It led to a beautiful series, *Nature Printed*, by the Englishman Henry Bradbury, in which he printed the ferns and other plants of Great Britain directly

from real specimens. Nature was thought to reveal herself more transparently through the medium of print. Grasping, measuring, and pressing—these are the activities through which things become *legible* in a bookish world.

But not for everyone. For some readers, the book is anything but graspable. It embodies an act of letting go, losing control, *handing over*. “Without me, little book, you will go into the city,” runs Ovid’s famous saying about his writing. Books cross time and space; they transcend the individual’s grasp. In this, we cannot know what will happen to them when they leave our hands. “Every poem is a betrayal,” Goethe once said.¹³ Turning over the book to another involves the possibility of losing control of one’s meaning, of potentially being betrayed by the reader. As an object that can fit easily into our hands, but also our pockets, the book and its meaning are always potentially purloined.¹⁴ It lends a whole new meaning to the divine command “take it and read.”

For those who see in books something meant to circulate, possessing books, holding on to them too tightly, is an indication of a potential mania. The book as object becomes *too* important; it stops being read. “The bibliophile approaches the book with a looking glass,” writes the Romantic bookman Charles Nodier, “and the bibliomaniac with a ruler.”¹⁵ The private library is not only a refuge of reading; it can also be an asylum. This is what Edgar Allen Poe thought with the invention of his murderous narrator in “Berenice,” who says of the family library, “In that chamber I was born.”¹⁶ The library, the place of books, is also the potential birthplace of obsessions. It is where we become possessed by our possessions. In Goethe’s greatest life’s work, *Faust*, which means “fist” in German, the quintessential modern hero famously flees his book-lined study at the opening of the tragedy. Possessing books, holding on to books, can keep us from life. It is a point viscerally illustrated in Anselm Kiefer’s *Population Census* (1991), a library that consists of giant lead census tracts, part of a long tradition of big books, from Kandinsky’s iron books to Hanno Rauterberg’s recent creation for the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, which consists of two concrete slabs in the

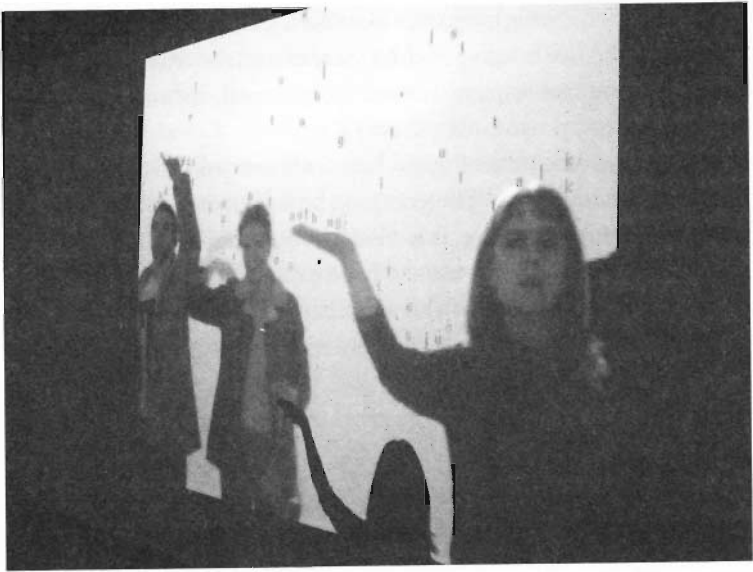
shape of a book weighing over six and a half pounds. For Kiefer, these monstrous books, and by extension the vastness of our entire bibliographic past, *cannot* be grasped, inhuman in their immensity and poisonous nature.

This then is the pathological knot of the book, the joint where hands grasp and let go. The grasping hand is not just about proximity and understanding, it is also about arresting and being arrested. To hold on to books is to hold on to time. One of the most popular book formats of the nineteenth century—the twilight of our bookish world—were literary almanacs with titles like *The Keepsake*, *The Forget-Me-Not*, *The Souvenir*. These books were designed as gifts, to be handed over so as never to be let go of again (although they were in fact often regifted). They were filled with inscriptions from a parent to a child, a husband to a wife, or an aunt to a niece, and occasionally poems written on the tissue paper between illustrations. In this way readers learned to preserve each other in their books. Books are how we speak with the distant and the dead. That the past lives on in books is a commonplace. The important point is that we can close books—and thus our relationship to the past.

