

Digital Publishing: Humans Write, God Reads

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I shall start with a joke and go on with a riddle. The joke first: in Woody Allen's film *Take the Money and Run* young Virgil, a future criminal, who is clumsy and unlucky, suddenly comes into view, in the middle of the school band, going along the streets of the town playing the cello; in this brief episode the mismatch between the instrument and the situation is complete, absolute, since the cellist could obviously not follow the rhythm of the procession. The riddle next: why do policemen always go around in pairs? Because one can read and the other can write. So the two skills complement each other unreliably, whereas they ought to exist together in the same person.

Here I am going to discuss new instruments and situations, people to whom these instruments and situations ought to be adapted, skills that only make sense when they are properly and correctly combined. This is why Virgil and the imaginary policemen in a way are predictors of the inappropriate behaviour that you need to be aware of when you suggest replacing the book, entirely or partly, with new instruments and techniques of communication and information.

These symbolic examples have enormous resonance. They invite us to think meta-culturally, and even metaliterarily.

In *Don Quixote*, at the very beginning of the narrative, we come across some observations on books and their hidden danger. As early as the first chapter we learn that 'the ingenious gentleman from La Mancha . . . spent his time reading books about chivalry with so much love and enthusiasm that he forgot almost entirely to go hunting and even to manage his lands' (Cervantes, transl. 1950). Immediately after Don Quixote's first adventure the priest and the barber, given the authority they then enjoyed, made it their duty to go and examine *in loco* the books that had so disturbed the knight's wits; when the room was opened 'where the books that had done this wicked thing were to be found', 'they went in' and 'discovered more than a hundred fat and well-bound volumes and also other small ones'.

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Knowing the fate of these books – in all likelihood destruction by fire – is less important for the moment than understanding that what is going to be destroyed possesses a body: '*cem corpos de livros grandes*'. These are the bodies of objects that have given access to information that was solidly established, in other words fixed in characters and a text which – via the book, a vehicle that was then relatively recent – created an imaginary world of chivalric adventures that were preserved in the memory of the printed words. Once the body of the book was destroyed, apparently the memory was as well, and consequently all the misdeeds provoked by the imagination; and it appeared that the memory and the body (of the book) were separately identifiable.

In another situation that is closer to us in every respect, a character (Zé Fernandes in the novel *202, Champs-Élysées* by Eça de Queirós) contemplates the 'majestic collection of the products of reason and imagination' that is Jacinto's library:

Lying there were thirty thousand volumes, all of them, without a doubt, essential to a person's culture. I had only just entered the room when I noticed Adam Smith's name tooled in gold letters on the spine of a green book. So this was the economists' section. I moved on and was flabbergasted to walk past eight metres of political economy. Next I spied the philosophers and their commentators, who covered an entire wall, from the pre-Socratic to the neo-pessimist schools. On these shelves there sat in splendour more than two thousand systems, all contradicting one another. You could guess the thinking from the bindings. Hobbes down below, all in black morocco, looked suitably weighty. Plato up above glistened in spotless vellum. Further on the histories of the world began. But there was another huge pile of paper-bound books, smelling of fresh ink and new paper, that rose up along the length of the library like recent alluvium covering an ancient mound. I passed round this hill and plunged into the natural science section, moving in ever greater confusion from orography to palaeontology, from morphology to crystallography. Those particular shelves stopped next to a window that was wide-open on to the Champs-Élysées. I raised the velvet curtain and discovered underneath it an impressive line of volumes on religious history and biblical exegesis, which climbed up the window as far as the highest panes, preventing the Lord's air and light from coming in, even on the clearest mornings. (p. 40)

The description goes on with 'the congenial library of Poets' until Zé Fernandes stops to read a book, but is immediately interrupted by a 'distant murmur, a purring coming from a mahogany chest that appeared so discreet' (p. 41). This chest is the lecturophone, a bizarre and extremely modern gadget that saves you the trouble of reading and obtains information for you through the aural medium. This is already the beginning of being able to do without the book and reading, in this universe where the printed word crushes, attacks the person it ought to serve. Jacinto is well aware of this; during the night when, at the end of a long, slow search, he finds himself unable to decide on any of his 30,000 volumes, he eventually goes to bed with an old copy of the newspaper *Diário de Notícias*. And in another equally expressive passage Zé Fernandes feels the physical violence of books that are crowding in everywhere:

I remember even more bitterly the historic night in my room when, tired and worn out by a walk in Versailles, with my eyelids itchy and drooping, I was forced to turf off my bed

amid swearwords a formidable *Dictionary of Industry* in thirty-seven volumes! I felt then as if I had reached saturation point with books. Punching my pillow with all my might, I cursed printing and human verbal diarrhoea . . . And I had already stretched out my legs and was dozing off when I banged violently, nearly breaking my precious kneecap, against the spine of a book that had treacherously concealed itself between the wall and the bedcover. (p. 99)

Everything seems to point to the fact that, having been a providential invention for passing on knowledge and entertaining the mind, the book has gone too far and crossed the threshold of human tolerance: hence Jacinto's boredom and Zé Fernandes's discomfort. In a sense we have here modern humankind (and few of us consider themselves modern to the degree that late 19th-century humans did, those indeed whom we meet in *202, Champs-Élysées*) questioning the book's suitability for functions that seem to call for other instruments; in other words, it is the problem of modern humans' ability to use this tool or other instruments for communicating information.

This thinking is justified in the cultural era of Eça de Queirós, that is, the second half of the 19th century, which was a period when the book was being democratized and widely distributed. Eça himself belongs to a generation who thought it was possible to reform behaviour and beliefs through books and other printed material: novels, criticism and cultural journals. But at the same time the 19th century reinforced the conviction of Don Quixote's priest and barber that the book, especially when it is widely available and accessible, may bring terrible wrongdoing in its train. The concerns expressed by a number of authors about women reading are a clear demonstration of this: it might be Ramalho Ortigão, Eça or, before them, Camilo Castelo Branco criticizing the sentimental novel in satirical mode:

It is the novel that has corrupted the races; do all the heroines not come to us from France, in octavo and at two hundred reis to the franc, sickly, consumptive, insomniac, nervous . . . A curse on literature that upsets the digestion and disturbs sleep, those two pillars of health, grace, beauty and all that creates poetry and pleasure in this world. (Castelo Branco, 1967: 169)

Produced in industrial quantities and so gradually popularized, books that were cheap, and accessible thanks to steam, brought about a decisive change that Eça de Queirós understood all too well: the transformation of the *reader*, a single individual, into a *readership*, which was on the way to mass appeal. 'The idea of reading today', writes Eça, 'only makes one think of a crowd leafing hurriedly through pages amid the bustle of a public square' (de Queirós, n.d.: 96).

This became self-evident, to Eça and *a fortiori* to us: the instrumental conditions for transmitting information, in other words, its media, determine irreversibly new cultural and mental behaviour; like the instrument, the book is neither irrevocable nor immutable; its uses change in direct relation to its adaptability, its ability to perform new functions and also in response to the pressure of technical and economic factors; the book's importance as a vehicle of knowledge and culture is historical and changing, especially if we think that we are talking about a recent instrument in the history of humanity, which has become accessible at an even more recent period: it

is scarcely two centuries or thereabouts since the book began to be what it largely still is for us today.

I shall now attempt to pose the problem of literary creation in relation to what has been said, drawing you towards the field of the digital and electronic media that are now its theatre and circulation space. And I shall be talking about literary creation not only as a mental and specifically artistic phenomenon, but in a wider sense as a practice conditioned by digital languages and the tools they make use of.

