Publishing History: A Hole at the Centre of Literary Sociology

John Sutherland

For most literary sociologists serious modern work starts with Robert Escarpit’s *Sociologie de la Littérature* (1958), a book which proposes that sociology (or a sociological perspective) can usefully explain how literature operates as a social institution. Subsequent Escarpit-inspired work on the literary enterprise covers topics such as the profession of authorship; the stratified “circuits” (Escarpet’s hallmark concept) of production, distribution, and consumption; and the commodity aspect of literature. Critics have objected that Escarpit’s increasingly macroquantitative and statistics-bound procedures bleach out literary and ideological texture. And his model of literature as discrete social system encourages the abstract model making which Raymond Williams despises.¹ But, whatever its shortcomings, Escarpit’s definition of literary product and practice as social *faits* (not facts, but things made) forms an essential starting point for the sociologist intending to investigate the apparatuses of literature.

In what follows, I shall mainly fix on a problem currently disabling constructive research on the literary-sociological lines projected by Escarpit: namely, scholarly ignorance about book trade and publishing history technicalities. This sets up, I shall suggest, a large and troubling hole at the centre of the subject, and there is little indication, at this stage, how or when the hole is to be filled.


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There is, one must add, no superficial complacency about this state of affairs. Any number of scholars piously urge (usually in passing) the need for more information about the machineries and the material processes by which books ("literature") are produced, reproduced, distributed, marketed, merchandised, and consumed. But vagueness on these matters, if not total, remains surprisingly extensive. For instance, Robert Darnton's *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* is probably the most lavishly praised work of literary sociology (broadly defined) of the last few years. Yet Darnton concludes what is essentially an investigation of the eighteenth-century French book trade with the admission that "we need to know more about the world behind the books" and presents "a new set of questions" (as yet unanswered), relevant not just for the eighteenth century, but "almost any period of history":

How did writers pursue careers in the Republic of Letters? Did their economic and social condition have much effect on their writing? How did publishers and booksellers operate? Did their ways of doing business influence the literary fare that reached their customers? What was that literature? Who were its readers? And how did they read?  

This questionnaire tacitly admits to vast areas of academic incompetence. And it is a tribute to Darnton's ingenuity that he can write authoritatively about the literary underground ("Grub Street hacks, pirate publishers, and under-the-cloak peddlers of forbidden books") in confessed ignorance of how publishers, authors, and booksellers of the period actually did their business. It is not a situation flattering to scholarship. But at least Darnton is candid about what he does not know. Many of the new-Marxist critics finesse the problem by invoking sub-Brechtian concepts of "production" in which (magically) the text is conceived to make itself. Or, alternatively, the "local mode of production" (as Terry Eagleton has

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2. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. viii–ix; further references to this work, abbreviated *LU*, will be included in the text.

3. A good example can be found in chap. 6 ("Towards a Productive Literary Practice") of Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice*, New Accents (London, 1980), where the "production" of automobiles in factories is assimilated to Machereyan notions of the production of literary meaning in texts.

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called it) is parenthesized as something sufficiently dealt with at the level of summary description not to impede engagement with more urgent issues.

The sociologist of literature probably expects eventual answers to Darnton’s set of questions from the newly defined subject area known provisionally as publishing history (in Britain) or history of the book (in America), and sometimes as nouvelle bibliographie matérielle (in France). The emergence and expansion of this specialism over the last twenty years has been phenomenal. Its physical manifestations have been in new journals, numerous conferences, the establishment of “centres of the book,” and a massive stockpiling of publishers’ and book-trade archives in academic repositories.

But as Darnton has elsewhere observed, publishing history, though it flourishes with extraordinary juvenile vigour, lacks binding theoretical coherence. Territorially, its status is Balkan, opportunistically annexed when convenient by history, bibliography, economics, sociology, literary criticism, library science. Publishing history operates in what Darnton aptly calls a “riot” of “interdisciplinarity.” And before its insights can be methodically used, its material must be “disciplined.” As things now look, the necessary ordering of publishing history is expected by collaboration with two firmly entrenched and separate academic departments. One is history, especially as redirected by the French “l’histoire des mentalités” school. The other is Anglo-American bibliography—not, one should add, in its traditional “analytic” form, but as regenerated by the current crisis taking place within its ranks.

