

Everybody's Elegies

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THESE LAST YEARS OF THE CENTURY ARE A FAT TIME FOR STORYTELLING IN THE non-fiction, retrospective vein. Biography and memoir, albeit mainly of the ghostwritten "celebrity" stripe, are among the few categories spared the recent retrenchments in the book business. American readers seem to have a limitless hankering for intimate disclosures, especially of high life. *Es war immer so*, the History Channel would no doubt remind us, itself a further illustration of the market for war and remembrance, a round-the-clock cinematic scrapbook of the GI generation. And of course the cable box also has settings for other mellowing cohorts (*Nick at Nite*, VH-1, Cartoon Network). The biological urge to re-present the past, along with the canny economics of stock footage, have made a national pastime out of looking backward.

No wonder then that the four preceding essays feature so much retrospection. The academic discovery of personal narrative makes sense for many reasons, partly on pedagogical grounds (see Eldred's reflections on Macrorie), partly as sexual/cultural politics (hear in Joyce's piece so many voices of women, notably Cixous). This is largely to the good. Personal narrative testifies that minds are inseparable from gendered, class-identified bodies. Bodies experience history, and in a more direct sense, time. Memoir brings us back to ourselves and thus perhaps to our situated selves. The ability to recover even a personal past is essential in an age of mass-mediation, as Greg Ulmer has shown in arguing for "mystories" (Ulmer).

At the same time, though, this urge to recover what we were is also a cultural product, an idol of the generation, if not the tribe. The stories told here might be arrayed along a birth-ordered scale: Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola, apparently the youngest of the group, give us scenes of consumption reading or watching television (see their account of literacy in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance"): *la recherche des textes perdues*. Eldred and Amato, who seem roughly of an age with this writer, offer stories about hard life lessons that include the hardest of all, the decline and death of parents. In Joyce's essay, as you might expect from a consummate storyteller, the tendency of all this recollection falls most clearly into focus. The story woven through Joyce's essay concerns the final illness of a mentor and teacher, an experience that instigates an accommodation of the present self ("We are who we are") with both preconditions and

posterity. Joyce writes the self in time and against what time has taken, which is to say, he does that quintessentially human work called mourning. There is a name for this sort of writing: *elegy*.

Elegy is an important intellectual pleasure, though like all pleasures it is subject to abuse. It may be possible to insist too much on the priority of the past, as any late-night viewer of "Year-by-Year: 1953" will recognize. There is, after all, something to be said about the present and the immediate future, little as we may wish to consider these rude realities that lack the charm of age. The younger you are, the more inclined you will probably be toward this critique. Generation X has little time for its elders' nostalgia and has yet to recognize its own susceptibilities. Sven Birkerts tells of a review of his *Gutenberg Elegies* by a twenty-something columnist somewhere on the Internet. "If all Birkerts wants is a return to the past," this writer allegedly said, "well, fuck that" (Birkerts). To which the usual responses suggest themselves—it sure is fun to say "fuck" in public, isn't it?—but curmudgeonly sneering does not undo the plain fact of rejection. "You can't let the little bastards generation-gap you," William Gibson counsels. As if we have a choice. We boomers have all been here before, and what goes around comes around. The familiar gap yawns behind us, stimulating a certain suspicion: *pace* Birkerts, maybe the kid has a point.

The mention of *Gutenberg Elegies* is of course deliberate, since that work comes in for specific criticism in two of the essays here. There are elegies and then there are elegies, or so some of us would like to think. Meaningful distinctions can probably be drawn. Joyce is no doubt right to criticize "contra-technologists" who "long not to last but to be among the last," wishing to "touch the wound of culture and in that gesture heal over the openness which is its possibility." By the same token, though, those of us more favorably disposed toward textual machines should probably examine our own cultural wounds, and likewise our interest in possibility. When we spend so much time looking backward, do we lose sight of what lies dead ahead? Are there other stories we should tell along with our recoveries of the past?

