

FOREWORD



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Is there a future for the little magazine in the Age of the Internet? The economics of paper seem inauspicious. One of the editors of *Graph*, Ireland's most interesting cultural review, tells me that the magazine may go on-line exclusively. It would appear, he says, that while the leviathans of literary culture are so far unscathed, the taste for the reading of small magazines in print is on the wane. Something has shifted; one suddenly empathizes with the teamster glimpsing the first billows of the steam locomotive.

When the hype clears, the history of technological advance will suggest that the impact of the computer on print is likely to be less sweeping and more focussed than some suppose. The computer revolution launched in the late twentieth century falls short of the overhaul of consciousness set in train by the introduction of alphabetic writing in the eighth century B.C., or even the terminal blow to manuscript culture delivered by Gutenberg. What Panglossians of the new technology in both electronics and genetics tend to forget is the extreme doggedness of the entanglement of old invention and human nature. Culture is like an antique shell formed by accretion; the needle coexists with the toaster, the light bulb with the hearth. Language is immemorial, and plump as a buddha in the middle of the kitchen is the supreme achievement of the global culture of the village that predated any city: the Neolithic vegetable.

In the words of a distinguished scholar of orality and literacy, Walter Ong, the new technology, like the earlier mass media of radio and television, is a phenomenon of "secondary orality"; it presupposes the consciousness dependent on literacy, but inflects it with something of the poetics of pristine orality that we glimpse behind Homer. Therein, you might say, is the difference between the Jamesian letter and the e-mail. In retrospect, we can see now that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a golden age of print culture whose ascendancy helps to account for the timbre of the high Modernism that reigned till mid-century.

Nonetheless, if culture can be dogged, a direct blow to the technological solar plexus can dispatch one of its forms with astonishing swiftness. Television has not killed off the movies, but sound sealed the fate of the silent film. It is conceivable that the little magazine, that quintessential expression of Modernist cultural difference, is likewise up against it with the Internet. Why bother raising the funds for print when it can all be done so easily and cheaply on a web-site? And will anything really be lost in the switch from the magazine sculpted in print to the more amorphous, glowing scroll of an e-journal?

Yes. There is the editorial pressure created by paper itself; since every page costs, unlike the infinity of the screen, the drive to critique is reinforced. There

is the sense in which the reading of print is more collective, less atomized, than the “hits” surfing out of cyberspace. A print magazine is an object; it is sold or sent to a readership; that readership tends to constitute a literary milieu; the object lies about in the common space of stores, libraries, homes and cultural events where it is seen by those who would not otherwise seek it out; its appearance at intervals means that there is some rough simultaneity of receiving and reading. It could be said that, in terms of collectivity, print stands to cyberspace as the central programming of national television does to the Aladdin’s cave of cable. Yet, important as space and commonality are, they do not seem to me the decisive reasons for resisting the little magazine’s abandonment of print. As I see it, the real defense of print is simply that it is not cyberspace; or rather, more precisely, that it does not therefore belong to the emergent culture of cyberspace.

Just after the fall of the Berlin Wall Vaclav Havel warned that if the West did not attend to its true freedoms much of what had collapsed in the East would reemerge in variant form in its own social systems. It was an extremely percipient prediction, and already we can see it unfolding at an escalating rate.

In its unrelenting assault on privacy, most of the tabloid media now constitutes a kind of public Stasi of snooping, vilification and social pillory; as the poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger has remarked, the tendency of the electronic media especially is to “throw off the burden of language and to liquidate everything that was once called program, meaning, content” as those terms are understood within writing. Paraphrasing Aristotle, George Steiner thinks the greatest challenge to Western democracy is the slow flight of intelligence and imagination from political life, and the consequent danger of a politics of minor corruption, mediocrity and philistinism; if the able stay in the house, the thugs will take over the agora. Most astonishing of all is the reemergence, within a few years of the demise of the Soviet empire, of a new version of Europe’s antique tradition of multinational collectivity, based this time on the democratic rather than the imperial impulse, but containing too the seeds of federal giantism: the European Union. And so on...

