Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Elizabeth I. Eisenstein. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and cultural transformation in early-modern Europe*. New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Cloth: 2-volume set, pp. xxi, 794, \$49.50. Paper: one volume, pp. 852, \$16.95.

The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and cultural transformations in early-modern Europe is advertised as "the first full-scale historical treatment of the advent of printing and its importance as an agent of change." It was written over an extended period of fifteen years. The author observes that during this time "what seemed relatively simple on first glance became increasingly complex. . . first thoughts had to be replaced by second ones, even third thoughts have had to be revised" (p. xii). The present formulation, she feels, is not necessarily final. She admits to uncertainties regarding publication at this stage, but concludes that "beyond this provisional resting point diminishing returns will set in" (p. xii).

The work as a whole is divided into three parts. Volume One contains Parts One and Two; Volume Two is given over to Part Three. Part One considers the general implications of the shift from script to print. Part Two deals with the Renaissance ("A classical revival reoriented") and the Reformation ("The scriptural tradition recast"). Part Three is devoted to a study of print and the rise of modern science ("the Book of Nature transformed"). Its four chapters include "Technical literature goes to press" and "Sponsorship and censorship of scientific publication."

One of the key themes of Professor Eisenstein is stated as follows:

It is surely one of the ironies of the history of Western civilization that Bible studies aimed at penetrating the Gothic darkness in order to recover pure Christian truth — aimed, that is, at removing glosses and commentaries in order to lay bare the pure 'plain' text — ended by interposing an impenetrable thicket of recondite annotation between Bible-reader and Holy Book. (p. 700)

Many readers will find the two volumes of Professor Eisenstein no less of an impenetrable thicket of recondite annotation than that which confronts the readers of the Holy Book.

By comparison with her unflattering and laconic dismissal of many historical authorities, McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* emerges as a kind of lyrical leit-motiv, a sort of double-plot for her sombre narrative:

The apparent blindness of most scholars to the effects exerted by the medium they look at every day has been most emphatically stressed and elaborately treated by Marshall McLuhan. According to his thesis, subliminal effects are engendered by repeatedly scanning lines of print presented in a standardized format. Habitual book readers are so subjectively conditioned by these effects that they are incapable of recognizing them. (p. 16)

A little further, she remarks,

*From a hearing public to a reading public:
some unevenly phased social and psychological changes*

These last remarks are relevant to most of the issues that have been raised by Marshall McLuhan in connection with the 'making of typographical man.' By making us more aware that both mind and society were affected by printing, McLuhan has performed, in my view at least, a most valuable service. (p. 129).

Elsewhere she makes the cliché observation that I see the new media as breaking a "bookish spell that held literate members of Western society in thrall during the past five centuries" (p. 16). The *Gutenberg Galaxy* does not even suggest a single value judgement about the effects of print or the effects of electronics, for the simple technical reason that my study of effects — i.e. *formal causality* — is entirely minus value judgements. On the other hand, the writer who studies the "printing press as an agent of change" moves at the level of *efficient causality*, which tends to be mainly moralistic and value-laden. For example, she remarks of the *Gutenberg Galaxy* that I have

...also glossed over multiple interactions that occurred under widely varying circumstances in a way that may discourage rather than encourage further study. 'The print-made split between heart and head is the trauma that affects Europe from Machiavelli to the present.' Since this sort of statement cannot be tested, it provides little incentive for further research. (p. 129)

The ordinary narrative method of presenting data in sequential patterns naturally tends towards classification and value judgements. This is the underwhelming pattern of Professor Eisenstein.

In an essay on "Interaction Between Text and Reader," later embodied in *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), Wolfgang Iser states,

Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. This is why the phenomenological theory of art has emphatically drawn attention to the fact that the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text. The text itself simply offers 'schematized aspects' through which the aesthetic object of the work can be produced.

The *Guttenberg Galaxy* belongs to the perception of the aesthetic effects of the form of printed text. This approach is so antipathetic to Professor Eisenstein that she

even avoids citing the eloquent aesthetic response of Montaigne to the new form of print, as when he says,

I owe a complete portrait of myself to the public. The wisdom of my lesson is wholly in truth, in freedom, in reality. . . of which propriety and ceremony are daughters, but bastard daughters.

