

# The Book: A World Transformed

Edited by **Eduardo Portella**

With contributions by **Rafael Argullol, Maurice Aymard, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean-Godefroy Bidima, Gerd Bornheim, Emmanuel Carneiro Leão, Milagros Del Corral, Francisco Delich, Barbara Freitag, Masahiro Hamashita, Georges B. Kutukdjian, Goretti Kyomuhendo, Gloria López Morales, Michel Maffesoli, Alberto Manguel, Sérgio Paulo Rouanet, Gianni Vattimo**

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# Preface

The subject–object we readily identify as the book is nothing if not a qualified agent of historic transformation. It is difficult to believe that the ‘book civilization’, today called into question by Peter Sloterdijk, has embarked on its ultimate voyage. It is more likely that ‘Gutenberg’s Galaxy’ will endure and, with characteristic obstinacy, extend its journey further. To the adage of our Portuguese ancestors – ‘We must navigate’ – I am tempted to add: ‘with or without Internet’. ‘Internetization’ should neither frighten nor appease us. If we can be reasonably sure of one thing, it is that we have not yet spelled out ‘the end’ in the story of the book. We must hold in check the fundamentalist delusions, to say nothing of the penchants for relic-worship and apocalyptic forecasts.

Books know that they live in a society both complex and simplifying, surrounded by dangers on all sides, assailed by market pressures and world impressions. This is what singles them out as deeply human – even too human, perhaps – and prey to the very suffering which comes with humanity. Books make available and protect the most visceral perceptions of the human adventure: memory, events, foreboding.

The book brings together, in one and the same project, culture and learning: culture as non-formal learning, and learning as formal culture. Each educational effort or procedure passes or should pass through culture and, eventually, through books. Thus it has been in our societies, from the most ‘uninformed’ to the most

progressively informed. And thus it should be more and more in the ‘informatized’ societies, devoted to the ‘digital gospel’ described by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Hence the necessity of reading, and the urgency of dismantling the excluding devices of monolingualism.

Reading as such would promptly convene a meeting of diverging alphabets, babelized words, the arduous liaisons all of us establish on a daily basis – our militant hope formed of coexisting memory and oblivion. Reading in the singular, as practised in the times of forced literacy, has yet to be rid of the authoritarian legacy and stigmas it bequeathed to our history. Reading against the current reveals itself as the freest of partnerships, a peculiar regime, under no rule but that of open contracts. This is when it reaches its most advanced stage, making of the reader a co-author.

None of this could happen without the initiatives and complicity of citizen libraries. But great attention is needed. The power of libraries is a silent power. Libraries speak very softly. I would even say they speak in whispers, yet they make themselves heard. Within their walls, along their fluid corridors, persuasive ghosts and perplexed beings engage in deciphering the elusive human truths. Deeply aware of this was a former director of the National Library of Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges, the inventor of languages who will be always at our side. Looking at a mirror at the entrance of his celebrated library, Borges refused the predominant notion of finitude. ‘I prefer to dream’, he said, and we repeat after him, ‘That polished surfaces represent and promise infinitude.’ *Borges, el hacedor, el memorioso*, taught us about books, about reading, about libraries.

Eduardo Portella

# Introduction

In the framework of an interdisciplinary research programme entitled, and aimed at highlighting, *Pathways for Thought in the Third Millennium*,<sup>1</sup> this volume examines from various angles the role of books in different parts of the world

If indeed books have influenced our perceptions, our ways of thinking and our behaviours, to what extent are these objects still involved in the construction of our cultures today? Some might tag as ‘postliterate’ a global tendency that appears to oscillate between a sort of ‘hyper-literacy’ and a new type of ‘non-literacy’, evidently altering our experience of books and reading. The book still has much ground to break. Yet it is just where it appeared to be thriving the most that other channels have sprung, flowing with the lure of multimedial, immediate and interactive communication.

Where does the book go from here? If absorbed into the World Wide Web, will it go into extinction or find a new vitality? Is the virtual book at odds with the real book? As uniform mass production gives way to a proliferation of limited series, the book has suffered, if not from critical shortages, at least from intense profusion: ‘more titles, less circulation’. In either case, its plunge into cyber-space is seen by some as its salvation. If the web, emerging as a daunting bookstore, is snatching up the book, can it be said that a culture of books is asserting itself in the

1. See *Chemins de la pensée: vers de nouveaux langages* (Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 2000) in French and Spanish in the series ‘La Bibliothèque du Philosophe’. Forthcoming in English (2002) under the title *Pathways into the Third Millennium: Toward New Languages*.

snarls of the super information highway? What will this limitless space make of the traditional compasses – editors who steer the readers' way around written production, libraries that provide books in a human dimension? Are authors doomed to lose their rights, if not their existence?

How does the book fit in with the 'new nomadism' that information technologies are helping to spawn? Just as the virtual sphere promises to pave the way for an international citizenry, it threatens to further fragment the public arena. Some see it as an aimless, thoughtless, undiscerning Tower of Babel in reverse; others envision a web of freely shared knowledge and perceptions, reversing the chain of 'production of relations' and baring the way to 'relations of production', perhaps even drafting the book of tomorrow – if not the one that dispenses all knowledge, the one through which all cultures could, at last, converse. The question arises as to whether instant communication is bound to blur every instance of collective identity, to reiterate but a single message, or rather to aid the further expression of multiple identities, through the eventual development of such devices as automatic translation. For the time being, however, it is evident that the new 'network society' has been reproducing a world of 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

Is the book an obsolescent pedagogical tool? Its contribution to reducing inequality, through the generalized education that it has made possible, cannot be doubted. In turn, the World Wide Web offers further access to education, bringing distance-learning nearer. But how can one thoughtfully read the Internet's mushrooming architecture; what is to be made of cyber-publication, at all times subject to alterations by its author and others alike? Preparing everyone to receive, select, edit and disseminate an infinite volume of information of uncertain origin is the challenge that faces us.

A similarly jagged and sinuous path can be traced if we take a critical look at the history of the book, bearing in mind its sometimes ambiguous performance on the democratic stage, from the infancy of silent reading, to the advent of free will and finally to the roots of modern society's pervasive individualism. Individualism and 'present-ism', that lead to a search for autonomy, forgetting and immortality, creating a rupture with the past. It is thus opportune to compare the role of written expression with the persuasive power of the image and the force of the oral expression that Plato considered indispensable to genuine debate.

Books have a way with words. They speak for and about us. We might live to see them affirm, to paraphrase the ironic tone of Mark Twain on reading his own obituary in a newspaper, that the reports of their death had been greatly exaggerated.



# Acknowledgements

The idea of conducting at the ‘scene of the book’ an investigation into our cultures and societies, our ways of seeing, thinking and acting, was first suggested by Eduardo Portella, co-ordinator of the *Pathways for Thought in the Third Millennium* Steering Committee. And yet the dialogues and reflections of which this work is an extension would not have been possible without the support of a great library, namely the *Biblioteca Nacional* Foundation of Brazil, to UNESCO’s International Symposium, ‘Within Nations and Beyond: the Place of the Book’.<sup>1</sup> This effort was also aided by the Organization for the Development of Science and Culture (ORDECC)/*Colégio do Brasil*, the journal *Tempo Brasileiro*, and the Brazilian Academy of Letters under the chairmanship of Tarcisio Padilha.

This book owes much to the generosity of its authors and of all those who guided and highlighted the symposium’s proceedings: historian Carlos Guilherme Mota, art historian Elmer Barbosa (who also heads Brazil’s Book Department), Professors Renato Janine Ribeiro (political philosophy), Nisia Villaça (communications), Muniz Sodré (theory of culture and media), Marcio Tavares d’Amaral (professor of thought systems who is also psychoanalyst, poet and storyteller), novelist Ronaldo Lima Lins (also professor of literary sciences), writers Carlos Heitor Cony, Lygia Fagundes Telles, poet Marco Lucchesi, Brazilian translator of Giacomo Leopardi, Giambattista Vico and Umberto Eco, and caricaturist Ziraldo, who also writes and illustrates books for children.

1. Rio de Janeiro, 28–30 August 2000.

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To all, our grateful thanks.

# Contents

- 5 Preface  
*Eduardo Portella*
- 7 Introduction
- 9 Acknowledgements
- 13 Books in the global dialogue of cultures  
*Zygmunt Bauman*

## PART ONE **The inscription of culture**

- 27 Speech, writing and the subject  
*Georges B. Kutukdjian*
- 33 A parable on books in the global culture  
*Francisco Delich*
- 39 Literature and books in Uganda's cultural framework  
*Goretti Kyomubendo*
- 43 The end of culture and the last book  
*Sérgio Paulo Rouanet*

## PART TWO **Thinking through libraries**

- 61 At the heart of language  
*Emmanuel Carneiro Leão*
- 67 Library, liberty  
*Gianni Vattimo*

73 About the story of a life  
*Gerd Bornheim*

79 The library of Robinson Crusoe  
*Alberto Manguel*

PART THREE **Books as reflections of society**

95 The information era and the use of books  
*Barbara Freitag*

107 The new literates of the network society  
*Gloria López Morales*

113 Books between African memory and anticipation  
*Jean-Godefroy Bidima*

131 Metamorphoses of the book and of reading  
*Maurice Aymard*

PART FOUR **Reading into the future**

145 Written culture in the globalization era: what future for books?  
*Milagros del Corral*

155 The word, the image and the humanities  
*Masahiro Hamashita*

165 Complicities  
*Rafael Argullol*

177 The paths of books  
*Michel Maffesoli*

185 **Notes on the Contributors**

# Books in the global dialogue of cultures

Zygmunt Bauman

My logic teacher in my student years in Warsaw was an advocate of a rare brand of philosophy, which he called 'reism' (from the Latin *res*, thing). That was, in its intention at least, a 'commonsensical', down-to-earth kind of philosophy steering clear of the refined, and on the whole esoteric, dispute between the supporters of 'materialist' and 'idealist' world-views. The 'reists' acknowledged the obvious, empirically given factuality of things – but nothing other than things. Sentences, the main objects of logical inquiry, were things like any other, and this was all there was to be told of their 'reality' or 'substantiality' or so my teacher kept telling me, whenever pressed: 'They exist', he said, 'as a layer of ink or graphite on the paper surface, or grooves on stone, or a sequence of airwaves.' I remember that I found this difficult to accept – as a young student as much as I do now, as a retired professor. Surely there was something more to a sentence or a proposition than a few drops of ink? More importantly, would a proposition change, depending on the colour of pencil I used? My learned friend, Leszek Kolakowski, insisted on the other hand that myths are not collections of words, but of human and animal characters, their relations and deeds: they may therefore be told and are told, and will keep being told, in many different ways over and over again. They 'stay the same' though the stories change. This opinion I found much more palatable, and not just in the case of myths, though these bore a particular importance: myths were the most ancient, but also the most ubiquitous stuff of which stories told by humans to humans were

assiduously moulded. I believed then, as I believe now, that however closely the ‘meaning’ and the form in which that meaning is ‘communicated’ constrain, determine or influence each other, they still retain a good deal of autonomy and that each meaning can be expressed in more than one way. There is more to a sentence than just the scratches on a clay tablet or black stains on paper, and they do not necessarily change once the pen replaces the stylus.

That episode from a distant country and another century would not be worth recalling and retelling, had it not emerged from oblivion in all its pristine freshness, but also with surprising topicality, in Roger Chartier’s report on the international conference on the present predicaments and prospects of the book held in Buenos Aires by the Argentinean Book Chamber and published in *Le Monde* on 13 May 2000. I had the uncanny impression of meeting my long-deceased logic teacher again; this time, however, cloned many times over, with his all too familiar song transcribed for several voices but sung in chorus.

First Dick Brass, a vice-president of Microsoft, presented the gathering with a detailed time-schedule of the forthcoming demise of the book and its funeral. By 2015, he said, the entire contents of the American Library of Congress will be electronically transcribed. In 2018 the last issue of a periodical will appear in print. As of 2019, under the entry ‘book’, one would find in dictionaries the following definition: ‘A substantial piece of writing generally available through a computer or personal electronic equipment.’ His announcement, expectedly, caused panic among the publishers present, busy as they are in producing objects which they now heard were bound to be cast into the dustbin of history in a matter of a decade or two. What made the news worse still was that there seemed to be some correspondence between the message brought by the Microsoft people and the publishers’ own experience. Though the 26th Book Fair in Buenos Aires (one of the largest events of this kind in Latin America, alongside the fairs of São Paulo and Guadalajara), held in May 2000, attracted over a million visitors, the state of Argentinean publishing has been descending from poor to poorer still: small independent publishers are pushed out of the market, dominated by a few giant products of serial mergers and takeovers like Prisa Santillana, Planeta or the Sudamericana branch of the Bertelsmann empire. Worse still, the demand for the publishers’ products goes on falling. Except for a few perennials like re-editions of Borges or Cortazar, or the texts of a few celebrities of Garcia Marquez’s rank, authors would be happy (and lucky) if the sale of their book passed the 1,000 copies barrier (see the report in *Le Monde des Livres*, 26 May 2000). At the Argentinean Book Chamber conference, over

700 representatives of the book industry from seventy countries gathered, and most of them must have shared their Argentinean hosts' apprehensions. It seemed that Dick Brass and his associates had put their fingers on the sore spots hurting everyone, or almost everyone present; they offered a credible explanation of the illness even if the medicine they promised seemed to many listeners much more hideous and repelling than the ailment it was meant to heal.

But then, shortly after Dick Brass, Jerome Rubin and Joseph Jacobson of MIT Media Lab rose to inform the audience that the testing of an 'electronic ink' and 'electronic paper', which together will permit the transfer of texts electronically without the mediation of computers and make readers feel as if they were turning the pages of a 'real' book, had reached final stages and could soon become commercially available, it was the turn of the Microsoft representatives to fall into a state of acute agitation; the posthumous life of the book, of which they hoped to take exclusive charge, seemed to be slipping out of their hands. After brief confusion and a lot of soul-searching, Microsoft suggested to the MIT Media Lab that they merge the scenarios and share the estate of the imploding Gutenberg Galaxy by joining forces to develop the planned replacements of printed books.

Most of the people present at the Buenos Aires conference were probably under the impression, just like my logic teacher would have been, were he also in attendance, that what they witnessed was a debate about the future of the book, that this future is now being shuffled between Microsoft and Media Lab, and that its shape would ultimately depend on which of the protagonists/antagonists on stage would prove most determinate, resourceful or clever in pushing through his own pet ideas.

So which one, if any, of the two scenarios is likely to be staged? Personally, I am inclined to reply, like Rhett Butler, in *Gone with the Wind*: 'Frankly, I don't give a damn.' The matter may be of tremendous interest to Bill Gates and those others who would rather strike the gold-mine themselves than leave the job to the competitors, even if, having struck it, they would risk being charged by the Trade Boards of monopolistic practice. But contrary to what they would wish the rest of us to believe, what they will or will fail to do won't determine the future of the book. It is not the technology of publishing and distribution that will decide the role of the book in weaving together (or taking apart, for that matter) human communities, its place in our shared or separate cultures, in the shape and the content of our humanity. I do not mean that there are no grounds to be worried about all these things. What I do mean is that what was hotly debated in Buenos Aires by Microsoft

and Media Lab bosses, and by so many others who echoed their concerns on so many other occasions, are not the prime reasons to worry.

Since its inception, and long before it assumed the form to which it has clung in the past centuries, the book has been primarily a story told in a perpetual dialogue with human experience. As Walter Benjamin put it, ‘experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written versions differ least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers . . . The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale.’<sup>1</sup> Let me observe, though, that not all books and not any specimen of a collection of pages bound together under one cover can be so described. As Gaston Bachelard, the founding father of modern philosophy of science, suggested a long time ago, science was born when scientific books began to disregard ordinary human experiences such as thunder or a steaming pot, and to deal instead with experiments completely dissociated with the daily habits of ‘readers’, or with propositions made by someone who had witnessed an analogous esoteric experience. In other words, science was born when the umbilical cord linking experience to ordinary, everyday ‘profane’ experience was cut. For this reason, scientific publications will be left out of the account that follows: the dialogue between scientific publications and ordinary experience was broken a long time ago, and their communication – whatever happens to the technology of publishing – is not at stake.

Storytelling fed on shared mundane experience and in turn fed into it. The setting of the conversation could not therefore but leave its profound imprint on the story told. As Franz Rosenzweig suggested, unlike the abstract thinker, who thinks for no one else and speaks to no one else and therefore ‘knows his thoughts in advance’, the speaking thinker cannot anticipate anything and must be able to wait because ‘he depends on the word of the other’, of ‘someone who has not only ears but also a mouth’. The subject-matter of a conversation is not passing the ready-made truth from one who knows it to another who does not. As William James proposed, ‘truth happens to an idea – its validity is the process of validation’.

1. Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited and with an introduction by H. Arendt. Tr. H. Zohn, New York, Schocken, 1968.



We may say that the meeting between a speaker/reader and a reader/speaker was the very site of that ‘verification’.

Storytelling and story-listening forged a bond between the two protagonists and kept them tied to each other in the negotiation of the truth of human experience. It was the repetitive restitution of that bond in the ritual of reiteration that supplied the cognitive ground for the idea of continuity and belonging – the ‘family loom’ of shared experience commonly inherited and owned by those whose experiences had not been shared: it was comforting, it brought reassurance, it mitigated or covered up the vexing uncertainties of life. (This may be why children, still struggling ‘to belong’ – to find their secure place in a frighteningly unfamiliar world – adore being told, repeatedly, the same, known-by-heart, stories.) It so happened that, as long as storytelling remained oral, for every group of people there was also a strictly limited number of stories likely to be told in their presence – and so heard by them. To use Walter Benjamin’s distinction, we may say that the predominant, almost the sole kind of story told and heard was the ‘peasant story’, the story of someone ‘who stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions’: only occasionally was the stream of ‘peasant stories’ interrupted by ‘seaman stories’, told by or heard from ‘someone who came from afar’. We may suppose that this imbalance played no minor role in maintaining the continuity and the separate identity of the group. To a large extent, ‘belonging together’ – being ‘us’ as distinct from ‘them’ – meant listening to the same stories while seldom – if ever – hearing any other.

This might have changed, or at least acquired a potential for change, with the advent of the ‘Gutenberg Galaxy’. Printed and sold, the stories could now travel separately from the storytellers, and they could cross the boundaries separating ‘us’ from ‘them’ more easily than most storytellers; ‘seaman stories’ were no more marginalized by the ‘peasant’ ones. That must have been the beginning of what would much later be called ‘cross-cultural communication’. Though the true impact of the change would not be fully felt immediately after the printing machine had been invented, it would become visible thanks to a social – not a technological – revolution: the spread of literacy – soon to be followed (as could only be expected from the treachery of markets, as is well known) by cheap printing.

One of the most fateful consequences of the new mobility of stories was a relative emancipation of the composition and narration of the stories from the lived experience of the readers. In the ‘oral communication era’ – with stories having but human memory as the sole repository and shelter – every listener was a

potential storyteller or re-teller. The two characters engaged in the dialogue were interchangeable. Not so now, with the stories coming in printed form, with the teller far away, and when only those tellers who could manage to get their stories printed could count on a significant number of listeners, now transformed into readers. The circle of readers and the circle of 'belonging' no longer needed to overlap. This could be a mixed blessing for the storytellers, since they could no longer count on the preordained harmony of the dialogue, but could – and did – reforge that somewhat disconcerting fate into an exhilarating opportunity to rise above, or go beyond, that aspect of their experience which they shared with their readers. From now on, social realities rose to the task which Hannah Arendt assigned to the arts: the task of 'adding to the world'. To add – to insert into the world something which was not there before and would not be there unless inserted – is an act sharply distinct from saving what has been said already, and more than giving articulated form to what has already been lived through, though not spoken about.

'Adding to the world' spelled danger for the continuity and identity of the group. The book that added to the world disturbed the order of things instead of keeping its previous and familiar shape intact. It could clash with the received world wisdom, or at any rate instil doubts as to its exclusive claim to truth. Instead of being, like before, an instrument of continuity and separation, the book turned into the yeast of self-reflection and change. The guardians of the group's cohesion and the wardens of order could not but sense a danger in the free circulation of stories. Arts had become subversive – and not by the artists' choice. Now it was rather the decision to conform, the submit to the powers-that-be, who assumed the right to be the sole interpreters of popular tradition and history, that became the artist's choice. The time of nation-building, with its cultural crusades promoting the unity of language, tradition, pantheon and world-view, also had to be, and indeed was, almost everywhere, the time of censorship. Not all 'additions to the world' were welcome, and particularly resented was the selection of additions by agents other than plenipotentiaries of the powers presiding over the nation-building process.

But what is it, precisely, that the book, whether jointly with the rest of the arts or on its own and in its own inimitable way, adds to the world, and most particularly to the *Lebenswelt* of the reader? What is it that appears in the *Lebenswelt* of the reader thanks to the act of reading; that something which otherwise would not be there? This again depends on both partners of the dialogue between the storytellers and their listeners, and changes with the partners.

Milan Kundera was one of the few commentators who, in the verdict passed by the late Ayatollah Khomeini on the writer Salman Rushdie, perceived not only an assault against the freedom of artistic expression hard-won in the long struggle against censorship, but a misdeed reaching much deeper, to the very roots of modern civilization. Khomeini's verdict was particularly abominable because the blow was aimed not just against one writer who blundered, but against the novel – in Kundera's view, the cornerstone of what is most precious, most humane in the type of society we inhabit: that very addition without which this world of ours would be so much poorer, less humane, bearable and liveable – that is, if it were at all able to exist. The novel brings into the world the moment of self-reflection, detachment, irony and laughter against which mighty powers militate, and which they would gladly condemn to exile were it not for the novel standing in their way. 'The art inspired by God's laughter does not by nature serve ideological certitudes. It contradicts them', Kundera notes in *The Art of the Novel*. 'Like Penelope, it undoes each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers and learned men have woven the day before.' Because it could not but mediate between diverse human experiences, thereby undermining the certainty of each one of them, artistic fiction served as an ironic, irreverent counter-culture to the techno-scientific and bureaucratic culture of modernity, that culture promoting orderly obsession, neat classifications, strict hierarchies, conformity to the rule and taut discipline. Artistic fiction defends the hard-won human freedom and redeems human imagination and daring; in a world waging a war of attrition against contingency, ambivalence and mystery, the novel is a perpetual training in the difficult, but badly needed art of living under conditions of uncertainty, in the company of polyvalence and among a variety of life forms.

Not all contemporary thinkers would agree with Kundera. You may find quite an opposite view in the writings of Umberto Eco (see particularly his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*), for whom the true value of artistic fiction is in its being an antidote against the shakiness of evidence supplied by daily experience: the novel is an island of reassuring certainty within the turbulent seas of doubts and insecurity. One can be pretty sure that Scarlett O'Hara married Rhett Butler. Margaret Mitchell is incontestably in full charge of the plot and we can rely on her story with less hesitation than on well-nigh every other news that reaches us in this world of noisy, pugnacious and ubiquitous controversy. Even the assertions made in the name of science are perched on a huge pile of assumptions, most of which we neither know nor would understand if revealed to us. It may be said that the novel's

value, according to Eco, is in the healing potential of a blessed tranquillizer, in the protection it offers to sorely tested and frayed nerves.

In this controversy, whose opinion is right? Perhaps each of the two stories tells one part of the truth. It is tempting to hypothesize that Kundera and Eco represent experiences of two different generations, brought up in two different parts of the modern world: one, like Kundera, growing up under the shadow of totalitarian threat and homogenizing pressures, in a world where freedom was the most coveted and most painfully missing of all indispensable ingredients of human dignified life; the other, like Eco, dazzled, deafened and baffled by the hubbub of the 'casino culture', with its constantly changing stakes, and few, if any, rules, in a world which managed to feel simultaneously uncertain, insecure and unsafe, and in which freedom was a 'fact of life', a fate rather than a gain, while security and self-confidence were the most poignantly missing of human values. Each of the two experiences caused various aspects of this Janus-headed, cloven-asunder phenomenon called the book to emerge. Each expected, sought and found in the novel different stories – different kinds of services filling different gaps and redeeming different torments.

What are the services that the book may render to our kind of society? What kind of services does it offer, and what kind of service, if any, do its readers tend to expect? To answer these poignant questions, we need perhaps to think less of the changing technology of book production and distribution than the prophets of electronic revolution would wish us to, but instead to look more closely at the changing nature of the world we live in and the changing experience of living in it.

In *Le Monde de l'avenir*, a one-off supplement to *Le Monde* published at the start of the new century, Jean-Pierre Langellier juxtaposes two visions of our globe as it may evolve in the years to come. One vision comes from Serge Lehman's novel *F.A.U.S.T.*, the action of which is located in 2095, in a world ruled by the 'Great Powers' of industrial and commercial empires. A string of affluent and comfortable metropolitan 'villages' stretches along 'Darwin Alee', encircling the globe. This thin belt of affluence is separated by another, much wider, sanitary belt of fallow no-man's-land, which separates it from 'the bush', the territory of lawlessness and future-less poverty inhabited by six billion deprived and impoverished creatures. In that world, the successful have finally opted out from all contact with the rest, having first secured, for their exclusive use, the plum parts of the globe. Classes which once cohabited have now turned into separate societies and broken communication with each other. Another vision comes from the widely read and hotly debated

prophecies of Samuel Huntington, who plays down the socially produced inequalities, while predicting a deep and unbridgeable chasm separating ‘civilizations’, of which he counts seven or eight (he is not sure about the future of Africa). Ideological, political, artistic, technological ‘universals’ would be, in Huntington’s view, powerless to cross inter-civilizational crevices, let alone to fill or cover them up. Fortified and walled off in their respective territorial enclaves, civilizations will meet, if at all, on the battlegrounds only. Their differences notwithstanding, these are visions of an incurable and irreversible split. While Huntington calls this the ‘bluff of globalization’ and suggests its ultimate impossibility in view of the permanent division of humankind, Lehman draws to their logical conclusion the present-day divisive tendencies of globalization ‘as we know it’ – globalization of economic, financial and commercial powers unmatched and unrestrained by the ‘planetarization’ of political institutions and democratic control (these remain as local as before). The major effect of this sort of globalization is a deepening polarization of life conditions and life standards. (Let us note that cultural differences and political fragmentation of the world seem to be developing in the opposite direction: while in 1850 the globe was divided between 44 states, there are now 193 ‘sovereign’ states and about 30 more queuing for promotion; about half of 6,000 languages spoken around the globe are expected to be extinct before this century is over, and 95 per cent of present languages are spoken by hardly 4 per cent of the global population.) Huntington’s split is caused by a breakdown of communication which cannot be repaired. Lehman’s rupture is prompted by the rich having no more use for the poor and so no further will to alleviate their lot, and the poor entertaining no more illusions as to the willingness of the rich to act. All the same, it is an abysmal split, not unity or universality of the human condition, that looms at the end of each of the two roads.

Lehman and Huntington have produced dystopias matching the outspoken or tacit fears of our globalization era. Their visions are warnings, not predictions, let alone ‘scientific predictions’ (so-called ‘futurology’ counter-factually assumes the regularity and lawfulness of human history, in order to pronounce on the future. But the future, by definition, does not exist – it is a ‘non-being’. Having no empirically accessible object, the idea of a ‘science of the future’ is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms). What the two authors predict may indeed happen, but we are not in a position to say with any degree of certainty. History is made up of human acts, and the future is not determined before it has become another present. Statistical trends may allow logical extrapolations, but human history has excelled in

defying statistical probabilities. Which one of the imaginable scenarios (or the unimaginable ones for that matter, just like a society without slaves was unimaginable to Aristotle, and state without royalty to Bossuet) will turn into a future present we cannot say. What we can do is to try to prevent the words of the dystopia from becoming flesh.

Other scenarios abound in current debates. There are Utopias alongside dystopias, visions of universal bliss, of the final emancipation of human creative potential and of the true autonomy of the human individual, of a final breaking of the barriers between peoples and their cultural treasures, of boundaries being effaced or made porous, of ideas of good life freely exchanged, available to all and negotiated by all with a universally shared intention of coming to agreement. Hopes are also expressed that we will all sooner or later come to terms with the plurality and diversity of the world and its residents – that we will see them as a chance, not a threat, and perhaps will even supplement the mere tolerance of variety with solidarity towards the other and the different. If the future is not predetermined (and it is not), then it is open; perhaps not ‘wide open’, not ‘boundless’ – but in all probability more open than we are prepared to admit. It is up to us to make sure that no possibility of a better lot for humanity that could pass through this opening is overlooked or neglected.

The book, the storytelling that ‘makes sense’ of human experience, has a tremendous role to play in that game of possibilities. Let me quote Franz Rosenzweig once more: ‘Had Luther died on the thirtieth of October, 1517, all the audacity of his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans would have been nothing but the extravaganzas of a late scholastic.’ We know, though, that he did not die on that day, and so the next day he nailed to the door of a Wittenberg church his ninety-five theses. It was thanks to that act, concludes Rosenzweig, that ‘life complemented the theory and made it true’. Rosenzweig saw his own *magnum opus*, *The Star of Redemption*, in the same light. By itself the message of that book was not ‘true’. It could, though, become true in its consequences; it could be ‘verified’ in life and by the living. It would not, however, have this chance were it not written, published and read.

This taking the chance of verification and so emerging as the true sense of human experience – by itself confused, disperse and opaque, devoid of obvious sense – is a task of the book which our times have made perhaps more urgent than ever, yet also more difficult than ever before. Pinning the blame on the new technology of publishing would be a grave mistake. The difficulty in question affects the

book and, more generally, storytelling, in all its forms: on paper, on screen or written in ‘electronic ink’. The difficulty is intimately related to the changing nature of our experience and, more precisely, to the change in the ways our lives are lived, and the world in which they are lived is therefore perceived and related to.

The present day differs from the one in which the classic forms of the book, and the novel in particular, thrived – and differs from it in many vital respects. I suggest that one of those many respects is of particular relevance to our problem: namely, the trademark of the present time, the fragmentation of life into a series of relatively self-enclosed episodes, coupled with the perception of the flow of time as a succession of relatively self-enclosed events. The consequence of that double fragmentation is the ‘short-termism’ which marks both public and individual lives.

According to a slogan launched by the French radio and television station RTL, ‘information, like coffee, is good when hot and strong’. We are these days flooded by information, but it is indeed served like coffee – strong enough to quash the taste of food consumed a moment before, and hot enough to stifle all other current feelings. It cools down quickly, though – it disappears from the newspaper headlines and TV news well before its taste can be savoured in full, let alone evaluated. If it happens to be information about the world which is served coffee-style, the speed of its coming and going portends the end to understanding: one bit of information is chased out by another before it can be absorbed. And since they are not absorbed, they cannot be linked in a meaningful chain of events. Each event must therefore be ‘lived through’ on its own, and the sense of it all is left behind by the runners at the very start of the chase.

Events, synchronically trumpeted by the media and synchronically sunk by them into oblivion, create for the brief duration of their presence their own ‘public’, but this is, like themselves, an ephemeral public, one that falls apart as soon as it comes together, without much progress to its cohesion. It is also an other-directed public, hammered together from outside, not an ‘organic one’, brought into being and sustained by an ongoing dialogue. Out of this peculiar experience of the ‘public’ it is extremely difficult, nay impossible, to mould the image of ‘public interest’ or anything related to it, like the idea of a good society, social justice or morality in politics. Just as out of the yarn of life lived as a string of poorly connected episodes, it is difficult in the utmost to weave the canvas of a ‘life project’, not to mention a ‘whole life’ project; the world is offered to us as a container full of events meant for an instant, on-the-spot and one-off consumption. In such a world, the life-span appears to be a series of episodes, each meant to be consumed in a similar fashion.

It is in such intertwining of the fragmented world and fragmented life that the book is faced with its biggest challenge. How can the book help, and can it be of help at all, in cutting this particular Gordian knot? And, as long as the knot stays tight, as it seems to be now, can the book maintain a meaningful dialogue with human experience, that *sine qua non* condition of any service it may render?

The strength of the book lay in its unique ability to tie biography to history, private to public, individual to society, lived moments to the meaning of life. That work of synthesis is difficult to grasp in a world that has put paid to duration and long-term thinking; its significance (indeed, its indispensability) tends to elude its residents. Our attention shifts too fast to allow us to pause and reflect, hence the falling demand for such readings that may offer just that. Books themselves change their location in the life-world of our contemporaries: they move from the universe of enlightenment to that of entertainment, they change from durable values to objects of consumption. More than that, in the world that has sliced its own history into events, books may count on their power of attraction if they themselves turn into events, hence the paradox of rising attendance at book fairs coinciding with rapidly falling readership. The cult of best-seller lists – the ‘hot books’ read by ‘everyone’ and adorning ‘everyone’s’ coffee table, only to be thrown out of the sitting room the next week when superseded by the next best-sellers – signals that transformation of the book into ‘event’. Instead of fighting back the pressures of fragmentation and ‘episodization’ of the world-view and human life, books remade into events co-operate in the process. It is the deep-reaching transformation of the socially produced life-setting that makes books ‘fit’ for the soft, kaleidoscopic and protean ‘virtual reality’ of the electronic network – not the other way round.

Books might have been adding to the world – but they never did it from outside. They were always part of the world and this is precisely why the additions they offered could be absorbed. It is only natural that members of the publishing trade tend to think of their products in terms of the problems that may arise in the course of the production. But the fate of the book in our globalizing world does not depend, nor can it be explained, by technologies of printing or anything else confined to the publishing trade. Books are doomed to share the fate of the societies of which they are a part. When we think of the book, let us think of society first. When we worry about the future of books, let us take a closer look at society and its trends. To make books fit for the society we inhabit, let us try to prevent that society from becoming unfit for books.



# The inscription of culture

# Speech, writing and the subject

Georges B. Kutukdjian

The spoken word and writing are indissociable and concomitant, when writing is understood as the representation of what is symbolized. This is because writing ‘formats’ the transition from same to other that is inherent in speech; writing indicates the passage from identity to difference. If words are a process of constitution of the speaking subject, as Roman Jakobson has shown, then writing depicts this constitutive initiative of the subject. Writing cannot be reduced to the transcription of spoken languages. Repeated imprints, representations of imprints of hands and feet, traces of passage, marks on the body and body painting, marks of belonging, scarring, inscriptions, glyphs, pictograms, ideograms, stylized images, drawings, graffiti, signs, numbers, letters . . . writing symbolizes the absent presence of the other; it represents otherness in the subject; it gives the subject an intimation of death.

Words and writing are not, however, exactly the same thing. If words are at the origin of the identity of a singular subject as inscribed in a group sharing the same language, writing founds the identity of the absent universal subject. Writing, as soon as it appears, imprints a movement (of the hand, of the body), paradoxical in that it both decentralizes and gives root to the subject. It imposes its indelible subjectivity and allows its erasing. In this passage from words to writing, what are the gains and/or losses for meaning and liberty?

To begin with, writing presents itself as a capturing of time within the space of the material, a diversion and a transgression of time. Body paintings accompany an event, a celebration or a seasonal ritual. They highlight a brief interval

in time and, like it, are ephemeral. The Kaduvéo, Kayapo or Karajà body paintings, at least for the time of a ritual, form links with the world of the spirits. Writing is the mediation between time and space, in this case human/supernatural space. Scarring goes beyond this short time. It carries the perennial mark of an initiation ceremony and inscribes in the flesh of the subject a passage between two times, from the childhood that he or she is leaving to the adulthood that awaits. It constitutes, notably in Africa, a sign of the identity of the person, as it can designate both ethnic membership and geographic localization. Body painting and scarring belong to the time of human existence. Clay cuneiform tablets equally speak of this time. Since they often constitute letters of exchange or are commercial inventories, they are left to disappear once the transaction is finished. Inscriptions on stone, marble or granite steles are intended for descendants. Palaeolithic motifs or genealogical dynasties, through the very repetition of a mark on a support – be they animal figures or lists of ancestors – indicate the will to represent different times: dance tempos; daily, seasonal; human life cycles; infinity. In itself the search for different supports for writing reveals that human beings used their genius to build and signify time. How can one miss, for example in the cylindrical royal seal, the capacity to write endlessly a name or an invocation when the cylinder rolls it out on to a permeable surface? The carriage inscribed on the cylinder is finite but the text can repeat itself infinitely, limited only by the support itself.

Secondly, writing has irreversible effects that words do not provoke. Writing displaces both the author and the reader as subjects. On the one hand, the author, traversed by what he or she has written, is transformed by it because he or she must take responsibility for the act of writing, which remains an unverifiable misdemeanour. On the other hand, the readers are transformed by it, because what is given to them to see and/or read leads them to wonder about their own understanding or reading of the world, and because this relationship with the space/time of reading has already displaced them in their subjectivity. Did Gide not say that the property of a book is to lead the reader elsewhere than the place where the book was found?

Thirdly, writing creates an additional memory, which is external to the subject. Writing relays memory but at the same time fixes it. While words conserve the plasticity of memory, its possible reorganization depending on forms of expression, writing formalizes memory but simultaneously liberates it.

## Writing as 'decentring'

Writing manifests as the symbolization of concepts. It first of all concerned mathematical concepts: the first fragments of writing found in the Maya glyphs or cuneiform tablets are in effect arithmetic texts, ways of counting. Mathematics and its symbols are absolute abstractions. Zero, for example, is a concept formulated in India. It does not exist in a tangible sense. No one has seen nor can see zero, any more than infinity. A number cannot be seen unless written. I can see an apple, but the number 'one' is a concept, the representation of which can only be written. The concept implies symbolic representation, mathematical of course, but also metaphysical: it is the case of the founding narratives which represent the concept of origin.

