PROLIFERATION

As European societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries grappled with new ways of interacting with print, a frequent debate in coffee shops, salons, and bookstores across the continent was whether the spread of print would prove a boon or bane to knowledge in general and literature in particular. Although national and regional norms for literacy, consumer spending, and free speech resulted in the uneven development of print culture across Europe, the general proliferation of printed materials, especially by the late eighteenth century, is indisputable. Determining exact counts of printed books by country is impossible, but the digitization of national library catalogs and the creation of databases such as the English Short Title Catalogue have allowed book historians to make increasingly reliable estimates. While data remains spotty for the nineteenth century, Eltjo Buringh and Jan Luiten van Zanden have provided detailed estimates of manuscript and book production across Europe from the sixth through the eighteenth centuries.

In their conservative count, Buringh and van Zanden suggest that the aggregate number of printed books in Great Britain rose from 122 million in the seventeenth century to 228 million in the eighteenth century. Similar rates of proliferation occurred in other leading European nations: France went from 146 million books in the seventeenth century to 231 million in the eighteenth; the Netherlands from 45 million to 94 million; Italy (as defined by today's borders) from 78 million to 123 million; and Germany (also defined by today's borders) from 98 million to 195 million (Buringh and van Zanden 417). According to Bur-

ingh and van Zanden, per capita book consumption in Great Britain was 14 percent higher in the eighteenth century's latter half (1751–1800) than in its first half (1701–1750), and growth rates tended to be even higher elsewhere in Western and Central Europe. Again, comparing the data sets for 1701–1750 and 1751–1800, average annual per capita consumption increased by 23 percent in Germany, 25 percent in the Netherlands, 26 percent in Ireland, 45 percent in Belgium, 53 percent in Spain, 79 percent in Italy, 100 percent in France, 127 percent in Poland, 127 percent in Switzerland, and 149 percent in Sweden (Buringh and van Zanden 421). Even factoring in the population surges seen across much of Europe in the eighteenth century, the numbers still point to a rapid proliferation of total printed books per capita.

While from the distance of several centuries, such explosive growth in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century book trades might seem an indisputable social boon, critics in the period tended to align themselves in two polarized camps. What both sides had in common was a marked tendency to articulate their views about print in terms that resonated with larger and more fundamental ideas about social progress or decline. On the one side, cultural conservatives tended to view a world awash in new books and periodicals as one on the precipice of aesthetic, moral, and structural decline. Of course, living at the high point of print's hegemony, these commentators often found themselves in the decidedly awkward position of having no effective means of publicizing their concerns without adding to the problem they were decrying (Algee-Hewitt). On the other side were those who hailed the profusion of writing as the leading edge of a march of intellect that would fulfill the greatest hopes of Enlightenment philosophers. For these critics, the proliferation of print was evidence of the democratization of culture, a process that must itself inevitably be a harbinger of the blessings of real democracy. More print presumably meant more readers, and it seemed plain to many European thinkers that the emergence of a well-informed, mentally alive reading public could bring about only the general improvement of society.

In this chapter we chronicle this push and pull surrounding print's quantitative rise during our period, surveying the diverse responses to print's proliferation by common readers and famous tastemakers alike. In particular, we are interested in what might be called the "third rail" of print proliferation—namely, an emergent regulatory discourse less intent on limiting or promoting print than on controlling and managing it. What made this discourse so powerful was that, unlike the polemic or the diatribe, it could take a variety of forms. In terms of genre, efforts to regulate print took the form of style guides, reading primers, book reviews, conduct manuals, handbooks on good taste, and philosophical, novelistic, and evangelical treatises on the often dangerous power of readerly imagination. Beyond the printed page, this impetus to control and systematize published materials became manifest in the era's enthusiasm for private lending libraries, rigid cataloging schemes, selective reading clubs, standardized indexing norms, and clearly demarcated academic disciplines (Wellmon 2015). In short, proliferation not only begat more language about print; it also generated an entire material and cultural infrastructure designed to make its diffusion more controlled and manageable. Information management, assuming a host of material, institutional, and discursive forms, therefore emerged as one of the great new industries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was in this that the real impact of proliferation was felt most deeply.

