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Discourse and Diffusion

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Discourse and Diffusion

We have a problem. Two historical genres, intellectual history and the history of books, seem to be made for each other, yet they have gone their separate ways-- intellectual history toward discourse analysis, book history toward the study of diffusion. Of course, they have forked, branched, and blossomed in other ways as well. But the split between the studies of discourse and diffusion can be taken as symptomatic of a general tendency in the human sciences, one that leads to divergence and fragmentation rather than convergence and collaboration. How can intellectual history and book history be brought together?

Historians who study the diffusion of books commonly run into a difficulty: the best-sellers of the past may serve as an index of public taste, but they also may be trivial, and they do not necessarily lead to explanations of important events such as the Reformation and the French Revolution. General arguments in book history tend to be riddled with weak links. Historians may determine what books people bought, but they find it difficult to know how those books were read, how the readings became assimilated in views of subjects like politics and religion, how those views came together in the formation of public opinion, and how public opinion impinged on actions and events. Each of those phenomena may be susceptible to study in itself, but they cannot be strung together along lines of causality. The very notion of causal linkage may be misconceived.

Discourse analysis also disappoints those who want to connect monographical insights with general interpretations. It tends to be confined within a narrow band of

evidence. Unlike the older history of ideas, it concentrates on intertextuality rather than the exegesis of isolated texts. It attempts to show what words do when they appear in print as a response to other printed words. But its emphasis on word play can become so esoteric as to remove itself from research on anyone outside an intellectual elite. It may have implications for interpreting the power games played by a few political figures. But it does not offer much to historians trying to understand the values and views of ordinary people caught up in the patterns of everyday life. Instead of joining forces with its naturally allies in social and cultural history, discourse analysis sometimes resembles the fine-grained history of ideas that it was intended to refute.

No one would dispute the importance of understanding a great book like Hobbes's Leviathan. Nor would anyone dismiss the need to know what books reached readers at a crucial time such as the two decades before the French Revolution. How then can these two approaches to books be made to converge? Can one be grafted onto the other? In a recent paper Noel Malcolm stressed Hobbes's "project of cultural transformation," something that included the history of books. Hobbes thought of Leviathan as an instrument of change, one intended initially for use by princes, but one that would ultimately be studied in an expanding world of universities and Gelehrten and that would promote the spread of reason. Given adequate documentation--combinations of the information available in D. G. Wing's Short-title Catalogue and the papers of the Stationers' Company--it should be possible to situate Leviathan within the general pattern of literary culture in England during the 1650s. Similarly, it should be possible to subject a French best-seller like Mercier's L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante to close textual and intertextual analysis. But the results probably would be disappointing. Leviathan

would not score well on a retrospectively reconstructed best-seller list for the 1650s, and

L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante could seem like little more than vulgarized

Rousseau.

The historical significance of those two books cannot be determined without

resort to different modes of interpretation. Leviathan shows an argument being deployed

against other arguments with all the force of logic and rhetoric then available in order to

make claims about the rightful distribution of power during a period of political turmoil.

L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante expresses a set of attitudes, both utopian and

politically engaged, that undercut the general public's faith in the legitimacy of the

government during the critical last years of Louis XV's reign.   One text slices through

competing arguments; another expresses a vague but powerful climate of opinion. They

need to be understood in different ways, not reduced to some common hermeneutical

denominator.

What strategy will work, then, in order to make the studies of discourse and

diffusion reinforce each other? Any attempt to devise a single formula is likely to fail,

but one can begin by considering what the two approaches have in common. Both reject

the notion of a book as a container of ideas--that is, something the reader can simply open

in order to extract its conceptual contents. Both understand meaning contextually--that

is, as an activity by readers as well as authors, who appropriate and fashion language in

their own ways and in response to others.

In discourse analysis, the fashioning of language is understood as speech acts,

which advance arguments within shared linguistic conventions and a particular political

setting. In his Second Treatise on Civil Government, Locke breaks with the rhetoric

deployed in an earlier age by Filmer and provides a new language to be used against

arguments that would justify the accession of a Catholic to the throne under James II.

Diffusion studies show how thematic currents run through a general literary landscape,

marking ideological boundaries. The <u>Vie privée de Louis XV</u>, for example, draws on a

large corpus of earlier political <u>libelles</u>, often by lifting entire passages, in order to

provide a picture of contemporary history that made the reign of Louis XV look despotic

to readers wary of despotism under Louis XVI. Both books mobilized opposition to an

impending threat from the throne, but they operated in different ways and need to be

understood differently.

How can such different modes of understanding be brought together? Some

examples taken from book history illustrate the possibilities. They concern the book

itself as an expressive medium, the nature of reading as an interpretive activity, and the

character of publishing as a way of tapping literary demand.

