

## After the Book ?

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The book as we know it has been a significant phenomenon for only a relatively short span of history—about a century and a half—only in certain areas and in certain cultures. Today, the enveloping matrix of our intellectual and emotional lives is not a reader's climate. The status of the book is changing, as is the make-up of the "language-world" we inhabit. The written word has become a caption for the visual and the musical image. Our verbal inheritance is caught between the semi-literacy of the mass market and the minutia of the specialist. The written word persists, but new forms for its circulation will bring alterations of our sensibilities and modification in our habits of discovery.

It is like us to ask such questions. They are, in several ways, symptomatic of the present climate of feeling. We are ready to ask very large and inherently destructive questions. This is radicalism in a special sense. Not Hegelian-Marxist radicalism with its implicit futurity, with its almost axiomatic presumption that we go to the root of a problem in order to solve it, and because we know that destruction, uprooting is only a necessary risk before solution. No; our going to the root of things is more ambivalent. We would do so even when we are not confident that there *is* a solution. It may be, in fact, that the aspect of demolition, the apocalyptic strain greatly tempt us. We are fascinated by "last things," by the end of cultures, of ideologies, of art forms, of modes of sensibility. We are, certainly since Nietzsche and Spengler, "terminalists." Our view of history, says Lévi-Strauss in a deep pun, is not an anthropology but an "entropology."

This makes for intellectual exhilaration and a kind of bleak nobility. It is, presumably, not every species that can meditate its own ruin, not every society that can image its own decay and possible subjection to new and alien energies. But it is a negative radicalism which carries with it an element of self-fulfilment. This is a large, intricate topic. As I have tried to show elsewhere, a good deal of the barbarism of the

politics of our century was anticipated, dreamt of, fantasized about in the art, literature, and apocalyptic theories of the previous hundred years. It makes sense—although only in a dialectical way—to ask whether a force of prevision of the order of Kafka's does not in some manner “prepare,” “prepare for” the lunacies and inhumanities which it intimates. If we ask, therefore, whether there is a future for books or what may come after the end of books, we may be doing more than pose a question. The fact that we *can* and *do* ask may be part of the process of debilitation which, presumably, we fear; and it could, conceivably, hasten it. It is a famous saying of Marx that mankind does not ask major questions until there is the objective possibility of an answer. This may be so. But there is another, more disturbing way of putting it: mankind may only ask certain questions in order to elicit a negative, predictive reply.

Obviously, however, we are not meeting in a spirit of indifferent inquiry or nihilistic play. If we pose the question of the viability of the book, it is because we find ourselves in a social, psychological, technical situation which gives this question substance. And although we hope to press the question home and to look scrupulously at the evidence, we hope also that the question will resolve itself positively; that our asking is, in Hegel's incisive terminology, an *Aufhebung*. Asking is an action, a possible bringing into view and into being of perspectives in which the question is seen to be trivial or falsely posed. Or, at the rare best, to ask is to provoke not the answer one actually fears or aims at, but the first contours of a new and better asking—which is then a first kind of answer. Bearing this in mind, let us sketch very briefly some of the historical and pragmatic grounds which make it possible and even responsible to envisage the end of the book as we have known it.

First, it is worth stressing that the “book as we have known it” has been a significant phenomenon only in certain areas and cultures, and only during a relatively short span of history. Being bookmen we tend to forget the extremely special locale and circumstances of our addiction. We lack anything like a comprehensive history of reading. It would, I think, show that reading in our sense—“with unmoving lips”—does not predate St. Augustine (who first remarked on it) by very

much. But I would narrow the range even further. The existence of the book as a common, central fact of personal life depends on economic, material, educational preconditions which hardly predate the late sixteenth century in western Europe and in those regions of the earth under direct European influence. Montaigne and Bacon are already bookmen, and profoundly conscious of the relations of their own inner life to the future of the printed form. But even they read in a way which is not entirely ours; their sense of the authority, of the layered hermeticism of the written word—from surface level to anagogical mystery—has much in common with an earlier, almost pictorial or “iconic” view of meaning. Our style of reading, the unforced currency of our business with books, is not easy to document before, say, Montesquieu. It climaxes in Mallarmé’s well-known pronouncement that the true aim of the universe, of all vital impulse, is the creation of a supreme book—*le Livre*. Now the relevant time span is only about a century and a half. Yet it is undoubtedly true that Mallarmé himself marks the beginning of the questions we are asking here.

