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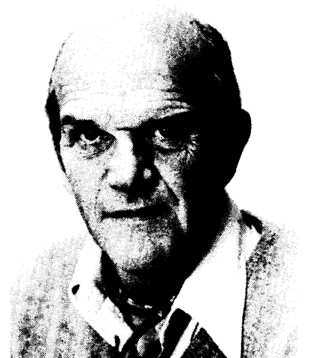
Narratives of Change

Don Gifford

In what follows I want to explore some aspects of our perception of change: how we anticipate it, size it up, address it, and cloak it in narrative. And, given the context of this symposium, change in the way we inhabit spoken, written, printed, and electronic language in the complex interweave of changing technology and changing patterns of human behavior. In a playful concluding moment in "Elegie III, Change," John Donne remarks:

> Change is the nursery
> Of musick, joy, life, and eternity.
> (ll. 35–36)

But time and eternity were thought to be mutually exclusive, radically so in the seventeenth century, and Donne's leap across the great divide between life (which is time's fool) and the serenity of eternity should remind us that there is a dark subtext of disruption and disorientation in the nursery of change, including our sense that change itself continues to change, that mutability is the essence of our experience of time.



Don Gifford is Class of 1956 Professor of American Studies *Emeritus* at Williams College. Professor Gifford presented this address after dinner on the first day of the symposium.

As we write and rewrite the history of literature, for example, we habitually story change as linear and irreversible, as though history were embedded in narrative as it happened. If it makes a better story that way, we are fond of dramatizing discontinuities as abrupt and revolutionary: from eighteenth-century neo-classicism to the about-face of nineteenth-century romanticism; from the straitjacket of Victorianism to the revolutionary freedoms of modernism; from modernism to post-modernism, and beyond. But when we return to confront our overstatements of the discontinuities, we hesitate and begin to detect continuities. Wordsworth, we once were fond of saying, broke sharply with eighteenth-century psychology, but on our return we discover that Wordsworth continued to share the eighteenth-century assumption that individual human growth was toward the plateau of a fixed maturity. What looked like revolution the day before yesterday begins to look like continuity today.

When we rewrite history, we are undertaking in formal and public terms what we intuitively and privately do with our memories. Contemporary neuro-psychologists suggest that memory does not move in the past tense but in the present tense, mapping and remapping the past to lend resonance to, to create and inform the "musick" of present experience. In this sense, memory is not replication but an art-form, just as the writing of history is. Ezra Pound once said that each generation must retranslate the classics for itself (including, I would assume, the classics of its own language). The corollary is obvious: each generation must rewrite history for itself.

Once upon a time, encouraged by Pound's dictum, I devised an exercise for a seminar I was conducting. The assignment consisted of seven translations of Book XI of the *Odyssey*, the book in which Odysseus recounts his adventures during his voyage to the underworld; I chose, variously, translations from the early-seventeenth to the twentieth century: George Chapman (1614–15), Alexander Pope (1725–26), William Cowper (1791), William Cullen Bryant (1871), S. H. Butcher and A. Lang (1879), Samuel Butler (1900), Robert Fitzgerald (1961), and, for good measure, Pound's Canto I (1917, 1925). The initial response was outrage and protest in each of the three seminars on which I sprung this exercise. The verbal textures were so outrageously different that no one with an eye on the page could believe these seven documents to be just seven different translations of a single text. The participants in the seminars were only slightly mollified by the news that scholarly knowledge of Homeric Greek changed radically between Chapman and Pope—as it has changed several times since. Exploration of changing cultural attitudes toward and expectations of the *epic* and the *heroic* provided a semblance of safe-passage from the high-serious mellifluity of Pope to the blood-and-guts Anglo-Saxon rhythms of Pound's Canto I, and began to explain some of the all-but-incredible verbal discontinuities. And gradually, when the focus shifted to the structural patterns and rhythms of the seven, the constant that we call Homer could be glimpsed if not finally grasped. So each of the seminars oscillated between incredulous perception of discontinuities and resigned, if restive, perception of continuity. And each time I conducted that seminar, I went through the same oscillation myself, bounced about by perceptions of the contrariety inherent in what we assume (or desire) to be continuity.