It is pleasant enough to move subject pieces around the academic board in attractively new formations. But for the engaged scholar, the issues present themselves as knotty problems of how best to advance his or her research. It gives a useful close-up on what these problems are to survey the work in progress of currently active scholars. I have chosen a representative trio—Darnton, Jerome McGann, and D. F. McKenzie—who are recent publications stake out the more significant new lines of history, publishing history, literary criticism, and literary sociology. If this were a different form of discourse (say refereeing, prize nomination, book reviewing) one might tout these three as “the outstanding scholars of their generation.” In fact they would, in my opinion, merit the description more than most. But the intention here is to consider their work (more particularly their field of work) diagnostically. Darnton, McGann, and McKenzie each mounts a critique of current disciplinary orthodoxies and proposes a future “great work” of comprehensive publishing history. In so doing, they indicate very precisely what can be done and what, given the present organization of literary and historical studies, probably cannot be done. Put another way, the “great work” which they project raises

structural and theoretical issues which call into question the competence of their disciplines to handle the task of publishing history.

Robert Darnton


Two intimately connected ideas inform Darnton's research: that of underground (in the guerrilla, or resistance sense) and that of underworld (in the sense of Grub Street). So infused is his thinking with these ideas, that he even sees publishing historians (to most observers a rather dusty crew) as a dynamic maquis within the academic establishment.5

In the largest sense, Darnton opposes what he calls “the summit view of history.” His intention is “to strike out in a new direction, to try to get to the bottom of the Enlightenment, and even to penetrate into its underworld, where the Enlightenment may be examined as the Revolution has been studied recently—from below” (*LU*, p. 1). This tiering of over- and underworld (with their respective culture and counterculture) is accompanied by another dominant symmetry in Darnton's analysis: namely, his sense that the world of the book divides evenly between the “legal” (which does not excite him) and the “clandestine” (which fascinates him). Darnton is particularly drawn to “forbidden literature,” with its symptomatic contests between state authority and political dissidence.

One of the features which makes Darnton's work so readable is its infectious sense of excitement and his habitual glamourizing of academic drudgery as adventure, struggle, discovery. The description of his initiation into the Aladdin's cave of publishing history is typically dramatic:

I was able to uncover [the literary underground] because seventeen years ago I walked into a historian's dream: an enormous cache of untouched archives, the papers of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel in the municipal library of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. The Société typographique was one of the largest of the many publishing houses that grew up around France's borders in order to supply the demand for pirated and prohibited books within the kingdom. Its papers contain the richest vein of information about an eighteenth-century publisher anywhere in existence. [*LU*, p. vii]

Darnton's main asset as a historian is his extraordinarily vivifying imagination (an imagination, incidentally, which often recalls Carlyle

5. See ibid., p. 65. This essay also gives a brief but fairly comprehensive account of the growth of the new subject with a superb bibliography.
rather than the Annales school to whom he formally genuflects as his main intellectual influence). It seems an effortless reflex with him to breathe life into documents: "It is an extraordinary sensation to open a dossier of fifty or a hundred letters that have lain unread since the eighteenth century. Will they come from a Parisian garret, where a young author is scribbling away, his vision suspended between Parnassus and the threats rising from the landlady on the ground floor?" (LU, p. vii). And so on. While surrendering to the pleasure of Darnton's animations, a certain uneasiness forms as to his method. His modus operandi is self-confessedly opportunistic. Hence his disarming confession in the preface to Literary Underground that "having explored as much of the literary underground as possible, I realized that it could be pictured more effectively by a set of sketches than by a grand tableau. Sketching in history provides a way of catching men in motion, of holding subjects up to unfamiliar light and examining their complexities from different angles" (LU, pp. vi–vii). Raiding the Neuchâtel archive for sketchbook material, Darnton consciously postpones "systematic study for a later work" (LU, p. viii).

