

The Gutenberg Elegies

The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age

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Introduction:

The Reading Wars

[See A in Reading Guide]

THE PREMISE THAT FUELED the writing of these essays—and which also holds them together—is simple, if drastic, and needs to be declared straightaway: Over the past few decades, in the blink of the eye of history, our culture has begun to go through what promises to be a total metamorphosis. The influx of electronic communications and information processing technologies, abetted by the steady improvement of the microprocessor, has rapidly brought on a condition of critical mass. Suddenly it feels like everything is poised for change; the slower world that many of us grew up with dwindles in the rearview mirror. The stable hierarchies of the printed page—one of the defining norms of that world—are being superseded by the rush of impulses through freshly minted circuits. The displacement of the page by the screen is not yet total (as evidenced by the book you are holding)—it may never be total—but the large-scale tendency in that direction has to be obvious to anyone who looks. The shift is, of course, only part of a larger transformation that embraces whole economies and affects people at every level. But, living as we do in the midst of innumerable affiliated webs, we can say that changes in the immediate sphere of print refer outward to the totality; they map on a smaller scale the riot of societal forces.

I cannot confront the big picture—I have neither the temerity nor the technological expertise. Instead, I have chosen to focus on the various ways in which literary practice, mainly reading, registers and transmits the shocks of the new. I do this in two stages. I begin by setting out an informal and highly subjective ecology of reading, an ecology ex-

trapolated from my own experience as a reader, and then I introduce the various elements, or forces, that threaten that frail set of balances. My discussions of reading will be seen to shade quite readily at times into discussions of writing or, later, criticism. This is not inadvertent sloppiness, but a recognition of the natural kinship of the various facets of literary exchange.

[See B in Reading Guide]

I would ask these same people to conceive of a time-lapse view of American domestic life—a vast motion study that would track a citizen or group of citizens through, say, four decades of American life. Let them watch what happens to the phenomenology of living; how since the 1950s countless technologies have been introduced and accommodated and how the fundamental transactions of existence have thereby been altered. At midcentury the average household had a radio and a rotary phone, and a small group of pioneers owned black and white televisions. In the 1990s, looking to the same sample milieu, we find several color TVs with remotes, with VCRs, with Nintendo capacities; personal computers, modems, fax machines; cellular phones, answering machines, car phones, CD players, camcorders . . . When the time-lapse is sufficiently accelerated, the drama of the transformation stands revealed. In less than a half century we have moved from a condition of essential isolation into one of intense and almost unbroken mediation. A finely filamented electronic scrim has slipped between ourselves and the so-called “outside world.” The idea of spending a day, never mind a week, out of the range of all our devices sounds bold, even risky.

Only part of this great change impinges directly upon the literary enterprise. But the overall rescripting of all societal premises is bound to affect reading and writing immensely. The formerly stable system—the axis with writer at one end, editor, publisher, and bookseller in the middle, and reader at the other end—is slowly being bent into a pretzel. What the writer writes, how he writes and gets edited, printed, and sold, and then read—all of the old assumptions are under siege. And these are just the outward manifestations. Still deeper shifts are taking place

in the subjective realm. As the printed book, and the ways of the book—of writing and reading—are modified, as electronic communications assert dominance, the “feel” of the literary engagement is altered. Reading and writing come to *mean* differently; they acquire new significations. As the world hurtles on toward its mysterious rendezvous, the old act of slowly reading a serious book becomes an elegiac exercise. As we ponder that act, profound questions must arise about our avowedly humanistic values, about spiritual versus material concerns, and about subjectivity itself.

I consider these matters and many others in the essays that follow. I do not pretend to be disinterested, however. Indeed, I have tried hard to resist the tone of a man who tries to find some good in everything. I speak as an unregenerate reader, one who still believes that language and not technology is the true evolutionary miracle. I have not yet given up on the idea that the experience of literature offers a kind of wisdom that cannot be discovered elsewhere; that there is profundity in the verbal encounter itself, never mind what further profundities the author has to offer; and that for a host of reasons the bound book is the ideal vehicle for the written word.

