

## The Written Word

by John Updike

By the late 1960s, many educated Americans (novelist Updike has observed) had come to focus not on books but on "the art museum, the symphony orchestra, the cinema, the educational TV band, the charming conversation—these were where the essences of culture condensed and could be supped." Today, to an extent not possible before World War II, "a person who takes pride in being civilized may feel, at heart, that the written word, in its less casual forms, has nothing crucial to offer." Mr. Updike feels otherwise. The above observations and the following essay are drawn from his Frank Nelson Doubleday lecture last December 8 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of History and Technology.

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The topic of the written word feels intrinsically contentious; to think about it makes us itchy, somehow irritated, as by cinder flecks in our eyes, or an uneven buzzing in our ears. Any discourse upon it is expected to strike an embattled note. Its soldiers are conscripted, in a doomed cause.

Yet the communiqués from the front are not all bad. According to the *Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*, the stocks of the major publishing companies went up roughly 85 percent in 1975, the last year for which full figures are available. In this same year, revenue from book sales rose 10 percent over the previous year's, and totaled over \$3.5 billion. Over 30,000

new titles were published, plus 9,000 new editions. In this recession year of 1975, the book industry reported a 13 percent profit overall. Up, up, the figures reach—up in book exports, up in book imports, up in average book price (for a hard-cover volume, the startling median of \$16.95) and up, of course, in manufacturing costs. A relatively small industry, but a relatively healthy one, rich enough to fling a number of new skyscrapers—the McGraw-Hill Building, the Random House Building—into the New York skyline. Creative writing is a boom major on college campuses, and one side effect of Watergate has been to lend journalism a new glamour. None of this would have been easy

to predict 20 years ago, when television was implanting itself at the center of nearly every American home, and rock/pop music was extending its hypnotic, pervasive presence in the cultural ecology. In the early '60s, Marshall McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* announced, with a compendious brilliance I shall draw upon more than once in my own dim estimations, that the print culture was obsolete—had been obsolete since the invention of the telegraph, and certainly since Einstein's special theory of relativity destroyed Euclidean space—and obsolete with crashing certainty since there came upon us "the revolution in human perception and motivation that resulted from beholding the new mosaic mesh of the TV image."

#### **Portable, Accessible . . .**

Of course, McLuhan's understanding of the previous revolution, the revolution of movable type, which was in turn predicated upon the epochal Phoenician invention of the phonetic alphabet, allows for retrograde effects within the transitional interface. He tells us that scribes in the outmoded manuscript tradition continued to survive by their pens through the 15th century, and that the material for the new presses was mainly medieval. He wrote: "As, today, the insatiable needs of TV have brought down upon us the backlog of the old movies, so the needs of the new presses could only be met by the old manuscripts." What seems clearer in the mid-'70s than it may have appeared in the early '60s is the extent to which the printed book exercises against the modern oral electronic culture the same advantages manifested against the oral manuscript culture of the

Middle Ages: the advantages, that is, of portability and accessibility.

Though we are shown advertisements of people taking portable TVs with them on camping trips and fanatically purchasing devices that enable them to record on tape one television show while they watch another, the clumsiness of these expedients is laughable, compared to the ease with which books can be tucked into knapsacks, or store their own texts against the moment when we want to consult them. The rise of television, and the proliferation of cassettes and tapes and filmstrips, all eager to take their place in the multibillion dollar educational works, has served really to emphasize what scarcely needs emphasizing here, how uniquely handy, inexpensive, and capacious sheets of printed words still are, for the transmission and storage of information and experience. McLuhan is himself a Gutenbergian polymath, who has written, "Far from wishing to belittle the Gutenberg mechanical culture, it seems to me that we must now work very hard to retain its achieved values."

#### **Reading and Survival .**

A distinction should perhaps be offered between post-literacy and illiteracy. It is one thing for members of the educated middle class to sit in their electrically suffused apartments and think of Walter Cronkite as a kind of tribal elder, to read less and stare more, to imagine that their brains are proceeding by a "mosaic field" approach rather than by linear logic, and to believe that their sleepy-eyed toleration of David Susskind and Johnny Carson has something to do with the theory of relativity and the

Heisenberg indeterminacy principle; it is quite another thing to be unable to read.