The decision to publish before undertaking "systematic study" of his materials allows full play for Darnton's novelistic imagination. But it leads to an excessive reliance on what he calls the "cas typique." His studies invariably begin with a a highly schematic historical mise-en-scène, followed by a single example which is made to bear an inordinate load of general significance. Thus a chapter such as the fourth in The Literary Underground opens by briefly indicting the utter failure of previous scholarship to penetrate the activities of clandestine booksellers and confidently promises that "by exploring the world of one of them, we can see how the underground operated and what material it conveyed to ordinary readers in an ordinary town" (LU, p. 122). Perhaps. But what intellectual controls are there in this procedure? How do we know that Darnton's single "cas" is "typique" or whether it is as eccentric as single cases are prone to be? There is often a surprising disparity between the titles of Darnton's works and their actual content. Thus The Business of the Enlightenment: A History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800 turns out to be a history of one reprint edition of Diderot's work. "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity" turns out to be (essentially) one reader's response.6 This stopping down of focus to the individual instance is not the outcome of idleness. It witnesses to Darnton's dedicated quest for living textures. Book history, for him, is best conducted by studying in extenso the "life cycle" of a single book or the exemplary careers of single-book people.

In its total effect, Darnton’s historiography introduces its readers to a vivid dramatis personae. It includes Joseph Duplain (“one of the scrappiest book dealers in one of the toughest towns of the book trade”); Charles-Joseph Panckoucke (“the aggressive publisher from Lille,” who came to dominate the Parisian trade); Jean Ranson (the merchant from La Rochelle who read Rousseau); Jacques-Pierre Brissot (the “spy in Grub Street”); Le Senne (“pamphleteer on the run”); Mauvelain (the “clandestine bookseller in the provinces”). We come to know this troupe intimately; as well almost as we might know characters in Balzac. But, unlike the population of Balzac’s fiction, their number remains few, nor do they by any stretch make up a statistically adequate sample from which to examine the “base” of the book world. Everything is made to hang on their being preternaturally “representative.”

In itself and as far as it goes, Darnton’s work is dazzling. But as a guide to the direction that publishing history should take it has clear risks. He has, for instance, a pronounced distaste for the quantitative dimension of book history and its habit of “freezing human beings out of history.” In fact, he is downright sceptical about its effectiveness. “The historical sociology of literature,” he contends, “has failed to develop a coherent discipline of its own, and . . . its commitment to quantification has not yet produced answers to the basic questions about reading and writing in the past” (LU, p. 182). The “yet” is mere politeness; Darnton clearly doubts that quantification ever will produce the desired answers. But given the massified nature of the modern book world, organization by category, statistics, and large unit is inevitable. What form, one wonders, will Darnton’s eventual “systematic study” of the Neuchâtel archive take? Surely not a fifty-thousandfold multiplication of individual case histories? Most future publishing history will be drudging, unexciting labour. The main task will be classification and the patient (and in itself very boring) uncovering of business routines. And this will take place in the relatively unexciting domain of the “legal” book trade, usually at periods of undramatic historical event.

In fact, one suspects that the systematic labour at Neuchâtel will not be done, at least not by Darnton. He has, as the French say, more interesting cats to whip. His latest book indicates that his current affiliation is now firmly to interpretive anthropology as defined by Clifford Geertz. And situated as he is on the terrain of the “blurred genre” between history and social science, Darnton’s natural scholarly activity is the brilliant essay rather than the accumulating of neutral (and in itself unpublishable) data for others to use. In retrospect, his advocacy of the cause of publishing history will be seen as a justified career manoeuvre by which he has arrived at where he really wanted to be. Its “riot of interdisciplinarity” was, transitionally, a useful liberation. Nevertheless, Darnton’s contribution to the future of publishing history has been profound; if only in the PR sense of glamourizing what was previously unglamourous. And if he has
failed to discipline the subject, he has gone a long way towards deprovincializing it for those who remain more centrally within its affairs.

Jerome McGann

Jerome McGann’s scholarly energies over the last decade have been mainly directed towards editing the complete works of Byron. It is an undertaking most would conceive of as life’s work. McGann has all but completed it in less time than others spend on Ph.D. dissertations. In addition to this formidable editorial task, McGann’s immersion in Byron has inspired two connected theoretical preoccupations which he has found time to elaborate at monograph length. The first (which does not concern me here) is with Romantic “ideology.” The other is with the nature of the literary “text.”