The four essays here do not completely overlook contemporary questions and controversies. Turning toward the past does not excuse one from the present. Each of these pieces begins with the recognition that "literacy," a complex set of assumptions about reading, writing, and their social consequences, has undergone important transformations in the latter half of the century. Both Eldred and Amato tellingly connect typographic literacy with particular economic realities, recognizing that writing is indeed itself a technology. These observations could lead to important insights about literacy in the age of commercial information. The crucial question posed by Joyce—what comes after the World Wide Web?—points more directly along this line of inquiry. The speculations (all too brief) on hypertextual literacy in Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola's essay sketch out some interesting answers. Nonetheless, these moments of engagement are largely just that—momentary—and the general

tendency of these essays runs elsewhere, mainly to storytelling and retrospect. A very critical reader might find this evasive.

This reader is not so quick to criticize, mainly because he understands how hard it is to answer questions like what are you doing after the Web? Asked to foresee the next five years of media history, most academics might well prefer to tell the stories of their lives. What's next? How should I know?—We are who we are. It is easy to share Joyce's professed weariness with the technology-and-literacy polemic, the tedious quarrel over whether electronic writing extends the print tradition or threatens to drive it under:

I'm a little tired of the supplant and supplement question. . . . Linear and hypertextual narratives seem a polarity but are only opposite shores of a stream. Our literacy is littoral. There are no linear stories, only linear tellings or readings. Supplant is a strange word . . . I prefer succeed, with all its senses.

Nothing succeeds like succession, the affirmation that life and literacy go on basically unaffected by so-called revolutionary ruptures. This is common ground (see Moulthrop 1991). We believe that what comes next will necessarily spring from what has been before; the reasoning is tautological but no less valid for that. The sense of wholeness is important here. No surprise then that Joyce's metaphor is "littoral," drawn from (or upon) the waters and the earth. Many of us have long believed that questions of media involve complex, co-evolving systems or ecologies, opposite shores of a stream where both shores and stream belong to something greater. This conception is indispensable.

Unfortunately, it is also slippery and ambiguous. To begin with, the river vision like any ecological metaphor risks confusing propinquity with identity. It is important to realize that the two shores define separate cultural regimes. Their paths are approximately parallel. They are also distinct. We can trace the course of the river but can only stand on one shore at a time. That is, electronic writing succeeds itself, not the culture of print. There is no compelling reason to think of writing on the Internet as print by another name. To return to the metaphor, the shorelines cannot meet, else the figure would shift from river to lake, from current to reservoir, from flow to circularity, a very different scheme. More about this later.

Joyce acknowledges this separation, going on to say that hypertext, like print, can be expected to succeed itself. But the littoral image has other implications. Like all metaphors, this one exceeds its ostensible limits. Propinquity is not identity; the shores are only more or less-parallel. The river may widen or narrow. Littoralism, unlike (this) literalism, knows no pedantic exactness. Which is to say that language and imagination, like rivers and riverbanks, comprise a dynamic system. Such systems are changing and changeable by nature, subject to things like seasonal variation and tidal flow. Though this change ordinarily does not amount to "revolution," sometimes the rate of change changes, resulting in an event that is extraordinary or catastrophic. Deluge, downpour, flood stage, disastrous excess. Or the lines of flow can change, obliterating one shore

while the other parches in the sun. Rivers do not always stay within their banks. What does this mean, not littorally but figuratively?

To come at that question, think of the other common meaning of "bank" and with it Amato's arrestingly frank account of life, literacy, and the pursuit of property. When the river Culture alters course, fortunes change. Some are washed out, and others find themselves with bottom land to sell. By his own account Amato, like most of us, does not find himself on the prosperous shore; midstream seems more like it. In his work life, he struggles to awaken capable imagination in educational consumers more concerned with earning potential and the status ladder. He also struggles to pay his bills. We know he cares about poetry and its unacknowledged legislature, but he feels this mission compromised, as do all of us who float between the library and the net, or along the backwaters of Amazon.com. The ecology of media is not simply a dualistic contest where "*ceci tuera cela*," as Bolter quotes Hugo (1991), but we should not therefore imagine it a peaceable kingdom.

