

IN THE CORPOREAL AGE, WE WILL KNOW THE NAMES OF TREES

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It's dangerous to predict the future; I don't go in for it much. Today is all we have and all we know, I always say. This philosophy perhaps comes with age. I used to fret over the future a lot: I made plans; I saved up (money and other kinds of capital—emotional and creative, for instance); I assumed things about who I'd be and what I'd be doing and with whom I'd be doing it, *x* or *xx* years down the road. Considering the future is nothing terrible in itself; it's just when those considerations begin outweighing the present, the here and now, that you get into trouble. You start arranging, and projecting, and spending your energy on either making it so (if your predictions are desirable ones) or twisting about in avoidance (if they are not). You begin living by fear—of what will or will not happen.

That said, we can still speak in terms of *hopes*, can't we? Cornel West has said (my paraphrase) that hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism says, "Things will get better." Hope is what we exercise in spite of our knowledge that things may not get better.

The future of books, the book world, and the role of the writer is our topic. Predictions abound because we're in such a wacky moment, a hyperflux-y moment. Art, commerce, and technology are colliding like so many boiling-point particles. All the players are scrambling to survive, to thrive, to stay ahead of the (hairpin) curve. As a writer, it would be easy to fall into all that arranging and projecting and twisting about; it could also be fatal.

In 2010, I consider myself neither young nor old, so it's particularly important for me, I suppose, to both embrace realism and willfully lean toward hope. So: What might we imagine to be around that bend, realistically? And how might we hope to respond?

As we consider the future of books—the creation, distribution, and consumption thereof—we are considering, I think, questions of human behavior in a changing environment. Meaning, all debates about the evolution of books and book culture are, at heart, debates about human nature. What do we, as readers and writers, need, desire, fear, value; and how will these manifest in our choices and behavior as we accelerate further into the digital age?

Realistically: the printed book, in hardcover at the least, may well go by the wayside. By all accounts, digital technologies and the market are pushing print, as we know it, to the margins. Along with this, the prospect of making a living as a writer is dwindling; what can be got for free will not be paid for, and while commercial players will surely reorient to identify and exploit alternative income streams, the writer—my guess—will be the first to be edged out from whatever miniscule monetary rewards he managed to eke out in the first place. And surprisingly (to me), many reader-consumers are content to go along for the digital ride; bytes of literature are evidently as good as pages, especially if the price point for a new release drops as a result.

The writer will thus increasingly find that his primary talents, energies, and time will pour into work for which he will not be

compensated; he will divert more and more time and energy toward non-writing work, which earns a living. For some, this may be just fine—that teaching job, or advertising job, or arts administration job is not so bad, the humble writer might say or think; merely the cost of doing business; to write is a privilege at any rate. (Some authors may begin earning their primary living via “personal connection” opportunities, such as speaking engagements—writing-related, perhaps, and yet for many authors the furthest cry from writing.) An attitude of wistful resignation will set in, a deep-sighing acceptance of this state of affairs, perhaps an occasional harkening back to a warmer, more vibrant time in cultural-literary life, when the work of the writer was revered just a little, and valued, materially.

All this may well be the reality of the moment. There is little, thus, about which the writer may be optimistic, materially speaking.

My *hope*, on the other hand, is that the above trajectory is not a foregone conclusion; or if it is, not a permanent one. I return to basic questions of human nature. Is it possible that human nature has undergone a sky-scraping pendulum swing toward the immaterial, toward hyper-volume and hyper-plurality, toward breadth over depth, multi-tasking over focus, lateral over vertical, mobility over fidelity, speed over slowness; and that soon we'll be swinging back (if we have not already begun doing so)?

We are swinging wide and high, and have been doing so for some time. There is euphoria about this for some, a sense of infinite possibility, gates thrown open for writers and readers alike: The hyperlink is the golden key, the silver bullet, one click to the publisher's cash-in, or the writer's fame, or the reader's emotional-intellectual fulfillment. But there is also discomfort, overload, disorientation. Too much of a good thing. Wading in shallow pools of generalism, gorging our information and infinite-selection appetites to soul-sickness.

Pendulum swings of this kind seem to accompany major advances in culture and civilization. The analogy that comes to mind is the evolution of feminism. Women (middle-class women, I should say) are professional peers to men, leaders in every sector, married and unmarried, straight and gay; they are, in a word, Out. But now that they are Out, they are struggling also to get back In—to be true to their bodies, which for many means both the joys and physical demands of motherhood, hearth-and-home for the twenty-first century. Women have been on the pendulum swing toward professional and intellectual achievement, and they are swinging back. They are reclaiming the corporeal: soul equals mind *and* body.

The analogy extends. The digital age has flung us Out of our bodies. I think—I hope, the way Dr. West exhorts us to hope—that we’re going to want back In. That the Information Age will give way to the Corporeal Age.

In the Corporeal Age, an e-book will seem like astronaut food, or a Slim-Fast diet. And a Facebook “friend” will smack of Kubrik-esque creepiness, with all the porousness and self-revelation of social networking eventually striking our children, and children’s children, as bizarrely dysfunctional; where were our boundaries? We’ll resurrect *Dirty Dancing* as a cult classic—again, finding our way back into our bodies en route to soul-wellness—and embrace the mantra given to us by the late Patrick Swayze: “This is my dance space, this is your dance space.”

Mobility will grow tiresome; we’ll want to stay put and re-discover what it means to have roots—longevity, fidelity to place. We’ll hold down jobs for longer, stop packing up and moving to a different neighborhood, apartment, city, every 2.5 years. We’ll acquire heavy, solid-wood bookshelves that do not disassemble with an Allen wrench and won’t be thinking, when considering buying a printed book, that we’ll have to box and haul these in a

year or two. Our two-week or three-month “breaks” from Facebook—“Need to detox! Back in a bit!”—will extend indefinitely. We’ll go for long walks (not on treadmills), we’ll rekindle our romance with the land, we’ll garden and keep goats and chickens, and we’ll know, as Nabokov is said to have insisted for aspiring writers, the names (and perhaps even the scents) of trees. We’ll chew on less information more deeply, and laugh at how we once thought everything was knowable as long as we sat at our computers and i-devices, acquiring more and more information, apps, favorites, blogrolls.

Those of us who write will write better books. We’ll pare back on blog-blabbing, will be freer from self-consciousness, quieter in our heads, slower and less distracted, more imaginatively limber and inventive.

Those of us who read will read more books. We’ll pare back on blog-surfing, will be quieter in our heads, slower and less distracted, more imaginatively limber and inventive.

None of this is true prediction; prediction is backed by gobs of information, of data. For me, it’s more a feeling in the air, a feeling of potential—energy gathered up into the pendulum at its apex, suspended and replete. It’s a what-goes-up-must-come-down-one-way-or-another kind of feeling. In that sense, whether you are optimistic or pessimistic, hopeful or dispirited, it is clear that our needs, desires, fears, and values are at stake; and what could be more exciting for literature?