The Medium is the Hyperobject

"What is most monstrous is sequence."

E.L. Doctorow

I read Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* back in the mid-1970s, a novel loosely based on the trial and executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, their fictional son trying to come to terms with the traumatic effects of this historical event on both him and his sister, the last chapter of which includes a parodic allusion to the Biblical Book of Daniel, where God tells Daniel to "Go thy way . . . : For words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end," hyper-ballooning the bubble of time being explored via the "story" from a couple of generations to eternity. It was a required text in a course I was teaching called Fiction and Fact, a forum for exploring interconnections between these purportedly distinct modes for distinguishing what is "true" from what is not, which so often elide in "real life." The single sentence of my epigraph leapt out at me back then, one I couldn't fully fathom either in the context of the book or in general, which is probably why I remembered it, the only vestige of the book that remains literally intact in my memory, its vague mystery both haunting and inspiring me ever since, a gnomic prophesy pertinent not just to the traumas chronicled in these two books of Daniel, but to life itself, time with its ceaseless sequences our ultimate overseer while we're here.

I say this at the outset to indicate that what follows—this essay on my reading of two apparently unrelated books separated by two generations of cultural history, my professional era, each of which seeks to find a way out of the dysfunctional tropes for temporal sequencing that are endemic to their respective moments—is as much an essay about time, a lifelong preoccupation of mine, one I've written about repeatedly in both my poetry and prose, as it is a commentary on the books.

Reading is of course a temporal activity, all those separate words sequenced out in endless processions waiting to meet us, or for us to meet them, their order of arrangement seemingly inviolable. For some readers, that is the "pleasure" of it, they say, the soothing regularity of alternative time creating an illusion of orderliness in life's often intractable chaos. For me, though, reading has always been the opposite of that, work, hard work. It wasn't until well into my adulthood that I began to understand why. I am, have always been, afflicted by a very bizarre sort of dyslexia, one that I believe derives more from my psychological relationship with time than my visual relationship with words. By which I mean I have a desire, an overwhelming urge really, to perceive a written text, to absorb it perceptually, the way I do a visual image, not incrementally but all at once, as when we look at a tree or a painting, seeing the whole before we examine the parts.

The material effect of this desire when I enter a text is my tendency to read very, very fast, almost manically, scanning whole paragraphs, even pages, at once, to look at these big chunks as if they are amorphous units of meaning simultaneously present instead of increments staged over time, past to future, my eyes jumping back and forth, up and down, trying mightily to override, to violate, the innate sequences of the words they are trying to

apprehend. Obviously, this doesn't work well, especially with texts longer than a page or so, which is probably why my preferred literary genre has always been poetry, especially lyric poetry. It is only after I engage in a reading of this sort as a first encounter with a text— its flow and silhouette clear in my forebrain, a jumble of puzzle pieces struggling to conglomerate sensibly in the background—that I can stand back, slow down, begin to assemble it for further consideration, which I tend to do in multiple stages of rereading that proceed eccentrically, asynchronically, a series of "windows" through which I can re-view what I've already "seen," inciting a revisionary process that invites me to write, often, as in this case, in a similarly recursive manner.

The essay below re-enacts such a process with two books I've been reading and rereading obsessively this month (Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*), each of its windows one of those moments of measurement. They are arranged now out of their original calendric order, more by how they interacted in retrospect than by how they happened in real time, transforming them into a temporal sequence. My hope is that by looking through those windows in that sequence, you'll get some sense of what the books did for and to me, not individually but in tandem, the four of us, McLuhan, Morton, you and me, dancing the night away.

Pre-lude: February 16, 2024

Prelude (n.): mid 16th century: from French prélude, from medieval Latin praeludium, from Latin praeludere 'play beforehand', from prae 'before' + ludere 'to play'.

Like most of my essays, this one moves in unusual ways. So I'll open with this pre-lude, the hyphen added to foreground its play-beforehandedness, already a violation of the in-built temporal sequence of reading, since I'm writing it after the fact. And I'll introduce each of the five "windows" the essay comprises with a much briefer one.

This essay explores two books, unrelated thematically or historically—Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013)—that I've been working through concurrently, more by happenstance than pre-planning—they just ended up on my bedside table at the same time—over the last two weeks or so, writing parts of the essay while, not after, I read, a practice of simultaneous reading/writing I took up some time ago more by accident than intention, one that has proven to be quite salutary for me in many ways, some of which I report on in "Teaching Secrets" (from my book *waking up: reading wisdom texts*) where several "gurus" end up conversing cross-culturally and trans-historically to open a path for me to think about some "problems" that are afflicting me, and us, right now, including global warming; and some of which I detail in "Quantum Reading Vs. the Rabbit Hole," the lead essay in this book, where I promote this mode of reading as an effective prophylactic for the sorts of cults and conspiracy theories that are so pervasive and deleterious these days, including the ones that pre-constituted the disastrous performance of

those college presidents at last year's Congressional hearing prompted by the catastrophic war ongoing in the Middle East.

In the latter, I call what I do now systems-level or quantum reading, i.e., reading outside the "silos" of separate texts, which promotes (for me) a liminal state of mind where various seemingly unrelated books can enter into ex-temporaneous dialogue with one another, with surprising results. I use a hyphen once more to highlight how a process of this sort suspends many of the time-related constraints that impede dialogue across wide historical gaps, including among disparate texts that make no express gestures toward, are even entirely unconscious of, one another. It differs from the sorts of field-dependent reading strategies scholars typically use, most of which are pre-arranged by some concept of disciplinary "history," with temporality moving sequentially and progressively, even teleologically, many "thens" gestured-toward to create a context for the "now" being proffered. Both of the authors I'm looking at here, for example, locate their work, as critiques of their cultural moments, in stereotypical templates of that sort, tons and tons of back-references to establish their authority to say something forward-oriented.

This is not, then, an explication of, a commentary on, or a review of the two books, neither of which I would likely have written "about" for anyone but myself had I read them in isolation from one another. Reading them in unison, though, opened a sort of Einsteinian wormhole that, among other unexpected things, both excised and highlighted the historical interim they bookend, making weirdly palpable what we now call, most generally, the postmodernist epoch, the former book facing toward it just before it arrived, the latter gazing back at it just after it passed, ancestor and descendent suddenly seeing one another, at least

in the alternate universe of my imagination, on opposite sides of their temporal divide. To use an automotive metaphor Morton introduces early in his book: “Objects in mirror are closer than they appear,” which in this case is more a temporal than spatial illusion, one convex mirror reflected in another, the object-oriented metaphysics of modernity seeing the object-oriented ontology of post-post-modernity and vice-versa, the vacuum of subject-oriented epistemology foreshortening the interim that separates them, just as relativity predicts would happen near the speed of light that each of these books indexes in some way to make its case.

My problem with postmodernist critical systems (and I’ve said this repeatedly and variously over the years in any number of venues) whichever flavor you prefer, is not that they set about dismantling well-established cultural tropes, systems, and constructions, most of which had long since passed their “best by” shelf-life. That was urgent and necessary, and I did my share of that work along the way. It was that once all these “ivory towers” were down, there was neither the will nor a way to dismantle the scaffolding that had been erected to accomplish the deconstruction, cumbersome mazes of planking and pipes left standing around empty space. Slap up a flimsy, whitewashed veneer to create the illusion of solidity and, *voila*, there is the ivory tower again, except way bigger, proclaiming all the while that it is not a tower at all.

As is always the case when I read and write in this manner, something quite startling emerged along the way, something nowhere near my horizon of possibility when I started. In this case, it was the “monstrosity” of “the book,” not as a literal artifact but as a cultural construction, that generic tabernacle within which the ideology of Western patriarchy, power,

and privilege has been ensconced serially for more than a millennium—at least since the codification of the orthodox Christian Bible in the 4th and 5th centuries CE—come again to fruition in these two arguments, ensconced in a medium so ill-suited to their purposes, the very thing that created all those ivory towers in the first place being deployed un-self-critically in an attempt to disassemble them: the medium as hyperobject, indeed!

