

TEXTS, SYMBOLS AND FRENCHNESS

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Any French historian will find Robert Darnton's most recent book¹ an invitation to reflection, but—and let me make this clear from the start—that is what makes the work of such engrossing interest. An invitation to reflection, first, because it combines two purposes generally considered incompatible: understanding the radical foreignness of the behavior and thought of men of three centuries ago and distinguishing a lasting French identity in that alien world. "Frenchness exists," Darnton writes, discernible in peasant tales of the eighteenth century (or before), embodied in the heroes of a French national literature, and present to this day in popular wisdom. How, though, is it possible to trace a continuity of this sort in texts or actions that Darnton himself qualifies as "opaque" and likely to contain strong "doses of cultural shock" for today's readers? This is the first question the book raises.

On another plane, the work is intended as a rigorous critique of French historiography, the history of *mentalités* in particular. Darnton offers two reproaches, both here and in other works, that a French historian is sure to find unsettling. First, he considers the very notion of *mentalités* woolly, vague, and imprecise: "Despite a spate of prolegomena and discourses on method, however, the French have not developed a coherent conception of *mentalités* as a field of study. They tend to load the term with notions of *représentations collectives* derived from Durkheim and the *outillage mental* that Lucien Febvre picked up from the psychology of his day. Whether *mentalité* will bear the load remains to be seen."² Second, he strongly objects to the program and the practice of the history of *mentalités* in its serial and quantitative form, defined by Pierre Chaunu as *histoire sérielle au troisième niveau* (the "third level," after the economic and the social, being that of culture).³ The history of *mentalités*, in this view, must be based on the

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collection of massive amounts of homogeneous, reiterated data treated in ways similar to the methods used for analyzing economic, demographic, or sociological serial data. This leads Darnton to a diagnosis of French cultural history: "The French attempt to measure attitudes by counting—counting masses for the dead, pictures of Purgatory, titles of books, speeches in academies, furniture in inventories, crimes in police records, invocations to the Virgin Mary in wills, and pounds of candle wax burned to patron saints in churches." He objects to this method on two counts: first, "cultural objects" are not of the same nature as the serialized data studied by economic history or demographic history, since "they are not manufactured by the historian but by the people he studies. They give off meaning. They need to be read, not counted." Second, culture cannot be considered as a "level" of some social entity resembling a three-story house because all interpersonal relationships are of a cultural nature, even those we qualify as "economic" or "social." By their emphasis on counting and their "undervaluation of the symbolic element in social intercourse" (p. 258), French historians have, in the last analysis, lost track of what is essential. Darnton's criticism is severe, but is it really pertinent to an understanding of what French cultural history in fact is? Is the program outlined by Pierre Chaunu twelve years ago (following his reading of Michel Vovelle's thesis on Provençal wills) a fair expression of what French historians are producing today? Darnton's aim is true and he hits the bull's-eye, but what is his target worth?

Darnton's book is presented as an essay in historical anthropology—better, as an "anthropological mode of history"—capable of going beyond the insoluble contradictions in which the history of *mentalités* "à la française" has come to be imprisoned. Anthropology has much to offer the historian: an approach (gaining entry into another culture by starting from a seemingly incomprehensible, "opaque" rite, text, or act); a program ("to 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" [p. 260]); and a concept of culture as a "symbolic world" in which shared symbols, "like the air we breathe," serve thought and action, mold classification and judgment, and furnish warnings or indictments. To understand a culture, then, is above all to retrace the significations invested in the symbolic forms culture makes use of. There is only one way to do this: to go "from text to context" and vice versa; to compare each specific and localized use of one symbol or another to the "world of significance" that lends it meaning. Such a program is different from that of historical anthropology as it has come to be defined within the *Annales* tradition, which consists essentially in a historical treatment of anthropological objects. For Darnton, reference to anthropology has a different status, since it purportedly brings "the historian what the study of *mentalité* has failed to provide: a coherent conception of culture."⁴ This "coherent conception" bears a signature, however—that of Clifford Geertz, with whom for six years Darnton presented a seminar

