

# The Renaissance of Books

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The article attempts to deal with the place of the book among the instruments of communication in modern society. The paperback revolution is characterized as a change in the conception of the book from cultural monument to intellectual tool. The cultural context of this change is discussed and the effect of radio and more particularly television on twentieth-century society is briefly considered. The book, the author points out, can not only be read but reread, consulted at will as a stationary focus for the community. The book is the technological instrument that makes democracy possible, and public access to written documents the principle that keeps it functioning.

I suppose one may spend one's whole life with books, without thinking particularly about the different kinds of emotional impact that books may have, not only because of what they are, but because of what they symbolize or dramatize in society. I can trace in my own earlier life several kinds of such symbolic influence. There had been a clergyman in our family, and the bookcases in our house included several shelves of portly theological tomes in black bindings. These were professional books, of course, and their equivalents would have been, and still would be, found in other such homes. But on a child they gave an effect of immense and definitive authority, of summing

This essay was originally prepared as an address to the Ferguson Seminar on Publishing, held on the campus of the College of William and Mary, November 15 and 16, 1973. It is in some respects a reply to George Steiner's article, "After the Book?" in *Visible Language* (Summer 1972), which was also originally delivered as a Ferguson Seminar lecture. The Ferguson Seminars were conceived by William Cross Ferguson, former president of the 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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up the learning and wisdom of the ages. They appealed to that primitive area of response before reading was a general skill in society, when “gramarye” meant magic, when there were few Prosperos and many Calibans to say of them:

remember

First to possess his books; for without them

He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not

One spirit to command. . . . Burn but his books.

And yet when I was old enough to begin to try to use these books myself, I became aware of another important principle connected with books: the principle of the mortality of knowledge. Apart from two which I am still using, a Cruden’s Concordance to the Bible and a Josephus, there was hardly a statement in any of these volumes which had not become demonstrably false, meaningless, or obsolete. I remember opening a huge commentary on the first page, the introduction to Genesis, and reading there: “Nothing is more certain than that this book was written by Moses.” Alas, I already knew that if there was one thing more uncertain than the authorship of Genesis, it was the existence of Moses. The black bindings were appropriate: the books were coffins of dead knowledge. Their impressiveness as physical objects was grotesquely inconsistent with the speed at which scholarship moves, and it was clear that books ought to have a very different sort of appearance if they are to symbolize the fact that genuine knowledge is always in a state of flux.

In the same house there were sets of Scott and Dickens, and sets of lesser writers as well, for in those days even a best-selling novelist with a temporary vogue might achieve a collected edition in twenty volumes. There were also poets—Elizabeth Browning, Longfellow, Whittier—bound up in some repulsive substance that at the least hint of sustained use began to split, crack, and come off on the fingers. Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street* refers to the “unread looking sets” of authors in the homes of Gopher Prairie, and doubtless many such sets were unread. But being read may not have been their only, perhaps not even their primary, social function. I still possess a set of *The World’s Best Essays*, bound in red leather and illustrated by steel engraving portraits of the authors. I hesitate to give it away, because it really is an extraordinary collection: I could hardly have believed

that so much of Baudelaire, for example, was so available to North American homes around 1910. But the physical conditions of the set make it difficult to read, and almost impossible to use.

I am not trying to characterize the reading habits, or non-reading habits, of an earlier generation: I am trying to illustrate the symbolic impact of certain types of books in middle-class households up to about 1920. As physical objects, such books assumed the role of a cultural monument, representatives of the authority of tradition. They are well evoked in an early poem of T. S. Eliot:

Upon the glazen shelves kept watch  
Matthew and Waldo, guardians of the faith,  
The army of unalterable law.

However, this poem is also about a girl who smoked and danced the modern dances, implying that even Matthew and Waldo may not have been altogether with it, at least not in that physical form. The word “glazen,” meaning, of course, that they were in formally designed bookcases with glass covers, indicates that, whether they were read or not, being looked at when they were not being read was an integral part of their function and value.

