Books in an Age of Post-Literacy

The decline in the skills of actual readers, further eroded by new technologies, also calls for drastic measures

by George Steiner

Recent work, particularly in France, but now taken up by such American scholars as Robert Darnton, has taught us a great deal about the history of publishing, of the book trade, of bookselling, of the distribution of books, of the actual physical object which circulates between readers. The French have formed an entire school of research into the history of books and of reading, centers of study for the distribution of books from Gutenberg to the present. For example, we now know more than we ever did in the past or thought we would about the history of book dealing, both public and clandestine, that great part of the iceberg of forbidden political literature, religious literature, which at certain moments in the 17th and 18th centuries constitutes the bulk of the trade in certain communities.

Statistics are beginning to emerge which are reeducating our whole sense of the book, from the appearance of the first booksellers—known as stationers (the old word, the one based on Latin), the town-dwelling men who were both publisher and bookseller, who begin to appear about 1170—to the present, a long, proud history.

The passage from manuscript to impression by movable type in the 1470s constitutes a major field of scholarship today in itself. It throws up the fascinating statistic that it is *after* Gutenberg that the production of beautifully handwritten and illuminated manuscripts increases dramatically. It is in the 60 and 70 years after the printed book begins to be available that more manuscripts are commissioned than before.

And we now can follow something of the history of publishing, bookselling, book distribution, book production, from an estimated 3500 new titles during the whole of the 15th century to the more than three million new titles published between 1975 and 1980.

But we know astonishingly little about the history of reading, about the changes in economics, in the sociology, in the psychology, in the techniques and habits of feeling, even of physical action and attitude, which surround our reading of a book. That very famous remark in St. Augustine's memoirs that his master and teacher in Milan, St. Ambrose, was the first man he had ever seen read without moving his lips is one of the few golden nuggets, radiant crystals of knowledge, that we have. It stands for an enormous chapter in the history of human feeling, the passage from reading out loud or physical following of the letters with your mouth even by the most learned, by the Church fathers, to that much more complex condition of silent reading, of reading without miming the actions of eye and lips as they follow the text. We wish we had many such observations; we don't.

> **"The period from the 1790s to 1914 marks an oasis of quality, in which very great literature reached a mass audience."**

Thus the history of how, when, what women read before their partial emancipation remains a puzzling and intriguing subject. We would like to know far more than we do about the suspicion that in the great regime of Europe in the 18th century, the aristocracy, though owning books, did not read them, and, though technically entirely literate, did not have immediate personal usage or habits of reading as we know them. These and other areas continue to be all but uncharted.

Man's relation to written texts has always been complicated and always charged with emotions and metaphoric associations which go right back to the origins of man and to that Hebraic formula—but not exclusively Hebraic, for we find it also in other Middle Eastern languages—the Book of Life. Life itself is in some manner to be imaged as a book which we read. We think of the great passage of Ezekiel 3, when the divine voice bids the prophet, the reluctant prophet, to consume physically, to put in his mouth, the scroll of the law, to appropriate, to embody, to incorporate, the text in his body. The irreverent question here would be, is this the first Reader's Digest?

We know in many mythologies of the mystery of the beginning of the written text. For example, the legend of Bellerophon in the one problematic reference in Homer. But again, the areas of the unknown are immense. Legends, myths, revolutionary mythologies tell of men dying to preserve the text of a book, or as in Brecht's famous last act of his play *Galileo*, of men risking their lives to bring a book or a manuscript across a political or theological frontier. Nevertheless, the history of the act of reading is, and remains, surprisingly fragmentary and conjectural.

