

WEN STEPHENSON

*The Message Is the Medium:
A Reply to Sven Birkerts and The
Gutenberg Elegies*

"Where am I when I am involved in a book?"

—Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*

"You're in cyberspace."

—Kevin Kelly, executive editor of *Wired* magazine,
responding to Birkerts in the *Harper's Magazine* Forum,
"What Are We Doing Online?" (August 1995)

I have before my eyes a page, and on the page, typewritten in a serif font, is a poem. It is an ode written in 1819 by John Keats. I read the first words aloud to myself, slowly, pronouncing each syllable as though it were a musical note or a percussive beat: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time." As I continue down the page, I linger over certain phrases and rhymes; I go back and re-read, taking the stanzas apart and putting them back together again in my mind. The words fall into their order, and I feel their rhythm somewhere in my chest, the resonance of language uttered by a human voice in solitude. I am forced back into myself by the words on the page, my mind pushed deeper and deeper into a realm of images and associations, and emotion that did not exist a moment before is conjured from some mysterious wellspring.

I repeat the last lines of the poem—an indecipherable pronouncement on the relation of art to life—and then a noise from outside draws my attention to the open window; the spell is broken. It is a sultry Sunday afternoon over the rooftops of Boston's Back Bay, and through the window of my office a humid breeze rustles the papers strewn across my desk. I notice the clock: nearly five hours have elapsed since I sat down to read, and in that

200
207

time I've wandered through a collection of British poetry. It seemed like no time at all. As I stand up to stretch, there's the sensation of floating that I often experience after long immersion in literature. But the pressure of the world returns, and its gravity pulls me back. The shock of reentering the temporal zone leaves me a little dazed, disoriented. I am still inside that Keats poem. Or it is inside me—the experience proved upon my pulse, which, by the way, is beating somewhat more rapidly than normal.

Where have I been? What has happened to the sense of time and space that governed my consciousness before I came upon that text? Something has happened, something connecting me across space and time to another human being, perhaps untold others—some experience of language that is ageless, primal, and indefinable. Perhaps I have had what some would call an authentic aesthetic experience of the art of poetry. If so, then I have experienced it directly through the digital channels of the Internet, on “pages” of the World Wide Web, through the circuitry of an Apple computer and the cathodes of a Sony monitor, at some 28,000 bytes per second.

* * *

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then I hope Sven Birkerts will take the preceding paragraphs not only as a rebuttal but as a compliment. His most recent collection of essays, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, is one of the most engrossing, engaging, provocative, and frustrating books I've come across in a long while. Published in December, 1994, on the cusp of the millennial hype surrounding the so-called “online revolution,” it has become one of the most talked about literary events of the past year. There should be nothing mysterious about its notoriety. At a time when the subject of the Internet and the new media it has spawned is everywhere you look—not just in the pages of *Wired* magazine but on the covers and in the headlines of the very print publications these new media are said to be replacing—Birkerts strikes deeply and often convincingly to the core of an anxiety felt by many in our postmodern literary culture. The strategy is simple and rather brilliant: to explore the relationship between a reader and an imaginative text at a time when serious literature is increasingly marginalized by the communications technologies that are transforming mass media and mass culture.

And yet, as one of a growing number of people with a foot in both the worlds of traditional literary publishing and the emerging online media, I can't help wondering how Birkerts could be so closed-minded to the possibilities the new media present for serious literary activity. Reading the book,

especially his descriptions of the reading experience itself, I often felt as though Birkerts and I should be allies; but time and again I found myself fundamentally at odds with him, baffled by his condescension toward all forms of electronic media. Here's a typical statement in *The Gutenberg Elegies*: "[circuit and screen] are entirely inhospitable to the more subjective materials that have always been the stuff of art. That is to say, they are antithetical to inwardness."¹ Elsewhere he has elaborated on the idea that the Internet is barren of serious thought and writing. "What the wires carry is not the stuff of the soul," he said in the August, 1995, Forum in *Harper's*. Afraid of what he calls a "creeping shallowness," Birkerts complained in another context, "If I could be convinced that the Net and its users had a genuine purchase on depth, on the pursuit of things which are best pursued in stillness, in dread, and by way of patiently articulated language, then I would open wide my heart. I just don't see it."² The fact that this last comment was made in the course of a live *online* conference hosted by *The Atlantic Monthly* on the America Online network (in which, I must confess, I participated as an editor), complicates things and adds perhaps more than just a touch of irony. I can only ask, as a worker in the "shallow" domain of cyberspace: should I be concerned, or merely insulted?

