

# PUBLISHING: POLITICS AND ESTABLISHMENT PAROCHIALISM

by

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Approximately 30,000 new books were published last year, most of them by large commercial houses, the majority being non-fictional works of various sorts. Of the fictional works published, the majority were of a popular, mass-market appeal—escapist romances, suspense novels of intrigue and frantic action, occult thrillers, books based on movies, and supermarket roughtrade sporting on their covers the latest wave of bloody meat cleavers and weird children. Of the remaining fictional titles—loosely called “serious” literature—the majority were reprints, classroom anthologies of tenth-told tales, the latest novels of John Updike and Philip Roth, and mid- and end-of-career collections of the works of well-established authors. If you, as an author, are new or “unknown”, are not interested in writing self-help or how-to-do-it books on improving one’s sex life or growing mushrooms in one’s cellar, if you are a poet, a writer of experimental fiction, a novelist whose work has its appeal for a small, discriminating audience, the chances are that none of these 30,000 mainstream books was yours. And that’s assuming that your work has great literary merit—is innovative, interesting, competently or beautifully written, with something important to say. Now, why is this the case?

Disappointed authors, surveying their rejection slips, frequently complain that “it’s all a matter of politics” which works get published, which rejected by the large commercial houses. They’re right, of course; but the politics involved is not merely the author’s knowing “the right people,” or having “an inside track,” or being in the stable of an agent who knows how to hustle. It may or may not help, as popular mythology has it, “to be Jewish,” “to have had stories published in *The New Yorker*,” to live in Darien, Scarsdale, or the West Seventies. I do not propose to deal with these matters. My concern is with politics of a deeper sort: Establishment decision-making that is based on ignorance and greed.

Why this sort of decision-making should be called “political” requires some amplification. ‘Ignorance’ and ‘greed’ are high-level abstractions which say both

too much and too little. And in all of my comments which follow, please remember that I am making generalizations, discussing tendencies, directions, drift. There are always exceptions to be noted when discussing the practices of commercial houses: good first novels being published, controversial and experimental works being launched, orthodoxies violated, risks taken. Bearing this in mind, let me outline some negative tendencies that seem increasingly to dictate policy in Establishment publishing.

When I use the term 'Establishment', I'm referring to the institutionalized book-production industry in the United States which has, as its component parts, (a) the large, prestigious publishing firms (most of them headquartered in New York City or environs) that dominate the book trade in numbers of sales and are becoming ever larger through mergers and being subsumed as subsidiaries of huge multinational conglomerates; (b) the cluster of quality magazines and newsprint reviewing organs that supportively publicize the publishers' new books in exchange for advertising revenue; (c) the editorial staffs, cost-accounting experts, and managers who, increasingly, though working for R. R. Bowker & Co., or Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, ultimately draw their paychecks from the Xerox Corporation or CBS; (d) the band of influential critics and reviewers who decide which books get favored treatment (or even public notice); (e) the Book Clubs (some of them subsidiaries of publishers) that promote certain titles over others and guarantee sales; (f) the large chain bookstores (that, in the aggregate, account for the majority of trade book purchases in the United States); (g) the national prize and awards committees (which build authors' reputations, bestow prestige on publishers, and enhance sales); (h) talk show hosts who promote new books and sustain celebrity status for a few lucky writers; and (i) agents, who select certain authors as clients and, as intermediaries, deal directly with publishers (in exchange for a 15% share of the author's take). This large and diverse grid of sometimes conflicting interests represents the Establishment; excluded from it, for the most part, are the university presses (which frequently *do* provide publishing outlets for new writers—including poets—as well as books of regional interest and re-prints of "forgotten" works), and the nation's nearly 4,000 "small" or independent magazines and alternative presses that publish most of the new and innovative literary works that see light.

'Ignorance', as I am using it, may be defined as a type of bigotry born of provincialism. It manifests itself as a prejudice not only against innovative works by unknown authors (whose marketability is immediately seen as doubtful), but also against authors living in, or writing about, sections of the country with which Establishment editors—with their Manhattan-blinded vision—aren't familiar. As a case in point: when I attended the American Writers Congress in New York in October of last year, one novelist from a Far Western state said with considerable bitterness (and I paraphrase): "These New York publishers don't take us Western writers seriously. They think we're regionalists, and that all we write is six-gun shoot-'em-up westerns. I've written four novels—not one of them a western." Significantly, some of the New York-based *writers* on the panel conducting the

session reacted to his statement with arch indifference—not taking his complaint seriously.

