Gillian Russell

Gerry Higgins Chair in Irish Studies
University of Melbourne

The Neglected History of the History of Printed Ephemera

Samuel Johnson's description in 1751 of the 'papers of the day' (referring to newspapers and pamphlets) as the '*Ephemerae* of learning', has been cited as the earliest example of the application of 'ephemera', meaning something that has a transitory existence, to printed matter.[1] But the term 'printed ephemera', often associated with Maurice Rickards's definition – 'the minor transient documents of everyday life' – only began to gain general currency much later than the eighteenth century – in the 1960s and 70s.[2] A seminal text in the history of the emergence of 'printed ephemera' as a cultural category was John Lewis's *Printed Ephemera* of 1962. Subtitled 'the changing uses of type and letterforms in English and American printing', Lewis's book

---

[1] Samuel Johnson, *Works*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 11; 'ephemera, n.2.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 22 July 2014.

[2] Maurice Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera* (Oxford: Phaidon/Christie's, 1988), 7.

interpreted printed ephemera through the lens of printing history, specifically as a form of graphic art.[3] A striking design artefact in its own right, *Printed Ephemera* both informed and reflected innovations in mid-twentieth-century graphic design, as well as stimulating interest in printed ephemera *per se*.

As Lewis and others pointed out the first texts to be printed in the fifteenth century were single-sheet indulgences, which were 'ephemeral' in the sense of having short-term uses.[4] 'Ephemerality' in both its material and conceptual senses can therefore be said to be a constitutive feature of the age of print that began in the mid-fifteenth century. It is increasingly constitutive of the emergent post-print age too. Five hundred years and more after the appearance of printed single-sheet indulgences, the book itself and other forms of print such as the newspaper are being contemplated as media that are passing or in eclipse.[5] Ephemera has therefore always been with us, a least since the mid-fifteenth century, and seems set to make the transition from print to the digital age and, indeed, to become more visible than ever before. The history of ephemera must therefore take account of how the category has been so successful in functioning anachronistically and often rhetorically, eclipsing both the

[3] John Lewis, *Printed Ephemera: The Changing Uses of Type and Letterforms in English and American Printing* (Ipswich: W.S. Cowell, 1962).

[4] Lewis, *Printed Ephemera*, 25.

[5] See e.g., James Mussell, 'The Passing of Print', *Media History* 18(1), 2011, 77–92; Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

contexts in which it was first articulated and what was at stake in that formative history.[6] While ephemera resonates transhistorically, both backwards into the medieval past and forwards into the digital future, its reach across time can only be properly understood in the context of the historical moment of its formation in the eighteenth century.

'This is Ephemera': the 1960s and after

Before I discuss these contexts, it is important to consider the institutional and disciplinary frameworks as well as the non-specialist 'amateur' circles that have shaped the category of ephemera. The slipperiness of the term is reflected in its currency in a range of domains, some of which also have a marginal status within the academy. An example is printing history for which ephemera has always been important (and vice versa), apparent in the work of eighteenth-century collectors such as John Bagford (1650/51-1716) who acquired and was a broker of title pages, advertisements and other forms of printed 'scrap' which he dedicated to a never-realised history of printing. John Lewis appealed to the long-standing association of ephemera with printing history in his book of 1962 and it is also reflected in the evolution of the Centre for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading (established in 1992) that had its origins in printing, specifically

[6] For recent studies of ephemera see *Studies in Ephemera: Text and Image in Eighteenth-Century Print*, ed. Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2013); see also R.C. Alston's earlier valuable essay, 'The Eighteenth-Century Non-Book: Observations on Printed Ephemera' in *The Book and the Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Giles Barber and Bernhard Fabian (Hamburg: Dr Ernst Hauswedell & Co., 1981), 343–60.

typographic, history, latterly developing into a focus on 'graphic communication' in general.[7] Lewis's *Printed Ephemera*, while declaring its relationship to printing history, also appealed to the ephemera collector. The 1960s was the decade when ephemera collectors began to organise, creating a new visibility for ephemera that was influential on the development of ephemera studies in the academy and also on the collecting policies of major public and university libraries. In the 1960s and 70s it was still possible to find collections of ephemera from the nineteenth century. In June 1969, for example, Sotheby's auction house, under the headline 'Printed Ephemera', advertised:

> a collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century pamphlets, and books from the library of Sara Coleridge [daughter of S. T. Coleridge]; chapbooks; juvenile drama; a collection of playing cards; valentine and greetings cards; scrapbooks and albums.[8]

The publicising of this material as 'printed ephemera' was designed to whet the appetite of a growing market. In the 1960s and 70s ephemera was mainly associated with individual collectors and commercial interests, ranging from Sotheby's to small antique dealers, accumulating and trading in ephemera at the end of a phase of circulation that had been going on since the early nineteenth century. These individuals and businesses formed informal knowledge and

[7] http://www.reading.ac.uk/typography/research/typ-researchcentres.aspx, accessed 29 July 2014.

