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# *Books: 'Against my ruins'*

I have spent a good deal of the last three and a half years researching the Sibyl of Cumae, the pagan prophetess of classical antiquity said by Virgil to write her oracles on leaves (Virgil books 3 & 6). Through my research I have discovered a library of lost books: ancient books that exist now as fragments, or only in text-memory, as titles or small quotes in other works.

Varro, a Roman scholar, compiled a list of ten Sibyls. This list exists today because Lactantius, a fourth century early Christian, quoted it in his work, *The Divine Institutes* (Lactantius book 1.6). Reading about Lactantius himself, I stumbled across a number of his works that exist only as titles (McDonald xii-xiii). I think of what William Arrowsmith calls the "mutilated state" of Petronius's *Satyricon*: "What we have...is a tantalizing fragment from a whole of uncertain length, and even the parts we do possess are not continuous but are everywhere marred by lacunae of greater or lesser length" (Arrowsmith vii).

I think of Sappho's poetry, now lost but for a few recovered scraps. I think of the scrolls in the library at Alexandria, burnt at the time of Julius Caesar (Avrin 231). In 64 C.E. a fire swept through Rome and destroyed what Tacitus called the "ancient and authentic manuscripts of so many of the great writers of Roman literature", which were "unique and irreplaceable" (Tacitus book 15.41). This is only a small selection, and does not touch the books destroyed more recently.

If these texts and stories had gone missing without a trace, we would not know to grieve. But the remains give a hint, a glimpse - enough to show us what has been lost. There is something of Derrida's "absent presence" in these allusions to lost books (Derrida 154). They resonate with the potential of what once was.

These literary ruins give me a glimpse of the lost worlds of previous millennia, and make me wonder what fell through the gaps. They also prompt me to consider the present, and to look forward to our future. Much of our cultural heritage has been written on paper and bound into books, in which we attempt to capture our lives in both history and fiction. Yet paper is fragile. What books will remain in two or three thousand years to tell our stories? What will future generations make of our literary ruins, of what we leave behind to be unearthed, classified and interpreted? Which stories will endure? I think about our leavings, imbued with what Bruce Sterling calls "the pathos of lost things" (Sterling 60).

Recent developments in computer technologies pose other interesting questions. Will books continue to be our main repository of culture and history, or will they vanish with developing technologies, replaced by virtual pages? It is a popular question, appearing in discussions in the online journal *The Book and the Computer: The Future of the Written Word,* (Note 2) and a 1996 collection of essays edited by Geoffrey Nunberg called *The Future of the Book*, appropriately in book form.

It is important to remember that this discussion is not an opposition between technological and non-technological media: the book itself is what Howard Rheingold calls "a bundle of technologies", which developed at a particular time and place, rather than a cultural given (Rheingold 6). Consequently, I consider the book as technology, comparing it with other technologies, their usability and durability.

Some commentators suggest that digital writing is the next media revolution after the invention of the printing press. For Jason Epstein, the development of digital text, combined with the Internet, is "an epochal event" (Epstein 34). Michael Joyce writes: "We live in a time when the book itself is in ruins, *eskhate biblos*" (Joyce 274). For Roger Chartier, the revolution is multi-faceted: "The electronic text revolution is, all at once, a revolution in text production and reproduction techniques, a revolution in the medium and substantiality of texts, and a revolution in reading habits" (Chartier 1). McKenzie Wark, however, is w(e)ary of claims of revolution: "Media technology 'revolutions' now come so close together that a lot of people still remember the failed promises of the last one when the new one is doing the rounds" (Wark 1). A cynical Paul Duguid suggests that claims of technological supersession are cunning marketing ploys to force us to keep up with rapidly changing electronic products (Duguid 68).

Revolution or not, the presence of computer technologies and digital text is a fact in the literary world. Some authors are releasing their new works as electronic books (e-books). Other writers are developing styles of writing relevant to the medium, like hypertext, dynamic text or communal writing projects. The immediate interaction allowed by the Internet (through e-mail, bulletin boards and chat sites) creates dialogic pathways between writer and reader, and these online audiences can influence the way a writer writes (Rheingold 8). Online writing workshops, discussion sites and newsletters also foster a sense of writing community. Numerous new publishing opportunities for aspiring writers have also appeared on the Internet, in websites and online journals.

Today, thousands of books are produced in comparison with the painstakingly hand-copied texts of the Middle Ages, or the slow creaking of the first presses. As the printing press made it easier to produce more copies of a work, so do developments in electronic publishing. Epstein describes the publishing industry as already heavily reliant on digital formats. These formats also hold possibilities for the future. Storing books digitally means backlists could be maintained cheaply and easily, preventing works going out of circulation Epstein suggests we will print out single copies from this digital backlist at point-of-sale, rather than in bulk factory print runs.(Epstein 34-5)

By conserving paper, e-texts reduce the environmental impact of the publishing industry. Furthermore, huge amounts of information can be stored in very little physical space (only the space of the server, hard drive or other storage medium), which is an important consideration as the world's population grows.

