



PALIMPSEST

In Search of Gutenberg

Clarence Wolfshohl

On a soft, overcast June morning I met the lady diviner. I was working in my garden, hoeing weeds and gently turning the soil to present a new face to the sky. Except for the in-frequent clinks of the steel of the hoe against a rock and my own breathing and inner dialogue, the morning was quiet, even traffic noise muffled. The green of the day was washed into grey as if the earth was dissolving slowly in the watery air. Then a red speck entered across the vacant lot next to my garden. A woman in a red t-shirt and holding her arms at awkward angles paced parallel paths across the lot.

I could not see what she might hold in her hands or did not care to notice, just catching glimpses of the woman as I continued hoeing and as her progress drew her closer toward me. The woman would enter my vision like a new chapter of some rubricated tome in those glimpses. I could not read her plowing progress, as if that text had been in some unknown language or had been partially erased, only the deep red initial letter decipherable. Not until she was a few paces away did I see the dipping of the wire she held. Intent on her own readings, she had not seen me bent-shouldered behind tomatoes. I sensed my speaking would startle her. I stayed as quiet as the morning and studied the increasingly distinct course of the wire. A memory arose like a lesson from childhood that tells us we knew the answer all along. A key to the purpose and actions of the wire.

I remembered a similar pacing and concentrating on a device by an old Mexican in khakis and a sweat brimmed stetson. Our neighbor wanted to dig a new well, and the old man was divining for water. He had used a willow fork but had held it the same way this lady diviner held the wire. But why would she be divining for water in this vacant lot besides the town's junior high school? As

that question pressed itself outward and she came within steps, she noticed me and I broke my tomato ambuscade.

She divined-searched for-the evidence of old buildings. She had discovered the foundation of a house that had once occupied the lot next to our yard, and she had been divining all over the town for like findings. Some findings were obvious, she told me, because the terrain rose and fell around the buried cellars. Others were well camouflaged with new texts written over what had been scraped away. But, she said, a sensitive diviner can still decipher what lies beneath.

Why should this memory now arise as I cross the bahnhofplatz into the altstadt of Mainz? Although it is October and the air more yellow from the lindens of the Schottenhof than green, this morning is much like that earlier one in June. Mist greys the autumnal golds and softens the sounds of early morning traffic. And I am now the diviner, holding not a willow or wire wand but a street map to seek signs of Johannes Gutenberg, inventor of printing with movable type and perhaps founder of our modern technological culture. Because I am a product of that culture and of German descent and, more especially, a printer for whom Gutenberg is the patron source if not saint of my craft, I seek these signs. When Mainz celebrated the 600th anniversary of Gutenberg's birth in 2000, he was named the Man of the Millennium. Signs of such a man should be ubiquitous.

Indeed, I walk a short distance and GUTENBERG fills the façade of two blocks of storefront. The obvious sign in plastic and electricity of the Gutenberg Buchhaus, two blocks and three floors of books, overflowing onto the sidewalk in bargain bins. In the window of the still closed emporium of print is a beautiful, illustrated anniversary-anticipating edition of Humboldt's *Ansichten der Natur*, and I wish I could read German to justify spending the €75. But these contemporary signs are not what I seek. They are the pronounced rise-and-falls of the Gutenberg terrain, as the lady diviner would say. I search for the Gutenberg, and the Mainz, of

buried foundations, of texts scrapped clean, upon which these more obvious signs are scrawled.

All cities, even in the Americas but especially in the Old World, are built layer upon layer. Finding the foundations and shapes of earlier versions is difficult, perhaps sometimes impossible. How many Troys did Schliemann dig through to discover Achilles? In Europe, WWII scraped away much of the Renaissance and Enlightenment text. In Munich I first encountered a postcard genre that I have since seen throughout Germany—the before and after card. On the left half of the card is pictured a bombed out cathedral or city center dated 1945; on the right half is an image of the restored cathedral or city in the present. In Munich, the card was of the Frauenkirche: on the left, only parts of its four walls remain, the rest rubble and dust collapsed inside or drifting like talus down the outer walls; on the right, a completely restored (in color now) cathedral. One may think the restored building would be a copy of the original. The cards do not give us a pre-WWII photo to compare. But there are no exact copies. Much, if not most, of the materials had been pulverized, so new and different materials were used in reconstruction. The medieval spirit and technology that produced that world were replaced by twentieth-century technology and some other spirit. A determination to stare down defeat and a dose of Teutonic ego oddly mixed with humility and tolerance rather than medieval aspiration toward celestial blessings wrote the post WWII city texts of Germany.

