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Excerpt
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1 The printed word and the modern bibliographer

In 1968, the late Harry Carter opened his Lyell lectures with words that have come to haunt a generation born since and for whom letterpress printing is a defunct technology. 'Type is something you can pick up and hold in your hand.' As his next sentence went on to reveal, he had in mind bibliographers, and especially those bibliographers whose ingenuity led them to forget this fundamental and material fact. To many bibliographers, and thus to historians and literary scholars, type is an abstraction, that leaves its mark on paper but that has no other existence. It was perhaps no coincidence among the preoccupations of the late 1960s that D. F. McKenzie's vigorously corrective paper on 'Printers of the mind; some notes on bibliographical theories and printing-house practices' was published only a few months after Carter's lectures, though it had been first written several years previously.[1]

It is appropriate also to recall some of the other developments in printing during the year 1968, a period when phototypesetting and computer applications seemed to offer the brightest future, and were certainly displacing metal at a speed whose pace was significantly increased by the activities of the Compugraphic Corporation. In that year, the VDU was first applied to correcting phototypesetting, and Her Majesty's Stationery Office was putting the finishing touches to computer typesetting for telephone directories. The first authoritative books to deal with automated composition were beginning to appear.[2] Not just for bibliographers, the word 'type' which Harry Carter understood in so tactile and corporeal a manner, was rapidly taking on a new two-dimensional meaning.

These developments were pursued with an extraordinary concentration of effort, in a fiercely competitive environment. Yet photosetting, the basis of so much investment by printers at the time, and which seemed to offer the answer to so many needs, proved to be only a partial solution. Computer typesetting has brought a social as well as a technological revolution that for the first time has (for those who wish it) given authors direct control at their desks over the final printed appearance of their books.

During the last two decades or so, we have become accustomed to speaking or writing of 'printers' not as people, but as machines made of plastic, metal and other substances that sit on our desks: machines driven at least one remove from ourselves via the computer, keyboard and screen that now form parts of our daily lives. In similar linguistic fashion, in the eighteenth century the Royal Observatory at Greenwich employed people who were referred to as computers. At the end of the nineteenth century, the people we now know as typists were referred to as typewriters. Such changes of usage come about almost by accident, but they have their roots in a mechanical assumption: that the printer or typewriter, human or otherwise, is an agent of reproduction, of reproducing our thoughts, words and images – usually but not always on paper.

There is perhaps something a little foolhardy in attempting to tackle so potentially large a subject as what past generations have understood by printing; but I have been moved to do so for several reasons.

First, it has become even more difficult today for many people to grasp what Harry Carter, a printer trained in letterpress, understood by instinct: that for almost four centuries the vast majority of books, periodicals, newspapers, advertisements and all kinds of other printed matter were printed by means of machines and equipment, metal and wood, controlled and made to work by hand; and that metal type was fundamental to most printing for well over five centuries.[3]

Second, the technology of which he spoke has now almost entirely disappeared, in a world where even the basic words in the vocabulary, 'type', 'printer', 'print' or 'screen' have quite different meanings today from those they held until the late twentieth century.

Third, and a little more subtly, the dichotomy identified by Harry Carter, between type and its mark, compositor and bibliographer, has had a deeper effect on our understanding of the history of the printed word and image than even he may have appreciated. Modern bibliography and historical practice have tended constantly to project the values and judgements of the present back to the values and practices of the past. Much contemporary bibliographical practice (I plead indulgence for a term that now has to stretch into the last century but one) traces its history from a period on the threshold of the peak of letterpress printing: the application of the Monotype, Linotype and other sophisticated equipment to machine composition; the engineering triumphs of printing machines by Robert Hoe, Robert Miehle and others; and the application of photography to printing as a daily routine in blockmaking for illustration.[4]

The process of technological change is, usually, easily monitored. It is less straightforward to comprehend new procedures, new technical possibilities, and new structures for the organisation of time, where processes have different paces relative to each other: education in all of these affects attitudes and expectations in authors, manufacturers and readers alike. Inevitably, as past everyday practice comes to require conscious study, so its own rationale slips gradually away. The purpose of historical bibliography is to recover and interpret past practice. As happens in many other fields of research, its considerable success in measuring materiality has not always kept pace with discovering not just purpose and meaning, but also the inconsequential and incidental vitality that distinguishes human activity.

