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Robert Darnton, *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 552 pp, 47 ill. Notes, index. \$34.95/£23.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8122-4183-9.

Review Essay by Geoffrey Turnovsky, University of Washington.

The Devil in the Holy Water surely resonates with readers who have become inured to the sleazy, hypocritical rumor-mongering that so defines our political culture, and who then see in the world of the eighteenth-century *libelle* the origins of today's farcical media circus. Robert Darnton both encourages and discourages such identification. "[L]ibellers prefigured in some ways the modern investigative reporter," he argues, highlighting the emergence in late eighteenth-century France of an information society characterized by ravenous hunger for salacious gossip about the private lives of the powerful and privileged (p. 314). Yet Darnton's book simultaneously warns against overly facile connections. Underscoring the limits of our ability to recognize our present predicament in this pre-Revolutionary material, he points out that the texts are "bewildering today," since they play to the experiences, desires, and expectations of "early modern readers" (p. 4). The tension struck me as rather productive in both directions. The remarkable milieu into which Darnton leads us with his typical deftness and energy, and on the basis of so much extraordinary archival work, is riveting. At the same time, Darnton's emphasis on the opacity of the world of pre-Revolutionary libelers might provoke us to consider the mysteries of our own media culture and the hardly self-evident processes by which we internalize information, taking rumors and opinionated hearsay for "reality" or "truth."

What is clear for Darnton is that these processes are decidedly *not* rational, certainly not in the eighteenth century. As such, *The Devil in the Holy Water* formulates a powerful alternative to the thesis of the Habermasian public sphere. Drawing on Roland Barthes and Gabriel Tarde, Darnton argues that *libelles* shaped public opinion not by appealing to the rationality of individual readers, but by feeding into and cultivating mythologies, deep-lying, collective assumptions accepted less because they are verifiable by reasoned judgment than because, as Stephen Colbert would say, they "feel right." Building on his tremendously influential work on the "literary underground," Darnton develops a line of inquiry forged in his *Forbidden Bestsellers of pre-Revolutionary France* (1996). He has long highlighted the role of illegal books in shaping sensibilities and attitudes in the pre-Revolutionary period. While the focus was initially on the writers who produced them, and on how their experiences in the underground book trade prepared them for involvement in Revolutionary politics, Darnton turns to what is perhaps a more vexed question: how did clandestine literature shape the mentalities of readers, eliciting the "visceral reactions" (p. 439) that would transform their sense of themselves and of their place in the political and social fields?

Especially impressive in the *Devil in the Holy Water* is Darnton's close attention to genre and rhetoric and to the mechanics of the processes by which readers were opened to a critical perspective on established authority and possibly to the idea of a new regime. The analysis is finely attuned to the ways in which the *libelles* impressed their irreverent visions onto readers as images of the real state of affairs of late eighteenth-century France. Darnton emphasizes different aspects of the texts' material demeanor, including their typography. He studies their engraved frontispieces, which supported the rhetorical

agendas of the texts (with their obscene, coded caricatures) and, at the same time, reflected the degree to which the libels trucked more in myth than truth. Drawn from a common stock, the illustrations did not offer a representation of “reality” in its specificity, but catered to and reinforced pre-existing sensibilities. Above all, Darnton highlights the complex dynamics of the truth-claims in which the libels couched their scurrilous narratives. In the pre-Revolutionary decades, these claims tended to be coy. The preface to Charles Théraveau de Morande’s 1771 *Gazette cuirassée*, a widely-read libel about the Maupeou government and power of Mme Du Barry with which Darnton opens his investigation, notes that “some of the news items” offered as true might actually be false. The preface goes on, in an unlikely echo of Rousseau in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, “I don’t take it upon myself to sort them out: it’s up to people in high society, who know about truth and lies” (p. 17). Such teasing disappeared after 1789, when a stark, earnest, denunciatory tone prevailed, and truth became more serious business.

