

Urmi Bhowmik

From Page to Book: Transformations of the Periodical in the Eighteenth Century

This paper considers the transformation the eighteenth-century periodical (a single-sheet folio, printed in double columns) underwent when (re)published in other forms. The passage from page to book, from single-sheet publication to a multivolume one, bound in hard covers, marked the change from an ephemeral medium, tied to time, to one that was fixed in time and space. The inevitable point of departure when it comes to a characterization of the periodical is its difference from the book. James Wald describes the book/periodical distinction as follows: where books are "venerable, complete, univocal,...permanent", periodicals are "recent, fragmentary, open-ended, ... provisional, derivative, ephemeral". A book is not a manuscript; neither is it a periodical—flimsy, topical and therefore rapidly outdated, noncanonical and indeed, uncanonizable. If the defining quality of the periodical is periodicity, it is necessary to consider what was gained or lost in the passage of the periodical from page to book.

In the first place, there were distinct advantages for the bookseller. Republication in volume form offered the publisher more ways of generating revenue: they could charge for subscriptions, or seek to widen the audience for their publications by dedicating each volume to prominent people. Being reprinted as a book also made it more difficult for periodicals' content to be pirated by other booksellers, and stopped rival publications from appearing under the same name.

Publication in book form could be a transformation not only of mode but also of content: John Dunton could present his question-and-answer periodical, the Athenian Mercury: or, Casuistical Gazette (1691-1697), when published in volume form, as an encyclopaedia, with an index listing all the topics covered. The Mercury solicited all kinds of questions (except those concerning current affairs of state) — about proper conduct, legal redress, religious doctrine, natural phenomena — from its readers, promising to answer them to their customers' fullest satisfaction, while preserving their anonymity. Publication in volume form thus privileged the content of the periodical over the means of interaction between authors and audience. Their eventual appearance in book form was planned for and foreseen by the periodicals in question: Defoe claimed his Review (1704-1713) when complete, would be a history of France.

Certain aspects of the periodical could be consolidated when published in book form, such as their function as moral reformers and guides to conduct. When Mrs Morland, in Northanger Abbey, goes in search of the Mirror to teach her daughter Catherine to be satisfied with the comforts of home, no matter how meagre, the effect of the moral instruction would be much diminished if the guidance she sought came in the form of a single sheet, as opposed to a bulky volume. Transformations in the way the periodical was presented entailed that it was read differently: their consumption became less occasional and more habitual. Publication in electronic form has turned periodicals into images: their visual aspect is now uppermost. One of the arguments for retaining journal publication in the print format in the sciences is that it retains the chronology of scientific research; since electronic texts can so easily be changed, it is harder for them to represent accurately the progress of the sciences. Periodical publication offers a way of representing the passage of time in a concrete fashion, and their publication as object or image changes the way we conceive of time.

Space and the Periodical

Periodicity is always identified as the "essential" attribute of the periodical, but this paper contends that its relationship with space is just as consequential. That the connection with space is intrinsic to their being is signaled by the titles of periodicals, almost from their very advent. Newsbooks, in the mid-seventeenth-century, advertise their frequency of appearance by describing themselves as "Diarnull" "Weekly" or "Monthly", but their most commonly adopted name is "Mercurius", after the Roman deity who could cover space in an instant. Even when, for

reasons of seditious or subversive content, it was necessary to disguise their place of publication, newsbooks could gesture towards their wide circulation. The *Mercurius Anti-Melancholicus*, or, *News from Westminster* (1647) bore the imprint: "Printed where I was, and where I will be." The *Daily Courant* (1702-1735), the first daily newspaper to appear in England, kept up this tradition, after the name "Mercury" fell out of use, of using the title to refer to the periodical's capacity to annihilate distance. It became important to the eighteenth-century periodical to bear the traces of its own circulation, as a mark of legitimation and authority. Therefore, they marked the places from which they were printed, sold, or from where their readers and correspondents sent in their news or views. Analyzing the periodical's relationship with space allows us to examine its formation of a reading community more closely, not only by through its evocation of place but also by its negotiation of new kinds of social organization through the medium of print.

The one space, above all others, that periodicals are identified with is that of the city. "Journalism equals urbanism," according to a twentieth-century scholar. The eighteenth-century periodical can be read as a commentary on the city: on the rights and duties of citizens, on how to inhabit the shared space of the public; on how to deport oneself in the new social organization of the city. A correspondent of the *Athenian Mercury*, or, *Casuistical Gazette* (1691-1697), in the grip of class anxiety, asks if it is appropriate for tradesmen to wear swords. Isaac Bickerstaff practices dating particular items in the *Tatler* (1709-1711) from particular places: "Will's Coffee-house" or "From my own Apartment", locating the various preoccupations of his journal according to various public or private places. When Mr. Spectator goes into the country, it constitutes a departure from the standard preoccupations of the periodical, and is understood by its readers as such. The trip is part of the Spectator's program of repositioning the domestic sphere as part of the public sphere; and as corollary, the country as part of the same social system that has given rise to the city.

But the space eighteenth-century periodicals constitute most effectively is not that of the city but the placeless space of the public sphere. Readers of periodicals are assured, implicitly or explicitly, that they are connected by a vast network. This network includes both city and country, metropolis and colony, but need not be identified with either (the eidolon of the *Gentleman's Magazine* is named "Sylvanus Urban"). To be in two places at once is to inhabit neither. The periodical's capacity to annihilate distance can become the loss of place (as in the example of the *Mercurius Anti-Melancholicus*, above): and it is this placelessness that allows a reading community to seamlessly identify itself with the public.