Like most valuable pieces of writing, Amato's personal history is both enlightening and disturbing. It shows with heroic honesty what lies behind so many of our assumptions about cultural production and reproduction. It reminds us that the humanist ideal of critical thinking stands sharply at odds with performative, end-driven assumptions of the info-market state. At the same time, though (as Amato no doubt intended), it also shows how dangerous it can be to think of culture as a homogenized unity, or to read the present through the past. According to his son's story, Amato's father had mastered the primary tools of 20th-century living. He was literate and willing to work. In the first part of the century (even in the Depression), this may have been enough to provide an adequate living, but as traditional industries and unskilled jobs disappeared from this country, the terms changed, with unhappy results for many workers. Here comes the son, then, trained as an engineer and prepared for social ascent but repelled by the greed and blindness of the collapsing industrial system. He turns into a poet and professor, sold as most of us have been on a fantasy of intellectual life. Small wonder that Amato ends his piece wondering what went wrong, where the dream turned delusional. He asks a question many of us will echo:

what
and who
on earth
will prosper
in the coming years
and who will not.

Though we certainly cannot address this question without a strong sense of the past, its focus on the future, like Joyce's formula, "next before you once again," brings us to the limit of elegy. Joyce's advice about the future seems very sensible—"We will have to watch"—but watching in itself is not enough. We

need to tell and consider stories of the near as well as the distant past, or about events that are still unfolding. Joyce's critique of the World Wide Web, Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola's sketch of hypertextual literacy, and Eldred's account of her mother's newly technologized voice all respond to this need, but the responses are notably limited. In all the essays to some extent (though most clearly in Amato's and Eldred's), current developments are understood mainly as extensions of past experience. "Then" seems to have more force than "now," and this suggests a gap of engagement. Though it is important to sight back along both shores of the stream, we cannot overlook the ground on which we are standing.

Stories from the near present are notoriously hard to tell, mainly because we know that in the near future we will visit them again with a clearer understanding of our foolishness and errors. The risk of embarrassment is acute. We may want to change the names to protect the not-so-innocent. We may want to tell no story at all. Or maybe we will choose a higher standard. Amato's example is instructive here, a model of self-disclosure that shows how much can be gained by candor.

Here is a story to set beside the various accounts of reading, listening, teaching, and watching that precede it. This story concerns another, rather important concern of literacy, namely publishing. Last month (June, 1997), after considerable difficulty and delay, the online journal *Postmodern Culture* released a special issue featuring writing in and about hypertext.¹ The issue as published includes four projects not translatable to print or plain text (a fiction, two poems, and a collaborative essay), two articles where links figure more prominently than they do in most Web efforts, and a third essay of more conventional form. The hypertext issue is about ten times as complex as a regular issue of the journal. Its components, counting HTML pages and associated binary, sound, and image files, comprise more than 750 items connected by several thousand hypertext links. If this is a story about the fate of publishing, it has one obvious message: *I have seen the future and it takes work*. Copious amounts of work. "Hypertextual literacy" seems to increase considerably the responsibilities of those who produce, evaluate, and disseminate texts. Pilgrims who cross the river of culture seeking a promised land of productivity may be in for a rude arrival.

Behind this immediate message, however, lies another message and another story. The issue as published omits one text initially included, a large work of cultural commentary, speculation, and narrative that began as a collaboration by graduate students in a course on writing and technology. The circumstances of its removal might concern anyone interested in online literacy because they raise crucial questions about intellectual property and the generational divide. The decision to remove the hypertext (technically to suspend its publication) rested with this writer, who served as special editor of the issue. It was motivated by an objection from the journal's publisher, Johns Hopkins University Press, concerning possible copyright infringements. The

work in question contains a number of images and video clips from proprietary sources: an image taken from a popular board game, for instance, used as a thematic page background. There are no credits or acknowledgments for these elements. Officers of the Press felt that publishing this hypertext might put them at risk, and since the issue in question was likely to set precedent for future electronic projects, they took a strong position. Publication had already been delayed several weeks by technical problems when the copyright issue came up, so this writer chose not to argue the point. The problematic work was removed with the understanding that it can be published later if the authors obtain permission for the copyrighted images and video.

