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The Future of Time:
Literature and Diminished Expectations

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Time, it seems, has no future. That is, time no longer seems to be an endless stream through which the human species moves with confidence in its own increasing consequence and value. It certainly seems not to have a future that equals the length or breadth or sweep or even the fascination of its past. Infinity is now, apparently, the domain of the past. In spite of frenzied anticipation of immanent entry into the next millennium, the quality of human habitation within its full span occupies very little space in public exchange. Twenty or forty years into the twenty-first century appears to be all there is of the "real time" available to our imagination. Time is, of course, a human concept, yet in the late twentieth century (unlike in earlier ones) it seems to have no future that can accommodate the species that organizes, employs and meditates on it. The course of time seems to be narrowing to a vanishing point beyond which humanity neither exists nor wants to. It is singular, this diminished, already withered desire for a future. Although random outbreaks of armageddonism and a persistent trace of apocalyptic yearnings have disrupted a history that was believed to be a trajectory, it is the past that has been getting longer and longer. From an earth thought in the seventeenth century to have begun around 4,000 B.C.; to an eighteenth century notion of an earth 168,000 years old; to a "limitless" earthly past by the nineteenth century to Darwin's speculation that one area of land was 300 million years old we see no reason not to accept Bergson's image of a "past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances."

Oddly enough it is in the modern West—where advance, progress and change have been signatory features—where confidence in an enduring future is at its slightest.

Pharaohs packed their tombs for time without end. The faithful were once content to spend a century perfecting a cathedral. But now, at least since 1945, the comfortable assurance of a "World without End" is subject to debate and, as we approach year 2000, there is clearly no year 4000 or 5000 or 20,000 that hovers in or near our consciousness.

What is infinite, it appears, what is always imaginable, always subject to analysis, adventure and creation is past time. Even our definitions of the period we are living in have prefixes pointing backwards: post-modern, post structuralist, post colonial, post Cold War. Our contemporary prophecies look back, behind themselves, post, after, what has gone on before. It is true, of course, that all knowledge requires a grasp of its precedents. Still it is remarkable how often imaginative forays into the far and distant future have been solely and simply opportunities to re-imagine or alter the present as past. And this looking back, though enabled by technology's future, offers no solace whatsoever for humanity's future. Surrounding the platform from which the backward glance is cast is a dire repulsive landscape.

Perhaps it is the disruptive intervention of telecommunication technology, which so alters our sense of time, that encourages a longing for days gone by when the tempo was less discontinuous, closer to our own heartbeat. When time was anything but money. Perhaps centuries of imperialist appropriations of the future of other countries and continents have exhausted faith in our own. Perhaps the visions of the future that H.G. Wells saw—a stagnant body of never rippled water—have overwhelmed us and precipitated a flight into an eternity that has already taken place.

There are good reasons for this rush into the past and the happiness its exploration, its revision, its deconstruction affords. One reason has to do with the secularization of culture. Where there will be no Messiah, where afterlife is understood to be medically absurd, where the concept of an "indestructible soul" is not only unbelievable but increasingly unintelligible in intellectual and literate realms, where passionate, deeply held religious belief is associated with ignorance at best, violent intolerance at its worst, in times as suspicious of eternal life as these are, when "life in history supplants life in eternity," the eye, in the absence of resurrected or reincarnated life, becomes trained on the biological span of a single human being. Without "eternal life," which casts humans in all time to come—forever—the future becomes discoverable space, outer space, which is, in fact, the discovery of more past time. The discovery of billions of years gone by. Billions of years—ago. And it is Ago that unravels before us like a skein the origins of which remain unfathomable.

Another reason for this preference for an unlimited past is certainly fifty years of life in the nuclear age in which the end of time {that is human habitation within it} was and may still be a very real prospect. There seemed no point in imagining the future of a species there was little reason to believe would survive. Thus an obsession for time already spent became more than attractive; it became psychologically necessary. And the

terrible futureless-ness that accompanied the cold war has not altered so much (in the wake of various disarmaments and freezes and non-proliferation treaties) as gone underground. We are tentative about articulating a long earthly future; we are cautioned against the luxury of its meditation as a harmful deferral and displacement of contemporary issues. Fearful, perhaps, of being likened to missionaries who were accused of diverting their converts' attention from poverty during life to rewards following death, we accept a severely diminished future.