The line of thinking that led me that way started innocently enough with my wondering at one point why these authors *chose* it as their "medium," one that seemed both much too long and way too a-sensory to suit their "messages." These are both smart men who must have been able to see that. So why wouldn't they have followed the imperatives of their own arguments and chosen some of the available multi-media formats for their presentations? McLuhan's many binaries—eye vs. ear, hot vs. cold, community vs. individuality, simultaneity vs. sequence, etc., all those structuralist contraries echoing through his work—would, for example, have *felt* more compelling had he used some combination of the media he purports expertise with—radio and TV, say, sound bites and video snippets moving at the speed-of-electricity (one of his obsessions)—rather than many thousands of mute words strung out like an endless mule train crossing a white-sand desert. And Morton's foundational references both to art (he does offer a few images as a centerpiece in the book, but too isolated from his commentaries on them to resonate) and music (especially contemporary experimental varieties, the subject of his final, long chapter) would, for example, have *felt* more compelling, too, had he used the kind of audio-visual "streams" contemporary media make available—PowerPoints, Ted Talks, YouTubes, Instagrams, whatever, the swoosh of images and sound (one of his obsessions) cascading along at the speed of light—rather than inaudible strings of

stylish prose. In other words, why do they print out the ledger sheets instead of showing me the money?

I think the answer is simple: because "the book" remains the only fully legitimized format for sharing the fruits of scholarly enterprise in the contemporary academy, which is where both of these authors want to live, or at least to be welcomed. So they default to it instinctively, no matter how averse it might be as a medium for their messages. Despite everything that McLuhan understands and believes about the limitations of phonetic literacy, despite everything that Morton believes about the vitality of thingness vis-à-vis words, despite everything that all those theorists in between said about "the death of the author" and the "destabilization of textuality," the book somehow remains as the preferred (if petrified) vehicle for intellectuals to reach an audience of their peers.

I understand the problems each author wants me to attend to—McLuhan the dramatic impact of electricity on how information was being propagated, with equally dramatic psychological and social effects that were being underestimated, misunderstood, even ignored; Morton the dramatic impact of a wide range of larger-than-us entities haunting us now, including several of our own making, while we indulge in either doomsday or fake news fantasies about their implications, the only visionaries experimental artists and musicians few of us have heard (of) or ever will. I just wish they had seen more clearly that the very medium they chose to convey what they had to say is part of the problem, as complicit as anything else they call out along the way. I would have been satisfied, and this essay would not likely exist, if they had acknowledged, even passingly, that contradiction, admitting that while not the most fitting, the book was still "the gold standard" for commodifying their

intellectual work in the economy of the academic marketplace. Instead, they simply defer to the numbing anesthesia of words on a page, many, many pages, which slo-mo temporal sequences via visual abstraction, instead of riding the fast-forward synesthesia AV media creates via intersecting eddies of vivid sensation.

Window 1: February 8, 2024

Pre-lude: I wrote this section in the midst of my first high-speed reading of the two books, trying to find a rhythmic relationship more with their moves than their "ideas," creating a simulacrum if you will of their surface textures, something I always do when I read a "difficult" text, my way of training my wavelength to the author's, more a temporal than a semantic move, until, as Yeats says, I can no longer "know the dancer from the dance."

Just by happenstance I've been reading two books this week that have no apparent connection with one another, either thematically or historically. One is Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, his fluidic post-post-modernist approach-avoidance to the many overwhelming "entities" that haunt us peripherally and scarily, constituting an ephemeral "mesh" (which he calls a "sensual object" foregrounded for its for-ness, and not an actual object in the way Object Oriented Ontology defines one) that orchestrates our experience of "the world" now that (he says) it has "ended," not so much because of those entities but because we can longer sustain the illusion that they are somehow outside of and subordinate to us. It is (counterintuitively) by

residing within/outside the overwhelming gooiness of hyperobjects that a "no-self" state [a term Morton borrows here, interestingly, from the "Oxbridge utilitarian" Derek Parfit, but could just as easily have derived from his personally native Buddhism] becomes not only possible but inevitable, instigating "a radical encounter with intimacy" (139). We have now, he argues,

> . . .entered the time of hyperobjects [which] is a time of *hypocrisy*, *weakness,* and *lameness*. . . Hypocrisy is a pretense, an act. But it is also simply hidden doom, a message sent from somewhere obscure. Or a message that is secret . . .: encrypted. (148)

All of this is well within the wheelhouse of the Object Oriented Ontology Morton speaks from and for, which even claims to reclaim "[t]he thing called 'subject' [that cornerstone of postmodernist epistemology] as an object" (149).

I find Graham Harman a more legible spokesman for what "object" means in OOO, but Morton has his moments, most especially in the chapter titled "Hypocrisies," where the fog started to clear for me and from which the above passages are extracted. Interestingly (to me) it is here that he opens that unintentional wormhole I can whoosh through all the way back to 1964, via an "uncanny" (a favorite word of his) reference to the traditional rhetorical concept of "delivery," a la Demosthenes, that stands at the root of the term "hypocrisy." He says:

> Delivery is physical. . . . Think about it. A CD is a delivery. An MP3 is a delivery. A vinyl record is a delivery. . . . each one is an object: not some merely neutral medium, but an entity in its own right. (149)

Which “delivers” me directly to the other book on my docket, Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, which is what led me to buy it, the original edition, a yellow-paged used version with “DISCARD” stamped on the bottom edge, a book I think I read in college back in the late 60s but remember almost nothing about except the famous catch-phrase, “the medium is the message,” his turgidly pre-post-modernist take on the radical cultural shift that was being instigated back then via electr(on)ic media, opening an era where, he says, a “medium” must be understood not as a value-neutral vehicle of conveyance for delivering a “message” but as an extension of human embodiment, one that impacts both individual cognition and social organization, a shift that has progressed at hyper-speed in the meantime, sucking us all both addictively and kicking and screaming into its swirling yaw while we indulge in its excesses and resist its imperative for change. All of which subverts the antique Wordsworthian equation about “all the mighty world [o]f eye, and ear,—both what they half create [a]nd what perceive.” In McLuhan’s vision, it is the “mighty world” of media that creates what eye and ear perceive, not vice-versa, no halfway or two ways about it. His two primary examples are radio, his own coming-of-age medium, which is “hot” in its capacity to reanimate the primitive ear-oriented intimacy of aurality/orality that favors community; and TV, which is “cool” in its capacity to simulate visually the sequentiality instilled by the eye-oriented print culture that favors individuality, another unexpected point of contact, of “intimacy,” between these two remotely arranged moments, McLuhan and Morton suddenly resonating, in tune with one another. In

McLuhan's view, a medium is not simply "an object in its own right." It is "an extension of our central nervous system" (264), a hyperobject of sorts.

For McLuhan "the ear is hyperesthetic . . . ["aesthetic" is a term Morton uses over and over to characterize our relationships, vexed as they are, with hyperobjects] intolerant, closed, and exclusive, whereas the eye is open, neutral, and associative" (264). I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that the former is more likely than the latter to promote a "no-self" relationship with what or whoever else is there, of the sort that Morton ascribes to Keats, who, in a roomful of others, becomes more "like a chameleon when 'not himself goes home to himself,' because the identity of everyone in the room has pressed upon him and annihilated his identity" (197), a set of terms he takes almost verbatim from a letter Keats wrote to Richard Woodhouse in 1818.

In general, there was something similarly exhilarating and frustrating about my experiences with both of these books, feeling in some strange way, despite their obvious philosophical differences, to be cut from the same cloth: products (literally) of the academic book-centric culture that pre-scribed scholarly enterprise during my 50 year career in university communities, which started when I changed my undergraduate major from physics to English in 1968, a few years after McLuhan's book appeared, and ended formally when I retired in 2018, a few years after Morton's book appeared.

