

Birkerts and the Decline of Reading

by Theodore Plantinga

I: It's Not TV

College professors of my vintage (baby boomers) are often thought to be liberals -- people who wish the 1960s had never ended. While there are certainly many liberals among us, I would submit that a great many of us are strikingly conservative when it comes to cultural and educational matters. Take the business of television. A couple of decades back we had Marshall McLuhan among us, seemingly trying to articulate something very profound about television and the new electronic media. The trouble was, we couldn't quite figure out what he meant to say. But at the very least he was telling us not to stick our head in the sand when it came to television. The box was having a profound impact on our culture. We needed to study it and think carefully about it.

Now then, we are not masters of the universe, but we can claim to be responsible for our own households and children. Various of my professorial acquaintances have responded to the television phenomenon by banning the box from their home. They have pursued an honest and honorable solution to the problem, and it will probably bear fruit in their family life. But their response does not help us with McLuhan's set of questions.

McLuhan himself died back in 1980. Since then the personal computer (PC) has entered our homes. It is now thought by some to be capable of as big an impact on society in general, and also on our homes, as the television set.

Is it a *new* problem? Many commentators seem to find it convenient to lump the PC together with the television set and to speak of "the new electronic media." One reason they favor the use of this umbrella term is that both technologies involve a monitor or viewing device; indeed, a computer monitor can be used to view television or VCR signals. Moreover, pundits now tell us that the television set and the computer are in the process of merging, so that in the year 2000 they will in effect be one. Much of our current equipment will then be obsolete.

In this discussion I propose to distinguish the two. One solid reason, which I will only mention here, is the orientation of television to sounds and images, and the orientation of PCs to text (numbers and letters, each of which has a definition in binary arithmetic). The bias against the written word with which television often gets charged is not to be found in the world of PCs. Spelling matters a great deal.

There are predictions to the effect that our current primary interface with the computer, which takes place via a so-called QWERTY keyboard first developed for the typewriter, will change dramatically in years to come. I am somewhat skeptical of these claims, but I will not dispute them here. I propose instead to discuss the computer as it is now among us -- the one with the keyboard and the wonderful programs for word processing.

II: Just a Tool?

Some thinkers who fear a Luddite stampede away from potentially useful new technologies are quick to assure us that we need not fear the computer. "It's just a tool," they tell us. That it is a tool I do not doubt. But what is meant by the little word "just"?

My own conviction is that the "just a tool" thesis does not serve us well. It cuts off discussion. The computer is indeed, in some sense, a tool. The question we need to ask is whether it changes us. Is there any reason to be alarmed and to ban the PC from our home?

Previous technologies bearing a direct relation to language have also engendered lively debate. Take the example of writing. Is there anything threatening about a sheet of blank paper and a ballpoint pen? Presumably not. Yet there are good arguments that can be made to the effect that writing has brought about a major change in human consciousness. This was already realized in the time of Plato.

On this set of issues, I follow the lead of Walter Ong [Note 1], who, as it happens, was Marshall McLuhan's teacher. Yet I believe that writing is a good thing on the whole, and I am convinced that it has changed us. I also believe that the computer is a good thing, and I suspect it, too, has substantial potential to change us -- indeed, I would hardly know what it means to use a computer in such a way that you are sure it is *not* changing you. To abstain from the computer altogether is something I can understand, but to use it while remaining in principle unaffected by it -- or *claiming* to remain unaffected -- is beyond my comprehension.

A comparison from the human domain may help us. A fleeting contact with another human being does not change me substantially. But a deep or profound relationship, e.g. between a man and a woman, between a father and a son, or between two friends, does have that potential. Indeed, we ought to *celebrate* such potential for change. To embrace the computer and use it for hours each day is to open oneself to being changed by it, just as, in Gadamerian terms, to encounter a significant text and steep oneself in it is a process that invites change.

III: The Birkerts Thesis

One recent statement of the claim that computers have the potential to harm us issues from the writings of Sven Birkerts, who is a literary critic. In *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston and London: Faber & Faber, 1994), which is a collection of related essays, he warns: "Everything about modern (or is it postmodern?) life carries us away from the state that is propitious for deep reading." [p. 148] "Deep reading" is something we need, and it contributes to something precious, namely, what Birkerts calls "subjective self-awareness" (p. 220).

