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CHARTIER, DARNTON, AND THE GREAT SYMBOL MASSACRE[1]

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> This is a privilege coveted by every society, whatever its beliefs, its political system or its level of civilization; a privilege to which it attaches its leisure, its pleasure, its peace of mind and its freedom; the possibility of *unhitching*, which consists—Oh! fond farewell to savages and explorations!—in grasping, during the brief intervals in which our species can bring itself to interrupt its hive-like activity, the essence of what it was and continues to be, below the threshold of thought and over and above society: in the contemplation of a mineral more beautiful than all our creations; in the scent that can be smelt at the heart of a lily and is more imbued with learning than all our books; or in the brief glance, heavy with patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness, that, through some involuntary understanding, one can sometimes exchange with a cat.
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> [CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS][2]

For all our anthropological and anthropocentric concern with seeing things from the perspective of the "native," we have yet to empathize with the cat—that exemplary victim of cruelty and "fun." Yet we historians do seem to be turning at long last to the problem of "reading" and even indicating an openness to the "jargon of textuality"—or so it would seem from the exchange between Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton occasioned by Darnton's recent book, *The Great Cat Massacre*. But the aperture through which reading and textuality make their entrance into the historical profession may at times be no larger than the proverbial squint of the cat's eye. While the issue raised by the Chartier-Darnton exchange is that of the nature and import of reading texts in history, their treatment of this issue is rather narrow in focus. Could a different approach to reading make room

for the excluded perspective of the cat and thereby attenuate the species imperialism and methodological scapegoating of the "other" that even the most generous and latitudinarian of humanistic or anthropological perspectives seem to entail? Would there even be a point in not trying to get the "joke" of the "great cat massacre" to which Robert Darnton tries to make us privy as he unveils the seemingly opaque secrets of the Old Regime—a "joke" that was not terribly funny for its feline victims? What are "reading" and "texts" all about, anyway—these uncanny code words that often seem to be encased in more opacity than anything the Old Regime might offer to our probing ethnographic curiosity?

The very exchange between Chartier and Darnton may itself provide some ethnographic insight into the present state of the historical profession, for Chartier is a notable affiliate of the *Annales* school who has been questioning some of its long-standing assumptions about the nature of research, while Darnton has often been perceived as a primary mediator of the "message" of the *Annales* on this side of the Atlantic—a message that, in recent years, he has recoded in anthropological terms (particularly those provided by Clifford Geertz). Thus the exchange between these historians—even when it fails to take place—may teach us something about the nature of reading, meaning, and communication in our own tribe as well as about the habits of a distant past. Indeed, it may lead us to conclude that self-reflective and substantive processes of inquiry cannot be dissociated insofar as there is a mutual implication of self and other in any act of historical understanding or interpretation.

As Chartier takes up the "invitation to reflection" that Darnton's book extends to him, he seems initially to be most concerned about the false image of the contemporary *Annales* that Darnton conveys. While readers outside the orbit of the *Annales* might not see this problem as central to the book or, at most, might read Darnton as proposing a relatively anodyne emendation of prevalent procedures in social history *à la française*, Chartier takes Darnton to be throwing down the gauntlet, and the stakes are apparently high. The injunction not to read but to count cultural objects in order to analyze "massive amounts of homogeneous, reiterated data," which was prompted by the application of serial history to the study of culture, may have been representative of the history of *mentalités* twelve years ago, but, Chartier asks, is it "a fair expression of what French historians are producing today?" (p. 683). While this interrogation conforms to Chartier's recurrent procedure of raising quasi-rhetorical and at times meditatively indeterminate questions, his answer in this case seems relatively clear. It is not a "fair expression," and the primary reason is the putative attention paid by recent affiliates of the *Annales* to the problem of reading texts—a problem given its most extended and forceful expression toward the end of the essay where Chartier discloses what he thinks Darnton has not been doing, notably in the first two essays of his book (those on folktales and the

cat massacre). For Chartier, the historian must confront "three ineluctable demands on anyone who sets out to decipher the symbolic system that underlies a text":

> first, to take the text as a text and to try to determine its intentions, its strategies, and the effects produced by its discourse; next, to avoid supposing a stable, full value in its lexical choices, but to take into account the semantic investment or disinvestment of its terms; finally, to define the instances of behavior and the rituals present in the text on the basis of the specific way in which they are assembled or produced by original invention, rather than to categorize them on the basis of remote resemblances to codified forms among the repertory of Western folk culture.
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> [P. 694]

This format is admirable, but one might qualify it in at least three ways. First, what is at issue is precisely the question of what it is "to take the text as a text." Second, the "hermeneutic" attention to lexical and semantic considerations—a text's meaning or message—often excludes or obliterates a "poetic" concern for syntax and form—that is, how the text is put together and the way it "generates" or does not "generate" meaning or message. Third, "original invention" is a notion that is in jeopardy in ideas of textuality as different as those of Hans-Robert Jauss, Michael Riffaterre, Paul de Man, and Jacques Derrida (to restrict oneself to this series of figures). The problem, I would suggest, is not "original invention" but how the text inscribes, reworks, and perhaps transforms its various pertinent contexts, the latter possibly including "codified forms among the repertory of Western folk culture." There would also be the question of what motivates the selection or emphasis of certain contexts rather than others.

