CHAPTER 1

The ocean of ink: a long introduction

> Reflecting the other evening on the influence of Fashion, I insensibly fell asleep, and imagined myself suddenly transported into a magnificent temple, in the centre of which, elevated on a pedestal, stood a female of a very light capricious air, attended by numbers of both sexes, who were burning incense on her altar. But what astonished me most was, that the scene experienced a perpetual change … All who rejected the solicitations of Vanity, were compelled to enter by Ridicule, whose shafts were universally dreaded. Even Literature, Science, and Philosophy, were obliged to comply.
>
> *Gentleman's Magazine* (1781)

> Fashion is never satisfied.
>
> *The Literary Fly* (1779)

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

This is not, much as I might have wished, a book about how things changed. But it is an account of how people living in an earlier period coped with change, or at least how they coped with seemingly endless talk of change. Addressing a similar ethos of overwhelming cultural and technological acceleration today, Robert Darnton posed the question of how we are to "orient ourselves" in an age when "information is exploding so furiously around us and information technology is changing at such bewildering speed" ("Library" 72). Rather than offering an answer, Darnton recommends a turn to history as a means of gaining some kind of critical perspective on these issues. This book is animated by a similar conviction. It explores an age that was rife with debates about information overload, about the destabilizing effects of developments in communicative technologies, about the corrosive influence of that scene of "perpetual change" known as fashion, and about the shifting distance between the written word and the political process. In other words, it is focused on an era which, like our own, was haunted by a sense of its own extraordinary modernity.

I am interested in the complexity and force of the pressures which Britain's changing commercial order exerted on cultural debates in this period, but rather than reading texts from these decades as sophisticated but implicitly passive accounts of these dynamics, I have tried to emphasize the resourcefulness, wit, and theoretical self-consciousness with which so many writers engaged with these issues in productive rather than reactionary ways. Rather than simply moralizing about these as problems or waxing nostalgic for some older better time, they embraced these realities as the unavoidable foundation of new ideas about why literature mattered, what kinds of knowledge it should aspire to, what the basis of authors' distinction should be, and what kind of reading public this ought to entail. Or, more accurately, they did all of these things. The texts which form the core of this book were animated by tensions between these impulses: curmudgeonly grumbling about the degraded state of modern culture; wistful longing for earlier, better times; and more genuinely engaged, often cunning, arguments for the renewed importance of modern literature in an era when, to echo Darnton, information was exploding furiously around them. As Chapter 3, which explores the age's penchant for cultural pathologization (the bibliomania, the *cacoethes scribendi*, the *Helluo Librorum*), suggests, there was never any shortage of grumbling and nostalgia. Nor was there any lack of literary feuds, from the sparring between the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review* to the Ossian and Rowley controversies. But these were never the whole story. And, too often, the sheer vitriolic splendour of these various complaints and disputes has distracted us from writers' more compelling accounts of the renewed importance of literature in a modern commercial society (the subject of Chapter 4) and the codes of professionalism which ought to ensure modern authors' distinction (Chapter 5).

Whatever their particular approach to these issues, writers' broader social focus on their cultural location within what a mid-century periodical named the *Microcosm* called "the wider Theatre of the world," which frequently extended towards their publishers and booksellers on the one hand, and to their reception among various reading communities on the other, anticipates the materialist and sociological turn of our own day (1: 6). Like many of these earlier writers, book historians have helped to focus our attention on the much broader and highly mediated landscape which defines the field of cultural production in any historical context. This, in turn, has helped to foreground questions about the ways that texts travelled: the kinds of knowledge which their transmission was engaged

in producing and the forms of subjectivity and community which these exchanges help to foster, from the polite image of a "well regulated" family enjoying the *Spectator* over "Tea and Bread and Butter" to the rise, near the end of the century, of a plebeian public sphere (1: 39).

