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Between raw and cooked

The book without mediators

Is there a future for bookshops? The author, an independent bookseller, answers the question starting out from the supposed but unsubstantiated preference of readers for the digital book while also championing the role of mediator played by the bookseller in the book's path from author to reader. Availing himself of the metaphor of the raw text, which is to say that born to flow immediately through the Web, as opposed to the cooked text, which is the result of a publishing process, the author challenges several of the clichés about the digital future.

Some weeks ago, during the last Frankfurt Book Fair, a survey carried out among a thousand professionals in the sector pinpointed 2018 as the year in which the digital book would definitively prevail over the paper book.

The significance of this hypothesis on the immediate future of the book is not so much whether the date is right or not as the fact that within the publishing world this is taken as something incontrovertible. Many managers in the big book business no longer see this as a more or less credible forecast but rather accept it as a true diagnosis and a strategic line of work, one of those vanishing points that enable them to mark out their plan of action for the coming years. Hence, we're no longer talking of the future but of the present; not of something that might happen but something for which many people, within the trade, are already working. This means that they are investing

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Many observers assume that, just as we have become used to reading blogs, web pages and e-mails, we shall soon be preferring to read books on the screen rather than on paper; it's just a matter of time and sorting out a few technical details. From the standpoint of the authors, agents and publishers, the main concern lies in the need to perfect rigorous control over authors' rights, but nobody doubts that their reservations will eventually be overcome.

The burgeoning presence of electronic texts circulating on the Web, something unimaginable just three years ago, obliges us to rethink the book as one more element in a global ecosystem that is being transformed with the force of a mountain gale, and we must pay a lot of attention to the border between the new ways of reading and the reading of what we can keep calling a "book", whether digital or paper. Here, we might distinguish a great bifurcation, a fracture that determines two clearly differentiated spheres:

a) The circulation of immediate, *liquid* texts, those born to flow. These are texts that, the moment they emerge from the author's keyboard, are offered to a multitude of readers, are propagated while being transformed into new readings and rewritten *ad infinitum*, without recognised authorship, without stability, without our ever being able to be sure that what we have read today is the same as what others read yesterday, but without anyone giving a damn. I refer to e-mail, blogs, chats and discussion groups and the texts of more or less lasting, or totally ephemeral, websites. These are texts written to flow, to be propagated, texts that break with the classical sense of the concept of *publish*: make public. Nowadays, for these *liquid* texts, to publish means being thrust in draft form on to the Web and being open to manipulation, copying and perpetual reuse. We might call these born-to-flow pieces "raw texts". Rather than from an act of writing, they emerge from the circulation itself, not starting out from an emitter to go to a receiver but immediately partaking of a world of reading-writing that devours them and regurgitates them with no chance of continuity.

b) In contrast with the flow of *raw* texts, we could situate the circulation of *cooked* texts, which is to say those submitted to the procedures of publication in which many co-authors have taken part, from the literary agent and editor through to the layout and

and adapting their businesses along these lines while at once reducing or dismantling any leftovers that are still linked to the traditional system.

Nevertheless, it cannot be asserted that this strategic change is in response to a confirmed preference among readers for the digital book. On the contrary, it has got ahead of them and is trying to drag them along, which is what I shall endeavour to show.

There is no doubt that a new way of reading electronic texts has consolidated: a good part, or the majority, of our readings only exist in our computers.

graphic designers, the illustrator and so on. In this regard, edit and publish would mean, more than anything else, fixing a form and establishing an “authorship”, by virtue of which the text will be attributed to a creator, a beneficiary of any returns and also the person who is legally in charge, without whose consent the text cannot be subsequently modified. We can be sure that today we are reading the same thing that, for example, millions of people have read over one and a half centuries. Who would dare to change the end of *War and Peace* and, out of sympathy with Prince Andrei, spare him from death? Since the Renaissance, editing and publishing a book has been, above all, a collective task that brings together such basic functions as selecting the text, fixing it and giving it form. The idea of cooking could be a good metaphor for understanding the process of publishing. Strictly speaking, we could only keep saying “book” to refer to the completed results of a process of publishing thus understood: coherent textual unities, with their own identity, more or less stable and finite, of recognised and protected authorship, independently of the support material in which they circulate. It’s saying something like “Book: set of cooked texts”.

This is a metaphor that enables us to think that, apart from the support, the important thing in the ecosystem as a whole would be to distinguish the sphere of the *raw*, of the texts born to flow, from the other sphere in which prevail the *cooked* texts, those that are forged to remain stable. If we accept that the great bifurcation occurs between these two spheres, while we are in the *cooked* sphere, the difference between paper and digital formats would be a minor detail; here, the most important thing, whatever the case, would be discerning between the best publishers and the most vulgar ones, determining if the methods of preparation and temperature of cooking have been the most apposite.