Essays (III:5)

And:

Amusing notion: many things that I would not want to tell anyone, I tell the public; and for my most secret knowledge and thoughts I send my most faithful friends to a bookseller's shop. (III:9)

The interface between the sensibility of people accustomed to manuscript culture and the encounter with the new form of repeatable typography was inevitably traumatic. In *The Modern Theme* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1933), Ortega y Gasset explains this interface as it occurs between periods of a changing culture:

This is simply that the generations are born one of another in such a way that the new generation is immediately faced with the forms which the previous generation gave to existence. Life, then, for each generation, is a task in two dimensions, one of which consists in the reception, through the agency of the previous generation, of what has had life already, e.g., ideas, values, institutions and so on, while the other is the liberation of the creative genius inherent in the generations concerned. The attitude of the generation cannot be the same towards its own active agency as towards what it has received from without. What has been done by others, that is, executed and perfected in the sense of being completed, reaches us with a peculiar unction attached to it: it seems consecrated, and in view of the fact that we have not ourselves assisted in its construction, we tend to believe that it is the work of no one in particular, even that it is reality itself.

(pages 16-17)

For example, it is not until page 350 that Professor Eisenstein introduces the first-hand and primal observation of William Lily in his celebrated grammar:

And as his majesty purposeth to establyshe his people in one consent and harmony of pure and tru religion: so his tender goodnes toward the youth and chylhdode of his realme, entedeth to have it brought up under one absolute and uniforme sorte of lernynge. . . consideryng the great encombrance and confusion of the young and tender wittes. . . by reason of the diversity of grammar rules and teachinges. (p. 350)

(In "The Waste Land," Madame Sosostriis refers to her client, "Dear Mrs. Equitone." Mrs. Equitone is the very archetype of the social and psychological affectation of superior and precise utterance. She mimes, as it were, the uniformity of the printed page in her Equitone discourse.) William Lily explicitly intends to get religious and cultural consensus and uniformity by means of the extension of a printed and regulated set of "grammar rules and teachings." That was in 1542. In 1545 came the authorized Primer published "for avoyding of the dyversitie of primer bookes that

are now abroad. . . and to have one uniform ordre of al suche bookes through out all our dominions" (p. 350). This observation does not tempt Professor Eisenstein to notice any of the political effects of centralism or nationalism being exercised through the agency of mechanical and uniform movable type. The primary quality which Professor Eisenstein associates with the printed word is *permanence*.

In "Resetting the Stage for the Copernical Revolution" (Chapter 7), Professor Eisenstein reminds us that

Any adequate account of Copernicus' or Tycho's 'medieval background' must take into consideration that we now see more of the 'thin trickle' from Alexandria than did the generations before us. Sixteenth-century investigators did not have our capacity to 'search the literature'. They lacked the resources of a knowledge industry developed after four or more centuries of print. (p. 501)

What is here ignored is the familiar cultivation of the four levels of exegesis (both of the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture), which was a prevalent resource in the sixteenth century, as well as in Alexandrian days. Varro simply reminds us of this commonplace in *De Lingua Latina* (V-8, Loeb Classical Library):

Now I shall set forth the origins of the individual words, of which there are four levels of explanation. The lowest is that to which even the common folk has come. . . . The second is that to which old-time grammar has mounted, which shows how the poet has made each word which he has fashioned and derived. . . .

The third level is that to which philosophy ascended, and on arrival began to reveal the nature of those words which are in common use. . . . The fourth is that where the sanctuary is, and the mysteries of the high-priest: if I shall not arrive at full knowledge there, at any rate I shall cast about for a conjecture.