In this new context the principles governing the production of literary texts, as written texts,¹ are clearly called into question: the principle of stability, the principle of coherence, the principle of linearity and the principle of discreteness (the criterion that allows us to identify the boundaries at which the text begins and ends). The cases where some of these principles were ignored at periods or in contexts preceding the existence of digital languages were exceptions to the accepted rule: they expressed, sometimes by making a clear break and adopting an avant-garde stance, the need for other media and a radically different basis for textual production; I refer, for instance, to attempts at emblematic and similar poetry (see Hatherly, 1983). Apollinaire's calligrammatic poetry, Mário de Sá-Carneiro's modernist poetry, experimental poetry, and even what is today called videopoetry, this last already being developed (or at least proposed) electronically.

In general terms literary writing used to be slow and aimed at achieving a stable final form. Its eventual, or at least ideal, 'format' was the book, particularly from a period (that of the first industrial revolution and the French Revolution) during which it assumed an economic standing that also reflected back on its author: literary books then became commodities and their authors, in addition to the aesthetic-cultural responsibility peculiar to them, claimed property rights, which were shared or contested with other actors: publishers, booksellers, distributors, etc.

This was how a logic of literary production emerged that, including creation *per se* but not limited to it, was different from what had previously been the norm: from the material viewpoint writing became ever easier and more economic. In comparison we might imagine Camões or Cervantes with no publisher in prospect, coping with primitive printing techniques, writing in very tough material conditions, subject to the technical and compositional constraints inherent in those conditions. We might conjecture that in their age memory played a crucial part in the process of literary writing, and that the line of poetry or the sentence was mulled over for a long time, mentally tested and consolidated, before being launched onto the quite rarefied medium of paper; then few amendments were made because the writing had matured in the mind, writing and rewriting were laborious activities and crossing out was complex. In those writing conditions publishing a book meant having to leap various hurdles, from the censor to economic problems, which were perhaps overcome with the support of a patron; so the published book was a craft product, sometimes similar to the individual artefact, as is demonstrated by the variants that might be included in the one edition. In short, if Camões had been able to use a wordprocessor and have access to the Internet, the *Lusiades* would have been very different; and even in the age of the industrialization of the book, if Flaubert had been forced to stick to the rules set by today's publishers, he would definitely not have corrected his work so much!

Literary writing in the digital era is evolving using languages that have a much greater dynamic potential than those known hitherto. The very phrase 'text processing' – and it is clear that literary writing, in digital language, cannot be reduced to that – is in itself most significant: indeed it implies the notion of writing 'in process', which has very recently been joined by another possibility, the unrestricted circulation of texts on networks on a worldwide scale, without spatial limits and in real time. Immediately we think about this it is obvious that certain established concepts, which are also historical and therefore subject to revision, are in the process of being adapted to the reality of digital and electronic media: concepts like author, literary property, originality and reading, which will inevitably have to adapt to this new reality in response to the pressure of systems that today govern writing in general and literary writing in particular.

In the arena of writing that is no longer simply textual but hypertextual, literary writing is becoming highly dynamic, intertextual, fragmentary, interactive and playful. Dynamic in the sense that it is exploiting the ability to move around fast within texts, which is combined with great compositional agility and the creation of electronic links between blocks of text or from one text to another, to an almost unlimited extent. Intertextual thanks to the possibility of moving from one text to another, linking up fragments of texts from different sources and even authors. Fragmentary, since intertextual kinetics tends to abolish the coherence and unity of texts. Interactive because putting texts on networks and circulating them through these networks stimulates a productive dialogue between authors who are distant in space but share, in the same real time, suggestions for texts and reactions, thus creating a kind of large text with multiple far-flung authors. And finally playful because, from the psychological as well as the functional perspective, the frontiers between artistic creation and play (frontiers that in any case have always been tenuous) have been forever eliminated, insofar as play is gratuitous and imaginative. Is it not the case that computers are also used for creating an infinite number of the most diverse games? And is it not well known that some software's potential in terms of graphics and 'architectonic' construction stimulates an (almost) childlike creativity and enjoyment of play?

It is too soon to make up our minds that literary creation in the digital age will dispense with books in the form in which they have existed throughout the last two centuries; to do so would certainly be to act too lightly.