Collective memory and individual memory are linked. Oral transmission remains an act where the narrator takes on the discourse within which a community recognizes itself, that a community appropriates. It is precisely because the teller of stories of a collective nature cannot remove himself from his recital that, paradoxically, due to the ephemeral character of his performance, he strays from the plot of the narrative – the *mythème*, or the core narration of a myth – to create different versions, as was the case with the troubadours of the Middle Ages or the Arab storytellers. The passage into writing, however, fixes the story in matter and makes it perennial. Here, again, paradoxically, even though the inscription constitutes an essentially individual act, the engraver or transcriber is left behind by the written text. Simone de Beauvoir compared the great works to 'great abandoned totems'. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, gathered through written fragments, is the most enlightening illustration. But be it myths and proverbs transmitted by the oral tradition, such as the African and Australian genealogies, or the funeral inscriptions or founding myths which persist in the written tradition, an equal distance separates the subject of the speech and the speaking subject. Writing manifests itself in the vacillation of the narcissistic object. As much as words mask the subject through seductive effects on the audience, so does writing expose the subject to a loss of his own love and the risk of an irreversible loss.

## Writing as rooting

Just like Isis's quest for the dissected body of Osiris, writing is a work of memory and reconstruction. In allowing the representation of concepts, writing opens the way to metaphysical symbolization, to founding narratives from which the subject is

forcibly absent, because often the one who speaks is the founder. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which founded the institutions of the Babylonian era, can once more serve as an example. The subject is left behind by the writing. Writing, the particular words of a subject, becomes a discourse of a universal nature which escapes all subjects. The speaker is 'virtualized' and the audience multiplies. As soon as the subject exults in his transgression of space and time, because he situates himself in the continuity of a community which shares the same language (past), he contributes to his constantly renewed formation (present) and bases himself in his presumed trajectory (future).

At the same time, one can extricate from this reading that writing – from exchange notes to sacred texts – inscribes the subject in space (community) and time (history). The writing has been a process and an extraordinarily powerful motor, as much for the identification of a people, an ethnic group or a community with their own language, as for their appropriation of this language. This is why written language is often perceived as a sealed oath and language in itself is sacred in many cultures. It is the case notably with the Arab language, the language of the Koran, which, beyond its dimension of formalized language in a revealed text, takes on the character of an oath of loyalty from the individual to the community. This is also why one can see, wherever one travels, that not knowing one's own language, even if it is a minority language or in the process of disappearing, is equal to treason in many societies.

### **Writing as a double movement**

Writing initiates a double movement: a movement which imprints and effaces at the same time. It imprints the subject in his community but effaces him from its midst. It imprints the identity of a community but it is also through writing that this community effaces itself, first because the written aims by definition for the universal and removes itself from all 'communitization', and second because at any moment a community must re-appropriate its identity conceived from a language. Every passing day augments the need to consolidate and preserve the memory of the diversity of cultural expression, especially the oral traditions, the languages which are thousands in number today and which are disappearing, and also the proverbs which express the norms and values of a culture, the rituals, the dances, etc. But it is also time that we envisaged an education which could meet the expectations of our time, not simply a vision for instruction, but education in a

broad sense.<sup>1</sup> I am thinking of an education without artificial separations between disciplines, which could work itself into the gaps in our ignorance, the labyrinths of our incomprehension, to move back the frontiers of knowledge and impressions, to avoid corporatist monoliths. Only this kind of education would be able to teach the young to reflect in a critical way, to take nothing for granted, especially as regards images. For Freud, the fascination with images comes from the visual drive, in other words the drive to see. Without doubt this is one of the most archaic drives in terms of the formation of the subject. Education must ensure that the young learn to deconstruct images in order to recompose them.

In the book world, the voices of written languages and spoken languages, minority or majority languages, languages which are fading or languages which are persisting, languages which are reconstituting themselves and those which are disappearing, have been meeting and corresponding for a long time. But these days new actors are appearing: artificial languages and computers add an economic dimension to the plot that is guiding the dialogue between human memory, which claims the wealth of its past, and electronic memory, which prevails with its boundlessness. The end of the play is not yet known because we are still in the process of writing it.

1. A relevant educative project has yet to be developed, but some clues leading up to it can be found in *Learning: The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century* (Jacques Delors, In'am Al Mufti, Isao Amagi, Roberto Carneiro, Fay Chung, Bronislaw Geremek, William Gorham, Aleksandra Kornhauser, Michael Manley, M. Padrón Quero, Marie-Angélique Savané, Karan Singh, R. Stavenhagen, Myong Won Suhr, Zhou Nanzhao), Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 1996; 1998 pocket edition available.

# A parable on books in the global culture

Francisco Delich

The globalization that received so much attention during the course of the twentieth century's final decade is not a recent phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The world order that was installed during the occupation of America by the Spanish and the Portuguese coincided with the invention of the printing press. The signs of the massive diffusion of the book that would ensue in the following centuries were already visible at that time. It is worth remembering that up until then, books were written and illustrated by hand. They were the products of individual intelligence and manual skill, registers which conserved the codes of life and the memory of peoples.

Along with warriors and priests, the Spanish and the Portuguese brought books to America, strange objects for the natives. Settling in the south of the continent, the Jesuits involved in the catechization of the Indians refrained from imposing any languages which were foreign to them, as well as from using the sacred texts which existed for the most part in Latin, but also in other European languages. They realized at the end of a century that words were not enough to consolidate their work of catechization. They must also think of the installation and theocratic organization of the Indians' economy and society. More than simply converting them, the Jesuits embarked upon the task of bringing the Indians definitively to Christianity. New religious morals and access to Western culture required something more than just sermons and rites.

1. As demonstrated by Aldo Ferrer in *Historia de la globalización*, the second volume of which has just been published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica in Argentina.

The truth was in the Bible, and this object – the book – was, by its sacred character, forbidden to the profane. The Holy Book was not accessible to the tribes to whom the Gospel was being preached for linguistic reasons. The Jesuits thus made two decisions which merit wider recognition, in so far as their traces and consequences still exist today, four centuries later. They decided, first of all, to catechize in the natives' own languages: Aymara, Quechua and Guarani. Next, they resolved to put the sacred texts at their disposition in their own languages. To this end they needed a framework for translation into these languages, as well as a space from which to educate the local élites by whom they wanted to be accepted. This is how in Argentina, in 1613, they founded the University of Cordoba, which was to be secularized in the course of the country's independence in the nineteenth century, placed under provincial and, later, under national control.

The principal library of the modern National University of Cordoba is home to an impressive collection of books spanning the Jesuit expansion up to their expulsion from Latin America in the eighteenth century. It is therefore easy to follow the Holy Book's deeds in the American continent. Owing to the first catechism, a trilingual edition in Aymara and in Quechua served for two centuries in the integration between converts and converters; Bolivia and Peru are today officially bilingual; the same goes for the edition in Guarani in regard to Paraguay, now equally bilingual.

The years 1584 and 1585 saw the publication of the *'Doctrina Christiana et Catecismo para instrucción de los Indios et de las demás personas que han de ser enseñadas en nuestra Santa fe; Con un confesionario et otras cosas necesarias para los que doctrinan, que se contienen en la página siguiente; Compuesto por autoridad del Concilio este catecismo incluye un segundo catecismo para instrucción de curas, de indios et un tercero para la expansión de servicios.'* ('Christian doctrine and catechism for the instruction of Indians and people to be instructed in our holy faith; With a confessional and the other things necessary to those who catechize and which are to be found on the following page; Composed in virtue of the authority of the Council, this catechism includes a second catechism for the instruction of priests, Indians, and a third for the expansion of the services.') The theological bases of this exceptional catechism were established by a provincial Congress of Jesuits, assembled in Lima in 1583.

These first books arising from another people and therefore incomprehensible to the Indians were rendered a little more decipherable in their own language, thus contributing to the consolidation of a historic parable. These books – and others – would be used to legitimize the protests of the natives and their



insurrection against the occupiers. Once they were vulgarized, the holy books would integrate themselves into their collective identity and turn against the ancient colonial order which supported illiteracy and no doubt coercion.

When the modern State defined itself as a lay institution in the West, holy books were relegated to the private lives of believers. They were displaced, yet not entirely replaced, by other books. These new books thus contributed to defining the identity, no longer of a tribe, but of a nation. In any case, books and words have contributed first of all to independence and then to the formation of citizens. As industrialization progressed on the one hand, and societies grew more aware of the importance of universal education on the other, books seen as civilizing factors were diffused and welcomed within various populations.

It is here that we encounter the paradoxes of a disconcerting parable: in our modern societies, we read less and less. In the United States of America, according to figures reported by the press, students spend 11,000 hours per year in school against 15,000 in front of the television. In Argentina, reasonable estimates indicate that primary school students spend over four hours a day in front of the television, more time than they spend at school. The growing numbers of literates in the advanced and emerging countries read less and less. Why? It is doubtless because we limit ourselves to the teaching of reading and writing in the age-old tradition of passive reception of the understanding of signs, while avoiding the meanings. Anyone can read and write, disposing of a formidable tool for understanding life, society, explicit and implicit codes. But the capacity for critical and stimulating reading remains untapped.

As I write these lines, we have received, in the context of the first Reading Olympiads for secondary school students, over 2,000 critical résumés of books. These résumés are interesting, some of them fascinating, but they represent only 1 per cent of the eligible students. While books flourish and are within the reach of everyone, only a small minority feels the need to read and talk about what they read.

The second paradox concerns the market. Available in pocket editions, popular and reasonably priced (alongside journalistic publications which enjoy large-scale national and regional circulation), books are within the economic reach of the sections of the middle classes whose purchasing power is still limited. Nevertheless, fewer books are bought. It is certain that social inequalities do not stimulate demand for books, but that is not enough to explain this lack of interest in reading.

Is it then, as some believe, digitization that is putting books and reading into question? It is true that digitization could bring to every home a virtual library that exceeds any individual's capacity for consultation and absorption. This phenomenon is spreading throughout the world, but presents two restrictions. The first is a technical one. A digital book is very likely to be unprintable without treading on the rights of the authors and editors. Digital books are therefore apt for reading and consultation, but not for copying. The second restriction is a subjective one. These books are incapable of replicating the aesthetic pleasure which intimately combines the hand, the eye and the feeling of turning pages. Nobody ever mistook cinema for theatre. In the two cases the pleasure can be immense, but it is different.

The third paradox concerns the globalization of books. Tastes are becoming more similar. Best-sellers cross national and regional boundaries. A planetary style privileges neo-historic stories, that is, stories that did not happen. It is a way, among others, of encroaching upon the memory of peoples. Books resist this invasion of a style which does not correspond either to countries or to histories. The globalization of culture advances, but belongs to no one. Books hesitate, and their readers too. But if books, whatever their form, are necessary to the current process of globalization, notably as privileged vehicles of the new culture, they are no less an institutional support for the State. Legendary books, books of poetry, books that identify nations are books, the same as those that societies exchange among themselves in order to recognize each other.

Who then are the enemies of books? Probably, in the first place, the devaluation of the word and the reinforcement of the fetishism of gestures. The word is beating a retreat, not only in the face of the gesture, but also as a social value. Societies are gradually abandoning the distinction between form and content, conscious and unconscious, objective and subjective. All that counts is the first appearance, which, devoid of preamble and conclusion, wears itself out in its own reiteration.

In the second place, and in a quasi-correlative way, there is a channelled form of pragmatism, which tends to preclude any debate around ideas. As soon as voices are raised in critical discourse, a devaluation immediately sets in. What is targeted is not criticism itself, nor its content, nor its style, but ideas, concepts themselves. The object is to question the utility of all controversial discourse. The very fact of debating is considered dangerous to the dominant 'good sense'. In these conditions, what use are books, if they are vectors of debate?

Finally, a necessary and unfortunate consequence of the first two: uniformity of thought. History has taught us enough about the consequences and the destiny of freedom when uniform thought takes hold of our societies. The dominant idea which is spreading at the moment with globalization is probably more subtle. Uniform thought does not travel among other thoughts. It forms by itself an enormous void – the one we are now beholding, without as yet reacting.

# Literature and books in Uganda's cultural framework

Goretti Kyomuhendo

It may be because Uganda's landscape presents a magnificent theatre of uplands and hills against a background of high mountains that Sir Winston Churchill once described it as 'the Pearl of Africa'. Uganda is a relatively small, landlocked country on the eastern side of the African continent. Almost one fifth of its territory is immersed in fresh water, including Lake Victoria, the world's largest lake, and the source of the River Nile. Its excellent climate, mild year-long temperatures, and abundant rainfall have made it home for an extraordinary variety of plant and animal life. Prior to independence in 1962, much of its social organization revolved around the extended family unit and traditional institutions based on ancestor and cult worship. Pastoralism, agriculture, hunting, fishing and iron-smelting were among the major economic activities. A former British protectorate, Uganda today has English as its official language but no national language. Its population is currently estimated at 21 million, of which 51 per cent are women, 90 per cent live in rural areas, and about 40 per cent are illiterate.

What is meant by Ugandan literature? As a working definition, we could say it is a literature written by, about, and for Ugandans, in any of the languages used in Uganda. This definition excludes, however, Uganda's traditional classics, which were conceived for transmission by word of mouth. Writing in Uganda can be

traced to the publication of Mackay's (a white missionary) *'Biscuit Tin'* Luganda Bible in 1887. Intended primarily for spiritual purposes, this and the other missionaries' publications that followed also played a significant role in sensitizing Ugandans to the written word. It can be said that reading and writing in Uganda are historically linked to the spread of religion. People instructed in the catechism of the Catholic faith, for instance, were simultaneously taught to read and write. It is interesting to note that converts to new religions were known as *abasomi*, a word that means 'readers' as well as 'churchgoers'.

From these beginnings, literary activity continued to develop through journals and periodicals written in local languages (Luganda) and printed by Christian missionaries. A considerable boom in education and literacy accompanied this. Institutions of higher learning were established, among them Makerere College, founded in 1922. Significant creative writing was produced in these institutions and there was a systematic policy to encourage publishing in local languages.

The landmark, however, came in 1966, with the publication, in English, of the *Song of Lawino*, Okot p'Bitek's cultural clarion and probably Uganda's best known literary work to date. Its success did not only encourage Okot to write more 'songs'. It also inspired a number of imitations of the genre and seems to have sparked off a flourish of writing in English that continued well into the 1970s. Owing to the misrule of Idi Amin and others, this trend was reversed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 'silent years' during which, in the words of a renowned African professor and writer, Uganda was reduced to a 'literary desert'. Some writers were killed, many went into exile, and others were simply silenced. Writing was 'under siege' and foreign publishers fled the country.

Promise returned in the 1990s, since when relative peace prevailed in Uganda. The foreign publishers returned. But among the most significant developments on Uganda's literary scene were the birth of indigenous publishing houses and a new generation of writers, many of whom were women. All the same, creative literature written by women remained hardly visible, owing to a perceived bias on the part of the publishers who selected the manuscripts for printing. This is what led to the creation, in 1996, of FEMRITE, an association of Ugandan women writers aimed at publishing and promoting this literature. FEMRITE has already published over ten books written by women. About ten other indigenous and five foreign publishing houses are now established.

Slowly but steadily, a so-called 'middle class', whose children read and value books, is emerging. But that is not to say that the book has claimed its rightful

place. The book is a fairly recent phenomenon in Uganda's cultural framework. As in many African societies, which are rooted in oral traditions, the book, a concept introduced by foreign missionaries, is often regarded as a foreign intrusion. Such societies traditionally place a higher premium on communal life than on the idea of 'individualism' that is implicit to the solitary reading of books. As evident in the funerals, marriages and initiation ceremonies, Africans still tend to mind each other's business and to do things together, be it as families, friends or colleagues. The reading of books is still regarded as an isolating activity which threatens to destroy or disrupt this culture of sharing and togetherness which is part and parcel of the African way of life. When I was growing up, for instance, my parents worried that my overwhelming interest in books would make me introverted. Similarly, a friend of mine who lives by reading is mockingly referred to as 'the professor'. To this day, moreover, pre-colonial Uganda's principal sources of entertainment and information – storytelling, poetry recitals, music, dance, drama and proverbs – continue to play an effective role. They are still by and large the most accessible media, even if books and periodicals have become and, given the limited availability of more recent technologies, continue to be important.

Needless to say, illiteracy and poverty are foremost among the factors conspiring against the development of reading habits. In sub-Saharan Africa, the illiteracy rate for people of fifteen years and over is estimated at 45 per cent, and as much as 80 per cent of the population still subsists below a poverty line drawn at less than one US dollar a day. The issue of priority, whether to buy a book or a meal, cannot be over-emphasized. But language barriers also constitute a daunting obstacle. Most books available in Africa are written in foreign languages such as Portuguese, French and English, cutting out a big chunk of potential readers who can only read in their home languages. In addition to these adversities, the traditional book itself is now threatened by competing information and entertainment media such as electronic publications, Internet and television.

To what extent can the book endure as a means of cultural construction? In my view, there is little we can do about technology. We cannot block 'development'. What we can do is popularise the book. But to make the book more appealing and accessible to African peoples and others, I believe the definition of reading must be enlarged to include listening and sharing. If books that were written by and for Africans, like the *Song of Lawino* by Okot p'Bitek (Uganda) and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), had an impact on peoples of Africa and beyond, it is because they addressed, promoted and popularized the interaction that is proper to

Part 1. The inscription of culture

African culture. In *Song of Lawino*, for instance, the author seems to be talking to you: 'My clansmen, I cry/Listen to my voice:/The insults of my man/Are painful beyond bearing. . . .'

The onus is on all of us. Do we want to reinstate Africa's 'orality'? Can we all write like Okot and Achebe? Can the book strike a balance between new technological trends and Africa's oral traditions?

# The end of culture and the last book

Sérgio Paulo Rouanet

A few years back a Brazilian poet triggered off a lively polemic when he declared that we were living in a ‘posteverything’ era. Today we are experiencing an analogous syndrome, which we could describe as the ‘end of everything’ or, if we want to be pedantic, the ‘pan-eschatological’ era. We are subjected to the end of ideology, the end of Utopia, the end of geography, the end of history, the end of the Nation State, the end of humanity and the end of modernity – not to mention the end of the world, prophesied by the apocalyptic sects which enjoy the privilege of seniority in tapping the rich theme of the ‘end of all things’. The only end that is not in sight is apparently that of the pan-eschatological era itself, the end of the epoch of the end of everything. This state of affairs is no doubt stirred up by the turning of the century and millennium, and will perhaps wear away with the passing wave of millennium fever.

Among the various things that are coming to an end, the book has been granted a place of honour in view of the current expansion of digital technology which has spawned the electronic book. Bill Gates and other ‘biblioclasts’ delight in this situation which casts them into the role of prophets inspired by the goddess Web and her immortal mate, the god Bit. But intellectuals generally find it appalling, also displaying the symptoms of this ‘millennium fever’: for according to conventional wisdom, recently contradicted by historians, the passage into the year 1000 was characterized by collective hysteria in the form of panic or hope of a better life, beyond the calamities of the present.



Millennium fever aside, one might ask if the emphasis of this ‘end of the book’ anxiety is not out of focus. Is it really the crisis of the book which preoccupies our intellectuals so much or something that underlies it, a cultural crisis of which the book’s predicament, if not a side-effect, is at least a symptom? Is the problem that James Joyce today is read only in digital form, or that no one reads James Joyce at all, in whatever form? If the latter proposition is true then no, it is not books which are in crisis, but culture itself. It is culture which needs to be subjected to examination, diagnosis, sombre or bright prognoses, sooner than the book, the destiny of which has always gone hand in hand with that of culture. Books contribute to the formation of culture and constitute its most prestigious vehicle.

The tendency to deplore the disappearance of culture is age-old, already displayed by the Romans, who lamented the loss of prestigious Greek culture, and manifest in various facets of the ‘quarrel between ancients and moderns’ that ranged from the seventeenth century to the contemporary avant-garde. In a general way, the ‘ancients’ saw the cultural innovations of the ‘moderns’ as attacks against classical culture and, by extension, against culture itself. The ‘moderns’, on their side, persisted in making every effort to confirm these fears. The nihilism of the Dadaists, who sought to break with traditional forms of artistic expression, like that of the futurists who wanted to burn down museums, was but the reverse side of the old ‘end of culture’ anxiety.

With the apparition of modernity, which consecrates the hegemony of the bourgeoisie and puts into circulation mercantile values linked to profit and utilitarianism, the phantasm of the end of culture defines itself in a new way: that of the opposition between culture and civilization. Whereas culture defined the symbolic sphere – religion, art, literature – civilization referred to the material world – that of the economy and procedure.

From the beginning, the polarization carried an intense ideological charge. In the German Romantic tradition, from Herder to Schiller and Hegel, civilization expressed the fragmented condition of modern man who, enslaved by the machine and commercial values, had lost the vision of the whole, the original unity with nature. Culture – high culture, classical culture – was a means of correcting the ills of civilization and winning back the lost whole.

This ideology was to know a violent nationalist offshoot starting from the First World War. The Germans came to see themselves as the people of *Kultur*, associated with authenticity, vital instinct, tradition; and the French as protagonists of a simple *Zivilisation*, which accepted as inevitable the dismembering of modern

man, replaced history with reason, established itself on materialist and utilitarian values, and was perverted by an excessive refinement which distanced humanity from its truth and its nature. The French in part accepted this attribution, indeed considering themselves as the spokespeople of civilization, but the word for them had a positive meaning. *Civilization* established the hegemony of morality and law and in this sense the birthplace of human rights embodied civilization in its highest form, whereas on the other side of the Rhine, *Kultur* – the French pronounced the word, ironically, in German – was in fact a realm of barbarism.

Thus, the old *topos* of the end of culture (or of civilization) suffered a chauvinistic transformation. If victorious, ‘civilization’ would be the end of *Kultur* in the German sense, or at least the end of the West, in the language of Spengler. If victorious, *Kultur* would be the end of civilization in the French sense, thereby consecrating the primacy of strength and instinct over reason and the law.

This old distinction was taken up by the Frankfurt School, but in a Marxist fashion. Marcuse explicitly used the polarity: capitalism would now be a mass society in which the sphere of civilization would absorb the sphere of culture. Thus society becomes one-dimensional, losing its transcendence in its relationship with reality. In a less direct manner, the old nostalgia for lost culture runs through Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critiques of the cultural industry. Reduced to a simple ‘civilization’, the Enlightenment becomes a cult of the world as it is, bereft of the possibility to appeal to idealistic values which once inhabited the sphere of culture and offered as much a critical model as a utopian perspective: a ‘promise of happiness’, in the words of Stendhal. The ‘end of culture’ anxiety became tinted with horror when faced with the disappearance of the unique instance capable of offering an exteriorization in relation to the social whole. The partisans of the Frankfurt School were all sufficiently Marxist to know that culture was a sublimated suffering, an ideal distillation of the relations of violence; but they also knew that without it humanity would be submitted, without remission, to its own raw uncertainty. It is for this reason that Adorno declared that to write poetry after Auschwitz was an act of barbarity, adding, however, that to stop writing poetry would be equally barbaric.

This is the sense of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s cultural criticism. They disputed the pseudo-culture diffused by the cultural industry because it was devoid of the transcending elements contained within high culture. In its stereotyping, in its banality, in its one-dimensionality, mass culture enthrones pure entertainment, blocks all critical reflection and substitutes the Utopia of a world beyond the existent with the myth of the existent as a realization of Utopia. In this perspective, the

phantasm of the end of culture is in reality the phantasm of the substitution of high culture by a mass culture, which is nothing other than the playful side of the sphere of ‘civilization’, the world of economics and procedure.

But the *topos* of the end of culture saw a decisive modification in the years which followed the publication of *The Dialectics of Reason*. In this period, which coincided with the movement towards decolonization, the enemy was seen as metropolitan culture and not mass culture. In parallel, there was a displacement of the concept of culture. It no longer designated a mass of knowledge, norms and art, such as morality, law, science, philosophy, music, dance, theatre, but rather, *lato sensu*, a group of values, beliefs, symbols, modes of behaving, creating, thinking. In addition, the meaning of culture as *culture cultivée* was repressed and gradually replaced by the anthropological meaning. Culture in the singular was replaced by cultures in the plural. Thus, the theme of the end of culture was redefined in particular terms, as by Herder, in opposition to the Marxist, universalist treatment given it by Adorno. The spectre which haunts the postcolonial writer is not the end of high culture, but rather the end of national culture, meant in an ample anthropological sense, and the diverse national cultures menaced by the bulldozer of a hegemonic Western culture.

This redefinition was considerably reinforced with the end of the Cold War and the appearance of the theme of globalization. From here on, the question was no longer that of protecting national culture from losing its character to attacks coming from the former metropolis, but from a veritable planetary cataclysm, a globalized capitalism which crossed all borders and levelled all cultural singularities. The old Adornian criticism of mass culture was not absent because, in the end, the cultural products which invaded the most far-flung parts of our countries were not dodecaphonic symphonies or abstract paintings, but rather martial arts films, and songs by Madonna and Michael Jackson. However, the focus of horror provoked by cultural globalization had clearly shifted: in Brazil, for instance, it is the end, considered as imminent, of ‘our’ Brazilian culture – the *bumba-meu-boi* festivals, rodeos, *cordel* literature, Master Vitalino’s statuettes<sup>1</sup> – and not the decline of high culture. Whereas formerly, the theme of the end of culture had an élitist edge, today it has a xenophobic edge. What is seen as repulsive in global mass culture is the fact that it is global and not the fact that it is a mass culture.

In this new guise, the phantasm of the end of culture is worrying, and rightly so, because the fear it evokes pertains to the domain of what Freud called

1. Popular cultural expressions from north-east Brazil.

*Realangst*, the non-neurotic fear which comes from reality. It is a fact that pressures for uniformity arising from a global culture constitute a menace to cultural diversity. And it is also a fact that, whatever the extent to which this aspect of the 'end of culture' theme has been exhausted by the ideologists of national populism, globalization has induced an accelerated generalization of mass culture to the detriment of high culture, regardless of nationality, this being no doubt its most problematic aspect. But could it also be true that the best way of exorcising this demon would be to reinforce the local identities, traditions, and roots?

In my view, all these particularisms are dangerous because they stem from an ontological vision of the group itself and render absolute the identity of the Other, making it an inimical essence and an irreducible extra-territoriality. They are machines for manufacturing foreigners. The proliferation of particularisms is transforming our society into what one author called 'a heterophilic society', devoted to the cult of difference. They replace the nightmare of total homogeneity with that of a re-tribalized world. Beyond the ethically and politically unacceptable, particularisms of this type are not able to contain globalization which, by definition, melds all differences and removes itself from all national jurisdictions.

What can be done in the light of this? The answer requires a more detailed analysis of what we mean by global culture. For this, I will revisit some ideas which I have already developed in recent essays.

The internationalization of culture is not new to the history of humanity. The phenomenon occurred in the empire of Alexandria when Greek culture imposed itself; in the Roman empire where Latin and Greek became generalized; during the Middle Ages, when the use of Latin and a common religion united people; and in the epoch of the great Iberian explorations, when the use of Portuguese and Castilian linked various continents. It was subjected to new stimuli in the seventeenth century, with the arrival on the scene of other actors, such as Holland, France and England. But it was from the nineteenth century on that the global expansion of capitalism led to the awareness that there was really a world culture in the making.

It is perhaps in Goethe that we find the first allusion to this culture. In one of his conversations with Eckerman, he says that 'if we, Germans, do not look beyond the confined circle of our own horizon, we will easily fall into a pedantic obscurantism. For this reason, I like to watch what happens in foreign countries and I advise everyone to do the same. National literature means little these days. The time has come for world literature (*Weltliteratur*), and each of us must contribute to the hastening of the arrival of this epoch.'

Marx employs almost the same words as Goethe. In the famous passage from *The Communist Manifesto* where he describes in the smallest detail what we today call globalization, Marx affirms that ‘the intellectual products of the different nations transform themselves into common heritage. National unilateralism and narrowness are becoming more and more impossible and a world literature (*Weltliteratur*) is forming from diverse national and local literature.’

Goethe, as much as Marx, let it be clearly understood that ‘world literature’ – both used the same expression, *Weltliteratur* – functions as a metonymic allusion to culture as a whole. And both described it as a *modern* phenomenon. This is an important hint for understanding the nature of global culture and exploring the means of overcoming its perverse effects.

Modernity is usually understood in the sense given it by Max Weber, as the epilogue of cumulative progress and the rationalism which arose in the West following the Protestant Reformation. According to this meaning, institutions *function* better in modern than in pre-modern societies. We can thus speak of a functional conception of modernity. But there exists a second vector of modernity, which has nothing to do with efficiency, but rather with autonomy. Its matrix is the Enlightenment’s project of civilization, which seeks not the functionality of structures but the emancipation of individuals. It is the emancipating conception of modernity.

Modernity is the contradictory coexistence of these two vectors. It is a prison, a *stahlbartes Gebause*, according to Weber’s expression, but also a promise of autonomy; it is the realm of instrumental rationality which submits humanity to the imperatives of the system, but also the utopian prefiguring of greater freedom for humanity.

Modernity tends towards either internationalization – or globalization – within these two vectors. In its functional vector, modernity perceives social and national barriers as obstacles to the full unfurling of the logic of efficiency and profitability. Consequentially, modernity seeks to break down these barriers. It passes first from national particularisms, which impose limits to the action of capital, to a larger space created by the Nation State, which places an integrated market at its disposition. When nation states themselves become much too narrow, it goes beyond their limits and globalizes. This is globalization.

But the emancipating vector of modernity is also globalizing itself, arising as it does from a planetary project, that of the Enlightenment, which aims for the autonomy of all human beings, regardless of gender, race or nationality. We could use the term ‘universalization’ for this extroverted thrust of emancipating modernity.

The agents of globalization are trans-national officials, technical and bureaucratic élites, specialists in satellite communications, and in general the ‘organic intellectuals’ of the new principle – the ‘global bourgeoisie’. The agents of universalization are non-governmental organizations, political parties, trade unions, parliamentarians, democratic governments, artists and intellectual critics who support universalist ideals. Globalization is the union of conglomerates. Universalization is the union of peoples. We are the objects of globalization. We are the subjects of universalization.

The acceleration of globalization processes through these two vectors gives rise to what could nowadays be called a global society. It is a society as yet relatively amorphous because it still lacks its political structures, but it is already endowed with its own culture, itself a culture that cannot be reduced to the sum of national cultures. Just as national societies give birth to national cultures, global society gives birth to a global culture.

Global culture, as the product of the two great movements of modern globalization, can include the elements of the functional as well as those of the emancipating vectors of modernity. Thus it is ambivalent. Global culture is the antagonistic unity of two cultures: global culture, produced by globalization, and universal culture, produced by universalization.

In the anthropological sense to which I referred earlier, and according to which the term ‘culture’ designates a repertory of beliefs, attitudes, representations and symbolic signifiers, global culture privileges values linked to profit, efficiency, and competition. In a more material sense, it is equipped with structures which allow the transformation of cultural goods into merchandise, as well as the worldwide dissemination of mass culture products, tending to drive out ‘authentic’ cultural creations.

According to the beautiful definition of Renato Ortiz,<sup>2</sup> global culture corresponds to a new, trans-national (i.e. no longer simply international) phase in the capitalist organization of production and consumption. Disneyland, jeans and McDonald’s are not the result of an imperialist North American project, but rather the characteristics of this new phase. The new reality will be fast food and not McDonald’s; fast food corresponds to the accelerated rhythms of life in the beginning of this century. The nationality of the enterprises embodying this reality is of little importance. There are other companies that specialize in fast food – Brioche

2. Renato Ortiz, *Mundialização e Cultura*, São Paulo, Ed. Brasiliense, 1998.

Dorée, Quick and Free Time – all three of them European. Cinema is increasingly crossing national borders: a growing number of movies are filmed in Africa, by a Hollywood studio, with a European producer and Japanese financing. Westerns, for a long time now, have ceased to be an American privilege. Today they are produced in Australia (*Silverado*) and in Italy ('spaghetti' westerns). A few years back, the American public was shocked to learn that the Japanese had acquired American film companies. There was no reason for surprise. Because, in the end, global capitalism is fundamentally cosmopolitan. This has been perfectly expressed by a Japanese businessman for whom 'before Japanese identity, before local subsidiaries, before the German or Italian ego, there is an engagement in a global mission', an engagement on behalf of the clients. A document from the Brown Bowery corporation leaves no room for doubt on the matter: 'We are not a homeless company; we are a company with many homes.' This cosmopolitanism is particularly obvious in the cultural sphere, in so far as the cultural goods industry can be indifferently monopolized by American, Swiss, German or Japanese conglomerates, and the panorama can change overnight, depending on the mergers and acquisitions which occur at lightning speed. The record industry, for example, is dominated by firms of diverse nationalities, like Bertelsmann, Polygram, Sony, Virgin. If Sony absorbs its competitors, this would not be seen as a Japanese musical imperialism, because the following day the German company Bertelsmann could take over the market.

Although less visible than global culture, universal culture has grown since the time of Goethe and Marx. In the anthropological sense, it is impregnated with humanist, non-utilitarian values, translating the consciousness of our belonging to the same species, the same community of destiny, and our exposure to the same risks, whatever our race, gender or nation. Increasingly cosmopolitan, science grows more and more sensitive to the ethical and political dimensions of knowledge. Morals are becoming universal, in the humanist sense, starting with propositions like those of Hans Küng, who claims to have founded an ecumenical ethics, Hans Jonas who has launched a framework for global responsibility, and Jürgen Habermas, who has conceived of a discursive ethics for universal acceptance. Norms are becoming universal through instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the Convention for the Prevention of Genocide of the same year, the Declaration of the Abolition of Slavery in 1956 or the Declaration against Torture of 1975, and more recently, through the elaboration of the concept of a universal law on crimes against humanity and the institution of the International Court of Justice. In the domain of aesthetics, limited to what is known as the 'arts',

culture is rapidly universalizing, in the fields of visual arts, through the Biennials of Venice and São Paulo, in literature through the Pen Club or parliament of writers, in theatre and dance through such festivals as that of Avignon, and in cinema, through festivals like that of Cannes or Berlin, for example.

There is no mortal combat between cultural globalization and cultural universalization. They are opposed but dialectically complementary. The same technical revolution which has made possible the globalization of culture can be used by those who claim to universalize culture. The two cultures form part of modernity and are inseparable from one another. Without global culture, universal culture would not have the technical means to impose itself, and without universal culture, global culture would imprison the ethical content. But there is a hierarchical relationship between the two cultures. It is from universal culture that are born the impulses which trace the directions of global culture, and which supervise and rectify its deviations. This is where we find an answer to our quest. To fight against the excesses of global culture, we must not take refuge in particularisms which buck the trend, because they will not allow us to struggle against the phenomena which superimpose themselves on all cultures, but rather act on the very terrain of global culture itself: that of globalization. The corrective to globalization is globalization through universalism.

This perspective downsizes our phantasm of the end of culture. Culture, in whatever sense, is not necessarily a patient in terminal stages of illness. Its extinction as 'high culture' is not to be feared because the processes of universalization will be led in principle by scientists, philosophers, artists or by their authorized representatives, who will avoid the banalization of their creations. And the end of culture in the anthropological sense is equally avoidable. It is certain that globalization has a levelling effect on particularities because it is driven by the optimization of profit through a market rationality which supposes the creation of homogeneous spaces. But universalization is pluralistic because its ends can only be reached by a communicative rationalization which presupposes the desire and the power of subjects to defend the specificity of their way of life. It is obvious that the processes of universalization cannot be fully effective until they have reached their logical zenith, the implantation of a world democracy supplied with the mechanisms necessary to correct the abuses of globalization.

We can now confront the second question, that of the end of books. This idea finds solid confirmation in reality: statistics prove that the print runs of books are increasingly shorter and that there are fewer and fewer readers.



But the crisis of the book does not necessarily imply a crisis of culture. For example, print runs may be shorter because the high cost of each copy is prohibitive to large sections of the population. This explanation is without a doubt decisive in Brazil, where books are more expensive than almost anywhere else in the world. Fiscal measures could probably help to solve this problem. Print runs may also be short because a large proportion of the population is illiterate or has not acquired the habit of reading at school. Here also, the problem is localized, restricted to schools, and does not bring into question culture as a whole.

It is not these factors which are causing alarm, but rather the signs that books are in the process of being displaced by new information and communication technologies: CD-ROMs are taking the place of books, digital books of printed books. Why are we frightening ourselves? Let's admit it, because of traditionalism.

All of us, intellectuals, live by and for books. We are all have something of the character of Eça de Queiros, who falls asleep in the middle of thousands of books, in a small palace in Paris, and dreams that everything has been turned into books: houses are built out of books, tree branches have books hanging from them, and women are dressed in printed paper. Climbing the Obelisk at the Place de la Concorde, a mountain of books of course, he reaches the sky and meets God, who happens to be surrounded by some very old books. The Eternal One is reading a cheap edition of Voltaire and smiling. In our imagination, we are all the directors of the Library of Babel, if not the Library of Alexandria, an ideal, indestructible one, never overcome by flames.

If this were not enough, we are incorrigible fetishists, fascinated by books as objects and not only as depositories of ideas and information. Hardly a pleasure can equal that of caressing the pages of a book from the *Pléiade* collection, turning the pages more as if this were a part of love-play, leafing through as if gathering leaves. One of my friends, during the events of May 1968, having ordered the works of Flaubert from this collection, spent an entire day joyfully anticipating the moment when he would go back home, after work, to examine his new acquisition. But on arriving, he found the books angrily defaced by his ten year-old son, the word '*merde*' written everywhere. On being severely interrogated, the little vandal replied 'It's the cultural revolution!'

Yes, we are the children of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' and reluctant to accept the passage into another galaxy. In this, we are not so different from Claude Frollo, the archdeacon of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in the novel by Victor Hugo, who opposed the printed book to the cathedral, saying that the first would

destroy the second, '*ceci tuera cela* [this will kill that]'. What will happen to us if the Internet kills books?