Multi-level exegesis was phased out at the same time as formal and final causality. Mario Bunge comments in his book, *Causality* (New York: Meridian Books, 1963),

The Aristotelian teaching of causes lasted in the official Western culture until the Renaissance. When modern science was born, formal and final causes were left aside as standing beyond the reach of experiment; and material causes were taken for granted in connection with all natural happenings — though with a definitely non-Aristotelian meaning, since in the modern world view matter is essentially the subject of change, not 'that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists.' Hence, of four Aristotelian causes only the efficient cause was regarded as worthy of scientific research. (p. 32)

The pattern of *efficient causality* and sequential presentation of effects is also the approved method in literary and historical scholarship, as well as in the physical sciences.

It is relevant in relation to Varro and Mario Bunge to cite the effect of the pre-print world on the awareness of causality, whereas it was strongly in the form of linear typography to fragment and specialize these levels by elimination and stress on one-thing-at-a-time. With the coming of print, three of the four causes were

phased out, and three of the four levels of hermeneutics were phased out. This matter is well attested in the prolonged battle between the ancients and the moderns. Father Walter J. Ong, S.J., in *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, has given eloquent testimony and illustration of the decay of dialogue which came in with the vogue of Peter Ramus, who reduced all discourse to a single level and a single (dialectic) *method*. His basic work is referred to (page 9) by Professor Eisenstein as "somewhat too recondite for my purposes." It is typical of the method and limits of Professor Eisenstein that she finds any demonstration of changing sensibility in the age of print as too recondite for her purposes. She would regard any such change as an incidental side-effect (*formal causality*) and thus peripheral to her main argument about print as an agent of change (*efficient causality*), and therefore as outside the purview of proper historical *method*.

In merely paraphrasing and quantifying instead of pinpointing specific shifts of sensibility, Professor Eisenstein achieves a persistent effect of anti-climax. For example, she eulogizes on "a recent perceptive account of the sense of intellectual crisis reflected in Montaigne's writing":

We are told about the shattering impact of the Reformation and wars of religion and 'the extension of mental horizons' produced by geographical discoveries and humanist recoveries. It would be foolish to assert that the most newsworthy events of the age made no impression on so sensitive an observer as Montaigne. But it also seems misguided to overlook the event that impinged most directly on his favorite observation post. That he could see more books by spending a few months in his Bordeaux tower-study than earlier scholars had seen after a lifetime of travel also needs to be taken into account. In explaining why Montaigne perceived greater 'conflict and diversity' in the works he consulted than had medieval commentators in an earlier age, something should be said about the increased number of texts that he had at hand. (p. 74)

Or, again, "Montaigne's special gift of achieving an intimate relationship with his many unknown readers has often been noted; so too has his peculiar cult of the self" (page 230). The footnote merely gives a reference to Winter, *Mon Livre et Moi*. There is a strong suggestion that Professor Eisenstein's paraphrases and scholarly allusions are to be considered more effective than any example of Montaigne's own manifestations of his "special gift" or his "peculiar cult of the self." Only one sensibility is manifested in this book, namely that of the author.

As noted, it is the preservative powers of print that Professor Eisenstein especially heeds:

Along with other culture-heroes such as the composer, playwright or poets, artists were raised to the rank of 'immortals'... as aspirants to this elevated position, they were caught up in an ever more frantic pursuit of novelty and threatened by an ever more oppressive 'burden of the past'. (p. 255)

Professor Eisenstein seems to have isolated the nemesis of *efficient causality* in this hyperbolic debunking of creativity.

Perhaps the crux of Professor Eisenstein's thesis concerning "print as an agent of change" is to be found on pages 299-300, where she states,

I agree that 'something important and revolutionary occurred' between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries; but disagree with the suggestion that 'we might as well go on calling that something the Renaissance.' Instead I propose that we break with precedents set by Michelet and Burckhardt and distinguish between the disparate developments now covered by the same label. It makes sense to employ the term Renaissance when referring to a two-phased cultural movement which was initiated by Italian literati and artists in an age of scribes and expanded to encompass many regions and fields of study in the age of print. But needless confusion is engendered when the same term is also used to cover the ensemble of changes which were ushered in by print.

