

Ian Jackson

THE CURSE OF BERNARD ROSENTHAL

The *Rosenthal Legend* takes many forms. Bernard Rosenthal has described its early manifestations in 'Cartel, Clan or Dynasty? The Olschkis and the Rosenthals' (*Harvard Library Bulletin*, 1977). Although consciously steering away from indulging in the more aggressive activities of their two grandfathers, Jacques Rosenthal and Leo S. Olschki, both Barney and his brother Albi, in their different ways, have none the less succeeded in overawing their rivals by their mere presence – but so gently that we have hardly felt the pain.

Richard MacNutt had a long career as one of the world's half-dozen leading music specialists, and yet late in life he had ruefully to admit, 'When I first started out in business, it was "Rosenthal! Rosenthal! Rosenthal!" and, now that I'm about to retire, it's still "Rosenthal! Rosenthal! Rosenthal!"' While Albi was buying Mozart manuscripts at astronomical prices, Barney's role at auctions was generally to be his amiable antipode, the underbidder – 'the most important man in the room', according to his first employer, Arthur Swann of Parke-Bernet Galleries. And Barney's reputation has insinuated itself into the most remote and unexpected corners, to the discomfiture of his colleagues.

When I went to buy the books of Emilio Segrè (Nobel Prize for Physics, 1959) from his widow Rosa in 1990, a year after his death, I thought myself assured of a friendly reception. After all, she had heard about me from my father, a Berkeley colleague who had worked closely with her husband for many years – every experimental physicist needs a reliable theoretician – and who was later to write Segrè's memoir for the National Academy of Sciences series of *Biographical Memoirs* (Washington, 2002). My father, as the author of the standard textbook on classical electrodynamics, had even received the appropriate bequest of a copy of James Clerk Maxwell's *Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism* in Segrè's will. But these were mere feathers when set in the balance against the adamantine *Rosenthal Legend*. The first words of Rosa Segrè as she greeted me at the door were, 'I don't know why I bothered to call you! My husband always used to say that all booksellers were thieves, except, *maybe*, Barney Rosenthal.' Things went downhill from there ... (When I told Barney the tale, he muttered, "Thank Heaven for that "*maybe*"!")

Is there no dark side – a *leyenda negra*, a ‘Black Legend’ – to so widely beloved and admired a bookseller as Barney Rosenthal? Is the jaunty cordiality that echoes the tilt of his beret an evasion tactic? – what is known in Italy (and Barney is half-Italian) as *cordialità protettiva*? If so, we have all been bamboozled for years. On Barney’s 90th birthday, it seems appropriate to look backward to the 50th birthday celebration of a younger Jewish émigré to California, Louis Weinstein of Heritage Books. Barney naturally supplied something genial for the Weinstein festschrift, *Letters from Friends, and others* (Los Angeles, 1994). Inspired, one suspects, by the conversational format of Paul Schilpp’s venerable series, *The Library of Living Philosophers*, Lou Weinstein added his own commentary to the contributions: with one exception, they are wisecracks. Of Barney (uniquely) he wrote, ‘the consummate bookseller. A true gentleman, a linguist, and scholar. Completely honest and the best of company ... Surprise – no jokes. L.W.’

Barney rarely has an unkind word for anyone, and he knows it. I have, for instance, only once heard him describe any bookseller as ‘a schmuck’ and the characterization was preceded by the caveat: ‘As Ruth will testify, it is very rare for me to describe anyone as a schmuck, but ...’ This unflinching outward geniality pleases or amuses his friends, but every so often, they begin to crack – in affectionate exasperation. After one egregiously tolerant remark, André Jammes was provoked to exclaim, ‘*Bernard, tu es trop indulgent!*’ (I know, not because I was there in Paris, but because Barney later told me, ‘You sound just like one of my French friends ...’). It was only recently that Nicolas Barker and myself discovered that we had both independently (and years earlier) devised the same *Rosenthal Game*, a private self-scoring amusement, like counting the white horses one passes (or used to pass) while driving through the countryside. The object of this innocent diversion was to lead the conversation in such a direction that even Barney would be forced to make an uncharacteristically uncharitable remark. Nicolas and I compared notes. The advantage of home turf enabled me to win on points, with a stunning remark recorded one evening when Barney and I had almost finished a second bottle of Chianti. Nicolas no doubt was too polite to point out that some of my methods were so lawyerly as to be unsporting.

Apart from his positive outlook on life, Barney is best known as the bookseller who made annotated books interesting. Of course, books with marginalia by Petrarch or Coleridge have always been interesting – but Barney drew our attention to the annotations of unknown writers,

and to marginalia as a genre. Sir Sydney Cockerell excoriated visitors who flipped casually through his illuminated manuscripts: 'You're not looking closely enough!' Barney has indeed looked closely enough – as shown in the recent portrait of him in his *Autobiography and Autobiography*, with an annotated copy of the first edition of the younger Osiander's vulgate *Biblia Sacra* (Tübingen, 1600). It would be an exaggeration to say that he 'invented' the now flourishing sub-discipline of annotation-studies, or postillatology, but Yale's catalogue of *The Rosenthal Collection of Printed Books with Manuscript Annotations* (1997), based on Barney's own unpublished descriptions, has undoubtedly served to define the field for librarians and scholars.

