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978-0-521-29955-8 - The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe: Volumes I and II

Elizabeth L. Eisenstein

Excerpt

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION TO AN
ELUSIVE TRANSFORMATION

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I

 THE UNACKNOWLEDGED
 REVOLUTION

In the late fifteenth century, the reproduction of written materials began to move from the copyist's desk to the printer's workshop. This shift, which revolutionized all forms of learning, was particularly important for historical scholarship. Ever since then, historians have been indebted to Gutenberg's invention; print enters their work from start to finish, from consulting card-files to reading page-proofs. Because historians are usually eager to investigate major changes and this change transformed the conditions of their own craft, one would expect the shift to attract some attention from the profession as a whole. Yet any historiographical survey will show the contrary to be true. It is symbolic that Clio has retained her handwritten scroll. So little has been made of the move into new workshops, that after five hundred years, the muse of history still remains outside. 'History bears witness to the cataclysmic effect on society of inventions of new media for the transmission of information among persons. The development of writing and later the development of printing are examples...'¹ Insofar as flesh-and-blood historians who turn out articles and books actually bear witness to what happened in the past, the effect on society of the development of printing, far from appearing cataclysmic, is remarkably inconspicuous. Many studies of developments during the last five centuries say nothing about it at all.

Those who do touch on the topic usually agree that the use of the invention had far-reaching effects. Francis Bacon's aphorism suggesting that it changed 'the appearance and state of the whole world' is cited

¹ St John, book review, *The American Journal of Sociology*, p. 255. (For full citation of all footnote references, consult Bibliographical index at end of volume II.)

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repeatedly and with approbation. But although many scholars concur with Bacon's opinion, very few have tried to follow his advice and 'take note of the force, effect, and consequences' of Gutenberg's invention. Much attention is paid to developments that paved the way for this invention. Many efforts have been made to define just what Gutenberg did 'invent,' to describe how movable type was first utilized and how the use of the new presses spread. But almost no studies are devoted to the consequences that ensued once printers had begun to ply their new trades throughout Europe. Explicit theories as to what these consequences were have not yet been proposed, let alone tested or contested.

There is, to be sure, a large and ever growing literature devoted to the history of printing and related topics.² Although much of it seems to be written by and for specialists – custodians of rare books and other librarians; experts on typography or bibliography, literary scholars concerned with press-variants, and the like – this literature does contain material of more wide-ranging interest. Historians working in neighboring fields – such as economic history, comparative literature, or Renaissance studies – have also contributed useful treatments of special aspects. The field of social history has probably yielded the richest harvest. There one finds a bewildering abundance of studies on topics such as investment in early presses and the book trade in various regions; labor conditions and social agitation among journeymen typographers; scholar–printer dynasties and publication policies; censorship, privileges, and regulation of the trade; special aspects of pamphleteering, propaganda and journalism; professional authors,

² According to 'Nouvelles du Livre Ancien' (Fall, 1974) no. 1 (a tri-annual newsletter issued by the 'Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes'), almost a thousand periodicals are covered by the new *Annual Bibliography of the History of the Printed Book and Libraries* issued from the Hague since 1970. In the 1972 volume (which excludes all U.S. publications as well as those of several European countries) there are some 2,800 entries. *The Selective Check Lists of Bibliographical Scholarship* issued at five-year intervals by the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia are especially helpful for keeping up with recent output. The *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* which first appeared in 1956 under West German auspices covers a wider, geographic and topical, area than the old *Archiv für Geschichte des Deutschen Buchhandels* and, along with two new journals launched since 1970 from Holland and France, enables one to sample the dazzling variety of research activities undertaken in the second half of this century. Like the *Archiv, Quaerendo: A Quarterly Journal from the Low Countries Devoted to Manuscripts and Printed Books* (Amsterdam) (a successor to *Het Boek*) and *Revue Française d'Histoire du Livre* (Bordeaux) (sponsored by the *Société Française d'Histoire du Livre*) stress the broader cultural implications of the history of the book. A useful selective bibliography is in Berry and Poole, *Annals of Printing*, pp. 287–94, but note the caution given by Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*, p. 392. For a basic introduction to topic, Gaskell should be consulted in any case.

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patrons and publics; the sociology of reading and the sociology of literature. The list could be extended indefinitely.³

Furthermore, several works that synthesize and summarize parts of this large literature have recently appeared. Thus Rudolf Hirsch surveys problems associated with 'printing, selling, reading,' during the first century after Gutenberg, for the benefit of 'the general reader of social and intellectual history' as well as for the specialist.⁴ A more extensive, well-organized volume by Febvre and Martin, which skillfully covers the first three centuries of printing, has appeared in the *Evolution de L'Humanité* series. An even broader coverage, embracing 'five hundred years,' is provided by Steinberg's remarkably succinct semi-popular English survey.⁵ All three of these books summarize data drawn from many scattered studies. But although the broader historical implications of these data are occasionally hinted at, they are never really spelled out. Like the section on printing in the *New Cambridge Modern History*⁶ the contents of these surveys rarely enter into treatments of other aspects of the evolution of humanity.