I don't want to give the impression that all current discourse is unrelievedly oriented to the past and indifferent to the future. The social and natural sciences are full of promises and warnings that will affect us over very long stretches of future time. Scientific applications are poised to erase hunger, annihilate pain, extend individual life spans by producing illness-resistant people and disease-resistant plants. Communication technology is already making sure that virtually everyone on earth can "interact" with each other and be entertained, maybe even educated, while doing so. We are warned about global changes in terrain and weather that can alter radically human environment; we are warned of the consequences of mal-distributed resources on human survival and warned of the impact of over-distributed humans on natural resources. We invest heavily in these promises and sometimes act intelligently and compassionately on the warnings. But the promises trouble us with ethical dilemmas and a horror of playing God blindly, while the warnings have left us less and less sure of how and which and why. The prophecies that win our attention are those with bank accounts large enough or photo ops sensational enough to force the debates and outline corrective action, so we can decide which war or political debacle or environmental crisis is intolerable enough; which disease, which natural disaster, which institution, which plant, which animal, bird or fish needs our attention most. These are obviously serious concerns. What is noteworthy among the promises and warnings is that other than products and a little bit more personal time in the form of improved health, and more resources in the form of leisure and money, to consume these products and services, the future has nothing to recommend itself.

What will we think during these longer, healthier lives? How efficient we were in deciding whose genes were chosen to benefit from these "advances" and whose were deemed unworthy? No wonder the next twenty or forty years is all anyone wants to contemplate. To weigh the future of future thoughts requires some powerfully visionary thinking about how the life of the mind can operate in a moral context increasingly dangerous to its health. It will require thinking about the generations to come as life forms at least as important as cathedral-like forests and glistening seals. It will require thinking about generations to come as more than a century or so of one's own family line, group stability, gender, sex, race, religion. Thinking about how might we respond if certain our own line would last 2,000, 12,000 more earthly years. It will require thinking about the quality of human life, not just its length. The quality of intelligent life, not just its strategizing abilities. The obligations of moral life, not just its ad hoc capacity for pity.

It is abundantly clear that in the political realm the future is already catastrophe. Political discourse enunciates the future it references as something we can leave to or assure "our" children or—in a giant leap of faith—"our" grandchildren. It is the pronoun, I suggest, that ought to trouble us. We are not being asked to rally for **the** children, but for **ours**. **Our** children stretches our concern for two or five generations. **The** children gestures towards time to come of greater, broader, brighter, possibilities—precisely what politics veils from view. Instead political language is dominated by glorifications of some past decade, summoning strength from the pasted-on glamour of the twenties—a decade rife with war and the mutilation of third world countries; from attaching simplicity and rural calm to the thirties—a decade of economic depression, worldwide strikes and want so universal it hardly bears coherent thought; from the righteous forties when the "good war" was won and millions upon millions of innocent died wondering, perhaps what that word, good, could possibly mean. The fifties, the current favorite, has acquired a gloss of voluntary orderliness, of ethnic harmony, although it was a decade of outrageous political and ethnic persecution. And here one realizes that the dexterity of political language is stunning, stunning and shameless. It enshrines the fifties as a model decade peopled by model patriots while at the same time abandoning the patriots who lived through them to reduced, inferior or expensive healthcare; to gutted pensions; to choosing suicide or homelessness.

What will we think during these longer healthier lives? How successful we were in convincing our children that it doesn't matter that their comfort was wrested and withheld from other children? How adept we were in getting the elderly to agree to indignity and poverty as their reward for good citizenship?