Barney's postillatological influence on the book trade is still indirect, and may always remain so. Dealers in modern first editions, who cannot collate a book and have never heard of 'Wing', now blithely and expensively market the occasional seventeenth-century pamphlet by citing the ESTC number that pops up on their computer screens. Similarly, the ready availability of the intermittently readable EEBO (more properly, EMFO or 'EarlyMicroFilmOnline') has given the book as a physical object (with individual peculiarities) a cachet that has increased as its audience has dwindled. All annotation is now perceived by the trade as commercially significant. At the very least, it may be said (in Alex Fotheringham's useful catchphrase) to 'richly repay further investigation'. Booksellers who have never even glanced at (or heard of) the catalogue of *The Rosenthal Collection* have absorbed just enough of the commercial Zeitgeist that trickles down from their more learned colleagues to think it worthwhile to crow about the insignificant, illegible, unmeaning and ubiquitous scribbles that deface their unsaleable odd volumes. What can one say but ... *Corruptio Optimi Pessima!*

It is conventional to describe any readable handwriting in an incunable as being 'in a fine humanistic hand'. The illegible is covered by the second entry in David Magee's *A Course in Correct Cataloguing, or Notes to the Neophyte* (San Francisco, 1958), which reads: 'ANNOTATIONS: If these are in an early printed book and quite unreadable they can safely be labeled "Scholarly".' Our current standards of handwriting, now that every child is educated on the anti-calligraphic computer, have plummeted. On the internet, no one knows you're not a humanist.

Barney is himself an annotator of reference books, not in the fine humanistic hand of his brother Albi, but in a subdued scholarly scrawl. (The front cover of his *Catalogue XV* [New York, 1964] reproduces a

marginal note in his hand.) Barney's annotations are merely one instrument in a full scholarly orchestra. He has truffled and interlarded his reference books as has no one else. The volumes swell or even burst, cracking their hinges with reviews, correspondence, prospectuses, offprints and extracted articles: he has been a ruthless destroyer of every scholarly and bibliographical journal he has ever received, apart from *THE BOOK COLLECTOR*, *Scriptorium* and *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* – 'Someone else is looking after them,' he once explained to me. And then, there are the bookmarks, often scraps of medieval manuscript – Barney bought the remaining Phillipps fragments from H. P. Kraus. Richard Linenthal has issued a series of six Quaritch catalogues, based on the Rosenthal collection, under the title *Bookhands of the Middle Ages, Nos. 5–8* (1988–2007). Today's trifles are tomorrow's treasures: we may all live to enjoy a companion series from Quaritch devoted to *Bookmarks of the Middle Ages*.

Barney's distinctive contribution to the annotated book, however, lies not in his marginalia but in his revival of the medieval book curse. His curses do not appear in every book, but rather are only added to books from his library that he has lent, and that, only at the moment of lending. A selection is recorded here. With most people, a curse is a threat, and damning evidence of a 'dark side' – but even here Barney's innate kindness and amiable tolerance shine through. Hell-mouth may be invoked by him in uncompromising terms, but Barney is not about to shove you in. There is a welcome loophole, an escape clause, from Barney's curses: *none of them has an effective date*. His curses promise all sorts of wretched and interminable punishment, but only if his private property is never ever ever returned, and 'never' never comes. Every book-borrower *in esse* is a book-thief only *in posse*.

These legal terms are part of the everyday vocabulary of Barney's most flagrant long-term borrower, a lawyer-turned-bookseller, Jordan Luttrell of Meyer Boswell Books in San Francisco. As I found when I bought the 4000 remaining books and pamphlets in Barney's reference library in 2008 – his books on bindings and manuscripts had been sold at auction in Munich in 2000 – Joe Luttrell had borrowed Curt Bühler's *The Fifteenth-Century Book* (Philadelphia, 1960) in 1985 and had rediscovered it on his own shelves in 2004. Barney had taken the precaution of writing on the front free endpaper: 'A million years of hottest Purgatory if this book is not returned to its rightful owner.' The contrite cover letter that accompanied the return parcel expressed Joe's evident pleasure

that the *Rosenthal Curse* had not yet taken effect: 'I hope you will forgive me. Perhaps after almost twenty years your far-seeing & necessary injunctions began to smolder, & I was drawn towards the neglected shelf in my shop where this book lay.'

Barney might, of course, have set a fixed term to borrowing, as would any public library, but he knows that one cannot predict or presume upon the Last Judgment. Moreover, a due-date would be uncongenial, uncordial and uncollegial, and not in keeping with our laid-back Berkeley ways. In fact, Barney himself prefers to borrow books on the same indefinite terms on which he lends – from friends who will not plague him with overdue notices. As he once wrote to me, asking for the loan of M. R. James's *Eton and King's*, 'UC has it (in storage) but I'd rather use the Walnut St. Library ...'