DECLINE

One of the most pointed late eighteenth-century responses to the proliferation of print was the 1795 *Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character* by Isaac D'Israeli, a respected scholar and the father of the future prime minister. In D'Israeli's mind, the cheapening of literature via overproduction had left the "literary character . . . singularly degenerated in the public mind." "The finest compositions," D'Israeli laments, "appear without exciting any alarm or admiration, they are read,

approved, and succeeded by others; nor is the presence of the Author considered, as formerly, as conferring honour on his companions" (vii–viii). Literature, it would seem, had become yet another commercial mode, slavishly devoted to fashion and trapped in a cycle wherein virtually any new book would quickly be rendered obsolete by a more recent and modish competitor.

Anticipating Hazlitt's 1827 claim in "On Reading New Books" that "the taste for literature becomes superficial as it becomes universal," D'Israeli casts the problem as not only one of surplus and excess but also of social and intellectual leveling. In D'Israeli's opinion, "what Alexander feared, when he reproached Aristotle for rendering learning popular, has happened to modern literature; learning and talents have ceased to be learning and talents, by an universal diffusion of books" (xiv). It is not just the apparent glut of writing to which D'Israeli objects, then, but also the popularity of print, the near "universal diffusion," or saturation, which has, in combination with "incessant industry," pushed the price of books down to a level at which they are "accessible to the lowest artisans" (xv). D'Israeli offers a dizzying lament of what the apparently endless increase in the production of literature must have felt like to those experiencing it firsthand: "When I reflect that every literary journal consists of 50 or 60 publications, and that of these, 5 or 6 at least are capital performances, and the greater part not contemptible, when I take the pen and attempt to calculate, by these given sums, the number of volumes which the next century must infallibly produce, my feeble faculties wander in a perplexed series, and as I lose myself among billions, trillions, and quartillions, I am obliged to lay down my pen, and stop at infinity" (xviii–xix). The ultimate result of this combination of so much writing and so many readers, D'Israeli concludes, is that literature has become but one commodity among many, and its producers, the composite "literary character," no longer share the elevated quality that they once possessed.

Of course, not all of those anxious about literary decline understood the saturation of print and the rise of a mass read-

ing public as the sole (or perhaps even the dominant) explanation for the decline of literature. A short piece "On the Decline of Poetical Taste and Genius" in a February 1792 *Town and Country Magazine* offers the alternative suggestion that, since true poetry originates in the fusion of instinctive enthusiasm and cultivated rationality, modern societies, with their predilection for luxury and refinement, are inimical to great verse. According to this theory, the explosion of print was less to blame for literature's purported decline than were luxury, effeminacy, and consumerism (85–87) [PAPER]. A letter to *Gentleman's Magazine* in January 1794 complained that "among the many luxuries of the present day, none appears to me more hostile to the general welfare of society than that which begins so extensively to prevail in the useful art of printing, and the other branches of the bookselling business. Science now seldom makes her appearance without the expensive foppery of gilding, lettering, and unnecessary engravings, hot-pressing, and an extent of margin as extravagant as a court-lady's train" (47). This emphasis on the debilitating effects of luxury was part of a larger denunciation of modern commercial culture that began to emerge in the late eighteenth century. As Paul Keen has elaborated, "Literature took its place in Britain's commercial modernity alongside a host of phenomena, from performing animals to the rage for air ballooning to scientific demonstrations" (2012, 13). Indeed, literature and the perceived luxury of commercial society merge most explicitly in the rise of "bibliomania," the pathologized addiction to reading and buying books that for some, like the author of the 6 March 1779 installment of the *Literary Fly*, offered conclusive proof of cultural decline, since "the collectors of moths, monsters, weeds, and cockle-shells" had transgressed their accepted terrain and were now "presiding over our public stock of Literature" (47).

IMPROVEMENT

While many commentators perceived the universality of print—the abundance that allowed ever more people to read ever more

new titles—as the root cause of the decline of taste in general and literature in particular, this was hardly a truth universally acknowledged. Where D'Israeli saw a dystopian future of ever-accelerating literary production, others hailed the emergence of an expanded reading public and a host of new periodicals designed to cultivate new readers' tastes. In 1820, for instance, the *Retrospective Review* introduced itself to an increasingly crowded field by acknowledging in its opening pages that even those who were "friendly to literature" must concede that "the number of books has been increasing—is increasing—and ought to be diminished" (ii). Having admitted as much, however, the essay invokes Pliny the Younger to argue, "The only real evil to be apprehended from the enormous increase in the number of books is, that it is likely to distract the attention, and dissipate the mind, by inducing the student to read many, rather than much" (iii). Accordingly, the *Retrospective* considers itself among those select periodicals that are the cultural equivalent of "dykes and mud-banks," which are "interposed between the public and the threatened danger," in this case "an inundation of paper and print" (i).

