

Introduction to *Twilight of the Literary*

by

Terry Cochran

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Address:

Département de littérature comparée

Université de Montréal

C.P. 6128, succursale Centre-ville

Montréal, Québec H3C 3J7

terry.cochran@umontreal.ca

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Figures of Thought

Efforts to characterize modernity have splashed barrels of ink over countless pages. In a particular, very limited sense, this book falls into that seemingly endless series of attempts to reiterate aspects of modernity. Most frequently, reference to modernity does little more than inscribe a narrative technique that claims supremacy for the modern period; assertions of modernity permit the illusion of a seamless historical unfolding from a premodern, to a modern, and perhaps even to a "postmodern" moment. Unfortunately, awareness of this narrative mechanism does not dispel its necessity, for it rests on the conceptual needs of secularization, on the needs to show that human beings largely control their own fate. This confrontation between modern and premodern, which translates into a precise vision of historical understanding, belongs to modernity as it is mentioned in this book. In attempting to take a less immediate view of history, I use the term "modernity" to describe the West's (and, ultimately, the globe's) relative disengagement from a theologically grounded view of human history.

This supposed break between a theologically ordered universe and a terrestrial, humanized understanding has often been equated with the Renaissance, with the rise of the vernacular state, or with some other historical or conceptual phenomenon. But this book follows no chronological impulse. Rather than presuming modernity to reside on this side of a vast chasm separating it from a superseded historical understanding, I consider the schemas of modernity more as a meandering out of the past that follows no simple temporal succession, even if from today's perspective certain tendencies may seem clear. In this larger framework, this book plots a shifting configuration of ideas and attempts to come to terms with key assumptions or preconceived notions in a secular generated world, notions I have called figures of thought. What this expression entails will be more concretely rendered in what immediately follows.

In this encompassing landscape of modernity, the twentieth century – or, rather, the transformations it signals – has had an overwhelming role to play, both implicitly and explicitly. The multiplicity of media, whether cinema, video, audio recording or software, involves new ways of transcribing human thought for posterity and alters understandings of historical continuity. In this context, many aspects of cultural production have become visible for the first time, and the notion of culture, including its dynamics of circulation, has become a privileged object of reflection. More importantly, however, these twentieth-century transformations have occasioned unprecedented consideration of how thought is inscribed, materially registered in the world, and of its role in producing historical understanding. In a general and tentative way, reference to

“figuration” in this book names this process of inscribing human thought, which includes the interpretations that might be read into such inscribing. Finding the reasons for this theme's emergence requires little effort. The literary or written foundations of history, which reigned supreme prior to the 20th century, have been severely undermined by the proliferation of other time-resistant media that range from visual to audio reproduction in which written language takes on a lesser role. At the same time, primary assumptions about how one receives and potentially makes sense of material artifacts, whether a literary inscription, a painting, or some other materialized product of human thought, have been no less destabilized.

Consequently, this book – the presuppositions underlying it, the questions it addresses, and the analyses it advances – resides at a specific historical juncture that enables a new critical perspective on the material bases of modernity. This interrogation of modernity's worldview is both historical and conceptual; it concerns the historical deployment of print as the dominant physical means of inscribing human thinking (or the human spirit or *Geist*, as the 19th-century German historians used to say), as well as the conceptual assumptions regarding human thought and its representation that this reproductive medium permitted or encouraged. A specific understanding of the limits and possibilities of producing sense, of moving beyond the visibly explicit to find, invent or affirm multiple meanings, has been central to the dominance of written culture. Whether in the form of manuscript or print, writing as a mode of inscription and transmission of human thought involves correlative historical views, social formations, and institutions of knowledge. For example, medieval interpretations of religious texts, produced and reproduced according to the logic of the scriptorium, attest to this vision of unfolding meaning that cannot take place in isolation from an organization of society and an understanding of history. The epoch of printing, however, which corresponds directly to the emergence and elaboration of global modernity, transmuted and magnified the inscribing powers of writing, creating previously unimaginable possibilities to organize and institutionalize secular knowledge. Moreover, in the epoch of print, the real and ideal constraints implied in bestowing meaning on material artifacts underwent serious transformation and form the conceptual and historical backdrop of modern and contemporary thinking. In sum, the shifting conditions of generating and materially inscribing human thought have profound repercussions on the emergence and consolidation of worldviews in the so-called modern age, and this book attempts to bring into focus the fundamental elements of this modern constellation of notions and presuppositions.

A broader panorama renders these issues somewhat less ethereal. Before the advent of linguistic writing, which is so bound to historical understanding that whatever precedes it is relegated to prehistory, inscribing human thought and effort had few possibilities. A favorite pre-writing or prehistorical example of how the humans leave material traces behind them is the menhir, an upright monumental stone of which there are numerous extant specimens. Before linguistic transcription, the limited means of rendering human thought visible make the menhir a sort of unadorned lowest common denominator of purposeful intellectual inscription. The

carvings inscribed in their surfaces, often indicating elements of some human figure, offer no meaning to decipher in the sense so customary for a world governed by linguistic transcription, by writing as linguistic record. The interpreter after the advent of writing can try to make sense of it, can invent an elaborate interpretation, but any search for sense remains for the most part supposition; there is simply not enough correlative material to corroborate any meaning definitively. Though difficult to imagine in the perspective of the contemporary world, the figure's incisions say nothing about its meaning and highlight only its necessary material aspect: it is a physical object, a stone bearing the marks of human intervention, and its continued existence in time transcends the here and now of the act producing it. In effect, the figure is constituted by this disjuncture between the material that historically endures and the here and now that is immediately lost. While the menhir's figurer may have launched, knowingly or unknowingly, a temporal message in a bottle to whoever might stumble across it, only succeeding history could write that message *for the first time*. This seeming paradox, unavoidably present in the historical relationship to the menhir's presumed meaning, constitutes rather the temporal quandary inherent in any attempt to appropriate the past. In this sense, this paradox lies at the heart of all historical interpretation.

For today's world, this aspect of the figure has lost its sense of urgency, and the temporal understanding belonging to the menhir makers is inconceivable. Contemporary society is built upon material and, to a much greater extent, immaterial elaborations that include strategies of interpretation and attributed meanings zealously guarded by interrelated institutions of knowledge. Just as modern technology moves the demands of daily life farther and farther from the empirical – for example, heat is more and more controlled by manipulating a thermostat rather than by poking logs in a fireplace – secular worldviews have rendered presuppositions and figures of understanding more and more abstract. Instead of being stalemated by the menhir's material barriers, immaterial figures – such as ideas of the human spirit, the *auteur*, or collective consciousness, all of which have been historically elaborated on the basis of specific historical needs – provide the basis for producing the effect of historical continuity and for bestowing meaning.