Taken to its ultimate consequences, this behaviour is certainly irrational. One can hardly deny the extraordinary contributions brought by the new technologies to the preservation, diffusion and even the formulation of ideas. Only a very profound ideological distortion could deny the enormous services that they supply to books themselves, ranging from the possibility of consulting at a distance the catalogues of major libraries in the world to buying rare books with a simple click of the mouse. Even if books are being transferred to other supports, this is not necessarily a tragedy. Books are essentially an instrument, a very valuable instrument, but an instrument. Other instruments can spring up, capable of coexisting with books without uprooting them. Of itself, the crisis of books does not necessarily indicate a crisis of culture. We would not be so preoccupied if there were some clue that new technologies were really filling the role attributed them by their advocates, and that behind the contents transmitted by these vehicles there was a vigorous and intact culture, as there was in France in the eighteenth century and part of the nineteenth, that is, at the height of the culture of books. In that case, there would be a crisis for books, but not for culture. With the invention of printing, for example, there was a crisis of the traditional technology which consisted of copying books in monasteries, but there was not a crisis of culture. Much to the contrary, culture then flourished as never before because printing enabled modern authors and treasures of ancient knowledge alike to reach a considerably larger audience than before.

But if our analysis is correct, there is indeed a crisis of culture and this is what to a certain extent is producing the crisis of books. People do not read not so much because they are illiterate as because they are victims of the social phenomenon that is 'non-literacy'; the refusal to read exists even when the technique of reading is acquired. It is in this, fundamentally, that globalization is tragic, not because it dissolves identities, but because it globalizes mass production, carrying cultural detritus to the outermost limits of the universe, and so destroying intellectual curiosity without which the pleasure of reading does not exist. It is from global culture, and the channels used for its diffusion, like satellite and cable television, that the counter-tendencies which inhibit reading are arising. People do not read because they have been conditioned not to read, passing through a pedagogy of non-reading. They do not read because reading requires effort and the media offer instant satisfaction; they do not read because reading implies a historicity, a temporal submerging into the chronology of the characters and the plot while the media have accustomed them to

an eternal present; they do not read, finally, because they are going through a regressive apprenticeship, which takes them back beyond the stage of conceptual thinking without which reading is impossible, to the stage of thought by images, ephemeral by nature, not linked to each other, and unable to do more than reflect a world equally disconnected, and for this reason unintelligible and non-transformable. It is evident that the opposite is also true: because they do not read, people do not learn to think using causal principles, historically and politically.

But if the crisis of books comes with the crisis of culture, the optimist would say that the modification of culture in accordance with the demands of the universalization process will put an end to the crisis of books. As soon as the deviations of global culture, the main cause of the resistance to reading that we come across in all countries, are corrected, books could once again assume the role of guide, friend and *magister vitae* that they have always had in the past. This would not mean the abandonment of new technology, which will continue to carry out its own tasks, nor would it render books superfluous. Books cannot, however, be merely a passive and automatic beneficiary of the universalization of culture; they can also contribute to the consolidation of this process.

During a large part of history, books were made up of the formation of collective identities. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were the foundations of Greek identity. The same role was played by the *Divine Comedy* for Italian identity, *Don Quixote* for Spanish identity and by *Os Lusíadas* for Portuguese identity. But during the phase of universalization, the issue is not so much to construct identities, nor is it to deconstruct or reconstruct them, by substituting for the concept of a unique identity that of multiple identities. Michael Walzer, for example, has suggested that a manner of 'civilizing' nationalism would be to integrate it into a larger pluralist framework. During a Zionist congress in the 1930s, David Ben-Gurion said: 'We belong to diverse circles. As citizens of Palestine, we are in the circle of a nation which aspires to a homeland; as workers, we are in the circle of the working class; as sons of our generation, we are in the circle of the modern world; and our partners are in the circle of the movement of women who work and struggle for their emancipation.' In the contemporary world, personal identities build themselves more and more often by the crossing of particular identities.

We can meet the forerunner of this in our own past. The image of the Latin American 'alien' who leaves his or her place of origin to become European has always been seen as detestable or ridiculous. But from another angle, this 'alienation' was to become the precursor of an epistemological attitude representative of the

new times. It is the *topos* of the lucid exile who perceives that which is covered up by local evidences. It is Montesquieu's Persian or Voltaire's Redskin who better understands the France of the eighteenth century than all the European scholars united. Let us note that it was the Brazilians who furnished the Europeans with the model of this knowledge 'from the outside'. I am referring to the three Tupinamba cannibals who were brought to France during the reign of Charles IX and who, according to Montaigne, observed things about France that no French person had noticed. They saw better because their perspective was that of the outsider: an ethnographic regard.

Many Latin American intellectuals were like these Tupinamba: they did not feel right in their homeland yet could not enter into European culture. They were strangers on both sides of the Atlantic. Joaquim Nabuco expresses it well in a passage from his masterpiece *Minha formação*:

We are . . . condemned to the most terrible of instabilities, and this explains the fact that so many South Americans prefer to live in Europe . . . Not for the pleasure of the *nouveau riche* as was said in Paris of the elegant life of the South American millionaires; the explication is more delicate and more profound. It is the attraction of the forgotten but not extinguished affinities, which are in all of us, for our common European origin. The instability to which I refer comes from that which is missing in America, the landscape, the life, the horizon, the architecture, all that surrounds us, the historic background, the human perspective; and that which is missing in Europe, that is to say the form in which each of us was melded from birth. On one side of the sea one feels the absence of a society; on the other the absence of a country. The feeling in us is Brazilian, the imagination is European.

What attracts attention in this important passage is that the Latin American mentality is defined by a double negation at the intersection of two absences: in Europe, we miss the tropical forest and in Rio, we miss the Seine. What Nabuco is describing is the experience of permanent disaster.

But a century later, in the era of universalization, perhaps one can deny this double negation and fill with a double presence the emptiness of these two absences. In this case, we will no longer have expatriates, but citizens of two worlds, not the rootless, in the sense of Barrès, but the decentred humans, possessing a nomadic identity, always forming, reforming themselves, always disposed to compare all these cultural certitudes through their capacity for role-taking, for endlessly

taking on the Other's point of view. Exile, in a way, becomes a founding experience of a new epistemology: the epistemology of the outward regard, because the exile is the person who has uprooted him or herself without putting down new roots, liberated from one characteristic without entering into another.

To acquire these multiple identities, new information technology can without doubt fulfil an important function. But only books will allow this acquisition to become profound and lasting. Books have always allowed us to be ourselves in order to find ourselves better. They should allow us now to come outside of our culture to see it from the exterior. This cultural stepping outside of oneself was anticipated by Goethe when he discovered the affinities between a Chinese novel and the novels of Fielding and Richardson.

A young Greek learned to be Greek by reading Homer. It was an instrument of socialization, a *paideia*, a didactic manual for learning Greek *areté*. Today, on the contrary, we must read Homer to recultivate ourselves, to move away from our culture of origin, from the century in which we were born. In this way we will become the contemporaries of Hector and Ulysses and we will identify ourselves with diverse cultures, the European and the Asiatic which fought one another at the walls of Troy, and equally with all the figures that peopled the epoch, the demiurges, the half-humans, the mermaids, the cyclops Polyphemous and Circe.

At the beginning of modernity a new genre grew, that of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel that narrated the vicissitudes of a hero trying to form himself, to reach *Bildung* in the sense of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, of Kant, Lessing and Herder. At the same time, the process of self-formation of the central character involved the reader, who had, by identifying with the hero, also reached his or her *Bildung*, or self-formation.

The prototype of the *Bildungsroman* is *Wilhelm Meister*, divided into two parts: the years of wandering and the years of apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister. These are the two moments of the contemporary *Bildung*. On one side, the man possessing several identities travels around the globalized planet, in a real or virtual voyage, and on the other side, he learns, during this voyage, to recognize himself as an inhabitant of the 'cosmopolis'. In this sense, any novel, these days, can transform itself into a *Bildungsroman* because through any of them we can come to the Other, to various Others, and even to that generalized Other that is the human species.

As long as we do not arrive at the Utopia (or nightmare) of a unique language, only books can lend themselves to this end through translations. If Walter Benjamin was right, the principle task of the translator is to liberate the echoes of

pure language imprisoned in the original, ‘rendering, as much the original as the translation, recognizable as fragments of a more important language, in the same way that broken pieces are recognizable as being the fragments of a vase. . . . The real translation is transparent; it does not cover up the original, does not stop its light but allows pure language, reinforced by translation, to shine more intensely on to the original.’ Even deprived of these messianic motifs, there is no doubt that translation allows our language to transcend itself towards others and obliges other languages to transcend themselves towards our own. Through translation, our culture opens up to the world and our own language can be modified. Because in a great translation, as Benjamin also observed, it is not so much a matter of transforming the foreign language into our own, but of allowing our own to be transformed by the foreign language. This is what Hölderlin did in translating Sophocles: the literality of the translation impacted in such a way on the German language that it ceased to be what it was and converted itself, as it were, into a new language. Translations of the works of Shakespeare by Weiland, Tieck and Schlegel Germanized them in such a way that for the Germans he ceased being an English author, and became completely integrated into the German cultural tradition. But translation is also in the service of the foreign language, not only in the trivial sense that it allows for the diffusion of a work beyond the frontiers of its linguistic origin, but in the sense that in a great translation the work attains the plenitude of its meaning. The translation tells the original what it was unaware it knew. I do not know if Kant understood his own philosophy only after having read its French translation, as the slanderers would have it, but it is undeniable that by translating into French Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, Jean Hyppolite gave Hegel a clarity which was certainly missing in the original. He thus demonstrated that there are no texts which cannot be transposed into other languages. Hegel is not untranslatable even though he used the German language, just as Plato is not untranslatable even though he used the Greek language.

Original or translation, all books presuppose a transcendence because their reading always allows for the escape from the immediate space-time context. These days, reading presupposes a *sui generis* transcendence, that which addresses itself to the whole of the human race, in its infinite variety. People, possessing several identities, learn to be Jewish with Proust, Catholic with Greene, Irish with Joyce, Colombian with Garcia Marquez, and in each of these books one can take an apprenticeship in otherness, identifying successively or simultaneously with each character.

Are we thus proposing schizophrenia as the ideal of the postmodern human, people possessing so many personalities that in the end they have none, transforming themselves, through the excess of attributes, into ‘people without qualities’? The risk is obvious, but this is perhaps the price of constituting a universal culture. The opposite choice has even more risks. At the stage of globalization, nothing is more dangerous than the perhaps obstinate adherence to a unique identity. Many genocides could possibly be avoided through regimes built around multiple identities, beyond purely national and cultural loyalties.

The end of culture? The end of books? Perhaps, but not necessarily. It is not an end but an *Aufhebung*, in the Hegelian sense. Culture can survive by transforming itself into universal culture. And books have a future, if they renounce their role of forming instances of collective, homogeneous identities, to transform themselves into instruments for constituting multiple identities, according to the logic of the process of universalization.

# Thinking through libraries



# At the heart of language

Emmanuel Carneiro Leão

The survival of Friedrich Nietzsche in the intellectual world is over one hundred years old today. In 1887, in the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche reminded us that books, without libraries, perish and disappear, while with libraries they are reborn and transform themselves into life, into *Will to Power*. To him, a book is not a book. ‘What do they contain, these coffins, these shrouds? For the past is their present’<sup>1</sup> and the present is not only presence, it is also the absence, of spirit, of life, of mind.

But what does Nietzsche want us to think of the book in which there lives an ‘eternal recurrence’? Which book is this that goes beyond a determined present to live for eternity? The eternal book is surely in a library. To exhume from its tomb, to remove from its shroud a defunct or inert past and to combine it with an infinite present, that is the challenge facing every library.

The ‘eternal recurrence’, the endless day that lives in the library book, is the concentration of time. For each and every day reveals and welcomes into itself the forces of the past and the future reunited. Without this ever-present continuity, time could not be time. The eternal day endlessly commemorates the creative instant, but also all the other instants which embrace it, in the grasp of a world that is infinite, because it is temporal. It is the ‘in-finite’ of time, and precisely because it

1. Author’s translation.

is invariably destined to an end, time never ceases to pass. The time present in every verb in the making of reality is conjugated in the poetic vision of T. S. Eliot:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.<sup>2</sup>

This impossible and irreplaceable time of remission is the time of library books, a time that passes incessantly, while denouncing all pretence to totality and unmasking all illusion of simultaneousness. Each of its steps is a first step, becoming the creation of a temporality both oscillating and punctual, infinite and finite, with a productive memory – the memory of the Muses – but free from all desire for immortality, from that desire of all living things dissatisfied with their animality, moved by a pretension to rise above life and death.

Library books no longer dream of conquering or taming death. On the contrary: by their very presence, library books evoke and welcome death as a precondition for the constant renewal of life. This trans-temporality is not then in any way a presumption of prospective or retrospective immortality. It expresses a completely different discourse: a discourse without definition, a proposition which does not propose itself because it imposes itself. Library books conjure up and conjugate time, endlessly celebrating the wedding of the present with the forever. But while they conserve what is already produced, they provoke creation, they evoke the necessity for constant transformation. It is in this sense, in this direction, that the ‘eternal recurrence’ constitutes a challenge and heightens the provocation of library books.

Why libraries? On the etymological level, the Greek word for ‘library’ is formed by the union of βιβλιον and θήκη (*biblion* and *thékē*). Βιβλιον (book) derives etymologically from βίβλος, the Greek word for the *Cypressus papyri* shrub that grew well in the Nile delta. The same word was used to refer to rolled papyri with written inscription – books. Βίβλος in turn was the name given by the Greeks to the Phoenician port (Byblos) from which they obtained raw papyrus. Before lending itself to what we call ‘books’, then, βίβλος designated the primary matter from which papyrus, the paper of Antiquity, was made. The idea transmitted in this etymology from an unknown eastern Mediterranean language is reflected in the verbs ‘collect’, ‘recollect’ and ‘select’: the pulp was collected from the bark and recollected in the papy-

2. T. S. Eliot, ‘Four Quartets’.

rus, where the writing itself would be collected and then selected in the act of reading. These three verbs also define our relationship with books. The Greek word for reading λέγειν, as the Latin (*legere*) and the German (*lesen*), further designated the actions of ‘assembling’, and ‘collecting’.

What, then, does one select to reunite, to conserve and to protect in reading a book? What is there in the writing for the reader to collect? That question is answered by θήκη, the second vocable in *biblio-thékē*, derived from an irregular verb which means to ‘establish’, to ‘institute’, in the sense of ‘guarding’ and ‘taking care of’, but also to ‘incite’ and ‘elaborate’. To integrate, in the same dynamic, the functions of collecting, that is, harvesting, recollecting and selecting, books need care and encouragement. They need a space which establishes vitality, a place which assures their conservation and protection, but also and above all which puts to work all their potentialities for creation, change and structural regeneration. So this second vocable defines the vital function of all libraries: books are only books when they move, within the movement of life, when they take on a challenge of growth: the challenge of language. To take on these tasks is to cultivate and to preserve language, any language.

It was the same Nietzsche who indicated, in an aphorism in 1888, that the philosopher lives in the high mountain glaciers, having for companion the neighbouring summit, the habitat of the poet. The philosophical thus finds itself drawn to the poetic no doubt because both are nourished by life and each one exists, in its own way, at the heart of language. The multiple philosophies constitute – much more than different ways of answering the same questions bequeathed by the tradition of thinking – diverse projects for questioning and deepening the answers which are locked up and preserved in the many tongues of language.

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘The limits of language are the limits of the world’. And all that we live, think and act on Earth only has a sense if it can receive a significance of and in language. There is no single truth, outside the whole range of integration and coexistence. The truth is given to us only through the fact that we are always in the plural, in a current which carries us towards a combination of, and with, differences. And this lapidary passage of Martin Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* is no doubt already a challenge of, and for, thought: ‘Language is the house of Being. In the wedding of Being and language lives man. Those who think and those who create poetry are the custodians of the dwelling.’<sup>3</sup>

3. Author’s translation.

Just like the glaciers, language has, or is, a radical power of life preservation because, as a witness of the past, it composes a future for the present. The glaciers have preserved the mammoths of Siberia and ‘the Iceman of the Alps’. Language preserves and has preserved the creations of the past, which it continuously delivers to present and future generations, through the diverse vocables of languages in constant transformation. From the sources and resources of language spring both our traditions and our human history, harvested from the cultural currents that which is, that which will be, and that which once was. This knowledge of integration and welcome is doubtless the one which, according to Hesiod (*Theogony*, line 27), Mnemosyne, creative thought, transmitted to the muses in nine nights of love: ‘Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies/From among the roots we know how to gather many mysteries;/Just as we know, when we want to,/To take the truth out of the veil of myths.’<sup>4</sup>

One of the mysteries of language, at least in Western cultures and civilizations, has been able to carve its way into the dynamic of expansion and transformation of books through libraries. Books have the power to generate and induce, at the base of all that is/or is not, tensions and conflicts. In the vicissitudes and wanderings of the production of its words, lives the fertile, creative and destructive power of language: that of composing positions and oppositions.

In the constellation of libraries, four different paths followed by language in poetry and thought may be pointed out:

- language lives in all forces for union, as an occasion for all ordinations of any order. Its ontological conjugation goes beyond and in a way safeguards all that is and all that is done;
- it falls to language to assure the cohesion and consistency of the structuring of differences and their tension;
- language tells reality, both as words and as a movement of production, managing all that is real and driving the universe of what is produced;
- language operates as a matrix, in tongues and discourses, of an early link which creates the world out of the worldly and brings order from disorder.

Heraclitus teaches us that vast experience in the wanderings of thought is necessary to understand that deliberation is the translation of language into tongues. And it is precisely to the learning of this translation that library books invite us. To translate in this sense is not to find the single direct correspondences between the vocables of

two or more languages. No tradition that wants to be creative can be literal. Electronic translation is impossible, because to translate is not to draw the lines; it is to respond to the appeals – multiple, diverse, constantly renewed – of language. Language is no tongue, if not the mother tongue of all tongues – and it is only by experiencing it in the maternal ‘bosom’, so to speak, that we can move a poem from one tongue to another. No tongue, be it verbal or not, can say all there is to say. But if no logic or grammar of discourse, of phrases or propositions, can overcome this impossibility, all of them are able to favour or to reinforce it. It is indeed due to this impossibility that language constitutes itself and perfects itself as the mother of all tongues. Only this impossibility creates the conditions of a maternity which takes in the differentiation that lives in every tongue. To say everything would be attain the heights of redundancy, a pure tautology, because the emptiness of words would thus find itself filled and the silence of saying would be filled with the fracas of discourse. So silence, like emptiness, is indispensable to all differentiation. Relationships are built not on the repetition of the same, but on the chaos of the differentiation of the differences which refer, in Nietzsche’s ‘abyssal thoughts’, to the eternal return of the same. To generate repetitions is all that digital translation is capable of. The poem must always escape from literalness to render itself, in the discourses of the different tongues, loyal to its creativeness.

Perfectly orderly tongues are transparent and fixed. Ideal and cloned, they are nonetheless devoid of life and death. They render themselves insensitive to historical differentiation and to the cultural diversity of humanity. The real language of human life values only structures which are logically composed, in faultless clarity and perfection. It always remains open to the most unexpected uses and to playing with its rules in constant mutation.

In the original sense of the Greek experience and word, the chaos at the source of historical life is the inaugural experience, full and dynamic to the point of generating all that is and all that is created, in whatever field at whatever level, reality or possibility, necessity or contingency. Thus all intention to think or to say, to know or to act, takes us back to the primordial vigour of being and existence, which comes through language in its countless expressions, of which books are one. Coming out of chaos, going back to chaos, pulling its resources from chaos, language gives back to chaos all order and all disorder, the positive and the negative – as well as all that has, and all that does not have, reason to exist.

The word ‘chaos’ probably comes from the same root as the verb *χαίρειν*, relating to the experience of being always in the process of opening, of remaining,

thus, always open. It translates the hiatus of being, the gaping abyss of reality that is, in the transitive sense, to let be and become real. Everything real installs itself and maintains itself in an advent of this wide open reality, in the limitless and non-discriminating hiatus of a creative nothingness. The essence of language, the mother of all tongues, subsists in the formative power of chaos – a power in itself undetermined and undeterminable as regards all determination and indetermination.

Language combines, through library books, three dimensions, in effect three powers, of reality:

- reality passes over and/or under all order and all disorder, whatever kind, nature or level;
- reality is the possibility – in the transitive sense of ‘to make possible’ by giving and/or taking away power – for all differentiation and/or non-differentiation;
- reality is the principle of transformation and of continuation for all discrimination and/or non-discrimination.

Through its integration, language constitutes the path of human existence and creates the inaugural force of the historical dynamic of cultures. And because it takes in both the silence of saying and the astonishment of creation, it gives birth to the unfamiliar which incites our thoughts and to the unexpected which nourishes our hopeful expectations. With language, thought shares the audacity of its adventures and the transforming obstinacy of all creative acts. In this sense, library books are at the very heart of language.

# Library, liberty

Gianni Vattimo

It is difficult to make a full inventory of all that we owe to books. Our individual education has been based upon certain books, which have become our instructors, often permanent, reference texts, but it is also founded on dictionaries, encyclopaedias, statute books, holy scriptures, classics. If we reflect upon this list of works, we find not only our intellectual biography, but also the backbone of modern culture. One generally talks of the religions of the Book in referring to Judaism, Christianity, Islam. But when we talk of a civilization of books, it is the whole of modern culture which is concerned – even going back to when the ‘book era’, in the modern sense of the term, had not yet begun.

This is all so familiar to us that we have difficulty grasping the connection and the distinction between the content of our education and the ‘bookish’ form in which it has been communicated to us. Everything seems to reduce itself to and reside in the contents of this education. If books seem destined to disappear, or to be replaced by other forms of transmission, we tend to think that this affects only the instrumental side of education. To the extent that the defence of books, often engaging us in discussions on new forms of social communication, seems to be the business of a class of ‘old gentlemen’ who cannot imagine a *Bildung* different from their own, which will be fatally overtaken by progress, etc. The debate is thereby reduced to an inter-generational quarrel that is purely psychological in nature, and basically pointless. It would be opportune on the other hand to make as complete as possible an inventory of that which, in the matter of education, comes from the

book form of communication – and not only in the case of school or personal education, but the very *Bildung* of our tradition.

I will begin by recalling the link which has woven itself, at least in the West, between books and freedom – a link the precursor of which may be found, curiously and coincidentally, in the double meaning of the Latin homonym *liber*. In the modern political tradition, a decisive step towards a freer society was taken when kings accepted having their laws written down. This is an extremely significant example, in the measure that it was notably around the interpretation of certain basic texts that liberty affirmed itself, starting with the great religious revolt of the sixteenth century, in search of the right to read and to interpret the Bible personally, against all the restrictions of the authorities of the Catholic Church. But the model of the book was not just an innocent metaphor in the realm of the natural sciences either: Galileo thought of tangible nature as being like a book written in mathematical characters, and Blumenberg has well demonstrated, in his own case and in many others, how this parallel played a decisive role in the history of modernity. Are the tablets of Moses not a book, a text which became the ethical basis of Judaeo-Christianity – and not only because of their contents, but also because of their written and communicable form? Was not moral law later imagined to be ‘imprinted’ on our hearts? It is very true that for centuries, well before Gutenberg’s invention, books – sacred writings, statutes, classics of literature and philosophy – were only accessible through the verbal mediation of a few ‘authorities’. But it is precisely around the transformation of their form that there developed (including the possibility first offered to the dominant classes of having the use of a library) the modern process of individual liberation, the conquest of freedom of conscience, etc. Is it only with books that we are confronted here, or with far more complex phenomena with likely ramifications that can hardly be reduced to the ‘form’ of the book as such? The complexity of these phenomena seems to bring up once again the difficulty of separating form from content. It is a little like saying that one cannot imagine a democracy without the press, and modern information systems without wanting, of course, to reduce democracy to information.

Can one conclude that the free modern individual is only formed by learning to read and refer to texts? Do we thus not exclude all the illiterate heroes of our popular traditions, such as Robin Hood, but also, why not, Homer’s Ulysses? One could obviously try to avoid this difficulty by pointing out that the notion of liberty is less generic than that of the ‘immediate’ revolt of someone against the violence they are being subjected to, or that ‘popular’ revolts always need a charismatic leader. It is



worth noting in passing that cults devoted to heroes, be they classical or modern, are – just as the actions that the latter have inspired throughout history – ‘mediated’ and even ‘mediatized’ by literary texts. (Does a hero always need a bard?) In any case, books, written transmissions experienced in the silence of private reading, are in many respects a constitutive element of our definition of freedom – even to the point that a popular revolt against injustice can only seem to us inspired by a charismatic leader, which is suspect enough for what we call freedom.

One could linger over the implications of this apparently ‘etymological’ suggestion about the link between books and freedom. But if we tend towards the analysis and enumeration of the traits of our *Bildung* (content and manner of education), which depends for its transmission on the object of the book, this link seems to reappear in terms less ‘suggestive’, but utterly concrete. The comparison between freedom and a revolt led by a charismatic leader brings us to another decisive element of the book form of *Bildung*: interiority, which one could equally call the appropriation of the contents of inherited *Bildung* with a whole series of links between freedom and privacy, for example. Could modern freedom consider itself without this distinction between the public and the private, a distinction which implies the constitution of an ‘interior’ space, even in the physical sense of the word – the salon of a bourgeois house (Walter Benjamin), for example? It is true that one learns to read at school, and therefore under the direction of a present and sonorous voice; but this only really means learning a tool which one later uses for oneself. I am thinking of the difficulties I am facing just now, in preparing this text without having access to my own books. I can, of course, use a national library, but a library, already contaminated by electronics, allows me to consult only a limited number of books at a time. Not to mention poetry, which is read by a living voice and cannot do without sonority. Our own books, worn out, scored on their first reading, contain our culture. The link between books and freedom is enriched therefore by a subsequent link: the link between books, freedom and interiority, including, perhaps, the interiority of bourgeois privacy. It could be that this reminder of the bourgeois salon is far from banal, notably in that it leads us to another room in the bourgeois interior, the library.

Even more than the image of books, it is very much that of the library which dominates the very form of our culture. I have often surprised myself thinking that I would trust completely, to the point of giving him or her the keys to my house, someone who dwells in a library, whatever the type of book he or she reads and loves. To live in a library is perhaps, in many regards, the image itself of perfection, of humanism, of the experience of the truth which renders us, according to the

words of The Book, The Gospel, free. (And if 'the truth renders us free', what can we say about books?) To live in a library is at once to realize fully and to go beyond the itinerary of the phenomenology of the Hegelian spirit. If one becomes the perfect resident of a library, initiated into its complexity, knowing how to live in it, having absorbed all its contents, this 'familiarity' with the contents of an immense collection of knowledge and experience would not appease the adaptation of the pure Hegelian spirit. It corresponds more exactly to a particular kind of assimilation, related, in other respects, to the very model of the modern, or rather postmodern, experience of the truth: one does not know all the volumes of a library and even less what they contain analytically. But one knows where to look when a problem presents itself. It is a hermeneutic rather than a metaphysical notion of the truth. And it is worthy of attention, because it could prove decisive for understanding and adapting to the new forms of experience determined by computerization. This experience of truth as a kind of 'inhabitation' of the library has, obviously, much to do with memory. For either the freedom which results from knowing how to inhabit the library simply depends on the fact that we have at our disposition all the information (the index cards, one could say, of the catalogue), or rather there is something more, which cannot be reduced to an objectified memory deposited in the catalogue, but is related to the organic memory which has become a part of us. (I am thinking here of those computers which are now being talked of – is it simply in the realm of science fiction? – which would use proteins.)

The question could also be put another way: how does the fact of working in a library, of being able to circulate freely amongst its shelves, of letting oneself be carried away by the suggestions of chance proximities (even if all this becomes more complicated with the Dewey system) compare with the fact of disposing of a computer on which one searches for texts, words, etc.? At first glance, contact with a computer seems more rigid and fixed: one must immediately choose a course all the more rapid and functional for being more demarcated. Can one still, for example, call *otium* (leisure) the intellectual work carried out on computers? What would happen if Dante's two lovers, Paolo and Francesca, read the adventures of Lancelot and Guinevere on a computer screen that could, for instance, register the fact that they lingered too long over certain passages, or even the interruption of their reading at the moment when they fall into each others' arms? All *otium*, even if not that of the two poor lovers of Rimini, appears here to be a violation of orders (the computer's), somewhat like the excessively lengthy wait for an answer on the screen on the part of an employee at a bank.

The *Bildung* which is transmitted to us in books is characterized by freedom (which is not simply independence from others), but also by interiority (and all its links with privacy), in a time and rhythm more biological and biographical than strictly physical and material, as well as by an *otium* which also implies freedom in terms of the possibility to follow flights of imagination and free association. (Is psychoanalysis also involved in the culture of books?) In addition, the image of the library, the fact of living in the library more as a librarian than as a specialist researcher, has become the very model of the postmodern experience of truth: the experience of a multiple truth which never lets itself be possessed by an individual, and so not even by the absolute Hegelian spirit, at least in the measure that the latter is thought of as a punctual act, as the *nous noeseos* of Aristotle.

How then can one recover and appreciate the same 'values' of our *Bildung* in a situation where computers and electronic communication will increasingly replace books? It is not only a catastrophic issue; one could consider there to be losses and gains, and it is this which requires a great deal of thought. I believe that the most difficult aspect, but also the most 'intriguing', of what awaits us in the new conditions of the transmission of culture is perhaps that which is called the interactivity of electronic communications. The surrealists had already anticipated this (consciously? I think not) when they played 'Consequences' [in French, *cadavres exquis* – Ed.]. Rather than proposing new interpretations of texts, on-screen readers will intervene more and more in the texts themselves. Today the question already exists in the form of authors' rights, rights which are becoming increasingly difficult to protect against pirates of all kinds, but a problem that is only presented in financial terms. It is of course not impossible to preserve in computerized communication the original integrity of our texts. But it is becoming increasingly easy to add hypertexts, commentaries, actual transformations. In so far as I conceive of the European tradition – and not only that tradition – as an affair of comments on a basic text, around which will develop the very experience of modern freedom, religiosity, the arts, I wonder what will become of all this under new conditions. In front of a computer with all the possibilities for interactivity, one will feel decidedly 'freer', precisely because less 'bookish'. But will this freedom be accompanied by a rich interiority, or rather an empty independence, fundamentally open to all forms of charismatic domination? Can one observe in the younger generations that their receptivity vis-à-vis computers is accompanied by an increased vulnerability to the preaching of prophets of all kinds? It is perhaps at this point that our discussion and our research should begin.

# About the story of a life

Gerd Bornheim

The overall assessment presents every refinement of evidence: for a multitude of writers, researchers, intellectuals and professors, books, be it only in their physical form, have become the object of a great deal of discussion. One of the principal tools, if not the most important, of modern expression now finds itself the cause of exceptional anxiety. It is clear that this agitation, new in every way, merits attention and the greatest consideration. One can pick out certain points in relation to what is a very important theme: the crisis of books.

The first comes precisely from the fact that so much is being said on the subject of books. The least suspect people, those who work in their fabrication, ardently defend books, eulogize about their lasting character, their irreplaceable reality, and so on. The problem starts from the moment when all these discourses, which by their insistence, their conviction – the conviction of those who write – even their enthusiasm, end up raising this extremely grave suspicion: what if all this is happening under the auspices of death, definitive decadence? What if books were indeed in a process conducive to the decomposition of their very *raison d'être*? Why this new enthusiasm, so total and possessed – and perhaps imprudent – for defending books? The question itself is misleading: why does this object, the book, privileged and uncontested vehicle, the existence of which seems so spontaneous, so natural – need, all of a sudden, so many eulogies in its defence?

It seems to me that it is precisely the vigour of this defence which ends up putting everything in danger, even though no one can cast doubt over the authenticity of this absolute passion on the part of anyone who wants to write. We

cannot take lightly the basis upon which such anxieties rest, nor the enthusiasm of writers and those who hold books in their hands for this defence. But here, already, one puts oneself briefly back into the sphere of Gutenberg's revolution, when books for the first time became consummate objects, pliable, accessible, and this just at the dawning of democracy and the expansion of the market. These were very promising beginnings. Imagine, for example, a book from the library of Erasmus or Spinoza in one's hands. Still rather roughly fashioned, these books had – and continue to have – the splendour, even the solemnity, of objects which, among their few peers, represented a unique and original success, commanding respect. At their beginnings books embodied this offer, generous in every way, promising, satisfied with its adequacy. These printed elements without doubt represented the very glorification of the new hegemony which was beginning to influence the category of the object.

There is no mistake: paradoxically enough, the appearance of the Bible, created with machinery that was still somewhat unreliable, would soon unmask its whole destiny. The Gutenberg Bible would reveal itself as simply the ungrateful ancestor of procedures which modern times would end up by casting off quite easily. The printed word soon replaced biblical themes of divine predestination with the demands related to the installation of the subject–object dichotomy. In these inaugural moments, the splendour of the subject went hand in hand with the ostentation of the object leading, in an all-illuminating way, to a progressive interweaving of the relations between subject and object. In fact, the industrial revolution – and with it all the transformations of typographic technique – was to change everything. And this to the point that in our epoch, where everything is metamorphosed into either subject or object, nothing, ever, can situate itself above or below this dichotomy. But what is more, from the internal mixing of subject and object has developed the modern consumer society, and in it, subject and object become excessively malleable realities – planet Earth itself becomes an object controlled by humans, because all objects are no longer anything more than the result of a human manipulation destined for consumption. And so our new world, in which production and consumption complete one another in a kind of eternal necessity, is installed, and continues to lay the foundations of democracy, the humane investment integrating science and technique with the objective of eradicating poverty and establishing humanity in the world.

It is clear that this succinctly sketched context is bound to affect books, which are above all objects, entirely subject to the rules of the industrial revolution. As objects, books cannot escape the rigid norms which command the confection of

objects. It is therefore fundamental to take account of the fact that books became, like any object, a malleable reality. The processes insert themselves into the general context through which passes the category of the objects. Books participate in all this, and suffer the consequences: the intrinsic corollary of the very idea of manipulation is that the object becomes disposable. This applies to everything that constitutes our manipulated world: the same goes for stones, apples, solar energy, houses, machines and all equipment. Perhaps museums are simply a way of rendering disposable works of art themselves, uprooted as they are from any context whatsoever. From this we understand that books also transform themselves into a reality which is easily diluted between its own lines. The history of books covers the history of the category which belongs to the object – from a certain sovereignty commanded by a calculating system right up to the displacements and excesses of the disposable.

Disposable means replaceable and perishable. In the developed world editions of very high quality are launched, what are called ‘working editions’. However, the reading of a page of Freud can lead to what was foreseeable: the falling out of a loose page, thus delivered into the hands of the reader. I repeat that the editions are perfect, but the irony comes from the replacement of sewn copies with glued copies, which renders deplorable the material dimension of a book. It would appear that the destiny of books merges with that of immense piles of various papers, ending up in the disorder of the waste paper bin. The same goes for the education of our students in relation to books. And all this is happening right now, just when any provincial professor could nourish the little luxury of creating a personal library, or even a considerable one at that. Are the most expensive books, those whose spine is well sewn, supplied with a solidly bound cover, not bound just for the useless stocks of collectors?

It would be as of yet fortunate if the *otium* of the collectors were to last. The book lover (and what researcher is not pleased to be one?) must easily imagine his or her predecessors indulging in the same pleasures as the founders of the collections of natural history in the eighteenth century. They collected rarities, snakes in ether, strange rocks and sands, skeletons and many other objects – but always things from far-off lands, thus forming kaleidoscopes of otherness. In their offices were to be seen large and beautiful books, full of illustrations, which told of the exotic adventures of voyagers in strange worlds. The book lover is perhaps nothing more than the extension of this adventurous spirit.

What is the point, then, of modern libraries? The question is not confined to the passable dimensions of the library of the provincial professor, nor to the

eagerness of the book lover. I am thinking of those colossal monuments, of the millions of volumes which fill the great libraries, all over the world today. Some of them are truly marvellous, and they have become irreplaceable for research. The illusion is exactly in this detail: the researcher thinks that all of a sudden the book is, concretely, in his or her hands. It is effectively the case, and this is necessary. Where does the illusion come from? From the fact that the great library no longer represents knowledge, or does not do so concretely in its total knowledge; it loses itself in details, in the doubt of an exceptional remark, in the uncontrollable character of a fragmentary vision. And for all that, the transparency of this englobing knowledge belongs almost genetically to the invention itself of the Western world. It is enough to remember the edification of Aristotle's library, at the end of the period when the Greek world had reached maturity. This englobing representation of knowledge was built one last time, and perhaps to perfection, in the eighteenth century's ideal of the French Encyclopaedia. The latter contained all knowledge, systematically ordered, and lay at the disposal of the researcher who could then command and create from it a living totality. This ideal of the Encyclopaedists no longer exists; only its fragments remain. Our libraries unfurl themselves in infinite labyrinths, scanned by computers which, in their own way, are equally labyrinths.

It is not by chance that modernity has created two means of expression: the system and the fragment, or the extension of the latter, which is the essay. The system offers the transparency of finally concretized rationality: it knows everything and transmits everything. The fragment, however, lives from its own attempts, its own experiments: it explores different paths, always in the obscure clarity of unfinished tasks. It is important to point out here that the system no longer works; or that it only works in what are known as the formal sciences, such as logic or mathematics, which have become plural – these days logic coincides with mathematics. It is even more important to point out that the fragment, the essay, contains the virtually universal means of expression. Libraries, like the books they hold, are merely a piling up of fragments; and all becomes fragmentary, including the individual who approaches them. At the base of everything is something like material scepticism: scepticism meaning the knowledge that has become inaccessible to humans, which does not pick up on the fragments of things, given that encyclopaedias no longer serve. There is no room for a Leibniz.

