Introduction: the disorder of books

This book is about the consequential intersection of religious controversy and print technology in early modern England. Together the printing press and the Reformation produced polemic, a new form of writing, that animated the literary culture of mid sixteenth- to late seventeenth-century England. This was a period of robust disagreement and, at times, outright stridency, but it was also a time of intense ferment and innovation, and polemic, I argue, was central to the literary culture of the time. With the Restoration of 1660, polemic did not disappear, but it no longer commanded the respect that it had claimed before the Civil Wars. An important new feature of this changed cultural landscape was a restricted notion of the literary. No longer conceived of expansively as that which is written, literature began to assume a recognizably modern form. Politeness and irony, which may work at cross-purposes, become the hallmark of the literary, which is now widely perceived as an antidote to polemic with its fierce enthusiasm and unsophisticated earnestness. The demise of polemic as a legitimate form of writing is inextricably bound up with the birth of the literary.

Beginning at the end, I would like to suggest that this development is perfectly captured in *The Battle of the Books*, published as an addendum to the anonymous *Tale of the Tub* in 1704. Jonathan Swift's title furnished the English language with a durable phrase used to describe, and occasionally ridicule, an academic or literary controversy. Yet Swift did more than popularize a convenient and memorable formulation. His mock-heroic account of the epic struggle between the ancient and modern books in the King's Library has often been seen as documenting a cultural watershed, the emergence of a new antipathy between literary and scientific cultures or between rhetoric and philology.[1] The work also provides an eloquent, if idiosyncratic, document for the historian of books. Swift's attention to the physical details of books as they engage in spirited combat within the confines of the library reveals a sensibility engaged by the possibilities and

problems attending the proliferation of print. Of course, the literary conceit of animated books in battle formation serves to heighten the reader's sense of the fantastic and ridiculous and produces a satiric effect by exposing the enormous gulf separating the verbal strife of the pedants from actual warfare. But there is something more to it: Swift's vivid fable, with its focus on the organization of the library and its volumes, testifies to a profound dislocation in the order of books.

Describing the arrangement of libraries, Swift makes a curious claim: "*Books* of Controversy, being of all others, haunted by the most disorderly Spirits, have always been confined in a separate Lodge from the rest; and for fear of mutual violence against each other, it was thought Prudent by our Ancestors, to bind them to the Peace with strong Iron Chains."[2] Combining the language of pneumatology and corporeal bondage, Swift suggests that these books are infused with an enthusiasm that requires the rigor of penal discipline. But what is perhaps more remarkable is the assertion that "*Books* of Controversy" have always been recognized as a coherent category and that, moreover, their forced and physical segregation from other books has been necessary in order to keep peace in the library. At the risk of self-contradiction, Swift then goes on to explain how this state of affairs originated:

> When the Works of *Scotus* first came out, they were carried to a certain great Library, and had Lodgings appointed them; but this Author was no sooner settled, then he went to visit his master *Aristotle*, and there both concerted together to seize *Plato* by main Force, and turn him out from his antient Station among the *Divines*, where he had peaceably dwelt near Eight Hundred Years. The Attempt succeeded, and the two Usurpers have reigned ever since in his stead: But to maintain Quiet for the future, it was decreed, that all *Polemicks* of the larger Size, should be held fast with a Chain. (223)

Intellectual history is here conceived of as a violent succession, marked by faction, intrigue, and ambition. Though the coup that led to the dominance of an Aristotelian scholasticism is regrettable, Swift's chief concern is to suggest that a workable arrangement, the chaining up of controversial books and implicitly their limited circulation, has been disrupted by "a new Species of controversial Books . . . instinct with a most malignant Spirit" (223).[3]

These books, unlike the ponderous "*Polemicks* of the larger Size," are fugitive and ephemeral pieces, the products of a lively commercial press. "For a very few Days they are fixed up in all Publick places," and from there the "chiefest and largest are removed to certain Magazines, they call, *Libraries*, there to remain in a Quarter purposely assign'd them, and

from thenceforth, begin to be called, *Books of Controversie*" (222). The books of this sort that find a place in the library assume a common denomination, "*Books of Controversie*," but those that circulate at large "are known to the World," writes Swift, "under several Names: As, *Disputes*, *Arguments*, *Rejoynders*, *Brief Considerations*, *Answers*, *Replies*, *Remarks*, *Reflexions*, *Objections*, *Confutations*" (222).

