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THE GUTENBERG ELEGIES: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age

By Sven Birkerts

Faber & Faber. 256 pp.

Deeply imprinted in both our racial and individual psyches is the image of a lost golden age, paradisiacal in its virtue and brilliance. Nothing, it seems, can recall that edenic hour of splendor in the grass or glory in the womb except lamentation that the good old days have yielded to coarser, brasher times.

So, those of us who love the spell and sensual delight of books come with a predisposed sympathy to Sven Birkerts' mournful elegy for the printed page. Writing on an antiquated typewriter a mere floppy disk's throw from M.I.T., the justly acclaimed literary critic has peered into the technological future of letters and found, to his horror, that it moves at the speed of light.

Speaking as "an unregenerate reader, one who still believes that language and not technology is the true evolutionary miracle," Birkerts argues with passion and dismay that modern electronic communication and information technologies have brought our culture to "what promises to be a total metamorphosis.... What is roaring by, destined for imminent historical oblivion, is the whole familiar tradition of the book."

That many are reading these words on America Online rather than newsprint makes credible Birkerts' point.

Birkerts' case is no mere curmudgeonly refusal to keep running with the accelerating pace of change. He sees the dawning era of reading on glass screens as a time of "dissolution" that will cripple our souls. He notes, "Our entire collective subjective history—the soul of our societal body—is encoded in print.... We have been stripped not only of familiar habits and ways, but of familiar points of moral and psychological reference."

Herded by electronic impulses and fiber optics into a global mass, what we most disastrously risk losing, Birkerts fears, is what books provided: the opportunity to read, pause, reflect, reread, memorize, reflect some more. We risk the part of our minds and hearts capable of depth, meditation, inner expansion. Progressively, Birkerts implies and constantly reiterates, each embrace of newer, faster technology becomes another step away from the fathomless, individualized self, the profound inner space of tranquillity where we find aesthetic and spiritual centeredness.

Given its full weight, then, this book prophesies the end of intellectual privacy, individual depth and the clarifying silence in which creativity occurs, the moment in which we conceive a *Divine Comedy*, a law of thermodynamics or even a computer chip.

Short of global nuclear or viral destruction, it would be hard to imagine a future more grave.

Not surprisingly, then, parts of this book have already appeared in forums ranging from *Harper's* to the *Associated Writing Programs Chronicle*. And, not surprisingly, Birkerts is being vehemently refuted, for his argument is open to attack at virtually every turn.

That electronic communication threatens the primacy of the book does not, after all, promise to render books obsolete, much less threaten silent reflection. Was not Gutenberg's (disputable) discovery of movable type a threat to the handcrafted artistry of the illuminated book? Did writing itself eradicate the sung Homeric epic or did it make *The Iliad* tangible, portable and capable of wide distribution?

When Birkerts writes despairingly of the modern worker who rises to an electronic clock, shaves with *Good Morning, America* droning in the background, starts his day with e-mail and voice mail and goes home to collapse watching *NYPD Blue*, he knows he risks seeming less an intellectual patrician than a hopeless reactionary. For he knows, and frequently admits, that the good old days were not necessarily all that good. And those days before the Internet, penicillin and flushing toilets were less good than he admits. Were we a more spiritual race when instead of breaking up the work week with *NYPD Blue* or pro football we broke it up with gladiatorial combat or bear baiting? For that matter, was there *ever* a time when most people read books, much less good books? The idea of reading on the ephemeral screen even has some humane attractions; as one of the nation's preeminent book reviewers, Birkerts himself must recall numerous volumes for which trees should never have died.

Moreover, our interconnected computer society, with its thousands of discussion forums, can hardly be accused of robbing us of the chance to dialogue about ideas as in the generation-ago days of Lionel Trilling's *Liberal Imagination*, which Birkerts celebrates as a dying breed. Far more guilty, no doubt, is the vacuous publish-or-get-denied-tenure academic morality that crowds out the risk-taking polemics of stimulating discussion (such as Birkerts' own) and replaces it with irrelevant, timid trivia and self-referential, faddish sophistry.

Birkerts' scope here is so large that it lures him into numerous inconsistencies. He decries even the telephone for eliminating the printed postal letter, yet the letter itself was once a dehumanizing modernism rendering old-fashioned the face-to-face personal encounter.

While reading Birkerts' long autobiographical chapter, a paean to his boyhood days with *Tom Sawyer* and student days working in a book store, I sensed and identified with something between his lines that seemed less prophetic than wistful. Just as I often suspect in middle-aged strident insistence on political correctness an unvoiced longing to recapture one's bead-wearing salad days of marching behind Dr. King, I sensed Birkerts' nostalgia for a youth that was personally magical.

Were times really as better then as they now seem when gilded by memory? In some ways, no doubt. Yet, as I look, as Birkerts also does, with mystified distance on my Nintendo playing, on-line lovemaking students, I recall that when I wore my cap backwards it was because I wanted to be Yogi Berra. And when Birkerts contends, "No one thinks any longer about writing the Great American Novel," I must note that each semester I see a dozen young people who wish to do exactly that. When Birkerts blows "Taps" for individualism and echoes Don DeLillo's "The future belongs to the crowds," I suspect I'm hearing what was moaned also by those who saw the storming of the Bastille or heard, "Not this man, but Barabbas."

That Birkerts proves so open to attack, however, is far more a testament to the courageously vast sweep of his polemics than to the disputable validity of his argument. For it quickly becomes clear that the enormous value of this book hinges not at all on how much readers will agree or disagree with Birkerts but on his unspoken invitation to reflect on his thesis, offer an antithetical rebuttal and then synthesize a new, deepened understanding of our own relationships to the printed and electronically transmitted word.

And, at that, I'm not sure it would have proved as engaging on a computer screen.