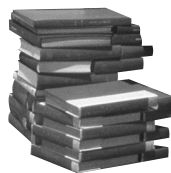


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## Complaining About Babel



ALMOST ALL BOOKS sell thousands of copies, not dozens or hundreds of thousands, let alone millions. It is said—unthinkingly—that this is a bad thing.

A film requires hundreds of thousands of viewers to justify the investment. What is the fate of films that could never attract such large audiences? They aren't made. As a result, the number of films produced worldwide is not even 1 percent of the number of books published. If books were to cost as much as films to produce and distribute (as some do, like encyclopedias), an audience of hundreds of thousands would be required—a Hollywood-size audience. And what would happen to the 99 percent of books that could never sell hundreds of thousands of copies? No one would publish them.

Books are so cheap that, unlike newspapers, radio, or television, they can be published adver-

tisement-free for a few thousand interested readers. To finance almost any book, it is enough to find three thousand readers willing to pay six hours worth of minimum-wage salary. Naturally, if thirty thousand readers could be reached, it would be possible to lower the price—by half, say. But it isn't easy to reach thirty thousand readers. Not because the lower price is still too high, but for a reason we prefer to ignore: the majority of titles published are of no interest to thirty thousand people—you couldn't even give away that many copies.

Book people (authors and readers, publishers and booksellers, librarians and teachers) have a habit of feeling sorry for themselves, a tendency to complain even when all is well. This makes them see as a failure something that is actually a blessing: The book business, unlike newspapers, films, or television, is viable on a small scale. In the case of books, the economic threshold, or the minimum investment required to gain access to the market, is very low, which encourages the proliferation of titles and publishing houses, the flourishing of various and disparate initiatives, and an abundance of cultural richness. If the threshold of viability were

as high as it is for the mass media, there would be less diversity, as is true of mass media. Let us suppose that only one of every hundred titles were published, but for readerships the size of film audiences. What advantage would that scenario offer? None at all, because those titles are already being published today: they're our bestsellers. On the other hand, the ninety-nine books not of interest to a huge public would be lost. The film business requires the elimination of perhaps as many as 99 percent of all possible films. The book business doesn't. If the book is appropriate for a broader public, it can reach a broader public. If it isn't, it may still be viable, as long as it is of interest to a few thousand readers.

What reasons are there for demanding that all books sell millions of copies? Vanity (the author's, the publisher's) or national pride? If a book, as compared to a film, is commercially viable even if it doesn't interest more than a few people, why not publish it? It is natural that a more populous, richer, better-educated society should fuel demand for certain titles, but it doesn't follow that such a society should therefore stop publishing books that sell fewer copies. On the contrary, as the pop-

ulation of a country increases and it becomes richer and better educated, it paradoxically publishes more titles with lower sales: the variety of specialties and interests grows, and it becomes easier to attract a few thousand readers interested in something very specific. The number of titles that are viable in printings of a few thousand copies rises.

This situation allows us to understand a little-known fact, one of those facts that is hardly ever stated, since it defies conventional wisdom: Most of the titles published in rich countries sell no more than a few thousand copies, just as is true in the rest of the world. How can this be? Isn't there always talk about massive printings? There is talk, and these printings do exist, but they exist side by side with small printings, which are the majority and are never discussed. The true editorial superiority of rich countries lies in their ability to more easily reach a few thousand buyers willing to pay thirty dollars (or much more) for a book of very limited appeal. It lies in the fact that they publish ten times more titles per capita than poorer countries, because they are able to afford the luxury of

publishing an infinite variety of titles in small printings.

