

## Books in the Running Brooks

### *Some thoughts on the uses of cultural adversity*

John Valentine Brain

Had I been told a year ago that I should today be taking the side of the moderns against the ancients in a new battle of the books, I should have been shocked and incredulous. I have spent many words in defense of an allusive rather than a naive approach to the arts, and my own writings are so loaded with allusion that they seem at times to be addressed more to the dead than to the living. It is perhaps because my basic attitude to these things is so similar to George Steiner's that I am able to rehearse the arguments that a scurrilous alter ego has leveled against my own classic posture.

Steiner's examination of the viability of books in the modern world falls under two heads, what he identifies as "the historical and pragmatic grounds that make it possible . . . to envisage the end of the book as we have known it." I do not find either his historical or his pragmatic grounds convincing; they do not carry the edifice he erects upon them.

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George Steiner's article was given as an address to the Ferguson Seminar in Publishing at The College of William and Mary, March 23, 1972. On this and the following pages are four replies to Dr. Steiner's address by other participants in the 1972 Seminar.

The Ferguson Seminars were conceived by William Cross Ferguson, former president of World Book Company and director and treasurer of the American Textbook Publishers Institute, who before his death in 1967 set in motion the establishment of an endowment for "a seminar in publishing . . . devoted to the writing, editing, designing, printing, and marketing of books. . . ."

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To begin with, we should always be suspicious of those perennial Jeremiahs who never cease to tell us that our age is one of cultural, moral, or spiritual decay. In fact, every age has seemingly believed itself to be in cultural decline, forgetful of the glories of its past, its poets and painters mere pigmies riding on the shoulders of the heroes of old. It is inevitable that we should see all around us the failures of culture that constitute the “noise” of life, rather than the significant signals that will impress future ages. Or, to switch from a technical to a literary metaphor, the snows of yesteryear always look whiter from the top of an ivory tower. If we may descend to statistics, it should be pointed out that there have never been more students of literature in the world than there are today. There are also more scholars—or card-carrying Ph.D.’s who pass for scholars—extant today than in any age heretofore. But admittedly this is less evidence of the love of learning than of the economic viability of university teaching as a clean, undemanding, and gentlemanly profession.

Whether there has been any decline in serious reading is open to question. Librarians tell us that more serious books are being borrowed than ever before, and that television appears to stimulate rather than to replace reading. All forms of communication widen horizons and stimulate curiosity, and books—which are the informational resource most available on individual demand—are the prime beneficiary.

There is little merit to the argument that modern man has no time to read. Working hours are little more than half what they were a century ago. We have time to spare if we would make use of it. Of course, a lot of people prefer the circus to the cloister, the active to the contemplative life, but then they always have. It is not the reading habits of the majority that are significant, but whether the intelligent minority can satisfy their lust for learning. Popular education has increased the number of semi-literate persons—which is, after all, an absolute good—but it has not done much either to help or to harm the true philosophers, except perhaps to create a somewhat more favorable climate for intellectual activities.

The real culture-villain is not popular education but pseudo-scholarship. Rather than read thoroughly and inwardly digest a comparatively few important writers, the student of today is encouraged to pick at thousands of “sources” out of which he constructs

his term papers and ultimately his doctoral dissertation. Matthew Arnold's concept of a loved and sustaining body of classical writings and culture cannot survive the joyless chewing of this army of scholarly termites.

Of paperback books it should be said that most purchasers do not regard them as disposable. So-called "quality" paperbacks are simply clothbound books in soft covers, an economic expedient, not an inferior species. Now that paperbound editions of complete classical works are available, students are assigned them in preference to the clothbound collection of predigested readings assigned to the preceding generation. Facsimiles of original texts are being used now in some schools in preference to modern editions. Today even scholars are turning increasingly to paperbound books for their libraries, and this shows that they would prefer to own the inward substance of three paperbacks than the outward appearance of one clothbound book, however elegant its exterior. Plato would surely have approved of this trend, for it is not essentially of cloth and paper that books are made.

