

On Native Ground: From the History of Printing to the History of the Book

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I AM GRATEFUL for the honor of inaugurating the Wiggins lecture series, and with it, the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture. Out in gold-rush California, Mark Twain used to perform on the lecture circuit of the mining camps. On one occasion he was introduced by a miner who, taking the stage reluctantly, 'stood thinking for a moment, then said, "I don't know anything about this man. At least I know only two things: one is, he hasn't been in the penitentiary, and the other is (a little sadly), I don't know why."' ¹ My credentials as a historian of the book are nearly as precarious as Twain's seemed to be that evening. The distinguished bibliographer and librarian Victor Hugo Paltsits once remarked that 'anyone can compile a list, many can make a catalogue, but very few can agonize to bring forth a bibliography.' Lists I have made, but never shall I experience the rite of passage of the bibliographer. Yet I do bring one credential to this occasion. At the age of eleven I became a newspaper delivery boy in Alexandria, Virginia, for the *Alexandria Gazette*, which in those days, and perhaps still, boasted that it was the oldest continuously published newspaper in America. Some months later I moved to higher things as a delivery boy for the *Washington Star*, to which I also contributed a story for the Children's Page about an immense rolltop desk my father had

¹ *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine, 2 vols. (New York, 1924), 1:161.

given me. It may not be appropriate for the Wiggins lecturer to stress his connections with the *Star*, now, alas, defunct while its rival the *Post* has reached new heights. In those innocent days of the 1940s it was the *Star* and not the *Post* that reigned supreme in Washington journalism—so supreme, so weighty, that on Sundays I had to endure the humiliation of dragging the gigantic Sunday editions from house to house in a child's wagon. As newspaper delivery boy and one-time journalist, I salute Mr. Wiggins as a fellow laborer in American journalism.

A hundred and seventy-five years ago, in 1808, Isaiah Thomas began to write *The History of Printing in America*. From his day to ours, a coalition of printers, booksellers, collectors, antiquarians, bibliographers, librarians, and historians have pursued the history of printing to the point where we know more about who published what, and where, than do the historians of printing in any other country. We may justly celebrate this scholarship. But as we celebrate there is also reason to reflect and reconsider. The present moment, marked as it is by the founding of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, demands critical reflection. What has been our native tradition? What themes, what arguments, what burdens do we inherit from the past? More crucially, what should be the relationship between the history of printing and the history of the book? These are the questions I wish to address this afternoon.

It was the first of April in 1808 when Thomas started on his *History*. His diary entry for that day was unpretentious, though also disconcerting in its juxtaposition of the commonplace and the extraordinary: 'Miss Weld left us in Dudgeon. Pleasant for the season. Miss C. returned, and went again to Gov. Lincoln. Began writing a Sketch of the Origin and Progress of Printing. A child fell in a kettle of boiling soap, and died. Its Grandmother going in haste from a neighbouring house to administer relief taken with Asthma, dies instantly.'²

² Charles L. Nichols, ed., 'Extracts from the Diaries and Accounts of Isaiah Thomas,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 26(1916):69.

The absence of literary pretension was characteristic of a man who began his career as printer, publisher, and bookseller apprenticed to one of Boston's least distinguished printers and who would later publish almost anything and everything, from *Goody Two-Shoes* and the Bible to the pseudoastrology of *Erra Pater*. Isaiah Thomas was a printer in the days before specialization severed the functions of publisher and bookseller from that of manufacturing books. His pride in an identity as 'printer'—late in life he told a correspondent that he preferred this role to any other—spilled over into the *History of Printing in America*.³ It is the key to his sense of audience, the 'professional men' and 'professors of the typographic art' for whom he imagined he was writing.⁴ The feeling of fraternity with printers past and present led him to insert biographical notices of his fellow craftsmen. His own printer's eye and hand lay behind the notice he took of 'neatness and correctness' in certain work, and the description of presses and their technology. From this same identity flowed his interest in the history of journalism, for the printer of his day was especially ambitious to establish a newspaper, regarding it, more so than books, as the crowning glory of his trade.⁵ Speaking of his own career, Thomas gave pride of place to his publication of the Massachusetts *Spy*, as, before him, Franklin had given pride of place in speaking of his own career to the newspaper and magazine he had founded in Philadelphia.

Isaiah Thomas was a printer, not a learned 'scholar' or man of letters. His own schooling had been intermittent at best, and certainly not of the kind to allow him entrance to the world of

³ Clifford K. Shipton, *Isaiah Thomas: Printer, Patriot and Philanthropist* (Rochester, N.Y., 1948), p. 84.

⁴ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, ed. Marcus A. McCorison, 2d ed. (New York, 1970), pp. 4, xxi. Thomas hoped that the book would be 'amusing to the man of letters, and not altogether uninteresting to the antiquarian.'

