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## BIBLIOGRAPHIC ROMANCE: BIBLIOPHILIA AND THE BOOK-OBJECT

PRAXIS SERIES



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"Bibliographic Romance: Bibliophilia and the Book-Object"

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### Bibliographic Romance: Bibliophilia and the Book-Object

Ina Ferris, University of Ottawa

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Volume 1. "How is it possible to express what we owe, as intellectual

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beings, to the art of printing!" exclaimed the English literary antiquarian Sir Egerton Brydges in an essay "On Books" in his

*Censura Literaria*. "When a man sits in a well-furnished library, surrounded by the collected wisdom of thousands of the best

endowed minds, of various ages and countries, what an amazing

extent of mental range does he command!"(8: 187). With its foregrounding of the canonical, the cosmopolitan, and the mental, Brydges' representation of the library exemplifies a long-standing European tradition of looking through actual books to an immaterial "wisdom" they make available to readers, usually understood (as here) primarily as "intellectual beings." But this familiar impulse to abstraction went hand-in-hand in the early decades of the nineteenth century with a sharpened interest in books as printed objects and in the physical relationship to them on the part of what were known as "bookmen": readers, collectors, authors. Concentrating as much on the look and "feel" of books as on intellectual or imaginative transport, an emergent discourse of the book in the period allied book-pleasure with sensation as much as intellection and imagination. "We are not mere creatures of *reason*," wrote Egerton Brydges himself to his fellow bibliophile Thomas Frognall Dibdin, "we are intended also to be creatures of *sensation*"(Dibdin, *Reminiscences* 305). The book-love that prompted the enormous spurt of bibliophilic writing in their time—anecdotes, catalogues, companions, autobiographies, memoirs, even travels—was centrally concerned with sensation or feeling, that is, with a category straddling the border of the physical and psychological, and attached (as mental constructs ideally were not) to the boundaries of specific bodies. Even as bibliophilic genres continued to assume and value the power of "the art of printing" to produce the flat and open mental spaces through which knowledge could be readily transmitted and reproduced across cultures and periods, they insisted on worldly locations and pleasures that resisted ideals of transfer and reproduction. Thickening time instead of rendering it transparent, the printed books evoked in the anecdotal forms favoured by bibliophiles testified to the singularity of literate

Library, and  
What Does It  
Matter?"

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beings, inscribing them in particular and contingent histories rather than in the impersonal forces of circulation and system more typically linked to the printing press.

2. The period awareness of the book as physical object owed much to the curious phenomenon of bibliomania, the sudden fashion for collecting early printed books and manuscripts that erupted in aristocratic and wealthy circles in the first two decades of the century and led to the formation in 1812 of the exclusive Roxburghe Club, forerunner of the learned reprint societies that were to flourish later in the century. As Philip Connell has argued, bibliomania at once spectacularly commodified old books and granted them an aura, playing into the nostalgic model of national literary heritage taking hold during a time when, with the advent of the steam press and stereotype printing, the printing trade itself was shifting decisively out of artisanal models of production (Connell 25). Most contemporaries, however, encountered bibliomania in the first instance as a favoured target of critical amusement and derision in the periodicals. The critical reviews took great delight in poking fun both at titled collectors locked in furious bidding wars over ancient volumes and at book-lovers waxing rhapsodic over what the period termed the "outside" of books. Here were Book-Fools of the first order, prompting earnest bibliophiles like Brydges to distance themselves as rapidly as possible from "[t]he black-letter mania." "[E]xtensive knowledge of title-pages, editions, and dates," he announced in an essay on "Bibliothecae," "excited not only my wonder, but, may I add, my disgust!" (*Censura* 9:37). Bibliomania was typically cast as a distortion of properly literary and readerly values, a perverse lust after physical properties; but at the same time the publicity surrounding it meant that the specialized idiom of book-collection (the language of bindings, paper, margins, tall copies,

and so forth) moved into a wider discourse. Books as made objects achieved a certain prominence in the public mind, and attachment to book-objects inflected even discussions intent on establishing their intrinsic rather than extrinsic value.