From a position strategically on the edge of the American bibliography establishment, McGann strikes a radically nonconformist stance on the issue of modern textual criticism. Very simply, he maintains that the discipline has taken a wrong turning over the last twenty-five years. In this period, under the generalship of Fredson Bowers and the less doctrinaire adjutancy of G. Thomas Tanselle (McGann’s main theoretic opponents), American bibliography’s self-imposed mission has been to establish “authoritative” editions of American (and other) classic works. Thousands of man-hours have been spent and millions of dollars invested in this project. And largely wasted, McGann implies.

His critique of the dominant orthodoxy of American bibliography can be summed up in a number of interlocking theses. The first is that current editorial practice pursues a chimera, in its attempt to reproduce the pure text “intended” by the author. Notoriously, the fetishization of final authorial intention has led to a doctrinal preference for the manuscript as copytext. This stage alone finds the author quarantined from subsequent contaminating processes of material production and transmission. (Publishers and printers are suspiciously regarded as inveterate corruptors.) Ideally, the Bowersonian editor should be a clairvoyant, since only by penetrating to the pre-scriptive level of thought process can “intention” be satisfactorily located. But if the laws of physics prevent him being a mind reader, the editor, faute de mieux, must be a manuscript reader.

McGann’s opposition to this is radical. In his view, the text is not the product of lonely authorial intention (thought). It is a “social product.” The publisher (particularly), the merchandiser, and the reader, as much as the author, can beget the literary work. And they achieve this not by

7. McGann’s arguments are most concisely expressed in A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism (Chicago, 1983).
thought but, precisely, by work or “collaboration” (a keyword in McGann’s *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*). For McGann, the literary text is correctly located not in some primal idea of itself but in its collaborative production and its material existence(s).

Three ideological systems are tacitly invoked by McGann in making this large and controversial assertion. The first, clearly enough signaled by his repeated stress on “materialism,” is Marxist. Although he has not (as far as I know) made a declaration on the subject, it is clear that McGann aligns himself with the pro-Marxist critical interventions of the 1970s. And his central contention is an unattributed gloss of Pierre Macherey’s edict: “the work is not *created* by an intention (objective or subjective); it is *produced* under determinate conditions.”

The second ideological system is religious. For McGann, Bowersonian quests for the pure “soul” of the text are quixotic. The literary work is unredeemably fallen, mired in the materialities of production and consumption. It is, to use his specifically theological imagery, flesh, not spirit: “Human beings are not angels. Part of what it means to be human is to have a body, to occupy physical space and to move in real time. In the same way, the products of literature, which are in all cases human products, are not disembodied processes.”

The third ideological system McGann invokes is the legal. He implicitly contradicts the notion (on which the law of copyright is based) that there is a single immaterial form of the work, which inalienably belongs as property to the author, or “creator.” For McGann, the work can belong impartially to a series of collaborators and participants who are thus released from merely passive roles as transmitters and consumers.

McGann’s critique goes beyond theoretical disagreement on what constitutes textual objects to a specific *j’accuse* directed at his profession: “It is [my] assumption . . . that literary study surrendered some of its most powerful interpretive tools when it allowed textual criticism and bibliography to be regarded as ‘preliminary’ rather than integral to the study of literary work.” McGann alludes here to the pontifical utterances of Bowers, notably “Some Principles for Scholarly Editions of Nineteenth-Century Authors.” Bowers there proclaims it the duty of bibliography to establish a set of monolithic authoritative texts “that will stand the test

8. Notably influential seems to have been Terry Eagleton’s *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1976).
10. McGann, “Shall These Bones Live?” *Text* 1 (1981): 25–26; further references to this work, abbreviated “SBL,” will be included in the text.
of time and, heaven willing, need never be edited again from the ground
up.”12 This task achieved, the literary work is ready, like a prepped
patient, for the separate operations of the literary critic.

