

PUBLISHING TODAY

Sometime in the Age of Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney, English-speaking readers became ignorant. First, translation into English was practically stopped: today, less than 0.1% of everything published in English is a translation, and that includes Japanese computer manuals. Having once been the keen discoverers of Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Unamuno, Neruda, Dürrenmatt (in the first half of the twentieth century, for instance,) English-speaking readers locked themselves into something worse than an imperial mentality, since the Empire forced them at least to look outside England: into a state of stolid contentment.

Readers and writers in English today know practically nothing of what is taking place in the cultures of the rest of the world. Step into a bookstore in Bogotá or Rotterdam, Lyons or Bremen, and you can see what the writers from other countries are doing. Ask in Liverpool, Vancouver or Los Angeles who Antonio Lobo Antunes or Cees Nooteboom are (two of the greatest living authors, the first Portuguese, the second Dutch) and you will be met with a blank stare. But such a question would probably not be asked, because English-speaking readers have become prisoners of their own language, living off whatever the publishing industry chooses to feed them.

Even the literature written in English has become, by and large, watered down to canteen fare. Of course there are many exceptions, and great writers are writing superb literature all the while, but they work in an atmosphere of intellectual numbness. And, while it has always been true that a new author has difficulty in finding a publisher, now even authors with notable careers are having trouble finding a home for their

books. In the English-language publishing world of today there is no middle ground for literature: formulaic fiction and bland non-fiction occupy the shelf previously destined for literary works, which have moved either to small "experimental" publishers (as they used to be called) or to university presses. Doris Lessing's English publishers told her a few years ago, after her eightieth birthday, that she wrote "too much" and that they found it difficult to continue publishing her work; her American publishers first turned down her novel *The Cleft* on the advice of their marketing department and then reluctantly accepted to bring it out "as a kindness." Bloomsbury, the publishers who once dared publish Nadine Gordimer and Margaret Atwood (authors who've become now "safe" modern classics and therefore still published by them,) now bring out Jane Austen and Charles Dickens in editions for an illiterate audience with cute introductions by best-selling "chick-lit" novelists such as Meg Cabot, of *The Princess Diaries* fame. In her introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*, Ms Cabot writes: "OK, so I'll admit it: I saw the movie first... But, as I had discovered from reading Peter Benchley's book *Jaws*, sometimes there are scenes in the book that aren't in the movie... The movies always leave something out. Which is what makes *Pride and Prejudice* such a joy to read over and over. Because you can make up your own movie about it -- in your head." The Bloomsbury edition also includes spoof interviews with the dead author: "My first book to make it into print was *Sense and Sensibility*..." and so on. Random House's Vintage imprint now publishes its novels with a how-to guide at the back, visibly intended for book clubs. These guides are demeaning catechisms that tell the reader what to think. I've had a fair experience with book clubs, and its participants are usually not idiots who need artificial guides to literary conversation.

But readers can be browbeaten into believing that they're not clever enough to read on their own. Like most things in our culture today, the publishing industry tends to undermine our belief in our own capabilities. I am certain that the vast majority of people are capable of intelligent reading if they are not made to feel inferior through theoretical jargon and specious arguments of authority; they have the experience and curiosity that enable them to ask intelligent questions and suggest thought-provoking answers. And if not everything on the page is obvious to them on a first reading, then (as teachers used to tell their students,) they can "look it up." Today, what the publishing industry is saying to its readers is this: "You're not capable of understanding on your own, you're not experienced enough to enjoy a book without our help. Therefore, we will produce 'easy' books for you and assist you along with 'easy' answers." It used to be a truism that a measure of difficulty added to the pleasure of an undertaking. Now difficulty is a fault to be avoided at all costs, especially at the expense of our intelligence. The keyword of our culture today is stupidity.

