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WHAT WAS THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK? A RESPONSE

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The history of the book is everywhere, so widely diffused that it merits comparison with the famously elusive Scarlet Pimpernel, whose pursuers sought him without success. Like that figure, book history passes among us in disguise, reluctant to reveal its presence even as it gains ever-greater recognition. In some quarters, it lurks within the domain of bibliography, a field of scholarship dedicated to describing the histories of printed texts and, in the service of this enterprise, concerned with the details of book-making. Elsewhere, book history installs itself within descriptions of libraries and education, sharing, with the first of these, a concern for how old books were accumulated and classified and, with the second, for the many ramifications of literacy and the fashioning of schoolbooks. Together with the history of journalism it studies how news was disseminated and ponders the significance of periodicals, be these newspapers or magazines. Political history has been another convenient site of disguise in the wake of efforts to connect the public sphere and concepts of nation with the emergence of print culture. And, of course, book history has enjoyed a long and fruitful kinship with literary history, a relationship freshly energized in recent decades as literary historians turned to describing the rise and remaking of a canon and to emphasizing the mediations that all texts undergo—the "sociology of texts," to borrow a phrase made famous by D. F. McKenzie.[1] To this list we can add the version of intellectual history that reconstructs the reading of a person or group and employs this data to generalize about the coming of the Enlightenment and similar formations.

But book history is also publicly visible, its contours mapped in an ever-increasing number of anthologies, handbooks, and works of synthesis that use the nation state as a point of departure—hence the "Cambridge History of the Book in Britain," the "History of the Book in America [that is, the United

[1] D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: The British Library, 1986).

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States]," and so on. The visibility of book history is apparent, too, in citations to the theorizing assertions of Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, and McKenzie that abound in recent literary scholarship. All of this activity suggests that we are in the presence of something substantial, possibly a discipline in the making or else a re-energizing of older methods and information to answer new questions.

Robert Darnton's reflections on the model of book history he sketched in 1982 are a useful point of departure for considering at greater length its pertinence to intellectual history. Those reflections remind us that Darnton commands an unrivaled knowledge of the particularities of publishing in the eighteenth century, particularities that encompass the kinds of paper being used, the pace of production in a printing shop, the intricacies of "rights to copy," the distributors who found ingenious ways of smuggling forbidden books into France, and much else besides. Darnton's fondness for these particularities eventually gives way to an attempt to organize them around structures and practices that constitute a "communications circuit." Here, I think, two motives are in play. The first springs from the immense amount of data about book-making that bibliographers and book-trade historians have assembled over the years. Having added to this data himself, Darnton knows that, in the main, historians have ignored book-trades history because it seems to lead nowhere except to more particularities. Though he does not cite Charlton Himman's massive two-volume *The Printing of Shakespeare's Plays*—a labor-intensive project if ever there were one—its pages are likely to provoke feelings of dismay: what on earth do its details contribute to intellectual history or, for that matter, to literary history?[2] Hence the attempt on Darnton's part to elaborate a model that would provide order and significance to such information. Another motive has been to encourage a comparative history of the book—first and foremost among Europeanists who write about the early modern period, but also more generally. Here again Darnton draws upon a near-comprehensive knowledge of book-trades history in several European countries to sketch aspects of that history that would benefit from a comparative perspective. He is surely assuming that, were this perspective more fully practiced, we would move closer to a general framework for book history.

Other readers of his essay may feel the importance, as I do, of both of these objectives: seduced on the one hand by the marvelously evocative portraying of details and, on the other, by the elegant generalizing that yields the model, here slightly revised, of a "communications circuit." We may also feel that his essay for this journal contains a tension that refers us back to the difficulties we may be

[2] Charlton Hinman, *The Printing and Proof-Reading of The First Folio of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). In another context I would express my admiration for what this book tells us of printing-office practices.

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experiencing with book history: does it provide a myriad of details that mostly seem irrelevant to intellectual history, or does it offer some means of improving our work? Does it change our understanding of intellectual life or of the texts that matter so much to us? Can it help us understand the currency of those things we call ideas, and if so, how? Or does its significance lie in gains of a smaller kind?