The ability to read the Bible or the Book of Common Prayer follows long after the rudimentary abilities to read an instruction leaflet, to read street signs and labels, to compose a legible letter, to keep a record of economic transactions. The Phoenicians were a trading people and the alphabet is their only known cultural accomplishment. There is nothing luxurious about literacy. As a UNESCO report of 1963 put it: "The map of hunger and the map of illiteracy in the world are the same. The regions where people do not have enough to eat are also those where they cannot read, and this is no accident." Nor is illiteracy eradicated from the United States, where, according to an estimate by David Harmon that was reported in 1970 in the *New York Times*, as much as half of the population over age 25 is functionally illiterate. In 1969 James E. Allen, Jr., then U.S. commissioner of education, told a congressional committee that in large city school systems up to half of the students read below expectation; that half of the unemployed youths between ages 16 to 21 are functionally illiterate; that an armed forces program showed 68 percent of the young men fell below grade seven in reading.

The map of illiteracy and the map of crime, vandalism, drugs, welfare, and misery overlap. In 1968, Christopher Jencks wrote:

The public school system of New York City is on the brink of collapse. . . . The origin of the crisis is simple. The public schools have not been able to teach most black children to read and write and to add and subtract competently. . . . The fact that the schools cannot teach black children basic skills has made the rest of the curriculum unworkable and it has left the children with nothing useful and creative to do for six hours a day.

#### An Electric Galaxy

Lest this problem be thought to belong only to the ghetto blacks, here is Karl Shapiro speaking (to the California Library Association in 1970) of college students in creative writing programs:

Students in similar programs today, according to my experience all over the United States, can no longer spell, can no longer construct a simple English sentence, much less a paragraph, and cannot speak. We have the most inarticulate generation of college students in our history, and this may well account for their mass outbreaks of violence. They have no more intelligent way to express themselves. . . . We are experiencing a literary breakdown which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters.

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At this point, where campus violence merges with the vandalism in ghetto schools, illiteracy and post-literacy merge, and McLuhan's jubilant prophecies appear in a more somber perspective. The "electric galaxy," as he calls it, is far from changing this fact about the real world: its business is conducted with slips of paper, and those who cannot read the symbols on the paper are excluded from the world's business and are potential victims of those who can.

What is this act of reading? Why do we resist it? Has—and if so, why has—a literary breakdown occurred in the student population of this nation?

The simplest theory, I suppose, is that the school systems, out of inertia, venality, and stupidity, have failed in their primary task, which is to teach children to read. This is the theory of Samuel L. Blumenfeld's *The New Illiterates*, from which the dire quotations above were taken. Mr. Blumenfeld, writing his spirited indictment in 1973, restates the conclusions of Rudolf Flesch's well-known *Why Johnny Can't Read* (1955), and of Jeanne Chall's studies a decade later; they tell us that American children are wrongly taught to read by the so-called whole-word or look-say or sight-vocabulary method, which in effect treats each word as a separate ideogram and ignores the very principles upon which the phonetic alphabet is based. "How did the sight-vocabulary establishment get such a stranglehold on the teaching profession?" Mr. Blumenfeld asks, and answers:

It was a simple process of institutionalizing vested interests. Those vested interests included the professional edu-

cators who created the sight-word basal systems, on the success of which their professional reputations depended; the publishers who invested millions of dollars in the publication of these systems; the school administrators who spent millions of the taxpayers' money to buy these books. Thus, while the whole-word basal systems have been an incalculable pedagogical failure, they have been an incredible commercial success, with authors and publishers not only making millions for themselves, but encouraging others to imitate them.

#### Look-Say or Phonetics?

Whence did this pernicious and illogical system arise, to inflict more than a century of confusion upon the basic learning task of the public school system? With the verve of a black humorist, Mr. Blumenfeld traces the whole-word recognition method back to the Reverend Thomas H. Gallaudet of Hartford, who was director from 1817 to 1830 of the American Asylum at Hartford for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb, and who developed a method, of words linked to vivid pictorial illustrations, whereby deaf children could be taught to read. These children had never heard these words, whereas a normal child arrives at the first grade with an oral vocabulary of several thousand words. Nevertheless, Gallaudet published his first primer in 1830 with the hope expressed in the foreword that "this little volume, although originally prepared for the Deaf and Dumb, will be found to be equally adapted to the instruction of other children in families, infant schools, common schools, and Sunday schools." Under the guidance of Horace Mann, the Gallaudet primers were adopted by the Boston school system, supplanting the alphabetic-

### UPDIKE'S FATHER AS READER

My father, as I remember him, read much as other Americans eat junk food—omnivorously, compulsively, and with slight nutritional benefits. By a kind of postal inertia many magazines flowed into the house, and there were few of these he did not pick up and touse, and even shake, as if long ago he had lost a jewel that might be found anywhere.