MahVuhHuhPuh

IT WAS VIRGINIA WOOLF who started me thinking about thinking again, set me to weighing the relative merits of the abstract analytical mode against the attractions of a more oblique and subjective approach.

[See D in Reading Guide]

I have had these various distinctions in mind for some time now, but only as a fidgety scatter of inklings. The magnet that pulled them into a shape was Woolf's classic essay, *A Room of One's Own*. Not the *what* of it, but the *how*. Reading the prose, I confronted a paradox that pulled me upright in my chair. Woolf's ideas are, in fact, few and fairly obvious—at least from our historical vantage. Yet the *thinking*, the presence of animate thought on the page, is striking. How do we sort that? How can a piece of writing have simple ideas and still infect the reader with the excitement of its thinking? The answer, I'd say, is that ideas are not the sum and substance of thought; rather, thought is as much about the motion across the water as it is about the stepping stones that allow it. It is an intricate choreography of movement, transition, and repose, a revelation of the musculature of mind. And this, abundantly and exalt-

ingly, is what I find in Woolf's prose. She supplies the context, shows the problem as well as her relation to it. Then, as she narrates her growing engagement, she exposes something more thrilling and valuable than any mere concept could be. She reveals how incidental experience can encounter the receptive sensibility and activate the mainspring of creativity.

I cannot cite enough text here to convince you of my point, but I can suggest the flavor of her musing, her particular way of intertwining the speculative with the reportorial. Woolf has, she informs us at the outset, agreed to present her views on the subject of women and fiction. In the early pages of her essay she rehearses her own perplexity. She is a writer looking for an idea. What she does is not so very different from the classic college freshman maneuver of writing a paper on the problem she is having writing a paper. But Woolf is Woolf, and her stylistic verve is unexcelled:

Here then I was (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought. That collar I have spoken of, women and fiction, the need of coming to some conclusion on a subject that raises all sorts of prejudices and passions, bowed my head to the ground. To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with color, even it seemed burned with the heat, of fire. On the further bank willows wept in perpetual lamentation, their hair about their shoulders. The river reflected whatever it chose of sky and bridge and burning tree, and when the undergraduate had oared his boat through the reflections they closed again, completely, as if he had never been. There one might have sat the clock round lost in thought. Thought—to call it by a prouder name than it deserved—let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the

water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating.

Soon enough, Woolf will rise and attempt to cross a patch of lawn, only to encounter a zealous beadle, who will not only shoo her back toward authorized turf, but will initiate her reverie on male power and privilege. This is her triumph: the trust in serendipity, which proves, when unmasked, to be an absolute faith in the transformative powers of the creative intellect. *A Room of One's Own*, whatever it says about women, men, writing, and society, is also a perfect demonstration of what might be called "magpie aesthetics." Woolf is the bricoleuse, cobbling with whatever is to hand; she is the flâneuse, redeeming the slight and incidental by creating the context of its true significance. She models another path for mind and sensibility, suggests procedures that we might consider implementing for ourselves now that the philosophers, the old lovers of truth, have followed the narrowing track of abstraction to the craggy places up above the timberline.

By now the astute reader will have picked up on my game—that I am interested not only in celebrating Woolf's cunningly sidelong approach, but that I am trying, in my own ungainly way, to imitate it. Woolf had her "collar" (women and fiction) thrust upon her; I have wriggled into mine—let's call it *reading and meaning*—of my own volition. I know that I face an impossible task. Who can hope to say anything conclusive on so vast a subject? But I opted for vastness precisely because it would allow me to explore this unfamiliar essayistic method. A method predicated not upon conclusiveness but upon exploratory digressiveness; a method which proposes that thinking is not simply utilitarian, but can also be a kind of narrative travel that allows for picnics along the way.

