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## Life in the Technology-Saturated Shallows

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# Life in the Technology-Saturated Shallows —

Review of *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* by **Sven Birkerts**

Now in paperback: NY: Fawcett Columbine c1994, ISBN 0449910091; \$12.50, 231p.

Reviewed by **Ellen Finnie Duranceau** (Assistant Acquisitions Librarian for Digital Resources, MIT Libraries; ph. 617-253-7562; fax 617-253-2464) <efinnie@mit.edu>

In library school it was not cool to admit that one was there because one "liked books." This was seen as an unsophisticated and unimaginative reason for becoming a librarian. Nevertheless, that's why I was there. I liked books enough to enjoy a job shelving them, liked them enough to want to spend a professional life around other people who liked them. Now, in a twist that might seem ironic if it didn't seem so incongruously natural to me, I am a librarian who never touches books. I support the acquisition of digital resources, primarily Web resources, which do not even take a physical form, let alone the form of a much-loved book.

Although my career trajectory would not please **Sven Birkerts**, literary critic, book reviewer, and writer of *The Gutenberg Elegies*, it would not surprise him at all. He argues that such change is endemic to our society today, and what is more, that such change is emblematic of the passing of an entire culture built on and around the values of the linear, literary narrative. Birkerts argues that "our era has seen an escalation of the rate of [technological] change so drastic that all possibilities of evolutionary accommodation have been short-circuited." And that, in fact, the technology that has come to surround us in the past fifty years is making change to our "basic nature" "all but inevitable." This change consists of an adaptation to what Birkerts,

in his characteristically lively and telling prose, calls "the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness" which is undermining wisdom and depth.

This is decidedly not an optimist's book.

In his first chapter—one of the most disturbing—Birkerts talks about the college students he taught who could not read a **Henry James** short story. Upon investigation, Birkerts learned that the students were not so much alienated by the content of James' nineteenth-century narrative, which may have described lifestyles and issues irrelevant to their lives, but that (among other things) they were uncomfortable with the density of the prose, with the allusions and difficult vocabulary, and with the lengthy passages (such as interior monologues) deviating from plot development.

This failed teaching experience represents for Birkerts a "conceptual ledge." For him, a generation's failure to read or understand James suggests a "permanent turn" from "our entire collective subjective history." Why? Because "the soul of our societal body is encoded in print." Therefore, "if a person turns from print—finding it too slow, too hard, irrelevant to the excitements of the present—then what happens to that person's sense of culture and continuity?" While the loss of human kind's collective history may seem an overly dramatic conclusion to reach from the discovery that a group of

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## Life in the Technology- Saturated Shallows

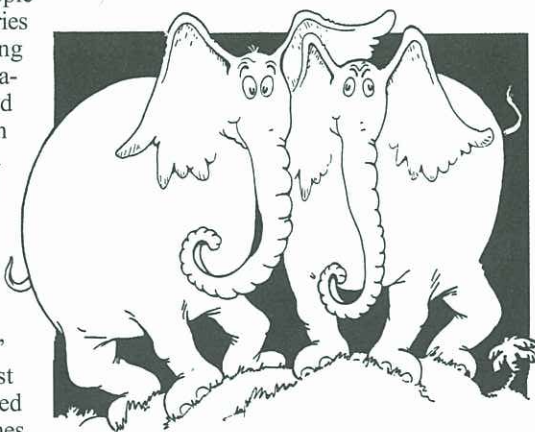
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undergrads found James impenetrable, Birkerts argues quite compellingly that there has been tremendous societal change and that this change is reflected in a generation of non-readers.