So much for pragmatics. The most important part of Steiner's paper concerns the decline of the classical world view and the consequent—or perhaps the determinant—loss to poets and readers of the allusive organism. The first thing to note is that this organism, though dormant, is not dead. The echoes of the past are all around us, even if the amplification system is temporarily out of action. Moreover, for most young poets, the problem is not too little tradition, but too much. Many must feel, as I did twenty years ago, the oppressive burden of the past, which seems to make independent thought and feeling virtually impossible. It is necessary to have a periodic revolution, a revulsion of feeling that clears the ground and makes new growth possible. While such revolutions—such gear shiftings in the cultural engine—are taking place, traditionalists will denounce the new trend as nihilistic and anticultural. But the mutations of culture are achieved by means of death and birth; it is not through modification of a single organism but through the succession of generations that change and necessary adaptation occur. Admittedly, Dada and Futurism were regressions to an infantile mode, anticultural in intention if not in effect. But cultural scavengers are necessary. I would not equate Mussolini with Michelangelo, but a man who could say,

“When I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my revolver,” could not be all bad.

Lamenting the passing of the past is a lot of fun and always an excellent academic exercise, but before we utter the last Alas! with weeping and gnashing of teeth, we might ask ourselves why our age does not feel the same need, as have past ages, to explore and exploit our cultural heritage. The quick answer is that the writings and models of the past are no longer relevant to the conditions of modern life. And though humanists may sputter, it is undeniable that most of our problems cannot be solved by references to the writings of Plato or Aristotle—or of comparatively recent philosophers like Kant or Mill. Wittgenstein once described modern philosophers as having hauled up the ladder once they had climbed aboard; henceforward they will discuss semantics with other philosophers, if they are on speaking terms. Meanwhile the ship of life is threatened with huge storms, and in the moment of crisis the cry goes up to jettison the lumber of the past.

But the more interesting question to ask is why past ages have felt the need for their systems of classical reference. Basically, it seems to me, these traditional systems reflect a desire to justify and dignify the present—to lend to novel ideas a measure of authority and apparent continuity, even if these claims to authority and continuity are specious. Interpreting the present in terms of the accepted values of the past—or, to be more precise, in terms of the values assumed to have been accepted by the past—is as evident in the history of cultures as it is in that of individuals. Thus, some more or less mythical history is an integral part of all religions, and their bibles and classical texts supply continuity and a rationale for present beliefs. The same is true of legal and constitutional history. New ideas—however revolutionary—are customarily dressed in the language and precedents of the past. In this way the unfamiliar appears in the guise of the familiar, and conservative reaction is disarmed. Perhaps the ultimate in classical rationalization is Milton’s defense of divorce by elaborate reference to Christian and Judaic tradition. Cultural antecedents, then, form a lustrous, insulating pearl around the grit of some sharp new irritant in the social consciousness. And even if there were no specific cultural reaction to contend with, most innovators would prefer to place their contributions in a distinguished genealogy

of ideas and to recognize themselves as “heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time.”

Sidney’s *The Defense of Poesy* is, of course, in the tradition of historical rationalization that I am discussing, but whereas Sidney’s argument is, in essence, that literature is moral and socially desirable, my point is that, irrespective of morality, the past will be used expediently to support the arguments of the present—much as a bird will build a nest out of twigs and fragments of once-living things. Anyone contemplating Philadelphia town hall—that monstrous pile of classical debris—will appreciate the nestbuilding analogy.

Needless to say, when a convenient past does not exist, it can be invented, and this is the poet’s mythopoeic role.

