THE GUTENBERG ELEGIES

THE FATE OF READING IN AN ELECTRONIC AGE

SVEN BIRKERTS

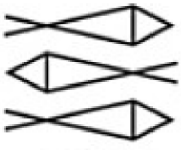

Table of Contents

Introduction to the 2006 Edition

THE DECADE OF THE 1990s was a classic historical watershed. There were many of us who still believed, figuratively speaking, that Planet Earth was the center of the solar system, even as evidence was fast piling up that this might not be the case. Technologically speaking, things had arrived at the so-called tipping point, and life was about to change very seriously. The digital bit had made enormous gains on the material atom; fluid instantaneity and unprecedented electronic connectivity were rapidly becoming the order of the day. The heralds of the new—the so-called digerati—were proselytizing zealously for a new world order, while the skeptics chewed nervously at their cuticles and feared the demise of all they held dear.

I was one of the skeptics. I still am, though I hasten to say I have had to make all kinds of accommodations in the past decade, integrating the computer into various facets of my life—to the point where I now live with one foot firmly planted in the new world. Which means what? That I am neither here nor there? Or that I'm better positioned than I was before to survey both places at once? How I answer this depends on what day you ask the question. Mainly, I think it means that I'm now a more self-divided skeptic, that I have had to dilute my former romantic-idealistic opposition to the digital revolution with a good dose of the reality principle.

The Gutenberg Elegies was written in a mood of private emergency, from the midst of what felt like a news-flash reality that was getting more intense every day. The essays reflect this, reverting again and again to a kind of satellite view of human history (an illogical analogy, but it will serve) in which the slow cumulative rate of change of former times

was held up alongside the fast-forward changes we were all living through. Yeats's "Second Coming" was surely at hand, I thought, except that the beast was not "slouching towards Bethlehem to be born," but galloping full tilt, the pace of transformation far exceeding our powers of absorption. A mind-boggling renovation of the familiar was in the offing, and everything—social and cultural practices, relationships, and of course reading, writing, and literature—had to be reconsidered in its light. My tone was alarmed—"alarmist," said the book's critics—and my forecasts often grim.

More than a decade has now passed—no time at all in the old scheme of things, but very nearly an epoch in the new—and while the sense of transition is still in the air, we feel it more like the after-gust of something that has just gone racketing by. There is the sense that the main event has happened—the literal and psychological shift from an unwired to a wired world—and that we are now dealing with expansions and refinements on the one hand, and the deeper work of psychological acclimatization on the other. We are, it seems, most willing to accept a life hurried and fragmented on every front by technology; we are getting past the prior way of things, which could be slow and frustrating, but was also vivid in its material totality.

The essays, I find, still make a great deal of sense to me, as a record of this cultural watershed but also for the points they put forward and the anxieties they express. These last have not been vanquished, and in some ways the changes are dispiriting. The onetime reigning assumptions of the humanities have been deeply shaken, if not yet dethroned—this is clear—even if we still agree to pay them a certain homage. Literature and old-style contemplative reading seem enfeebled—almost as if they need to be argued for, helped along by the elbow. Not that people don't write and read in a thousand different ways; they do. Arguably, they "write" and "read" more than they ever have. But the belief in the gathered weight of literary expression, what we used to consider our cultural ballast, is fading and is likely to fade

further.

Given all this, the plural noun “elegies” remains apt.

There is no stepping twice into the same river—we know that—and neither is there any returning to the scene of the crime without facing the fact that everything looks conspicuously different. Were the curtains always open? Did I really leave the butcher knife right there on the kitchen counter? Was this the drama that felt so urgent, all this business with screens and hypertext and CD-ROMs? Well, yes and no. Those were the leading-edge developments of the early 1990s, but others have overtaken them. Hard as it is to believe now, the Internet and the World Wide Web and e-mail were still mainly in the wings back then, as were Googling, podcasting, iPods, blogging, and dozens of “essential” new refinements that we’ve already absorbed into our daily behaviors.