Although Birkerts does not spell out the philosophical side of his argument in any detail, he seems to presuppose that a depth-level presence of persons to one another is very important for "subjective self-awareness." He laments: "We are experiencing the gradual but steady erosion of human presence, both of the authority of the individual and, in ways impossible to prove, of the species itself." What he sees on the rise is what he calls "electronic tribalism." The upshot: "My core fear is that we are, as a culture, becoming shallower; that we have turned from depth -- from the Judeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery -- and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness. That we are giving up on wisdom, the struggle for which has for millennia been central to the very idea of culture, and that we are pledging instead to a faith in the web." [p. 228] The new technology is the enemy of "soul" (see pp. 211ff).

It should be realized that Birkerts holds to a high view of the existential significance of literature. "Serious reading" is for Birkerts "an agency of self-making" (p. 87). Birkerts says of reading that "... more than anything else, [it] created in me the awareness that life could be lived and known as a unified whole; that the patterns which make meanings are disclosed gradually. That awareness, I admit, gets harder to sustain with the passing of time -- life feels much less concentrated as one grows away from the urgencies of adolescence -- but I would not dream of surrendering it. Without that faith, that sense of

imminent resolution, the events of the day-to-day would be like some vast assortment of colored beads without a string to hold them together." [p. 94] Birkerts would be hard pressed to do without his faith in a string that holds the colored beads together: "What reading does, ultimately, is keep alive the dangerous and exhilarating idea that a life is not a sequence of lived moments, but a destiny. That, God or no God, life has a unitary pattern inscribed within it, a pattern that we could discern for ourselves if we could somehow lay the whole of our experience out like a map. And while it may be true that a reader cannot see the full map better than anyone else, he is more likely to live under the supposition that such an informing pattern does exist. He is, by inclination and formation, an explorer of causes and effects and connections through time." [p. 85]

IV: Initial Response

It would be easy to take issue with Birkerts on the basis of credentials. He confesses to a "Luddite disposition" (p. 144) and tells us that he wrote his book using a typewriter (p. 28). He admits that he does not own a computer (p. 214), although he makes it clear that he has tried one out: he speaks of sitting at his friend's computer terminal (pp. 162, 164).

He would, of course, be more credible if he were a heavy user who had seen the error of his ways, so to speak. But I don't believe he should be ruled out of the discussion because he is a comparatively light user. His concerns about selfhood and self-awareness are appropriate. And we may take it for granted that in this case, as in virtually all cases of good scholarship, the author in question has drawn not just on his own experience but also on what others have written. In short, I choose to take Birkerts seriously when he sounds a warning.

It happens that he also shares the widespread concern about television, although he does not run television and the computer together. In an essay entitled "Television: The Medium in the Mass Age," which he published in an earlier collection of essays [Note 2], he makes some telling and interesting points that reveal that he is indeed a thoughtful critic. Television diminishes us: "It is the will that we call upon in order to persevere in an action, to endure difficulty without relinquishing our intention. Any movement against the natural grain of a situation requires some amount of will. But what are the effects upon the will of prolonged passivity, of putting the self repeatedly into a state of suspended animation, of replacing obstacles by a path of least resistance? Is the faculty of will analogous to a muscle -- does it atrophy from lack of use? If it is, then the whole issue of television is tremendously important." [Note 3] Through television we are undergoing moral corrosion.

V: Paper Versus Monitor

Part of the concern Birkerts has expressed is that in the age of the computer we do less actual reading -- less processing of words and letters -- than we did in the days before the PC took up residence in our homes and offices. And because we read less, we are less oriented to the kinds of stories that can provide a framework for the thinking and existential hard work involved in building and maintaining selfhood. Now, one might be inclined to answer that some of us, at least, still read a lot, although a good deal of our reading time is now spent sitting before the computer screen. Between the internet and CD-Roms, an enormous amount of good reading (by anyone's standard) is now able to be done on computer screens.