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at Princeton University (from which the present book sprang) on the topic "History and Anthropology." *The Great Cat Massacre* uses the concept of culture in a strictly Geertzian sense, as expressed, for example, in *The Interpretation of Cultures* as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life."⁵ Under what conditions can a historian legitimately make use of a definition of this sort? What attitude does it imply vis-à-vis texts that give access to the "symbolic forms" that functioned in ancient societies? Is it sufficient to the founding of a new way of writing cultural history, freed from the incertitudes of a defunct history of *mentalités*? These are questions that the book encourages us to pose as clearly as possible.

Before turning to these questions, however, we need to state what the book is. It contains six essays connected by a good many echoing motifs and joined by a common principle placing any specific "text" into the "context" that makes its interpretation feasible. In the first essay, the text is furnished by French popular tales, as collected by folklorists between 1870 and 1914. These presumably offer a written form of versions of the same tales that were passed on orally during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—versions independent of and predating the more "learned" written tales of Perrault, Madame d'Aulnoy, or the comtesse de Murat. In order to understand these tales, which contain surprising amounts of crudity and cruelty, we need to relate them to the social experiences and daily practices of the world in which they circulated, the peasant society of the Ancien Régime, now fairly familiar to us through regional and general studies that have appeared in the last twenty-five years. Darnton's interpretation is that French tales communicate, in a specific and national manner, a body of learnings concerning the social world and precautions to be taken or rules to be followed to make one's way in that world. "Frenchness exists," and in this case it consists in a morality of guile, in a celebration of ruse, the only recourse in an unfeeling, unjust, and brutal society. In this view, the way peasants construed the world is expressed in such tales in a thought not formulated in clear and distinct ideas, but arising out of the manipulation of a repertory of symbols in story form.

This is the process described in "The Great Cat Massacre," the essay that gives the book its title and its jacket design (an engraving from William Hogarth's series on the *Stages of Cruelty*, emblazoned with the French colors). The "text" is the story of a massacre of cats carried out by apprentice and journeyman printers on the rue Saint-Séverin in Paris in the 1730s. The episode is related by one of the massacrers, who later became first a *prote* (foreman) and then an engraver, in a manuscript entitled *Anecdotes typographiques*, bearing the date 1762. Ill fed by their master and kept awake by neighborhood cats, the apprentices and journeymen decide to

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take revenge. First they harass the master and his wife with nocturnal meowings near their bedroom window, then they carry on (at the master's request) a veritable cat-hunt including la Grise, the mistress's adored pussycat, which they smash to pieces with an iron bar. The slaughter ends in a parody of justice when some of the feline victims are condemned to be hanged after a mock trial. The scene infuriates the master, throws the mistress into despair when she realizes that la Grise is dead, and sends the workers into fits of laughter. It all seems to them so comic that they are still laughing over it long after, spurred on by the talent for mimicry of one of their number, who replays the scene, acting out the master's fury and the mistress's distress.

Why all this laughter over a horrible massacre? We need to turn to the "context" to see. Here it is of three sorts: social, involving tensions existing between master printers and journeymen in Paris; festive, borrowing from the rituals of Carnival and *compagnonnage*; and symbolic, endowing the cat with multiple significance to make it an incarnation of the Devil, a stand-in for the household, and a symbol of female sexuality. By playing on these plural meanings, the journeyman printers could attack their bourgeois and his wife without resorting to physical violence. The mistress is cast in the role of a witch with no need to put it into words; her womanly honor is attacked without raising a hand to threaten her virtue. The metonymic aggression that directs to the cats the violence symbolically aimed at the masters (who are helpless to respond) is so clever and so well carried out that it necessarily leads to laughter—hearty and long-lasting laughter.

