advantageously Stendhal used the telegraph system in *Lucien Leuwen.*

Thus, some places are senders of information: they are known in many other places, for example Mont Saint-Michel; others are receivers: through them many other places can be known, for example the National Institute of Geography; still others are collectors who receive, organize and distribute this information, thus establishing new relations between other places. The city of Paris is doubtless even today one of the most important of these centers.

In this power one place has in relation to another, works of art always have played a particularly important role, whether paintings or novels; and consequently the novelist, if he really wants to illuminate the structure of our space, is obliged to introduce works of art. The properties which he will be able to uncover in this regard in the works of others, whether real or fictional, he will appropriate in several ways: not only will the effects of these works be achieved through the mediation of his own work, but he will be able to draw conclusions from them as well, and in turn utilize his own experience in order to pursue their exegesis. These works will be, then, in this realm of space as in so many others, an instrument of thought, a sensitized point through which the author inaugurates his own criticism.

Of course, it is first of all in the space of representations that the novel introduces its essential modification, but who can fail to see how information influences both routes and objects; how, in fact, beginning with an invention in a novel, objects can be effectively shifted, and the order of trajectories—journeys, voyages, passages, and paths—can be transformed?

—translated by Gerald Fabian

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**The Book as Object**

The book, this object we hold in our hands, hard-cover or paperback, small or large, expensive or cheap, is obviously only one of the ways in which language can be preserved. Not only is it possible to attach writing to solids of another kind, such as the "volumes" of antiquity, but today we possess all sorts of techniques for "freezing" what we say even without the help of writing, for recording it directly, with its timbre and its intonations, on records, tape or film.

The fact that the book, as we know it today, has rendered the greatest services to the mind for several centuries in no way implies that it is indispensable or irreplaceable. A civilization of the book might well be replaced by a civilization of recordings. Mere sentimental attachment, like the kind our grandparents cultivated for gaslight for some years, obviously deserves no more than an indulgent smile; I once knew an old lady who claimed that an icebox produced a better quality of cold than a refrigerator.

This is why every honest writer is today confronted by the problem of the book. What are the grounds of our satisfaction with this object by means of which so many events have occurred? In what ways, if any, is it really superior to the other methods of preserving speech? How can we make the most of its advantages?

Now, when we examine this problem with sufficient detachment, the answer seems obvious, though it implies, of course, consequences that may upset our cruder censors. The sole, but significant, superiority not only of books but of all writing over the means of direct recording,
which is incomparably more accurate, is the simultaneous exposure to
our eyes of what our ears can grasp only sequentially. The develop-
ment of the book’s form from table to tablet, from scroll to superim-
posed signatures, has always been oriented toward a greater emphasis
of this feature.

1 A Line Which Forms a Volume

Listen to someone making a speech. Every word follows one other, pre-
cedes one other. As a result, they take their places along a line activ-
ated by a meaning, along an axis. The best way, in fact, to store such a
line, such a “thread,” with the least bulk, is to roll it up; and this is just
what we see in records, tape or film. The trouble is that when we want
to find a word, a detail, of that speech, to check something, we have to
unroll the whole line and thus become dependent upon its original
length. If the speech has lasted an hour and the information we need
occurs five minutes before the end, we must listen to the first fifty-five
minutes, enslaved by this sequence, unless . . .

Unless, in another dimension of space, for example according to the
diameter of the reel, we have been able to establish points of reference
which we can then consider simultaneously. The surface of a record
can thus be divided into concentric zones, or bands, which can corre-
spond to a catalogue. Henceforth our sight, our hearing, will possess a
certain freedom, a mobility with regard to the text. We can explore it
without having to endure it.

Writing’s first advantage, as we all know, is that it enables language to
last—verba volant, scripta manent—but the miracle is that it not
only enables us to reproduce what has been said, to “have” the speech
as a whole a second or a hundredth time, but also preserves each ele-
ment of this speech upon the advent of the next, leaving accessible to
our eyes what our ears would already have missed, permitting us to
grasp a whole sequence at a single glance.

If we were to arrange an entire speech in a single straight line, the
beginning would very soon become inaccessible to the eye moving on
its course. How might we contract the text so as to make the largest
possible section of it legible at one time? Boustrophedonic script (al-
ternating lines in opposite directions, as if the scribe were a plowman
turning his team of oxen at each edge of the field; but this method has
the disadvantage of making the series of characters reversed from one
line to the next almost unrecognizable); colling around cylinders (but
one section of the line necessarily conceals the rest, and the bulk is
usually considerable); and so forth—men have tried many solutions.
So far, the best solution seems to be to cut the line of text into lengths
which are then arranged one under the next, forming a column.

Ideally, of course, the line breaks would correspond to something in
the text, the text would be already articulated into measures. Each line
of writing, hence each continuous movement of the eye, would corre-
spond to a unit of meaning, of hearing; the time the eye takes to skip
from one line to the next would represent a pause in the speaking voice.
Such transcription would be totally satisfactory: we should be in the
presence of the “verse, or perfect line,” as Mallarmé calls it.

