DIGITISING JOURNALISM: NCSE Conference, March 2007

Notes on a Learning Curve: reading The Monthly Repository before and after digitisation

The Monthly Repository is one of the journals being digitised by NCSE (Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition). I decided to read Volume Six, New Series, for 1832 (William Johnson Fox was then editor and owner), a crucial year, to ask and possibly answer, two questions.

First, what is a **digital** reading? Digitisation and electronic text is often associated with territorial terms. We hear of the digital landscape, mapping, mining, the digital immigrant and the digital native. How is the process of reading this digital landscape different from reading the material products of traditional print culture?

Second, through digitisation, can you **know** something you can know in no other way? Something you could not derive from print reading? In other words, what does reading digitally do to and for knowledge?

I am not speaking here of finding things out, the discovery of empirical data, the fact-based knowledge that floods the internet. I mean a form of knowledge, and epistemological possibilities. (It does not need saying that you are never going to find anything out unless you have an idea in the first place – nor that seemingly neutral data is ideologically loaded.)

Because these are nineteenth-century periodicals, I went back to a lecture by William Whewell on the 1851 Exhibition. [1] He claimed the Exhibition to be a moment in a new modernity that entailed understanding and theorising material art, artefacts and images, including them in the culture instead of reading them as non aesthetic and non meaningful. Whewell writes that the Exhibition has transformed time and space. Like a photograph, the model of modern knowledge, it caused the synchronous presentation of everything on display (p.3). Every item in it came to be known simultaneously, not successively. And because artefacts from every country in the world were co-present, different histories and phases of production could be contemplated simultaneously. Likewise, if time collapses, so does space. Objects are seen in absolute contiguity, not serially (p.6).

The corollary of this is that individual research is now extinct. He points to the failure of diachronic research by the individual scholar. For while this researcher studies one area, the objects of his study have changed in another. He is doomed. Knowledge must now be collectively constructed.

Whewell has a fantasy of time travel: travelling a little faster than light images, it is possible to see all the images ever generated, and all history is accessible, read backwards from present to past (p.7). The possibility of storing images follows logically. In this model of specular knowledge both cinema and the internet are anticipated.

In reality we always perceive through both contiguity and seriality, and Whewell is talking nonsense. There is a suave effrontery in his wily respect for Prince Albert's fondness for thinking of the modern world as one where the categories of time and space have changed, and in the Tory iconoclasm that is preparing the way for technology and capital. (Neither knew that Marx was saying the same thing.) But to see Whewell purely in these terms is to neglect the cultural richness of his lecture. The insight of the lecture is that modern knowledge no longer needs to be constructed diachronically. Whewell's theory of knowledge starts from the present. He believes that we need to read backwards, not forwards, backwards from the present to the past. The result is a hermeneutics that depends not on a synthetic but an analytical act of reading.

I decided to test this out by looking again at one of the great classics of scholarship on nineteenth-century serials, Francis Mineka's The Dissidence of Dissent, published as long ago as 1944. [2] I had read this wonderful study of The Monthly Repository, ground-breaking in its time, and the journal itself, for an earlier book. What would research look like after digitisation? Would its methodology be the same or different from Mineka's work?

Re-reading this study makes one thing clear: such works of scholarship are still indispensable to research on periodicals and are its bedrock. Mineka's is an encyclopaedic work of historical scholarship. Thinking methodologically, it is self-evident that such works are created by temporal synthesis, building up, aggregation forwards. The sequence of editorships, the modulations of Unitarianism with editorial change, the nature of contributors, the content, shifting policy, and dissenting intellectual and political interests of the periodical, were meticulously charted. An archaeology putting evidence together from the bottom up, the filling of gaps, the sequence of cause and effect, these are the models that come to mind. It's also an evolutionary model.

Such scholarship is the foster child of slow time. I do not think it can be replaced. But it might be supplemented with other procedures. (These are not mutually exclusive.) What would that look like? An analytical, synchronic way of reading would be atemporal, starting anywhere. It would be mindful of Barthes's ways of reading, 'starring' or spotting the text, to see what weight segregated and repeated elements might bear, such as key words or phrases, concept clusters. [3] (That is, it would not work with topics or even people in the first instance.) A network of connections, where the lacunae were in some way constitutive, a laser rather than digging, a research of the surface rather than depth, what would that mean?

Not much at first. My first attempts were disappointing, and only served to confirm the already known so carefully evolved through empirical and diachronic methods. They neither changed my way of reading nor elicited anything new.