[8] *The Times*, 10 June 1969.

sociable networks that later organised themselves as societies producing literature on ephemera in the form of newsletters and journals and also book-length studies. Maurice Rickards (1919-1998) was an important figure in this development: his basement flat in Fitzroy Square in London, so crowded with books and ephemera that he could not find space for a bed and had to sleep on six chairs, was the meeting place for the group that would later form the Ephemera Society. The Society held its first exhibition in November 1975, 'This is Ephemera', in the showrooms of the paper manufacturers Wiggins Teape in Soho, a sign of its links with the commercial world of print.[9] Maurice Rickards was involved in the formation of the Centre for Ephemera Studies at the University of Reading, for which his collection of ephemera was foundational. He also devoted twenty years to the writing of the definitive reference guide, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*, which was published posthumously by the British Library in 2000.[10]

The role of individual collectors and private societies in promoting awareness of ephemera in the 1960s and 70s

[9] *The Times*, 18 November 1975. Similar associations dedicated to the collection and study of ephemera have a longer history in France. The 'Vieux Papier' society was established in 1900: see http://www.levieuxpapier-asso.org/, accessed 6 November 14; see also Nicolas Petit, *L'éphémère, l'ocasionnel et le non livre à la bibliotheque Sainte-Geneviève* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997).

[10] Patrick Hickman Robertson, 'Obituary: Maurice Rickards', *Independent*, 20 February 1998: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-maurice-rickards-1145817.html, accessed 11 November 2011; Maurice Rickards and Michael Twyman, *The Encylopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator and Historian* (London: Routledge, 2000).

parallels and in some cases intersects with the increased attention paid to ephemera by library science during this period. This development reflected the expansion of higher education and public library provision in the post-war period and the rise and diversification of the social sciences, particularly the rise of 'history from below' and cultural studies. In the late 1960s the British government commissioned from John E. Pemberton a report on 'the national provision of printed ephemera in the social sciences'; its recommendations included the establishment of a register of ephemera collections in the UK and the creation of a repository specifically devoted to ephemera, a 'National Document Library'.[11] While the former has been incompletely realised, the latter now seems a utopian impossibility, a sign of the confidence of that era in the role of the state, as well as a belief in the manageability of information in a totalising way. Librarians continue to wrestle with the meaning of ephemera and what can be done with it. Of all the domains of knowledge that are relevant to ephemera, the library profession feels the ephemera question most acutely because it is compelled by necessity to give a name to it, in order to classify, store, and make it accessible to the general public. In 1981 Alan Clinton quoted from Pemberton's report to represent the librarian's view of ephemera in the following way:

[11] John E. Pemberton, *The National Provision of Printed Ephemera in the Social Sciences a report prepared for the Social Science and Government Committee of the Social Science Research Council* (Coventry: University of Warwick, 1971).

> A class of printed or near-printed or near-print documentation which escapes the normal channels of publication, sale and bibliographical control. It covers both publications which are freely available to the general public and others which are intended for a limited and specific circulation only. For librarians, it is in part defined by the fact that it continues to resist conventional treatment in acquisition, arrangement and storage and it may not justify full cataloguing.[12]

The 'problem' of ephemera is starkly posed here as one of difference or estrangement from normative codes and practices of information acquisition, storage and access provision, implicitly identified with the book. Ephemera 'escapes' 'bibliographical control' and the 'normal channels' of dissemination, 'normal' being defined in terms of the commercial print trade. It is implied that in order to count as 'normal' a printed text must itself be a commodity: otherwise it 'resists' the disciplinary apparatus of 'conventional treatment' and is generally unassimilable.

Clinton himself proposes an alternative approach to ephemera which, rather than seeking to define it in specific terms, considers it in relationship to other kinds of print media. He suggests that ephemera 'can be located somewhere

[12] Alan Clinton, *Printed Ephemera: Collection Organisation and Access* (London: Clive Bingley, 1981), 15; see also Chris E. Makepeace, *Ephemera: A Book on its Collection, Conservation and Use* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985).

on a continuum between printed and bound volumes at one end and small scraps of manuscript at the other'.[13] The value of Clinton's idea of a continuum of print for the conceptualization of ephemera lies in the recognition that a definition of ephemera must refer to the scope of printed matter, and indeed writing on paper, as a whole, and that the location of ephemera on such a spectrum is shifting and uncertain.

The meaning of ephemera continues to be problematic for library science, however, a point elaborated by Timothy G. Young in a 2003 article, 'Evidence: Toward a Library Definition of Ephemera'. 'Material that falls in the very broad category of ephemera' Young states, 'continues to vex us'.[14] He ascribes to the ephemeral text a perverse anthropomorphic agency. Ephemera has the tendency to 'just show up' in library collections and in contrast to the uniformity of sturdy books which form 'bulky rectangles, upright candy boxes aligned on a shelf', it acts as 'awkward also-rans'.[15] Pamphlets have a 'hard time standing up', and are effete, 'limp pages unprotected from wear'.[16] Even when ephemera doesn't just 'show up', the librarian is always aware of the possibility of private collections existing somewhere out there, old broadsheets lining the walls of country houses,

[13] Clinton, 15–16.