At a time when we also face changes in what we mean by books, and therefore find ourselves challenged for better definitions, the following chapters are designed to enquire into a few of the assumptions by which we have lived for the past five hundred and more years. They question, from several points of view, what Paul Eggert has referred to as 'the illusion that imaginative activity gives rise in almost every case to a stable textual product',[5] and by considering what is meant by printing they seek to extend this argument into new territories.

So as to bring some order into so large a question, I have selected a number of different but related issues. Some of these have been aired before, in greater detail and often by people with more knowledge than I can bring here. Others will be less familiar. But by assembling such a group of questions I hope to show how assumptions about the apparent authority of print, the reality of its creation, and the combination of conservatism with a creative training in readers, may be questioned, in order that we may better understand the expectations that have underlain a principal means of communication. Accordingly, I shall be exploring the relationship between manuscript and print as it emerged in the creation and management of knowledge and ideas during roughly the first 350 years after the invention in the west of printing from movable types; some aspects of the relationship between print and manuscript in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a period in which we frequently find less a revolution than an accommodation; the ways in which printing, *ars artium conservatrix*, was not so much compromised as extended and even partly defined by the employment of older techniques having their roots in the manuscript tradition; some – but by no means all – of the ways in which printing was seen not so much as an end as a beginning in the presentation of texts; some of the ways in which printing, seemingly so final and therefore authoritative a statement, was liable to readjustment between printer and reader; the ways in which readers are themselves expected to take a part in the process of typographical creation; and something of the extent to which the lapse of time impinges on the purposes of printing, publication and reading. In each of these differently angled views, brief and impressionistic though their treatment has to be, we shall discover how the concept, as well as the act, of printing is not necessarily one of fixity, of textual rest or (still less) of stability, but actually implies a process liable and subject to change as a result both of its own mechanisms and of the assumptions and expectations of those who exploit its technological possibilities to greater or lesser extent.

While we speak today, using radical and dramatic vocabulary, of a printing revolution, it was apparent from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, and perhaps especially to the generations born after about 1470, that innovations in printing were gradual: that both in its technical achievements and in its social (including religious and political) consequences it was not invariably appropriate to speak of rapid transformation. Just as the wooden printing press itself was gradually adapted and improved, illustration techniques were applied to books with more or less success (the process was by no means one of uniform advance), typefounding was an evolving technology, whose processes and organisation were adapted to an international market of printers and readers, so, too, the effects of letterpress printing were felt differently by different parts of the community. The Fifth Lateran Council, in the second decade of the sixteenth century, is now often remembered for its attempts to control printing. But the choice of words of the decree *Super impressione librorum* reveals not only an acknowledgement of the power of the press for good (the spread of scholarly study) as well as for ill. It also explicitly addresses this sense of progressive technological as well as social change. 'Ars imprimendi libros temporibus potissimum nostris divino favente numine, inventa seu aucta et perpolita.' 'The skill of book-printing has been invented, or rather improved and perfected, with God's assistance, particularly in our time.'[6]

Chronologically, most of my discussion will fall before the introduction of machine-printing in the nineteenth century. There is another volume to be written on the industrialised book, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and with one important exception in chapter 8 I shall have relatively little to say about this period. I wish to concentrate very largely on issues of stability, as they were conceived and as they were in practice, and as the concept was exploited, between the mid-fifteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. This period has become defined mainly by reference to the wooden hand press, or common press, even though it was, in fact, one replete with complexities of technological and material kinds in no way reflected by this quite unrepresentative flag of intellectual convenience.[7] As for the closing date of the era with which this book is concerned, this is itself only approximate, in that a combination of developments in the printing and associated industries took time to become established as ordinary practice. The iron hand press survived in commercial use until the second half of the twentieth century, in the shape of Albions, Columbians and a host of other nineteenth-century iron presses, all worked manually and at not vastly greater speed than the old wooden or common press.