In his first two essays Darnton follows the model of "thick description" to the letter. The massacre of Parisian cats is like the cockfight in Bali: it is a point of entry that gives us access to the comprehension of a culture in its entirety. It is one "text" among others that make up this culture. It provides us with an interpretation which that culture gives of itself. Once their symbolic forms are deciphered, the folk tales or the ritual can reveal the significances it is their task to manifest and the statements concerning society with which they have been invested. This approach, now classical, is fertile, but it nevertheless raises a question: Is it legitimate to consider as "texts" actions carried out or tales told? To be sure, the old tales can be known only through the fixed written form folklorists have given them, and the cat massacre would never have been heard of if Nicolas Contat, the author of the *Anecdotes typographiques*, had not written of it thirty years after the event took place. But can we qualify as a text both the written document (the only remaining trace of an older practice) and that practice itself? Is there not a risk here of confusing two sorts of logic, the logic of written expression and the logic that shapes what "practical sense" produces? Metaphorical use of terms like "text" or "reading" is always risky, and it is even more so when the only access to the object under anthropological investigation is a *written* text. Not only does it obliterate the ways of

speaking or acting that gave the tale or the rite as much significance as its literal meaning (or even more); above all, a real text with a status of its own stands between the observer and this oral or festive supposed "text." In this sense, the massacre of the cats is not the cockfight: in relating it and interpreting it the historian is dependent on a report that has already been made of it and a text that is already in existence, invested with its own specific ends. This text exhibits the event, but it also constitutes the event as the result of the act of writing. "The funniest thing that ever happened in the printing shop of Jacques Vincent, according to a worker who witnessed it, was a riotous massacre of cats" (p. 75), Darnton writes in the introduction to his essay. The whole question, obviously, lies in the status to be given this "according to": it may very well refer to an eyewitness, but it quite certainly refers to a text maker.

The two initial essays are followed by four others that appear to deviate somewhat from the principles stated in the introduction. It is immediately evident that the texts on which they are based belong to another cultural level than peasant tales or a printer's yarn. They include an anonymous description of the city of Montpellier written by a local bourgeois in 1768; a series of 501 reports written between 1748 and 1753 by Joseph d'Hémery, inspecteur de la librairie (inspector of the book trade), on the men of letters of his time; the "Système figuré des connaissances humaines" from the *Encyclopédie*; and letters addressed by a La Rochelle merchant, Jean Ranson, to the director of the Société Typographique of Neuchâtel, Frédéric-Samuel Ostervald, in which Ranson places book orders and comments on his reading. In the analysis of these documents the relationship between text and context becomes somewhat hazy; at the most we might speak of intertextual comparisons, for example, between Ranson's letters on Rousseau and the thoughts of other readers of Rousseau's works, or between the branching investigations of the *Encyclopédie* and similar "trees of knowledge" proposed earlier by Bacon or Chambers. In these four studies, the text is always taken in itself and for itself and analyzed for its intentions and mechanisms. Darnton concentrates on the categories and images that lie behind the descriptions given; on the rhetorical strategies that aim at imposing a new order (to the advantage of pre-Revolutionary burghers in the Montpellier text or of the Philosophes in d'Alembert's "Discours préliminaire"); and on the ways in which the various authors use the written word, as they read it or produce it, to construe and construct their own existence. Can intellectual and affective forms taken in this sense really be called "symbolic"? And can an approach that aims at reconstructing the categories and classifications at work within texts to describe or select and set up hierarchies among people and items of knowledge be called anthropological? This seems doubtful, unless we accept an extremely broad definition of symbolic forms—so broad that it would lose all specific content, at which point it becomes difficult to see what would be excluded from the category of the symbol.

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Even though Darnton's intention is to interpret "a massacre of cats in the same vein as the *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie*" (p. 7), there is an incontestable rupture in the book between the first two essays and the last four. The first two aim at recreating a situation on an anthropological terrain; hence they take the written texts only as a means of access to the spoken tale or to the act of the massacre. The remaining four attempt to show how both a position within society and an intellectual stance are expressed by means of a piece of writing (descriptive, administrative, philosophical, or epistolary). 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 the 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.