The classic age of the book depended on a number of material factors (even as we have no full history of reading, we have no sociology of reading, though there are in the criticism of Walter Benjamin and in Adorno’s sociology of music numerous indications as to what is needed).

The book on the monastery lectern or in the chained university library is not the same as that of the seventeenth century. In its classic phase, the book is a privately owned object. This requires the conjunction of specific possibilities of production, marketing, and storage. The private library is far more than an architectural device. It concentrates a very complicated spectrum of social and psychological values. It requires and, in turn, determines certain allocations of space and silence which impinge on the house as a whole. In visual and tactile terms, it favours particular formats or genres—the two are intimately meshed—over others: say the bound volume over the pamphlet, the in-octavo over the folio, the *opera omnia* or set over the single title. The spiritual cannot be divorced from the physical fact. A man sitting alone in his personal library reading is at once the product and begetter of a particular social and moral order. It is a *bourgeois* order founded on certain hierarchies of literacy, of purchasing power,

of leisure, and of caste. Elsewhere in the house there is most likely a domestic who dusts the shelves of books, who enters the library when called. And there are children schooled not to make undue noise, not to burst in when their father is reading. In short, the classic act of reading—what is depicted as *la lecture* in so many eighteenth-century genre paintings and engravings—is the focus of a number of implicit power relations between the educated and the menial, between the leisured and the exhausted, between space and crowding, between silence and noise, between the sexes and the generations (it is only very gradually that women come to read in the same way and context as their husbands, brothers, and fathers).

These power relations and value-assumptions have been drastically eroded. There are few libraries now in private apartments and fewer servants to dust them or oil the book spines. Intensities of light and noise levels of an unprecedented volume crowd in on personal space, particularly in the urban home. Far more often than not, the act of reading takes place against, in direct competition with another medium—television, radio, the record player. There are almost no taboo-spaces or sacrosanct hours left in the modern family. All is free zone. Where the book shelves were, we tend to find the record cabinet and the row of l-p's (this, in itself, is one of the most important changes in the climate, in the enveloping matrix of our intellectual and emotional lives). It is only rarely in the home that the exercise of reading, in the old sense, now takes place. It is in highly specialized frameworks: mainly the university library or academic "office." We are almost back at the stage before Montaigne's famous circular reading room in the quiet tower. We read "seriously" as did the clerics, in special professional places, where books are professional tools and silence is institutional.

The modern paperback is an immediate and brilliantly efficient embodiment of the new parameters. It takes very little space. It is quasi-disposable. Its compactness declares that it can be, is almost intended to be, used "in motion," under casual and fragmented circumstances. Being quite explicitly of the same material make-up as trashfiction, the paperback—even where its content is high-brow—proclaims an easy democracy of access. It carries with it no manifest sign of economic or cultural élitism. Mickey Spillane and Plato share the same book rack in the airport lounge or drug store.

But the mainsprings of change in the status of the book lie deeper. Definite philosophic beliefs and habits of perception underlay the primacy of the book in the life of the mind from the time of Descartes to that of Thomas Mann (one of the last complete representatives of the classic stance). Having tried to make some of these points in detail in previous work, I will do no more than summarize.

In very large measure, most books are about previous books. This is true at the level of the semantic code: writing persistently refers to previous writing. Explicit or implicit citation, allusion, reference are essential means of designation and proposition. It is via this dynamism of reiteration that the past has its most palpable existence. But the process of reference is even more comprehensive. Grammar, the literary idiom, a genre such as a sonnet or a prose novel, embody a previous formalization of human experience. Thoughts, feelings, events as set down in books do not come raw; the format of expression carries with it very strong and complex, though often “subliminal,” values and boundaries. In a suggestive essay, some years ago, E. H. Gombrich showed that even the most violent, spontaneous of pictorial notations—Goya’s sketches of the insurrection in Madrid—are stylized by, filtered through previous work of art. So it is with books: all literature has behind it human experience of the kind which previous literature has identified as meaningful. The act of writing for the printed page as it conjoins with the reading response is intensely “axiomatized” or conventionalized, however fresh and turbulent the author’s impulse. The past is strongly at his back; the current moves between bounds of established possibility.