In a way, libraries now live in the impossibility of their own presupposition; they betray themselves while still carrying out their functions. And this does not only concern the great library as a whole – but, and in the very first place, each

individual book. In this perspective, each book becomes the fundamental clue to its own crisis, the impossibility of the project. Everything closes off into particularisms: the essay, arithmetic, the novel, poetry – the fragment that a form of essay tries to be, the arithmetic imprisoned in the thread of its own being, the partial vision that is the novel, the rays shed through the blinds of subjectivity that are poetry.

This context seems to provoke a kind of vertigo, as if humanity were condemned to walk upon something like the absence of foundations. For certain authors, our era is essentially a time of penury. Penury comes of a certain essential hiatus. So, originally, libraries were uniquely the unification of knowledge controlled by humans who disposed of knowledge; the genius of modernity lived alongside the total objectivity of creative knowledge. Later on, in our own era, appeared the discourse on penury which is, among other things, a proliferation rendering the unity of knowledge, and therefore the very *raison d'être* of a library, impossible. The same goes for the evolution of our universities. In effect, universities have their roots in a well-established classification of the sciences, which gives a unitary vision of the whole. However, the expansion of the sciences has led to an intrinsic fragmentation of the university, and the latter finds itself unable to recognize the essential unity which determined its own *raison d'être*, that of its origin. And the problems, which are not disposable, are already there: they cannot all be naively considered to be negative. It is in this disorder, in any case, that we must seek to understand what the identity of books can be.

It should also be added that the penury we are referring to has nothing to do with poverty, or even with an absence of meaning. Such a poverty can only refer to a past world, which can no longer exist. I mean that the eulogy to penury comes, above all, from the demonstration of an extreme richness. Suffice it to remember that not so long ago, in the time of Kant, a single science was well established: Newtonian physics. These days, the multiplication of the sciences has become uncontrollable, not to speak of the dichotomy from the second half of the nineteenth century distinguishing the natural from cultural or historic sciences, or again from those of the 'spirit', as the Germans say. This strong diversification provoked a crisis among the methodologies at the roots of knowledge, reflected, in the end, in that of the presence of books. Books, having forgotten their origins, now occupy the outer limits, deploy themselves in infinite libraries – but does there exist today anything more exterior to humans than the infinite?

Evidently this brings us easily and exactly to the recognition of the glory of books. The multiplication of libraries and the immensity of their purpose are



inscribed now in the destinies prefixed in the origins of the fabrication of books. Nevertheless, all this may be announcing nothing other than the extreme fragility of books. The resources needed to express the human condition, from the inscriptions on the walls of ancient caves to the later, manifold forms that emerged (one need only think of the marvellous history of alphabets), has surely found in books its most perfect and significant materialization. Do we need reminding, however, that books, linked to the invention of printing, have developed only over the last few centuries? Today things seem to be moving in other directions. One is obliged to recognize that, despite the greatest passion, it would be senseless to pretend that books must constitute an eternal and stable reality.

At the Frankfurt Book Fair, considered as the leading event of the literary world, a great novelty suddenly arrived in 2000: the first example, much vaunted, of an electronic book. It is not too difficult to imagine what this could signify. In this technological epoch, progress reveals itself as irreversible. But perhaps there will remain a nostalgic little place for the generosity of those book lovers we have become – in the measure that books can still be held in our hands. The worst solution would be, without a doubt, to nourish all kinds of prejudices against the progress of technology, even if only because such progress can never reach across the path of the descendants of the greatest writers.

# The library of Robinson Crusoe

Alberto Manguel

‘Un vieil homme est toujours Robinson.’

François Mauriac,

*Nouveaux mémoires intérieurs.*

On an early October day in the year 1659, after being cast ashore on the coast of what he called ‘the Island of Despair’, Robinson Crusoe returned to the wreck of his ship and managed to bring ashore a number of tools and various kinds of food, as well as ‘several things of less value’ such as pens, ink, paper, and several books. A few of these books were in Portuguese, several were ‘Popish prayer-books’ and three were very good Bibles. His ‘dreadful deliverance’ had left him terrified of death through starvation; the tools and the food met his material needs, and then he was ready to seek something to mitigate the awful days that lay ahead. ‘Erst kommt das Freßen, dan kommt die Moral’ (‘First comes the fodder, then the morals’), Brecht was later to remark. So, his body taken care of, Crusoe set out to tend to his mind, and sought moral entertainment in the ship’s meagre library. Robinson Crusoe was the founder – the reluctant founder – of a new society. And Daniel Defoe, his author, thought it necessary that at the beginning of a new society there should be books.

We, Defoe’s readers (compulsive creatures that we are), consider it obvious that, searching for bare necessities, Crusoe would rescue the ship’s books, whether in Portuguese or any other language; we are also tempted to guess what the ‘several Portuguese books’ might have been. No doubt a copy of Camões’ *Os Lusíadas* (1572; *The Lusiads*), a fitting book in a ship’s library; perhaps the sermons of the illustrious Antonio Vieira, including the wonderful ‘Sermon of Saint Anthony to

the Fishes' in which Crusoe might have read a defence of the brothers of Friday; most certainly the *Peregrinação* (1614, *Peregrination: The Voyages and Adventures of Fernand Mendez Pinto*) of Fernão Mendes Pinto which tells of strange voyages through the still mysterious Orient and which Crusoe's author, the omnivorous Defoe, knew well.

We cannot, however, tell precisely what those books were because, in spite of keeping a diary in which he dutifully recorded the changes of weather and mood, Crusoe never wrote of the books he brought on to his island. Perhaps, true to the conviction of some speakers of English that English is the only language a gentleman requires, Crusoe was unable to read Portuguese. But imagine our despair, had we found ourselves in his goat-hide shoes, having at our disposal volumes of literature in a script that we could not decode; imagine flicking through the wilfully tongue-tied pages, willing the sense to come to us through the twenty-something letters we know so well, and yet set out in a meaningless arrangement that lent the page the quality of a nightmare. Poor us! Poor Robinson Crusoe! But of this calvary, which would be foremost in the minds of every one of us – his hypocritical readers – he tells nothing. In fact, very soon, Crusoe seems to have forgotten his books entirely; when he leaves the island on 11 June 1687 and makes a detailed list of his possessions, he doesn't breathe a word about those mysterious volumes.

He does tell, however, of his uses of the Bible. The Bible is at the core of this new human society: it colours each of Crusoe's actions, it dictates the meaning of his sufferings, it is the instrument through which he will try, Prospero-like, to make a useful servant out of the savage, Friday. Crusoe writes: 'I explained to [Friday], as well as I could, why our blessed Redeemer took not on Him the nature of angels but the seed of Abraham, and how for that reason the fallen angels had no share in the redemption; that he came only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and the like.' And Crusoe adds, with disarming frankness: 'I had, God knows, more sincerity than knowledge in all the methods I took for this poor creature's instruction.'

The book is an instrument of instruction; the book is also an instrument of divination. Some time later, sunk in despair, Crusoe tries to understand, like Job, his condition: 'Why has God done this to me? What have I done to be thus used?' He opens the Bible and finds this sentence: 'I will never, never leave thee, nor forsake thee', and immediately it occurs to him that these words are meant for him. On that faraway coast, starting over again with a few odds and ends from society's ruins

– seeds, guns, and the Word of God – Crusoe constructs a new world at whose centre the Holy Bible shines its fierce and ancient light.<sup>1</sup>

One can live in a society founded on the book and yet not read, or one can live in a society where the book is merely a prop, and be, in the deepest, truest sense, a reader. As a society, the Greeks, for instance, cared little for books and yet, individually, they were certainly great readers. Aristotle, whose books (as we know them) are probably lecture notes taken down by his students, read voraciously, and his own library is the first in ancient Greece of which there is any certain information. Socrates, who despised books and never deigned to leave a written word, chose to read the speech of the orator Lycias, not to hear it recited by the enthusiastic Phaedrus. On the other hand, Crusoe, I believe, would have chosen to be told the text. Crusoe, the representative of a book-centred Judaeo-Christian society, was not a reader as we, in our so-called literate societies, are readers. Crusoe (even though he ‘read daily the Word of God’, as he tells us himself) was not even a keen reader of the Bible, the book that lay at the centre of his social life, his Book of Power (to borrow Luther’s phrase). Crusoe would consult it daily, as he would have consulted the Internet had it existed, and would have allowed himself to be guided by it. But he did not make the Word his, as Saint Augustine insisted we must do, incarnating the written text. He merely accepted society’s word for it. Had Crusoe been shipwrecked at the end of our millennium, it is easy to imagine him rescuing from the ship not the Book of Power but a powerbook, which is not an instrument for reading but merely a tool for writing and consulting.

What is it then that distinguishes Crusoe from Defoe, his author and voracious reader, both inhabitants of the society of the book? What distinguishes a

1. A digression: had Crusoe not landed on that island off the coast of South America, had his island been elsewhere, off the Pacific Coast for instance, one of the Charlotte Islands perhaps, inhabited by a people whose tradition is not centred around a book, carried through time and space, but around the power of memory and imagination and the gifted human tongue, had Crusoe not brought along his precious Bible and had he been willing to listen to the stories of those other inspired Fridays, no doubt the society described in his journal would have been very different: different, obviously, from his island that reflects the other island, the island of Britain, from which he sailed on a fateful September day, but different also from any of our societies in which what we are and where we are depend on what was once recorded on a page. Our time is the time of the book, not the time of its telling: a cumulative time, full of foreshadowing and reflections, unfolding like a narration, progressing in geometrical fashion, chapter after chapter, from the unimaginable opening sentence written in the desert of Sumer to the unimaginable final word that will be written as the last ink runs dry or the last word-processor breaks down. Unlike the time of the book, the time of oral societies is linear, its past is whatever the present wishes to preserve, its future is simply the next present. But that, as the poet said, is another story.

reader of books from someone for whom a book is merely powerful or prestigious? Or rather, what distinguishes the importance of words rescued through the act of reading from the prison of the page, from the word unread but revered in the prison of the page? There is an unbridgeable difference between the book that tradition has declared a classic, and the book (the same book) that we have made ours through instinct, emotion and understanding: we have suffered through the latter, rejoiced in it, translated it into our experience and (notwithstanding the layers of readings with which a book comes into our hands) essentially became its first discoverers, an experience as astonishing and unexpected as finding Friday's footprint on the sand. 'The songs of Homer', declared Goethe, himself a little-read classic today, 'have the power to deliver us, if only for brief moments, from the fearsome load with which tradition has weighed us down over many thousands of years.' To be the first to enter Circe's cave or to be the first to hear Ulysses call himself Nobody is every reader's secret wish, granted over and over, generation after generation, to those who open the Odyssey for the first time. This modest *jus primae noctis* or 'first night rights' assures for the books we call classics their only useful immortality.

There are two ways of reading the much-quoted verse of Ecclesiastes: 'Of making many books there is no end.' We can read it as a mirroring of the words that follow, 'and much study is a weariness of the flesh', and we can shrug at the impossible task of reaching the end of our library; or we can read it as a jubilation, a prayer of thanks for the bounty of God, so that the connecting 'and' reads as 'but'. 'But of making many books there is no end.' Crusoe pronounces the first reading; Aristotle (Saint Jerome, Erasmus, León Hebreo, Sor Juana, Dr Johnson and Northrop Frye) pronounces the second. Ever since a certain forgotten afternoon in Mesopotamia, every reader has found ways of picking his or her way through the infinite library of infinitely 'many books', in spite of the 'weariness of the flesh'. Every reader has found the magical formulas, the charms by which to take possession of pages that, by magic, become as if never read before, fresh and immaculate, all previous readings now incorporated into the very atoms of the text. The history of reading is, in some sense, the story of these magic charms.

At the other extreme of Crusoe – the man who venerates the Book but doesn't read the books, who accepts the verdict of tradition but is not moved to peer between a book's closed covers – sits the reader for whom every book is always open to his censure, and who believes that any interpretative reading must be erroneous. Discipline, not pleasure, dictates this reader's craft, and he finds occupations in the seats of academia and the office of the censor. For this hypersensitive soul, no

text can be taken at face value. In fact, no text can be taken at all, unless expurgated and purified, sometimes to the point of destruction.

One evening in 1939, in Buenos Aires, the writers Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo decided to immortalize this punctilious reader. They composed, in his honour, a list (his list) of things to avoid in literature. This is the list, according to Bioy Casares, very much tongue-in-cheek, of ‘the Things Literature Must Avoid’:

- Psychological curiosities and paradoxes: murders through kindness, suicides through contentment.
- Surprising interpretations of certain books and characters: the misogyny of Don Juan, etc.
- Twin protagonists too obviously dissimilar: Don Quixote and Sancho, Sherlock Holmes and Watson.
- Novels with identical twin characters, like Bouvard and Pécuchet. If the author invents a trait for one, he is forced to invent a trait for the other.
- Characters depicted through their peculiarities, as in Dickens.
- Anything new or astonishing. Civilized readers are not amused by the discourtesy of a surprise.
- Idle games with time and space: Faulkner, Borges, etc.
- The discovery in a novel that the real hero is the prairie, the jungle, the sea, the rain, the stock-market.
- Poems, situations, characters with which the reader might – God help the reader! – be able to identify.
- Phrases that might become proverbs or quotations: they are incompatible with a coherent book.
- Characters likely to become myths.
- Chaotic enumeration.
- A rich vocabulary. Synonyms. *Le mot juste*. Any attempt at precision.
- Vivid descriptions, worlds full of rich physical details, as in Faulkner.
- Background, ambience, atmosphere. Tropical heat, drunkenness, the voice on the radio, phrases repeated like a refrain.
- Meteorological beginnings and endings. Pathetic fallacies. ‘*Le vent se lève! Il faut tenter de vivre!*’
- Any metaphors. Particularly visual metaphors. Even more particularly, metaphors drawn from agriculture, seamanship, banking. As in Proust.

- Anthropomorphism.
- Books that parallel other books. Ulysses and the Odyssey.
- Books that pretend to be menus, photo albums, itineraries, concerts.
- Anything that might inspire illustrations. Anything that might inspire a film.
- The extraneous: domestic scenes in detective novels. Dramatic scenes in philosophical dialogues.
- The expected. Pathos and erotic scenes in love stories. Puzzles and crimes in detective stories. Ghosts in supernatural stories.
- Vanity, modesty, pederasty, no pederasty, suicide.

At the end of this reader's demands lies, of course, the absence of any literature.

Fortunately, most readers fall between these two extremities. Most of us neither shun books in veneration of literature, nor shun literature in veneration of books. Our craft is more modest. We pick our way down endless shelves of books, choosing this or that for no clear reason: because of a cover, a title, a name, because of something someone said or omitted to say, because of a hunch, a whim, a mistake, because we think we may find in this book a particular tale or character or detail, because we believe it was written for us, because we believe it was written for everyone except us and we want to find out why we have been excluded, because we want to learn, or laugh, or forget.

I have been talking about reading as if the different aspects of this craft were invariable. Perhaps, up to a point, they are. In Mesopotamia as in Greece, in Buenos Aires as in Toronto, everywhere readers and non-readers have existed side by side, and the non-readers have always constituted the vast majority. Whether in the exclusive scriptoria of Sumer or medieval Europe, whether in eighteenth-century London or twentieth-century Paris, the number of those for whom reading books is of the essence is very small. What varies, I think, is not the proportions, in very general terms, between these two groups of humanity, but the way in which different societies regard the book and the art of reading. And here the distinction between the book enthroned and the book read again comes into play.

If a visitor from the past arrived today in our civilized cities, one of the aspects that might surprise this ancient Gulliver would certainly be the reading habits of his future brethren. What would he see? He would see vast commercial temples in which books were sold in their thousands, immense edifices under such names as Waterstones or Books etc., in which the published word would be divided and arranged in arbitrary categories or fields for the guided consumption of the

faithful. Here, in Books etc. for instance, the gastronomic vocabulary developed to describe the art of reading since the angel ordered Ezekiel to eat the heavenly book, has acquired physical reality, and readers sip dozens of kinds of coffee and chew on various kinds of cake as they sit and read studious tomes and trashy novels, gossip magazines and learned journals that lament the death of the book. He would see libraries, with readers still milling about in these neo-classical edifices, still wandering among the stacks or among the half-mutated virtual collections into which some of the books have been converted, leading the fragile existence of electronic ghosts. Outside too the visitor would find a host of readers: readers on park benches, readers in the subway, readers on buses and trams and trains, readers waiting with books at airports and readers sitting in restaurants with books open before them. Inside apartments and houses (the visitor has piercing vision) he would see readers in bed and readers on the toilet, readers in armchairs by crackling fires and readers sprawled on the floor, legs in the air. Everywhere our visitor sees readers and he may be excused if he supposes that ours is a literate society.

On the contrary. We are not a literate society. Our society accepts the book as a given, albeit antiquated staple. But the act of reading, once considered useful and prestigious, if not dangerous and subversive, is now condescendingly accepted as a pastime, a slow pastime, that lacks efficiency and does not contribute to the common good. As our visitor would eventually realize, in our society reading is nothing but an ancillary act, and the great repository of our memory and experience, the universal library, is considered to be less a living entity than a cumbersome storage room: a superfluous storage room, because it merely contains the past.

During the student revolts that shook the world in the late 1960s, one of the slogans addressed to the lecturers at the University of Heidelberg was ‘Hier wird nicht zitiert!’ (‘No quoting here!’). The students were demanding original thought; they were forgetting that to quote is to continue a conversation from the past in order to contextualize the present; to quote is to make use of the Library of Babel; to quote is to reflect on what has been said before, and unless we do that, we speak in a vacuum where no human voice can make a sound. ‘To write history is to cite it’, declared Walter Benjamin.<sup>2</sup> To write the past, converse with history, was, as we know, the humanist ideal, the ideal which Nicholas de Cusa first put forward in 1440. In his *De docta ignorantia* [On Learned Ignorance], he suggested that the

2. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard U. Pr., 1999.



earth was not, perhaps, the centre of the universe and that outer space could be infinite, rather than bounded by divine decree, and he proposed the creation of a semi-utopian society that, like the universal library, would contain all mankind, and in which politics and religion will have ceased to be disruptive forces. It is interesting to note that, for the humanists, a correlation exists between the suspicion of unbounded space that belongs to no one and the knowledge of a wealthy past that belongs to all.

This is, of course, the very reverse of the definition of the World Wide Web. The web defines itself as a space that belongs to all, and precludes a sense of the past. There are no nationalities on the web (except, of course, for the fact that its lingua franca is English) and no censorship (except, again, that governments are finding ways to ban access to certain sites, a censorship by omission). The past (the temporal tradition that leads to our electronic present) is, for the web-user, inhabited by no one. Electronic space is (apparently) frontierless. Sites – that is to say, specific, self-defined locations – are set up on it but neither limit nor possess it, like water on water. It is quasi-instantaneous, it occupies no time except the nightmare of a constant present. All surface and no volume, all present and no past, the web aspires (advertises itself as) every user's home in which communication is possible with every other user at the speed of thought. That is its main characteristic: speed. The Venerable Bede, lamenting the brevity of our life on earth, compared it to the passage of a bird through a well-lit hall, entering from the darkness at one end and exiting through the darkness at the other; our society would interpret Bede's lament as an act of boasting.

The electronic media are impermanent. The life of a disk is about seven years; a CD-ROM lasts about ten. Virtual collections, where they exist, must be backed up several times to save them from total destruction in case of an electronic glitch. But how many times can you back up these virtual collections? A few years ago, in the Archaeological Museum of Naples, I saw, held between two plates of glass, the ashes of a papyrus rescued from the ruins of Pompeii. It was 2,000 years old; it had been burnt by the fire of Vesuvius, buried under a flow of lava; and you could still read the letters written on it as clearly as a page of today's newsprint. The electronic media, on the other hand, is of the moment, useful above all to communicate in this very instant and to retrieve information updated in the second you seek it. Why then do we ask it to do what it is so evidently ill-suited for?

With its audio and writing functions, the electronic text straddles the oral tradition and the tradition of the book: eventually (one can only hope) it will free

itself from both, developing its own, technology-specific vocabulary. To read the whole of *Crime and Punishment* or *Gone with the Wind* on a computer screen or downloaded on a rocket-book is a stressful business, since no ordinary person can sit for hours on end in front of an illuminated screen behind which scrolls, like in the days of Greece or Rome, a text that is not solid but made of flickering dots. And readers of books on CD-ROM (now reserved mostly for works of reference) must be submitted to the humiliation of being taken through a story as if they were children, requiring illustrations, a guiding voice or pretty moving images. To demean a CD-ROM, so full of possibilities, to the mere function of an ancient codex, albeit illustrated and read aloud, is to wilfully ignore its richness, something akin to using a jet plane to drive down the street to the mall. This misuse, I believe, will not last long: only until the artists take over the new medium and grant it its own vocabulary, as artists did with the invention of photography, of radio, cinema, video. Only then will we realize that a CD-ROM is not a book, just as a photograph is not a painting. Until then, its function will hover somewhere between chatting and leafing.

One other failing: the web is not universal. Only the richest societies possess it. For millions of human beings on this planet, the web is as inaccessible as the universe's farthest moon.

We who do possess it, however, think of it as all-reaching, and speak of it as if it were to replace every other technology, including the technology of books. North American publishers today assume that at least 30 per cent of a future book's print run will be electronic, as a text on the web, to be downloaded at will into one of several kinds of digital book, already on the market. Our future paperless society (defined by Bill Gates in a book, I point out) is a society without history, since everything on the web is instantly contemporary and since, thanks to our word-processors, there is no archive of our notes, hesitations, developments and drafts. Walter Benjamin noted, sometime in the 1930s, that 'Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.'<sup>3</sup> To this self-alienation we have now added the alienation of our own ideas, and enjoy watching the destruction of our own past. We no longer record the evolution of our intellectual creations. To a

3. Walter Benjamin, Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1977 (in English: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited and with an introduction by H. Arendt. Tr. H. Zohn, New York, Schocken, 1968).

future observer, it will appear that our ideas were born, like Athena, fully developed, from her father's brow – only that now, since our historical vocabulary will be forgotten, the cliché will mean nothing.

The proposed paperless society, that would enhance the illusion of a borderless world, may be global but it is certainly not cosmopolitan, since it can be no one's home, since no one can actually inhabit a website. But a paperless society can increase the already gargantuan profits of the multinational companies that own and manoeuvre in this virtual space. Not only do they control the systems that allow these sites to exist, encroaching on the written patrimony of the world, but they are now purchasing our iconographical inheritance as well. The figures on Achilles' shield and the ever-unravelling picture on Penelope's tapestry would, if fashioned today, be subject to a fee pocketed by one of the multinationals. Corbis, the company founded in 1989 by Bill Gates, has acquired non-exclusive reproduction rights to many works in the collections of the National Gallery in London, the Barnes Foundation, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and the Far Eastern collection in the Royal Ontario Museum. Other companies acquiring massive iconographical rights are Disney, CNN, Spielberg's Dreamworks, the Bertelsmann Group, Sony, and Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc.<sup>4</sup>

On 18 January 1949, an American by the name of James T. Mangan filed a charter with the Cook County Recorder of Deeds, and under the state attorney's authority claimed ownership to the whole of space. After giving his vast territory the name of Celestia, Mr Mangan notified all countries on earth of his claim, warned them not to attempt any trips to the moon, and petitioned the United Nations for membership.<sup>5</sup> Mr Mangan's ambitious enterprise has now, in a more practical sense, been taken over by the multinationals. Their methods have been extraordinarily effective. By offering electronic users the appearance of a world controlled from their keyboard, a world in which everything can be 'accessed' and everything can be had, as in fairy-tales, by a simple tap of the finger, multinational companies have ensured that, on the one hand, users will not protest against being used themselves, since they are supposedly 'in control' of cyberspace; and that, on the other, users will be prevented from learning anything profound about themselves, their surroundings or the rest of the world. This sleight-of-hand is achieved by stressing velocity over reflection and brevity over complexity, preferring

4. Luc Melanson, 'Le Cartel des Images', *L'Actualité*, Montreal, 1st September 1999.

5. *The Herald Tribune*, 18 January 1999, Paris.

snippets of news and bytes of facts over lengthy discussions and elaborate dossiers, and by diluting informed opinion with reams of inane babble, ineffectual advice, inaccurate facts and trivial information, made attractive with brand names and manipulated statistics. The fastidious Florence Nightingale once declared that ‘To understand God’s thoughts we must study statistics, for these are the measure of His purpose’.<sup>6</sup> They are also the measure of the unholy purpose of these ever-encroaching multinationals.

But the web is not to blame for our lack of interest in exploring the past, nor for our superficial concern with the world in which we live. Its virtue, as I have noted above, is in the brevity and multiplicity of its information; it cannot provide us with concentration and depth as well. The electronic medium can assist us (does in fact assist us) in a myriad of practical ways, but not in all, and it will not be held responsible for that which it is not meant to do. It will not be the container of our cosmopolitan past, like a book, because it is not a book and will never be a book, in spite of the endless gadgets and guises invented to force it into that role. Nor will it lend us bed and board in our passage through this world, because it is not a resting-place. It is neither a foreign country nor a home, it is neither Circe’s cave nor Ithaca. We alone, and not our technologies, are responsible for our losses, and we alone are to blame when we deliberately choose oblivion over recollection. We are, however, adroit at making excuses and dreaming up reasons for our incapacity. The Abnaki Indians of North America, for instance, believe that a special group of deities, the Oonagamessok, presided over the making of petroglyphs, and then explained the gradual disappearance of these rock engravings by saying that the gods were angry because of the lack of attention accorded to them since the arrival of the whites.<sup>7</sup> The petroglyphs of our common past are fading not because of the arrival of a new technology but because we are not moved any more to read them. We are losing our common vocabulary, built over thousands and thousands of years to voice and help, and delight and instruct us, for the sake of what we take to be the new technology’s exclusive virtues. Virtues they may be, but they are not exclusive. The world, as Crusoe discovered, is large enough to accommodate always one more marvel. In this sense, being a cosmopolitan today may mean being eclectic, refusing exclusion. Our

6. K. Pearson, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton*, vol. II, Ch. 13:1, Cambridge, Cambridge U. Pr., 1923.

7. Garrick Mallery, *Picture Writing of the American Indians*, Washington, Bureau of Ethnography, 1893; rpt. New York, Dover, 1972.

tendency to build walls is useful only to provide a starting-point for self-definition, walls that contain the bed in which we are born, in which we dream, we breed and we die; but outside the walls lies Siddharta's realization that all human beings grow old, all are prone to nightmare and disease, and all must ultimately come to the same implacable end.

Our existence flows, like an impossible river, in two directions: from the endless mass of names, places, creatures, stars, books, rituals, memories, illuminations and stones we call the world, to the face that stares at us every morning from the depth of a mirror; and from that face, from that body which surrounds a centre we cannot see, from that which names us when we say I, to everything that is Other, outside, beyond. A sense of who we are, individually, coupled with a sense of being citizens of the inconceivable universe, collectively, lends something like meaning to our life – a meaning put into words by the books in our libraries.

I am convinced that reading will carry on and survive, as long as we persist in lending words to the world that surrounds us. So much has been named, so much will continue to be named, that in spite of our foolishness we will not give up this small miracle that allows us the ghost of an understanding. Books may not change our suffering, or protect us from evil, books may not tell us what is good or what is beautiful, and they will certainly not shield us from the common fate of the grave. But books grant us the possibility of these things, the possibility of change, of illumination. It may be that there is no book, however well written, that can remove an ounce of pain from the tragedy of Kosovo, but it may also be that there is no book, however badly written, that does not allow an epiphany for its destined reader. On page 162, Robinson Crusoe writes: 'It may not be amiss for all people who shall meet my story to make this just observation from it, viz., how frequently in the course of our lives, the evil which in itself we seek most to shun, and which, when we are fallen into it, is the most dreadful to us, is oftentimes the very same means or door of our deliverance, by which alone we can be raised again.' This, of course, is not Crusoe speaking, but Defoe, the reader of many books.

Histories, chronologies, almanacs offer us the illusion of progress, even though, over and over again, we are given proof that there is no such thing. There is transformation and there is passage, but whether for better or for worse merely depends on the context and the observer. As readers, we have gone from learning a precious craft whose secret was held by a jealous few, to taking for granted a skill that has become subordinate to principles of mindlessness or efficiency, and for which governments care almost nothing. We have gone from one to the other many

times, and will no doubt do so again. We can not be spared from this erratic course which seems to be an intrinsic part of our human nature, but we can at least sway with the knowledge of our swaying and with the conviction that, at one point or another, our craft will once again be recognized as of the essence. The library of Robinson Crusoe was (or rather, should have been) not merely an idol or a prop but his new society's essential tool.

The apostle Paul (the only apostle *not* to have known Jesus face to face) would boldly say to those he encountered, men and women seeking the Scriptures, 'Do you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me?', knowing that having read the Word, the Word was now lodged inside him, even if he had not met the Author; that he had become the Book, the Word made flesh through that little bit of the divine that the craft of reading allows to all those who seek to learn it. This is the wisdom of the Essene sect, the devout people who gave us, so many centuries ago, the Dead Sea scrolls: 'We know that the body is corruptible and the stuff of which it is made, impermanent. But we also know that the soul (and I, their future reader, will interject, "the book") is immortal and imperishable.'

# Books as reflections of society

# The information era and the use of books

Barbara Freitag

Manuel Castells, Spanish sociologist and teacher at the University of California, belongs, alongside Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas, to a group of contemporary intellectuals which surrounds and advises those in power. When Habermas<sup>1</sup> was trying to dialogue with the German Chancellor, Schröder, and Giddens<sup>2</sup> was taking on the role of ‘prompter’ for Tony Blair, Manuel Castells<sup>3</sup> was attending the international seminars organized by the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso to reconsider the guidelines of the conduct of the Brazilian Government. It is in this framework that Castells gave an interview on the programme *Em Aberto* on TV Culture of São Paulo and launched his trilogy in Brazil, which carries the general title of *The Information Era*. In brief, Manuel Castells has something to say about the world and about Brazil. But does he also have something to say about ‘the place of books between the nation and the world’?

The central thesis of Castells’ trilogy can be summarized as follows: ‘We are living in the *network society*.’<sup>4</sup> Following the development of this thesis of some

1. See Barbara Freitag, ‘Habermas como intelectual’, in ‘Habermas, 70 anos’, special issue of *Tempo Brasileiro*, Rio de Janeiro, 1999.
2. See A. Giddens, *The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998.
3. Manuel Castells, ‘Hacia el Estado de Red? Globalización económica e instituciones políticas en la era de la información’ [Toward the Network State? Economic Globalization and Political Institutions in the Information Era], paper presented at the Seminar Sociedad y Reforma del Estado, São Paulo, March 1998.
4. Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. I: *The Rise of Network society* (1996); vol. II: *The Power of Identity* (1997); vol. III: *End of Millennium* (1998), Oxford, Blackwell, 1996–98.



1,500 pages, amply equipped with data from world reports<sup>5</sup> and an abundant bibliography at the end of each volume, we learn that we have already taken a step beyond the globalization of the economy and that we are entering the ‘information era’.<sup>6</sup>

During the passage from the second to the third millennium, the change from globalization to computerization, and from the industrial era to the information era has already taken place. These macro-structural changes have an unforeseen impact on the organization of world society and on the mentality of the individuals of which it is composed. Castells points out that these processes of radical change took place over the last two decades of the twentieth century, raising a quarter of humanity to a level of wealth never seen before, approximately 2 million ‘affluent’ people. Elsewhere, however, the same processes have left three-quarters of humanity on the margins of the information era. This population of over 4 billion subsists, as the author admits, at unsustainable levels of poverty, dispersed over continents and countries which have not ventured, or missed their attempt at integration, into the new ‘information mode of development’. The latter represents the last stage of international capitalism, provoked by a fourth technological revolution which has its origin in California’s Silicon Valley.

In writing his trilogy, Castells sought to formulate a systematic theory of the information society, capable of analysing the impact of modern information technology on the division of labour, the structure of employment, the weakening of the state and trade unions, the organization of the means of communication in a globalized world connected by networks. This is what he reaffirmed at the conference in Brazil. Castells proposed to identify on a world scale the principal processes which have transformed the economy, *culture* and society in the last ten years, analysing the how and why of the current dismantling of the Nation State, built in the modern age, and the crisis of legitimacy that is affecting these institutions and their representatives.<sup>7</sup>

5. World Bank, United Nations (Human Development), UNIDO, UNICEF, UNESCO, among other reports prepared by economists, sociologists, communications specialists, on the last three decades of the twentieth century, etc.

6. See the 1999 television broadcast *Roda Viva*, in which Castells was interviewed by Brazilian intellectuals, sociologists, economists and urban specialists, on the occasion of the launching of his trilogy, by Paz e Terra in São Paulo. See also: *Castells – The Videos* (I: *Castells at Oxford*; II: *Castells the Interview*; III: *Castells*, ed. B. Dimitri), which can be obtained at 3 Broadway Close, Woodford Green, Essex, IGH OHD, UK. The English periodical *CITY: Information, Identity and the City*, No. 7, May 1997, Oxford, published an introduction to the above-mentioned trilogy by Manuel Castells himself (p. 617), as well as an interview with Manuel Castells by Bob Catterall in London, 1997.

7. Introductory page to *Hacia el Estado de Red?* (Toward the Network State).

In this new context of a 'passage', where 'everything that is solid seems to be disappearing into thin air', more precisely 'in the electronic flux', it is a proper moment to ask ourselves *what will be the place of books in the future?*

In his prologue, Castells gives a (relative) response: 'This book is not a book about books', where he seems to want to set himself apart from authors like Jürgen Habermas who, before formulating his 'theory of communicative action', revisits, criticizes and examines more than 2,000 books and essays, in the search for a new theoretical way of understanding the society of the future. Castells says he is searching for his information in 'actual reality', in other words in the reports of the World Bank, in the official statistics of the United Nations, in the technical and economic reports of governments, banking establishments, etc. Castells in fact wanted to say: this book does not take its lead from the theories of others. It seeks to build its own theory: the theory of the information era. So everything indicates that books and their theories can be pushed to one side, today obsolete.<sup>8</sup>

I will try, in the first place, to present a synthesis of the theory of the network society developed by Castells. Next, I will seek to 'track down' in the three volumes of *The Information Era* the references to the place and role of books in this global society compressed into the 'information mode of development'. Only then will I come to an examination of the 'place of books between the nation and the world', borrowing from theories that are less fascinated by the data and diagrams of the information era.

The Castells of the 1990s is convinced that the end of the twentieth century represents not only the end of Marxism but also the end of the 'era of reason', each of these being replaced by the 'information era'. For Castells, the moment has come to develop new concepts, capable of expressing the technological changes that have occurred during the last two decades and summarized in the concept of the 'fourth technological revolution'. This revolution has occurred thanks to an ensemble of converging technologies, integrated into a block: the micro-electronic, the computer (soft and hardware), telecommunications, fibre optics and even recently, genetic engineering. But all this would not have produced the structural changes in the markets, states and societies of the whole world if there had not been a happy marriage between this high technology, and a lively and flexible market which was able to propagate and multiply the results of science (new knowledge) and high technology, developed in Silicon Valley, via the networks of the World Wide Web.

8. Castells, vol. I, p. 25 ff.

The characteristic of this recent technological revolution is not the centralization of knowledge and information (which was always present in previous revolutions), but rather the immediate and easy communication of the new knowledge, information and technology right across the world through the *global networks*, feeding off and integrating new networks, associated to the market and economic and political power.

Castells admits that all this has occurred in only a few parts of the world, in a privileged way in the United States, in the European Union and in certain Asian countries, such as Japan and Taiwan. Even in these countries, there are zones and segments of the population which are not affected by this revolution, and which are excluded and marginalized from the resulting wealth.

The 'excluding' character of this new mode of development has not escaped Castells. He knows that, at best, a quarter of the world's population is benefiting, but he expresses his 'hope' that this situation is only temporary. In the long term, he hopes it will be possible to integrate larger and larger fractions of those excluded today from the heart of the 'favoured information society'. The *Caderno Mais* of 20 August 2000 published a recent article by Castells in which he seeks to advise an African head of State. He sees the only way of overcoming poverty in Africa as adhesion to the new model of the network society. This will require a big effort on the part of Africans to modernize, from a technological point of view, and to educate the new generations. This will in turn require understanding and a certain generosity on the part of the rich countries, already connected, in terms of 'writing off the debts', and a bigger adherence of the excluded, thus invigorating the structures generated by the fourth technological revolution.

Castells does not accuse the 'information era' of causing unemployment. On the contrary, he affirms that with new technology new forms of employment are created. If there have been waves of redundancies, this is due to the inability of the workforce, linked to old technology, to adapt to the new conditions. As for the structural changes in the division of work and employment, the author points the finger at the East European countries and the ex-Soviet Union, after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The 'flexibilization' of employment structures is inevitable, rendering imperative the dissolution of the stability of employment and of the welfare state that guarantees it. Neither professionalization in rigid management, nor a job for life, still demanded by workers' trade unions, would be the means of 'modernizing' the economy. Only the new models imposed by economic globalization and

generalized computerization of the political, cultural and social life of society can indicate new paths for the humanity of the third millennium.

For the State, trade unions, entrepreneurs and employees, there is no alternative left but to adapt to the new models introduced by the technological information revolution. This is why the State must loosen the structures of work, by making flexible legislation concerning employment, and by providing up-to-date and diversified education for the new generations so that they, in turn, will be in a position to adapt more rapidly to the needs of the market. In addition to withdrawing from the market, the modern State must also render autonomy and responsibility to the governed, who will take care of their own health and retirement by subscribing to health schemes and individual insurance policies, better educating their children for the new era. The activity of the State should therefore confine itself to formulating proper laws and making available certain basic services, notably modern telecommunications technologies and cybernetic highways, in order to organize the changes to the benefit of the internationalization of the network society.