In the column of prose, the line is broken anywhere at all, according
to a module based on the number of characters and completely inde-
pendent of the text itself; in another edition one might choose another
“measure” and the break would occur elsewhere; it does not make the
slightest difference. We act as if the break did not exist. Since we have
not had time to study the measure or the arrangement, we disregard
them.

Just as one must divide the thread of speech into lines which, when
this division is justified by something more than editorial accident, are
called verse, so one is soon obliged to divide the column into lengths
which, when this division is justified, are called strophes or paragraphs.

Strophe, perfect page, as “verse, or perfect line.”

On the classical scroll, the column lengths were arranged beside each
other along an axis parallel to the one the words followed, which
quite soon ran into the same difficulties as the earliest scrolls. The book
in its present form represents a considerable advance by deliberately
utilizing a third axis in depth, perpendicular to the other two. The
lengths are piled on top of each other, just as the lines were.

Geometry’s use of the word “volume,” quite remote from its etymo-
logical source, volumen, shows how explicitly the three dimensions ap-
ppeared in the book when it assumed its present form.

Just as the eye can grasp the whole line at a single glance, can very
rapidly run down the page to see whether a certain word appears there,
so, with the help of an agile hand, it can leaf through the volume, mak-

The Book as Object
the advantage of allowing the reader a great freedom of movement in relation to the "unrolling" of the text, a great mobility which most nearly approximates a simultaneous presentation of all parts of a work.

II The Book as Commercial Object

How, then, does it happen that these very obvious and outstanding characteristics of the book-as-object are generally forgotten or denied; that the literary columnist so often blames the writer for making him look back (whereas the immense advantage of the book in its present form over the ancient *volumen*, and especially over the means of direct recording, is that it makes such looking back as easy as possible)? The reason is that the history of the printed book has developed in a consumer economy, and that in order to be able to finance the production of these objects, it has been necessary to regard them as if they played the same role in the process of consumption as foodstuffs: that is, as if to use them was to destroy them.

When the book was a single copy, whose production required a considerable number of work hours, the book naturally seemed to be a "monument" (*exergi monumentum aere perennius*), something ever more durable than a structure of bronze. What did it matter if a first reading was long and difficult; it was understood that one owned a book for life.

But the moment that quantities of identical copies were put on the market, there was a tendency to act as if reading a book "consumed" it, consequently obliging the purchaser to buy another for the next "meal" or spare moment, the next train ride.

Obviously I cannot return to a chicken drumstick I have already eaten. Suppose the same were true of books, that it was impossible to reread a chapter, that one got through it once and for all; whence this ban on looking back. Once the last page was finished, the book would no longer be any good; the remaining paper and ink, garbage. All this to provoke the purchase of another book presumably dispatched with the same speed.

This is the pitfall that threatens today's publisher, a danger so imminent that in recent years one well-known house was terrorized by the following edict: Any work not sold out in the course of a year will be pulped—the policy of a notions manufacturer anxious not to be stuck with outmoded items. The brightest and bravest editors vainly tried to convince their boss that there was something foolish about applying this rule to books; that such severity toward his own wares was doubly-

The Book as Object

less justified for most of the trivial novels he was counting on to win one or another of the season's prizes, but that serious nonfiction, for example—especially in translation—needed a certain time to reach its public slowly but surely. The publisher refused to listen, declaring that such were the rules of modern industry. It is easy to see how far we are from *scripta mentem*.

Indeed, it must be admitted that a huge part of today's book trade hinges on objects of ultrarapid consumption: the daily newspapers which are out of date as soon as the next edition appears. The habit of writing for these pages almost inevitably leads to encouraging books which need not be reread, which can be absorbed at a glance, which are read quickly, judged quickly, and forgotten quickly. But it is obvious that in this case the book as such is doomed to extinction by illustrated magazines, and even more by broadcast and televised magazines. The publisher who cannot see his profession as anything but a branch of journalism is sawing off the branch on which he is sitting. If there is really no need to reread this story, if there is absolutely no point in turning back, why not listen to it by means of a transistor, a tape recorder or a phonograph, nicely recited by a popular actor who will restore the proper intonation to all the words?

It is of course the development of this competition which obliges us to reconsider the book in all its aspects. Indeed it is this competition which will rid us of all the misconceptions which still encumber the book, which will restore its dignity as a monument, and which will once again emphasize all the aspects obscured by the frantic pursuit of an ever-faster consumption.

Newspapers, radio, television and movies will force books to become increasingly "fine," increasingly dense. We will shift from an object of consumption in the most trivial sense of the term to an object of study and contemplation, which nourishes without being consumed, which transforms the way we know and inhabit the universe.

Nothing is more remarkable in this respect than the present development of inexpensive or paperback editions: the proportion of classics and serious nonfiction is continually increasing, in France as in every other country. This means that a sort of vast public library is gradually being created, one available to an incomparably greater number of people than the old institutions. If, before the war, anyone had said that twenty-five years later the *Discourse on Method* and Augustine's *Confessions* would be on sale in every railroad station, he would have been called an idle dreamer.

We are rediscovering the book as total object. Not long ago, the