Birkerts knows this, of course, but the availability of on-screen reading material does not alleviate his concern. Reading on a computer screen is somehow not as wholesome as reading from paper. Birkerts tells us: "Screen and book may exhibit the same string of words, but the assumptions that underlie their significance are entirely different, depending on whether we are staring at a book or a circuit-generated text. As the nature of looking -- at the natural world, at paintings -- changed with the arrival of photography and mechanical reproduction, so will the collective relation to language alter as new modes of dissemination prevail." Birkerts finds the changes on the horizon ominous: "... I have a great feeling of loss and a fear about what habitations will exist for self and soul in the future." [p. 128]

What, more specifically, will go wrong as we move further into this new age of electronic reading? Birkerts speaks of "language erosion" (p. 128) and the "flattening of historical perspectives" (p. 129). But an even deeper issue, in terms of his main thesis, is what he calls "the waning of the private self." He explains: "... one of the many incremental transformations of our age has been the slow but steady destruction of subjective space. The physical and psychological distance between individuals has been shrinking for at least a century." [pp. 130-1] He warns: "We may even now be in the first stages of a process of social collectivization that will over time all but vanquish the ideal of the isolated individual." [p. 130] How can the notion of individual moral responsibility, which is fundamental to a free society, survive such developments?

VI: My Own Experience

A friend of mine told me recently that he knows no one who likes reading on a computer screen or who would choose the screen version of a document over a

hard copy on paper. I immediately informed him that he was looking at an exception to his rule. I *do* like reading on screen. But I *shouldn't* -- at least, that's the impression I get from people who set themselves up as commentators. James Fallows, writing in the April 1996 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, declares: "Reading from even the nicest computer screen is so unpleasant -- and the expectation is so strong that the computer will always be doing something more active than just displaying text -- that computers will remain better suited to jumping from topic to topic than to the sustained intellectual, artistic, or emotional experience that print can provide. People can read books by the hour; it is hard to imagine anyone's spending even ten minutes straight reading a single document on a computer screen."

Well, people do spend ten minutes and more reading text on computer screens. Why do they do it? What are the advantages of using a computer to read? I probably do not know all of them. Without meaning to sweep aside the concerns Birkerts has raised, I will now offer a few observations drawn from my own experience.

An obvious benefit of reading on a computer screen is the ability to adjust print size. I have reached the point in life where print size is a factor in the enthusiasm I can muster for reading a particular article or book. When I read on screen, I can make the print the right size for me, assign foreground and background colors to my liking, and so forth. Many printed materials have too many characters per line; when I read on screen, I never complain about too little space between lines, or a typeface (font) that is hard to decipher.

Some time ago someone sent me a lengthy philosophy paper in printed form and invited me to read it, send him comments, and so forth. I got bogged down in the paper a couple of times and then set it aside, meaning to get back to it. Months later I laid hands on it again and felt guilty. The author had included an e-mail address and seemed to be a computer user. I sent him a note complaining about his small print in certain sections, the excessive number of characters making up a single line, and so forth. I suggested that he send me an electronic copy of his paper which I could then read on screen, after formatting it to my own liking. I heard nothing from him. Another example: I sometimes find myself downloading internet copies of periodical articles for reading even though I have a copy of the periodical issue somewhere in the house. Stuff that is downloaded gets read or skimmed fairly quickly; I find it enticing. But a great deal of print material in paper form piles up unread in my study. I find that on an unconscious level, I do prefer to read stuff on screen.

In assessing this claim, one must distinguish between books and periodicals. A well designed and properly printed book is still preferable to the same material displayed by the computer. It also has the advantage that one can easily take it out to the back yard or to the beach. Periodicals, on the other hand, generally include advertisements and extraneous materials. One does much paging from here to there to get the stuff read. Computer copies are easier to manage.

And then there is the issue of searching the text to find a particular passage or phrase or name. To use the search feature in the word processor is second nature for me by now -- to the point that I sometimes feel within myself the impulse to invoke search when I am reading paper materials.

The impulse to use search is related to skimming and the use of speed reading techniques. Much reading done by academic folks is actually a quick check to see whether the material in question contains anything of relevance and/or interest -- not every thought expressed by the author is re-thought by the reader. Such work can be done more efficiently by an on-screen reader using the search feature.

