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The Democratization of Literature

“ If you look at the Greek plays, they’re really good. And there’s just a handful of them. Well, how good would they be if there were 2,500 of them? But that’s the future looking back at us. Anything you can think of, there’s going to be millions of them. Just the sheer number of things will devalue them. I don’t care whether it’s art, literature, poetry or drama, whatever. The sheer volume of it will wash it out. I mean, if you had thousands of Greek plays to read, would they be that good? I don’t think so.

—Cormac McCarthy in The Wall Street Journal

I love people who think this way, futurists who ponder and project, and maybe that’s why I love Cormac McCarthy’s fiction (that and his beautifully bare prose). The interview is full of this kind of speculation and well-worth a read, but it’s as bleak as you’d imagine from the guy who wrote *The Road* and *Blood Meridian*, and I think he’s wrong about the effects of volume on art. Like most members of an old guard bemoaning change, he fails to see that change as transformed through the lens of the paradigm shift that comes with it.

The same kind of talk abounds about the media, as the old giants slowly die. I’ve had long talks with a friend of mine who’s worried about the effects of social networking and Wikipedia — if there’s no authority to fact-check, no *New York Times* or *Encyclopedia Britannica*, how will future generations ever know what’s true? My response is always the same: Past generations only *thought* they knew what was true, which is much more dangerous, much less accurate, than being perpetually skeptical. When Walter Cronkite tells you it’s true, it’s true, and few bother to dig deeper. As news itself becomes increasingly independent, where there was once one reporter, “there’s going to be millions of them.” The truth becomes a collective truth, and a collective is almost impossible to corrupt. If one report lies, you can fact-check it yourself against a million other reports, and the lie won’t stand for long. I see the future of news as a combination of Indymedia and Wikipedia — user-generated news, edited continuously, vetted by the users themselves. Maybe that’s already starting with Google Wave, but it’s still too new to really know how it’s going to work.

The democratization of media. It looks like a big mess now, but so did democracy to the monarchs of Europe. Let the people rule themselves, with no king to oversee the big picture!? My god, what chaos! And there is chaos — but out of that chaos emerges incorruptible order. *The Wisdom of*

Crowds, the flocking of birds, fuzzy logic, quantum computers. If there's a theme to the scientific of the last 30 years, it might be that chaos is a harnessable power. But the domino of political democracy, and the relative peace and prosperity it brings, has been showing us that for two centuries.

McCarthy's fears about the future of literature are the same as the loyalists in Europe, or those who worry about the effects of social media. As with so many things, the paradigm is shifting from an authoritarian model to a democratic model. No longer will the editors and publisher and critics be the ones telling us what's good. With a million novels being published every year, no critic or award committee will ever be able to read them all. He assumes that, with no ruling agency to tell us what's worth reading, we'll all read different books — no one work will be able to reverberate across a culture, because the sheer volume of all those books will turn them into white noise, the whole cancelling out all individual parts. With no unifying literature, there will be no "literature," just a million people, reading a million different things.

What he fails to see is the power of "we." Under the old model of publishing, individual readers can be seen as mostly discrete units — word of mouth is important, but it was always one mouth to one ear, one reader at a time. It's easy to see how at that speed of communication, a large volume of information quickly overwhelms the system. But what he doesn't see is that we're no longer one mouth to one ear — we're one mouth to a million ears, and all those ears have mouths that are talking. If you watch birds flock or bees swarm or fish in a school, there is no leader, but the groups still move as a group, and get where they need to go. And they make decisions more quickly and effectively than they would with a single leader and a chain of command, because every individual has the power to temporarily be a leader.

We can already see readers flocking on Rattle.com. The most popular poems are read by 100 times as many people as the average poem. And if you read the poems on that list, they're all good poems — not the best 15 I'd pick out of the thousands we've published, but the top 15 *we'd* pick, and who's to say my opinion is better than a collective of 40,000 others? It's not.

There are often times when I'm at an event and have to pick one poem from *Rattle* to share — for a long time I just picked one of my favorites, Li-Young Lee's "Seven Happy Endings," for example. Recently, though, I've started using one of the collective choices. My best sales pitch at a book fair is to simply get someone walking by to read Brett Myhren's "Telemarketer." It was always a poem I liked, but I had no idea that it was a poem that would resonate so readily with so many people, until the people themselves told me. And they were right.

So I'm very optimistic about the democratization of literature. I want forever more people writing

poetry, reading poetry, submitting poetry, posting poetry on their blogs, starting poetry magazines in their living rooms. It's going to be messy for sure, and we'll have to beware the mediocrity of the middle — but I'm convinced that in the end, literature will be more vital for it. It's time to topple the ivory tower.

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