

Henri-Jean Martin and the Birth of the History of Reading: A Memoir

In September 1972, having completed a Ph.D. in history, I began my training in librarianship in the now defunct Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago. Still at heart a historian, I opted to attend Professor Howard Winger's course on the History of the Book and for that class wrote an essay on Colard Mansion of Bruges and the evolution of the printed book. Having spent three years in Paris, Brussels and Vienna working on the books and texts that formed the library of Charles le Téméraire, it appeared to me that from the vantage point of the reader, the reading of a fifteenth-century Burgundian manuscript was very similar and in fact scarcely differed from reading an incunable.

The English-language books I encountered in my library school curriculum all emphasized the revolution of printing and presented the printed book as a seismic shift that altered every aspect of book culture. The book-length essay of 1945, *From Script to Print* by H. J. Chaytor, a distinguished Cambridge scholar of Provençal poetry typified the then received consensus that printing transformed the oral culture of the Middle Ages.¹ As students, we were assigned Elizabeth Eisenstein's then recently published article in the *Journal of Modern History* in which this approach reached its zenith.² Baldly stated, we were encouraged to believe that printing from movable type generated a "proliferation of books" that privileged extensive reading over intensive reading, and which in turn privileged rapid silent reading over reading aloud. However, at Professor Winger's suggestion, I encountered in French Henri-Jean Martin's magisterial *L'Apparition du livre* with its excellent introduction by Marcel Thomas, commissioned at the instance of Professor Martin, that placed

* Newberry Library (Chicago).

¹ Henry John CHAYTOR, *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 1945.

² Elizabeth L. EISENSTEIN, "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report", *The Journal of Modern History*, 40, 1968) p. 1-56; reprinted in *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader*, ed. Harvey J. Graff, Cambridge, CUP, 1981 (*Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture*, 3), p. 53-68.

the technology of printing in the context of its scholastic medieval antecedents, notably the *pecia* system.³

In summer 1973, the late Professor Julian Brown of the University of London at the invitation of the Medieval Academy of America offered a summer seminar in medieval palaeography at the University of Chicago. I convinced Howard Winger and the dean of students of the Library School to permit me to participate in it for credit. Julian Brown's first assignment to his twenty-odd students was to transcribe a photocopy of a leaf of an ancient Latin majuscule manuscript of a classical text written in rows of letters without any word separation whatsoever. I asked Julian why the Romans ceased to separate words, and he reflected and then sagely replied, because they emulated the Greeks, and the Greeks had not. It was an experience akin to that which Professor Martin was wont to describe when as director of the Bibliothèque municipale of Lyon he first encountered the fifth- and sixth-century Latin manuscript treasures of that library.⁴

Some months later, I began employment as a social science bibliographer in the Northwestern University Library and among my responsibilities was book selection for cognitive psychology. Soon thereafter I discovered, to my amazement, that scientists in laboratory experiments had displayed English text written entirely in capitals without word separation, and thus, unconsciously, they had replicated the ancient Greek and Latin format. These cognitive psychologists found that this continuous form of textual display led to profound changes in eye movement and greatly augmented vocalization in the act of reading. From their observations stemmed my thesis that the introduction of word separation in Ireland in the early Middle Ages was a prerequisite for modern silent reading. I wrote an abstract outlining my thesis and submitted it to the "Pen to Press Conference" that was to transpire in Baltimore in spring 1976; the program committee unanimously rejected my proposal. I submitted my proposal for inclusion in the *Manuscripta* conference scheduled for autumn 1978. This time my topic was swiftly accepted, and soon, after my paper was delivered, an abstract of it was printed in *Manuscripta*. Professor Lynn White read the abstract and invited me to submit my essay to *Viator* which I did in spring of 1980.

Meanwhile I was working each weekend cataloging the pre-1500 manuscripts of the Newberry Library financed by a federal NEH grant. At about the same time the Library was encouraged by the National Endowment

³ H.-J. MARTIN, *Les métamorphoses du livre, entretiens avec Jean-Marc Chatelain et Christian Jacob*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2004, p. 68-69.