In the realm of cultural analyses not only is there no notion of an extended future, history itself is over. Modern versions of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* are erupting all over the land. Minus, however, his conviction that the modern world contained an unsurpassable "will to the Future." The "landslide" began in 1973 according to Eric Hobsbawm. And that post-sixties date is more or less the agreed upon marker for the beginning of the end. Killing the sixties, turning that decade into an aberration, an exotic malady ripe with excess, drugs and disobedience is designed to bury its central features—emancipation, generosity, acute political awareness and a sense of shared and mutually responsible society. We are being persuaded that all current problems are the fault of the sixties. Thus contemporary American culture is marketed as being in such disrepair it needs all our energy to maintain its feeble life support system.

Seen through the selectively sifted grains of past time, the future thins out, is dumbed down, limited to the duration of a thirty-year Treasury bond. So we turn inward, clutching at a primer book dream of family, strong, ideal, protective. Small but blessed by law, and shored up by nineteenth century "great expectations." We turn to sorcery: summoning up a brew of aliens, pseudo enemies, demons, false "causes" that deflect and soothe anxieties about gates through which barbarians saunter; anxieties about language falling into the mouths of others. About authority shifting into the hands

of strangers. Civilization is neutral, then grinding to a pitiful, impotent halt. The loudest voices are urging those already living in dread of the future to speak of culture in military terms—as a cause for and expression of war. We are being asked to reduce the creativity and complexity of our ordinary lives to cultural slaughter; we are being bullied into understanding the vital exchange of passionately held views as a collapse of intelligence and civility; we are being asked to regard public education with hysteria and dismantle rather than protect it; we are being seduced into accepting truncated, short term, CEO versions of our wholly human future. Our everyday lives may be laced with tragedy, glazed with frustration and want, but they are also capable of fierce resistance to the dehumanization and trivialization that politico-cultural punditry and profit-driven media depend upon.

We are worried, for example, into catalepsy or mania by violence—our own and our neighbors' disposition toward it. Whether that worry is exacerbated by violent images designed to entertain, or by scapegoating analyses of its presence, or by the fatal smile of a telegenic preacher, or by weapons manufacturers disguised as occupants of innocent duck blinds or bucolic hunting lodges, we are nevertheless becoming as imprisoned as the felons who feed the booming prison industry by the proliferation of a perfect product: guns. I say perfect because from the point of view of the weapons industry the marketing is for protection, virility, but the product's real value, whether it is a single bullet, a thousand tons of dynamite or a fleet of missiles, is that it annihilates itself immediately and creates, thereby, the instant need for more. That it also annihilates life is actually a by-product.

What will we think during these longer more comfortable lives? How we allowed resignation and testosterone rationales to purloin the future and sentence us to the dead end that endorsed, glamorized, legitimated, commodified violence leads to? How we took our cue to solving social inequities from computer games? winning points or votes for how many of the vulnerable and unlucky we eliminated? winning seats in government riding on the blood lust of capital punishment? winning funding and attention by re-vamping 1910 sociology to credit "innate" violence and so make imprisonment possible at birth? No wonder our imagination stumbles beyond 2030—when we may be regarded as monsters to the generations that follow us.

If scientific language is about a longer individual life in exchange for an ethical one; if political agenda is the xenophobic protection of a few families against the catastrophic others; if religious language is discredited as contempt for the non-religious; if secular language bridles in fear of the sacred; if market language is merely an excuse for inciting greed; if the future of knowledge is simply "upgrade," where also might we look for hope in time's own future?

I am not interested here in signs of progress, an idea whose time has come and gone—gone with the blasted future of the monolithic Communist state; gone also with the fallen mask of capitalism as free, unlimited and progressive; gone with the deliberate

pauperization of peoples that capitalism requires; gone also with the credibility of phallogocentric "nationalisms." But gone already by the time Germany fired its first deathchamber. Already gone by the time South Africa legalized Apartheid and gunned down children in dust too thin to absorb their blood. Gone, gone in the histories of so many nations mapping their geography with lines drawn through their neighbors' mass graves; fertilizing their lawns and meadows with the nutrients of their citizens' skeletons; supporting their architecture on the spines of women and children. No, it isn't progress that interests me. I am interested in the future of time.

