"This is splendid historical writing..."

THE LITERARY UNDERGROUND OF THE OLD REGIME

Robert Darnton
The Literary Underground of the Old Regime, Robert Darnton, Harvard University Press, 1982, 0674536576, 9780674536579, 258 pages. Robert Darnton introduces us to the shadowy world of pirate publishers, garret scribblers, under-the-cloak book peddlers, smugglers, and police spies that composed the literary underground of the Enlightenment. Here are the ambitious writers who crowded into Paris seeking fame and fortune within the Republic of Letters, but who instead sank into the miserable world of Grub Street—victims of a closed world of protection and privilege. Venting their frustrations in an illicit literature of vitriolic pamphlets, libelles, and chroniques scandaleuses, these "Rousseaus of the gutter" desecrated everything sacred in the social order of the Old Regime. Here too are the workers who printed their writings and the clandestine booksellers who distributed them. While censorship, a monopolistic guild, and the police contained the visible publishing industry within the limits of official orthodoxies, a prolific literary underworld disseminated a vast illegal literature that conveyed a seditious ideology to readers everywhere in France. Covering their traces in order to survive, the creators of this eighteenth-century counterculture have virtually disappeared from history. By drawing on an ingenious selection of previously hidden sources, such as police ledgers and publishers' records, Robert Darnton reveals for the first time the fascinating story of that forgotten underworld. The activities of the underground bear on a broad range of issues in history and literature, and they directly concern the problem of uncovering the ideological origins of the French Revolution. This engaging book illuminates those issues and provides a fresh view of publishing history that will inform and delight the general reader.

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AUtopia and Reform in the Enlightenment, Franco Venturi, 1971, History, 160 pages. In this detailed study of the republican tradition in the development of the Enlightenment, the central problem of utopia and reform is crystallized in a discussion of the ....


The Devil in the Holy Water Or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon, Robert Darnton, 2010, , 534 pages. A National Book Critics Circle Award winner explores the proliferation of slander and libel in France during the period after the French Revolution, during which a ragtag group ....


The Order of Books Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries, Roger Chartier, 1994, Literary Criticism, 126 pages. In The Order of Books, Chartier examines the different systems required to regulate the world of writing through the centuries, from the registration of titles to the ....

Media and political culture in the eighteenth century, Robert Darnton, 2005, Social Science, 130 pages.

The Case for Books Past, Present, and Future, Robert Darnton, 2009, Language Arts & Disciplines, 218 pages. A renowned historian and pioneering scholar in the history of the bookD²D,ã€•a lead voice in the debate about the digital future of books and knowledgeD²D,ã€•distills his experience and ....

The women of the court of Louis XV., Imbert de Saint-Amand, 1892, , 304 pages.

Reflections essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings, Walter Benjamin, Peter Demetz, Jan 1, 1978, Literary Collections, 348 pages.

An account of the southern maritime provinces of France representing the distress to which they were reduced at the conclusion of the war in 1748, and in what manner they may again be distressed upon any future renewal of hostilities, Sir William Mildmay, 1764, 133 pages.


Here are the ambitious writers who crowded into Paris seeking fame and fortune within the Republic of Letters, but who instead sank into the miserable world of Grub Street-victims of a closed world of protection and privilege. Venting their frustrations in an illicit literature of vitriolic pamphlets, libelles, and chroniques scandaleuses, these "Rousseaus of the gutter" desecrated everything sacred in the social order of the Old Regime. Here too are the workers who printed their writings and the clandestine booksellers who distributed them.

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This is splendid historical writing...Darnton [has] a well-justified reputation as one of the most original contributors to our understanding of life in pre-revolutionary Paris...What Darnton says about the writers is necessary to understanding the revolutionaries. The French Revolution was a continuous conflict between people, as well as a battle of ideas, and anyone who wants to understand the people had better start with the work of Robert Darnton.

[Darton's] book gives us not only a history of 18th-century publishing but a notion of how the lower orders of literature contributed to the fall of the Old Regime...The reader who wants a glimpse of the world behind a very unusual literature and an enlightening look at a famous time in history will get an eyeful in this surprising and entertaining volume.