⁴ "Lectures et mise en textes", in *Histoires de la lecture: un bilan des recherches*, ed. Roger Chartier, Actes du colloque des 29 et 30 janvier 1993, Paris, 1995, p. 250.

for the Humanities to apply for funding to establish an inter-university Center for Renaissance Studies. Since no one then on the Library staff was competent to formulate a specific mission for the Center, Professor George Huppert and I were invited to write the project statement that formed the essential element of the grant. Without any interference or supervision, we found ourselves free to propose that the Newberry Library undertake to emulate the *École des chartes* by establishing a Summer Institute in Chicago on palaeography, bibliography and the archival sciences. In Chicago in 1979, although the publications of its faculty were legendary and highly esteemed in the New World, the faculty members of the *École* and the *École* itself were little known in American academic circles, even by historians of French medieval history and medieval literature.

In 1979, our proposal having been funded by the NEH, I found myself in effect free to select the leader of the first Summer Institute. I chose Bernard Barbiche whom we knew exclusively from his publications in the *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*. Neither personal contact nor friendship played any role whatsoever. Although numerous French professors of history from the Sorbonne and the *École des Hautes Études* had been invited by colleagues to teach in American universities, in 1979 there existed no international institutional nexus to facilitate faculty exchanges in the realm of library and archival instruction. Bernard Barbiche was, I believe, the first professor of the *École* to give a full course of instruction in North America, and once in Chicago, he invited his colleague, Henri-Jean Martin, who was participating in a conference on the history of the book in Boston, to come to Chicago to give a guest lecture to his class.⁵

Monsieur Martin arrived in Chicago, and Bernard and Ségolène Barbiche invited me to lunch along with M. and Mme Martin. Professor Martin asked me the subject of my own research and I replied the history of silent reading.⁶ He seemed interested, and the upshot of our conversation was that Professor Martin gave to me the next day a copy of his article entitled, "Pour une histoire de la lecture," which had appeared three years earlier in the *Revue française d'histoire du livre*.⁷ He asked me to correct it. I was terrified. Had Professor Martin pre-empted the research and conclusions of my own article which had not yet really been officially accepted in its definitive form? How could I possibly dare to offer corrections to a published article of a faculty member

⁵ *Books and Society in History: Papers of the Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Preconference 24-28 June 1980, Boston, Massachusetts*, ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter, New York, 1983.

⁶ H.-J. MARTIN, *Les Métamorphoses du livre*, *op. cit.*, p. 239 *et seq.*

⁷ *Id.*, "Pour une histoire de la lecture", *Revue française d'histoire du livre*, nouvelle série, n° 16, 1977, p. 583-608.

of an institution that I regarded with celestial reverence? For me, it was unimaginable to emendate an article by a scholar, who, as a former librarian, had constituted a model for remaining an active scholar even though I did not have a faculty appointment. I read Martin's article and found one minor point where I could with great politeness offer a minor emendation. I, however, felt great relief that his conclusions had not duplicated my own work, but rather in a substantive manner, our two narratives complemented each other. Martin left Chicago and returned to Paris and within a fortnight Professor Barbiche approached me in the halls of the Newberry and told me that I must send a copy of my article, still in typescript, to Paris. I was again terrified. My text still had not been formally accepted for publication, but I obeyed his injunction and the communication of that article to my new friend was the beginning for me of a relationship that molded the rest of my professional life and had, I believe, some consequence on the history of reading.

