Chapter 5

Surfing on Penelope’s Web

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1 The Book that Never was a Book

Inventor of both the World Wide Web and its name, Tim Berners-Lee chose a metaphor as a title for the book published in 1999 on his invention: Weaving the Web (Berners-Lee and Fischetti 1999). Occasionally, metaphors are the best solution to name new activities: using ancient words and images, they describe objects and actions yet to be named, nevertheless metaphors are never neutral.

The web’s image is endowed with a long literary history. Once, a woman spun and unspun her web whilst waiting for a man lost in an endless navigation. The scenario is well-known: the Odyssey, the story of a subtle correlation between Odysseus’ endless navigation and Penelope’s perpetual weaving and unweaving. So long as Odysseus was wandering the world of nowhere, Penelope had to find a way to escape time. The sailor and the weaver are the complementary characters of an epic, the first to explore the conditions of narration and the art of weaving plots. Narrating, sailing, weaving are, in the Odyssey, correlated activities. For Aristotle the Odyssey was an interlaced web. In his Poetics, he explained how the poem was remarkable by way of its interweaving: being more “twined”, “woven” (peplegmenon) than the Iliad.2 For Maurice Blanchot, at another time and in another context, the Siren’s song was, in the Odyssey, “a form of navigation.”3 To weave and to navigate are thus, from differ-

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1 This paper has been translated by Margaret Escandari-Church and for the last section by Roelof Overmeer. The translation has also been the occasion of a rich discussion on many points and I want to thank both translators for the many suggestions and ameliorations they proposed. Claire Clivaz, David Hamidovic and Paul Dilley also made very precious comments. This study is the development of an oral presentation at the Conference “Humanités délivrées” (October, 2013 at the University of Lausanne). A French and complementary version of this study has been published (Bouvier 2014c).
3 Blanchot 2003 (=1959): 4: “This song, we must remember, was aimed at sailors, men who take risks and feel bold impulses, and it was also a means of navigation.” French (1959) exactly says:
ent points of view, parallel metaphors to define the adventure of a poetic composition.

What if, spanning the centuries, Odysseus’ navigation and Penelope’s weaving loom were anachronistically pertinent examples to question the endless construction and the deconstruction of knowledge on the contemporary Web? Lacking the right words, perhaps it is not a coincidence if present-day imagination borrows images dating back to the *Odyssey* to name new technologies of communication and information; the *Odyssey* was, after all, the first poem to be aware of and to beware the boundless exploration of knowledge (Schein 1996, 31).

Let’s begin however our discussion by considering another metaphor: the French “word play” used as a title for the Swiss Conference in which this paper was first presented: “Les humanités délivrées.” The expression is an auditive play on words: “dé-livré” means “delivered,” but by homonymy, it also refers to the word “livre” (“book” in French) and sounds similar to “delivered from the book.” What will humanities become without the book, when we “deliver” (“dé-livrer”) them? What about humanities caught in the meshes of the Net? How will cultures be reinvented beyond books? History has rendered the book a preeminent cultural object (Nora 2007; Mollier 2012, 182–191). Perhaps one should break away from the book’s ascendency in order to understand to what extent this object has influenced and still largely influences our relationship with knowledge and culture. What happens when knowledge is transferred to new technologies which have absorbed the contents of the earlier ones? (Jacob 2007 and 2011) The pathways and consequences are multiple and unpredictable. As the perfect emblem of occidental culture from the fifteenth century, how will the printed book resist the digital revolution? Tomorrow will books represent the culture of the past? Will the book as a container give its content an outdated aspect? While reading an ancient text on a “digital tablet” and referring only to the content, how can one consider that the “old book” is no longer a book with its familiar binding and comforting pages to turn? The matter will directly bring me – though I take the precautionary measures of a digression – to Homer. The enigmatic poet could be of great help to think the identity of the “book.”

It should be noted that the goal here is not to consider the history of writing and its mediums or supports, already invented, from stone to digital, or to be

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“Ce chant, il ne faut pas le négliger, s’adressait à des navigateurs, hommes du risque et du mouvement hardi, et il était lui aussi une navigation.”