Yet, what does it mean to accept this transition, without any continuity in sight, from paper to digital? Can we be sure, as many within the publishing industry have ventured, that the transformation of the classical format will not radically alter the conditions for creating and disseminating literature and the humanistic essay? Can we believe, as many within the world of the book do, that if we hold out in the sphere of the *cooked*, continuity is guaranteed? Will the publisher of the future be a simple “manager of dematerialised information” that bears no relation with physical objects?

We accept that what happens in the sphere of the *raw* is something else. Utterly diverse artistic expressions and activities, frequently a long way from tradition, emerge here: compositions where texts are joined with video images or soundtracks, many-voiced creations in continuous transformation, chains of messages, discussion forums, activists’ blogs and protest pages that are able to mobilise thousands, change a certain policy, upset elections or threaten to bring down a government. These are hitherto unknown phenomena that are, in many aspects, a long way from literary creation and humanist reflection such as we have known them to date.

Let us leave the *raw* world for a moment and dwell on the circulation of *cooked* texts. There is at least one front in which the digital option has advanced almost without opposition: the specialised publication of books and reviews of a scientific and technical nature. In this domain, in just over five years, the publishing panorama has completely changed: a lot of specialist scientific reviews linked with universities or research centres

are no longer published on paper and are now only available in digital format. True, the traditional publishing model was totally unsustainable because of the high publishing costs along with the scant number of extremely costly subscriptions (most taken out by university libraries). However, more than anything else, what has really speeded up the change has been the existence of the three big companies that prevail in the world market of technical, legal and scientific publication (Thomson, Wolters Kluwer and Reed Elsevier). After hefty investments in technology, they have completely managed to take over this branch of publishing tending to digital format. Paper has not put up any kind of resistance here and the advances have been as spectacular as they are irreversible.

Many researchers (historians, sociologists and philologists) have taken the view that the model of digital scientific publishing could be an alternative to the deficiencies of

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traditional humanistic publishing, where it is increasingly difficult to publish monographs and doctoral theses. At the same time, projects like the enormous digital library of Google Book Search, in which thousands of millions of dollars have been invested in producing digitalised versions of the collections of the leading American and some European libraries, look like some kind of panacea. This project will not only make it possible to access almost any book but, moreover, thanks to the power of its search algorithms, it offers infinite possibilities for retrieving information. In its beginnings, the project was very enthusiastically received although, at

the same time, a good number of publishers, especially in Europe, were looking askance at it since not only works in the public domain were being turned out in digital format but even works that were subject to payment of rights. The project was partially checked by this determined opposition which ended up in the courts; on 28th October 2008, the dispute was settled when agreement was reached in which Google undertook to pay 45 million dollars for the copyright of already-digitalised books as well as a proportional part of the sales of the new digital books. In fact, on second thoughts, this is a trifle. Now that stumbling block has been cleared away, the project forges ahead. With its development, the foundations of the great universal library, so often imagined by the poets, would have been fully laid. According to Google estimates, we are talking about between seven and ten million scanned books with strategically indexed and classified content: an immense part of humanity's cultural heritage accessible with an immediacy and a precision that no visionary could ever have imagined. However, all this is now in the hands of a single company, thanks to the computational power of its search engines, which give it an unbeatable advantage in comparison with other analogous projects of constructing digital libraries. Some competitors as powerful as Microsoft have abandoned the project.

There is, perhaps, a hazy point in the digital whole that does not yet seem to have been cleared up: we are better at recovering and conserving a bibliographic heritage

that once existed as paper, but how will new values be added to this? How will future readers find the new books they'll want to read in this nearby, immense, infinite digital universe, in which locating whatever text from whatever place will always be possible and immediate? The usual answer is that people simply trust in the possibilities offered by the search engines themselves. This, however, is to lapse into a series of clichés that would seem worthy of reflection:

■ The first of these clichés we detect has a great deal to do with the way in which people and books find each other today: we tend to believe that, when choosing something new to read, readers know exactly what they are looking for.

This is a hypothesis derived from the scientific and technical model of reading, one that is also much favoured among university philologists and researchers. The specialist and student always know what they have to read because the selfsame texts they have read indicate and lead them on to the new reading they need to do. Moreover, in a digital setting, it is easier to locate and follow other researchers working in the same field so as to have a first-hand acquaintance with their work. Yet outside the university world hardly anyone reads in keeping with these specialist's guidelines. Ordinary readers rarely know with any exactitude what they are going to enjoy reading and only have at their disposal the changing indications and figurations of diffuse, nebulous expectations. Here it is the book that delimits and creates the *topos*. Only when the reading is finished will readers be able to formulate the motives that led to it. Readers will not be able to say, then, that they have set out to find such-and-such a book because of knowing that this was the one that best coincided with certain previously known needs. The contrary is closer to reality: it is the book that has invented its own need; already-read books are the ones that enable us to put a name to our expectations and not vice-versa.