New York is widely perceived as the hub of America’s literary activity—the place “where it’s happening”. This is evident from the large numbers of aspiring writers (many of them young) who flock to Manhattan and Brooklyn (even as starlet hopefuls used to flock to Hollywood) to establish themselves near the seat of power. And if the general public perceives New York to be the center of America’s literary activity, the Establishment most assuredly does, too. Well, of mainstreaming and influence-brokering it *is* the hub,—and of mass-market publishing. But *not* of America’s literary activity. There’s a lot more going on than that. To think of all points west of Philadelphia as “the sticks” or “the boonies”, and being unable to easily conceive that writers living in Cincinnati, Little Rock, Dubuque, Ponca City, Wichita, Sioux Falls, Shreveport, Tampa, Omaha, Tucson, Albuquerque, Spokane, Bakersfield, and Portland have little of importance to say is provincialism at its worst: the kind of shortsightedness that comes from sitting in an office on Fifth Avenue and associating too much with folks of equally limited vision. (Of course this doesn’t mean that first novels from Biloxi, St. Louis, and Seattle don’t get published by Establishment firms; it means that those manuscripts may have an uphill struggle just to get *read* and fairly evaluated by the low-level gatekeepers whose job it is to heap high the slushpile and push back into the hall the works that come in “over the transom”.) The consequences of provincial bigotry, smug self-satisfaction, assumed superiority, and their consequences are what I mean by ‘ignorance’.

‘Greed’ is easier to define: it’s simply a determination to maximize profits through whatever means necessary; or, to phrase it differently, to squeeze the biggest return possible out of the investment made. To understand the peculiar consequences of this profit-motive in Establishment publishing in the 1980’s, a word of background is needed. Since the 1960’s, there has been underway a progressive concentration of ownership and control in Establishment publishing. Smaller firms have been merged with bigger; independents have dwindled, subsumed into larger combines, The imprints of these former free-standing houses may remain as subsidiary companies within the larger corporate structures, and a degree of nominal autonomy is frequently preserved; but at some point, as balance sheets are carefully studied, some type of centralized oversight and management becomes inevitable. An even more disturbing trend has been the takeover of large publishing firms by multinational conglomerates such as Time-Life, Gulf & Western, CBS, and Xerox, to name a few—entities to which text- and tradebook publishing is ancillary to their main pursuits.

In this context, those traditional concerns of Establishment publishers that transcended the goal of making money—such as the discovery and nurturing of new talent, the making available of classics in cheap reprints, and taking pride in contributing to the enhancement of literary culture—began to evaporate. If turning a profit came progressively to be the uppermost concern, certain

consequences followed as night the day. New procedures of cost-accounting efficiency. Centralized policy- and decision-making. The replacement of oldstyle humanistic editors with managerial market-researchers. Deletion of slow-moving titles. Concentration of capital resources in non-literary publications (poetry and fiction don't bring in the bucks; self-help and how-to-do-it do). In publishing fiction, an accommodation to perceived levels of public taste to insure successful mass-marketing: a focus on the trendy, the sensational; a fixation on generating instant best-sellers. Throughout the 1960's and '70's, books increasingly came to be seen as commodities requiring quick turnover and, in some cases, as properties to be sold to the highest bidder. Frequently the authors themselves were contractually-bound to serve as publicists.

As the national economy worsened through the 1970's and into the '80's, competition between Establishment publishers intensified as they vied for the fewer dollars of the already-shrunk book-buying public and inflation boosted the costs of book-production. If a huge bookstore chain such as B. Dalton or Waldenbooks, with hundreds of outlets in shopping malls nationwide, purchases sufficient copies of a new novel—already hyped to be a best-seller prior to publication—to stock in all of its stores, that's a sale *worth* competing for.