At first approach, each book seems to have a fairly straightforward position to elaborate: Everything is changing in fundamental ways right now, respectively, and we need to adapt to those changes not just discursively but philosophically and materially by revising our previously taken for granted assumptions about the foundational concepts that end up in

their titles: media and objects. My expectation was that their definitional work would be done quickly, locating me firmly within their preferred paradigms, and the implications would be unraveled gradually along the rest of the way. My readerly experience was the opposite of that: I had no firm idea of what either of those concepts meant for them or, more crucially, for me, until quite late in their books, all the discursive sleight of hand finally stilled.

I actually wondered just today, while I was out walking, whether either author knew exactly, from the get-go, what their key terms "meant" before they started writing; using instead the process itself to tease all that out. As a reader, I felt constantly off balance, tantalizingly close to something I might call an "understanding" but unable to reach it, as if their books were not media for sharing what they knew, but scrims for both of us to learn what we didn't yet know. I have no problem with that because it is exactly how I write myself, never quite knowing what I want to "say" until I find out what that is as I write, a process as exhilarating and frustrating for me as reading their books was. So once I adjusted to the uncertainty built into the vehicle, I was happy to go along for the ride.

My experience of reading Morton, for instance, was less a process of assimilating a new discourse by translating his into my own vernacular, or of comprehending his "point" in the normal sense of that word, as in "Oh, I see what you mean now, Tim;" it felt more like skating along over black ice, trying to stride faster and faster to keep up enough speed to stay upright, resisting any temptation to look directly down, where all I'd see is my own feet skittering over the bumps of his many gestures toward outside sources, some of which I knew—thus the temptation to slow down and try to recalibrate my stride with his—some of which I didn't—thus the temptation to stop and add them to my mental catalog of things to

get to someday, maybe even right now, by getting off his ice and onto someone else's—either of which would disrupt my rhythm enough to end in a stumble, a miniature "end of the world," at least as it pertains to reading a book like this.

All the while, I was scanning the path forward the way one does while driving, looking at what's immediately upcoming without apprehending it, gathering vague impressions from peripheral asides, remembering fleetingly what just flew by, an ongoing "aesthetic" flow of sensation that becomes instantly vertiginous if one has a sudden self-reflective connection to the immediacy of the embodied moment, as in "what the hell am I doing whizzing along here at 75 miles an hour in a large tin can, among all those other large tin cans whizzing by barely an arm's length away, any sudden shift in the wrong direction precipitating a 'fall' of catastrophic proportions:" reading as a simulacrum of life-in-time, the speed of life, always seemingly just this side of catastrophe. In other words, I read Morton the way I learned how to read Derrida and Heidegger (one of Morton's primary recovery/disposal projects here) before him, what's left after the (f)act a residue of method and rhythm that I can then apply to anything in my vicinity I want to write about in order then to think about, always in that order.

My experience of reading McLuhan was similar, though given his historical moment, those last few seconds of late-modernism, right before the water froze, it felt more like riding white water after the spring melt, all his equally copious citations looming up like boulders I needed to navigate a way around or bump into, still-iconic literary and philosophical masterpieces (including ample doses of Shakespeare, whose work seems present to McLuhan in a way it could never be for Morton, who prefers poets like Blake or nursery rhymes), the sort of allusive mode of reference that was the staple of modernism, post-Eliot,

all of McLuhan's extraversion in this respect a way both to create an aura of authority and to hint toward the elusive meaning of his famous meme, one he seems constantly to be both pointing toward and withholding, as if even he isn't quite sure what it means (prompting some of the many critiques of this book in the meantime.)

McLuhan demanded the same sort of speed and balance as Morton: just go with the flow and make instantaneous adjustments to each shift in the speed and turbulence of the text, new vistas appearing out of nowhere at the same frequency as they do in *Hyperobjects*, but with a stability and "mass" they would soon be deprived of by an assortment of continental thinkers (Heidegger's concept of "withdrawal" a good initial step toward understanding the unnerving experience of encountering what is there more in the ways it is not there than how it is), the foundational slipperiness of scholarly discourse shared across both of these platforms as if nothing has changed, at least on that level, in the two generations that separate them.

This sense of simultaneity in my ways of slip-sliding across those two different states of water, one rushing with me in it, one frozen with me on it, was somehow subtly depressing to me, these two iconic books, standing like bookends on either side of my personal intellectual history, college to post-retirement, seeking to compress both within and between them all the other books I either read or meant to during the interim that separated them, a portal in their shared hyper-space of ideas opening up for direct transit, at either side of which is an electron, entangled with its partner, communicating with one another not via speed-of-light signals but instantly, Morton the McLuhan of my post-academic life, McLuhan the Morton of my pre-academic life, two peas in a pod, sharing their own two cents with one

another via the electricity that starts with my eyes, those portals toward a dissociative "literacy" McLuhan claims was substituted for the intimacy of ears when the phonetic alphabet, the basis for Western imperialism, pried individuals from their communities with effects that have led directly, it seems now, to Morton's "end of the world," haunted by hyperobjects, those frightful figments ushering the Anthropocene toward whatever comes next (for Earth if not for us), all on filmy, flimsy pages flipping by, littered with millions of black marks colliding finally in the labyrinthine archive of my hidden brain.

Which is how I ended up deriving my title from their merger. We are finally now so deep into the electronic age, media-saturated to the extreme, that it is pointless to dissemble about our capacity to examine them specifically and analytically as discrete cultural functions, the way McLuhan does in the latter half of his book: 20-some brief, discrete chapters on media that range from clothing to TV, all of which (and many more) are now arrayed in a collaborative unison that retreats as we approach it, hides as we examine it, absorbing us into its gooey aura whether we like it or not, no matter our political or ethical inclinations, or what we actually say we believe about any of them. Those 20-some separate things are now one thing, a hyperobject, that keeps "warming" us "globally," surrounding us, filling us up, emptying us out, remaking us over and over in its own image.

Window 2: February 2, 2024

Pre-lude: This is the first chunk of stuff I wrote for this essay, while I was reading the opening sections of the books, trying to get my bearings with their respective projects, beginning to feel connections forming between them, sounding more like a review might. I wrote a lot of multi-book reviews for a small magazine early in career, a genre, still one of my favorites, that demands focus and concision.

Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World, both as a book and as a concept, is Timothy Morton's attempt to reconfigure our relationship with our "world," once we acknowledge that it has now "ended" and we are displaced permanently from any semblance of a position of privilege vis-à-vis all the other "objects" with whom we shared spaces and times in what it once was. He proffers a litany of approach/avoidances early on, as if one of the best ways to understand this new "(dis)order of things" is not top-down or bottom-up conceptually, that delusional remnant of Western philosophy now in tatters, but inside-out and outside-in, materially, the object-ness of Object Oriented Ontology that Morton both endorses and elaborates via his work.

Global warming (which he prefers over the more antiseptically de-anthropomorphized "climate change") ends up being his chief concern, the *raison d'être* of the book in a way, a kind of looming presence/absence haunting his thinking as it haunts ours; but his inventory ranges spatially from quantum clouds of subatomic particles to the farthest astronomical reaches of the cosmos, both of whose secrets have been partially peeled back during his lifetime; from the sheen of radioactive after-glow sprinkled over the earth's surface to the specter of nuclear annihilation those little clicks on a Geiger Counter force us to live with

endemically; and temporally from the tiniest tick of time, the present that disappears even before it evanesces, that mysterious irregular metronome that defines what "life" is and means for us in this universe, to the lifespan of that universe, Big Bang to whimper, its intrinsic futurality washing over us repeatedly like waves on a beach, rather than emerging unblemished from a frittered-away past, a radical reordering of the presumed directionality of time.