During the Renaissance—the prime example of classical allusiveness in our culture—the classical past was discovered (a true *renovatio* or *renascità*), even if not exactly in the way that is usually imagined. Tillyard and others have shown that much of the classical heritage was available to the late middle ages. What changed was not so much the availability of the past as the uses to which it was put, and this reinterpretation—largely religious and political—was achieved through the agency of the humanistic publicists of the time and the printing press. As a result, new doors were opened, and alternatives to the restrictive scholasticism of the middle ages abounded in fantastic profusion. I realize that I am oversimplify and overstating my case here, and that the ideas of the Renaissance to a large extent *created* the attitudes of mind that made them relevant; the chicken and the egg are not always distinguishable. My point is that a classical heritage is influential while it is being discovered and explored, as a novelty and not on account of its antiquity, and that once it becomes known and accepted, once it does not represent an intellectual liberation from the bonds of the present, its value as a cultural stimulus declines. It becomes effete, like late medieval scholasticism or eighteenth-century classicism, ripe for a new invasion of “barbarian” feeling that offers novel alternatives for thought and action.

It should also be mentioned that a classical education was for many centuries the exclusive hallmark of a social élite, its bases not “liberal” at all but constrictive and discriminatory. Thus, ironically, the main social function of the liberal arts was to distinguish the lettered from the unlettered and serve—like lace and ruffles—as a

conspicuous frill that the poor could not afford. Such a form of discrimination is better far than big cars and expensive suits, but the fact is that it is once again the few "true philosophers" of an age who are of cultural importance, not the many who learned Greek who might just as well have memorised logarithms as an exercise in social irrelevance.

If the once-rich mines of allusion that fueled western civilization for many centuries are no longer producing, it is not only because their mythologies are exhausted, but also because the engines of today run on different fuels. When I think of the sources of stimulation that have most affected me, I think not only of the western tradition, but of the ideas and religions of the east and the even more important ideas generated in the sciences and social sciences. To some extent the ideas of the sciences and social sciences *are* our mythology, providing the basic metaphors and models that shape our apprehension of the world, even if we do not understand them in their entirety. For the real "breakthroughs" of the twentieth century have not been literary or philosophical *ideas*, but historical and scientific *events*; it is the facts of our time, not its artifacts, that have most affected us.

It is a truism that we live in an atomic age, an age of moon rockets and supersonic travel, of television and communications, of immensely complicated machines that have profoundly modified our conception of human nature. Think only of the cultural impact of the atomic bomb (which has overshadowed our generation like a prophesy of doom), of the automobile, of the population explosion and contraception, and of the social impact of psychoanalysis and behaviorism, not to mention drugs and the psychedelic way of life. If Sophocles is less read today (and this is by no means certain), it may be because he has less to say to our condition than Skinner or Szasz. I personally don't think so, but we can always go back to Sophocles, whereas the ideas of Skinner and Szasz must be dealt with now.

It is partly the extreme rate of social and technological change that our species is undergoing that has relegated the mythical structures of the past to the museum and the icebox. We have only a limited attention span, every happening on earth is instantly flashed on our screens, and the classical past is but a petty sideshow compared with

the three-ring circus performing in the world arena. But the ideas of science and technology, and to a lesser extent those of the social sciences, are very perishable; they are useful for a few years and are then discarded in favor of new models, like old cars. This process does not lend itself to comprehensive humanistic synthesis. The arts today show more evidence of the fragmentation of ideas than of their assimilation into a new totality that includes elements of the past and the present.

The use of any commodity—whether it be a natural or a cultural resource—will depend on how necessary it is, and on its availability at acceptable cost. Our traditional western culture has never been more available. The libraries are stuffed with it, and barring some world cataclysm, it will probably survive indefinitely. If we are no longer relating to it, it is because it seems less relevant to us. But the stabilization of our society that must come about before long—if the world ecology is to be brought into balance—will send innovative thinkers once again to mine the resources of the past. Until then, the high priests of culture, like Professor Steiner, may be relied upon to guard our heritage, celebrating their secret mysteries in lonely splendour. But one day the trumpet shall sound, the doors of the British Museum will open, and Poly-Olbion shall once again be proclaimed in the streets.

Some of us may yet live to see this new renaissance. And when it comes, I am willing to wager that the book as we know it will still be extant.