As I climb Gaustrasse steadily toward the highest point in Mainz, I discover an example of that spirit in St. Stephanskirche. A friend had insisted I should see this church, and without setting out to do so nor even having noticed it on my city map, I read its identity immediately from the blue stained glass windows. There are no before-and-after postcards on the rack of literature in the vestibule nor in the small gift shop in a rear corner of the church, but there is a large photo display on the wall upon entering that documents St. Stephan's resurrection from bombed-out husk to

restored church not once but several times in its thousand year history. The glowing blue windows are the latest edition of this church that began in 990 as the Holy Roman Empire's Place of Prayer. The original Ottonian, pre-Romanesque basilica was replaced by a Gothic structure built on the original foundation in the fourteenth century. In 1857, the building was badly damaged when a nearby gunpowder store blew up. Between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the building underwent the baroqueing process seen in most of the older churches in Mainz, but

the baroque decorations were removed and not replaced during the renovation after 1857. Some of these pieces were rediscovered after the destruction from Allied bombing and integrated into the latest reconstruction. Now the text of St. Stephanskirche stands on the same medieval foundation with some of its eighteenth-century baroque touches and with the stunning blue windows designed by Marc Chagall begging for peace and tolerance. St.



Stephan's is a palimpsest, as is all of Mainz. What was written in stone has been scraped away time after time to make a clean surface for new narratives, making my search for Gutenberg and the Mainz of his revolutionary invention so difficult.

Palimpsests are books or documents of which the original text has been erased and written over with a new text. In the ages

before good paper when parchment was used for manuscripts, it was economical to use this method to scrap away outdated or out-of-favor texts so that new ideas and information could be preserved. The practice dates back to classical times, but was most prevalent in the seventh through ninth centuries when classical works were erased in favor of patristic literature. Ironically, later in the early Renaissance before the printing revolution, biblical manuscripts—some of the same as those created in the seventh through ninth centuries—were scraped clean to make way for the reintroduction of classical texts. To prepare an old manuscript, the scribe scraped off the writing with a knife or pumice and then used a mixture of cheese, milk, and lime to soften the vellum. Although the goal of the scribe was to remove the first text entirely, very seldom was that done because the ink would bond with the parchment; thus, some of the original remained a shadow text, which has provided scholars with clues to lost and valuable material.

Gutenberg's Mainz is such a palimpsest, scraped clean and written anew several times over the millennia. When I amble down from St. Stephanskirche back toward the altstadt, I happen on the one block long Vordere Synogogenstrasse (First Synagogue Street). In mid-block a low line of cut stones, blackened and polished over centuries, marks the only architectural remnant of the original Jewish sector of Mainz. The Jewish community and the attitude toward Jews underwent multiple revisions throughout the history of Mainz. Mainz was a center of Jewry with a yeshiva that attracted scholars from all of Europe, when in 1012, just a couple of decades after the founding of St. Stephanskirche, all Jews were expelled by Emperor Henry II because priests had converted to Judaism. Later the Jews were allowed to return, and a pattern was established of expulsion and reconciliation, scraping away and rewriting the Jewish narrative. In 1438, they were expelled after a dispute with the city council. The wall dates to this event, for the synagogue was confiscated and even the tombstones were recycled for building material. In 1445, the Jews were readmitted only to be expelled in

1462. Readmitted in 1473, they were again expelled in 1483. As I think of this history, Gutenberg tries to surface as a shadow text, for the fifteenth century was his time and his narrative in some ways entwined with Mainz's Jews.