In contrast with the world surrounding a simple menhir standing in some corner of a forgotten countryside, today's material and conceptual complexity is incalculable. Moreover, one cannot slough off centuries of interpretive elaboration that runs through the very fabric of thought; nor would one want to. Caught up in this spectrum of concerns, this book explores the idealizing constellation of the self-styled modern age, the figures of thought that emerge to anchor modernity. In moving to interrogate this constellation of notions, it gives a particular weight to the material aspect of the process of inscription. Unlike the menhir, which came to exist in what could almost be called a historical vacuum, modern inscription spans multiple material possibilities of reiterating tradition, culture, and civilization (all terms with a problematic history) and includes painting, architecture, sculpture, tools, and any other artifact that endures

historically. But, above all, modernity's figures of thought – like those of the Middle Ages – find their most forceful expression and duration in writing, to a large extent because it can easily offer commentaries on the other materials; in contrast with the ages before printing, however, the mass means of reproduction and diffusion dramatically altered the configuration of historical understanding. Writing – and in its more hegemonic modern forms of national literature and history – has formed the backbone for interpretation generally, assembling the various expressions of thought or human “spirit” in other media into a coherent, discursive whole. In modernity, itself coextensive with an ever greater proliferation of printed matter, writing still has the last word, so to speak. This last word, which is only provisionally final because it is constantly surpassed by new “last words,” takes on another character in print. As Montaigne already remarked in the 16th century, “Nous mettons en dignité nos betises quand nous les mettons en moule” (“We dignify our fopperies, when we put them to the presse”).¹ The dignity – of the word, the name, the inscription, or the figure – is as much its material staying power as what it might express.

Institutional Groundwork

In the mundane world of physical action, clearing the ground to lay the foundation of an architectural structure entails a manual engagement with tangible objects, whether merely found in nature or resulting from human craft. Conceiving this structure, creating a mental image of this physical edifice, occupies a different plane of existence, no matter how important the real terrain might be to the final conception. At still a farther remove from the empirical world of things is reflection on the significance of any given institution, its meaning for human existence, the interests it serves, the possibilities for human action it enables, and the sociopolitical benefits it represents. In modernity, the gradually spreading print culture greatly exceeded the bare fact of technological advances that made printing possible and opened up an unprecedented dimension of historical reflection. Printing – specifically, the mechanical reproduction it signaled – both accompanied and fostered a transformed conception of the world; while irreducible to the simplistic status of “prime mover” of the modern impulse, printing permitted a new investment of the world, a centering of history, along with its transcription and transmission, in human hands.

A number of 17th-century thinkers are often cited as instrumental in chiseling out notions that defined the nontheological thrust of modernity. For example, according to the traditional story, Descartes reconceptualized the human subject and fashioned a new theory of scientific knowledge; Spinoza elaborated an immanent vision of history and argued for excising theology from political formation; and Pascal strove to underscore the power of human thought without

¹Michel de Montaigne, “De l'expérience,” *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1962), 1059. English is cited from John Florio's translation of 1603: *The Essays of Montaigne* (New York: The Modern Library, ?), 978.

jettisoning the active complicity of the divine. While swept along in the same current of secular reflection, Leibniz added a modernizing perspective that concerns the institutional ramifications of print technology and how it strengthens the human role in the overall production of history and knowledge. Unlike the other thinkers I cited, who enjoyed a (muted) radical or even renegade reputation, Leibniz had explicit links to various secular powers, a fact that gave some of his writings a decidedly more practical and conservative turn. Leibniz's texts on the institutions of knowledge in the wake of printing take the form of projects that require political decision, although these writings contain largely speculative elements designed to convince the powers that be to implement the various projects. Not surprisingly, these diverse plans for localizing, channeling, and governing the production of knowledge concern the existing and potential institutions in Germany, an important early center for thinking out the implications of print.

In fact, the intellectual hegemony of the German book trade, particularly as it concerns issues of transnational flow of ideas, translation, and property rights, has been seriously challenged only in the late 20th century. In Leibniz's time, for example, the Frankfurt book fair was already being annually held; while its role changed over time, with it eventually becoming the foremost site for selling and buying intellectual property, it has for centuries represented the yearly summum of print production on a global scale. Leibniz's endeavors to analyze knowledge production in the light of print technology draw their impetus from the book fair, which serves as the concrete basis for his plans to inventory, preserve, foster, and promote human knowledge. In his proposal to establish Mainz as the seat of royal authority over book production – even if for practical reasons he believed that the overseeing commission should have its offices in Frankfurt (because Frankfurt was the “universale emporium literarum” in Germany²) – Leibniz lays bare the conceptual scaffolding necessary to rethinking the world from the perspective of print. First of all, the network of concepts and institutions calls for a proto-national or territorial anchor. As he acknowledges, his efforts involve basing “in Mainz the supreme authority over all that concerns books and *res litteraria* throughout all of Germany” (“Privilege,” 3). From the outset, the reference to “*res litteraria*” indicates the breadth of the drive to envision writing as the backbone of human knowledge and culture. In the vein of the classical *res publica*, which would later become *republic*, the term *res litteraria* covers both the concrete object, the book or the printed page, as well as the conceptual and institutional baggage that necessarily accompany it. In other words, *res litteraria*, perhaps best rendered as “literary matters” or “things in the world of writing,” has a material and an immaterial aspect, in the same way that books themselves have a material existence even as reading them generates a series of ideal or immaterial “worlds.” But Leibniz is even more specific in requesting permission to elaborate his plans for institutionalizing and

²Leibniz, “Leibniz Bemühungen un ein kaiserlich Privileg für den Plan seiner Semestria,” *Oeuvres de Leibniz, publiées pour la première fois d'après les manuscrits originaux*, vol 7, ed. A. Foucher de Careil (Darmstadt: Fotokop Wilhelm Weihert, 1969, facs.; orig. Paris: Librairie de Firmin Dido frères, fils et cie, 1875), 7. Hereafter cited in the text as “Privilege.”

keeping track of knowledge production: "The commissariat encompasses inspection of all of res litteraria to the extent that it appears before the public in print" ("Privilege," 7). It is a matter of regulating printed knowledge that goes public; in Leibniz's vision of the human status quo, the technology of print simultaneously represents dangers to stability and enormous powers of historical transformation that must be mastered. The so-called commission he recommends is designed to mediate the forces that print unleashes.

Contrary to passing comments about how such a commission might "quietly suppress" unseemly or undesirable publications ("Privilege," 10), the real thrust of his document in support of an administrative agency lies elsewhere. Rather than concentrating on its powers of executive action, that is, actions of direct censorship or overt physical intervention, this application for privilege stresses over and over the mental connections that must be forged in thinking the historical and political significance of this new "technology." Its existence will set in place a network of relations, a sort of economy of producing knowledge, and its stable operation will permit, "after prior consultation and correspondence with scholars, the realization of all kinds of things, rules, and institutions that are useful and even necessary for the common good, concerning books, authors, booksellers, correctors, printers, and studies" ("Privilege," 11). The passage underscores the bureaucratic aspect of any governmental agency, but most striking is the explicit link between the producers and distributors of the physical object (that is, the book), on the one hand, and the production of knowledge (such as the scholars and the "studies" they generate), on the other. Ultimately, Leibniz remarks, this new situation enables the ideas of scholars to be legitimated by the force of royal authority ("Privilege," 11-12). In sum, in rethinking the production of knowledge along the lines of what print allows, Leibniz places more than a little emphasis on the formation of ideas and their role in the perpetuation of knowledge. While the preeminence of ideas, of scholarly opinion, is not born with print, in the age of print ideas take on a special significance because of the forms of institutionalization that print allows and, to a certain extent, requires.