The media, until now oriented towards the masses, will also have to accompany these changes, by incorporating the logic of information. Their addressees, the receivers of their messages, will no longer be the shapeless masses, but individualized internauts. Those 'connected' to the Internet are isolated subjects who, at home (in intimacy), connect with their PC through software different to the World Wide Web. The use of mass means of communication, radio and television, will become of secondary importance. Trade unionism, like demagogic political actions, common in the twentieth century, will be coming to a halt, losing its function of collective mobilization. Flexible 'free' labour will be available for (re)use in conformity with the demands of a market turned towards high productivity, profit (medium and long term) without risk, guaranteeing the accumulation of wealth for the international conglomerates. Flexibilized and easily recyclable labour will take on the risks once devolved on to the welfare state. In this way, the worker of today will move into the condition of autonomous and responsible citizen of tomorrow.

The model of the information society exposed here is, as Castells admits in one of his interviews, *a-moral* (that is, stripped of individual morality and collective ethics) and *neutral*, according to the best models defended by the positivists of the nineteenth century and a part of the twentieth; its sole and unique function is to guarantee profit in the medium and long term.

If it is true that the impact of the 'information era' translates itself by an accelerated growth in wealth for approximately a quarter of beneficiaries, to the

detriment of the rest of the world's population, who remain excluded and pauperized, we should take up again the question of books, raised previously, in relation to two types of readers: the minority connected to the world networks of the Internet and the great majority that is not connected.

For the first, 'the connected', new forms of sociability will develop, for example the 'virtualization of social relations' between individuals. They, if need be, will no longer travel or even telephone the other side of the world, nor leave their homes to go to work, the bank, meet the neighbours or do their shopping. As they will have easy access to amazon.com, they can also order the books they want via the Internet, as long as they have a credit card to debit the purchase price and cost of delivery. Thanks to the virtual access to the latest launchings, reviews and the reproductions of the book that interests them, they have the potential to be always aware of everything that is published in their specialist field. The employment opportunities for these beneficiaries grow, because they have access to the information technology and the employment alternatives engendered by the remodelling of production based on the immediate flow of profitable information. Independently of books, the sectors that are, above all, the beneficiaries are private and public management, dealers on the stock exchange, speculators of volatile capital which promises high risk profits, property administrators, virtual sellers, information agents, journalists, editors. Thus are opened new employment possibilities and easy, fast, tempting and lucrative enrichment. As one can see, all these jobs presuppose the use of books or newspapers, real or virtual. In order not to 'waste time' and money, these 'privileged ones' can read directly on their computer screen the latest news, the situation on the stock exchange, or the state of their bank account, without the need for a print-out. But what can materialize with a click in the form of printed pages, bound or not, are indeed books, newspapers, electronic texts. These beneficiaries of the new 'mode of informational development' experience a 'beneficial effect' on their lives from the information era. The structure of employment changes and becomes more flexible, work is reduced, salaries rise, society as a whole gets richer, despite a strongly differentiated appropriation (by a reduced percentage of the population).

The impact of society organized in networks on the three-quarters of the population untouched by the fourth technological revolution is translated into a faster growth of poverty (proportionately and in absolute terms). Despite their exclusion from the economy and the politics of information, these more than 4 billion inhabitants of the globe are doubly affected. There are no mechanisms

capable of inserting them into the traditional labour market, nor adequate mechanisms for preparing them for the new market of work generated by the information society.

Thus what is known as structural unemployment arises, an unemployment that reaches diverse generations of potential labourers (grandparent, parent and child). This great majority remains outside the exclusive ghetto of beneficiaries. For them to be able to profit they must have access to the different networks of information and to information technologies which, in turn, guarantee access to the networks (cellular telephones, computers, new programmes, as well as an adequate training to be able to use this technology, among others).

It could be true, as Castells insinuates, that the network society has dissolved the traditional social classes, but it is also true that it has created a new social hierarchy at the summit of which live the inhabitants of the globe locked in a virtual ivory tower, sustained and made viable thanks to a real base of 'non-connected' workers. It is the latter, veritably, who hold up the tower. The 'virtuals' often lose consciousness of those who effectively guarantee their existence at the base of the social system. In these terms, Castells' 'information society' reminds us of *Metropolis*, the 1930s expressionist film by Fritz Lang, in which this vision of society on two levels is predicted. The development of the information era, considered 'unsustainable' in the long term, could lead to workers' revolts, like those represented in the film.

The information society is indifferent to the risk it is running, neglecting the population that is excluded by its 'beneficiaries' and underrating nature, from which it extracts a large part of its riches. As we know, the information society is a big consumer of energy and cannot exist without it. Depleting the reserves, this society will crumble like a sand-castle or a line of toppled dominoes. From the fact that it is indifferent to nature and its energy sources, it does not respect the rules of its preservation either, as the ecologists warn us. For this reason, it is hostile to the environment. Suffice it to remember the toxic batteries of mobile phones, walkie-talkies, radios, CDs and televisions.

Castells himself admits it is 'a-moral' in that it does not preserve the humanist values of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nor the defence of the integrity and dignity of human beings, all human beings. In defending the neutrality of science, technology and the market, it does not introduce new social, political or moral values capable of leading the new generations to integrate, support, preserve and develop the information society on a dignified basis for everyone. These values can hardly be produced in the virtual space of the web but they can be incorporated

and diffused there. This is where I can see new chances for books, books that are written, read and re-read, debated and commented upon, and even concretized in values and institutions (such as democracy, human rights, literacy for everyone, freedom of religion, universal suffrage).

In an interesting article written in the 1980s, Vilhem Flusser, a Czech-Brazilian philosopher,<sup>9</sup> warned of the need to translate the old codes contained in books and (dusty) documents into the new codes of the digital era. In other words, it is not about getting rid of books to have the Internet, it is about preserving them, incorporating them, maintaining them – in the sense of *Aufhebung* – within the electronic and digital languages of the information era. Flusser's proposition, unfortunately, is not part of the system of receipts of Manuel Castells but is already put into practice, as the newspapers inform us daily.<sup>10</sup>

If we accept the new division of humanity between included and excluded, stratified into 'those at the top' and 'those at the bottom', what is the role of books for those 'at the top', that is, those connected to the network? And what is the role (if there is one) and the place of books among those 'at the bottom', the disconnected and excluded, who live in poverty and structural unemployment?

For a better view of this problem, let us return to Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, which anticipated in striking images this stratification of the future. Seeing again this classic of German expressionist cinema, I was surprised by the *absence of books* in the two principal strata of society: neither the owners of the factory nor their exploited and exhausted workers seemed to have recourse to books, be it for diversion or distraction, in the first case, or information or reorganization in the second. The owners of the factory seemed to be more interested in their account books (profits and losses, salaries and production costs) than by books in the tangible sense (philosophy, literature, art, science, economics, politics). They are far too busy watching the workers through a kind of 'panopticum-TV' to make sure that they are really working. The latter, for their part, installed at their machines in the basements and caverns of Metropolis, lack the ability either to conceptualize or to acquire

9. Vilhem Flusser, 'Alte und neue Codes', in Walter Prigge (ed.), *Städteische Intellektuelle. Urbane Milieus im 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt-am-Main, Fischer Verlag, 1992 (text originally written in 1988). See also by the same author: *Ficções filosóficas*, S. Paulo (ed.), USP, 1998. A reflection on Flusser's article can be found in Barbara Freitag, 'A cidade brasileira como espaço cultural', in *Tempo Social, Rev. Sociol.*, USP, São Paulo 12 (1), p. 2948.

10. See Isabel Piquer, 'Livro digital se firma na Internet', in *Correio Brasiliense*, 12 August 2000, for a commentary on the new agreement signed between Microsoft and Barnes and Nobel.

books because they lack the time and energy to invest in reading during the hard day at work. Neither (the real) Maria who preaches solidarity and faith in religion, nor (the false) Maria, the mechanical clone of the real Maria, consults any manual whatsoever of the revolution that she advocates only to provoke disorientation within the working class.

A book appears, however, in the film, in the hands of a wise Jew who lives in a personal residence mid-way between the two antagonistic classes. He is the mad scientist who finally becomes guilty of the disaster and short circuit which menaces the existence of Metropolis, when furious workers destroy the machines and flood the underground part of the town where their own children live. Revolting in this way, at the instigation of the 'clone' Maria, built by the scientist, against a false enemy – the machines – they do not recognize their real enemy in the monstrous system of exploitation conceived and realized by the factory owners. In this fictional film which reflects the anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism diffused in Germany even before Hitler's ascension to power, the book of science and technology, in the hands of the wise Jew, takes on a perverse role: the 'cloning' of Maria. The film anticipates two abominable practices common under Nazism: the burning of books in the public square opposite the Humboldt University, and the experiments in Auschwitz of Doctor Mengele, the cold and monstrous researcher in genetics.

Having recourse to the metaphor of *Metropolis*, I will try to think of the role of books in the 'information society', following the 'script' given us in Castells' trilogy. In the third millennium too, the holders of wealth are more concerned with following the values of shares on the stock exchange, by the virtual sale of 'shares', by financial investments, etc., than by the books that could be virtualized and diffused by the electronic system of the network or the CD-ROM, the most advanced technological version of books. Those who do not (frantically) manipulate their mobile phones, their electronic diaries and calculators, or 'study' the latest news and 'information', which could be useful for making new investments and other economic decisions, on the Internet via a portable computer in a VIP lounge of any airport in the world, or a PC installed in their home. One rarely meets, in airports or on a plane, in restaurants or cafés, modern professionals of the 'information era' reading a real book, and even less a virtual book 'downloaded' on to their 'screen'.

Moreover, I have seen in the last six months, from the balcony of my apartment, the daily life of ten to twenty '*sem teto/sem terra*' (homeless and landless) who live at the foot of a tree (under a piece of black canvas), between two blocks of Brasilia's North Wing. They are certainly the most excluded of the information era



that Castells is telling us about. In their case, the first preoccupation is water, food, fire. The children do not go to school, the parents do not know how to read or write. They have no electricity, let alone an Internet connection. They live from the rubbish accumulated in the big depots used by the buildings of the *superquadras* and the neighbouring commercial areas. They collect empty tin cans, bottles and other 'leftovers' that the richest class of the nearby consumer society throws away, and resell them, linking themselves in this 'original' way to the money market. They obviously possess no books, much less read them, but they like to pick up old newspapers which cover the ground where they sleep.

I have 'caricaturized' the two extremes of the social stratification of the 'information era' to bring out the fact that in the two extremes of the social hierarchy of today there is no place for books. Yet, despite everything, books exist and persist. Where are they?

In the metaphor of *Metropolis*, the Jewish scientist, between the two classes, has one. In the reality of the information era, they are to be found in the homes of researchers, professors and students, in research centres, bookshops, publishers, in the libraries of the many readers still enchanted by physically materialized books. But one also finds them – in my field of vision, beyond the 'homeless' – in the libraries of the University of Brasilia, of Congress, of the Brazilian ministers, even in those of the presidential palace and that of the town governor, that is, at the heart of institutionalized power. They are not just an element from the past, locked up in seven towers, but a real instrument which can be activated at any moment.

A while back the newspapers revealed the efforts made by the Brazilian Congress to bring literacy to the service and cleaning staff that work there, mostly illiterate. The book that one of them had dusted for decades, without knowing the name of the author or its contents, was the epic *The Lusíads* by Camões. It is likely that the cleaner who had recently learnt to read would give up reading it beyond the first couplets, but the book is visible, palpable, beautiful; it exists and continues to provoke, like many others, the potential reader. For this reason, I am going to propose the following: books, 'safeguarded' in the form of a virtual text or in printed form, bound in linen or in leather, in wrapping paper or plastic, establish a link between the extreme strata of the 'network society'. They possess the conditions for humanizing the excluded who apparently live at the technical level of prehistory; in the same way that they conferred dignity on and delighted the (formerly) illiterate cleaning man of the Brazilian Congress. But they possess, above all, the conditions for humanizing those who have attained wealth and glory in the information society,

manipulating their computers and their mobile phones. In Brasilia, the Congress Library is known as one of the best and most up-to-date in Brazil. It is what gives us hope that the senators, who come from the four corners of Brazil, follow the example of the cleaning man and use the library, immersing themselves in the books it contains.

Instead of the characters of *Metropolis* who establish contact between those above and those at the bottom (the son of the factory owner, model worker who obeys the orders of the boss and transmits them to the workers, in the same way as he translates their clamour for the unfeeling owner, the real Maria, the Jew), we have, in the 'era of the network society', the battalions of '*in-betweens*'. They are the mediators between the extremes whose only 'folly' is their interest in books, their attachment to their conservation and their transmission, collaborating in the formation of readers. One should add those who write books, edit them and bind them, those who organize national or international festivals to diffuse them. But above all, book readers, who see in them their most intimate friend, the inspirer of ideas, dialogue, source of knowledge and pleasure, joy and leisure, text and pretext for scientific research and technological discovery.

'The information era' is the result of books and the knowledge 'relearned' through them by inventive, creative readers. Associated with information technology, books can be 'virtualized' as Flusser taught us, transmitted by fibre optics to the other side of the globe, and there rematerialized in printed form, sewn and bound. Books can also be fixed on a CD-ROM, boxed up in a little sheet of shiny silicon, their information, which once filled the shelves and libraries, compressed.

'The information era' is not an enemy of books; it disposes of the technology to universalize and democratize. Information technology, more than any other, such as those Walter Benjamin had in mind, guarantees the 'technical reproducibility' of the written word, the spoken, the illustrated drawing, separately and in synthetic form. There are those who prefer to read a Shakespeare play printed on paper-maché, others prefer a video filmed in London, at the Globe Theatre; still others, for their part, prefer to listen to the voice of Lawrence Olivier, accompanying the sonorous words with a reading of the text. But there can also be those who want the synthesis of the ensemble on a technically perfect CD-ROM by which all their senses are activated: their eyes, their ears, their spirit. For my part, I prefer to take King Lear to bed, in a leather-bound copy that I inherited from my maternal grandmother.

# The new literates of the network society

Gloria López Morales

Mexico City, July 2000: the long hegemony of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) has just ended with the defeat of the party's candidate at the presidential election. The attitude of the electorate raises a number of questions. Why was it not enticed by the universal panacea that the party was proposing? It was promising a generalized education at primary and secondary levels in English and computers, now the two most important keys to progress and modernity.

In fact, taking into account the problems of their country, as well as the needs and priorities for resolving them, the Mexican electors have shown great lucidity. The idea of a plan aiming to bring millions of illiterate people into modernity using computers and English must have seemed absurd at the very least – as if these would allow them to join, by magic, the legions of the newly literate, precursors of a happy world. They must have had recourse to the proverbial wisdom, adapted to the circumstances: 'hungry people cannot busy themselves with computers'.

The problems cannot be measured only in quantitative terms, even if the latter are revealing. In round figures, about 10 per cent of the population is illiterate, but functional illiteracy reaches much more alarming proportions. An estimated 60 per cent of the Mexican population live in poverty and 30 per cent live below the absolute poverty line. Statistics also show the persistence of a low quality of life in the rural world as well as in the immense suburban zones which are growing up around the big towns: precarious levels of health services and a lack of drinking water and electricity on the one hand; overpopulation, insufficient and dangerous

housing on the other. Another indicator which brings little joy is the level of unemployment in the country and the town, the most visible effects of which are emigration and a noticeable rise in delinquency.

So, even if they know nothing of all the figures and statistics, the voters showed that they are able to exercise a qualitative judgement and to distinguish not only the indispensable from the dispensable but also the essential objective from the means to acquiring what is necessary. They probably realized that behind this seductive didactic package associating English and computers there was a neo-civilizing movement which, if not mistaken about the merchandise, was not far off. They suspected that the trimmings were being passed off for the necessary and that they were being offered a supersonic vehicle to plunge them into an amorphous globality, before they even appropriate, take on and know their own local space.

The determination of the politicians and the elaboration of government programmes cannot ignore cultural context nor historical heritage. In Mexico, as in other Latin American countries, it is impossible to invite the population to uncritically join the communications community while social conditions render this improbable or, at the very least, secondary compared with other urgent matters. To extend this, there are questions from the cultural context which seem to contradict the notions of time, space and usefulness developed by cybernetics. All the more so because, by tradition, the populations of these countries belong in part to the community which Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira calls that of debate. In addition, if the computerized support, as a number of theorists claim, only transports and treats information in blocks and at high speed, without promoting reason, it is logical that in exchange, the practitioners of the spoken language and the adepts of books will feel excluded from a language which inhibits emotion, prevents reflection and reduces memory. In any case, the different types of written expression seem more consubstantial with their own norms than with the language of computers.

In this sense, one must eliminate directly the false debate between computers and books. The question is not of choosing between one or the other, because the two are necessary and complementary. The other side of this equation is perhaps at the origin of the excesses which are now provoking the undesirable effects of selective and élitist computerization in the countries where there is an uneven development. A fragmentation has thus been provoked with a veritable cultural rupture between the different layers of society. In addition, a computerised people is not necessarily a cultivated people. In order to be cultivated, a people must know how to read and love reading.

Coming back to the Mexican political process, it is therefore on the development of books and reading, doubtless finished off with a strong dose of training in computing, that an intelligent electoral campaign should base itself. To put the country on a par with the rest of the world, to allow for the exchange of valuable knowledge and above all to develop the democratic process, individuals must be capable of penetrating the meaning of a text and able to reflect, understand the nuances of the reality in which they are immersed, and thus to analyse it critically. To confront a cybernetic screen with an ability to be selective, one must first have been a reader.

The formulation of hasty and impatient communication and education policies results from the mistaken expectations placed on all-powerful computerization. One must not delude oneself; nothing replaces books for satisfying the necessity for reflection which underlies the function of education, as nothing replaces the Internet for rapid treatment of information. In both cases, the learning of writing and reading are indispensable.

In the 1950s, at the launching of the notion of development at all costs, our countries perceived reading as a boon to economic take-off. Suffice it to remember the great editorial movement of the time. The intuition was correct, but the hazards of the market, the generalized and recurring economic crises, and the lack of policies adapted to giving books their indispensable role, have seen the arrival of computers without the basic conditions necessary for their correct use. We now observe that the lack of preparation of readers leaves them unarmed when confronted with audio-visual screens, with consequences for the formation and transmission of the individual and collective values which unite a social body. For us, reflection is devalued and its usefulness goes unnoticed. The cultural value of reading has given way to the value of books as consumer objects, and this goes even for countries where the proportion of readers is high.

A good policy for an educated, cultivated and informed people must on the whole recognize that books and reading are obligatory for real use to be made of computers, that the latter are a means of satisfying complementary needs for information and technical support, but never a substitute for the real elements which forge individual and collective culture.

We can neither fight ignorance, corruption or inequality, nor cultivate democracy, without appealing to the sole arm available: culture and its great vehicle which is reading. We must equally reflect differently about culture if we want to reform the bases of our development: we must understand that cultural resources

are its best motor and recognize the essential role of our artists, creators and thinkers. It can seem complicated to link fiscal policy to cultural policy or even enterprise development policy to educational policy, but it is possible and a number of developed countries have done it. An intelligent cultural policy can achieve all this and if, in addition, it stimulates reading and in this way the exercising of thought, it will generate aware citizens, with a strong capacity for participation in public life, allowing them to advance more obvious objectives than that of cyber-life as a necessary and sufficient condition for attaining happiness. All these elements merit the attention of politicians when they order their campaigns from the magicians of electoral marketing.

Nothing is further from the brilliant minds of the Portuguese/Hispanic orbit than to deny the advancement and influence of electronic means, apart from closing their eyes to an enslaving reality. Not long ago, Carlos Monsivias, one of the most enlightened and influential Mexican intellectuals, exploded a series of myths in just a few phrases. He recognized both that the Internet encourages a return to reading, and that, television having got the upper hand before the arrival of the web, 'there is nothing so little sought after as a conference in real time, and nothing more populated than a chat'. He was pointing out at the same time, of course, the necessary survival of the written press and the indispensable permanence of the local faced with the global.

A consensus appears then to be materializing on the prognostic that books will not disappear and that there will be rather a cohabitation between the different supports. But I do not think that this will happen in a spontaneous way. We must see what will be done in politics which seems, for the moment, given over to the pragmatic currents on the future of cybernetics. The theme must be analysed in all its complexity, which means that the social is ecological, and the ecological becomes ethical, which means equally that the transmission of thought and knowledge cannot be uniquely considered from the point of view of the support or the means.

With this approach it will be easier to determine the function that reading must have. One must put oneself into the multiple perspective of reading, that of cultures, to conclude that it is perhaps not books that are in a situation of crisis. It could be that the crisis is in the framework of the vision that we have of culture itself, a framework ill-adapted to a changing world. It is also necessary to re-examine the fundamental role of education to evaluate, choose and rank the means and supports which transmit knowledge.

In this sense, cultures form a polyphony where reading perhaps does not have the same role for some as for others. We must permit all voices to be audible, without forgetting that the State exists, and that there are governments, structures of power and political formulations. To leave the development of books and reading to the free play of demand and supply, to permit the installation of the predominance of computers or other means and supports solely for reasons of the market would be to renounce the capacity of decision and direction of a society. One should ask oneself if policies that are attentive to cultural conditions on a local and regional scale are in place. Can we concentrate our efforts of reflection on the crisis of culture or national and local cultures in order that, far from navigating blindly on the seas of globalization, we find the manner of advancing in the cultures of universalization from the basis of what belongs to us?

Starting from the principle that books are not terminally ill, we must however agree that public and private determination must intervene if their survival is to be more than a question of artificial prolongation. Globalization should not paralyse reflection on a local level, a regional level, within cultural families reunited by history. And if something identifies the Latin American family, it is the community of languages and the real possibility of communicating orally and in writing through the expedient of Spanish and Portuguese. This conjuncture allows the nations which form this cultural space to penetrate the network of networks without losing their characteristics and, further, to participate with these networks in a globalization which need not be undifferentiated. The Iberian-American network, using the possibilities of cyber-space, should be able to conserve its own linguistic and cultural resources to communicate within itself and with the rest of the world. In this network, books, be they on paper or electronic support, are irreplaceable.

# Books between African memory and anticipation

Jean-Godefroy Bidima<sup>1</sup>

Books sow seeds . . . and whether one likes books or not, the fact remains that they sow seeds. The capital letter ‘L’, holding a dandelion and blowing the seeds to the winds is the trademark of the Larousse dictionaries and encyclopaedias in France. ‘L’ is also the initial of the word for ‘book’ in the Latin languages. There is no doubt about it: the book disseminates to the four winds. ‘L’ (either for *Livre* – Book – or Larousse, but let’s choose *livre*) sows to the four winds: ‘L’: can it be ‘*ivre*’ (drunk)? Supposing it is, it would seem that this ‘drunkenness’ of books is today arrested by proclamations of the end of books that promoters of the audio-visual industry are putting into circulation. The latter promote immediacy by promising readers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that they will have access to immediate knowledge, visually, orally and through icons. The temporal dimension of the detour is replaced by a temporality which defines itself in the instantaneous. In their drunkenness, books deliver humanity a paradox. They only sow *unity* among people of the past, the present and the future so as better to divide them in terms of the use they make of their contents. That is because the rule assembles, but usage, interpretation, divide. Books offer knowledge – informative value – only to take it away from the majority: one only ‘enters’ a book when initiated in the codes which cover the rules of spelling and grammar, the latter being the officers of the legal police of spoken and written expression.

1. I would like to dedicate this article to Élise Mbezele Mekoulou, Joséphine Ndzengue Bidima, Emmanuel Abina Mekoulou and Roger Ebogo Bidoung.



Books, once introduced into African cultures known as oral, opened them up to the other cultures of the world – through the reading of the histories of other peoples, Africans opened up and integrated world history – but this *opening* immediately produced a *closing*. Because, just as books appeared in Africa, Africans only entered into world history to be locked into the ‘Noble Savage’ category. It was necessary, in order to properly affirm their difference, that they be the ‘Other’ of written civilization. The production and circumscription of books in African colonies – fostered long before European colonization by Islam – was simultaneous to the archiving, cataloguing and classification by geographers, linguists and ethnologists who produced, through these techniques, a figure of the African as the Other.<sup>2</sup> Giving everything yet holding back, opening yet closing, books construct the codes of reading, displace purposes and understandings and obstinately sow doubt or expectations in an African history in which to have tamed the instrument-book is no small merit. Instruments of knowledge, books cannot be reduced to a simple *Organon* because they are in the process of fruition, sowing and promise. Books are the seeds sown in Africa and they can bear both the fruits of knowledge (of oneself, of others and of institutions) and the fruits of barbarism. The recording, publication and dissemination of the ideological books of political dictatorships and religious fundamentalisms are eloquent in this sense. Books are therefore the rich soil of possibilities which can promote, within each individual historic site, the best, while being capable of the worst.

### **But is the ‘Africa’ site fertile?**

One should not only study the adventure of books, *productive* activity, and the *product-book* as a process. How do the symbolic products (books) in circulation in Africa speak, contradict, translate, betray or cover up the contradictions which weave themselves between the places of production and the products? This seems to be the general question posed by the existence and enduring presence of books in Africa. Evaluating the space of the book (the place), as well as the actors involved in it, suggests that all analysis of the book’s situation in a particular history should

2. Michel de Certeau observed that ‘ethnology occurs when the scene of the savage world acquires a homogeneity . . . as the space of “objective” representation is detached from the observer’s reason’. *L’Écriture de l’histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 236 (*The Writing of History*, Translated by Tom Conley, ‘European Perspectives series’, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988).

consider it not simply as a *product* but also as a *process*. Books as a product are in turn *productive*. As an active link in a process, books have produced – often in spite of themselves – an illusion in Africa. Have books not been taken as something sacred there? Have they not been associated directly with scientific knowledge – as if all books were part of knowledge – as they are for the Beti of Cameroon, whose word for *book* is the same as that for *knowledge* (*Kalara*)?<sup>3</sup> Process, product, producer, books are also a symptom. The content of books, the frequency and quality of publication, the legal terms of literary and artistic property, the diligence, harshness or laxity of censorship all put into perspective the manner in which a society cheats in its moments of creation, covers up the unbearable and suffocates the speakable. Books in Africa thus become a mirror, displaying, creating doubles and simulacra, reflecting, deforming images and able to dazzle.

To study books, one can scrutinize at least three perspectives. First, the African collectors, the question here being to determine whether there existed in Africa, outside of religious Muslim circles and before the arrival of the European book, a tradition of collection of this tool, the book? What was collected? According to what criteria? Where? This orientation would probe the production circuits and centres of a certain type of knowledge in Africa. For all its usefulness, this approach would evidently overlook the symbolic-material dimension of books. Second, one could propose an *aesthetic approach* scrutinizing both the conditions surrounding the production of books, their material form and their dissemination. The questions arising on this level touch upon the modifications which the ornamentation of books bring to the African aesthetic perception. But this fertile approach would be incomplete if the more general dimension of the symbolic is not considered. From whence, finally, our orientation here: to understand books by joining them to *a social history which is in the process of occurring* in Africa.<sup>4</sup> This orientation is to see how the book – this mirror, this medium and this symptom – unveils the social categories of a determined history by articulating *material* production (books are firstly objects), *intellectual* production, *economic* accumulation and *symbolic* appropriation. Object, knowledge, capital and policy, books can only be assessed in Africa around this constellation. Our enquiry will turn about four axes to determine how books: (a) are linked with the imaginary; (b) are objects of mystery and censorship; (c) give access

3. In the Beti language (Cameroon), ‘Ayem Kalara’, i.e. ‘he knows’, is also used to designate ‘knowledge’ and ‘book’.

4. The book is a way for the subject to conjugate his or her historicity.

to the Other by modifying the relationship which Africa upholds with its historical memory on the one hand; and (d) at the same time builds its policies, on the other hand.

### **Books in the imaginary: attractions and fears**

#### *Books and the libido imperandi*

Books have been perceived by Africans as means of access to political power. Africans were conquered by the military, and books convinced them that the power of the white man came from his books. African novelists describe this quite well. Cheikh Amidou Kane, Senegalese author of *L'aventure ambiguë*,<sup>5</sup> wrote of how the young Samba Diallo is torn between the Koranic instruction given by schoolmaster Thierno and the Western school. This dilemma requires a referee, and it is Grande Royale, an aunt of the young Samba Diallo, who decides in favour of the Western tradition: the young Samba must go to school. Why? 'To learn to vanquish without being right.' Books and school are therefore the signs of the power which must be won at all costs, a power which would bend the law if necessary. The thirst for reading is here the thirst for power. In the same vein, the novelist Mongo Beti describes, in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*,<sup>6</sup> how newly converted African Christians, to the chagrin of the pious colonial priest, return to 'fetishist' practices. The priest consults his cook, the African Zacharie, who answers him something like this: 'The Africans followed you, you the Whites, so that you would teach them how to build planes, arms, etc. Instead of this, Father, you spoke to them of the Holy Spirit, of life after death, etc. Did you think they knew nothing of these notions? . . . Well, now, they return to their fetishes.' What is in question here is the status of the school and books as the essence of knowledge and, therefore, of power. The Africans who embraced the school – sometimes under constraints – did not do so to find a substitute for mystical initiation,<sup>7</sup> but to acquire political power, because the introduction of books itself was political. Father Henneman, a German Pallotine priest, remarked that: 'The conversion of the pagans of Cameroon began with school: books were

5. Cheikh Amidou Kane, *L'aventure ambiguë*, Paris, Julliard, 1961.

6. Mongo Beti, *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, Paris, Laffont, 1956 (*The Poor Christ of Bomba*, Heinemann, African Writers Series).

7. This is contrary to Philippe Laburthe Tolra's thoughts on Cameroon, in *Vers la lumière ou le désir d'Ariel*, Paris, Karthala, 1999, p. 168.

the mysterious magnets . . . in the absence of compulsory education and often without their parents' permission, boys and young men hurried to learn the art of reading and writing.<sup>8</sup> A significant historical fact on the political level is the 'auctioning' off of the German teacher Christaller by the six kings of Douala (Cameroon) who were fighting over him. The teacher was to establish himself on the territory controlled by the highest bidder,<sup>9</sup> which shows that books were perceived by these kings as a sign which would increase their power.

*Books as sacred objects: taboos and fears*

In African Islam, the sacred book the Koran is the object of particular veneration. The personal protective talismans of certain *marabouts* have pages of Koranic verses carefully enveloped by leather thongs. The page protects, and so does the inscription. This protection works even with a simple reproduction. If a student in a Koranic school, learning to read and write Arabic through the Koran, reproduces a verse on his slate, he will drink the water with which he washes it. This water is reputed to be purifying. Books therefore have a purifying value which even their mere reproductions guarantee. With regard to the Bible, there are examples of conversions based on the 'Biblical threat' or the 'Breviary' of the Catholic priests. The Liberian preacher Harris – founder of the Messianic movement that is Harrisism in Côte-d'Ivoire and Liberia – had a Bible and a stick with which, according to legend, he defied the power of the sorcerers. Books in general, the Bible in particular, have remained mysterious objects. The Breviary, the prayer book of the Catholic priests, also had a mysterious connotation. Was it not, for the first generation of Cameroonian Catholic priests, an instrument of blackmail against the 'pagans'? It is said that when someone refused to give up his or her fetishes to the priest, the latter would often put the Breviary on the roof of the house of the fetishist, who trembled with fear before this mysterious object, the Book.

Agents of power, object of fear, books have incessantly exercised in the imagination this fundamental contradiction. Years later, the fear of the book would provoke the distrust of those who 'know books'. This unconscious fear of books as devilish objects fuels the censorship further back up the chain.

8. Seiben Henneman, 'Missionsarbeit in Kamerun', in *Zeitfragen aus der Weltmission 1*, Xavierius Verlag, Aachen, 1918, p. 3.

9. N. Boeckheller, 'Theodor Christaller, der erste deutsche Reichs-Schullehrer', in Emil Hermann Senior, *Kamerun*, Leipzig, 1897, p. 32.

## Books and prohibition: the question of censorship

### *Seeing and knowing: the forbidden*

What is censorship? It is the *interdiction of knowing* the contents of a cultural model, a banning of the spread of images, and an interdiction of being informed of the contents of a book presumed able to modify a subject's behaviour. Prohibition concerns not only the knowing but also the having. Censorship *prohibits possession*. Any object that is charged with negative motives and symbolically soiled – even if its content is not revealed – can seem dangerous from the censor's point of view, which is why *having is prohibited*. Touching, appropriating, and merely approaching the forbidden object are equivalent to blasphemy. It is prohibition of knowing, of having and, above all, *prohibition of sight*. The dimension of the visible is also important in the contamination of the stain, because the visible excites attention, inflames the subject's imagination and can lead to action – the censorship of films is illustrative of this point in Africa – hence the voraciousness of interdiction. To know, to see, to have, censorship *forbids homo loquax to speak*. Speech is uncontrollable, a wave which spreads, a fire which consumes and more: if well ornamented with rhetorical frills, it can captivate, enchant and seduce, that is to say, it can lead one away from the righteous path. A regulation, or even an obliteration of this speech, is therefore useful to the censors. The example of the impious words which are thought to entrench believers in their sinful state should be emphasized here. Censorship is thus a refusal to transmit and communicate, surrounded in the logic of an identity which has difficulty allowing debate, difference, transition and contradiction. Through censorship, things must stay the same.

Censorship is not only an interdiction, a negative activity of privation. Transformed, it has become today an example which guides, authorizes and channels towards what is believed to be just, worthy and good.

### *The Franco-German battle of books: an aspect of colonization*

The intensity of Franco-British rivalries in Africa is well known. Historians remember the clashes between the British ambitions to spread their zone of influence from the Cape to the Nile, and those of the French, who also wanted control of the Great Sudan. But the way in which these European rivalries expressed themselves through a battle of books, not just diplomacy or military treatises, cannot be sufficiently emphasized. Germany had just lost the war in 1918, and the Treaty of Versailles

took away 'its' colonial territories. Under the supervision of the Society of Nations, Togo was given to France, South West Africa (Namibia) to South Africa, Rwanda-Urundi to Belgium, and Tanganyika (Tanzania) to Great Britain. As for *Kamerun* (Cameroon), the eastern part was given to France and the western part to England. In French Cameroon, as early as 1923, the French administration took affairs in hand by cleansing all school programmes of any '*boche*'<sup>10</sup> elements'. Those who had attended German schools were 'mentally reformed', with an interdiction from speaking or reading German. When it came to the Catholic clergy, this battle of books reached its apex. After the departure of the German Pallotine priests, the Vatican entrusted the direction of Cameroon to a certain François Xavier Vogt who, originally from the Alsace region, had been a German bishop in Tanzania (Alsace was still German before 1918). This bishop, who was German when he set off for Africa, changed his nationality there and practised in Cameroon, from 1923, as a French bishop. In trouble with the French administration over the forced labour carried out by the indigenous people, he was accused of anti-French activity and especially of having, as an Alsatian, a '*boche* mentality'. The best proof was that he dared to read books in '*boche*' and to write a few personal notes in German.<sup>11</sup> In 1928 the conflict between the bishop and the administration escalated and everything was done to remove the former from his episcopal seat. But the Vatican, instead, gave him an adjunct (a bishop's aide), in the person of Monseigneur Graffin, who being very French, would not read '*boche books*'.

What was at stake in this battle of books was the very 'nineteenth-century' notion, which had nourished colonial anthropology, that each race has an individual mindset or spirit transmitted by many vectors, including books. It was useful, therefore, in order that the 'French spirit' might enter Cameroon, to forbid books in German.

*The Protestant reform and the spirit of Trent in the colonies:  
books and authority*

The second form of censorship was to do with the plans of the Roman Catholic Church for reading and the politics of books. After the reforms of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, the Catholic Church regained control of its doctrine's reformulation – moving towards a more rigid stance. Dogmas were more forcefully redefined,

10. Derogatory term in the French language to designate anything German.

11. See Laburthe, op. cit.

liturgy opted for greater visibility, and information control guided a teaching which became more didactic. It was precisely this modified stance which made for greater control in the training of clerics. The Council of Trent revoked recommendations on seminary reform and the young seminarian involved in theological studies would first learn *to censor himself* – by not reading just any book – and then *to censor* – in his preaching he would warn Christians against the devilish ruses that insinuated themselves into certain texts. Internal self-censorship meant that all books read by the cleric required the authorization of a bishop or of his parish priest, of the ‘Ordinariates’, according to the formula in use in Canon Law, the well-known *nihil obstat* (no obstacle). The same went for books written by the ecclesiastics, who had to submit their manuscripts to the bishop or to his replacement in order to receive the authorization to publish: the very famous *imprimatur*. The latter was not a mere editorial authorization, but acted as a symbolic witness. The bishop is a witness and guarantees the purity of a book’s content. This instruction was strictly adhered to in African seminaries. Books published by the Protestant teachings were regarded as heretical. Catholics, who used the ‘catechism’ in their teachings, distrusted readings from the Bible as conducted by Protestants. The latter, in turn, mistrusted the Catholic catechism, which was not the Bible but a hindrance of questions and practical answers. In the latent battle between the book of catechism and the Bible, Catholics leaned on the fact that an understanding and reading of the Bible without institutional mediators could only lead to misunderstanding and eventually heresy. It was therefore necessary, for them, to use the catechism, the ecclesiastical authorities’ mediation *par excellence*. For Protestants, the book of catechism was simply a compendium which distorted the basis of the doctrine of faith contained in the Bible. This quarrel between the *catechism* and the *Bible* had as its backdrop the problem of authority. In a question of interpretation, who fixes the limits of authority, the ecclesiastical hierarchy or the ‘holder of truth’ that is the biblical text itself? What is interesting is to see and remark that in the bosom of the Christian faiths, African believers were exposed to a reciprocal censorship, one side (Protestants) censoring the other (Catholics) over the problem of transmission and instruction.