Because art is temporal and because of my own interests, my glance turns easily to literature in general and narrative fiction in particular. I know that literature no longer holds a key place among valued systems of knowledge; that it has been shoved to the edge of social debate; is of minimal or purely cosmetic use in scientific, economic discourse. But it is precisely there, at the heart of that form, where the serious ethical debates and probings are being conducted. What does narrative tell about this crisis in diminished expectations?

I could look for an Edith Wharton shouting "Take your life"—that is take on your life! For a Henry James (in *A Sense of the Past*) appalled by an ancient castle that encloses and devours its owner. For a William Faulkner envisioning a post-nuclear human voice however puny. For a Ralph Ellison posing a question in the present tense signaling a sly and smiling promise of a newly sighted [visible] future. For a James Baldwin's intense honesty coupled with an abiding faith that the price of the ticket had been paid in full and the ride begun. Those voices have been followed, perhaps supplanted, by another kind of response to our human condition. Modern searches into the past have produced extraordinary conceptual and structural innovations.

The excitement of anticipating a future, once a fairly consistent preoccupation of nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, has recently been reproduced in an amazing book by Umberto Eco—*The Island of the Day Before*. And its title makes my point. The genius of the novel's narrative structure is having the protagonist located in the seventeenth century in order to mesmerize us with future possibilities. We are made to take desperate pleasure in learning what we already know to have taken place long ago. And this extraordinary novel is, as the author tells us, "a palimpsest of a rediscovered manuscript." Through its construction and its reading we move forward into an already documented history. When the power and brilliance of many late twentieth century writers focus on our condition, they often find a rehearsal of the past to yield the most insightful examination of the present and the images they leave with us are instructive.

Peter Hoeg, whose first novel nailed us relentlessly in the present, turns in *History of Danish Dreams* to a kind of time travel (associated with though not similar to Eco's) in which regression becomes progression.

"...if I persist," Hoeg writes at the end of this novel, "in writing the history of my family, then it is out of necessity. Those laws and regulations and systems and patterns that my family and every other family in Denmark has violated and conformed to and nudged and writhed under for two hundred years are now in fact in a state of foaming dissolution.... Ahead lies the future, which I refuse to view as Carl Laurids did: down a gun barrel; or as Anna did: through a magnifying glass. I want to meet it face-to-face, and yet I am certain that if nothing is done, then there will be no future to face up to, since although most things in life are uncertain, the impending disaster and decline look like a safe bet. Which is why I feel like calling for help--...and so I have called out to the past.

"...now and again the thought strikes me that perhaps I have never really seen other people's expectations; that I have only ever seen my own, and the loneliest thought in the world is the thought that what we have glimpsed is nothing other than ourselves. But now it is too late to think like that and something must be done, and before we can do anything we will have to form a picture of the twentieth century."

Forming a picture of the twentieth century then--not the twenty-first--is, in this novel, the future's project.

William Gass, in a masterful work, *The Tunnel*, sustains a brilliant meditation on the recent past forever marked by Nazi Germany. In it his narrator/protagonist having completed a "safe" morally ambivalent history of German fascism, a work titled *Guilt and Innocence in Nazi Germany*, finds himself unable to write the book's preface. The paralysis is so long and so inflexible, he turns to the exploration of his own past life and its complicitous relationship to the historical subject of his scholarship--"a fascism of the heart." Gass ends the novel in heartbreaking images of loss,

"...suppose," he writes, "that instead of bringing forth flowers the bulb retreated to some former time just before it burgeoned, that pollen blew back into the breeze which bore it toward its pistil, suppose the tables were turned on death, it was bullied to begin things, and bear its children backward, so that the first breath didn't swell the lung but stepped on it instead, as with a heavy foot upon a pedal; that there was...a rebellion in the ranks, and life picked the past to be in rather than another round of empty clicks called present time.... I made...a try. I abandoned Poetry for History in my Youth.