Print, in particular print as the material backbone of a new world conception, has readily identifiable characteristics that have permeated modernity so deeply as to be inseparable from it. Once again, Leibniz illustrates the basic precepts that printed matter entails; in the context of this regulatory agency that he describes,

scholars and inquisitive people throughout Germany, following the example of other nations, will be encouraged to correspond and communicate among themselves and with neighboring and distant universities, to reach an understanding and, thereby, to preserve and multiply numerous new and useful thoughts, propositions, inventions, and observations that would otherwise disappear with their authors; this applies to the domains of natural science, mechanics, manufacturing, trade, and mathematics, as well as to those of history, politics, law, and others, opening the way for the youth in universities and elsewhere to

become familiar with the occupations in a timely fashion, in a way more useful than when they unsoundly begin reasoning before steeping themselves in sufficiently rigorous studies, a practice more damaging than helpful to the fatherland, hindering even their own advancement. ("Privilege," 12-13)

The single nation, Germany – still not quite yet a "nation" in the modern sense – appears in a global context, vis-à-vis others that have already tried to address the organization and reproduction of knowledge. In this sense, Leibniz brings into the picture the institutions of higher learning, the universities, that serve as the nodes of exchange in transforming or building new knowledge. As the document's passing reference to "youth" suggests, the reason why the emergence of print provokes a reaction among its contemporaries – scholars and kings alike, even if they sometimes have dissimilar interests – entails precisely the question of reproducing knowledge on a grand scale.

With the advent of print, the relationship between the past, present, and future changes considerably, in part because of the volume of extant writings that continue to pile up, in part because thinking out and sorting through that quantity calls for an unprecedented compartmentalization of knowledge, including reliance on "scholars" or legitimate judges to oversee it. It is no longer only a question of what is going to be passed on but of the criteria for determining which lines of thought are designated to carry the burden of history into the future. Print is a mechanical apparatus of inscription that upsets the traditional relationship between the preservation and multiplication of past knowledge that is destined to outlive the present. The centrality of print affects all disciplines of knowledge, from the practical to the more theoretical, from science to the human sciences, from commerce to the juridical domain. Writing in the 17th century, Leibniz necessarily neglects to mention the literary disciplines, including the national literary traditions that since the beginning of the 19th century have proven so important to modern history and to the immaterial ideals that channel it. Nevertheless, the basic insight is evoked: based on the preserving and reproductive powers of print, knowledge institutions – attached implicitly or explicitly to the sociopolitical formations – house the past legacy, the diffused scribbles of dead individuals, that extend from wispy thoughts and propositions to more concrete inventions.

Within this overarching framework, Leibniz pursues his goals to create various knowledge institutions and depositories of written and printed material. His various projects hold nothing startling in the eyes of the 21st century, which, in the burgeoning mass of material artifacts of every ilk, has seen thousands of such institutions established, the smallest of which dwarfs Leibniz's institutional ambitions. Among his projects, he calls for setting up a governmental archive to create a line of continuity between the past and present with regard to legal or official

questions.³ In addition, he makes a case for establishing and maintaining a princely library to include writings and representations of every imaginable branch of knowledge; this document, entitled “Repraesentanda,” contains a multimedia reflection on the role of images for the human spirit, along with the typical discussion of youth education (“To instruct our young men above all nothing in the world is better than figures” – that is, visual representations).⁴ Nevertheless, with regard to the implications of print, to the institutional transformation it demands, Leibniz’s most straightforward text is his actual plan for producing a “Semestria literaria” for every Frankfurt book fair. While still not a full-blown “Semestria,” that is, a reference work that condenses and represents new knowledge produced each year, this plan constitutes a step beyond his separate request for permission to pursue it. This proposal about organizing published knowledge calls for a number of components, including a series of summaries of everything published (“Bibliothecae universalis contractae”), an analytical index, information about publishers, and a history of things literary (“Historia rei literariae totius”: again, things written or, in this context, things printed and published).⁵ What he recommends resembles 20th-century yearbooks that update ongoing knowledge in the epoch of print domination (a form of publication unlikely to prevail against the perpetual incorporation of new knowledge resulting from interconnected computer networks). For Leibniz, the stakes of this yearly summum of knowledge, combining information with a conceptual roadmap for the year’s production, are quite high and concern the very existence of civilization. This task, he argues, needs to be undertaken with dispatch:

The number of books increases to such an extent that if we delay too long the work would ultimately become so desperate as to be impossible. The result would be no less than total confusion, a scorn for all learning, and, finally, the return of ancient barbarism; in such an indescribable mass of books it would no longer be possible to find and recognize the best in the midst of the bad and the insignificant. (“Semestria,” 157)

Already in the 17th century, the piling up of printed matter was just at the edge of being unmanageable; according to the logic of these remarks, the rate of new publications demanded careful scrutiny to maintain advances of human knowledge. In this sense, Leibniz poses the question – without, however, offering any concrete answers – of the criteria for separating the chaff from genuine knowledge. Leibniz’s own tendencies for evaluating authenticity, very much in line with the spirit of the times, favored explicit advances in (scientific or philosophical) knowledge and speculated little about other sorts of literary or so-called aesthetic knowledge. More important regarding the issue of printing’s role in human culture, Leibniz’s plan sketches out a

³ Leibniz, “Von nützlicher Einrichtung eines Archivi,” *Oeuvres de Leibniz, publiées pour la première fois d’après les manuscrits originaux*, vol 7, 126-137.

⁴ Leibniz, “Repraesentanda,” *Oeuvres de Leibniz, publiées pour la première fois d’après les manuscrits originaux*, vol 7, 140.

⁵ Leibniz, “Semestria Literaria,” *Oeuvres de Leibniz, publiées pour la première fois d’après les manuscrits originaux*, vol 7, 157. Hereafter cited in the text as “Semestria.”

readily discernible theory of history. Knowledge and its accumulation, which the mechanical inscription of printing stockpiles in ever greater quantities, permits humanity to transcend its “barbarism” by materially laying down a timeline of memory that lets the present build on past knowledge. But overcoming this barbarism cannot be reduced to the brute writing down and disseminating of ongoing knowledge; sheer quantity – in this instance, of books – reintroduces the question of historical continuity, the progress it implies, and, ultimately, the potential return of barbarism. Too much knowledge or, more specifically, too much printed matter brings historical chaos and undermines the technological power of print and the leap in human knowledge it prepared. This linear view of human history, in which each present raises itself to a higher lever and propels history forward, also has the potential of decline. In the face of this threat, Leibniz sees no alternative to instituting a novel organization of knowledge; in attempting to think through what he viewed as the technical challenge to ongoing human progress, he unknowingly laid the groundwork for a process of institutionalization that comes to be identified with modernity.

While Leibniz’s plan of synoptic knowledge does not address the criteria, presuppositions, ideas, or figures of thought that gradually emerge to anchor modern historical understanding, it traces out the fundamental notions that such an organization of knowledge implies:

Despite the greatly overpowering mass of books, (...) the largest and best part of human knowledge and experience has not yet been put in books; a special effort should be made to overcome this lack, and learned people should find the opportunity and occasion to fill these gaps and to produce things not yet written rather than repeating the old.