The purpose of much academic reading is of course to make and take notes. In the case of computer reading it is very convenient to move selected bits of what is being read to the appropriate file that relates to some teaching area or projected future publication. Scanners can spring into the breach here, enabling us to transfer what we read on paper to this or that computer file, but my own experience with scanners thus far has not been encouraging.

It has occurred to me that my enthusiasm for reading on screen has something to do with the element of novelty. Although I have been a fairly heavy computer user for almost ten years, I am still not beyond the wonder of it all -- the power and speed of the technology available to the plain folk like myself. And so I sometimes speculate that I may feel and think differently about this matter when another ten years have passed. I cannot be sure that I will not. (Remember all those times when someone said to you, "I used to think that as well, but in time you will come to realize"?) I suspect that my enjoyment and appreciation will grow as new technologies prove even more serviceable than the technology I now use. But there is no way to *prove* that this will indeed be the case.

Some readers may suspect that I am wealthy and possess equipment far beyond the reach of the average computer user. Not so. The only exceptional feature of the system on which I do my computer reading is an oversized VGA monitor, which is able to make the type easily readable from a viewing distance of three

or four feet away. Before I got the oversized monitor, I was having trouble getting just the right physical relation to my monitor -- one that did not have me tilting my head back at an uncomfortable angle so that I could look at the screen through the lower panel in my bifocals. Once I got the oversized monitor and was able to seat myself farther from it, reading on screen seemed effortless, and I was able to look through the top panel of the bifocals, while glancing at my keyboard through the bottom panel.

Another feature of my setup is the magnification capability in my word processor, which is Word for Windows, version 6. When I first began to work with a Windows word processor, I enjoyed changing the appearance of what I was reading by assigning larger font sizes to the main body of the text. In Word 6, one can leave the font size alone and simply adjust the on-screen appearance by using the magnification feature (Alt, View, Zoom). I assign some favorite settings to macros which are then launched easily via Control keys. The result is that the changes I make in the appearance of what I am reading come about instantly without my having to make and unmake changes in the file as such.

Now, I am not so enthusiastic about these possibilities as to be a great promoter of on-line reading. It happens that my internet provider limits me to a DOS environment -- text only, no graphics. (I use Lynx as my net browser.) I generally do not read very much in this environment; instead I download or use Capture Text (a feature in Quicklink software that takes a copy of everything that appears on the screen and places it in an ASCII file which can be called up later, when one is no longer on-line). Thus any careful reading on my part is done within my Word 6 environment, in which I have lots of macros available to give the text the appearance I want it to have when I am reading.

VII: The Fixity Issue

In presenting myself as an enthusiast for *on-screen* reading (which is to be distinguished from *on-line* reading), I do not intend to dismiss all of Birkerts' concerns as unfounded. Indeed, there is one issue, in particular, that troubles me. Before I mention it, I will quickly state my agreement with the thesis that much of the culture of video games that now is linked to high-speed computers has the effect of discouraging reading and the type of deeper reflection that Birkerts sees as essential to our moral health. And the predicted merger of television with computer technology does not appear to be an improvement in terms of such concerns. Thus there are certainly some things to worry about. But my focus in this essay is reading.

Birkerts knows what the fixity issue is about, and I suspect that it motivates him to a greater extent than he has let on. He writes: "Words read from a screen or written onto a screen -- words which appear and disappear, even if they can be retrieved and fixed into place with a keystroke -- have a different status and affect us differently from words held immobile on the accessible space of a page." [p. 154]

A small reference to deconstruction may be in order here. When we hear that there are no authors, that the reader is now sovereign and does with the text as he pleases, and so forth, on-screen reading should be borne in mind. I have just admitted that I manipulate on-screen texts routinely in terms of their formatting. And the more I do it, the more I also feel the impulse to do it when I am reading texts printed on paper. The main thing I change, of course, is appearance. But when I download an article from a magazine and find a typo, or a period where a comma was intended, I fix it. Some people do the same thing in printed paper texts; I do not, except on rare occasions. On screen it seems the right thing to do. But even as I perform such deeds, I recognize that there is something a bit subversive about tinkering and fixing.