"What a journey, though, to crawl in earth first, then in filth swim; to pass through your own plumbing, meet the worms within. And realize it. That you were. Under all the world. When I was a kid I lied like a sewer system. I told my sometime chums I went there. To the realm of shades. And said I saw vast halls, the many chambers of endless caves, magic pools guarded by Merlins dressed in mole fur and cobweb, chests overflowing with doubtless dime-store jewelry, rooms of doubloon, and, suddenly, through an opening jagged as a rip in rotten cloth, a new sun shining, meadows filled with healthy flowers, crayon-colored streams, oh, the acres of Edens

inside ourselves...

"Meanwhile carry on without complaining. No arm with armband raised on high. No more booming bands, no searchlit skies. Or shall I, like the rivers, rise? Ah. Well. Is rising wise? Revolver like the Fuhrer near an ear. Or lay my mind down by sorrow's side."

This is no predictable apocalyptic reflex, surfacing out of the century's mist like a Loch Ness hallucination. This is a mourning, a requiem, a folding away of time's own future.

What becomes most compelling therefore, are the places and voices where the journey into the cellar of time does not end with a resounding slam of a door, but where the journey is a rescue of sorts, an excavation for the purposes of building, discovering, envisioning a future. I am not, of course, encouraging and anointing happy endings—forced or truly felt—or anointing bleak ones intended as correctives or warnings. I mean to call attention to whether the hand which holds the book's metaphors is an open palm or a fist.

In *The Salteaters*, Toni Cade Bambara opens this brilliant novel with a startling question: "Are you sure you want to be well?" Are you sure you want to be well? What flows from that very serious inquiry is a healing that requires a frightened modern day Demeter to fathom and sound every minute of her and her community's depths, to re-think and re-live the past—simply to answer that question. The success of her excavation is described in these terms:

"...what had driven Velma into the oven...was nothing compared to what awaited her, was to come.... Of course she would fight it, Velma was a fighter. Of course she would reject what could not be explained in terms of words, notes, numbers or those other systems whose roots had been driven far underground.... Velma's next trial might lead to an act far more devastating than striking out at the body or swallowing gas.

"The patient turning smoothly on the stool, head thrown back about to shout, to laugh, to sing. No need of Minnie's hands now. That is clear. Velma's glow aglow and two yards wide of clear unstreaked white and yellow. Her eyes scanning the air surrounding Minnie, then examining her own hands, fingers stretched and radiant. No need of Minnie's hands now so the healer withdraws them, drops them in her lap just as Velma, rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl that drops down on the stool a burst cocoon."

The title of Salmon Rushdie's latest novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, suggests the narrative will end on a death bed or in a graveyard. In fact it does. The storyteller/protagonist, Moreas Zogoiby, leads us on an exhilarating journey in order to nail his papers on the wall. Papers that are the result of his "daily, silent, singing for

[his] daily life." Telling, writing, recording four generations of family and national history. A history of devastating loves, transcendent hatreds; of ambition without limit and sloth without redemption; loyalties beyond understanding and deceptions beyond imagination. When every step, every pause of this imaginary is finally surrendered to our view, this is the close:

"The rough grass in the graveyard has grown high and spikey and as I sit upon this tombstone I seem to be resting upon the grass's yellow points, weightless, floating free of burdens, borne aloft by a thick brush of miraculously unbending blades. I do not have long. My breaths are numbered, like the years of the ancient world, in reverse, and the countdown to zero is well advanced. I have used the last of my strength to make this pilgrimage....

"At the head of this tombstone are three eroded letters; my fingertip reads them for me. RIP. Very well: I will rest, and hope for peace. The world is full of sleepers waiting for their moment of return. ...somewhere in a tangle of thorns, a beauty in a glass coffin awaits a prince's kiss. See: here is my flask. I'll drink some wine; and then, like a latter-day Van Winkle, I'll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head beneath these letters RIP, and close my eyes, according to our family's old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time."