I went to Toronto for my university training, and Toronto, in the nineteen-thirties, still had a good deal of the British midland town about it, including a number of second-hand bookshops. Here was a quite different kind of emotional appeal connected with books. I should put this statement in the plural, for many emotions clustered around the second-hand bookshop. One was the emotion of nostalgia, on finding the favorite books of one’s earlier life. Alexander Woollcott has an essay about a woman who discovered on a Paris book-stall the identical copy of a book she had possessed as a child: he speaks of this experience as “catching nature in the act of rhyming.” Then there was the reflection on the vanity of human wishes, in coming, say, upon a book by an unknown author with a sad little inscription on the fly-leaf presenting it to a friend. More central, of course, was the excitement of the treasure hunt. This could be literal and commercial, the rare exhilaration of carrying out from under the bookseller’s nose something that was more valuable than he realized. But that was for experts: as a rule, one was content with the feeling that the book itself might be a hidden treasure, an unlocked word-hoard. This

feeling, however often disappointed, is quite as primitive and essential as the impression of magical authority, already mentioned. Such shops have now largely disappeared from Toronto, as from other cities: even the forlorn books that used to go the rounds of church rummage sales have been bought up by librarians of new universities, at least in enough quantity to remove them from the orbit of the book-searcher's interest. The second-hand bookshop however represents something irreplaceable in one's literary experience, and it is bound to revive sooner or later, if only as an aspect of the junk-antique business.

I was in London, on my way to Oxford as a student, when Penguins began to appear. At that time they were sixpence apiece, and could be got out of slot machines. They were aggressively advertised, at least for British mores at that time: I remember an advertisement contrasting a new Penguin with a battered and dog-eared copy of a book from a public library, with the caption: "You don't know who had it last." I did realize that this reflection on public libraries had some social significance, the public libraries being so major an influence on the book market throughout the nineteenth century, able to exert collateral forms of pressure like censorship. But I did not realize that I was seeing the birth of something like a revolution. After all, why should it have been one? Why should putting out books in brightly colored soft covers, with the pages glued instead of sewn, be an important cultural change? It is surely not comparable with other physical changes in the history of the verbal arts, such as the change from scroll to codex around the beginning of the Christian era, to say nothing of the invention of the printing press itself.

The reason, I think, is once again the fact that books are significant not only for what they are but for what they dramatize or symbolize in society by their appearance. The paperback was partly a reaction to the book as cultural monument, and by being that it helped to dramatize the importance of the book as an intellectual tool. It suggested a higher degree of expendability, and so acknowledged the mutability of scholarship and literary taste. The psychological effect of studying such a work as Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* in paperback seems to me to be quite different from studying the same book in a hard cover. And by dramatizing the book as intellectual tool, the paperback also dramatized the extraordinary effectiveness of the

book, the fact that, familiar and unobtrusive as it is, the book is one of the most efficient technological instruments ever developed in human history.

There are signs, naturally enough, that the paperback vogue is waning and that it will come to dominate the book world less exclusively in the future. One has to see it in its proper context, as one of several revolutions in verbal media. Others are the development of photocopying and the immense growth of facsimile reprints: I should add to this also what seems to me to be an unprecedented increase in the volume and range of translation. All these are part of the same cultural expansion that has produced reproductions in paintings and recordings of music, and like them they have greatly expanded the range of possible influence on contemporary culture. Just as any freshman in a conservatory may learn from records more about pre-Mozartian music than Mozart himself ever knew, so any student in a small college may have access, potentially, to a range of materials formerly available only in the biggest libraries. Even when books are produced in the scale and size of the cultural monument, they show the effects of these revolutions. An example is the type of book usually called, rather deprecatingly, the coffee-table book. This is normally a collection of photographs of pictures or buildings, and is designed, not to stand on shelves with an army of unalterable law, but to lie down enticingly and alone, like a mistress.

