

AN AGENDA FOR IMPERIAL AND POST-IMPERIAL BOOK HISTORY
IN INDIA AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

There are signs that the history of the book as a field of study is entering a new phase. This raises some big issues and large prospects.

I

The first phase, let us recall, began with the publication in 1958 of *L'apparition du livre* by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin. This was a significant event in the development of the French *nouvelle histoire* - the history of the experience of everyday life, of which the production and reading of texts is an essential element. The first phase has been characterized by national projects for the history of the book, beginning with France, and followed by Britain and by those of its former peripheries which can be thought of as originally 'colonies of settlement' [G.C.Bolton, *Britain's Legacy Overseas*, 1973]: North America (the United States as well as Canada) and Australasia [Willison, 'Centre and Creative Periphery in the Histories of the Book in the English-speaking World', *Publishing History*, 59, no 1]. We note, *inter alia*, that in the case of colonies of settlement not only were the books for a considerable length of time largely imported from the metropolitan centre but so also, with continuing immigration, were the readers - though by no means forgetting the 'aborigines' now coming under scrutiny [for example, Cornelius J.Jaenen, 'First Contact of Native Peoples with Print Culture: Native Oral and Inscribed Discourse', in *History of the Book in Canada*, Vol. 1, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2004, pp.13-18; Penny van Toorn, 'A Book by Any Other Name? Towards a Social History of the Book in Aboriginal Australia', in *A History of the Book in Australia*, vol 1, forthcoming].

Steps are now being taken towards histories of the book in the former British 'colonies of alien rule' [Bolton, op cit]: principally India and Sub-Saharan Africa [Willison, op cit]. These will open up the study of the history of the book in the English-speaking world as a whole (leaving the West Indies, the Dependencies, and the 'Informal Empire', still to be dealt with, as a matter of urgency). This in turn will be a major and indispensable contribution to the world history of the book envisaged by Martin in his *Histoire et pouvoirs de l'écrit* of 1988.

In the case of the colonies of alien rule, if printed books were to begin with largely imported or were produced by mission presses readers of texts in manuscript, and audiences for oral texts, had been conspicuously indigenous for millennia, with vernacular literatures persisting, even dominating, to the present day (and clearly, in India and Africa, beyond). Given this additional complexity common to colonies of alien rule, book-historical analysis and narrative in this vast sub-field will require a greater degree of sophistication: moreover, a sophistication moving in a distinctly transnational direction, formulating paradigms 'which illuminate both the uniqueness of [Indian and] African developments and the ways in which these can be factored into a broader international story' [Isabel Hofmeyr, *English Studies in Africa*, 47 no 1, 2004, p 17]].`

At the same time the history of the book as a field of study is interacting with the scholarly disciplines adjacent to it : literary history, cultural history and anthropology, economic history, political history, and the like [Willison, 'The History of the Book as a Field of Study within the Humanities', in *The History of the Book: International Comparisons* (forthcoming)]. For example, stimulated in part by greater sophistication of in the theory and

practice of textual criticism (following D.F.McKenzie - the idea of 'the sociology of texts' [1986] - and Jerome J.McGann - the idea of 'the textual condition' [1991]), a 'new' literary history aims to replace the older, essentially disembodied, literary-historical narratives: the 'parades' and 'parliaments' as William St Clair calls them [*The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 2004]. Instead it aims to reveal the interaction between on the one hand the sites of the material production, reception and circulation of texts (the field of book history) and on the other the aesthetic and generic projects of their authors (the field of traditional literary history). Thus we now speak of Rabrindanath Tagore striving 'to establish himself as a *writer* [my italics]...at a time in which Kolkata's literary-magazine *culture* [my italics] was reaching its zenith [William Radice, *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories*, 1994), p 2). We see the simultaneous publication in 2004 by Permanent Black in Delhi of *Print Areas: Book History in India*, announced as the first 'in what we hope will be a multi-volume series devoted to book history in India' (p 3), and *India's Literary History; Essays in the Nineteenth Century*, which aims to help 're-orientate the study of Indian literary history so as to include [the] many forms of popular literature that were printed for public consumption ...it is certain that major insights into the literary history of the period will come from research in the emerging field of print culture and the history of the book' (pp 6, 21). Likewise we see the Longman histories of African literature by Michael Chapman and Gareth Griffiths [1996, 2000] identifying the specificities of 'oral tradition', with its characteristic 'hesitations, repetitions, circling progressions' [Chapman p.23], as constituting 'a usable past' for post-imperial, post-Apartheid writing practice, and identifying 'missionary auspices and control' as a pre-condition for printed literature in the imperial period of the subcontinent's history [Griffiths, pp.50-70].