The rest, the peace is twice enunciated; but so is the hope. For renewal, joy and, most importantly, "a better time."

In 1990 Ben Okri ended his novel *The Famished Road*, with a dream so deeply felt it is prioritized over the entire narrative:

"The air in the room was calm. There were no turbulences. His [father's] presence protected our night-space. There were no forms invading our air, pressing down on our roof, walking through the objects. The air was clear and wide. In my sleep I found open spaces where I floated without fear. The sweetness dissolved my tears. I was not afraid of Time.

"And then it was another morning...

"A dream can be the highest point in life."

In 1993, continuing the story of this sighted child, Okri concludes *Songs of Enchantment* with a more pronounced gesture toward the future:

"Maybe one day we will see the mountains ahead of us. Maybe one day we will see the seven mountains of our mysterious destiny. Maybe one day we will see that beyond our chaos there could always be a new sunlight, and serenity."

The symbolisms of the mountains he is referring to make up the opening of the book:

"We didn't see the seven mountains ahead of us. We didn't see how they are always ahead. Always calling us, always reminding us that there are more things to be done, dreams to be realized, joys to be re-discovered, promises made before birth to be fulfilled, beauty to be incarnated, and love embodied.

"We didn't notice how they hinted that nothing is ever finished, that struggles are never truly concluded, that sometimes we have to re-dream our lives, and that life can always be used to create more light."

The expectation in these lines is palpable, insistent on the possibility of "one great action lived out all the way to the sea, chang[ing] the history of the world."

Leslie Marmon Silko in *The Almanac of the Dead* flails and slashes through thousands of years of New World history, from centuries before the Conquistadors made their appearances on these shores to the current day. The novel rests on a timelessness that is not only past, but a future timelessness as well—time truly without end. The final image of this narrative is the snake spirit "pointing toward the South in the direction from which the people will come." The future tense of the verb is attached to a direction that is, unlike the directions of most comings we approve of, the south. And it is impossible to ignore the fact that it is precisely "the south" where walls, fences, armed guards and foaming hysteria are, at this very moment, gathering.

Cocoons from which healed women burst, dreams that take the terror from time, tombstone hopes for a better time, a time beyond chaos where the seven mountains of destiny lie, snake gods anticipating the people who will come from the south—these closing images following treks into the past lead one to hazard the conclusion that some writers disagree with prevailing notions of futurelessness. That they very much indeed not only have but insist on a future. That for them, for us, history is beginning again.

I am not ferreting out signs of tentative hope, obstinate optimism in contemporary fiction; I believe I am detecting an informed vision based on harrowing experience that nevertheless gestures toward a redemptive future. And I notice the milieu from which this vision rises. It is race inflected, gendered, colonialized, displaced, hunted.

There is an interesting trace here of divergent imaginaries, between the sadness of no more time, of the poignancy of inverted time—time that has only a past—of time itself living on "borrowed time," between that imaginary and the other one that has growing expectations of time with a relentless future. One looks to history for the feel of time or its purgative effects; one looks through history for its signs of renewal.

Literature, sensitive as a tuning fork, is an unblinking witness to the light and

shade of the world we live in.

Beyond the world of literature, however, is another world; the world of commentary that has a quite other view of things. A Janus head that has masked its forward face and is at pains to assure us that the future is hardly worth the time. Perhaps it is the reality of a future as durable and far-reaching as the past, a future that will be shaped by those who have been pressed to the margins, by those who have been dismissed as irrelevant surplus, by those who have been cloaked with the demon's cape; perhaps it is the contemplation of that future that has occasioned the tremble of latter-day prophets afraid that the current disequalibria is a stirring not an erasure. That not only is history not dead, but that it is about to take its first unfettered breath. Not soon, perhaps not in thirty years or fifty, because such a breath, such a massive intake, will take time. But it will be there. If that is so, then we should heed the meditations of literature. William Gass is correct. There are "acres of Edens inside ourselves." Time does have a future. Longer than its past and infinitely more hospitable—to the human race.

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