Despite the meticulous attention to textual detail, though, the question of how the libels were, in fact, read is, as Darnton points out, inevitably conjectural, “a matter of guesswork” (p. 295). And ultimately, it is the milieu of the writers that comes across most forcefully in *The Devil in the Holy Water*, compared with the experiences of readers (other than Darnton himself, whose passion for these texts is contagious). Darnton paints a vivid, engrossing panorama of the unruly world of libelers, masterfully constructed in intricate, interwoven narratives. These extend rather than rethink the core interpretations of his previous work. Thus, the book presents a detailed account of one of the expatriate communities from which “French Enlightenment” surged forth in a flood of pamphlets, journals, and pirated books in the early eighteenth century. Darnton has long argued for the critical importance of extra-territorial publishing, which extended in a “fertile crescent” shaped by the northeastern border of France, from Amsterdam to Geneva. In this latest work, he offers an especially rich analysis, in the case-study of London, of how one of these communities operated: where it congregated in the city; how it interacted with local literary and political groups; and above all, how from a distance – one hundred leagues from the Bastille – it engaged the French market and French authorities.

That said, Darnton’s view remains deeply invested in stark bifurcations, in the notion that the real action takes place on the underside of the divide, and in a conception of this underworld as ruled by brutes in a raw struggle for survival. Darnton’s toughness has not abated. Though an underlying affection for the characters who give life to his accounts is certainly detectable—a sentiment we are called upon to share, less because of the characters *per se*, than the stories they provide—at the end of the day, they inhabit the same “low-life” as they did in his seminal 1971 essay: they are failures, drifters, crooks, and swindlers, driven by venality, self-interest, a base need to put bread on the table, and decidedly unfettered by any loftiness of purpose or sense of personal morality.¹ Darnton describes one of his key protagonists, the Marquis de Pelleport, as “bad hat, a blackguard, a thoroughly wicked ne’er-do-well” (p. 167). Such characterizations tend to apply to all their activities and situations: whether they make money or fail to do so; whether they dodge the law or co-operate with the police; whether they write obscene, violent *libelles* or crank out anodyne, gossipy news articles for legal periodicals, they don’t escape their underworld identities. Their scurrilousness and desperation come from within, defining who they are and shaping everything they do.

The odd counterexample that enters into Darnton’s analysis does not sway things in their favor. Pelleport’s poignant attempt to protect his former Bastille jailors from the rioting crowds on July 14, 1789, or his effort to translate the non-libelous writings of David Williams and Catherine Macauley (admittedly abandoned) do not really temper the assessment of Pelleport as a “scoundrel” or open a new window on his character (p. 167). Darnton does offer a re-appraisal of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who is no longer the disreputable hack-turned-spy that he had been in earlier work. As Darnton explains in a

¹ Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Past and Present* 51 (1971): 81-115.

footnote, new documents have become available in the *Archives nationales*, leading him to modify “the severe view [...] that I expressed in “The Grub Street Style of Revolution” (p. 477, note 14).² But Brissot is the exception that proves the rule. Simon Burrows contends that, all things considered, Théveneau de Morande was “a reformist patriot rather than an alienated nihilistic hack.”³ Surveying the same material, Darnton concludes that he was “an unprincipled literary adventurer” (p. 463 note 1). Such divergence of views rooted in equally thorough scholarship might suggest that the truth lies somewhere in between. It is tricky, in any case, to distinguish “principled” from “unprincipled” motives. Darnton’s conceptualization of the libelers as “hacks” rests, however, on the notion that they wrote only for survival, seeking not utility or benefit for others, but money through sales and blackmail or, like Rameau’s nephew, simply a next meal. But it will be difficult to develop a compelling account of intellectual work and careers, not just in the eighteenth century but today as well, unless we figure out a way to allow self-interest and high-minded purpose to co-exist if not peacefully, then plausibly, without the former presenting such a sharp negation of the latter. The real story lies in how the two motives intersect and how one inheres in the other.