Yet the power of the chains has extracted its price from Establishment publishers, too. In exchange for their huge purchases, and their ability to give a book mass distribution and public exposure, the chains have demanded increasingly generous discount terms from publishers (treatment that "favors" them over non-chain bookstores and maximizes *their* profit), and have insisted on the privilege of returning unsold copies of the book to the publisher's inventory for full credit. The net effect of this has been to jack up the price of books for the buying public. And when the publisher receives back the unsold copies of a new novel (with some of them shopworn, scuffed, or otherwise damaged beyond saleability), the firm's corporate policies demand that the book be ditched as quickly as possible. In the wake of the recent Supreme Court decision in the Thor Tool and Die case (1979), and the subsequent Revenue Ruling that disallows manufacturers (including book publishers) from depreciating their inventories, those books don't go back to the warehouse to constitute a slow-moving backlist. No, they tend either to be sold en masse (at an enormous loss) to remainder houses that in turn sell them (at enormous mark-downs from the publisher's list price), or else are simply sent to the shredder to be pulped. Despite their howls of protest, the Thor decision was a godsend to Establishment publishers geared to the profit motive; it gave them an economic justification for emptying their warehouses of older and slower-moving titles (never mind that there were excellent and historically important works among them) and concentrating their capital on items designed for rapid turnover. This explains why classroom teachers are increasingly finding out-of-print and unavailable certain literary texts they would like to have their students read.

In accord with the corporate groupthink that sees literary works as commodities with small profit margins, there has been increasingly a selective commitment to the blockbuster best-seller at the expense of less potentially lucrative books. In this context, literary agents have gained new status as power-brokers—partly because many Establishment houses have streamlined their operations by adopting a policy of only reading manuscripts that come to them through agents. Some publishers fortunately still do read works that come in “over the transom” directly from the authors, but more and more are stating openly that they do not. Knowing this state of affairs, more and more authors are seeking agents to manage their affairs. All of this gives agents increased clout when negotiating among various publishers to get the best terms for their clients (and themselves). In the last few years, the competition among Establishment publishers for hot properties has resulted in best-selling authors’ receiving larger and larger advances against sales royalties. Some authors (most notably Judith Krantz for *Princess Daisy*) have received astronomical advances. When publishers invest hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars in advances to a very few authors, there are fewer dollars which can go as advances to other authors they may be publishing. And once that pre-publication investment has been made, balance-sheet thinking requires that yet further enormous sums must be spent in advertising and promotion prior to publication to insure that the book is indeed a blockbuster when it appears. As a consequence, there are fewer dollars available to promote and advertise other authors’ works.

And thus, for the majority of literary writers, a self-fulfilling prophecy begins to work itself out. In a mass-marketing context, a book’s success is usually directly tied to the amount of advertising, hype, and effective distribution it receives. If the money has gone into “this season’s blockbuster”, it all too frequently happens that the other authors’ books appear with only minimal promotion, receive a few reviews in the Establishment media, sell a small number of copies, and then—since they aren’t “carrying their weight” and “pulling their load”—are quickly remaindered. Authors gain nothing when their books are dumped. If the sales of a book do not generate royalties beyond what the author has received by way of advance, that advance may be the only monetary return the author will ever realize from the book. If the unsold copies are pulped, the book is effectively dead. Should the author later become famous because of subsequent works, that early book might be resurrected to capitalize on the current crest of popularity. But that’s a tenuous hope at best; fame may never come, because the first book was dumped before it had time to find its audience. Books which have substance and great literary worth frequently don’t have the status of instant best-sellers; but, given time to find their audience and to have their merits spread by word-of-mouth recommendation, these works may prove to have the staying power and perennial appeal which, over the long haul, make them classics. Ironically, had the publisher been able to give them time, they might have proved to be a self-sustaining and profitable investment.

But increasingly the economic constraints under which Establishment publishers work have rendered policy-makers myopic and forced them to think in terms of rapid turnover and what can be accomplished in “the short haul”. Time was when a good book was assumed to have an indefinite lifespan; it would be available as long as people wished to read and buy it. Now, however, when books are regarded as ephemeral (disposable?) commodities, the statement made a few years back on the Dick Cavett show by a spokesman from Simon and Schuster may have a rather widespread currency: he said, “We figure a book has a life of three months.” A *sales* life, presumably; but that has come to be fairly coterminous with *effective* life.