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## A Reply to George Steiner

Norman S. Fiering

George Steiner's address touches on vital and complex modern developments, many of which have little to do with the book. It is at least half concerned with the general symptoms of the cultural crisis of our time, a crisis in which the fate of the book is only one problematic element. Nowhere else, however, have I seen so sharply and concisely defined the character and the virtues of the literary world of the past four hundred years. Steiner has given us an historical construct which can be worked with and pondered. What does the end of nineteenth-century "book culture" portend for society and the individual? How profoundly does the book as such underlay our civilization? In order to find our bearings in this crisis, as in any revolution, it is necessary to define carefully what is threatened and then to assess whether or not it is essential. Only after that can we know where it is safe to give way and where the line must be held against destructive change. I leave out here altogether the obvious but very meaningful considerations that the book as we know it is sometimes beautiful, usually convenient, and often affords unique pleasures to its votaries.

It may be a mistake, however, to invest the physical book with more symbolic value than is appropriate within a wide perspective on western civilization. For this physical object with many of its cultural supports and accoutrements is to some extent expendable, and the very intellectual and spiritual health of our civilization may require not the book's demise but at least its chastening. The book serves as a useful symbol for learning, for language, for humane culture, for respect for intellectual tradition, for the passion of scholarship, for literary art. Hence "book-burning" and book censorship in certain forms, have for centuries been rightly identified with barbarism,

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philistinism, and anti-intellectualism. But these repugnant historical phenomena are assaults on much more than books. They represent nihilistic forces, or political vendettas, or uncontrolled commercial materialism which threaten the venture of learning and humane culture in all forms, including oral teaching and listening, religious expression, free art and free song, microform storage, and computer data banks. These destructive forces are always objectionable and are not properly at issue here. Everything that threatens the supremacy of the book is not of their nature. Nor has the preservation of book culture been effective insurance against barbarism. In his superb *Language and Silence* (1967) Steiner has himself observed in moving passages on the Nazi death camps the union in the case of some Germans of both book culture and bestial criminality.

To put these propositions in different form, we do well not to over-estimate the dependence of our culture on the present book world, for the deepest roots of western civilization are sunk in predominantly oral cultures—the Hebraic, the Greco-Roman, and the Medieval. Since the publication of Father Walter Ong's fundamental Terry Lectures, *The Presence of the Word* (1967), this fact and its consequences are immeasurably clearer. It is also clear now—after the work of Walter Ong, George Steiner, and others—as even twenty years ago it was not, that the typographic age in which book culture has flourished, is passing.<sup>1</sup> The expansion of technology serving the transmission of knowledge and information to the ear rather than to the eye has been extraordinary in the twentieth century. In addition to obvious inventions like telephone, radio, phonograph, tape recording, and television (when it brings us persons speaking rather than pictures), the automobile, and the jet airplane have vastly multiplied opportunities for the personal conference. "We inhabit a language world," Steiner says. This is undeniably true, but language begins with speech, not print, and amidst the signs of cultural decay and nihilism there are also many indications that the spoken word is

1. To the wealth of data supporting this conclusion which one may find in the work of Steiner, Ong, and Marshall McLuhan, I can add only this item. I have recently heard that it is now extremely difficult to get replacement parts for Linotype machines, a problem which is virtually forcing letterpress printers to turn to cold-type composition, especially in the United States where Monotype has never flourished.

being revitalized. In existential philosophy "speech-thinkers" like Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Martin Buber, who began their work after the first World War when the crisis in the book world was apparent to only a few, are now recognized as prophetic. Here we are talking not about analytic language philosophers of the English school, but about men who have been intent on revealing the sacredness of speech.