As a “hack writer,” the libeler pursued his living in “Grub Street.” This can be seen in both a sociological light, according to which initially idealistic *gens de lettres* are corrupted and hardened by the remorselessness of this milieu, and a moralistic perspective, which assumes that *gens de lettres* are led to Grub Street by an already degenerate ethical demeanor. I think, though, that these are two sides of the same coin. Grub Street takes shape, in Darnton’s account, as a kind of aggregate of the corruption of the individuals who populate it. In other words, it is defined, as a literary sphere, less by impersonal forces (as in Pierre Bourdieu’s “cultural field,” which is characterized by an abstract opposition of economic and aesthetic value), than by singular acts of scheming, double-dealing, profiteering, and cooptation. If Grub Street makes corrupt individuals, it is, by the same token, corrupt individuals who, in concrete exploits of depravity and sleaze, make Grub Street.

The sociological account rests on the premise that a “population explosion” occurred in the world of letters after 1750, producing an oversupply of intellectual labor that made it impossible for many writers to find adequate employment. Sinking into poverty, they turned to “hack work and scraps of patronage,” tutoring, translating, peddling pamphlets, directing plays, dabbling in journalism, speculating in publishing, and of course writing libels. To illustrate that “few authors could live from their pens,” Darnton, as he has in previous work, cites Mercier’s estimate from a 1778 essay called *De la littérature et des littérateurs* that only thirty did so (p. 209). The original, refuting an increasingly prevalent contemporary anxiety that “le nombre des Auteurs est immense,” reads: “Oui, de ceux qui usurpent ce nom ou qui ont fait une seule brochure dans leur vie pour prouver qu’ils ne sont pas absolument des sots. Mais de fait, il n’y a point en France plus de trente Ecrivains qui suivent habituellement la carrière, & constamment livrés à leur art [sic].”⁴ I’ve always read this line a little differently, as a reflection not so much of the difficulty of making a living in an overcrowded

² Robert Darnton, “The Grub Street Style of Revolution: J.-P. Brissot, Police Spy,” *Journal of Modern History* 40 (1968): 301-327. Brissot has had his defenders, including Frederick de Luna, “The Dean Street Style of Revolution: J-P Brissot, *jeune philosophe*,” *French Historical Studies* 17 (1991): 159-90; and Elizabeth Eisenstein, *Grub Street Abroad: Aspects of the French Cosmopolitan Press from the Age of Louis XIV to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 145-52.

³ Simon Burrows, “A Literary Low-Life Reassessed: Charles Théveneau de Morande in London, 1769-1791,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22 (1998): 76-94 (p. 76). Burrows recently published a biography of Morande, *A King’s Ransom: The Life of Charles Théveneau de Morande, Blackmailer, Scandalmonger, and Master-spy* (London: Continuum, 2010).

⁴ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *De la littérature et des littérateurs suivi d’un Nouvel examen de la tragédie française* (Yverdon, 1778), pp. 37-39.

eighteenth-century literary field, as of the challenge of maintaining one's dignity as a writer in accordance with the exalted views of authorship that Mercier advances in the text. Only thirty manage to do so, though not because they're able to earn the right money. Rather, they have the moral qualities to pull it off; to persist in their noble vocation—"donn[ant] au Public des Ouvrages d'imagination ou de Philosophie, & [...] rempliss[ant] son attente par des productions successives" – despite the endless humiliations inevitably endured by true *gens de lettres*: the criticism, persecution, and the petty jealousies of those less talented, "la haine jalouse des méchants."⁵

If anything, easy money was probably one of those indignities. Indeed, other accounts from the time, including from Mercier, as well as from contemporary scholars, including Darnton (p. 208), suggest that it was actually never easier than in this moment to live "by the pen," so long as by this phrase we mean not actually earning every *sou* from the sale of manuscripts to publishers (which scarcely any self-identified writer can do today), but making enough by direct and indirect means, and with the right affiliations and connections, in order to claim plausibly the identity of *écrivain* or *auteur*.⁶ When he notes in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* that "[t]el qui sera toute sa vie un mauvais versificateur, un géomètre subalterne, serait peut-être devenu un grand fabricant d'étoffe," Rousseau refers not to a harsh, pitiless world that only the most delusionally ambitious would enter, but to a system whose real opportunities drew untalented yet *rational* individuals away from other jobs, thereby sustaining literary mediocrity as a viable livelihood rather than a miserable existence.⁷ Even before he was in the pay of the French cops, Morande made 24,000 livres from the *Gazette cuirassé*, according to the *Mémoires secrets*, enough to be able to drive around London in a coach (p. 140).