Paperbacks and photocopied materials reflect also a major change in the academic perspective. As an undergraduate I was taught philosophy by G. S. Brett, a scholar greatly admired by his students, and most deservedly so, for his vast learning. He was the author of a *History of Psychology*, still a standard work on the subject; he had no degree except an Oxford M.A., and was Dean of the Graduate School, a task he took with little seriousness because he thought graduate research was mostly a lot of nonsense. He represented a generation of scholars whose life work was expressed by a single major book, or a very restricted canon of such books. But even in his last teaching years, the cataract of papers, off-prints, and other manifestations of the publish-or-perish fetish in academic life had begun, as a part of the cultural change of which the paperback and the reprint are other symbols. Philosophers like A. J. Ayer began mounting attacks on metaphysics, partly, I think, because meta-

physics represented the structural aspect of philosophy, the aspect which made large books possible. In their wake came the “productive scholars” of a new school, who tended to be suspicious of all books that were not collections of brief papers. Robert Musil, in *The Man Without Qualities*, surveys the situation with his usual double-edged irony:

Philosophers are violent and aggressive persons who, having no army at their disposal, bring the world into subjection to themselves by means of locking it up in a system. Probably that is also the reason why there have been great philosophic minds in times of tyranny, whereas times of advanced civilization and democracy do not succeed in producing a convincing philosophy, at least so far as one can judge from the lamentations one commonly hears on the subject. That is why nowadays there is a terrifying amount of philosophizing done in small slices. . . . There is, on the other hand, a definite mistrust of philosophy in large chunks, which is simply considered impossible.

I have always been very touched by the preface to the third and last volume of Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology*. This was a work on which Tillich had spent many years, because, he says, he had always wanted to write a systematic theology. I can think of no better reason for writing anything, but the ambition itself was typical of a certain period of culture. By the time he reached his last volume the fashion in theology had changed, the younger intellectuals had turned to much more simplistic versions of existentialism than the one that he held, and he was being told on all sides that the phrase “systematic theology” no longer made any sense, in fact was a contradiction in terms.

Similar changes naturally affected literature itself, especially poetry, which up to about 1950 symbolized a good deal of cultural authority whether it was read or not. When we speak of such nineteenth-century poets as Longfellow as “popular,” we are using the term in a somewhat retrospective sense: Longfellow was widely read, but he was also a scholarly poet, and most of those who read him felt that they were engaging in a fairly high-brow enterprise. Even writers of inspirational doggerel might be regarded, on a popular level, with the kind of awe implied in another phrase from Lewis'

*Main Street*: "they say he writes real poetry." The great poets of the first half of this century—Eliot, Yeats, Pound—had the somewhat aloof authority conferred by their erudition, even though they often felt the pull of the desire to be genuinely popular. We have the Eliot of Sanskrit quotations and the Eliot of practical cats; we have the Yeats of Rosicrucian symbolism and the Yeats of the luminously simple ballads in the *Last Poems*. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* is usually taken as the turning point towards a neo-Romantic poetry which has been popular in a way hardly known to previous generations. Much of this poetry has turned back to the primitive oral tradition of folk song, with the formulaic units, topical allusions, musical accompaniment, and public presentation that go with that tradition.

The changes in prose fiction are even more significant from our present point of view. In Canada, as in many other communities, there lingered for a long time the myth of "the great Canadian novel," the hope that somebody some day would produce a novel in Canada as monumental as *War and Peace*. The word "the" implies that whoever did it would do it only once, but, even so, the achievement would have a redemptive force for the whole Canadian community: the authority of such a work would confer authority on the society that produced it. This means, among other things, that a monumental novel reflects a relatively coherent social order, as the Victorian three-decker, the book one could live inside of, manifested the prestige of Victorian society. Even Tolstoy's *Russia*, despite our hindsight, afforded a good deal of stability to the novelist of this kind. Hence the most highly regarded novels, in the period up to say 1940, were predominantly realistic, for realism had the dignity and the moral force that goes with the ability to study and interpret a civilization. Such realism was central to what F. R. Leavis calls "the great tradition," which he studies, in a book with that title, in George Eliot, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James.