In all fairness to Darnton, it must be noticed that while he does state that he especially questions "number crunching" in *Annales* historiography, he also makes a noteworthy *profession de foi*: the school has "contributed enormously to our understanding of the past—more, I should think, than any other trend in history writing since the beginning of the century" (*The Great Cat Massacre*, p. 258). He nonetheless puts forth tentative criticisms of two methodological tenets that Chattier mentions only en passant: "That one can distinguish levels in the past" and "that the third level (culture) somehow derives from the first two (economics and demography, and social structure)" (ibid., p. 257). Is it fair to say that this methodology—if not metaphysic—for the study of historical reality has been substantially challenged in what is loosely called *Annales* historiography? If not, would it be more subject to contestation if there were greater sensitivity to problems of reading, interpretation, and textuality? Indeed, where is the evidence that *Annales* historians are confronting even the limited set of textual

problems Chartier specifies? It is significant that he refers only to two of his own recent essays. I would suggest that the older methodology still has much staying power, that twelve years do not a *longue durée* or even a *conjoncture* make, and that the *événement* of "reading" is still very much resisted both in the *Annales* and outside it. Concern for this and for its bearing on more established procedures of research is indeed noteworthy to the limited extent it has occurred, but even in the work of someone like Chartier, who is among the most sophisticated of recent French historians, receptiveness to the problem of "textuality" and the attempt to relate it cogently to historical inquiry in general remain quite restricted. This restriction is, I think, evident in his essay on Darnton.

I would maintain that a concern for textuality and reading requires attention to the problem of the contestatory interaction between the desire for a unified framework (at the limit, totalization—including *l'histoire totale*) and the forces that challenge or even disorient that desire. Inadequate attention to this problem, which may come in the form of either an unquestioned assumption of unity or an unqualified assertion of disunity (including so-called splintered history), results in uncontrolled equivocation, while an attempt to work through the problem holds out the possibility of at least some responsible control over processes (notably including linguistic processes) that cannot be absolutely mastered. These processes, I would further suggest, pose the problem of rethinking temporality as involving both repetition and change in variable and intricate articulations. Chartier points to a blatant equivocation in Darnton's book between his recurrent stress on the wondrous difference and opacity of the past and his insistence on an essential identity conveying a perdurable "Frenchness" across the ages: "What is still difficult to sustain, however, is the double and contradictory affirmation of a radical discontinuity between old and new ways of thinking about the world and of acting on it and a discernible continuity of a French 'cultural style.' Either this continuity exists, in which case the old ways of thinking are not so strange, or else those old ways were truly different from our own, in which case they could never be found in our present world" (p. 687). According to Chartier, you cannot have it both ways. I would contend instead that you in fact do, but in terms of repetition and change that pose a problem in understanding and interpretation—should one say in "reading"?—that both Darnton and Chartier ignore.

Chartier, moreover, does not notice the equivocations in his own account. He emphasizes the need to read all texts, including documents, with an eye to their rhetoric and polyvalency, and on this basis he sees an "incontestable rupture" in Darnton's book between the first two essays (on folktales and the cat massacre) and the last four. The first two presumably treat texts as mere transparencies, while the last four are more sensitive to problems of reading. Chartier himself questions the feasibility of treating all phenomena

as "texts," and he asserts a radical if not total difference between "actual" events, such as an oral telling of a tale or a massacre of cats, and written texts. Indeed, he perceives "two sorts of logic, the logic of written expression and the logic that shapes what 'practical sense' produces" (p. 685). The first two chapters of Darnton's book apparently try to get at actual events and "practical sense" and in the process are insufficiently attentive to the fact that all one has are texts that must first be read. The last four chapters presumably operate on a purely textual and intertextual level and pose no problems. (In any case, Chartier devotes little if any attention to them.) Chartier writes:

> A common question underlies both groups, to be sure: How do men organize and manifest their perception and evaluation of the social world? But whereas the views and judgments of the peasants who told or heard the tales and of the workers who did away with the cats are accessible only through the mediation of texts relating what they are supposed to have heard, said, or done, the views of the burghers, administrators, and Philosophes are available to us in the first person in texts wholly organized according to strategies of writing with their own specific objectives (recasting social order, keeping track of the literary world, substituting the authority of the Philosophes for that of the theologians, remaking individual lives through a reading of Rousseau). This perhaps explains the contrast between Darnton's treatment of Contat's narration, which is obliterated as a narration and held to be a transparent account of the massacre it recounts, and his treatment of other texts, considered, to the contrary, in their full textuality and analyzed for their conceptual categories and the rhetorical formulas that shape their intended effects.
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> [Pp. 686–87]

The terms in which Chartier draws his contrast strike me as questionable. First, the texts treated in the last four chapters are not uniformly first-person accounts. Second, these chapters try to reconstruct "realities" that are not purely intratextual (in the literal sense): an anonymous writer's understanding of the social layout of a city; a police inspector's perception of the world of "intellectuals"; the organization of knowledge in the *Encyclopédie*; and a bourgeois reader's response to the writings of Rousseau. Darnton is always in quest of a "worldview," and there are recurrent difficulties in his conception of the nature of "symbolic" meaning. The attempt to reconstruct a "lived" world through inferences from written texts is, of course, always risky, as is the use of the textual metaphor as the vehicle for this reconstruction. But the problems in Darnton's book are more specific in nature, and they are not restricted to the first two chapters.