That proved a radical exercise in what we experience in a less vertiginous way as we rewrite history and find ourselves oscillating between contrary perceptions of continuity and change. Eventually we may begin to wonder whether, thanks to our facility with and dedication to the mapping and remapping of our narratives, we haven't rendered time reversible, whether we haven't all but developed the ability to write the history of the future. If only we could, in Emily Dickinson's phrase, make "Prospect taste of Retrospect" (no. 1227), we could thus make your discussions of the "Twenty-First Century" in this symposium rather easier than they are likely to be.

In other words: so insistent is the present tense of our memories and histories that we are easily seduced by signs and portents into at least the hope that we could write the history of the future. Therefore, it's frequently useful to remind ourselves that things remain very much and surprisingly the same.

The Renaissance scholar-editor Hieronimo Squarciafico saw the handwriting of change on the wall in 1477, nine years after Gutenberg's death: "abundance of books," he said, "makes men less studious,"[1] and that just before the advent of the relatively inexpensive handheld book. Squarciafico's anxiety seems to have taken two directions: one, that abundance of books would vulgarize scholarly enterprise and threaten the exclusivity and authority of the closed society of the scholars. Literacy, heaven forbid, might spread and with it the rising tide that was to become the flood of Protestantism forty years later. Anxiety number two: abundance of books might well render men less diligent in their cultivation of the art of memory (if you could carry a book around, you wouldn't have to put it to memory)—a misplaced anxiety, as it turned out.

[1] Quoted in Martin Lowry, *The World of Aldus Manutius* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 31.

Erasmus, who was eleven years old when Squarciafico voiced his worries, seems the embodied refutation of those worries. Erasmus spent some time as an editor in the abundance-of-books business in Venice, but in his scholarly mendicancy he traveled with a core collection of only thirty-two books. The extraordinary range of his scholarship, on the other hand, reflects a mnemonic grasp of thousands of books and manuscripts. There must have been a world-class memory traveling with that box of thirty-two books en route to Carlyle's dictum: "The true university of these days is a collection of books," a dictum with which some of us are still comfortable in this age of electronic memory.

Pope and his contemporaries shared another sort of anxiety, summed up in two lines of "An Essay on Criticism" (1711):

> Our sons their fathers' failing language see,
> And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be.
> (ll. 482–83)

That is to say, if, as Pope feared, English continued to change as it had in the three hundred years between Chaucer's death in 1400 and Dryden's in 1700, Dryden (and with him Pope) would be all but unreadable by the year 2000. That fear was at the time exacerbated by what was still regarded as the unchanging permanence of Latin. But technology was there to frustrate Pope's fear: print was in the process of stabilizing spelling and of slowing the pace of change in grammar and punctuation.

Changes in technology behave in strange and unpredictable ways. Two developments at the beginning of the sixteenth century promised changes that were in fact long delayed. The invention of the black lead pencil in England in 1500 plus an increase in the availability of paper provided a portable scriptorium which, combined with the abundance of books Squarciafico feared, should have rendered the elaborate discipline of the art of memory obsolete—but it didn't, not for two hundred years. The externalization of memory in notebooks, diaries, journals, lecture notes, and printed texts took its own sweet time to exploit the new technologies.

And why, after the introduction of the handheld book in Venice just before 1500, did it take almost three hundred years to internalize reading fully, to develop that silent voice-in-the-head that, as we experience it, is seen as much as heard, that voice which is so familiar to us as the "natural" way of reading to oneself? From an Elizabethan point of view there was something ambiguous, perhaps even unhealthy, about reading to oneself. When Hamlet is discovered "reading on a book" (II:ii:168), the Queen and Polonius take that behavior as a sign of his melancholy, and a bit later, Polonius applies that lesson. When he sets Ophelia to entrap Hamlet, he gives her a book to read: as he says, to "color / Your loneliness" (III:i:44–45)—that is, to suggest that she too is melancholy, suffering from unrequited love and therefore desiring to be alone. A couple of lines later Polonius suggests another possible allegory of reading to oneself, "pious action" (III:i:47). In Zurburan's paintings of the young Virgin Mary in the 1630s and 40s, small books are always (anachronistically) just at hand as aids to pious action. At the end of the seventeenth century the American poet and divine Edward Taylor, in the frontier isolation of Westfield, Massachusetts, regarded books as so indispensable to meditation that he copied out by hand books that he borrowed from his wealthy friend and former Harvard roommate Samuel Sewell. Sewell was bookrich to the tune of 220 volumes.