Both of these, space and time, blend into one another until neither is quite there any longer, a sort of eternal tactile present that is no longer present to us in any recognizable respect, allied with one another in a surrealistic version of Einstein's dream until neither is what it was or seems, evading even their own names. Pretty slick in a way, if you just skim over the surface of his elegant prose without stopping repeatedly to process one of his references to some text that is not his, the beautiful and burdensome bane of both philosophical discourse (let me show you I know it all, from Heraclitus to Harman) and of post- (and now post-post) modernism generally. But also pretty sticky, given the medium that serves as his conveyance: Materially, there is this book, "his" book, that artifactual antique of the print culture that indemnifies intellectual work against both dismissal and radical innovation, a hyperobject of vast proportions masquerading as something I can hold in my hands; and intellectually by the sort of "monstrosity of sequence" that Doctorow's Daniel finds intolerable in his search for meaning, in this case the always-default position of the philosopher in Western culture: the beginning to now narrative of dialectically impelled progress that emerges from the sediment of citations along the way, each new work

purporting to be both continuous with and discontinuous from that "story," its temporary capstone, if you will.

At the risk of sounding glib, one of the simplest imperatives I read in OOO is "it's not about me now," the underlying tenet for the two primary identity roles I created as an adult because of personal choices I made to become a teacher (first) and then a father, each of which turns on a massive, blinding Times-Square-type-light-scroll with that sentence repeating over and over. I knew I could respect its imperative or not. But either way, it was just true. And it was not rendered, crucially, as a provisional statement, as in, "it's not about me any longer," which is how I was first tempted to read it. It was in fact, as Morton makes clear, never about me. Not now, not before, not ever. OOO simply invites me to expand that imperative to larger and larger levels until I understand and accept that this "about me-ness" is the foundational delusion of cultural privilege that animated the Western history portion of the Anthropocene, with all of its excesses, arrogances and devastations on all the other alleged not-mes out there.

Understanding Media: *The Extensions of Man,* both as a book and as a concept, is Marshall McLuhan's manifesto for radically reorienting our way of thinking about how we communicate with and relate to one another, now that the hegemony of print was being undermined, if not deposed, by the cascade of audio-visual alternatives that emerged during the first half of the 20th century. Since McLuhan came of age during this moment, his own formation was vexed by these crosscurrents of "in-formation," shaped "in-timately" under the aegis of those new ways of making meaning, yet still regimented foundationally by the print-based culture of the academy. The fact that he renders what he has to say in a book, the most

conservative and stolid index toward the latter, puts him at odds with his argument materially in ways that certainly inflect its pertinence.

But what in fact does he hope to get across by assembling his two key terms—"medium" and "message"—in this order, the all-important "is" asserting a directional identity between them? Is the key element the sequence? Or is the absence of a "not" the key? And is any of this still relevant? McLuhan's assertion that media are not vehicles of conveyance but extensions of embodiment seems so obvious, now that Elon Musk is implanting microchips in human brains, Apple is selling goggles that turn us into walking Googles, and ChatGPT is capable of doing so much of the pre-thinking we need to do to think that it's easy to think we barely need to think at all.

His primary obsession early on is with electricity (his equivalent of Morton's global warming), the force that feeds all the then-new media that interest him, one that jump-starts, ironically, an evolutionary reversion to the sort of aural, tactile culture that pre-dated the printing press, where simultaneity replaces sequence as the order of the moment, introducing a lag between habit and possibility. McLuhan seems to believe that we were right then on the cusp of a fundamental shift in how "subjects" (as in domains of knowledge, not people) might be arrayed in K-12 settings, moving away from the mechanical model founded on the industrial economy where the "parts" were discrete "entities" with no essential interrelationships, and toward a more synergistic model where learning, he says, will be experimental, serendipitous, discovery-oriented, fundamentally creative, a "humanities"-based approach that will produce "artists" capable of presenting (not re-presenting)

synesthetic experience, promoting even more rapid adaptation to new media. He was clearly wrong, at least as far as schools go.

A seventh grader these days still tramps from one room to another, math here, English there, art around the corner, without any systemic structure for perceiving them as facets of an organic human experience rather than slots of knowledge, like separate silos full of corn and wheat and oats in a giant barn. And while university students experience their array of choices via electronic rather than hard-copy "catalogs" now, they are still coded as a series of discrete "fields of study," like Aristotle's bookshelf, each subject between its own covers, all the titles facing outward for selection, no book ever able to bleed sidewise into the one it's sitting next to let alone into all the others—the this is this and that is that and that is not this and this is not that approach to knowledge and learning that makes it difficult for any of us, students, teachers, professionals, everyone, to bleed into one another in some collaborative way toward common understandings. The radical transformation McLuhan seemed to believe was right around the corner, Morton seems to imply we are still awaiting, as the future rushes in, premeditating each present moment rather than un-premeditating time so we can find a path forward from where we happen to be now and now and now, those empty "sequences" both Morton (the various kinds of resistance to incremental change—cynicism, rage, wishful thinking, et al.— that afflict left, right, and middle, especially in relation to global warming) and McLuhan (the way media indenture vast and unreflective "audiences" to banal entertainment and chronic distraction rather than to education and activism) angst about. And at the foundation of all of it, for some reason, remains "the book."

That this radical disconnect between cultural imperatives and institutional adaptation has not been catastrophic is due in large part, I think, to the fact that young minds instinctively learn what the media of their moment make possible via an on-the-fly autodidacticism, making them more expert with the technology "at hand" than those who purport to teach them how best to use it. McLuhan for example writes more compellingly about radio as a form of social currency, his own coming-of-age medium, than he does about TV, which he would have first encountered as an adult. In the former case, he seems to have what Morton would call an "intimate" connection to his object. In the latter case, he sounds more like I would if I tried to write with authority about rap music or TikTok. Someone of my vintage might find what I had to say interesting. Someone who grew up with those media would find it comical. I grew up with TV and I find most of what McLuhan has to say about that medium more weird than wise.

Window 3: February 12, 2024

Pre-lude: I don't underline text when I read, takes too much time. I fold back the top corner of pages that have material of especial interest to me, hoping I'll remember why when I come back to them. I compiled the lists below retrospectively by going back over the various pages I had marked in this way and then typing out the passage that I assume I wanted to remember. Then, for efficiency's sake, I winnowed that list down to my top fourteen for each book, mostly to highlight my readerly predilections in each case—time for Morton, education for McLuhan—long term obsessions of mine mingling with theirs, as is the case with every

reader who writes about what they read. I insert it here so you can "listen to" some snippets of their "voices" before mine fully takes over.

From *Hyperobjects*: *Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*

"Global warming denial is also a denial about what causality is after Hume and Kant—namely a feature of phenomena rather than things in themselves." (16)

"In a sense, we can expect human egos to be pockmarked with the traces of hyperobjects." (51)

". . . the undulating fronds of space and time float in front of objects." (63)

"This wake of causality would appear to flow backward 'into' the present." (67)

"Objects do not occur 'in' time and space, but rather emit spacetime." (90)

"Appearance is the past. Essence is the future." (91)

"What is called nowness in Buddhist contemplative theory is not a point or even a bubble, no matter how wide, but a fluid, uncanny washing back and forth like a current and an undertow." (93)

“Futurality is reinscribed into the present, ending the metaphysics of presence: not through some neat philosophical footwork, but because the very large finitude of hyperobjects forces humans to coexist with a strange future, a future ‘without us.’” (94)

“What is left if we aren’t the world? Intimacy. We have lost the world but gained a soul—the entities that coexist with us obtrude on our awareness with greater and greater urgency. Three cheers for the so-called *end of the world*, then, since this moment is the beginning of history, the end of the human dream that reality is significant for them alone. We now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and non-humans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of *world*.” (108)

“This is the momentous era, at which we achieve what has sometimes been called ecological awareness. Ecological awareness is a detailed and increasing sense, in science and outside of it, of the innumerable interrelationships among lifeforms and between life and non-life.” (128)

