

The Book and Literature in the 1980s

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THE TECHNOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION of course affects the forms of literature. Homer's *Μῆνιν ἀειδε θεὰ* roars from the bard's throat; Virgil's "*Arma virumque cano*" lies softly on the page. The spread of writing by Virgil's day had already made the epic poem an archaism, still beautiful as the Gothic spires of an American college campus may be beautiful, and still reflecting the grandeur but no longer the vitality of the original.

Similarly, the widening availability of print in the late eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth century led to the dominance of the novel as a literary form, replacing drama. The further cheapening of print in the latter decades of the nineteenth century produced the dime novel as an alternative to live entertainment. Even an invention apparently so remote as the railroad had its effects on literature. By making possible the rise of prosperous, truly national magazines that were able to pay contributors well, the railroad fostered the development and the popularity of the short story.

In our own century the cinema and television have restored drama to its pre-eighteenth century dominance as a literary form, and have given it audiences beyond any earlier imagining. The new media have also affected the character of drama. The capacity to use both close-ups and sweeping out-of-doors scenes has given a powerful flexibility to cinema and television as compared with the constraints of the stage. The recent BBC productions of Shakespeare have offered a fresh and intensi-

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fied perception of these magnificent works. Not only are traditional works transformed, but this new technology has made possible quite new dramatic compositions—new literary forms.

The revival of drama in its new forms now consumes the attention of audiences to an extent never before dreamed of for any form of literature, with television alone occupying an average of thirty to thirty-five hours a week. To a much less degree than might have been assumed, however, has this truly extraordinary development diminished the attention to printed literature. Far more books are sold and apparently read than before the advent of television. And success in one literary form appears to whet, not sate, the public desire to experience the work in another. Popular novels become popular films or television miniseries. A successful film or television series will reignite demand for the book in which it is based; and if the film or series is based on an original script, a novel may be concocted to meet the demand.

We now confront still another remarkable new development in information technology: the computer and related data communications technology, together with the capacity to record in compact digital form text, images, and sound. What effect, we inquire, will this powerful new capacity have on literature and on the book as an embodiment of literature?

I am inclined to believe that the effect will be less than is anticipated, certainly less than that of cinema or broadcast. The new technology will affect profoundly the ways in which literary works are reproduced, recorded, preserved, cataloged and bibliographically controlled. But it is not likely to create new literary forms. The capacity to store, search, manipulate, recall, and instantly convey bodies of individual data is a most important capacity; but I believe it does not, like cinema, provide a new medium for literary work, for new forms in which the human mind can present its considered perceptions of life.

True, there are two possible exceptions to this general statement. A digitized laser disk could record a variety of alternative scenarios, indeed could be programmed to create new scenarios, which would enable a reader, by inputting his choices, to have a part in shaping the outcome of the story thus establishing a new sort of relationship between author and reader. This could be an interesting gimmick, but a gimmick nevertheless.

More important is the fact that the same digitized laser disk can record text, moving images and sound. If one is prepared to read from a cathode ray tube—and that will become less vexing and inconvenient as the technology improves—it will be possible to have the text accompan-

ied by sound and moving illustrations. This will provide a useful medium for travel books, natural history guides and certain textbooks; but actually the technique is already available in less efficient form as videotapes or films. Like those earlier manifestations, this new technology is unlikely to generate significant new literary works.

We can conclude that the mediation of the human mind in giving meaning to experience that we call literature is unlikely to be affected in a major way by the new technology as a medium. There may, however, be indirect consequences of the new technology as was the case in the relation of railways to magazines. Particularly may this be true in the impact of the technology on printing costs.

The developments in the field of printing during the 1940s and 1950s involved very high-speed presses, special printing plates and laminated paper adhesive bindings. The economies they produced were applicable only to very long runs, usually of at least 100,000 copies, and hence relatively few titles. They made possible the mass-market paperback, making books available at a nominal price within the reach of almost everyone. This sharp reduction in price made possible, and was reciprocally made possible by, the use of magazine patterns of distribution with newsstands and drugstores rather than bookstores as the ultimate point of sale.

These technological and marketing changes made it possible to reach enormous new audiences at great profit to the publishers and authors of books adapted to this format and method of distribution. But these rewards were available to only a small proportion of the titles published annually—a few hundred at most out of tens of thousands. Even at extremely low prices, only certain kinds of titles could find the enormous number of buyers necessary to make this form of publication practical. And the limited number of pockets in newsstand and drugstore racks in the 1950s, as well as limited channels of distribution, imposed a further restriction.

Books offered in the mass-market paperback format as it existed in the 1950s had to sell themselves without benefit of recent reviews or advertising or the assistance of clerks. Since only a few dozen titles were likely to be available at any given outlet, the newsstand rarely rewarded a buyer seeking a particular title. Rather it met the needs of one who wanted simply a detective story, a western, an adventure story, a sexy romance, or a book by a well-known author (such as Earle Stanley Gardner) whose name had the characteristics of a brand-name, assuring the buyer that he was getting a book with the qualities he had enjoyed in the last one.