Alert for tips and oddities, he read, I believe, in hope of profit, and in search of company. "Misery loves company" was one of his sayings, and the one novel I watched him read was George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*. My impression is that he gulped the book down in a single sitting and at the end pronounced, "Poor devil, he never had a chance."

My father read, as he walked, with surprising speed. He was an excellent speller. His handwriting was always considerably clear. He could produce out of his reading facts collected with a true tenderness toward the workings of large practical matters beyond his control; this generous curiosity, like his cheerful admiration of the exceedingly rich, may have passed away with his generation, along with phrases like "can-do" and "American know-how." The magazines, whether the *Farm Journal* or *Reader's Digest* or *Coronet* or R. G. Letourneau's evangelical pamphlet *Now*, came to him like letters from some more successful older brother, whose advice my father systematically ransacked with an impatient yet not quite hopeless air of fraternal obligation.

The hail of new checkpoints, as it were, that surrounded him in the form of print seemed to confirm his own disorientation, at the same time promising that a correct orientation was possible. As a schoolteacher and a Sunday school teacher, he read in the way of homework, I should add, and his last heart attack struck him sitting upright at a desk, doing drills for a refresher course in trigonometry, a willing student to the last.

phonic methods then in use. The Boston schoolmasters, interestingly, attempted a rebellion in 1844, pointing out the deterioration in spelling that had come about with the abandonment of the alphabetic method, but their protest had no more effect upon the educational establishment than Mr. Flesch's book more than a century later. I am no educator, but from my own glimpses of fear-

ridden academic hierarchies I find it, alas, not implausible that until recently reading has been taught to our children as if they were deaf or were learning Chinese.

Jeanne Chall's careful conclusion, after years of research, was that any one of several code-emphasis—that is, phonic-alphabetic—methods produce better results than the entrenched look-say method, which I

believe has been substantially replaced by phonic instruction now. Indeed, my two younger children were taught by a phonetic method, or "sounding out" as we called it, and I would like to report that they read fluently and spell admirably—but, though bright as buttons, they do not. And though the anti-look-say movement surely has some justice with it, and the arresting drama of any conspiracy theory, it ascribes, I believe, too large an effect to too small a cause. Even if the instructional methods *have* made reading English more difficult at the start than it should be, some difficulties exist in any case. The notorious phonetic inconsistencies of English spelling, for instance, must be treated under a phonic system as a horde of special "outlaw" cases. Millions of reading people, including myself, at any rate did learn to read in the public schools prior to 1965, and no pedagogic improvements can make up for the kind of cultural de-emphasis that removes motivation.

#### **A Will to Learn**

It is hard to glance into my grandfather's textbooks, with their "memory gems" and "elements of rhetoric," and not to sense that the mastery of the written word promised more to him than to us; that the written word then promised to lift its young students up from the rural world in which they dwelled into a kind of ancient light; and that, were the ghetto child of today as convinced as my grandfather that that ancient light would shine upon him, he too would study.

The human capacity to learn is enormous where a will exists; the same child who cannot read can

learn to disassemble an engine or memorize the words of a hundred popular songs. The United States Congress, attempting to stem the tide of immigration, barred, in the Immigration Act of 1917, illiterates; but the peasants of Europe learned enough English to pass the new reading requirement in droves. What happy land, what America, are reading and writing and arithmetic now passports to? This is not a question for the schools to answer, but for the society that awaits after school.

#### **A Simple Matter?**

Before we leave the scholastic walls, let me add one observation. Karl Shapiro specifies 20 years of decline in college literacy, and it has been about 20 years since Latin was dropped from the college preparatory course of study. Mine was the last generation, I believe, that was expected to have some Latin as an educational requisite, and in retrospect it does seem there was some point to it. Parsing one's way through sentences entirely by case ending sensitized one to grammatical nicety and illustrated the possibility, not obvious in English, of varied word order; and awareness of Latin roots in English words unhinged them in a revelatory way.