I invoke Woolf as the instigating presence. Her example sets the key signature for an inquiry into the place of reading and sensibility in what is becoming an electronic culture. Within the scheme I have in mind, Woolf stands very much at one limit. Indeed, her work is an emblem for some of the very things that are under threat in our age: differentiated subjectivity, reverie, verbal articulation, mental passion . . .

[See E, Reading Guide]

In the fall of 1992 I taught a course called “The American Short Story” to undergraduates at a local college. I assembled a set of readings that I thought would appeal to the tastes of the average undergraduate and felt relatively confident. We would begin with Washington Irving, then move on quickly to Hawthorne, Poe, James, and Jewett, before connecting with the progressively more accessible works of our century. I had expected that my students would enjoy “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” be amused by its caricatures and ghost-story element. Nothing of the kind. Without exception they found the story over-long, verbose, a chore. I wrote their reactions off to the fact that it was the first assignment and that most students would not have hit their reading stride yet. When we got to Hawthorne and Poe I had the illusion that things were going a bit better.

But then came Henry James’s “Brooksmith” and I was completely derailed. I began the class, as I always do, by soliciting casual responses of the “I liked it” and “I hated it” sort. My students could barely muster the energy for a thumbs-up or -down. It was as though some pneumatic pump had sucked out the last dregs of their spirits. “Bad day, huh?” I ventured. Persistent questioning revealed that it was the reading that had undone them. But why? What was the problem? I had to get to the bottom of their stupefaction before this relatively—*I thought*—available tale.

I asked: Was it a difficulty with the language, the style of writing? Nods all around. Well, let’s be more specific. Was it vocabulary, sentence length, syntax? “Yeah, sort of,” said one student, “but it was more

just the whole thing.” Hmmmmmm. Well then, I said, we should consider this. I questioned whether they understood the basic plot. Sure, they said. A butler’s master dies and the butler can’t find another place as good. He loses one job after another—usually because he quits—then falls into despair and disappears, probably to end it all. “You don’t find this moving?” One or two students conceded the pathos of the situation, but then the complaints resurfaced, with the original complainer chiming in again that it was not so much the story as “the whole thing.”

The whole thing. *What* whole thing? My tone must have reflected my agitation, my impatience with their imprecision. But then, after endless going around, it stood revealed: These students were entirely defeated by James’s prose—the medium of it—as well as by the assumptions that underlie it. It was not the vocabulary, for they could make out most of the words; and not altogether the syntax, although here they admitted to discomfort, occasional abandoned sentences. What they really could not abide was what the vocabulary, the syntax, the ironic indirection, and so forth, were communicating. *They didn’t get it*, and their not getting it angered them, and they expressed their anger by drawing around themselves a cowl of ill-tempered apathy. Students whom I knew to be quick and resourceful in other situations suddenly retreated into glum illiteracy. “I dunno,” said the spokesman, “the whole thing just bugged me—I couldn’t get into it.”

Disastrous though the class had been, I drove home in an excited mood. What had happened, I started to realize, was that I had encountered a conceptual ledge, one that may mark a break in historical continuity. This was more than just a bad class—it was a corroboration of something I had been on the verge of grasping for years. You could have drawn a lightbulb over my head and turned it on.

What is this ledge, and what does it have to do with the topic I’ve embarked upon? To answer the second question: Everything. As I wrote before: the world we have known, the world of our myths and references and shared assumptions, is being changed by a powerful, if often intangible, set of forces. We are living in the midst of a momentous paradigm shift. My classroom experience, which in fact represents hundreds of classroom experiences, can be approached diagnostically.

This is not a simple case of students versus Henry James. We are not

concerned with an isolated clash of sensibilities, his and theirs. Rather, we are standing in one spot along a ledge—or, better, a fault line—dividing one order from another. In place of James we could as easily put Joyce or Woolf or Shakespeare or Ralph Ellison. It would be the same. The point is that the collective experience of these students, most of whom were born in the early 1970s, has rendered a vast part of our cultural heritage utterly alien. *That* is the breaking point: it describes where their understandings and aptitudes give out. What is at issue is not diction, not syntax, but everything that diction and syntax serve. Which is to say, an entire system of beliefs, values, and cultural aspirations.