It looks as if we are now seeing, all of us today, the gradual end of the classical age of reading. Of an age of high and privileged literacy, of a certain attitude toward books which, very roughly, lasted from, say, the period of Erasmus to the partial collapse of the middle-class world order, of the bourgeois world order and of the systems of education and values we associate with it during this century. It is certainly no accident that this era—and I would put it at no more than four centuries, which is a very brief period—that these roughly 400 years coincide in the history of painting, engraving, woodcuts, drawings, with an extraordinary series of portrayals that have someone reading for their subject. A man or woman reading alone, either standing or sitting, the *lecteur* or *liseuse*, as they are known almost typologically. From Holbein's *Erasmus*—which itself alludes in the way the painting is painted to the figure of St. Jerome in his study, St. Jerome reading, and preparing to translate the Bible—all the way to one of the last great masterpieces in the genre, Van Gogh's *A Woman Reading*. The decisive attributes of this 400-year period, I would suggest, are something like

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this—and they turn out to be very special, far more special, I suppose, than we had realized. My footnote here—and we are profoundly in debt when we think this way—is to what is called the Frankfurt school of sociological criticism, to that most brilliant and simple and stunning remark made in the 1930s by the philosopher Adorno when he said you cannot have chamber music without a very specific chamber for it. A stunningly simple remark which nobody had made, and which launched much of our current study and understanding of the relationships between certain modes of music and the spaces, the economics, the instrumental possibilities, the audience reception, which these forms are very closely related to.

Now if you follow something of this model we get, first of all, the private library, the personal as distinct from the institutional, i.e., the monastic or academic ownership of the means of reading: you own the book which you read. You do not go to the monastery library for it, you do not go to a public institution; it is *your* book. We are beginning to study the economics, the conditions of space, vital here, under which the private library or reading room or reading closet developed. We need bookshelves, a crucial point. The history of architecture is beginning to help a great deal here. When did private bookshelves become available—as distinct again, for example, from the great chained libraries of the monasteries, or the chained books as they still are in the older part of the Bodleian in Oxford and the older colleges in Cambridge? When did we get shelves from which you can take the book, put it back, change the order of books, expand and so on?

Space is, of course, more than dimension; it is silence; it is an apartness in the household, and it is time and leisure. Here the classical texts are those of Montaigne, pointing out the autistic solitude of serious reading, the fact that even those one loves best, wife and children, closest friends, are intruders on the act of reading. Everything I'm trying to evoke has its *most* famous image in the round tower library of the Château de Montaigne, preserved to this day, and in which we can reconstitute one of the most famous of all classical acts of reading, the life of Montaigne *le lecteur*. The silence he demanded, the privacy, the time, the leisure. And it is only very, very gradually now that we are getting histories of noise and histories of time division in the household, in the professions, that we can begin to do some educated guessing about how much time there was in the day to give to reading, what orders of silence were available for serious reading.

In the classical era, the art of reading was almost that of a contract between privacy and the privileged reader on the one hand and the familiar social world on the other. Quintessential embodiments of this private contract had their direct economic power relations. What I'm talking about is a privileged class, privileged in its space, privileged in its temporal relations.

It is obvious that the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, already bring with them a very considerable change in the dissemination and in the structuring of the arts of reading. Books begin to be a mass medium for the first time. Public libraries, readers' clubs and associations, the strong evolution of the book trade and the new alliance between the book and the periodical, the new senses of the very word "press," immensely enlarge and diversify the access of men and women to reading material.

George Steiner at the Bowker Lecture podium

Again I pause for a footnote: when we study letters and diaries, even of that period of revolution and transition, of that great opening of windows on a larger horizon of literacy, the part of women remains *intensely* difficult to gauge rightly. We know they are encouraged to read to the children at a very elementary level. So far as we can make out, the battle for women to have total access to the library even in their husband's house—I do want to emphasize this—is a long and hard-fought one. It was not a natural reflex in the elite habits of literacy. It's only gradually that women acquire the right to choose their reading from the library shelves, and what we touch on here is that intricate overlap between the sense of masculine power relations and the whole immense problem of propriety, of what orders of literature were judged to be proper for women and particularly for younger women, even educated younger women, to read. The distant echoes of this motif come in the opening scenes of *Vanity Fair* and in the differences between the reading habits and ambitions of the notorious Becky Sharp on the one hand and of the obedient Amelia Sedley on the other. And that is very late indeed.