“Thus the time of hyperobjects is a time of sincerity: a time in which it is impossible to achieve a final distance toward the world.” (130)

“The proximity of an alien presence that is also our innermost essence is very much its structure of feeling.” (139)

“What is doom? . . . Doom can mean fate, destiny, and in a stronger sense, death. Finally, doom means justice . . . a figure that Derrida calls synonymous with deconstruction, in that it is irreducibly futural. . . Doesn’t this rich range of meanings suggest something about the hyperobject? The hyperobject is indeed the bringer of fate, destiny, death. This destiny comes from beyond the (human) world, and pronounces or decrees the end of the world.” (147-48)

“Large, complex systems require causality theories that are not deterministic. The oppressive drive to repeat the epistemological thrills and spills of the correlationist era by returning to Humean skepticism is itself a symptom that the nonhumans are already here.” (177)

From *Understanding Media*: *The Extensions of Man*

“We are no more prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal work and beaches him in individual isolation.” (31)

“The giving to man of an eye for an ear by phonetic literacy is, socially and politically, probably the most radical explosion that can occur in any social structure.” (58)

“The new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves constitute huge collective surgery carried out on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics.” (70)

“I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to rearrange one’s psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties.” (71)

“Language extends and amplifies man but it also divides his faculties.” (83)

“Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of man.” (83)

“The Greek myth about the alphabet was that Cadmus, reputedly the king who introduced the phonetic letters into Greece, sowed dragon’s teeth and they sprang up armed men. . . . Letters are not only like teeth visually, but their power to put teeth into the business of empire-building is manifest in our Western history.” (85)

“It can be argued, then, that the phonetic alphabet, alone, is the technology that has the means of creating ‘civilized man’—the separate individuals equal before a written code of law.

Separateness of the individual, continuity of space and of time, and uniformity of codes are the prime marks of literate and civilized societies." (86-87)

"By imposing unvisualizable relationships that are the result of instant speed, electric technology dethrones the visual sense and restores us to the dominion of synesthesia, and the close interinvolvement of the other senses." (108)

"Such has always been the case, most notoriously in government censorship of the press and the movies. Although the medium is the message, the controls go beyond programming. The restraints are always directed to the 'content,' which is always another medium." (266)

"The only medium for which our education now offers some civil defense is the print medium. The educational establishment, founded on print, does not yet admit any other responsibilities." (267)

"A cool medium . . . leaves much more for the listener or user to do than a hot medium. If the medium is of high definition, participation is low. If the medium is of low intensity, the participation is high." (278)

"In education the conventional division of the curriculum into subjects is already as outdated as the medieval trivium and quadrivium of the Renaissance." (301)

"Our education has long ago acquired the fragmentary and piecemeal character of mechanism. It is now under increasing pressure to acquire the depth and interrelation that are indispensable in the all-at-once world of electric organization. Paradoxically, automation makes liberal education mandatory." (310)

Window 4: February 5, 2024

Pre-lude: I wrote this section just after I wrote Window 1, as a way of "getting to the point." It was McLuhan's chapter on radio, and Morton's chapter on hypocrisies, both very late in their respective books, that oriented their key terms retroactively and clarified the implications of their arguments, at least for me.

Okay, I've had my fun looking at these two books from the other side of Alice's looking glass, my language mirroring Morton's and McLuhan's, who, though separated by the two generations during which postmodernism came and went, my adult life, seem to me to share the same DNA, one riding over white water the other gliding over black ice, same medium, different messages, or vice-versa, depending on which point in the temporal range one is stepping back into from behind that glass. I need now to do some actual work, first to try to understand for myself what new things McLuhan was trying to say about media back in 1964, and then what new things about objects Morton wants to call my attention toward in 2013. And maybe to get to a "point" that is not just more and more words about words, to "rise up"

to a level where I can actually see McLuhan's media as Morton's hyperobjects and Morton's hyperobjects as McLuhan's media, both of which I'm quite sure (though "quite sure" is not a state of mind I experience with any confidence as it pertains to these books and those problems) would be considered anathema by their respective creators.

So let me begin at the beginning, that title of mine, which I hope I can persuade you is something more than just a cutesy merger of their respective memes. In 1964 the media that McLuhan was primarily concerned with would be considered quite primitive by our standards. He talks a lot about TV, for example, and radio, and movies, none of which provides the possibility for interactivity, a feedback loop, all of which simply ferry their cargo to those who witness them: I sit and watch or listen, absently present, an image or sound wave making an impression on me, with (perhaps) dramatic effects on my social and psychological matrices I am largely unconscious of. End of story, at least in the relatively simple realm of the mid-20th century media economy.

What McLuhan says, first of all, is that all of these medias' messages are themselves other media, disturbing the long-entrenched linearity that print literacy induced technologically, which promoted individualism over kinship as the foundational social imperative, and, more mechanically, the sequential arrangement of all sorts of intellectual and economic structures, along the lines of moveable type, the foundational difference between imperial and indigenous cultures (a distinction he makes via the term "civilization.") At least some of the media that emerged via electricity reverted, quite suddenly by evolutionary standards, to those prior modes. One example of this is the movie, "[w]herein we

return to the inclusive form of the icon" (27). To explain this, he turns (oddly) to a seemingly static medium, painting:

> It was at this moment of the movie that cubism occurred . . . [C]ubism substitutes all facets of an object simultaneously for the "point of view" or facet of perspective illusion. Instead of a specialized illusion of the third dimension on canvas cubism sets up an interplay of planes and contradiction or dramatic conflict of patterns, lights, textures that "drives home the message" by involvement. . . Cubism, by seizing on instant, total awareness [i.e. "sensory awareness of the whole"], suddenly announced that the *medium is the message*. . . [which is] the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous. . . . [and s]pecialized segments of attention have shifted to total field . . . Before the electric speed and total field, it was not obvious that the medium is the message. The message, it seemed, was the "content" as people used to ask what a painting was *about*. (27-8)

Yes, the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous, its "monstrosity" finally overcome!?

And finally, late in the book, in "Radio: The Tribal Drum," his coming-of-age medium, he seems to me to come clean:

> Radio is provided with its cloak of invisibility, like any other medium. It comes to us ostensibly with person-to-person directness that is private and intimate, while in more urgent fact, it is really a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords. All technological

> extensions of ourselves must be numb and subliminal else we could not endure the leverage exerted upon us by such extensions. (263-64)

Here, the storehouse of cultural information implied by Eliot's concept of tradition, that bedrock of modernism, one that can only be acquired by Herculean feats of bibliophilic labor, becomes in McLuhan's late-modernist moment instantly available in theory and impossible to fully process in practice, via electricity, which short-circuits the sequencing of words into the simultaneity of sensation:

> Radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. This is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of the medium with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber. (261)

The aurality of radio is "intimate," "private," "immediate," oddly "unspoken," a sonic boom that rattles everything at "subliminal depths," scribal to tribal, just like that!

Morton achieves a similar if quieter effect via sound late in his book, especially in the chapter called "Hypocrisies:"

> The Aeolian properties of objects are well accounted for in OOO. OOO holds that there are real things, and that those real things are objects, every single one. We humans are objects. The thing called a "subject" is an object. Sentient beings are objects. . . There are all kinds of objects that so-called subjects don't apprehend. Global warming existed long before human

> instruments started to detect it. For millions of years oil oozed around deep under the ocean. All kinds of objects apprehended it, of course. When we are conscious of something, we are on a continuum with rock strata and plankton that apprehend oil in their own way. (149)

Here a sort of eerie wind-played music that emanates from objects including even subjects-as-object both delineates them as distinct "things" and invites us into a continuum with all of them, like McLuhan's "subliminal echo chamber [with] magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords." Again, simultaneity overrides sequence, language succumbing to sensation, subject yielding to objects, one and then all, just like that! And further:

> According to OOO, objects have a very interesting property. We only see their sensual qualities, in interactions that spontaneously spawn new objects. Me smelling an oil spill is a whole new object in the universe . . . This object has special properties. What are they? Just like all objects, hyperobjects *withdraw*. (150)

Finally, hyperobjects, like all objects, withdraw. This may not make hyperobjects analogous with McLuhan's "all technological extensions of ourselves must be numb and subliminal else we could not endure the leverage exerted upon us by such extensions," but it sounds to me like it's in the same neural ballpark.