(“Semestria,” 158-59)

The goal is to inscribe human knowledge in a material form that will enable it to be passed down to later times. While for Leibniz knowledge remains incomplete, this fragmentariness is not endemic to human existence but rather derives from practical impediments that the material possibility of print can – at least in principle – surmount. The presumption of totality, in this passage specifically evoked as a synchronic notion claiming that the gaps in current knowledge can be filled in, provides a methodological mechanism for understanding the continuity and motivation of human accomplishment. This presupposition gives a clear rendering of the voluntarist undercurrent of modernity; the human mind, which by means of material representation can extend its reach in time and space, has the powers to invest the world in its entirety, to unearth and reflect on data with the intention of completing omissions in knowledge. Moreover, this new vision of human thought, based on the working assumption of total understanding, places a specific burden on any given present: it must seek to differentiate itself and its knowledge from what preceded it. Contrary to the prehistorical world – that is, before writing – in which repetition of past knowledge keeps alive communal thought and understanding, Leibniz’s reasoning emphasizes that the present should break with the past and try to avoid reiterating it. Widespread material preservation of the past frees up the present to operate

according to a different set of assumptions. Just as with the idea of totality, this transformation in historical understanding draws material support from printing, which early in its development seemed almost to keep pace with human investigation, creating unprecedented objects of reflection as well as the means to disseminate them widely. In this perspective, printing signals a radical change from the historical limitations of scribal copying, which, with its glacial slowness and the singularity of its production, was more closely akin to the oral world than to the technical reproduction of print.

These assumptions – about potentially totalizable human knowledge, about the human ability to grasp the old in order to produce the new – do not belong to the order of truth and validity but *enable* a particular view of historical understanding. In the 17th century, the technical mastery of registering thought in printed matter accompanies rather than causes the emergence of these assumptions. The intimate interconnectedness of ideas and the material production of thought belie any effort to determine causal primacy. But print, along with the “yearbooks” that synthesize yearly production, provides a point of departure for Leibniz’s historical and epistemological project. The “Semestria” or yearbook volumes should be catalogued and cross-referenced to create

a treasury of human knowledge with an inventory so that everything can be correctly and orderly arranged, readily available for whoever seeks to get his hands on it, and, in a word, to use it. On the contrary, in the present-day confusion, we humans don’t even know what we have... (“Semestria,” 160)

As the 20th century’s deluge of knowledge production amply demonstrated, mapping that knowledge takes on massive importance as the quantity of material increases. This inventory summarizes but also offers a guide for accessing the totality of extant knowledge. Long before print, writing was itself viewed as an extension of human memory and history, but in Leibniz’s proposal print, by means of its ongoing synthesis and abstraction in “Semestria,” becomes more a material prosthesis of human thought. Print becomes the material means of a more efficient rationalization of the products of the human mind. Thoughts become materialized, achieve an external existence, to become in turn the object of subsequent human reflection.

Much like the calculus notation that take mathematical variables to ever-higher levels of abstraction, the “Semestria” pile up, adding layer upon layer, commenting, organizing, probing, and – most importantly – integrating knowledge as it is produced. Documenting the total output of human understanding is not a short-term task, and Leibniz’s plans stress the exponential power of these yearly summaries of published knowledge. The Semestria, having in a few years

brought all human experience [*Erfahrung*: science or knowledge] to paper, will ultimately constitute the material of and lay the groundwork for the principal structure of an *Encyclopaedia perfectae*. In this way, we will have in our hands the possibility of resolving and ordering human thoughts or notions, of proving demonstratively or fundamentally

according to mathematical order all primary truths that flow from reason... (“Semestria,” 161)

The Semestria, themselves a continuing reassessment of knowledge produced and published, give rise to their own reassessment and reorganization into an encyclopedic summa of products of thought. No longer simply in the realm of facts, of what is thought, this encyclopedic abstraction mobilizes a higher-level possibility of interrogating human thoughts and their reason supposedly susceptible to mathematical demonstration. This reiterative structure of thought, which builds a historical network of references farther and farther removed from the strictly empirical world, rests squarely on material organizations and refinements that rest on still other printed matter. In this sense, Leibniz’s elaborations spin out the mechanism of modernity that relies on the specific character of print culture and on the intertwinement between immaterial thought and its material rendering. It is at this juncture that what I am calling “figures” take on their greatest significance.

The Spirit of Print

For better or for worse, the emergence of modern institutions corresponds to a mutation in the manner of materializing books. These modern institutions run through various planes of thought and range from empirical manifestations such as university organizations of knowledge and consolidations of statehood, to the more abstract inventions of vernacular grammar, including phenomena necessary for formulating the modern worldview, such as the so-called discovery of the globe, massive urbanization, and new forms of collective consciousness. With the printed book, the mechanical means of materializing, publishing, and distributing efforts of the human spirit permits sociopolitical practices and conceptions of human understanding that have subsequently been identified as “modern”; these novel conceptions are so entrenched in and intertwined with modernity that not even the multiple media of the 20th century were able to dislodge them. Just as Leibniz’s dream of an encyclopaedia of human knowledge becomes realized only after a lengthy period of institutional gestation, modernity’s conceptual configuration achieves its early coherence only in the 18th century, a century in which the book is often explicitly evoked as the cornerstone of an emergent secular understanding. The most eloquent and succinct formulation of modernity’s coordinates is Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, which simultaneously incarnates a centuries-old intellectual project (which also inspired Leibniz), summarized the status of human knowledges in every domain imaginable, and codified an interpretive grid that will be enlarged on in elaborating the national and historical conceptions of the 19th century.

In situating the beginning of critical history in the mid-fifteenth century, the *Encyclopédie* article on “History” emphasizes the confluence of various areas, including those of politics, the arts, technology, and knowledge generally. More to the point, in this broad landscape of

knowledge transformation, it indicates a close relationship between history or historical understanding and the medium that records it. Although in the late twentieth century the primary medium of history draws no attention to itself and is wholly taken for granted, the notion of history, which even in its most rudimentary form mobilizes claims of objectivity, requires the fixity of a material inscription. In the eighteenth century, awareness of this link between matter and history still belonged to the active cultural understanding, and the matter or medium in question was the printed word:

It is at the end of the century [the article refers to the fifteenth century] that a new world is discovered, and soon afterward European politics and the arts take on a new form. The art of printing and the restoration of the sciences finally allow for histories that are relatively faithful instead of those ridiculous chronicles that had been locked up in the cloisters since Gregory of Tours. Every nation in Europe soon had its historians. The earlier paucity turns into abundance: there is not a city that doesn't want its own particular *history*. One is buried under the weight of minutia. A man who wants to be instructed ... grasps in the multitude of revolutions the spirit of the times and the customs of peoples. Above all one must follow the *history* of one's own land [*patrie*], study it, possess it, retain all its details, and look more generally at other nations. Their *history* is interesting only for the links they have with us or for the great things they have accomplished...⁶

While the passage openly espouses a secular view of historical understanding, it is less a critique of the divine than a valorization of human capacities. This revitalized human agent discovers the planet, reconfigures European politics, and transforms the arts – or “cultural production,” as one might say today with greater precision. Moreover, the idea of national history emerges, and the homegrown histories establish geographies of the mind, identities narrated in printed texts. According to this 18th-century rendering, the technology of reproduction, along with the material diffusion of thought it entails, both transforms the physical means of representing thoughts and creates mental images – what one might be tempted to call “figures” – that take on an existence of their own. In other words, history represents some kind of a nonmaterial spirit, that is, an idea such as that of a nation, a fatherland. In the world of tangible objects, that spirit is linked to a demarcated territory or boundary guarded by uniformed individuals who act in its name, to institutions where judges sit to pronounce in reference to its interests. In addition, however, it is bound up with a collective identity, and with an understanding of how events take place and how they are reported or expressed in language. In sum, history is a key component of a conceptual apparatus, a configuration of presuppositions closely associated with modernity and with the nation-state formation that fosters it. As the

⁶ “Histoire,” *L'Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, eds. Diderot et d'Alembert, vol. 8 (Neufschastel: Samuel Faulche & Cie, 1765), 223.

passage remarks, this entire configuration rests on the dominance of a particular medium – writing – and its mechanical reproduction in print.