However, when empires start building walls around themselves it is a sign that their power is declining, and "the great tradition" is now not much more than a tradition. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* came out in the mid-fifties, to the accompaniment of a chorus of readers saying "of course I can't read fantasy," usually with an air of conscious virtue. The success of Tolkien's book, however, indicated a change of taste parallel to the post-Ginsberg change in poetry,

towards the romantic, the fantastic, and the mythopoeic. Science fiction, which is really a form of philosophical romance, has taken on a new importance, and the mythical elements in Pynchon or Vonnegut do not revolve around a realistic center, as they do in *Ulysses*. Romance, fantasy, and mythopoeia are the inescapable forms for a society which no longer believes in its own permanence or continuity. I know several writers who acquired early in life an intense desire to be novelists of the “great tradition” type: they are dedicated and highly intelligent people, but they find heart-breaking difficulties in getting published, and when they are published suffer from a feeling that the parade is now going down some other street.

One curious feature of the realistic development of prose fiction, from *Don Quixote* down to the last generation, is that it so frequently took the form of a parody of romance formulas. This is explicit in *Don Quixote* itself, but many other novels, *Joseph Andrews*, *Northanger Abbey*, *The Eustace Diamonds*, even *Waverley*, began as parodies of well known types of romance. In Jane Austen’s other novels the realistic study of character and setting is related, somewhat quizzically, to a romantic story with a conventional happy ending, and in the later novels of Dickens a great pageant of vividly “lifelike” characters move within a melodramatic plot so incongruous with them as to be almost an anti-narrative. We notice that characters confused by romantic values—Emma Bovary, Lord Jim, Anna Karenina, Dorothea Brooke, Isabel Archer—often occupy the central place in a realistic narrative. There seems something inherently paradoxical about the structure of a genre of literature that avowedly imitates life. The reason is not really so hard to grasp. Life has no shape; literature has. A realistic story must get its shape from somewhere, and ultimately the only place it can get it from is romance, a form of fiction in which the story is told for its own sake.

The change of taste in favor of the romantic and mythopoeic in fiction, therefore, is parallel to the movement away from representation in painting. Fantasy presents the reader with the kind of situations that occur only in stories: it belongs to a conception of literature as a self-contained and autonomous art. But literature, as long as it uses words, can never be as purely abstract as painting or music, and a more far-reaching principle still is involved. Modern criticism, as such, begins with Oscar Wilde’s dialogue, *The Decay of*

*Lying*, the main object of which is to point out the shortcomings of any kind of literature that accepts the obligation to imitate "nature," or "real life." The speakers in Wilde refer to Charles Reade, who wrote one outstanding romance, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, followed by a number of inferior realistic stories, as an example of the fact that the popular notion of the greater weight and dignity of realism can often mislead a writer. They also say that *Romola* is a better novel than *Daniel Deronda*, not a statement that many admirers of George Eliot would accept, but again expressing a preference for romance over realism. Again:

M. Zola sits down to give us a picture of the Second Empire. Who cares for the Second Empire now? It is out of date. Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life.

Literature, we are told, does not necessarily gain in seriousness or value when it imitates nature or real life, but nature and real life do gain in seriousness or value when they imitate literature, that is, when something like a literary shape can be discerned in their chaotic phenomena. Wilde's argument is presented as a good-humored paradox, but for us to go on thinking of it as one is living in the past: it expresses a simple truth reflected in many aspects of our cultural situation, especially from the mid-fifties to our own day.

The principle of life imitating literature explains why the growth of fantasy and mythopoeia in fiction is accompanied by such works as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *Armies in the Night*, which are not realistic fiction but are documentary reports on events that seem to have in themselves a narrative shape. In some films the boundary line between imaginative artifact and documentary is even more difficult to find, the former often being disguised as the latter. This development is important in the growth of the communication media that have the social function of stabilizing the non-reading public. The non-reading public includes, of course, the reading public whenever it is not reading. But it also includes the very large group of people who cannot get a sufficiently vivid stimulus from the printed word to rely much on it for their imaginative participation in society. This group has finally settled mainly on television, to which films, radio, and picture magazines have all become subordinated. All these media are concerned with news and

commentary as well as entertainment, and the principle of life imitating literature is present in both aspects.