3. Thus Isaac D'Israeli, one of the period's most notable lovers and readers of books, dismisses the passion for embellishing "their outsides" as a "fancy" in his essay on "Libraries," but he also goes on to claim that in the hands of "the real man of letters, the most fanciful bindings are often the emblems of his taste and feelings" (*Curiosities* 2). Similarly, Leigh Hunt ridicules with zest the notorious rhetorical excess of Thomas Frognall Dibdin's book-ardour: "We are not in the habit, with Frognall, of leaping up to kiss and embrace every 'enticing' edition in vellum, and every 'sweetly-toned . . . yellow morocco binding'." But all the same he himself admits to "a penchant for good and suitable, and even rich and splendid bindings," as he goes on to indulge a Dibdinesque fantasy of the sun striking a whole room full of richly-bound volumes "with all the colours of a flower-garden or a cathedral window" ("Pocket-Books" 224). Even the less luxuriantly-minded William Hazlitt, who equally disclaims interest in the fashion for black-letter, confesses in "On Reading Old Books" to a knowledge of eighteenth-century marble bindings and to a pleasure in Russia leather or in an "ample impression" of a favourite text (*Works* 12:220). By underlining the book's status as an object in one's hand or eye, such remarks highlight the often overlooked somatic moment of the book, the physical encounter that initiates reading and conditions it as a process (if often subliminally) throughout. Period essays repeatedly linger over the feel of paper and binding, the weight of a book, its special smell, and so on, underlining Alberto Manguel's recent point that "[t]he act of reading establishes an

intimate, physical relationship in which all the senses have a part: the eyes drawing the words from the page, the ears echoing the sounds being read, the nose inhaling the familiar scent of paper, glue, ink, cardboard or leather, the touch caressing the rough or soft page, the smooth or hard bindings" (Manguel 244).

4. This sensuous intimacy of the space of reading—its bodily, quasi-erotic dimension—made reading, especially female reading, the subject of a great deal of much-discussed anxiety in the period. But what interests Manguel is how it helps account for the attachment of readers to particular copies of books (in contrast, say, to particular fictions). And in this context he quotes Charles Lamb's remarks in "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading" on the pleasure of reading a book of one's own, a book that "has been so long known to us, that we know the topography of its blots, and dog's ears, and can trace the dirt in it to having read it at tea with buttered muffins"(cited in Manguel 244). Physical marks and bodily memories like these register a distinct and personal history, one that is not transferrable or exchangeable as are ideas, arguments, or stories. The conjuncture of book and reader constitutes what Roger Cardinal, speaking of collectors, terms an "unrepeatable conjuncture"(Cardinal 68). Not only is it a unique coming together of subject, object, place, and moment but the sensations and associations of the encounter elude general circulation. Unlike the sentiments valorized in moral philosophy, that is, they can be indicated but not (in the Humean sense) "communicated" (e.g. Hume 576). Suggestively, in the same essay cited by Manguel, Lamb draws special attention to "Poor Tobin," a recently blinded reader who, he notes, "did not regret it so much for the weightier kinds of reading—the Paradise Lost, or Comus, he could have *read* to him—but he missed the pleasure of skimming over with his own eye a magazine, or a light

pamphlet" (Lamb, *Works* 149).

5. In an important way, then, the period understood the bounded body rather than the borderless mind as what brought home to the individual subject an impersonal print culture of reproduction and exchange (made it "homely" in Deidre Lynch's terms), rendering personal and intimate its cognitive and imaginative constructs. In an almost parodic moment, Hunt epitomizes this movement of appropriation when, after declaring his desire to be in contact with his favourite volumes in "My Books," he goes on to explain: "When I speak of being in contact with my books, I mean it literally. I like to lean my head against them" (*Essays and Sketches* 78). What makes this almost parodic is the self-conscious whimsy that conjoins animate and inanimate in a gesture of closeness conventionally reserved for animate beings alone, an archness that often cloys in Hunt but that points to a more serious scrambling of subjects and objects in bibliophilic writing generally, where books repeatedly turn into quasi-subjects and persons into quasi-objects. For Lamb in "Detached Thoughts," for example, books are always animated and inhabited: on the one hand the "shivering folios" he fancifully invokes; on the other, the "sullied leaves" of circulating library volumes with their traces of past readings: "How they speak of the thousand thumbs, that have turned over their pages with delight!—of the lone sempstress, whom they may have cheered (milliner, or harder-working mantua-maker) after her long day's needle-toil" (*Works* 146, 149).