There is something companionable about Barney's curses. They are not addressed to posterity, still less eternity. He is the Virgil of his own *Purgatorio* and *Inferno*. Under the guise of the Evil Eye, he is the watchful guardian. Every borrower has therefore enjoyed the comfortable feeling that the loan, like the lender, will last 'for the duration'. But one need not have been cautioned by Barney to experience the warm glow of having Everyman by one's side. All who know him will want to wish Barney a healthy and contented life for many years to come, thereby extending our own span under the sign or the curse – if not *sub signo* then *sub maledicto Bernardi*.

AN ANTHOLOGY OF ROSENTHAL CURSES IN
(ROUGHLY) CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

Three hundred thousand years
in Purgatory is the penance
for not returning this
book to its owner

Bernard Rosenthal
120 East 85th St.
New York NY 10028

And everlasting Hell
to those who steal
it.

Th. J. I. Arnold, *Bibliographie de l'oeuvre de Lucas Jansz Waghenaer* (Amsterdam: N. Israel), 1961.

THE CURSE OF BERNARD ROSENTHAL

1000 YEARS
OF
PURGATORY IF
NOT RETURNED
TO

Bernard M. Rosenthal Inc.
Rare Books – Manuscripts
120 East 85th Street
New York 28, NY
RE 4-3711

Denis I. Duveen & Herbert S. Klickstein, *A Bibliography of the Works of Antoine Laurent Lavoisier, 1743-1794* (London: W. Dawson & E. Weil), 1954.

Return to B. M. Rosenthal
or be roasted on a
spit in the fires of
Hell by Satan himself.

8/64

Arnold Kuczynski, *Thesaurus libellorum historiam reformationis illustrantium* (Leipzig: T. O. Weigel), 1870.

Warning
Borrowers who do not return
this will either be struck by
lightning or grow a long,
bushy tail.

1 May 1969

Pius Bonifacius Gams, *Series episcoporum ecclesiae catholicae* (Ratisbon: G. J. Manz), 1873.

121,767 days in the fires
of Purgatory if this book
is not returned to its
rightful owner

Bernard Rosenthal
223 East 61st St.

This 21st day of October
in the Year of the Lord
1969.

Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York: Barnes & Noble), [1968].

THE CURSE OF BERNARD ROSENTHAL

Damnatus sit qui
hunc librum non
restituit possessori sui

Bernardo Vallis Rosarum
in civitate s. Francisci

Curt F. Bühler, *The University and the Press in Fifteenth-century Bologna* (Notre Dame: The Medieval Institute), 1958.

Return to
Barney Rosenthal
251 Post
or add 157 000 years
to your time in Purgatory.

B.M.R.
9.7.70

Franz Falk, *Bibelstudien, Bibelhandschriften und Bibeldrucke in Mainz vom achten Jahrhundert bis zur gegenwart* (Mainz: Franz Kirchheim), 1901.

Failure to return to
Barney Rosenthal
251 Post
San Francisco CA 94108
will put the evil eye on
all those who will come in
contact with this volume.

July 8th 1977

Fernanda Ascarelli, *La Tipografia cinquecentina italiana* (Florence: Sansoni), 1953.

A million years of
hottest Purgatory if this
book is not returned
to its rightful owner

Barney Rosenthal
Dec. 10th, 1985

Curt F. Bühler, *The Fifteenth-century Book* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 1960. Lent to Jordan Luttrell on 10th December, 1985 and returned by him on 15th June, 2004 with an apologetic letter.

THE CURSE OF BERNARD ROSENTHAL

Bernard Rosenthal
Reference Library

Maledictus sit
qui librum Bernardi
abstulit.

Nov. 1992

Jochen Hoock & Pierre Jeanmin, *Ars mercatoria, Eine analytische Bibliographie, Band I: 1470-1600* (Paderborn: Schöningh), 1991.

Iste liber pertinet ad
bibliothecam Bernardi
Vallis Rosarum.
Satana devorabit te
si ei non redditur.

Datum in civitate
Berkeleiensis die
ix^o Novembris MCMLXXXVI

Flavia Cristiano, *L'Antiquariato librario in Italia: vicende, protagoniste, cataloghi* (Rome: Gela Editrice), 1986. Lent to Bernard Breslauer on 9th November 1996, and returned by him on 21st January, 1997. The curse seems to have had a bracing effect even on so redoutable and cocksure a bookseller as Breslauer. In sending the volume back, he enclosed a note (signed "Dein Bernardino!") apologizing for his delay in returning the book: "daher die Verzögerung in der Rücksendung, die ich vielmals zu entschuldigen bitte."

Ian,
Ce livre appartient à
Bernard Rosenthal (voir faux-
titre et p. 278) – Dieu
punira l'emprunteur qui
oserait ne pas le rendre.

Berkeley, le 24 août 2009

Gérard Oberlé, *Mémoires de Marc-Antoine Muret: roman* (Paris: Bernard Grasset), 2009. I still have the book on my shelves.