

## The Persistence of Writing

An intellectual apocalypse may be looming: Caleb Crain informs us that the “Twilight of the Books” is upon us, whereas Steve Jobs tells us that the concept of Amazon’s Kindle is “flawed at the top because people don’t read anymore.”<sup>1</sup> At the Conference on College Composition and Communication in March 2009, workshops focused on how to assess multimodal assignments, rather than the traditional essay. And the Modern Language Association annual convention in December 2008 opened with a panel on multimedia. Is reading dead? Is the teaching of writing becoming a more difficult exercise because of these mounting cultural pressures against reading and writing? It appears that we might as well “stop the sea” (as Leopold Bloom muses in *Ulysses*) as take up arms against the onslaught of multimedia.

But instead of relying on the predictive power of the Magic 8-Ball to respond “Outlook not so good” for writing, perhaps we should choose “Ask again later” as a better response. Nancy Bunge has noted: “Students realize that if they do not grapple with difficult, abstract texts, they will miss an important dimension of human learning and thinking.”<sup>2</sup> Does this comment represent the last gasp of a moribund print culture? Is it the desperate hope of one whose livelihood may be going the way of the farrier? Nay, let me borrow from Mark Twain: the reports of the death of writing are greatly exaggerated.

Let me also be clear: I am not against teaching with multimedia, and on many occasions I require my students to create a number of such artifacts. But let us not

discard print completely in favor of audio, visual, and/or audiovisual creations. As Jonathan Swift suggested centuries ago in his novel *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), a concrete language is not enough. At the Academy of Lagado, Gulliver observes scholars carrying bags of objects to avoid the ambiguity of words, yet for abstract thought and expression, humans need the suppleness of meaning that only words afford. And we need certain conditions to appreciate or create such subtleties. As Crain suggests, some learning requires solitary reading. He quotes Marcel Proust that to read is “to receive a communication with another way of thinking, all the while remaining alone, that is, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power that one has in solitude and that conversation dissipates immediately.”<sup>3</sup> Writing, I would argue, further enhances learning, since written communication demands a set of conditions and intellectual skills different from those needed for speech or multimedia texts.

Even if multimedia expression will eventually dominate our intellectual discourse—as it, arguably, has now come to dominate our popular communication—the written word and its systems will continue to have an influence on us. For although writing arose millennia ago, and movable type has been around since at least the fifteenth century, and inexpensive books have been common for most of the last 150 years, we still rely on rhetorical elements that have roots in the Classical world. Even if we reduce the longevity—in something analogous to Moore’s law—writing will not vanish for decades. It will have direct and ancillary benefits, albeit in a multimodal universe.

Why does reading still matter? In the twenty-first century, the contemplative and distinctly unimodal Proust has assumed a leading role in defenses of reading and in laments about its possible demise. Both Crain and Bunge cite his introduction to a 1906 translation of John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*; they were led to it, in all likelihood, by Maryanne Wolf’s *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*.<sup>4</sup> They extract pithy remarks from Proust’s remembrance of books read, later published as *On Reading*, such as: “I believe that reading, in its original essence, . . . [is] that fertile miracle of a communication effected in solitude.”<sup>5</sup> Reading allows both contemplation and discourse, offering isolation and community. More important, reading and writing have altered us and continue so to do. Walter Ong maintains: “Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does. . . . More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> Or, like Jack Goody, one may regard writing to be “a technology of the intellect.”<sup>7</sup> The human race would be in a very different state of development without the invention and techniques of the written word. And a very precise tool writing can be. Ong argues: “Written words sharpen analysis, for the individual words are called on to do more. To make yourself clear without gesture, without facial expression, without intonation, without a real hearer, you have to foresee circumspectly all possible meanings a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation, and you have to make your language work so as to come clear all by itself.”<sup>8</sup> Are we ready to abandon entirely this extraordi-

nary tool that encourages such attempts at accuracy?

