

# The Paradox of the Book

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THE IDEA OF THE BOOK, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing...if I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book, as it is now underway in all domains, denudes the surface of text.

Jacques Derrida  
*Of Grammatology*

Our first teachers of philosophy are our hands, our feet and our eyes. To substitute books for all of these is not to teach us to reason, but to teach us to use the reason of others. It is to teach us to believe much but never to know anything.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
*Emile*

And when we consider the first use to which writing was put, it would seem quite clear that it was first and foremost connected with power: it was used for inventories, catalogues, censuses and instructions; in all instances, whether the aim was to keep a check on material possessions or human beings, it was the evidence of power exercised by some men over other men and over worldly possessions.

Claude Levi-Strauss in Georges Carbonnier  
*Conversations with Claude Levi-Strauss*

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Paradoxes abound these days and among the minor ones is the following: we are in the midst of an explosion of scholarship on the role of the book in history and society and research into the nature of literacy. At the same moment, literacy seems to be everywhere in decline, an increasingly marginal intellectual skill, and the book, at least as we have known it, seems to be a less important, more ephemeral artifact in our collective life. More important, scholarship on the book is itself a form of revolt, a revolt against the book, against bookishness, against literacy, against textuality, against the very notion of a civilization built upon literacy and the book.<sup>1</sup> What is the explanation for this state of affairs?

The historical significance of the printing press has long been recognized and it is ritually included between gunpowder and the compass as one of the artifacts which defines the beginning of the modern world. However, until recent times the significance of the book and printing press has been assumed rather than investigated. I go too far, of course. Scholarship on the book can be traced back to the Renaissance and it was an active, if marginal, subject throughout the nineteenth century. But it has only been in the last twenty years that the general history of the printing press, the book and literacy in particular, has emerged as a distinctive field in the humanities. Robert Darnton has suggested that the field has expanded so rapidly in recent years that, "it seems likely to win a place alongside fields like the history of science and the history of art in the canon of scholarly disciplines."<sup>2</sup>

The reason behind the emergence of this scholarship is easy enough to locate. The book and traditional literacy is being displaced as the principal medium in which the central transactions of social life occur. Interest in the book as a means of communication has come about largely because of the eruption of electronics, particularly television, within literate societies. Electronics, stretching from the telegraph to computer communications systems, is not, of course, a craft enterprise deriving from ancient lore. Rather electronics is the first of the science-based, science-derived technologies and is unthinkable without the habits of mind, scholarship and social organization made possible by the printing press. Nonetheless, the products of electronics and chemistry, particularly the ability to reproduce and transmit visual experience, have cultivated new habits and practices which have, in turn, not only affected literacy but rendered it radically problematic. The new literacies—visual literacy, computer literacy—have, on the one hand, reduced the privileged and honorific status of print literacy, its unquestioned right to social prestige. Print literacy increasingly looks like one type of literacy among many which precede and follow it. Print literacy

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is one set of intellectual skills among many possibilities and, in principle at least, there is nothing to recommend it over its alternatives.

The displacement of the printing press by the television screen, and other electronic devices then, has focused attention on the conventions of print literacy and has exposed and made problematic the role which the book played in modern history. This was explicitly the case in the work of Marshall McLuhan who was forced to mediate on "Gutenberg's Galaxy" because he found his students living, not in the world of printed texts, but in a new habitus, an electronic village. His argument is, in part, mine: while books continue to play a vital role in our lives and while literacy remains an indispensable skill, the central transactions through which we participate in politics, culture, work, and social life are no longer mediated by the book, printed page or literacy but by a family of other devices, principally the television set but including audio- and videotape and, above all, the computer. Phrases like visual literacy and computer literacy are surely conceits, borrowing a venerated name to honor something neither known nor understood, but they point to a rearrangement in the hierarchy of skills and a revaluing of the importance of artifacts.

Scholarship on the book and literacy is, in one sense, another example of the principle of Minerva's Owl: we focus our energies on a phenomenon at the moment it takes flight, at the moment we are about to lose it. Scholarship becomes simultaneously an episode in nostalgia and a way of finding our bearings in a world that seems to be shifting under our feet.

However, scholarship on the book is not only a reaction to loss and a recognition of how little we know about the skill and artifact through which we have conducted our lives; it has also changed the very meaning of the object under study. We can never again approach the book and the printing press with the Whiggish innocence of our predecessors.