We can now return to the three questions posed earlier, beginning with the one raised by Darnton's attempt to define a French identity on the basis of practices or texts that he qualifies as alien to us and opaque. This objective might appear astonishing and provocative, given that it aims at tracing national continuity in cultural forms that owe nothing either to the centralized state or to a sense of homeland. French historians, ill accustomed to associating popular culture and national history, might well find this unsettling. The heritage of a social history that gave priority to regional and local divergences and an awareness that the same rituals or the same motifs existed in the various societies of other European anciens régimes have helped remove the study of cultural practices from the framework of the state. More recently, the return to national history that inspires several ongoing projects (one by Fernand Braudel) presupposes an emphasis on the role of the state in centralizing and unifying the country, while cultural traditions may well appear, in this view, as holding back or shackling the foundation of a feeling of belonging to a nation. Darnton's objective is thus more novel than it seems when he calls for a reevaluation of the national traits that make French folk tales different from their German or Italian counterparts based on the same story, for example. 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. "Frenchness exists," *sans doute*, but certainly not as an entity that spans the centuries.

The second question Darnton's book raises is whether a strict conformity to a program for *histoire sérielle au troisième niveau* is a necessary characteristic of French cultural history. A pronouncement of the sort seems to take little account of the discussions under way or the fields of research under investigation today. Some of the scholars most firmly rooted in the *Annales* tradition have themselves raised questions concerning the choice of categories and the methods once considered obligatory to the study of *mentalités*. A quantification that reifies what is contained in thought has been criticized as illusory, since this supposes either that cultural and intellectual entities are immediately available in quantifiable objects, or else that collective thought must be seized in its most repetitive and least personal expressions, thus reduced to a limited set of formulas to be studied merely as present in a given society in greater or lesser number. To combat this reduction of thoughts to objects or to "objectivations"—to counter a simplistic sociology that establishes strict correspondences between the various social levels and cultural forms—a definition of history primarily sensitive to inequalities in the appropriation of common materials or practices has come into being. Serial data can and should continue to be collected, if only to give a preliminary notion of the extent and distribution of cultural objects and practices (Darnton's own highly quantitative recent studies on late eighteenth-century best-sellers are perhaps the best example of this). Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the most pressing question inherent in cultural history today, not only in France but *also* in France, is that of the different ways in which groups or individuals make use of, interpret, and appropriate the intellectual motifs or cultural forms they share with others. Hence the complex of shifts in the historian's task to focus attention on individual careers, to revoke or cast doubt on the canonical separation between the popular and the learned, and to attempt a reconstruction of practices on the basis of representations given of them and objects manipulated in them.⁶ This may not be the "anthropological mode of history" that Darnton aspires to, but it decidedly is not, or is no longer, the cost accountant's history that he claims is typical of the French.

Darnton's criticism has two parts, however: he speaks of "overcommitment to the quantification of culture" but also of "undervaluation of the symbolic element in social intercourse." We need to think a moment about this "symbolic element" and about the definition of culture as a "symbolic world." The notion of symbol is taken in its broadest sense, following Geertz's

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definition, as "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception." Is this in any true sense a workable definition? Let us look at the question "from the native's point of view" and open one of the older dictionaries, Furetière's, for example, in its 1727 edition. *Symbole* is given as: "sign, type, sort of emblem, or representation of some thing moral, by the images or the properties of natural things. Figure or image that serves to designate some thing, either by means of painting or sculpture, or by discourse. The lion is the symbol of valor; the ball that of inconstancy; the pelican that of eternal love." It is clear, then, that the symbol is a sign, but a specific, particular sign, which implies a relation of representation—for example, the representation of an abstraction by a figure. In order to be qualified as "symbolic," the relation between a sign and what it makes known to us, which is invisible, supposes that this sign is put in the place of the thing represented, that it is the representing thing. Thus for a man of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, hieroglyphics, enigmas, and emblems were symbols par excellence.