Now, were the text before me the holy, inspired Word of God, I would not feel quite so free to "fix" it. However, when I read the Word of God, it is in a translation made by fallible human beings like myself who are likely to leave the occasional typo behind. And even if I look at the Greek or Hebrew "original," I am cognizant that Bible experts will admit to small variations here and there between the earliest manuscripts, which are the result of "copying errors." Thus, although I do not tinker with the text of the Bible and fix it up, some people do.

The impulse to tinker and fix is an old one; computers simply make it much easier for us. The upshot, I suspect, is that on-screen reading will invariably lead us to lose some of the respect we have traditionally shown to texts that are well-written, neatly typeset, and labeled as authoritative by people whom we respect.

A degree of hermeneutical laziness is likely to creep in among us. Why did the poet use word such-and-such in line seven? It's probably a misprint. Let's just change it to the word that we thought he should have used when we went through the poem for the first time. When professors adopt such an attitude while marking student papers that were not properly proofread, they are giving the student the benefit of the doubt. When the same attitude is applied to the reading of great literature, the reader is likely to lose out.

VIII: Bible Study

For people in my cultural community, there is no text that commands greater respect than the Bible, no text that more strongly resists our efforts to tamper with it. Therefore respect for the Bible might be expected to function as a bulwark against any postmodernist notion of putting the reader in charge of meaning and the text. But it doesn't work out quite that way. Why not? Because there is one more factor to be considered in the discussion of electronic reading, namely, hypertext.

People who revere the Bible have not, by and large, shied away from computers and the technology that surrounds them. While there are *some* Bible-believing groups that steer clear of the latest technologies, it has been my experience that a great many theologically conservative Christians embrace the computer with enthusiasm. They have no objection to a CD-Rom encyclopedia that makes good use of hypertext links. And most of them see no reason why the same technology ought not to be used to follow up those cross-references which already appeared in the margins of their study Bibles long before anyone knew what a computer was.

In other words, the notion (more strongly promoted in some Christian circles than in others) that one Bible text points to another, and then in turn to yet another, and so forth, helps lead people to take a favorable attitude toward on-screen reading. If one is reading a text, e.g. a novel, in which there are no footnotes or cross-references that could be followed up, there is a great deal to be said for using an attractively printed paper copy for maximum reading enjoyment. But if one is working with a text to be studied and reread, with lots of references to other passages and perhaps to other works, there is great benefit in allowing one's computer, and perhaps the internet as well, to function as one's electronic book-opener and page-turner. Thereby one might well become accustomed to reading on screen.

There is an important theological issue here, one that is related to Birkerts' concern about selfhood. Some types of Christian thought, including the brand of Calvinism in which I was raised, discourage jumping around in the Bible. One is to read the Bible historically -- or redemptive-historically, as we often say. Its main characters are not to be understood as moral or spiritual examples or ideal types, exemplifying some virtue or other, but as actual historical figures working out their eternal destiny in relation to their covenant God. Likewise, we believers on earth today must think of ourselves as living with God through time, and making historical choices that have an eternal significance. Time is real and unidirectional. We do not live in an a-temporal

mist in which we might be tempted to conclude that the things of everyday experience are "maya" or illusion. Such Calvinism has deep sympathy for the quest for selfhood, and it promotes the old-fashioned emphasis on reading with which Birkerts is at home.

In short, the Christian embrace of the hypertext Bible or electronic Bible is by no means an accomplished fact, even though the line of thought in the previous paragraph does not yet get articulated in Christian classrooms and publications with any regularity. The Christian community needs to discuss these matters calmly and look below the surface at the deeper ramifications. Therefore I hope my own community will give a hearing to Birkerts and other thinkers of his ilk who issue a warning about on-screen reading.

I am well aware that this essay does not sound a single note throughout, and that it has an unfinished feel to it. My thinking on this matter is indeed unfinished. I need to live longer with the computer and do much more reading and studying on-screen and on-line. But I felt I could not wait any longer with thinking aloud. I hope that others will join in this discussion, and that some of them will let me know what they have experienced, and what conclusions they have reached.

NOTES

[NOTE 1]

Ong writes about these matters in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London and New York: Methuen, 1982). See also *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981; first published in 1967) and *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[NOTE 2]

Published in *An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1990; first published in 1987), pp. 369-381.

[NOTE 3]

An Artificial Wilderness, p. 379.