Among the many authors who, like those at the *Retrospective*, argued for the ameliorative effects of print, perhaps the most dogged was Anna Letitia Barbauld. Over a publishing career that stretched from the 1770s through the 1810s, Barbauld regularly attributed society's improvements in both knowledge and manners to print. She therefore articulated a teleological model of media change that traces human progress through the invention of writing and, subsequently, the press. In her early essay "On Monastic Institutions" (1773), for instance, Barbauld reflects on the history of writing, attributing to print (and the invention of paper) an acceleration of the process by which knowledge could be preserved and disseminated. She contrasts the mental lives of medieval Europeans with little to no access to books and those of her contemporaries who lived in an "enlightened and polished age, where learning is diffused through every rank, and many a merchant's clerk possesses more real knowledge than

half the [medieval] literati" (99). Barbauld thus expresses her understanding of print as, to use Elizabeth Eisenstein's phrase, an "agent of change"—claiming, as Eisenstein would two centuries later, that print facilitates the advancement of knowledge because it can be preserved, standardized, and disseminated with far greater ease than is the case with oral or handwritten forms of communication.

That Barbauld was far from alone in this view of history is evidenced in John McCreery's 1803 book *The Press, a Poem: Published as a Specimen of Typography*. Charting the development of human knowledge, McCreery moves from orality, which limits the spread of knowledge to "memory's stinted power" (2); to writing, which invests ideas with greater permanence but constrains the spread of these ideas by the incessant labor needed to make copies; and finally to print, which most fully enables human communication and development. In a passage describing this final transition, McCreery writes:

> A host of Scribes whose slow progressive art
> No public use to genius could impart,
> Astonish'd saw with what profusive hand
> The PRESS could send its labours thro' the land. (14)

The "profusive" quality of the press thus portends enlightenment rather than degeneration, progress rather than decline.

Those inclined to view the spread of print as inherently salutary frequently pointed to the burgeoning trade in children's books to support their cause. Once again, Barbauld was among the leading advocates of this position. In the prefatory "Advertisement" to her seminal work for young children, *Lessons for Children. Part 1. For Children Two to Three Years Old* (1787), Barbauld celebrates the "multitude of books" (3) recently written for children, arguing that publishing such titles is "humble, but not mean; for to lay the first stone of a noble building, and to plant the first idea in a human mind, can be no dishonour to any hand" (4). Over the course of her long career, Barbauld

spearheaded a revolution in child-centered education, one that emphasized, for example, the importance of stories, as she puts it in the preface to the edition, being "adapted to the comprehension" (3) of children at various ages. She also implicitly underscored the importance of print to this project through her innovations in the typography and layout of children's books. Beyond this, she demanded as early as this preface that children's books feature "good paper, a clear and large type, and large spaces" (3–4).

Nearly two decades later, Barbauld further emphasized the importance of getting well-designed, thoughtful printed works into children's hands in the epilogue to *Evenings at Home* (1796), an immensely popular collection of instructional tales for children that she coauthored with her brother John Aikin. Summing up thirty-one nights of tales rehearsed in the preceding pages, the epilogue employs the metaphor of the seed to suggest the cultivating power of print:

> May Wisdom's seeds in every mind
> Fit soil and careful culture find;
> Each generous plant with vigour shoot,
> And kindly ripen into fruit! (ll. 7–10)

A few lines later, Barbauld borrows from Locke in comparing children's minds to "a whiter page" (line 13). Between her emphasis on the "large spaces" of the printed page in *Lessons for Children* and the "whiter page" of a child's mind in this epilogue [SPACING], Barbauld makes a case for print's links to intellectual and moral cultivation that would be further developed by Maria Edgeworth, Jane and Ann Taylor, and other writers heavily influenced by her work.

Of course, Barbauld's enthusiasm for life in a print-saturated society extended beyond her advocacy of books for children, as in her introductory essay to her *British Novelists* collection where she famously defends the literary genre most frequently singled out by scolds of proliferation: "the humble novel" (1810, 47).