I started by pursuing clusters of words and their contexts, the most elementary function of an electronic text. 'Woman' and 'Poetry' was my initial cluster. This was disappointing. The depth of The Monthly Repository's feminism is incredible, and it is a project

recognised by both men and women contributors to the journal. Mineka had already marked Fox's encouragement of female contributors (particularly Harriet Martineau) and the progressive content of the journal. In Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics, I explored this theme further. Looking at these clusters only confirmed my understanding of the journal's feminism, which ranged from a defiant critique of the educational and political subordination of women in Wollstonecraftian terms, to attempts to push out the boundaries of the womanly and the feminine while staying within orthodox definitions. Perhaps the capacity to look at word clusters revealed contexts where one would not have immediately searched. For example, in 'Domestic Manners of the Americans', a review article on Frances Trollope's study of American life, her sexist account of the diplomas received by American girls (p.403) and her own use of the 'shelter' of 'sex' (p. 404) received harsh comment. A three-part article, 'On the connexion between Poetry and Religion' (p.485, p. 618, p.817), made an extensive reading of Felicia Hemans's work. 'She is a love poetess, and a true woman', a 'Sappho of the affections': 'The heart is her province' (p.817). At the same time she is praised for her 'electrifying boldness' (p.822) as 'the poetess of home becomes the poetess of war', and the 'feminine' spokeswoman of anti- Metternichian freedom (p.823). The writer believed that a religious poetry did not necessarily possess overt religious content. Secular subjects and their complexities might produce a 'fruitage' 'different from the root' (p.822), but the hidden root of such poetry would be religious and ethical feeling.

All this confirmed and consolidated what I knew, that the Monthly Repository exploited a gendered aesthetic as a supplement to a Unitarian and Benthamite agenda as a way of deepening and enriching both – sometimes carried to absurd lengths. 'Flowers are utilitarian in the largest sense. Their very life is supplied by ministering to others – producers and distributors, but consumers of what, unused, would be noxious . . . [they are] ornaments in happiness'(p.827). But the core agenda was despite this mostly unchanged. My reading confirmed the fusing of utilitarianism and Unitarianism described by Mineka. The new Poor Law, for instance, gained stringent approval: not charity but education was the way forward. The journal supported Babbage's instrumental account of the division of labour in the factory. Panoptical readings of the prison were accepted – Fox admired a New York state penal system in which prisoners sat back to back while eating so that they could not communicate subversive information (p.583).

At a loss, I went back to the impassioned editorial that Fox had written in the first issue of Volume Six for January, 1832 (I had reprinted some of it at the start of Victorian Poetry). Fox asked for electoral reform, changes in the law, education, and the repeal of taxes on knowledge. One word stood out that looked a little anomalous – 'Community'. It seemed an unexpectedly modern word. The current 'forms' of society, Fox wrote, do not 'represent the intelligence' or 'harmonize with the condition' or 'satisfy the wants, and realize the desires of the community' (p.1). In what sense was Fox using the word, and would its occurrences elsewhere explain it?

Of the ten meanings assigned to 'community' in the OED, the seventh and oldest (dating from 1380), and with it a cluster of related meanings, seemed to be relevant: 'A body of people organized into a political, municipal, or social unity', either in (a) a state or a

commonwealth or (b) in the same locality. The primary meanings bifurcated into two contradictory ones, an exclusive and inclusive meaning, following from the use of the definite and indefinite article, and these meanings were just becoming current in the late Enlightenment. First, members of a civil community marked off by birth, religion or occupation '*not* (my italics) shared by those among whom they live'(1797). Second, designated as '*The community'*, 'the people of a country (or district) as a whole; the general body to which all alike belong, the public'. This second meaning was supported by a quotation from Bentham of 1789, from Principles of Legislation, xviii, para 2. 'The good of the community cannot require that any act should be made an offence which is not liable in some way or other to be detrimental to the community'. Walter Scott also used the word in this sense. Another quotation of 1832 cited Harriet Martineau – 'Such men become . . a burden to the community' (Hill and Valley, ii, 26).

It seemed that 'community' used in both these senses must be a modern, that is, late enlightenment and early nineteenth-century word. At this stage the citations from Bentham and Martineau appeared to be a coincidence.

I called up other occurrences of 'community'. Here, in abbreviated form, are four phases of semantic discovery.
1/ 'Community' occurred in another Fox article, 'Who killed Colonel Brereton?'(pp.130-134). This article was on the terrible Bristol reform riots of the previous year, where there was a death toll unprecedented since Peterloo. Brereton, commander of the troops, committed suicide upon his court martial. About such affairs, Fox wrote, 'every enlightened member of the community has a 'voice potential' (p. 130). Fox distributed responsibility across the magistrates, the army, the aristocratic structure of Bristol's governance, and the rioters themselves – they all killed him. The word was used in the analysis of social fragmentation and breakdown. If 'education, which is the universal right of man, born in a Christian community, had not been witheld', he argued (p.132), the riots might not have occurred. It seemed that Fox was using the word to think through a more integrated reading of the social, a body of people in the same locality with interconnected interests. I thought that this word must be, then, a Fox favourite, and that he was forging it with an understanding of its comparatively recent meaning.