Not that the readership is stupid. But an organized publishing industry wants us to believe that we are not sufficiently gifted. Notice that I say "publishing industry" and not publishers. There used to be a time when publishing (though traditionally reviled by writers) was an educated, literary enterprise undertaken by people with a love for books. If it made money from its authors --and several did-- it was more a question of happy chance than ruthless method. But since the 1980s, publishing companies, bought up by large international corporations, began to apply industrial methods to the making and distribution of literature. Having discovered that books are sold and bought, the managers of these corporations reasoned that books could be bought and

sold like any other artifact, from pizzas to sports cars. This conclusion is based on a misunderstanding -- and here I know I will be accused of elitism, an ancient insult traditionally cast at readers. Books are indeed sold and bought, but that is a circumstantial fact of their existence, not their defining essence. Unlike the merchandise on which our societies build their economies, books are intellectual repositories, the holders of our experience, imagination and memory. We have decided to exchange and share the products of these abstract qualities (literary creations) by means of ordinary commercial systems, because in some remote past we deemed this to be the simplest method of transmission. But that does not mean that we actually buy and sell a text, merely its receptacle. When you buy Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* you are not buying the story of *Pride and Prejudice*, you are buying a pile of bound paper containing a system of ink stains in which we have agreed to encode Austen's story. I'm reducing the transaction to an almost absurd simplicity in order to make my point: that we confuse contents and container, another unfortunate characteristic of our society today. To feed this confusion, the multinational corporations have turned publishing companies --as well as bookstores-- into supermarkets and imposed supermarket rules to the commerce of books. Whether a book is to be published or not is now decided not by the editor (more or less trained to read manuscripts and assess their literary value) but by the marketing department staff whose literary skills are at best not proven. Decisions are made based on projected sales, an economic tool that does not apply to literary books, only to manufactured fake books, that is to say, to books created according to formulas for a specific market and a specific time. Somerset Maugham once said that to write a good novel there were three rules, but that unfortunately no one knew what they were. The administrators of these publishing companies believe otherwise: since there are rules for

imposing a certain brand and type of soft drink on the market, why not apply these rules to impose a certain author and a certain book? As a consequence, books now have a "sell by" date, like boxes of cornflakes, since booksellers cannot stock an infinite number of titles and publishers force them to take their ready-mades. Backlist titles (the classics old and modern on which our civilization is based) tend to disappear in a circular reasoning that argues that since they are not much requested they shouldn't be stocked and they shouldn't be stocked because they're not much requested. Furthermore, a huge investment in these fake books is made in TV chat shows, targeted advertising, purchased bookshop window space, etc. to ensure that a book will sell (though even these blockbusting tactics do not always work.) Bookstore chains have joined this scam. While in old-fashioned bookshops (most of which have disappeared in the wake of these takeovers), booksellers recommended what they liked and judged appropriate for a certain reader, in the chain outlets the employees must display the books in hierarchical spaces for which publishers have paid. Readers are thereby duped into thinking that what they are offered by the bookseller is the best, while it is merely the most richly promoted.

Why are we not up in arms about this? Why are we, readers, such cowards? Perhaps we think that this onslaught of idiot's fare will not affect us individually, that it is the other, that imaginary beast we call "the masses," who will be the victim, the dumb consumer. But that is simply not true. No writer writes in a vacuum, no artist creates in an echoless room. Literature, art, exist through interchanges, from author to reader to author, along generations, so that Homer speaks to us today by means of a multitude of responding voices, and we, the readers, enrich Homer every time we open the *Iliad*. If the process is interrupted, (as

happens during dictatorships, for instance, when readers lose their books and writers are silenced,) even though a few brave souls may carry on, it takes a very long time for the majority of readers to reconnect with the circle of voices that preceded them. The great problem is that the destruction of anything (in this case, the prestige of intellectual knowledge and the respect for our cultural achievements) is a terribly fast process; its reconstruction (because I believe the time will come when we will have true publishers and booksellers once again) is heartbreakingly slow. Perhaps we will be lucky and the great multinational companies who have seized upon the book as another means to make money, will realize what readers and writers, editors and booksellers, have always known: that if you want to make money, don't deal with books. Be an industrialist, a real-estate promoter, a politician, but don't bother with literature. Perhaps they will realize that their real fortune comes from the sale of weapons (as in the case of the Lagardère Group, owner of Little Brown and Warner Books among many other imprints,) not of the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, and will let the whole messy little business drop. Perhaps a period of catastrophe will follow, but (allow me a clichéd lyrical ending) a new, truer publishing world will emerge from the ruins, no doubt from the continuing efforts of the small, persistent editors and booksellers who have somehow managed to survive. I hope so.