THE BOOK

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It must be called quite simply the Book, inadequate as this name sounds. It is the Book of Books, of course, but that title has already been appropriated, and I want no such confusion. 'The Book', alone, it must be. Those who know it will need no more, and there may be trouble enough convincing others that it exists at all.

Some who have possessed it have written of it at great length. Others, knowing better its power, have remained silent, or conveyed the fact of their ownership by only the obliquest means. These are the ones, it may be, who have inadvertently allowed the story that the Book is no real book at all, but only an idea of such, a dream. So it has happened, in any case, that it has vacillated, through recent centuries, between substance and rumour, theory and fact, sometimes disappearing almost entirely, sometimes assuming, if we are to believe the few accounts there are, such tangible form that you could break a head with it, thump it on a cockroach or (most outrageously of all) be painted or photographed, holding the Book in your hands, a thing at once of infinite dimension, of staggering size, a thing 'no more than two inches thick, a work of but tow hundred pages, sewn untitled between crudest boards, having for a cover illustration only the entrance hole of a worm, who subsequently departs the text at about the hundredth page.'

Or so, at least, we might imagine Sir Humphrey Rivers writing sometime in his later years, when eschatology had all but replaced philology in his mind and he could afford some levity at words' expense. It had not been so when, nearly forty, he had stumbled from the jungles of Ecuador, clutching a thing wrapped in giant liana leaves, convinced that he had found, in the rubble of a monastery, the seed itself of all literature, and from then on guarded it as if it were his life.

One can only guess what went on in that ruined place, how Rivers found it, how long he stayed - a place overrun by jungle, the books in its enormous library fallen from the broken shelves, already disintegrating into humus, their remaining pages thick with mould, their spines and leather bindings eaten by slaters, their text, once set laboriously, letter by letter, by printers in Lyon, Antwerp, Lima, Madrid, now swollen and discoloured by the potent interminglings of ink and vegetation, and in the centre of it all, a few books in all appearance scarcely touched, any and all of which a reader might have taken, and only one of which he did.

It seemed to him, this book, or came to seem, the sum of all that he had ever known or even fleetingly desired, a book as complex and as various, as terrible and as bounteous as the mind itself, with the same dark passages, the same grand vistas, the same half-

suspected guilts and secrets, a book that held all possibilities of thought, all certainty and all perplexity. Not within one reading, it was true, but whenever it was reapproached, a new world opened: characters had changed, events were seen from new perspectives, discourse was deeper or more difficult than before, with unsuspected subtleties, unthought of implications. As dense as a tropical jungle, as ornate as a cathedral, one never stepped into the same text twice: always there were found new themes, new symbols, readings never yet imagined, always there were vital passages completely missed before, as if, even while resting undisturbed - the library locked, the key safely upon Sir Humphrey's person - the book had been changing, parts of it dying, others growing, seeding anew, the words themselves fertilizing their own rich undersoil, more like a forest than a thing of paper. Sometimes, indeed, bending close to its pages, it seemed that one could even catch faint odours of decay, or soft delicious perfumes of new growth, the scent of leaf-mould, the damp, cold exhalation of a newly opened tomb.

This story, however, is not of Sir Humphrey, but of the Book itself. Apart from his journal, some account of his travels, and the late, short *History of Gardens*, the knight did not take up his pen, for all his interest in literature. The true and proper history of the Book in our own culture starts instead with a nephew, a courtier poet, and from thence descends, in erratic hops and dramatic downward slides, one of the most cluttered and eccentric family trees until the point where, like the worm, it departs altogether from the page, only to appear on quite another for three further generations. The pattern repeats itself almost until the present age. Four clans, at least, at different times are dominated by the book. He who could trace it would find, bobbing conspicuously in its wake, not only one of the language's greatest philosophers, but one of our finest playwrights, our greatest essayist, a celebrated pamphleteer, the great Romantic aesthetician, a poet-ess, a novelist, and a whole, small galaxy of versifiers, satirists, chroniclers of the bizarre and strange. It is a record unequalled in our literature, and yet, so thickened and so tangled has each family tree become - so often has the passage of the book defied the normal passage of inheritance - that the observance of this passage, brilliant as so many of its stations are, has as yet defied philologist and genealogist alike.