Window 5: February 19, 2024

Pre-lude: I return now to "the book," to explore more deeply its status as a cultural icon rather than an artifact, a hyperobject rather than one of the things I held in my hands while I wrote this essay, the quotation marks highlighting that distinction. I want to frame what I have to say with a quote from each author that, while not materially connected with the narrative that follows, indexes, via Kant and Hume, one of our conventional ways for measuring change: cause and effect.

> *"It was David Hume who, in the eighteenth century, demonstrated that there is no causality indicated in any sequence, natural or logical. The sequential is merely additive, not causative. 'Hume's argument,' said Immanuel Kant, 'awoke me from my dogmatic slumber.' Neither Hume nor Kant detected the hidden cause of our Western bias toward sequence as 'logic' in the all-pervasive technology of the alphabet." (88)*
>
> Marshall McLuhan

> *"Hyperobjects are not just collections, systems or assemblages of other objects. They are objects in their own right . . . Least of all, then, would it be right to say that hyperobjects are figments of the (human) imagination, whether we think imagination as the bundling of associations in the style of Hume, or as the possibility for synthetic judgments a priori, with Kant.*

Hyperobjects are real whether or not someone is thinking of them. . . .

Hyperobjects force us to acknowledge the immanence of thinking to the physical. But this does not mean that we are 'embedded' in a 'lifeworld.' (2)

Timothy Morton

One of the most surprising things about writing, at least as I experience it, is that it quite often reveals (to me) what I don't yet know (at least not consciously) rather than reports (to you) what I do know or have come to know by reading someone else's writing as if it reports (to me) what they know. In other words, in practice, the stereotypical cause/effect sequence we presume inheres to writing and reading as knowledge-making technologies is inverted. At least for me. I'm not sure what if anything Hume, Kant, McLuhan or Morton would say about that. But together they somehow opened this final window for me to see something I never anticipated when I sat down to read these two books or when I started to write about them, how their medium of choice, "the book," in its hyperobjective mode, opened a portal toward the very long runway that brought me here.

I'm going to head down that runway in reverse, starting with a personal experience rather than an historical trend. After my wife Carol died suddenly and unexpectedly in 2015, a deeply traumatic event for me, I concluded that the status-related mechanisms I had been indenturing myself to in order to "progress" through my profession were much ado about nothing that mattered even in the short run let alone the long run. All of this had been percolating inside me for decades as I endured the typical no-exit hazing routines imposed episodically in my profession, "the book" the primary cudgel for enforcing their imperatives.

Unfortunately, it took an event of this magnitude for me to see that the exit was right in front of me all the time, this window I'm looking back through now from the opposite side.

The first book I wrote in the aftermath of this loss—*This Fall: essays on loss and recovery*—was founded on the walks in the woods I was then taking alone every morning, after many years having taken them together with my wife. It is a wonderful book, my best I think. When I finished it, I had to decide what to do with it, publication-wise, and I knew immediately and instinctively that I could not run a book this intimate through the gauntlet of the extant publishing marketplace, which I had some familiarity with. So, I decided instead, without a clear premonition of the implications, to publish it on my own.

First, I created a personal website and uploaded my manuscript, in PDF format, free to anyone who wanted to read it, assuring thereby that what I called at the time the "profanities" of money and fame, those currencies of status in the capitalistic economy of the knowledge industry, would not sully the memory of wife. Then I recorded and uploaded an audiobook version, also free. Almost immediately, the book found a few readers in various parts of the world dealing with loss and grief who let me know how valuable it had been for them, which told me I was on the right track with this venture.

A few months later, more out of curiosity and boredom than ambition, I decided to create and publish a paperback version of *This Fall*. I had no interest in the old "vanity press" marketplace, where one pays someone else a lot of money upfront to end up with a stillborn simulation of a book. I wanted to do it all myself and to make a book that would be indistinguishable from all the others out there in the marketplace. I quickly found that the online tools necessary for this were freely available and extremely user-friendly: upload a PDF,

create a cover, press a few buttons, and a few days later, for a small expense, a very nice-looking book will arrive at your doorstep. The one I created for *This Fall* looks and feels just like any book you might pick out from a bookstore shelf, beautiful cover (via an image of a painting made by my son, an accomplished artist), quality materials, etc.

I reported all of this casually and in passing to my chair at the time, who told me sternly: "You know that book doesn't count, don't you?" I was taken aback by the tone of contempt in his voice. Most literally, of course, that meant that it could not be "counted" additively in my personal inventory of credentials, on my CV or in my annual report, say, to leverage a raise. But more importantly, of course, because it had not been processed through the approved machinery of the academic marketplace, that it had no legitimacy, could not be "counted-on" by anyone who might want to read it. In other words, it was a book that was not "the book" in any of the certified ways such a designation was institutionally authorized. It was a no-book on a no-shelf, something like the no-self Morton talks about.

I knew all of that full well, of course, which is what I told him. And, I said, that was exactly why I did it! I explained how from my vantage point at the heart of this loss, where life and death collide and collude in the most awful and awe-filled ways, none of that mattered to me, not a whit. He looked at me as if I was lost instead of found, which was what I was trying to tell him: that I had found, through this no-book, not just my no-self, but freedom from external validation, and control over my "means of production," all in one fell swoop, exhilaratingly rare in the academic marketplace, where what is called "freedom" is quite often merely control exerted invisibly, claustrophobically, from the outside in, until its work of

colonization is completed and it operates automatically from inside out, “work” fully overtaking “life,” to use that lame binary academics often claim to be struggling to "balance."

As I used to tell graduate students who were trying mightily to assert some personal agency via this life/work conundrum in their ongoing, often very stressful, formation (that maddening “between” state of wanting, needing, to establish an authority of their own while at the same time feeling indentured to so many external authorities, from their immediate mentors to the disciplinary matrix in which they were ensconced professionally), that that binary was at best a misleading guide toward their goal of finding a state that merited the tag of “happy.” At worst it guaranteed finding the opposite. In my view, one of the wonderful things about committing oneself to the “life of the mind,” and to writing and teaching, the mind’s avenues back into the world, is that one’s work is, by definition, full of life. And one of the wonderful things about living one’s life in the world *mind*-fully, as a partner, a parent, or more generally as a human being, is that it takes a lot of ongoing work to do that well. To imagine one’s work aside from one’s life or one’s life free from work, is not only delusory, it could well end up being ethically compromised. So, for me, the solution was not to separate the two categorically, but to call out and amplify the most joyous elements they share in common, revel in them, allow them to merge recursively, one’s work animated by life, one’s life guided by work. My new book provided me a template for exactly that kind of merger.

Just above, I referred to “the book” in its hyperobjective mode as the “primary cudgel” for “enforcing” the “no-exit hazing routines imposed episodically in my profession.” That may sound overly dramatic. But the real drama of history is often enacted via seemingly benign instruments of this sort. My career was impacted in quite significant ways by those routines,

as the following narrative will document. While this story is rendered in personal terms, I believe it may speak for and to many of my generational peers, who will recognize its outlines and outcomes in their own autobiographies.