In many areas, progress destroys diversity. Not so with books. After Gutenberg, mass market journalism, film, television, computing, satellite communications, and the Internet have all appeared. With each new development, the end of the book was prophesied, and each time more books were published, with greater ease and on more diverse subjects. Now, print-on-demand systems make printings of fifty or one hundred copies cost-effective. And what does this mean? It has become possible to publish books that interest no more than fifty or one hundred people. Of course, there will always be some author who, instead of appreciating the benefits of this system, will say, “How is it possible that no more than fifty (or one hundred) copies of my *Deconstructive Hermeneutics* have been sold! There must be a conspiracy against me. Publishers and booksellers are in it for the money—they only promote books that are easy to sell. How will humanity, numbed by television and consumerism, hermeneutically deconstruct itself? Nothing will change until Everything changes . . .”

But let us suppose that, at last, Everything does change; that the Golden Age is upon us; that a universal library system is established (a great Library of Babel) that holds every book ever published, more than fifty million titles; that every human being is allowed to collect a salary for dedicating himself solely to the reading of books; that, under these conditions, each reader is able to read four books a week, two hundred a year, ten thousand in a half-century. It would be as nothing. If not a single book were published from this moment on, it would still take 250,000 years for us to acquaint ourselves with those books already written. Simply reading a list of them (author and title) would take some fifteen years. When we say that books should be read by everyone, we aren't thinking. Our simple physical limitations make it impossible for us to read 99.9 percent of the books that are written.

Humankind writes more than it can read. If for every book published one or two languish unpublished, then two or three million books are written each year. Xlibris, “a strategic partner of Random House Ventures” specializing in vanity publishing, estimates that for every book published in the

United States there are nine unpublished manuscripts (*Harper's Magazine*, December 2000). And yet a full-time reader can't read more than two hundred, one out of every ten or fifteen thousand.

Would it be desirable for just a few books to be published each year, books that everyone in the world could read? Each of us dreams of having the world's full attention, of everyone else falling silent to hear what we have to say, of everyone else giving up writing in order to read what we have written. There exists a belief that at least a few things should be read by the whole world. But what could be said to everyone? If there were a permanent universal assembly, at which a microphone was passed around so that each person could speak to the crowd, we would scarcely have time to say hello and sit down. The universal dialogue would be reduced to a recognition of the self, a kind of Babelian poem of creation consisting of everyone saying "Good morning" to one another. Maybe that is what life is: We stand up and say hello and then disappear. But it is difficult to accept that idea. In our hello is a yearning for eternity, a yearning that makes us cling fiercely to the microphone and leads to totalitarian commun-

ion. Everyone must listen to what I have to say. The never-ending salutation is the expression of a never-ending *I*, echoing from the center of the universe. It resounds in the speeches of the Führer; in Mao's *Little Red Book*; in Psalm 49:

Hear this, all ye people; give ear, all ye inhabitants  
of the world:

Both low and high, rich and poor, together.

My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation  
of my heart shall be of understanding.

It is a noble temptation, that desire to seize the microphone, to refuse to let the world go (for its own good), to subject it to one's wise words and good intentions. Nevertheless, even at gatherings of specialists the conversation must be broken up when the crowd reaches a certain size, so that the participants don't dwell on generalities and are able to address more subjects, able to say more, in smaller groups. There is no such thing as an infinite capacity for communication. Even supposing that every specialist had the same expertise and interest in every subject, there would be no time to address all subjects in a general gathering. Our

simple physical limitations decree that as the number of participants rises, the average time for dialogue decreases. The participation of the whole world in a conversation doesn't enrich the dialogue; it diminishes it.

Imagine an agora, a marketplace, a cocktail party, where multiple conversations are underway. The microphone appears. The many circles become one circle, different conversations become the same conversation. Is this a good thing?

It is a myth: a myth of transparency, of the Tower of Babel replaced by a totalitarian *I*. We complain about the confusion of languages, the multiplicity of conversations, because we dream of the world's undivided attention, beyond the grasp of our finiteness. But culture is a conversation without a center. The true universal culture isn't the utopian Global Village, gathered around a microphone; it is the Babel-like multitude of villages, each the center of the world. The universality accessible to us is the finite, limited, concrete universality of diverse and disparate conversations.