Henri-Jean Martin was unlike almost all the academics that I had encountered in American universities who did not have a high regard for librarians and who patronized and encouraged only students and beginning scholars who echoed and expanded the conclusions of their masters. Martin's most impressive quality was his imagination and openness to new ideas. Although my essay departed from his 1977 conclusions, he and Professors Jean Vezin and Roger Chartier invited me to deliver a series of lectures at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*; Martin and Chartier invited me to contribute to the *Histoire de l'édition française* (1983) and subsequently Martin and Jean Vézin invited me to write for *Mise en page et mise en texte du livre manuscrit* (1990). In November 1982, Monsieur Martin published a revised edition of his essay, "Pour une histoire de la lecture," in *Le Débat* in which he generously acknowledged my work as he did again twenty years later in his conversations with Jean-Marc Chatelain and Christian Jacob, published as *Les métamorphoses du livre*.⁸

When I was a student, the history of reading constituted essentially of analyzing inventories and catalogues of private and institutional libraries, the records of public censors and where possible the archival records of printers indicating the titles published and sometimes, the number of copies produced. Thus conceived, the history of reading was predominantly about what publishers chose to print and what people chose to read and which social classes were able to read, and not how people actually read, that is to say it was not about the cognitive evolution of the act of reading itself. When the great English and American emigré scholars, Sigfrid Henry Steinberg and Helmut Lehmann-Haupt described the history of how books were read, it was

⁸ *Le Débat*, n° 22, novembre 1982, p. 160-177.

to reading in the former sense that they referred.⁹ It was also the history of reading in this sense that Martin addressed in his magisterial 1969 doctoral dissertation, *Livre, pouvoirs et société à Paris au XVII^e siècle* that analyzed the readership of different social classes.¹⁰

In the early 1980's Martin had begun to interest himself in the German literary school of reader response theory, the insights of which he rapidly transcended.¹¹ Martin increasingly began to complement the French term *lecteur* meaning reader with *liseur*, a term that suggested the reader's personal interaction with the book as an object.¹² In 1993, he spoke of this new definition of the history of reading as the history of "les manières de lire au sens le plus matériel de cette expression".¹³ Martin's great achievement was to broaden the history of the early modern book by redefining the history of reading as the history of the physiological manner of reading and in so doing he tacitly and gradually de-emphasized the significance of the invention of printing with movable types and in its stead emphasized psychology and specifically, the evolution of the cognitive modes of extracting meaning from written and printed text. He came to refer to this dimension of the history of the book in the early years of the twenty-first century as "pratiques de la lecture".¹⁴ The terms that he introduced in parallel, *pratiques de la lecture*, *mise en page* and *mise en texte*, brilliantly implied breaching the great divide in scholarship between the realms of the manuscript codices and that of printed books by implicitly resolving the question as to the definition in material terms

⁹ S. H. STEINBERG, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, Harmondsworth, 1961); Helmut LEHMANN-HAUPT, *The Book in America: A History of the Making, the Selling and the Collecting of Books in the United States*, New York, 1939. For the history of reading viewed as the history of literacy, see Carlo M. CIPOLLA, *Literacy and Development in the West*, London, Penguin Books, 1969. See as well Robert DARNTON, "What is the History of Books" and "First Steps Towards a History of Reading", essays published in 1982 and 1986, revised and republished in Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History*, New York, 1990, p. 107-135, 154-187, 358-362 and 364-368.

¹⁰ Genève, Droz, 1969, 2 vols.

¹¹ See for example Wolfgang ISER, *Der Akt des Lesens*, Munich, 1976; Hans-Robert JAUSS, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982. Martin's influence (although not explicitly acknowledged) is perceptible in Erich SCHÖN, *Der Verlust der Sinnlichkeit oder die Verwandlungen des Lesers*, Stuttgart, 1987, especially p. 1-11, 99-122 and 340-344; well summarized by Hans Erich BÖDEKER, "D'une histoire littéraire du lecteur à l'histoire du lecteur", in *Histoire de la lecture: un bilan*, *op. cit.*, p. 98-124.

¹² H.-J. MARTIN, *Les métamorphoses du livre*, *op. cit.*, p. 237-38.

¹³ *Id.*, "Lectures et mises en textes", *art. cit.*, p. 250.