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80. Speaking of the 'country printer' in the middle of the nineteenth century, William Dean Howells observed, 'Their hope was somehow to get hold of a country paper and become editors and publishers.' Howells, 'The Country Printer,' *Impressions and Experiences* (New York, 1896), p. 32. See in general Milton W. Hamilton, *The Country Printer New York State, 1785-1830* (New York, 1936).

the scholar—a world still based on the classics. Fortunately for us, Thomas's *unlearnedness* made him sympathetic to materials that others would ignore. No man of letters in 1810 would have written a history of printing, and certainly not a history of printing that paid so much attention to newspapers. Nor would a man of letters have *collected* newspapers. All of these activities depended on Thomas's wonderfully undifferentiated sense of himself and on his independence from the hierarchies of traditional literary culture. We catch a glimpse of those hierarchies in a statement of praise for newspapers and their role in modern society that Thomas inserted in the *History*. He borrowed this statement from the Presbyterian clergyman and Princeton teacher Samuel Miller's *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*. Miller was assuredly a learned man. Thomas must have been pleased to dress up, to legitimize, his own commitment to journalism by quoting him. But if the statement began with praise, it ended with qualifications that reaffirmed the old hierarchies, for Miller complained that in 'our country . . . too many of our gazettes are in the hands of persons destitute at once of the urbanity of gentlemen, the information of scholars, and the principles of virtue.'⁶ For Thomas to admit these words into his *History* was, I suggest, to introduce a tension that would reverberate for another century and a half: the tension between a broad and narrow view of printing, or between the democratic and the genteel view of culture. In the *History*, as in his daily practice, Isaiah Thomas stood for a broad approach; but even in his own day there was a contrary position which he felt it necessary to acknowledge.

Contemporary response to the *History* was modest. No one, not even the American Antiquarian Society, was interested in publishing the revised edition on which Thomas labored for the next twenty years until his death in 1831. After a long

⁶ Thomas, *History of Printing*, pp. 18–21. Having allowed these words into his text, Thomas added a note in which he blamed the deficiencies of American journalism on the extreme partisanship of our politics.

pause, the native tradition would resume its development in the 1860s, when Americans set to work again on the tasks of preparing a national imprint bibliography and a more thorough history of printing. Early in the 1860s, Joseph Sabin, a bookseller and antiquarian who arrived at bibliography by way of preparing sales catalogues, started on the first of what would grow into the twenty-nine volumes of the *Bibliotheca Americana*. John Russell Bartlett published the first really significant state bibliography, his *Catalogue of Books Relating to Rhode Island*, following it in 1865 with a *Catalogue of the Library of John Carter Brown*. That same year, Henry Stevens, a Vermonter who had migrated to London, brought out his *Catalogue of the American Books in the Library of the British Museum*.⁷ Joel Munsell, like Thomas a successful printer and bookseller, would follow up his studies of the development of printing and paper-making by editing, together with Bartlett and Samuel Foster Haven, a revised edition of *The History of Printing in America*.⁸

In these years the great collectors of Americana, John Carter Brown, George Brinley, James Lenox, were making themselves felt. They had allies in booksellers, antiquarians, and the earliest of the professional librarians. The friendships and rivalries among these men are recalled by R. W. G. Vail in his retrospective evocation of Sabin's world in the final volume of the *Bibliotheca Americana*:

It would have been well worth a winter journey to have heard Sabin pay tribute to Ebeling and Rich and Terneaux-Compans as earlier travellers on his road; to have listened to his comments on HARRISSE; to have heard him talk about Henry Stevens . . . to have got his views about George Brinley and John Carter Brown

⁷ Joseph Sabin, *A Dictionary of Books Relating to America from Its Discovery to the Present Time* (New York, 1868); John Russell Bartlett, *A Catalogue of Books . . . Relating to the State of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1864), and *Bibliotheca Americana: Catalogue of Books Relating to North and South America in the Library of John Carter Brown*, Part 1 (Providence, 1865); Henry Stevens, *Catalogue of the American Books in the Library of the British Museum* (London, 1866).

⁸ Worcester, 1874. Munsell's scholarship is described in David S. Edelstein, 'Joel Munsell: Printer and Bibliographer,' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 48(1946):383-96.

and James Lenox and their libraries; to have known what he thought about Peter Force and Jared Sparks . . . to have watched him compare Samuel G. Drake and William Gowans and Charles B. Norton and Joel Munsell and . . . the other rival booksellers of this day.⁹

Let us pass from this generation, so rich in its accomplishments, to another that accomplished even more. At the turn of the century Charles Evans had begun upon his monumental bibliography of American imprints, to be completed, finally, here at the Antiquarian Society in 1970.¹⁰ Clarence Brigham would soon be at work on a bibliography of American newspapers that built upon foundations laid by Thomas.¹¹ Wilberforce Eames, who as a young Brooklyn bookseller had volunteered to assist Joseph Sabin, was now the principal editor of that ever-lengthening series. Underneath the shelter of these great enterprises, hundreds of collectors, antiquarians, librarians, and bibliographers were pursuing the details of local printing in an effort that continues to this day. The quality of these local studies would gradually improve to the point where, by the 1930s, a distinct maturity had been achieved. This maturity is evident in Douglas C. McMurtrie's *History of Printing in the United States*, of which, sadly, only one of a projected four volumes would be published. Yet indirectly, and directly, McMurtrie gave direction to and set standards for the history of printing as written according to state boundaries.¹²

The maturing of our native tradition is also evident in another book of the 1930s, Lawrence Wroth's *The Colonial Printer*.¹³ To reflect on the strengths and the limitations of *The Co-*

⁹ Vail, *Bibliotheca Americana*, 29:iv.