* * *

It isn't just that Birkerts is less than optimistic about the prospects for serious literature in cyberspace—his misgivings go well beyond a reasoned critical skepticism toward new forms of literary activity springing up on the World Wide Web and in other multimedia applications. The magnitude of his subject is spelled out in the opening pages of *The Gutenberg Elegies*. While Birkerts is hardly the first in recent years to see a "total metamorphosis" of our culture brought on by the revolution in communications technology, his stance in regard to the effects on literature and the consequences for Western culture is, I believe, radical. "Suddenly," he says,

it feels like everything is poised for change.... The stable hierarchies of the printed page... are being superseded by the rush of impulses through

1. Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 193. Page numbers of subsequent quotes will be indicated parenthetically.

2. The transcript of the conference is available in *The Atlantic Monthly's* area on America Online (keyword: atlantic) and on the World Wide Web (<http://www.theatlantic.com/atlantic/agora/trnscrpt/tranindx.htm>).

~~202~~
208

freshly minted circuits. The displacement of the page by the screen is not yet total.... But, living as we do in the midst of innumerable affiliated webs, we can say that changes in the immediate sphere of print refer outward to the totality; they map on a smaller scale the riot of societal forces.
(3)

At the vortex of this transformative riot is for Birkerts the printed page. Not only is the "formerly stable system" of literary publishing being undermined and eroded, but as "the printed book, and the ways of the book—of writing and reading—are modified, as electronic communications assert dominance, the 'feel' of the literary engagement is altered. Reading and writing come to mean differently; they acquire new significations" (6). Pondering what he calls the "elegiac exercise" of reading a serious book, Birkerts concludes that "profound questions must arise about our avowedly humanistic values, about spiritual versus material concerns, and about subjectivity itself" (6). Clearly, there's more at stake here than the fate of the traditional publishing industry. For Birkerts, it is never merely a question of whether we get our reading material via the Internet or from a bookstore; what matters is how we experience what we read: "I speak as an unregenerate reader, one who still believes that language and not technology is the true evolutionary miracle. . . . that there is profundity in the verbal encounter itself . . . and that for a host of reasons the bound book is the ideal vehicle for the written word" (6). I follow along fine until his insistence on the bound book and the primacy of print stops me cold. Birkerts raises his devotion to the printed word to a nearly religious level: the book as holy relic, the page a fetish embodying everything he holds sacred.

Nowhere does Birkerts provide better insight into the underlying reasons for this devotion to print than, of all places, the inaugural issue of the electronic magazine *FEED*. As one of four participants in *FEED*'s first hypertext roundtable "Dialog," called "Page versus Pixel" (June 1995), Birkerts gets top billing and is allowed to fire off the first shot. Thus, with the kind of irony that has come to characterize so much of the self-reflexive discourse on media, Birkerts offers the crux of his argument in favor of print in the context of a hip new e-zine on the World Wide Web:

I do not accept the argument that a word is a word is a word is a word no matter where it appears. There is no pure 'word' that does not inhabit context inextricably. I don't think the medium is absolutely the message, but I do think that the medium conditions the message considerably. A word incised in stone (to be extreme) asks to be read as a word incised; a word skywritten (to be extreme again) asks to be looked at as such. A

word on the page at some level partakes of—participates in—the whole history of words on pages, plays in that arena. Reading it, we accept certain implicit notions: of fixity, of hierarchy, of opacity. By 'opacity' I mean that the physical word dead-ends on the page and any sense of larger resonance must be established in the reader and by the reader.³

Inexplicably, for the same words to be displayed on a computer screen, in Birkerts's reasoning, causes their presence to disintegrate, and with that loss so goes the entire hierarchy they represent: the whole culture disintegrates into random bits of digital information as soon as the words disappear from the screen, as if irretrievably. The image strikes me as an apt metaphor for the chaos that has been unleashed in literary studies by deconstruction and the linguistic indeterminacy associated with postmodernism. It's as though Birkerts fears for the stability and efficacy of language itself, and I begin to imagine him as Dr. Johnson's hapless lexicographer, who in the preface to his dictionary laments the vanity of the wish that language "might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote."⁴ Like Johnson, Birkerts appears to suffer an acute discomfort over the mutabilities of meaning and the transience of cultural values.