¹⁴ See Martin and Chartier's introduction to *Histoire de l'édition française: Le Livre conquérant du Moyen Âge du milieu du XVII^e siècle*, Paris, Promodis, 1982, p. 10-11; H.-J. MARTIN, «Pratiques de lecture», dans *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, on line: <https://www.universalis.fr/recherche/l/1/q/94443> [8 août 2001]; *Id.*, «L'Histoire du livre: de la tentation d'une histoire globale à une réflexion sur les systèmes de communication», *Cultura. Revista de história das ideias*, 21, 2005, p. 15-26.

of what consisted a text. In the year 2000 in the conclusion of his *Naissance du livre moderne*, subtitled *Mise en page et mise en texte*, Martin revealed exactly why the ancient Greek and Roman authors would have been astonished by the page format of the manuscript and printed codices containing their works as they circulated over a millennia and a half after their composition.¹⁵

The Romans and Greeks wrote in *scriptura continua*. However even in late antiquity *mise en page* was undeniably an important aspect of text. For the Vulgate Latin Bible of Jerome, authorial contextual space was severely modified or entirely suppressed in late medieval manuscripts and in printed editions. Then in the second half of the nineteenth century, consistent with authorial intent, Jerome's lines of sense were restored to modern editions, first by Constantin von Tischendorf, subsequently by Wordsworth and White and Henri Quentin, and definitively by the Protestant editors of the 1969 Stuttgart Bible.¹⁶ Similarly for numerous medieval scholastic authors the use of red ink could properly be regarded as an essential part of thirteenth-century scholastic *mise en texte*. Martin's great contribution was to lead us to understand that according to the period and genre in which an author created a text, contextual space, intra-textual space, intra word spacing, non alphabetic signs, and punctuation and even numerical symbols could form intrinsic para-verbal elements of that text, significantly affecting the cognitive act of reading, and that contemporaneously these same formats could be retroactively imposed upon a text of an earlier age by either a scribe or eventually a type setter to create a *mise en page*, often felicitous for the reader, but entirely unanticipated by the author. Above all else, Martin explained how blank spaces, that emerged in the Middle Ages as essential elements of texts, devolved after the introduction of printing to become an integral element of Latin and French poetic and prose texts in the printed books of the seventeenth century.

Probably even more than his experiences with the ancient codices that he encountered as director of the municipal library of Lyon, Henri-Jean Martin's formation in the *École des chartes* with its emphasis on mastering the description and transcription of ancient and early medieval manuscripts led him to view printed books from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century from a medieval palaeographical perspective that set him apart from Anglo-Saxon scholars of material bibliography whom he admired greatly and virtually all other twentieth-century historians of the printed page.¹⁷ It was Martin's

¹⁵ *Id.*, *La naissance du livre moderne: Mise en page et mise en texte du livre français (XIV-XVII^e siècles)*, Paris, Éditions du Cercle de la Librairie, 2000, p. 472-475.

¹⁶ Constantin von TISCHENDORF, *Biblia Sacra Latina*, Leipzig, 1973.

¹⁷ See for comparison the essay of D.F. MCKENZIE, "Typography and Meaning: The Case of William Congreve", *Buch und Buchhandel in Europa im achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, eds. Giles Barber and Bernhard Fabian (Fünftes Wolfenbütteler Symposium, 1981), p. 81-126, reprinted in *Printers*

breadth of vision encompassing medieval antecedents combined with his limitless imagination that led him to assemble some fifty scholars of manuscript and print (some internationally known), some (like myself) quite obscure to author a collection of essays that transcended the divide of script from print. Many were professors, some were librarians, and some were antiquarian book dealers. Working together, they created the two great collective works that generated the intellectual synergy that guided Martin to the publication in the year 2000 of *La naissance du livre moderne*. A few years before his death, he confided to me that he considered this tome to be his greatest intellectual achievement.