This print economy of modernity, along with the concepts that mobilize it, hinges on the concept of the book. Once again, I refer to the *Encyclopédie*, this time to the article on the “Book”:

[A book in general is] a writing composed by some intelligent person about some issue of knowledge [*science*], for the instruction and amusement of the reader. One can still define a *book* as a composition by a man of letters, realized to communicate to the public and to posterity something that he has invented, seen, experienced, and assembled, and that must be long enough to make a volume. (...) The uses of *books* are no less numerous nor less varied; it is by means of them that we acquire our knowledge: they are the repository of laws, memory, events, usages, mores, customs, etc., the vehicle of all the sciences; even the establishment and preservation of religion is in part owed to them.⁷

In the view of the 18th-century “Encyclopedists,” the book was responsible not only for history but for all knowledge, specifically, for its temporal continuity. The book is *the* means of access to knowledge, at least before the 20th century and the unpredictable proliferation of other technologies of reproduction. The book is the mediation between the human (what the text calls “us”) and knowledges, the guardian or repository of all productions of the spirit capable of being in some way recorded, and the vehicle of all disciplines of knowledge (that is, of all “sciences” or knowledges). The list of the domains determined and channeled by the book is remarkably complete and contains all the branches of intellectual production: the juridical, historical, cultural, scientific, and religious sectors. Once again, this privilege of the book derives from its capacity to materially encode thoughts and effects generated by the human spirit. Print technology exponentially augments the powers of the book, creating a flood of printed matter that transfigures the fundamental notion of materializing the spirit. In other words, it mechanically induces massive transformations that are qualitative as well as quantitative. As the *Encyclopédie* describes it in another article: “Type founding and printing proper collaborated to infinitely multiply the productions of the spirit or, rather, copies of these productions.”⁸

The spirit that survives its own death is always materialized; as Leibniz already noted, printing calls for or demands a renewed organization of knowledge specifically conceived to direct and tame its effects. Elevation of the *printed* book (as opposed to the laboriously copied manuscript) to the supreme point of reference for thinking about human intellectual continuity has important consequences for modernity, for the worldview it installs, and for the figures of thought

⁷ “Livre,” vol. 9 (1765), 605.

⁸ “Imprimerie en taille douce,” vol. 8, 620.

it institutionalizes. In this context, the *Encyclopédie* article on “Printing” renders explicit the stakes in the mechanical reproduction of printed matter:

Thus, with the aid of printing, we come not only to multiply knowledge, but to fix and to transmit until the end of centuries the thoughts of human beings, while their bodies are bound up with matter and their souls have flown away to the domain of the spirits.

All the other arts that serve to perpetuate our ideas perish in the long term. Statues, in the end, collapse into dust. Buildings don't subsist as long as statues, and colors last less than buildings. Michelangelo, Fontana, and Raphael are what Phidias, Vitruvius, and Apelles were in sculpture, and the works of these latter no longer exist.

The advantage that authors have over these grand masters comes from the fact that their writings can be endlessly multiplied, reprinted, and renewed in the number of copies desired, without the copies diminishing in value vis-à-vis the originals.

What would one not give for a Virgil, a Horace, a Homer, a Cicero, a Plato, an Aristotle or a Pliny, if their works were restricted to a single place, or in the hands of one person, as is the case of a statue, a building, a painting?

It is therefore thanks to the beautiful art of printing that human beings express their thoughts in works that can last as long as the sun and that will be lost only in the universal upheavals of nature. Only then will the inimitable works of Virgil and Homer perish along with all the worlds spinning overhead.

Since it is true that books pass from one century to another, how could the authors not take great care to use their talents in works aiming to perfect human nature?⁹

The extreme lucidity of these observations deserves careful consideration. The passage aims to characterize the role of printing in producing human continuity; it describes writings in the perspective of their mechanical multiplication. Thoughts outlive the human body that has materially inscribed them and remain behind after the unity of body and mind – a fundamental division of Enlightenment philosophy – has disintegrated, with the constituent elements moving toward their respective spheres. In this sense, thoughts as well as printed knowledge are a sediment if not a fossil of the spirit: these modest remains that continue to exist after the disappearance of the mind creating them necessarily pose the question of history, of matter, and of their entwinement.

The passage's subsequent commentary unfolds in the midst of this bundle of issues. In comparing various “arts,” the text is able to pinpoint the specificity of print, that is, of the printed book, even if the book is only vaguely mentioned. The comparison concerns only one aspect of these “arts,” and the text displays great precision in this respect: they are considered in light of

⁹ “Imprimerie,” vol. 8, 608-9.

their potential material duration. Instead of employing concepts deriving from fields of knowledge – for example, from the domains of architecture, of sculpture, of painting, of literature – the article limits itself exclusively to empirical objects, that is, it refers only to a building, a painting, a statue. Despite the slight differences separating them with respect to their material duration, these three empirical examples share a number of aspects that contrast with those of a printed artifact: they are not reproducible in mass (given the technology of the epoch), they occupy *one* point in space, and they are concretely perceived by the senses. Print, on the other hand, produces an artifact that occupies a multiplicity of places at the same time; what the article calls “works” (not simply books and certainly not “literature”) always exceeds the empirical and requires an imagined or idealizing perspective on two levels. First, the technology of writing itself calls for reading, an intellectual production, so that an “object” comes to be through the mediation of the material; in addition, print technology multiplies the material so that the work becomes even farther removed from empirical books viewed as material objects, as “things.” In the very concept of the printed work, figuration or the ability to produce objects on the basis of material squiggles acts as a relay between matter and thought. While the interplay between thought and matter characterizes the single-copy parchments emanating from the scriptoria as well as the multiple copies deriving from mechanically produced printing, the idealizing power of printed matter radically exceeds that of the unique manuscript, if only because it simultaneously saturates large swatches of space and time. This mesh of ideal and material factors constitutes the particularity of the printed book as a model of cultural production.

This passage from the *Encyclopédie* comes to a close in referring to historical continuity, on the one hand, and to a specific conception of history, on the other. The multiplicity of print reinforces the power of the human spirit in the face of catastrophes or natural cataclysms; by simultaneously occupying countless places with the help of print technology, intellectual matter progressively escapes the dangers of annihilation. In this perspective, the book’s specificity – whether in manuscript or printed form, although the differences between the two are significant – is not due to its linguistic character but to its technologies of materialization, the means of inscribing the effects of thought by leaving a material residue. In this general framework, the article expresses the historical view that seems to be the logical consequence of an infinite accumulation of materialized knowledge. The book, champion of human continuity, lends itself well to historical recuperation and to the idea of progress that is omnipresent in the 18th century. The matter of the spirit in book form, which is considered an extension and modification of human nature, grounds the theory and practice of linear history, with its concomitant notions of progress and decline, which are simply reversed images of the same historical view. That directionality profoundly depends on the transformations that matter provokes in human nature, matter that, with the spread of print, becomes less and less precarious and, at the same time, more and more idealized.