Although symbols are signs, however, not all signs are symbols, to the extent that the relation that connects them to the things of which they are the "indication" or the "mark" is not necessarily a relation of representation. Under the word *signe*, Furetière's dictionary lists several of these other possible relationships between the signifier and the signified: identification through a recognition of the whole by means of a part ("this child, who had long been lost, was recognized by a sign he bore on his thigh"); diagnosis in which a state is deduced from a property (as in certain or probable "medical signs"); prediction or presage that deciphers the future on the basis of the present. These acceptations, ancient and common, in a dictionary of the French language reflecting and popularizing the theory of the sign as it had been formulated by the logicians and grammarians of Port-Royal, stand as a first warning against too broad a use of the term "symbol." In point of fact, they clearly indicate that not all the signs manipulated in a given culture are by any means symbols, which necessarily require a relationship of representation between the visible sign and the referent signified. To be sure, the historian or the anthropologist is not obliged to remain prisoner of the thought categories of the men he studies, and he has a perfect right to draw up his own analytical vocabulary. I recall this older sense of "symbol" for a particular reason—to note that anyone concerned primarily with reconstructing the way in which men of the eighteenth century conceived of and expressed their relations with the world should pay strict attention to the definitions that they themselves gave of the term to designate the mode held to be essential to this way of thinking and of speaking. And to remark—once more in contrast to too loose a definition of the term "symbol," which by broadening the notion makes it less readily comprehensible—that the old definitions better enable us to formulate a working meaning of the term by founding such a meaning in a

particular type of relation between the sign and the signified in the relation of representation.

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. Therefore it seems difficult to postulate 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. Furthermore, how can one postulate that symbolic forms are organized into a "system"? This would suppose coherence among them and interdependence, which in turn supposes the existence of a shared and unified symbolic universe. During the Ancien Régime, in any event, such a system and such a unity seem highly doubtful, given the multiple cleavages in French society, fragmented by differences in age, sex, status, profession, religion, residence, education, and so forth. Have we then a right to think that, beyond this discontinuity of particular cultures, each of which secreted its own "pattern of meaning," there existed a symbolic culture that could be held to englobe the others and to propose a system of symbols accepted by everyone? The errors of one particular form of the social history of culture, which attempts at any cost to correlate every form and every bit of raw data with a specific social "level" (usually identified in dryly socioprofessional terms), are insufficient to persuade us, without reservations, of the validity of a "general idiom" capable of accounting for all single expressions. Here again, metaphorical use of the vocabulary of linguistics comports a certain danger.

Ascertaining the status of symbolic forms is not to be taken for granted, then, and although the traditional vocabulary of cultural history is hardly satisfactory, borrowings from anthropology do not in themselves resolve all uncertainties. They may even create a few problems of their own by destroying the "textuality" of texts that relate the symbolic practices being analyzed. The now famous cat massacre is a case in point. We know of it from a manuscript text entitled *Anecdotes typographiques. Où l'on voit la description des coutumes, moeurs et usages singuliers des compagnons imprimeurs*, dated September 1, 1762, dedicated to d'Hémery, inspecteur de la librairie, and signed "Mxxx (Le Brun) Ancien Prote, Graveur et Auteur."

The title page bears an address, "A Bruxelles. Chez Pierre Hardy, A la Vérité," that is doubly fictitious, since the text was not printed and no such printer existed.⁷ Giles Barber has managed to trace the author: "Le Brun" was one Nicolas Contat, a wood engraver who began his career in 1737 as an apprentice to the printer Vincent on the rue Saint-Séverin. Jean-Michel Papillon mentions the change of name in his *Traité historique et pratique de la gravure en bois* (1766) but offers no explanation for it: "The so-named Contat, called Le Brun, formerly a Printer or Worker in Letters, has always worked in wood engraving." Thus the text has an identifiable and identified author. Is this reason enough to conclude, with Darnton, that his work belongs in "the line of autobiographical writing by printers that stretches from Thomas Platter to Thomas Gent, Benjamin Franklin, Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, and Charles Manby" (p. 78)?