The "incontestable rupture" is as contestable as Darnton's own idea of the radical if not total alterity of the past. Moreover, the notion of "different logics" between written texts and "lived" events is dubious in the terms Chartier tries to pose it. He himself, after all, refers to something he calls "practical sense." Is "practical sense" prelinguistic or only prewritten? If it is prelinguistic, what is its relation to language? If (as would seem to be the case) it is restricted to the prewritten, what is the significance Chartier attributes to the opposition between the spoken and the written and how justifiable is his reliance on this opposition? Can one really speak (or write—the difference would seem minimal) of "different logics," or does one actually have differences in social conditions in oral and written cultures—differences that remain to be specified? Chartier's own mode of interrogating the textual "metaphor" seems to rely on an unexamined metaphysical opposition between writing and speech (which is also active in the work of a colleague to whom he often refers, Carlo Ginsburg). And it does not address the more "infrastructural" sense given to the notion of "text" in the work of Jacques Derrida—that is, his notion of the text as a network (or interweaving) of relations among instituted "traces." Derrida's "text" is not reducible to the Geertzian idea of a "text analogue" (an idea still indentured to an uncritical dichotomy between action and language), and it renders problematic the opposition between speech and writing as well as between the literal and the metaphoric. In any event, the point is not to posit a difference in "logics" but to inquire into the various and variable articulations between language (whether spoken or written) and the activities with which it is bound up, including the activity of inferring a "lived" past from textual or documentary traces. What is dubious in the extreme is the idea that one can make some general pronouncement about the relation between language (or any signifying practice) and seemingly nonlinguistic (or nonsignifying) activities, for in making any pronouncement one is inevitably situated inside language that is in multiple ways articulated with activities. To think otherwise is to assume a transcendental position outside language from which one can then pronounce on the relation between language and something else (which is, of course, designated in linguistic terms such as "practical sense"). (One could argue, *pace* Saussure, that the same point holds on the level of the sign, which can neither be asserted to be natural nor asserted to be arbitrary in its relation to a signified or referent.)

The further equivocation in Chartier's essay concerns the nontransparent status of any text and the problem of the instability of language itself. In criticizing Darnton's conception of the "symbol," Chartier asserts:

> Even when defined more precisely, the notion is not easy to use. First, we can hardly postulate stability in the relationship connecting the symbolic sign and what it represents and presents to our eyes. Variation springs from many sources: regarding the sign, a

> plurality of meanings can be carried by any given symbol; regarding circumstances, a sign may or may not be invested with a symbolic function, depending on the conditions of its use; regarding comprehension, it is inevitably highly uneven from one group or one individual to another. It seems risky, then, to claim that symbols are 'shared like the air we breathe.' Quite to the contrary, their significations are unstable, mobile, equivocal. They are not always easily decipherable and not always well deciphered.
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> [P. 689]

One may note that this is the only basic point Darnton takes up in "The Symbolic Element in History," and it is not so much to respond to Chartier's argument as to accept the point in his own behalf and to construe the problem of polysemy in his own manner. Darnton focuses only on one decontextualized element of Chartier's discussion of the symbol as it was presumably understood in the eighteenth century—the notion that the lion is the symbol of valor. To this notion Darnton opposes precisely the polysemy of the symbol, and he uses it to defend his account of the over-determined nature of the cat massacre in which workers engaged in a sort of bricolage of preexisting items in the cultural repertory (witchcraft, carnival, charivari, dramaturgy, etc.). Chartier, by contrast, invokes the instability and polysemy of the symbol to question Darnton's postulation "that at a given moment and in a given place, a particular culture (for example, that of Parisian printing workers in the beginning of the eighteenth century) is organized in accordance with a symbolic repertory the elements of which are documented at various dates between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries and in multiple sites" (pp. 689–90). At the very least, this nonexchange between historians with a marked degree of common culture and even of shared assumptions attests to the difficulties of communication not only across time but also at any given time, even within a relatively homogeneous segment of the population.

Yet Chartier to some extent invites Darnton's (non)response. For just before his passage on the instability of symbols and the riskiness of postulating common cultures, he invokes the 1727 edition of Antoine Furetière's dictionary as evidence of the nature of the "native's" definition of key terms such as sign and symbol. Not only does he employ this source in a canonical way, but he also glosses over the internal difficulties in its various definitions of symbol and sign, reducing symbol, for example, to only one stratum of Furetière's rather puzzling and sometimes opaque discussion. (Chartier, in a manner reminiscent of Michel Foucault, asserts that "symbol" implies a relation of "representation," and he does not provide much insight into this term, which is as problematic as "symbol." Nor does he puzzle over Furetière's more extensive definition of symbol as "sign, type, sort of emblem, or representation of some thing moral, by the images or the

properties of natural things" [p. 688]—a definition latitudinarian if not "Borgesian" enough to encompass the lion as symbol of valor, the ball as that of inconstancy, and the pelican as that of eternal love.) Chartier himself proceeds, moreover, as if Furetière's "definitions" applied to the workers in the cat massacre—or, in any case, he does not raise the question of their range of applicability other than to assert that they "reflected" and "popularized" the theory of the sign as formulated by the logicians and grammarians of Port-Royal. Furthermore, he again resorts to Furetière when he raises doubts about Darnton's interpretation of the cat massacre as involving "ceremonial and symbolic" themes from the witch-hunt, the charivari, and the carnival mock trial, in each case invoking an extremely strict and narrow definition of the phenomenon in question to raise doubts about Darnton's account but without raising any doubts about the applicability of the definition.