If these tropes of circulation anticipate our own more sociological focus today, they also gesture to a renewed interest in the question of what it might mean to speak of cultural materialism as a critical practice. The focus among many book historians on factual details, either about how books were printed and distributed, or who was reading them, has helped to complicate our understanding of cultural production in valuable ways. But this shift has also raised important questions that converge in Michael Warner's cautionary reminder about the dangers of approaching "the history of print" in ways that "suppose printing to be a nonsymbolic form of material reality." Printing, in this view, "is mere technology, a medium itself unmediated" (9). If literary criticism tended, for too long, to read past the material realities of books, in terms of both how they were produced and sold, and where and how they circulated, research on the factual specificities of print culture – the details of the print shop and the book trade – risks falling into an inverted form of this problem.

Gesturing to the same issue, Roger Chartier warned that "the space between text and object, which is precisely the space in which meaning is constructed, has too often been forgotten" by both types of critics: practitioners of "the traditional sort of literary history that thinks of the work as an abstract text whose typographic forms are without importance," and those whose concentration on typographic form excludes more abstract questions about literary interpretation (*Order* 10). Reifying the differences between these material and cultural realms, consciously or otherwise, amounts to a new version of the theoretical dead end which bedevilled reductive Marxist accounts of base and superstructure. Raymond Williams' reminder, in his discussion of this issue in *Marxism and Literature*, that "it is ironic to remember that the force of Marx's original criticism had been mainly directed against the *separation* of 'areas' of thought and activity," offers an important corrective to approaches to print culture which implicitly ground themselves in a similar model of a materialist (or typographic) base and cultural superstructure (78). Challenging more deterministic models, Williams insisted that "a lived hegemony is always a process … a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits" – a shifting and internally heterogeneous network of forces that

amount to what Chartier would describe as the intensely relational nature of any field of cultural production (112). Adequately recognizing the highly charged commercial aspects of these eighteenth-century debates means being more attuned, not only to the often fraught nature of this "space between text and object … in which meaning is constructed," but more ambitiously, to the changing distance between these poles in different texts and for different audiences. Books' status as commercial objects means that the question of their history has as much to do with the fetishistic realm of the commodity as with the typographic world of bibliography.

Rather than offer a series of unified accounts of representative individuals, I have submerged my analysis of particular writers within a more diffuse, often cacophonous assembly of voices. This focus on debates rather than on individual authors resonates in important ways with these writers' own arguments, which I trace in the next section of this chapter, about the radically intersubjective nature of commercial modernity, which, as Adam Smith and others insisted, was marked by an unprecedented degree of mutual dependence. This sense of the collaborative nature of a transactional world extended to a self-reflexive awareness of their own shared fate as writers; their common predicament was both a sociological reality and one of their most enduring themes, simultaneously the context and a great deal of the content of their writing. I have, in turn, integrated that historical lesson as a central aspect of my own methodological choices.

If this diffused focus, which privileges points of discursive convergence rather than isolated voices, amounts to little more than taking these writers at their word, it does still beg the question of the sorts of generalizations I am making, which surface in the kinds of descriptions that I have already been using: "they embraced," "their own shared fate," and so on. The point is not that these claims were equally true of all writers, or that there was any kind of easy unanimity in the period. On the contrary, as my account of the rage for ballooning in Chapter 2 suggests, most responses were marked more by ambivalence than by unswerving support or condemnation; virtually every one of these authors can be found to be alternately generous and censorious in different places in their writing, inclined to embrace the more democratic cultural realities of their day in one place and to bemoan modernity as so much vulgarity and faddish corruption in another. But that heterogeneity should not negate the strength of a consensus which emerged in the second half of the century, which underlay and in many ways organized the more

specific disputes about literature that preoccupied so many of these writers. By the second half of the century, the debate about the legitimacy of professional authorship (as opposed to the more genteel model of the amateur man of letters) had largely been won, but this consolidation only generated further debates about what literary professionalism *meant*: what forms of writing for money were acceptable and even laudable as opposed to the widely reviled literary prostitution of the Grub Street hacks who remained objects of ridicule throughout the century.[1] My emphasis, in other words, is on shared discursive positions: both the broad underlying areas of agreement which facilitated these more particular debates about literary professionalism, and the shared emphases of the numerous voices that converged in each of the contending positions within these debates. My focus has been on the tensions which animated these debates, but if the enormous range of authors and journals included here seem at times to speak with a single voice, that is in part because my goal has also been to highlight the prominent features of one particular position within these debates about why literature mattered in a modern transactional world, a perspective which was most closely associated with the age's many periodical and miscellaneous writers, and to which we have not been adequately attentive.