¹⁰ Charles Evans et al., comps., *American Bibliography*, 18 vols. (Chicago, Worcester, and Charlottesville, 1903-70).

¹¹ Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820*, 2 vols. (Worcester, 1947).

¹² Douglas C. McMurtrie, *A History of Printing in the United States: The Story of the Introduction of the Press and of Its History and Influence During the Pioneer Period in Each State of the Union* (New York, 1936).

¹³ Lawrence Wroth, *The Colonial Printer*, 2d ed. (Portland, Me., 1938).

lonial Printer is to reflect on the strengths and limitations of our native way of doing the history of printing. Like so many others before and after him, Wroth had done a local study, following in that regard the tradition that began with Thomas, who had organized the *History* according to geography. Why did geography entrench itself in the history of printing? There was the factor of convenience that the boundaries of a town or state provided. Another reason was surely the sense of place aroused in many Americans, perhaps most among those in the northeast as they experienced the onset of industrialism. Recall, if you will, the great outpouring of town histories in New England that occurred as 'olden times' yielded to the 'railroad age.' Like other landmarks of the past—roads, buildings, families, churches—books seemed somehow different then than now; and the antiquarian reached back across a widening chasm to preserve and record a vanishing past. This sense of jeopardy had waned by the time Wroth came to write *The Colonial Printer*, but the geographical principle, and its corollary, the history of printing told as the rise or spread of printing from one colony or state to the next, remained his vision of the subject.

Wroth would combine localism with a second principle, that of the 'fine book.' In the last half of the nineteenth century a distinctive understanding and appreciation of the handcrafted book emerged as part of the reaction to industrialism. On both sides of the Atlantic, sensitive persons voiced their dismay at the mediocrity of the mass-produced and mass-consumed artifact. Consider, said Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, the pocket watch as produced in aristocratic society and as produced in a democracy: the one made slowly and to the highest standards for the aristocratic patron, the other rushed out quickly for patrons who could not tell the difference between the mediocre and the well-made.¹⁴ Did this distinction apply also to the book? Reviewing Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (New York, 1954), 2:50-55.

insisted that it did. A fundamental realignment of culture was occurring: 'It is the middle class that now rewards even literature and art; the books by which most money is made are the cheap books. . . . Elementary and popular treatises are immensely multiplied, superficial information far more widely diffused; but there are fewer who devote themselves to thought for its own sake, and pursue in retirement those profounder researches, the results of which can only be appreciated by a few. Literary productions are seldom highly finished—they are got up to be read by many, and to be read but once.'¹⁵

From Mill to William Morris and the Kelmscott Press the road is very short. It is a road that led to a new cultural hierarchy: books made by craftsmen using the hand operated press were superior to books produced by the steam press. More generally, there was something known as 'fine' printing, in contrast to more ordinary varieties. This distinction would increasingly inform the practice of typographic design,¹⁶ the way in which the history of printing was written, and not least, the habits of book collectors. In 1912 the English critic and literary historian Alfred Pollard would advise collectors that 'the only good qualities which a book can possess in its own right are those of strength and beauty of form.' Age and rarity, he declared, were secondary considerations; the contents were irrelevant. 'No collector would value a dull sermon printed in 1800 any higher than a dull sermon printed in 1900.'¹⁷

On almost every page of Lawrence Wroth's *The Colonial Printer* we sense the impact of this new hierarchy. The wealth of details about the craft of the hand press grew out of a sympathy for the handcrafted book that Wroth made explicit in his preface:

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill, 'De Tocqueville on Democracy in America,' *Essays on Politics and Society, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto, 1972), 18:195.

¹⁶ James M. Wells, 'Book Typography in the United States of America,' Kenneth Day, ed., *Book Typography 1816-1966* (London, 1966), pp. 325-70.

¹⁷ Alfred W. Pollard, *Fine Books* (London, 1912), pp. 9-10.

To love the contents of a book and to know and care nothing about the volume itself . . . is to be only half a lover, deaf to a whole series of notes in the gamut of emotion. The book-lover, more richly endowed, broods over the hand that fashioned the volume he reads, and, like the Tramp Royal, he goes on till he dies observing 'the different ways that different things are done,' the materials, the processes, the how and what and why of the ancient mysteries of printing, paper making, type founding, ink making, press building, and binding.

Let me call attention to the phrase, 'ancient mysteries.' It suggests the distance that has intervened between the age of the craftsman and the age of the machine. This expression placed Lawrence Wroth and his readers on one side of a great cultural divide, and even though the span in years was not especially long, a century or less, the distance seemed immense. I take this phrase to imply something else. That which is mysterious and ancient is also, by association, rare and beautiful. Ever since the coming of the book there have been those who wished to elevate, to mystify this artifact, to transpose it from the realm of utility to the realm of the aesthetic or the sacramental. Such an effort, I propose, is suggested by Wroth's evocation of the craft of printing; and his remark a page later that 'God save us from the . . . windy fellows who say, "I had just as lief read an author in a poor edition as a good one."' ¹⁸

The Colonial Printer is a masterpiece of our native tradition. Wroth's sense of printing as a craft was impeccable; and he was realistic about the utilitarian tasks that early printers undertook to stay in business, the kinds of job printing that seldom were given their due. Nonetheless *The Colonial Printer* was infused with criteria that were foreign to Isaiah Thomas, printer that he was of many 'poor editions' and 'dull sermons.' In repeating the geographical mode of organization that origi-