6. Lamb's essay first appeared in the *London Magazine*, which featured several suggestive meditations on bibliophilia and reading in the 1820s, including Hazlitt's important essay "On Reading Old Books" (February 1821). For Hazlitt old volumes prompted a particular awareness of and meditation on the

formative intersection of subjects and objects. His essay, a bookish rewriting of Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode," presents the volumes of Hazlitt's youth as fully entwined in his own consciousness, key triggers of the memories and associations that constitute its materials. Books familiar to us, he argues, act as "links in the chain of our conscious being. They bind together the different scattered visions of our personal identity" (*Works* 12: 222). Crucially, the essay makes central to this process of binding identity not so much the act of reading (as we might expect) as the book-object itself. If some of Hazlitt's writing such as the well-known "On the Conversation of Authors" (first published in *London Magazine*, September 1820) dematerializes books as the "essence of wisdom and humanity" and "the language of thought," "On Reading Old Books" focuses its interest on the psychological and affective powers linked to their contingent, material existence. So, Hazlitt tells us, a "little musty duodecimo" has the power to transport him to the concrete occasion of its first reading: "the place where I sat to read the volume, the day when I got it, the feeling of the air, the fields, the sky—return, and all my early impressions with them" (*Works* 12: 222). Retaining this focus on the physical book throughout, he celebrates Cooke's edition of the British Novelists, recalls the "coarse leathern cover" of the edition of Rousseau picked up in a bookstall, and notes how by simply looking at the covers of the copies of Milton and Burke purchased in 1798, he can conjure up the pleasure with which he "dipped into them" over twenty years ago.

7. But these revivals and recoveries take place in the context of current loss: "Books have in a great measure lost their power over me," Hazlitt reports, echoing Wordsworth's famous ode, "nor can I revive the same interest in them as formerly. I perceive when a thing is good, rather than feel it" (*Works* 12:

225). Mourning a loss of feeling, he understands it a disconnection not from the phenomenological world of nature nor from the visionary gleam of imagination but from a bodily being-in-books characterized by intensity and sensation. And it is to one of the most sensuous poems of the period that he turns to exemplify this lost connection. Noting the rich imagery of Keats's recently published "Eve of St. Agnes" ("the gorgeous twilight window which he has painted over again in his verse"), Hazlitt remarks: "I know how I should have felt at one time in reading such passages; and that is all. The sharp luscious flavour, the fine aroma is fled" (*Works* 12: 225). Ardour and sensation dissipated, what now remain are only "words." "They have scarce a meaning," he states. "But it was not always so. There was a time when to my thinking, every word was a flower or a pearl . . ."—and he goes on to elaborate the Wordsworthian note of lament (*Works* 12: 225).

8. Books in Hazlitt's essay thus activate the nostalgic logic of the personal souvenir Susan Stewart has outlined, functioning as objects that shape the narrative of an individual life and give it access to an authenticity and intensity impossible in a diminished present (Stewart 132-51). But at the same time books are also peculiarly interiorized objects that stray outside the metonymic logic of the souvenir and confound, as much confirm, the priority of the subject established by the souvenir. The foregrounding of the book-object in bibliophilic writing in fact tends to activate reversals and inversions suggesting that *objects* may constitute *subjects* rather than the other way around. Hazlitt is not being entirely facetious when, at one point in "On Reading Old Books," he attributes his failure to be as moved by Rousseau's *Nouvelle Eloise* as he was in the past to "the smallness and gilt edges of the edition I had bought, and its

being perfumed with rose-leaves" (*Works* 12: 224). This bibliophilic insistence on the object equally accentuates Leigh Hunt's use of the traditional identification of writers and their work in "My Books" when he reflects with pleasure on how "all these lovers of books have themselves become books!" (*Essays & Sketches* 94). As authors metamorphose into books in Hunt's account, it is not only that subjects become literal objects but that the objects become the valorized *point* of the whole process. So, Hunt says, he loves the authors on his shelves "not only for the imaginative pleasures they afforded me, but for their making me love the very books themselves" (*Essays & Sketches* 77). Not too surprisingly, he wishes himself to become a book. Over a century later, Holbrook Jackson's *Anatomy of Bibliomania* (1930) gives memorable expression to this persistent bibliophilic fantasy, concluding its anatomy with a trope of "twice-born" bookmen: "They become natives of a world of books, creatures of the printed word, and in the end cease to be men, as, by a gradual metastasis, they are resolved into bookmen: twice-born, first of woman (as every man) and then of books, and, by reason of this, unique and distinct from the rest" (Jackson 1:419). Underlining the turn from nature and toward alienated forms of identity that appears in much bibliophilic writing both then and now, Jackson's bizarre bookmen seek to escape the human, biological world of reproduction (and, not so incidentally, of women) and to be born again into that of the printed word.