A sobering thought. Unless the book is a sleeper or takes off surprisingly well, within three months the initial bulge of sales will be over, the return on the publisher’s investment realized (whatever it is), and the firm’s commitment to the work ended. I have heard of instances where a publisher will, true to the terms of the contract, print a specific number of copies of the text, but bind only a portion of the run to distribute for review and test-marketing, leaving the remainder as unbound pages. This saves binding costs, and, after the book has demonstrated poor sales potential, makes shredding that much easier.

It’s estimated in the industry that a hardcover novel must sell 10,000 copies to be economically “worthwhile”: thus, the scramble for favorable reviews, the competition for book club purchase and prestigious awards which guarantee large sales. But 10,000 is minimal to the profit motive. Given the existing market for fiction, 20,000 copies of a hardcover novel is quite good; 10,000–50,000, phenomenally good; 80,000, a blockbuster; 120,000, you’ve died and gone to heaven. Many first novels—no matter how provocative, engrossing, insightful, moving, and well-written—are lucky, if they don’t get the full promotional commitment of the firm, to sell 1,200 copies.

If this is so, why *should* Establishment publishers devote much of their resources to the launching of new talent? If, contrary to all expectations, a first novel should take off running and do well, the publisher would probably be inclined to look with interest on that author’s next book. But, given corporate priorities and the necessity for wise management of financial resources, most Establishment publishers would, I suspect, be *more* inclined to bring out yet another—and perhaps inferior—work by a *famous* author with a predictable audience and a known sales record. And this is what I mean by ‘greed’.

Taken together, the ignorance and greed of Establishment publishers constitute what I call ‘parochialism’. And here we can go to *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* for a formal definition: “the quality or state of being parochial; *esp.* selfish pettiness or narrowness (as of interests, opinions, or views)”. Decision-making with regard to which works get accepted for publication (and which rejected), which get the lion’s share of promotional and advertising budgets (and which don’t), which get reprinted (and which remaindered), and which authors get the big advances (and which get peanuts) is indeed “a matter

of politics”, as disappointed authors claim. Knowing the right people, having an inside track and a good agent undoubtedly work to an author’s advantage; as do being legitimately famous, sensationally notorious, or able to boast an impressive track record of previous book sales. But without these, all the power of determination lies with the Establishment publisher. Which brings us back to politics.

For what *is* politics, after all, but the dynamics of establishing and exercising power differentials between diverse and conflicting interests? Since relatively few of the thousands of authors desiring publication enjoy the advantages listed above, most find themselves dominated by the dictates of Establishment parochialism.

Traditionally, authors have had to rely on commercial publishers, who had the capital resources, reputation, and network of promotional contacts and sales outlets to produce, advertise, and market their works. When a publisher accepts a work and strives to insure its success, the firm has exercised its *power of commission*. If the work *is* a success, the author’s effective power is thereby increased: the writer may become famous, may reasonably expect to have subsequent works accepted for publication, may attract the attention of a high-powered agent to serve as a go-between, may be in a position to negotiate better contract terms and larger advances against royalties, gain the notice of grants and awards committees, achieve celebrity status on the talk-show circuit, and even (perhaps) acquire the security of being taught in the college classroom.

But authors whose works are not accepted by commercial publishers can expect none of this. In the balance of power, they have nothing. And here the functional politics of the situation becomes painfully clear: if publishers, through their power of commission, confer a modicum of power on authors they accept for publication (those whose works prove to be successful), they likewise, through their *power of denial*, render impotent the writers they reject. Not only does this power of denial prevent the dissemination of potentially valuable work and deny the public the opportunity of seeing it, the power also denies authors the public expression of their views and public acknowledgment of their status *as authors*. (If this calls up the specter of censorship for you as it does for me, that concern is worth pondering—particularly since, increasingly, CBS, Gulf & Western, Time-Life and Xerox will be framing policies and calling the shots

