I am thinking again of the date 1800, the crucial date in printing history: “ca. 1800,” the hand-press period, the rise and progress of modern bibliography.¹ If we turn to English bibliography or book history of this period—the period of transition—one name dominates all others: Thomas Frognall Dibdin.

I have tried to write the history of Dibdin earlier, imagining a scholarly narrative to place him within history. That history would be understood as a history of type or typography, the very history Dibdin announces in the title of his four-volume revision of Joseph Ames’s Typographical Antiquities of 1749, still a classic of English bibliography, written when typography was a synecdoche for what we now call printing.² But history is a complex thing, as is “a” history or “the” history. I settled instead for reproducing some of Dibdin’s reproductions: images, type—the very idealizing of historical images that I discuss here and elsewhere—abstracting evidence to produce an image or version of evidence that is much more persuasive than the original. I set-
tled, that is, for my own failure to write the narrative. I did not understand the reasons for this (or at least, I couldn’t come up with a convincing reason for it).

A student studying the Romantics was referred to me by a colleague at the last stages of his dissertation. He had a chapter on Dibdin, I was told. (Is Dibdin Romantic?) I might be interested. I might help. The dissertation involved modern theory (my colleague likely implied this was lacking in my own work); there was a relation to queer theory, about which I knew not very much. I read the chapter. It was like a version of my own more professional chapter, and I could see too the history of my own dissertation there: drafts, false steps, the good days of insight and enthusiasm. I could calculate his days of work in the obvious seams between sections. This was exactly what I would have written as a graduate student, I thought, had I been directed to a topic as interesting as this one. It was similar to what I write today when I cannot get the narrative straight, as I cannot get this one straight.

“Queer? You say?” We are not talking about Dibdin’s sexuality, of course. “Well have you read him?” I asked. “Dibdin’s style. It’s damn queer, wouldn’t you say?” Why not a word on that? After all, Grad Student, you are not, say, a book historian, looking for amusing anecdotes about book prices and conditions in the early nineteenth century, so what else could possibly be interesting about Dibdin? As an example:

The *Erudition* of Caxton appears to me to be deserving of better treatment than Bale and others have bestowed upon it. That he had a far greater claim to intellectual reputation than that of possessing the mere negative excellence of “not being downright stupid or slothful” must be allowed by the most fastidious reader of his numerous prologues and translations; and how a late “very learned” author of an amusing publication called “Anonymiana”* could so readily subscribe to the acrimonious censure of Bale, can only be accounted for from the supposition of his not having been conversant in Caxtonian lore. The reader will consult the numerous “Testimo-
“nies” relating to the character and talents of our Typographer, which are selected in the preceding pages [vide p. lxiv to lxxi] and draw his own conclusion from the preponderating body of authority adduced. For my part, I should hope that the suffrages of commendation would be found more numerous than those of disapprobation… .

I could go on. I wish I could make this up. I employ the Sortes Dibdiniana method, and open the book at random:

The lover of rare old books, who has particularly turned his attention to the ancient specimens of the French presses, will probably call to mind the very singular and gigantic capital initial prefixed to the work, without date, entitled “La Mer des Histoires;” printed in the black letter…. Although it has been my object to revive the use of the picturesque typographical ornaments, yet I should be unwilling to have it supposed that I encouraged the introduction only of such bizarre capital initial as are in these books, or in the above specimens, submitted to the reader’s notice.

I have no idea what qualification Dibdin is making here, or what he thought the image of the two animals, locked in what appears to be some kind of sado-masochistic sexual embrace forming a, to me, unreadable initial, might mean.

Another example, one littered with erudition:

While Herbert has equalled the industry of Bagford, and eclipsed the reputation of Ames, he has evinced such diligence, patience, and minute fidelity, as have scarcely been exhibited by the most distinguished foreign bibliographers; and if he does not display the liveliness of Chevillier, and the taste

---

4 Ibid., 1:xxxii, n*).
of Renouard he unites in himself all the accuracy of Audiffredi, and the perseverance of Panzer.⁵

As I read this, it becomes like a foreign language. I read with part of my attention, and perhaps a half-beat behind (or am I getting Dibdinesque?) translate what I have absorbed into an intelligible English sentence or thought. Do I know what is being said? And if I can follow the allusion to Renouard (book on Aldus? taste? I don’t get it), even concur with the “perseverance of Panzer” (I think), who, then, is Audiffredi, or Chevillier, and do I have to stop to admit I don’t know?