The change Birkerts sees includes (to name just a few of the stark trends Birkerts notes): a “fragmented sense of time;” “a reduced attention span and a general impatience with sustained inquiry;” “an estrangement from geographic place and community;” and “an absence of any strong vision of a personal or collective future.” On the plus side, Birkerts does admit that we gain through “electronic postmodernity” “an increased awareness of the ‘big picture’” an “expanded neural capacity” which for Birkerts means the ability to take in many stimuli simultaneously; “a relativistic comprehension of situations that promotes the erosion of old biases and often expresses itself as tolerance;” and a “willingness to try new situations and arrangements.” Although he does not say directly whether these gains outweigh the losses, elsewhere he admits that his views are “in some ways, pessimistic perspectives,” and it is quite clear that Birkerts sees a net loss when assessing the impact of technological change.

**The Gutenberg Elegies** is actually a series of free-standing essays that relate to a common theme. This format has its strengths: it can be read nicely in chunks and each chapter is a satisfying whole. But it also has its weaknesses: there is some, though limited, repetition and Birkerts’ argument is developed less through a sequential building of a case than it is through a compilation of loosely integrated autobiographical and reflective pieces. His chapter on how he came to attempt writing fiction and then give that up for writing essays is interesting and will please any bibliophile, for example, but it supports his overall theme only in demonstrating how one reader found his calling and grew into a writer. Birkerts groups the essays into three sections: “The Reading Self,” “The Electronic Millennium,” and “Critical Mass: Three Meditations.” The first and third offer the most sweeping, compelling, and alarming of his views, which are always provocative. Birkerts is no sociologist, and his book is not founded on surveys or scientific analysis, but on deeply personal observation and reflection.

Birkerts makes the case that we have lost wisdom, depth, and what he calls “deep time” because of the volume and horizontal nature of information in an era saturated with information. To make his case, Birkerts examines how people have used and processed stories throughout history, moving from an oral to a written tradition, and now to a world where most communication is mediated by technology. Birkerts concludes that there has been a “gradual displacement of the vertical by the horizontal—the sacrifice of depth to lateral range ... a shift from intensive to extensive reading.” Although I would suggest that the opposite has occurred in many scientific disciplines, where scientists are expert in (and read in) a more and more narrowly-defined literature, Birkerts has a valid point that “in our culture, access is not a problem, but proliferation is. ... [T]he reader tends to move across surfaces, skimming, hastening from one site to the next without allowing the words to resonate inwardly. ... [Q]uantity is elevated over quality.” Such access offers a larger perspective, which is good, but also risks creating a “relativism resembling cognitive and moral paralysis.” Wisdom disappears, since wisdom by definition



emerges from a “vertical consciousness,” from “a sense of the deep and natural connectedness of things.”

It may give a librarian pause to consider Birkerts’ view that “Wisdom has nothing to do with the gathering or organizing of facts...Wisdom is seeing through facts...”. In his view, a societal obsession with managing information, and with the computer (which allows us to manage information in efficient ways) is characteristic of an era in which comprehending all the information that flows around us is impossible. For Birkerts, our society offers very few places where it is still possible to enter a mode of “deep time” and thus achieve wisdom. The list is very short. It consists of churches, and the offices of therapists. (You may note he does not include libraries in this list.)

In his essays on the “reading self,” Birkerts articulates a metaphysics of reading with the goal of determining what the act of reading

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means. This is essential to his overall argument, for the act of reading must confer some fairly substantial impact on the psyche and intellect if it is to provide, as Birkerts believes it provides, the linchpin for so many of the values and skills Birkerts fears we are

losing. For anyone who has been in love with books and reading, this chapter will satisfy. It was certainly the first time I’d encountered a thoughtful, penetrable description of what reading is and does. It is difficult to encapsulate his argument, but basically, Birkerts believes that “reading a novel ... makes a change in the whole complex of the self.” When reading, one enters “a world held fully in the suspension of a single sensibility—the author’s.” This creates a state of mind that is characterized by connectedness and access to real time, “deep time.” Reading in and of itself represents a “judgment” that the “understandings and priorities that govern ordinary life” are “insufficient.” Reading asks us to “change our lives, ... to live them in the light of meaning.” Birkerts sees the reading of fiction, especially in adolescence, as taking a “vital part in what we might call, grandly, existential self-formation.” Books offer the ability to access “otherness”—other cultures, other historical periods, other genders. Books force reflection and “make certain kinds of thinking inevitable.” Needless to say, these