According to Steinberg: 'The history of printing is an integral part of the general history of civilization.'⁷ Unfortunately the statement is not applicable to written history as it stands although it is probably true enough of the actual course of human affairs. Far from being integrated

³ The wide range of periodicals containing relevant material is suggestive. Apart from numerous journals specifically devoted to special aspects (such as *The Library* or the *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*), I have also found useful data in the *Journal des Savants*, the *UCLA Law Review*, *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, *Isis*, *Shakespeare Studies*, and other seemingly unrelated specialized journals.

⁴ Hirsch, *Printing, Selling*. In my view the specialist will profit more than the general reader from sampling the richly detailed findings contained in this work. For a second printing in 1974, the author has added a bibliographical introduction but has left intact the text. The latter provoked perhaps an unduly harsh critical review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Sept. 21, 1967), p. 848.

⁵ Febvre and Martin, *L'Apparition*. (Febvre died before the book was completed and credit for most of it should go to Martin.) Martin's later master work: *Livre, pouvoirs et société à Paris au XVIIe siècle* has been described as a 'splendid sequel.' (See 'Books in France,' *Times Literary Supplement* (Nov. 20, 1969), p. 1344.) It is indeed a splendid work encompassing more than its title suggests. But two volumes on conditions in seventeenth-century France do not really serve as a 'sequel' to one volume covering all of Europe during three centuries. As a synthesis, the one volume is, as yet, unsurpassed and, unlike the other surveys, contains a large classified bibliography. An English translation which has just been issued: *The Coming of the Book*, tr. David Gerard (London, 1976) unfortunately omits the bibliography, which is by now in need of updating. Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years*, covers a wider interval in fewer pages but lacks the richness and depth of the French volume. In dealing with the most recent centuries, Steinberg's work is especially thin. But in covering the first century after Gutenberg, he offers some data that is not duplicated in the other surveys despite their traversal of the same ground.

⁶ Hay, 'Literature: The printed book,' pp. 359-86. See n. 64 below.

⁷ Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years*, p. 11.

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into other works, studies dealing with the history of printing are isolated and artificially sealed off from the rest of historical literature. In theory, these studies center on a topic that impinges on many other fields. In fact, they are seldom consulted by scholars who work in any other field, perhaps because their relevance to other fields is still not clear. 'The exact nature of the impact which the invention and spread of printing had on Western civilization remains subject to interpretation even today.'⁸ This seems to understate the case. There are few interpretations even of an inexact or approximate nature upon which scholars may draw when pursuing other inquiries.⁹ The effects produced by printing have aroused little controversy, not because views on the topic coincide, but because almost none have been set forth in an explicit and systematic form. Indeed those who seem to agree that momentous changes were entailed always seem to stop short of telling us just what they were.

The following two citations may suffice to illustrate the range of evasive tactics that are employed. The first comes from a justly celebrated study of comparative literature by an eminent literary historian: 'The immense and revolutionary change which it [the invention of printing] brought about can be summarized in one sentence: Until that time every book was a manuscript.'¹⁰ The author goes on to discuss scribal book production, in a somewhat fanciful and romantic vein.¹¹ Nothing more is said about what happened *after* books ceased being manuscripts and perhaps this explains how Curtius can assert: 'we have modernized our railroads but not our system of transmitting tradition.'¹² In my view, the transmission of literary traditions was 'modernized' several centuries before the steam engine appeared; but this cannot be seen unless one takes a longer look at the 'immense and revolutionary change,' than Curtius does. That an otherwise careful scholar entertains

⁸ Hirsch, *Printing, Selling*, p. 2.

⁹ The casual treatment given to the topic by most historians has often been underlined by students of library science, without much effect. See e.g. remarks by Uhlendorf, 'The Invention and Spread of Printing,' p. 179.

¹⁰ Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 238.

¹¹ Compare Curtius' remarks about the diligent, loving, sedulous scribe (p. 328) with Ivins' 'sloppy, clumsy, inelegant, hastily and carelessly written manuscript' as reported by Bühler, *The Fifteenth Century Book*, p. 87. Curtius says that 'every book produced by copying' was 'a personal achievement,' overlooking all the evidence that shows piecemeal copying was common – at least as far back as the ninth century. See Destrez, *La Pecía*, pp. 21; 44. The misleading impression of manuscript books conveyed by the beautiful specimens preserved in library treasure rooms is underlined by Butler, *Origin of Printing*, p. 11.