In its fossilized beauties, Latin unfolded a meaning of meaning that lazy linear English, worn smooth of almost all grammatical inflection, tends to glide over. While Cicero seems gone forever from general education, we should realize that our notions of literary excellence and grammatical integrity descend to us from writers, from Chaucer to Waugh, whose English had been crystallized by a saturation in Latin. As it happens, I have been reading

the letters of E. B. White, surely one of the great American stylists. In a preface, he describes his schooling, and mentions Latin: "I liked Latin pretty well," he says, "but never was able to get a modern language and am still monolingual." He also tells us how he learned to read, from his brother Stan:

Stan taught me to read when I was in Kindergarten and I could read fairly fluently when I entered the first grade—an accomplishment my classmates found annoying. I'm not sure my teacher, Miss Hackett, thought much of it, either. Stan's method of teaching was to hand me a copy of the *New York Times* and show me how to sound the syllables. He assured me there was nothing to learning to read—a simple matter.

But is it a simple matter? In the act of reading, a double code presents itself for decipherment: sounds that, except for a few onomatopoeic expressions, have an arbitrary relationship to things are represented by graphic forms—letters—that have an arbitrary relation to sounds. And these appear in staggering quantity. If we take an average line of type to contain 50 letters, and an average page to contain 40 lines, and an average book to contain 250 pages, then half a million individual letters must in some sense be recognized and discriminated, to trigger the infinite additional recognitions of word-meaning, of sentence comprehension, of grasped nuance and allusion, that it takes to read this book.

The physiological labor of reading has received little analysis from critics and writers; two professional groups that have had to give it some thought are typographers and remedial reading teachers. In the manuscript age, notation was a code for

the few; if those few could make it out, its purpose was served.

This is still true, by the way, of legal documents, medical prescriptions, love letters, and the fine print required by law on medicine bottles. Those of you who have looked at reproductions of the Magna Carta or even the Declaration of Independence must founder, as I have, on the length of the line. With a line of type too long, the eye tends to get lost, to double back; a line too short, however, does not utilize the eye's ability to seize 10 to 12 words at once.

#### Dyslexia

Typography is a profoundly conservative and organic art. The letter-forms in use today are close copies of Renaissance manuscript hands; my distant relative Daniel Berkeley Updike, in his classic history of printing types, inveighs with surprising vehemence against the excessively regular French typefaces concocted on the principles of mathematical subdivisions so dear to the Enlightenment. "The eye," he wrote, "becomes tired when each character is absolutely perfect." The once fashionable fonts of Didot are "rigid, formal, and tiresome"; the older "most irregular" types of Garamond "make elegant, easy, readable pages." Updike prizes so-called "pen quality"—and we all see how the serif, that funny little foot left by the shaped quills of medieval scribes, stubbornly keeps toeing the line in our modern letter-forms. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on typography contains a revealing passage about blank spaces:

The practice of dropping the chapter opening is justified by the fact that the eye, in traveling from the gener-

ally occasional blank at the end of a chapter to the beginning of the next, finds a companion blank an agreeable consistency. It also has the psychological advantage of saving the reader from feeling overpowered by the text.

"Saving the reader from feeling overpowered by the text"—a beautiful aim. But as we know, many children—as many as 15 percent—*are* overpowered by the text and *do* suffer from neurological disorders that significantly inhibit their ability to read. The term *dyslexia* is in some disfavor, and has been seized upon perhaps too avidly by anxious parents, but it will serve—like its brothers *dysgraphia*, the inability to write, and *dyscalculia*, the inability to do arithmetic—to indicate a medical condition, for which there is, unfortunately, no medical cure. The brain remains the most mysterious of our organs, and there is no way around dyslexia but patient training, with often modest hopes of success—the hope, as expressed by R. M. Crosby and R. A. Liston in their book *The Waysiders*, that "these children can learn to read at least well enough to obtain sufficient knowledge to make a contribution to society commensurate with their intelligence."