Apart from pious meditation in the centuries following the introduction of the handheld book, reading was something healthy people were expected to share with others. But some time in the course of the eighteenth century the art of reading to oneself *in camera* began to evolve. Jean Jacques Rousseau says in *The Confessions* that he learned to read at five or six, and remarks: "It is from my earliest reading that I date the unbroken consciousness of my existence."[2] At first he read out loud with his father. Later he developed the habit of reading alone, *in camera*, and he says that he came to loathe interruption or distraction. At the end of the eighteenth century, reading to oneself began to emerge as a metaphor for the interiorized stream-of-consciousness. The narrative voice of the novel was gradually interiorized, and the voices of poetry turned in to imitate the interior melodies of emotion and meditation. But why, with the technology in place, did that process take so long? And now, two centuries later, so firm are our assumptions about the naturalness of reading to ourselves in silence that it comes as something of a refreshing jolt to discover that that "Lord of Language,"[3] Abraham Lincoln, drove his two young secretaries up the wall because he read everything (newspapers, correspondence, books) out loud to himself.

In 1966 Marshall McLuhan, with more flair than prophetic accuracy, pronounced the handheld book "obsolescent."[4] The electronic media were going to finish off books; and computer access to all the libraries of the global village was soon to finish off paper as well. That prophecy has yet to come true. In fact, its contrary holds. There are more books than ever. Overproduction and the consequent glut of books has been spurred and streamlined by computerized production techniques and by publication of books targeted to small specialized audiences, thanks to computerized marketing techniques.

If the future of the handheld book looks bleak, the real threat comes not from radio and television and computer-transmitted libraries but from the homogenization that proceeds from the glut of books—more and more of them unsorted by libraries, unreviewed by competent critics—all cats fading toward gray in the gathering dusk. And when I think of those graying quantities, I am reminded of the far greater numbers of books and poems, thousands upon thousands, that will never make it as far as a cursory glance of an editor's eye—unsolicited manuscripts need no longer apply.

And what might be lost in that flux unsettles me: I think again of the miracles of survival in nineteenth-century American letters. Thanks to the great fire at Harpers' in 1853, Melville was lost to a whole generation of readers and might have stayed lost except for a rescue operation that looks uncomfortably hair's breadth. It took half a century for Thoreau to emerge from Emerson's shadow and to be accepted at last as what Melville called "parlour-safe." And only thanks to an elaborate exercise in public relations did Whitman survive the onslaughts of Victorian-American prudery. Finally, in the rarest case of all, Emily Dickinson, so close to being lost, survived the posthumous passage from closet poet to publication.

But late-twentieth-century quantities of the published and the unpublished take us a quantum leap beyond those survival stories to the point where never in our history have we been in such danger of a significant failure to discover (in other words, in danger of significant loss) and I must say, I'm not much comforted by that teasing dictum, "If Shakespeare had never existed, we wouldn't miss him," or by its corollaries: if Melville hadn't been rediscovered and if Emily Dickinson had never been published, we wouldn't miss *them*.

[2] Trans. J. M. Cohen (1787; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 19.

[3] Tennyson, "To Virgil" (1882).

[4] *New York Herald Tribune*, 21 March 1966.

And just last June "The End of Books," more particularly the end of the novel, was proclaimed yet again in the *New York Times Book Review*.[5] The over-production of books, we were told, is the

> sign of the book in its death throes, just before "hypertext . . . written and read on the computer" takes over and frees us forever from the "tyranny" of linear narrative. Multilinearity and indeterminacy will displace the author's authority and challenge the reader of hypertext to compose for herself or himself.

A generation ago, the end of the novel was being proclaimed in Paris, its tombstone a novel by Marc Saporta, *Composition Number One*. It comes in a box of loose pages that readers are supposed to shuffle and thus compose and recompose for themselves. This reader found that the experience became thin and repetitive after about twenty-five pages. But Saporta's experiment brought with it an additional message for the novelist and critic of the future: the Williams College Library, when it first received that box of pages, promptly sent them to the bindery so that all might be fixed and no page lost. Multilinear freedom was at a stroke rendered frozen and inflexible for the next century's reference.