And yet, as I began by saying, this is not ultimately a book about how things changed. Its main focus is in many ways a history that got lost. The ideas about modern literature, authors, and readers that preoccupy me in these chapters would be displaced by an aesthetic ideology which embraced the power of the creative imagination in terms of a far more narrow understanding of "the literary." If that emergent ideology, which we have come to refer to as Romanticism, was distinguished by a levelling spirit of its own, and by a similar respect for ordinary life, it embraced these ideas in the far more conservative disciplinary terms of a perspective which equated literature with aesthetic expression, or a literature of power, as De Quincey would theorize it (54). Martha Woodmansee argues in *The Author, Art, and the Market*, that it was precisely the interventionist nature of these eighteenth-century periodicals and miscellanies that disqualified them from serious consideration in an era which saw the crystallization of an aesthetic ideology that privileged disinterested contemplation. Periodical writers such as Addison, she argues, were "attempting not so much to explain a pre-existing practice as to *produce* a new practice" (6). Woodmansee's argument that these authors' interventionist commitment ensured their own marginalization applies to literary history as much as it does to a broader history of aesthetics:

because they wear their prescriptive intent so boldly, because they aim to *intervene* and to *alter* rather than to *explain* practice, such writings do not appear to be "properly" philosophical. They therefore tend to be overlooked by the philosopher-historians – excluded from the canon of texts relevant to the history of aesthetics. (5)

In the wake of recent critiques of this aesthetic ideal of philosophical detachment, a shift which is epitomized by Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, the interventionist spirit of writers such as Addison has regained its importance, if in strikingly new ways. Knowing more about the residual force of these earlier ideas helps us to recognize more clearly just what was at stake in those aesthetic imperatives which displaced them, and which in turn had such an indelible influence on our own inherited ideas about literature and the disciplinary map which these ideas authorized.

THE LAST MASQUERADE AT THE PANTHEON

There can be few more appropriate starting points for a study of the cultural effects of debates about Britain's commercial modernity than a masquerade. The May 1782 edition of the *European Magazine*'s recurring column, "The MAN-MILLINER, Containing an Account of the Fashions, Fetes, Intrigues, and Scandal of the Month," depicted a memorable "frolic" in which literature, or at least a fictional character dressed up in the various fields which constituted literature, jumped into the deep end of polite sociability in its most refined and, sceptics would have insisted, dissipated state: a visit "to the last Masquerade at the Pantheon."

I covered my jacket with printed labels, descriptive of the work … There was not an inch of my coat which had not its characteristic label – Science – Biography – Politics – Poetry – History – Anecdotes – Music, and all the various topics which compose your miscellany, furnished me with ornaments; and the tout ensemble of my dress was composed by A Hive placed on my breast, for the reception of the flowing wit and humour of the place. On my entrance I distributed the following hand-bill:

"Advertisement. – This is to give notice, that in the next number of the European Magazine, and London Review, there will be inserted a complete account of all the trips and miscarriages, the intrigues and scandal, the faux pas, and the tetes-a-tete, the goings out and the comings in, the leers and the glances, the whispers and the appointments that have taken place, are now taking place, or may yet take place at the Masquerade at the Pantheon."

Flaunting its own physicality, this version of literature unsettled the tendency of many eighteenth-century thinkers to abstract their focus from

the materiality of social practices to the purely contemplative realm of taste and learning by aligning itself with the sensuality of these revellers, "the leers and the glances, the whispers and the appointments." Literature had not merely entered a world of bodies, but had itself become embodied. The masqueraders and labels reflected each other in their chaotic density. Every inch of the Man-Milliner's coat was covered with the names of forms of literature, but the seriousness and dignity of these genres ("Science – Biography – Politics – Poetry – History – Anecdotes – Music") only served as a foil for the "scraps" of gossip which he collected. Such was the novelty of his costume that

> I had not … been long in the Rooms before I had my box loaded with papers – You will hardly believe what a crowd and variety of contributors there were to your Hive. Beaux who never scribbled before – and ladies who declared themselves to be everlastingly at the cabinet, pulled out their pencils and threw into my hive all the scandal of the night. (1782: 1: 330)