In Henry James are distilled many of the elements I would discuss. He is inward and subtle, a master of ironies and indirections; his work manifests a care for the range of moral distinctions. And one cannot “get” him without paying heed to the least twist and turn of the language. James’s world, and the dramas that take place in that world, are predicated on the idea of individuals in an organic relation to their society. In his universe, each one of those individuals are still surrounded by an aura of importance; their actions and decisions are felt to count for something.

I know that the society of James’s day was also repressive to many, and was, further, invested in certain now-discredited assumptions of empire. I am not arguing for its return, certainly not in that form. But this was not the point, at least not in the discussions I then pursued with my students. For we did, after our disastrous James session, begin to question not only our various readings, but also the reading act itself and their relation to it. And what emerged was this: that they were not, with a few exceptions, readers—never had been; that they had always occupied themselves with music, TV, and videos; that they had difficulty slowing down enough to concentrate on prose of any density; that they had problems with what they thought of as archaic diction, with allusions, with vocabulary that seemed “pretentious”; that they were especially uncomfortable with indirect or interior passages, indeed with any deviations from straight plot; and that they were put off by ironic tone because it flaunted superiority and made them feel that they were missing something. The list is partial.

All of this confirmed my longstanding suspicion that, having grown

up in an electronic culture, my students would naturally exhibit certain aptitudes and lack others. But the implications, as I began to realize, were rather staggering, especially if one thinks of this not as a temporary generational disability, but rather as a permanent turn. If this were true of my twenty-five undergraduates, I reasoned, many of them from relatively advantaged backgrounds, then it was probably true for most of their generation. And not only theirs, but for the generations on either side of them as well. What this meant was not, narrowly, that a large sector of our population would not be able to enjoy certain works of literature, but that a much more serious situation was developing. For, in fact, our entire collective subjective history—the soul of our societal body—is encoded in print. Is encoded, and has for countless generations been passed along by way of the word, mainly through books. I'm not talking about facts and information here, but about the somewhat more elusive soft data, the expressions that tell us who we are and who we have been, that are the record of individuals living in different epochs—that are, in effect, the cumulative speculations of the species. If a person turns from print—finding it too slow, too hard, irrelevant to the excitements of the present—then what happens to that person's sense of culture and continuity?

These are issues too large for mere analysis; they are over-determined. There is no way to fish out one strand and think it through. Yet think we must, even if we have to be clumsy and obvious at times. We are living in a society and culture that is in dissolution. Pack this paragraph with your own headlines about crime, eroded values, educational decline, what have you. There are many causes, many explanations. But behind them all, vague and menacing, is this recognition: that the understandings and assumptions that were formerly operative in society no longer feel valid. Things have shifted; they keep shifting. We all feel a desire for connection, for meaning, but we don't seem to know what to connect with what, and we are utterly at sea about our place as individuals in the world at large. The maps no longer describe the terrain we inhabit. There is no clear path to the future. We trust that the species will blunder on, but we don't know where *to*. We feel imprisoned in a momentum that is not of our own making.

I am not about to suggest that all of this comes of not reading Henry

James. But I will say that *of* all this comes not being *able* to read James or any other emissary from that recent but rapidly vanishing world. Our historically sudden transition into an electronic culture has thrust us into a place of unknowing. We have been stripped not only of familiar habits and ways, but of familiar points of moral and psychological reference. Looking out at our society, we see no real leaders, no larger figures of wisdom. Not a brave new world at all, but a fearful one.

The notion of historical change compels and vexes me. I am not so much interested in this war or that treaty or invention, although obviously these are critical factors. What I brood about has more to do with the phenomenology of everyday life. How it is that the world greets the senses differently—is experienced differently—from epoch to epoch. We know about certain ways in which the world has changed since, say, 1890, but do we know how the *feeling* of life has changed? We can isolate the more objective sorts of phenomena, cite improvements in transportation, industrial innovations, and so on, but we have no reliable access to the subjective realm. When older people sigh and say that “life was different back then,” we may instinctively agree, but how can we grasp exactly what that difference means?

