Chapter 2
The Novel and the Death of Literature

The Ends of Literature
During the past decade, a number of critics, novelists, and essayists have announced the end of literature. For the literary theorist J. Hillis Miller, “[t]he end of literature is at hand. Literature’s time is almost up”; he goes on to explain that “[t]he printed book will retain cultural force for a good while yet, but its reign is clearly ending.”¹ The essayist Sven Birkerts, who has made a career out of elegizing the book, claims that “[t]he stable hierarchies of the printed page . . . are being superseded by the rush of impulses through freshly minted circuits.”² And according to the critic Alvin Kernan, morbid symptoms of the “death of literature” can be traced throughout the institutions of publishing, the university, and the law.³ Marshall McLuhan’s flamboyant assertions about the end of the print era, elaborated in The Gutenberg Galaxy and a string of other volumes published in the 1960s, have acquired a new currency in the last years of the twentieth century.

These commentators find ominous signs of the end of literature and the book in the rise of new technologies, the decline of literacy, and the emergence of postliterate subjects. Such conclusions are troubling, perhaps even debilitating to the novelist: the novel’s future lies at best in survival on the margins of an image-based culture. Any power to shape the larger culture is now or soon will be greatly restricted, as the larger culture turns increasingly to electronic media. Signs of such a future are evident today: visibility for the contemporary work of fiction means cinematic adaptation, while the canonical works of the past survive outside the classroom as pendants to the heritage industry. Even if complex, challenging works of fiction continue to appear, they will struggle henceforth to find readers attuned to their sophistication and daring. For the pessimist, the novel seems doomed to enjoy no more than a coterie

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following, its bygone authority dissipated or taken over by electronic cultural forms.

Such views express a conservative reaction against the cultural and technological changes of the final decades of the twentieth century. But they also reflect a genuine uncertainty as to the nature of literary field—the institutions and ideologies of the literary world—within the emerging media environment of the postmodern era. Arguments about the decline of literature, or even its demise, are efforts, however limited or defensive, to make sense of cultural change, to understand the place of literary reading and writing amid the turbulence of new cultural practices, markets, and technologies. As Carla Hesse has written, “what we are witnessing in the remaking of the modern literary system at the end of the twentieth century is not so much a technological revolution (which has already occurred) but the public reinvention of intellectual community in its wake.”

Though their efforts are often couched in the accents of technophobia and apocalypse, the elegists of the book try to mount a defense of literature, and specifically literary value, in terms of the public and private significance of the novel. They try, in other words, to imagine a community of minds forged through the reading and discussion of the literary text.

In this chapter, I examine the recent work of two distinguished novelists, John Barth and Philip Roth, writers whose careers span the postmodern literary enterprise, and who have articulated their cultural pessimism in essays, interviews, and above all novels. Their remarks about the close of the literary era echo those of other elegists of the book, while their fiction pursues complicated and impassioned explorations of the place of the novel in a culture transformed by new technology, changing sensibilities, and political malaise. What place is there for the novel, for the specific form of inquiry, representation, and narration that late-twentieth-century novels, informed by the modernist and postmodernist traditions, still have the power to offer? And how indeed can this power be exercised—why must it be exercised—in a climate of stark political and cultural divergence? For Barth and Roth the cultural environment in the last years of the century was in various ways inimical to their literary endeavors. Though both continued to write and to add new items to their formidable oeuvres, they struggled with the perception that their moment had passed; the white male writer could no longer take for granted the undivided attention of a serious literary readership.

Both novelists thus engage with the rhetoric of anxiety that surrounds the future of literary fiction in the last years of the twentieth century. In Barth’s essays particularly, the modernist theme of the death of the novel—wherein the startling innovations that have characterized fiction