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How can we hold, and hold on to, our digital texts today?

It is not surprising that one of the most canonized pieces of new media art is Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv's *Text Rain* (fig. 1.5), where letters rain down a screen and come to rest on projections of viewers' open hands, one of many new electronic works that take the hand as their conceptual starting point.¹⁷ *Text Rain* is a potent reminder of the way the digital, at least in English, is named after the hand's component parts. The book's handiness is recycled on the screen, only now the circuit that once enclosed us within a larger sense of self and place has become purely solipsistic: we see *ourselves* collecting words with our hands, as we become the new gods. But unlike Duc de Berry's God who could grasp the book of the world in his (many) hands,



[FIGURE 1.5] Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv, *Text Rain* (1999). Interactive installation (custom software, video camera, computer, projector, and lighting), 1.5' \times 10' projection, 10' \times 20' interaction area. Image courtesy of the artists.

the words of *Text Rain* can never truly be grasped by our hands. They are like Platonic forms. They remind us how fragile our hold over words is, that we are only ever godlike.

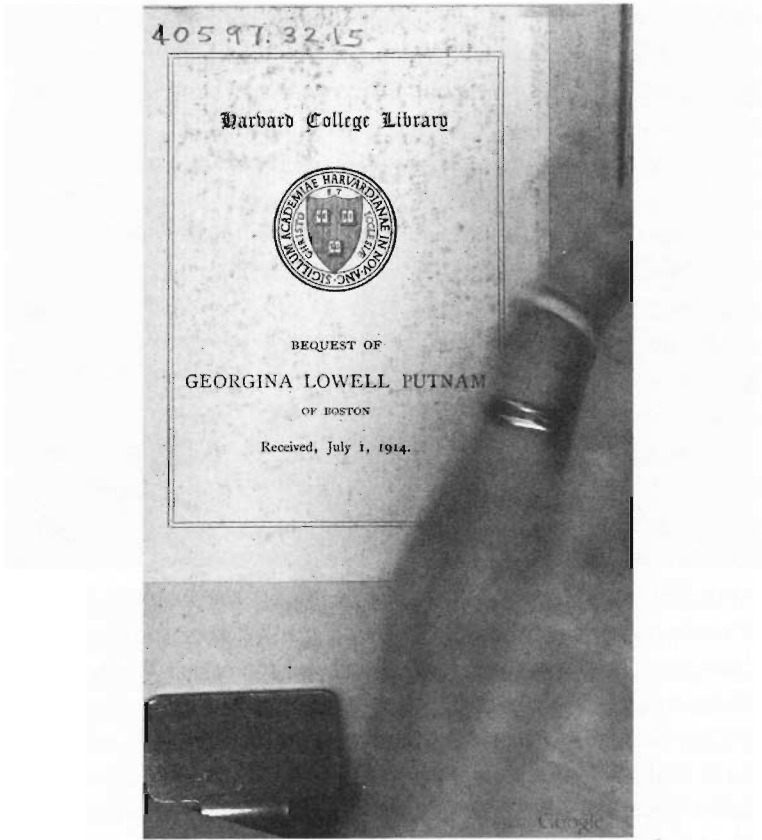
For Augustine, the book's closedness—that it could be grasped as a totality—was integral to its success in generating transformative reading experiences. Digital texts, by contrast, are radically open in their networked form. They are marked by a very weak sense of closure. Indeed, it is often hard to know what to call them (e-books, books, texts, or just documents) without any clear sense of the material differences between them.

But on another level we could say that digital texts don't so much cancel the book's closedness as reinscribe it within themselves. Where books are closed on the outside and open on the inside, digital texts put this relationship in reverse order. The

openness of the digital text—that it is hard to know where its contours are—contrasts with a performed inaccessibility that also belongs to the networked text. There is always something “out of touch” about the digital. Consider Kenneth Goldsmith’s online *Soliloquy* (2001), which was initially published as a printed book consisting of transcripts of his digitally recorded speech over the course of a single week. In the online version, words on the screen only appear when touched by the cursor (the electronic finger) and then only one sentence at a time. Every time we move the cursor to illuminate another sentence, the one before it disappears, just as the one after remains invisible. Like a jellyfish, the textual whole slips through our fingers.¹⁸