Martin in his direction of the *Histoire de l'édition française* and *Mise en page et mise en texte du livre manuscrit* assembled not only a dynamic team of specialists, he was in medieval terminology a *nominalist* who believed that valid historical generalizations of necessity had to be based on specific objects, that is specific manuscripts and printed codices. In his collective works he and his collaborators assembled an album, unparalleled in scope and focus, of photographic images whose great value lay in visually communicating to those university-trained historians and historians of literature, many of whom never had enjoyed the opportunity to handle primary sources in their original state, an appreciation of the actual format of objects about which they often wrote in general terms eloquently and copiously, but all too frequently with insufficient precision precisely because they either had not viewed them or only in passing through the glass of a *vitrine*.

When I came to lecture in Paris in March 1983, Martin had just returned from Germany where he and Chartier had met with academic specialists in literary reception theory whose approach to the history of reading printed texts had little to do with the physical objects that transmitted those texts. He took me aside and confided to me that his goal was to apply the insights derived from describing the presence or absence of interword space in medieval manuscripts by scholars such as Richard and Mary Rouse and myself to analyzing the interaction between readers of fifteenth-, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printed books. I distinctly remember opining to him in a puzzled voice that I did not understand how that could be possible.

of the Mind and Other Essays, eds. Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez, Amherst (Mass.), 2002, p. 199-236. McKenzie's chronological scope, limited to the eighteenth century, offered scarce consideration of medieval antecedents, see pp. 100-101 and note 32; D.F. McKENZIE, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (The Panizzi Lecture, 1985), second edition, Cambridge, CUP, 1999, p. 17, 18 and 46. His new revised and expanded foreword to the second edition that placed emphasis on "the functions of white space" (p. 4), in a manner reflecting the influence of Martin; cf. D.F. McKENZIE, *What's Past is Prologue: The Bibliographical Society and the History of the Book*, S. l., 1993, p. 14-19.

I was *very* wrong. However, I did not understand fully why I was wrong until almost twenty years later when one day in Evanston I received a large package in the mail containing the strikingly beautiful *Naissance du livre moderne*. In this volume of which the seductive beauty of its illustration, design and fabrication at moments distracted me from its analytical brilliance, I came to understand that by his allusion to space, Martin had meant more broadly to include the use of intratextual space, contextual space, chapter division, numerals, signs of punctuation, color, diagrams and illustrations that had in the second half of the twentieth century formed the focus of codicological and palaeographical research in medieval manuscripts. All of these visual aspects of the page, described sometimes in excruciating detail by cataloguers and students of medieval manuscripts like Robert Marichal, Richard and Mary Rouse, E.A. Lowe, Neil Ker, Malcolm Parkes and Pierre Petitmengin, affected the manner and activity of reading far more than the evolution of letter forms in either script or print that in the early twentieth century had formed the principal focus of scholars of both palaeography and typography.¹⁸ Martin posited that in a fashion analogous (but not identical) to the continuous writing of sixth-century copies of Livy and Ammianus Marcellinus, the unparsed typographic word blocks, printed in black ink of sixteenth-century humanistic printed editions encouraged an act of reading that depended on greater sub-vocal activity than that required by the reader of pages of René Descartes's 1637 edition of the *Discours de la méthode* and his *Méditations métaphysiques*, in which numbered chapter divisions and paragraphing inspired by medieval scholastic antecedents constituted an essentially visual dimension of the author's text, a typographic innovation which Descartes embraced because it made his work accessible to a broad vernacular audience.¹⁹

In print, the chapter division and the alphabetical tables of content that the first Paris press introduced to Cicero's *De officiis* and Lorenzo Valla's *Elegantiae linguae latinae* facilitated silent reference reading of Latin in exactly the same way that the tables and page formats of the thirteenth and fourteenth century described by the Rouses had done for readers of Latin fourteenth-century scholastic texts, but for a different and far larger audience. Similarly, the format of François de Sales' spiritual works facilitated their use for silent meditation

¹⁸ See especially Robert MARICHAL, «L'Écriture latine et la civilisation occidentale du 1^{er} au XVI^e siècle», in *L'écriture et la psychologie des peuples: XXII^e Semaine de synthèse*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1963; Malcolm PARKES, "The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book", in J.J.G. ALEXANDER and M. T. GIBSON, *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays Presented to Richard William Hunt*, Oxford, 1976, p. 115-141 and plates 9-16; and Richard and Mary Rouse, Robert Marichal and Pierre Petitmengin in their contributions to the first volume of the *Histoire de l'édition française* and to *Mise en page et mise en texte du livre manuscrit*.