Looking back, I can see that most of these technologies were to some degree anticipated, there in outline in my anxious speculations about the widening, tightening, all-engulfing electronic mesh. But if I agree with my mapping of the overall tendency, I would now change certain things about the way I conferred emphasis. I granted the computer a kind of demonic supremacy back then: it seemed as if all roads led to the silicon chip. If I were writing the same essays now, I would lay much more stress on the fact that *all* our new technologies affect us in tandem. They modify our reflexes and expectations at the same time that they wrap us up in an invisible fabric—like the one that the fabled Emperor wore, only this fabric is strangely actual, and capable of obscuring the nakedness underneath. The larger development, as I see it, is an unprecedented merging of devices and functions, so that a phone is a camera is an Internet portal is a television …

Receiving and transmitting—the potency of digital information lies in its compression and flow, its supple malleability. We are, with that ever-amazing hi-tech effortlessness, threading ourselves to others in the great universe of signals. In terms of psychological implications,

this is probably *the* core development. The speed and amniotic feel of the process are phenomenal, their impact yet to be assessed. Messages, data packets, images, and sound flash from person to person, all exertion of transmission obviated. Already, in the early years of the new millennium, the volume of exchange defies computation—and we are just in the early stages. If information were visible—color-coded, let's say—then the incoming alien observer would see not blue ocean but a glowing aurora borealis-like shimmer, an omnidirectional pulsing of colored light. Our new world.

Still, for me the original question remains: What does this steadily throbbing shimmer hold for us? How is it revising our ideas about the larger human project? What continuities remain, and how do we contend—collectively and individually—with all the breaks and rifts, all the spots where traditions can no longer carry us over? These essays were written when the spirit of asking was fresh, but a decade-plus later, that asking still remains.

The different transformations of book culture and reading that I address impinge directly on the larger culture. What has changed in that culture since I wrote? And do the changes bear me out? I am sufficiently convinced by my overall "take" to say that they do. In the largest view, I see a deep transformation in the nature of reading, a shift from focused, sequential, text-centered engagement to a far more lateral kind of encounter. Chip and screen have at one and the same time inundated us with information—pages to view, links to follow, media supplements to incorporate—and modified our habits. They have put single-track concentration, the discipline of reading, under great pressure. In its place we find the restless, grazing behavior of clicking and scrolling. Attention spans have shrunk and fragmented—the dawning of the age of ADD—and the culture of literary publishing struggles with the implications. Who has the time or will to read books the way people used to? Book sales, when not puffed up by marketed "infotainment," by "nonbooks," are stagnant at best.

Literature—fiction—is languishing. Indeed, at present, fiction is under assault by *non*fiction, by documentary and memoir. I don't see that a return to the status quo ante is likely.

The triumph of the digital seems to have also brought the triumph of the factual. As literature, as the *idea* of literature, suffers depreciation, it gets ever harder to make the case for imagination. And what is imagination if not the animating power of inwardness? The subjective self takes in the world and fashions meaning; art and religion are its supreme exertions. This was the deep latent theme of *The Gutenberg Elegies*, and I worry about the loss as much as I did before.

The big question, though less grand and encompassing, is the question implicit in the book's subtitle: What will be the fate of reading? I don't mean the left-to-right movement of the eyes as we take in information, but the age-old practice of addressing the world by way of this inward faculty of imagination. I mean reading as a filtering of the complexities of the real through artistic narrative, reflection, and orchestration of verbal imagery. Our reconfigured world makes these interactions—this kind of reading—ever harder to accomplish. The electronic impulse works against the durational reverie of reading. And however much other media take up the stack—of storytelling, say—what is lost is the contemplative register. And this, in the chain of consequences, alters subjectivity, dissipates its intensity.

François Rabelais, the great scholar and bon vivant of the Renaissance, advised that "the soul does not dwell in a dry place." He meant the statement as a call to the pleasures of drinking. Without disputing the author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel,* I would add that neither does the soul flourish among signals and distractions. The soul needs silence, time, and concentration—precisely what is required by the counter-technology of the book. The object you hold, an instance of this counter-technology, is built to resist the cataract of distractions engulfing our lives.

S.B.
February 2006

Introduction:

The Reading Wars

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 extrapolated 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.

I have been developing my ideas on paper and in conversation for several years now and I have come to inhabit my assumptions like a comfortable room. They are so familiar, so self-evident to me that I am always taken aback to find that, to say the least, they are not universally shared. The so-called "Luddite" stance is not especially popular these days, at least among intellectually "progressive" people. These progressives tend to equate technological primitivism, or recidivism, with conservatism of the N.R.A. stripe. The implication would seem to be that the new technology has a strictly liberal pedigree. But a moment's contemplation of the electronic ministries of the televangelists or resources of our Defense Department think tanks ought to disabuse us of that notion. I don't think the technology question breaks down along conventional political lines.