*Censorship through deprecation: colonization and the question of so-called vernacular languages*

European linguistic policy mistrusted local languages. I should stress that British colonization, with its system of ‘indirect rule’, left up to the ‘natives’ the initiative to speak and even to teach their mother tongues in schools. German colonization was

more ambiguous, at times accepting, tolerating, the use of local languages in education: 'In the time of the German colonization of Cameroon, the first book used in Yaoundé was Father Nekes' (Fibel) primer or ABC book in Ewondo (a native language) . . . In 1913, the translation of this work into Douala completely abandons gothic writing . . . We have the schoolmaster's book for the two years of the bilingual (German-local languages) schools, set up, as the preface indicates, in order to respond to government stipulations . . .'<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the book policy which developed did not inhibit local languages. With the ideology of promoting the understanding and assimilation of the religious message, it was useful to know the languages of the colonized, and that the latter have perfect knowledge of their own languages. That is why the first books translated into local languages were Bibles: 'Religion was only taught in the mother tongue. Nothing touches hearts better and nothing enters the head more easily than one's own way of speaking.'<sup>13</sup> The same policy for books was in effect in German Rwanda-Urundi. Thus, the 'catechism itself was a strange mixture of degenerated Kirundi, Swahili and Kinyarwanda'.<sup>14</sup>

The promotion of local languages was not subject to real censorship or deprecation. The censorship of local languages was mainly an outcome of the assimilation policies adopted by French colonialism. In 1885, Victor Duruy thus defined the role of the French language in school: 'If the sword subdues the body, if the plough enriches the peoples, it is the book which conquers souls. Behind each regiment, there must be a teacher. . . . When the natives learn our language, it is our ideas of justice which little by little enter into their spirits: markets open for our industry; it is civilization which arrives and transforms barbarism.'<sup>15</sup> To do this, it is necessary to kill local languages. At first degraded to dialects, they were then submitted to infamy. It was forbidden in the colonial schools under French administration to speak in the 'vernacular languages'. To do so was to expose oneself to the shame of a symbolic punishment: the wearing of a 'symbol' around the neck. This 'symbol' was either a bunch of leaves, a tortoise shell, or a snail. The student who was thus 'marked' for having spoken an African language had to catch another of his comrades speaking the forbidden language in order to be rid of the 'symbol'.

12. Ibid., p. 169.

13. H. Skolaster, *Die Pallotiner in Kamerun, 25 Jahre Missionsarbeit*, Limburg an der Lann, 1924, p. 258.

14. Ian Linder, *Christianisme et pouvoir au Rwanda, 1900–1990*, Paris, Karthala, 1999, p. 65.

15. Cited in H. Froidevaux, *L'œuvre scolaire de la France dans nos colonies*, Paris, Challamel, 1900, p. 20.



The censorship exercised by the colonisers finds its aides among these young Africans, who learnt in this way to despise themselves. In these conditions, censorship is not applied to books but to a precondition of books, that is, to language.

*State censorship and domestic censorship*

The State aspired to be all-powerful in the colonies, and thus it remains, which is why its pretensions often go beyond its real means: *teleological pretensions* (the State defines social goals); *axiomatic pretensions* (it participates in the definition of what has worth alongside the other entities of morals and religion). These pretensions are clothed from a terminological point of view in a legislative artifice called ‘sovereign functions’. The State must protect its citizens from themselves first of all. This is why the undemocratic State dictates how and when to speak. It is up to the State – or so it believes – to outline what it is possible *to say*, *to publish* and *to read*. European ministries discreetly control publications in Africa, and in the past books and newspapers there were carefully surveyed. Books were known to be ‘forbidden’ in France and in the African ex-colonies alike. The case of the book by the novelist Mongo Beti of Cameroon is a good example. In 1972 the essay *Main basse sur le Cameroun* was published by Editions Maspero in Paris. This described Franco-Cameroonian relations from a polemic angle. It was barely published when it was banned in France by the minister of the Interior at the time, Raymond Marcellin, as well as in Cameroon. Other cases probably exist in English-speaking Africa – especially during the apartheid era in South Africa. *State censorship* can also be *passive*. Its methods are well known: the book is simply ignored, or made the brunt of an orchestrated ‘university assassination’, ranging from short sentences to ambiguous critical reviews invariably accompanied by *ad hominem* arguments. Domestic censorship was often practised within families. In certain African families, ‘cartoons’ and ‘photo stories’ were purely and simply banned by parents who saw in them the seeds of ‘banditry’. This is how the heroes of these publications (Zembla, Akim, Bleck, Zagor, Miki the Ranger, Spirou, etc.) simultaneously became *forbidden objects* and *role models* for young school and college students.

The adventure of books in Africa is inseparable from the notion of prohibition. With censorship – an ancient practice which exists everywhere – one can reflect on its new forms,<sup>16</sup> and on the ambiguous relationships between *creation*

16. The philosopher Herbert Marcuse would describe as ‘repressive tolerance’ this new form of censorship which no longer keeps you from thinking, publishing, or reading, but which dictates how you should think, publish and read.

and *prohibition*. It is clear that prohibition obstructs creation, but paradoxically it can also be a precondition for it, in the sense that cunning (*métis*), the art of detour, adds the enjoyment of transgressing forbidden territories, producing an oblique form of writing (the famous *logica esquiva* evoked by Leo Strauss in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*). Individuals are never more creative than when they are forbidden to create.

## Books and African memory: reviewing the link

### *Books and their aporias: horizon, signs and meanings*

With the introduction of books, Africa rethinks its relationship with memory which must be defined in terms of multiplicity of entrance points. A collective memory<sup>17</sup> asserts itself only over time by producing detours, spaces and liaisons. This double role of linking, while at the same time separating, is taken on by books. Books in this way open a *horizon*, because in their nature and materiality, they seem to present the exigency of a meeting with the real while taking upon themselves the asymmetrical character of this meeting. In wanting to reduce the real through the written, books condense the signs while dispersing the meanings. It is this coming and going between the finiteness of the signs of a book (which can today be counted) and the infinity of meanings which makes books into objects of dissatisfaction, of hunger. All books 'hunger to exist' and, when they want to be the reflection of historical reality, they are only received as the opposite. If they want to be only a counterpoint to reality, complicities of tone and expression will quickly be found for them within

17. This expression holds weighty implications, in that it relates to the subject who holds this memory and to the state of this memory. Can one speak of a 'collective subject' who holds or produces this memory? The 'proletariat's adventure' as a 'collective subject for itself', messenger of humanity's emancipation, such as Marxist politicians and certain theorists have taught, is so eloquent that we tend to distrust the term 'collective memory' with its corollary, 'the productive collective subject' of this memory. The institution of the social is not a matter of an atomised individual either, as the creation of the imaginary institution (Castoriadis) cannot spare the community of significance which preforms within a sociohistorical formation the veracity and validity of the discourse that each subject holds in regard to his or her history and on the latter's imbrications with other histories. As for this memory's state, it remains a constantly gaping opening which further implies the term of state. The state is not static but a process of opening towards an elsewhere. One must also ask 'state of what?' All this leads to considering the notion of collective memory not as a state, but as the provisional welding of dispositions, positions and propositions, linking the subjects in a community of significations.

the reality they set out to analyse and critique. Books are therefore in a tenuous position where all that is left to them is to admit their indigence, which is also their wealth. This object-book is a pile of stated things – polished or crude – which opens onto a horizon represented by the process of saying, of enunciation. This object introduces a significant change in African historical memories. First it indicates that this memory must see itself in an aporetic manner. African memory, like books, hungers to exist. Afterwards, its own endeavour, on the margins of the accumulation of experiences, remains the permanent negotiation between the finiteness of the signs of sociohistoric experiences and the infinity of their meanings. How does a historical memory produce its horizon of meaning in the middle ground between signs and their significance?

### *Memory and narrative community*

How does a historical memory combine the *closed* nature of its enunciated terms (always local, nationalistic and dated) with *openness* through its enunciation process (which is a constant call towards the possible)? Books beckon the African memory to pay attention to the notion of *narrative community*. A book is always a composition enriched by the work of imagination. It is the latter which situates and inserts a book into the tragi-comedy of existence. The imagination, and not just the market, makes the book a wandering object which, albeit limited in its diction and circulation within university, commercial and media circles, finds the drive to move elsewhere, so as to tell the readers, who would shut it into its own little particular story, that it is a wanderer and belongs to everyone, to humanity. It can only justifiably belong to humanity if it is, however, anchored in a narrative community which a group has adopted. Every book expresses the narratives elaborated by a community. Hence the African historical memory, taking its inspiration from the experience of books, will have to operate this change of perspective; to be not only evocation, or invocation of the past, but also convocation of the *not yet* present. And for this not-yet to come into being, memory must ‘cobble together’ its relationships with the multiple ways in which it is ‘put into narrative’. *It is as narrative that Memory is initially constituted* – and like books – as a putting into narrative.

All this coexists in a process where, as in the case of a history book, one articulates ‘that which has really happened’, both narrated and conveyed through speech and practices, and that which did not really happen but is nevertheless conveyed through speech and practices. In the book transmission process, one can set

apart the books which reveal what has happened,<sup>18</sup> thus denoting a kind of authenticity, as well as the apocryphal stories which are also conveyed, but play varying roles of confusing or illuminating the discreet charms of authenticity. The process of establishing apocryphal stories in the transmission of books has a connotation: all transmission is the construction of a fiction. In relation to the African memory, the question arising from this experience of books is that of reintegrating, within the fragmentation and transmission of collective memories, no longer the truth of facts which have come to pass, but the inauthenticity of fiction. How can African historical memories, today trapped in a *via dolorosa* that reflects a feeling of permanent victimization, make a self-critical turn-about that can discern the apocryphal dimension in establishing discourses about themselves? Not everything that a book reports is *true*, even if it is *valid* from an argumentative point of view; likewise, not everything that Africans say about themselves and African history is true, even if it is valid. This leads to another problem that books raise in Africa: in a historical experience, should one favour the *truth* of the reported facts or the *validity* of the discourses? And can there be a *fact* without the *discourse* which organizes it, gives it its logic and reports it? What is a *fact* without the *fiction* that shapes it and organizes its presentation? In other words, what is a *truth* without the process of demonstration which *validates* it? In the truths transmitted by collective African memories, what is the dimension of the fictional discourse and how are the ‘apocryphal stories’ of oral transmission organized?

*Between the oral and the written: books, distances and imprints*

Some historians, like Le Goff, think that writing effects an historical transformation in the collective memory of oral civilizations. In fact, it has almost become a habit in university circles to talk of oral societies only in the framework of the distinction between the *oral* and the *written*. On the one hand, we find those who, like Jack Goody, believe that the appearance of writing is an advancement that implies modifications of the psyche because mnemonic processes which allow for ‘word for

18. It is fitting to observe that the ‘past situation’, once it has been captured by the historian’s or the writer’s discourse, becomes a construction. One reports an authentic event only by reconstructing it. (See, in this regard, the epistemologists of history: A. Prost, *Douze leçons sur l’histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 1996; R. Aron, *Dimensions de la conscience historique*, Paris, Plon, 1961; M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou le métier d’historien*, Paris, A. Colin, 1960 (*An Apology for History or the Profession of Historian*); P. Aries, *Temps de l’histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 1986; P. Nora, ‘Passés recomposés. Champs et chantiers de l’histoire’, in *Autrement* (Mutations series), No. 150–1, 1985.)

word' memorization are linked with writing.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand are those who enthuse over the oral, finding in its plasticity the ferment *par excellence* of historical memory. What has not been said and done about the phrase of the colonial official and Malian writer Hampâté Bâ: 'An old man who dies in Africa is a library that is burning down'?<sup>20</sup> I would rather go beyond the written/oral distinction to emphasize, as Paul Zumthor did, that every written text carries 'oral clues'<sup>21</sup> which writing cannot purely and simply liquidate. Far from choosing between the written and the oral, what is important is to scrutinize how the oral and the written are interwoven in the constitution or destruction of social memory. The gamble of this interweaving is in the *notion of imprints*. The imprint obeys time, and tries to struggle, both against the rubbing out of its former marks and the territory not yet traced. From this moment, the imprint commemorates its support, the written is always a memorial which, somehow, signs the death warrant of the marked object, while words (which imprint, and are also imprints in their own way) perpetually replay their future to escape dissipation. In this dialectic between an imprint which is experienced as a monument in memory, and one which marks out its furrow in the same terms that will imply its effacement, books on arriving in Africa prod the African memory to a rethinking of the notion of imprint in a critical period. What does it mean to leave an imprint in a time of crisis? Can one reduce everything to the scriptural trace? Events such as the genocide in Rwanda, beyond the question of justice, were not seeking the effacement of imprints; and that was the reason for urging African intellectuals to write about the genocide during a training course in a Kigali hotel (under the surveillance of the local government), to trace on paper an experience which no words can

19. Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 120 (*History and Memory*, Columbia University Press, 1992 [1977]). He quotes, but also comments, Jack Goody's proposals, *La raison graphique: la domestication de la pensée sauvage*, traduction de Alban Bensa, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1979, p. 192–3 (*Domestication Of The Savage Mind*, Cambridge University Press, 1977).

20. This proposition – which has been exploited – is naturally inaccurate. The Library symbolizes knowledge; this sentence of Bâ's, in this sense, means that in Africa all elders are wise. This is false, because knowledge in traditional societies was a matter of élites. It was accessible only to those who passed the ordeals of initiation. There were indeed some old men who had failed these ordeals in their time. In addition, where does one find a society in which everyone is wise once they grow old? Knowledge is tension, conquest, trial and effort, and not a 'state'. Hampaté Bâ's sentence must be reviewed in the context of Africa's intergenerational struggle with its quarrels of legitimacy and hierarchy.

21. Paul Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix. De la littérature médiévale*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, p. 37: 'By "oral clues" I mean all that, inside of a text, informs us of the intervention of the human voice in its publication: I mean in the mutation through which the text has passed, from a virtual state to an actual state . . . Each text . . . demands a singular hearing: it contains its own oral clues . . .'

adequately describe. Can the genocide, a wound which will always remain open before the African consciousness, be ‘condensed’, summarized by a few carefully distilled and controlled formulae? And yet, books are still an appeal to the Other.

*‘Structures of appeal’ and ‘horizons of waiting’*

Studies on reading distinguish, in every reception of a book, structures of appeal and horizons of expectation. It is the famous literary school of Constance (Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser)<sup>22</sup> which has put forward these two notions. Every book is produced and received through the angle of fulfilled or still open social expectations, as though these expectations were suction devices propelling the book towards an elsewhere, beyond its little community. Society’s expectations are usually in contradiction. And as books are pulled between the *time of expectation* and *the time of appeal*, how is the *concordance of time* created in the heart of a society? How can one *think temporality* through books in the very terms of their *discordance*, in that expectations are always disappointed by appeals? Books are a means of instituting the social because, through them, we are at the centre of the games that are played with time by the anticipations of imagination and the relations of the subject with otherness. Books are thus ‘memory’ and ‘promise’.<sup>23</sup> As promise, they are our ‘link with the future’. And when they become ‘critical’, they deliver the future.

**Book policies: what is their future?**

*Colonial ideologies: what educative politics for books?*

When books – excepting the Koran – were introduced in the colonial period, they served several purposes, the first of which was economic. The governor of French West Africa, Mr Brevié, affirmed that ‘colonial duty and political and economic necessities impose a dual task on our work: it is to train native managers who are destined to become our auxiliaries in all fields. . . . From an economic point of view . . . it is to prepare the producers and consumers of tomorrow’.<sup>24</sup> Brevié also committed, on 10 May 1924, a decree that reorganized education, of which article 64 stipulates that: ‘French will be the only language in schools. Teachers are

22. See Hans Robert Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978 (*Towards An Aesthetics of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

23. See Didier Cahen, ‘Les réponses du livre’, in *Écrire le livre*, ‘Autour d’Edmond Jabès’, Colloque de Cerisy, Champ Vallon, 1989, p. 57–70.

24. Brevié, *Bulletin de l’enseignement en AOF*, No. 74, p. 3.

forbidden to use local idioms.<sup>25</sup> The second was political. Books served to give a dependent mentality and an inferiority complex to Africans. Regarding teaching programmes, Roume, another governor-general of French West Africa, affirms: ‘Through well conducted instruction, it is necessary to lead the native to a suitable perception of his race. . . . It is an excellent means of subduing the vanity to which he is inclined, to render him modest. . . . All teaching of history and geography must tend to show that France is a rich, powerful nation capable of making itself respected.’<sup>26</sup> The final purpose was pedagogical. Books also contributed, during this period, to a better knowledge of others, because after all, whatever their intentions, the best grammars, dictionaries and judicial compendiums of African languages and civilizations resulted from the patient work of missionaries and colonial administrators. How has this legacy of books been taken after independence?

*Independence and contradiction: books ‘break down’*

African independence was culturally supported by the various nationalist movements and by *négritude*,<sup>27</sup> the aim of which was to give back to Africans their ‘souls’. Literature was written in national languages and means for the diffusion of African thought were created (editions, collections by specialized publishers in France). The need for books made itself felt in the literacy plan and governments formulated audacious strategies. But with the economic crisis of the years 1970–90, the politics of books suffered a great setback. Here are some obstacles which prevent African books from fully playing their role today:

- Authoritarian regimes (single-party and Marxist), through censorship, have not encouraged free publishing.
- Editorial initiatives are often imprisoned by subsidies from the French government, from Muslim or Christian groups, and from NGOs, all of which impose, through their priorities, what may and may not be published.
- The basic problem with libraries, which depend either on solely French-language sources (with the restrictions that this implies), or on government sources (with the demands that this implies).

25. Ibid., No. 83.

26. Gouverneur Roume, *Journal officiel de l’AOF*, 10 mai 1924, No. 1024.

27. Literary movement (approximately 1930–60) that began among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris as a protest against French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation. [Translator’s note.]

- The notions of profitability and immediacy which trust the army and the market in preference to the university.
- The lack of faith in thought that universities and intellectual élites display as they invest in financial and political networks.
- The absence of a tradition of reading combined with ideological sub-products diffused through the audio-visual media.
- The fact that African intellectual production (not counting sculpture and music) is considered to be ‘fringe’ production at the international level.

### To conclude, perhaps: books and the fiduciary relationship

The problem of books in Africa is not only logistical. What is needed is neither just libraries, nor computerization which heralds a little too soon the end of books in favour of the Internet, but a *relationship of trust*. In Africa, there is less and less faith in knowledge. Faith is invested in religiosity, money and power. One needs to search therefore on a symbolic level for the founding prohibitions which structure our relationship with faith (not religious). What is it to have confidence within the public arena? One should perhaps reconsider in Africa the *symbolic wounds* from the chasms of which something can be said. It would not be without interest to look again at the attitudes of the subject in its relation to what is the *promise*, how to assure critical vigilance and the ‘*maintaining of oneself in the promise*’.<sup>28</sup> Books are promise, and the important thing is not the content of the promise (which can be harmful or dishonest) but its momentum. Through books, we sound out what makes the *link* and who institutes the social. ‘*Lier et lire* (link and read), they are the same letters, pay attention to this’, Lacan says.<sup>29</sup> Books link us to history and make us ‘inhabit time’ through the power of this liaison. They will bear fruit in Africa only if a trusting relationship with knowledge is re-established. ‘The history of the representation of books . . . is like that of the mirror: symbol of knowledge and vanity, of life and death. A double search for oneself and for others . . . books are a mirror; to read is to look in the mirror.’<sup>30</sup> The mirror reflects, deforms, produces the double. But, watch out – it must be handled carefully: it is breakable!

28. P. Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, p. 99.

29. J. Lacan, *Le séminaire*, Livre 20, Encore, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 109 (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 20, New York, W. W. Norton).

30. A. Marie Chartier, J. Hébrard, *Discours sur la lecture*, Paris, Fayard, 1989, p. 540.



# Metamorphoses of the book and of reading

Maurice Aymard

The anxiety surrounding the future of books in the electronic era is surprising. It concerns in fact the parts of the world which are the most literate, the most deeply influenced by European culture and the most dependent, in their daily workings, upon written materials presented in printed form. These are the very regions where demand for production and circulation of information has not ceased to stimulate increasingly accelerated innovation and improvement.

Civilian, and no longer purely military, applications of this innovation were made initially in response to the needs of restricted scientific communities, leading to the formation of 'clubs' of which all members knew or recruited each other. Little by little, they spread to increasingly larger circles, growing into veritable networks without borders, which, in turn, on developing and dynamically expanding, were often put to other uses: it became necessary to attract, include or seduce, by any means, actors who were strangers to each other and indeed knew nothing about one another. Initially limited primarily to personal messages on a borderline between the oral and the written, these means began to apply to more elaborate texts, the speed of circulation urging an upstream feedback to the original writer, resulting in a search for a more direct style, which disregards or modifies the rules of formal correspondence and the notion of a finalized, 'ready to print' text. Today, this innovation is pushing against the boundaries of publishing, calling into question every aspect of book production, distribution, consumption and, even more profoundly, affecting the very concept of text as well as the author–reader relationship.

At the same time, electronic publishing is enriched by other potentialities, which give it a definite advantage over the classic book format: the possibility to combine, in one and the same medium, not only text and images, but also sound, and to endow this combination with a dynamic, mobile (no longer static), as well as interactive character (providing the 'reader' with freedom and chances for far greater initiative in the way he or she consults a document).

Fundamentally, however, 'the electronic era' signals a continuity just as much as it does a splitting point in relation to Gutenberg. It effectively releases the printed word from many constraints which, notwithstanding the progress begun at the beginning of the nineteenth century in particular, had persisted over the last five centuries. But its logic is the same.

The volume of information circulated in printed form is no longer limited by capacities and costs of composition and printing by specialist companies: any division of labour is abolished because any author can compose a text and choose where to send it, and any reader can choose to read the text on screen, print it out, keep it, transmit it to others or throw it away, as well as, of course, reply to it, and thereby become an author as well. The printed word has thus managed something which it had only begun to do a century ago with the typewriter: to absorb a large chunk of the territory until then reserved to the handwritten word which, in reaction to the invention of the printing press, had become the sign of individuality and intimacy: the instrument of personal correspondence and literary creation, but also, through signature (which had replaced the seal) and graphology, the deepest and most inimitable expression of the personality. This victory of the printed word has also reached countries like China and Japan, where ideograms had obstructed the use of the typewriter, while they work well on a computer.

From now on, there are no more limits, whether spatial or temporal, to the circulation of text: liberated from all physical support (other than the terminals necessary for emission and reception), text is perceived by the user as instantaneous (the only delays being due to the jams which can build up on the information highway), and indifferent to distances, as if the whole world were living in the same time zone. The printed word can compete with the spoken, which moves at the same rhythm in the sense that it uses the same instrument of coded transmission: a telephone, which is itself, more and more often, digital.

Former limits, today forgotten, are replaced by others, such as the effects of various forms of saturation: saturation of computer memories, overburdened, despite the growth in their capacities, by the flow of messages which one does not

dare throw away, as if everything that is written must be preserved; saturation of the reading capacities of receivers, and the growing difficulty of getting their attention; exhaustion of the authors, incapable of meeting the demands for texts, and tempted to work up, using 'cut and paste', a patchwork out of fragments of texts written by themselves or others, offsetting the plurality of all the possible readings with reiterations of the same text paralysis of the networks, which mushroom at an excessive speed, eliciting distrust or indifference, if not a desire to return to more restricted circles of communication, protected from any virus or indiscretion – to reconstitute, in other words, the hierarchies and the private places within a system now judged too open to everyone and, finally, saturation of the access to stocks of information that fall prey to their own sheer size and to their users' expectations, which are all the greater for being at least partly utopian, of being supplied with truly encyclopaedic knowledge (or simply information).

Of course, the game is far from over and any assessment made today can rapidly be outdated by technical innovations and practical modifications. Handwriting could sooner or later find its rightful place on screen, putting an end to the reign of the keyboard, itself celebrated in a famous article by the economist Paul David as the model of long-term technical choices which engendered something rigid and irrevocable on a more or less long-term basis (in this case only a century, a rather short span for a historian trained in the school of Fernand Braudel, whose 'long-term prisons' illustrated, twenty years earlier, the same intuition). The mediation of all personal writing is part of a wide range of possibilities, the computer itself transcribing into text the spoken word. The screen, now an irreplaceable element in the chain, wavers between miniaturization (pocket computers) and enlargement (allowing the juxtaposition of several texts), and could well be replaced by more supple and less constrictive supports. In the same way, changes may come to affect the preferences of the users, between reading directly from the screen or printing out texts prepared (for more attentive correction) or received (for a reading and eventual classification that is more in keeping with their habits or needs). And many are those who still prefer libraries (the catalogues of which are on screen) as an access to books, over works digitized and on screen.

But whatever the possible changes, they are inscribed within the perspective of a generalization and multiplication of writing as a tool for communication, circulation of information, transmission of knowledge and access to knowledge. Undeniably this generalization and multiplication today concern only a minority of countries and populations on this planet. The importance of the material and

qualified human resources required by computerization and by the creation and maintenance of networks contributes to deepening the divide between the 'poor' and the 'rich': will the logic of market expansion, the search for new customers, suffice to attract, on the part of both public and private institutions, as well as individuals, the necessary investments which, once paid off, will bring about a lowering of costs? Unreserved optimism would certainly be inappropriate. But have not books and letters already passed by the same route? Expensive products, reserved for the élite, books have been gradually 'democratized'. The important thing to understand is that the current changes are setting a new stage in their history: e-books and e-mail exist, have developed and have imposed themselves solely in reference to this history, even if their effects could turn out to be revolutionary in the longer term.

If books appear to be threatened today, it is because they have earned a privileged place and status in our culture: a text can be both a religious and a literary reference; it warrants reproduction and transmission as protection against oblivion, but it also requires reading for appropriation of – and identification with – a culture, or a body of knowledge of a more professional nature (law, medicine, theology) or disinterested character (philosophy, poetry, etc.). Printing not only multiplies the number of copies in circulation and ensured wider access to a greater number of works (quantitative impact), but it also led to the development of scholarly disciplines which competed to find the purity of original texts, to free them of all additions, gratuitous or otherwise, and transcription errors, and thereby to establish unique sources of reference (qualitative impact). But for purposes of textual presentation, it had adopted the form of the *codex*, consisting of folded and assembled pages, which, in the Middle Ages, came to replace the scroll (*volumen*) of classical antiquity – a mutation which it seems possible to date to between the second and fourth centuries, and in which the reproduction of the original texts of Christianity seems to have played a pioneering role.<sup>1</sup> This form lent itself particularly well to the religious purposes of the texts, associating the readings of the different passages of the sacred scriptures to the rhythm of the hours, the days, the months. But among other advantages, it also allowed for cursory reading, for the identification of passages (thanks to the numbering of pages and the establishment of indexes and tables of contents), and for comparison between different pages from the same work or other works.

1. Roger Chartier, 'Les représentations de l'écrit', *Culture écrite et société: L'ordre des livres (XIV<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996, p. 33–5.

If computers take, from this point of view, a backward step in that they unfurl the text before our eyes like an antique *volumen*, they compensate for this through pagination, indexation and the possibility to search for specific words or phrases and to print a text which reconstitutes the familiar form of the *codex*. But, above all, thanks to hypertext, they propose a radically new mode of reading which is infinitely freer than that of the book yet still situated in the same logic. Hypertext allows infinite possibilities for comparison, potentially linking each point of a text with any other, and introduces in this way a sort of reading on demand, playing upon underlying and often hidden structures of the text.<sup>2</sup>

But the challenge confronting computers also crossed the path of printing: that of language, or rather the absence of a common language, even if the situation in this regard may appear in 2000 diametrically opposed to that of 1500. Printing was invented in a context where European intellectuals mastered one common language, Latin, and seemed to serve to multiply the works of reference in this language. Very quickly, however, the demands of the clientele and the needs of governments put printing in the service of affirming national languages, as much to the expense of Latin, international language, as of the dialects, which were thus relegated to the ranks of the oral.

English emerges today as the apparent common language of the electronic era, if only because computers, along with their programmes and the networks in which the internavts surf,<sup>3</sup> were often conceived and built in that language. But even if governments intervene very little, or marginally, to impose their languages on users who wish to benefit from all the freedom afforded by their new machines, national languages have quickly gained an upper hand, ensuring the adaptation of computers and their programmes to their users' demands; even if a growing number of users read and write several languages, these languages maintain their major role in daily communication. Hence, it becomes necessary to adapt the computer's capacities to the requirements of these languages (alphabetic, syllabic or ideographic), including spell check and grammar correction programmes. Having underlined in red, as a protest or warning in the fashion of my former schoolteachers, the words 'e-mail' and 'e-book', not to mention *primavera*, *verano*, and *muerte*, my

2. Umberto Eco, 'From Internet to Gutenberg', a lecture presented by Umberto Eco at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America on November 12, 1996, was consulted by the author in the Catalan version published in *Debats*, primavera/verano 2000 [Spring–Summer 2000], No. 69, 'La muerte incierta del libro y su cultura', p. 66–75.

3. In English in the original text [Tr. note].

computer has just warned me that ‘patchwork’ is an ‘anglicism’<sup>4</sup> and suggested that I use instead, as proposed by the *Journal Officiel* of the French Republic, the words ‘mosaïne’ or ‘arlequine’. The existence of these words was as unknown to me as it was to my *Larousse Lexis* Dictionary, edited, admittedly, in 1982, but comprising 76,000 words and covering classical, literary, and contemporary language, as well as ‘regional words and words of French-speaking countries’. It is a blessing that the same programme allows me to ignore its recommendations . . .

On closer inspection, national languages are not the only ones to benefit from this new context: regional languages are offered the possibility and the right to a place which printing refused or barely acknowledged for a long time. By pitting flexibility against mass production, the electronic era enlarges and renews in spectacular fashion the ‘world of possibilities’.<sup>5</sup> It permits a cost-effective decentralization of production, circulation and consumption of ‘short’ print runs, in so far as expenses are borne by authors and readers, and not by editors, printers, distributors and booksellers. If found profitable, these could create and organize new markets for the possible implantation of classical publishing. The combination of global and local could now play more easily on different scales, giving new impetus to the traditional debate between languages and dialects, in which the existence of a written literature and grammar had drawn the line.

One can thus distinguish three levels of text production and circulation, according to the language used: the language of international communication (English, and to a lesser extent Spanish, French and Portuguese), national languages and regional languages. At each of these levels there are just as many definitions of ownership, arising essentially from decisions of private organisms and individuals, which in turn go beyond those of the national state authorities. In maintaining their national languages at the centre of their educational systems and everyday life, states have indeed no other choice but to promote learning an international language at school (indispensable in all sectors subject to competition) and to tolerate, even if not to support, the learning of regional languages demanded by families and encouraged by local authorities. From one of these levels to another there is no other possible mediator but the individuals themselves, who find themselves in a position that obligates them to operate on several linguistic registers, as long as automatic

4. This article was written in French before being translated into English [Tr. note].

5. Charles F. Sabel, Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), *World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization*, Cambridge/Paris, Cambridge U. Pr. / Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1977.

translation software does not attain the quality needed to ensure their credibility. Numerous actors are themselves multilingual, so there is nothing rigid about this superposing of levels: it offers a margin for freedom of choice and, depending on the circumstances and the contents of the information involved, a chance to redefine the notion of networks with mobile frontiers.

However, to emphasize only the liberty of the actors and the new possibilities which a redefined book production and distribution chain can offer authors and readers is to distort the picture. The importance of the investments required by digitization, the planetary dimension of communications markets which go far beyond any book market frontiers, the judiciary framework of copyrights, the variety of forms in which the same text can be presented to different audiences (book or CD-ROM, simple or multimedia, film or television programme, etc.) have all contributed to the emergence of large companies operating on an international scale. Such companies today seem not only to influence – through costly advertising campaigns, production, distribution and sales, which, in a nutshell, create the best-sellers – but also to determine creation itself.<sup>6</sup> More than ever, it comes down to a matter of scale. Between total freedom for all to edit and distribute their texts and select their readers, and total domination by big corporations with the power to model and orient consumers' tastes, there is an open contest.

It would be better therefore to set aside the pointless or falsely apocalyptic speculations about those three associated deaths: the death of the book, the death of the author (announced in 1968 by Roland Barthes in a completely different context, admittedly, because the author was the victim not of the machine, but of the all-powerfulness of the reader), and the death of the reader. One thing is certain: the Gutenberg Galaxy, that of the generalization of written communication in printed form (but necessarily using the paper medium), is more alive and solid than ever, contrary to the pessimistic prophecies of Marshall McLuhan, who announced the end of this phenomenon due to the victory of the image. New technologies have replaced the text, which can now be accompanied not only by the image, virtual or real, static or moving, but also by sound, at the centre of a renewed system of communication that is open to the active participation of the reader. The universe of Internet is a universe of readers and authors. It is also a universe of books – even if books are called upon to change simultaneously their support, form and content; and even if the definitions of 'authors' and 'readers' are called upon to change, along

6. Roger Chartier, *Le livre en révolutions*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1977, p. 146–8.

with their relationships with each other and with 'books'. This is because to give these three 'objects', inscribed in history, a stability and permanence that they have never had would be a fundamental error of perspective.

In fact, such an assessment of the Internet universe highlights a first, and doubtless the deepest, limit of our debate about books. Whom does it concern, in fact? Is it just a minority, a reduced percentage which is, in addition, very unequally distributed on a world scale, for whom new technologies have been developed in answer to growing needs for information and communication of information, a minority endowed with the will and the means to make the necessary investments? Is it the totality of the world's population, or even only the totality of its élites?

In sub-Saharan Africa, books could be perceived, with their readers, as excluding the community, in that they are objects of an individual reading, solitary and silent. But let us think about what the history of reading has been in Western Europe in the modern and medieval epoch: individual reading has been a slow conquest here (or the product of a long evolution, if one prefers to avoid the triumphalist connotation of the word conquest). It spanned at least six or seven centuries. It was firstly a deed of monks, those professional readers whose very status meant they lived cut off from the rest of the world. Reading has long coexisted with the practice of reading aloud, at times individually, but often collectively for those who, like the eighteenth-century French peasants at evening gatherings, could barely read, if at all. They preferred to receive and to seize the text in this manner, rather than in that which today seems to us superior and obvious, but in fact meets a double need: that of a rapid reading, allowing each individual to assimilate more quickly a growing flow of complex and subtle information, the oral being seen now as simplifying; and also that of silence, felt to be necessary to proper understanding, as if the sound of a voice were an obstacle. Significantly, wherever the reading aloud of a written text persists as a practice, outside of religious ceremonies of course, it tends to hide itself behind an apparent improvisation of the spoken word: the television journalist seems to look us in the eyes, when in fact he or she is reading the edited text displayed on the prompter situated behind the camera. Teaching itself tends to relegate to a secondary activity the ancient practice of reading texts aloud, either by the teacher, who for a long time was called a 'reader', or by the pupil.

History persuades us that the stage of the book, and all it entails in terms of the restricted or generalized relations of a society with a written culture that is fixed and diffused in manuscript or printed form, cannot be passed over, at least not



entirely. The situation today is very different from the one which was created a little over five centuries ago by the invention of printing using mobile characters in Western Europe.

Printing took root in societies where reading and access to books was still the privilege of a minority. It first made it possible to produce at lower costs greater quantities of books for a public accustomed to manuscripts. But very quickly publishers began to diversify production and lower its costs even more, in order to reach a new audience which had never had and would never have otherwise had access to manuscripts. They profited from conditions which were favouring literacy through schools, encouraged in the same era for different reasons by churches and states, but also by families, which were called upon to finance small schools in towns and villages, just as they financed their children's studies in colleges and universities.

To reach new audiences, the same publishers encouraged a remarkable growth in the field of the written word, which led to making two distinctions. One is the distinction between the text, restored to its original form, and the commentary or annotations (glossary) which handwritten texts tended to integrate into the text itself, a practice which computers have revived. The other is the distinction between the wisdom acquired by preceding generations and even civilizations, symbolized by ancient texts, religious or otherwise, and original creation (or at least what appeared to be or aspired to be), exercised in new or renewed genres: poetry, philosophy, history, the novel, the short story, the essay, in fact everything that we call literature today, which has had to assert itself through numerous 'renaissances' and not least numerous quarrels between 'ancients and moderns', which aimed at legitimizing the rifts, in other words, the right to innovation compared to simple respect for tradition.

Among the transformations effected by printing, one that is worthy of note is the recuperation of the oral tradition by scholarly literature, which often precedes its being made available through books, illustrated or otherwise, to a large audience, thanks to simplified editions, a route taken and symbolized by Perrault's *Contes*.<sup>7</sup>

From this point of view, Menocchio is only partially representative of the transformations begun in the sixteenth century. His passage through a public elementary school remains a hypothesis, deduced by Carlo Ginzburg from the fact that

7. For an English language version of these fairy tales, see Charles Perrault, *Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales*, tr. A. E. Johnson, London, Penguin (Puffin Classics), 2000.

he knew how to ‘read, write and count’, but not at all proven. Any doubts are reinforced by the fact that he is in no way concerned with transmitting his knowledge to all his children, because at least one of his sons, Ziannuto, the one who appears the most often during the trial, is illiterate. The ten or so works which he seems to have read, if we deduct from the quotes he took from them, be they religious (the *Bible*, the *Légende dorée* by Jacques de Voragine) or otherwise (John Mandeville, Boccaccio),<sup>8</sup> are mainly texts which pre-date printing. And even if he reads them alone, moreover uncritically, he hastens to share his reading orally with those around him, as though a one-to-one relationship with the text were not enough for him, and he needed both the intermediary and the confirmation of the spoken word and the sharing with others of the contents of the message or ideas which inspired him: we must wait for more than a century for Spinoza’s formulation of the famous ‘*larvatus prodeo*’. Schools, with all their forms of learning and training, but at the same time their hierarchy of knowledge and the regulation of use of knowledge, have not yet reached this point. Yet the books we speak of today are directly linked with schools, and more generally, with a whole system of education through which the organized reproduction of our knowledge passes. The place for truly self-taught people in the field of culture has not stopped shrinking.