This text with no "I" makes a curious autobiography. It presents a hero named Jérôme who is not immediately present (he appears only at the end of chap. 3) or continuously present and who never speaks as the grammatical subject of a statement but is always the object of description. The procedure followed in the text is to give a succession of general statements that are either pronouncements of supposed universal verities concerning the printing trade or descriptions of what happens to Jérôme and his companions. In neither case is the enouncing subject clearly designated. This gives the text an odd tone: the reader never really knows who is speaking, and the various adventures that befall the hero are as if neutralized, set off at a distance, and stripped of their reality by the author's use of the present indicative or the historic future. None of the usual marks of autobiography can be found in this text, and its editor, Giles Barber, remarks that it is possible neither "to find any precise motive for the writing of the *Anecdotes typographiques*, nor to establish the exact status of the text and to know for whom it was intended."

I would like to hazard a hypothesis: Contat's *Anecdotes* belong in 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. As in such texts, Contat first presents the differentness of the world he intends to unveil. For him, the *enfants de l'Imprimerie* constitute "a people, or rather a republic that lives separate from the other nations"—a republic with its own laws, government, and language, which the text is about to exhibit before the eyes of all. It is hardly surprising to find the same elements as in the literature of revelation such as, for example, works published since the later Middle Ages promising to divulge the secrets of sham beggars' organizations. First the various degrees of initiation are related, then the various sorts of apprenticeship are described, and a dictionary translates terms specific to the trade. Rather than to autobiographies, then, the text seems close to works that owed their success (on occasion a resounding one, as in the case of the *Jargon ou*

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langage de l'Argot réformé, which describes the monarchical and corporative organization of the beggars' and vagabonds' kingdom) to the divulgation of the secrets, real or imaginary, of communities held to be to some extent mysterious.

During the eighteenth century, there were two genres that breathed new life into this sort of literature. First, there were descriptions of crafts and trades. Contat alludes to these directly in his "Avis au lecteur en forme de préface": "A Dictionary and an exact description of the instruments that serve for the crafts and trades has just won your suffrages, what must a faithful portrait of the instruments of the author and of the conservator of the arts [printing] produce and excite in you; of those men who generously spend their days to procure for us the beautiful engravings [that are] the fruit of their wakeful nights?" A second model for the work, travel accounts, is more implicit. The subtitle of the *Anecdotes typographiques*, "in which one sees the description of the customs, mores, and usages singular to the Journeyman printers," imitates the title of many a travel account. Contat plays on this parallel to announce that he is about to transport the reader to an isolated people, exotic in its own way, but close at hand.

Although it is clear that the entire text is founded on personal experience and on an intimate knowledge of the printing trade, the work is not primarily autobiographical in nature. Its announced intention is dual: "to pique the public's curiosity" by proposing "anecdotes," a "description," and an account (*une histoire*) of a trade rich in secrets; and to use this publicity to defend the independence and the tradition of the community of print workers, threatened, according to the "Avis au lecteur," by the government, who, "armed with all its despotic authority attempted to make changes and disunite the Companions." This perhaps explains the choice of a particular mode of discourse that uses the various anecdotes as *exempla* charged with the incarnation of universal verities. Thus a description of the printing trade that both publicizes and argues in favor of the profession is interwoven with narrative elements, grouped around the character of Jérôme, that dramatize the life of this community and enliven the text with anecdotic tales.

I do not mean by this judgment that the *Anecdotes* has no relation to social reality or that what it relates is pure fiction. My interpretation of the text should lead us to raise questions, however, concerning the *discursive* function attributed to each anecdote or episode and to avoid hasty conclusions concerning their "reality." The cat massacre is one of the *exempla* to illustrate the tricks the weak play on the strong and the revenge of the wily on those who torment them. In this it resembles the plot of French folk tales celebrating ruse and the ingeniousness of the lowly turned against the masters. Did the massacre ever take place? Probably. As Contat tells of it? We cannot know and will never know. But it is clear that for us it remains a massacre in writing. Thus we need above all to decipher its function in the text.