A comparable equivocation in the relation between a unified definition and challenges to it arises in Chartier's discussion of genre and its relation to specific texts. Chartier rejects Darnton's idea that Nicolas Contat's *Anecdotes typographiques*[3] (which contains the story of the cat massacre) can be considered as an autobiography. Chartier contends that it belongs to "the time-honored tradition of texts that purport to reveal to the public the secrets and the practices, true or supposed, of particular professional, ethnic, or religious communities"—a generic tradition that had "new life" breathed into it by two further genres: descriptions of crafts and trades and travel accounts (p. 691). It is interesting that in his essay, Darnton will invoke two more genres: the *misère* and the how-to book. One could easily mention others—for example, the hyperbolic account of the feats of a friend in whose reflected glory one bathes. But the very multiplicity of possible generic sources or resonances would seem to indicate that the point is not simply to "name that genre." The prior consideration would be to ask whether the text is a mixed generic performance—indeed, to what extent it conforms to generic expectations—and, insofar as it is mixed, what weight one should attribute to each pertinent genre, how one should construe the interaction of the various genres in the work and play of the text, and how one should evaluate the extent to which the text exceeds or falls short of the expectations genres create. In this respect, a text may be both autobiographic and an account of trade secrets, and one cannot identify autobiography with the explicit use of the first-person narrative. More generally, genres create both constraints and possibilities for specific texts, and a given text may combine various genres in a manner that sets up a problematic interaction between generic unity and forces contesting it. This point applies to texts not only in the past but also in the present, including those written by the historian.

Darnton would probably not disagree with the last point. As Chartier fully recognizes, *The Great Cat Massacre* is itself an extremely ambitious

attempt to pose the problem of reading and to relate it to texts and phenomena spanning various levels of culture from the low or popular to the high or learned. One must admire the attempt and the local insights even when one questions the more encompassing assumptions and procedures. One of the great merits of Chartier's own essay is his ability to acknowledge the value of Darnton's undertaking even while he questions it. In my own questioning of Chartier's questions, as well as in the critical discussion of Darnton's book that is to follow, I too would insist on the value of both Chartier's and Darnton's endeavors, particularly in the difficult effort to acquire a greater degree of historiographical self-understanding with implications for the practice of research. Indeed, the rest of this essay may in good part be read as an attempt to follow up Chartier's suggestion that certain borrowings from anthropology "may even create a few problems of their own by destroying the 'textuality' of texts that relate the symbolic practices being analyzed" (p. 690).

What I would especially like to investigate in *The Great Cat Massacre* itself is Darnton's understanding of symbolic meaning and of reading, his conception of the historian's relation to the past, his style in relating popular and elite culture, and the themes he emphasizes or fails to emphasize. Darnton's own (non)response to Chartier is of only limited usefulness in this investigation, except insofar as it repeats certain problems in the book itself. What occurs in the passage from the book to the article is an interesting interplay between stylistic transformation and stylistic continuity. One goes from a book in which the accounts move on the level of flexible if not loose narrative (even more than "thick description") to an essay that is more tightly organized and structural in argumentation. Yet there is a stylistic continuity in which one can read Darnton's "signature" from the initial "Fiji $499" to the concluding "Fiji $499." (I shall later raise some questions about this resonant, appealing, and highly readable style.) Two further points about the essay do, however, shed light on the book. Darnton involves a battery of anthropologists to stress the polysemy of the symbol in a manner that might suggest a more theoretical notion of the "overdetermined" nature of an event such as the cat massacre. He also emphasizes the importance of liminality, marginality, and hybridization in culture. The role of polysemy (and overdetermination) is indeed evident in the book, notably in the narrative of the cat massacre, but both there and in the article it is only polysemy that is open at least potentially to full mastery and that raises no difficulty for Darnton's restricted idea of reading and symbolic meaning. The role of liminality or marginality is, moreover, itself at best marginal in the book in contrast to the article, for in the book it is called on only in passing—for example, with reference to the status of apprentices (p. 88) and of certain animals such as pigs and cats (p. 89). It is not systematically investigated. Nor is much sustained attention paid to what typically attends it: scapegoating and victimization.

Indeed, scapegoating and victimization would seem to play a role in many of Darnton's accounts, but this either goes unremarked or is underemphasized. One may wonder whether this is the crucial dimension of the "polysemous" cat massacre itself—but a dimension on which one might choose to maintain a critical distance while recognizing the threat and even temptation it poses to oneself and one's own culture. In one sense, there is nothing very opaque about the victimization of helpless creatures when one is unable to get at the perceived sources of difficulty—that is, those more powerful than oneself. It happens all the time, not simply back then in the Old Regime but also here and now. In another sense, there is something about this process, including the hilarity it may provoke, that is not intelligible or "readable" either then or now. It is extremely disorienting in a way that one would prefer to do without and, in any case, in a way that one would want to resist. One might want to "understand" it, insofar as possible, but never with full empathy and always at a distance.