2/ I was interested that 'community' occurred collocated with 'poetry' in Crabb Robinson's discussions of Herder: 'in communities where there is no people, there can be no public and no nation, no language and poetry – that is properly our own and has a living agency in our hearts'. The series, 'people', 'public', 'nation', related to the primary meaning of community and its bifurcation. Not a group within the state but the nation itself – 'the general body to which all alike belong, the public'. These related to contiguous words – kingdom, country, state. All these semantic fields began to interact with one another to suggest that Crabb Robinson was using this meaning of 'community' self-consciously to designate the inclusiveness of the 'general body' and in a deliberately non hierarchical way.

3/ The next occurrence of 'community' I called up was in an editorial by Fox on 'Prison Discipline' (pp.577-586) and prison reform. Here 'community' is repeatedly collocated

with ‘our’ population/civilisation/nation. Here are few examples: ‘useful to the community’ (p. 578), ‘the security of the community’, ‘resources of the community’ (p.581), ‘peace of the community’, ‘intercourse between different classes of the community’ (p.582), ‘sensible relief to the community’ (p.585). The right of arbitrary infliction of punishment (covertly the death penalty) and the connection between crime and poverty were two prominent themes. Again, Fox was assigning responsibility and *choices* widely to all individuals and groups in the state and conceptualising civil society as interdependent. Whoever gives to street beggars helps to fill our prisons, whoever votes for the corn laws or East India charter helps to fill our prisons (p.586). ‘Everyone is consciously or unconsciously, enlisted with the Prison Discipline Society by being for or against it’. The work done by ‘community’ is to suggest that responsibilities are diffused across society, that choices and even opinions matter over the spectrum of a population. ‘Community’ is constituted by the total body of individuals coexisting, to which ‘all alike belong’. This strong reading of community as interaction is quite unlike the communistic meaning (the holding goods in common) that was developing concurrently. Nor does it presuppose liberal individualism, though it *is* surely predicated on a universal franchise.

4/ I was led to Thomas Southwood Smith’s oration over Bentham’s dead body, and the ceremony of dissection attended by prominent utilitarians (the medical theatre held over 300 people), ‘On the Character and Philosohpy of the late Jeremy Bentham’ (p. 450). ‘Community’, I realised, was Bentham’s word. I was able to see, through it, how Southwood Smith and Fox saw Benthamism – as a redefinition of civil society. The ‘only comprehensive and only right and proper end of the social union, or of the aggregate of individual men which constitutes a community, is the greatest happiness of all the members of the community’ (p.451). Note that Smith does not speak of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, the familiar reductive formula associated with Bentham. The ‘delinquent is a member of the community as well as every other individual’, he said.

‘Community’ appears to have been a Benthamite code word, used performatively to express a new, modern, inclusive and non hierarchical understanding of the ‘social union’.

This was not a conclusion but a beginning. The semantics of ‘community’ in Bentham’s works would need to be researched, and its collocations in those of his followers, who clearly adapted and modified his thinking. The reach and the limits set upon the word, and its potential tensions, would have to be investigated. But it did seem that for his followers Benthamism meant not merely a system of codification, as John Stewart Mill described it in his famous analysis of Bentham and Coleridge, but something more. It was a part of the complex and contradictory strands that later went into theorising the Victorian nation. The Monthly Repository is evidence here.

Without the capacity to roam across a digitised text, and to play randomly back and forth with its terms, I doubt whether ‘community’ and its implications would have been noticeable at all, or capable of being investigated if it had. This capacity precipitates and

structures investigation. Though it can never do without ‘traditional’ research, it is a genuine amplification of it.

Two further thoughts. First, as for the utilitarian flowers, the joke was against me. Flowers occur in botanical communities, a body of individual entities with shared interests. I should have remembered that the clumsiest and most awkward moments in the linguistic work of a culture or subculture often lead to the heart of its concerns. Second, there is ground for optimism. At the dawn of digitisation and the electronic world, it was often said that what constitutes ‘knowledge’ in the post modern condition must change, reduced, simplified and abstracted to the information that could be sent and received from a computer terminal. Surely, even if knowledge has changed, that reduction has not occurred. [4]

[1] William Whewell, The General Bearing of the Great Exhibition on nthe Progress of Art and Science.Inaugural Lecture, November 25, 1851, London, 1851.
[2] F. E. Mineka, The Dissidence of Dissent. The Monthly Repository 1806-1838, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1944.
[3] Roland Barthes, S/Z (1970), trans. Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, New York, 1974, pp.18 ff.
[4] Jean Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984.