Taking their cue from bibliographers, book historians often insist that authors do

not write books. They write texts, which printers make into books. Typography may

inflect the meaning of a text in fundamental ways, ways that constrain the sense made of

it by readers. In red-letter editions of the Bible, the words of Christ stand out with

peculiar force, compelling the reader to attribute more authority to them than to the

surrounding language printed in black. Early Bibles did not have the same typographical

articulation as later ones, so the texts lent themselves to different modes of reading. Only

after the text was cut up by headings and numbered paragraphs did it become possible to

"quote chapter and verse" and to perceive messages contained within specific boundaries

of print. No original manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays have survived, and the texts of

the earliest editions contain so many garbled passages that they can be interpreted in radically different ways. But bibliographical analysis makes it possible to arrive at some fairly definitive readings and also to be aware of their limitations. We now have two King Lears, each one bibliographically sound yet incompatible with the other. By limiting himself to typographical evidence, D. F. McKenzie demonstrated that the general character of Congreve's plays changed substantially when the scrappy, Elizabethan-type quarto editions were replaced by the majestic, neoclassical Works in octavo of 1710. Bibliographical analysis could complement discourse analysis by showing how speech acts were translated into typographical acts in the printing shop and ultimately into active constructions of meaning on the part of readers.

The history of reading has extended the notion of context beyond the limits of linguistic moves in a shared game of political discourse, but it, too, has an element of gamesmanship to it. Literary journals in France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries featured word games--mots d'énigme, logogriphes, bouts rimés--which predisposed readers to develop a variety of reading that resembled deciphering and puzzle-solving. Those techniques became standard modes of interpreting the romans à clé that were so popular at the same time. One can reconstruct the interpretations of the readers from notes in margins and from the keys themselves, which also contain annotations. Recent studies of commonplace books have demonstrated other kinds of hermeneutical exercises common in the early modern period. To be sure, reading was such a complex activity that it cannot be reduced to a single formula, not even the notion of a reading revolution that supposedly took place in the late eighteenth century. But historians have demonstrated the existence of certain kinds of reading in specific times

and places--for example, the Lesewut and Wertherfieber that swept through Germany during the period of Sturm und Drang.

The history of publishing also offers access to an understanding of how people made sense of books in the past. It can even help historians negotiate a way around anachronism in their pursuit of meaning making. To take another example from the eighteenth century, French publishers commonly used the term "livres philosophiques" to describe pornographic as well as irreligious literature. The books themselves often mixed those ingredients in ways that would be unthinkable today. From Thérèse philosophe to La Philosophie dans le boudoir the sex is interspersed with radical materialism. Many philosophes--Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot--combined erotic narratives with philosophical speculation. It is not that they were incapable of recognizing any distinction between sex and thought but rather that they found sex good for thinking: they did not sort things out into categories that seem self-evident to us. Their understanding of literature had affinities, both elective and economic, with the practices of publishers, who circulated special catalogues of "livres philosophiques" among booksellers, and with the booksellers' orders, which registered the demand for d'Holbach's Système de la nature alongside Mercier's L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante, Mairobert's Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry, Du Laurens's L'Arrétin moderne, Raynal's Histoire philosophique, and Voltaire's Pucelle. These were the best-sellers of the underground book trade according to statistics compiled from the orders. A diffusion study of this kind does not lead to conclusions about eighteenth-century ways of thinking. But taken with other sorts of book history--information about authorship, reading, the practices of

censors, the composition of libraries, the concept of literature itself--it shows how the printed word became embedded in a cultural system peculiar to the Ancien Régime.

The notion of an embedded book history has implications for the study of discourse. Consider the example of Voltaire, the supreme philosophe of the Enlightenment. He intervened actively in the publication of his works. He knew every trick of the book trade, devised elaborate strategies for promoting his works, played one publisher off against another, and even collaborated in the pirating of his own books--not to make money, but to spread light. Engagement in the diffusion of the printed word lay at the heart of the Voltairean Enlightenment, just as engagement in the affairs of the world characterized the Enlightenment ideal of the philosophe. As defined in Le Philosophe, a key tract of 1743 reworked and reprinted in many later books, including Diderot's Encyclopédie and Voltaire's Dictionnaire philosophique, the philosophe was a man of the world as well as a man of letters. He subscribed to certain advanced ideas, but he did not combine them in systematic arguments. Instead, he slipped them into conversations with like-minded gentlemen and ladies. They gathered together in salons, country houses, theater loges, opera boxes, promenades in the gardens of the Tuileries and the Palais-Royal, sharing a world of pleasure and politeness: le monde, as they called it. "Superstition"--that is, dogmatic adherence to the teachings of the Church--was banished from the free play of their wit. They subscribed to the cultural ideal that Voltaire expressed in his wittiest poem, Le Mondain. It involved a social code as well as a common stock of ideas, and therefore it served perfectly in Voltaire's strategy for spreading light. He fought prejudice with prejudice, playing on notions of good taste and good manners peculiar to le monde. Instead of treatises, he published novels, facetious

anthologies, and "petit pâtés" or bite-sized tracts that could easily be digested by the elite. He made them laugh, but laughter was a weapon: "Il faut mettre les rieurs de notre côté," he advised his lieutenants. And when the cause called for it, he mobilized passion. After the Calas Affair, "Ecrasez l'infâme" became a rallying cry that shook the world. It did so thanks to the power of print, for Voltaire spent the last thirty years of his life far from the Parisian <u>monde</u>. He relied on Swiss publishers and French booksellers to spread the printed word--that is, to diffuse Enlightenment. The Enlightenment itself was a process of diffusion, one interwoven inextricably with the history of books, along with the history of ideas, culture, and society.

Can discourse analysis provide a fresh perspective to the history of books? In order to turn the argument around in this fashion, it is useful to consider early-modern political thought. [Over to you, Quentin...]