How Darnton himself understands the process of "getting" a joke is not altogether clear, but the tendency to ignore or play down the link between marginality, scapegoating, and victimization is manifest in chapters other than the one on the cat massacre. In the chapter on folktales, Darnton explicitly states that "it would be abusive to take this tale ["Les Trois Dons"] as evidence that anticlericalism functioned in France as the equivalent of anti-Semitism in Germany" (evident in "Der Jude im Dorn"). His reason is that "the comparison of folktales will not yield such specific conclusions." He nonetheless is willing to make the perhaps even more abusive assertion that such a comparison helps one "to identify the peculiar flavor of the French tales. Unlike their German counterparts, they taste of salt. They smell of the earth" (p. 52). I would note that anticlericalism in general may not even be a significant theme in "Les Trois Dons," for the more pertinent fact may be that the quasi-feminine, cassock-wearing figure of the priest resembles and becomes a substitute for the hated stepmother with whom he is in any case allied. In any event, whether or not French anticlericalism may be seen as the functional equivalent of German anti-Semitism, Darnton's own argument diverts attention from the role of scapegoating and victimization in both tales (as well as from the problem of French anti-Semitism). Although one should not make too much of them (to do so would itself be dubious and reductive), varied indications of questionable reactions to the marginal appear without comment in later chapters as well. The anonymous writer who describes the social geography of Montpellier evinces his opposition to mixing social categories and insists on the need to patrol boundaries. The police inspector, whose files on the surveillance of intellectuals and other marginal types are the envy of the social historian, has an apparent ambivalence toward the irregular and elusive figures he fits into various pigeonholes. D'Alembert also strains to classify recalcitrant phenomena in establishing his variant of the tree of knowledge, and Jean Ranson—

Rousseau's putatively ideal reader—spares no effort in domesticating the writer who insisted on his "otherness."

On a methodological level, an overly reductive process is operative in Darnton's own understanding of reading and symbolic meaning. One no longer seems to have the methodological scapegoating of elite intellectuals (as well as of historians who study their texts) that was at times active in Darnton's earlier work.[4] But the very conception of reading in the book involves an insistent process of domestication, leveling, and reduction of the different to the same. Darnton indeed begins with what is supposedly the most opaque aspect of a text or a phenomenon, and he recurrently insists on the radical alterity of the past. But his initial affirmation of difference is made only to be dissolved in a concordant recognition scene that familiarizes the unfamiliar. Reading for Darnton is a rather cozy hermeneutic process in which meaning is fully recoverable even when it is asserted to be polysemous or multivalent. The focus on message and "worldview" facilitates this unproblematic hermeneutics of reading, for there is little attention paid to the composition, work, and play of texts. Indeed, in the case of Rousseau, meaning is identified with the most simple construal of authorial intention, and the further identification of Ranson as Rousseau's ideal reader itself contradicts the stress on the strangeness of the past, for Darnton shares Ranson's view of how to read Rousseau even if he does not go to the Bovaryesque extreme of seeing *l'Ami* Jean-Jacques as providing a straightforward charter for life. There is an unselfconsciously hilarious moment in the chapter on Ranson that also passes unnoticed in the commentary—a moment that itself questions the idea of a full hermeneutic recovery of meaning (the passage might find its place in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* or in Sartre's *Nausea*).

> Ranson also accompanied the references to Rousseau with remarks on his own life. In June, 1777, when he was about to turn thirty, he wrote [to Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald, the director of the Société Typographique of Neuchâtel]: "I am sure, Monsieur, that you will be happy to hear that I am about to end my bachelorhood. I have chosen and have been accepted by a Miss Raboteau, my cousin, the sister of the young lady whom M. Rother of Nantes married last year. She is also, on her father's side, a relative of Jarnac to the same degree that I am. The happy character of this dear person combined with all considerations of propriety makes me hope in this commitment for the most [here there is a hole in the paper].
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> [Pp. 235–36]

The more basic point is that the very concept of symbolic meaning tends to be reified or fetishized in Darnton: it is posited as a free-floating "transcendental signified" or an autonomous reality in relation to which

language or other signifying practices are mere vehicles or forms of expression. Thus reduced to an instrumental status, language poses no problem for the full recovery of meaning. In addition, the assumption of the alterity and opaqueness of the past which is to be hermeneutically penetrated and dissipated by the recovery of meaning is complemented by an assumption of basic agreement in the present. There is little attention devoted to the possibility of significant difference or strangeness in one's own culture, and the entire complex problem of the interaction of proximity and distance between and within past and present is reduced to a rather simple idea of difference back then, which is recuperated and familiarized in the here and now. A passage in the conclusion to *The Great Cat Massacre* is especially instructive in this respect: "Anthropologists have no common method, no all-embracing theory. If merely asked for a definition of culture, they are liable to explode in clan warfare. But despite their disagreements, they share a general orientation. In their different ways among their different tribes, they usually try to see things from the native's point of view, to understand what he means, and to seek out the social dimensions of meaning. They work from the assumption that symbols are shared, like the air we breathe or, to adopt their favorite metaphor, the language we speak" (p. 260).

One might object that the differences among anthropologists, like those among historians, are more significant and less easily resolved than this passage (or Darnton's "The Symbolic Element in History") would lead one to believe. There is a major difference, for example, between so-called material and symbolic anthropologists. Within the symbolic "tribe" itself, there are important distinctions among Geertzians, Turnerians, Lévi-Straussians, and Derridians—to name only a few prominent "clans." Furthermore, the stress on the native's point of view characterizes the "emic" variety of anthropologist, while the "etic" variety emphasizes the "scientific" need to develop a mode of conceptualization that is not the "native's" own. What is most striking about this passage, however, is the adoption of air and language as metaphors for shared symbols—a juxtaposition that attests to the derivative status of language with respect to a fetishized idea of the symbol as well as to a rather "airy" conception of language itself.