Like Jane Austen, who in *Northanger Abbey* mocks reviewers for lamenting the appearance of "every new novel . . . in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans" (62), Barbauld questions the lack of respect afforded to this genre. Both women also praise the novel's capacity to give pleasure, with Barbauld noting that "their leaves are seldom found unopened, and they occupy the parlour and the dressing-room while productions of a higher name are often gathering dust upon the shelf" (1810, 1). But Barbauld also contends that novels "have had a very strong effect in infusing principles and moral feelings. . . . They awaken a sense of finer feelings than the commerce of ordinary life inspires" (1810, 48). Indeed, Barbauld makes the causal connection between the rise of the novel and improvements in domestic manners explicit, stating that "perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say, that much of the softness of our present manners, much of that tincture of humanity so conspicuous amidst all our vices, is owing to the bias given by our dramatic writings and fictitious stories" (1810, 49). Here Barbauld puts forward another direct benefit of the proliferation of print: its capacity to foster humanistic values through the category of fiction.

CONTROL

D'Israeli and Barbauld thus embody the two poles of print proliferation, capturing it as a force for decline on the one hand and a vehicle of improvement on the other. For many, however, ensuring this equation between modern print culture and progress was possible only through the formation of particular types of readers. In the new world of print saturation, readers who lacked self-restraint and discrimination might easily fritter away their lives on the lowliest productions of the press. As the German scholar Johann Georg Heinzmann put it in 1795 in *A Plea to My Nation: On the Plague of German Literature*, unregulated readers might easily be infected by a reading addiction (*Lesesucht*) or reading madness (*Lesewut*).

Such complaints about too many books or an excess of reading were not only descriptive; they were normative as well. Every complaint about too many books was accompanied by a claim, either implicit or explicit, about how one ought to read, about how all these books ought to be engaged. As the German scholar Johann Gottfried Hoche opined in his 1794 polemic *Intimate Letters: The Current Reading Addiction and Its Influence on the Reduction of Domestic and Public Happiness*:

> The reading addiction is a foolish, detrimental misuse of an otherwise good thing, a really great evil that is as infectious as the yellow fever in Philadelphia. It is the source of moral degeneracy in children. It brings folly and mistakes into social life. . . . Nothing is achieved for reason or emotion, because reading becomes mechanical. The mind is savaged instead of being ennobled. One reads without purpose, enjoys nothing and devours everything. Nothing is ordered; everything is read in haste and just as hastily forgotten. (68)

The perceived saturation of print could not be managed simply through better, more efficient print technologies. It required ethical techniques and strategies that would form particular types of readers. This revised focus enabled scholars to shift the discussion to moral and ethical disciplines and technologies of the self. In essence, the regulation of print required a disciplining of the self: the individual who read not just the right books but read them in the right way.

One of the more pronounced ways such self-regulation was enacted in the European context was through a discourse of "taste" (Gigante). For early eighteenth-century writers like Jean-Baptiste Dubos, author of *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719), taste was a form of discernment based on feeling. As such, taste enabled individuals deemed deficient in rationality or inadequately educated—in other words, the "general public" of the era—to develop and even voice aesthetic judgments with some legitimacy. Beyond this, even in deeply patri-

archal cultures, sophisticated taste was often viewed as more commonly belonging to women than men (Conti). That said, however, many leading men of letters argued that truly refined taste was not purely innate. Both Voltaire and Melchiorre Cesarotti, in his *Ragionamento sopra il diletto della tragedia* (1762), for instance, stressed that those with good taste also needed some level of training in order to form proper aesthetic judgments, including an understanding of literary and artistic conventions (Tsien). Thus, while certain strains of the era's discourse on taste promised to empower female and middle-class readers [CONVERSATIONS], by the late eighteenth century competing strains threatened to foreclose the preferences and stylistic choices of those very readers.

Another significant development in eighteenth-century publications on taste was the increasing emphasis on concepts of limitation and excess (Noggle). As Hugh Blair remarked in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), "[I take] every opportunity of cautioning . . . readers against the affected and frivolous use of ornament; and, instead of that slight and superficial taste in writing, which I apprehend to be at present too fashionable, to introduce, as far as my endeavours can avail, a taste for more solid thought, and more manly simplicity in Style" (2:30). As with Wordsworth's later programmatic invocation of simplicity in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), the excess of texts that print's proliferation portended was increasingly associated with an excess of text itself. Quantitative concerns were increasingly interpellated with qualitative issues like stylistic embellishment and graphical ornamentation [SPACING]. As a we have already seen in the January 1794 letter to the editor of Britain's *Gentleman's Magazine*, the author complained, "Science now seldom makes her appearance without the expensive foppery of gilding, lettering, and unnecessary engravings, hot-pressing, and an extent of margin as extravagant as a court-lady's train" (47). Or as the German author Christoph Martin Wieland lamented to his publisher upon the publication of his collected works, "I must confess to an inner feeling, one that seems to me to be

more than mere humility, that repulses me in the imagination that all of my writings will circulate in such an ostentatious edition" (qtd. in Erlin 38).