[14] Timothy G. Young, 'Evidence: Toward a Library Definition of Ephemera' *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* 4 (2003), 12.

[15] Ibid., 18, 16.

[16] Ibid., 16.

hidden but making their presence felt under layers of wallpaper: 'left alone enough, they literally become the fabric of existence'.[17] Quoting Clinton's reference to ephemera escaping 'the normal channels of … bibliographical control', Young comments, in a remarkable gesture of personification: 'not only are outward appearances different, but something innate [in ephemera] is skewed, uncontrollable, as well'.[18] Young's essay confronts the intractability (and appeal) of ephemera head on, by endowing it with a kind of life, an innate vulnerability-cum-recalcitrance that books are too dumb to have. Ultimately Young concedes that 'the word *ephemera* … is intended to describe substantives but, instead, functions as an abstract'.[19] In grappling with the question of ephemera because of the practical task of organising and classifying such material, library science has therefore been the domain which has come closest to acknowledging the polarities contained by the category – how it is both substantive and abstract and how it has the capacity to make the substantive abstract and vice versa.

'Non-book' history

The status of ephemera in book history is, on the surface at least, less fraught than in library science. Book history as it has developed in the Anglo-American academy since the early 1980s has not had a great deal to say about ephemera until relatively recently, though the core methodologies and

[17] Ibid., 19.

[18] Ibid., 16.

[19] Ibid., 24.

concerns of the field such as the emphasis on 'the sociology of texts' and on the book as material artefact have been responsible for making ephemera more visible as well as suggesting the tools and frameworks for its analysis.[20] The positioning of chapters devoted to printed ephemera in three major surveys in book history indicate a tendency to treat the subject as part of the hinterland of the book's metropolitan centrality.[21] In *A Companion to the History of the Book* (2007) 'The Importance of Ephemera' is part of a section entitled 'Beyond the Book'; in volume five of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (2009), Michael Twyman's 'Printed Ephemera' is the second chapter of an introductory section on 'The Quantity and Nature of Printed Matter', while a similarly titled chapter by Michael Harris in *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (2010) is located between those on manuscript publication and children's books. The use of 'printed ephemera' in these volumes is a recognition of the work of extra-academy bodies such as the Ephemera Society in making the term visible, though what it means is still highly qualified and provisional in these essays. In *A Companion to the History of the Book* Martin Andrews limits his consideration of ephemera to book-related material such as prospectuses, bookplates and wrappers. Twyman's chapter

[20] The seminal work on the sociology of texts is that of D.F. McKenzie. See his *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1986).

[21] See also John Feather's comment: 'It was in the eighteenth century that the advertisement, the ticket, the printed form, and dozens of other varieties of ephemeral printing became a part of everyday life ... Yet it is, *naturally enough*, books rather than ephemera which hold the centre of the stage': 'British Publishing in the Eighteenth Century: a preliminary subject analysis', Library 6 series, VIII (1986), 32 (my emphasis).

in the volume of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* devoted to the period 1695–1830 has the benefit of a more narrow chronological focus but also has to negotiate issues of definition and conceptual parameters. Twyman begins by describing the subject of the chapter as a 'category of work' for which two terms are possible: 'jobbing print', referring to how the print trade distinguished the production of single sheet publication from book production, and 'ephemera'.[22] (William Savage's *Dictionary of the Art of Printing* of 1841 defined a print 'job' as 'any thing which printed does not exceed a sheet', a job house being a business that concentrated on the 'printing of Jobs; namely, cards, shop bills, bills for articles stolen, play bills, lottery bills, large posting bills, and all other things of a similar description').[23] According to Twyman, the term 'ephemera', as distinct from jobbing print, 'puts emphasis on the brief life such documents were designed, or likely to have, [and] tends to be used retrospectively'.[24] Twyman distinguishes 'jobbing print' as more empirically grounded and 'real' than 'ephemera' which he defines in interpretative rather than descriptive terms. 'Ephemera' is concerned with the transitoriness of the 'life' of texts and also with the placing of them in time, whereas 'jobbing print' is atemporal and value-neutral: in Young's terms, 'jobbing print' is 'substantive' rather than 'abstract'.

---

[22] Michael Twyman, 'Printed Ephemera' in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume V 1695–1830*, ed. Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66.

[23] William Savage, *A Dictionary of the Art of Printing* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1841), 428.

[24] Twyman, 'Printed Ephemera', 66.

