

Reply of a Gaul of the Old Continent to an Indian of the New World

(Reply to an article of John Wronoski entitled The prospects of the American Rare book Trade) ... and about the cultural differences.

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The text of the lecture given by our colleague Mr Wronoski is "apocalyptic" in more than one sense. On the one hand, it brings to mind the style of the visionary of Patmos, and on the other, it reveals more particularly the difference in culture which exists between the old and new world.

Nonetheless when it comes to the profession of antiquarian bookseller, the apocalyptic vision which our American colleague presents us with does not appear to have any bearing on current European trends. Europeans do not seem to have the same problems when it comes to cultural developments, whether such developments concern booksellers or clients. The potential in Europe is such that the average client, the "Sunday amateur", is a relatively common specimen. Consequently, there exists a large number of potential clients for books that are relatively ancient. On the other hand, millionaire philanthropists or collectors represent a specie more prevalent in America. The average French collector tends to be broke and has no longer the means to acquire precious books, which in one way or the other find their way abroad. Equally, the donations of great private collectors to libraries are extremely rare in Europe and to the same extent libraries are not our natural clients for the simple reason that they have no money... Furthermore, we should not forget that books which find their way into libraries are buried there "ad vitam", whereas with private collectors we can expect them to be resold thirty or forty years later. It should also be remembered that the underlined distinction between booksellers of current modern original editions to which Mr Wronoski refers, and booksellers of real ancient books, does not really exist in Europe. If we take France, for example, there are a large number of average bookshops more or less specialised, with a substantial stock in old books, which are traded in street-level shops.

Regarding the Internet we also have a different approach. This difference in vision was particularly expressed during the preliminary negotiations which finally resulted in the Internet agreement signed in Vienna, Austria, last October at the ILAB Congress. The Europeans

appeared to be anxious to conserve a special and personal character of each bookshop, and it was for that reason that they were, for the most part, opposed to systems of overwhelming general specifications of the type ABE, BIBLIOFIND, BIBLIOCITY etc... in which all books were mixed together and where bookdealers would disappear behind a great mass of books with hardly any bibliographic description and where the price factor determines the choice of the buyer. The French among others are anxious to develop over the Internet a personal image with a sophisticated presentation of illustrated catalogues. It was for that reason that they always supported within the ILAB the maintenance of a federal structure allowing each country to reorganise its own website freely, while at the same time reinforcing relations between the various countries; that was why they were against the centralised option where all bookshops would have been regrouped in one gigantic website (American of course). In general, the European is against uniformity and is anxious above all to develop his own particularity.

What was of equal surprise to us was the approach of our colleague and his concept of the book as a mystical object, whereas for us, Europeans, it is the content of the book which could eventually evoke a mystical concept, rather than the opposite itself. This is perhaps explained by the materialist concept of American culture which tends towards an inversion of the book's contents in favour of its container.

We are permitted to inquire of Mr. Wronoski to indicate where are the Sodom and Gomorrah of the old world or whether the new continent is more rampant with nitpickers. "Honni soit qui mal y pense."

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