Detail is indeed Robert Darnton's strong suit. He likes to conjure up voices which had been silent for two centuries, to resurrect what he calls (modifying Peter Laslett's famous phrase) 'a world that we had lost.' And how? Not by 'contemplating philosophical treatises,' but by 'grubbing in archives,' in particular, the rich store of papers from a Swiss publishing house, the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel...Darnton resuscitates a vanished world, and in doing so, like the best historians...produces a literary text of our own time.

This well written book is a set of linked essays on the literary underground of pre-Revolutionary France. Darnton was fortunate to discover a treasure trove of archival materials in the form of business records and correspondence of a major 18th century Swiss publisher producing for the French Market. The French book market was controlled by a combination of government censorship and the activities of Parisian publishers/booksellers who enjoyed semi-monopoly privileges. Darnton
describes the activities of the clandestine book trade including the difficult life of the Grub Street hack who wrote much of the published material through the actual and often difficult mechanics of smuggling proscribed books into France and selling them.

Cumulatively, these essays paint a vivid picture of pre-Revolutionary France; a nation where the government tried, with variable success, to control the press, where there was a consistent market for tracts attacking the monarchy and aristocracy, and where a marginal living could be made by individuals committed to some forms of the Enlightenment critiques of the Ancien Regime. Beyond exposing an interesting aspect of 18th century French social history, Darnton's work leads to some generally interesting points. Much of what was retailed, and presumably read, was not the major works of the Enlightenment philosophers, but rather a mixture of scurrilous political attacks, semi-pornographic tracts, and popular fiction. Much of this work, however negligible its literary or intellectual merit, had the effect of discrediting the monarchy and aristocracy, and particularly the whole notion of privileged orders of society. While often presented in vulgar and actually libelous forms, this literature probably contributed greatly to the erosion of the legitimacy of the Ancien Regime. Darnton shows also that a number of the leaders of the early Revolution emerged, including individuals like Brissot and Marat, emerged from the literary underground. Their relatively primitive ideology was formed in this milieu and their experience as marginal figures in French life contributed greatly to their hatred of the Ancien Regime and their zeal to destroy the established orders of society. Read more ›

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Here are the ambitious writers who crowded into Paris seeking fame and fortune within the Republic of Letters, but who instead sank into the miserable world of Grub...more Robert Darnton introduces us to the shadowy world of pirate publishers, garret scribblers, under-the-cloak book peddlers, smugglers, and police spies that composed the literary underground of the Enlightenment.

A captivating look at the seamy underside of the French Enlightenment. Darnton argues plausibly that it was the illegal literature of blasphemy, scandal, and political pornography, not the more genteel writings of the "established" philosophes (though he probably overstates the latter's complacency), that readied the people of France for the revolutionary rage of the 1790s.

Darnton makes this case by drawing on police files and the archives of a Swiss publishing company, one of many that smuggled books across the border into France. Using these records, he draws vivid portraits of the spies, swindlers, smugglers, and starving authors and printers who kept the clandestine book trade alive during the late 18th century.(less)

Essai qui repose sur une thèse simple mais efficace: La Révolution est moins le produit des Lumières (L'Encyclopédie étant réservée à une élite) que celui de la littérature "scandaleuse" qui a contribué à désacraliser la personne du roi, la puissance de la cour et plus globalement la légitimité de l'Ancien Régime.

For anyone interested in the causes of the French revolution. A book that studies literary black market that existed in France before the revolution. This consisted of the notorious pamphlets that
did everything from push slanderous scandals (the affair of the necklace is a famous one and was even made into a Hollywood film) to books that promoted enlightenment thinking, to others that directly slandered the king. The author's research included sales records from old printing houses (usually outside of France), etc. (less)

The French Enlightenment? Think of Huber’s famous picture of the dîner des philosophes: there is Voltaire, one arm raised to heaven, and alongside him, around the well-provided table, on elegant chairs, sits the periwigged company of older and younger Enlighteners, D’Alembert, Diderot, Marmontel, Condorcet, La Harpe... Two familiar images come together here. Eighteenth-century France as a place of refinement, good taste and witty conversation, a haven of the civilisation celebrated long ago by Clive Bell. But at the same time the dynamic new France, in which great thinkers shake the foundations of traditional society and prepare the way for the Revolution and the modern age such is the view propagated in different guises by the French republican tradition.