There are already entire libraries of full-text books ready to be accessed on the Net, for example Project Gutenberg (Hart 1999/2001). E-libraries represent greater, more convenient access to large numbers of texts for people connected to the Internet. Rather than one copy of a work in existence, there can be hundreds, even millions, all around the world. Texts can be reproduced with the click of a mouse or the touch of a key. If one copy is lost when a server crashes, there is usually a backup copy to replace it.

These technologies also allow a wide readership of certain precious manuscripts. Pages from Leonardo da Vinci's *Leicester Codex* came to Sydney's Powerhouse Museum recently. The pages of the actual manuscript were pressed between sheets of glass and kept under low lighting to preserve them. The manuscript was written in Italian from right to left. Text from one side of the page showed through, making it difficult to actually "read" the works. The pages were more like exhibits in a gallery or relics in a Catholic Church. However, the original pages had been scanned into a computer and translated by a tool called a "Codescope" (Fewster 7). A row of computers enabled the public to see the pages as they were, to reverse them and read them in Italian or in English translation. Leonardo's words were able to reach more people than in book form, while the original was safely preserved.

As I consider these digital possibilities, I find myself returning to the physical presence of the book. Leonardo's actual pages elicited awe and reverence in me, an almost visceral reaction, while the digital versions were practical, but not poetic. I love the first page of a blank journal

or a new novel, and the crinkly thin pages of dictionaries. The deckled or marbled edges of old books, their stains and musty smells. I wholeheartedly admit to what Ueno Chizuko calls "our fetish attachment to the physicality of the medium" (Chizuko1999: 10). The book is not just an object, but what Régis Debray calls a "symbolic object" (Debray 141), marked by time, which resonates with personal and cultural associations.

Part of my pleasure in writing and reading is bound up with the material texture and sensuality of the work. These tactile pleasures are lost to me when books are translated into computer languages. While e-texts are non-material, they must be read through a material object. Our current "reading machines" give me little sensual pleasure, with their black marks on a white screen, the nondescript beige boxes, the hum of the fans or the static crackle of the screen. I appreciate the convenience of this medium and its functionality, but it doesn't fill my senses.

Rheingold believes that today's computer screens are inadequate for reading large amounts of text (Rheingold 7). Currently, e-books are being developed to mimic the physical form of a book, making them as user-friendly as their hard-copy cousins (Wildstrom 1998/2001: 1). Some fold out into two screens, and some are leather bound, yet the text is electronic and down-loaded from the Internet (Hepp 2000/2001: 1, 4). Others come in tablet form (Wildstrom 1998/2001: 1). Recent surveys show readers of e-books prefer to "turn" the pages of these e-books, rather than scroll through the text ("Can e-books … Readability" 1). Interestingly, there is also resistance to e-books because they don't smell like books ("Can e-books … Usability" 1).

Chartier suggests that computers will change to accommodate the sensual pleasures of reading and writing (Chartier 3). Another possibility is that we will change - our habits will shift as we become accustomed to this medium, possibly developing a symbolic connection as powerful as our relationship with the book. It is important to recognise that this relationship is culturally constructed, and to acknowledge what James O'Donnell calls "the unnaturalness of this whole affair our culture has had with books" (O'Donnell 91). (note 3) My feelings for the book exist because the change to computers came late in my upbringing. The way I read and write, the way my body does these things, is inscribed in muscle memory.

But the world is changing quickly. Perhaps it will be different for today's toddlers, whose earliest experiences of writing and reading will probably be mediated by computer. Their ontological and phenomenological experience of digital texts might be unimaginable to me, creating pleasure where I see only function. Chizuko says: "When a generation makes a new technology its own and learns to manipulate that technology as it pleases, it begins to express itself in ways suited to the medium in question" (Chizuko 1998-1999: 9). George Landow describes the physical form of a text as having its own defining qualities, and these have cultural effects (Landow 217-8). What will be the symbolic resonance of this new medium for generations to come? How will our reading and writing patterns change?

It is also important to consider how this new medium will age. Harold Innis (1950/1972) considers various media and their differing properties of longevity and mobility. (note 4) He notes that heavy materials such as stone or clay are durable, but because of their weight are difficult to transport, while lighter materials, like papyrus, paper, parchment and vellum, are easily carried across distance (facilitating the growth of sprawling bureaucratic empires), but are more vulnerable to the action of time (Innis 7, 9, 107, 116).