Closer to home, I see many of my culturally savvy friends and colleagues carrying on as if very little is really changing, as if we are living in the midst of a fundamentally static environment. They greet my assertions with shrugs and impatient expressions that say, "Are you *still* carping about computers and television?" And no matter what perspectives or evidence I offer, I am met with the "it's just" response. The word processor, the laptop? "It's just a tool, a more efficient way of …" Electronic bulletin boards and networks? "They're just other ways for people to connect." The prospect of books on disk? "What's the difference? The *words* don't change …" These are often the same people who insist that writers are flourishing, that publishing is healthy, and that readers are reading like never before. I sometimes wonder if my thoughtful friends and I are living in the same world.

These people, my affable adversaries in argument, including all of the well-meaning empiricists who like to assert that "the more things change, the more they stay the same," make up the first tier of my targeted readers. It is their expressions and their rebuttals, real or imagined, that I have in mind as I write. I have thought long and hard about their refusal—or inability—to grant me my thesis of a millennial transformation of society. Are they, I wonder, suffering from the empiricist's particular nearsightedness, or am I entertaining a delusion? Naturally I prefer to think that the problem lies with them—that they cannot credit what they cannot *see* happening, and that they cannot see the transformation going on around us because they cannot pry themselves free from their synchronic worldview. They are not, most of them, interested in projecting backward and forward in time—they prefer the here and now.

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.

These are, in some ways, pessimistic perspectives. Pessimistic, certainly, if we measure the state of things according to the old humanist assumptions about the sovereignty of the individual. These essays are extrapolations, predictions, warnings. But they are

counterbalanced—not refuted, alas—by a number of pieces that were written in a spirit of celebration. When intimations of the brave new future began to drag me down, I had recourse to the place of nourishment. I read and thought about reading, and I indulged my long-standing predilections in a number of reflections on the subject. These represent the faithful heart of this not always cheerful project.

Although this book does have a central premise, it is not what my five-year-old daughter would call a "chapter book." That is to say, the argument is not conducted in linear fashion, but rather by way of what I think of as organic clusters. Each essay was conceived as a freestanding entity; each emerged from its own private compulsion. But as many of the essays depend on the central premise in one way or another, certain thematic recurrences are inevitable. To eliminate these would be to compromise the individual essays. My hope—my faith—is that the recurrences are not simply repetitions but are in fact differently angled approaches to a cultural situation which cannot be sufficiently remarked. I ask similar indulgence, while offering no excuses, for the mixture of discursive and autobiographical—or disinterested and interested—strategies. My investment in the topic of reading is too deep and too partisan to allow me the detachment of the watchful bystander. The more confiding essays at the beginning of the book should be seen as the soil in which the seeds of the later meditations were embedded. Everything here ultimately originates in the private self—that of the dreamy fellow with an open book in his lap.

PART I

The Reading Self

1

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. The comparison was ventured for interest alone. Abstract analysis has been closed to me for some time—I find I can no longer chase the isolated hare. Problems and questions seem to come toward me in clusters. They appear inextricably imbedded in circumstance and I cannot pry them loose to think about them. Nor can I help factoring in my own angle of regard. All is relative, relational, Einsteinian. Thinking is now something I partake in, not something I do. It is a complex narrative proposition, and I am as interested in the variables of the process as I am in the outcome. I am an essayist, it seems, and not a philosopher.

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 Woolfs 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. Woolfs 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 exaltingly, 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 dock 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 Woolfs 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 …

Before I go on, I must make a paradoxical admission: I was spurred to read *A Room of One's Own* by watching a televised adaptation of the book. On the program, Eileen Atkins, playing the part of Woolf, soliloquized for a full hour. Her address, supposedly directed at an audience of women at Girton College, was composed of extracted passages from the text. Armed with minimal props and a rather extraordinary repertoire of gestures, Atkins held forth. And I, wedged into my corner of the couch, was mesmerized. By the acting, sure, but more by the sheer power and beauty of the spoken word. Here, without seeming archaic or excessively theatrical, was a language such as one never hears—certainly not on TV. I was riveted. And as soon as the show was over I went to find the book.

A Room of One's Own, I'm happy to say, stood up to its television rendition—indeed, galloped right past it. And it has spent many nights since on my bedside table. But the paradox remains: Just as Woolf's charged prose shows us what is possible with language, so it also forces us to face

the utter impoverishment of our own discourse. And as we seek to explain how it is that flatness and dullness carry the day, we have to lay at least part of the blame at the feet of our omnipotent media systems. And yet, and yet … here I found myself reintroduced to the power of Woolf by the culprit technology itself.

This is the sort of thing I tend to think about. I ponder the paradox—stare at it as if it were an object on the desk in front of me. I stare and wait for ideas and intuitions to gather, but I do not unpack my instruments of reason. For, as I see it, this little triad—of me, TV, and book—potentially touches every aspect of our contemporary lives and our experience of meaning. To think about the matter analytically would be to break the filaments of the web.