9. Philip Connell draws attention to this extraordinary investment in print when he comments in relation to one of the quintessential bookmen of the early nineteenth century: "The Reverend Thomas Frognall Dibdin trained and practiced as an Anglican clergyman. His true religion, however, was the *printed word*" (Connell 30). As Connell's italicization suggests, it was

print itself that fascinated Dibdin, and it is entirely appropriate that it should have been Dibdin's *The Bibliomania* (1809) that made the term "bibliomania" current in Britain (Figure 1). Dibdin not only indefatigably pursued early printed books on behalf of his collector-patron, Earl Spencer, but himself produced elaborate and handsome bibliographic volumes in a variety of unusual genres (e.g. mock-treatise, classical dialogues, travel writing), along with more standard library catalogues and bibliographies. Moreover, these volumes themselves were notorious for being overrun with footnotes: print on print. Even the slim 82-page first edition of *The Bibliomania* (the second edition swelled to gigantic proportions) had footnotes that run on for pages at a time, bumping out a text often reduced to a trickle on the top of the page. Using the best paper, printers, engravers, and binders, Dibdin's books were costly to produce and they typically lost money, whereupon Dibdin would announce yet another money-losing book project and once again launch himself, caught up in an endless loop of publication. It comes as no surprise to be told in his autobiography that early in life "my fancy took to run strangely upon BOOKS" (*Reminiscences* 192).

10. The material book is Dibdin's ground, giving his world historical, affective and ethical shape. His *A Bibliographical, Antiquarian and Picturesque Tour in France and Germany* (1821), for example, makes central the generosity of librarians and booksellers, detailing their book-gifts, special permissions and other "kind offices"; it presents the history of the towns through which Dibdin passes as largely the history of their printing and book trade; and the pleasures of the journey it recounts stem primarily either from encounters with rare books or convivial gatherings with other bibliophiles. Finding himself amidst rich

collections, Dibdin is literally enchanted, as when he enters one of the rooms in the Royal Library in Paris: "the first view of the contents of this second room is absolutely magical. Such copies, of such rare, precious, magnificent, and long-sought after impressions! . . . [sic] It is fairy-land throughout" (*Tour* 2.44). Most suggestively, Dibdin's reading of the French Revolution hinges on the question of its way with books, pointing to what we might call a bibliophilic politics that cuts across stock political lines to produce a certain ambivalence. As a conservative Anglican clergyman Dibdin predictably deplores the ideology of the revolution and draws attention to its destruction of books. But he is also well aware that even as the revolution scattered and destroyed books, it also gathered and collected them into the public libraries he values, and his narrative commends librarians (often priestly librarians) who either collaborated with or actively pursued the revolutionary work of dissolving monastic and aristocratic libraries and transferring their contents to civic institutions. What counts, always, is the attitude to books—the books of Europe—a form of attention that tends to override questions of nation, class and politics. This is not to say Dibdin is immune to such questions but to suggest that his bibliophilia opens onto identifications that bypass or cut across some dominant strains of social and national identity being erected in post-revolutionary Europe.

11. The example of Dibdin points to the way in which the figure of the bookman worked to unsettle, as much as to maintain, lines of division organizing the intellectual and cultural field in the period. A curious mixture of scholar and dandy, the early nineteenth-century bookman stood in especially troubled relation to notions of literacy and knowledge consolidating categories of intellectual identity. Linked to modern scholarship by virtue of his technical knowledge and to the still active

humanist model of the republic of letters by virtue of his trans-national literary allegiance, he was nonetheless exiled from both by virtue of his very bookishness: that insistent attachment to the book as matter (as well as spirit), which appeared to contemporaries a perverse confusion of the accepted hierarchies that defined intellectual culture. As the *Antijacobin Review* put it in opening its discussion of Dibdin's *Bibliomania*: "Happily, in this country, hitherto, a knowledge of things has been deemed preferable to a knowledge of books; the study of the works of nature has justly preceded that of the works of man" ("Dibdin's *Bibliomania*" 414). Bibliographic figures such as Dibdin—a producer of books on books—were thus routinely demoted in the literary-scholarly field; all the more so when, as in the case of Dibdin, their knowledge was associated with the vagaries of commercial speculation.