This is not to imply that digital texts are not at some level “there.” This would be to fall prey to the “virtual fallacy” (computing culture’s equivalent to Ruskin’s “pathetic fallacy”). Digital texts are somewhere, but *where* they are has become increasingly complicated, abstract, even forbidden.¹⁹ If the book is a thing you can put things into, the electronic book keeps things out. We cannot see, let alone finger, the source of the screen’s letters, the electromagnetically charged “hard drive,” without destroying it, though we can, in a telling reversal of fortune, touch our software. Unlike books, we cannot feel the impressions of the digital. As Shelley Jackson writes in her hypertext fiction, *My Body*, “A blind person could trace my drawing with her fingertips three pages down in my notebooks.”²⁰ The touch of the page brings us into the world (three pages down), while the screen keeps us out. Digital texts lack feeling. All that remains of the hand is a ghostly remnant of its having been there at the time of scanning, like the chance encounters with scanners’ hands from Google Books (fig. 1.6), accidental traces of the birth of the digital record. The hand no longer points, like the typographic manicule, it covers over or gets in the way. Hand was there, we might say.

But digital texts *can* be grasped, you will say (I, too, own an e-reader or two). Touch has emerged as one of the most important new fields in contemporary computing.²¹ Falling under the heading of “haptics” (like optics for the hand), it encompasses the



[FIGURE 1.6] Scanner's hand from Google Books. Dedication page of Honoré de Balzac, *Scènes de la vie de province* (Paris: Charpentier, 1850). Courtesy of Google.

development of touch screens, virtual handshakes, and surgical training at a distance. But it is also part of a culture of the “hand-held,” the way computing has steadily been migrating from large rooms to our desks to our hands. The more screenish our world becomes, the more we try to reinsert tactility back into it.

However much electronic books may try to look like their printed brethren, they still change how we manually interact with them and those changes matter for how we read. There are, for

starters, no longer any pages to turn. There is no density to the e-book (all is battery), which is incidentally one of its greatest selling points. Open books can be measured by the sliding scale of pages past and future, like steps, just off to the side of the page. What lies *after* the digital page? An abyss. No matter what the page number says, we have no way to corroborate this evidence with our senses, no idea where we are while we read. The digital page isn't a window, it's a door (but like Bluebeard's castle: to where?). Perhaps Piranesi, with all of those stairwells that lead nowhere, should be considered the father of the digital page.

If we no longer turn the page, then what do we do? We have, at least for a little while longer, the button.²² The hand no longer points, and thus cognitively and emotionally reaches for something it cannot have (like Michelangelo's famous finger), it *presses* or *squeezes*. The mechanical pressure that gave birth to the book in the form of the wooden handpress is today both vastly reduced in scale and multiplied in number through our interactions with the digital. There is a punctuatedness, a suddenness, but also a repetitiveness to pressing buttons that starkly contrast with the sedate rhythms of the slowly turned page. Buttons convert human motion into an electrical effect. In this, they preserve the idea of "conversion" that was at the core of reading books for Augustine. But in their incessant repetitiveness the meaning of conversion is gradually hollowed out, made less transformative. Conversion loses its singularity, as well as its totality. It is reduced to thousands of little turns. As Roland Barthes once remarked, "to repeat excessively is to enter into loss."²³

But buttons also resist. Over time, their use causes stress to the human body, known as carpal tunnel syndrome. Like its related postural malady, "text neck," these syndromes are signs of how computation is beginning to stretch us, both cognitively and corporally.²⁴ The resistance of the button is an intimation of the way technology increasingly seems to be *pushing back*.

Perhaps it is for this reason that we are moving away from the world of the button to that of the touch screen. From the ugly three-dimensionality of the mechanical apparatus we ascend to

the fantasy of existing in only two dimensions, a world of the single, yet infinite page. Here the finger no longer converts, but *conducts*. With capacitive touch screens your finger alters the screen's electrostatic field thereby conveying a command. Instead of pressing to turn the page, we now swipe and, at least for one reading interface, shake.²⁵ Kinesthesia, the sense of bodily movement, overrides the book's synesthesia, its unique art of conjoining touch, sight, and thought into a unified experience. In an electronic environment, corporal action overtakes reading's traditional inaction. Ever on the lookout for "impact" or "measurement" today, we appear to be increasingly afraid of reading's inertia.

The more my body does, however, the less my mind does. Interactivity is a constraint, not a freedom.²⁶ Swiping has the effect of making everything on the page cognitively lighter, less resistant. After all, the rhythmic swiping of the hand has been one of the most common methods of facilitating "speed-reading." And as one study after another affirms, the more time we spend reading screens, the less time we spend reading individual units of the text.²⁷ Skimming is the new normal. With my e-book, I no longer pause over the slight caress of the almost turned page—a rapture of anticipation—I just whisk away. Our hands become brooms, sweeping away the alphabetic dust before us.