I would conjecture that the period, let us say, from the French Revolution to the catastrophes of world war mark an oasis, an oasis of quality, in which very great literature, very great nonfiction, did reach a mass audience. (I'm leaving out the very difficult problem of the almost total nonreading on the agricultural side of things, the fact that books were scarcely available and scarcely wished for by the peasant population in the West). Nevertheless, taking the urban audience, growing as it was, I would posit something like this: that between the 1790s and 1914 we have this unique moment, unique I would honestly judge, of a matching between the best that is being thought and written on the one hand, and a very large popularity—great sales, great circulation, massive readership—on the other. It even touches poetry. Figures such as Byron, Lamartine and Tennyson, and the complicated afterglow in the phenomenon of Rudyard Kipling, speak of a time when poetry—and demanding poetry—had very large sales. We now look back on this period with an almost dangerous sense of wonder and nostalgia.

But as high literature turned against the middle-class reader who had given to the 19th century so much of its optimistic élan and breadth of feeling, the world of Balzac and Dickens begins to pass away. In the world of Mallarmé

(probably the most influential single figure in the turn of the West to modernity), the world of Proust and of Joyce, that consensus of expectation begins to break down. The esoteric, the hermetic, the experimental, disassociate themselves from—yes, let's call it positively and simply—the energy of the middlebrow.

Something breaks down and values as old as those of Erasmus, of Bacon, of Montaigne, who marked the beginnings of our classic age of reading, fade. In another sense, what is now happening is the search for the secret book, the hidden book, the book understandable only to the initiate, as in *Finnegans Wake*, as in parts of *Ulysses*, a movement surely analogous to that in abstract and nonrepresentational art and possibly in atonal music.

What haunts me is the possibility that this search for the great hidden book, for the revelations through an esoteric masterpiece, represents some kind of effort, probably subconscious or subliminal, to replace the Bible and the loss of authority of Scripture and of narrative scripture after the 19th century.

It is hardly necessary for me to cite the evidence for the deepening disassociation between the semi- or subliteracies of the modern mass media and the ideals of literacy in the old sense. The evidence is all around us.

Let's quickly look at what is still a privileged, elite society—Britain. Even there the signs are unmistakable. Britain still publishes over any 12-month period more serious titles than the United States. It does still keep quality titles in print far beyond the American remainder habits. Reviewing space and the level of weekly reviewing are still commendable. The paperback quality—but paperbacks do not make a library, useful as they are—is considerable. Public libraries are still important. There is still a great political benefit in referential literacy; I mean by that, that power and prestige still go in large measure to those who belong to a culture of quotation, to a culture of reference and recognition of great literature.

But bookstores are closing, all over Britain; fiction is beginning to be remaindered as rapidly as anywhere else; there's a catastrophic decline in the space and quality given to serious reviewing of books of specialized interest, and the standards of reviewing are everywhere under sharp pressure. These, however, are luxury problems; they are still nostalgic problems. The American situation is far more dramatic.

Twenty years ago, which is not terribly long, 2500 copies sold of a first novel in the United States published at $4.50 broke even. Today the figures are a minimum sale of 15,000 at $13.95. In 1958—again, not so very long ago—72% of all books were sold by independent one-store firms. Today, 52% are sold by four large bookstore chains. As of 1982, more than 50% of all mass market sales are accounted for by five publishers across this continent. Ten publishers account for more than 85%. As for general-interest books, as they are known, nine firms now account for 50% of all sales. They include names like Time Inc., Gulf+Western, MCA, Times Mirror Inc., the Hearst Corp., CBS, and a firm of which I've been hearing a lot these last days, Newhouse Publications.

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The situation is almost classically that of a Marxist analysis: the concentration of the marketing and dissemination of books not only in a very few hands, but in hands which are politically and sociologically scarcely distinguishable. Whatever the differences of style, of personality, of anecdote, they constitute, so far as culture goes, an almost monolithic and monopolistic vision.

The figures one has from the Department of Education in Washington are the following: it is now believed that 27 million Americans cannot read at all—that is to say, by the department's standards, they cannot read (I quote) "the poison warning on a can of pesticide." A further 35 million read only at a level which is less than equal to the bare survival needs in our society. Fifty percent of all black 17-year-olds are functionally illiterate. And 15% of current graduates of urban high schools—*urban*—can read only at less than a sixth-grade level. The U.S., among the 158 member nations of the United Nations which have supplied figures and details about the distribution of books and reading material, ranks 49th in its literacy level. By contrast, the most literate societies on earth are Switzerland and Israel.