I will therefore set down what amount to a few anecdotal provocations and go wandering about in their midst. All of my points of focus have, as you will see, some connection to my immediate daily experience; they are embedded in the context of my life. But they also have a discernible link. For I *have* been going around for quite some time with a single question—a single imprecisely general question—in my mind. The interrogation mark has been turned upside down and, to follow Woolf, lowered into the waters of my ordinary days. It is always there, and, from time to time, for whatever reason, it captures the attention of some swimming thing. I feel a tug: The paper is produced, the note gets scribbled, and the hook is thrown back out.

The question, again, is, "What is the place of reading, and of the reading sensibility, in our culture as it has become?" And, like most of the questions I ponder seriously, this one has been around long enough to have become a conspicuous topographical feature of my mental landscape. In my lifetime I have witnessed and participated in what amounts to a massive shift, a wholesale transformation of what I think of as the age-old ways of being. The primary human relations—to space, time, nature, and to other people—have been subjected to a warping pressure that is something new under the sun. Those who argue that the

very nature of history is change—that change is constant—are missing the point. Our era has seen an escalation of the rate of change so drastic that all possibilities of evolutionary accommodation have been short-circuited. The advent of the computer and the astonishing sophistication achieved by our electronic communications media have together turned a range of isolated changes into something systemic. The way that people experience the world has altered more in the last fifty years than in the many centuries preceding ours. The eruptions in the early part of our century—the time of world wars and emergent modernity—were premonitions of a sort. Since World War II we have stepped, collectively, out of an ancient and familiar solitude and into an enormous web of imponderable linkages. We have created the technology that not only enables us to change our basic nature, but that is making such change all but inevitable. This is why I take reading—reading construed broadly—as my subject. Reading, for me, is one activity that inscribes the limit of the old conception of the individual and his relation to the world. It is precisely where reading leaves off, where it is supplanted by other modes of processing and transmitting experience, that the new dispensation can be said to begin.

None of this, I'm afraid, will seem very obvious to the citizen of the late twentieth century. If it did, there would be more outcry, more debate. The changes are keyed to generational transitions in computational power; they come in ghostly increments, but their effect is to alter our lives on every front. Public awareness of this expresses itself obliquely, often unconsciously, as nostalgia—a phenomenon which the media brokers are all too aware of. They hurry to supply us with the necessary balm: media productions and fashions that harken back reassuringly to eras that we perceive as less threatening, less cataclysmic. But this is another subject. We are, on a conscious level, blinkered to change. We adapt to the local disturbances. We train ourselves to computer literacy, find ways to speed up our performance, accept higher levels of stress as a kind of

necessary tax burden, but by and large we ignore the massive transformations taking place in the background. This is entirely understandable. The present hastens us forward, at every moment sponging up what preceded it. Only when we wrench ourselves free and perform the ceremony of memory do we grasp the extent of the change. In our lives, in the world. Then indeed we may ask ourselves where we are headed and what is the meaning of this great metamorphosis of the familiar.

I was recently reading a novel by Graham Swift entitled *Ever After.* At one point, the narrator, an adult looking back upon his youth, recalls how he used to race on his bike to a private lookout post from which he could watch the great steam engines go hurtling past. Calling upon the privileged hindsight of his narrator, Swift writes:

> Between Aldermaston Wharf and Midgham, where the Reading-to-Newbury line clipped the side of the hill and entered a short cutting —a favorite spot for these enthralled vigils, so limply known as "train-spotting"—I could look out on a vista which might have formed the model for one of those contrived scenes in a children's encyclopedia, depicting the theme of "Old and New." River, canal and railway line were all in view. At a single moment it would have been perfectly possible to see, in the background, the old watermill on the Kennet, with a horse working the field before it; in the middle distance, a barge on the canal; and in the foreground, a train racing for the cutting; while no less than three road bridges provided a fair opportunity for some gleaming motor car (complete with an inanely grinning couple in the front seats) to be brought simultaneously into the picture.
>
> I must have seen it once—many times—that

> living palimpsest. And no doubt I should have been struck by some prescient, elegiac pang at the sight of these great expresses steaming only to their own oblivion, and taking with them a whole lost age.

I found the passage a compelling analogy of our own situation, only instead of modes of transport in the palimpsest I would place book, video monitor, and any of the various interactive hypertext technologies now popping up in the marketplace. Looking up from Swift's page, I wondered what it would be like to look back upon our own cultural moment from a vantage of, say, thirty years. Are we not in a similar transitional phase, except that what is roaring by, destined for imminent historical oblivion, is the whole familiar tradition of the book? All around us, already in place, are the technologies that will render it antiquated.