Psychologically, the politics of exclusion frequently has implications that go beyond the rejected writer’s disappointment and potential cynicism and bitterness. To the extent that the writer truly believes that Establishment decisions are based solely on literary merit, he or she may come to feel that repeated rejections indicate that the work isn’t worthy of publication. Some writers have fragile egos, and some—particularly the young and previously unpublished—are sufficiently lacking in self-confidence that they need the assurance of external authority that they really *do* have talent. They require validation *as writers* by an Establishment firm’s acceptance of their work. But

why, for heaven's sake, should authors feel compelled to seek legitimation from capricious external authority? Such an attitude gratuitously puts even more power into the publisher's hands, and—if acceptance doesn't come—contributes to a further diminishing of the author's self-esteem.

But the general public, too, shares with many authors this basic attitude. One of the persistent myths abroad in the land is that one must be published by a large commercial house to be validated as an author: that if a work is good, it *will* be accepted for publication; that if it's *not* accepted, it's clearly because the work is *not* good; and, as a corollary, if a work *is* accepted, it *must* be good. But, as I hope I've indicated, literary merit isn't the sole criterion on which Establishment decisions are based. (To prove the point, one need only examine the current season's crop of literary works bearing big house imprints.) I call this myth and its effects "the Validation Fallacy". For authors who still subscribe to it, and who take rejection of their work as rejection of themselves as writers and an indication that they have no talent, the consequences of this mode of thinking can be tragic. Both historically and, increasingly, at the present time (as authors come to understand the current situation in Establishment publishing), those of greater self-confidence and self-determination have not depended on external definition to know themselves. In the face of repeated rejections they have simply gone on writing, secure in their internal self-definition as authors of worth. And both historically and, increasingly, at the present time, if they have wished their works published, they've simply turned their backs on the mainstream and sought out other channels. When authors subscribe to the Validation Fallacy, they deny to themselves whatever power they might have had, and close off other options as well.

Authors of literary works have various motivations for wishing their works published. Some write for a living: and for them, earning money may be the chief motivation. Some write primarily to express themselves and desire publication to share their thoughts with others, or simply to be read. Still others write for fame, prestige, self-justification, or to receive the acknowledgment of an appreciative audience. And of course many writers desire publication for all, or various combinations of, these reasons.

Those who wish to earn a living from writing fiction are truly dependent upon Establishment publication and distribution, for it's only through advances, reviewing, promotion, and mass-marketing that sufficient money can accrue. But to "fit" Establishment requirements, those writers had better resign themselves, at least for part of their careers, to writing works that will satisfy popular taste and have mass-market appeal: spy thrillers, whodunits, family sagas, plantation romances, suburban "soap operas", etc. Those to whom self-expression and being read are more important than money alone have other options, which I will discuss in a moment. Those who wish fame or the acknowledgment of an appreciative audience may have to choose the kind of fame they want, and the

audience they prefer. If it's celebrity and glowing reviews in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, they may have to try their luck with the Establishment.

Those who are particularly committed to writing poetry, experimental fiction, and work of any kind that does not have mass-market appeal will probably—at least early in their careers—opt for a narrower, more adventurous readership by publishing with university and alternative, specialized presses. A few writers manage a balancing act and satisfy all of these motivations at once, publishing different types of things in different places through different means. But they aren't numerous. And very few fiction writers earn their livings from their fiction alone.

While it is becoming ever more difficult for *new* writers to see print with Establishment publishers, even *experienced* writers (unless they have reputations that might insure sales) find it particularly difficult to "sell" Establishment publishers a book of poems, or short stories, or experimental long fiction. There just isn't enough market demand to make such books profitable. The writer of short fiction who wishes to sell single stories is really up against it. The large mass-circulation magazines which historically provided outlets for individual short stories (and through which many now-standard authors got their starts) have either disappeared altogether (*Argosy All-Story Weekly*, *McClure's Magazine*, *Liberty*, *Collier's*, *The American Magazine*, *The Smart Set*), or at best can publish only a small number of stories per year (*Playboy*, *The New Yorker*). The various cheaply-produced pulp magazines which provided outlets for hundreds of genre stories (mysteries, westerns, romances, science-fiction, adventure, and horror)—having been popular in the 1930's and 40's, were for the most part gone by the mid-1950's.

