“Novel Obligations: The Future of Fiction in the Digital Age”

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In projecting a scenario for the future of fiction in the digital age, it is worth revisiting remarks made by John Fowles in a 1964 essay "I Write Therefore I Am," reprinted in his 1998 collection of essays, *Wormholes.* The comments concern the fate of the novel in the age of *cinema*. About the current (1964) milieu for writers and readers of novels, Fowles makes the following observations:

"All the purely visual and aural sequences in the modern novel are a bore, both to read and to write. People's physical appearance, their movements, their sounds, places, moods of places—the camera and the microphone enregister these twenty times better than the typewriter. If the novel is to survive it must one day narrow its field to what other systems of recording can't record. I say "one day" because the reading public still isn't very aware of what I call mischanneling--that is, using the wrong art form to express or convey what you mean. In other words, to write a novel in 1964 is to be neurotically aware of trespassing, especially on the domain of the cinema. Of course, very few of us ever get the chance to express ourselves on film. (Having one's book filmed is equivalent to having a luxury illustrated edition; it is not expressing oneself on film.) So over the novel today hangs a *faute de mieux*. All of us under forty write cinematically; our imaginations, constantly fed on films, "shoot" scenes, and we write descriptions of what has been shot. So for us a lot of novel writing is, or seems like, the tedious translating of an unmade and never-to-be-made film into words."

Fowles' insights, nearly a half-century later, are not only no less salient, they acquire a rather sinister significance in the context of heavily increasing digitalization across a broad range of media, including, of course, the novel. What further degradation might await the novel as it becomes increasingly available in digital form? While this issue has been fretted over by authors and publishers alike (both groups largely preoccupied with the question of how sales might be affected of the physical product), it remains to be sufficiently explored in terms of the continuing "*faute de mieux*" relationship between novel and film. Will increasing digitalization further ensconce the novel's inferior status—or will it provide new ways for the novel to find its "proper channel" of artistic expression? The answer to this question will have a profound effect on both the *way* people read novels and the *kinds* of novels that will be popular in the

near and distant future. This paper, in addressing the transformation the novel undergoes (and *might* undergo, in the future) from print to digital form, sets forth a number of caveats for readers of the fiction novel—along with a number of responsibilities for writers to sustain and challenge the collective imagination—in the framework of Fowles' still-relevant remarks.

Put briefly, the caveats concern the continued exercise of the reader's imaginative faculty and the commensurate effects on readers of digital fiction who will likely face an increasing bombardment of visual stimuli—a virtual plethora. If writers continue in greater and greater numbers to make the switch to publishing digitally instead of using the conventional print form, then fiction as we know it—both the writing and the reading of it—will have access to an infinite array of technologies with which to transform itself as an art form far beyond anything our current vision might conjure up.[1] The printed word, in being replaced, supplanted, or (*pace* the reactionary doomsayers) merely *complemented* by the digital word, becomes something "we know not what," an asymptotically evolving phenomenon whose ontological stability is at best a mirage, a temporary fixture in a world of exponentially increasing possibilities of authoring, co-authoring and mixing media, among others, not to mention—though we must—reader

[1] David Thorburn's warning in "Web of Paradox" is relevant here: "[D]angerously, the dominant metaphors deployed to describe our experience of all things digital constrain our understanding, limit and channel our inventions and even our speculations" (19). Just as an early twentieth-century vocabulary would fail miserably at capturing the essence of early twenty-first century life, so too must our current metaphors fall well short of capturing the possibilities for lived experience awaiting those who inherit our planet and our culture a hundred years from now—or even twenty. Nevertheless, we continue to speculate with our frail and uncertain equipment, "nervously loquacious on the edge of an abyss," as Kenneth Burke puts it in an early essay. Whitehead perhaps puts it better with his classic formulation: "mankind is driven forward by dim apprehensions of things too obscure for its existing language." This is, as Thorburn argues, a situation fraught with inadequacies and dangers both. We continue using an ineffectual vocabulary—or worse, a debilitating one—for lack of the proper terms which we perpetually seek *ex post facto* and finally—if ever—obtained long after the first felt intimations of the experience we were seeking to describe. Perhaps the best we can do in the digital age (and the best we have always been capable of doing) is to be ever mindful of Schopenhauer's humbling dictum: "Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world."