McGann’s contention is that the bibliographer should not subordinate
himself as merely an editor, a server up to the critic. He should impertinently
meddle with the act of criticism. More particularly, the bibliographer
should play the role of “memory,” recalling the material facts of the
work’s existences or “histories” in the moment of critical engagement.
“Textual scholars,” McGann asserts, “must labor to elucidate the histories
of a work’s production, reproduction, and reception, and all aspects of
these labors bear intimately and directly on ‘the critical interpretation of
a work.’”13 Conventionally, as McGann puts it, criticism proceeds in a
state of “anamnesis,” professorial absentmindedness, in which the material
circumstances are quite deliberately forgotten. And this is abetted by a
textual theory which programmatically “desocializ[es] our historical view
of the literary work.”14

McGann provides a sample illustration of his ideally concatenated
textual and critical operation in an extended discussion of “The Charge
of the Light Brigade.”15 But more interesting to me (as a Trollopian) is
an example he throws off in passing: “The aesthetic field of literary
productions is neither an unheard melody nor a linguistic event, as one
can (literally) see by merely glancing at Trollope’s The Way We Live Now
either in its first printing, or in some subsequent edition, like Robert
Tracy’s recent critical text” (“SBL,” p. 26). A footnote adds, “That is to
say, the printed numbers of Trollope’s novel—their size, their format,
their schedule of appearance—are all relevant matters, as are the physical

Although he does not himself pursue the idea, a brief summary of
The Way We Live Now’s “histories” indicates the strenuous exercise in
material recollection that McGann proposes. (It requires, one must chide,
rather more than “merely glancing.”) Trollope’s novel was published in
twenty monthly parts by Chapman and Hall, 1874–75. The issue was
eccentric, given the fact that novels in numbers were a thing of the long
past. Trollope was on the board of his publisher, and his reason for
choosing the anachronistic form is mysterious. The work (execrably il-
lustrated) was poorly reviewed and (probably) sold poorly. Before the
end of its serial run, Frederick Chapman sold the copyright (at a tenth of what he had paid for it) to Chatto and Windus. This second publisher brought out a 6s one-volume edition in November 1875 (with twelve of the original twenty illustrations cut down to smaller page size). This reprint was designed primarily to appeal to the circulating libraries as part of Chatto's campaign against the three-decker. The 6s edition was not successful (selling only 3,700 copies in seven years) and was remaindered at 3s 6d in 1882. The work continued to be reprinted by Chatto in 3s 6d and 2s reprint forms: ugly, cramped books, aimed at the down-market railway reader. Chatto kept the work in print until 1928, the stereotype plates having been destroyed in 1907. The novel never did well for Chatto, and it passed through a notable deep trough during 1914–18, when some seven hundred copies were pulped for the war effort. Altogether, some fifteen thousand copies were sold by Chatto and Windus in fifty-three years. Things looked up (critically, at least) for The Way We Live Now in 1927, with the publication of Michael Sadleir's Trollope: A Commentary. As part of a wholesale critical reassessment, Sadleir proclaimed the work Trollope's masterpiece. This led directly to publication in Oxford University Press' World's Classics as one of their oversize “double” volumes, in 1941. Publication in this prestigious series, devised by E. V. Rieu at the turn of the century, marked a rite of honorific canonization. The Way We Live Now's critical reputation gathered in subsequent years, culminating in Tracy's annotated critical edition (1974) which McGann mentions. But The Way We Live Now stubbornly declined to be generally popular. As late as 1969, Penguin turned it down for their English Library, on the grounds that it was too long and unlikely to sell profitably. This changed in 1970, with a BBC TV miniseries of the novel (dramatized by Simon Raven). Since this mass-media treatment, the novel has seen publication in a number of paperback forms—notably in the revamped World's Classics (very different from Rieu's original series), where it now sells year in, year out an unprecedented two thousand copies annually. Critical esteem and reader popularity have at last converged, some hundred years after the novel's first publication.

This is only the most skeletal outline of the histories of the novel's productions and reputations. But it will give some idea of the Funes-like burden of memory which McGann would impose on the critic. All these facts and more must, he insists, be “borne in mind,” not merely appended, footnoted, or, perish the thought, ignored in the misbegotten quest for what Trollope originally intended. McGann has been profoundly influenced in his thinking and practice by the computer and he seems to demand of his ideal critic a huge random access memory which can effortlessly load and hold all the data of “production, reproduction and reception.” More worryingly, McGann prescribes this taxing intellectual effort while at the same time vigorously wanting to dismantle the disciplines that normally organize, dignify, and materially reward such labour.
McGann stands at an interesting point of his intellectual career. As a textual critic, he has had what effectively amounts to a service of excommunication performed on him by Tanselle and Bowers. Increasingly, any reforms he brings about will have to be battled for. They will not be easily legitimized by an institutional establishment which at present displays the same enthusiasm for his "socialized concept of authorship and textual authority" as does the AMA for socialized medicine. This casts McGann in the adversarial role where he probably feels most comfortable. But it may limit his future interventions to those of the provocateur.