The Global Medium

Contrary to expectations and perceptions in an age conditioned by satellite imaging, the globe is not a twirling object that can be simply grasped and represented in an inert snapshot. Notions of the world, both as a physical entity and as a conceptual space in which humans move and think, that is, as a worldview, have a strong historicity. As the *Encyclopédie* indicates, for example, awareness of the globe as an integral whole accompanied the political and technical changes that help define modern understanding. Prior to space travel, conceiving of the earth's unity required developed powers of visualization to turn the flatness of experience into planetary roundness. In the same vein, thinking the world as a counterpart to its human inhabitants involves a reflection on the medium that links potentially links them together. The "world" before writing was immeasurably large, even though the communities that peopled it were extremely limited in number and in extension. At the other end of the spectrum, at an epoch in which writing is itself less and less materialized, the very existence of the global Internet has provoked substantive reflection on the status of human collectivity and the world it literally englobes.¹⁰ In this sense, placing print – specifically, the printed book and its multiple copies – at the center of evolving human knowledge implies a worldview with series of presuppositions and figures of thought, so to speak. Not surprisingly, the question of print and the idealized world it provides leads back to the 18th century.

As the first thinker of modernity to ground his sociopolitical philosophy in an explicit understanding of the world at large, what he refers to as the cosmopolitical, Kant is the obvious reference in this context. In this sense, Kantian thought laid the foundation for modern globalism. Language as such does not constitute a significant theme in Kant's extensive writings, but the matter of language, its medium and the ideal bond it creates between the members of a collectivity, resides at the center of his worldview. Although Kant addresses the "cosmopolitical" or "global" question in a number of texts, the issues of language, medium, and cosmopolitical collectivity find their most succinct expression in his much used and abused essay that responds to yet another question, "What Is Enlightenment?" The basic precepts of the Enlightenment form a constellation to project how, in modernity, individuals think reasonably, function as members of a collectivity, organize themselves into states, and interact with each other on a global scale. In plotting the idealizing coordinates of modernity, it is important to sketch briefly the presuppositions that underlie Kant's Enlightenment, particularly how this model of society, grounded in cosmopolitanism, propels itself to ever greater domination by the lights of reason. Kant's description of this sociopolitical mechanism is based on his well-known distinction between public and private reason:

¹⁰ See, for example, Pierre Lévy, *L'intelligence collective: Pour une anthropologie du cyberspace* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1994).

By the public use of one's reason I understand the use which a person makes of it as a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers (*ganzen Publikum der Leserwelt*). Private use of reason I call that which a person may make of it in a particular civil post or office that is entrusted to him. Many affairs conducted in the interest of the community require a certain mechanism through which some members of the community must passively conduct themselves with an artificial unanimity, so that the government may direct them to public ends, or at least prevent them from destroying those ends. Here one is not allowed to use reason freely; one must obey. But so far as this part of the machine regards himself at the same time as a member of the whole community or of a cosmopolitical society (*Weltbürgergesellschaft*), and thus in the capacity of a scholar who addresses the public (in the proper sense of the word) through his writings, he can certainly employ his reason without hurting the affairs for which he is in part responsible as a passive member.¹¹

As with any theory of human history, Kant's concerns are two-headed: on the one hand, society requires stability, the conceptual hallmark of all socially conservative thinkers who want to contain the anarchist forces at the heart of any multitude; on the other hand, any historical vision must also account for the transformations necessary for human society to surpass itself and continue to stave off historical exhaustion and decline.

These two categories of historical action have distinct territorial centers of gravity. The scholar – or the educated or learned person, a notion that is anachronistically referred to as the “intellectual” – operates in these two domains, which are, respectively, conservative and transformative. When scholars work for the state, their reason is harnessed to the collective will that is determined by the government in power, which also includes the institutions of civil society. In this sphere of action, scholars do not reason on their own but follow directives; they channel an authority they do not possess but in whose name they act. Kant's text characterizes this ongoing production of stasis as a mechanism of containment in which the person is a cog in the machine. This mechanism is not constitutive but regulative; if the cog does not function properly, the state or institution justifiably removes it, reworks it, or tightens it down. In Kant's text, which concerns primarily the economy of reason and its sociopolitical limits, this state sphere refers to the “private” use of reason, which is private only in the sense of its determined territorial and administrative boundaries. In other words, it is not global.

The contrary of private or state reason, which Kant calls “public” reason, has a different sphere of circulation; public reason courses through a virtual collectivity, a “whole community” as

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” *On History*, tr. L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963); translation modified. “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?,” *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik 1*, ed. W. Weischedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 55-56.

opposed to simple “community,” or what the essay portrays as a “cosmopolitical society.” The cosmopolitical needs no homogeneity, no singular collective will or vision, artificially produced to tame the forces of disintegration. This “virtual collectivity” or, in the words of the essay, the public “in the proper sense of the term,” has a peculiar profile: it is constituted by people *who can read*, the *world* of readers. Kant’s warning that this public should not be understood figuratively indicates the nature of that public: it is not a particular public, identifiable with specific geographical boundaries or formed around certain themes or objects of interest, in the way, for example, a public is conceived in the 20th-century world of commerce. Instead, it is formed on the basis of its members’ capacity to create links among themselves by reading printed texts, a public formed by an act of rendering public, as in the publication of a book. In other words, for Kant, and for modernity generally, the notion of the cosmopolitical presupposes the dissemination of a certain medium of knowledge, a certain skill to take a material object – a printed text – and produce an idealizing, immaterial “reading.”

The public comes together ideally through the mediation of a virtual spirit or “mind.” Yet, even if accurate, this way of describing the material phenomenon underlying Kant’s vision of global history is far too abstract. In the 18th century, print provided the only means of conceiving a “mass” mind linking multitudes spread over large distances. This public, however heterogeneous its members and disparate its tendencies, was of “like mind” in the economy of meaning and collective consciousness; that is the nature of Kant’s modernity and of the cosmopolitical world view that mobilizes it. Print was the only means of mass production in the intellectual sphere, and Kant – in this passage and elsewhere – views the relationship between scholar and public according to a model of communication. Learned persons – solitary individuals acting in their public role – send their discourses to a public formed only by its capacity to receive those discourses, in whatever fashion. That is, through the public use of one’s reason, one acts as a “scholar, whose writings speak to his public, the world” (6;57). Whether conception or realization, the cosmopolitical cannot exist without the medium that creates it. In the constellation of modernity, that medium has been the book, the material object that inscribes a shared virtuality.

As my discussion of the *Encyclopédie* stressed, the question of the book – and the language question it implies – is not a gratuitous side issue in the historical thinking of the Enlightenment. Although it is not widely known, Kant reflected a great deal on the status of the book both as a material and immaterial entity, that is, as a physical object occupying space and as a material manifestation of what can be produced only ideally, mentally – for example, in a reading. This distinction between the material and the immaterial constitutes the core of all copyright law that developed in Kant’s wake; the entire modern economy of what is called “intellectual property,” no longer restricted to texts but spanning the gamut of cultural production, depends on this opposition. Kant’s definition of a book is simple: “a writing...presenting a

discourse that someone extends to the public by means of visible linguistic signs.”¹² The discourse belongs to the immaterial side of the equation, whereas the written language, visible in essence, occupies the material sphere.