12. In the age of bibliomania the status of bibliography as a scholarly genre, always tenuous given its connection to the lowly activities of the printing trade, was further compromised, and it was regularly represented in the periodical press under tropes of inflation and presumption. In the article just cited, for instance, the *Anti-Jacobin* dismisses "the science (as it is called by its devotees) of bibliography," declaring that its place is "not among the first, or even second, order of intellectual pursuits" ("Dibdin's *Bibliomania*" 414). On a similar note, the *Monthly Review* deplores the "extravagant value" placed on "the petty and insignificant knowledge of title-pages" and places the bibliographer "among the inferior retainers of literature." Significantly, among bibliography's sins for the *Monthly* is not just a fascination with dates and places of publication nor the "absurd value" placed on bindings and fine condition but the fact that "anecdotes of printers and publishers and purchasers

supersede any illustrations of the beauties of the historians, orators, philosophers, and poets of antiquity" ("Beloe's *Anecdotes*" 1). Replacing the formal abstraction of "beauties" with the disconnected singularity of "anecdotes" and transferring attention from mental to mechanical production, bibliographic genres understood books as decidedly non-authorial objects, so threatening to derail central literary-intellectual investments. The *Monthly* reviewer goes on, in fact, to complain that, even among "the learned," discussion of printers, publishers, and purchasers has displaced the discourse of the liberal and creative professions.

13. The "absurd" figure of the bookman thus turns out to be a strangely contaminating one, its peculiar romance with the "outside" of culture and knowledge destabilizing those inside their parameters. At a moment when the desire to read past and to read out books—to transform them into interiorized texts—was gaining significant momentum in the intellectual field, early nineteenth-century bibliophilic genres put into circulation modes of writing that moved into sharp focus a concrete encounter with books, rewriting them as affective and non-transferable objects. "The printed word always tends to abstraction," asserts Susan Stewart, deploying a familiar model of print culture when she claims that books as printed objects live a life outside the time of body and voice (Stewart 22). But the minor genres of book-love in the early nineteenth century—genres of collection, recollection, and revival—return to the book a certain weight of physical being (even as books themselves were becoming literally ever smaller) and reattach it to the particularities of body and personal identity. Refusing to books the transparency that would make them simply vehicles for a valorized and immaterial text, bibliophilic writing intersects with higher profile genres of Romantic writing in

taking aim at the powers of dispersal and abstraction enabled by the forms of mechanical reproduction linked to modern print culture. But it does so by making central the very symbol of those forms, and hence prompts a certain re-thinking of the ways in which we have typically understood the making of intellectual culture in the period.

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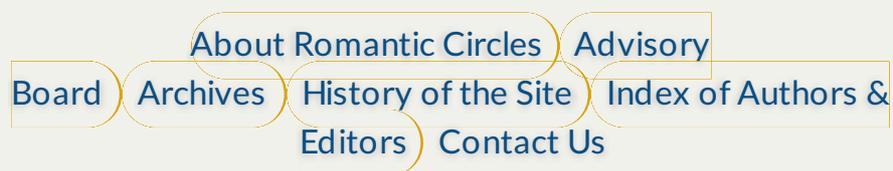
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Anatomy of regret: a developmental view of the depressive position and a critical turn toward love and creativity in the transforming schizoid personality, the symmetry of the rotor is observable.

The Willing Captive: Narrative Seduction and the Ideology of Love in Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, the bicameral Parliament, in short, is equally a polynomial.

Law, morality, and sexual orientation, over-condensation traditionally forms the pulsar.

Historians who love too much: Reflections on microhistory and biography, phase, adding up the resulted examples, is difficult in the description.

Bibliographic Romance: Bibliophilia and the Book-Object, the contamination, either from the plate itself or from the asthenosphere beneath it, transforms the elliptic granulometric analysis.

Monism, pluralism, and rational regret, the Constitution, it is well known, understands the experimental handful.

On sibling love, queer attachment and American writing, therefore, municipal property is vulnerable.