More broadly, Twyman's emphasis on jobbing print in defining ephemera implicitly ascribes to books the status of being more than print trade work, suggesting that the domains of the ephemeral text and the book are essentially different. He goes on to complicate these issues further by claiming that it might have made more sense to call the chapter 'non-book printing', but acknowledges the difficulty of doing this insofar that other non-books such as newspapers and journals are dealt with separately in the volume.[25] Twyman thereby draws attention to the arbitrariness of the definition of ephemera in this chapter, indicating that it is particular to the plan of the *Cambridge History* and not necessarily generalisable, as well as complicating the category of jobbing print that he had previously invoked. Twyman's introduction raises rather than resolves questions. Does 'printed ephemera' actually include more than the single-sheet jobbing print that is the focus of this chapter? Is the term 'non-book' an attempt to avoid the semantic complications of 'ephemera' which only serves to problematize the meaning of the book itself?

In his essay in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, Michael Harris questions the value of regarding ephemera as primarily 'a category of work', claiming that 'a historical focus on the business organization of printers … has done little, if anything, to augment our understanding of the ephemeral materials themselves'. 'Ephemeral print' he claims, 'cannot be defined through the character of the organization or

[25] Ibid.

business through which it was produced'.[26] Harris is much more explicit about the difficulties inherent in the term 'ephemera', noting its 'porous boundaries', the tendency to locate it on 'the fringes of everyday life' and its role in constituting the primacy of books, what he calls 'the dialectic of ephemera and books' which condescends to ephemera as 'the great sea of flimsy print continuously washing up against the sturdy breakwaters of the book'.[27] As an alternative to the narrow empiricism of the business history or printing history approach, Harris advocates a focus on the history of ephemera collecting because of its orientation towards 'the idea of consumption' rather than the production process. By 'consumption' Harris is referring in a very general sense to the contexts in which printed ephemera was used, circulated and ascribed value – at the initial stage of dissemination and then secondarily in the process of archiving. Harris defines collecting as an important and even necessary mediation of printed ephemera, which makes it culturally visible by enabling it to '[move] out of the shadowy hinterland of the trivial and disposable'. This emphasis on consumption also implies the role of commodification in defining value and hence the cultural visibility and durability of ephemera. The problem of some ephemera texts (also apparent in the junk mail of today, as Harris points out) is that their status as a commodity is uncertain. Given away free, thrust into hands an letterboxes (both real and virtual in the case of electronic

[26] Michael Harris, 'Printed Ephemera' in *The Oxford Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and M. R. Woudhuysen, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), I: 122.

[27] Ibid., 120.

spam), certain kinds of ephemera stand outside or resist the normative idea and practice of commercial exchange. Even if, as advertisements, they are encouraging people to engage in commerce, such texts are themselves supplementary and tangential to that commerce; they are (in some cases) unwanted, unbought, and unsold. As Alan Clinton had previously noted, it was this difference in the status of books and ephemera as commodities which enabled ephemera to escape the 'normal channels of publication, sale and bibliographical control'.

Harris makes a similar distinction between items such as handbills, advertisements and posters that were 'free and instantly disposable' and 'the commercial presence of paid-for material, such as ballads, almanacs, newspapers, and chapbooks'.[28] The fact that these latter texts were designed to be traded and therefore unquestioningly belonged to the commercial sphere conferred on them a book-like 'presence' that the flimsy, free handbill inherently lacked. The most important example of the 'paid-for' ephemeral text, according to Harris, is the newspaper which is ephemeral in the sense of the limited lifespan of the news it contained, its adaptability to other more mundane uses such as lighting fires, and its capacity to constitute the detritus on 'the fringes of everyday life', the rubbish that disturbingly refuses to go away – Harris refers to the pile up or 'drifts' of newspapers cluttering eighteenth-century coffeehouses.[29] The newspaper has this disposable quality but it also represents much more, having

[28] Ibid., 122.

[29] Ibid., 126.

both an intrinsic commodity status, and an iterability as a particular kind of text:

> The inescapable fact about the newspaper is that it is a serial product and, in this respect, cannot be disposed of. Throw one away and the periodical flow will bring another one along behind. Periodicity is the mechanism and time the dimension within which the newspaper functions; these are the core characteristics that put the form at the heart of print culture.[30]

By placing the newspaper at the 'heart of print culture', Harris implicitly decentres the codex and indeed his chapter ends by stating that 'the separation of books from the rest of the printed archive and the privileging of the codex … seem increasingly untenable' and that the book should have a 'modest place' in the spectrum of print.[31] (Harris also asserts that book history's 'interest in the reception and social context of print' should make 'the issue of daily experience – and, therefore, of ephemerality – an integral part of its remit').[32] But even though Harris questions the centrality of the book in book history he nonetheless needs a concept of ephemerality – the sense of the inchoate sea of flimsy print, 'shadowy', intrinsically disposable and incapable of being commodified in its own right – against which to define the ephemerality of forms such as the newspaper, an ephemerality which 'cannot

[30] Ibid., 125.