The focus in this book is deliberately on western Europe, rather than just on Britain, though – particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – I shall have more to say on what will for most readers be the more familiar ground of this country. I have chosen to cast so wide a net in order to bring evidence to bear on questions that, whether they were acknowledged or not, were of common import. The obvious disadvantage of such a dispersed approach is that it risks too much abbreviation. But against that, and far outweighing it, is the advantage of reminding ourselves of the commonwealth of print, whether expressed in terms of authorship, manufacture, distribution or readership. The international nature of the book obliges us to take such an approach. Although there were sundry differences in practice between various parts of Europe in this period, there was also much that was held in common. Workmen took their skills from country to country (Germany to Italy and France in the fifteenth century; France and the Rhine valley to England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the Netherlands to England in the seventeenth century; France to the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example). Type-founding and paper-making were international businesses. From the 1450s onwards, printed books were international objects of merchandise, and therefore of reading.

My examples have intentionally been drawn from a range of different kinds of literature – scientific, historical, geographical, musical and pictorial – as well as what we conventionally call literature itself. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, the bibliographical study of books and other printed documents, of texts and of images, has to do with the manipulation of alpha-numeric signs or of pictures as they are applied by compositors, printers, proof-readers and others in a host of different environments. Secondly, those signs will be used by the same compositors, pressmen and others involved in the recreation and reproduction of texts: not just for 'literary' texts – poems, plays, novels etc. – but also for whatever other forms of writing and images require to be set or printed. Thirdly, I believe that by seeking to understand the purposes of illustration, and the artistic and technical conventions, opportunities and restrictions of illustrative reproduction, we may also reconcile in a more satisfactory way our understanding of different forms of print.

In purposely embracing many forms of literature, and seeking a common goal, it will be seen that I part company, in some respects, with those who prefer to restrict themselves to what are generally, and often inhospitably, referred to as literary works. In his essay already referred to, for example, Paul Eggert restricted himself to 'literary works' remarking that they 'usually consist of multiple, often competing, texts',[8] even though the same might be said for other forms as well. Jerome J. McGann in his discussion of 'The rationale of hypertext', limited his treatment more precisely still:

> The poet's view of text is necessarily very different. To the imagination the materialities of text (oral, written, printed, electronic) are incarnational not vehicular forms. But for the scientist and scholar, the media of expression are primarily conceptual utilities, means rather than ends; to the degree that an expressive form hinders the conceptual goal (whether it be theoretical or practical), to that extent one will seek to evade or supersede it – perhaps even, in critical times, to develop new intellectual devices.[9]

I find it difficult to divorce discussion of the poet's understanding of the materialities of text from those of other authors. Indeed there are, and have been, many poets from the Greek Bucolic poets onwards, who have exploited visual forms as a part of their meanings.[10] Among current critical preoccupations, one might cite Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman. Yet other authors work likewise, in their division of text into chapters or paragraphs, or in the care they take over their illustrations, or in the way that they dispose their subject-matter between the larger type of primary parts and the smaller types of footnotes or sidenotes, or in their anxiety at their choices of publisher or in their opinions as to the prices of their books. All these are in some sense 'incarnational' in that they directly affect the birth of the book for the reader, and hence markets for anticipated sales, and (finally) the reader's response. Moreover, and despite a vocal minority, for whom the visual impact of poetry is as important as its alphabet-based content, there is little in most contemporary commercially published poetry to suggest that poets retain a distinctive 'incarnational' influence over the finer points of typography, paper, format or binding.

Although I have drawn most examples from about three-and-a-half centuries, the disciplines of historical bibliography have a general bearing on the western history of reading that command an influence permeating – not merely affecting – the whole of that subject. We may perceive examples in detail; but their general lessons have also to be observed. As will be seen in the later parts of this book, there are differences in direction and in priorities to be observed in some generations, that we may identify by historical or critical criteria. But the principles survive these changes; indeed, the means and process of their survival help us to establish their nature.