Thus, poets, short story writers, experimentalists, and new authors are finding the best outlet for their work in the numerous small magazines and alternative presses specializing in "serious" literature which have sprung up since the 1960's in all parts of the country. Individual poems and stories can more easily be placed in these little magazines; and after an author's work has appeared sufficiently to have made a mark in the small-press world, those poems or stories may be collected and published in book form by alternative presses. Now, these books will usually be issued in small print-runs: 250, 500, 1,000 copies; and payment will more likely be in copies than in cash. A major advantage lies in the fact that when the book appears on the small-press scene, it has an audience waiting for it—those interested parties who follow the publications of particular presses, or who have known the author's work through word of mouth or having read it in the little magazines. It may not be a large audience; but there's no assurance that a larger audience would have been found if, through some fluke, an Establishment publisher had issued the book. Thus, while distribution remains a problem for small presses in general (most sales occurring not in bookstores, but rather at readings, conferences, bookfairs, and

through mail order), these books may have a greater chance of reaching a targeted audience that will appreciate them.

In the last few years, more and more university presses have undertaken the publication of serious writers who have built their reputations in the little magazines, or with chapbooks and small-print-run books published by alternative presses. University presses have the prestige of the institutional name they bear; since they are frequently at least partially subsidized by their respective universities, their books tend to be handsome and well-produced. They do tend to advertise their books in academic journals and the popular press and are sometimes quite aggressive in promoting their publications. Since they are (or have been: the situation may be rapidly changing in the deteriorating economy) relatively free of the economic pressures Establishment publishers feel to turn a quick profit, they can better afford to issue books of fairly specialized appeal—regional writing, poetry and short stories, experimental and avant-garde work—and to maintain slow-moving titles in their backlists. University presses tend to have an easier time than alternative independent presses in placing their books in commercial bookstores. And frequently university presses issue their poets or fiction writers as volumes in ongoing series which major public and academic libraries subscribe to. Although notice by the Establishment media is still somewhat sketchy, books published by university presses have a better chance of being reviewed in *The New York Times* or *The Christian Science Monitor* than those published by alternative presses.

Until very recently, literary works published by alternative presses almost never were reviewed in the mass media. Now, fortunately, there is at least a token acknowledgment of the activity going on in the alternative press (it's grown to the point that it can't be easily ignored), and a few alternative press books are receiving reviews—though frequently only in special features run annually or a few times a year (e.g., a special article in *Publisher's Weekly* on the small presses; or a small-press roundup briefly summarized in the *Monitor* well-publicized in advance so that people will be "looking for it"). It's as though the Establishment review organs have just discovered that there *is* activity going on out there beyond Random House, Little, Brown, Simon & Schuster, Doubleday, Viking, and Alfred A. Knopf. Good. It's about time. But the fact remains that literary works from university and alternative presses do not get the review coverage they deserve. Maybe as Establishment parochialism is educated beyond itself, acknowledgment of the nation's literary life that thrives beyond New York and Boston will become less feeble and grudging.

All of this is not to say that the alternative, independent press doesn't have parochialisms of its own. As one scans the entries in the *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, it quickly becomes apparent that many alternative publishers have narrow interests and specialized tastes (e.g., only publishing materials of Libertarian interest, or haiku, or conservation/ecology; accepting submissions only from children, prisoners, black writers, women, native

Americans, feminist/lesbians, or residents of Montana, Hawaii, etc.). However, among the almost 4,000 independent magazines and presses in the nation, there is great diversity, a broad eclecticism, endless opportunities for new talent to get a hearing, and, in general, a warm acceptance of the innovative, experimental, and unusual. Since most of these alternative literary presses and magazines operate on a shoestring, they don't expect to make much money, and typically aren't knee-jerked along by the profit motive. They exist because of dedicated individuals with a strong love of, and belief in, literature; and—within their financial means—they are free to do what they like. This is power.