In Judd Morrissey's *The Jew's Daughter* (2000), a title derived from a ballad sung in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and certainly one of the finest web fictions to date, we are presented with a single, yet unstable page (fig. 1.7).²⁸ As the cursor moves over highlighted words in the text, portions of the page suddenly change. It marks a nice inversion to Goldsmith's discretely revelatory cursor that brought text into view. In Morrissey we keep reading the same page over and over again, even as parts of it continue to change. We never "get" anywhere in this palimpsestual universe, just as it never stays the same.

The evanescence of *The Jew's Daughter* is everything that Anselm Kiefer's lead books were not. With even the barest proximity between the simulated forefinger and the simulated letter in

□

Will she disappear? That day has passed like any other. I said to you, "Be careful. Today is a strange day" and that was the end of it. I had written impassioned letters that expressed the urgency of my situation. I wrote to you that that it would not be forgivable, that it would be a violation of our exchange, in fact, a criminal negligence were I to fail to come through. To hand to you the consecrated sum of your gifts, the secret you imparted persistently and without knowledge, these expressions of your will that lured, and, in a cumulative fashion, became a message. In any case, the way things worked. Incurable. Stops and starts, overburdened nerves, cowardice (Is this what they said?), inadequacy, and, as a last resort, an inexplicable refusal. You asked could I build you from a pile of anonymous limbs and parts. I rarely slept and repeatedly during the night, when the moon was in my window, I had a vision of dirt and rocks being poured over my chest by the silver spade of a shovel. And then I would wake up with everything. It was all there like icons contained in a sphere and beginning to fuse together. When I tried to look at it, my eyes burned until I could almost see it in the room like a spectral yellow fire.

A street, a house, a room.

close

[FIGURE 1.7] The first "page" from Judd Morrissey, *The Jew's Daughter* (2000). The lines beginning with the words "and without knowledge" and ending with the words "in my window, I" will disappear and be replaced by new lines when the cursor touches the highlighted word "criminal." Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Morrissey, text can suddenly not be there. It replaces the durable impression of the printing press or the less durable pressure of the button with the instability of electronic projection. When we touch texts in an online world, Morrissey reminds us, they can change in an instant. My hold over them is less secure. Contact is now conductivity.

As the digital scholar Matthew Kirschenbaum has recently cautioned us, however, digital texts are both notoriously difficult

to preserve and *incredibly hard to delete*.²⁹ Reading my old Apple IIe diskettes today is as difficult as trying to completely erase my current hard drive (the National Security Administration recommends that anything short of immolation is not entirely foolproof). Digital texts are both sticky and fragile, hard to hold on to and hard to let go of.³⁰

Kirschenbaum's reminder is a timely one, a welcome correction to the widespread belief in the instability of digital texts. But what strikes me as even more important is not this apparent choice between preservation and loss, between claims of one medium being more or less stable than another. Rather, at issue is understanding the way these two categories, the lost and found, mutually inform one another as conditions of knowledge. In the nineteenth century, it had become fashionable to travel to old libraries and scour collections for "lost" manuscripts, ultimately with the aim of publishing them in print, much like the itinerant humanists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had done before them. The losability (and thus discoverability) of manuscript sources had become a key complement to reading printed books. The sense of print's durability depended upon an imagined sense of the perishability of handwriting, although this was by no means actually the case (compare the longevity of many medieval manuscripts with the fragility of Renaissance chapbooks or much nineteenth-century ephemera and you will see what I mean). Printed books, too, can come and go. Indeed, the more there were of them the more they required vigilant attention to ensure their proper reproduction over time. The sense of lost-and-foundness that belonged to reading in the nineteenth century was an essential component of the rising historical awareness that gripped the century and that is in many ways still with us. Thinking historically rests on the contradictory notion of something being both simultaneously present and absent, on grasping and letting go.

