

result will be sabotage and terrorism, coupled with the loss of civil liberties as governments crack down. I frankly do not see how the chaotic and varied assemblage of fact, opinion, marketing hype, and loonyism that currently constitutes the "knowledge" available on the Internet could possibly confer "ever more intoxicating powers." Admittedly, the ability to access Internet "knowledge" (or more to the point, to differentiate between online trash and treasure) may make some slight contribution to career success in the years to come, but the strategic value of Internet access surely pales before the real determinants of class differentiation in Western society (class, race, and differential access to high-quality education).

Turning to the "democratic possibilities" of electronic media technologies, Sobchak ("Democratic Franchise and the Electronic Frontier") begins by noting, in the term *franchise*, the conflation of the right to political participation and the exclusive rights of commercial enterprises to sell products in a certain area. For most of us, the term's two meanings might seem accidental, an artifact of intersecting word histories, but for Sobchak, they testify to an underlying cultural conflation of political liberalism and capitalism that pops up in anything American do. This conflation signals a contradiction between political freedom and monopoly capitalist domination, Sobchak says, which lies at the heart of American culture. But, of course, this is not recognized: It is mystified by its reappearance at the superstructural level in the notion of free-market competition. The Internet repeats this pattern, she says, by offering what appears to be enhanced political participation blended with a healthy free market, but this masks the areas of contestation between political freedom and capitalist domination, and to the extent that you buy into this, you become a numb, apathetic consumer-

ist and your politics become Libertarian. If the Center for Democracy and Technology's Web site starts sporting Microsoft's banner ads, sells its demographics to direct marketers, and links to Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, I suppose I will have to concede that Sobchak is right—but do not count on it.

There are other essays in the book, but what I have described thus far serves to illustrate both the strengths and the weaknesses of the cultural studies approach that informs much of the volume. The method boils down to positing some type of horrifyingly unjust, underlying structure that you think tends to manifest in all the various products of Western culture, and then to select some things you have heard about the Internet that seem to echo this pattern. As a method, this pattern-matching, Marx-alluding technique provides the touchstone for interesting, thought-provoking, and often maddening creative writing projects. The results can be amusing, too, thanks in part to the unintentionally hilarious overstatements (e.g., "Prepare for holographic Slashers to break out of 'alt.sex.stories' and stalk the earth"). At the end of the day, though, you really do not know anything more about the Internet's hidden assumptions, or how the network is likely to shape society in the years to come.—*Bryan Pfaffenberger, University of Virginia.*

Tolstoy's Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse. Ed. Sven Birkerts. St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf (Graywolf Forum, 1), 1996. 261p. \$16 (ISBN 1-55597-248-9). LC 96-75790.

Many librarians, as they watch the gradual migration of their collections from print to electronic form, experience some unease over a question few actually verbalize: What influence does the medium through which our culture passes have on the ability and willingness of readers to engage in dialog with

writers? In a way, this is an old question: Choices between alternative “data formats” are at least as old as microfilm, and indeed can be fairly said to date back to the invention of writing as an alternative to the culture of oral narrative. With the advent and rapid spread of our modern digital text-and-image culture, however, the question appears to face us now with a special vengeance. Is our cultural heritage being totally reformatted, and if so, with what consequences for the nature, content, and integrity of cultural transmission?

Reviewer and critic Sven Birkerts addressed the effects of technological change on readers in his much-discussed 1994 book *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. He based his reflections on the observation, surely correct, that “how we receive information bears vitally on the ways we experience and interpret reality.” In this earlier book, Birkerts dwelled on the joys of reading but wrote with special ardor and eloquence of the glorious tactility and meaningfulness of the printed book as a vessel of knowledge and vicarious experience. Yet, as the title suggests, with its allusions to wakes and funerals, *Gutenberg* is a deeply pessimistic, even gloomy, work. Birkerts finds that “the whole familiar tradition of the book” is “destined for imminent historical oblivion,” more broadly seeing himself and a dwindling number of his thoughtful contemporaries being “gradually coerced into living against [their] natural grain, forced to adapt to a pace and a level of technological complexity” that is now driving them to revolt, though without any hope of success.