Our waking existence is a continuum: sleep and dreams have beginnings and ends, but when we wake up again we rejoin the continuum. Our lives also begin and end with birth and death, but birth and death, both of which are often described in terms of sleep or dream, respectively attach us to and drop us off the unending continuum of the living, the dead, and the unborn, in Edmund Burke's phrase. The function of the news media is to present a verbal imitation of this continuum, and television is the most efficient of all the media at doing so. Ritual is one means of keeping the continuum punctuated: we dramatize the stages when we join it or leave it or make a major change in our relation to it. News, in the stricter sense, is whatever breaks into the continuum, which is why so much news consists of disaster, and why all disaster is news. But besides the images of breaking, air crashes and the like, there are images of confrontation. Intellectual news, or the discussion of "issues," consists very largely of a polarizing of attitudes, for and against, which is why news media are so fascinated by the conception of the "controversial." In the "issue" the continuum appears to stop for an instant and focus on a simultaneous vertical contrasting of opposed attitudes.

Television is consequently most effective when it presents such rituals as public weddings and funerals, or the ritualized confrontations of football and hockey games, and it presents "issues" in the same polarized way. Such direct pro-and-con opposition, with all neutral or middle ground eliminated, is also what the revolutionary aims at: the revolutionary strives for situations in which everyone opposed to his group can be equally characterized as "counter-revolutionary." Hence the treatment of issues in democratic mass media consists very largely of a kind of unconscious and undirected revolutionary strategy. The time when the impact of television really hit American society, in the later sixties, produced exactly this kind of undirected revolutionary confrontation, in student demonstrations and the like, which achieved practically nothing of any real social importance and stopped as suddenly as it began.

This combination of ritual, game, and polarized issue brings into television a quality of literary imitation, a "story line" with a beginning, a prescribed direction, and a conclusion. The three

elements are most completely merged in the great public trial or investigation scenes, where ritual, game, and the polarizing dialectic of legal prosecution and defence are all most fully employed. The Watergate sequence belongs to the same quasi-literary genre as the Joseph McCarthy hearings of the fifties: evidently a modern society needs a continuous supply of such dramas if the imitation of literature by life is to be kept at its most effective pitch. And unless life takes on something of the shaped quality of a literary structure it will not be deeply interesting to watch. For, as indicated above, it is by our imaginations, the mental response we make to literature, that we primarily participate in society.

By itself, of course, this imitation of literature by the news media could become a very sinister tendency. There is no difference between Watergate and the Stalin purge-trials of the thirties so far as the genre being employed is concerned. Besides, moral issues are not related to literature in the same way that they are related to actual life. We ask an actor to put on a good show, not to tell the truth, and when, say, a senator remarks approvingly that the President was very "believable" in his last interview, he reflects the confusion of standards. Such a confusion returns us to the Machiavellian principle of pure appearance, the basis of what we now call propaganda. It is not important that the prince should be virtuous; it is important only that he should seem so. Such an attitude is imaginative in a perverted sense. Literature is phenomenal: it presents reality entirely through appearance, but in "real life" what is "real" is normally hidden or disguised by the appearance. In trying to get out of the bind that this imitation of literature by life gets us into, we have to return to the book, or at least to the verbal documents of which books form a major part.

Newspapers and the electronic media have carried much further a tendency which was begun by the book: the tendency to break down the distinction between private and social experience. It always was true that poetry, for example, could never become the exclusive possession of one person in the way that an easel painting could be. Wherever there is a literature, there is a community of shared imaginative experience; and yet, wherever there are books, there is the opposite tendency of individualizing the audience. When society still contained a number of illiterates, or habitual non-

readers, a village community, say, would form around a man who could read aloud to them the news, or what passed for news, and current literature. A certain amount of Richardson in the eighteenth century, even of Dickens in the nineteenth, was transmitted in this way. But of course in proportion as the ability to read increased, the audience of hearers decreased. In Elizabethan times there were several popular theatres, but the fateful action taken by Ben Jonson in 1616, of publishing his plays in a book, and so suggesting that one could stay home to read the play instead of risking catching the plague in an audience, began an erosion of the public theatre that by Victorian times had threatened to remove drama from serious literature altogether. Similarly with religion: although Protestants insisted on public attendance at church as strongly as Catholics, their simultaneous insistence on the supreme authority of a sacred book did much to advance the decay of church attendance which is still with us. The concert hall has met similar difficulties with the recording of music. In the age of television it is a common experience to attend a public function and then go home to get on television a more comprehensive and comprehensible view of what one has just been engaged in. So what is the comparative value of the two experiences?