The traditional history of the book is encased within a narrative frame that goes, in burlesqued form, about as follows. The invention of the book, of movable type that allowed for the reproduction of manuscripts in quantity, is the signal event in the creation of the modern age. With Gutenberg's invention, the Middle Ages come to an end and modern times begin. The book represents, therefore, a great divide in Western history, one of those regnant before and after moments. The book represents not only an episode in the history of progress but a basing point from which progress begins and in terms of which it is measured. Similarly, the spread of the skill associated with the book—literacy in the narrowed sense of the ability to read a printed text—is

taken to be a historical divide within every society in which the skill takes up residence. Before and after literacy divides the primitive from the modern, the skilled from the unskilled, the wild and savage from the domesticated and orderly. It is a social divide understood as an intellectual divide—a moment when modern habits of living are made possible by modern ways of thinking, by a modern technology of the intellect. Indeed, the book has come to represent that most metaphoric of all divides, the divide between nature and culture. Speaking is part of our biological inheritance; writing and printing part of our cultural achievement.

The equation of the book and literacy with progress and development has been described as a dogma of modern thought. It is part of a “whig interpretation of history” in which all the forces which retarded or aborted the spread of printing were mere examples of cultural lag or, even worse, the forces of darkness. The book as a marker in the history of communication inscribes not merely a divide in the history of the mind and society but a divide in the history of freedom. Before and after the book demarks besotted ignorance from healthy enlightenment. The books shattered the monopoly of knowledge of the church and crown and ushered in an unprecedented growth in individual liberty. The book and the printing press, above all, created a new form of social life. It brought a rational, critical, inquiring public into existence. The history of the book is everywhere connected to a particular view of political history in which the book aids in the realization of both a more democratic and rational form of political life. Reading is not only something that should be a free activity; it distills the essence of freedom.

In this conventional narrative the book does not refer so much to the wide range of materials produced by the printing press—dime novels and dollar pornography, religious tracts and scientific treatises, historical romances and romantic histories, collected essays and uncollected diaries, philosophical arguments and unphilosophical memoirs—but to an artifact that is an abstraction, a volume transmuted to a symbol. The Book, in this narrative, is an homunculous, an inscription of the social order writ small, that condenses in an artifact a certain set of skills and ideals. The Book refers less to a manufactured object than to a canon: a selective tradition of the best that has been thought and written in the Western tradition. But it condenses, as well, certain skills and values: hieratic literacy, the ability to write, comment upon and interpret these texts in some depth; *homo litterratus*, a certain social type or figure of unquestioned rectitude and honor; and a certain way of life in which the intercourse with books connects to wider habits of

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feeling and conduct—habits which we call, in the honored sense, bourgeois.

I don't wish to play the skeleton at what may be a banquet of the book. Yet, I do agree with the headnote of Jacques Derrida, if one can agree with lines so enigmatic, that the book is being destroyed: a military metaphor here used to make a very unmilitary point. The book is being dislodged from its historical niche. The conventionality, the textuality of the book, is being revealed; it is just one more form of inscription among others; print literacy is just one more intellectual skill among others anterior and posterior to it.

The eruption of research on the book and society has a common effect even if scholars are not joined by a common purpose. There is revolt against the book, against bookishness, against *homo litteratus*, underway. It is not the first such revolt, and Derrida is not the first revolutionary, as the quotation from Rousseau indicates. And it is certainly not the first such revolt against bookishness in America. As Neil Harris' research has convincingly shown, many of the late nineteenth-century movements that created institutions such as zoos, wilderness areas and botanical gardens as well as social movements such as scouting and practical education were attempts to return to nature from the desiccated world of books and literacy.<sup>3</sup> However, the contemporary revolt against the book has a different focus. What Levi-Strauss says about writing has been extended to printing. The book and the printing press are increasingly seen not merely as agents of change but agents of power. The equation linking the book and literacy with wisdom and progress is seen as part of a complex ideology that justified the technology of printing as it served the interests of those who controlled it. The revolt against the book is aimed at an entire way of life represented by the book and the ideology that supports it.

Whatever other fruits the new research on the book yields, it will first usher in a revised narrative of the role played by the book in our civilization. It will remove the book from its pristine place in our culture and soil it—implicate it in the more paradoxical, and unsavory parts of our history. It will also make the book a vaguer object of contemplation. At one time so solid an artifact, so indisputable a reality and presence, something immediate and palpable, the book is now more amorphous, more difficult to trace. The consequences of the book at one time so transparent and unambiguous are now more paradoxical and contradictory, more uncertain and muddled and certainly more suspect. As I have said, the identification of the book and progress—moral, social and economic—is so stitched into our brains, and embroidered

into our culture that we have been slow to realize that the arrival of the book was a harbinger of loss as well as of gain, of ignorance as well as enlightenment, of more subtle forms of a social control as well as wider boundaries of freedom.<sup>4</sup> It is not the book and literacy that is being destroyed but the Book and Literacy: the image condensed in an artifact is being displaced by technology and history.