Electronically generated quantity challenges us from all sides. I wonder, for example, about the extraordinary quantities of talk and image that television and radio generate daily. Where are those quantities to be housed and cataloged, and what sort of access do they deserve? Twenty-five years ago CBS Television did a documentary series on the Warren Report in the course of which the two pathologists who performed the autopsy on President Kennedy discussed their findings. During the furor over Oliver Stone's film *JFK* earlier this year, the American Medical Association remarked that at last the two doctors had broken their silence after "twenty-eight years." The AMA was wrong by twenty-five years, but the media archives had all but swallowed that 1967 program whole, and only after intensive search and with some luck could a transcript be located.[6] Similar questions of recall and access cloud the future of electronic publishing and the extraordinary quantities of data it can make available (and presumably lose).

And for those interested in the evolution of a manuscript, the computer/word processor looms as a giant eraser, scrubbing out draft after draft as the writer makes his or her way toward the pristine final product. That product will have swallowed and absorbed all previous textual variants, additions, corrections, revisions into itself. Advanced computer technology may be able to help us retrieve that electronic palimpsest, but will the electronic trail resemble the crosshatchings and intercuttings of a Keats or Whitman manuscript, or will the electronic ease of manipulation somehow sanitize and obscure?

An image out of what Yeats would call Anima Mundi disturbs my mind. In the 1930s, sponsored by the WPA, the American composer Henry Cowell and his wife Sydney toured the Appalachian hinterlands in search of what amounted to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folk songs still stored in the living memory of those regions. The Cowells made notations and kept paper records, but the bulk of their findings was preserved by the then new technology of wire recording. Somewhere, en route back to the twentieth century, they drove through the magnetic field of a transformer station. Their wire archives were wiped out, the spools scrubbed clean. There is something for a Thoreauvian "parable-maker" in that wipe-out.

[5] Robert Coover, "The End of Books," 21 June 1992, pp. 1, 23–25.

[6] "Television's Memory Hole," *New York Times*, 1 July 1992, p. A21.

The quantities of data that modern computers can store and access are there to haunt the book people among us in other ways. The textual critic in search of the elusive grail of the Ur-text can suddenly be lost in a white-out of undifferentiated textual variants. The literary and historical researcher can find himself wandering without landmarks in a blizzard of factlets, similar to those entities Joyce called "unfacts" in a splendid half-sentence in *Finnegans Wake*:

> The unfacts, did we possess them, are too imprecisely
> few to warrant our certitude . . .
>
> (p. 57:16–17)

Computerized bibliographies promise us an extraordinary expansion of the range of our reference, but they can be so selective and so refined as well as so thorough that they all but eliminate the possibility of serendipity: the eye cannot stray to adjacent entries, or to adjacent pages, or to adjacent shelves in the library stacks.

But enough of these anxieties about future-shock. In spite of Squarciafico, quantities may yet help us to be more studious. And I've been wondering recently whether our sense of language isn't already in a process of change. The computer in its word-processor mode introduces a flexibility into writing and composition that may very well remind us that our experience of language is flow. Only in the retrospect of lexicography do we chop that flow up into isolated words and phrases.[7] In the living act of speech we go with the flow. "One cannot," the poet George Oppen said,

> make a poem by sticking words into it; it is the poem which makes the words and contains their meanings.[8]

That Tower of Babel, *Finnegans Wake*, should have restored us to that sense of language as holophrastic, polysynthetic, but the lesson is taking its time to sink in and colonize us. After all, the English-speaking romance with the dictionary, with what Emily Dickinson called "This loved Philology" (no. 1651), is only two and a half centuries old; and the computer may, such is the mystery of change, be enabling us to make giant strides in lexicography and, at the same time, it may be subtly reintroducing us to the undertow of an old narrative: the poetics of language as flow.

7 See Hugh Kenner, "DARE to Make it Known," *Mazes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), pp. 93–100.

8 Quoted by Kenner, *Mazes*, p. 309.