If the book culture of the last four hundred years is dying (this does not mean, of course, that we could possibly ever do again without mountains of mere print), we should recognize, too, that this is in part because it is diseased. To some degree the revival of a more oral world is a salutary corrective to a number of distortions and corruptions in the body of high culture. The era of typography and book culture promoted intellectual individualism, the thinker in isolation in his library, the belief that language was a rather poor tool for the poet to have to suffer with; and the highest premium was put on originality, novelty, and even sensationalism. In this context, it has often been considered more important to be startling than to be right, sound, or responsible. Steiner has emphasized in his paper the conservative or centralizing side of book culture, with its structure of allusion, reference, and tradition. But centrifugal pressures seem also to be built into it and have become more and more in evidence as the inherent unity of oral and manuscript culture has retreated farther into the past. There have always been great intellectual figures in the west who have instinctively distrusted this centrifugal and ultimately deadening tendency in book culture, from at least the time when St. Bernard of Clairvaux suppressed that proto-bookman, Peter Abelard. Paradoxically, the vacuousness in so much of higher education in America today, which Steiner has nicely capsuled as "organized amnesia," is partly the result of a cancer intrinsic to the book world. We see today in higher education the proliferation of many titles for no other reason than material profit or career advancement, a case of publishers and scholars serving each other in a scandalous and chaotic fashion. No scholar with a family to feed can be entirely unsympathetic or rejecting to this commercial system, but it is disturbing to consider that academicians have themselves unwittingly contributed to the degradation of the book to a commodity, have betrayed the book world from within. Excessive departmentalization is also part of

this disease syndrome in the book world, for career advancement takes place within one's special discipline almost exclusively. One consequence of departmentalization is that at most colleges it is almost impossible to find anyone who will teach the great (and uncategorizable) books at all, or they will be taught only from the narrow standpoint of one's discipline. And at the same time a plethora of mediocre individualistic books buries the central tradition and all thought of a coherent circle of knowledge. There is probably some connection between the flourishing of book culture and a particular condition of modern man that Nietzsche already observed one hundred years ago, that he "carries inside him an enormous heap of indigestible knowledge—stones that occasionally rattle together in his body."<sup>2</sup>

Even at the level of infant education there is typographic madness. Parents today are exposed to frequent pressure to lower the age at which their children are taught to read. The advocates of these plans—sometimes disinterested but often with something to sell—are oblivious to the irretrievable opportunity the child has in his first six or seven years to be immersed exclusively in a realm of the sounded word which will be the basis of later abilities to obey, to listen, to sing, and to play.<sup>3</sup>

I think I am in agreement with Steiner on nearly all points of significance. What I have stressed outside of his tremendously useful statement are some strains in the pathology of the book world. This potentiality for sickness was once more brought home to me only recently with great force when I came upon that most terrifying depiction of book madness in modern literature, the character of Professor Kien in Elias Canetti's great novel, *Auto-da-fe*.<sup>4</sup> With Steiner, I think the question, "After the book, what?" is timely as never before. We agree, too, that a straitening and irreversible cor-

2. *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. by Adrian Collins (Indianapolis, 1949), p. 23.

3. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Bibliography/Biography, Including a Mediation . . . entitled: Biblionomics* (New York, 1959), privately printed. See p. 23, "Man is reverberating the Word. How can he do this if he runs away from the first periods of life, in which he should acquire forever the resounding qualities of obedience, of listening, of singing and of playing?"

4. Trans. by C. V. Wedgwood (New York, 1946), from the German *Die Blendung* (1936).

rective in the book world is occurring which can be beneficial. Steiner himself exemplifies in his work a moral discrimination and a personal wholeness that points to a strong future. Who does not join with him in his concern for the perpetuation of “*full reading*,” one of the great arts in the history of the “transformations of the word.”<sup>5</sup>

5. I owe this phrase to the work of Walter Ong.

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# A Reply to George Steiner

John Freeman

It is a difficult and frustrating situation when the questions raised by George Steiner are so basic while their answers must be so tentative. I think that the purpose of such an address is stimulation of thought, and to this end Steiner has been excitingly successful. Since there can be no concrete, empirically proven answer to these abstract problems, it is of course necessary to investigate all possible approaches, and with this in mind I hope that my comments will be seen as complementary to Steiner's projections rather than critical of them. The main subject at hand is the future of the book, but Steiner raises far more sweeping questions with the idea that the end of the book heralds the end of western culture; I am left somewhat dissatisfied with his insistence on the dependency of our culture on the book.