Of course, I go too far. As the old saw has it, the printers never leave us at rest. Now, the printers will never leave us at rest about printing. The expansion of scholarship about the book has not arrived at settled conclusions; it has merely put everything in doubt, thrown every established proposition into contention, displaced our beliefs without replacing them with knowledge. The expansion of research has made the subject more elusive and problematic by incorporating new themes within it, but the overwhelming thrust of this research has been to incorporate the book into the central theme of contemporary scholarship, namely the acquisition and exercise of power.

Research on the book is part of an anticanonical spirit in scholarship, part of an attempt to destroy the very notion of a literary and intellectual canon. This spirit, in turn, takes two forms. In the first place, it consists of showing that the books enshrined in the canon are not there by a principle of natural selection, a kind of survival of the smartest, but present instead a selective and changing tradition. The tradition is everywhere connected to the power and privilege of certain classes to represent the world through books in ways that serve their interests, through interests in the widest sense of the word: economic interests, moral interests, aesthetic interests, intellectual interests. Consequently, the canon of texts is never fixed. It changes in relation to the contemporary scene. "The best that has been thought and written" is a variable collection that shifts with the ebb and flow of the interests, preoccupations, needs and wants of powerful social groups.<sup>5</sup> In short, there is, on the one side, an inevitably arbitrary quality to the books that at any given time comprise "the Book," and, on the other side, a continual struggle over just which books should be granted canonical status, a struggle that represents the purposes and powers of social groups.

Research on the book is part of this same struggle. The books which are now the object of much research are of the most ordinary sort: the cheap, the popular, the ephemeral, the sensational. Much of the research seeks to elucidate the literary experience of the ordinary reader. Like much of contemporary scholarship, particularly that deriving from the "Annales school" of socioeconomic history, it is a democratic

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and democratizing movement in scholarship.<sup>6</sup> It is aimed at recovering the ordinary lives of ordinary men and women. It seeks to recover the voice and experience of those who left no imprint on the historical record and whose experience was nowhere systematically recorded. This democratizing tendency attempts to restore disenfranchised groups to a place in history by including their books, their literacy, their reading within the literary tradition. It also derogates and relativizes the "great works" by admitting to focal concern work that had been considered subliterate and antiliterate.

The subliterate and the antiliterate, the nonbook and the antibook, contain, on this reading, alternative ideas of knowledge and culture. The book has always been honored as a technology of knowledge and we have all repeated, until we deadened its significance, the shibboleth that knowledge is power. However, we have never, until recent times, investigated the precise implications of this phrase. The notion that knowledge is power developed in a particular historical context in which knowledge was opposed to ignorance, superstition, and tradition. The power of knowledge, and therefore of the book, was to lift the veil of ignorance, to arm us with the truth that would set us free. Alas, no such complacent and self-congratulatory view is any longer possible. If knowledge is power, it is because it allows us to get ahead with the work of the world. But, so much of the work of the world in the age of the book has been the exercise of dominion and domination over not only the forces of nature but over other men and women, cultures and societies. Knowledge, in short, is the form in which power works its way in the world. Therefore, the powers of the book are everywhere bound up with growth of technological, national, state and class power—the powers of domination.

I have up to now merely suggested that the received history of the book and the received relations between the book and society are gone with the wind. The whiggish saga of social progress in which the wings of learning and labor spring forth from the binding of the book is a story we can't quite bring ourselves to tell any more. I have also insinuated a different narrative, a narrative organized around the theme of power. In this scenario the book is first of all part of the social process whereby structures of power are transformed into structures of culture.

I have rather deep reservations about these revisions in our received image of the relation between the book and society, though this is not the place to develop them. Curiously enough, my basic objection to Marshall McLuhan, who initiated and modernized much of the current research on the book, was that he paid insufficient attention to ques-

tions of ideology, power and class and was much too sanguine in his analysis of the effects of communications technology.<sup>7</sup> That deficiency has certainly been overcome, though I feel rather like a proof of Goethe's maxim: Be careful what you wish for when you are young for you will get it when you are old.

It was necessary to correct both the traditional narrative of the book and McLuhan's rather too complacent arguments concerning the effects of communications technology. It is now time to correct the corrections by foregrounding certain other themes that have also been elucidated within contemporary research on the book. I will mention briefly and in closing but a few of these themes which together with some of the arguments previously outlined will correct and complete our understanding of the relation between the book and society.