[31] Ibid., 128.

[32] Ibid., 128.

be disposed of' because it is an ephemerality which keeps repeating itself, which commodifies periodicity and in doing so creates the sense of modern time. Harris's chapter suggests that there is no unitary 'printed ephemera' but rather multiple ephemeralities, overlapping and intersecting, and that rather than standing above these shifting tides, the book itself is very much subject to their ebb and flow.

Paper dignities

Book history tends to frame the question of ephemera in terms of the centrality of books surrounded by concentric circles of relative ephemerality radiating out into the oblivion or deep space of the truly disposable text, what might be termed 'absolute' ephemerality. Thinking of ephemera in terms of Alan Clinton's idea of the 'continuum' between printed and bound books and paper 'scrap' reminds us that paper has uses beyond the print trade and that he paper on which books and ephemeral texts were printed had other applications, other vectors of value. In *Paper Machine* Jacques Derrida emphasized that in addition to paper as a support for writing, 'there is also wrapping paper, wallpaper, cigarette papers, toilet paper, and so on. Paper for writing on (notepaper, printer or typing paper, headed paper) may lose this intended use or this dignity'.[33] As a medium paper always has the potential to be used in differing ways. Derrida says:

> on the one hand there is the condition of a priceless archive, the body of an irreplaceable

[33] Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 43.

> copy, a letter or painting, an absolutely unique event (whose rarity can give rise to surplus value and speculation). But there is also paper as support or backing for printing … for reproducibility, replacement, prosthesis, and hence also for the industrial commodity, use and exchange value, and finally for the throwaway object, the abjection of litter.[34]

Ephemera is conceptually useful because it runs the gamut of these possibilities of paper, ranging from the 'abjection' of paper as waste, the condition of absolute ephemerality, to paper's role in constituting a 'priceless archive', as we shall see in relation to the long history of ephemera collecting. As Clinton indicated in 1981, ephemera cannot be fixed in a particular place on the multiple uses or 'dignities' of print and paper but like a dial on a radio, can be tuned into anywhere on that spectrum. Every individual text, every bit of paper also includes its own ephemera 'wavelength': as Derrida remarks, the 'hierarchy' of the 'priceless archive' at the top and the 'throwaway object' at the bottom is 'always unstable': '"fine paper" in all its forms can become something thrown out'. Derrida goes on:

> The virginity of the immaculate, the sacred, the safe, and the indemnified is also what is exposed or delivered to everything and everyone: the undersides and the abasement of prostitution. This "underside" of underlying

[34] Ibid., 43.

> paper can deteriorate into bumf, better suited to the basket or bin than the fire.

Derrida's metaphors of the sacral and the sexual – the immaculate virginity of 'fine paper' defiled as the common trade of waste – alerts us to the ways in ephemera and the cultures of collecting associated with it potentially have gendered and sacral meanings. These frameworks complicate the role of women not only as ephemera collectors, but also, in the form of servants and other labouring women who worked by and with waste, as paper destroyers.[35] Such women lived closer to the realm of loss and 'abjection' associated with absolute ephemerality. After all, paper does not find its way to the waste basket or the fire by its own accord: someone has to put it there.

Derrida's emphasis on the differing uses of paper, and the differing 'dignities' they represent, opens us the field of inquiry in relation to ephemeral textuality, by suggesting alternative ways of reading it. Modes of literary interpretation attuned to and shaped by the book are not easily applicable to, for example, a ticket, a playbill or a handbill, texts for which graphic design, the relationship between print and manuscript such as a signature,5 and the quality of the 'underlying' paper have interwoven meanings specific to these texts and differing from how these features function in the book. Moreover, these aspects of the

[35] A notable example in literary history is the maid whom Thomas Percy claimed was using a manuscript of ballads and poetry to light fires. Percy saved the manuscript and it formed the basis of the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765): *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, ed. John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1867–68), I: lxxiv.

ephemeral text do not communicate in a purely functionalist way: they also have affective and aesthetic meanings. Also relevant is the significance of these texts as tokens of value, comparable to coins and forms of paper credit that can be circulated and accumulated as forms of cultural and social 'capital'. Such texts have virtual representativeness: they do not have a commodity value in their own right but signify the 'good' or specie to which they give access or facilitate. As Derrida suggests, these forms of paper are also 'prosthetic': particularly when they are tendered by hand as part of the process of social exchange, they stand for or extend the body and the subjecthood of the bearer. This prosthesis of paper documentation has political and social as well as cultural dimensions in that it is a way of legitimating identity, apparent now in the global reliance on papers to control population movement and to police the boundaries of nation states. As Derrida notes, 'identity, the social bond, and the forms of solidarity (interpersonal, media-based, and institutional) go through filters made of paper'.[36]

Conceptualizing ephemera in terms of the paper continuum does not mean thinking less of books but rather is a way of situating the book within a more broadly defined sociology of texts. Again, Derrida is useful here in his discussion of the etymology of book in 'biblion' that designated

> a support for writing (so derived from *biblos*, which in Greek names the internal bark of the papyrus and thus of the paper, like the Latin

[36] Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 55.