In Boston, 40% of the adult population is now technically defined as illiterate. Today the number of identified nonreaders is three times greater than in 1970. The list could go on, and it is not being cited in any polemical sense—the United States is far ahead of Europe in its honesty, in its grim and unforgiving self-scrutiny.

But my own worry here today is less that of this overwhelming problem of elemental literacy than it is of the slightly more luxurious problem of the decline in the skills even of the middle-class reader, of his unwillingness to afford those spaces of silence, those luxuries of domesticity and time and concentration which I've tried to suggest surround the image of the classic act of reading. A figure—it may not be reliable, but it sounds as if it's pretty near the truth—suggests that almost 80% of American *literate* teenagers, educated teenagers, and particularly in universities, can no longer read without an attendant noise, without music or a record player or a very complicated phenomenon which needs thinking about—a television screen, not looked at, but flickering at the corner of the field of perception. Now we know very little about the cortex and we know very little about what it does with simultaneous conflicting input, but every commonsense hunch suggests a sense of profound alarm. That is to say that the breach between concentration, silence, solitude, and this new form of part-reading, of part-perception against background noise, carries into the very heart of our notion of literacy, that it renders impossible certain essential acts of apprehension, of concentration, let alone that most important tribute any human being can pay to a poem or a piece of prose he or she really loves, which is *to learn it by heart*. Not by brain, by heart; the expression is vital.

Under these circumstances the question of what future there is for the classic arts of reading is a real one. Ahead of us lie technical, psychic, social transformations probably much more dramatic than those brought on by Gutenberg. You remember I mentioned this extraordinary multiplicity of beautiful illuminated, handwritten manuscripts *after* the invention of printing. Many regarded the new mode of printing as

vulgar, unpleasant to read, and somehow breaking the egotistical but ecstatic link between a reader and the ownership of the means of his delight. They continued commissioning manuscripts to be written and decorated for them.

The Gutenberg revolution as we now know it took a long time. It was slow; its effects are still being debated. What now seems to lie ahead of us is far more dramatic. It is what is called the information revolution.

It will touch every facet of composition, publication, distribution and reading. Not one among us in the book industry can say with any confidence what will happen to the book as we've known it in the imminent age of the word processor, the microfiche, the memory bank on a scale scarcely conceivable, retrieval techniques of a precision and comprehensiveness which we can only imagine, the storage and transmission of texts by lasers at speeds far beyond those of even fourth-generation computers today, and so on.

There is not an aspect of reading, writing, distributing texts which will not be touched by these extraordinary processes. Even to mention some small examples is only to nibble, as it were, at a continent of change. My own hunch is that word processors—and I may well be entirely wrong—are subtly inflationary, in a very interesting and seductive way. They encourage loquacity. Texts get larger because the insertion of further material in the word processor does not concomitantly demand the elimination of other material. And we're going to get as finished texts what are in fact the histories of successive drafts. Anyone who teaches knows this already to be true.

The microfiche and the memory bank suggest that in the crowded spaces of today, in the crowded urban spaces in which the idea of the private library, the private reading room, is indeed a romantic and farfetched luxury, there has been a fortunate coincidence between technology and constriction. In the small apartment in the high-rise building, in the reduced office space of the great conglomerates, the microfiche memory bank says you do not need shelves, you do not need the bulky, perishable, often to be dusted or rebound object that is the classical book. You have available to you, at the touch of your finger on a button, means of reference, of bibliography, far beyond the dreams of the greatest scholars. You will have present to you at home not the old aristocratic or bourgeois luxury of a personal library which, however large, is still minute, but, on the contrary, at your democratic disposal, the resources of the great libraries of the world.