These elements of tradition and limitation are of the essence of a classic world view. If western literature—from Homer and Ovid to *Ulysses* and *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*—has been so largely referential, each major work mirroring what has gone before and bending the light only so much out of a given focus and no more, the reason lies at the very heart of our literacy. Western and Chinese culture have been bookish in a very definite way: Western culture unfolds, by highly self-conscious modes of imitation, variation, renaissance, parody, or *pastiche*, from a strikingly small set of canonic, classical texts and form-models, principally Greek. By creative “ingestion,” as Ben Jonson put it, the curve of discourse tends from Homer to Virgil, from Virgil to Dante, from Dante to Milton,

Klopstock, Joyce, and the explicit retrospective of the *Cantos*. There have been fifteen *Oresteias* and a dozen *Antigones* in twentieth-century drama and opera. Archilocus points to Horace, Horace to Jonson, Jonson to Dryden and Landor, Landor to Robert Graves. The line, the experience of lament over the poet or hero who has died young is unbroken since the Greek Anthology and passes, via stages of massive cross-reference, through *Lycidas* and *Adonais* to Arnold's *Thyrsis*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, and Auden's elegy—built of Ovidian echoes—on the passing of Yeats. Print and the physique of books have been the enforcing framework of tradition. It is in this respect—not in any vague, undemonstrable intimation of visual-linear compulsion—that we can characterize western culture as being that of the library at Alexandria, of Gutenberg and of Caxton.

This close correlation of formal invention, of energized feeling with established genres and a framework of allusion and prepared echo has further implications. *Le Livre* is the proven talisman against death. This is the grand discovery, the proud cry, in Homer and Pindar: the words of the poet outlive the events they narrate and make the poet immortal. Rephrased by Horace and by Ovid the promise that time cannot gnaw great words to dust, that they will outlast the brass and marble on which they are incised, is the password of western literature. I die, my life may have been a shamble of error and non-recognition, but if my book has truth and beauty enough, it will endure. There are those as yet unborn who shall read it, as I read the classic on my table. This is the secret of Demodocus, the minstrel in the *Odyssey*, and, two and a half millennia later, of Paul Éluard when he states *le dur désir de durer*.

The gamble on immortality can only come off if language itself holds. There is nothing mystical about this notion. It is a traditional trope of western literature, particularly poetry, that words are inadequate to the needs of personal expression, that available language falls drastically short of the poet's inner vision. But this trope is itself linguistically articulated. The anguish of unattainable precision or radiance is real enough, but it is also conventional and is itself a means of eloquence. The Petrarchian sonnet springs constantly and with confident elaboration from a basic complaint about its own insufficiency to state the uniqueness, the vehemence of the poet's love. Mystical writings, such as the *Canciones* of St. John of the Cross come

nearest the limit; but we know this just because they communicate to us in words of great precision and clarity their sense of the neighbourhood of the inexpressible.

Here again, the complex of the book and of its reader stands in a specific Judaic-Hellenic descent. It is from these two antique sources, so oddly, so intensely literary and bookish in their self-definition, that we derive our view of the eminent worth and stability of speech. These two civilizations tell us that the word—the *logos*—is central to man's religion, to his *logic*, to his mythologies. They tell us that the relations of descriptive adequacy between human language and the "outside world" may be epistemologically opaque, that there are deep problems about meaning what we say and saying what we mean, about understanding one another and about denoting objects or sense-data unambiguously. Nonetheless, this very opaqueness can only be diagnosed and registered in words, linguistically. We inhabit a language-world, and if it is the source of perplexing but marginal dilemmas, it is also the root of our conscious being and mastery over nature.

This conviction, of which books are the active incarnation, prevails with only eccentric challenges from the time of the great oral epics at least to that of Rimbaud and Surrealism.

Each of these philosophic tenets and the psychological attitudes which accompany them have come under severe attack. (Perhaps one ought to have realized earlier how fragile the fabric of western literacy was, how delicate and probably unique were the historical, moral raw materials which went into its making.)

The basis of referential recognition on which our poetry and prose have operated from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot, from the *Roman de la rose* to Valéry, has become the increasingly fictive possession of a mandarin few. The organized amnesia of American schooling—and much of Europe is following suit—ensures that the alphabet of scriptural, mythological, historical allusion in our literature has become a hieroglyphic. Footnotes lengthen on the page as rudimentary identifications and paraphrase are needed. Off balance on top of these explanatory stilts, the poem itself becomes strange and blurred. More and more of our verbal inheritance is caught between the semi-literacy of the mass market and the Byzantine minutiae of the specialist.