¹² Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 16.

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the notion of summarizing such a change in a single sentence is surely remarkable. A less exceptional approach is provided by the author of the second citation, who has contributed much to the special literature on printing and whose competence in this field gives his views added weight. 'It would require an extensive volume to set forth even in outline the far-reaching effects of this invention in every field of human enterprise.'¹³ This is probably so. Yet no volume, whether slim or extensive, can set forth or present in outline form, effects that have not yet been described or explicitly defined. Douglas McMurtrie's reference to an immense unwritten volume turns out to be scarcely more satisfying than Ernst Curtius' summary sentence. In both instances we learn nothing more about seemingly momentous consequences save that they occurred. Nor is the curious reader offered any guidance as to where one might go to learn more.

Since we are concerned with 'far-reaching effects' that, by common consent, left no field of human enterprise untouched, one might well wonder why such effects still remain undetermined. 'Neither political, constitutional, ecclesiastical, and economic events, nor sociological, philosophical, and literary movements can be fully understood without taking into account the influence the printing press has exerted upon them.'¹⁴ All these events and movements have been subjected to close scrutiny by generations of scholars with the aim of understanding them more fully. If the printing press exerted some influence upon them, why is this influence so often unnoted, so rarely even hinted at, let alone discussed? The question is worth posing if only to suggest that the effects produced by printing are by no means self-evident. Insofar as they may be encountered by scholars exploring different fields, they are apt to pass unrecognized at present. To track them down and set them forth – in an outline or some other form – is much easier said than done.

When McMurtrie or Steinberg refer to the impact of printing on every field of human enterprise – political, economic, philosophical and so forth – it is by no means clear just what they have in mind. In part at least they seem to be pointing to indirect consequences which have to be inferred and which are associated with the consumption of printed products or with changed mental habits. Such consequences are, of course, of major historical significance and impinge on most forms of human enterprise. Nevertheless it is difficult to describe them

¹³ McMurtrie, *The Book*, p. 136.¹⁴ Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years*, p. 11.

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precisely or even to determine exactly what they are. It is one thing to describe how methods of book production changed after the mid-fifteenth century or to estimate rates of increased output. It is another thing to decide how access to a greater abundance or variety of written records affected ways of learning, thinking, and perceiving among literate élites. Similarly, it is one thing to show that standardization was a consequence of printing. It is another to decide how laws, languages, or mental constructs were affected by more uniform texts. Even at present, despite all the data being obtained from living responsive subjects; despite all the efforts being made by public opinion analysts, pollsters or behavioral scientists; we still know very little about how access to printed materials affects human behavior.¹⁵ (A glance at recent controversies on the desirability of censoring pornography shows how ignorant we are.) Historians who have to reach out beyond the grave to reconstruct past forms of consciousness are especially disadvantaged in dealing with such issues. Theories about unevenly phased changes affecting literacy rates, learning processes, attitudes and expectations, do not lend themselves, at all events, to simple, clear-cut formulations that can be easily tested or integrated into conventional historical narratives.

Problems posed by some of the more important effects produced by the shift from script to print, by indirect consequences that have to be inferred and by imponderables that defy accurate measurement, probably can never be overcome entirely. But such problems could be confronted more squarely if other impediments did not lie in the way. Among the far-reaching effects that need to be noted are many that still affect present observations and that operate with particularly great force upon every professional scholar. Thus constant access to printed materials is a prerequisite for the practice of the historian's own craft. It is difficult to observe processes that enter so intimately into our own observations. In order to assess changes ushered in by printing, for example, we need to survey the conditions that prevailed before its advent. Yet the conditions of scribal culture can only be observed through a veil of print.

Even a cursory acquaintance with the findings of anthropologists or casual observations of pre-school age children may help to remind us of the gulf that exists between oral and literate cultures. Several studies,

¹⁵ Berelson and Janowitz, *Reader in Public Opinion* contains several relevant articles.