We must therefore take account of this institutional force and presence of books, and not only of reading, in our societies, at least in those with a largely or mostly literate population. This force and presence go far beyond the aesthetic pleasure that we intellectuals can experience in seeing, holding, caressing the cover, smelling the paper and ink of a book. This aesthetic pleasure alone would not ensure the survival of books if they were not profoundly inscribed in our mental habits, to the point that the book’s format dictates all the modern electronic adaptations: characters, format, page set-up, etc. In order to resemble books better, all *Softbooks*, *Rocketbooks* or *Everybooks* have a device which allows for the passage of one page to another.<sup>9</sup> The most elaborate present the text in the form of a double page, and some even have a leather cover. Will the electronic book be obliged, in order to impose itself, to hide and make itself forgotten?

8. Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi*, Turin, Einaudi, 1976, p. 4, 10 and 35 (French tr. Monique Aymard, *Le fromage et les vers*, Paris, Flammarion, 1980, p. 34, 40 and 65; *The cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated into English by John and Anne Tedeschi, New York, Penguin Books, 1982).

9. Steve Silberman, ‘Ex libris: La satisfaccion de “enrollarse” con un buen dispositivo de lectura digital’, *Debats*, op. cit., p. 94–103.

Whatever is said, the chances are that books have a long future ahead of them. They enjoy a certain prestige and a reputation for all that they have achieved in the past. And in terms of cost they are still competitive, once the print runs reach a certain level. Even for 1,000 copies, the printing represents only between a third and a half of the real costs (impossible to reduce if the final quality of the text is to be maintained) of composition and preparation of 'ready for print' text. And this percentage diminishes rapidly when the print run increases. And for those who continue to prefer reading on paper to reading a text received via Internet, the cost of using a printer (in the region of US\$0.20 per page) is strictly marginal compared with the high quality composition and page lay-out of a text supplied on diskette by an author to his or her editor (at least US\$11–14 per page, and often more). The real weakness of books as industrial serial products, which in addition keep infinitely better and for longer than any of the existing electronic supports, is actually elsewhere: distribution costs double or triple the price of books when they are diffused through the traditional circuit of the bookshop, which we find nonetheless essential to preserve. And one can easily see that the big communications groups, while championing the defence of the rights of their authors (who set up their own copyright), aspire to eliminate the intermediaries of diffusion and distribution in order to reach the reader directly, and make their own investments as lucrative as possible by benefiting from the price of downloading. The competition of electronic publishing is thus likely to transform, on a certain number of essential points, the very conditions of writing, of shaping text, of placing it within the reach of its audience, and finally, of reading itself.

Faced with the proliferation of written materials and print-outs, reading risks becoming even more individual and solitary, more rapid and selective at the same time, but equally more interactive for the reader, who will discover the right to intervene in the text proposed. Reading will also use more and more often the resources made available by hypertext.

As the composition of printed matter has been done over the last ten years or so through electronic word processing and digitization, texts will tend to circulate in a multitude of forms and in varying proportions depending on their nature. It appears nowadays legitimate to think that electronic accessibility and circulation are likely to take the upper hand as far as several categories of text are concerned:

- Daily information, all reliant on speed for being eminently perishable: the majority of our newspapers already propose on-line editions.

- Encyclopaedic type information, which could in this way meet its needs for storage capacity, permanent updating and timely consultation by a growing number of users. Or again, in the same vein, the textbooks offered to students, which would be accompanied by increasingly attractive and effective teaching materials.
- The long-distance consultation of books and magazines, through on-line libraries and web access to on-line publications. One cannot but consider paradoxical, moreover, the fact that it is those who present and perceive themselves as the most avid defenders of books who are most likely to be the principal users of this universal library of which they have dreamt for so long.
- The publication and circulation of difficult, specialized or rare texts, written in rarely diffused languages, destined for too small a number of readers to be able to pass through more traditional circuits of publishing and bookshops.
- Communications within the ‘Republic of Letters’,<sup>10</sup> already so greatly transformed by the use of the telephone, the fax and the Internet that traditional correspondence has been emptied of most of its essential content.

One can equally imagine that the writing of certain texts, though not necessarily all, is likely to change in light of the new possibilities arising in the electronic communications environment. Writing will tend to become less individual and more collective, appealing to veritable ‘producers’ and specialists of different media and techniques.

Possible or likely, all these choices, all these evolutions, all this compromising or sharing out of tasks, leave full and complete the central place that books currently hold as instruments of a direct dialogue, with no intermediary, between authors and readers, through something which we will continue to call a text. A text exists only because it was given a finished form, be it by its author, transcriber, even an unknown one, or by the editorial tradition. And, because it has readers, each reading, different, individual and free, brings it alive over and again.

May this relationship be destined to last, even if it changes, as everything seems to indicate. That it will be ‘eternal’ is an assumption that no historian would hazard to make – not even one who wished as much as I that this would come true.

10. Community formed by men and women of letters between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment which reached beyond political and religious frontiers.

# Reading into the future

# Written culture in the globalization era: what future for books ?

Milagros del Corral

Time accelerates more and more quickly: in 1997, for example, amazon.com did not exist. Still under the impact of the launching and commercialization of the first 500,000 numbered copies of the first e-book destined for the general public (*Riding the Bullet*, by Stephen King), we are surprised by the brief lapse of time (48 hours) it took young hackers to break through the technological protection, and release onto the Internet a host of clones of the book. This unexpected experience will certainly have given authors food for thought. It is not sure that this same Stephen King will remain in the history of horror stories for publishers, but he must certainly have sown seeds of terror among them when he decided simply to 'do without' his own. In presenting the latest of his works on his own website, he created a new commercial event: on 24 July 2000 the first chapter of his novel *The Plant* was found on-line, and 'downloadable' from an e-mail address. The popular author invited each of his readers to send him one dollar per chapter, warning them that he would stop writing the novel if this sum was not sent by at least 75 per cent. Of those who downloaded the first chapter, 76 per cent followed his instructions (100,000 people in just two days). This initiative, apparently anecdotal, is interesting in its proposal of a new paradigm for authors' rights, based on the voluntary payment of these rights, and its introduction of the concept of a publication without an editor, derived from the technique of the serial, revisited by the soap opera and served up with a technological sauce. It has fuelled a lively debate on the Internet's forums, with more partisans

than detractors, even though most of the commentators have concluded that the 'system' will only be worth it for authors with a large audience. We should note nonetheless that at the end of the publication of the sixth chapter, Stephen King decided to put *The Plant* on hold. The number of downloads having dropped to 40,000 and the percentage of paying readers reaching only 46 per cent, the author has for the moment turned back to the printed edition, after cashing US\$600,000 from this revolutionary experience. In parallel, he has nonetheless given to an electronic editor the commercialization of the six chapters at the price of US\$7. Would Frederick Forsythe and Arturo Pérez Reverte be able to better these results, or, on the contrary, would their enthusiasm wane when librarians begin to study the modalities for lending out e-books?

What does all this mean for the book community (authors, editors, distributors, bookshops, librarians, readers), which seemed so stable? What are the implications for the future of authors' rights, and the legal basis for negotiations in publishing? As all the discussions necessarily mention globalization, what could be the repercussions of this evolution for 80 per cent of the world's population, or the more than 1.2 million people who survive on less than \$1 a day?

### **The anatomy of books**

The domain of publishing is clearly confronted with a situation without precedent in its history. Until a short time ago, the 'cultural capital', that group of symbolic and intellectual elements created by human beings, was fixed upon a paper support, decoded by reading, and profitable by virtue of its circulation. The editor was the last link in the copyrights chain in a scheme which had overcome, without difficulty, and even with profits, the eruption of different technological developments – newspapers, cinema, television, new printing techniques – rendering ridiculous all the birds of ill-omen who announced the death of the book. At the moment we are seeing the dematerialization of this support and the questioning of authors' rights by Internet users, whose interest in the gratuity of contents coincides with that of new actors and network operators who are taking the place of the editor at the end of the chain. Important transformations occur regularly in the area of demand for cultural goods and services in a global context where the imbalance is growing, reinforced by commercial and technological globalization.

In the industrialized countries, cultural consumption is growing, but the supply becomes more competitive every day. The consumer is becoming more

conscious of and sensitive to the price factor, struggles against time and, because of this, searches for a personalized service in the areas of information and culture. The editing industry, oscillating between fascination and distrust vis-à-vis the new technologies, responds by continuously increasing the supply, and is subjected to growing legal insecurity in the protection of authors' rights. This produces high-risk investments, and leads to the creation of big multimedia holdings, as much in publishing as distribution, which are often financed by capital from outside the field and accustomed to higher returns on investment. In the new modes of functioning, the decisions of enterprises are based on economic, marketing reasons. What is becoming of the editors' cultural and educational functions? What will become of this sector's legendary plurality and diversity?

In the developing countries the situation is very different. The necessary conditions for the publishing sector to take off have yet to be united. Private demand exists and is important, but its purchasing power falls short of satisfying its needs in terms of education, culture and information. Public administrations, overcome by external debt and population growth, resort to international loans to import school books or decide to adopt only one text, edited and printed by the government authorities, which closes the school book market to local editors. Numerous developing countries possess a modern copyright legislation, often inspired by international organizations or bilateral pressures, but this does not prevent pirating and illegal production in the face of the governments' passivity – and at times complicity – to the detriment of legal imports and foreign investments, but above all, to the net disadvantage of the national publishing industry. The impact of new technologies is almost always of little importance and very costly due to the rarity of electrical and telephone infrastructures, or to the distrust of many governments vis-à-vis the Internet. This means, for example, that African internauts represent only 0.8 per cent of network users. In the meantime, Tuvalu has decided to sell its mythical 'domain name' (.tv) to a North American enterprise (dot.com). This little island in the Pacific, with a population of 10,000 and one of the lowest GNPs in the world, has thus jumped to the first ranks of the planet in terms of per capita revenue.

The challenge – and it is a sizeable one – is to make books accessible to the numerous citizens of the developing countries, confronted with serious economic and social problems, armed conflicts, embargoes, illiteracy and difficulties in controlling demographic growth, all of these factors hampering the consolidation of their education systems. It is ironic that just as MIT's E-Ink project, closely followed by Xerox/Gyricon's, prepares to launch in the latest technological fashion its



2 million e-books, and requests the collaboration of UNESCO for the selection of the 100 best titles for universal education, Senegal suggests, as an initiative for the millennium, a project entitled 'writing slates for all'. Must we resign ourselves to seeing these countries continue their development without editors, and without books with subject matter per se? Is their destiny that of simple consumers of imported electronic content, supposing that their development may one day give them the purchasing power?

We can only sketch out a response to the multiple cultural, sociological and ethnic interrogations that such facts evoke, and which today seem strongly linked to the future of books, an ancient and impressive technology which has managed to accompany human beings for five centuries as an irreplaceable tool for access to information, to the culture, knowledge and thoughts of our peers, or, more humbly, as an important part of our leisure.

### **From printing press to e-book: history repeats itself**

Book historians would know better than I how to establish analogies between the impact provoked in the past by the introduction of printing and what is happening today. They would probably remind us that books had to confront, in the beginning, the hostility of the university libraries and the distrust of rare book lovers who considered them horribly vulgar. They would probably point out that the first printers had to try to imitate manuscripts in order to win over the already flourishing university market for books, which was based until then on the lending of manuscripts to students who would copy them (obviously, by hand). This commerce had already been regulated in Paris, in Bologna, Oxford, Cambridge and in Prague, before the invention of printing. We could raise a passionate debate about the impact of printing on the contents of books, and the consequences of their leaving the monasteries and the universities in search of larger audiences, or the distrust that this revolutionary means of diffusing ideas aroused in governments. But one need not be a specialist in the history of books to measure their impact on the generation and dissemination of new ideas in the fields of literature, science, philosophy, religion and politics?

I will limit myself to pointing out that in this area there is '*nihil novum sub sole*' either. In effect, the new devices for the reading of e-books (Rocket, Cytale, Microsoft Reader, Copernicus, etc.) all try to resemble books as much as possible. The e-ink that I referred to even uses authentic pages – in white – of something which looks like paper. Bound and able to pass, at first glance, for a conventional

book, free of cables and plugs, it is quite simply supplied with two little discreet buttons on its back. The difference is that its invisible memory contains 100 books and 400 pages which magically 'write themselves' on the pages or 'erase themselves' by activating the buttons, and that we can read this pile of books, successively, in the type size that best suits our more or less weary eyes. And of course turn the pages at our own rhythm. We can equally underline the contents, add remarks, and reload them with new titles on to the Internet, if we have the little cable for connecting to a computer or a mobile telephone WAP, etc. Even the sensual pleasure of the feel of paper is bound to disappear . . .

### **The future of books: more questions than answers**

It is very difficult for the moment to foresee the reaction of the wider public to these 'new books', but there are very important signs in the areas of production and distribution. All the on-line bookshops, until now devoted to commercializing traditional books, are opening specialized sections for e-books or e-contents in their catalogues, or relating to the contents of this kind of publication, generally offering the added possibility of receiving a printed and personalized copy on demand. UNESCO Publishing is preparing in its turn to launch its first e-books, testing the reactions of readers to this way of saving on production and distribution costs.

One should nonetheless wonder if the eventual generalization of the e-book in the twenty-first century will work for or against cultural and linguistic diversity, and whether its large-scale introduction will contribute to the democratization of culture or to the appearance of a new élitism. Given the social gap between the rich and the poor, will conventional books limit themselves to fulfilling the needs of the most disfavoured social groups or will they become, on the contrary, luxury objects for collectors? Do e-books announce the end of censorship or the beginning of an even more perverse new 'censorship of the electronic market'? What will become of the conservation of the literary heritage for the future, robbed of its material support?

In addition, serious problems arise in relation to the viability, the permanence and the responsibility of the messages or the contents diffused on the Internet. This responsibility is linked to the question of authors' rights, to the technological problems of ensuring their protection in the digital format, and to the public's reluctance to pay for the contents. The recent copyrights ruling imposed on Napster concerning music will play a determining role in the solution found for

books as well as for audio-visual media. Will it lead to a common standard for the protection of works distributed on the Internet? At present, confusion still reigns and alliances between the different media are far from consolidated, each trying to perfect its own secure platform to make profits from downloads. Perhaps the controversial matter of authors' rights on the Internet will fizzle out if the tendency towards 'vertical control' of the network by a small number of actors generally distant from the book world is confirmed (for example, the absorption of Time Warner by AOL, of Universal by Vivendi, of Endemol by Telefonica). This would follow a model where contents, previously purchased by big multimedia groups, will be just an alibi, a mere pretext for attracting new subscribers – and more publicity – to the services which generate their real incomes. If this tendency wins out, what new ways of paying authors will need to be developed, in order to stimulate cultural and intellectual creation?

Nobody knows as yet if these novelties will shape the new face of the book in the twenty-first century or if, on the contrary, books will be buried, like so many other gadgets, in technology museums. It is impossible to foresee if school-children will be able to replace their heavy backpacks with little electronic devices, and even less what the impact of these new technologies will be on the process of learning. However, we do know that in the industrialized countries, it has been a long while since children learnt multiplication tables, the electronic calculator having triumphed over the masters of the old school. And it is therefore normal that publishers of schoolbooks are starting to worry seriously about the massive arrival of such competitors, to say nothing of the eventual end of the single book price, itself sacrificed to economic liberalization, and this with the hearty approbation of the beleaguered heads of families.

### **The impact on contents or how to conjugate the 'glocal'**

We know that schoolbook publishing, in all countries, is the most powerful sector of this industry, and that the big publishing groups have developed thanks to it. If this weakens, the effects will be felt by other editorial sectors with greater prestige but less profitability. This possibility could be accentuated if Stephen King's example is followed by other successful authors, whose highly profitable works indirectly finance publications destined to a minority – literary essays, new genres, debates of ideas, etc. – and much more difficult to sell. This could be one impact on contents.

A movement has arisen, confidential for the moment, of 'independent' or alternative editors, who gamble on traditional publishing and its cultural mission, and who count entirely on our sympathy. In the month of June 2000, a meeting organized by UNESCO, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Organization of American States worked, in Gijon, on this particular problem in the context of globalization. Involved were thematic publishers who cultivate their symbolic capital, do not depend upon the big groups and can in this way conserve the autonomy of their editorial decisions. In addition to a certain idea of quality, this allows them to attain high levels of cultural commitment. Although almost always precarious economically – as they go against the current of the compulsive search for 'best sellers' – this economic independence, their vocation and their rigour, which leads them to resist the banalization and the normalization of the 'editorial product' conceived by the big groups uniquely in terms of demand and profitability, are the last ramparts of the writer who deals with transcendent themes, cultural expressions which carry unconventional positions, analyses which avoid the easy option.

However, without a strong policy of support on the part of public authorities, these editors disposed to resisting the 'commercially correct', particularly in the field of fiction, poetry and the essay, can be considered to be 'the last of the Mohicans' – a rare species in danger of extinction. If we want to avoid the risk of monoculture and uniformity of thought, we must carefully analyse the strategic potential offered by this alternative editorial movement for re-establishing the balance between the importance given to meaning and that given to the market of this two-sided – symbolic and economic – object that we call a book.

### **Text versus zapping: the impact on the intellect**

It is also necessary to allude, if only briefly, to the impact of new technologies on the behaviour and the cognitive processes of the reader. Imperceptibly, learning is passing from the linear discourse which is characteristic of the written text, to the simultaneous perception of numerous messages, the interactivity of which bases itself on the *zapping* technique, generally enhanced by images that appear on the screen through various windows. More than a method, this new mode of message apprehension corresponds to a new attitude and a new manner of connecting thought, which reaches also the mechanisms of memory.

In effect, the technique of reading requires a methodical apprenticeship. It is not so much about deciphering a code, but rather about penetrating the meaning

of a text, and exercising memory and reflection to capture all its nuances. This leads to the development of critical analyses and to the comparison of the written with the reality of each person. (I always say that there is nothing more interactive than the act of reading and, faced with those who say 'a picture paints a thousand words', I believe that 'a word paints a thousand pictures'.) All this is possible thanks to the patience of words, which line up one after the other, and the loyalty of the message which, enclosed in the paper, lets itself be turned around and looked at, taken apart and put back together, grammatically, philosophically.

Reading is a discipline linked to time, because it requires a prolonged effort of concentration. But we know that time is precisely our society's rarest resource. The screen, on the contrary, and no matter which screen, lends itself more to showing images and, in summary, brief texts which do not require an effort of comprehension, but, simply, recognition and acceptance. The screen message presents itself as something obvious, soliciting neither a rational foundation nor an analysis of the antecedents, which the spectator has no time to refer to anyway. Whence the cleavage between books and the screen, between the linear spirit of the written discourse and the mottled, simultaneous and rapid perception of the multimedia via the screen.

It is necessary to begin analysing the possibly damaging effects on the memory and capacity for analysis of the young generations, of the combined action of the screen (television and computer which, in addition, announce their convergence on the large frequency which is promised for the year 2005), of the minimal effort which it incites and the chronic rarity of time. There is, on my part, no desire to demonize new technologies. I deeply appreciate their advantages and profit as much as I can from them. But I think that we must learn a healthy management of information resources and insist on the fundamental importance of linear reading.

Our not so distant ancestors could only move about the Earth on foot or on horseback, before the invention of the bicycle. The generalization of the car, bus, train and plane is historically recent. Nevertheless we continue to walk short distances, horseback riding is an increasingly valued sport, bicycles have become fashionable for ecological reasons and to combat excess traffic, cars are very popular though sometimes buses are more practical, the advantages of the train are more and more evident, and planes are the surest transport for long distances. At no time has it been the desire of the aeronautics domain to replace all the modes of transport to the point of forgetting that human beings have legs with which to walk.

In the same way, once the ‘novelty effect’ has worn off, it will be necessary to learn to use in a rational and combined manner the different supports of knowledge that are available to us: books, periodicals, magazines, television, Internet, e-books and everything yet to come, because each of them has a different role. In order for our societies to escape the risk of ‘anaesthesia’, all of these supports need to coexist. We must progress towards a future that is respectful of cultural diversity, where freedom of choice and the development of critical thinking, the bases of democratic pluralism, remain guaranteed. It is necessary, above all, to assure each of the individuals that make up our society of a future endowed with memory, comprehension and a will which are, precisely, the faculties of the soul.

# The word, the image and the humanities

Masahiro Hamashita

## Critical phases: books and humanities

In addition to helping communication among people, literacy has been essential to the development of the humanities. Books have served both as tools for literacy and as texts for the humanities. The overwhelming profusion of multimedia and Internet communications that appears to threaten the destiny of books thus brings about a crisis in the humanities. Following the invention of characters, written communication and books gradually took the place of many forms of oral transmission. Stories that were once read out loud, in public, before an audience, could be read in silence.<sup>1</sup> With the development of the printing machine, stories came to be largely produced for private and solitary reading.<sup>2</sup> In our day and age, we observe a major reversal of this trend. Character-based information is increasingly replaced by visual communication.

1. Walter Jackson Ong, *Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London and New York, 1982.

2. Jacob Burckhardt says in his *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*: 'Dann Kommt der Ausgang des Epischen in den Roman, der je nach dem Grade seiner Herrschaft und seines Inhalts und nach der Beschaffenheit seines Leserkreises sein ganzes Zeitalter charakterisieren hilft. Er ist wesentlich die Dichtung für isoliertes Lesen' [Then comes the transition from the epic genre to the novel which, given the dimension of its predominance and content, and the structure of its readership, is able to characterize its epoch as a whole. It is written essentially for solitary reading], Jacob Burckhardt, *Gesamtausgabe* [Complete works], Von A. Oeri und E. Dürr (eds.), Basel, 1929, vol. 7, p. 56.

This crisis to which books are subjected has many ramifications. Younger people tend to prefer computer games to books. Books themselves take on electronic forms, dispensing with traditional aspects of printed matter. Internet websites provide us with information of every kind. A corresponding crisis is underway in the humanities, particularly as business, science and technology take precedence over liberal arts in our age of multimedia communication. Specialists in information technology seem not to have read Plato or Dostoevsky at all. Many young sociologists and psychologists have far less knowledge of philosophy than their predecessors. Setting aside the definition of the humanities for now, let us focus on some outstanding phenomena in the academic world.

Books and the humanities have undergone a series of critical phases. First of all, such provocative distinctions as those established between '*l'esprit géométrique*' and '*l'esprit de finesse*' by Pascal, the *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* of Heinrich Rickert, and C. P. Snow's suggestion of 'the two cultures', appear today as scarcely more than legacies from the past. Has the distinction between the humanities and the scientific courses of study become meaningless? Because of their skilful manipulation and programming of computers, certain artists today could be qualified as systems engineers or scientists. We, researchers in the humanities, are also required to know more about natural sciences and technology and to become competent users of personal computers. Rather than a blending or sublimation (*Aufhebung*) of the humanities and science, this seems to signal a depreciation of the humanities in the face of the power of science and technology.

Secondly, a marked contemporary preference for practical sciences is borne out by the large-scale governmental support granted to highly developed technology. Funding earmarked for the humanities pales in comparison to that allocated to academic departments of technology. In the academic world, modernization has promoted an emphatic shift from the humanities to science and technology.

But, thirdly, the traditional character of the humanities has itself transformed. Some philosophers had already attempted to make use of the accomplishments of scientific and related fields. Descartes, for instance, appealed to the rigid nature of geometry as a model for the exact methodology of thinking. David Hume, in turn, followed Newton's successful example of natural science in reconstructing his moral philosophy. These can hardly be considered as suicidal acts on the part of the humanities, but rather as efforts to catch up with the standards of the contemporary or fashionable sciences and thus to enlarge the spectrum of the humanities'



possibilities. Modern aesthetics was among the outcomes of these tendencies. But I am not sure whether the so-called ‘cultural studies’ and interdisciplinary research programmes can ensure the humanities’ survival.

Fourthly, we are up against the problems posed by media. Language was hitherto the principal medium used to develop our thoughts, research and discussions. But through the development and expansion of highly technological devices, language is relinquishing its leading role within our societies to pictorial representation. (I might add that, in using the word ‘language’ here and throughout this paper, I am referring to words, written or oral, as distinct from pictures.)

It is often said that the social organization of advanced nations is characterized by three ‘Cs’: computers, control, and communication. We find ourselves suddenly surrounded by a multitude of pictures and images, and bereft of any symptoms of iconoclasm. What prevails instead is a sort of ‘idolatry of images’. This is, moreover, reflected in our books, many of which abound in illustrations or are in fact either picture books or books dealing with various types of visual representations (photography, cinema, TV, cartoons, etc.). It is thus from the media perspective that I should like to think through the crisis currently underway in the humanities.

There was a time when the humanities functioned as ideology. Renaissance humanism enjoyed the support of wealthy citizens, mainly merchants. The humanities then produced numerous men of letters, a republic of *litterati*, devoted to civility and refinement. In contrast, the staple that mass culture offers its children today is far from sophisticated: ‘manga’ comic-strips, TV games and cartoons, action movies and other pictorial forms of entertainment. Given the thin line that separates humanities from cultural studies, one might wonder where the emphasis on visualization might take the humanities of tomorrow?

### **Languages and pictures/*Ut pictura poesis***

Having shifted from oratory to written language, communication and civilizations are of late increasingly reliant on the electronic media which are now widespread. Pictures have a larger share in communications for a number of reasons. The larger the population, the greater the role of pictorial representation. Visualization allows for plain, direct, concrete, convenient, rapid, persuasive and useful communication between peoples, including those who are foreign or unfamiliar to each other. But pictures alone do not suffice to foster the humanities.

What must be considered, then, is the relationship between language and pictures. This relationship has had many facets throughout history. Chinese characters and hieroglyphs originated from a combined system of language and pictures. The ideograph, for example, can be easily identified as a drawing that developed into a writing system. A system of characters such as this contributes to thinking of the image in a concrete rather than abstract way. In contrast, an alphabet based on denotation requires a full act of imagination. We can therefore understand why the topic of *ut pictura poesis* arose from Horace's *Ars poetica*, that is, the comparison of poetry and picture, and developed primarily among the Western *literati*. In ancient Greece, *literati* enjoyed higher social status than plastic artists. The 'artes liberales' were considered more honourable than the 'artes mechanicae'. It was only later, during the Italian Renaissance, that Leonardo da Vinci and others sought to elevate the status of the plastic arts and artists. Da Vinci constructed a theoretical basis for painting, claiming it to be a science (*scienza*). Federico Zuccaro established the San Luca Academy of Arts with a view to educating young painters as equals to poets in knowledge and manners. The discussion of *ut pictura poesis* tended towards a reinterpretation of the meaning of pictures as compared with literature.

Beginning with the famous phrase by Simonides, 'Painting is mute poetry, poetry "speaking picture"', *ut pictura poesis* became a prominent topic in the theory of Western art, sometimes involving an enquiry into the common elements of both arts. For example: the principle of imitation; the notion that both arts contribute to education through delectation ('*ducere et delectare*'); the idea that colour in painting, like phrasing in poetry, helps effectively to express the motif; and the ideal of the 'learned painter', endowed with the classical knowledge required both of poets and painters. As discussions advanced, however, growing emphasis was placed on the distinctive character of each artistic genre. James Harris in *A Discourse on Music, Painting, and Poetry* (1744) and Lessing in his *Laokoön* (1766), for instance, argued the differences between words and pictures.

In modern times, and especially in the eighteenth century, discussion around *ut pictura poesis* implied that painting would become a leading artistic genre. Attempts were made to include painting among the humanities by raising its social esteem to match that of poetry. The possibility of moral education through painting was conceived by the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who had clearly in mind 'history painting'.



*Paulo de Matthæis Pinx*

*Sim. Gribelin sculpsit*

Fig. 1. – *Judgement of Hercules*, from B. Rand (ed.),  
*Second Characters of the Language of Forms* by Antony, Earl of Shaftesbury, Cambridge, 1914  
 (photo © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris)

Shaftesbury expressed his wish to publish the French copy of the *Judgement of Hercules* in a letter addressed to Pierre Coste on 25 July 1712:

I wish this . . . because I should, from the effect of this when it was read by people of fashion, be able to judge whether or no it would be worth while to turn my thoughts (as I am tempted) towards the further study of design and plastic art, both after the ancient and modern foundations, being able (as I myself) to instil [*sic*] by this means some further thoughts of virtue and honesty, and the love of liberty and mankind, after a way wholly new and unthought of.<sup>3</sup>

Author of *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), Shaftesbury was one of the pioneers of attempting to set his estimation for painting within the framework of an appropriate theory. When paintings themselves developed their variety of styles, motifs and genres, Shaftesbury's propensity to 'history painting'

3. *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury*, B. Rand (ed.), London, 1900, p. 503.

appeared to have fallen behind the times. After Shaftesbury, and aside from his historical limits in art theory, the other noteworthy critic in this regard was George Turnbull. A somewhat forlorn adherent of the Scottish Enlightenment, he is nonetheless interesting both as an educational reformer and as a reformer of sciences:

. . . if we consider what Philosophy is, we shall yet more fully perceive what excellent Use may be made of the Arts of Design in Education; if teaching either natural or moral Philosophy in the properest Manner be any Part of its Aim and Scope. Philosophy is rightly divided into natural and moral; and in like manner, Pictures are of two Sorts, natural and moral: The former belong to natural, and the other to moral Philosophy. For if we reflect upon the End and Use of Samples or Experiments in Philosophy, it will immediately appear that Pictures are such, or that they must have the same Effect. What are Landscapes and Views of Nature, but Samples of Nature's visible Beauties, and for that Reason Samples and Experiments in natural Philosophy? And moral Pictures, or such as represent Parts of human Life, Men, Manners, Affections, and Characters; are they not Samples or Experiments in moral Philosophy? In examining the one, we act the Part of the natural Philosopher; and in examining the other, our Employment is truly moral; because it is impossible to judge of the one, or of the other, without comparing them with the Originals from which they are taken, that is, with Nature: Now what is Philosophy but the Study of Nature?<sup>4</sup>

Thus, according to Turnbull, philosophy and painting correspond to each other. Moral philosophy can be better demonstrated through history painting, and landscape painting represents natural philosophy in its exact description of natural law.

In this connection, the historiography of art theory offers two excellent books. One is Erwin Panofsky's *Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939), the other Rensselaer W. Lee's *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (1940). Particularly interesting are the proximity of the publication dates and the subtitles, 'humanistic' appearing in both. Panofsky and Lee were among the forerunners of locating pictures within the tradition of the humanities. It should be borne in mind that these historical theories of *ut pictura poesis* usually imply the subjection of pictures to language, the concept of poetry serving as a model for theorizing the humanistic meaning of pictures. From the end of the eighteenth century, pictures have always

4. George Turnbull, *A Treatise on Ancient Painting*, 1740, edited reprint by V. M. Bevilacqua, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1971, p. 145.

been placed on a secondary plane, after poetry, literature, and word-languages. If we are still to think through the meaning of pictures along the lines of authentic art history today, we need a contemporary version of *ut pictura poesis*.

### Oculocentrism in modern times

Shifting our focus, there have been attempts to assert the supremacy of sight over other senses, with the growing importance of visual literacy in multicultural societies: the visual is seen as a standard medium for communication among peoples of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. New technologies have not only rendered the reproduction of images easier and more accessible, but also increasingly improved their clarity. Contemporary researchers in aesthetics might feel that such inventions did not arise from the needs of their own research, but resort to them because they are there. The flood of pictures, albeit amusing to people today, does overwork our eyes.

The primacy of sight as a superior sense, along with hearing, has been regarded as a matter of fact throughout the history of Western philosophy since the time of Plato. Indeed, sight seems to hold the power of judgement. Sight enables us to see everything ‘objectified’. This is a theory which may have derived from Descartes, that the subject always distances itself from the object, and is at all times the observer whilst the object is scenery. Yet, there are alternative theories. Herder’s (1744–1803) remark on the sense of touch in his *Plastik* (1778) is one such example. And there is the argument of ‘*synaesthesia*’, the harmony of the senses, which gives no exclusive emphasis to the status of sight.

It is fitting to mention here the concept of ‘affordance’ suggested by James Gibson (1904–79) in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979). Gibson’s treatment of sight is comprehensive and critical of any attempt to explain vision, be it by physics, optics, anatomy, or visual physiology. According to him, optical scientists know light as radiation, but not about light considered as illumination. Physiologists know the nerve cells in the retina and how they work, but not how the visual system works. They can create holograms, prescribe spectacles and cure diseases of the eye, but they cannot explain vision. Gibson does not conceive of vision as subjective, or liable to personal differences. According to him, perception always presupposes information that is inherent to the ecological circumstances from which the perceiver picks up useful information for his or her own perception and action. The environment affords the opportunity for animals and humans to exert their abilities. He would say, for instance, that openings are conducive to locomotion, cliffs to jumping,

objects to throwing, holding to plugging, etc., describing the mechanism of perception in terms of real and practical life, and not at all abstract or speculative. His claim is that perception is an intersubjective act.

Gibson's theory of ecological psychology seems in my view to overcome the difficulties involved in the modern empiricist conception of sense perception, by which empiricists isolate the concept of sight physically by abstraction and treat images analytically. The distinction between 'seeing' and 'seeing as' that Wittgenstein made in his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* suggests that the single act of seeing cannot be reflexive without a self-awareness of seeing. The act of 'seeing' is thus completely different from the act of 'seeing as'. 'Seeing as' implies interpretation or identification of the seen through something held in the viewer's mind. It thus presupposes knowledge, experience, the categorization of terms, etc., making it impossible to suppose something like pure sight, exclusive vision, or solipsistic perception.

### Pictures interpreted through languages

We must also bear in mind the discussion on theory-laden perception, which again suggests that there is no such thing as pure perception without preconceived knowledge or theory. Of course, if pictures were essentially universal and valid regardless of history, nation, race, time, age, gender, etc., picture-languages could promote the unification of humankind.

However, there are many examples of geometrical illusions (see Fig. 2), which any one of us can experience. Among these, I could mention that the moon seen near the horizon looks larger than the moon seen up in the sky. This illusion is totally unrelated to knowledge, even if, the more learned we become, the more accurately we know the size of the moon. We can thus admit that vision has its own laws or natural tendencies independent of knowledge.

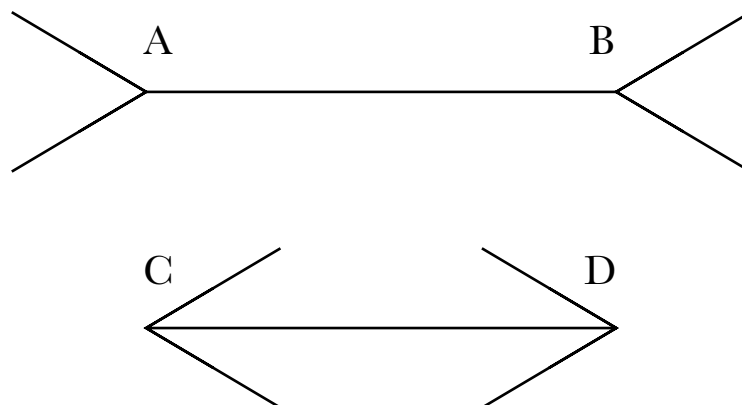


Fig. 2. — Müller-Lyer's illusion

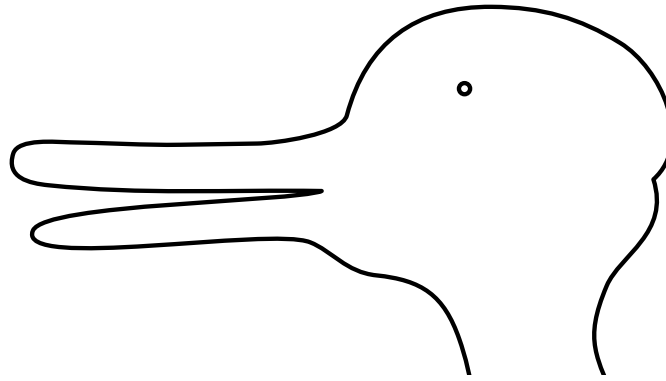


Fig. 3. — The 'Jastrow image'

But whilst pictures are themselves the objects of quantifications, physical measurements and explanations, they can also be objects of interpretation when produced at a specific time and place, against the background of a culture. The 'Jastrow image' for instance, looks like a goose to those who have never seen a rabbit, and like a rabbit to those who have never seen a goose (see Fig. 3). The distinction between rabbit and goose requires experience and knowledge. Perception is thus theory-laden<sup>5</sup> as well as knowledge-laden<sup>6</sup>, or culture-laden and culturally relational. Images are bound to be interpreted with the help of language, a necessarily historical and cultural product.

### Pictures for the humanities

Hermeneutic enquiry stimulates another relationship between words and images. It tries to interpret and explain a picture by using words to the largest possible extent. Our understanding of the world depends on our ability to use language. Even if plastic artists and musicians use languages in a wider sense than just words, the humanities maintain their *raison d'être* by how they make the most of words. Dominance of words over pictures is an essential survival factor for the humanities. But in the field of the humanities, language and image are inseparable. What should thus be considered is what kinds of pictures would foster the humanities. We need images that are conducive to a contemplation of the image itself, and thus to the concentration and self-reflection which are most lacking in today's busy and rapidly evolving society – a society for which, moreover, the concept of humanities needs redefining. If so, then, which kinds of pictures can help us build and cultivate experience?

5. N. R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*, London, Cambridge U. Pr., 1958.

6. Levi-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, Paris, Librairie Alcan, 1928.

There are pictures to be avoided. We should also close our eyes to protect our contemplation from any superfluous information.