It would be extraordinary indeed if the world of commercial publishing, even poetry publishing, were immune to Havel’s warning. In fact, of course, the juggernaut of conglomeration proceeds apace. Where will it end? While we are constantly assured by the Fukuyama optimists that such developments threaten neither standards nor freedoms, the sociology of the twentieth century would suggest otherwise, at least in the long-term. That such developments must subtly and not so subtly shape serious literary culture seems beyond dispute. As Lee Briccetti observes in her essay on the publishing scene, the commercial production of poetry in the United States is now dominated by five entertainment conglomerates, outside which a few trade independents struggle to survive, amidst a legion of non-commercial micro-presses. These are corporations for which the book is but a branch of “the culture industry” (or, as Enzensberger calls it, “the mind industry”), and for which (we are told in Johannine tones) the Internet will be the prime vehicle of a new “single multimedia” dispensation.

Moreover, the history of the written word suggests that each new technological innovation demands its pound of intellectual flesh. When we look at a North African qur'an written in gold on blue vellum, or a papyrus of the Apocalypse, we realize how much the sculpted texts of antiquity derive from both the surrounding orality and the reverence accorded to the unique labour of a manuscript. When we read Descartes or Proust, we realize how inseparable the logic or artistry is from the classic mentality of print. So what does the Internet carry in train?

Self-evidently, the Internet, with its Anglo-American inflection, is the emerging medium of globalization and thus of the forces, such as conglomeration and mass cultural commodification, that buttress it. And what is the prime orientation of this global *lingua franca*, this supra-language, as it might be called?

One of modern Ireland's preeminent writers, the essayist Hubert Butler (1900-91), who was much interested in the Information Age long before the advent of computers, thought its media typified by a drastic diminution of linguistic complexity allied to what he called "the disease of pseudo-cosmic thinking" and "the ravages of the secondhand". "An idea," he wrote of the glib scientism of C. P. Snow, "that has to travel far by modern means and circulate freely among alien people must, like an air passenger's luggage, be very meagre indeed." Butler, an early Green, had had a rich classical education, and in an essay on the Greek city state he goes on to reflect:

Surely Greek art and letters owed their crystalline clarity in part to this small-scale simplicity... We have to ask how far we have damaged the intimate relation between a creative mind and its milieu by distending almost limitlessly the field of vision and hearing, dulling the impact of experience on our senses by exposing them incessantly to titillations from afar... Impressions from far away as soft as snowflakes are choking up the channels of perception, making sharp corners into curves, generalizing what is particular, reducing everything to a boundless colourless uniformity.

And in one of his last essays, when the ramifications of the new technology were already evident, he concludes: "Is it not obvious that when through the modern media far things are brought near, the near things must be pushed far to make room for them? Imperceptibly, we become Lilliputians wandering in a Brobdingnag of our own contrivances and persuading ourselves that through contact with greatness we ourselves become greater."

Cyberspace, then, is Brobdingnagian in Butler's sense. Understood as a whole, and regardless of the infinite variety of what can be downloaded, it carries the charge of a sensibility and a system. One might extend Butler's question and wonder whether the culture of cyberspace, where the limitless horizons of the Information Age stand in for immediate experience, is equally damaging to

the intimate relation between a magazine and its milieu, that symbiosis engendered by centuries of print culture. After all, in turning (for instance) a print journal into “virtual object”, is it not thereby *déraciné*, cut off from the aforementioned real plurality of things in public space and therefore, in some “Lilliputian” sense, from “the near” that informed it? In what sense is a click on the global Brobdingnag part of the local literary weather that produced it? If the answer is negative, it could be said, QED, that the best place for the literary culture of print-and the best guarantee of its rich ecology-must remain print.