And yet the technological and functional changes we are experiencing are no less radical than those that brought about the invention of moveable type five centuries ago. Similarly we need to remember that, if we are talking about a general crisis for books (and literary books in particular), we are doing so following attempts and intuitions that in their own way were forerunners of some of what has already been said. The attempts at compositional innovation represented by some of Mallarmé's poetry, Joyce's writing and the fragmented complexity towards which it evolved, and equally the ambiguities of construction and even 'genology' of Bernardo Soares' texts in the *Book of Untranquillity*, which he never managed to arrange in a definitive order, all that and everything that still remains to be said seems to call for languages and media that were no longer or were not intended to be those of conventional literature. Instead of a plodding writing practice, slow and with a static horizon

(atomic writing, Negroponte would say), writing in the digital age requires some of the properties foreseen by Calvino as belonging to the next century (which in fact is ours): light swift writing, dynamic writing, continually being recomposed and highly interactive, proceeding by constant acts of call and response.

Our bodies need to adjust, as they have always done, to new instruments, new gestures and new functions. Text processing by computer, navigating networks and electronic books are clearly the first and as yet hesitant steps we are taking into this new world for which we have apparently been made: these steps demand skills matched to people who, unlike the two policemen in the riddle, can both read and write electronically. And there will be no nostalgia for books because books will naturally not disappear, just as cellos have not been abolished because they do not follow a brass band's march. But books have to adapt and above all should be kept for more specific and perhaps more limited purposes.

To end, I return to the situations and examples I referred to at the start of this article, with the aim of explaining myself more clearly – and drawing some conclusions, as far as I can. Wearied by the excess of books and other abuses it is irrelevant to mention here, Jacinto leaves Paris and abandons his overwhelming library. But he does not give up on books; in Tormes he rediscovers reading and at the same time the laughter that is the pleasure of the repeat encounter with a story that is exemplary in various ways: *Don Quixote*, the book that referred to destroying books because of the harmful effects they had in the head of the Knight of the Sad Countenance. In fact not all the books are destroyed: some are saved for the consolation and delectation of those who, at certain times and for regenerative purposes (like Jacinto in Tormes), use them and are served by them – and not the reverse.

It is once more in 202, *Champs-Élysées* that we find the final divine parable in which the need for the book's survival bursts forth, even though we were not expecting it. Tormented by the invasion of books at 202 and having, as I mentioned, cleared his bed of a 'formidable Dictionary of Industry in 37 volumes', Zé Fernandes falls asleep and dreams: he dreams that on the Champs-Élysées 'all the houses round about were made of books'. And furthermore:

In the branches of the chestnut trees, the movement was leaves of books. And the men, the chic ladies, dressed in newsprint, with headlines on their backs, had where their faces should be an open book, whose pages were being gently turned by a lazy breeze. At the end of the avenue, on the Place de la Concorde, I saw a steep mountain of books, which I tried to climb, puffing and blowing, and found myself suddenly plunged up to my thighs in a viscous layer of verse composition, or banging against the covers, which were as hard as rock, of imposing volumes of exegesis and criticism. (de Queirós, n.d.: 99)

In the end Zé Fernandes ascends to Paradise and finds there the final proof of the omnipresence and permanence of the book and, in addition to the enormous pleasure it gives, even in an unusual situation, even to a divine reader absorbed in a very special author. In fact God is reading and Zé Fernandes cannot suppress his curiosity:

Surrounded by a brilliance, more luminous than any other, that emanated from him, with gold shelves overflowing with incunabula all around, seated on extremely ancient folios,

with his interminable woolly beard spread over piles of scattered sheets, leaflets, newspapers and catalogues – the Supreme Being was reading. The most holy head, which had conceived the world, rested on the all-powerful hand that had created it, and the Creator was reading, and smiling. Trembling with sacred awe, I dared to glance over his shoulder, from which flashes of lightning struck forth. The book was a ten-penny paperbound one . . . The Eternal One was reading Voltaire, in a cheap edition, and he was smiling. (p. 100)

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. We are aware that literary texts are not necessarily written; but we also know that literary texts that are more elaborate and culturally more substantial have, for the most part, been written texts.

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