¹⁸ Wroth, *Colonial Printer*, pp. xvii-xviii. Wroth was a principal contributor to Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *The Book in America: A History of the Making, the Selling, and the Collecting of Books in the United States* (New York, 1939), another study which in its overall design and themes reflects the ambivalence I am describing.

nated with Thomas's own *History*, Wroth was misleading in a different respect, for the history of printing in America deserved a better framework. Ours was never really a frontier society with culture radically dispersed into local units; the technology in use from one end of the country to the other was derived from a metropolitan tradition, and most of the books being sold and printed had originated in centers such as London, Edinburgh, Boston, or New York. In summing up the strengths of American scholarship, *The Colonial Printer* also indicated some of its limitations.

Similar issues would arise in histories of American literature. A native literary history began to emerge in the early nineteenth century, with Samuel Kettell's *Specimens of American Poetry, with Critical and Biographical Notices* serving as something of a twin to Thomas's *History*.¹⁹ At midcentury the New York critics Evert and George Duyckinck brought out their *Cyclopaedia of American Literature*, an immense anthology-cum-literary history. The *Cyclopaedia* provides a useful benchmark for considering how it was that literary historians would define their subject. What *is* American literature? Each of those words was problematical: the word 'American,' the word 'literature.' Well aware of the complications, the Duyckincks chose to solve them in a particular way. 'The history of the literature of the country involved in the pages of this work,' they declared in a forward, 'is not so much an exhibition of art and invention, of literature in its immediate and philosophical sense, as a record of mental progress and cultivation, of facts and opinions, which derives its main interest from its historical rather than its critical value.' Because they preferred a 'historical' to a 'critical' or aesthetic understanding of literature, the Duyckincks could reach out widely for examples of writing—to the explorer John Smith, for example. And because they did not limit the category 'American' to writers born on this soil

¹⁹ Samuel Kettell, *Specimens of American Poetry, with Critical and Biographical Notices*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1829).

or identifying themselves with the country, John Smith was doubly welcome to the pages of the *Cyclopaedia*.²⁰

This same breadth of sympathy would characterize the first academic history of American literature, Moses Coit Tyler's great four-volume study of colonial and revolutionary period writing. In his pages on the Revolution, Tyler laid aside as irrelevant the political categories of Tory and Patriot. Tory writers, he declared, were just as American as those who labored on the side of independence.²¹ Similarly, Tyler set aside any merely aesthetic conception of literature, recognizing that 'for the purposes of historical interpretation' the 'lighter, as well as the graver, forms of literature' had value. Hence he was willing to give 'full room to the lyrical, the humorous, and the satirical aspects of our Revolutionary record—its songs, ballads, sarcasm, its literary facetiae.'²²

Even more remarkable was Tyler's sympathy for the almanac. Admit the lowly almanac into a history of *literature*? Yes, insisted Tyler: 'No one who would penetrate to the core of early American literature, and would read in it the secret history of the people in whose minds it took root and from whose minds it grew, may by any means turn away, in lofty literary scorn, from the almanac,—most despised, most prolific, most indispensable of books, which every man uses, and no man praises, the very quack, clown, pack-horse, and pariah of modern literature, yet the one universal book.'²³ These were words to warm the heart of Isaiah Thomas, who never allowed 'lofty literary scorn' to interfere with his decisions about book publishing. But the very vigor of Tyler's argument suggested the strength of the alternative he was rejecting, an alternative

²⁰ Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck, *Cyclopaedia of American Literature*, 2d ed. (New York, 1866), 1:v.

²¹ Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature During the Colonial Time*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (New York, 1897); *The Literary History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (New York, 1898).

²² Tyler, *The Literary History of the American Revolution*, 1:v-vi.

²³ Tyler, *A History of American Literature During the Colonial Time*, 1:120.

but half concealed in the ambiguities of his own description of the almanac.

In the years ahead, the alternative of an aesthetic understanding of literature would become increasingly significant. We may trace the rivalry between broad and narrow understandings of literature through Barrett Wendell's *Literary History of America*, a notably stingy expression of the genteel tradition, to the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, the first collaborative, academic history, and one that combined both modes, to the postwar *Literary History of the United States*,²⁴ where the rivalry is explicit in the juxtaposition of long sections on a handful of 'major' writers with others that were broadly historical or cultural in their focus. The sections on major writers reflected the redefinition of literature that was occurring as a consequence of literary modernism. The critical principles of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and others of their generation amounted to a radical reassertion of aesthetics as the sole basis for understanding literature. The traditional literary hierarchies that Thomas had ignored, and Tyler also, were now reborn. In their wake came the enshrining of Henry James, that most self-conscious and 'literary' of our novelists, and the elevation of a modest galaxy of such kindred spirits as Poe, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman and Twain.²⁵

It may seem like something of a paradox that modernist criticism, as practiced by Americans, became intertwined with the search for a 'native' literature—but such was the case. Literary critics in the 'twenties were obsessed with the discovery, and if necessary the creation of, a native literary tradition.²⁶ Nativism and modernism converged in a study that has

²⁴ Barrett Wendell, *A Literary History of America* (New York, 1900); William P. Trent et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, 3 vols. (New York, 1917–1921); Robert E. Spiller et al., eds., *The Literary History of the United States*, 3 vols. (New York, 1947).