“certain kinds of thinking” are kinds of thinking that Birkerts values highly, and such notions are terribly satisfying to anyone who has spent a significant portion of life reading. While here as elsewhere it can seem, when summarizing Birkerts’ views, that he makes a great deal of very little, he presents a case that makes intuitive sense. It seems impossible that all of the characters, plots, language, and morality absorbed in a life of reading do not have some effect on one’s worldview and character.

The section on the electronic millennium brings Birkerts closer to the heart of his argument that society has become shallower, more superficial, with the advent of technology, how we are being altered as a species because of technological change. He sees the print-based society disintegrating within fifty years. With it, will go the vestiges of print-based processing: the linear, logical progression that “requires the active engagement of the reader’s attention” in a private act, an act which promotes rereading and sustained attention, with the “pace of reading...determined by the reader’s focus and comprehension.” Birkerts notes that the electronic world offers and promotes thinking and processing that is “in most ways opposite” to that of print.

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The act is public, either passive or interactive, with evanescent contents. In the electronic sphere, "impression and image take precedence over logic and concept, and detail and linear sequentiality are sacrificed. ... [T]he basic movement is laterally associative rather than vertically cumulative."

Birkerts is not sanguine about the social changes that will accompany this trend. Birkerts tries—halfheartedly, I felt—to remind us that he finds "these portents of change depressing, but also exhilarating" but when he elaborates them, they seem largely depressing. They include the erosion of language, when freed from the structure of print literacy; the flattening of historical perspectives, due to the loss of the physicality of history represented in objects — physical books — rather than hyperspace; and the waning of the private self, even of our experience of individualism, as the networked, connected world changes the way we experience our lives.

About hypertext, Birkerts is, you will not be surprised to learn, skeptical. He notes that fundamentally it changes the relation of writer and reader, questioning the "core assumptions of reading," for once a reader is "enabled to collaborate, participate, or in any way engage the text as an empowered player," he or she is violating the "premise behind the textual interchange ... that the author possesses wisdom, an insight, a way of looking at experience, that the reader wants." Thus what is at risk in the hypertext format is the very purpose of reading, the chance to be "taken in unsuspected directions under the guidance of some singular sensibility."

In the final section of the book, Birkerts tries to demonstrate in further detail some of the cultural changes that have accompanied technological change. In the first essay of this section, he exam-