II

So far as India is concerned, historical analysis of the interaction of literary culture and the material book has now been taken far back in time by Sheldon Pollock and his team, through the Mughal empire to what Pollock calls the original Sanskrit 'cosmopolis' [*Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions in South Asia*, 2003]. Pollock demonstrates the importance of the enduring viability of India's distinctive symbiotic oral/script culture over the centuries, in particular the remarkable resistance of this culture to the cosmopolitan prestige of adjacent early Chinese and later Western print cultures. Understanding and presenting this massive alternative world of oral/script textuality in pre-British India provides vital balance when we envisage 'globalization in history' [*Globalization in World History*, ed. A.G.Hopkins, 2002] that is now fundamental to the humanities - and to global humanism. In Pollock's words "a number of generalizations about the world we are prone to accept on the basis of a rather thin slice of human experience in the West are likely to be unsettled or at least complicated" ('Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India', in *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*, 2007, p.77)

Globalization in history is constituted by the succession of cosmopolises, or cultural empires (in William St Clair's words [*The Reading Nation*, p.422]), and in the case of India is exemplified by what Pollock calls the three 'globalizing literary cultures: Sanskrit, Persian, and Indian-English'. The history of the book in India will have to engage with all three; but also with the concomitant 'unwritten literary world of the tribal communities of India' [N.Patnaik, *Folklore of Tribal Communities: Oral Literature of the Santals, Kharias, Oraons and the Mundas of Orissa*, 2002, jacket and p. 177]. This will help clarify and reinstate the integrity of the Indian cultural heritage - the

main task for scholarship and its funding agencies in India, and signaled (for example) by Tagore's description of his family background as 'a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British', and by his own 'integrative message' [Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*, 2005, pp.32, 349]. Indeed it will help consolidate the Tagorean humanism that is necessary to complete India's post-imperial, and post-fundamentalist, 'Tryst with Destiny', particularly in respect of general education and the disciplines of scholarship on which it is dependent [Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, especially ch.5, 'Tagore and His India']. This grand project is the equivalent of what, in the case of post-Apartheid Africa, Chapman calls 'the humanism of reconstruction', the reading of 'the literary and historic terrain as a semiotic whole' [pp. 5,8; see also Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Poetry and Humanism: Oral Beginnings*, 1986], or Francis Galloway's 'the need for an integrated approach based on various "common grounds", including...shared semiotic systems such as the oral tradition, rock painting, and ritual' ['Notes on the Usefulness of Publishing Statistics', *English Studies in Africa*, 47 no 1 2004, p.112]

Further , there is now the interest of social and political historians, as well as literary historians, in textual culture whether oral, manuscript, or print. So far as India is concerned an example, already something of a classic, would be Christopher Bayly's *Empire & Communication: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* 1996, his concept of what he calls India's 'colonial information order' involving orality, script and print, and ranging from religious controversy to popular erotic literature; and what he calls 'political print culture', represented by the newspaper, that helps explain the climacteric of 1857. Indeed, for solid analysis of the whole global succession of interrelated cosmopolises, or text-based cultural empires, we now have what can be called a 'new' imperial history of which Bayly is one of the pioneers and

which is represented, so far as the English-speaking cosmopolis is concerned, by the *Oxford History of the British Empire* (1998-99). The key to the new imperial history is its aim 'to understand the end of Empire in relation to its beginning...[but at the same time] as part of the larger and dynamic interaction of European and non-Western societies' [*Oxford History of the British Empire*, 'Foreword']. It is such two-sided interaction between centre and periphery that requires historians of the book as well as general historians to think in 'imperial' and 'post imperial', rather than conventional one-sided 'colonial' and 'post-colonial'., terms ; and this all within the inclusive concept of 'globalization'.

Finally, the vastness of the projects - in the case of India involving (for example) an estimated 'thirty million manuscripts...still extant' [Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, 2006, p.558] and in the case of Africa 'a project...stretched across millennia and a thousand languages' [Hofmeyr, 'Towards a History of the Book and Literary Culture in Africa', in *Literary Cultures and the Materiality of the Book* (forthcoming)] - demands the development of digitized archival databases of virtually unprecedented sophistication in both content and collaborative management, a challenge to which I shall return after looking a little more closely at the prospects for Africa.