²⁵ The transformation of literary criticism may be traced in the anthology assembled by Morton D. Zabel, *Literary Opinion in America*, 2 vols., 3d ed. (New York, 1962).

²⁶ The search for a native literature, and its consequences, are traced in Richard Ru-

exceptional depth and passion, F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*.²⁷ It is a book to which, as much as to any other, I owe my own sense of vocation; but in spite of Matthiessen's own democratic sympathies, *American Renaissance* stands near one end of a spectrum that stretches from modernist, 'aesthetic' criticism to Tyler and the Duyckincks. The fusion of modernism and nativism would have many consequences. The impact on colonial literature has been striking, for the canon of early American poetry gradually shrank to the few, chiefly Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, who bear up under close 'literary' scrutiny. Yet there were dozens of other poets in the period, as Harold Jantz demonstrated in a remarkable work of literary history in 1944.²⁸

But the triumph of modernist criticism placed literary history in the shade, and with it, the concept of 'literary culture,' that network or community of writers, critics, publishers, and readers that our literary historians had been intent on describing. To our literary historians we owe much, including many studies that have enriched the history of printing. I think of such books as Thomas Goddard Wright's *Literary Culture in Early New England*, based in part on probate inventories; of Louis B. Wright's *First Gentlemen of Virginia*, which made use of similar sources; of its distinguished and more wide-ranging successor, Richard Beale Davis's *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South*; of William Charvat's studies of author-publisher rela-

land, *The Rediscovery of American Literature: Premises of Critical Taste, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

²⁷ F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, 1941). To a certain extent Matthiessen believed that great writers absorbed motifs from the wider culture of which they were part, a point of view more forcefully argued in a book that returned to the almanacs for inspiration, Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York, 1931).

²⁸ Harold Jantz, 'The First Century of New England Verse,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 53 (1943):219-508. For a stimulating reappraisal and critique of nativist (and, implicitly, modernist) literary history, see William C. Spengman, 'Discovering the Literature of British America,' *Early American Literature* 18 (1983): 3-16.

tionships;²⁹ and not least, of Frank Luther Mott's *History of American Magazines*, the fifth and final volume of which appeared after his death. Mott had earned his Ph.D. degree in English literature at Columbia University. In the preface to the first volume, published in 1930, Mott began by citing the negative opinion that 'periodicals have in them little or nothing of reliable information or admirable literature.' To the contrary, declared Mott, periodicals 'provide a democratic literature which is sometimes of high quality.' The remarkable ambivalence of this sentence may have done more to expose a tension than resolve it, but Mott pressed on, offering the prediction that literary history would have to take into account 'social, economic, geographical, industrial, and educational factors. . . . The time is happily past when biographical sketches plus criticisms of masterpieces may be accepted as literary history. Much of our literary history must be rewritten from the standpoints of geography and the social sciences. No longer can we consider literature as of the mountain top, dissociated from social and economic pressures; it has come too close to the people.'³⁰

A brave prophecy, but for its times a wrong one, if we bear in mind the indifference and even the hostility to economic and social factors that would characterize the dominant school of literary criticism in the postwar years.

I am suggesting that historians of American literature have vacillated between quite different approaches to their subject matter, or even to the question of what their subject matter was. This ambivalence is akin to that we find in Wroth. Is the story one of fine printing or one of books, no matter what their

²⁹ Thomas Goddard Wright, *Literary Culture in Early New England, 1620-1730* (New Haven, 1920); Louis B. Wright, *The First Gentlemen of Virginia; Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class* (San Marino, Calif., 1940); Richard Beale Davis, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1585-1763*, 3 vols. (Knoxville, 1978); William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America* (Philadelphia, 1959).

³⁰ Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1930-1968), 1:2-4.

appearance or function? The common issue, the deeper question, concerns hierarchies of value: should the aesthetic merits of a book determine whether it is studied or not, and by what methods? Should the historian of printing—of American literature—reserve his efforts for the best that was done, or reach out to the utilitarian, the vernacular, the tawdry? And does place of origin affect the field of study? Does a book conceived and written in America have more value than a book conceived and written somewhere else, though both had readers in this country?

Whatever else the history of the book may be—and I use the term deliberately, to contrast it with the history of printing—it must put to rest this ambivalence. Let me speak directly to the issues. The fact of the matter is that Americans depended on imported books for most of their literary culture in the two centuries and a half of settlement that preceded the Civil War. A history of the book in America is not a history of *American* books. Quite the contrary. Ours was persistently a provincial culture dependent for its modes on a distant cosmopolitan center, be it London or some other central place.³¹ We may resonate to Emerson's declaration of cultural independence in 'The American Scholar,' but the man who defiantly asserted that 'Books are for the scholar's idle time' was himself a most bookish man, deeply indebted to British and German writers for his romanticism. The American printer and bookseller did not think twice about reprinting or importing books originating overseas.³² In our zeal to assert a native tradition, we overlook the contrary example of a Benjamin Franklin; for Franklin repudiated local tradition in favor of the new prose style he encountered in stray copies of the *Spectator* and *Tatler*. His narrative of how he modelled his prose style directly upon theirs

³¹ John Clive and Bernard Bailyn, 'England's Cultural Provinces: Scotland and America,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 11 (1954):200-213.