reception, which takes on an entirely new form altogether, hyper-inflating Stanley Fish's notions of interpretive communities whose constituents or members have instantaneous access to their rapidly evolving communal vocabularies via chat rooms, fan groups, etcetera. As William J. Mitchell rightly points out, the digital text, at every moment (potentially) subject to addition, revision, or modification through either the original author's initiative or as a result of a reader's on-line posting as a response to the text which (depending on the way the text is made available on-line) might either become a part of the original document or else an alternative addition, a footnote that is available for consultation at the whim of each reader (211-212). One can easily appreciate the extent to which the digital text loses its previous status as a single, determinate entity (as an edition of a printed novel is traditionally perceived to be).

The issues at this point are multiple and multifarious in significance: numerous studies such as Mitchell's have already elaborated on the possibilities for interaction and co-creation on the part of readers who no longer passively absorb information but actively search for it and contribute to it as they click on various links (where fixed and limited-volume footnotes once took their place in the printed version—of academic texts, mostly). But what is of concern here is the profoundly intensified effect of visual accompaniment created by a digital text scenario where every phrase, every sentence of a novel might conceivably be linked to an image or series of images. Why? The answer is buried in the increasing obsession with the visual image that has integrated itself into the forefront of global technological advance over the last half century or more. As Thorburn puts it, the internet age has ushered in an intensified period of "lurking voyeurism" (20). We are a culture obsessed with the visual image and nothing in the current state of

cultural affairs suggests a tempering or reversal of this seemingly unquenchable yearning. In France, the work of Jean Baudrillard over the last few decades has firmly ensconced our obsession with the image indelibly within our collective conscience. We are indeed "lurking voyeurs," watchers of all things, and our appetite for visual stimuli increases daily, it would seem.

Which brings us back to Fowles' 1964 remarks, since his concern at that time was that too many novelists were failing to resist the lure of the visual, succumbing to the overpowering temptation to do poorly in the medium of print what cinema does so much better. If cinema, with its plenitude of visual and aural possibilities, seemed to dwarf the attempts of the novel to represent similar phenomena solely through the printed word, then how much more does the digital novel—with its potential access to an infinite link of visual and aural stimuli—threaten to eclipse the printed novel forever as a culturally revered artistic item? This state of affairs for the novel's evolution has much more significance, however, than merely functioning as the vehicle through which an ineluctable artistic metamorphosis must go through its motions. Whether or not the digital novel will supplant the print novel is one thing; how it affects the collective cultural imagination is entirely another.

This last process is my concern here, since the kind of fiction writing that aims at visual and aural representation marks a sharp decline in quality—or a shift, shall we say (so as not to cause undue umbrage to those writers whose novelistic goals are to provide, primarily, a cinematic substitute). It might be worth noting that not all writers of Fowles' and subsequent generations have succumbed to the lure of the cinematic moment. Cormac McCarthy comes to mind as a writer whose convoluted prose eludes the easy

translation into visual and aural images, and might indeed be representative of what Fowles might consider to be “proper channeling.” Consider the following passage from McCarthy’s 1985 novel *Blood Meridian*, an episode where a band of renegade cowboys roam the wild west of America in the mid-nineteenth century:

“They wandered the borderland for weeks, seeking some sign of the Apache. Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered, leaving what had been and what would never be alike, extinguished on the ground behind them. Specter horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat, above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was, and each was all.”

Aside from the apt and vivid image of the cowboys “as “[s]pecter horsemen, pale with dust,” there is virtually nothing in this passage that aims for the cinematic moment Fowles is so worried about. Far from trying to convey a visual or aural image, McCarthy’s prose seems to be aimed at pushing the reader beyond the familiar confines of such easily transferable descriptions. There is a restraint at work, a refusal to take the easy road (or a pleasure, one might argue, in taking the more difficult route of using a terminology that stretches one’s capacity for understanding). McCarthy’s prose at this point (and others in this classic, much-celebrated novel) places a demand on the reader’s imaginative work: what does it mean to be “provoked out of the absolute rock”? The reader is pushed to ponder the meta-commentary at work here on man’s original relationship to the planet, a philosophical quest that simply won’t be solved with a simple arrangement of visual or aural clues.