The etiological myth explaining the practice of chaining books alongside the taxonomic identification of "a new Species of controversial Books" suggests an affinity between classification and confinement; both are attempts, imaginative and not entirely serious, to impose order on disorderly books. Yet, *The Battle of the Books* appears deeply ambivalent on this score – it is itself a disorderly book with a text marred by ostentatious gaps (accompanied by Latin notes acknowledging deficiencies in the manuscript) and lacking a conclusion. The notion that the entire Western tradition of philosophy and literature is riven by contention and dispute justifies Swift's own participation in controversy: if intellectual antagonism is a constant, then engagement involves belligerence. But the claim that "a new Species of controversial Books" has emerged is historical, and these books, "moved by a most malignant Spirit," constitute a cultural innovation that must be resisted in order to restore the peaceful decorum of a less turbulent past. The tension between Swift's own animated polemic and his wish to discipline disorderly books may be reduced, but not resolved, by pointing to the qualities of Swift's literary satire that distinguish it from the ardent and ingenuous controversial works that freighted the bookshops. Parodic wit and subtle irony do not, however, entirely overcome this difficulty: *The Battle of the Books* remains an entrant in the very combat that it deplores and ridicules.

Despite its ambivalence, Swift's fable represents a widespread reaction to the burgeoning print world of the late seventeenth century. To most of his readers the claim that a new sort of disorderly book was abroad in the world would have appeared a self-evident truth. Indeed, the phenomenon was soon to attract the attention of Myles Davies, whose *Eikon Mikro-Biblike Sive Icon Libellorum, or, a Critical History of Pamphlets* was published in 1715. Davies's account of the "Republick of Pamphlets" acknowledges that little treatises are to be found in antiquity, as the Greek and Latin titles suggest, but focuses on the rise and growth of pamphlet writing since the beginning of the Reformation. "The Figure Pamphlets make in the World at present is so very considerable," writes Davies, "that there is a necessity laid now-adays on most People to make their Court to them, or at least, to have an Eye upon them."[4]

The disorder of books, diagnosed by both Swift and Davies, was largely the consequence of print technology and religious controversy. The claim here is not that earlier periods did not witness polemical exchanges; they most certainly did. The point is rather that the category of polemic only emerges in response to the spread of hostile disputation in print.[5] The long tradition of academic controversy, a central practice in the medieval university, was fundamentally transformed by the hostilities of the Reformation and the effects of the press. Acrimonious public dispute does not readily produce a stable world picture, or indeed an articulate consensus; it does, however, promote recognition of polemic as a category of writing that has become common. Swift is not the first to observe the prevalence of controversial books in post-Reformation England; what distinguishes his remarks is their acute awareness that these books constitute a "new Species." Swift's insight, in fact, comes at the end of two centuries of development and definition during which English speakers came to acknowledge the existence, if not necessarily the desirability, of polemic. Intimately related to the invention of polemic is the simultaneous restriction of the literary to the imaginary. The authentically literary comes to be perceived as the antithesis of the polemical: it is aesthetic, not political; disinterested, not tendentious; exploratory, not restrictive; imaginative, not dogmatic. These oppositions, with their obvious evaluative content and their central place in the modern articulation of the literary, are produced by a long history, and it is the contention of this book that the invention of polemic was a crucial development in that history.

In the chapters that follow, I analyze a series of books: *Actes and Monuments*, the Marprelate tracts, the early quartos of *Hamlet*, Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* and his *Anatomy of the World*, and Milton's *Areopagitica*. This sequence is followed by a chapter treating King James's College at Chelsea, an important, albeit unsuccessful, attempt to institutionalize the writing of religious polemic in England. Finally, I conclude with a short account of the way in which the literary came to be understoood in the post-Restoration world as the antithesis of polemic. The books chosen for consideration provide the basis for case studies that have, I argue, wide-ranging, though by no means uniform, implications. None of these books is straightforwardly representative of early modern English culture. Indeed, the sort of synecdoche that allows a specific text, event, or individual to represent an entire culture is invariably homogenizing and simplifying in its effect. However, taken as an ensemble or constellation, these books (and many more could be added) illuminate the polemical world of early modern England.