In the glass case of the academic storehouse verse, drama, fiction which was once a common presence now leads an immaculate but factitious life. Authority—and authority is the core, the wellspring of formal tradition—is itself highly suspect. Ezra Pound’s “make it new” was, in fact, a call for renovation in the renaissance sense. The cry of the new millenarians against the classic, against eloquence, against that which is difficult of access, is something entirely different. It goes back to the terrorist insight of Dada that the literate past must be destroyed, dynamited if history is to enter a phase of radical innocence.

The aim of survival, of glory in the pantheon, is equally suspect. It speaks of hierarchy and academicism. We seem to be involved in a revolution of time-values. *Now* is everything, and the young regard as hypocrisy, opportunism, or worse, the traditional strategy of the poet or thinker sacrificing his present life to future eminence. This equivocation, self-evident to Milton, to Keats, to Hölderlin, now has a ring of hallow bathos. To the radical generation there is obscenity in Mallarmé’s belief that a supreme masterpiece, *le Livre*, is the goal and validation of human affairs. Today Pisarev’s slogan, “a pair of boots outweighs Shakespeare and Pushkin,” has come into its own.

The doubts about language have more varied and respectable sources. Again, I have dealt with this theme at length previously and will only summarize here. In the period from Rimbaud and Mallarmé to Dada and Surrealism an “anti-language” movement springs up from inside literature. Bored by the oppressive eloquence and perfections of the past, the new iconoclasts and experimenters sought to recreate the word, to find in new verbal and syntactic forms intact resources of exactitude, of magic, of sub-conscious energy. The Dada demand for “an end to the word” is at once nihilistic—man cannot be renewed if he keeps his worn skin of speech—and aesthetic. It calls for the discovery of hitherto unexploited phonetic, iconic, and semiological means. A second current of doubt is that which stems from formal logic and the work of logical positivism and of Wittgenstein. It is one of the major effects of modern philosophy, from Moore to Austin and Quine, to have made language look messier, more fragile, less comfortably concordant with our needs, than before. The confidence in the medium which animates earlier philosophic monuments—those of Kant, of Hegel, of Schopenhauer, of Bergson—is simply no longer available. A third impulse to linguistic scepticism comes from

the enormous expansion of the exact sciences. An ever-increasing portion of sensory and conceptual reality has passed into the keeping of the non-verbal semantic systems of mathematics. A modern writer can deal precisely, and in the relevant idiom, with far less of natural fact and intellectual analysis than could Shakespeare, Milton, or Pope. The fourth aspect is that first investigated by Karl Kraus and George Orwell: the cheapening, the dehumanization, the muddling of words through the mass media and through the lies of barbarism of modern politics. This brutalization and profanation of the word is very probably one of the main causes for the tide of self-destruction, either through self-imposed silence or actual suicide, which has come over western literature from the time of Nerval and Rimbaud to that of Sylvia Plath, Paul Celan, and John Berryman. The words in my mouth, says Ionesco, have gone dead.

Taken together, these attacks on traditional literacy, on the transcendental view of the artist's and thinker's enterprise, and on the validity of language constitute a fundamental critique of the book. It is not so much a "counter-culture" which is being developed, but a "post-culture."

But once we have made this analysis, the factual question arises: *are* people reading less, is there an empirically demonstrable decline in the vitality of printed books?

The evidence is very difficult to come by. Robert Escarpit's *La Révolution du livre* (1966) is the only full-scale study I know of, and it is at best, preliminary. What we find are fragments of information, isolated statistics, guesses of every kind. I hesitate even to adduce these in the presence of experts.

A survey conducted in 1970 indicates that on average a French man or woman will read no more than *one* book a year. The figure for Italy is thought to be even less as there are extensive pockets of sub-literacy. In Germany, on the other hand, the ratio is rather better. The number of bookstores in the United States—i.e., of stores primarily or exclusively devoted to the sale of serious books and able to keep a representative selection in stock—has diminished drastically over the past twenty years (I have heard the figure of closures of "hybridizations" put as high as 75%). The turn-over rate has accelerated formidably, especially in regard to fiction. If it is not immediately

successful, a new novel will remain only very briefly in the bookstore. The ratio of remaindered prose fiction to what is kept in stock from among the estimated thirty or forty novels published weekly in the English language is, obviously, dramatic. The economics of serious hard-cover publishing have become fairly lunatic. Prices have trebled and often quadrupled between successive volumes in the same work or series. In numerous cases publication would not be feasible at all were it not for complex, often hidden schemes of subsidization or for immediate tie-ups with the paperback market. It is, currently, no more than a sober platitude that the whole future of the commercial production and distribution of hard-cover books with only a limited circulation is in doubt. The wild circus of personnel changes among American publishing houses, the spate of take-overs, the febrile vulgarization of once-great lists, are only the external symptom of a deep malaise in the whole book-world.

