



Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

Why does the materiality of books matter?

[PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER] The University of Basel was founded over 555 years ago, in 1460. It probably already sported a library back then, but the university library was first mentioned in writing in 1471. So you can imagine that, as the oldest secular library of Switzerland, Basel's University Library contains extensive historical holdings. To make sure that these historical holdings are preserved for future generations, you cannot access any of these books in the regular library rooms. To access those older books, you have to descend into the 'Sonderlesesaal', the special collections reading room. And that's what we're doing right now.

[LIBRARIAN] Good morning.

[PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER] Morning.

[LIBRARIAN] Here is Ezra Pound's *Lustra*.

[PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER] Thanks.

[PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER] It's a really beautiful edition.

[LIBRARIAN] Yes it is. For preservation reasons, we keep it in an acid-free box. It belongs to our collection of famous first editions, which goes back to Incunabula times.

[PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER] Well I'm much looking forward to having a closer look at it. Thank you.

[LIBRARIAN] You're welcome.

[PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER] Now let's start by having a look at the cover of the book. It's a hardback, cloth cover. And that gives the book a certain feel. It gives it the feel of something precious, something worthwhile preserving, something of note. And the cover also comes with elegant, debossed letters, sunken letters, which makes this book pretty much the opposite of cheap airport fictions that have embossed letters that protrude from the page and scream at us. And the book also comes with rough-cut

pages. And that gives the book an older, antiquarian feel, the feel of a fine limited edition. Now you might think that these are fairly banal, obvious observations. But think again.

The material, the physical qualities of this book, at least partially determines our expectations as we open it. And it shapes our response to the poems that are in it.

The German literary and media theorists Ludwig Pfeiffer and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht speak of the 'materialities of communication' here. The urge is not to exhaust our efforts in trying to interpret literary texts and trying to get at their meanings. Instead Pfeiffer and Gumbrecht invite us to join Marshall McLuhan in zooming in on the medium itself, on its material, its physical qualities and the effects those qualities have on us as readers of these books.

Now let's open the book and have a good look at it.

One of the first things we can see is a little sticker here. A little sticker that tells us that this book was bought at Blackwell Booksellers in Oxford. So this already tells us something about the journey this book made before it ended up here in Basel.

Next we get the title page.

And then we get the photograph of Ezra Pound as a pretty handsome young devil. And the photograph is protected by what is called tissue, a thin sheet inserted into books to prevent certain parts of it from damage. And in this case, also to prevent offsetting onto the facing page.

On the facing page, we find copyright information. Where it was published, London. Who published it, Elkin Mathews. And when it was published, 1916. It's a first edition.

And what we also get is an explanation of the title of the book. We get a definition of Lustrum. 'Lustrum, an offering for the sins of the whole people made by the censors at the expiration of their five years of office.'

This already shows us something. This already leads us to expect that we're dealing with a poet who uses precise language. And that's precisely what we get in 'In a Station of the Metro'. Let's continue, shall we?

Then we find acknowledgement of previous publications. And then we get to the book's epigraph. It's in Latin. 'Cui dono lepidum novum libellum.' This is a quote from the Roman poet Catullus. And it translates as, 'to whom do I dedicate this little book?'. So Pound certainly displays his erudition here. But he also stages a bona fide dedication. He dedicates this book to a person that carries the initials V. L. This happens to be Vail de Lencour, a woman that Pound greatly admired.

And then we get to the table of contents. And on page 45, we find our old friend again, 'In a Station of the Metro'.

Now what I've done so far is I've had a look at those pages of the book, those parts of the text in the book that we usually skip over to get to the real thing: the cover, the title page, the epigraph, the dedication, the definition of lustrum. In other books, blurbs or the summaries on the back cover.

The French literary theorist Gerard Genette has coined the term 'paratext' to talk about those texts that surround the text proper. Paratexts, Genette argues, are thresholds of interpretation in the sense that they shape our response to the literary texts we read. Paratexts are the gates through which we pass to get to the real thing. And they're really important gates. Think of Pound's definition of lustrum. Think of his Latin epigraph. They lead us to expect precise, learned poetry. And that's exactly what we get with Pound's brand of modernism.

Now even once we've gotten to the poem, even once we've gotten to 'In a Station of the Metro', our attention isn't solely drawn to the poem. It's also drawn to the poems that surround it. And it looks like there is a method to Pound's madness because these other poems also give us but flash images, but a single instance, but fragments. So it looks like 'In a Station of the Metro' is part of a larger poetic project of Pound's.

So this too is how we can read literature in the digital age: by considering the material surfaces in which literature comes to us, by considering the texts that surround the text proper, the paratexts, and by considering the poems that are around the poem we're mainly interested in. And if we do any of these things, we're engaging in what is called surface reading.