One source of confusion is in the mind of Professor Eisenstein in trying to make a distinction between the old software and the new hardware, between the effects of the old script culture versus the effects of the new print culture. She wishes above all to keep the nature of print separate from the nature of the manuscript culture which preceded it. Print permits her to relate her narrative to the level of *efficient causality*, and to avoid the psychic and social effects which relate to *formal causality*. She may well have a subliminal fear of appearing in the role of the collegian who wrote in his exam, "Petrarch was the first modern man: he stood with one foot firmly planted in the Middle Ages while with the other he saluted the rising star of the Renaissance." Her own words are not quite as clear or colourful as that observation:

A later sense of antiquity 'as a totality cut off from the present' is thus confusingly coupled with an early sense of antiquity on the verge of being reborn. (p. 300)

Preliminary to "The scriptural tradition recast" (Chapter 4), she observes that "Under the aegis of the early presses, a classical revival in Italy was reoriented. Under the same auspices, German Protestantism was born." (page 302) Citing Dickens, in *Reformation and Society*, she notes,

Lutheranism was from the first the child of the printed book, and through this vehicle Luther was able to make exact, standardized and ineradicable impressions on the mind of Europe. For the first time in human history a great reading public judged the validity of revolutionary ideas through a mass-medium which used the vernacular languages together with the arts of the journalist and the cartoonist. . . ." (p. 303)

Professor Eisenstein has nothing to say about how the print medium affected the attitudes to the interpretation of Scripture. Multi-leveled exegesis gave way to that literal and sequential treatment which Professor Eisenstein uses herself as basic historical method. When she comes to noticing how Scripture and the Book of Nature were transformed by the Gutenberg revolution, she cites Kearney on the *Origins of the Scientific Revolution*, observing that her book "has been aimed at developing a new strategy for handling the issues posed by the. . . [following] citation":

The elements which go into the making of 'modernity' may be seen. . . first. . . in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some historians attributed the change to the liberation of men's minds during the Renaissance and the Reformation. Today many historians would be

more likely to stress the conservatism of these two movements. . . . Their emphasis tends instead to fall on . . . 'the Scientific Revolution'.

By this is meant above all the imaginative achievements associated with the names of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton. . . Within the space of a century and a half a revolution had occurred in the way in which men regarded the universe. Most of this was made possible by the application of mathematics to the problems of the natural world. . .

All this is by now well known. . . though many of the details are still to be worked out. . . What is not clear is how it all came about. . .

(Kearney, introduction, p. xi)

In a word, the Book of Nature underwent the same radical levelling as the Book of Scripture, and was reduced to mathematics. Nowhere, however, does Professor Eisenstein discuss the four levels (in either causality or hermeneutics) and their fortunes in the protracted battles of Ancients (grammar) vs. Moderns (dialectic *method*).

Professor Eisenstein derives an almost aesthetic thrill out of her meditations on "Technical literature goes to press" (page 520). On page 572 she says,

Here as elsewhere, the transitory and incomplete revivals that had occurred under the auspices of particular colleges during the middle ages ought to be compared with the permanent, total process of recovery that occurred after printers set to work.

Here are the thrills of the archivist who obtains an impressive document in substantial form.

There is a class of writer who is not a scientist and yet a writer of highly specialized variety, who is more privileged, however, on quasi-scientific grounds than the novelist. I refer to the historian. The historian's title to quasi-scientific status may well be of assistance in framing a claim on behalf of the man of letters to great political indulgence and greater latitude as a social historian or critic. Professor Eisenstein has won her claim to quasi-scientific status in her study of *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*.

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Peter Clark. *English Provincial Society from the Reformation to the Revolution: Religion, Politics and Society in Kent 1500-1640*. Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977. Pp. xiv, 504. £17.95.

This book is a contribution to something that is apparently becoming a colossal historical enterprise: relating the traditional great themes of constitutional crisis and change to the actualities of regional society. It is thus, perhaps it may be thought, an enterprise of a peculiarly English kind, enabling those engaged in it to be constitutional historians and social historians at the same time, at the cost of writing two books in one. The task of relating national and provincial developments has certainly