Now Birkerts presents this new anthology of twenty essays, some written especially for the volume, others previously published in literary magazines. Although from a host of differing and often conflicting perspectives, the es-

says in *Tolstoy's Dictaphone* have in common that they address the other, the “writing” half of the cultural transmission dyad. The title, of course, is just as loaded as that of Birkerts's earlier work and reflects his own unbroken agenda. It alludes to Leo Tolstoy's alleged refusal to use a new invention called the dictaphone, which Tolstoy explained by saying it would surely be “too dreadfully exciting” and distract him from the content of his literary compositions. In his letter to prospective contributors to his anthology (quoted in his introduction), Birkerts makes no bones about his own views on the topic at hand (“What will be the place of self, of soul—of artist, writer, individual—in the society we are so hell-bent on creating?”). Yet, delightfully, the responses of these free-spirited contributors cover the entire gamut of reaction to the new technologies, from the arrogant technophobia of novelist Paul West and the blanket rejection of all “simulacra” by environmentalist writer Mark Slouka on the one hand, to the ruminations of hypertext fiction writer Carolyn Guyer and the eager embrace of technology by feminist multiculturalist Carole Maso, for whom electronic writing is very welcome in that it opens up a “deeper understanding of the instability of texts, of worlds.” (Maso states further: “Electronic writing will help us to think about impermanence, facility, fragility and freedom, spatial intensities, irreverences, experimentation, new worlds, clean slates.”)

Between these extremes are a number of writers who, like most of the rest of us, are struggling to maintain good writer's discipline despite the siren enticements of “AutoText” and “StyleCheck” and to preserve what is important and valuable in preelectronic writing technologies, while at the same time showing a guarded openness for the potential of the new, almost infinite but, above all, instant mutability of text. These

essays also deal with technology most broadly. At the low-tech end of the scale, novelist and essayist Lynne Sharon Schwartz, herself the author of a very Birkertsian book on why we read and how what we read shapes us (*Ruined by Reading*, 1996), considers the anthropological aspects of telephone communication. Magazine editor Wendy Lesser praises how e-mail, "once it has been brought under control and made to function in the life you have already constructed for yourself," can "reintroduce us to the form of writing that best enables us to know and acknowledge friendship."

Three essays in this volume stand out as especially illuminating and persuasive. They are, first, the article by the anthologist himself, entitled "'The Fate of the Book'" (note the double set of quotation marks, playing on the already vast body of literature on this topic), in which he offers a crystal-clear summation of his extensive reflections on the functional, perceptual, and semiological differences between books and screen technologies, going beyond those contained in *Gutenberg* and breaking somewhat with his earlier either/or dichotomy. "These are not two approaches to the same thing," Birkerts now writes, "but two different things. Books cannot and should not have to compete with chip-powered implementations." A second intriguing contribution to this volume is that of national poet laureate Robert Pinsky, translator into English of Dante's *Inferno* (1994) but also author of *Mindwheel*, an early interactive computer game, and thus a writer

standing confidently astride both cultures. Pinsky considers the worldview of the brilliant, but culturally myopic, postwar inventors of computer technology who have brought all of this progress down upon us and in the process imposed a part of that worldview upon their less technically inclined contemporaries. Finally, and most poetically, I enjoyed the essay "Screens: An Alchemical Scrapbook," by University of Michigan English professor Alice Fulton. Fulton contemplates the aesthetics of the computer screen, poetizing the encounter between human and machine much as Birkerts has done with the encounter between reader and book, in the end emerging with a synthesis of her affections for screen and book cultures that serves to temper some of the shrillness of other articles in this collection.

Birkerts's new anthology probably will be of less native interest to librarians than *Gutenberg*, for it is the mediation of the process of reading, not writing, in which we as a profession are most directly involved. Yet, for the light these diverse essays cast on culture creation in the digital age, *Tolstoy's Dictaphone* offers a fascinating complement to Birkerts's previous book. Those interested in a more scientific (i.e., less humanistically oriented) study of the dialectics of writing and text technology may wish to turn to another recent collection of essays: *The New Writing Environment: Writers at Work in a World of Technology* (1996).—Jeffrey Garrett, *Northwestern University*.