Taste, too, however, could itself be seen as something foreign and excessive. For instance, the lukewarm review of James Ussher's *Clio; or, A Discourse on Taste* in the June 1767 issue of the *Critical Review* situates the very idea of taste as an insidious and entirely modern concept with suspiciously foreign origins: "The antients knew of no such term," the reviewer grumbles before alleging that "the term was first catched by the modern French from the Italians; from them it was transplanted into England, where it has been cultivated with so much success, that it has made more fops in literature than perhaps any other word in the English language" (422). The refinement that good taste promised, it seems, was a double-edged sword, promoting the very sense of luxury and distinction it was presumably meant to combat.

While questions of taste continued to surface in essays on the long-term cultural impact of proliferating print, by the turn of the nineteenth century the focus increasingly turned to the need to regulate readers' overstimulated imaginations. Alongside the now-traditional fears of material excess in an age of print came a new set of worries over psychological excess. The widespread association of reading with dreaming was one of the more common ways of linking reading and imaginative excess (Piper 2009b). J. R. Smith's *The Dream* (1791) is one of a host of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century images that associated books with the unconscious flights of fancy in the sleeping reader's mind (fig. 15.1, plate 14).

In the spirit of preemptive action, the very potential for excessive thought (Wordsworth's "overflow of powerful feelings") was deemed sufficiently dangerous to require regulation, especially in women readers. Case in point, in Charles Williams's satirical print *Luxury; or, The Comforts of a Rumpford* (1801), a female reader warms her bare behind by a Rumford stove while holding a copy of Lewis's *The Monk* in one hand and warming her
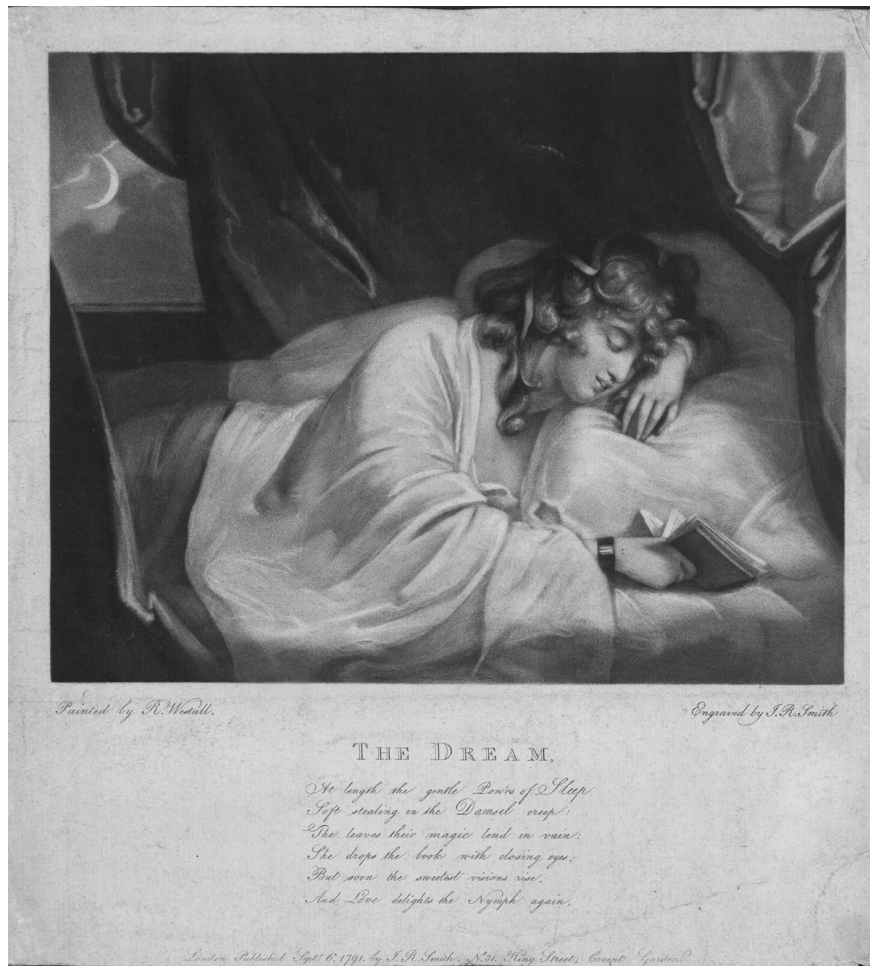
THE DREAM.