In all this, we shall be exploring the interaction between the everyday realities and compromises of human experience and the possibilities of mechanical reproduction. Thereby, we shall be facing some of the same issues that challenge us with each computer-based reworking of the relationship between author, meaning and reading.

In these contexts, it is also necessary to consider how bibliographical understanding must be sought not exclusively in the material, social and other economic conditions of manufacture and commerce – what we may call the traditional skills of historical and textual bibliography – but also something of how it is affected by the course of time. With some notable exceptions, this extra dimension, of time, is underestimated or ignored by many who have written about the creation of a book in the printing house. D. F. McKenzie and Peter Blayney have both demonstrated, the one from surviving documentary records and the other from a detailed typographical examination of books for whose timetable of production the evidence is otherwise somewhat thin, how crucial is the relationship of one task to another, and therefore how much we need to understand the relative durations of chronological processes.[11] McKenzie's work appeared as long ago as 1966; yet it is still possible to find uncritical and incautious assumptions about the often messy reality of running a printing house. The printing of a book may take a few weeks, or it may take many years. The first volume of Roger Long's *Astronomy*, announced in 1730 and printed privately in Cambridge, was published in 1742; but the second, in train for much of the remainder of his life, was not completed until 1785 – fifteen years after his death.[12] This is by no means a phenomenon unfamiliar to the twentieth century. It took twenty years to print Strickland Gibson's edition of the old statutes of the University of Oxford, published in 1931.[13]

I have, however, a different chronological sequence in mind. Perceptions of books change with time; and with them there change also our ways of using and looking at books. I think not only of bibliophile fashions, on which there is a large if often somewhat uncritical literature. Rather, I wish to draw attention to how the trade in, and manufacture of, new books may be influenced by the past; how books may change their status even before they are sold for the first time (and have not yet survived long enough to be accorded the attentions of collectors, antiquaries and second-hand-book sellers); and the extent to which a reader may or may not notice decisions made by the printer or bookseller even when they result in an object whose appearance may diverge from the everyday of his or her time.

I am also concerned with some of the ways in which a more comprehensive bibliographical understanding of illustration, its methods and its applications, may enhance our understanding of what we mean by stability. Literature on the history of illustration is noticeable for its general failure to engage with bibliographical issues as they affect books;[14] and on the other hand the bibliographical study of books still has to engage with the related but different strategies of pictorial or figurative reproduction.

In such matters we may begin to understand better how the printed book – quite apart from the manuscript – may be said to be unstable.

Though it is indissolubly bound up with questions of manufacture and production, I shall have little to say in the following on what we might term the instability of place. The ways in which we read and interpret books depend on the circumstances of reading (in a library, at a desk, out loud, etc.) as well as where we read, or even where we obtained what we now hold. We expect a variety of attitudes to the same book in different places, as well as by different people. In this, we face the enigma of how much it can be assumed that the same book will be treated or understood in common. This maverick quality, an essential part of the definition of a printed book, familiar to critical theory in literature and art alike, challenges assumptions that books possess a uniformity not just of content, but even of interpretation.[15]

In assessing the changing ways in which authors, printers, publishers and readers have related one to the other in the course of the period between the mid-fifteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, it is a help to establish some broad headings for our questions. The period may be broken down in summary fashion as follows. (a) Fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries: wonder at printing, and in particular at its speed of production and its ability to produce multiple copies of apparently the same text; a period of innovation, experiment and compromise. (b) Mid-sixteenth to seventeenth centuries: a period of anxiety: at inaccuracy in the printed book, and at the apparently unstemmable increase in the numbers of publications, with their tendency for ill as well as for religious or scholarly good. (c) Eighteenth century: widespread antiquarian interest in the history of printing, particularly in the fifteenth century, coupled with increasing technological interest and experiment, these two apparently disjunct strands of interest finding common ground in printers' grammars; the same complicated relationship between history and method also apparent in illustration. (d) Early nineteenth century: driven by cost (not least the rates of pay for compositors) and by a new awareness in an industrialised world of the relationship between production and increased demand and consumption, a revived interest in speed, in the technical possibilities of new inventions and in their social and interpretative implications.