When I entered the profession "the article" was considered a legitimate and favored vehicle for conveying scholarly work to the marketplace, and I wrote lots of them. I loved that genre, adapted so well both to radical insights and sweeping recommendations for disciplinary change, promoting ongoing and often intense dialogues in both print and at conferences, which I found exciting. I came up for tenure at precisely the time that the first book-related shift of consequence took place where I worked: Articles, while not dismissed as credentials, were, quite suddenly, "counted" only as opportunities to publish a chapter of "the book," already in its hyperobjective form, which became the prerequisite. That I didn't yet have one was a significant problem. My tenure was held up for many months as I, but mostly others, given the power dynamic in academic systems, argued that my articles, looked at collectively, were at least the equivalent of a book. Their arguments apparently won the day and I was promoted.

Based on this close call, I shifted my writerly schedule away from articles to books, and I wrote one that was very well-received, including winning a national award in my field. Several years later I put myself up for promotion to full professor, which in my department, at that time, required a book-since-tenure. This was, unfortunately, at exactly the moment that mid-level universities like mine with aspirations toward upward mobility in the national rankings were elevating their "objective" standards across the board—SATs for undergrads, GREs for grad students, and "the book" for faculty. At the very meeting that was called to

consider my case, which met each of the established criteria with "excellent" credentials, the full professors rewrote the guidelines to add an additional book. My application was immediately rejected.

So I spent the next seven years writing another book and resubmitted my portfolio, with some anxiety because in the meantime "the book" standard had been rewritten to preclude many of the kinds of books scholars in my field typically publish, and two cases in advance of mine, each with two books, were rejected because those books were disqualified, deemed no-books. My fate turned out to be better for reasons I can't entirely account for, probably because my two books somehow squeaked between these much narrower guardrails. On the basis of all this first-hand experience, I think you can understand why I became wary of the largely arbitrary ways the academy deployed "the book" to parse the legitimacy not only of texts but of those who wrote them.

That my new no-book didn't "count" in my professional community was a detraction, but I was well-compensated. I realized very quickly, for instance, that I could continue to revise it in any way I wanted, any time I wanted, as often as I wanted; not just "corrections," I mean, but radical revisions, significant additions—like the final two "epilogues" that close the book, written almost a year later—even after it was published. As *This Fall* evolved through its multiple editions—at hyper-speed, a new one every few months, impossible via the traditional press—it grew and changed in the most unexpected ways. This process felt to me more like a marriage than a funeral, to borrow and hack into a set of metaphors Walt Whitman uses in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, the closest thing in the 19th (or 20th!) century to what I was doing right then. In other words, my book was alive, growing, changing, along with me, a relationship

I reveled in. And in some ways that helped to keep alive my relationship with my wife, no small thing. *This Fall* went on to win a "Notable Indie" award in a competition I submitted it for. And it has garnered other plaudits as well.

That book, and the way I commodified it, opened the floodgates to an astonishing era of creative enterprise in my life. I went on to write, at a breakneck pace, (more an expression of recovery from trauma, I believe in retrospect, than a career-related evolution) a dozen other books, on a wide range of literary and philosophical topics, all made available for free on my website and sold at cost. As I said often along this way, had I stopped to find a publisher for *This Fall*, a process that takes years not minutes, I knew from experience, much, perhaps all of this new work would not have found its way out of my head and into print. Unfortunately, that also meant it could not find a pathway into the general marketplace. I now have two CVs, one for professional purposes with all the countables from my career, another that includes all these other living things I have made, and continue to remake, in the meanwhile.

I tried in each case to experiment with some innovation that would be impossible with a one-and-done book in the conventional marketplace. For example, for the trio of poetry chapbooks I wrote so furiously, grief fueled, during September, 2016, I actually created the poems "live," in real time, on my website, just sat down and typed them up as they came to me, sometimes several poems in one day. As far as I know there were only a few occasional witnesses to that process. But their experience, they told me, was unique and stunning. If I had created a month-long, fixed-position, stop-action recording of it and then played it back at hyper-speed, it would look like one those nature videos that shows a snowmelt, a seed sprouting, and the evolution of a full-fledged flower, all in a few seconds.

In another of the books I amplified its various parts over a 6-month period with new, dated material, expanding the book like an accordion, from the inside out, creating a sort of temporal palimpsest. In another I worked to hybridize genres in a way that would have been difficult to explain let alone sell to a publisher. And often, I was able to keep in material that felt, from my point of view, crucial, but was simply weird, something for which I have a much higher level of tolerance than is common in the commercial marketplace of ideas. I also along the way experimented with all kinds of social media and AV-related modes of expression: Instagram, YouTube, audiobooks, even Bandcamp, so I have a pretty good idea of what each can and cannot do as a venue for creative and intellectual exchange.

I have not, of course, made any money or accrued any professional status from all that. And my readership is small (I know nothing about marketing and have no interest in learning about it). But the adventure has been breathtaking, not least of which is a sense that I may be blazing a trail toward a new way of composing, one that remains chronically open rather than closed, resembling more in that respect the sort of multimedia compositions I would have preferred Morton and McLuhan to have used.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of this process, initiated in my deepest grief without any foresight of what it meant, was how I proffered my books: Instead of saying I had "published" them, I took to saying, simply, that I "shared" them with anyone interested, which is exactly what I did, free on my website, of course, but also, whenever possible, mailed for free in paperback form. That distinction—between published and shared—may seem specious, even duplicitous to you, but it meant everything to me, not simply as it pertains to the production side, but even more so on the reception side, where it rejiggers the relationship

of authority between author and reader in quite fundamental ways, leveling it. In the local examples of my new books, this meant that I had quite personal interactions with almost all of my readers, even made new friends on the basis of what they then "shared" with me, extraordinary gifts.

In a more general sense, this approach transfers the responsibility for qualitative assessment almost entirely over to the consumer, which may promote a more refined critical sensibility and a sense of personal agency among readers, who have to *learn* how to do *their own* vetting, or find *trusted* others to help them with it, in exactly the same ways that consumers of social media need *right now*, quite urgently, to learn how to discern what is "real" and what is "fake" in the endless streams of "(dis)(mis)information" inundating them, with AI looming and the longstanding firewalls that journalistic, political and juridical arbiters once provided having been breached by various lunatic fringes competing for power in the dystopian landscape of our public commons, an ongoing slow-motion civil war that propagates cults and conspiracy theories like Cadmus' sown teeth sprouting armed men.

Those culture warriors, marching now under banners like "the Freedom Caucus" and "Moms for Liberty," are genuinely terrified, as they should be, that the ideals their names seem to be endorsing might somehow become universal, de-privileged in relation to race, gender, class, and religion. The primary historical matrices for promoting that kind of democratization—literacy in the service of critical thinking—are the public schooling system and libraries. Anything, therefore, that hobbles them is not simply attractive to them, it is absolutely crucial for their long-term survival. Thus the current obsession with book-bannings, and all the assaults on anything in either arena that has "critical" in its title. I'm

surprised they haven't mounted campaigns against the concept of "critical mass" in nuclear fission, or the term "critical condition" that the media uses to describe so many of the victims of the gun violence that is being amplified exponentially by these very same "warriors."

Their goal is not to dismantle public schooling completely, reserving education exclusively for the elite, which might incite significant resistance, but to disable it so that it can't function as a significant threat to their preferred social order. That project started in earnest a generation ago with Bush the 2nd's No Child Left Behind, the effect (and I would argue the goal) of which was to transfer the center of gravity in K-12 education out of classrooms with their many local, inside-out economies, and into the stateroom with its one global, outside-in economy. Stagnant funding that has left teachers' salaries in the poverty range in many states, driving many from the profession completely, and a chaotic pandemic, along with the ongoing assaults on libraries and librarians, have accelerated this transfer of power exponentially. It remains to be seen whether the complementary rise in state-sponsored voucher programs, spawning all kinds of largely unregulated alternative schooling options, will decenter state control, though it seems (to me) that they are generally designed more to undermine the public schooling system than to enhance educational opportunities, especially among less privileged constituencies, the "parental control" trope more a feint than a vision. It is ironic (to me) that one of the primary arguments on behalf of this movement, promoted and often funded by states, is to escape from the various standards-related protocols the state(s) insisted, two decades ago, were the solution to deficiencies in the system, using in that case those "less privileged constituencies," quite cynically, as their targets of opportunity. Depending on your perspective, this may or may not be a good example

of a fundamental principle of capitalism: In order to dismantle an organization or system, you need first to control it; and quite often, as in this case, you can use the same set of tropes duplicitously to justify both ends of that process.