Certainly, reading can be the conversation across time envisioned by many, including René Descartes, John Ruskin, and Kenneth Burke, but John Sturrock, in his preface to *On Reading*, points out that Proust is a particular type of reader: a writer—in many ways, the type of writer we want students to become, for “reading should be an ‘incitement,’ a unique means of prompting the reader to, in the strongest sense of the phrase, ‘think for himself.’ The Proustian reader is made



more, not less alert to the activity of his own mind by reading.”<sup>9</sup> Ideally, we hope students will join these conversations and engage in the critical thinking that both reading and writing nurture. Neither reading nor writing should be practiced only by the elite—with the former becoming “an increasingly arcane hobby” as some sociologists predict, according to Crain<sup>10</sup>—unless we wish to cede our responsibilities in a democratic society. Furthermore, having students write substantive prose requires them to live with the writing of others for a while (granted, often not as long as we might fervently hope). Thus, writing should continue to be taught in colleges and universities for both intellectual and political reasons.

But what if this battle is lost, and no one is asked to read and write anymore? Should we then padlock all the English departments in all the colleges and universities in all the world? Perhaps, but don’t put the rhetoricians behind bars, for they have much to offer the multimodal students, since the five canons or precepts of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory—still apply. Just as writers (and writing teach-

ers) have adapted these principles from oral to written expression, so might we consider how they function in a multimodal world. Invention, arrangement, and style easily make the transition to multimedia. Discovering what to say, how to put the pieces together, and how to present them transfers easily to multimedia work. With delivery, the means to persuade moves from tone of voice to choosing audio or audiovisual presentation and effects. How one may best convince an audience expands dramatically as our capabilities to make audible and

visible arguments are enhanced by technology. Memory, on the other hand, may no longer have the importance it once did, since extended oration more often than not necessitates a teleprompter. Certainly memory preoccupies us in terms of kilobytes on a computer disk drive. Perhaps, more significantly, memory may be regarded in terms of what it evokes. In our post-modern, mashup, remix culture, few produced texts—in any form—avoid becoming a bricolage of memories and meanings. Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, the polyphonous text, can exist on many levels in an audio essay or in a multimedia narrative. Adding a song, using a particular tone of voice, or applying a special effect may all communicate a message simultaneously.

Of course, even without resurrecting the spirits of Aristotle and Cicero, writing has a place in teaching forms of new media. Few of us can make a compelling point in an audio essay or create a voice-over for a short film without first generating a script. Having students create both written and multimedia texts allows them to contrast the effects of their words in a variety of situations. They begin to under-

stand register, diction, and transitions in a new way when they deploy these techniques in different types of media. Multimodal expression should encourage the use of a variety of abilities.

Rather than banishing writing or lamenting the development of multimedia, as Socrates famously deplored the introduction of writing, let us teach both writing and multimedia. Each has distinct purposes and effects that students will discover as they explore their expressive and analytic potential. In her conclusion to *Proust and the Squid*, Wolf argues for such a “both/and” approach: “The analytical, inferential, perspective-taking, reading brain with all its capacity for human consciousness, and the nimble, multifunctional, multimodal, information-integrative capacities of a digital mind-set do not need to inhabit exclusive realms. Many of our children learn to code-switch between two or more oral languages, and we can teach them also to switch between different presentations of written language and different modes of analysis.”<sup>11</sup> Let us *lead*—an etymological root of *educate*—students to such richness of expression.

#### Notes

1. Caleb Crain, “Twilight of the Books: What Will Life Be Like If People Stop Reading?” *New Yorker*, December 24, 2007, <[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2007/12/24/071224crat\\_atlarge\\_crain](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2007/12/24/071224crat_atlarge_crain)>; Jobs quoted in John Markoff, “The Passion of Steve Jobs,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2008, <<http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/15/the-passion-of-steve-jobs/>>.
2. Nancy Bunge, “Assign Books, and Students Will Read,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 17, 2008, p. 24.
3. Crain, “Twilight of the Books.”
4. Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
5. Marcel Proust, *On Reading*, preface and translation by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 27.
6. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 78.
7. Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), p. 133.
8. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 104.
9. Sturrock, preface to Proust, *On Reading*, p. vii.
10. Crain, “Twilight of the Books.”
11. Wolf, *Proust and the Squid*, pp. 228–29.

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