³² Robert B. Winans, 'The Growth of a Novel-Reading Public in Late Eighteenth-Century America,' *Early American Literature* 9 (1975):267-75.

bespeaks the powerful appeal of cosmopolitan standards to the aspiring provincial—an appeal that is elsewhere evident in the career of a John Singleton Copley, and that colors, I would argue, the entire history of American literature at least until the 1930s.

Ours was not only a provincial culture but also one in which the press was in the service of utilitarian needs. Only incidentally were printers and booksellers responsive to any other patronage than that of the marketplace, or of institutions such as schools, churches, and political parties. As time went on, advertising would assume immense importance, as would the needs of governments. In this context, fine books, fine bindings, and first editions do not loom as consequential. Pride of place belongs to more lowly genres—the schoolbook, the almanac, the newspaper, the legal form, the devotional manual. In these utilitarian and provincial functions of the press lie the makings of a history of the book.

Having spoken of the literary historians and historians of printing, let me comment briefly on those who have studied education and ideas, politics and society. The contributions to an understanding of the book in American culture have been many, as in the histories of education that specify what books were used by faculty and students. Samuel Eliot Morison's *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century* is exemplary in this regard.³³ From the many possibilities in intellectual history, I want to single out Zoltán Haraszti's *John Adams & the Prophets of Progress*, a book originating in a librarian's browsings in a collection he presided over. John Adams responded vigorously to the authors he read, filling margins of his books with pungent marginalia, like the following remark addressed to the philosophe d'Alembert: 'Thou Louse, Flea, Tick, Ant, Wasp,

³³ Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1936). Many of the relevant studies are listed in the bibliography to Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607-1783* (New York, 1970), and its sequel, *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876* (New York, 1980).

or whatever Vermin thou art, was this Stupendous Universe made and adjusted to give you Money, Sleep, or Digestion?' Out of all these comments Haraszti wove a stimulating description of Adams's political and moral philosophy.³⁴ Yet the excellence of these studies was never made the basis for any larger or compelling interpretation of printing or the book in relation to politics, culture, or society. Tocqueville, noting the extraordinary circulation of newspapers in America, had described them as instruments of 'association' in a society of individuals.³⁵ Reflecting on this same proliferation, a modern historian could only ascribe it to the 'booster spirit' of Americans.³⁶ Could the history of printing illuminate the course of American politics? Isaiah Thomas had thought that the rise of independent journalism was a step toward political independence. Arthur Meier Schlesinger pursued the same theme in his study of prerevolutionary journalism, *Prelude to Independence*.³⁷ Taken as a whole, the history of printing and the history of politics and society achieved tenuous connection through themes like the 'rise of the common man,' the rise of democracy, or the coming of independence. Apart from their vagueness, these themes did not do justice to the powerful currents of conflict and oppression that existed in the past.

In moving from the history of printing to the history of the book, we must transcend the geographical principle. It is equally imperative that we move beyond nativism, aestheticism, and the instinctive whiggery of themes such as the 'rise of democracy.' The history of the book in America will be cosmo-

³⁴ Zoltán Haraszti, *John Adams & the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 111.

³⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2:119-22.

³⁶ Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: the National Experience* (New York, 1965), pp. 124-135.

³⁷ Isaiah Thomas, *History of Printing in America*, p. xx; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: the Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (New York, 1957). There are interesting suggestions about the relationships between politics and the press in Leonard L. Richards, 'Gentlemen of Property and Standing': *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970), pp. 71-73; and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 2-4.

politan in its understanding of American culture, democratic in its openness to all forms of print, and alert to the uses of power—a point to which I shall return. Indeed a better understanding of power will culminate in our study of the ways in which the history of the book departs from the history of printing. Let me close by enumerating four topics or directions it will undertake.

Lecturing on 'What Pragmatism Means,' William James described his new philosophy as the very opposite of a 'closed system,' a dogma or final truth. It is less a 'solution,' he declared, 'than a program for more work. . . . Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work.'³⁸ In the spirit of William James, we may say that the history of the book is not a system or set of rules, much less a set of *a priori* truths, but a point of view that unstiffens the heaps, the veritable mountains, of information that have been accumulated by patient research on printers, publishers, booksellers, readers, and the physical book. Consider, for example, the history of bindings. An esoteric subject? Not if we ask the question, why were some books singled out to receive special attention and others not, for by asking this question we transform the history of bindings into the history of values—that is, of culture. The history of music publishing is extraordinarily revealing of folk values—if we want to use that word in reference to styles of hymnody—in conflict with a more cosmopolitan elite; and, as pianos became household items in the homes of upper middle class Americans, of shifting modes of gentility.³⁹ At its best, the history of the book, like James's pragmatism, will persistently transform isolated and static information into evidence of dynamic social processes.

A second way in which the history of the book departs from

³⁸ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York, 1907), pp. 51–53.