That we are fascinated with "last things" is a basic human characteristic. Because we are mortal and because we think, it is inevitable that we direct our faculty (our power of thought) to our greatest problem (our mortality). Steiner's implication seems to be that this is a characteristic of the twentieth century, that it is a new problem caused in part by "the barbarism of modern politics" and "first investigated by Karl Kraus and George Orwell." But the classical world offers numerous examples of political barbarism unsurpassed in the twentieth century, that of ancient Athens' crucifixion of Melos (as related in detail by Thukydides), or of Rome's simultaneous destruction of helpless Corinth and Carthage, an act which stands out in a long tradition of Roman political barbarism. And I think there are adequate examples of literature which both commented upon and previewed the "lunacies and inanities" of their times as Kafka did his. In short, I do not agree that our concern with "last things" is a problem uniquely related to our century and

its politics (in a broad sense), but has been of the greatest concern throughout the history of western culture.

Very close to this question of historical perspective is the idea of books being the “enforcing framework of tradition,” “that we can characterize western culture as being that of Gutenberg and Caxton.” We have had 2,800 years of unbroken western culture, if I may use as the beginning an approximate date of the ninth century B.C. for the first written *Iliad*. Even in the so-called “Dark Ages” the tradition moved forward unbroken, from the early Anglo-Saxon elegies, “The Ruin” or “The Wanderer,” or *Beowulf* through such manifestations of the Middle Ages as the great cathedrals and universities. During the more than 2,000 years before Caxton there was no familiar “print and . . . physique of books” to control the tradition of western culture—there must have been something else. Perhaps it was the idea of the immortality of *le Livre*, as Steiner suggests in such an interesting way in a somewhat different context. The idea of *le Livre* may well have been the bond of continuity from Pindar and Homer, but its form did not exist in our modern sense, as Steiner says, until Gutenberg and Caxton. Looking at history from this point of view, I do not think that the development of the book signified the development of western culture, nor that its possible passing *necessarily* means the passing of the culture which it represents.

In the same context of the long tradition of western culture, there is another problem raised by Steiner. I certainly agree that language is “the root of our conscious being and mastery over nature,” and that it is presently under attack, but should this and other attacks discussed by Steiner be taken to remind us of “how fragile the construct of western literacy was?” One might rather conclude from the 2,800 years of that literacy that its construct was magically strong. The threats of the twentieth century—mass semi-literacy, visual media, the vast overproduction of books, the world wars, and all the rest—may not exceed some of the historical threats which would have shattered the fragile. The end of Rome and invasion by the “barbarians” during the first millenium would be one such gigantic threat, and the Plague (destroyer of at least a third of Europe’s population) or the Thirty Years’ War (destroyer of seven to eight million people within the Empire alone) would be a few more among many. I do not mean to make light of the threats of our

century. They do present a very great danger, but we might gain confidence in our efforts to save our literacy if we could have more confidence in it as an ally with an innate strength of its own.

One final question about which I feel a different historical perspective from Steiner is that of the modern library. There is today the possibility that the combination of present overproduction of written material with improved technological collection devices will increase libraries' holdings to the extent that they will become practically unusable, that one will not "be aware of material earlier than a very recent point on the index tape." But is this so different from some of the great libraries of history, particularly the Alexandrian? The ancient *scholiast* was the product of such libraries and was little different, I think, from the modern scholar who is being forced to over-specialize by the same sort of overproduction and tremendous collection of material. What Steiner calls "the byzantine minutiae of the specialist" is of course a phrase given its significance by history, by the specialist's concern with the minute which was characteristic of the art and scholarship of the Byzantines. And the Byzantines kept and fostered a culture which was passed on both to Russia and the West to make large contributions to the present character of western culture.

I agree with Steiner that the book is under serious attack and its future uncertain, and so by association is the tradition of reading. But the book is only one manifestation of western culture, and that culture may grow out of the book just as it grew into it with Caxton and Gutenberg; it may carry through the twentieth century as it has through other centuries. I do not mean to imply that history always repeats itself or that we should simply wait with a self-satisfied complacency for our culture to continue unsupported. But I do think that what we have to work with is basically as strong as it has been, and that the threats which we face are similar in their power to destroy culture to those faced and overcome by our ancestors.