#### Unnatural Work

Dyslexia is relevant here because, just as psychopathology lays open the healthy psyche, so the study of dyslexia reveals what a maze of perceptions and retentions are involved in the feat of reading. Insofar as we all misspell, or pass over typographical errors, or lack the patience to assemble a toy from written instructions, we are all dyslexic, and in a state of counterrevolution against Gutenberg. Reading is such hard

work that a rebellion against it is always smoldering. The idea of mass literacy arose simultaneously with the sweatshop. In our American mythology it is associated with pioneer striving, with midnight oil and Lincoln's long trudge to return a book, with railsplitting and stump-pulling. Reading thrives during depressions, and in stifling enclosures, in attics and monasteries; the great scholars—Christian, Talmudic, Confucian—have a savor of the monstrous. Reading is not merely hard work, it is unnatural work.

#### Focus on Food

What *is* natural to man? His very cranial size is unnatural; only humans find birth a travail, only humans wear clothes, talk, write, and read. The human eye developed first in the trees where our simian ancestors swung and then on the savannah where the primitive men hunted. In the trees, depth perception was important, hence our bioptical vision and the frontal monkey faces that go with it; the conditions of the hunt demanded a far, scanning vision.

This biological preparation is not for reading. Early *Homo sapiens* would focus at book distance primarily upon things he was eating. The lemurlike creature at the fountainhead of the primates was probably an insectivore, a nut and berry eater who had to give each nibble a skeptical glance; otherwise our eyes might not now be able to focus on a telephone book. That they can doesn't mean they should; men can do many things that violate their bodies, from drinking alcohol to walking on hard pavements.

This little plane of minutely printed paper we hold for hours 18



inches from our faces is, indeed, a kind of pavement for our eyes. For most of their history men have not expected themselves to read. Systems of writing came into being, it is thought, as simple pictures to remind the song-chanter or the message-bearer of his main themes. Once invented, they were long confined to the rulers and the priesthood. By the time of the New Testament, the Hebrews encouraged literacy among themselves; nevertheless Jesus surprised the rabbis with his knowledge of the sacred literature. "Beware of the scribes," he admonishes in Luke 20:46, and only once, in John 8:6, is he described as writing, and then with his finger on the ground. St. Thomas Aquinas addresses the question of why Jesus did not himself write the Gospels:

I answer by saying that it is fitting that Christ did not commit his teaching to writing. First on account of his own dignity; for the more excellent the teacher, the more excellent his manner of teaching ought to be. And therefore it was fitting that Christ, as the most excellent of teachers, should adopt that manner of teaching whereby his doctrine would be imprinted on the hearts of his hearers.

To the Middle Ages Plato was merely the amanuensis of Socrates, and the clerk, the man who could write, was synonymous with the clergy. References to "literate laymen" begin to appear in English records at the end of the 14th century, but it took Protestantism and mercantilism two more centuries to create a literate middle class. French army records of 1832 record that half of the recruits were illiterate, and in Spain as late as 1910 half of the population over ten years of age were reported as unable to

read. An estimated two-fifths of mankind are illiterate right now.

### Haptic Wholeness

No, being literate, it surprises us to realize, has little to do with being human. Marshall McLuhan claims that on the contrary it has a lot to do with being *less* human, or at least less integrated. "Writing is a visual enclosure of non-visual spaces and senses," runs one of his formulations. "It is, therefore, an abstraction of the visual from the ordinary sense interplay." A few pages further on, the invention of print intensifies this abstraction into a fission: "It was not until the experience of mass production of exactly uniform and repeatable type, that the fission of the senses occurred, and the visual dimension broke away from the other senses." This haptic (a favorite word of McLuhan's) wholeness of the senses is on the same page described as "tactile-muscular sensuous intuitions," and on the next page made to belong to an "Africa-within" Western experience, which the electronic media are going to regenerate.

### An African Adam

McLuhan cites the report of a missionary doctor in Kenya on the disturbing effects of literacy upon the human qualities of the African:

The high qualities of the African untouched by missions or education impress nearly everyone. Those of this district are good workers, cheerful, uncomplaining, unaffected by monotony or discomforts, honest and usually remarkably truthful. . . . The uneducated African is incapable of filling any skilled post. At the most he can be trained to carry out work that requires no reasoning. That is the penalty paid for his good qualities.