Again, from my narrow point of observation, which is the academic, the results are beginning to be extremely problematic. They are the production in term papers, in dissertations, in short and long theses, of bibliographies beyond the dreams of any previous generation of scholars. Bibliographies can be instantaneous, they can be up to date as never before, they can be detailed and massively specialized as never before. What evidence is there that the person who has called them up on the screen and on the online has looked at a single item in them? Again, that's too facile a critique. Ought one to punish someone for making available for instantaneous vision the state of the art in his subject or discipline? Did we not, all of us, in a slower age, even in an age of handwriting, sometimes name books in our bibliographies which we had scarcely glanced at and certainly not read thoroughly? I do not know an easy answer to the question, but it is soon going to have to be faced all across the scientific and academic worlds.

Retrieval techniques may reach hardly conceivable degrees of power. The storage in, the transmission of texts by, lasers is a chapter yet ahead, a chapter in the rapidity of the dissemination of words, of languages, of pictures, again far beyond anything that could have been dreamt of.

It may well be—and this is only a hunch—that the privately owned book, in a format such as we know it, in type (even where such type is electronically cast and composed), will become a luxury object. It will become an article for special use, as were the hand-copied manuscripts which appeared after Gutenberg. As is the rag-paper, numbered, individually lithographed or bound *livre d'art*, still produced, particularly in France, for collectors on top of the trade edition. It looks as if the arts of reading are going to undergo fundamental changes.

I say this with a sense of perfectly simple pedestrian shock, having on my way here discovered the disappearance of Brentano's, a bookstore I'd known since my boyhood, and whose partial decay into a postcard emporium I'd followed closely. And when I inquired in that last bastion of people who actually like to read and buy a poet, the Gotham Book Mart, its owner, an old friend, glumly informed me that Scribners was within a millimeter of closing and had only been saved by an intervention from Europe, by Rizzoli. A strange irony on Fifth Avenue, perhaps the richest, most representative shopping area in the whole Western world.

It now looks as if the arts of reading will fall into three main and rather sharply distinct categories. The first must continue to be, I would guess, a vast amorphous mass of reading for distraction, for momentary entertainment—the airport book. This kind of reading will, one suspects, take place more and more not even in cheap paperbacks as we now know them, but via cable transmission to the home screen. You will select the book you wish, the speed at which you wish it to be presented on the screen, the speed at which you wish the pages to be turned. Some, maybe a good deal of it, I believe, will be read to the viewer by a professional reader. Whether the professional reader on the screen will actually accompany the text—there are experiments being conducted here—so that you will see the text while a voice behind it reads it, or whether he will simply read it and you will only listen is an open question. Both techniques are now under study. But the format and the time conditions are already thoroughly available in so popular a program as that of the Home Service of the BBC called *A Book at Bedtime*, where chapter by chapter is read to its listeners every evening. This is a wasteful, difficult method compared with the possibilities of prerecording the reading of books, or, for example, the showing of illustrations, the montage of illustra-

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tions across text while a voice declaims the books.

Of this there is bound to continue to be an enormous mass. It is possible that the culture of the Walkman, the culture of "total noise-envelopes," as certain psychologists call it, will be one in which bursts of music will alternate with fragments of text, in which, possibly, texts will be heard above a background of eternal Muzak. All the technical means are available for this.

The second kind of reading will be for information, knowledge, education, what Thomas DeQuincey called "the literature of knowledge" to distinguish it from fiction, poetry, drama, which he called "the literature of power." The literature of knowledge, the micro circuit, the silicon chip, the laser revolution will alter techniques and habits, as I've tried to suggest, beyond anything we can now imagine.

> **"My passionate wish would be to make of our undergraduate universities quite simply schools of reading."**

That great fable by Borges of "The Library of Babel," that is to say, the library of all possible libraries, the bibliography of all bibliographies, will be literally and concretely accessible for personal or institutional use. It will be summoned up on the screen, and, as I've tried to show, here the possibilities of a basic change in the structures of attention and understanding are almost incommensurable.