[See F, Reading Guide]

There is a difference between this sort of reflection and that more-piercing awareness we call nostalgia. Nostalgia is immediate, and tends to be more localized. As often as not, it is triggered by an experiential short-circuit; our awareness of the present is suddenly interrupted by an image, a feeling, or a sensation from the past. A song on the radio, an old photograph discovered in the pages of a book. The past catches us by surprise and we are filled with longing; for that thing, that person, that place, but more for the selves that we were then.

Like everyone else, I am subject to these intrusions. I distinguish them from the more sustained sorts of excavations that I have been undertaking recently. I am not in search of private sensation, but of a kind of understanding. I want to know what life may have been like during a certain epoch, what daily living may have felt like, so that I can make a comparison with the present. Why? I suppose because I believe

that there is a secret to be found, a clue that will help me to solve the mystery of the present.

It happened that while I was in this season of thinking about time and the life of the past I rented a video of a film called *Fools of Fortune*, based on a novel by William Trevor. It was a desperate grab, really, a bid to cancel the residue of an enervating day. But as soon as I popped the cassette into the player I felt my obsessions again coalesce. The opening moments of the film reproduced what were meant to be bits of old 8-mm footage. Jerky, erratic, bleached and pocked by time. A child toddling forward across a grand lawn, a manor house in the background. A woman in a garden chair with period clothing and hairstyle. All cinematic artifice, of course, but I was entirely susceptible to it.

The film depicted Ireland in the early years of our century, during the time of the civil war. I was most struck by what seemed its real sensitivity to the conditions of the provincial life it recorded. Lingered shots of silent rooms, of people working in uninterrupted solitude, of people walking and walking, carts slowly rolling. I may be tailoring my memory of the film to fit my need, but never mind. And never mind the fact that I was sitting in my 1990s electronic cottage, watching actors in a commercial production on my videocassette player. For a few moments I succumbed to the intended illusion: I was looking through a window at the actual past, at things as they had once been. I was overwhelmed, really, by the realization of change. In a matter of decades—from the time of my grandparents to the time of the present—we have, all of us, passed through the looking glass.

At one point in the film the main character walks along the side of a brick building, toward the town square. An unremarkable scene, transitional filler. Yet this was, for some reason, the moment that awakened me. I thought: If I could just imagine myself completely into this scene, see my surroundings as if through the eyes of this person, then I would know something. I tried to perform the exercise in different ways. First, by taking a blind leap backward, restricting myself to just those things he might have encountered, imagining for myself the dung and coal-smoke scent of the spring air, the feel of rounded cobblestones under my shoes, a surrounding silence broken by the sounds of hammers,

cartwheels, and hooves. A nearly impossible maneuver, but attempting it I realized how much has to be forcibly expunged from awareness.

I have also tried working myself back gradually from present to past, peeling off the layers one by one: taking away televisions and telephones (all things “tele-”), airplanes, cars, plastics, synthetic fibers, efficient sanitation, asphalt, wristwatches, and ballpoint pens, and on and on. The effect is quite extraordinary. I feel a progressive widening of space and increase of silence, as well as a growing specific gravity in objects. As I move more deeply into the past, I feel the encroachment of place; the specifics of locale get more and more prominent as the distance to the horizon increases. So many things need to be reconstituted: the presence of neighbors; the kinds of knowledge that come from living a whole life within a narrow compass; the aura of unattainable distance that attaches to the names of faraway places—India, Ceylon, Africa . . . And what was it like to live so close to death? And what about everything else: the feel of woven cloth, the different taste of food, drink, pipe tobacco? From the center of the life I imagine, a life not even a century old, I find it impossible to conceive of the life I am living now. The looking glass works both ways.