Of course many excellent books, especially readily recognized classics, appeared in the mass-market format; and their number greatly increased after the 1950s when paperbacks became widely used in schools and colleges and were sold in traditional bookstores. But the primary effect of this technology was to provide very large financial rewards for the writing and publishing of formula fiction crafted to meet the current demands of the mass market and for certain limited kinds of nonfiction works. This concentration of financial rewards was heightened by the increasingly close interrelation of films, television and best-sellers.

Probably the impact of this sort of best-seller fever on serious literary publishing was less than feared. The people who bought gothic novels and horror stories off the newsstands in the millions did not put aside Saul Bellow or John Updike to do so—and indeed writers of that quality themselves shared, if less extravagantly, in the mass-market income. Serious publishers were perhaps more aided in than distracted from their literary undertakings by their mass-market bonanzas. But without question the emphases of publishing were in some measure distorted by these phenomena growing out of the developments of the 1940s and 1950s in printing technology.

The computer-related technology of the 1980s points the opposite way. It lowers the per-title or per-page cost of readying a book for publication rather than, as in the earlier decades, the per-copy cost of reproduction. It tends to make affordable not the production of a great many copies each of a very few titles but rather the production of a great many titles in a relatively few copies each. This will have two consequences. One is that it will be easier to publish works in small editions, perhaps of 2000 or fewer copies. The other is that it will be more practical to do “demand” publishing, in which individual copies are reproduced from a master as needed (in the future more likely from a laser disk rather than, as in the past, from a microfilm negative). Each of these new or enlarged possibilities is likely to be more significant for the publishing of specialized scholarly and technical works than for literary publishing. But the publishing of small literary journals and experimental works may be facilitated. The bibliographical and heuristic power of the computer and the greater ease of sharing resources among libraries afforded by the new technology will also broaden access to less known and less widely held literary works.

In view of all these considerations it seems unlikely that the new technology, for all its vast importance in other ways, will have a major effect on literature, either as a medium creating new forms or as a more

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efficient means of reproducing and distributing old forms. Though the artifacts in which it is embodied may change, the literary text will remain.

There will be novels, short stories, poems, and essays, and with rare exceptions we will read them from printed pages and not from the cathode ray tube or the computer printout. The forces that will change literature in the decades immediately ahead are either societal ones affecting the universe of which literature is a part or else forces internal to literature itself. They are unlikely to be generated by the technology of information or communication.

I am no critic of literature, and I feel diffident in suggesting what some of these societal and internal changes may be. But two trends over the last generation seem evident. One is that American, and indeed Western, society—or at least the intellectuals in those societies—feeling betrayed in earlier enthusiasms and suspicious of professions of noble sentiment have forsworn magnificence, whether in literature, art or music. It would be difficult to imagine anyone in our time even attempting to write a *War and Peace*, paint the ceiling of a Sistine Chapel, build a cathedral of Chartres, or compose a Ninth Symphony. No faith in religion, in patriotism or in man would inspire it. We flee the fear of grandiloquence and pomposity to take refuge in minimalism and simplicity. Heroes yield to anti-heroes: Willie Loman replaces King Lear.

The other trend is a rejection by all the arts of a vocabulary worn smooth by use until it seems no longer able to express with precision the concepts of the creator. New tonal patterns, new forms of sculpture and painting and new literary devices are sought. This has given a freshness and vitality to much of the creative work of our time. But a work of art is consummated in its perception. A book is actualized by being read, a picture by being viewed, a symphony by being heard—not through the mechanical acts of reading, looking and listening, but through the audience being penetrated by the creator's work and achieving a new conception. To the extent that the creator abandons a vocabulary familiar to the potential audience—abandons it indeed precisely because he feels it has become overfamiliar—he forfeits the opportunity for that communion. He creates to express rather than to communicate.

Hence many of the most expressive creators of our time—a Pollock, a Cage, a Pynchon—to some degree fail in broad communication with a large and comprehending audience, while mass audiences are achieved by the exercise of meretricious skill with the opposite concern: with how many are reached rather than with what is expressed to them. To exaggerate the dichotomy: on the one hand those deeply concerned with

creative expression, but not with achieving communication with a broad audience; or the other, those seeking to profit by a large audience and willing to shape their creation to whatever will draw the largest number.

This was not always so. Sophocles and Shakespeare were the most popular playwrights of their times. The giants of Victorian literature were also avidly read and some became public heroes of a sort. Even into the generation just past Faulkner, Hemingway and Eliot, among many others, wrote nobly and were read widely. And there are not lacking, even today, those—one thinks of Saul Bellow, John Updike, and Robert Penn Warren—who are profoundly committed with important ideas and are concerned to communicate as well as to express them, and who in consequence have achieved wide audiences as well as critical respect for both integrity and skill.

It is not the computer or the laser-read disk or the word processor, nor yet the changing economics of the publishing industry that will determine with what themes literature will concern itself or whether a reunion of serious creator and broad audiences can be achieved. The instruments of literature will remain. The book will still be there, made easier by the new technology to produce and to distribute, but probably little changed in form or physical character. Authors and readers will determine how and to what end their potentials will be realized.

References

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