In this communication model, the public – always cosmopolitical – receives the discourse of an individual through the mediation of material, linguistic signs. What is at stake in understanding the global political and linguistic economy of the book turns around the nature of this immaterial discourse. Elsewhere Kant is much more explicit about this discourse, somehow embedded in the “mute instrument” that is the book: “The book is the instrument for diffusing a *discourse (Rede)* to the public, not simply thoughts, as is the case for painting, a symbolic representation of an idea or of an event.”¹³ Ultimately, the book’s centrality to historical understanding and to the cosmopolitical sphere derives from its mechanical reproducibility; in the epoch of printing, every publication, every discourse offered in writing to the public, is multiple by definition, a fact that separates the book’s *discourse* from its material presence. Before mass production, a painting embodies its representation; burning it destroys its material as well as immaterial existence. By contrast, a printed book cannot be simply coextensive with the discourse for which it provides the material anchor, partly because its existence in multiple copies allows for no original to which the discourse can be reduced, partly because before the 20th-century explosion of technological reproduction, the linguistic economy remains distinct from the economy of visual representation.

But, in the final analysis, the material aspect furnishes the most decisive ground of comparison. Kant clarifies this facet of discourse in discussing the modalities of dissemination – that is, specifically, art dealers and editors: “The reason that all works of art (*Kunstwerke*) by others can be reproduced for public sale, but not books that already have their appointed editor, resides in the fact that the former are *works (Werke) (opera)*, the latter, *actions (Handlungen) (operae)*; works can exist as things existing for themselves, whereas actions can have their existence only in a person (*Person*)” (86). Objects not subject to mechanical reproduction cannot ever wholly shed their existence as things and cannot be simultaneously present in multiple locations; it is in this sense that, in the 18th century, the book – and its discourse – is the means and the medium of the cosmopolitical sphere. Discourse resides on the side of action, of interaction, which, in Kant’s vision of the unfolding human spirit, opens the space of historical transformation to counter the stranglehold of the state’s regulatory mechanism.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre*, ¶31, II, cited in G.S.A. Mellin, “Buch,” *Encyclopädisches Wörterbuch der kritischen Philosophie*, vol. 1 (Züllichau and Leipzig: bei Friedrich Frommann, 1798), 736.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, “Von der Unrechtmäßigkeit des Büchernachdrucks,” *Abhandlungen nach 1781*, vol. 8, *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), 81n.

Subsequent interpretations of Kant and of modernity, including the model of knowledge production it sets in place, have placed undue emphasis on this voluntarism characterizing human action without acknowledging the material presuppositions on which it rests. A brief reference to Michel Foucault's comments on Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" indicates the parameters of these presuppositions and offers a backdrop for returning specifically to the language question and to its pertinence for the cosmopolitical sphere. Foucault observes that Kant's essay represents "the first time that a philosopher links in this way, closely and from the inside, his work's significance for knowledge, a reflection on history, and a specific analysis of the single moment when he writes and for which he writes."¹⁴ This historical thinking is bound to the notion of producing a discourse – written, printed, and published – aimed to provoke a public to action. The sphere of mediation is crisscrossed by the book trade, in reality and as an allegory for understanding history – both its documental record and the upheavals that transform it. In this sense, Foucault continues, "...The *Aufklärung* is simultaneously a process in which human beings collectively participate and an act of courage to carry out personally. They are simultaneously elements and agents of the same process" (565). Even the notion of subjectivity, so dear to the modern worldview, rests squarely on the materiality of printed ink.

The model of cosmopolitan understanding bequeathed to modernity displays, therefore, a number of characteristics that I am now able to enumerate more precisely. First of all, it entails a notion of the subject who makes a voluntary decision and on that basis attempts to constitute his or her public. Constituting such a public – composed of individuals who are in principle unknown to one another, a public that exists over time and covers an extensive geographical area – requires a medium or a material basis by means of which a mental "unity" can be elaborated. In modernity, at least up until the 20th century, this medium has been the book. The linchpin of this model is the state, which provides what Kant refers to as the "mechanism" of stability. But, as we have seen, the state monopolizes only a part of the subject's activity; the other pole, the fuzzy domain of the cosmopolitical, both includes the state – that is, the more localized community – and extends beyond it potentially to encompass the globe.

As the model for understanding globalism in modernity, this worldview has had and continues to have political consequences. With respect to language, to the linguistic economy, these consequences are most readily discernible in the link between the state, that is, a single state, and the cosmopolitical, or between what Kant's "Enlightenment" text calls "private" and "public" use of reason. These two partially overlapping realms come together only in the subject, what Kant calls the "scholar" or the individual "person." The person broadcasts a discourse, through the medium of print, to a world public. But the notion of discourse employed by Kant had a different inflection than it has today; in fact, in Kant's reflections on the book and on the

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?," *Dits et écrits*, IV: 1980-88 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 568.

legitimate means of reproducing it, “discourse” constitutes the fundamental category for determining the status of intellectual property: “Translation in another language cannot be considered a copy (*Nachdruck*) [of some original] because it is not the author’s discourse itself (*dieselbe Rede des Verfassers*), even if the thoughts are exactly the same” (87). In other words, the discourse that establishes the cosmopolitical public is the product of one given language, the language of the person writing and publishing.

From the contemporary perspective of intellectual property, this conception of translation rights seems wholly outmoded and irrelevant; in the 20th century, the conception of the work takes priority over the language of its composition, and, according to international conventions, translation rights legally belong to the creator or owner of the original work. But the real significance of this 18th-century notion of intellectual property lies in the model of globalism it engenders. While the cosmopolitical public shares the language of the person or scholar who writes for it, the shared language is not a global language in the way one might understand it today. It is, rather, the language of the individual who has a sort of “split appointment”: he works for the state, for a given local or localizable institution, and writes and publishes in the vernacular for a cosmopolitical or global public. To state it succinctly, the modern view of the global sphere has a bipolar logic: language and state are coextensive, and the cosmopolitical economy of language is based on a state language becoming global. In this model, language is piggybacked on the state, just as the state slips in surreptitiously through imposing its language. We don’t have to be reminded of the efficacy of this model, which, as a conceptual counterpart of the European nation-state, has underwritten the colonialism of modernity, the cornerstone of which has been the unbreakable bond between culture, state, language, and education system.

Engaging Anachronism

This modern paradigm of globalization, taken for granted as the product of ongoing technological progress, depends heavily on the medium that anchors it, without which no public would ever be constituted. The modern view of the cosmopolitical is enabled by the hegemony of the printed book, which establishes the view’s conceptual limits. Throughout the 20th century, which has produced a much discussed technological explosion of new global media, the univocal hegemony of print has been gradually diluted until it is on the verge of being dissipated entirely. The media – most of which are global by nature, but according to a different linguistic circulation than that of the book – have played a highly significant role in pushing the question of globalization into the foreground. The issues of this global transformation have been evident since the early part of the century, even if the consequences were not always so readily apparent. In the early 1930s, for example, Gramsci clearly drew the distinction:

Verbal expression has a strictly national-popular-cultural character: a poem by Goethe, in the original, can be understood and experienced fully only by a German (or by

someone who is “Germanized”). Dante can be understood and experienced only by a cultivated Italian, etc. On the other hand, a statue by Michelangelo, a piece of music by Verdi, a Russian ballet, a painting by Raphael, etc., can be understood almost immediately by any world citizen, even by noncosmopolitan minds, even if they haven’t moved beyond the narrow confines of their country’s provinces.¹⁵

Writing just at the moment when sound film was being first commercialized, Gramsci’s opposition pits the mass-reproduced text against other forms of cultural experience. The cultural artifacts Gramsci mentions, in his analysis all original performances or artworks, no longer escape the economy of mass production that until this century characterized only the book. Today these artifacts are rarely, if ever, experienced in anything resembling an original production, but are omnipresent throughout the globe as transmitted images, whether printed, televised, filmed or circulated on the Internet.¹⁶ The public “mind” is no longer constituted simply by the capacity to read texts for which it is the addressee, texts in a particular language, carrying a specific discourse, and emanating from a given state subject. This global mind, a virtual public coming to life by virtue of the power of the image and living off of the shared consumption and imagined production of images, no longer requires or even cares about the authentic artifact that characterized nontextual culture. Anyone can possess a Raphael, the same Raphael, which hangs just as well on a wall in Amazonas or Beijing as in New York City.