In each case, the principal object is to examine the way in which an important discursive form – ecclesiastical history, theological controversy, tragedy, elegy, and political tract – is manifested in a particular publishing event. Though such publishing events appear discrete, a book is after all produced at a given place and time, they are in fact protracted: the book is the culmination of a collective project that involves the intentions, ambitions, and animosities of authors, editors, publishers and printers, and it goes forth into a world of readers hostile, friendly, and indifferent. If all the agents engaged in the circuit of communication have a part to play, it does not follow that in every case the roles played by the various figures will be of equal interest. Consequently, an attention to publishing events does not entail a rigid uniformity of focus. In the second, third, and fourth chapters, publishers and printers are prominent; in the fifth and sixth, authorial intentions, exemplified by Donne and Milton, become an important part of my account. This shift in emphasis reflects the increasing prominence of the author as a figure in the seventeenth century – both Donne and Milton are exceptionally self-conscious about what it means to assume the title of author in a world of print, and this awareness is registered in their texts and their books – but it also reflects my attempt to be responsive to the documents themselves. The printed matter of early modern England is an enormously rich archive, and each document in that archive is the concrete residue of the multiple intentions of a plurality of agents.

The constellation that I have assembled here is, of course, selective. It could not be otherwise. I have attempted to bring together both books not usually considered under the aegis of literary history and books considered central to the aesthetic achievement of Tudor–Stuart England in order to reveal just how thoroughly polemic, produced by religious controversy and print technology, shaped the literary culture of early modern England. My selection is partial, both incomplete and motivated, but adequate to the task of showing how polemic emerged as powerful concept and ubiquitous practice. In juxtaposing books that are usually thought of as highly literary – Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Donne's *Anatomy of the World* – with books usually thought of as non-literary – *Actes and Monuments*, the Marprelate pamphlets, and *Pseudo-Martyr* – I am making two related arguments. In the first instance, I seek to demonstrate the way in which polemical concerns mark even those texts from the period that we have found most emphatically literary. In the second instance, I hope to show how the modern notion of "the literary" is in part constituted through a repudiation of polemic that imposes a historical amnesia, a wilful forgetting of the polemical engagements of the past.

In the remaining part of this introduction, I elaborate on the concept of polemic in order to elucidate the theoretical implications of my argument and place it in relationship to recent work in literary and intellectual history as well as political and cultural theory. Of central importance are the connections between polemic and questions of the public and publicity as well as the connections between polemic and questions of dialogue and the dialogic. Whereas print is frequently imagined as regulative and regularizing, an attention to polemic suggests that print is also fractious and divisive. In the first instance, print contributes to a disordering of books. Related to the regulative conception of print is the notion that print, by encouraging impersonality and abstraction, fosters a rational exchange of views and, ultimately, promotes deliberative democracy. However, such accounts depend on the repudiation of polemic: either it is relegated to the prehistory of the public sphere as that which must be overcome in order to usher in the free exchange of ideas or it is marginalized as a form of irrationality. My focus on early modern polemic finds it at the very center of the movement toward a world of public debate, but rather than seeing this as an unequivocally positive development, the glimmer of a democratic dawn, I find evidence of the durability of fundamental antagonisms. One of the major consequences of such an argument is that the privileged terms in literary analysis come into a new focus. The cultivation of ambivalence, the celebration of ambiguity, the appeal to dialogue and the dialogic, all look quite different when seen as a response to the troubling presence of polemic.

That print aided and abetted Protestantism is a textbook truism. Indeed, the notion that the press was God's gift to the Reformation was first promulgated by the reformers themselves. Luther himself held print to be "God's highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward; it is the last flame before the extinction of the world."[6] Invested with the unremarkable obviousness of common sense, this relationship has received little sustained attention.[7] Macaulay writes of the Reformation, "The fulness of time was now come. The clergy were no longer the sole or the chief depositories of knowledge. The invention of printing had furnished the assailants of the Church with a mighty weapon which had been wanting to their predecessors." Macaulay's echo of Galatians 4:4 – "But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son" – associates the invention of print with the dispensation of the gospel itself. Behind this formulation lies a serene confidence in the fundamental affinity between the technological innovation of print, perhaps all technological innovation, and Protestantism; both are seen to be

part of the "long progress from poverty and barbarism to the highest degree of opulence and civilisation."[8] In making this claim, Macaulay is articulating what has been called a "mini-fable" from "the collective memory of Western culture."[9]