The following story may seem hard to believe, but a few years ago in Japan, about one hundred children who had watched a particular TV cartoon suddenly suffered an epilepsy-like ailment. The cartoon was popular, and parents allowed children to watch it freely because the story, called 'Pocket Monster', was deemed far from harmful, and actually rather instructive. The 'Pocket Monster' cartoon takes place in cyber-space, where heroes and heroines fight against computer-virus-like villains. What appeals to the young fans is that they can identify with the brave heroes who go inside the computer. But though the story may be educational, the cartoon can be severely harmful to children. While the exact cause of the phenomenon has yet to be determined, most experts agree that the children's symptoms resembled a type of seizure that is triggered by optical stimuli. Indeed, the cartoon presented several explosion scenes, featuring red or blue flashes over a period of several seconds, which may have caused the symptoms. The incident is doubly suggestive to our discussion. On the one hand, it implies that the stimuli offered by certain pictures can be excessive for us to bear, both physically and mentally. On the other, it indicates that today's technology can provide us with a world of virtual reality – bearing a striking resemblance to our ordinary, real world, yet displaying extraordinary properties, well beyond our sane, common sense.

An essential principle of the humanities, in so far as it must keep with its tradition and history, is the Socratic '*gnōti seauton*': to know the limits of our abilities, and to recognize ourselves as beings destined to dialogue with other people, or to soliloquy, but in either case mostly through language, if sometimes with the help of pictures. The reading of books, which restricts our visual information and exercises our thinking and imagination, should continue to absorb us.

Tools and machines are extensions of our hands, and computers are substitutes for our brains, yet we must not take the computer to be our brain. Without books, we might be able to enjoy a contemporary way of life to some degree. But the humanities would ultimately vanish from the human world. We need to re-estimate and redefine the concept of the humanities with reference to the place of books in its midst. Needless to say, the clarity assigned to pictures is far from the 'clear and distinct', in Descartes' terminology, which describes our mode of concept formulation. *Ut pictura poesis* still suggests, as Horace once did, the word-painting, that is, the pictorial, clear description arrived at through words. A contemporary version of 'painterly poetry' and 'poetic painting' is still needed.



# Complicities

Rafael Argullol

## The scene

In years marked by paradox and transition, our cultures allow us to discern grounds for complicity, a will toward hospitality and a summons to polyphony. These grounds could be envisaged as a scene which, in the face of the nihilist avalanche of images, of the visual levelling that threatens us, could never endure were it not for the possible worlds we can gather from potential, conjectural and multiple readings.

Given the importance that Western mentality attributes to the notion of time, by principle linear, past, present and future, we must first try to understand how time is structured. We know we can hardly conceive of the Western day-to-day if not in linear terms. Only the time of dreams is anarchic. Its laws are unknown to us, as are the temporal laws of memory, even if it runs from the present to the past.

Was this also the case in classical Greece? We can deduce from pre-Socratic philosophy and the tragedians that time may have had a double dimension: on the one hand an effectively linear sense of time, and on the other, this linear time was probably tinged with or dialectically related to a more circular time dimension. One of the few passages in Greek literature that suggest that destiny is guided as much by the gods who represent linear time as by other gods who represent a continual returning of things appears in *Prometheus Bound* (although I do not know if this

means the 'eternal recurrence', as Nietzsche would have liked). It is thus likely that these two time dimensions were connected.

But it is certain that the myth of Chronos weighs heavily upon the West. The fundamental phase of one of the most important painters of the modern era – the Black paintings of Goya's *La Quinta del Sordo* – is dominated by the myth of Chronos, in works such as *Saturn Devouring his Children* or *The Spinners of Time*. These powerful images might lead us to say that humanity, when acquiring the consciousness of time, simultaneously created a myth that is unequivocally destructive and devouring, and accepted it as such. The destructive and devouring myth reinforces the notion of a strict progression that runs from birth, to life and to death, the legacy of which is onerous for the West.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition adds to this legacy as, unlike other metaphysical systems which convey a vision of a cycle or a transmigration of successive reincarnations, the Jewish tradition takes the birth of the world to the end of time. Genesis evokes not only the Fall of man, a process of suffering and liberation, but also the end of time which, for each of us, is the moment of salvation or damnation. And Christianity proposes an end of time for humanity in the form of the resurrection of the body. The collective schema offered to the West is linear; it leads to a final paradise or a final hell, after crossing the stages of the world, or human life. By having God take on a body, in the form of Christ, Christianity offers a figure who is born, grows, dies and rises again, in obedience to a linear vision. So, the myths originating from ancient Greece, as well as those which come from Judaeo-Christianity, leave us in the forceful presence of a temporal linearity, which was to become even stricter in the modern era. For, if what we know as history is an ancient discipline, founded by the Greeks, the application of history to time, in the form of historicism, is an entirely modern exercise.

In the ancient world, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, this penetration of linear temporality by historicism did not exist in the continuous sense of our modern understanding. Modern Western humanity, however, is the fruit of a very powerful historicism. We have a vision which transports theological eschatology to the secular world, entailing our advancement in a course of progress that is parallel to linear time. We understand that there are ancient times and modern times, and that there will be future ages in which human progress will reach fruition. Western historicism outlives Giambattista Vico, Hegel and the theories of Marx along with Marxism. But I believe it found an application more universal than that of Hegel or of Marx with Darwin. Evolutionism lends itself to a kind of biological

historicism which supposes a process of adaptation and improvement for humanity, a continuous process of evolution linked to historicism, making it extremely difficult for Westerners to think of time as anything but linear.

But the categorical weight of time – be it as myth or as an individual dimension, Chronos individualized or myth on a collective scale – soon stirred up, I believe, the struggle against the consciousness of time. By adopting this consciousness, humanity has also created a struggle against time. This consciousness of time is a direct consciousness of death. We generally assume that we are the only animal to be aware of death, and we attribute other animals with the function of instinct, reproduction and survival, but not the knowledge of death.

In historical terms, in the West, as in other cultures, this struggle against time has been carried out, it seems to me paradoxically, through what we can call attempts at the conquest of a space. As the time of death is something which escapes us, we delude ourselves that we are able to conquer a space that denies the march of time, holds back the march of time. As a product as well as a producer of civilization, the city is nothing less than a conquest of space aimed at creating an illusion against the march of time. Man as a builder of towns, of monuments, of bridges, *homo faber*, endowed with technical skill, creates a spatial perspective that is also an illusion when faced with the march of time. In general terms, we would say that the utopian spirit, that which tended towards creating a *topos*, a scene which does not exist yet remains at the margins of the human condition in its mortal or temporal aspects, must be almost as old as the consciousness of time and death. The first manifestations of what we now call art – Palaeolithic art, cave art – or the first symbolic manifestations of humanity, must surely answer the need to create this non-place, which does not yet exist but can put up obstacles in the way of the march of time. So a great part of what we have called civilization, from art to technique, through the successive symbolic expressions, is linked to this struggle against time, and takes root in the weight of linear time, almost as though we wanted to break the river, the canal of time.

Obviously humanity does not struggle against time merely through exterior products, including material civilization and technique, including the arts. It also resorts to a series of spiritual efforts, which we also call art, or literature. I think that at the exact moment when humans become conscious of time, they understand the double dimension of memory as an entity of this consciousness of time and as a battlefield in the struggle against this consciousness. For primitive humans, for ancient and modern humans alike, memory is both the vehicle of death and the haven from

death. It is no surprise that the ancients made memory the mythical muse of the arts. Finally, this other side of art, art as a utopian creation which tries to dam up the march of time, plays through memory, because the latter creates games which have at their roots the struggle of memory against the consciousness of death. This is why, at the origin of what we call art, are always funerary monuments, in memory to death as well as against death. This is also the reason why all known cultures have epic poetry, which is the memory for and against death.

This poetry, so closely linked to the divine sphere, gradually sheds its heroic dimensions as the secular Western modern world denied the domain of the divine. The hero who arises in the poetry of modern literature is much more closely related to what Octavio Paz called the consecration of the moment. Paz's concept does not refer to the possibility of building literary or artistic monuments, retables, frescoes against death, by the expedient of a memory which has a capacity for representation, poetic, pictorial or sculptural. It refers rather to the possibility that certain moments have to redeem us, if only provisionally, from our fallen temporal condition. These are the moments which give us the illusion of going beyond time, of being outside of time; and enjoying the plenitude or immensity that we had already taken as something beyond temporality, or eternity. To step outside of time, to extract oneself from the consciousness of time, presupposes for Westerners a feeling of completeness, but a complete emptiness also places us on the edge of time. So one of the characteristics of modern art, modern Western poetry, is this kind of secular gamble which has replaced the religious and the mythical, to the benefit of this consecration of the moment which ends up being, nonetheless, mythical and sacred. The most beautiful manifestation of art and modern poetry has delivered itself from the sacred to return to the sacred.

In our universe, the domination of technology, of communication, that which has been called planetary globalization, and the need for permanent novelty have been converted into a planetary invitation to amnesia. Our world is thus strongly influenced by a model of amnesia and speed, amnesia and vertigo, even if this vertigo often reveals itself, as in the myth of Sisyphus, as an immobile vertigo which hovers over the same axis. It is highly significant that the linear teleological model of a paradise placed at the end of the schema, either a religious paradise or the lay paradise of progress and equality, has been replaced in the West by the model which could be called the circle of a permanent present to which our modern capitalism invites us. It is a model of permanent production and consumption, with nothing left of this totalitarian wheel, not even the leisure which is inherent in

production and consumption. The modern world does not place a paradise at the end of time, but rather the fantasy of a permanent paradise, with every consumption of what has been produced. Our epoch's substitution of the promise of paradise by paradise as consumption, accompanied by amnesia and immobile vertigo, finally destroys the West's modern historicist model. The citizen of current globalization thinks neither in historicist terms nor in terms of an eternal return.

This is why Utopia has apparently lost its prestige. Not only because of the calamities provoked by collective Utopias, but because, if the present is effectively continuous, in a present which consumes, there is no place for Utopia, nor for a non-place, because of the illusion of a permanent place, even if this place is simply the production and consumption of products. There is no place for Utopia, just as there is no place for time, nor memory, which is thwarted by amnesia; neither is there sufficient perspective in this process of permanent newness for death, camouflaged and pushed out of mind, because the dead neither produce nor consume. To be able to criticize, in the face of the modern world, to resist, it is necessary to step outside of the infernal circle which is presented as a paradise.

## Hospitality

Essentially one can recognize three types of knowledge – scientific, artistic and religious knowledge. Scientific knowledge carries us towards an idea of objective domination of exterior reality. It is a knowledge linked to a linear and progressive conception of time, allowing us to ensure that what we take as certain cancels out what we took as certain two thousand years ago. This happens in the fields of astronomy, medicine, botany, for example. The second knowledge can be called, in a general way, artistic. The third knowledge, religious, implies the relationship of men to their gods or religion through the different metaphysical and mystical systems. In the case of Western religion we tend to take this knowledge fundamentally in linear and apocalyptic terms, in terms of a final paradise. Leaving aside this third type, which belongs exclusively to believers, I would like to concentrate on artistic and scientific knowledge.

Artistic knowledge takes us into a circular space, to which the linear vision does not apply. The works of art which please us today do not invalidate the ancient works of two or three thousand years ago. The philosophical works which we appreciate today do not invalidate the works of Plato or Aristotle. This circular knowledge is related to scenes which directly involve the human condition, with a

whole series of scenes where the vision of life, death, human passions and emotions, takes the lead. This allows us a greater proximity to the lights and shadows of our existence. If we were to use computerized methods to bring out the themes of universal poetry, we would find that only a dozen reflect this circularity. These would be the themes which can back no colonizing authority. Poetry, art, philosophy do not allow us to control, to colonize, to dominate. They confirm an unfinished knowledge which comes back to us and which never allows us to finish it. I have already said that, logically, a poem should never have a last verse, nor a painting a last brushstroke, because in the internal logic of art this last brushstroke, and this last word of a poem, do not exist. This is what Leonardo, Michelangelo or Rodin expressed by the unfinished, in fact more perfect than the finished work, which takes on an essentially artificial character. This knowledge is outside of linearity; it is beyond the reach of domination and of colonization.

As the proper goal of scientific knowledge is objective mastery/domination, its natural extension is technology, even if this relationship is two-way, since technology can lead to new scientific developments.

These two schemes of knowledge act simultaneously in a human being. He or she can look at the body from a scientific point of view as a collection of cells, canals, nerves, muscles and organs which can be described in a totally objective manner, and can be colonized by techniques such as surgery. The same person could also sing about the same body and express the emotions caused by its beauty or the repulsion felt through its ugliness, in what we could call aesthetic feelings. Scientific knowledge is not better, not superior nor inferior to aesthetics. The sun, for example, has traditionally been one of the great symbols of beauty for most cultures; but the sun seen in scientific terms, in physical terms, is one of the most violent cosmic scenes we can imagine, with its great thermonuclear explosions. To dispose of this information about the sun does not impede the contemplation of its aesthetic beauty. The knowledge that I have called objective, that which induces colonization and domination, produces its own rites and myths, as does the aesthetic circular knowledge which Kant called 'disinterested'. So, while we talk of the verbalizations that are myths, and the representations and gestures that are rites, we are referring to these two types of knowledge in their different aspects. Each of them has a type of rite and of myth: as much the productive, technical, colonizing knowledge which can mystify and ritualize the objective domination of hunting trophies, as the symbolic knowledge linked to what we could call artistic knowledge, that is, the desire for transcendence, to be able to express a harmony, an order, a cosmos.

In general, aesthetic, symbolic knowledge refers to the domain of the sacred. But I would say that in scientific knowledge, there is also a desire for transcendence, because to establish, say, a theory which unifies forces implies a desire for unity. From Prometheus to Faust, it is possible to identify this ambition to create life which implies the desire for an absolute. This manifests itself, obviously, more clearly in aesthetic, artistic knowledge, which presents, as I have said, a continuous cycle throughout the history of Western culture.

My position is one of integrating the two types of knowledge. It seems to me necessary not to look at knowledge in absolute or exclusive terms, but rather to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge leads us to given moments, at times grandiose, at times terrible, but wisdom consists in the acceptance of an alternation, a balance, between knowledge and enigma. Wisdom accepts that certain aspects of human life, of the relationship between humanity and the world or existence, can be neither dominated nor colonized, because they will always be impossible to control or diminish. This dialectic between knowledge and enigma is the cohabitation between scientific knowledge and symbolic, aesthetic knowledge.

If a definition of humans were necessary, although such things are better avoided, I would never use the traditional definition given in our schools, according to which humans are rational animals. I would say that humans are nostalgic animals: conscious of a lack, of a separation, of being strangers, of being exiles in a land that is not their home. The homeland, in many religious and mythical traditions, is inhabited by the gods. But when the gods are evicted, humans become nostalgic beings and define themselves as nomads wandering the globe. Life is therefore a pilgrimage that is not devoid of meaning, but this meaning is unknown in its entirety. At this point an ignorance is revealed, leading to pain and suffering, but also at times to images of great beauty. For myself, at present, the sacred is related to this nostalgia, not so much with the religious definition of a world, a god, but with the perception of isolation caused by this nostalgia, with education in this nostalgia, with the forming of the outsider in this nostalgia.

This search for something lost on an unknown horizon leads us to develop a sense of plenitude which is a sense of hospitality. We desire to reach a homeland which is not our cradle, which is not behind us. Paradoxically, we do not know a homeland which is ahead of us, one which promises us this unity, this plenitude, this integrity and which cannot be reached through colonization, through domination. It is as guests of this homeland that we can express and verbalize

harmony and beauty. What we have called beauty is not so much the product of laws, of certain figures, of certain canons, but a manner of living in this homeland, of feeling like a guest. In this way I think it is possible to develop a fully modern sense of rite and myth. Going beyond this condition of exile to reach this homeland, if only provisionally, is what takes us to our most profound rites as human beings, in our double dimension of nostalgic beings and beings who desire hospitality.

I referred originally to the aesthetic rite, from its beginnings a representation, a game, a mask. But aesthetics is also the feeling of being an inhabitant of this homeland and this hospitality, an inhabitant of this house, of experiencing the wholeness, beyond the rift. This aesthetic rite which I would call art, accepts, by definition, all masks, games and representations which allow human beings to feel essential hospitality. The same goes for this other essential bridge towards hospitality which I have called *glimmering knowledge*, a spark of knowledge, which often occurs without us knowing how. This is what happens with our erotic rites, when Eros is identified as a force of nostalgia and unity, as well as with a mystical and not necessarily religious ecstasy, as mystic rites can be of a lay nature. These aesthetic, erotic and mystic rites are glimmering because they lead us to the very summits of nostalgia and, if only for brief, ephemeral, fleeting moments, beyond them in essential hospitality. It seems important to stress that, even if this type of knowledge occurs, as I have said, in a fleeting way, there can be a kind of predisposition. This predisposition requires the acceptance of the dialectic between logos and enigma, between knowledge and enigma. He or she who is exclusively attached to reason will never know this type of experience; nor will the pseudo-spiritualities which fall into a certain kind of irrational cult of the enigmatic.

Another important aspect is that glimmering knowledge occurs within situations of dialogue, never of monologue. The person who tries to attain this kind of knowledge through monologue gets lost in a kind of solipsism, if not in downright delusions. Knowledge of the enigmatic always occurs through dialogue, as it occurs in erotic, mystic, aesthetic rites, which always imply a dialogue with another, a letting go with another being. Without this dialogue, it is impossible to go beyond our condition of exile. This is why it is so important in the domain of culture to open oneself up to others, and why in the domain of the personal it is so important to arrive at oneself through others.



## Polyphony

I do not know if a real dialogue between cultures is possible, but it does take place between individuals belonging to different cultural traditions. In this sense it pleases me to allude to the notion of complicity. I do not believe in collective projects. I believe, nonetheless, that it is possible to produce an intellectual complicity, which is generally an outcome of friendship, not only on an intellectual but also a sentient level. If two individuals do not feel each other, do not touch each other, do not perceive each other, if a tactile complicity is not established between them, real conversation can hardly ensue; conversation can hardly go beyond the archetypes, the commonplace, and the 'politically correct'. The passion of intimacy must be balanced by the wisdom to disarm each of those hurdles, for intimate friendship can hardly flourish on rigid, dogmatic postures, even if passion can scratch up the polished surfaces of dogma. The same goes for the dialogue between cultures.

Even where there is passion in meeting other cultures, dialogue and complicity require a disposition to open oneself, to be disarmed, to crack the overly smooth surfaces. An individual from the West experiences the same drawbacks and constraints as an individual from India or any other culture, because he or she is also affected by the 'politically correct', the politically 'egalitarian', the type of tolerance and interculturality which stiffens into bland political discourse. There is no more limited a starting point than another tradition, even with the critical and self-critical vision of modernity (alas, somewhat lost nowadays) that might help the dialogue along. In this, the weight of colonialism turns back against itself because, even if there were no doubt that racism and egoism are part of the heritage of the whole of humanity and all cultures, the West has dominated the rest of the Earth. The legacy of colonialism, including its sequels and extensions, is the first element to consider. Related to it is the attraction to the exotic, the second to threaten this relationship, since it is the false explanation of colonialism which is fascinated, also falsely, by other mentalities, which are also false. In the domain of art, spirituality or philosophy, exoticism involves no more than a series of superficially understood customs. A third area of difficulty is the autism and cultural endogamy which attack all traditions and which seem all the more impenetrable as they are the most solid. In this way, the classic Judaeo-Christian capitalism of the West is a very solid tradition, although we can probably talk of several different traditions within this one. There

is a natural tendency towards endogamy, and generally racism is stronger in our mentality than in our neighbourhoods and towns, where it is already widespread.

The limiting factors are thereby obvious. Yet the circumstances of the modern world have produced the most far-reaching means of communication of all times. Universal communication, globalization for all its detrimental effects, the effective decolonization in most continents, the progressive recovery of cultural legacies and different traditions, have gradually instilled a feeling of mutual respect. For complicity to work, it remains nonetheless important to disarm mentally, all the while being able avoid taking refuge in false spiritualities and closed dogmas. Disarmament is, in this sense, the acceptance of the relativity, of the flexibility, and of the irregular, unfinished and plural disposition of truth. Intellectual rigour is equally very important in the face of easy connections and pseudo-spirituality, and in the face of this kind of universal techno-communication which would like to impose an easy, superficial, unique model. We must advance in a translation which is not only linguistic, but also conceptual and logical. It is important to disarm to be able to arm oneself with others, to be able to understand the confrontation between one's own ideas and those of one's partner in dialogue, through the means of linguistic, logical and conceptual translation.

On a superior level, disarmament and logical and conceptual translation can bring us to a mythical and symbolic exchange, which would be the next stage of this complicity. Two individuals can then exchange mythical and symbolic figures, and share vast territories of the essential hospitality which I have already alluded to. Dialogue is thus difficult, impossible between cultures on a political footing; it is, however, exciting and possible from the point of view of complicity and exchange between individuals.

Globalization presupposes dangers: the invitation to amnesia, to uniformity, to a kind of idolatrous cult of modernity which replaces all reality, the invitation to banality. One could add to this a so-called tolerance and a politically correct interculturality which remain at the surface of things, dwelling on subjects which ring with the flat, universal discourse. Thus, there is no doubt that this inevitable globalization, which has its positive aspects such as the universal communication I have already alluded to, must balance itself with respect and profundity. Globalization can coincide with something like *hybris*. Linked to knowledge as colonization, this *hybris* has in the end led to an ecological counter-conscience, a defence of biodiversity. All that defends communication and dialogue between human beings, among everything that is vital, is an extraordinarily creative factor. At the same time,

to fight for difference is to defend equality, in the way that fighting for biodiversity is one of the ways of defending universality. Once again the idea of the metamorphosis of the one and of the many invites us to a certain balance which is unsettled in the often ruthless process of globalization.

I think that we are in the world of the global village foreseen by McLuhan. But the global village has produced as a counterpart the tribal metropolis. Centralizing tendencies exist and in turn lead to centrifugal tendencies, to a quest for biodiversity, for a difference which does not mean inequality.

Using technology, the West has not only colonized nature, the non-human, but also the non-Western human. It has produced a kind of global model with extremely positive and productive elements, but with strong outbreaks of violence. In general terms, I think that faced with the unidimensional, the monotheistic, the unilateralism of human colonization, faced with a thought which builds up from a monologue, what we are really in need of is polyphony. The polyphonic is related to wisdom, taking into account that knowledge must go beyond the separation between ethics and intellectualism, practical reason and intellectualism. Polyphony is the means of reaching this better way of living, which can also be a way of feeling.

# The paths of books

Michel Maffesoli

It is time to get back on to the path, to find, in the image of the method that Descartes elaborated for modernity, what could now be the ‘method’ which would cast light on our thoughts. Books are certainly one of the most important entries to the orientation of the ‘paths of thought’. What are, finally, the signs of a new world? If I can use to this effect a more ancient term, a little more anachronistic than ‘sign’, it would be the word ‘cipher’. Saint John asked himself the question in Revelation: what is the cipher of the beast? It could equally be asked: what is the ‘cipher’ of postmodernity? In the context of the societies which are being born, a reflection on books thus lends itself to the search for this ‘cipher’.

In the first lines of the text in this volume by Zygmunt Bauman, it is precisely a question of what he calls ‘reism’ from the Latin *res*, which means ‘thing’. To come to the ‘thing’, I would like to stick to this ‘thing’ that is a book. On a paradoxically very empirical and also very imaginative level, to stick to this precise thing (and one can only really understand something precisely when one situates it, puts it in perspective), I will take my inspiration for example from a forceful idea – that of the German sociologist Georg Simmel, who spoke of ‘formal soziologie’. In order to best translate this expression into English, I propose the neologism ‘formist sociology’, to describe what I want to stress here.<sup>1</sup>

1. Michel Maffesoli, *La connaissance ordinaire*, Paris, Méridiens, 1985; English translation, *Ordinary Knowledge: An Introduction to Interpretative Sociology*, Cambridge, Polity Pr., 1996.

Here is a paradox. Books are empirical. This said, one can only understand a thing if one puts it into perspective, if one tries to shed light on the long term. As an example, one can recall, in the philosophy of the Middle Ages, that which the theologians called apophatic thought, or a negative theology. That is to say that one does not speak directly of God; one speaks of Him by avoidance. This is how I am going to speak. Because if books seem to me an essential entry to understanding the world, I cannot, however, understand books unless I put them into perspective. What interests me deeply is to create a sociology of the soul. What of the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world? Finally, everything is right for creating a sociology of the soul: the detail, the fragment, a little in the manner of the mathematician Mandelbrot's theory about the fractal. Any one detail can reveal the whole world, the total social fact. And from this point of view books are for me a total social 'fact'.

The three arguments that I am proposing stack nearly into one another, and are based on just plain common sense, so to speak, all the more because intellectuals have trouble really appreciating what common sense encompasses. Firstly, there is no *a priori* book, the book being merely context. Secondly, the real author of a book is the decipherer, the reader who deciphers it (there, again, the idea of cipher). It is not necessarily he or she who 'creates' the book. In truth, the person who creates the book is possessed by a *daimon*, and I will come back to this idea of demon. And thirdly, if one agrees on the fact that there is a community of readers, the book remains a myth. I use this word 'myth' in its etymological sense: as that which ties the initiates to each other. The essential function of myth is eucharistic: it works like 'cement'.

As a preamble to the development of these three arguments, a first perspective, a genealogy, imposes itself if we want to agree on a path for our thoughts. We are precisely in a period which 'celebrates' all and everything. Let us be attentive to this mania for celebration. One can, in effect, consider that what one commemorates no longer exists. Thus, when one speaks much of love, it is because love is no longer there. When a myth is celebrated, it is because the myth is no longer effective. It is, however, important to see what one is commemorating. For my part, I would say that what one commemorates is the 'phantasm of the one'. This idea supposes that it is from the unity of the one that we are going to think about the individual and society.

I am thinking here of Saint Augustine, who is considered to be the very founder of modernity. For Saint Augustine, 'human reason is a force which leads to unity'. It is interesting to note that at the founding of Western philosophy, at the

founding of this Judaeo-Christianity which is our cultural tradition, predominates the great 'phantasm of the one': the unified deity, monotheism in the strict sense of the word. One can never insist enough upon the prevalence of this 'phantasm of the one', of this phantasm of unity. It seems to me that, in many ways, the 'one' is celebrated, even if, or precisely because, this 'one' doesn't necessarily exist.

In a book that was published some time ago, Eugenio d'Ors, noted for his classic work on the baroque, studied the great figures of Isabelle and Ferdinand. His analysis of the 'political type' as the modern impulsion *par excellence* is interesting. He shows the correlation that exists between the political and the modern, and this from what he called an 'appetite for cleaning'. The metaphor of cleaning obviously evokes all that will 'clean' diversity, that will evacuate it. It is Augustinian reason, that which leads to unity, which will, in many respects, make the world function on univocal concepts. The contemporary 'politically correct' (which we might even 'translate' as the French do, with the term *langue de bois*, the 'wooden tongue' that says one thing while thinking another), all bring us back to the great phantasm of cleaning. One can compare this with the conceptual attitude which creates what it names. God says 'this is man', 'this is woman'. God created the world by 'saying' it, and very often intellectuals consider themselves as an avatar of the deity. In other words, it is via the concept that one creates and names the world. And this is a paranoid function *par excellence*, the real paranoia being essentially in this capacity to believe that one can create that which one names. It is the demiurge of the Word.

One can see that knowledge is power. And it is precisely this which is in play with the Book. The Book simply records the divine word. It expresses the right words. And it is this which shows so well how one can, starting with unity, end up at this great phantasm: the Book, the paradigm of which remains, obviously, the Bible. The Book which records and canonizes that which the world 'should be'. This phantasm rests, essentially, on a simple idea, which is the great theory of *substance*. Perhaps it is important to declare war on substantialism which wants life to come only from Being. That this Being be God, that this Being be the Father, be it the individual, the nation or institutions – and one can list the forms of this substantialism forever – it is a specificity of the Judaeo-Christian tradition to think of life as starting uniquely from the Being with a capital 'B'. It is this which will outline a vertical structure. This vertical structure is instructed by the founding duality. On one side, there is the *oecumenicus*, the known world, civilized world, which is, in fact, the expression of the Book. On the other side there is the *exotericus*, that which is outside the walls of civilization.

One can easily see how this vertical structure and this founding duality have functioned – on the one side is good and on the other is evil. There is culture and there is non-culture. There is civilization and there is barbarism. And at the base, one can consider that modernity is simply an application of this *verticality* which has imposed, for 500 years, the spirit of conquest, the hegemony of the West, monotheism, monoculturalism – and all this in the name of the values contained in the Book. The founding Book, I reiterate, is a book functioning on the order of verticality, of the *substance* of which God is the paradigm *par excellence*. Three words explain this slip: theology, theodicy and rationalism. Among these three words, there is a logical concatenation. We have passed from theology to theodicy and to rationalism. There is an internal logic among these three words. Evidently, the goddess Reason of the French Revolution is a good image for this liaison founded on verticality.

The reflection of Gilbert Durand<sup>2</sup> shows that certain human cultures function on the ‘daytime regime of the imaginary’, which corresponds, obviously, to our Western tradition. Durand points out that the essential ‘figures’ of this regime will be objects which wound: the double-edged sword of reason which slices, cuts, discriminates; the blade of the plough, symbol of productivity and industry; and the erect and triumphant phallus – symbols of the Masculine, the Father, the Man. The sword, the blade and the phallus must be put into relation with the context in which the unique Book arose. It is from here, also, that the great educative idea arose. *Educare*, in its etymological sense, is to pull somewhere, and to pull from the exterior. The Book brings from the exterior, fills something which is empty, the poor brain of the child who is a barbarian, an animal. And one does the same for other barbarians or other animals.

Education is the very foundation of modernity. We want to escape from barbarism, escape from animality, we want to pull from the *infans* the one who does not speak, who is not capable of putting words where it is correct to put words. And in this perspective are founded all the words of modernity, which, perhaps, mean nothing. ‘Democracy’, ‘citizen’, ‘liberty’ are words which have been elaborated in a specific context. Institutions continue to pour them out in the mode of an incantation. They are terms which are to be painted over a reality which is elsewhere. If we agree on the fact that the Book is a ‘context’, we must take this context into account in finding the words that will be the least false possible. It is no use continuing to

2. Gilbert Durand, *L'imaginaire*, Éditions Hatier, 1992.

use words elaborated in a former context, that is, the philosophy of the nineteenth century. What has come to an end is not the twentieth century: we are only with great difficulty finishing off the nineteenth century and we are having problems, notably, getting out of the grip of the philosophy and the words of this century. They are handsome words, but they are dated; it is time now to find other words.

I would like to pause here, very briefly, and mention a text in which Leon Bloy has analysed the miniatures of Byzantium and shown that, in the beginning, the most important elements in a manuscript were the ornate letters, then the lettrines<sup>3</sup>. Then the illuminations were taken out of the book. In analysing this gradation, he aptly demonstrates that there was something there which marked the living aspect of words: the ornament, the dropped initials. Then one takes out the painting. This analysis is very interesting in that it illustrates, in a symbolic manner, how reason has progressively rejected the image, and how one perceives now only in the name of the universal idea, in the name of Universalism, in the name of the Enlightenment, in the name of those great values of the Rights of Man, and that we are going to remove everything that is in the name of beautifying the world, the detail. I would also like to make a link with the theme of the orgy, from the Greek *orgue*, which literally means 'passion in common'. A sociology of the orgy is interesting in order to see how there can be a *passion in common*, and how it is this passion in common that moves social life. It seems to me that in the face of the unifying aspect of reason that brings all down to unity, there is these days an inversion of polarity: an inversion which puts the accent more and more not on the universalism of the idea but on the 'idiography', that is, the capacity to mark the specificity, the idiomatic, the idiom, the particularism.

It is in such a context that a tendency is created which leads us to appreciate or locate books which illustrate *idiomatic expression*, books which illustrate no longer the great Universalism, but specificity, the commotion which moves the body and moves the abdomen: the experience, the emotional bursting out, the return of the storyteller. The literature of *cordel*<sup>4</sup> in Brazil is an example. But one can find plenty of expressions of this type. It is no longer about a Book which translates the universal, but books which are going to render universal the concrete. And at bottom, it is the orgy. It is essentially something structurally 'hysterical' which goes back to the uterus, which goes back to the abdomen. The thoughts of the brain upon which we

3. A lettrine is an initial letter, particularly a decorated one, standing out from a printed background.

4. Popular literature of North-East Brazil.



have functioned and of which books are the expression *par excellence*, make way for the thoughts of the abdomen, to a multiplicity of contemporary books which recount – and put the accent on – that which is socially rousing. I have no other expression to evoke the idea that I am trying to explain, apart from ‘turning back’. In opposition to regression, which is quite simply pejorative, turning back brings us to the image of the spiral. It is this spiral which takes the place of the linearity of great Western thought, of our great progressivist tradition, of optimism, of Marxism, and, let us say clearly, of Christian *parousia*. This is because there is no difference between Augustinian Christian thought and Marxist thought. On the opposite of this linearity, there is the somewhat too simplistic attitude of Nietzschean circularity, in which is considered the return of the same. For me, this spiral would be *regredience*. It consists of at last seeing ancient things again but on another level.

From this point of view, what is currently in question is no longer the vertical structure supported by the weapons I spoke of. It is no longer a question of the triumph of the patriarchy or of Man as such. From now on, it is rather about a horizontal structure, much more fraternal and which, in many respects, no longer uses the imposition of the Verb and the Book as its support, but will fundamentally be of the order of relativism. We are always afraid of relativism, which corresponds to the abdication of thought. Yet relativism is the putting in relation. It is the fact of recognizing that there are *cultures* (not culture), and that these cultures are obliged to dialogue.

Where there is relativism, there is syncretism and sensualism. This is why I have evoked the thoughts of the abdomen, thoughts which do not function on the simple verticality of the brain, the ‘chief’ who is both the head and he who commands. In the syncretism which is currently in play in relativism, in sensualism, there is something which leads us to the wholeness of being. I remind you that Gilbert Durand had discerned, in certain cultures, a different regime, which he called the ‘night-time regime of the imagination’. While the ‘daytime regime’ rests upon weapons which cut, the ‘night-time regime’ is a hollow; its symbol is the cup, and represents the vagina, the abdomen. This regime causes a kind of feminization of the world and promises, from this, polyculturalism, relativization. But the idea of the *cup* is also that of horizontality which, as opposed to the verticality of the overhanging structure, creates something like fraternity within relationships.

It is thus that one can finish up at the relativization of the Book by books. It is no longer a question of the founding Book, but the books that will put experience into play, customs, particularities, idioms. One might wonder about the

success of books on religion, spirituality; but in many respects, the latter do nothing but translate idioms, they are the expression of a shared emotionality. Of something which does not fall from 'on high', but which comes from below. One can find a number of examples of this. Books no longer express universalism but *localism*. It is what I call the 'time of the tribes' which puts the accent, essentially, on archaisms, tribalism, nomadism, hedonism, whilst modernity is educational on the basis of the founding Book. In my view, what is in question here is something which goes back to the reclaiming of the *function of initiation*. Different from education imposing something from the outside or from a given book, initiation brings out *what is there* in all cultures. What education imposes from the exterior, from the *corpus* established once and for all, initiation finds step by step. Thus the failure of education, in its diverse modulations, underlines the possibility of a return to initiation which brings out the treasure which is there.

But how can there be a junction between this archaism and technological development? There is no place, obviously, for fear of the Internet and other applications, because in many respects they translate this horizontality, for example in forums, discussion papers, etc. There is the birth of something of the order of orality, something essentially archaic. Those who are afraid of the end of their intellectual monopoly are as suspicious of the Internet as of the horizontality of the different types of forums. However, the network of networks allows what I would call the synergy of archaism and technological development, that is, a multiplication of effects.

It therefore becomes important to develop a 'demonic' thought, following the example of Socrates, but – dare I say? – quite simply demonic too. And this is because 'demonic' reality is here. It is the symbol of the subconscious, the symbol of that which is obscurely plunged into the cosmos. It is something which is no longer in the class of subject–object duality where the subject acts upon the object. Demonic wisdom, this wholeness of thought which I have called the thought of the abdomen, goes precisely beyond this dichotomy. It can be the occasion for *trajectivity*; trajectivity of which Internet is just the expression.

In sum, all the vertical structure, the great monotheist idea, is also *nomothetic* – it puts down laws. In effect, the Book puts down laws. The Rights of Man are nomothetic, the Enlightenment is nomothetic, Western values are nomothetic. And be it with cannons or not, one will impose – and one has imposed – these values on the whole world. This imposition was, of course, carried out for the good of the 'Other', of the barbarian, the child who must be civilized,

who must be pulled towards civilization. But on the opposite of this nomothetism, one is confronted with what I will call *idiographism* – something which will carve, which will visualize specificity, particularities. If the nomothetic is the Book, the idiographic is *books*, as ‘ciphers’ of this horizontality I spoke of earlier.

From now on, one no longer conceives of the book in an oscillation between the Nation and the World. Books do not belong in either one of these spheres. Neither in the nation, which at bottom is nothing but a rational expression of being together, nor in the world, of which the overly great universality seems to me no longer pertinent. I think that books can from now on only translate the *idea of the tribe*, the idea of community, and one should not be frightened to rethink books as an expression of the community.

In ‘Hyperion’ describing, poetically, the war of the Greeks against the Turks – a war of independence, fought to create the Greek nation – one finds the neologism of the ‘nationel’. This poem by Hölderlin describes the birth of the ‘nationel’. Talking of the feeling of belonging, emotional and affective, it shows well that it is through this sharing of orgiastic feelings that a community will be created. These communities founded on the ‘nationel’ create themselves from the bottom up, from something which comes from the flesh, which makes the body vibrate. The world and the nation relate only to the rational order and it is not simply the verticality of the brain which is in question. Let us remember here the ancient wisdom ‘*timeo hominem unius libri*’. I fear the man of just one book. It is, quite evidently, books in the plural which must now be valued.

# Notes on the contributors

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