Gutenberg's name itself is a palimpsest. Most Germans of the medieval period used only their Christian names but, if needed, also used place names to distinguish themselves. If the family changed residences, it likely took on a new "family" name. Frilo Gensfleisch, Johannes' great-great-grandfather, owned two properties, the Hof zum Gutenberg and Gensfleisch (Goose flesh). Johannes was born a Gensfleisch around 1400, but his family took the name Gutenberg because at the time they resided at the Hof zum Gutenberg. *Gutenberg* was a linguistic corruption of *Judenberg*, or Jewish Hill, the property purchased by Frilo from a family which had grabbed it when it was abandoned by the Jewish owners during the 1282 pogrom.

The authorities of Mainz did not expel only Jews during the tumultuous fifteenth century. A conflict between the old established patricians, Gutenberg's class, and the upwardly mobile guildsmen, with whom he probably had a natural affinity, often left Christian Mainzers looking for refuge. Gutenberg first exiled himself from Mainz in 1428 when the guild-controlled city council levied a higher tax on the patrician class. In anger and probably under some coercion, he left the city and refused to return two years later when the guildsmen relented. Where exactly he went is not known, but he did live in Strasbourg from 1434 to 1444, during which time he began using his metal working skills to make his mark. He manufactured polished metal mirrors for pilgrims to use in Aachen. At the tomb of Charlemagne in Aachen, holy relics were displayed and pilgrims believed viewing them would assure answered prayers. However, so many pilgrims thronged to the event that many would be unable to see over the heads of those in front. But one needed merely to see the relic in some fashion, even a reflection, so Gutenberg conceived the idea of manufacturing

mirrors that pilgrims could hold over their and their neighbors' heads to catch glimpses of the holy items. The only problem was that the displays were held once every seven years, and the pilgrimage that Gutenberg had borrowed heavily to supply with mirrors was canceled. So he returned to Mainz in the mid-1440s, along with the Jews from the 1438 expulsion, and began or continued work on the development of printing from moveable type. It was in this period that he partnered with Johann Fust and apprenticed Fust's adopted son, Peter Schoeffer, to establish a print shop. The project succeeded; the beautiful Gutenberg Bible is the result. However, Gutenberg failed at business because Fust called in his loan before the Bibles sold. Gutenberg had no funds so had to give up most of his equipment and production to pay Fust.

In 1462, Gutenberg again chose the wrong man. His faction supported the newly elected Archbishop Diether von Isenburg, but Isenburg had a falling out with Pope Pius II, who replaced Isenburg with Adolf von Nassau. Adolf attacked Mainz to wrest control of the archbishopric. Many of Isenburg's defenders were killed and

survivors expelled. Gutenberg and his apprentices had to flee. Gutenberg probably went to Eltville, down the Rhine a few miles, where he may have established another print shop and from which his apprentices scattered over Europe to disperse the new technology. By 1465, the old printer was somehow reconciled to Adolf von Nassau who appointed him *Hofmann* or courtier. Sometime after that, Gutenberg returned to Mainz where he died on February 3, 1468.



From the Vodore Synogogenstrasse I can see the spires of the Dom, the cathedral symbol of Mainz's recognition as the ecclesiastical center north of the Alps. Although the basic foundations of the tenth-century structure remain, the dom has been altered by its history of fires, lightning strikes, and bombardments. But I am not concerned with the Dom but with the fact that it fronts on Gutenbergplatz and is near the Gutenberg Museum. I stroll through the labyrinthine walkways of the completely post-WWII altstadt, past shops that would fit into any contemporary western city, including the Buch Habel, another large bookstore. Mainz may have more bookshops, large and small, general and specialty, than any city of comparable size. In the bahnhof the usual newsstand is separated into two shops, one for periodicals and the other for books. Gutenberg started all of this from a print shop that produced under two hundred copies of his 42-line Bible from 1449 to 1455. By the early twenty-first century, the annual Frankfurt Book Fair, held about twenty-five miles across the Rhine, displays over 400,000 new titles annually. Quite ubiquitous and quite obvious signs of Gutenberg's influence.