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But, someone might object, what difference does it make whether symbolic manipulations fall into the category of acts that actually took place or into that of imagined writing? Is not the same hostility toward the master expressed in both cases? Is he not attacked in the same way, using an animal and using parody, both charged with symbolic meanings? The objection is valid, even if, as is obvious, the social effects of a collective act or an individual's invention are not the same. It obliges us to return to the detail of the narration itself. Darnton sees in it three "ceremonial and symbolic themes" that turn the scene into a witch-hunt (with the printer's wife as the witch), a charivari, and a carnival mock trial (pp. 96-98). For him, the presence of the "theme of sorcery" is attested by the text's choice of words in expressions such as *des chats endiablés font toute la nuit un sabbat* ("Some bedeviled cats celebrate a witches' sabbath all night long"); *le lendemain Monsieur Leveillé fait son sabbat et passerait pour sorcier si on ne le connaissait pas* ("Leveillé stages a sabbath the next night. If you didn't know him, you would be convinced he was a witch"); or *il est décidé que ce sont des chats envoyés, que l'on a jeté quelque sort* ("The word spread that there is witchcraft afoot and that the cats must be the agents of someone casting a spell").⁸ The whole problem here is to discern the semantic charge of this vocabulary of sorcery within the culture of Paris artisans of the early eighteenth century. Is it unthinkable that such terms had lost much of their original force to become a neutralized, weakened vocabulary that no longer necessarily implied the images or the ideas that they bore a century earlier? Let us turn once more to Furetière: *Sabbat* "is said by extension of a great noise, of shouting such as one imagines is made at the Sabbath. There are the cats, beginning their *sabbat* in the gutters." Hence the word had come some distance from its first referent, passing, as the linguists say, from denotation to simple connotation. Contat attests to this himself when he calls the cook who mistreats the apprentices and journeymen *diable incarné habillé en femme* ("the Devil incarnate dressed as a woman"). Must we necessarily conclude that when he speaks of her in these terms he really thinks the cook a sorceress as the seventeenth century understood the term? Similarly, the allusion to a spell cast, of which the parish priest is aware, does not seem sufficient evidence on which to decide that the cat-hunt was ordered by the master as a substitute for an exorcism, nor that the mistress is accused of being herself a witch. Words are just as mobile as symbols and are charged with meaning to unequal degrees. It is not at all certain that the use of terms taken from the vocabulary of sorcery set off the same associations among Parisian printers as a hundred years earlier in peasant culture.

Is the massacre a charivari? Darnton thinks it is, on the basis of allusions to relations between the master printer's wife and the young abbé who tutors their two sons. The master is thus cuckolded, "so the revelry of the workers took the form of a charivari" (p. 97). But is this a legitimate term for a "festivity" in which none of the elements that characterize the

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charivari are present? To return to Furetière: "*Charivari*: Confused noise that the common people make with pans, basins, and pots to show offense to someone. One makes charivaris in derision of people of highly unequal age who marry." The massacre of the rue Saint-Séverin hardly corresponds to this definition, either in its forms (there is no parade and none of the noisemaking common to charivaris) or in its supposed motivation, since adultery did not usually give rise to charivaris, which mocked either remarrying widows or henpecked husbands. The allusion to the mistress's infidelity when she deceives her husband with the young abbé probably has another function in the text. When we couple it with another intrigue between Marion, the printer's daughter, and an abbé attached to Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, it adds a joking, entertaining touch of anticlerical satire to the narration.