It is not surprising, then, that the fixity of words printed on a page, and bound in a book, becomes Birkerts's last best hope for Western civilization. What's at stake for Birkerts is nothing less than the tradition of Western humanism dating back to the Renaissance and rooted in Hellenic civilization. Books are the repository of that tradition. It all rests on the stability of print. "For, in fact," he says in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, "our entire collective subjective history—the soul of our societal body—is encoded in print.... If a person turns from print... then what happens to that person's sense of culture and continuity?" (20). Birkerts observes how the narrative and syntactical structures afforded by print are for the most part linear, whereas in electronic media everything from the jump-cut in film and video to the lateral and tangential movements of hypertext works against our traditional notions of time and historical progression. That Western culture is threatened both by these technologies and by the intellectual and artistic movements associated with postmodernity is to Birkerts no mere coincidence:

3. Sven Birkerts, in "Page versus Pixel," *FEED* (<http://www.feedmag.com/95.05dialog1.html>).

4. Samuel Johnson, "Preface to a Dictionary of the English Language," in Frank Brady and W. K. Wimsatt, eds., *Samuel Johnson: Selected Poetry and Prose* (University of California Press, 1977), p. 280.

Transitions like the one from print to electronic media do not take place without rippling or, more likely, reweaving the entire social and cultural web.... One could argue, for instance, that the entire movement of postmodernism in the arts is a consequence of this same macroscopic shift. For what is postmodernism at root but an aesthetic that rebukes the idea of an historical time line, as well as previously uncontested assumptions of cultural hierarchy. The postmodern artifact manipulates its stylistic signatures like Lego blocks and makes free with combinations from the formerly sequestered spheres of high and popular art. Its combinatory momentum and relentless referencing of the surrounding culture mirror perfectly the associative dynamics of electronic media. (123)

Postmodernism's "relentless referencing" of mass culture and its rebuke of the historical time line are closely related, in Birkerts's picture, to the electronic media that are undermining the "stable hierarchies" upon which both narrative history and the novel are based. In the midst of these rioting forces, can there be any doubt that Birkerts would prefer for the spheres of high and popular art to remain sequestered? It would seem that the fate of literature in the electronic age depends upon the extent to which they do.

Accordingly, Birkerts feels the decline of print most acutely in the accompanying eclipse of the "serious" or "literary" novel as a form wielding cultural authority. Its eclipse, the direct result of the rise of electronic culture at the expense of print, represents for Birkerts no less than the death of literature itself, or at least the possibility of its death. We realize soon enough that Birkerts would defend the literary novel (and his heroes Flaubert, Joyce, and Woolf) from the destabilizing forces of postmodern intellectual and artistic culture—from the various manifestations of post-structuralism in the humanities, particularly deconstruction, and from the politics of multiculturalism as manifested in the growth of cultural studies—as well as from mass-cultural art forms that threaten the authority, if not the very existence, of the novel. It is here that Birkerts's position begins to come into clearer focus, and we see a nostalgic modernist overwhelmed by the currents of postmodernism carried on the tide of electronic media. In response, Birkerts erects the physical certainty and materiality of the printed word as a levy against the flood.

Knowing as he does that the levy cannot hold—or, more likely, that it has long since broken—at least Birkerts shows a sense of humor (if a somewhat perverse one) as he takes his stand. In the final essay of *The Gutenberg Elegies*, an eerie coda titled "The Faustian Pact," we find our champion of high-modernist print culture resisting the temptations of a cyber-pop

Mephistopheles decked out in the “bold colors, sans serif type fonts, [and] unexpected layouts” (210) of *Wired* magazine. Appropriately, one of Birkerts’s rare bows to popular art takes the form of the blues refrain he intones from the chapter’s first sentence onward: “I’ve been to the crossroads and I’ve seen the devil there” (210). He pauses. “Or is that putting it too dramatically? What I’m really saying is that I’ve been to the newsstand, again, to plunk down my money for *Wired*. You must have seen it—that big, squarish, beautifully produced item, that travel guide to the digital future” (210). Evidently it’s not too dramatic for Birkerts; he develops the theme thoroughly before returning to it on the climactic last page. The image would be more humorous if not for the distinct impression that Birkerts is only half joking:

Yes, I’ve been to the crossroads and I’ve met the devil, and he’s sleek and confident, ever so much more ‘with it’ than the nearest archangel. He is casual and irreverent, wears jeans and running shoes and maybe even an earring, and the pointed prong of his tail is artfully concealed. Slippery fellow. He is the sorcerer of the binary order, jacking in and out of terminals, booting up, flaming, commanding vast systems and networks with an ease that steals my breath away. (211)

You can almost hear Birkerts pronouncing these (to him) exotic terms of the digital present, distrusting them, not quite sure what to make of them, superstitious of the mystical powers they seem to hold, as though they’re poised to steal our souls—or, as Birkerts would say, “our subjective individualism” (228).

He goes on to lament the inevitable loss of this individualism in the midst of an increasing “electronic tribalism,” or “hive life,” and he identifies the consequences of our Faustian contract in the realization of his “core fear”—“that we are, as a culture, as a species, becoming shallower” (228). In our embrace of technology and its transformation of our culture we have sacrificed depth, “adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness” (228). Woven into this expanding web—pervading our academic institutions and trickling down into the mass media by way of high-brow journalism, film, and now, he fears, the Internet—is a nihilistic “postmodern culture” with its “vast fabric of competing isms,” chief among them a terrorizing “absolute relativism” (228). Birkerts’s answer is to resist the reflex response that all is “business as usual,” and to see through the illusions that our wired Mephisto would weave seductively before our eyes. Birkerts won’t be fooled: “The devil no longer moves about on cloven hooves, reeking of brimstone. He is an affable, efficient fellow. He claims

to want to help us all along to a brighter, easier future, and his sales pitch is very smooth. I was, as the old song goes, almost persuaded" (229). From somewhere deep in his "subjective self," Birkerts summons his courage and with his final words heeds the inner voice that says, "Refuse it" (229).

It's a dramatic ending, to be sure—the work of a skilled evangelist. Yet, as it turns out, in his rhetorical flourish Birkerts has inverted the meaning of the "old song," the traditional evangelical hymn in which the speaker is, as the title says, "Almost Persuaded" to respond to the call of salvation but is ultimately too late. The hymn is supposed to strike fear and contrition into the hearts of sinful listeners, and using it the way he does is a telling maneuver on Birkerts's part, turning it around so that it's the voice of an electronic-age Devil rather than the voice of God that nearly persuades him. To be honest, he almost persuades me that my soul is in danger, nearly convinces me of my shallowness—almost, but not quite.

The truth is that, like many in Birkerts's target audience, I'm susceptible to the alarm. Like the fretful soul in the revival tent I am vulnerable to the message, and the heightened passion of its delivery makes inroads where reason cannot. I recognize myself in his portrait of the "unregenerate reader." Here's my confession, my creed. Yes, I believe. I believe in aesthetic experience and in the need for literature to communicate something otherwise unknowable—and in that communication to achieve some connection with other human beings, however slight and fleeting, and however compromised by the indeterminacies of signs and the structures of meaning and power imposed by our cultural contexts. I make my own refusal: a refusal to accept that such communication is impossible. I take the very existence of this literary journal and the hundreds (thousands?) like it around the planet as evidence that others share a need for this kind of communication, within and across personal and cultural boundaries. A postmodern pilgrim, I struggle to maintain my faith in the ability of language to transmit not just what one culture calls beauty (though that, too, is an important function) but more so, to communicate what people recognize across time and space as human experience. If I truly believed that any of this is threatened with extinction by the new electronic media, I would gladly cast my modem down the sea's throat and never look back. But, in fact, the picture I see looks considerably different, considerably less frightening.

* * *

To be fair, there are glimpses of hope even in the midst of Birkerts's apocalyptic visions, though they are rarely pursued. These are the occasions, usu-

ally at the end of a chapter, upon which he rises to affirm the possibility that language itself, even literary language, might survive despite the decline of print. "We may discover, too," he concedes, "that language is a hardier thing than I have allowed. It may flourish among the beep and the click and the monitor as readily as it ever did on the printed page" (133). Yet these moments are few and far between. The conclusion forever reached is that our literary culture and our civilization rest on print, and that the fate of our individual and collective souls depends upon the solidity of ink and paper.