What about reading in the old, archaic, private, silent sense? This may become as specialized a skill and avocation as it was in the *scriptoria* and libraries of the monasteries during the so-called Dark Ages. We now know these were in fact key ages, radiant in their patience, radiant in their sense of what had to be preserved and copied, to survive. Private libraries may once again become as notable, as rare as they were when Erasmus and Montaigne were famous for theirs, when Montesquieu's great collection at La Brède was widely talked about and discussed. The idea that you have a room, a large room possibly, with shelves with books on them, not paperbacks, bound books, the idea of the complete edition of an author, itself a very special concept, the idea of the collecting of a first edition, not necessarily the rare book of the Morgan Library, no, but the first edition of a modern author, the hope to own everything of a writer whom you love—good, bad, indifferent—the ability, above all, the wish to attend to a demanding text, to master the grammar, the arts of memory, the tactics of repose and concentration which great books demand of us—this may once more become the practice of an elite, of a mandarinate of silences.

If one had the power, if one were allowed to experiment, my own passionate wish would be to abolish for a time the pretentious fabric we are trapped in in the so-called humanities and liberal arts and to make of our undergraduate universities quite simply *schools of reading*. To start absolutely basically again. I give only one or two tiny examples; they are meant to have no pedantic edge. When you start music, if you were to say to the student or to his instructor, "Must you really bother to learn scales, to learn the difference between A flat and B flat, to tell a chord or a dominant or a resolution?" you would be asked to leave. If you were to ask in an introductory freshman art lecture, "Look, I am a very sensitive person. Must I really worry whether Botticelli came before Renoir? That's pedantic knowledge. I can look it up." Even in the most populist schools they would balk. Yet that is exactly our current situation in literature and the arts of reading. Prosody, metrics, for example, are not ornaments, they're the music of meaning. The reason a poem is a poem is that it's in meter. Why the devil otherwise should it be a poem? Do not ask graduate schools in our finest universities to do even the simplest parsing or scanning of a great line of poetry—knowledge which was available to schoolboys in this country in decent schools still at the turn of the century.

I would start all over again. I would sit around a table with people and say we will take something we all love, a great poem or novel or play, and try to learn to read it together without noise, without critical aids. We'll see whether we can learn a little of it by heart. We will ask ourselves what is an iambic, what is a spondee, what is a trochaic, because the man playing the piano next door knows that he couldn't play the *Moonlight Sonata* in its most reduced form if he did not learn what a syncopation was.

Thus it may be that for a time the arts of reading serious, demanding texts will become the possession of a clerisy of trained men and women very much like that monastic tribe without whom we would not be here today, whose skill of knowing how to write and recopy in the early Middle Ages handed on to us the bulk of the possibilities of Western literacy and civilization.

The great difference from the past will be this, I think. Such a mandarinate, such an elite of book men and book women, of lovers of the text, will not have the power, the political reach, the prestige, which it had in the Renaissance or during the Enlightenment, or almost to the end of the Victorian age. That power almost inevitably will belong to the aliterate. It will belong to the numerate. It will belong increasingly to those who, while technically almost unable to read a serious book and mostly unwilling to do so, can, as we already know, in preadolescence begin to produce software of great delicacy, logical power and conceptual depths. The power relations are shifting to them, to men and women who, freeing themselves from the heavy burden of actual alphabetic literacy and its constant referential habits, from the fact that almost all great literature refers to other great literature, *are* creators—nonreaders, but creators of a new kind.

The clan of readers, readers in the old sense, may become a fairly small one, and it may for a time be a fairly powerless one. It will consist of book men and book women such as can be found working in the traditional book publishing firms. It will consist of *amateurs* in the proper sense of the word, of "lovers," of men and women not conspicuous perhaps for financial or social aura. It will consist of people who will, curiously, come back to the beginnings of the classic period of reading.

Returning home one night, Erasmus is said to have seen a torn piece of print, besmirched in the mud. As he bent to pick it up, they say he uttered a cry of joy, overcome by the miracle of the book, by the sheer miracle of what lies behind picking up such a message. We today can, in a vast traffic jam, be it on a highway or in a Manhattan grid, insert cassettes of the *Missa Solemnis* at any hour of the day or night. We can, via paperbacks and soon cable television, demand, command, compel the world's greatest, most exigent, most tragic or delightful literature to be served for us, packaged, cellophaned for immediacy. These are great luxuries. It is not certain that they really help the constant, renewed miracle which is the encounter of an individual with a major text. □