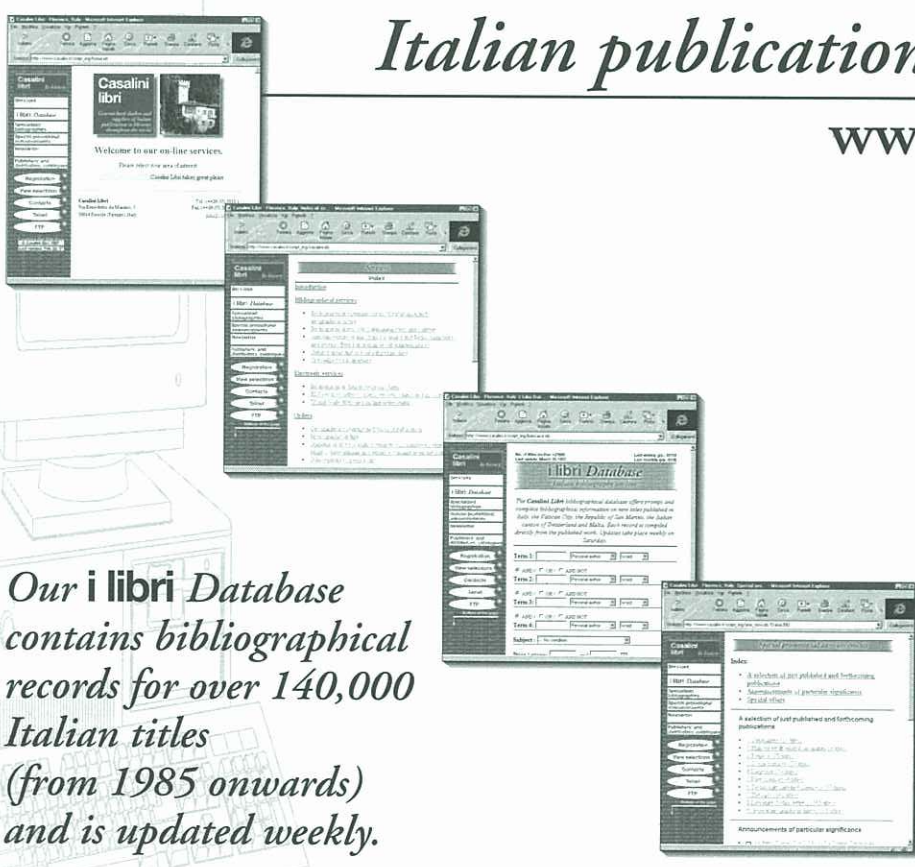
ines "how things concrete and abstract seemed to people before the onset of the electronic deluge," using the critic **Lionel Trilling's** work as a guide. Here he discusses the decline of reading, the loss of a set of certifiably great works—the literary canon—and the evolution of our society from one of many serious readers (in the nineteenth century) into one divided into two unequal groups: a small academic elite and a mass population that effectively does not read.

In another essay, he discusses **Alvin Kernan's** book, the **Death of Literature**, arguing that "from the large-scale societal perspective" literature is indeed dead, for it is "no longer a source of energies or a place of shared recognitions" but lives on only as a "retreat for those who refuse to assimilate to American mass culture." This is powerful and painful stuff. But in this section, particularly, his arguments, while sound, would make an even greater impact if supported by just a few numbers. (How helpful to know, for example, if "book buying and reading have fallen off radically among the under-thirty crowd," what the actual changes are, numerically, and who has studied and assessed this trend. Without notes or index, Birkerts' ideas must stand or fall on their own merits and act primarily to provoke discussion and reflection, not to provide a definitive assessment.)

In a book on books and reading, one might think more mention would be made of libraries. Libraries, do not, in fact, play much

*Despite the lack of discussion of libraries, no librarian (and indeed no one who cares about books) can afford not to read The Gutenberg Elegies.*

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## Something About Books

by Jack Walsdorf (V.P., Library Relations, Blackwell's)  
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"Why don't you write something about books?" the caller asked. What a wonderful idea! It's a subject dear to my heart, as my life is filled with books—collecting them, writing bibliographies about them and when time permits, reading them. Next to my bed, on my night stand, I always have at least three or four titles in progress. I like reading bits and pieces before falling off to sleep. Some books never get finished, often to my regret. Some others get read right through, much to my delight.

Right now I'm reading an unusual little book, published by the **Coach House Press** in Toronto, Canada in 1994, called *Better Than Life*. It was written by **Daniel Pennac**, a teacher at a Lycee in Paris, and unfortunately out of print (although copies are readily available from any of the out of print Internet search services). In just over 200 pages the author covers such interesting topics as "The Reader's Bill of Rights," "The Necessity of Reading" and "The Gift of Reading." Here is a book, which, opened at almost any page, will provide such gems as "Once we stood before a closed book, our eyes shut. Now we are free to wander among the pages" (p.140). "Life is a per-

petual plot to keep us from reading" (p.145). "Time spent reading, like time spent loving, increases our lifetime" (p.146). "Even adults, though we'd rather not admit it, read diagonally once in a while" (p. 183) and perhaps my favorite: "...unlike good wine, good books don't age. They wait for us on our shelves while we age."(p. 185) This is a good book, one that reminds me of the lines from **Paul Engle's** poem "Library": "Libraries are alive, walls tremble, books Bounce on their shelves. In terrible times Enter, your life comforted by their lives."

