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The Death of the Book, the Birth of the Electronic Word

RICHARD PASSON

Richard A. Lanham

The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts
University of Chicago Press, 1993
\$22.50

Sven Birkerts

*The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading
in an Electronic Age*
Faber and Faber, 1994
\$22.95

I was on my way to writing a review of Richard Lanham's fascinating book, *The Electronic Word*, when I ran into Sven Birkerts's *The Gutenberg Elegies*. Or perhaps it ran into me. In any event, I sympathized enough with Birkerts's rather engaging dirge that I was driven to look at Lanham's book again. They provide an interesting study in contrasts. I like Birkerts's book; I think I even understand it. *The Electronic Word*, on the other hand, can be rather tough sledding, and I'm not always sure that Lanham and I are even on the same sled. But in the end, Lanham seems to have the best of it.

Both books agree on a couple of basic assumptions. First, the phenomenon of the "electronic text" that has come to dominate the world of letters so dramatically is not simply a useful new tool for authors and publishers. Its coming is an event that is likely to have a profound effect on contemporary literacy and contemporary culture. Second, the effect is not all positive, no matter what one's prejudices are about technology. Both authors admit to a whole range of daunting problems, such as the difficulty of developing coherent revisions of copyright laws to deal with new practices of composition and publication by electronic means.

At this point, Lanham and Birkerts part company. While Lanham's view is fundamentally positive, Birkerts, a familiar critic of contemporary literature, sees the eventual death of the book and the loss of many of the central cultural values that the printed book represents. Birkerts's approach is not difficult to summarize. He begins by developing what he calls "an informal and

highly subjective ecology of reading," which eventually shades into an ecology of writing and criticism as well. It is a personal, witty, and engaging account of the centrality of the book for someone of Birkerts's generation in defining the intellectual life and identifying self. He luxuriates in a process that is rendered mysterious, indeed, almost religious.

In the second part of the book, which begins with a chapter titled "The Electronic Millennium," Birkerts gives a number of examples of the changes wrought by various electronic media. And the third part concludes with a pessimistic view of the future characterized by the death of literature (to quote the title of a recent book by Alvin Kernan). Though Birkerts tries, he says, to find some positive signs in the coming of the electronic age, his last chapter warns the reader that such impulses are simply signs of the devil at the crossroads. His answer to the demonic sales pitch is simple: a voice that says "Refuse it."

Richard Lanham, professor emeritus of English at UCLA and an expert in classical rhetoric, takes a very different position. He argues what he himself calls an optimistic thesis. "I think electronic expression has come not to destroy the Western arts and letters, but to fulfill them. And I think too that the instructional practices built upon the electronic word will not repudiate the deepest and most fundamental currents of Western education in discourse but redeem them."

Lanham builds his optimistic thesis through ten chapters, seven of which had appeared in slightly different versions as articles in a range of journals, from *The South Atlantic Quarterly* through the AAC's *Liberal Education*. The approach is not linear. He circles round the thesis, diverges into the arts, reviews and argues with a number of nay-sayers, including Alvin Kernan. But he doesn't dismiss those with "pessimistic" views out of hand, and his last chapter is an interesting dialogue with himself as an old curmudgeon with a tradi-

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tional literary background and as a theorist of the new electronic age.

His fundamental insight is that, along with other effects, the new technological revolution is bringing back a new form of classical rhetoric into our culture. "The rhetorical paideia," he says, "formed the basic pattern of Western education for most of our 2,500 years." Now, after a "Newtonian interlude," dominated by a print-bound aesthetic (and epistemological) ideal that Lanham characterizes as the "C-B-S" school (clarity-brevity-sincerity), electronic technology seems to be "forming a central part of our return" to an appreciation of the value of the rhetorical, the dramatic, and the playful in our search to know and communicate truth.

The electronic word, Lanham argues, makes writer and reader self-conscious about the text itself, as more than a representation of something that supposedly lies behind the appearance of the words. Whereas the printed book aims to create a kind of transparent text, which the reader is invited to look through, the electronic text calls attention to itself as constitutive of whatever meaning the text, its producer, and its perceiver create. The reader looks at electronic text as well as through it. Classical rhetoric, Lanham argues, operated from a similar sense of what he calls "bi-stable oscillation," between the poles of unself-conscious and self-conscious expression, between language as trans-

parent medium and as richly figured performance, full of gestures, poses, and games. Modern communication, Lanham thus argues, is likely to be enriched by the new modes afforded by electronic media and digitized text, as these reawaken a new consciousness of and appreciation for the rhetorical.

Lanham extends his concern, and his exemplification of the concept of "bi-stable oscillation," into the arts, culture, politics, and philosophy. The capabilities of electronic text extend the surrealist and postmodern artistic revolutions of the twentieth century against the cultural domination of the printed book. And the new rhetoric, enhanced by technology, will give new and dynamic expression to the classical opposition of the philosophers and the rhetoricians. It's at the point at which Lanham tries to tie in mathematical and scientific chaos theory that this curmudgeon gets a bit lost.

What is most interesting about *The Electronic Word* for me is that Lanham's argument ends with a vision of a new center for the English curriculum of the modern university. This vision accepts what Walter Ong has called the new "orality" of our time, and sees the return of a new form of the rhetorical paideia. This vision puts deconstructionism in a balance with more traditional approaches, and redefines literacy in a newer, broader sense. It just might be worth talking about.

The Secularization of the Modern American University

J. A. APPELYARD, S. J.

George M. Marsden
The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Nonbelief
Oxford University Press, 1994
\$35.00

It is well known that most of the colleges and universities founded in the United States before the 20th century had a strongly religious character, usually Protestant Christian, and that virtually all of these institutions have no significant religious identity today. The best-known example is Harvard, founded "for the pro-

vision of a learned ministry," whose motto for three centuries was *Christo et Ecclesiae*, but scores of other institutions—including Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Stanford, Duke, Boston University, and even publicly funded state universities such as Michigan and California—had a pronounced Christian character in the early years of their existence which they abandoned in the 20th century.

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