To these facts I would add one or two personal observations, obviously subjective and very limited in scope. Paperbacks do *not* make for the collection of a library. Among the very many students I have met and taught in several countries over the past two decades, fewer and fewer are book collectors, fewer and fewer reject the pre-packaged selectivity of the paperback in order to own *complete* works of an author. Among these same young people there appears to be a marked decline in habits of solitary, exclusive reading. They know less and less of literature *by heart*. They read against a musical background or in company. Almost instinctively, they resent the solipsism, the egotistical claims on space and silence implicit in the classic act of reading. They wish to shut no one out from the empathic tide of their consciousness. Being something we can listen to personally yet share fully with others at the same moment and in the same place, music, far more than books, meets the present ideal of participatory response. It is not the “dog-eared volume” we find in the walker’s pocket, but the transistor. And because it allows access at so many levels—ranging from technical insight to the vague wash of semi-conscious echo—music allows that democracy of emotion which literature, particularly difficult literature, denies. In brief: so far as I can make out, the prime requisites of concentrated reading in the old sense—aloneness, silence, contextual recognitions—are growing rare in the very milieu in which we would most crucially look for them—that of the undergraduate.

These are, I repeat, *ad hoc* and piecemeal impressions. They are nearly impossible to quantify. We are too close to these new tendencies and problems to have more than a very indistinct view. My observations would, I suspect, not be true of the Soviet Union, which is in a phase of centrally determined, almost Victorian literacy. They are only partly true of those countries of eastern Europe in which reading is often the best way of showing opposition to the regime, and in which competing electronic media remain underdeveloped. Nevertheless, and with regard to our own setting, I would say that the world of the bookman is much diminished.

Hence one's readiness to speculate—it can be no more than that—on what may come after the book or what may happen to books in a period of cultural transition.

It is now a commonplace that audio-visual means of communication are taking over wide areas of information, persuasion, entertainment which were, formerly, the domain of print. At a time of global increase in semi- or rudimentary literacy (true literacy is, as I have tried to suggest, in fact decreasing), it is very probable that audio-visual “culture packages,” i.e. in the guise of cassettes, will play a crucial role. It is already, I think, fair to say that a major portion of print, as it is emitted daily, is, at least in the broad sense of the term, a caption. It accompanies, it surrounds, it draws attention to material which is essentially pictorial. When uttered on the radio and, to a far greater degree, when spoken on television, language has a specialized, perhaps ancillary status. The phenomenon can be exaggerated: contrary to McLuhan's expectations, radio is holding its own, particularly in such hyper-verbal genres as discussion or drama. It is nonetheless obvious that a great part of humanity now receives its main informational and evocative stimuli in the form of images and illustrative signal-codes. The astonishing fact is not that this should be so, but that the word in the old sense should still be so vital. We touch here on an extremely puzzling phenomenon. Even the most superb of movies can only be seen a very limited number of times (say five or six) before it goes stale, before an impression of utter inertness takes over. Why should this be? In what way is a piece of print—a poem, a chapter in a novel, a scene from a play—any less “fixed,” static, unchanging than a film frame? Yet we can read the same poem a hundred times over in

our lives and it will literally be new to us. Where does the difference lie? What is there about purely visual material which does not have the inherent repeatability, the sameness with change which is the attribute of the written word? So far as I know, neither aesthetics nor psychology have come up with an answer. But the evidence is, I believe, unmistakable, and it entails a power of survival for printed speech which no competing medium has.

The more radical, though less visible changes, are those occurring not in the communication of material but in its storage and analytic treatment. Information storage and retrieval by means of data banks and computers are far more than technical devices. They constitute little less than a new way of organizing human knowledge and the relations of present inquiry to past work. All taxonomies are, in essence, philosophical. Any library system, whether by size or Dewey, enacts a formalized vision of how the world is put together, of what are the optimal sight-lines between the human mind and phenomenological totality. Electronic indexing and memorization, the instant provision of information according to various grids and semantic markers, will profoundly alter not only the physical structure of libraries, but our proceedings in them. The key concepts of referential relevance and of context (the books further down the shelf, the one we needed most but did not know we were looking for) will change. Data banks are not for browsing. In many disciplines, moreover, the cut-off point of chronological utility will be codified and institutionalized. One will not be expected to cite, to be aware of material earlier than a very recent point on the index tape. It will thus become ever more difficult to resist the illusion—and it *is* an illusion, certainly so far as most humanities go—that insight is cumulative, that there is a necessary progress and teleology in the statement of feelings and ideas. The “programming” of knowledge in the electronically managed libraries of the future will, I think, bring on alterations of sensibility, modifications in our habits of discovery, as significant as any since the invention of moveable type. The formula is one that makes for the minimalization of hazard, of waste, of spill-over. Yet it is these counter-utilitarian aspects of traditional reading which have determined much of the best in our culture.