Since the 1960's, as disillusionment grew with the conglomeration and homogenization of Establishment publishers and with the debasement of the mainstream fictional book trade into the peddling of "pop schlock", the small press movement has simply "taken up the slack" and assumed the major responsibility for the production of serious literature in the United States. It has not formally "declared its independence" from the Establishment; there was no need for that. It merely spontaneously evolved an alternative sphere of activity, and in so doing took on the traditional role of discovering new talent and publishing important, innovative literary works which the Establishment increasingly abdicated.

In the process, the alternative press movement is creating a kind of Establishment of its own—but one that is looser, more flexible, highly diverse in its components, opposed to the notion of "bigness" for its own sake, characterized more by an attitude of cooperation than of competition, more receptive to the offbeat and the experimental. It is a geographically diffuse network, not localized in a single population center, more concerned with serving the health and growth of the culture than with homogenizing and exploiting it. I think the alternative press network will avoid having its Establishment become monolithic and rigid, not only because of its geographical/regional dispersion, but also because in the nature of things, old magazines and presses are continually dying off and new ones are being born. Add to this the continual waves of new writers moving through the alternative presses, and the fierce independence that characterizes alternative editors and publishers, their pride in "going it alone", and there is good reason to believe that vitality and diversity will be preserved.

One final type of independent publishing must be mentioned, both because of its increasing importance on the literary scene, and because it nullifies the effects of Establishment snobbishness, conglomerate bottom-line decision-making, and narrow parochialism, and because, in the politics of publishing, it reverses the traditional power relationships, denying any power at all to the Establishment publishers and conferring it all upon the individual author. I refer, of course, to self-publication. For the author/publisher, it is the ultimate political act.

As regards print media, or text on paper, there are two forms of self-publication currently in practice. One is the cooperative or collective model, in which a likeminded group of authors pool their resources (or work out various ratios of commitment) to enable individual members to publish their work (perhaps under the aegis of the group): this time it's Sarah's book; next time John's. Or, Mary's book is very important; let's all work to get it out. In the collective model, decisions on policy, and which books to publish, and (perhaps) editorial matters frequently are made by the group as a whole. In the other form of self-publication, the author goes it alone, becoming at once financier, editor, publisher, promoter, distributor, and sales force (and, if in possession of the requisite facilities and skills—and so desiring—perhaps typist, fonter, book designer, layout/cover artist, printer, and binder, as well). The production end of things can be contracted out to professionals if authors prefer to do so and if they have the resources to cover expenses.

Electronic publishing of texts, whether to lists of known e-mail recipients, or to an indefinitely large cyber-audience through collective or personal websites, blogs, or online chatrooms, will be increasingly utilized as an alternative to print on paper. As electronic publication of literary works evolves, many protocols, conventions, safeguards of property rights (or perhaps a complete re-thjinking of 'property rights') will probably emerge. While granting that this mode of publishing does exist and will continue to expand, I wish to confine my comments here to self-publication using print and paper.

Solitary self-publication has the advantage of giving the author/publisher complete control over the book. Commensurate with available resources and skills, the book will have the form, shape, content, and appearance the author desires. No external editor will suggest the cutting of material, the adding of more sex and violence to Chapter 9, changing the language, or shifting focus or emphasis. A drawback of solitary self-publication is that it requires the author to spend a great deal of time and energy producing and selling the book. (In mainstream, big-house publishing, the Establishment publisher is nominally responsible for these tasks; but the author can only hope that, within the narrow confines of the contract, the publisher will do a good or even adequate job.) Compensating for the expenditure of time and energy, though, are the useful information and skills the author/publisher acquires regarding editing, book production, and business practice, the legitimate pleasure of achievement, and the many personal contacts which are inevitably made. It also takes money to self-publish. One must have capital to invest. However, the self-publisher is able to choose the level of financial commitment he or she wishes to make. There are many levels of production-quality that one can choose for launching the work—ranging from typing and stapling of pages to photo-offset to computer print-out to handset letterpress, with various kinds of bindings to suit. All of these methods constitute publication, which is simply "the duplication of copies of a work for public dissemination".