To finish the series, can the parodic trial of the cats that crowns the massacre be fully likened to carnival festivities? The Mardi Gras execution included one essential element missing here: the fire in which the effigy of carnival is burned. On the rue Saint-Séverin there is no pyre and no glowing coals, but only hanging cats—which is a far cry from both the carnival ritual and the typical festive use of the cat, in which (e.g., in Saint John's Eve festivities) it is thrown into the fire. The mock trial, as Darnton indicates, echoes a cultural form common among typographic workers and practiced, for example, at the Feast of Saint Martin. There is therefore no reason whatsoever to see in it a strictly carnival rite. The massacre, as Contat describes it, is thus not easy to place among folklorists' classical categories, and it is perhaps wiser to avoid trying to make it conform with the canonical forms of carnival festive culture or of the charivari. When they do away with the cats, the mistress's pet in particular, the *compagnons* make a clear statement of their animosity toward the people who use them badly. They do so by wreaking their violence on the animal who best symbolically (in the sense given above) represents the household and the lady of the house. But although it is probable that urban artisan culture attached to the cat the significance that is manipulated in the narrative and in the macabre ceremony (if it indeed took place), it is more doubtful that this culture was really playing with the full repertoire of diabolical and carnival motifs that Darnton attributes to it. This would suppose that the collective action that takes place on the rue Saint-Séverin carries with it an entire set of beliefs, rites, and behavior difficult to imagine as simultaneously inhabiting the mind of urban printshop workers of the eighteenth century.

This analysis of Contat's text—which is itself open to dispute—is intended only to point out 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

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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. If we keep these injunctions in mind we can measure the risk involved in a linguistic comparison that designates as a "general idiom" the symbolic system of a certain culture and as particular statements localized uses varying from one given set of circumstances to another. It is not a simple task for the historian to situate the statement in relation to the idiom or to measure the gap, the amount of "play," existing between the forms held to be characteristic of a culture and the individual actions or sayings—written or spoken—he finds before him. We need rigorous verification of the signs considered to be sure and clear indices of manners of thinking and feeling, and we need an explicit description of the operation by means of which a singular event is accepted as revelatory of a totality. In this sense Darnton's book, and the essay on the massacred cats in particular, brings a welcome addition to the ongoing reflection on both the nature and the status of historical proof and the relationship between the exception and the normal, or, as Edoardo Grendi writes, "the normally exceptional."⁹

This discussion of Robert Darnton's book is perhaps a bizarre way to do justice to his talents. His is not a book on theory or epistemology but, as is Darnton's wont, a work in which the society of Ancien Régime France springs to life, in which men and women of three hundred years ago become flesh and blood beings who think and suffer, cry or laugh. No reader, unless he is of a particularly bilious and carping nature, could possibly resist this sensitive and subtle quest for a lost humanity. But at the same time, the book is also intended as a "defense and illustration" of a new way of conceiving of and writing about cultural history. For this reason, I hope I shall be forgiven for turning aside for a moment from the seductive picture Darnton paints to the unavoidable grisaille of a discussion of concepts and methods.

Notes

- 1 Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 298, \$17.95. Page references in text refer to this work.
- 2 R. Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History," in *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. M. Kammen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), pp. 327–54, esp. p. 346.
- 3 P. Chaunu, "Un nouveau champ pour l'histoire sérielle: Le quantitatif au troisième niveau," in *Mélanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel*, 2 vols. (Toulouse, 1973), 1:105–25.
- 4 Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History," p. 347.
- 5 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p. 89.
- 6 An echo of these critical reevaluations of the history of *mentalités*, serial and nonserial, can be found in R. Chartier, "Intellectual History or Sociocultural

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History? The French Trajectories," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. E. La Capra and S. L. Kaplan (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 13–46; and R. Chartier, "Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France," in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. S. Kaplan (Berlin, 1984), pp. 229–53.

7 This text has been published, with an introduction and notes, by G. Barber in the Oxford Bibliographical Society Publications, n.s., vol. 20 (Oxford, 1980).

8 Darnton's translations, pp. 102–4.

9 C. Ginzburg, "Signes, traces, pistes: Racines d'un paradigme de l'indice," *Le Débat* 6 (1980): 3–44; C. Ginzburg and C. Poni, "La micro-histoire," *Le Débat* 17 (1981): 133–36.