It is hard to believe, despite his statements about words incised in stone versus words written in the sky, that Birkerts really accepts the McLuhanesque determinism embodied in the ubiquitous cliché about the medium being the message. What if the medium in question is language? Then what does the message become? At the end of his chapter called "Close Listening," in which he describes his experiences with books on tape, Birkerts confesses to having had an epiphanic moment, one that may suggest an answer. He recalls driving down a stretch of open road after visiting Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts—a good place for a transcendental experience—and popping in a cassette of Thoreau's *Walden*, spoken by Michael O'Keefe. The effect is that Birkerts seems momentarily transformed into an all-encompassing, all-hearing ear:

The words streamed in unmediated, shot like some kind of whiskey into my soul. I had a parenthesis of open country, then came the sentence of the highway. But the state held long enough to allow a thought: In the beginning was the Word—not the written or printed or processed word, but the spoken word. And though it changes its aspect faster than any Proteus, hiding now in letter shapes and now in magnetic emulsion, it remains. It still has the power to lay us bare. (150)

I remember first encountering that passage and putting down the book, thinking, "Precisely! I rest my case!" I can only hope that Birkerts has more experiences like this one. For he as much as admits that the essence of literature might actually survive in the valley of its saying, even outside the precincts of print.

Given such a revelation, the absence of poetry from Birkerts's discussion of literature's fate becomes all the more conspicuous. In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, he has given us a moving paean to the achievements of great prose stylists, such as Flaubert, whose *mots justes* represent the essence of what Birkerts fears we are losing. But what of the poets? How is it that they do not figure into his scheme of things? After all, sound as much as sense is the essence of poetry, and verse may bring us closer than any other use of lan-

~~208~~
215

guage to that primal "Word" Birkerts communed with on the road from Walden. And that is just the point. Poetry does not fit into the design of his argument. For unlike prose, and especially the kind of prose narrative Birkerts is so keen to salvage, poetry has long been comfortable outside of print. Poetry, in many of its forms, comes much closer to the kind of aesthetic Birkerts describes as characterizing postmodern, electronic culture. And where much is made of the non-linear, cinematic techniques employed in prose narrative, so we would do well to remind ourselves that poets have been using those techniques since the first invocation of the Muse.

Whether Birkerts misses the significance of his epiphany, or whether he represses it for the sake of argument, perhaps the most telling moment occurs when he takes up the well-known essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in his concluding chapter. There, Birkerts invokes Benjamin's notion of the "aura" of a work of art—"its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."⁵ But whereas Benjamin refers to the withering of the original artwork's aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, and develops his thesis on the transformation of art and its social function at the hands of technology, Birkerts borrows the term, stretching it beyond recognition, and applies it to his notion of the subjective self. He writes:

To put it in simple terms: Do we each, as individuals, have an aura, a unique presence that is only manifest on site, in our immediate space-time location? And if we do, how is this aura affected by our myriad communications media, all of which play havoc with our space-time orientation?... I am taking it as a given that every person is blessed with an aura, that he or she gives off the immediate emanation, or 'vibes,' of living. (226)

If poetry is what is lost in translation, then Birkerts's idea is that an individual's "aura" is what gets lost in the transmission through layer upon mediated layer of electronic communication. Groovy. I appreciate Birkerts granting me my own unique vibes. And, yes, he may have hit upon something important here; perhaps changes in communications media do somehow affect our sense of subjectivity. But Benjamin is concerned with the status of things that are made and reproduced as art objects, and with the way technology transforms the function of art from that of sacred object in the secular cult of beauty (*l'art pour l'art*) to that of a mass-cultural phenomenon, with a new social and political function, that is part of a larger

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), p. 220.

dialectic in which bourgeois capitalism gives way to socialism. Birkerts, on another plane altogether, is concerned with the status of individual souls and how technology is transforming the self.