The chain of association is the lifeline, or fate, of thought. One thing leads to another; ideas gather out of impressions and begin to guide the steps in mysterious ways. After my experience of watching *Fools of Fortune*, I decided that I should find a novel from the period. To read it with an eye for those very “background” features—to derive some further sense of the feel of life in a pre-electronic age. I picked up Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*.

Read this way, with as much attention paid to the conditions of life as to the lives themselves, *Jude* becomes another window opening upon *how it was*. From the very first sentences, the spell of the past is woven:

The schoolmaster was leaving the village, and everybody seemed sorry. The miller at Cresscombe lent him the small white tilted cart and horse to carry his goods to the city of his destination, about twenty miles off, such a vehicle proving of quite sufficient size for the departing teacher’s effects.

To enter the work at all we need to put our present-day sense of things in suspension; we have to, in effect, reposition the horizon and reconceive all of our assumptions about the relations between things. Hardy's twenty miles are not ours. The pedagogue does not pile his belongings into the back of a Jeep Cherokee. His "effects" fit easily into a small horse-drawn cart he has borrowed. The city, called Christminster in the novel, is within walking distance of the village of Marygreen, but the distance means something. Soon enough, Hardy's Jude will stand on a nearby hill straining to catch a glimpse of that city's spires. He will dream of one day going there: to Jude it is the far edge of the world. Not because he could not with some pluck walk there to see it himself, but because he knows, as does everyone, that places are self-contained. Christminster is not just a point on a grid, it is a small world with its own laws, its own vortex of energies; it is *other*. And reading *Jude* we begin to grasp distinctions of this sort.

It would take too long to address as they deserve the myriad ways in which Jude's world is different from ours. But as we read we are gradually engulfed by a half-familiar set of sensations. Because the characters walk, we walk; because they linger by roadsides or in market squares, we do too. And by subtle stages we are overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by the size of the world. If Christminster is a trip, then London, hardly even mentioned, is a journey. And America, or any other country, is a voyage. The globe expands, and at the same time our sense of silence deepens. No background hum, no ambient noise. When people communicate, it is face to face. Or else by letter. There are no telephones or cars to hurriedly bridge the spatial gaps. We hear voices, and we hear footsteps die away in the distance. Days pass at a pace we can hardly imagine. A letter arrives and it is an event. The sound of paper unfolding, of wind in the trees outside the door. And then the things, their *thingness*. Jude's little hoard of Greek and Latin grammars, the smudgy books he had scrimped to buy—books he carried with him until his dying day. His stoneworking tools: well cared for, much prized. I suddenly think of lines from Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Crusoe in England." The castaway has returned "home" after his long years on the island:

[See G, Reading Guide]

Now I live here, another island,
 that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?
 My blood was full of them; my brain
 bred islands. But that archipelago
 has petered out. I'm old.
 I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,
 surrounded by uninteresting lumber.
 The knife there on the shelf—
 it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
 It lived. How many years did I
 beg it, implore it, not to break?
 I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
 the bluish blade, the broken tip,
 the lines of wood-grain on the handle . . .
 Now it won't look at me at all.
 The living soul has dribbled away.
 My eyes rest on it and pass on.

This is it, no? The densities of meaning once conferred, since leached out. Our passage into bright contemporaneity has carried a price: The more complex and sophisticated our systems of lateral access, the more we sacrifice in the way of depth. Read *Jude the Obscure* and you will be struck, I think, by the material particularity of Hardy's world. You will feel the heft of things, the solidity. You will also feel the stasis, the near-intolerable boredom of boundedness.

Advantages and disadvantages—how could it be otherwise? I speak as if longingly of those times, but would I trade the speed and access and comfort of my life for the rudeness and singularity of that? I doubt it. But then, I have the benefit of hindsight. I am in the position of the adult who is asked if he would return once and for all to his childhood. The answer is yes and no.