One cannot, I think, look to McGann personally (or as a research director) to supply the factual data which his program of resocializing the text demands. The value of his intervention lies principally in his exposure of the nature of American institutional power to mobilize and regiment scholarly orthodoxies even where those orthodoxies rest on contentious foundations. Intellectually, like Darnton's, McGann's affiliation to publishing history seems to have been tactical: that is to say, it represented a transitional stage in his career. But as with Darnton's, McGann's contribution has been valuable to the cause of publishing history. Particularly valuable is his eloquent insistence that the material facts of literature's making are neither contextual nor subtextual but, in a primary and inherent sense, textual.

D. F. McKenzie

Donald McKenzie, having spent most of his academic life working at Wellington in New Zealand, was in 1986 appointed to the Readership in Textual Bibliography at Oxford. (Despite its modest-sounding rank, this is a post of seniority and prestige.) McKenzie's qualifications for this post are by any standards solid. His first major undertaking in bibliography was the taxonomic listing of Stationers' Company Apprentices, published serially from 1960 to 1978 (mainly under the auspices of the Oxford Bibliographical Society). For those, certainly few, students of literature who have any call to consult it, McKenzie's compilation must seem a labour of quite staggering diligence and Sisyphean inconsequence. Effectively, it is a census of all the registered guild personnel employed in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century printing industry. The number of entries runs into the thousands, listing name, county of origin, social status (by profession of father), and other recordable items (such as money advanced to and from the company). The effort of accurate tran-

scription involved must have been heroic. But exactly what the utility of
the exercise was I, for one, have never understood.

In 1966 McKenzie produced the second major work of his career
with the completion of the massively documented study, *The Cambridge
University Press, 1696–1712*. As a history of the oldest press in the English-
speaking world, McKenzie’s account is strange. Cambridge University
Press began 250 years earlier and is today the largest publishing house
(in terms of titles) in Britain. McKenzie’s selection of fourteen years from
the press’s five hundred is justified on two grounds: first, that this is the
crucial juncture when the character of the press was formed (which is
questionable), and, second, that it is only for this period that the “records”
remain. It is, one may think, a relief that more records do not remain,
since if they did, and if McKenzie transcribed them as assiduously as he
does those for 1696–1712, his history of the press would run to 120
quarto volumes. As it is, this “study in depth” offers 170 pages of general
history and 641 pages of transcribed minute books, stock books, and
vouchers (business receipts).

Again, after admiring the sheer secretarial labour involved, one is
driven to ask, what is the point? Rather halfheartedly, McKenzie suggests
in his preface that his data (drawn from an elite university publishing
house in the provinces) gives a valid picture of the whole publishing
industry of the period which was, of course, nonacademic and London-
based.

Whatever else, these early works of McKenzie’s witnessed to his
fanatic reverence for precise notation of the publishing historical fact.
He evolved from this phase of his career (in which his highest ambition
seemed to be to punish himself by compiling ever more complex lists)
in the mid-1970s. In terms of classical developmental sociology, McKenzie
graduated from Comtean positivism to a Weberian interest in ideologically
formed institutions. His influential Sandars lectures at Oxford in 1976
were widely circulated in typescript (an unusual form of scholarly com-
unication in the West) and took as their subject the London book trade
in the later seventeenth century. In them, McKenzie proclaimed (in implicit
self-criticism), “one needs an historical understanding of the trade and
its practices before the facts of physical bibliography and textual criticism
can be seen in perspective.” And as part of this new responsibility McKenzie
discarded the term “historical bibliography” in favour of “what we might
agree to call the sociology of the text.”