The alliance between Reformation and press perceived by the reformers depends on a strictly instrumental conception of print that regards print technology as a transparent means to an end – in this case, the spread of the gospel. Print is not held to be capable of acting as itself a source of cultural or social change – it only succeeds in extending innovations that arise elsewhere and for other reasons. This vision of the relationship between print and Protestantism has been vigorously contested by Elizabeth Eisenstein, whose work remains, despite recent and premature claims about its obsolescence, central to the field of print history. Eisenstein recognizes not only that print was an "important precondition for the Protestant Reformation," but that "the new medium also acted as a precipitant."[10] In making this claim, Eisenstein significantly reverses the usual order of causality implied by accounts that see the Reformation as *using* print. Pointing to the chronological priority of print, emerging in Germany at least half a century before Luther's break with Rome, Eisenstein rejects the tradition that would seek solely religious and political causes for the Reformation. She objects that historians of the Reformation have underestimated the new technology, seeing it as a neutral platform for the ideas it carries and limiting its function to the process of dissemination: print "is given no part in shaping new views but only seen to diffuse them after they have been formed" (I, 368).

Eisenstein is surely right to see traditional accounts of print as a neutral medium of communication as thin and inadequate; rather than being merely a technology for distribution, print enables new social practices and encourages new habits of mind. To be fair, Eisenstein claims only that print is *a* precipitant of the Reformation not *the* precipitant. Nonetheless, Eisenstein's work – marked by what Perry Anderson has referred to as "a monomania familiar in historians of technology" – has often been interpreted as making the singular claim, as elevating print to the level of historical agent and attributing to this agent a primary role in not only the Reformation, but also the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment.[11] As a corrective to intellectual histories that have concentrated on the development of disembodied ideas, her focus on the material practice of print is salutary. However, the great strength of her book – its enormous chronological, geographical, and disciplinary range – is also a weakness. When so much is covered, detail is invariably lost, but, more

importantly, the constant presence of print in so many different contexts creates the impression of a single epic narrative with the printing press in the role of protagonist.

The impression of a mono-causal technological determinism can be avoided by a dialectical account of the relationship between print and various cultural and social movements.[12] Technologies do not descend from the heavens; they emerge from a particular social and cultural matrix. Technologies are put forward as solutions to perceived problems and are adopted to the degree that they are recognized as efficacious. While the use and meaning of a technology are largely determined by this social and cultural matrix, it would be a mistake to dismiss the shaping force of technology itself, the way in which it can have a recursive effect on the very social world that has produced it. As Febvre and Martin write, "All such inventions were the result of great social transformations, but in turn gave further impetus to their development."[13] Their account, while recognizing in general this recursive relation, pays little attention to the specifically cultural transformations that accompanied the emergence of the printed book, relegating their consideration of humanism and the Reformation to a final chapter on "The Book as a Force for Change" and creating the impression that such cultural changes are epiphenomenal. Yet cultural developments themselves are, in fact, crucial to the emergence and deployment of new technologies.

A forceful argument for the social construction of print has recently been made by Adrian Johns, who insists that any attempt to invest the press with "inherent" characteristics that then shape the social and cultural world is to mistake effect for cause. The terms that we have come to associate with print – most importantly for Johns, authority, fixity, and permanence – are the result of a long social and cultural history during which print practitioners had to work hard to legitimate their craft; as Johns puts it: "Printers and booksellers were manufacturers of credit."[14] While this is certainly true, Johns is so determined to avoid the perceived oversimplifications of technological determinism and the attendant notion of a unitary "print culture," which he consistently associates with Eisenstein, that he dissolves print technology almost entirely into social relations. Admittedly, without the multitudinous hopes and fears, ambitions and resistances, of a variety of individual agents and specific institutions, the printing press would not have had the effect that it did, but for all that, the machine itself required a reorganization of textual reproduction that had dramatic consequences. Rather than asking whether history is conditioned by print or print by history, one might more fruitfully pursue the reciprocal relationship

between print technology and particular cultural and social developments, as Johns himself does in his excellent account of the complicated relationship between the practices of print and the history of science in early modern England.[15]