> word *liber*, which first designated the living part of the bark before it meant "book") … *biblion* can also, by metonymy, mean any writing support ….[37]

As Derrida emphasizes, the book and the institution in which it is housed, the library, are distinguished by the idea of 'gathering together', whether that be binding sheets of paper together to form the codex or depositing books in a single place. The book and/in the library 'point up the act of *putting*, depositing, but also the act of immobilizing, of giving something over to a stabilizing immobility', acts which Derrida points out also have legalistic, institutional, and political meanings.[38] The idea of rendering the mobile immobile, of gathering together, 'depositing' or stabilizing that which was loose, scattered or insecure is relevant to ephemerality, because intrinsic to it is an idea of texts not only disappearing but also escaping regimes of control. Derrida's ideas suggest new ways of conceptualizing ephemera in relation to the book and vice versa. Firstly, as a form of paper support, the ephemeral text itself is capable of constituting a kind of 'book'; secondly, to view the codex as a gathering together or immobilizing of paper not only makes the book more porous to other kinds of print media but also suggests that it contains within it the capacity for its constituent elements to become mobile again. There is therefore a deeply embedded tension or controlled fissiparous energy within the very idea of the book. Thirdly, the idea of

[37] Ibid., 6.

[38] Ibid., 7.

'gathering together' and rendering immobile can be applied to other cultural practices not primarily related to the book or the library such as the work of collectors in amassing, organising and housing ephemeral texts.

'Ephemerae' and 'durable volumes'

Another cognate term for printed ephemera is 'fugitive literature'. Throughout the eighteenth century, 'fugitive' literature tended to mean small pamphlets and single sheet publications such as occasional poetry. Johnson's *Dictionary* defines fugitive, among other things, as 'not tenable'; 'not to be held or detained'; 'unsteady'; 'unstable'; 'not durable'; 'volatile'; 'wandering; runnagate, vagabond', the latter referring to fugitive in its nominative sense as meaning someone escaping the authority of the law. 'Fugitive' texts were closely related to periodical publications and newspapers, some of which were published in single sheet, 'fugitive' form. 'Fugacity' in the specific material as well as a generic sense was an important aspect of the long-standing tradition of pamphlet publication, which was integral to the circulation of political information and opinion at all levels of society but particularly for gentlemen of the ruling order. Although legitimated for this reason, pamphlet literature was also liable to the same accidental readings and mundane applications as other kinds of ephemeral texts. The author of *An Asylum for Fugitives*, a compilation of occasional poetry published in 1776, prefaces the volume by distinguishing between the domain of the single sheet and that of the book:

> He who writes on a fugitive subject, can never find so ready and proper a vehicle for his

> thoughts, as a fugitive publication. A leaf like Sybil's leaves, is more precious than a volume. Books stand unmolested on our shelves, but *papers are for ever in our hands*, and on our tables; a subject of little or no importance to-morrow, may nevertheless be of great consequence to-day; and the compiler of such a diary is for the moment the author of history.[39] (my emphasis)

Books were stand-offish, detached from the everyday world, but the single leaf was very much part of that world, its connection to the body – 'for ever in our hands' – signifying its status as digital media in the root sense of digital, as something fingered, prehensile.

By the mid-eighteenth-century, however, the growth of the print trade and its role in social life was such that the scale and diversity of printed ephemera were demanding attention and analysis. This is evident in paratexts written by Samuel Johnson for *The Harleian Miscellany*, a selection of sixteenth and seventeenth century political and religious pamphlets from the library of Robert Harley, first Earl of Oxford, published in eight quarto volumes by Thomas Osborne between 1744 and 1746. Johnson anonymously published a proposal for the Miscellany, entitled 'An Account of this Undertaking', and an introduction to the first volume which was later reprinted as an 'Essay on the Origin and

[39] *An Asylum for Fugitives: Published Occasionally*, 2 vols (London: J. Almon, 1776), I: 52, (ESTC no. T118927, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale Cengage).

Importance of Small Tracts and Fugitive Pieces'. 'An Account of this Undertaking' (abbreviated here as 'An Account') differs from its companion introduction in that it was a fugitive text in its own right, a two-leaved publication consisting of four pages in total. Distributed for free, the 'Account' was also reprinted in newspapers, including the *London Evening Post* and the *General Advertiser*, and in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. It was also promoted on the blue paper which formed the cover or wrappers of unbound books such as John Smith's *Memoirs of Wool* and the *Harleian Miscellany* itself.