Robert Darnton’s objective, in this collection of essays, is to disturb the serenity of the dinner party, to bring the historian of ideas or the literary scholar down from the noble summits to the murky depths of Enlightenment. His particular concern is with the later Enlightenment in France, the last decade or so before the Revolution, when the masters of the heroic period are all dead or dying and a new cultural configuration has come into being. The once radical Enlightenment has conquered the Academy and much of the polite sector of French society. The second-generation philosophes (a Suard or a Marmontel) no longer have the subversive fire of their elders, but live respectable and well-paid lives until the Revolution as members of the enlightened élite. But the élite is small: there is no room in it for all the young provincials with no money and the burning desire to be the Voltaires of their generation. These are the people who interest Darnton; they inhabit the Grub Street which he explores here in fascinating detail.

Detail is indeed Robert Darnton’s strong suit. He likes to conjure up voices which had been silent for two centuries, to resurrect what he calls (modifying Peter Laslett’s famous phrase) a world that we had lost. And how? Not by contemplating philosophical treatises, but by grubbing in archives: in particular, the rich store of papers from a Swiss publishing house, the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), which have already provided the material for a splendid book, The Business of Enlightenment (1979), and which look good for a lot more.

Before The Business of Enlightenment Darnton had published a study of Mesmerism. This displayed strange strands of Enlightenment thought, which might strike a modern reader as far from enlightened, and it showed the author’s taste for highly spiced historical narrative in which period documents are made to yield their maximum flavour. The same holds true for the present volume. Darnton has not attempted a systematic study of the literary underground, but a set of sketches, which add up to a little comédie humaine. They are engagingly written, perhaps rather long on detail but telling some vivid stories about a colourful cross-section of vanished humanity.

The first main character to appear is the revolutionary leader Brissot, by no means an unknown figure. His pre-Revolutionary career is generally known through his own self-justifying memoirs, written not long before his execution. The archives of the STN, together with the Paris police records, tell a different story. They show us not so much the pure and persecuted apostle of Enlightenment as a man deeply engaged in the shady dealings of the literary underworld. In particular, Brissot was driven by poverty, a spell in the Bastille and the crash of his ambitious philosophical projects to act as a police informer. Persistent rumours to this effect have often been dismissed as malicious gossip emanating from personal enemies such as Marat, but Brissot’s letters to the STN and the memoirs of Lenoir, the Paris police chief, leave little doubt about it.
Although Darnton takes some pleasure in showing up Brissot’s hypocrisy, he claims that he is not concerned to unveil the villain behind the noble mask, but rather to explain the unpleasant compromises forced on a well-meaning man who, like most people, trod a tricky path between ideals and expediency.

SIR: Peter France’s thoughtful review of Robert Darnton’s The Literary Underground of the Old Regime (LRB, 2 December 1982) focuses on a number of significant issues, the most important of which is Darnton’s scepticism on the causes, nature and effect of the Enlightenment. Many readers will be puzzled by an excessive caution here. Some of Darnton’s other positions, such as the influence of pornographic tracts on revolutionary politics, will be questioned for being too broad. The difficulties raised on both scores deserve attention, since they relate to the genre in which Darnton has cast his work – namely, the history of the Book.

Darnton’s most provocative, if perplexed argument concerns the influence of Grub Street on its writer and readers. Of the writers, he believes that it was their situation more than their ideas that mattered. The “Low-Lifers” and yellow journalists of the Enlightenment repeated the message of the great philosophes (indeed, they had no ideas which were specifically their own “Grub Street had no coherent political programme nor even any distinctive ideas of its own”). The “emotional thrust” of Grub Street literature displaced political or social argument as the message, and it was from the Low-Lifers’ “visceral hatred, not from the refined abstractions of the contented élitist, that the extreme Jacobinism found its voice”. In this phase of his analysis Darnton empties Grub Street culture of its ideological substance: what they said not really matter to them.

The second half of Darnton’s argument deals with the effect on the reader of this filtered-down Enlightenment. There, he thinks, ideas did matter. The police understood this. They took popular journalism seriously because the libelles had a serious effect on public opinion. Paradoxically, though the Grub Street writers were moved by their own misery, the Grub Street reader was genuinely moved by their ideas. Cynics seduce. Reading Rousseau’s Social Contract may not have motivated the libellistes, but something did happen to their audience when abstract concepts of popular sovereignty were translated into pornographic stories about the Queen:

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