Arising out of an increasingly theorized involvement with publishing
history, McKenzie went on to proselytize for his “sociology of the text”
(to the consternation of some of his fellow bibliographers). In a paper
given at a German conference on book-trade history in 1977, he elaborated
on the theorem with precise reference to the printing of Congreve’s

drama. As McKenzie argued, the different typography and page layout of the play’s successive printings (in which Congreve actively participated up to 1710) are the outcome of subtle shifts of sensibility, part authorial, part social. The modulation from Restoration libertinism embodied in the early quartos to the decorum of the three-volume octavo Works cannot be recorded by a single, modern-format, eclectic, “critical” text, however scrupulously it is composed. Nor, if one follows McKenzie, would it be intellectually honest to attempt any such homogenization. The traditional procedures of bibliography inevitably sever (while they hope to transcend) the subtle links which bind a literary work to its time. As McKenzie was at pains to show, these typically inhere in “accidental” as much as in “substantive” variants. He goes on to quote approvingly from the Germanist J. P. Stern: “Every story, poem and play was written in time, belongs to time and shows its time.” Bibliography has traditionally been unconcerned with the fine detail of that “showing” and McKenzie concludes, aggressively: “Current theories of textual criticism, indifferent as they are to the history of the book, its architecture, and the visual language of typography, are quite inadequate to deal with such problems. Only a new and comprehensive sociology of the text can embrace them.”

The force of McKenzie’s critique, like McGann’s, is that it specifically controverts the faith of modern bibliography in the reproducibility of the “essential” text, if only institutionally approved procedures are followed. There is, for McKenzie and McGann, no ahistorically essential text to reproduce. The task of McKenzie’s “sociology,” as he sees it, is in any case not reproduction but the reinsertion of the text into the critical moments of its historical and political existence. The work, this is to say, must be put back into time and contingency. And this calls less for “editing” than commentary, or a bibliographically informed criticism. It also broadens the textual critic’s horizons beyond the merely literary object. McKenzie has recently demonstrated the appropriateness of the nonliterary text in an essay entitled “The Sociology of a Text: Orality, Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand.” This article begins with the round assertion that “bibliography must expand.” He goes on to analyze the conception, mediation, and reception of the most important text in New Zealand history, the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840. This “agreement” effectively alienated the colonial territory from the Maoris, and McKenzie, with great precision (and no cultural condescension), elaborates the different understandings of a legal document in the colonial and native minds. And at the end of what is a powerful performance (originally a presidential address to the Bibliographical Society), McKenzie grandiosely steps forward as the in-

carnation of bibliography become sociology: "I myself cannot help but see texts, their distinct versions, their different physical modes, and their comprehension in social contexts—in a word, the sociology of texts—as the substance of bibliography."20

As a bibliographer, McKenzie proposes new and transmuting liaisons with sociology. But significantly he has also retained his early reverence for the primacy of the narrowly defined publishing historical fact. And in his role of publishing historian, he has recently proposed a vast gathering of factual knowledge, in the form of a collaborative history of the English book, from A.D. 400 to the present day. Taking the long historical perspectives afforded by Oxford (where time has never been a problem), McKenzie tables a fifteen-year schedule for this team-written venture.

A main problem facing McKenzie's twin empirical/theoretical projects ("a sociology of the text"; "a history of the English book") would seem to be logistical. Can his theory of the "sociology of the text" be contained within the cramping structures of departmental bibliography as it is institutionally administered? Second, can the necessary team effort be mobilized, organized, and sustained for the proposed history (effectively an encyclopaedia) of the English book? Oxford history is littered with the wrecks of similar long-term collaborative efforts.

The isolated work of three scholars has obvious limitations for general diagnosis. But there are indicative points of convergence between McGann's "socialized concept of authorship," Darnton's "life cycle of a book," and McKenzie's "sociology of the text." Each stresses the sociomaterial instance rather than the essence of the literary work. Each takes an adversarial stance against traditional "discipline." And, more important, each sees his current scholarship as preliminary to a great concerted task—writing (or in McGann's case "remembering") the comprehensive history of the book and the processes of its production, reproduction, and consumption.

It is this large writing project which seems to me the more urgent and problematic. And the soundness of much future literary sociology will, I believe, depend on how the task is carried out. This is not to presume that once publishing history is comprehensively "written" the discourse of literary sociology will be that much easier to write. The opposite is more likely. If the evolution of sociology proper has proved anything it is the truth of Theodor Adorno's rule that "empiricism and theory cannot be accommodated in a single continuum."21 In Adorno's view, the best that can be expected are "fruitful tensions" between the two domains. But as things now are, such tensions in literary sociology

20. Ibid., p. 365.
are denied by the sheer unavailability of necessary empirical knowledge. Put another way, one of the things that makes literary sociology so easy to do at the moment is that we don't know enough to make it difficult.