A good point of entry for addressing these questions is the history of reading, which intellectual historians employed as one of their methods long before it rose to prominence in association with the history of the book. Early on, the challenge was to understand reading as a practice that changed over time and was inflected by social and cultural circumstances. Distinctions arose to mark off one period from another: silent reading from reading aloud, and "extensive" reading from "intensive," a transition characterized as a "reading revolution" by Rolf Engelsing.[3] Another challenge was to map the geographies of reading—who read what when, using, for this purpose, probate inventories, the records of booksellers and libraries, and personal writings such as diaries. A third was to understand the mediations that, it was quickly realized, shape every phase of reading: the versions of literacy that people brought to the task of reading, the "interpretative communities" that affected the practice in several ways, the systems of classification, including genre, that individuals and institutions used in arranging their books, the material form of the text itself . . . all of these have proved fruitful subjects of research.[4]

Fruitful, but also problematic. The more we have learned about the particularities of reading, the more uncertain it becomes that intensive reading was practiced in one period and extensive in another. Inventory studies, though enlightening in some respects, were disheartening in others, for it was almost impossible to demonstrate whether or how the books listed in them were read, and, in the aggregate, impossible to demonstrate that owners had intentionally selected the titles in their possession, given the presence of so many old books (i.e. inherited). The same possibility affected the analysis of social libraries and booksellers' stock; as Darnton and I pointed out some months ago to a young scholar who, at a conference on book history, was making much of an eighteenth-century European social library, many of the books would have been booksellers' remainders that no customer would ever borrow or purchase. Stories abound of reading as a powerful experience, as in Darnton's account of an eighteenth-century Frenchman's response to Rousseau. The experience of

3 Intensive reading refers to the practice of repeated readings, undertaken slowly, of a small body of texts; extensive to a quicker style that is often associated with the rise of fiction.

4 The essays in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), are excellent summaries of recent work that calls into question some of these generalizations.

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reading is registered as well in books that someone annotated or excerpted. Yet these episodes of reader response are not easily converted into general arguments—or general arguments that avoid overstatement. What we think we know about the experience of reading is often a matter of representations of the act, representations within a text (the "implied reader"), and representations fashioned by educators and cultural critics urging a particular mode of using texts or decrying what they take to be acts of misreading. Indeed, intensive reading was first and foremost a matter of prescription, the right way to read, as for some of us it still is. Meanwhile the possibilities for understanding literacy as practice and representation were proliferating in ways that worked against any simple distinctions or periodizations: women's literacy as contrasted with men's, for example, or visual literacy versus forms based on print.

William St Clair's recent *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* adds to these complexities a description of the difference that pricing and press runs made for printed books in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, with a side glance at the United States. His starting point is a question of intellectual history: how do we know which books were influential? Wanting to avoid a text-centered answer or a mere reaffirming of the customary canon of high writers, he has used publishers' records and similar sources to demonstrate the small size of press runs for most new books but, on the other hand, the surprisingly large press runs for books that fell out of copyright, a principal difference between the two types being price: high for new books, low for reprints. Quantity becomes a measure of readership, and from his point of view readership is a useful measure of cultural or intellectual significance. That Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) "disappeared from the catalogues of such circulating libraries as had taken it before the turn of the century," that the press run of the initial three editions may have totaled no more than 1,500 or 2,000 copies, and that no one reprinted the book until mid-century and then not again until 1892, are reasons for concluding that "it would have been difficult, and unusual, for anyone, woman or man, to find and read the book" in the early decades of the nineteenth century.[5] On the other hand, conduct books for women that prescribed a traditional role were available in "enormous" quantity, as were many other "old" books that, in their themes and subject matter, had little or nothing in common with the romantic age evoked as it has been by literary and cultural historians. Few intellectual historians are this stringent in using quantity as evidence, but St Clair's point about the book trade's habit of "prolonging the

[5] A different way of approaching the readership of the *Vindication* would be to survey how it was discussed in periodicals—if indeed it was discussed.