What of the more immediate prospects for the printed book? In the presence of some of those most competent in the field, it is perhaps

foolhardy to conjecture. But some lines of change are already clear. There will be fewer books published. The current rate of over-production, notably in fiction, has triggered an absurd, ultimately self-defeating spiral of small printings, mounting overheads and the inability to amortize costs at anything near the rate regarded as indispensable in other industries. There will be fewer publishers, and it looks as if the edition and production of books, in both England and America, is passing into the hands of a small number of large consortia, often allied with, financed by other industries or capital holdings. What seems to be emerging is a pattern of giants together with a few small, specialized houses whose actual structure resembles that of the "little magazine" in relation to the mass media. The search for a technological breakthrough in regard to production costs will intensify. The restrictive and inflationary practices in the printing trades plainly reflect a luddite, terminal mood. The industry feels that its days are numbered. Whether some radical new photoprocess will emerge, whether the electric typewriter points the way, is uncertain. But increasingly, the hard-cover book printed (let alone illustrated) by traditional manual-mechanical means, is an anachronism. It is viable only in very large editions, which are of course limited to a small percentage of the annual list.

Even more significantly, there will, I expect, be a frank polarization in our understanding of books and of what is meant by *reading*. A firmer distinction than has been current hitherto will emerge as between the immense iceberg bulk of semi-attentive reading—ranging from the advertisement billboard to the pulp novel—and genuine "full" reading. The latter will, more and more, become the craft and pursuit of a minority trained to do the job and who themselves probably hope to write a book. It is precisely the disaster of mass education in the United States, but also in other over-developed consumer technocracies, to have blurred this vital difference. A large majority of those who passed through the primary and secondary school system can "read" but not *read*. There is a pseudo-literacy. Various measurements are possible. It has been estimated that the vocabulary and grammatical comprehension possessed by a considerable majority of American adults has stabilized around the age level of twelve or thirteen. An estimated eighty per cent of adult readers find it difficult to apprehend a dependent clause

(a fact long familiar to the copy editors of advertisement agencies, magazines, trash fictions, and federal or state regulations). Because it is no longer a natural, immediate part of our schooling, reading in the full sense of referential recognition, of grammatical confidence, of focused attention will have to be taught as a particular art. Anyone who has tried to teach literature or history or philosophy to the average high school graduate will testify that this is what the job is all about. It can well be argued that reading in the full sense was always the prerogative of an élite, that our pictures of a lost literacy are idealized and never applied to more than an educated minority. But this does not infirm the case. That minority held the centers of power and of example; its criteria were those of the culture as a whole. This is no longer true. It is far more honest and far more productive to admit that the standards and ideals of a full literacy are not self-evident, that they are not applicable to the majority in a populist society, that they represent a special skill. We do not, after all, demand that all citizens be trapeze artists. What we must try to see to, is that those who *want* to learn to read fully can do so and that they be allowed the critical space and freedom from competing noise in which to practise their passion. In our fantastically noisy, distracted milieu this minimal room for private response is not easily come by.

These guesses and provisional suggestions may seem pessimistic. They are not meant to be. There is a strong element of health in our diminutions. Too much has been printed; too much made glossily available. Lincoln or Carlyle tramping miles to read and to excerpt a book provide an image to think about; as does Edwin Muir, new from the world of the crofters, chancing at an Edinburgh book-stall on the worn copy of *Zarathustra* which was to transform his inner and outer life. Because it has been made so easy, our sense of the act of reading has often grown facile. At the very outset of the centuries of high literacy, Erasmus tells of stooping in a muddy way to snatch up a torn piece of print, and of his cry of wonder and good fortune at the event. Tomorrow's bookmen may, perhaps, find themselves in a like condition. This would not be, altogether, a bad thing.