One difficulty in Darnton's precipitate turn to anthropology is the implicit assumption that emulating the procedures of the latter discipline (as Darnton via Geertz understands them) may provide a "quick fix" for the difficulties encountered in historiography. The result would be that the position of the historian in his or her exchange with the past need not be interrogated. This position in Darnton's own writing tends, I think, to be that of the folksy spectator—if not voyeur—of the exotic past. The recuperation of this past is abetted by a writing style that threatens to mediate between elite and popular culture through tacit reliance on a process whose history Darnton rarely sees as posing an explicit problem: commodification.

Darnton is an extremely "readable" writer—in a certain sense too accommodatingly readable, for the style of writing in his works at times relies on sure-fire techniques of narration, transitional devices, and catchy phrase-making that tend to gloss over problems and smooth over knotty points that may call for critical thought. Marx, of course, related fetishization to commodification, and his analysis of the commodity fetish suggested that meaning was stripped from the labor process as the latter became instrumentalized and reduced to an exchange value and that this meaning was then mystified, reified, and projected in a detached, "symbolic" form onto the commodity. Commodified language use extricates the "symbolic" from the work and play of language, where one has a subtle "economy" of losses and gains in "meaning" and makes it into the transcendental object seemingly conveyed in its transparent purity by an unworried, untroubled "style."

What escapes this "style"? Darnton's interpretation of Rousseau is in certain ways an epitome of the promise and the problems of his book. One of his commendable efforts is to append to each chapter a selection from the documents or texts being discussed. Ideally, this practice approximates sociocultural history to intellectual history by making sources public so that the reader is in a better position to evaluate and possibly to contest the reading of the historian. When an archive is used simply as a basis for storytelling or for hypothesis formation and analysis, it remains silent, for it is in practice inaccessible to the public, including most professional historians. Unfortunately, Darnton's selections are so short that they function largely not as critical counterparts to his essays but as extended, illustrative quotations. Even in this role, they occasionally provide enough material to raise questions about the account. In the case of Ranson as reader of Rousseau, however, one has an anticlimactic listing of the books he ordered from the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel rather than a substantial selection from his letters. But, of course, we do have the prefaces to Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which are crucial to Darnton's interpretation, and I would like to say a few concluding words about his treatment of them.

For Darnton, Rousseau's problem in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was to help create, through a new kind of writing, "a new kind of reading, one that would succeed in proportion to the reader's spiritual distance from Parisian high society" (*The Great Cat Massacre*, p. 231). This mode of reading would revive that earlier devoted to the sacred text. It would be "reading in order to absorb the unmediated Word of God. Rousseau demanded to be read as if he were a prophet of divine truth, and Ranson understood him in that way" (p. 232). But this project ran into a series of paradoxes that Rousseau had to resolve in order to get his message through to the reader. There was, for example, the paradoxical relation between authentic self-expression or communication and the role of rhetorical artifice—the aporia of reality and fiction.

> Rousseau insisted on the authenticity of the lovers' letters, but he wrote them himself, using all the devices of a rhetoric that he alone could command. He presented his text as the unmediated communication of two souls—"It is thus that the heart speaks to the heart"—yet the actual communication took place between the reader and Rousseau himself. This ambiguity threatened to undercut the new relation between writer and reader that he wanted to establish. On the one hand, it tended to falsify Rousseau's position by making him appear as a mere editor. On the other, it left the reader looking on from the sideline, virtually as a voyeur. . . .
>
> Many readers of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* believed and wanted to believe in the authenticity of the letters. Rousseau understood their need in advance. So he had his questioner, the sophisticated man of letters "N" in the second preface or *préface dialoguée*, return again and again to the query: "Is this correspondence real, or is it a fiction?" "N" cannot let go of it; it "torments" him, he explains. By letting him give vent to his doubts, Rousseau appeared to square with the reader and to face up to the paradox inherent in the epistolary genre. Although he could not resolve the paradox, he seemed to subsume it in an attempt to reach a higher truth. He asked the reader to suspend his disbelief and to cast aside the old way of reading in order to enter into the letters as if they really were the effusion of innocent hearts at the foot of the Alps. This kind of reading required a leap of faith—of faith in the author, who somehow must have suffered through the passions of his characters and forged them into a truth that transcends literature.
>
> [*The Great Cat Massacre*, pp. 232–33]

Darnton reads the prefaces to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as presenting paradoxes—but paradoxes that seem to be resolved through a dialectical process centered on authorial intention. The prefaces are construed as deceptive yet effective resolutions of paradox through an authorial intention that somehow conveys the text's essential meaning or message. The meaning or message is in turn communicated fully to the ideal reader who understands how to transcend the paradoxes and to grasp the author's intention. Thus the hermeneutic circle circumvents the problems posed by the epistolary genre and attains full closure as an unmediated, "heart-to-heart" relation is achieved on a higher level between the isolated writer and the equally isolated reader. One might even extend Darnton's analysis to the point of contending that the writer/reader relation is an unproblematic displacement of that between the Hidden God and the believer in certain Protestant confessions.