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accordingly, have illuminated the difference between mentalities shaped by reliance on the spoken as opposed to the written word.¹⁶ The gulf that separates our experience from that of literate élites who relied exclusively on hand-copied texts is much more difficult to fathom. There is nothing analogous in our experience or in that of any living creature within the Western world at present. The conditions of scribal culture thus have to be artificially reconstructed by recourse to history books and reference guides. Yet for the most part, these works are more likely to conceal than to reveal the object of such a search. Scribal themes are carried forward, post-print trends are traced backward in a manner that makes it difficult to envisage the existence of a distinctive literary culture based on hand-copying.¹⁷ There is not even an agreed-upon term in common use which designates the system of written communications that prevailed before print.¹⁸

Schoolchildren who are asked to trace early overseas voyages on identical outline maps are likely to become absent-minded about the fact that there were no uniform world maps in the era when the voyages were made. A similar absent-mindedness on a more sophisticated level is encouraged by increasingly refined techniques for collating manuscripts and producing authoritative editions of them. Each successive edition tells us more than was previously known about how a given manuscript was composed and copied. By the same token, each makes it more difficult to envisage how a given manuscript appeared to a scribal scholar who had only one hand-copied version to consult and no certain guidance as to its place or date of composition, its title or

¹⁶ For suggestive imaginative use of the distinction between oral and literate cultures to illuminate diverse phases of Greek thought, see Havelock, *Preface to Plato*. The same distinction is discussed from the viewpoint of anthropologists by Goody and Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy,' 304–45. See also collection of essays, edited by Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* for pertinent discussion and references. Despite passing reference to the work of McLuhan and Ong in Goody's introduction, the difference between scribal culture and print culture tends to be blurred by arguments which contrast alphabetic with ideographic writing and oral with written transmission but not script with print. For an earlier, somewhat neglected essay comparing oral with written transmission, see Gandz, 'The Dawn of Literature.' As noted in my preface, recent interest in African studies has stimulated a new, large and mushrooming literature on this question. See bibliography given by Vansina.

¹⁷ For elaboration on this point, see my essay, 'Clio and Chronos.'

¹⁸ I have found the term 'scribal culture' useful as a shorthand way of referring to such activities as producing and duplicating books, transmitting messages, reporting news and storing data after the invention of writing and before that of movable type. 'Chirographic' is more correctly opposed to 'Typographic' by Father Ong but seems somewhat too recondite for my purposes. As noted in my preface, the term 'print culture' is used to refer only to post-Gutenberg developments in the West. How printing affected pre-Gutenberg Asia must be left to others to investigate.

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author. Historians are trained to discriminate between manuscript sources and printed texts; but they are not trained to think with equal care about how manuscripts appeared when this sort of discrimination was inconceivable¹⁹ – when everything was off the record, so to speak, save that which was read to those who were within earshot. Similarly, the more thoroughly we are trained to master the events and dates contained in modern history books, the less likely we are to appreciate the difficulties confronting scribal scholars who had access to assorted written records, but lacked uniform chronologies, maps and all the other reference guides which are now in common use.

Efforts to reconstruct the circumstances that preceded printing thus lead to a scholarly predicament. Reconstruction requires recourse to printed materials, thereby blurring clear perception of the conditions that prevailed before these materials were available. Even when the predicament is partly resolved by sensitive scholars who manage to develop a genuine ‘feel’ for the times after handling countless documents,²⁰ efforts at reconstruction are still bound to be frustratingly incomplete.

For the very texture of scribal culture was so fluctuating, uneven and multiform that few long-range trends can be traced. Conditions that prevailed near the bookshops of ancient Rome, in the Alexandrian library, or in certain medieval monasteries and university towns, made it possible for literate élites to develop a relatively sophisticated ‘bookish’ culture.²¹ Yet all library collections were subject to contraction, and all texts in manuscript were liable to get corrupted after being copied over the course of time. Outside certain transitory special centers, moreover, the texture of scribal culture was so thin that heavy

¹⁹ The need to distinguish between the pre-Gutenberg manuscript and the post-print one has been recognized by specialists in the history of the book. For general discussion of the ‘archeology’ of the manuscript book, see Josserand, ‘Les Bibliothèques.’ One scholar has suggested reserving the term ‘codicology’ for the study of the pre-print manuscript book and using the term ‘manuscriptology’ for the study of mss. after Gutenberg. See important article by Gruijs, ‘Codicology or Archeology of the Book?’ where pertinent remarks of W. Hellinga at a Dutch Philological Congress in 1952 are cited (p. 107, n. 4). The absent-mindedness of most modern book users about the nature of manuscript books handled by scholars before print is brought out by Goldschmidt, *Medieval Texts*, p. 9.

²⁰ A remarkable imaginative reconstruction of the European mentality before print is offered by Febvre, *Le problème*. See especially the sections devoted to the printing press and hearsay, pp. 418–87. For another example of sensitivity to the conditions of scribal culture, see Smalley, *English Friars*, pp. 9–10. A pioneering effort to describe how medieval literature was shaped by scribal procedures is Chaytor’s *From Script to Print*.

²¹ I have not mentioned Moslem or Byzantine centers simply because they are off limits for this book. It is a truism that scribal culture flourished more vigorously in certain centers outside Latin Christendom than within it during much of the medieval millennium.