15.1. J. R. Smith, *The Dream* (1791). Photograph: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

front end with the other (fig. 15.2, plate 15). Here print's quantitative (note the other half-read books on the table and floor), typographic, and semiotic excesses scandalously coalesce at the hearth, one of the archetypally feminine and domestic sites in the home. Clearly, as Williams would have us believe, the psychological excesses born of a surplus of books were in dire need of regulation.

Such regulation would assume many forms over the course of the nineteenth century. The fashionable conduct books that

15.2. Charles Williams, *Luxury, or the Comforts of a Rumpford* (1801). Photograph: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Austen caricatures in *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice* trained young female readers how to choose the *right* books. In Germany, these books emerged from the press with bludgeoning titles like *Die Kunst, Bücher zu lessen* (The art of reading books; Johann Adam Bergk, 1799) and *Plan im Leben nebst Plan im Lesen und von den Grenzen weiblicher Bildung* (A plan for life, a plan for reading, and the boundaries of female edu-

cation) (Karl Morgenstern, 1808; Wittmann 44of). In a similar vein, the manual of style would serve as the writer's equivalent to the reader's conduct book. The popularity of such guides to writerly self-regulation is suggested by one midcentury commentator's claim to have identified 548 separate handbooks on English grammar (Watson) and reports that Samuel Kirkham's *English Grammar* went through fifty-three editions in the first eighteen years following its 1823 publication and was into a 110th edition by century's end (Lyman 81). The 1920 mass publication of William Strunk's *The Elements of Style* as the authoritative handbook on standardizing and controlling writerly excesses marks the culmination of the nineteenth-century concern for regulating writing in an age of mass print.

Alongside the regulatory discourses (taste, style, conduct, imagination) discussed earlier and practices covered elsewhere in this book [INDEX], dozens of inventive technological solutions emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to provide a basic infrastructure for controlling swelling archives of printed materials. Among the many regulatory technologies that might be mentioned here—ranging from codified penmanship standards for librarians (i.e., the "library hand") to reciting a mandatory oath to enter Oxford's Bodleian Library to the construction of locked library cages for materials deemed blasphemous, seditious, or pornographic—one particularly merits memorializing in the early twenty-first century: the humble card catalog (fig. 15.3). Invented, as legend would have it, in Paris in the heady days following the fall of the Bastille (Kent, Lancour, and Daily 14:448), this simple technology functioned as archives' primary organizational engine from the mid-nineteenth through the late twentieth century, when the digital revolution rendered it virtually obsolete in the space of a generation.

A descendant of the early circulating library's paper slip [PAPER], the most widely adopted card-based index system is attributed to Ezra Abbot, an assistant librarian at Harvard who began creating the university's card catalog in the early 1860s. Abbot's model became the prototype of a simultane-

15.3. "The Card Catalogue," from *Library Bureau Catalog* (1890), 22. Photograph: Hollis Library, Harvard University (B 7770.8.5).

ously expandable and public information system (Krajewski and Krapp). "I would propose," Abbot wrote, "to have the titles written on cards, about 5 inches long and 2 wide, of such thickness that they can be manipulated and separated with facility, and made of such material that they will not wear out by handling" (qtd. in Krajewski and Krapp 81). For Abbot, the durability of the card was one of its most important features, as the library catalog was no longer imagined solely as a tool for experts, but also for the general reader. Search and access went hand in hand. The book as container [BINDING] was therefore reimag-

ined by Abbot as something that could itself be contained, now in desklike drawers. In essence, the bibliographic imaginary would recapitulate itself many times over. The card catalog, like the trolley cart or movable bookshelf, thus functioned as one of many new technologies that would make the library a vibrant space of technological innovation. And with the invention of Melvil Dewey's decimal cataloging system, first proposed in his *A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library* (1876), quantification would finally overtake proliferation in the most literal of ways.