³⁹ Richard Crawford and D. W. Krummel, 'Early American Music Printing and Publishing,' in William L. Joyce et al., eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester, 1983), pp. 186–227.

the history of printing is via its concern for readers and reading. Readers were scarcely present in the history of printing, and have often proved an embarrassment to bibliographers because of their tolerance for debased versions of popular texts. But the history of reading and of readers is central to the history of the book. In and of itself this statement helps to define the differences between the old history and the new. By reading I mean the process by which persons responded to a text. It is often said that in early America many persons could not start upon the process of reading because they were illiterate. I wish to cut the Gordian knot that literacy studies pose—what is it they measure, and how accurately?—by asserting that, early and late, the great majority of Americans, men as well as women, could read. When Isaiah Thomas went to work for Zechariah Fowle at the age of seven, he ‘knew only the letters, but had never been taught to put them together and spell.’ Yet literacy came easily to this child, as it did to most Americans: ‘I was left to teach myself and soon learned by practice to set types, and to read tolerably, and obtained some knowledge of punctuation.’⁴⁰

Many persons learned to read by listening to the Bible or some other book as it was read aloud. Samuel Goodrich, the nineteenth-century publisher, writer, and antiquarian, tells a story that bears upon the fusion of oral culture and the culture of print. It concerns a Vermont widow who began each day with family worship. One day she prevailed upon her foreman to lead in family prayers.

On a bright morning in June . . . the family were all assembled in the parlor, men and maidens, for their devotions. When all was ready, Ward, in a low, troubled voice, began. He had never

⁴⁰ *Three Autobiographical Fragments by Isaiah Thomas*, ed. Marcus A. McCorison (Worcester, 1962), p. 19. My broader assertion requires making a distinction between reading and writing, the latter a skill that many fewer persons possessed. Some of the evidence is reviewed in William T. Gilmore, ‘Elementary Literacy on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution: Trends in Rural New England, 1760–1830,’ *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 92(1982):87–171.

prayed—or at least not in public—but he had heard many prayers, and possessed a retentive memory. After getting over the first hesitancy, he soon became fluent, and taking passages here and there from the various petitions he had heard—Presbyterian, Methodist, Universalist, and Episcopalian—he went on with great eloquence, gradually elevating his tone and accelerating his delivery. Ere long his voice grew portentous, and some of the men and maids, thinking he was suddenly taken either mad or inspired, stole out on their toes into the kitchen, where, with gaping mouths, they awaited the result. The Widow Bennett bore it all for about half an hour; but at last, as the precious time was passing away, she lost patience, and sprang to her feet. Placing herself directly in front of the speaker, she exclaimed, ‘Ward, what do you mean?’

As if suddenly relieved from a nightmare, he exclaimed, ‘Oh dear, ma’am—I’m much obliged to you—for I couldn’t contrive to wind off.’

In this episode, as in the history of reading in general, access to culture was casual and strangely democratic.⁴¹

It is certainly the case that some persons achieved greater mastery than others of the books that came their way. A history of reading must take account of variations in ability, and of changes in the basic mode of reading over time.⁴² The pace could differ, as could the setting in which reading occurred. We read privately and to ourselves, and often own a piece of furniture designed for book storage. These conditions were uncommon before the nineteenth century. The historian of reading must join hands with the historian of material culture in developing our knowledge of physical setting. Probate inventories provide rich information on book ownership; these must be studied systematically, and with attention to key variations. The diaries, autobiographies, letters, and annotated books that survive from the past offer up many kinds of evi-

⁴¹ Samuel Goodrich, *Recollections of a Lifetime*, 2 vols. (New York, 1857), 1:158–59.

⁴² I have sketched one pattern in ‘The Uses of Literacy in New England: 1600–1850,’ in Joyce, ed., *Printing and Society in Early America*, pp. 1–47.

dence of reading as a style and as an activity. Somewhere and somehow, this complex of evidence and interpretation must include the text itself, for every text offers directions—some of them explicit, as in an author's preface, and others implicit, as in matters of typography—that affect reader response.⁴³

A third characteristic of the history of the book is its concern with popular culture. Our literary historians have described certain books that sold extremely well: Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom*, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur*.⁴⁴ But the history of popular culture is not synonymous with the history of bestsellers or that of cheap (inexpensive) print; and it is surely not synonymous with the history of literary trash, the books or periodicals that fall below some sort of level. All of these quite common misunderstandings must be set aside in favor of a conception of popular culture that acknowledges its multiple dimensions, and indeed the fluidity of the fundamental boundary between 'high' or formal culture and that which we call 'popular.' Considered as something in and of itself, popular culture was conservative, a place where old values and belief systems lingered on; it was also radical, a place where dominant or official values were resisted and replaced with others; and finally it was playful, a place where truth gave way to fictions, humor, and reversals.

We can detect the conservatism of popular culture in the history of the 'steady seller,' the book that seemed never to lose its audience even though the learned ceased to acclaim or acknowledge its existence. Certain fairy tales fall into this category, but to an American they are less interesting than the

⁴³ D. F. McKenzie, 'Typography and Meaning: The Case of William Congreve,' in Giles Barber and Bernhard Fabian, eds., *The Book and the Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Wolfenbütteler Schriften zur Geschichte des Buchwesens, vol. 4 (Hamburg, 1981), pp. 81-125.