One may note in a prefatory way a bizarre dissonance that Darnton's interpretation of Rousseau creates in the book as a whole. The burden of

the first chapter on folktales was to establish that "Frenchness exists . . . it is a distinct cultural style; and it conveys a particular view of the world . . . Frenchness makes for ironic detachment" (p. 61). The world in the "worldview" of "Frenchness" is mean and hard, and the message is simple: "The world is made of fools and knaves . . . better to be a knave than a fool." This "message" presumably became "a master theme of French culture in general, at its most sophisticated as well as its most popular level" (p. 64). Rousseau was, of course, from Geneva, but, whether it be classified as emblematic of "Frenchness" or not, his "message" appealed to French readers such as Ranson. For Rousseau the world was corrupt. But, on Darnton's interpretation, the conclusion to be drawn seems radically at odds with the putative "master theme" established by folktales. Without a trace of irony, *l'Ami* Jean-Jacques told people to suspend disbelief in illusion—indeed, to be good or else they would feel bad. One may question Darnton's reading of both folktales and Rousseau. But the "lesson" one may nonetheless draw is that anything as intricate as French culture cannot be approached in terms of stereotypes of national character or "master themes."

The missing link in Darnton's analysis of Rousseau would appear to be situated between the paradox Rousseau seems to transcend (but presumably does not) and the type of reader—presented by Darnton as ideal—who, indeed, does believe that he transcends the paradox in taking literature as an unmediated charter for life. ("Ranson did not read in order to enjoy literature but to cope with life and especially family life, exactly as Rousseau intended" [p. 241].) Are aspects of Rousseau's text elided or obliterated in the now cliché-ridden "willing suspension of disbelief" that Darnton perhaps too readily identifies as the mechanism through which Rousseau seems to transcend paradox and through which the reader, getting the message, apparently does achieve transcendence and unmediated communication with the author? Darnton has located a possible reading of Rousseau that was in fact "actualized" by certain letter-writing readers—a reading with which he agrees. He has also located a stratum or dimension of what may be called, for convenience's sake, Rousseau's text—that in which the author strives for transparency, immediate communication, and authenticity that transcends fiction toward a higher reality or truth. But the work of Jean Starobinski and Jacques Derrida, among others, has alerted contemporary readers to the manner in which Rousseau's repeated quest for transparency, authenticity, and full "presence" of self to self and of self to other is repeatedly displaced and disoriented by "obstacles," detours, doubts, and other paradoxical "remainders" that are at best only seemingly transcended—indeed, at times not trans-cended but, rather, insistently explored in the text.[5] This point would at least induce one not to take Ranson's reading as canonical but to test it against a critical reading of the text.

It is noteworthy that Rousseau writes two prefaces to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* —a fact that alerts one to the general problem of doubling and repetition in the text. Not only are themes and textual strategies repeated from preface to preface but, in addition, the second preface has a dialogic form in which the narrative voice is doubled. The point I would stress is not that one has a literal dialogue with two separate entities or persons involved in an exchange of views. In fact, the full identity of the interlocutors is impeded or even denied in that they are not given proper names but only letters as self-designations: "N" and "R." It would, moreover, be dubious simply to identify "R" as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, biographical author of the text, for the dialogic relation between "N" and "R" is an intense interaction of voices or perspectives that engage, challenge, threaten, tempt, and cajole one another. The interlocutors are hybridized or liminal beings who exist on one another's margins. Indeed, there is some "N" in "R" and some "R" in "N."

Rousseau's own complex relation to the two interlocutors is made textually explicit in the very obsessive question concerning the status of the author and the editor. Indeed, the exchanges concerning this issue might even be read as signs of the "death of the author" in the sense of a full identity or presence whose intentionality masters the work and play of the text. Darnton himself quotes a portion of an exchange relevant to the issue:

> R [Rousseau]: Does a man of integrity hide himself when he speaks to the public? Does he dare to publish something that he will not dare acknowledge? I am the editor of this book, and I will name myself in it as editor.
> N: You will name yourself in it? You?
> R: I, myself.
> N: What! You will put your name to it?
> R: Yes, Monsieur.
> N: Your real name? *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* spelled out in full?
> R: *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* spelled out in full.

Darnton stops his quotation before the next important exchange:

> N: You surely don't think—What will people say?
> R: What they please. I name myself at the head of this collection not to appropriate it but to be answerable for it. If it contains anything bad, let it be imputed to me; if good, I desire no praise. If one finds the book in itself to be bad, there is all the more reason for putting my name to it. I do not want to pass for better than I am.[6]

Here "R" in the name of Rousseau disclaims authorship that would allow full appropriation of the text but insists on being answerable for it. But can

any writer, who is always involved in tensely negotiating a way among various and often heterogeneous discursive practices, from the particular works of other writers to anonymous currents and clichés—at times to the point of being "ventriloquated" by them—ever claim more? Rousseau would simply seem to be making explicit the role of answerable "editor" that inheres in the practice of writing—a role mystified by any pretension to full authorship. (He would also proleptically cast doubt on any attempt to interpret the text as a mere expression of authorial intention—much less as prophetic utterance—with the prefaces as an unproblematic "how-to" manual for reading.) But with more insistence, passion, and energy than is common, he also inscribes the doubling and internal dialogization that takes place in a critical and self-questioning discourse. His discourse would seem to call for readers who are able to meet or at least to recognize its demands—readers who attempt to come to terms with its complexities but who do not renounce the passion in reading that for Darnton "we can barely imagine, that is as alien to us as the lust for plunder among the Norsemen . . . or the fear of demons among the Balinese" (*The Great Cat Massacre*, p. 251).