And the purpose of this rambling excursion? Am I simply lamenting the loss of something I could not bear to recover—a gone world? No. What I intended, in the obscure way one intends these things when writing, was to wander away from the specter of my American short story class, wander until the reader's memory traces should have all but faded, and then to bring the image of those students forward again. To

[See H, Reading Guide]

try one more time to make something of my intuition: that their unease before Henry James's "Brooksmith" has a larger significance, that it is not just another instance of young minds being put off by James's assumptions of civilization, but rather that that unease illuminates something central about our cultural condition and its prospects.

Obviously it is too simplistic to blame the students' discomfiture, not just with James but with demanding texts in general, upon any one thing, such as television, video games, inadequate secondary schools, or what have you. To do so would be to miss the larger point: that the situation is total and arises from systemic changes affecting the culture at every level. And while the situation thus defies ready analysis, it nevertheless has the greatest consequences for all of us and must somehow be addressed. We are at a watershed point. One way of processing information is yielding to another. Bound up with each is a huge array of attitudes, assumptions, and understandings about the world.

We can think of the matter in terms of gains and losses. The gains of electronic postmodernity could be said to include, for individuals, (a) an increased awareness of the "big picture," a global perspective that admits the extraordinary complexity of interrelations; (b) an expanded neural capacity, an ability to accommodate a broad range of stimuli simultaneously; (c) a relativistic comprehension of situations that promotes the erosion of old biases and often expresses itself as tolerance; and (d) a matter-of-fact and unencumbered sort of readiness, a willingness to try new situations and arrangements.

In the loss column, meanwhile, are (a) a fragmented sense of time and a loss of the so-called duration experience, that depth phenomenon we associate with reverie; (b) a reduced attention span and a general impatience with sustained inquiry; (c) a shattered faith in institutions and in the explanatory narratives that formerly gave shape to subjective experience; (d) a divorce from the past, from a vital sense of history as a cumulative or organic process; (e) an estrangement from geographic place and community; and (f) an absence of any strong vision of a personal or collective future.

These are, granted, enormous generalizations. But they record what a great many of my students have said of themselves and their own experiences. For, apart from talking about their responses to texts, we

talked a good deal about their lives. They were as interested as I was in discussing how their sense of the world had bearing on their reading. What surprised me was the degree to which their own view of themselves was critical.

[See I, Reading Guide]

I rue all of this, but I can take it. Reading and writing will last long enough to cover my stay here below. Indeed, I have resolved to make the crisis—I see it as such—my subject. But I also look toward the future as a father. I have a five-year-old daughter and cannot but think of the

ways in which her life will be different than mine. And when, in my darker moods, I contemplate the forces that will determine so much of her experience, her subjective outlook, I feel a sharp sense of regret. Then it seems to me that unless her mother and I are able to equip her with an extraordinary doggedness and with a strong appetite for what is unique and vital, she will be swept up in the tide of the homogeneous. If she goes to a school where reading is not prized, if she follows the non-reading horde of her peers, where will she find the incentive, the desire to read on her own? And if she does not read on her own, where will she find the nutrients she needs in order to evolve an independent identity?

We do what we can, and we try to do it in a noncoercive way. We promote the pleasures of the book by example, by forever reading. And we try to make the encounter enjoyable. We buy books, borrow them from the library, and read to her regularly. But we also try to avoid any association of the medicinal—that books are good for her and that reading is a duty. So far it seems to be working. She is eager; she recognizes that books are a place away from routine, a place associated with dreams and fantasies.

On the one side, then, is the reading encounter, the private resource. On the other is the culture at large, and the highly seductive glitter of mass-produced entertainment. We are not so foolish as to prohibit it, but I sometimes wonder if we are being as wise as we might be in not curtailing it more. We have entered the world of Disney, and I am seized by the fear that there might be no way out. This past season it was *Beauty and the Beast*. I don't just mean that we saw the movie in the theater once or twice, which would have been the beginning and end of it when I was a child; we saw the movie three, four, five times. We bought the book, illustrated with stills from the movie, and we read that, and looked through it, half a hundred times. The cassette of the songs was purchased and played until the emulsion on the tape wore thin. Then, for Christmas, the video. Another thirty viewings, maybe more. And then the ice show with the *Beauty and the Beast* theme, and the accessories (flashlight, cup) that can perch on the shelf alongside the plastic *Beauty and the Beast* toys given out at Burger King.

