

## IN PRAISE OF BOOKS

From the dawn of mankind's ability to think and to articulate his thoughts he has needed to communicate and preserve them in written symbols, to give even to his <sup>early</sup> ~~early~~ nothings a local habitation and a name. For this reason every book carries within its covers <sup>the</sup> ~~a~~ long <sup>history and</sup> tradition of the written word. Whenever we handle even an undistinguished and ephemeral book our minds can range back to the earliest forms of writing, to the clay tablets on which the Phoenicians scratched with a wedge-shaped tool, to dried strips of palm-leaves fastened with a thong, to birch-bark and scrolls of papyrus and parchment, to patient monks bending over their richly-illuminated manuscripts and to the invention of printing with moveable characters by Johann Gutenberg in 1440 which led to the gradual development of the modern book. Today it is becoming increasingly fashionable to question whether this long tradition may not now be ending and whether there is still a <sup>place</sup> ~~need~~ for books in this electronic age in which computers are able to store, retrieve and present in seconds information which would previously have taken a life-time to process and in which, increasingly, we look to a screen not a printed page for instruction and entertainment. This may seem an unrealistic, almost perverse anxiety at a time when books have apparently never been more popular, when new and exciting bookshops are opening and <sup>apparently flourishing and</sup> when the buying and selling of publishing houses at previously undreamed of prices hardly suggests that there is no longer money to be made from the printed word. But the fear is nevertheless very real. <sup>Professor</sup> George Steiner, in an article in the Times Literary Supplement of 1988 wrote that the library of tomorrow will, to a very large degree, be a complexity of electronic sources <sup>a)</sup> and the means of reception and that "although the paperback revolution and the need of undeveloped countries for

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text-books has given to the Gutenberg culture something of a second wind, it is by no means clear that literature will endure in its quintessential bookishness". The book is, indeed, endangered and as Mr <sup>D. Steiner</sup> Steiner wrote "we have hardly begun to grasp the extent to which in both entertainment and information, radio, the cinema and, first and foremost, television are appropriating the resources of time and of perception which were once the domain of the book".