And I wonder too what Dibdin intended with all this impressive bibliography: was he interested in being remembered as a learned scholar of old books? Or as an eccentric old coot with a flair for style that he doubtless thought amusing for reasons utterly different from those we have for coming to the same judgment?

It is as if Dibdin has built an icon of the history he is describing, where we can pick out in the blur of his style a few “facts” as they would later be known, and put them in some usable, if not entirely intelligible order. Dibdin’s style and technique become the very thing he is talking about, and we either throw our hands up in despair (I will never understand history; I will never get through Dibdin), or we just mine it for what we can, precisely the same thing we (or in this case, I) do when confronted with a card catalogue or heap of books in a rare book library, or the clutter of received or disconnected facts such as I find in Spurgeon, that allow us to construct a narrative or argument about “what happened” at some arbitrarily defined moment or period of history? How can we discover what those people were thinking if we are unable to find out what they were doing?

Dibdin is always in history, I then conclude, somewhat magisterially. But he is never a part of history. Damn queer, that Dibdin fellow!

⁵ Ibid., 1:91–93.
And why is it, I wonder, so many of those who followed him — those sober bibliographers like Samuel Sotheby, or Henry Bradshaw and his followers, or William Blades, who was certainly subject at times to the infections of Dibdin’s style — why do they make no notice of this? And why does Grad Student pass over this as if it were the most natural thing in the world to sound like a crazy person? Have graduate students so assimilated what I call the Myth of Complete Competence that nothing sounds baffling to them anymore?

Again:

I refer the student of ancient English literature to the elegant extracts given from this work by Warton and Mr. G. Ellis: but, as so much has been here said in commendation of it, he may probably not be displeased with the subjoined specimens….⁶

Or this:

Homer, as the reader will naturally imagine, is the fountain head of it; but his pure stream has been so polluted by the absurdities of Dares and Dictys, and, in the 13th century, by the licentiousness of Guido de Colonna, that it has no pretensions whatever to a faithful historical legend….⁷

This is what Dibdin is, for better or for worse. And this is what connects him to the often quoted Thomas Warton, even though Warton is the soberest of scholars by comparison — reined in, I suppose, by the stylistic conventions of the late eighteenth century. And this is what distinguishes him from Blades or Bradshaw, whose styles often (not always!) seem to disappear in some kind of Addisonian transparency, I will say, in imitation of the very things I am both deriding and trying to discuss.

⁶ Ibid., 1:181.
⁷ Ibid., 1:9.
The following is typical of Blades in his more popular works, that is, those addressed to casual collectors rather than, say, professional scholars:

The first edition of the *Canterbury Tales* is to them an ugly book and nothing more: they would prefer a volume of *Punch*. But convince them that a copy would fetch £1000 at public sale, and if there is the least chance of their shelves containing so rich a prize, no one will be more anxious and eager for a thorough examination. … Before stating the specific measurements of each type, I will give a few rules, which, in numerous instances, will, at a glance, enable the reader to “tell a Caxton” without even the trouble of measurement.\(^8\)

Blades could be considered the second great descriptive bibliographer of the nineteenth century in England. I can claim this is a “breath of fresh air,” or, having attuned oneself to Dibdin, or somehow allowed Dibdin to set the standard for style, I can simply shake my head and say I don’t care a whit about the accuracy of his descriptions, the seminal nature of his work, the Caxton industry that owes so much to him: “The man’s heart” I sadly say, “is just not in it.”

To study Dibdin, then, is not to study what one imagines. We are not studying English literature or bibliography, not the history of English prose style or any prose style. Hardly the history of books, because the data Dibdin collected has been more or less transformed into the language of contemporary bibliography already. We are studying, then, a particular aberration in whatever history or subject we have defined. We were going to study books. We find ourselves instead within the aesthetics of prose style.

This, we could convince ourselves, is the difference between bibliography and what used to be called bibliophilia, the difference between collecting and cataloguing, dilettantism and true

\(^8\) William Blades, *How to Tell a Caxton, with some hints where and how the same might be found* (London: Sotheran, 1870), 6.
scholarship, or however we wish to define that. Yet even these categories are historically determined and only really apply to the period under discussion, which we alone would define, it turns out, in these terms. We try to put Dibdin within a dichotomy, and we end up again only projecting the modern categories we started with: history, we conclude, begins with dilettantism in the service of the aristocracy, and ends with the democratic meritocracy we imagine has privileged us.