

Preface

In bringing together under this title the three essays that make up this book I hope to highlight a question that runs all through it: how did people in Western Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century attempt to master the enormously increased number of texts that first the manuscript book and then print put into circulation? Inventorying titles, categorizing works, and attributing texts were all operations that made it possible to set the world of the written word in order. Our own age is the direct heir of this immense effort motivated by anxiety. It was in those decisive centuries, when the hand-copied book was gradually replaced by works composed in movable type and printed on presses, that the acts and thoughts that are still our own were forged. The invention of the author as the fundamental principle for the designation of a text, the dream of a universal library, real or imaginary, containing all the works that have ever been written, and the emergence of a new definition of the book that made an indissoluble connection between an object, a text, and an author – these are some of the innovations that transformed

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people's relationship with texts, both before and after Gutenberg.

That relationship typically contains an internal contradiction. On the one hand, every reader has to deal with an entire set of constraints and obligations. The author, the bookseller-publisher, the commentator, and the censor all have an interest in keeping close control over the production of meaning and in making sure that the text that they have written, published, glossed, or authorized will be understood with no possible deviation from their prescriptive will. On the other hand, reading, by definition, is rebellious and vagabond. Readers use infinite numbers of subterfuges to procure prohibited books, to read between the lines, and to subvert the lessons imposed on them.

The book always aims at installing an order, whether it is the order in which it is deciphered, the order in which it is to be understood, or the order intended by the authority who commanded or permitted the work. This multifaceted order is not all-powerful, however, when it comes to annulling the reader's liberty. Even when it is hemmed in by differences in competence and by conventions, liberty knows how to distort and reformulate the significations that were supposed to defeat it. The dialectic between imposition and appropriation, between constraints transgressed and freedoms bridled, is not the same in all places or all times or for all people. Recognizing its diverse modalities and multiple variations is the first aim of a history of reading that strives to grasp – in all their differences – communities of readers and their 'arts of reading'.

The order of books has still another meaning. Whether they are in manuscript or in print, books are objects whose forms, if they cannot impose the sense of the texts that they bear, at least command the uses that can invest them

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and the appropriations to which they are susceptible. Works and discourses exist only when they become physical realities and are inscribed on the pages of a book, transmitted by a voice reading or narrating, or spoken on the stage of a theatre. Understanding the principles that govern the 'order of discourse' supposes that the principles underlying the processes of production, communication, and reception of books (and other objects that bear writing) will also be deciphered in a rigorous manner. More than even before, historians of literary works and historians of cultural practices have become aware of the effects of meaning that material forms produce. In the case of the book, those forms constitute a singular order totally distinct from other registers of transmission of the canonical works as ordinary texts. This means that, even though it is not emphasized in the present book, keen attention should be paid to the technical, visual, and physical devices that organize the reading of writing when writing becomes a book.

This work has another aim in its three chapters: to initiate more general reflection on the reciprocal relations between the two meanings that we spontaneously give to the term 'culture'. The first designates the works and the acts that lend themselves to aesthetic or intellectual appreciation in any given society; the second aims at ordinary, banal practices that express the way in which a community – on any scale – experiences and conceives of its relationship with the world, with others, and with itself.

Works – even the greatest works, especially the greatest works – have no stable, universal, fixed meaning. They are invested with plural and mobile significations that are constructed in the encounter between a proposal and a reception. The meanings attributed to their forms and

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their themes depend upon the areas of competence or the expectations of the various publics that take hold of them. To be sure, the creators (or the 'powers' or the 'clerics') always aspire to pin down their meaning and proclaim the correct interpretation, the interpretation that ought to constrain reading (or viewing). But without fail reception invents, shifts about, distorts.

Works are produced within a specific order that has its own rules, conventions, and hierarchies, but they escape all these and take on a certain density in their peregrinations – which can be in a very long time span – about the social world. Deciphered on the basis of mental and affective schemes that constitute the 'culture' (in the anthropological sense) of the communities that receive them, works turn the tables and become a precious resource for thinking about what is essential: the construction of social ties, individual subjectivity, and relationship with the sacred.

Conversely, any work inscribes within its forms and its themes a relationship with the manner in which, in a given moment and place, modes of exercising power, social configurations, or the structure of personality are organized. Thought of (and thinking of himself or herself) as a demiurge, the writer none the less creates in a state of dependence. Dependence upon the rules (of patronage, subsidy, and the market) that define the writer's condition. Dependence (on an even deeper level) on the unconscious determinations that inhabit the work and that make it conceivable, communicable, and decipherable.

To consider in this way that all works are anchored in the practices and the institutions of the social world is not to postulate any general equivalence among all the products of the mind. Some, better than others, never exhaust

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their significant force. If we try to understand this by invoking the universality of beauty or the unity of human nature we will fall short of the truth. The essential game is being played elsewhere, in the complex, subtle, shifting relationships established between the forms (symbolic or material) proper to works, which are unequally open to appropriation, and the habits or the concerns of the various publics for those works.

What any cultural history must take into consideration today is the paradoxical articulation between a *difference* – the difference by means of which all societies, with varying modalities, have separated out from daily practice a particular domain of human activity – and *dependencies* – the dependencies that take a variety of ways to inscribe aesthetic and intellectual invention within the conditions of possibility and intelligibility. This problematic connection is rooted in the very trajectory that gives works their most powerful meanings – meanings constructed on the aesthetic or reflective transfiguration of ordinary experiences, grasped on the basis of practices proper to those works' various publics.

Reflection on how the figure of the author was constructed, on the rules for the formation of communities of readers, or on the significance invested in the building of libraries (with or without walls) may perhaps contribute to focusing a few of the questions that currently inhabit the disciplines of knowledge and public debate. By reintroducing variation and difference where the illusion of universality spontaneously springs up, such reflection may help us to get rid of some of our over-sure distinctions and some over-familiar truisms.