⁴⁴ Relevant studies include Frank L. Mott, *Golden Multitudes* (New York, 1947); James D. Hart, *The Popular Book in America* (New York, 1950); and the extraordinary bibliography-cum-history, Albert Johannsen, *The House of Adams and Beadle and its Nickel and Dime Novels*, 2 vols. (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950).

evangelical texts of the seventeenth century that survived into the nineteenth. One such text, originating in the sixteenth century, would continue to be printed in Victorian Britain and America.⁴⁵ The conservative and the radical dimensions of popular culture could converge, as they did in the case of enthusiastic religion. The people of seventeenth-century New England lived in an enchanted universe. Ghosts came to people in the night, and trumpets blared, though no one saw from where the sound emerged. Nor could people see the lines of force that made a 'long staff dance up and down in the chimney' of William Morse's house. In this enchanted world, the sky on a 'clear day' could fill with 'many companies of armed men in the air.' Voices spoke from heaven, and little children uttered preternatural warnings. Bending over his son Joseph's cradle one evening, an astonished Samuel Sewall heard him say, 'The French are coming.'⁴⁶

But by the close of the seventeenth century, this openness to visions, prophecy and 'wonder' was coming into disfavor. Witches ceased to work their spells and prophets ceased to testify, at least so far as the official culture was concerned. Where most of these possibilities survived was in a cultural underground well nourished on broadsides and chapbooks, an underground that provided sustenance to many a prophet and visionary of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—a Joseph Smith, a John Humphrey Noyes, a Mary Baker Eddy. The radicalism of popular culture can shade over into playfulness.⁴⁷ The almanac was consistently playful in its stance to-

⁴⁵ I refer to the story of Francis Spira, a sixteenth-century Italian apostate from Protestantism. Some seventeenth-century versions of this story are noted in Hall, 'Uses of Literacy,' p. 35.

⁴⁶ Some of this paragraph is borrowed from my essay, 'The World of Wonders: The Mentality of the Supernatural in Seventeenth-Century New England,' David Grayson Allen and David D. Hall, eds., *Seventeenth-Century New England* (forthcoming 1984), where the references are also provided.

⁴⁷ The line between playfulness, or theatre, and true inversion or revolt, is not always easy to discern. An exemplary case study is Peter Burke, 'The Virgin of the Carmine and the Revolt of Mesaniello,' *Past and Present* 99(1983):3-21.

ward truth, inventing weather, inventing remedies for illness, inventing quarrels with a rival publication, inventing its astrology. The humor of the almanacs often involved folk inversions of official culture—the thieving priest, the greedy lawyer, the dishonest politician, the weak husband yielding to his wife. As play, popular culture was available to everyone; it was not the exclusive domain of some particular social group. Yet it always had its enemies, and the history of the book must take account of the antagonisms—the uses of power—that were involved in efforts to exclude and stigmatize.⁴⁸

Yet another task of the history of the book is to incorporate the work of analytical bibliographers and their holy of holies, the text. It may be impossible to arrive at a text that corresponds exactly to the author's intention. Certainly the American printer and the American reader were quite indifferent to this issue, content as they were to publish and to read the most extraordinarily corrupted editions. The very concept of a perfect text is an invention of the twentieth century, and cannot be imposed upon the past. Yet in the details that only bibliographers seem prepared to master lie important evidence of several histories—the history of author-reader relations as seen from the author's point of view, the history of reading as one of quite varied encounters with what passed as the same text, and the history of the physical book itself. I am struck by the personal familiarity with books and their typography that characterized so many of the persons who contributed to the history of printing; Frank Mott had set type for his father's newspaper, while Sabin and Eames had been bookdealers. Inheriting some of their skills and sensitivities, the bibliographer can instructively collaborate with persons trained in other ways.

I have spoken of reading and popular culture, of texts and a general process of 'unstiffening.' The history of the book is

⁴⁸ David D. Hall, 'Introduction,' in Steven Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture* (The Hague, 1984), pp. 5-18.

something more than the sum of these four parts. What draws us onward is that glittering phrase, the history of the book as the history of culture and society. The promise of the history of the book is simply this, that it will not tolerate a simplistic or reductionist understanding of the relationship between culture and society. Commonly, we base our understanding of power on how wealth is distributed. But power comes in many other forms than wealth. The history of domination and subordination must take account of gender and age, of demarcations of the sacred, of knowledge and its concentration or diffusion. 'Knowledge is power; popularity is power.' In the interplay between expertise and popularity, between books restricted to the few and books that circulated widely, lies the making of a different history of American culture. Such a history will proceed as well from the recognition that books embody codes that reflect and act upon the structures of authority.⁴⁹ Culture is not synonymous with social class. Any text is too ambivalent, too multiple in its significance, for there to be a one to one relationship. Yet we have every reason to regard cultural processes and artifacts—the rituals of a church, the act of reading, the exercise of speech—as bearing on the shape and exercise of power.⁵⁰ Deeply sympathetic to this relationship, the history of the book will serve to map with new precision and complexity the axes of conflict and consensus.

I began with Isaiah Thomas in 1808 as he started on his *History of Printing*. Two years later he had finished. I venture to predict that we shall need more time to complete our history of the book. But I fancy him as warmly supportive of our enterprise—of its sweep, its breaking with old hierarchies, its fusion of book, culture, and society. We stand on native ground as we embark on this new program.

⁴⁹ William Weber, 'Learned and General Musical Taste in Eighteenth-Century France,' *Past and Present* 89(1980):58.

⁵⁰ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1982), pp. 121–31.

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