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# A Reply to George Steiner

Leland E. Warren

Listening to George Steiner declaim his answer to our query on the book, I found it difficult not to agree with him completely. He is obviously a man of wide learning, a man who loves books, and a man who passionately deploras the evident debasement of the word that we all see about us daily. Further, Mr. Steiner effectively drew me into his world and made me see as he sees. It is pleasant to hearken back to a "classical age of the book," to imagine a world of clear hierarchies and faith in language. And what could the booklover desire more than an heroic clinging to his mad habit of reading as books grow fewer and fewer? I became a new Erasmus standing on the dim shore of some future classical age.

It seems necessary first to ask exactly what Steiner envisions. Is it the demise of the book? Language? Civilization? No doubt there is an intimate connection between the three, but equally certain, they are not the same. I will not attempt to imagine a civilization without language, and books are an "active incarnation" of language. It is not, though, difficult to point to civilizations without books, without reading in the "old sense." Indeed, Steiner is at pains to point out the fragility of a civilization based upon books and reading. Great civilizations predated the book (the Judaic and Hellenic civilizations were bookless), and it is not difficult to imagine future eras without books. If then it is merely the demise of the book and even of a "spectrum of social and psychological values" associated with it that is envisioned, one wonders whether the histrionics and the heroic pose are warranted.

Of course this is not all that Steiner suggests. Our asking about the end of the book is associated with a fascination for "the end of culture, of ideologies . . . of modes of sensibility." Books are seen as the

embodiment of the western tradition, a tradition which underlies and enforces a system of hierarchies offering a stability and a recognizable framework of values. Antagonism toward—or rather indifference to—the book is seen as a rejection of authority and, indeed, of rationality. After the book, the flood?

I would not wish to deny that such a view is a reasonable one, but I would like to pose two questions. First, is there not a degree of equivocation in speaking of the brief history of the book and of the limited range of references upon which books depend, and at the same time appealing to a “basis of recognition” extending “from the time of the great oral epics at least to that of Rimbaud and Surrealism”? A writer, or any artist, no doubt depends upon a range of recognitions in his audience, but has this range been so uniform for so long, as Steiner suggests? The phrase “a basis of” can excuse a lot, but isn’t it too easy to glare at the spate of footnotes to a textbook edition of a poem and declare that this basis is disappearing? In short, doesn’t Steiner describe a somewhat idealized past and compare it with the worst of the present?

But I do not wish to be unfair to Steiner. He did not raise these questions by himself. We all sense much truth in his appraisal. This leads, though, to my second question. If things are as bad with the book as they appear in our darkest moments, is an assertion of élitism, a declaration that books and reading always have been and always must be for the few, the proper response to this situation? Should those of us who feel something of the passion Steiner holds for books despise attempts to bring the masses into the fold? Should we abhor paperbacks and give up mass education as a bad job?

It is here that I face the greatest difficulty. I certainly wish to be “honest” and “to admit that the standards and ideals of a full literacy are not self-evident.” One does not have to teach many survey courses in English literature to realize that most of the students confronted will never be fully literate and that the mere act of getting through a semester almost requires a cheapening of the works read. But is it only a necessary illusion to think that some students do take the first step toward literacy in such courses and that some of these students might never have discovered true reading otherwise? Certainly forcing every human to look at a certain number of poems, essays, and novels in the hope of catching the chosen few is an

irrational procedure. One may, however, express a doubt as to whether it is more rational to close our library doors and admit only those who know our password.

But Steiner is ahead of me again. He does not speak of what we should do, but rather of what might be forced upon us. In my darker moments I can find a certain satisfaction in this bleakness; the image of Erasmus is compelling. Most of the time, though, while I cannot deny that Steiner's prophecies may come true, neither can I look toward such a future with optimism.

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