

“The Book of the Future” and “Enrichment”

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The Book of the Future (1993)

¶₁ Manfred is one of the top computer experts in the country. “The book of the future,” he told me during his last visit, “will be like a dream. It will revolutionize reading and provide an atmospheric literary experience. And you won’t have to hold a meaty tome in your hands, or have miles of bookcases, or destroy all of the forests, because it will be paperless!” he continued enthusiastically. “Just a rectangle the size of your palm. Buy it once and then refuel it at the so-called Info-Filling-Stations whenever you like. For a nominal fee, your electronic library can instantaneously access and store any book in the world, in any language. Soon there will be self-service kiosks all over the place. You’ll simply insert your electronic book into one of these contraptions, type in the title you’re looking for, and fill it up. This little electrobook has a 300,000-page capacity. You can delete the books you’ve already read and save quotes for any occasion at the touch of a button, retrieving them as you wish.

¶₂ “But when you get home, that’s when the atmospheric experience really begins. Your monitor will transform into the page of a book with an array of selectable typefaces. The color and font size can likewise be set to your liking. Of course, you can flip the pages back and forth, but that’s certainly not all. At the mere swipe of your finger across a line of text, you can activate what they

call the “Acoustic File.” The receiver picks up an infrared signal, activating the “Sounder,” which is linked to top-notch quadrasonic speakers, to generate the passage’s soundscape. This allows you to hear the footsteps, the wind, the hum of the insects, a waterfall, indeed each and every background sound, as though you were wandering around inside the novel. But that’s still not all. A simultaneous signal is emitted from the receiver to the “Atmosphere File,” which controls the temperature, wind, humidity, and scentscape using a network of fans and spray hoses.

¶₃ “Generating the acoustic atmosphere presents no issues. That’s the beauty of sound, to be sure. It dies the moment it’s born. Smell is different. A hundred or so nozzles regulate the atmosphere so that it corresponds with that of the book. But how can a scent dissipate just as swiftly? After all, in some stories, the situation changes line by line. Take, for example, a chase sequence with gunfire through streets, nightclubs, homes, possibly even parking garages and swamps! Like I said, it’s no problem creating those atmospheres with these new computers, but getting rid of the smell has thus far proven impossible. Of course, computer-operated scentsuckers already exist, but such a device occupies an entire room and costs a pretty penny. Mind you, with this one purchase, you’d be set for life. You can set up the gizmo to guzzle up all the unpleasant odors in your house and re-

place them with others. And these computers will get smaller and, as a result, also cheaper, meaning that someday soon, every family will be able to afford an atmospheric literary experience of their very own.”

- ¶4 “What do you mean someday soon?” I responded triumphantly. “I already have such a system. It can do all of that and much more, plus it’s more environmentally friendly than your spray-and-suck-monster.”
- ¶5 My friend paused, momentarily stunned silent, before asking with a sheepish grin, “are you trying to pull my leg? This is still in the planning stages. It doesn’t exist yet!”
- ¶6 “Sure it does,” I said and tapped myself on the head.

Enrichment (2017)

- ¶7 Critics have sometimes praised my literary contributions as “enriching” German-language literature. The concept of “enrichment” has remained hazy, though, so I have asked myself how this was to transpire. Through the creation of new words? New expressions? New metaphors? All of that can take place when two or more cultures collide in the soul of the exilic author (in my case, it’s three: Aramaic, Arabic, and German), however, true enrichment lies not therein, but rather in the new perspective this literature offers. A foreigner brings along his angle, which is not a question of mere geometry; it clings to a person, to all those layers that have constituted his life up until then. A stance, question, or theme that may, for the majority of the population, seem ordinary, becomes astonishing, fascinating, and extraordinary. That is what is truly at the heart of enrichment.
- ¶8 I once wrote, “If, indeed, the creation of new words and metaphors engenders roses and flowers in the garden of the host language, then the other perspective plants an oak tree in this landscape. Chamisso’s *Schlemihl* is less a linguistic gem

than a perspectival one concerning an important topic, namely, the loss of identity ... Chamisso was the first to consider employing one’s shadow upon the earth poetically as the faintest yet simultaneously most decisive mark of existence under the sun. This and this alone will one day be the only enrichment that remains, because perspective clings to its bearer: a person.”

- ¶9 I am convinced that, for a non-native speaker, absolute perfection is a gratuitous, needless illusion. With diligence and imagination, one can produce poetry that inevitably subverts the language’s norms. As such, these original themes, schemes, and perspectives can take unfamiliar paths, albeit to the editors’ occasional consternation, or perhaps requiring more effort to make such literature readable.
- ¶10 It never fails to amaze me when a German author is praised for performing linguistic experiments or defying the rules of the German language. Such poetry is hailed as exceptional. In the case of a foreign author, the same experimentation would be deemed a mistake.
- ¶11 Just as Adalbert von Chamisso did in German, Joseph Conrad, too, spoke English with a strong accent and frequently made mistakes when writing in the host language.
- ¶12 Joseph Conrad decided upon English as a literary language, despite having a significantly worse command over it than Polish or French. Years ago, I read that, during an argument, Joseph Conrad’s literary agent had once snidely remarked, “to begin with, speak proper English.”
- ¶13 Authors who choose a language other than their national or mother tongue become the targets of malicious critique. Returning to Joseph Conrad—in my view, one of the world’s greatest writers—he was besieged not only by disparaging comments from the nobleman Vladimir Nabokov, who had spoken English from childhood, but also by injurious, imperiling invectives from his com-

patriots, who went so far as to accuse him of treason. Most notable among these were the attacks by then-prominent writer Eliza Orzeszkowa. She reproached him for his alleged “linguistic betrayal,” for “squandering his talents,” and for behavior that was “deeply unpatriotic and sinful.”

¶14 I am well acquainted with every one of these accusations.

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