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A Comeback for Writing, but Not Necessarily for Eloquence

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FOR all the cultural upheavals being wrought by new technology, the spread of writing may be one of the biggest. Everybody, it seems, is writing these days.

The catalyst is e-mail messages and Web chat. In electronic messages and conversations, millions of people who thought that after their schooling ended they would never have to worry about a semicolon again are spending time, lots of it, writing.

"E-mail is basically a kind of grass-roots rediscovery of writing," said Rob Wittig, who is director of Tank20, which puts fiction on the Web. "People didn't have a rule-based way of thinking about e-mail when they first got it. It was purely utilitarian. The verbal play and inventiveness of spoken conversation was able to jump the barrier into the new medium and get combined with visual things."

But the e-mail-chat culture may be ushering in the demise of the things that sustain it: grammar, syntax, spelling and, eventually, because of the visual, shorthand, hypertextual nature of the medium, possibly even some words. And as with any cultural upheaval, the changes are eventually appropriated by the eras' artists.

A typical e-mail message does away with commas and capital letters, and is riddled with misspellings, some of which are deliberate, most probably not. There is a lot of white space because the return key functions as punctuation. Acronyms and little pictures, called glyphs or emoticons, communicate thoughts and impressions. The freedom implicit in jettisoning grammatical rules could be what has enabled the e-mail-chat revolution to occur, unlocking the inner writer in everyone. Not having to abide by grammatical rules, as chat room visitors might say, makes them :).

But is writing e-mail and chatting really writing?

"E-mail is a huge time waster, but lots of fun," said the novelist Annie Dillard, whose book "The Writing Life" suggests that the writer has a responsibility to write as well as possible. Ms. Dillard doesn't deny that e-mail makes it easy for people to communicate by writing things down, but added: "There's no virtue in writing per se. It's like dribbling. Can you make the shot? is the question."

Some writers who still believe in the importance of things like etymology and spelling and grammar say more people writing more often can only help the march of literature itself.

"Anything that takes away the fear of writing has got to be very healthy," said William Zinsser, who teaches writing at the New School University in New York and whose book "On Writing Well" is a bible for a generation of writers looking for clues to clean, compelling prose. "What has been given back to people by e-mail is really their natural right to talk to someone else on paper without all these inhibitions that the school systems have foisted on them."

The ease of writing on the Internet may also be fostering a legion of would-be writers. Depending on one's point of view, this may or may not be a good thing.

Proponents of electronic literature say that in addition to unlocking the writer within, e-mail and chat are fostering a new wave of literacy. "People who didn't write letters, who didn't read books, now have textuality as part of their regular everyday experience," said Scott Rettberg, executive director of the Electronic Literature Organization, a group formed to promote online literature. As a result, a new language is developing, Mr. Rettberg said, and like all Internet phenomena, it is evolving quickly.

But Cynthia Ozick, the essayist, novelist and short-story writer, said that the speed and ease of composing on the computer doesn't help the language change but rather, it stunts it. Writing on the computer, she added, fosters prolixity; ease of use deprives the author of much-needed time to ponder. That disappoints her.

"At the start," Ms. Ozick said, "there was this excitement: We're going to enter an age like the new 18th-century epistolary, glorious age. We do have an epistles age -- it consists of grunts."

Mr. Wittig, who puts some of his writings on the Tank20 Web site, said that people should expect that writing will evolve. "Many people who are really smart make the mistake of identifying the beauty of language, love of language, history of language with their own beloved style," he said. "If there's anything that we learn from the long view of literary history is that styles change."

The ease and speed and casualness of writing found on the Internet has infected some authors who write work to be published online, including Ms. Ozick, who mostly uses pen and paper to write. In 1997, Ms. Ozick wrote a diary for the online magazine Slate. For the project, she broke with her handwriting routine and used a computer. The diary entries, now archived on the Slate site

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(www.slate.com), have a conversational quality not often associated with her. Ms. Ozick said she didn't notice any difference in tone between her Slate diary and her other work, but conceded, "I was writing for Slate, and you write for your audience."

Anne Lamott, the novelist and author of "Bird by Bird," a nonfiction book that is an inspiration for many writers, wrote a column for the online magazine Salon, called Word by Word. She said her experience writing the short essays was similar to that of the enchanted e-mail neophyte who fires off missives to everyone.

"The Internet was much more playful for me," Ms. Lamott said of writing for Salon (www.salon.com). "It was like open mike at a bookstore, much less lofty, much less elitist. You sure don't take yourself very seriously."

She says she now notices that her colleagues, too, are loosening their style for the online magazine. "The communication is the point, rather than the beauty of the sentence," Ms. Lamott said. "I think beautifully crafted sentences are really overrated."

There is a break in the clouds for those who fear the loss of the language, grammar, spelling and with them, compelling prose, even in the e-mail-chat world. It is one of the oldest reasons to write with care: love letters.

"In the Elizabethan period, being able to write a poem or a very sophisticated letter was a basic courtship tool," Mr. Wittig said. "The success of your affairs of the heart depended on your ability to write really well. The same holds true now." He predicted that 10 years from now, the best of these amorous exchanges will be published and enjoyed as literature.

On the Web, of course.