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.” Hmmmmm. 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 ref erence. 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?

On the other hand, we all inhabit multiple time zones. We have the world of our daily present, which usually claims most of our attention, but we are also wrapped in shadowy bands of the past. First, we have the layers of our own history. The older we get, the more substantial grows the shadow—and the greater the gap between the world as we know it now and the world as it used to be. At the outer perimeter, that indistinct mass of memories shades together with another mass. These are the memories we grew up among. They belong to our parents and grandparents. Our picture of the world, how it is and how it used to be, is necessarily tinged with what we absorbed from innumerable references and anecdotes, from the *then* that preceded us.

Thus, as a man in my early forties, I already carry a substantial temporal baggage. I am a citizen of the *now*, reading the daily paper, sliding my embossed card into the money machine at the bank, and renting a video for the evening's relaxation. But I am also other selves: a late starter, a casualty of the culture wars of the 1960s, an alienated adolescent sopping up pop culture and dreaming of escape, an American kid growing up in the 1950s, playing touch football and watching "I Love Lucy." An American kid? I should say a kid trying very hard to be an American kid. For although I was born here, both my parents were from the old country, Latvia, and my childhood was both subtly

and overtly permeated by their experience—their stories of growing up in Riga, of war and dispersal. And how it was for them naturally became a part of how it was for me.

Nor did it end there. I also grew up with grandparents. And from them I imbibed still another sense of time. Visiting their home, I circulated among their artifacts, heard their reminiscences. Through them I made contact, however indirectly, with a world utterly unlike anything I know now: a world at once more solid and grim, a world that held gaps and spaces and distances. Although my grandparents both grew up in towns, they had roots in rural places. Their stories were filled with farm and country lore. Indeed, until quite late in their lives they had no car, no TV. Even the telephone had something newfangled about it. Their anecdotes unfolded in a different order, at a different pace. They had one foot in the modern era and one foot back in the real past. By that I mean the past that had seen generation upon generation living more or less in the same way—absorbing incremental change, yes, but otherwise bound to a set of fundamental rhythms.

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. Lingering 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:

> 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 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 aptitudes, 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.

But these are all abstract considerations while the pressure that compels me to write this is very much rooted in daily experience and in my own fears. I worry not only that the world will become increasingly alien and inhospitable to me, but also that I will be gradually coerced into living against my natural grain, forced to adapt to a

pace and a level of technological complexity that does not suit me, and driven to interact with others in certain prescribed ways. I tried to live without a telephone answering machine for a time and was made to feel like a pariah. I type these words on an IBM Selectric and feel positively antediluvian: My editors let me know that my quaint Luddite habits are gumming up the works, slowing things down for them.

These are trivial examples, but they are indicative. On one level or another we make our adjustments; we shrug and bow to progress. But the fact is that with each capitulation we are drawn more deeply into the web. True, none of the isolated changes make that much difference—but the increasing enmeshment does. The more deeply we are implicated, the more we forfeit in the way of personal initiative and agency; the more we become part of a species-organism. Every acquiescence to the circuitry is marked by a shrinkage of the sphere of autonomous selfhood.

As a writer I naturally feel uneasy. These large-scale changes bode ill for authorship, at least of the kind I would pursue. There are, we know this, fewer and fewer readers for serious works. Publishers are increasingly reluctant to underwrite the publication of a book that will sell only a few thousand copies. But very few works of any artistic importance sell more than that. And those few thousand readers—a great many of them, it turns out, are middle-aged or older. The younger generations have not caught the habit.

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 commercial 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.

The form of my meditation has been—as I warned—loose. Liberated by the example of Woolf, I have at times let the line of thought go trailing away. But there is also a point to these musings. To put it simply: We have, perhaps without noticing, slipped over a crucial threshold. We have rather abruptly replaced our time-honored and slow-to-evolve modes of communication and interaction with new modes. We have in significant ways surmounted the constraints imposed by nature, in the process altering our relation to time, space, and to each other. We have scarcely begun to assess the impact of these transformations—that will be the work of generations. What I have tried to suggest is that some of our fundamental assumptions about identity and subjective meaning need to be examined carefully. For, by moving from the order of print to the electronic, we risk the loss of the sense of obstacle as well as the feel of the particular that have characterized our experience over millennia. We are poised at the brink of what may prove to be a kind of species mutation. We had better consider carefully what this means.

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