As he adapts Benjamin's term in this way, Birkerts avoids having to acknowledge that the good old-fashioned book is itself a mechanical reproduction. And at this point I find myself wondering, where is the "aura" in a work of literature? If it is merely that of the author, of some elusive authorial subjectivity, then isn't that "aura" diminished as much by the printed page as by the pixels of a computer screen? But Benjamin does not speak of aura in regard to literary works. Written works of language would seem to fall into a separate category. For no matter how the words of a literary work are reproduced and transmitted, the essential qualities of the language, the sounds and meanings, survive. If anything, Benjamin's thesis of the aura of an original artwork only points up the fact that works of language are inherently different. Language is more than content; it is itself a medium—the medium of literature—and it transcends print, paper, silicon, electricity, even the human voice.

* * *

So, where does this leave literature—or, more to the point, literary language and the kind of communication it allows—in the computer age, and in a future of rapidly expanding online networks? One place to look is the emergence of literary publishing on the Internet. If we venture beyond the too-easy opposition of print and pixel, we might find that literature will take to the digital environment more naturally than many would expect. For one thing, computers themselves, and the experience of cyberspace, can appeal to our imaginations in ways similar to the aesthetic experience of literary language. As Robert Pinsky wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* this past spring, in an essay titled "The Muse in the Machine: Or, the Poetics of Zork," poetry and computers may have something uniquely in common, sharing what he identifies as "a great human myth or trope, an image that could be called the secret passage: the discovery of large, manifold channels through a small, ordinary-looking or all but invisible aperture."⁶ Pinsky appears to be tantalized, rather than threatened, by the possibilities implied in the comparison. "This opening up," he continues in the same essay, "the discovery of much in little, seems to be a fundamental resonance of human intelligence. Perhaps more than the interactive or text-

6. Robert Pinsky, "The Muse in the Machine: Or, the Poetics of Zork," *The New York Times Book Review* (March 19, 1995): 3.

210
217

shuffling capacity of the machine, this passage to vast complexities is at the essence of what writing through the machine might become. The computer, like everything else we make, is in part a self-portrait; it smells of our human souls." From hypertext and archival databases, to advanced language experimentation, to the increasingly sophisticated descendants of early computer text-adventure games such as *Zork*, the "peculiar terrain of literature-for-the-monitor" offers a vision of what the digital future may hold for the literary imagination.

Not long after that essay appeared I had the opportunity, as the moderator of another online conference for *The Atlantic Monthly*, to ask Pinsky if he would elaborate on his thoughts about poetry and its potential life in cyberspace. He confirmed a qualified optimism, emphasizing certain practical advantages of the new medium over the old, while leaving no doubt as to where, he believes, the message is to be found. "The medium of poetry—real poetry, for me—is ultimately breath," he typed (broadcasting the words to a live audience), "one person's breath shaped into meaning by our larynx and mouth. So like print, the computer is still a servant or a conduit—not the ultimate scene of poetry, which is in the ear."⁷ He then declined to predict what might be the most promising applications of computer technology to literature, opting instead to point out perhaps the most significant aspect of electronic publishing, not only for poetry but for literary activity in general: "the capacity to download what used to require a publisher, a bookstore, etc. . . . that compression and availability have amazing potential for freeing individuals from control, from the treatment of people as masses. In that, poetry (an ancient technology) and new technologies are potential allies in the service of individual creativity, orneriness, imagination." A few hours browsing on the World Wide Web will more than bear Pinsky out. What he tentatively projects is in fact taking shape, albeit in an infantile form, on the Internet, especially across the multimedia landscape of the Web.

Yahoo, one of the most popular directories on the World Wide Web, lists at the time of this writing more than 290 individual Web sites under the heading "Poetry." It lists more than a hundred sites under "Literary E-zines" and another 217 under "Authors" (from Edward Abbey to Virginia Woolf). I've barely scratched the surface of the literary scene emerging on the Web, so any attempt to list my favorite places would be highly arbitrary. Nevertheless, I've recently come across two sites that represent what I hope is a

7. Conference transcript located in *The Atlantic Monthly's* area on America Online (keyword: atlantic) and on the World Wide Web (<http://www.theatlantic.com/atlantic/agma/trnscript/tranindx.htm>).