While, obviously, there are many people, and many other strands in the tale, that do not conform to this pattern, and it neglects some major issues such as the relationships – modern or historicised – of printing and politics (as diverse as Milton, L'Estrange and Atkyns, to take examples of just one generation in mid-seventeenth century England[16]), the overall framework does suggest how bibliographical analysis may be made to discern a shift of still more fundamental importance in the history of authorship and reading.

By approaching the history of the book, and the creation of literature of all kinds, in this way, and by emphasising the always transient and unstable nature of its manufacture, we shall better understand that our present awareness of such textual characteristics in a new electronic environment is not a modern one, but one that is inherent in that supposedly fixative medium, of print; and that print itself has been understood to be unstable since the mid-fifteenth century. Hinman's work on the Shakespeare First Folio, and that of R. M. Flores on the earliest editions of *Don Quixote*, taught the world one aspect of what had been known to all printers from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth centuries: that printing-house practice resulted in unpredictable and incalculable variation between copies of books bound up from sheets each of whose differences in themselves could be monitored and demonstrated.[17] This has also been clearly demonstrated in the work of Jeanne Veyrin-Forrer on the first press in Paris, and of Lotte Hellinga on the work of Peter Schoeffer at Mainz.[18] Books are printed by men as well as by machines. What ought to be a commonplace had to be forcibly demonstrated by McKenzie in his examination of the daily routines, and exceptions to routines, in the Cambridge printing house at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[19] How exactly authors' and readers' understandings and assumptions of such instabilities have changed over the centuries is another matter, to which I will turn in my final chapters.

In a paper on the material origins of the New Bibliography, Joseph F. Loewenstein usefully juxtaposed the founding of the Bibliographical Society not just with legal change (the Berne Convention (1886); the British Copyright Act (1911)) but also with technological change, and in particular the phonograph and photography.[20] In fact, palaeographers and bibliographers alike had been exploiting the latter for many years, since Roger Fenton had photographed pages from the Codex Alexandrinus in 1856. The application of photography to zincography, and hence to the first conventionally printed photographic facsimiles of printed books and manuscripts (notably of the Domesday Book in 1861–3 and of early editions of Shakespeare) under the aegis of Sir Henry James and others in the early 1860s had an immediate and lasting effect on historical understanding among members of the general public.[21] The work of Sir Thomas Duffus Hardy, Edward Bond, Edward Maunde Thompson and Walter de Gray Birch on the Utrecht Psalter in the 1870s, and the founding of the Palaeographical Society in 1873, mark photography's coming of age for shared research in books.[22] In 1892, the very year in which the Bibliographical Society was founded, Konrad Burger began to issue his series of photographs of fifteenth-century printing types.[23]

Late-nineteenth-century perceptions, as well as actions, were changed fundamentally by processes of mechanisation, and their implications for all manner of activities, social, domestic or industrial. Not surprisingly, the assumptions of a mechanised world affected the course of bibliographical theory and research. Transforming though they were, McKerrow, Greg and their circle only partially recovered the world of the author and printer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: McKerrow was a publisher by profession, and Greg's family had expected that he would become editor of *The Economist*, which it owned.[24] The present book is an attempt to recover a view that is not dependent on the assumptions of a mechanised world, to distinguish between how things are made, and how people think they are made; between what people see, and what they understand.

No less pertinently, because of possible confusion between ways in which bibliography may accommodate or respond to new technologies, Loewenstein remarks of our own time that 'new information technologies have often prompted a cult of the deconstructed text', and that as a consequence of these same technologies we prop up 'a fetishization of the composite text'. In fact, the composite text has enjoyed an existence that has been exploited – openly, or clandestinely, but usually consciously – since the fifteenth century. It has been a bibliographical fact of life, accepted and acknowledged by authors, booksellers, readers and others who would use books ever since the beginning of printing with movable type in the west. In some respects, the advent of hypertext software merely adds to the possible variations, while for the first time also permitting readers to explore further, and unprecedented, confections.

With these background points in mind, we may turn now to the relationship between manuscript and print as it has become understood in the last four hundred years.