The danger, as more and more writers move to a digital format for their work, is that this kind of novel becomes less common, and even threatens to disappear altogether

as the lure of visual images for both writers and readers has them spending most of their time connecting words with images through the click of a mouse. The novel as a genre will thus most surely face further mischanelling charges from critics such as Fowles. If in trying to imitate film by representing the visual and the aural it is neglecting its real duties, how much more temptation will arise with the click of the mouse providing immediate visual or aural representation of the same material?

Robertson Davies' *Cunning Man* might also serve as an example here. Davies is without doubt one of those authors who, to borrow another of Kenneth Burke's phrases, "revels in the sheer syllables of vituperation," even when his narrator is not upset. Davies, in other words, is a man who likes to listen to himself. His stories have that peculiar quality of self-conscious narration in which the author seems to pause every few moments to ponder, in awe, his painstakingly crafted labyrinthine prose. At one point, his narrator, Dr. Jonathan Hullah, is marveling over the marginalia of a friend's letter, miniature drawings which complement the letter's verbal content. Even though the narrative is doing here precisely what Fowles laments, the verbal descriptions are exquisite, and leave the reader in awe, his imagination juggling the multiple possibilities suggested by the particular diction used to describe each drawing. In a possible digital version of this text, a reader well might, with the click of a mouse, access these very drawings (provided either by the author, the author's illustrator, or a co-creating volunteer-reader permitted to contribute to the on-line content of the novel) and consequently forego entirely the various possibilities for imaginative construction the verbal description of these drawings would have had cause to precipitate.

Given the constraints of space and time in a paper of this length, these two examples must suffice to alert us to the potential for imaginative diminishment which awaits a wide-scale switch from print to digital novels. Perhaps it won't even happen. Perhaps the printed book will survive as a significant and highly-regarded artistic product with inherent, inimitable values. If the printed book does begin to disappear, however, I hope I have made it clear what we might lose along with it. Without wishing to be a Sven Birkerts, I think we might pause for a moment to consider what it is he feels is worth defending with such vehemence.[2] Andreas Huyssen, writing about the internet age in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, lamented the loss of cultural memory brought on by instant access to information through the internet. We don't need to remember anymore, Huyssen argues, because Google can do it for us. In another ten years, he might well be writing about the loss of the collective imagination in a culture so saturated with the visual image that there is hardly time anymore—or inclination—to probe the periphery of language itself which novels like *Blood Meridian* encourage us to do.

Meditating at some length on the novels of Ronald Firbank in a 2006 *Guardian* article, Alan Hollinghurst observed that "by making the novel a structure of bright fragments, Firbank had aestheticized it, and in the aesthetic realm the normative claims of morality are relaxed." What we risk today, in a completely different way and with a completely different purpose, is indeed making the novel "a series of bright fragments," a series of visual spectacles which foreclose the darker, introspective tendencies of fiction at its best, the nihilistic implosion of McCarthy or Lowry: think of *Under the Volcano*

[2] I side with Paul Erickson in seeing Birkerts as much too narrow in his view of internet content as being comparable, at best, to reading *Catcher in the Rye* (105), and I agree that more work needs to be done in terms of analyzing the reading experience of users of electronic media.

with its inebriating double-helix of schizophrenic interior monologue experienced by its protagonist, the Consul). Writers are often queasy about accepting moral imperatives, and critics often foolhardy in placing such imperatives upon them. Nevertheless, if our novelists do not continue using language to push our individual and collective imaginations towards the "dim apprehensions" Whitehead mystically identified a century ago, perhaps the day is not far off when each of us awakens to find the content of our lives not so different—not different at all, in fact—from the constrained—if vivid—perspective of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, whose sum total of perceptions are suddenly filtered though the "ineluctable modality of the visible." "All this," we might note to ourselves, "if nothing more, thought through my eyes."

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