Scholars of the future will no doubt troll libraries to locate "lost" print editions of undigitized texts, just like their print predecessors scoured libraries for lost manuscripts. At the same time,

like their print predecessors, they will also work tirelessly on preserving digital texts through time, maintaining our hold over the written record, as the great British editor Richard Bentley had done in the eighteenth century and as Kirschenbaum and others are beginning to do today.³¹ But what matters to such future endeavors is not some ultimate hoped for completion of the digital record—that we will digitize all the books (or all the pieces of paper in the world) or that all digital texts will be preserved forever. Rather, these archival practices are important because they engage in the oscillatory rhythms of the lost and found of historical thinking, something that was itself very much a product of modern bookish learning. By drawing attention to the incomplete remnants of print or the challenging legacies of the digital, scholars can help complicate beliefs about digital writing as something either purely evanescent or permanently present, what Kirschenbaum calls “the long now” of software. They will lend digital writing a sense of temporary closure, a sense of internal differentiation with itself.

Perhaps this is what is ultimately most interesting about Morrissey’s digital page in *The Jew’s Daughter*—the way its instability is compensated for by the imposed act of rereading. It keeps repeating itself with a difference. Only *portions* of the text fly away and are replaced when we touch them. Morrissey’s single page has the structure of a refrain about it, like the genre of the ballad from which it derives its inspiration. As a work, it mixes novelty and repetition, instability with iterability, which has been at the heart of all true knowledge regardless of the medium. Plato famously said that the problem of writing is that it keeps telling us the same thing over and over again.³² Morrissey’s digital answer is, sort of. There is a great deal of wisdom preserved in this “sort of,” in reading’s dialectic of the lost and found.

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Tonight I will read to my children before they go to bed. Although the “bedtime story” was only invented as a common practice at

the end of the nineteenth century, there has always been a durable physiological connection between sleep and reading.³³ Unlike the nursemaid's oral tales that were meant to frighten children into staying in their beds (magnificently parodied by the fantasist E. T. A. Hoffmann in *The Sandman*), the slightly monotonous rhythm of parents' reading aloud is imagined to be a more effective way of accessing the unconsciousness of sleep.

Once the circus of getting ready for bed is over (why pajamas are so hard to put on is a mystery), we search out a clear plot of carpet and choose a book to read. Maybe it will be something from the Frog and Toad series or Tinker and Tanker or, the house favorite, George and Martha. The prevalence of so many pairs reminds me that children's books are often concerned with the ambiguous sociability of reading, the way we are both together and apart when we read. In this, these books nicely recall that first great childish reader, Don Quixote, and his pint-sized literary companion.

As I begin to read, the kids begin to lean into me. Our bodies assume positions of rest, the book our shared column of support. No matter what advertisers say, this could never be true of the acrobatic screen. As we gradually sink into the floor, and each other, our minds are freed to follow their own pathways, unlike the prescribed pathways of the web. We read and we drift. "The words of my book nothing," writes Walt Whitman, "the drift of it everything."³⁴

New research continues to emphasize the importance of mind wandering for learning.³⁵ It turns out that *not* paying attention is one of the best ways of discovering new ideas. Reading books, whether silently or aloud, remains one of the most efficient means of enabling such errant thinking. As our bodies rest, our minds begin to work in a different way. New connections, new pathways, and sharp turns are being made as we meander our way through the book, but also away from it. There is no way to tell if anyone is actually paying attention anymore as I read, including myself. This seems to be one of the great benefits of reading aloud, that you can think of something else while you do it. We may be

holding the book together, but our minds are no doubt far apart by now. The fairy tale is the first story of childhood because it tells of such leaving behind (parents and home), of entering the dreamscape of the woods—and the mind. It tells of the crooked path of change. How can one know where reading books ends and dreaming in books begins?

We come back in the end to Dr. Faustus, who was one of the most important folk heroes of the world of printed books and a rough contemporary of Don Quixote. Faust was a product of early modern learning, of all those books that were increasingly available to readers. Faust was Quixote's serious side. Unlike the Don, however, who steadily devoured works of fiction, Faust tried to know too much about the world. He tried to surpass what could be known in a book, whether it was the Bible or the alchemical handbook. Faust, the fist, in other words, is our modern day demon, not Mephistopheles, his devilish double. Faust reminds us of the way books are totems against ceaseless activity, tools for securing the somatic calm that is the beginning of all careful but also visionary thought. If we believe in the value of rest, and the kind of conversional thinking that it makes possible, then we will want to preserve books and their spaces of readerly rest.

But Faust also reminds us not to hold on too tightly. He shows us the risks of grasping. I find joy in the way words escape me with Morrissey, in their lightness, the way I can make them go away. They remind me that the meaning of reading lies in the oscillatory rhythms of the opening and closing hand.