A stiffer penalty, I might remark in passing, than the tone of the description implies. Even a touch of book learning changes this African's nervous system:

This different mentality may show itself in a shirking of work, trouble over food or in a desire to have his wife living with him however difficult for the employer. The reasons are clear; the African's whole capacity for interest, pleasure, and pain are immensely increased through even a little education. . . . Monotony has become a trial to him as it is to the normal European. It takes greater will-power for him to be faithful to uninteresting work, and lack of interests brings fatigue.

Among the untouched African's virtues were listed a prodigious capacity to go without sleep: "I suggest also that the nervous system of the untouched African is so lethargic that he needs little sleep." These observations are quoted in a 1959 article, "Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word," by J. C. Carothers, that operates as a virtual cornerstone for McLuhan's overall thesis. They interest us here for their depiction of the elusive pre-Gutenbergian condition. Its essence appears to be lethargy, a static equilibrium of the mind so delicate that even a sprinkling of printed symbols unbalances it. The foremost strength of this African Adam is noted as his capacity to bear monotony.

Such a capacity is indeed valuable to consumers of the electronic media. On the radio, the same "Top 40" songs, often repetitive within themselves to the point of incantation, are re-churned around the clock. On television the fight for high ratings leads to imitation of the proven and repetition of the safe; a few weary formulas run through a

scripting machine as mechanical as canned laughter. As a massage, television is triumphant; there is even a domestic syndrome called "media dependence." In a recent British study, 184 families were paid to stop watching "the telly" for one year. The deprivation caused so much anxiety that no family lasted more than five months.

#### **"Books Are Never Reruns"**

Television has enlisted itself among the chronic needs, with food and sleep and a bath. Unlike love or a job, it has exempted itself from the linear responsibility to get better or worse, to go somewhere. To be there, every day, is enough. It has the regressiveness, the circularity, of our animal rhythms, and in the fuzzy quicksilver of its transitory passage across the hours of the day it shares our mortality. The very mechanics of the tube forfeit that fixity we associate with art. Television is all process, as books are all product. Our intuition of television, that it is amorphous and semifluid, is reflected in popular phraseology, from the commonly printed complaint that it is "making mush of our brains" to the wonderful metaphor "chewing gum for the eyes." Whatever is formless tends to take a circular form; when I asked a 10-year-old which meant more to him, television or books, he said, "Books, because television is all reruns." And he added, "Books are never reruns."

The notorious multiplicity and variety of the forms of the printed work are its bane. We are in danger of being overpowered by the text, the wise typographer knows; we are in even more danger of being overwhelmed by the number of texts.

The philosopher Leibnitz, in 1680, feared that people might become disgusted with the sciences. He feared

that a fatal despair may cause them to fall back into barbarism. To which result that horrible mass of books which keeps on growing might contribute very much. For in the end the disorder will become nearly insurmountable; the indefinite multitude of authors will shortly expose them all to the danger of general oblivion; the hope of glory animating many people at work in studies will suddenly cease; it will be perhaps as disgraceful to be an author as it was formerly honorable.

#### The Show of Wisdom

In the torrent of print our brains become bottlenecks. Who could not pity our President-elect as, the day after his election, he promised us, over television, to master the foot-and-a-half-high stack of reading material that had been piled high on his desk in Plains to begin to acquaint him with his duties? And during the campaign did not both candidates, in their honorable effort to demonstrate mastered information, seem to lose themselves as men? Long before Leibnitz, Plato had foreseen the hollow knowingness, the nervous sophistication that the invention of letters might bring.

This discovery of yours [Thamus says to Theuth in the *Phaedrus*] will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. . . . They will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

Reality, for Plato, is face-to-face

instruction, the personal tribalism that saves us all from being "tiresome company." But over 2,000 years after Plato we do still look to our leaders and to our friends for a kind of haptic integrity; the personal, as a mode, persists, and the written word, which can so easily be set aside, which is so plainly *other*, interferes less, it may be, with our personal communications than a device which dominates our living rooms like a tireless, box-shaped person.

#### Reading and Education

Hearing in myself the forewarned note of embattlement, I think the time has come to attempt a summary. Of the written word as a medium of education in the real world, we seem to observe:

1. It is elitist. The alphabet is a code, and large numbers of people, either through lack of opportunity or ability, cannot decipher it. It is less accessible than oratory, or music, or cinematic imagery. In this country, *Publishers Weekly* estimates, over 90 percent of the population never buy a book.