Such appraisal is valid for a very wide-ranging set of "ordinary" readings, from novels read purely for entertainment, through self-exploration publications, through to high-quality works of literature and critical essays, readings in which the reader makes choices guided, more than anything else, by suggestions and intuitions and in which the book has not been located by means of some clear prescription. Book and reader meet in a free and diffuse wandering in which difficulties, limitations and opportunity also play a part. Here, finding is not locating. The logic of finding is not that of need. It is the logic of desire, which is impossible to lock into in some numerical algorithm.

The paper book comes equipped with a set of cogs with the function of enabling the orientation of the reader, offering indications for the choice of coming reading. They are effective in being invisible mechanisms, always there before us but barely noted and their functioning seems to be totally natural. A good part of these mechanisms are inscribed in the material form of the book and are inextricable from it. The peculiarities of the book's form —typography, formats, illustrations, colours, editorial symbols, collections, jacket bands, flap or back-cover blurbs— constitute a particular language with which publishers deploy their eloquence in an attempt to seduce the attentive reader. The meanings and rules pertaining to this language have been defined over centuries of history, shaping a meaningful landscape for readers wherein finding something new to read is more a game than anything else, a moment of pleasure. We then wonder what

price we shall have to pay if we forsake all this, not only because we shall be dispensing with a complex cultural heritage but also because its function in the free system overall, such as we know it today, is much more decisive than it might seem at first sight.

|| Another cliché we should ponder is this idea that the closer the creator and receiver are, the more direct the relationship between author and reader will be, the purer and more diaphanous the reception of the work.

In the way people think about the literary opus, the author-cum-creator is generally the object of fascination. This comes from an old romantic idea but, in particular, it justifies the principle on which rests the economic crux of the modern book: how to transform creations of the imagination into objects of consumption. For literary agents, for politicians who are concerned to exalt the national culture, for the mass media in quest of memorable personalities, for public relations people in the publishing milieu and, above all, for the creators themselves, the author is everything. Only thus, the work, the brilliant product of his or her unique mind, can be turned into something of exchange value. From this almost mythical standpoint, it is thought that if between creator and receiver, between author and reader, there have been intermediaries —editors, distributors, critics, booksellers— this has only been a result of the inevitable and archaic exigencies of the paper book. It is therefore easy to postulate that everything would be richer and more fluid without them.

Yet perhaps it's not so simple. Things appear in another light if we contemplate the path from author to reader not as a flat trajectory in which the stages to be got through are exclusively of a practical nature but as a complex, open process in which many mediating agents intervene. By mediators, I mean agents that are capable of transforming the value of the mediated object by means of their intervention. In other words, the book that ends up in the reader's hands is never the same work that flowed from the "pen" of the author, and not just because it has undergone transformation with each stage of the publishing process: it appears alongside other works in the same collection, suddenly being presented in relation with a series of already-established works and authors, the cover illustration evoking this or that genre, the typography bringing to mind a certain tradition or, on the contrary, calling up the desire for renewal and change, while the blurb on the back cover or jacket band cite other writers known to the reader. Taken as a whole, they are gestures that transform the book: they are like layers of value added at each step, wrappings of symbols that distinguish one book from another, thanks to which readers find the book they want.

It is precisely where the reader is confronted with new things to read, in the bookshop, that the book keeps undergoing new transmutations. The bookseller is that silent intermediary with the job —rarely recognised— of always being at the readers' side, trying to see the book with their eyes. Far from being a shaper of canons, the bookseller has the peculiarity of being able to associate readings, to suggest continuity between apparently distant texts, to create familiarities that could not be formulated any other way, to reveal hierarchies that can only be hinted at. The bookseller's is not a reading that wonders only about the stylistic properties of a text, the coherence of its plot, its aesthetic qualities; booksellers attempt to anticipate the eventual reading that is to be done by a set of people whose tastes and reading itineraries they are able to make out. Booksellers probe the prior requisites demanded by a text, the other readings it evokes, imagining it in different

reading situations, appraising possible “good-neighbour” relations, situating it within an immense set of pigeonholes that makes it possible to organise and classify this imaginary library shared with the community of readers with whom they are conversing. In this sense, the bookseller is not so much someone who prescribes as someone who propitiates, a kind of procurer who keeps weaving intrigues and setting traps, taking advantage not only of the texts but also, and very particularly, of everything that surrounds them. The particularities of the form of the book also constitute the bookseller’s raw material.