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obsolete" via anthologies and other forms of reprinting should prompt us to take such books more seriously.[6]

Looking back on *The Order of Books*, Roger Chartier reminds us of another crucial difficulty in the history of reading: the attempt to understand it as a process of individual (or local) appropriation of texts and, at the same time, as one of imposition on the reader. Impose *and* remake: that a text operates (or is operated on) in both these ways has been one of Chartier's most important contributions. Here he reminds us of a persistent misreading of his own work as giving more emphasis to appropriation than to the authority of the text. It is a misreading that anyone who has fallen under the spell of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980) may be inclined to make, but as Chartier rightly insists, his goal is to sustain both sides of this "opposition." Should we ask nonetheless if some means exists of discerning whether, for a certain text or reader, the two are of equal force? It would not seem the case, for example, that most readers of the Bible in seventeenth-century Puritan culture strayed from the interpretation of Scripture provided by their clergy.

Another aspect of Chartier's work on reading history is his insistence that the material form of a text shapes how it is read. What makes this assertion something more than a truism is that the material form of a printed book encompasses the preliminaries or "paratext" that serve as the threshold every reader must cross before arriving at the text proper, preliminaries that do a great deal of work in how (for example) the reader is addressed in a preface and the provenance of the text narrated. In a much-overlooked study of editions of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Barbara A. Johnson shows that nineteenth-century editors of the book who wanted to claim it as a contribution to English literature created front matter to suit, for example an author portrait, whereas editors who regarded it as instructing readers in Protestant devotion preferred to depict a reclining Bunyan receiving the text from the Holy Spirit: Bunyan not as author but as instrument or vehicle.[7] But the nearly endless possibilities for pursuing this kind of analysis still leave us with a question akin to the one I posed in the previous paragraph: is there any method or technique for assessing the significance of material form over and against the significance of the text as written, i.e. language itself?

For literary critics and historians, the great benefit of reclaiming the material form of a text is how this evidence pushes back at "formalism." It pushes back, too,

6 William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 277–9.

7 Barbara A. Johnson, *Reading Piers Plowman and The Pilgrim's Progress: Reception and the Protestant Reader* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992). See also Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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against the editorial practices that became authoritative at mid-century, practices flowing from the goal of arriving at a pure text as the author had intended it. As David Kastan has recently observed,

> no single version of a literary work, whether Renaissance or modern, can offer us the fond dream of unmediated access to an author . . .; the more aware we are of the processes of mediation . . . the less likely we are to be caught up in a constricting hermeneutic knot by which the shaping hand of the editor is mistaken for the intent of the author, or for some lost, "perfect" version of the author's creation.

As indicated by this statement, a vigorous critique that dates back to the 1970s and 1980s has become the new orthodoxy, an understanding of texts that foregrounds the mediations that inhere in an edited text. And not only edited texts, in the narrow sense of that term, for the making of every text is a process that encompasses many different people who become in some sense collaborators of the author, hence the phrase "social authorship" as a means of acknowledging such acts of collaboration. Hence too a return to the material form of the text given the predicate that all "texts are realized materially," a strategy that "demystifies the act of writing, clarifying the actual conditions of creativity, locating the text within a network of intentions."[8]

These assertions help to explain why the history of the book is so widely evoked among students of the English Renaissance and its Continental equivalents, and why a few departments of English are beginning to make appointments in this field. For the moment, my money is on literary historians to raise book history to a higher level of analysis and argument. If intellectual historians seem less excited by the assertions I have quoted, the reason may simply be that we never experienced the edicts of the new bibliography and its fetish of the pure text. Nor do we struggle against an estheticized formalism.[9] Good intellectual history has always acknowledged context and the revisions that a text undergoes, though we can also feel pressured to make a text conform to a particular understanding of a writer by erasing evidence to the contrary. But we can do better, and by better I mean learning from the literary historians as they demonstrate how to read the material form of texts and understand the complex workings of anonymity,

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8 David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3–5; Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). See also *PMLA* 121/1 (2006), with its special topic, "The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature."