Writing's trajectory has taken it from stone to paper to screen, and in each transition the medium has shed volume and mass. In themselves, electronic texts have no materiality, existing as patterns of binary code stored on floppy disks, CD-ROMs, hard drives, zip drives or Internet servers. There is no physical form unless the pages are printed out. E-text is the logical extension of Innis's idea: it is non-material therefore infinitely portable (i.e. accessible from any Internet-ready computer around the world). But how will this affect a text's longevity? Does Innis's formula of physicality to time apply to digital writing?

Thinking in apocalyptic terms (like some of the ancient Sibyls), I wonder how easily these electronic texts would be retrieved if a great cultural shift occurred - as large as the shift between Greek and Roman societies and our own. This possibility was hinted at in the panic about the so-called "Millennium bug", when the computers we take for granted threatened to behave in an unpredictable way.

More worrying is technological obsolescence. Even now it is difficult to access documents formatted in outdated word-processing programs. Translating these old documents into current programs often creates curious quirks of font and paragraph alignment. What would happen if the gulf became so large that it was not possible to translate them? Electronic documents would be like books written in an archaic language, needing what O'Donnell calls a "data archaeologist" (O'Donnell 48) and a Rosetta Stone to translate them. According to Epstein: "Sumerian clay tablets can still be read, but the long-term survival of digital texts cannot be taken for granted" (Epstein 36). Bruce Sterling questions the permanency of texts stored on the Internet. He asks:

> How long will it be before the much-touted World Wide Web is itself a dead medium? And what will become of all those billions of thoughts, words, images, and expressions poured onto the Internet? Won't they vanish just like the vile, lacquered smoke from a burning pile of junked Victrolas? (Sterling 60)

What if communication technology shifts away from computers to some new, as-yet-unimaginable medium? Without equipment to read the binary code, our electronic texts could not be retrieved or read. I imagine computer carcasses as artifacts analysed by future generations, yet giving up none of the secrets hidden within their beige exoskeletons.

The word *ephemeris* is Latin for "diary" (Simpson 1963/1987: 79). It comes from the Greek word ephemeros meaning "lasting a day" (YourDictionary.com Inc 2001). The English word *ephemeral* shares the same stem. While considering the relationship between book and computer, I realise that both media seem ephemeral. Books have a physical presence that implies permanency but, as we have seen, this is not true. Digital text has no permanency. Read on-screen, e-text overwrites itself, a palimpsest, like early wax tablets, or the vellum and parchment manuscripts scratched back to blank so a new text could be written on them (Joyce 273). Despite this, we trust both media to be the repositories of our cultures, to store the minutiae, the details and experiences that define our milieu. What will become of these in years to come? What will survive?

According to O'Donnell, "prophecy is a mug's game" (O'Donnell 83). Indeed it is. Unlike the Sibyl of Cumae, I have no direct link to the divine. I can only shuffle fragments of the past and the present and speculate. Looking back at our fragmented past, and considering the ephemeral nature of our cultural products, I believe it is a safe assumption to say only fragments of our stories will be transmitted into the future.

This moves me. Our words, in books or binary, are inscribed for contemporary readers, but they are also our legacy to the future. Yet there is no guarantee these words will survive the passage through time. Every letter we write contains a trace of its own uncertain future, just as our signatures can be said to contain a trace of our death (Derrida & Bennington 148-66). As the absence of the lost books evoked their presence, so our present evokes an absence, and our writing contains our non-writing; the point at which we will no longer write. I hope our words will outlive us, to tell our stories when we are gone, but there is no guarantee. Strangely, this knowledge does not make writing seem futile. Instead, it makes my determination stronger. I write, knowing that every word is as vulnerable to the action of time as the Sibyl's leaves.

My stories of the lost books have a double function. On the one hand, the gaps in the texts show how much has been lost over time. On the other hand, the existence of these literary ruins, circulating thousands of years after they were originally written down, proves the tenacity of the word, even on frail media. I have found the process of gathering these

fragments fascinating, and I hope future generations will shuffle our leavings with equal enthusiasm. To end, I offer a poem from Sappho - one hardy fragment that has survived the voyage through time:

> You may forget but
> Let me tell you
> this: someone in
> some future time
> will think of us
> (Sappho fragment 60)

**Notes**

1. The quotation in the title is from T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (Eliot 79).

2. Find these online discussions at: <http://www.honco.net/archive/rt-1.html> and <http://www.honco.net/archive/rt-5.html>. Return to article

3. My thanks to Jenny Lee for suggesting O'Donnell's fascinating book *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). *TEXT* Vol 5 No 2 Return to article

4. I was alerted to this book by McKenzie Wark. His paper mentioning Innis was presented at the AAWP's 2000 conference and also appeared in *TEXT* Vol 5 No 1. Return to article

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