The difficulties faced by the self-publisher in advertising, promoting, and distributing the book, and in getting it reviewed (which brings it to public attention) are essentially the same that would be encountered if the book were issued by an independent small press. A major disadvantage of solitary self-publication is that the time and energy one must devote to promoting and selling the work can slow one's writing of the next book; yet many authors feel that the absolute control conferred by self-publication more than compensates for the energies consumed. If the self-publisher is imaginative and industrious, the book might do better in reaching its audience than if an Establishment publisher were doing the job, for the self-publisher is not bound by the habits, orthodoxies, customary channels, back-scratching, and overhead expenses of the mainstream publisher. Besides, there are no ironclad guarantees that an Establishment publisher will actually work very hard for a serious literary work—particularly if the firm's commitments already lie with the season's blockbuster. Good books have been allowed to languish, thus triggering the self-fulfilling prophecy of the book's financial failure and assuring its consignment to the remainder house or the shredder. The self-published book can remain in print as long as the author wishes it to, giving it an indefinite life to be out circulating in the world.

Some authors even today are inclined to shrink from self-publishing because of a persistent popular notion that equates self-publication with "vanity publication", and of the onus that accompanies the latter. Vanity publication and self-publication have one feature in common: the author puts up the costs of production. But there the similarity ends.

In "vanity publishing" the "publisher" is frequently a company that produces physical copies of books for pay (sometimes with little regard to the literary merit of the work) while taking little or no responsibility for promotion and distribution. These jobs fall to the author, who, having little by way of experience, know-how, and contacts for distributing the books, is often in the position of having to give copies away to friends and relations. In vanity publishing, the author pays with the primary aim of *getting the book into print*.

In self-publication, the production costs are seen as an investment, and having the book in print as only a means to the end of *getting it to its audience*. In "self-publication", authors usually create a unique imprint (thus creating their own publishing companies), pay a printer to have their books produced, and then *handle promotion, distribution, and sales as a business*, assuming responsibility for the fulfillment of orders, tax collection, inventory management, and accurate book-keeping.

Distribution is undertaken as a business to be conducted in a businesslike manner. To do this, many self-publishers create their own publishing companies and imprints. This gives them the status of being publishers in their own right. People who look askance at self-published works, seeing them merely as vanity publications and therefore inferior to works bearing the imprint of Establishment

houses (or even independent small presses) have fallen prey to, and are laboring under the illusions of, the Validation Fallacy (discussed earlier): “The book can’t be any good; if it were, an Establishment house would have published it”. This prejudiced assumption, reflecting an ignorant and parochial attitude, is simply wrong, and should be laid to rest once and for all. When an author self-publishes, that action brings into being “an alternative press”.

During the last two hundred years, authors who have borne the costs of publishing their works have labored under a stigma: a pervasive assumption on the part of the general public, Establishment book reviewers, and large publishing houses—too frequently shared by the authors themselves—that if a work *did* have merit, it would have been brought out by a commercial publisher at the publisher’s expense; conversely, that if a commercial publisher did *not* take it on, the work clearly *didn’t* have merit (or else they would have). And further, that if a book is published by a commercial publisher, it *must* have merit (else, why would they have published it?). These assumptions are based upon another: that commercial publishers can be relied on to accurately judge a book’s merit and to have sufficient concern for literary culture to want to see a good work published. A careful survey of the books being churned out by commercial publishers at the present time should reveal the fallacies in these assumptions.

And, finally, why should there be a stigma for underwriting the cost of producing one’s books? Self-publication has a long, honorable history and tradition. Self-publishers find themselves in distinguished company—rubbing shoulders with the likes of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Walt Whitman, James Joyce, Benjamin Franklin, Robinson Jeffers, Mark Twain, and Beatrix Potter, to name just a few. Having a good book to market, adopting aggressive and imaginative sales techniques, and observing sound business practices can make self-publication a rewarding (note: I did not say ‘profitable’) enterprise. And, as I said earlier, it is the ultimate political act for an author. It constitutes a true declaration of independence from the controls and limitations of Establishment (or even small-press) publishers and from the necessity of relying upon the mediation of literary agents. It constitutes *self-validation* by asserting to the world one’s self-defined status as an author, freeing one from the crippling need to be validated by external “authority”. It makes it possible for any book to see light, find its best audience, and stay indefinitely current doing its work. And finally, the only parochialism the author has to worry about is the author’s own.

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