III

Though dealing primarily with the manuscript culture of India and South Asia Pollock's insists that

precisely how manuscript culture interacted with an orality that long

remained dominant both in fact and in the ideology of authentic knowledge - to say nothing of its interaction with the true oral culture that maintains its existence outside of literature and history - is one of the great complexities of South Asian literary cultures [*Literary Cultures in History*, p.21

So far as Sub-Saharan Africa is concerned the far greater predominance and (so far) persistence of 'true oral culture' on the one hand, and post-imperial disintegration on the other, gives the history of the book an even more critical role in reinstating the integrity of the cultural heritage from the earliest times, and on that basis identifying and consolidating the necessary 'humanism of reconstruction' [Chapman, p. 5] by analogy, one might say, with the Tagorean project. The 'questions about details of performance, audience, and occasion' [Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, p 10] - the equivalent of McKenzie's performative 'expressive forms' such as *mise-en-page* in the case of print - are of even greater moment in establishing the oral 'text' as an object of serious historical and critical scrutiny. The history of the book in Africa, starting with the Bushmen and their rock paintings, will have to proceed through the long 'interface between the written [, the printed,] and the oral' [Jack Goody, 1987] to the present day, taking in the considerable history of manuscript production produced under Islamic rule in West Africa. The great stretch of space and time, the varieties of *Sitz im Leben*, and the problematic materiality - visual and verbal - as well as vastness of the evidence will involve using paradigms (in Isabel Hofmeyr's phrase) in this case derived from cultural anthropology as well as cultural history. It will reveal what we may call the essentially complementary if not archetypal nature of the African as well as Indian experience of textuality in the new perspectives of 'globalization in history'.

Indeed this archetypal aspect takes us into the realm of what Australian historians of 'new national and post-colonial literatures' call the 'pan-

aboriginality' common to indigenous literatures, at least in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand [Adam Shoemaker, 'Paper Tracks: Indigenous Literatures in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand', in *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: an Introduction*, Oxford 1996, pp. 245-62]. This concept has already extended to Africa as is evident in Duncan Brown's recent work [*To Speak of this Land: Identity and Belonging in South Africa and Beyond*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2006], It should also be extended to the 'tribal communities' of India .

Having talked of the greater concern and involvement with 'the *process* of story-telling rather than just with the *content* of the tale' Shoemaker emphasizes that the indigenes 'were *profoundly* literate in the sense that body painting, inscription, mapping, and caring for land were all forms of reading the country as long as reading is understood in a larger, semiotic sense...[they] introduce a crucial element of spirituality into their *attitude* towards writing' [p.256]. Such concepts harmonize essentially with those of 'performance', 'miraculous literacy', 'baptizing' or 'traditionalizing' of print technology, and so on, which Finnegan and Hofmeyr use for the African textual experience at the fundamental, popular level: for example Hofmeyr's analysis of the 'African Christian interpretations of the complex roll that documents play in colonial and mission society' in the case of the numerous translations of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and their dissemination 'in a variety of forms which included postcards...hymns...pageants [in which] molecules could easily be taken up into African oral narrative tradition, which often works through an ever-changing assemblage of episodic'; or of the tradition of 'popular pamphlet/chapbook publishing...in close proximity to the printing press itself', in the case of the Nigerian Onitsha market literature of the 1940s-60s ['Towards a History of the Book and Literary Culture in Africa']. These themes have been taken up by Newell and Barber for West Africa (*Readings in African Popular Culture*, ed.

Karin Barber, 1997 and Stephanie Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction, 2000*].

Pursuing the focus on 'the fundamental, popular level' we return to imperial India to explore the role of the traditionalizing of print technology in preserving and re-energising vernacular genres such as 'almanacs, religious and mythological literature, sensational novels and romances, plays and songs on topical themes' [Amindita Ghosh, 'Cheap Books, "Bad Books": Contesting Print Cultures in Colonial Bengal', in *Print Areas*, p.169].

IV

The plenitude of expressive forms involved, from pan-aboriginal textuality onwards to the present day, is leading to the development of appropriate archival control in the form of the 'innovative multimedia and multivocal digital research resource [based on] international collaboration' (see the Great Lakes Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures, GRASAC, directed by Ruth B. Phillips [Google, s.v. "GRASAC" and "Ruth B. Phillips"]. See also, for example, the Sanskrit *South Asia Microform Project* [Google, s.v. Sheldon Pollock]). One can anticipate the enlargement of such international collaboration to involve the relevant research centres in India and Africa and other comparable sites such as those in Central and South America, as well as the great research libraries in the West: all with their prime responsibility for a humanism of reconstruction that is truly deep, hard-headed, and global.

IRW