The anecdote achieved its comic effect by turning established codes of polite sociability on their head. For Jürgen Habermas, the *Spectator*'s invitation to its readers to deposit their letters through the jaws of a lion's head attached to the west side of Button's Coffee House was a healthy sign of the purposeful nature of bourgeois publicity (42). The Man-Milliner, on the other hand, decorated himself in a kind of fancy dress in order to be "loaded and pestered with intrigues, rumours, hints, surmises, certainties, doubts, and all the items of which a long account of slanders is composed," all of it to be recycled in future issues of the magazine (1: 330). Addison may have bragged of following the example of Socrates who "brought Philosophy down from Heaven, to inhabit among Men" by bringing "Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and in Coffee-Houses"; the Man-Milliner had brought literature to "the last Masquerade at the Pantheon," a scene shaped by Rabelaisian impulses rather than rational exchange, trading in gossip rather than sharing philosophical ideas, and the revellers who encountered it there loved it (*Spectator* 1: 38–39).[2]

The point about this light-hearted account of literature's immersion in the world of fashionable display (apart from its obvious comfort level with what we might be inclined to think of as more anxious terrain) was in some ways its predictability. Inventive though this particular conceit may have been, it succeeded by inverting a familiar set of assumptions. Acknowledging "the tyranny of fashion" was an almost ritualistic stance. Critics' frequent observations about the literary dimensions of fashion's tyranny were informed by assumptions about the close relation between a culture's manners (a word

that was suggestive of the broad texture of everyday life) and its writings, but this proximity offered little comfort. The August 1786 edition of the *Monthly Review* gravely reminded its readers: "we have frequently observed, that Fashion exerts her influence over the literary, as well as over the gay world" (75: 81). A dream vision in the *Gentleman's Magazine*'s depicted the world of Fashion (figured as "a female" standing "on a pedestal") as a scene of instability and distraction policed by Vanity and Ridicule, with which "even Literature, Science, and Philosophy, were obliged to comply" (1781: 51: 355). In his controversial *Letters of Literature* (published in 1785 under the pseudonym Robert Heron), John Pinkerton warned that "fashion, after exerting her power upon most other subjects, has at last chosen literary reputation to display the utmost caprices of her sway" (15). The *Analytical* echoed this sense of frustration: "it is much to be lamented, that fashion should extend its influence even to matters of literature" (1790: 8: 543).[3] Vicesimus Knox was prepared to allow fashion to exert "her arbitrary power in matters which tend not to the corruption of morals," such as "the exact dimension of a buckle or a head-dress," but, he warned, "the misfortune is, that she will, like other potentates, encroach on provinces where her jurisdiction is usurped" (*Essays* 2: 321–22, 2: 17, 2: 322). As Herbert Croft put it in his short-lived periodical the *Literary Fly*, "fashion is never satisfied" (96). Described "exerting her power," "exert[ing] her influence," "extending its influence," "encroach[ing] on provinces," Fashion (more often than not gendered if not actually personified as a female) in these accounts is depicted in motion: an insidious colonizing force characterized by incessant expansion.

What interests me is not the question of what it was that made this denunciatory posture (and the ironic celebrations which traded on it for their effect) popular but the more important issue of the kinds of cultural work that it enabled. In what ways did these descriptions of fashion as an aberration implicitly legitimate alternative models of literature that were deeply engaged with the contingencies of a modern commercial society? What realignments and affirmations did this facilitate? Or to put this another way, in what ways did negative versions of fashion as commercial excess help to legitimate other models of literary professionalism that were nonetheless consistent with the pressures of a polite modern nation? How did identifying the corrosive influence of fashion enable authors to create the grounds for a model of writing that could be argued to engage with these pressures rather than merely turn their back on them in Augustan disdain? And what sorts of knowledge would this imply, circulating among what types of readers, and to what end?