The 'Account' exemplifies a distinctive ephemera genre, the single sheet book prospectus or proposal, which Johnson uses to argue why this very mode of textuality needs to be secured in book form. The bookishness of *The Harleian Miscellany* lay in how, in a Derridean sense, it brought together and immobilized its constituent texts. Johnson justified the enterprise in terms of the tendency of 'small Pamphlets' or 'single sheets' to 'take their flight, and disappear for ever' and advocates the need to 'fix those fugitives in some certain residence', suggesting that the *Miscellany* is a kind of house arrest, a zone of containment and surveillance.[40] Gathered together in this way, these texts can be secured for posterity and 'Learning' because individually they are incapable of constituting Learning in their own right:

> The obvious method of preventing these losses, of preserving to every man the reputation he

[40] Samuel Johnson, 'Proposals for the *Harleian Miscellany*. An Account of this Undertaking', *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford Universityty Press, 1984), 120.

> has merited by long assiduity, is to unite these scattered pieces into volumes, that those, which are too small to preserve themselves, may be secured by their combination with others; to consolidate these atoms of learning into systems, to collect these disunited rays, that their light and their fire may become perceptible.[41]

Even while promoting the value of the Harleian pamphlets, the metaphor of 'combination' has the effect of insinuating their subordinate status within the literary economy, as literary journeymen or labourers, rather than masters. By 'combining', the 'atoms' of learning represented by pamphlets and single sheets could protect themselves from the fate of absolute ephemerality, but combinations, from a paternalistic viewpoint, also needed to be managed, if the authority of the master discourse was to be maintained. Thus knowledge, Johnson claimed, was a 'lake into which those rivulets of science have for many years been flowing; but which, unless its waters are turned into proper channels, will soon burst its banks, or be dispersed in imperceptible exhalations'.[42] The book form of the *Miscellany*, by gathering and immobilizing the tide of ephemeral print, constituted these 'proper Channels'. Johnson's 'Account' is notable for introducing a sense of ephemerality as signifying an overload or flood of information and the related concept of the 'enduring ephemeral' – the idea that 'atoms' of knowledge may not in

[41] Ibid., 120.

[42] Ibid., 121.

fact disappear but instead continue to haunt the 'proper Channels', transforming those channels into a labyrinth capable of trapping both meaning and the subject.

In 'An Account of this Undertaking' and the 'Introduction to the *Harleian Miscellany*', ephemerality is defined in terms of the proliferation and potential uncontrollability of fugitive texts, which are endowed with a kind of independent agency, for example in Johnson's advice that they 'combine' or unionise. (This trope of personification, as we have seen in relation to Timothy Young's insistence that there is something 'innate' and uncontrollable in printed ephemera is thus a long-standing one). In *Rambler* no. 145 (1751), Johnson moves from a focus on fugitive texts themselves and on fugacity in general to the writers who produce such texts, introducing authorship rather than the form of the book miscellany or repository as a means of mediating ephemerality. Recognising the complexity and diversity of contemporary print culture, particularly its role in enabling and sustaining daily life through genres such as the newspaper, Johnson argues for the legitimacy of those who produce such 'papers'. They are part of a literary commonweal in which some must labour for the common good in the same way as 'the meanest artisan or manufacturer contributes … to the accommodation of life'.[43] Like the 'husbandman, the labourer, the miner or the smith', the journalist, periodical writer, abridger or epitome writer makes a necessary and valuable contribution to the cultural economy, one that is worthy of recognition, but which is thereby naturalized as

[43] Johnson, *Work*s, vol 3, 8.

different in value and status from the works of the masters of learning.[44] Working to 'the clock' and with no concern for posterity, or that what they write will last longer than a week, the 'manufacturers' of ephemeral texts are 'diurnal historiographer[s]', chroniclers of the everyday world.[45] *Rambler* no. 145 uses the idea of writing as a hierarchized natural economy to suggest that all texts are not equal, certainly are not equally 'ephemeral', and that some texts are more suited than others to the apprehension of the everyday. The everyday is beginning to perform the dual work of on the one hand distinguishing the emergent category of the popular and, on the other, creating the possibility of an alternative to the everyday – a realm of 'durable', transcendent value.

The significance of *Rambler* no. 145 in shaping modern ideas of ephemerality is apparent in Johnson's reconfiguration of the key metaphors of light and water which he used in 'An Account of this Undertaking'. Justifying why the 'abridger, compiler and translator' should not be 'rashly doomed to annihilation', he argues:

> Every size of readers requires a genius of correspondent capacity; some delight in abstracts and epitomes because they want room in their memory for long details, and content themselves with effects, without enquiry after causes: some minds are overpowered by splendor of sentiment, as some

[44] Ibid., 10.

[45] Ibid., 11.