9 The "linguistic turn" and the (fleeting) hegemony of "discourse" are, perhaps, rough parallels.

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censorship, and the technology of scribal publication, to mention three areas that have witnessed impressive scholarship.[10]

Some of the possibilities for doing better are demonstrated in James Secord's *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of* Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (2000). In 1844 the Scottish man of letters Robert Chambers published an iconoclastic book that contemporaries immediately characterized as a "sensation." He did so anonymously, and the drama of the story Secord tells hangs in part on whether this secret would be exposed or maintained. But the real point of *Victorian Sensation* is to demonstrate how "abstract ideas about nature should be approached first and foremost as material objects of commerce and situated in specific settings for reading." These are strong claims, animated by Secord's reaction against his version of formalism, a history of science centered on great ideas that arise and prevail by their very merits. His is emphatically a contribution to the social history of science, but the book may be most instructive for how it reconstructs the reading history of the *Vestiges* and for suggesting what that history tells us about the authority of science in nineteenth-century England. To this end, we are set amidst several different communities of readers, each exercising its own version of sociability, each bringing its own expectations to the practice of reading, the implicit point being that the book had no one meaning, a point further emphasized by the revisions Chambers made in successive editions and the eventual publishing of an inexpensive reprint. Secord's point, too, is that the established men of science who reviewed the book, one or two of them quite critically, were unable to control how it was appropriated. Its reading history thus betokens the emergence of "new literary forms such as popular science . . . and its larger role in making 'the people' a central category of the industrial order."[11]

Secord would surely sympathize with Peter Burke's attempt to construct a social history of knowledge, though the particularities of *Victorian Sensation*

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[10] Marcy L. North, *The Anonymous Renaissance: Cultures of Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Two recent studies that do pay attention to aspects of book history are Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[11] J. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of* Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 4, 5.

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as well as its focus on reading have greater depth than what Burke could accomplish in a book that, as he acknowledges, relies on synthesis and is meant to be suggestive. Burke does not explicitly evoke the history of the book or the proposition that material form affects meaning. Yet printing and printed books are central to the story he tells in *A Social History of Knowledge*, a story of sites and social groups involved in producing, storing, regulating, and consuming knowledge. Here, as in *Victorian Sensation*, knowledge is relieved from abstraction and, as it should be, located in social settings, each with its own claims to authority. Yet I wonder how far we can carry this approach. One constraint is the fracturing of knowledge into areas of specialized expertise, something I am painfully reminded of whenever I stand in line at my local hardware store and realize how little I understand the chatter about parts and tools. Is the social history Burke is sketching akin to the social history of literacy, which eventually was overwhelmed by the many different modes this skill could take? And can a social history of knowledge do more for us than the close reading of texts that has always worked well for understanding "thought"? Such a social history may be more attuned to the relationship between knowledge and power, yet this too is a truism that eludes precise description. It is one thing to put authority in play, as Secord and the social historians of science have been doing, and another to specify the conditions that allow a particular version of knowledge to prevail. Truth be told, Chambers was not writing "good" science, and although truth is a quality Secord would prefer to ignore given the ramifications of popular versions of the scientific, some forms of knowledge are better than others, as I realize in my local hardware store.

The history of the book is a useful aspect of intellectual history when it serves to remind us of the mediations—material, social, economic, political—that surround the texts we study. That so many editions of older texts eliminate the evidence of these mediations means that we risk ignoring what they tell us, though as the present-day confusion about how to edit Shakespeare's plays reveals, there is no simple means of reinstalling that evidence. The history of the book is useful, too, in directing us to readers and their appropriations of a text; on a larger scale, it invites a history of reception. Models such as Darnton's—overlaid, perhaps, by the emphasis within literary studies on social authorship and the instability of texts—hint at possibilities for synthesis that, for the most part, remain unrealized. Yet I am inclined to think that any stronger claims, like those of Kastan and Secord that I have quoted, have a tactical importance that may not translate into any grand refashioning of intellectual history.

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