III A third cliché that must also be challenged is that of taking for granted the notion that, if one book stands out from the rest, it is only due to its own qualities. I have noted that, in the system of classical publishing, the book passes through a number of portals that bring about its transformation. However, not all books do this with equal good fortune. The publishing system in itself is a mechanism of selection and hierarchisation, with all its

defects and distortions: its essence is having a set of filters with which to detect and bring out, among an infinity of private (raw) texts, those that are worthy of being made public, refining them, fixing them and bestowing a form on them. In its beginnings, a book is just a material object but, once in circulation, on certain occasions it is transformed and it is “ordained”, which is to say it becomes the receiver and bearer of symbolic values, values that are shared and recognised by a more or less extended group of readers. Again, on many other occasions —the majority— the book ends up as the dregs of paper pulp.

The devices of the modern system of book distribution make it possible to single out one book from among other candidates, conferring on it a certain recognised status that is acceptable to everyone without the need for any kind of imposition. Their efficacy is the bedrock on which the whole system rests. We have often said that this is unjust or blind, but in the way it has worked, when it has always stressed its open character, it has been the unpredictable and hitherto ungovernable result of the intervention of numerous unconnected agents without any one of them being sufficiently powerful to prevail over the rest. With all its failures and fissures, with all the tensions between the more commercial and the more exigent poles, the most audacious, creative and memorable literature of the 20th century was built on this. To a great extent, these mechanisms are inextricable from the paper book, from its possibilities, from the wealth and complexity its materiality allows or, in other words, from the place the book-as-object has always occupied in the memory and imagination of readers.

To sum up, the paper book is not so much an object as a system. We might see it as a three-dimensional universe: the first dimension would consist of the texts themselves, stable, finite, forged to stay and to endure. This is the dimension of imagination; the second is the dimension of memory: it is the moment of the form, of the materiality of the book as language, of the book-as-object as a recipient for evocation and memory; the third is the dimension of

Will the transformations of the classical format radically alter the conditions for creating and disseminating literature and the humanistic essay?

culture (in the anthropological sense), of the book as a social bond, as a material good that is at once a shared social value, in agreement and in dispute. Here the book is a commodity that is bought and sold while yet simultaneously able to come to be the bearer of cultural signs and symbols, which we can use in order to speak with others from our place in the world.

Hence the book universe would constitute a landscape in relief, its valleys and hills representing hierarchies, zones of emphasis and shadows, crossed through by paths full of

The peculiarities of the book form constitute a particular language with which publishers deploy their eloquence in an attempt to seduce the attentive reader

signs and warnings, delimited by boundaries beyond which stretches what has been discarded and forgotten. Over centuries of history, new readers have been shaped in becoming familiar with this landscape, slowly finding their bearings. Perhaps it might be possible to reduce it to a flat surface of only one dimension: an infinite and undifferentiated continuum of texts. But then it would be something very

different. The mechanisms that make it possible to shape new readers, that are able to highlight certain works while overlooking others and that enable thousands of strangers to share the reading of the same stories would have to be reinvented through and through.

It is not that I am trying to defend the system of marketing of the paper book in its present version. On the contrary, in its most recent evolution it is showing tendencies such as rampant overproduction, neglect of the bookseller's collector's item and submission to the chain and department stores, to which one cannot give support, perverse tendencies that look like an implicit recognition that this way of doing business is no longer sustainable. They make one suspect that they themselves will be the motor of self-destruction.

The truth is that neither the new ways of distributing the paper book nor the model of business that is proposed for the digital book seems very encouraging. In neither case can we be sure that the principles that have permitted freedom, risk and creativity will be able to survive. There are rather alarming symptoms that invite us to think the contrary: in particular the omnipresence of the two great global agents (Google, Amazon) that, annihilating everything with their computational (and financial) power, aspire to oligarchic control of the book chain.

In reality it is as if we had to accept that the critical exercise of writing, of reading and reflection in freedom will only be possible in the domain of the *raw*, among texts born to flow, to be ephemeral and volatile, in a kind of digital *samizdat* in which everything is yet to be invented, a possibility that strikes us, the "archaic" ones who were shaped in our readings of Plato and the classics, as an *aporia*. One wonders whether the sphere of *cooked* books (except perhaps the technical, scientific and academic ones) might not be heading for a *cul-de-sac*, towards inevitable strangulation: maybe on the point of blowing the old system sky high but without yet disposing of any alternative to the subtlety and complexity of a set of cogs that we have always ignored because it was so evident ||