Certainly, Morande was not a typical case. He indicates, though, an alternative backdrop against which "Grub Street" – as a conception of the literary world rather than an actual place – might also be understood, one defined not by brute survival, but by a professional feasibility inherent in the idea that writers, despite the obstacles, prison time, and inconsistent symbolic and economic payoffs, could nonetheless stay the course. In the process, they relentlessly publicized their own and each other's hardships, generally in order to valorize routine trajectories shaped by undistinguished outcomes that were experienced in disappointing contrast with the soaring hopes that had initially driven them into the world of letters. Still, they built careers and amassed voluminous and varied bodies of publications. They get some measure of validation by being integrated into posterity as *authors*, albeit minor ones whose traces are to be found not in Ph.D. lists of major works but in nineteenth-century bibliographies and erudite studies.

Were they "desperate" "ragged writers" (p. 1)? Darnton counters a modern-day skepticism regarding "historical truth, [...] when historians take their cues from literary critics and history sometimes looks more like a verbal construct made with tropes than a solid edifice built from facts" (p. 105). Yet his discussion of these "down and out" (p. 1) "starving wretches" (p. 43) suggests that it is not easy to deal with the question of authorial poverty in this period (or any period?) without navigating the tropes by which it was represented. Whether integrated into the rhetorical arsenal of those trying to discredit enemies (e.g. Voltaire's "pauvre diable"), into self-justificatory texts as markers of one's disinterest, or into the reports of police-inspectors trying to enforce order on a complex world where neither motives

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Direct income, which Escarpit calls "internal financing," comes directly from one's writing, via the sale of manuscripts. Indirect income ("external financing") means earnings derived from writing-related work, such as teaching, tutoring, book reviews, journalism, etc. Robert Escarpit, *La sociologie de la littérature* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), p. 47.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 3:29.

nor allegiances were ever pure, “authorial poverty” assumes its significance less as a “fact” than as an over-determined, value-infused construct that, while enabling clearer depictions of a literary sphere divided into opposing camps of writers—insiders and outsiders, major and minor, “true” and “venal,” etc.—does not allow for much “objective” account. Not in the eighteenth century, and I doubt that it does today. Describing the “poverty” of writers never seems like a productive way to grasp their “real lives,” in the sense of their socio-economic circumstances. For one thing, I am not sure we have a workable, trope-free notion of what poverty means when applied to individuals who, usually building on a solid base of human capital (education, family wealth, and connections), lead lives defined, in all appearances, more by possibilities and choices (even if “bad” choices) than a dearth of prospects, by mobility (lateral, as well as upward and downward), and by the striking range of their social contexts, connections, initiatives, work, and income, not to mention by the protean, malleable nature of their personae.

A complex, multi-layered study, *The Devil in the Holy Water* brings a variety of different perspectives to bear on a fascinating corpus of works. It nimbly shifts from an analysis of interweaving libels in part one to an exploration in part two of how these libels confronted, in their representations, the social and political worlds which they claimed to reveal. It is primarily to “the most familiar, worked-over sources of old-fashioned history” that Darnton turns in gauging the truth claims of the libels: namely, diplomatic correspondences and police archives (p. 105). He is careful in doing so, cautioning that the truth isn’t to be found as “‘hard’ facts [...] extracted from the archives [...] but evidence embedded in documents that can be made to make sense.” The caveat notwithstanding, the police do enjoy a relationship to objectivity in Darnton’s investigation that the libelers do not. To be sure, incarnated by inspectors such as Joseph d’Héméry, “a serious, systematic public servant” (p. 115), and especially, Jean-Charles-Pierre Lenoir, “a diligent, intelligent, and responsible official” (p. 106), the police were meticulous administrators and thorough record-keepers, compared with the libelers. Yet these qualities were, of course, expressive of the vision and purpose of the bureaucracy for which they worked, which was premised on understanding the world of print as a domain of potential criminal activity, libeling as a danger to public order and the state, and the libeler as a “criminal author” (p. 176), who required constant, painstaking vigilance.⁸