The first such theme is the recognition, as in the work of Michael Clanchy, that the book was the culminating event in medieval culture before it was the first invention of the modern world. The book expressed a *telos* and demand of the medieval world:<sup>8</sup> to produce a literacy that was simultaneously sacred, bureaucratic and learned. Writing was of extraordinary importance to the medieval world and printing was an outgrowth of the search for a capacity to reproduce an alphabetic script on a standard of quality sufficient to compete with medieval manuscripts. The printed book, then, is in the first instance an agent of the continuity of medieval culture rather than its rupture.

The second theme concerns the process by which the printing press was annexed to a tradition of community culture, of rote learning and oral communication which exploited the powers of the spoken word as well as the written manuscript. Much contemporary research is aimed at documenting the argument that writing and printing existed for some period solely for translation into the oral register. At the least, this means that the book can only be understood in terms of the way it articulated with and then transformed the power, nature and practices of the oral tradition.<sup>9</sup>

A third theme, at the opposite end of the historical divide, relates the book and printing to the emergence of the computer. The computer is an agent of continuity and extension of a certain phase in the history of printing and literacy. The glut of information generated by the promiscuous reproduction of letters and type positively demanded a further mechanization—or better an electrification—of the entire process of creating, storing and transmitting information. If the origins of printing are in the medieval world and the oral tradition, its *telos* is in

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the computer. The book can only be understood in terms of its complex relations to the skills and artifacts anterior and posterior to it.<sup>10</sup>

A fourth theme concerns a shift in the focus of attention away from the book and onto the socially established practice of literacy. Studies in this area are now overwhelming in number, a thick luxuriant and confusing growth of scholarship.<sup>11</sup> By shifting interest onto the uses and practices of literacy, the social consequences, effects, and status of the book have become enormously complicated. It is now clear that the uses and practices of literacy do not constitute a fixed object. Literacy is a variable practice among social groups and it always has been. It is also a variable practice within social groups; the practice and use of literacy is not the same for contemporary middle class and the middle class of the early nineteenth century, for example. Research therefore has increasingly focused on the shifting and variable nature of literacy and the connection of literacy to other social processes. There is one important consequence of this shift: literacy no longer looks like the great social and intellectual divide of modern history. The literate emerged out of the illiterate and nonliterate the way modern Britain emerged out of ancient England: slowly, gradually and unevenly and everywhere connected to other glacial changes. Moreover, the assumption that the thought processes of the literate and nonliterate are qualitatively different and everywhere the product of training with books is no longer so widely accepted.<sup>12</sup> The gulf between the ancient and modern, the primitive and the civilized intellectual has everywhere been narrowed. Moreover, there appears to have been a radical shift in the nature of literacy in the early nineteenth century, though it is less important to date it than to recognize it. Traditional literacy is best expressed in Rousseau's maxim that books should be so thoroughly digested that they become absorbed in life. Traditional literacy involved reading and re-reading a small number of texts and therefore actively incorporating them into the memory and personality structure of the individual. In the nineteenth century, literacy shifts from this ritual model to more of an information process: the wide and promiscuous reading of texts. Robert Darnton has described this as the difference between intensive and extensive reading.<sup>13</sup> Francois Furet and Jacques Ozouf connect this change to the spread of writing rather than reading, with the ability of the individual to carve out a "free private space for himself" and with the expansion of the market economy and the secular state.<sup>14</sup> However this change is caught, it testifies to a discontinuity in the history of literacy once reading and writing were detached from the oral tradition and printed materials were widely and cheaply available.<sup>15</sup>

A final and summary theme in contemporary scholarship on the book is the absorption of the artifact into a circuit of interaction. The book is seen now as part of an activity: "The construal of meaning within a system of communication rather than as a canon of texts."<sup>16</sup> The circuit of interaction of the book runs from "the author to the publisher, the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader."<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, the same circuit, with appropriate modifications, through which all communications run. Placing the book within the context of communication emphasizes the commonness and vulgarity of it as an object. It demystifies it. However, it also makes the book available to us in terms of its relation to technologies of communication which preceded it and to others yet to come. It situates the book in relation to other media—the newspaper and periodical press, for example—which shaped it and which in turn it influenced. Finally, the examination of the book in the context of communication will more clearly reveal its role not only in the processes of power and politics, but in the wider, more significant enterprise in which the rich, organic inheritance of the oral and manuscript tradition was reconstituted in modern form.

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