Traditionally, the individual is thought of as having a primary duty to support the institutions of society. The permanence and continuity of church, court, lawcourt, political party, classroom, even, in lesser degree, of theatre and concert hall and museum, give dignity and importance to the individual's life by representing something older and longer lasting than he is. Hence the feeling of obligation about many forms of public attendance. The kind of development we have been tracing, from the earliest books to television, reverses this tendency by increasing the range of private life. It is significant again that the impact of television in the late sixties carried with it a cult of nearly anarchic individualism. Yet the individual, qua individual, can hardly get much beyond the spectacular perspective on public life which makes it potentially a series of theatrical events. There must be some other form of activity that enables us to get closer to what underlies these spectacular representations.

The permanence of social institutions is often symbolized by public monuments, buildings, statues and the like, built for the astonishment of posterity out of stone or metal. There is of course a lurking irony in

such productions of the kind crystallized in Shelley's "Ozymandias" sonnet: anything that can be set up can be knocked down, and doubtless will be sooner or later. The history of verbal documents is rather different, even though they too can become monumental, as we saw. There is a dramatic episode in the Book of Jeremiah, in the Old Testament, where Jeremiah's secretary Jehudi is reading from the prophet's scroll, to the king, a prophecy consisting largely of denunciations of the royal policy. At the end of every paragraph or so the exasperated king cuts off the read portion of the scroll with a knife and throws it into the fire. This must have been a papyrus scroll: parchment or vellum, besides being probably beyond the prophet's financial means, would have been tough enough to spoil the king's gesture. The king's palace disappeared totally in a few years, but the Book of Jeremiah, entrusted to the most fragile and combustible substance produced in the ancient world, remains in reasonably good shape. The vitality of words written on papyrus, as compared with the hugest monuments of perennial brass, has perhaps some analogy to the fact that life, precarious and easily snuffed out as it is, is still at least as strong a force as death.

In our own civilization, as explained earlier, information changes quickly and needs more fluid media, and paperbacks, talked and taped books, interview books, print-outs, microfiche, and documents coded for feeding into computers are all parts of the result. So are the great mountains of photocopied papers, which among other things have thrown the copyright law into a complete chaos. But by doing so, photocopied materials have illustrated the importance of a moral issue connected with the verbal arts which is even more important than copyright.

In a primitive society, where there is no general dissemination of the ability to read or write, the poet becomes the teacher of the community. The reason is that a society without writing depends a great deal on memory, and the poet is better able to remember than other men because he can hitch things into verse, and verse is easier to remember than any prose arrangement of words. In such a society there is of course no sense of the poet's having exclusive possession of his material, any more than any other teacher would have. Later, the conception of literature develops as a body of great traditional themes held in common. Chaucer, Shakespeare, the writers of Greek tragedy,

all draw their materials from well known sources, and their assumption is: this story may have often been told, but I'm telling it better, so you won't need to refer to any other versions except mine. Gradually literature became assimilated to the conditions of the capitalistic market: the individual author's work had to be sufficiently distinct for him to patent it and prevent others from appropriating it. The right of an individual author to benefit from the marketing of his work is of course an unquestioned moral principle, and is likely to remain one. Still, copyright, or the private possession of literary work for the purposes of making a living from it, is not the primary moral principle connected with literature, or the verbal arts generally. That primary principle is rather the principle of public access to the work.

I think once more of the Old Testament. We are told that during the repairing of the Temple in Jerusalem, a "book of the law" was discovered and brought to King Josiah:

And when the king heard the words of the book of the law, he rent his clothes. And the king commanded . . . saying, Go ye, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book.