We might discern how this lens inflected what the police saw and recounted in the examples Darnton cites in a chapter on reading. To characterize how “real people” read (p. 80), he highlights a passage from a 1774 report by the inspector Pierre-Antoine-Auguste Goupil identifying a book stall run by a demoiselle La Marche where a libel against the abbé Terray, just dismissed as controller-general of finances, was being sold: “People flock to her shop as if they were going to a new play, and that creates a sensation. Besides, this brochure gives rise to talk about the persons who are compromised in it; and although it is quite badly written, the salty, wicked remarks scattered through it make it sold and read” (p. 82). However, the image of the muttering, pressing crowd says, I suspect, at least as much about the preconceptions and anxieties of the police as it does about actual reading practices in the period. Darnton looks to confirm Goupil’s perceptions in Mercier’s chapter on *Revendeurs de livres* in the *Tableau de Paris*. Referring to “curieux amateurs de la littérature,” Mercier writes (I quote Darnton’s translation), “You see groups of them who stick to the sales counter as if drawn there by a magnet. They pester the bookseller, who has removed all chairs in order to make them remain standing; but they stay nonetheless, for hour after hour, propped up against books, continuously leafing through pamphlets and

⁸ Informative discussions on the use of police files as sources of evidence can be found in Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, trans. Rosemary Morris (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1995), pp. 18-26 [originally published as *Dire et mal dire: l’opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992)]; Lisa Jane Graham, *If the King Only Knew: Seditious Speech in the Reign of Louis XV* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp. 9-14; and Christian Jouhaud, Dinah Ribard, and Nicolas Schapira, *Histoire, Littérature, Témoignage* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), pp. 327-36.

holding forth about the merits and potential impact of works that they have barely glanced at” (pp. 84-5). It is an evocative image, but I do not think it corroborates the menacing mass that Goupil conveyed to his superiors. Rather than a threatening scene of indistinct readers incited to slanderous, disrespectful chatter, Mercier's tableau shows blasé customers whose seen-it-all sophistication and languid time-killing conflicts with the urgency of the inspector's view. The beginning of the chapter, in fact, mocks the kind of over-cooked rhetoric on which Goupil drew, referring to banned books resold with the original *réquisitoires* condemning them, not to draw attention to the threat the books posed but as ironic testimony to their innocuousness: “hautes jérémiades de ceux qui jadis ont lancé leur foudre sur ces brochures, lesquelles devaient, selon eux, ébranler les trônes et renverser les autels.”⁹

Mercier's more measured and perhaps more knowledgeable description might stand as a corrective to the panic of the police. Conversely, elevating the police archives as a more reliable source relative to, say, Mercier or even the libels themselves has the effect of “naturalizing” the criminality of libeling and libelers, and hence undermining the prospect that there could be anything redeeming in the latter's activities. Darnton, in turn, tends to present this “natural” criminality as integral to the strangeness of eighteenth-century literary life, which resides in the idea that an intellectual field *could be* such a seedy underworld dominated by ruthless schemers and double-crossers, “shocking as that may seem today” (p. 137). But I wonder if what we are reacting to as strange or foreign to our sensibilities is less the actual transformation of the literary world into the Enlightenment-era equivalent of perhaps our drug trade, than the evolving excesses of an administrative paranoia, rooted in the seventeenth century, which continued to perceive certain kinds of printed materials – obscene libels, anti-government satire, etc. – as constituting a grave threat to the security of the state and the authority of the monarch (thus as a crime of *lèse-majesté*). Maybe the authorities were right. *The Devil in the Holy Water* declines to weigh in on the question of whether the libels “caused” the Revolution. But it seems important to distinguish the inherent criminality of writers from their criminalization in the eyes of the state, which involved not just the surveillance, arrest, and imprisonment of writers, but also the mobilization of a specific language, indeed a set of tropes, for describing and discrediting their activities.

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⁹ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet, 2 vols (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), 2: 1425-6.