Possession, moreover, has never been sufficient precondition for such flowering. Over and over again, sometimes for decades, the Book has lain dormant. Some libraries, it seems, provide more fertile soil than others. The record of its power, its genius, influenced as it may have been by fortune, blood or friendship, is in fact also the record of one particular event, albeit in several variations.

The young philosopher, let us say, unaware as yet that that is what he will become, returns from hunting or some dalliance in the capital and, after eating, after entertaining friends, retires to the library, to spend some warm and quiet moments with a familiar volume, only to find it altered inexplicably. The poet, reaching for Ovid, checking a quotation, finds there a word that he had not remembered and, reading on, discovers his copy - a

translation - remarkably yet beautifully corrupt, the names confused, events misplaced, the text itself reproducing uncannily the transformations of its subject.

Such incidents cannot be ignored, and their pathology is swift. The rearrangement of words, the alteration of sentences, the volatility of thought and narrative increases as the owner nears its source, the volumes closest to it altered sometimes almost unrecognizably by this proximity. Sooner rather than later he or she suspects the Book, and from then on, for the chosen or susceptible, their fare has come upon them, the seeds of mutability and transgression entering their minds, their bloodstreams, affecting all that they do or write thereafter. The Book, that is, takes root in certain places like a tropical vine, becomes established like a mould, a parasite, assuming forms that vary with the nature of its host.

In the library of the poetess, for example, the parts of speech change function, verbs migrate to points of action grammar never offered them. In the nonsense that ensues, giving effort and time, new kinds of sense emerge, language develops sinews, muscles unknown before. It seems to her that now it closely wraps a world of sense, of feeling, that hitherto it only gestured to, or rested on like dried mud on a river-bed, or plaster cracking from a wall.

To the dramatist, the Book is something else again. Although we know he had it - willed it to his friend - nowhere does he mention it, and yet, reading his plays, we know for him it was a World of Worlds, a great, enchanted forest in which, straying from glade to glade, he met character upon character whose life and situation all but consumed him - each clearing, as it were, a stage, another country, a tragedy or comedy only awaiting him to see and set it down.

The secret it seems, is not in Law, but in some growing thing. The mathematicians, the physicists of texts will never quite discover it. The almost infinite permutations of a finite alphabet, a known and predetermined language, cannot suffice as explanation when the letters, the very words themselves are rotting, growing, sending out fibrous re-rooting tendrils that in turn adapt in unpredictable new ways within the sentences that house them. I have called the Book a mould, a parasite, taking on its different forms depending upon the nature and condition of its host - but could it be that we are parasites, the Book the host, or that we both exist in some as yet unenvisioned symbiosis, the range of our mutually dependent forms as limitless as the natural world itself?

But I speak as if the Book, through all its changes, were in essence still the same. Nowadays this, like its whereabouts, is not so clear. With its vast dissemination of knowledge in our time, with the extent and intensity of our scholarship, enough about the Book is known, or at least suspected, that there are now, I'm sure, many hundreds, if not thousands, scattered about the globe, who pore over the pages of newspapers and journals, or browse continuously the bookshops, looking for its tell-tale signs. Something

has happened. Perhaps it is merely a symptom of our era - our fragmentation and restlessness, our individual truth-seeking - or perhaps it is that the Book itself has somehow changed more radically than ever before: that, steeped too long in the one library somewhere between the first and second wars, the volumes it affected have themselves become contagious and, distributed, now threaten us with a strange, global infestation of infoliating sentences, texts that never finish, words that have lost their old, stable meanings, or, mirroring our discontent, never quite stay where we have put them, but shift about listlessly, as if seeking a new grammar, an utterly different order.