If the corporate Brobdingnag in publishing continues to aggrandize at the expense of diversity, one can envisage Havel’s warning also materializing at the heart of Western literary life. Under the relentless pressure of marketing to scale, the emergence of a kind of final Soviet gulf in content between the official-saleable and the unofficial-marginal is hardly far-fetched. In literary fiction especially, the migration of mass marketing techniques from the airport lounge to the culture of prizes and celebrity cannot be missed. At the moment, the dynamic seems perfectly compatible with talent and originality, but that might be transitional, and much less the case in future. Come to think of it, where is the literary Max Weber for all this? It is only because the huge social phenomenon known as “modern literature” lacks a sociology comparable to that evolved for religion, which it has partly replaced, that the import of such trends tends to be underestimated.

Be all that as it may, it seems to me that the special merit of the little magazine is that it remains cross-grained to the spirit of the Brobdingnag, whether corporate or cyber. In its resolute paper economics and limited transmission, I suspect it may come to seem, wherever it survives, like a samizdat of the small-scale; an image of “the space outside”, that truest locus of contemporary culture; a milieu whose Lilliputian autonomy is proof against what Enszenberger calls “the industrialization of the mind”:

The mind-making industry is really a product of the last hundred years. It has developed at such a pace, and assumed such varied forms, that it has outgrown our understanding and control. Our current discussion of the “media” seems to suffer from severe theoretical limitations... Hardly anyone seems to be aware of the phenomenon as a whole: the industrialization of the human mind. This is a process that cannot be understood by a mere examination of its machinery...

Yet the vague and insufficient name “culture industry” serves to remind us of a paradox inherent in all media work. Consciousness, however false, can be induced and reproduced by industrial means, but it cannot be industrially produced. It is a “social product” made up by people: its origin is the dialogue. No industrial process can replace the persons who generate it. And it is precisely this truism that the archaic term “culture” tries, however vainly, to remind us.

The mind industry is monstrous and difficult to understand because it does not, strictly speaking, produce anything. It is an intermediary, engaged only in production's secondary and tertiary derivatives, in transmission and infiltration, in the fungible aspect of what it multiplies and delivers to the customer...

The mind industry's main business and concern is not to sell its product: it is to "sell" the existing order, to perpetuate the prevailing pattern of man's domination by man, no matter who runs the society, and by what means. Its main task is to expand and train our consciousness—in order to exploit it...

Pursuing my theme, I would go further and echo Robert Pinsky, in the essay that follows, by observing that, in the case of the little poetry magazine, its very smallness seems of a piece with the distinguishing scale of the art itself:

On the evidence of the many applications to the writing program where I work, and on the evidence of writers' conferences, Poets in Schools, and so forth—and on the evidence of my own soul—I would guess that poetry, true to its form and to its peculiar history in American culture, embodies a particular appetite for the equivalent, in art, of individual speech. It embodies the idea that in someone's voice, forming the words and sentences we exchange all day there is the model for a form of art, with its defining place among other arts...

It is dizzy-making, maybe fruitless to contemplate this "crisis" of mass and individual, elite and popular, academic and demotic. Muddling at trying to think through such tangled immensities, I realize that what I crave to hear is a voice—a voice in a poem. The single human voice—which cannot match film for spectacle, or music for glamour, or drama for ready emotion—conveys something of all those things, along with the precious sense of human scale. Contrary to the vision of *Leaves of Grass*, poetry may not hold us together in the mass; yet we seem to carry it as the vessel of some valuable property, the property, perhaps, of our own imagination inside us.

Years ago, I attended a reading by the poet and classicist Robert Fitzgerald, whose splendid translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* remain unsurpassed. Asked whether the classics would survive, he answered simply that it was all a matter of individuals; if a few renewed them, they would be renewed. The same might be said of the "the little magazine" in a period when—to borrow an image from Seamus Heaney—the humanist heritage of the West risks being "slighted" by the blandishments of a new technological culture. The potential of its Lilliputian role, independent dialogue, is far from exhausted.

BELFAST, IRELAND, FEBRUARY 2000