I set my eyes on the Dom tower again, and when I turn a corner, I am in Gutenbergplatz, the focal point of Mainz's altstadt. The statue or denkmal of the most famous citizen of Mainz stands in the center of this plaza. It is green with the patina of 170 years. The great bearded man in medieval robe



clutches one of his Bibles to his heart with his left arm and fingers a composing stick with his right hand dropped to his side. I wonder what he thinks during Johannisfest of the book printer *Gautschen*, dunking of new journeymen printers in a tub of water at the foot of his monument. But it is only a statue without thoughts, a latter-day, French imposition on Mainz, which did not recognize Gutenberg as in any way significant for nearly four hundred years. Other German cities had celebrated centennials of Gutenberg's invention-Wittenberg in 1540; Leipzig, Breslau, and Strasbourg in 1640; Dresden, Bamburg, Halle, and Frankfurt in 1740. Mainz finally erected this *denkmal* in 1837 after the French took over "Mayence" in 1792. Anarcharsis Cloots addressed the National Assembly with an impassioned plea to have Gutenberg's ashes placed with those of the heroes in the Pantheon in Paris. However much the revolutionaries of France knew the value of printing, they did not value Cloots that highly and guillotined him two years later. But his message was heeded, and the French administrators of Mainz scraped away part of the city to create this Gutenbergplatz in celebration of the fourth centennial. I gaze into the statue's gaze and see shadow indecipherable and beyond, as if this bronze Gutenberg has set his back against it, the McDonald arches emblazoned on the building on the south side of the plaza.

I turn my back on egg McMuffins and am content with the fragrances from the many bakeries. I decide it is time to find Hof zum Gutenberg, the birthplace. I backtrack a few blocks and find Schusterstrasse and a plaque that modestly informs "HIER STAND GUTENBERGS GEBURTSHAUS"-Here stood Gutenberg's birthplace-and even more modestly in smaller type "UND SPATER DAS HAUS IN DEM 1869 DER DEUTSCHE BUCHDRUCKER-VEREIN GEGRÜNDET WURDE"-And later in 1869, the German Book Printers Union was founded in this house. The sign stands in front of a post WWII building that is now Mohren Apotheke, but around the corner is the ruins of St. Christopher's Church where Gutenberg was baptized. The north wall of the nave is gone and



concrete reinforcement formed into an anti-war memorial supports the other three walls. In the ruins is the baptismal font supposedly used when Gutenberg was baptized. I walk through the chancel that is still used as a chapel and on the other side is a statue of Gutenberg pulling an impression.

Unlike the imposing denkmal at Gutenbergplatz, this is a contemporary statue with a rusted patina. Representational detail is minimal. In fact, the statue stands less than lifesize. The press is suggested by two pipes or rods , one five foot vertical bar from which juts a two foot horizontal pipe about chin height. The Gutenberg figure leans backward, both arms outstretched in the act of pulling on the suggested impression lever. The figure stands on a thin sheet of metal suggesting a page recently off the press. The figure is robed as on the official denkmal, but the robe falls open and laps on the ground rooting Gutenberg like a tree trunk to the sheet he stands upon and to the ground, for this statue stands on a circular base that is only four inches above the swirled cobblestone paving. The printer's head leans toward his right shoulder, face upturned, eyes shut in ecstasy. This morning, golden leaves sprinkle the base.

The sun breaks through the morning overcast. The leaves gleam for a moment. I will go to the Gutenberg Museum later this morning and several more times in the weeks to come. I will enter the darkened room on the second floor and marvel at the two opened Bibles securely under glass. I will wander through exhibits of printing technology and the most beautiful books ever printed. I will learn more about Gutenberg's life, his contemporaries of Mainz and Germany, his family's mysterious coat of arms. I will cross the alley beside the museum and be like one of the children in the Druckladen, the municipal print shop that lets us handle its array of letterpress equipment and print whatever we wish. And all of that will help me decipher the layers of this palimpsest I have been attempting to understand. But here before this rough cast Gutenberg with leaves shimmering at his feet, my divining wand has discovered a foundation.



Colophon

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Photos

All photographs were taken in Mainz, Germany, October 2005.

Page 1 (cover): The ubiquitous curved cobblestone walkways of Mainz

Page 5: Interior of St. Stephanskirche with Marc Chagall's stained glass
windows

Page 8: The dom or cathedral of Mainz

Page 9: The denkmal or monument to Gutenberg in Gutenbergplatz (The
author stands at the base.)

Page 11: The plaque designating Gutenberg's birthplace

Page 13: The modern sculpture of Gutenberg at the entryway to St.
Christopher's Church