To the disappointed authors, this action probably seems irresolute and hypocritical. If hypertext is not print by another name, then there should be rules of intellectual property more appropriate to its fluid, promiscuous information space. Even if we follow the old standards, why should the familiar fair use defense not apply to this obviously creative and speculative work? There are certainly plenty of projects on the Web that play fast and loose with trademarks and commercial images (to cite but one prominent example, Carl Steadman's "Placing," <http://www.placing.com>). From the authors' position, this outcome must seem a clear attempt to limit the freedom of electronic reference, if not expression.

No use pointing out that a successful legal defense can cost thousands, or that the people who run academic presses necessarily see the world differently than academics. "Fiduciary obligation" is not a familiar phrase for most faculty members in the humanities, let alone graduate students. What we have here is not a failure to communicate but a fundamental clash of values. The young electronic writers assumed they could freely appropriate any textual production they liked. What is the Internet but a means of sharing information? What is hypertext but a tool for connection? Writers (especially writers in their twenties) are likely to value intellectual engagement over property claims. Expression justifies transgression.

For managers, lawyers, and one uneasy editor, however, there is a limit to this thinking. Those of us involved in the business of academic publishing—and make no mistake, it is a business—cannot separate the expressive value of writing from its commodity value. As many Internet startups are learning these days, someone eventually has to pay the bills. Authors may transgress; editors may offer to assume liability in case of court action (two editors did so in this case); but as the publisher's counsel pointed out, academic writers make poor targets of a suit. Damages would be sought from the party with ability to pay. "Intellectual property" has a different ring when it is linked to material property.

This is not a very pleasant story for anyone concerned. The most one might hope from it is the enlightenment that comes from failure. What does this story mean? Maybe it is a story about selling out; maybe it is about youth and middle age; maybe it is about the collision of industrial and post-industrial societies; or

perhaps it is really about cultural geography. The fault line between expression and commodity cuts deeply across the technological landscape. It may in fact be the channel that carries the muddy waters of literacy and electronic culture—with which figure we come one last time to the littoral.

Projects like the hypertext issue (and there are many happier examples) attempt to pass from print to network textuality. But there are many ways to move between the banks of a river. Some are called bridges. Others are called dams. And, as said earlier, the metaphor of the river makes sense only if it allows us to observe distinctions and maintain a sense of flow. Propinquity is not identity. When we forget on which bank (or which sort of bank) we are standing, we are likely to find ourselves in the middle of things—or in the way. A bridge is a passage, a dam is an obstruction, and though our industrial iconography paints them as means of “taming” or “harnessing” a latent power (the better to shore up our banks), dams are also sites of contention and turbulence.

We should think about the future as well as the past, which unfortunately leaves more questions than answers. What does this story mean for the unpublished writers? What will they take from this experience in two years, five, or ten? How would they have told this story themselves? In the end, these writers and their contemporaries will decide the meaning. It is hard to say whether they will see this triumph of commodity as a betrayal or a devil’s bargain—though it may be significant that one of the group now works for Microsoft. For the moment, we might suggest a parable in lieu of interpretation: a reminder about history and hydrology. Among other things, a dam represents a great debt to entropy. With good design and careful maintenance, it can carry this debt for many years, perhaps through several human generations. But of course the accounts of entropy are really kept on another sort of scale in which the span of a generation means almost nothing. It is through this slow, geologic time that rivers really run, revealing the true terrain of the littoral. Over this long run, no dam lasts.

NOTES

1. Complete back issues of PMC are available only to Project Muse subscribers, but a text-only archive will be open to all on the net by the time this appears. Most likely only the introduction to the hypertext issue will be included in this archive. Details have yet to be determined.