Another book on my night stand is **Anna Quindlen's** *How Reading Changed My Life* (1998, Ballantine). Part of their Library of Contemporary Thought series, this equally small (84 page) work by the former *New York Times* columnist and author of the highly praised *Black and Blue*, is a wonderful combination of autobiography, hymn in praise of books and reading, and a selection of eleven reading lists at the end. Here Ms. Quindlen interjects that: "My most satisfying secondhand experiences as a reader have come through recommending books, especially to my children." Using such eye-catching titles as "The 10 Books I Would Save in a Fire (If I Could

Save Only 10)"; "10 Mystery Novels I'd Most Like to Find in a Summer Rental" and "10 Modern Novels That Made Me Proud to Be a Writer," she gives us a wonderful group of titles we all have read, or if we have not, we at least know we wanted to read at some time in the past.

I was especially excited by Ms. Quindlen's description of her encounter with Mrs. LoFurno's book-filled basement. Here she found a book, which she remembers as *I, Natalie*. "For some reason I pored over a novel about an adolescent girl...which I remember today only as being set in a grim block in Poland and including some suggestion of sex, which was always welcome." As Paul Harvey likes to say, here's the rest of the story. The author of *Natalie*, **Alexandra Orme**, was in the early 1960's my German professor at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. Orme was her pen name, we knew her as **Alice DeBarcza**, and I remember that I was most impressed when a classmate told me she was a published author. Frau DeBarcza was the first published author I had met and even then, some thirty-five years ago, I was filled with admiration for anyone who could get published. That admiration has not gone away, and in Ms. Quindlen's brief book, I find yet another reason to admire authors. 🐾

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of a role in Birkerts' argument, which is primarily hammered out at the level of the individual reader awash in ruthless technological change. But Birkerts makes much of the comments of a certain **Robert Zichs**, in charge of special projects for the **Library of Congress**. According to Zichs, libraries will become more like "museums," and big research libraries "will go the way of the railroad stations and the movie palaces of an earlier era [when they were] really vital institutions in their time." Birkerts sees these comments, made by a high-placed official at the institution closest to a national library that the US has, as indicating that the horror of an electronic future is indeed upon us. These words may not ring true, however, to those of us actively engaged in those "big research libraries," where our mission is changing radically, precisely in order to prevent us from becoming museums. Nevertheless, the fundamental point that technology has changed the library's business, and that any library that remains solely a repository of print will indeed become a museum, remains valid.

Despite the lack of discussion of libraries, no librarian (and indeed no one who cares about books) can afford not to read **The Gutenberg Elegies**. Whether you agree with Birkerts or not—whether he strikes you as a prophet or as a blinded reactionary (as

he may well be when he states that "being online and having the subjective experience of depth, of existential coherence, are mutually exclusive situations")—his claims about our culture and the place of the book in it constitute a serious indictment of our techno-obsessed society. What librarian (now as likely to have "information manager" on his or her business card as any form of "librarian") could remain unmoved by Birkerts' "nightmare scenario" of our future: "not one of neotroglydotes grunting and wielding clubs, but of efficient and prosperous information managers living in the shallows of what it means to be human and not knowing the difference."

In his introduction, Birkerts says that "I have not yet given up on the idea that the experience literature offers is a kind of wisdom that cannot be discovered elsewhere; that there is profundity in the verbal encounter itself, never mind what further profundities the author has to offer; and that for a host of reasons the bound book is the ideal vehicle for the written word." Even if technology is not as profoundly detrimental to our culture as Birkerts fears, there is something at stake in our rapid advance into a totally wired society. For those of us who have carved out personal and professional lives built on publication of and access to both books and technology, it may take as much courage to admit this and to fully heed the book's warnings, as it did to write it. 🐾

*The soul of our  
societal body is  
encoded in print.*