In this sense, the cosmopolitical is not what it used to be; with the onslaught of the image, which penetrates into every nook and cranny of the globe, the public has become virtually all-inclusive. At the same time, language – and, particularly, printed language – assumes an ever diminishing role in forming the contours of and saturating the cosmopolitical sphere. This shift from text and language to image and other forms of mass cultural production does not signal merely a quantitative change in the virtual global mind. It implies a disengagement of language from the primary production of cultural hegemony and raises questions about cosmopolitical knowledge and about the model of globalization itself, not to mention about the figures of thought that have structured modern historical understanding.

In the model inherited from the Enlightenment and operative in modernity, globalization results from the progressive imposition of a local, state culture on the world. “Culture,” cultural artifacts and its reproductive logic, are extended to the globe as part of a political economy that includes commercial domination and straightforward gunboat diplomacy; its medium or “mass media” is the printed word, and the state language is coextensive with the culture for which it

¹⁵ Antonio Gramsci, “Quaderno 23 (Critica letteraria),” *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 2194. Gramsci’s view of the media is discussed in greater detail in chapter 7 below.

¹⁶ This has given rise to numerous theories about the new hegemony of the image; see, for example, Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image and the Fall of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

serves as the vehicle. In spatial terms, the global is conceived as the irradiation from a center against which the acculturated zones are measured. The prevailing medium of cultural artifacts plays a crucial historical and epistemological role because each medium or configuration of media mobilizes a cultural and political economy that enacts at the same time a process of globalization, however rudimentary it might be. In a world whose collective links are fashioned by multiple visual, audio, and textual media – what is referred to as mass media – cultural production is more explicitly tied to the commercial sector than to narrowly construed ideology, that is, than to the centralizing power of a given state. Nevertheless, the emergence of this new cosmopolitical sphere in no way means that ideology has simply disappeared, nor does it suggest that forces of hegemony are not continually at work to produce and maintain a stability that is as intellectual as it is physical.

While squarely inhabiting the current cosmopolitical situation, which encompasses the newly idealized world and the new media that work to displace print from its solitary pedestal, the chapters that follow are concerned principally with the conceptual and historical parameters of print culture. Specifically, they engage the modern literary understanding, which unfolded over several centuries, that furnishes the historical backbone of modernity. The ascendancy of print has undergirded an overarching vision of history, of the way in which the “human spirit,” a wispy ghost, becomes a point of reference for establishing virtual links between the past, present, and future. It has created a universalist human subject who undergoes historical transformation and functions as historical protagonist, as the secular motor of progress and decline. This humanoid figure, what I will designate below as the “anthropos,” has found its most substantive support in the modern literary tradition, where it has staked claims that are both universal – that is, global or cosmopolitical – and limited to the expression of specific groups or collectivities. The legitimacy of secular literature, which beyond relying on print technology depended on a complex ensemble of factors that include the invention of vernacular grammars, their extension into national languages, and scholars who build and perpetuate its corpus, consolidated the paradigm for the modern organization of knowledge and, in particular, for the historical worldview that gives it coherence.

The printed book, along with the literature and history that are necessarily its immaterial parasites, is no longer alone in its ability to give a mass-produced view of time and space. In the 20th century, the churning out of cultural production, as well as the growing technological means to inscribe matter, whether in cinema, software or audiotape, not only affected the institutional place of literary thought but has shaken the edifice of historical understanding. The epistemological problem of literary studies, even if they are revamped as “cultural studies,” derives from the unbridgeable gap between the contemporary materializations of human thinking and the concepts and figures of thought that rest on the hegemony of a single materiality, of one technique of inscription: that of print. In terms of their circulation and their materialities, current cultural productions do not obey the precepts so laboriously generated according to the character

of printed matter; nor can they be adequately grasped when viewed as simple outgrowths of print logic. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, "Technology is obviously not a purely scientific phenomenon. It is also a historical one."¹⁷ Knowing has its own historicity, and the project of transposing outmoded concepts on new manifestations – as, for example, using the notion of "hypertext," which represents an enriched textuality, more complex and thus more evolved, that at bottom only reiterates the new old presuppositions of literary thinking – only highlights the distance between the contemporary cultural phenomenon of virtual texts and the conceptions available to describe them.

In focusing on the print medium's relationship to the modern organization of knowledge, I have tried in this introduction to sketch the historical context and to lay the groundwork for the reflections elaborated in the chapters that follow. Because of the centrality of literary studies to the establishment of modernity as a worldview, as a mindset and institutional framework in which the notion of worldview plays an important role, the modern literary tradition constitutes a significant touchstone in these investigations. At this juncture, it is not possible to forget or unilaterally to undo the historical privilege of literary studies and their role as guardian of the paradigm of historical understanding. Nevertheless, it seems essential to come to terms with the demise of the hegemony of Literature as the primary reservoir of humanity's historical spirit. Writing in print form, and the literature it spawns, will undoubtedly remain pertinent to thinking because it has the advantage of being a supple medium with low-tech requirements in comparison with other media. But that does not diminish the force unleashed by print's displacement as singular guarantor of the modern configuration of knowledge. A supreme consequence of this shift away from print hegemony concerns the impossibility of adopting without question the customary figures of human consciousness or mind and their presumed temporal unfolding. The current multiplicity of media seems to call for other models of consciousness that give a greater place to images and permit other notions of collective belonging not cordoned off in a territorial and linguistic imaginary.

Any preliminary consideration of these questions entails confronting our own anachronism, which comes to be in the inability of our thinking and concepts of historical understanding to grasp the implications of the means of contemporary cultural production. In considering this issue, Gramsci made an observation that has even greater resonance today than when he first formulated it:

One's conception of the world responds to specific problems posed by reality, which are quite specific and 'original' in their immediate relevance. How is it possible to think the present, and a quite specific present, with thinking elaborated for problems of a past that is

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, tr. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 357.

often remote and superseded? When that happens, it means that we are anachronistic in our own time, fossils and not modern living beings.¹⁸

Being “modern,” however, no longer suffices to eliminate the temporal lag and reestablish synchrony. In the whirlwind of contemporary transformation, what is unthought in modernity, its assumptions based on a very specific materialization of human effort, along with an accompanying constellation of knowledge, sociopolitical organization, and historical understanding, takes the notion of anachronism to a new level. Anachronism has become the condition of 21st-century modernity. While our necessary anachronism cannot simply be sloughed off, certain of its aspects are not impervious to scrutiny. In this spirit, this book’s subsequent chapters tackle the grounds or presuppositions of modernity’s intellectual configuration whose very success has provoked its anachrony.

¹⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 324, translation modified; “Quaderno 11 (Introduzione allo studio della filosofia),” *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 1377.