Despite the far-reaching implications of *The Nature of the Book*, the work has a fairly restricted focus both in terms of its geography and its subject. Indeed, Johns justifies his concentration on the development of scientific discourse with the assertion that this is the form of knowledge with the greatest authority in the present: "the widely accepted status of modern science as the most objective, valuable, and robust kind of knowledge currently available makes it a peculiarly appealing subject for the historian of printing" (6). Despite the repeated claim that his is only one possible history of print, Johns gives the impression that the science–print nexus is *primus inter pares*: "Conclusions demonstrated about science should be acknowledged as credible a fortiori for less authoritative fields" (623). But the decision to make science central in the treatment of a period in which it is not yet acknowledged to be the "most objective, valuable, and robust kind of knowledge" has two immediate consequences: epistemology assumes priority over ontology or metaphysics, and religion, arguably the source of the most objective, valuable, and robust kind of knowledge known to the period, is marginalized.

Not only does theology, the queen of the sciences, get dethroned, the entire complex known as humanism with its intense and insistent focus on the question of a specifically literary authority and its concomitant attention to matters of both rhetoric and philology is sidelined. Indeed, the way in which Renaissance humanism and Reformation theology together pursue a deep engagement with the very question of language itself, a problem that has recently been luminously explored by Brian Cummings, is not part of the picture.[16] The point is not that Johns should have written a different book but that he should have given it a different title. *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* asserts, despite demurrals, a punning claim to comprehensiveness, and yet the thesis Johns develops about the very gradual emergence of "print culture" focuses attention on the mid and late seventeenth century and so underestimates the importance of earlier cultural developments. The Reformation and humanism, two legs in the tripod that supports Eisenstein's concept of "print culture," affect not only chronology but substance. The notion that two cultural movements deeply committed to language and the written would have a different relationship to technologies of communication than would an embryonic science is hardly surprising. Indeed, the great achievement of

Johns's book has been to show how a technology of communication like print played a fundamental role in the development of science, a discourse that has until rather recently emphatically denied the role of language in the constitution of knowledge. However, it would be a mistake to read this as a definitive debunking of the "print culture" concept. Johns has exposed a set of almost metaphysical ideas that lurk in complacent invocations of print culture and has forced those who would use the term to think hard about the historical process that produces "print culture." However, to acknowledge the uneven development of "print culture" is not to advocate for a plurality of print cultures; the very point of retaining the concept of "print culture" is that it addresses important continuities across a variety of discourses and geographical regions.

What follows contributes to our understanding of the emergence of print culture by charting the complex cultural consequences of the reciprocal relationship between print technology and religious controversy. If print enabled the Reformation, it is equally true that Reformation and Counter-Reformation attempts to secure consent and conformity gave momentum to the proliferation of print. Of course, it is not easy to assess the degree to which such strategic deployments of print by publicists penetrated beyond the rarefied world of the intellectual elite, but it is crucial to recognize that there were concerted attempts to reach a broader segment of the population through print. If, however, print was thought to allow for the imposition of regular forms of worship and the dissemination of theological orthodoxy, it succeeded less in securing uniformity than in constructing polarities, producing not a common language but polemic.[17] The relationship between print and the Reformation is, therefore, not only reciprocal and mutually reinforcing, but dynamic and volatile.

This complex dynamic is exemplified by the printing of the Bible in English under Henry VIII. As David Kastan has written, "The English Bible did not produce a nation unified in and by a common faith, but neither did it, as its opponents feared and often claimed, leave England ravaged by division and sedition."[18] It did, according to Kastan, "encourage literacy . . . and provoke debate." Concentrating on the marginal notes that Bible producers hoped would make manifest the unitary meaning of the scripture, Evelyn Tribble similarly argues that: "The only way the institution can establish its own authority is by producing more translations and marginal glosses"; and yet these only succeed in providing "a model for contention and proliferation."[19]

Though the relationship between print and the Reformation cannot be reduced to a one-way causality, together they created a culture that formed