direction literary publishing on the Web will take. The first of these, *Switched-On Gutenberg*, based at the University of Washington, calls itself "A Global Poetry Journal on the World Wide Web."⁸ Fortunately, the poetry is much better than the name, including work by some of this country's most accomplished and acclaimed poets (Galway Kinnell and Maxine Kumin for example). The editor notes in an introductory message that the main reason for starting the electronic journal is the demoralizing structure of literary publishing for poets today, and the opportunity offered by the Internet to expand access to poetry to a potential audience of twenty million (a very generous estimate at this date), all at very little cost, while doing away with the old limitations of processing and production time, the problems of storage, shipping, and handling, not to mention saving a few trees. The other is a site developed jointly by the University of North Carolina Press and the UNC Office of Information Technology. They've created the fledgling Internet Poetry Archive, with the stated goal "to make poetry accessible to new audiences (at little or no cost) and to give teachers and students of poetry new ways of presenting and studying the poets and their texts."⁹ Noting that the Internet is becoming "more inclusive and more public" they've recognized the need to provide first-rate literary content, of which there is still relatively little (quantity, alas, does not compensate for quality). Their first "unit," or edition, will feature eight poets, providing sound and graphics as well as text: poets reading and commenting on their work, along with biographical and bibliographical information. The first two poets featured are Czeslaw Milosz and Seamus Heaney.

It is becoming clearer that the Internet has vast potential to expand the audience for works of the literary imagination; and not only to expand access but also opportunities for interactivity, and for building communities of creative minds that could not exist otherwise. It's a lovely picture, one I'd like to believe in. But I know it is more likely that the Internet will become a vast cyberspace mall, every bit as commercialized as any other mass medium in a free-market society. And yet, if it's true, as Auden put it, that "poetry makes nothing happen"—at least not within the realm of an expanding and virtually untapped marketplace—it is nevertheless also true that individuals do make things happen. And I will maintain—surely Birkerts would agree with me here—that literature, as a means of communication, has the power to make something happen within individuals. For this reason, it is all the more important that we do not surrender cyberspace and the new media to the purely market-driven forces of late-twentieth-century mul-

8. *Switched-On Gutenberg* (<http://weber.u.washington.edu/~jnh/>).

9. The Internet Poetry Archive (<http://sunsite.unc.edu/dykki/poetry/home.html>).

tinational capitalism. There are other values—values which cannot be measured in monetary units—that will survive only if we vigilantly carve out a space for them to breathe.

* * *

At the end of another long day of work in the cyberfields, I watch from my office as a late-summer dusk darkens the sky over the rooftops of Back Bay and the skyline of Cambridge across the Charles River. Most of my colleagues have gone, and I'm left in the semi-darkness of my office with the glow of a lamp and my computer monitor before me. Emanating from the screen is a poem by Jane Hirshfield that is featured in the first issue of *Switched-On Gutenberg*. The poem is titled "Studying Wu Wei, Muir Beach," and I can't help thinking that somehow Hirshfield is speaking to me, and to Birkerts, as if to point out the futility of our engagement in what Birkerts calls "The Reading Wars." Hirshfield describes the difficulty of bringing in a horse that is grazing in "bright spring fields," where the grass is a little too ripe, and the "wild-anise breeze" wanders in and out of his mane, a mare "jutting her body between his and yours":

It is hard not to want to coerce a world that
takes what it pleases and walks away, but *Do not-doing*,
proposed Lao-tsu—and this horse. Today the world is tired.
It wants to lie down in green grass and stain its grey shoulders.
It wants to be left to study the non-human field,
to hold its own hungers, not yours, between its teeth.
Not words, but the sweetness of fennel. Not thought,
but the placid rituals of horse-dung and flies.¹⁰

I know Hirshfield's poem has nothing to do with Birkerts and me—but the tired world of which she speaks evokes a pang of recognition, and I'm drawn to her images. She is practicing the kind of communication I know can and must endure in the midst of our over-mediated lives. And after another day in which I've contributed my share of the noise and the hype, it's hard not to feel the fatigue she describes, or the desire for placid ritual, or the impulse to lie down and surrender words to the non-human world, letting them fall silently back into their mute materiality.

But I resist, wisely or not, and I jump to another page that I've "bookmarked," where I find the poem that's been going through my head

10. Jane Hirshfield, "Studying Wu Wei, Muir Beach," *Switched-On Gutenberg* (<http://weber.u.washington.edu/~jnh/poems/hirschf.htm>).