2. The written word, nevertheless, is not easily dispensed with, and those without it are disadvantaged in all but the remotest corners of our shrinking world. Literacy in this century suggests Christianity in the 19th; though subjected to intellectual challenge and public indifference in its centers of distribution, it nevertheless spreads outward with eager evangelism.

3. It retains certain competitive advantages. The transformative effect of a medium depends not only upon—to quote McLuhan one last

time—"the structuring power of media to impose their assumptions subliminally" but upon its capacity to absorb, store, and transmit content. In this capacity print has not been superseded.

4. Reading makes us nervous. Whereas the heard word thrusts itself into our ear with a measurable tactile impact, the written word skims in through the eye and by means of the utterly delicate retina hurls shadows like insect legs inward for translation. Our attention clings to the page *anxiously*; and this anxiety belongs, it may be, to the evolutionary exaggeration whereby we became eye-dominated and left the "tactile-muscular sensuous intuitions" of the dog and the bat behind.

5. It is anti-tribal. A man with a book in his lap epitomizes the anti-social, and there can be little doubt that our modern individualism, our egoism, our obsessions with freedom and personal aggrandizement are intertwined with the written word. Burning and suppression of books is a natural totalitarian act.

6. Reading is a low-priority activity. Imagine oneself reading a book in a room wherein a fistfight breaks out. The fistfight will claim priority of attention, as will a baby crying or a telephone ringing. The keenest rival to reading is of course not television but human activity. Someone in the 18th century, I think Pope, complained that people never read, they are always playing cards. But, like the universal "weak force" of gravity, the attraction of the printed page asserts itself wherever there is literacy, and in sum is surpassingly strong, and holds us fast

to the world of the written word.

And I, where do I stand, on this world? I rise in the morning and consume with my orange juice my newspaper, thus initiating myself afresh in my national tribe and the human race, as signalized chiefly by its murderous and scandalous aspects. At night before sleeping, I as dutifully take up a book or magazine, to reapply, as it were, before surrendering consciousness to the primordial deep, for membership in the international ranks of the generally cultured, the exceptionally conscious. In between, through a day as vague and endless as a housewife's, I labor or mangle in the sweatshop of the written word, reading whatever will help me write, sometimes a compulsive muncher like my father, sometimes a word-bored wanderer in the Gutenbergian wastes, sometimes even a reader as enraptured as the adolescent Proust. "A writer," Saul Bellow has said, "is a reader moved to emulation." A writer is a reader with a difference; yet perhaps that small angle of difference admits of one more perspective on our topic.

#### **The Broken Code**

In considering the written word, the printed page, the bound book, we have reified these things; we have treated the written word as the descendant of the notched stick and the knotted string that messengers in pre-literate societies carry, to prompt their memories when they arrive. Such mnemonic sticks and strings are indeed things, as is a sheet of paper covered with lines of printed letters. But this sheet of opaque paper—and how opaque a page of Arabic, or Japanese, or Finnish does look to our ignorant eyes!

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—this sheet of paper is from another angle the transparent topmost skin on a profound volume in which our minds, the code broken with a splash, immerse themselves; the volume, of course, is language.

### Descent to Delight

Language is not merely a medium of communication but a raw material, a manmade ore, the stuff of mimesis, the most nearly complete, the most multiform and plastic and reverberant and even mysterious alternative creation Man has set beside the received Creation. Once the double code is learned, an immense space opens up in silence and privacy, a space where, literally, anything is possible. Only music offers us such release from the material accidents of existence; and music can represent nothing but itself. Exploration frequently occurs as a simile for the reading experience: Keats on first looking into *Chapman's Homer* becomes

. . . like stout Cortez when with  
eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific.

Gutenberg and Prince Henry the Navigator were born in the same decade, and print began to erode "the Africa within" at the same time as the early Portuguese probes down the coast began to map the real Africa.

A sense of vast and potent space adheres to the written word. Into an endlessly fecund subuniverse the writer descends, and asks the reader to descend after him, not merely to gain instruction but to experience delight, the delight of mind freed from matter and exultant in the strength it has stolen from matter.

The written word brought, and still brings, infinitude. Indeed, in combinative richness the written word rivals, almost blasphemously, Creation itself, and like that Creation holds within itself the seeds of infinite renewal.