If these questions are difficult to answer, this is partly because we, like so many readers in the period, already know the script. For Tobias Smollett's Matthew Bramble, "the *public*" was an "incongruous monster" addicted to "noise, confusion, glare, and glitter" (88), a predisposition which was itself symptomatic of "the general tide of luxury, which hath overspread the nation, and swept away all, even the very dregs of the people" (36). Rather than either reproducing Matthew Bramble's account of decline into a commercially driven world of triviality and distraction or, in a recuperative spirit, embracing those authors and texts which were damned for being part of this new literary marketplace, it may be more productive to explore the multiple and often contradictory processes of cultural transmission that underpinned these dynamics.[4] This includes understanding more about the ways that debates about fashion enabled critics to come to terms with tensions between two very different accounts of the emergence of modern culture.

On the one hand, it is important not to underestimate the buoyant optimism that pervaded what Paul Fritz and David Williams have described as "the triumph of culture" in the eighteenth century, an era when, as J. H. Plumb argues, "the combination of leisure and culture became an important industry" (38).[5] "This is the age of inventions!" the *Morning Post* declared. "How happy are we to live at such a pregnant period, when common mechanics produce contrivances, that a very few centuries ago would have been considered as miraculous, or caused their inventors to be hanged as conjurors" (November 7, 1786). Critics framed their endorsement of these changes in terms of a paradigm shift in the definition of virtue away from civic humanism's masculinist ideal of heroic self-government towards a liberal emphasis on commerce as a civilizing force, under whose "benignant" influence "Barbarity is polish'd," and "infant arts" made to "Bloom in the desart," as Richard Glover exclaimed in his epic poem *London: Or The Progress of Commerce* (1739: 12). John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, the anonymous authors of *Cato's Letters* (1720–23), argued that commerce promoted a spirit of "mutual confidence" as the "only possible way … to maintain publick honour and honesty" (1: 48). This sociological emphasis on commerce's ability to foster a "mutual confidence" was in many ways its advocates' strongest point. Samuel Johnson insisted in strikingly similar terms that "the business of life is carried on by a general co-operation; in which the part of any single man can be no more distinguished, than the effect of a particular drop when the meadows are floated by a summer shower: yet every drop increases the inundation, and every hand adds to the happiness or misery of mankind" (3: 137).

If Johnson's focus was more general than narrowly economic, it is equally true that critics' growing tendency to align commerce with the whole range of social interactions – "the business of life" – offered a powerful rationalization for more sympathetic perspectives. Commerce was no longer a discreet realm which individuals might choose to enter into in pursuit of personal gain, or which they might prefer to avoid in order to be sheltered from wily opportunists and hard-nosed tricksters; it had become a byword for the totality of relations which society itself comprised in a modern transactional world in which everyone, if they were perceptive enough, recognized the general value of a shared sense of reciprocity.[6] Nor was Johnson alone in grounding this leap from social analysis to moral prescription in a vision of irreducible intersubjectivity: the indistinguishable presence of a single drop amid the flood waters of modernity. An article entitled "On the Commercial Ideas Prevailing in some Parts of Europe" in the *European Magazine* echoed Johnson in its insistence that "every branch of commerce forms a link in this great chain of universal acquaintance; none, therefore, can be annulled, without loosening the bond of reciprocal union and friendship, and setting men at a greater distance from each other than they stood before … The neglect of commerce would be attended with the most destructive consequences" (1784: 6: 18–19). Standard phrases such as "the commerce of human life" fused literal and more figurative interpretations in a vision of modern life where personal virtue depended on an adequate appreciation of the vast intricacy of the social connections which made individual endeavours possible (*Monthly* 75: 1786: 425).[7] However much nineteenth-century thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle might rail against the alienating effects of industrial capitalism's tendency to reduce social relations to a mere "cash nexus," in the eighteenth century it was easier to align commerce with community by reimagining the Renaissance ideal of a Great Chain of Being in terms that were commercial rather than theological, and appealingly horizontal rather than hierarchical: a "great chain of universal acquaintance."

But this triumph was never uncontroversial. The dark side of this narrative of progress was not so much greed and bad taste as the threat of effeminacy, which for many critics was inexorably linked to personal and civic corruption. Reactions to the perceived excesses of modern fashions were in part a response to the dangers of these more refined and polished virtues, and to a materiality which reflected the perils of a social order committed to arousing rather than regulating desire. It is not difficult to trace a powerful anti-commerce strain of thought throughout the century,