¹⁹ See notably the use of numbered divisions and corresponding cross references in René DESCARTES, *Méditations métaphysiques*, Paris, J. Camusat and P. Le Petit, 1647.

and prayer. To the same effect, Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac introduced into his essays the first numbered subdivisions, and later unnumbered paragraphs. The paragraphs incorporated in the second half of the seventeenth century into Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* of necessity materially and psychologically enhanced the reader's solitary experience. In a manner similar to illuminations in late medieval manuscript books of prayer, the illustrative engravings of printed tomes not only illustrated French-language books in the seventeenth century; they stimulated the reader's imaginative faculties in ways – still not fully understood – that complemented the reader's creation of a private and intimate connection to a text silently scanned. In mathematics, the printed graphic expression of numerical equations engendered levels of understanding that far transcended that of the symbols and abbreviations employed in the scientific texts of medieval scholasticism. By viewing the seventeenth-century printed page from a medieval perspective, Martin uncovered for the first time a material basis in evolving page formats for the birth of the early modern modes of reading.

The implications of Martin's approach remain profound. Just as Henry Bradshaw's essays on analytical bibliography first altered the cataloging standards for printed books and then, a half century later at the hands of Montague James, profoundly changed the standards for cataloging medieval manuscript codices, Martin's work implied the necessity of developing new paradigms for the concise descriptions of text and page format that can be incorporated into the cataloging records of Renaissance and early modern printed editions.²⁰ Such is especially the case now, because more than a decade after Henri-Jean Martin's death, advances in the application of neuroscience to reading offer new possibilities for using MRI brain scans to assess in a very precise scientific fashion the neurological implications for the history of reading of the material evolution of text format that Martin described.²¹

In recent years, Stanislas Dehaene's brilliant application of MRI scans to the analysis of reading has confirmed that while human neurological capacity has not changed in the past 10,000 years, the mode of application has evolved.²² Over time, man's ability to repurpose and exploit that circuitry has expanded.

²⁰ See Paul NEEDHAM, *The Bradshaw Method: Henry Bradshaw's Contribution to Bibliography*, Hanes Lecture, n° 7, Chapel Hill (North Carolina), 1988). See the descriptions and collations of James's *Descriptive Catalogues* of Cambridge college libraries that appeared beginning in 1895.

²¹ See very recently, Kathleen RASTLE, "EPS Mid-Career Prize Lecture 2017: Writing Systems and Language", *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, February 15, 2019, p. 1-16.

²² Stanislas DEHAENE, *Reading the Brain: The New Science of How We Read*, London, Penguin Books, 2010; *Id.*, *Consciousness and the Brain: Deciphering How the Brain Codes Our Thoughts*, *ibid.*, 2014, p. 55-59, 63-64, 67, 69-71 and 83-84. For laboratory details, see S. DEHAENE and L. COHEN, "Cultural Recycling of Cortical Maps", *Neuron*, 56, 2007, p. 384-398.

In this light, the descriptions of evolving page format in Henri-Jean Martin's *Naissance du livre moderne* constitute a monumental first step towards recording precisely those typographic changes that the human brain in early modern times came to utilize for the rapid extraction of meaning from the printed page. Future bibliographers, equipped with the tools of the neurosciences, will elevate the history of the act of reading to a rigorous level of scientific enquiry in a manner which, I believe, would have fascinated Henri-Jean Martin.

In conclusion, let me express my profound gratitude for the extremely good fortune that led me to meet and collaborate with one of the great scholars of the twentieth century and one of the finest teachers that I have had the privilege to meet.