The preface does not "solve" any of the problems explored in the principal text. It "repeats" them in an anticipatory way by reenacting them on another level of discourse. The author/editor relationship is itself doubled by the reality/fiction relation, which is a repeated motif of the two prefaces. In the first preface, Rousseau (who again asserts that he has named himself at the head of the collection "not to appropriate it but to be answerable for it") states: "Although I here have only the title of editor, I myself have worked at this book, and I do not hide the fact from myself. Am I the sole author [*ai-je fait le tout*], and is the entire correspondence a fiction? People of the world, what does it matter to you! Certainly for you it is all a fiction."[7] In this passage, Rousseau is ironic in fending off the question of whether the epistolary novel is real or fictive. For *le monde* it is fictive in the ordinary and somewhat pejorative sense of the term. That is as much as he is willing to concede in a defiant tone. Concerning the truth of the facts in the text, he later states that he has been several times in the country of the two lovers but has not heard of the various characters. Furthermore: "I must also warn the reader that the topography is grossly changed in several places; whether because of a desire to deceive the reader or because of the author's ignorance, I leave undetermined. Let everyone think as he pleases."[8] Here again Rousseau does not decide the issue of whether the text is "real" or "fictive" but ironically alerts the reader to problems in reading the text. In the second preface the theme of reality and fiction is treated in a similarly inconclusive way. At the very outset "N" asks: "Is this correspondence real or is it a fiction?" And "R" replies: "I don't see the point of the question. In order to say whether a book is good or bad, what difference does it make how it was made?"[9] Later in the

dialogue, "R" even raises some extremely disconcerting questions about himself as subject: "Who can say whether I am beset with the same doubts as you are? Whether all this air of mystery is not perhaps a pretence [*une feinte*] to conceal from you my own ignorance concerning what you want to know?"[10] Without attempting to trace the further exchanges on the issue, I would simply note that the effect of the continually displaced mooting of the relation between reality and fiction is to question the pertinence to the text of this opposition. The text is neither purely "real" nor purely "fictive" in the ordinary senses of those catch-all terms, just as Rousseau is neither simply the "real" author nor the "fictive" editor of the text. The text—and "Rousseau" as writer—are situated in a more problematic zone not entirely defined by clear-cut oppositions.

The shifting relations between "N" and "R" make any determination of their identities and relation to "Rousseau" problematic as well. At times they seem at odds on an issue, but they also converge or even come close to exchanging positions. The very end of the dialogue is particularly instructive in this respect.

> N: I advise you to exchange roles with me. Pretend that I urged you to publish this Collection, and that you resisted. Put the objections in your mouth, and give me the answers. This will be more modest, and will have a better effect.
> R: Would that be in keeping with the character for which you praised me a while ago?
> N: No. I tried to trap you. Leave things as they are.[11]

The seeming agreement achieved by the two interlocutors at the end of the second preface is complex. It cannot be reduced to a full closure of the hermeneutic circle. "N" appears in the role of devil's advocate to tempt "R." He almost seems to express a thought that might have occurred naturally to "R" himself. But the role reversal or substitution that "N" proposes would simply have inverted a hierarchy and recreated an invidious distinction between the interlocutors. "N" would have become a supplicant and "R" a holier-than-thou figure of humility. "R's" loss in rejecting this offer is not total: he intimates that the affirmation of the ways in which one is not praiseworthy is itself quite praiseworthy. But his refusal does reproduce differences between the interlocutors while not going to the extreme of pure opposition or invidious pretense. One may well ask whether this exchange marks the limit of communication itself.

Claude Lévi-Strauss would not be my candidate as Rousseau's "ideal" reader (if such an idealization exists), but he may well be preferable to Jean Ranson. One thing that made Rousseau so appealing for Lévi-Strauss was that, in his quest for a form of agreement respectful of noninvidious differences, *l'Ami* Jean-Jacques made room for nonhuman

beings such as the cat. Whether this quest should be classified as "real" or "fictive" may itself be beside the point, although we too seem unable or unwilling to let go of the question. Indeed, the cat might even be said to have a "practical sense" to which we can respond with a glance of involuntary understanding—a glance that neither fully transcends language nor remains totally within its problematic borders. To say this is not to subscribe to the contemplative aesthetic that Lévi-Strauss at times seems to suggest. Nor is it to deny that Rousseau's writing has critical implications for social and political life. But it is to contest the thoroughly domesticated identification of those implications, via putative authorial intention, with the sentimental wedded life of a reasonably wealthy bourgeois of the time and to contest their interpretation, via a so-called ethnographic reading, in terms of an exclusionary, anthropocentric "worldview."

Notes

1 The works in question are Roger Chartier, "Text, Symbols, and Frenchness," *Journal of Modern History* 57 (1985): 682–95; Robert Darnton, "The Symbolic Element in History," *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986): 218–34, and *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984). Page references in the text refer to these works.
2 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, [1955], trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York, 1974), pp. 414–15.
3 Nicolas Contat, *Anecdotes typographiques* [1762], ed. Giles Barber (Oxford, 1980).
4 On this problem, see my "Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the 'Culture' Concept," in *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).
5 See, e.g., Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris, 1957); and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; reprint, Baltimore and London, 1974).
6 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris, 1961), 2:27 (translation is mine).
7 Ibid., p. 5.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p. 11.
10 Ibid., p. 28.
11 Ibid., p. 30.