What is significant here is the king's conviction that it was a matter of the utmost importance for the community as a whole to know what was in a written document. Naturally the first categories of verbal documents that need to be publicly known are the laws, so it is not surprising that a book of the law should first be open to public inspection. Most scholars think that the book thus discovered was, or was closely connected with, the existing book of Deuteronomy, which in the present arrangement of books looks like a supplement to or repetition of the law, as its name indicates. But it seems more likely that Deuteronomy was the kernel of the conception of a sacred book, out of which the whole Bible eventually grew. What was new was the feeling that this sacred book should be known by the whole community instead of being locked away among temple records. We see history in the process of turning a corner here, making a decisive and permanent change in human conditions. In such an event as the Protestant Reformation, two thousand years later, we can see how

important still for the future was the insistence on the general accessibility of the acknowledged sacred book.

This leads to a much more far-ranging general principle, one that has been expounded by the Canadian scholar Harold A. Innis in such works as *The Bias of Communications*. Control of communications is one of the primary aims of an ascendant class: whatever tends toward democracy must have, as one of its primary aims, the openness and sharing of communications.

This principle goes along with another one, that the more fully a communications medium is concentrated on the passing show, on recording events as they occur, the more it tends to become a one-way street of messages in which the ordinary consumer has a passive role. In our day radio and television tend naturally to become monologues of this kind, despite the efforts made through cable and open-line programmes to give the consumer a chance to talk back to his set. The electronic media are in any case so set up that, given a revolutionary situation, it is relatively easy for the group in power to seize control of them. Wherever there are dictatorships, the radio is the main instrument of expression: it is, in fact, highly significant that everything we regard as anti-democratic should be summed up by the word "dictator," that is, an uninterrupted speaker, who can expatiate for five hours on the glories of his regime and have the same speech bellowing from every street corner. Television is sometimes thought to be a "cooler" medium, but it isn't: we may compare the role of the "telescreen" in Orwell's *1984*. In the democracies, of course, radio and television reflect the economic anxieties of selling and making profits through consumer goods rather than the political anxieties of censorship and thought control, but the cultural consequences have many parallels. Newspapers also become one-way streets in proportion to their preoccupation with headlines and deadlines: however, the competition of television is now forcing them to become something more like journals of opinion. Even *Time*, the most dictatorial of all journals, was recently startled by Watergate into producing an editorial.

In this situation it seems clear that, however important it may be to have a "free press" and extend the principle of that freedom to radio and television as well, the main battles of freedom are not fought on the news front. They are fought further back, in an area where

issues have acquired some temporal dimension and some historical context. If it were really true, as McLuhan and others have urged, that print is a "linear" medium, carrying the eye forward and hypnotizing all responses except the purely visual one of reading, there would be no difference between print and any other medium. But this thesis confuses the reading process with the consulting process, and overlooks the fact that print has a unique power of staying around to be read again, presenting, with unparalleled patience, the same words again however often it is consulted. It is therefore public access to printed and written documents that is the primary safeguard of an open society. We notice how drastic the alteration of the degree of freedom in society is when we are at war and a large group of documents have to be treated as "top secret," thereby inculcating a facile habit of secrecy which carries on into peacetime. We said earlier that there is no difference between Watergate and the Stalin purge-trials of the thirties so far as the genre is concerned: open inspection of the relevant documents is one of the major moral distinctions between them, one quite as important as the physical treatment of the witnesses.

The relevant documents are, of course, difficult to interpret, and in raw form are as esoteric to most people as though they were locked up. We are brought back to the book, more particularly the book which is an expository treatise, as the ordinary means of expressing and understanding the general conflict of opinion in society, so far as that opinion is not simply a snap response to current events but a sustained and supported argument. The written expository treatise looks at first sight like a dictatorial monologue, but this is a misunderstanding. Nothing of the hypnotic rhetoric of speech to a present audience is left in it: the author is forced, by the nature of his medium, to put all his cards on the table, to take his reader into his confidence, to appeal to nothing but the evidence of the argument itself. And so, however often it may fail in meeting the standards prescribed by its own physical shape, the expository or thesis-book remains the normal unit of impersonal social vision, and the normal medium by which communication draws us together into a community. Now that society, after some years of reeling from the impact of television, is beginning to bring it under control, we can see more clearly that the book is the chief technological device that makes democracy and the open society continuously possible.