Today as never before in human history the child lives in an entertainment environment, among myriad spinoffs and products and com-

mercial references, all of which reinforce the power, or should I say tyranny, of the movie. I relent in the face of it. I was raised quite strictly so I am, in my turn, lenient. I don't have the heart to deny my daughter what she covets and what all her friends have. I see the pleasure she takes in occupying this vivid universe and I want her to have it. I tell myself that it will feed her imagination and that she will soon enough grow into more intricate and demanding fantasies.

And then I despair. I conjure up a whole generation of children enslaved by a single carefully scripted, lushly animated narrative. Not even a narrative created by a single artist, but a team product. A studio job. And I wonder what tale or rhyme or private fantasy will be able to compete with the high-powered rendition from Hollywood's top talents. Is her imagination being awakened, or stultified, locked forever on a kind of assembly-line track? What is the effect of these dozens and dozens of repetitions? What are the overt and subliminal messages she is taking in? What is she learning about men, women, love, honor, and all the rest? Is she incorporating into her deepest subjective structure a set of glib clichés? Will she and her millions of peers, that huge constituency that comprises our future and that is underwriting the global growth of the Disney empire—will all of these kids march forward into adulthood as Disney automatons, with cookie-cut responses to the world they encounter?

I have these fears, and yet I remain permissive. I suppose that is in part because I believe that mass culture is so pervasive these days that it is folly to try to hide from it; that if I do curtail it I will invest it with all that much more appeal. But my permissiveness also depends upon a kind of wager, or a profession of faith. I let the rivers of popular culture (the less-polluted ones) flow freely around my daughter. But at the same time I do everything I can to introduce her to books and stories. I trust that in the free market of the child's imagination these more traditional goods are interesting and unique enough to hold their own. No less important, I stake myself on the basic vitality and independence of that child's soul. I cannot allow that we are so limited, so acquiescent in our basic makeup that we can be stamped to shape like identical cogwheels by the commercial machinery, however powerful that machinery may be.

The good and the true, I believe, will win out. But for that to happen

there must be exposure. The child needs to know the range of pleasures. There is room for *Beauty and the Beast* à la Disney, but only when the field includes the best that has been imagined and written through the ages. I believe, I believe—help mine unbelief.

[See J, Reading Guide]

I have been accused of being alarmist and conservative and prey to excessive nostalgia. And I accuse myself of cowardly pessimism. Why can't I embrace the necessity of historical progress? I have my reasons.

1. I believe that what distinguishes us as a species is not our technological prowess, but rather our extraordinary ability to confer meaning on our experience and to search for clues about our purpose from the world around us.

2. I believe, too, that meaning of this kind—call it “existential” meaning—has from the beginning been the product of our other great distinguishing aptitude: the ability to communicate symbolically through language. Indeed, language is the soil, the seedbed, of meaning. And the works of language, our literatures, have been the repository of our collective speculation.

3. Literature holds meaning not as a content that can be abstracted

and summarized, but as experience. It is a participatory arena. Through the process of reading we slip out of our customary time orientation, marked by distractedness and superficiality, into the realm of duration. Only in the duration state is experience present as meaning. Only in this state are we prepared to consider our lives under what the philosophers used to call "the aspect of eternity," to question our origins and destinations, and to conceive of ourselves as souls.

I am not going to argue against the power and usefulness of electronic technologies. Nor am I going to suggest that we try to turn back or dismantle what we have wrought in the interests of an intensified relation to meaning. But I would urge that we not fall all over ourselves in our haste to filter all of our experience through circuitries. We are in some danger of believing that the speed and wizardry of our gadgets have freed us from the sometimes arduous work of turning pages in silence.