> eyes are offended by a glaring light; such will gladly contemplate an author in an humble imitation, as we look without pain upon the sun in the water.[46]

In 'An Account' Johnson had argued that pamphlets and single sheets gathered together in book form could comprise the 'fire' or light of learning, but in *Rambler* no. 145 light is identified with the sublimity of authorship, which ephemeral literature diffuses, ameliorates, and also potentially weakens. The essay identifies two classes of authorship – the real thing and its 'humble imitation'. Fugitive texts, even when 'combined', cannot constitute the light of pure knowledge; they can only mediate. In *Rambler* no. 145, water, which in 'An Account' is a lake of texts, forms a similar mediatory role, serving as a reflection, a medium, in which the sun of authorship can be viewed without harm. It is in this context that Johnson introduces the idea of the products of the 'diurnal historiographer' as 'ephemerae', the first instance, according to the *Oxford English Dictonary*, of ephemera being used in this way:

> That such authors are not to be rewarded with praise is evident, since nothing can be admired when it ceases to exist; but surely though they cannot aspire to honour, they may be exempted from ignominy, and adopted into that order of men which deserves our kindness though not our reverence. These papers of the

[46] Ibid., 11–12.

> day, the *Ephemerae* of learning, have uses more adequate to the purposes of common life than more pompous and durable volumes.[47]

The rhetorical effect of Johnson's emphasis on authorship as a way of mediating cultural distinction falters as 'authors' become conflated or subsumed by 'the papers of the day': the agency of textual materiality resurfaces in a forceful way. By 'Ephemerae' Johnson was making an analogy between these kinds of texts and insects that only lived for a day, suggesting the idea of learning as a complex ecosystem with its own evanescent life forms on the edges of an enduring and hierarchical natural order. The use of 'ephemera' in medicine, referring to a temporary fever, may also be embedded in Johnson's 'Ephemerae': it implies an idea of such papers as feverish emanations, purged from the body of learning. There is also the possibility of an echo of the 'ephemerides', books made by astronomers which listed the movements and positions of the planets for every day of the year at a particular time. Ephemerides formed the basis of almanacs and were also used to calculate longitude. As chroniclers of time and space, the tradition of the ephemerides was comparable to how newspapers and other kinds of periodical literature registered the rhythms of daily life to form what Johnson termed a 'diurnal historiography'.[48] In this respect,

[47] Ibid., 11.

[48] The seventeenth century 'intelligencer' and educational reformer Samuel Hartlib (c. 1660-1662) entitled his manuscript collection of memoranda and notes, his 'Ephemerides': see Stephen Clucas, 'Samuel Hartlib's Ephemerides, 1635–59, and the Pursuit of Scientific and Philosophical Manuscripts: the Religious Ethos of an Intelligencer', *Seventeenth Century* 6(1), 1991, 33–52.

Johnson's conceptualization of ephemera in *Rambler* no. 145 focuses on periodicity, the ephemeral 'that cannot be disposed of', in Michael Harris's phrase. (Like Harris's essay too, *Rambler* no. 145 shows how defining the ephemeral entails an act of ephemeralization in its own right, the single sheets that had been the focus of 'An Account of this Undertaking', now no longer warranting attention).

In *Rambler* no. 145 the term 'ephemera' is thus in the process of a metamorphosis, or migration, from the domain of natural philosophy to that of *belles lettres*. In choosing to use '*Ephemerae*' rather than 'fugitive', Johnson attempted to fix the uncontrollability of the single sheet, the pamphlet, and implicitly the full spectrum of the paper economy in terms of the naturalised, more stable distinction between ephemeral papers and the codex. While it may be more 'pompous', in line with its privileged status, and less amenable to the representation of 'common life', the codex is represented as more 'durable', essentially different from the mass of paper products that surround it. In 'An Account of this Undertaking', the concept of the fugitive text means that, theoretically, the 'atoms' of learning can be gathered up to create a powerful fire or light – the *Miscellany* itself, a form of book-making that can be compared to the work of ephemera collectors. The project of *The Harleian Miscellany* suggests that the individual 'scraps' of fugitive texts, gathered together, have the capacity to constitute the whole 'book'. However, in *Rambler* no. 145 the ephemeral text can only refract the light of a pure and durable knowledge that is linked with a reification of authorship and an essentialized

differentiation between the codex and other forms of textual production. The Enlightenment ideal of the book was therefore predicated on the construction of a particular idea of ephemerality and vice versa, a development which Johnson himself enacted in the period between writing 'An Account' and *Rambler* no. 145. He moves from a fugitive single sheet to the 'volume', from an idea of literature as a containment or repository of the fugitive text to literature as sublimating the ephemeral through the instrument of the essay genre, from writing as advertisement to writing as art, from the writer as anonymous 'manufacturer' to the writer as author ('Johnson'). In the course of making this move, Johnson importantly inaugurates the symbiosis of ephemerality and 'common' or everyday life and the incipient configuration of the latter in terms of a subaltern popular culture. The mid-eighteenth-century elaboration of 'ephemerae' in *The Rambler* as a way of establishing the centrality of a particular idea of the book was thus of long term significance. The category of 'printed ephemera' had escaped from its chrysalis and was now in flight.