At its crudest, writing publishing history will be a daunting physical undertaking. Literary criticism (at the moment, publishing history's main sponsor) has not, in the past, distinguished itself in the fulfilment of such large tasks. One reason, Eagleton has suggested, is that the character of the profession (trade? occupation?) is essentially "artisanal" and petit bourgeois in its mentality. That is, it breaks its scholarly work force down into single-unit operatives, engaged (often in conditions of jealously guarded privacy) on their "own" projects or "my research." Eagleton implicitly holds out the saving prospect of co-ideological unity on party lines which seems quixotic given the politically conservative (but generally unpolitcized) nature of the academic profession. Nevertheless, his analysis of the present state of affairs is shrewd if somewhat spiteful.

It is conceivable that publishing history might be approached in the same way that some other large projects recently have been: the Toronto Press Erasmus edition, for instance, or the Cambridge University Press collective edition of D. H. Lawrence's works and private papers. But there is a large difference. These other cooperative ventures effectively link a number of straightforward and in themselves manageable small tasks (typically single-volume commissions) into a composite whole. They are unambitious theoretically, drawing as they do on the established expertise of the English or history departments.

Publishing history, by contrast, would seem less in need of antlike collaboration than a new theoretical base from which to proceed. That base is alien to the inherited text-centric and canonically exclusive theories on which academic English, for instance, founds itself. And without theoretic formulation, the publishing history enterprise very quickly founders on intractable hard cases. Put in the form of a blunt example: it is difficult to see either history or English as disciplines happily sponsoring a comprehensive account of sheet-music publishing in the nineteenth century, of prime importance though the topic is in strict publishing history terms.

Publishing history will also need funding on a large scale. Again, put crudely, it is more expensive to maintain than, say, deconstruction (which is one reason why so much more disposable money can currently be used in the form of sky-high salaries to attract luminous "critics"); publishing history, by contrast, is likely to subsist in genteel poverty, its finances drained off into resource management and research backup). Traditionally, the sources of funding for publishing history have been self-interested. Narcissistic "house histories" by firms wanting to celebrate anniversaries in their existence have been the major form of publishing history in Britain and America. In the case of businesses such as Longman's which have operated for 250 years (and whose commissioned history is
just now being undertaken by Asa Briggs), the house history can subsume a large slice of general book-trade activity. But such ventures are, ultimately, mercenary, uncritical, and self-serving. Less nakedly, but arguably more insidiously, this is also the case with the national publishing histories currently subsidized by the French and German governments through their state cultural agencies.

The way forward lies, initially at least, in the formation and support of semiautonomous “Centres of the Book,” as they have been established at National Libraries in Washington and (with any luck) in the new British Library Euston site. Domiciled here, as a self-reflexive department within major book collections, publishing history will necessarily regard itself as primarily a resource: an accumulation of raw and neutrally databased material, accessible indifferently to all comers. This, of course, sidesteps theoretical problems by concentrating on logistical priorities. But logistics have always been an initial issue with publishing history: whether as a matter of preservation (incredibly, for instance, the British Museum simply threw away book jackets for most of the twentieth century); storage (publishers have traditionally found it difficult to persuade libraries to accept their archives, even as gifts); or accessioning (Darnton’s systematic work on the Neuchâtel papers presumes discreet but extensive servicing of the material by its institutional custodians). For the moment, publishing history should probably decline to write itself, concentrating instead on the preliminary business of gathering itself.

A possible small-scale model for the future of the enterprise is the Gabler-Garland Joyce project. This began some twenty years ago with the acquisition and eventually the transcription and reproduction of primary materials. Only latterly, and as a conscious superstructure, did the heavily theorized (and highly controversial) composite text of *Ulysses* emerge. Success depends on a number of uncertain factors: money, manpower, institutional will. But it is as the outcome of a similar double-step process (the first of which has barely as yet been taken) that I expect an adequate publishing history eventually to be written.