That mission finally moved into higher education about fifteen years ago with externally imposed "outcomes-based" protocols, same ambition, same effects, some of which I witnessed, with deep concern, during the late stages of my career. This assertion of governmental control has intensified considerably in the meantime via state level interventions in what and how disciplinary material can/must be taught, in admissions, staffing, and hiring policies. It reached a chilling watershed moment last fall via the tumultuous Congressional hearings that resulted in the resignations of two presidents from elite universities, a stunning humiliation for "the university" as a cultural institution, once a revered paragon of independence, one that was made easier, as I argue in "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole," by gradual corrosion from the inside out (what I call the "corporatization" of the university) during the 80s, 90s, and 2000s. All of which calls to (my) mind that gory, apocryphal anecdote that Chinghiz Aitmatov narrates in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* in which Stalin plucks a live chicken to demonstrate how best to keep "the people" weak and dependent.

In 1964, as I said, Marshall McLuhan believed we were on the cusp of a radical transformation in our ways of schooling. He would be aghast to see what that transformation has amounted to. It will take generational work from countless creative individuals committed to working from the inside out to shift the balance toward his vision. I spent almost 50 years teaching writing and reading, much of it at the entry level, by far my most enjoyable

pedagogical arena. I witnessed firsthand how transformative it was when students experienced the excitement of realizing they could "think for themselves." So I have a deep and abiding faith that good things can and will happen once our culture wakes up from its current self-induced nightmare, and they will arise from the bottom up (not be imposed from the top down), one roomful of minds at a time. It may even spur more of these thinkers to create and share their own work, not because it "counts" but because it matters to them.

Which gets me at last to the final point I want to make concerning the two books I've been writing about here, specifically how each of their authors defaults unreflectively to this material precondition, "the book," one that evades notice not by how small it is but by how big it is. Neither of them mentions that move as problematic, or even as a choice. Had I read them separately, as if they had no connection with one another, I may well have acceded equally unreflectively to those defaults. Reading them together, though, somehow made visible how their preferred "medium" worked against rather than with their "messages."

This started as a vague sense about midway through my reading that both books could, and should, have been shorter, more efficient. My hypothetical imagined range was about 100 pages. In, out, done. But there is simply no template in the print culture (even now) for scholarly books in that range, a no-man's land rather than my "goldilocks zone," a perfect example of how invisibly hyperobjective the medium has become. As I read further, a gnawing doubt began to grow about whether "the book" itself, no matter its length, was the best venue for what they had to offer. Why, I wondered, hadn't McLuhan used some combination of the AV media of his day to make his point, each element not a "static" description, little sparks discharging harmlessly from my fingertips every time I picked up his book, but an "electric

current," enough zip to zap me off my feet? His argument would have made more sense to me that way and would have had a much more intense impact, the inbuilt vitality of images and sounds replacing the sluggishness of words arrayed in sequences. In other words, the medium would be more with than against the message.

I answered my own question almost immediately: because that sort of a presentation lacks the cultural status of "the book," most especially in the academic community, often as "hidebound" in its orthodoxies as books used to be in their leather jackets. Beyond that, there is an ephemeral aspect to multimedia presentations, a there-and-goneness, that impacts not just their gravity but their durability, especially given the rapidly accelerating rate at which technologies for archiving such performances keep evolving, threatening to leave content beached in unreadable oblivion, which McLuhan was surely aware of. "The book" might be snail mail by comparison, but at least it was a stable technology, easily portable, not dependent on the outside oomph of electricity.

As to Morton: His most compelling material examples for revealing what hyperobjects do are the visual art pieces he comments on and the musical pieces he describes. He does provide a mid-book sheaf of illustrations of the former, but so far removed from his individual commentaries and so poorly rendered that they feel more like a skippable afterthought than the foundation for significant parts of his argument. And there is, of course, no aural component to his book at all. He writes copiously and beautifully about music along the way and closes with a long encomium on various kinds of avant-garde sound compositions, most of which I was unfamiliar with. I tried to imagine while I read how much more impactful that would feel if I could hear cascading snippets of the amazing sounds he was describing, his

commentaries either voiced-over or visually staged via one of the many media formats available to him, amplifying the impact of his examples exponentially. I could, of course, have interrupted my reading over and over to search out a recording of the piece he was talking about. But that would not only take an enormous amount of time, it would be a chronic distraction from his line of thinking, the reason I was reading *this* book in the first place.

At least during McLuhan's era, that last gasp of modernism, one could argue, as Eliot did a couple of generations earlier, that "the tradition" inflecting his book could and should be acquired before not while or after reading it. In the information age, that is clearly impossible. There is no singular, coherent tradition any longer, Western or otherwise. Only streams. Lots of them. And the unscripted, serendipitous, hypertextual "surfs" they invite. It's possible that had I initiated one of those at some point during Morton's final chapter, I would never get back to his book at all, making it irrelevant, the ultimate insult to the cultural tradition "the book" is designed to reinscribe.

The term "aesthetic" is foundational to Morton's discourse, the "shimmering," "oozing" effects/affects of being alive in "the world" now that it "has ended." The term "synesthetic" is similarly pervasive in McLuhan's discourse, the speed of electricity with which experience and simulations of experience are experienced. Both terms gesture toward the inviolably embodied materiality of their "objects" of interest. A book is, of course, an object (I've been leafing through these two repeatedly as I wrote all of this) and can be used to point to such things. But (unless it is poetic, and these don't make that cut in my opinion) it is neither an aesthetic nor synesthetic "experience," more like an after-the-fact blueprint for a spectacular

edifice than an animate rendition of the edifice itself, “the book” instead of Coleridge’s Xanadu.

I understand why these authors felt they had no viable alternative in this matter. I just wish they had been more mindfully upfront about the consequences and limitations of that fact, that all of us in the business of scholarly enterprise would be more mindfully upfront about what this by-default *medium,* “the book,” does and cannot do, not only as we exchange messages with one another, but even more so in how we create elaborate hierarchies of value, a collegial pecking order for example, on its basis, one that regulates both literal and institutional “sequences” relentlessly from the outside in and remains functionally invisible from the inside out. All of which I hope makes clear why I see “the book” as an unacknowledged *hyperobject* in the academic marketplace, one that now exceeds any capacity of the culture that created it even to comprehend it, let alone bring it to bay, global warming between two hard covers.

Afterwards (literally)

All of this begs the question, of course: Why, given my critique of “the book,” am I seeking a return to the conventional print marketplace in the hopes that it will transform the one I’m now circulating, with this essay as one of its parts, *into* one? Well, first of all, my new book feels and sounds more like one my former colleagues would have approved of than anything I’ve written since my wife passed. So that may make it eligible for a mode of publication that will reach a wider audience than I can with my meager marketing skills. And I

would love to do that. It may even invite readers to sample my other more experimental books, which I would also love.

Still, I want to resist the temptation to call my book-in-progress a hyperobject in the sense I've been writing about "the book" thus far. First of all, it may never find a willing publisher in the current marketplace, in which case I will publish it myself. What's the difference, I can hear you saying? Well, if you ever experimented with self-publication I think you'd know the difference immediately. The concept of "sharing" I talked about is one index to that difference. I contrasted it with "publishing" but could just as well have contrasted it with "selling," not so much in terms of the individual monetary transactions for those who purchase my book on Amazon, but more in terms of rights to the book itself. When I published my first countable book, I was stunned by the contract I had to sign. It was pages and pages long, detailing all the rights that were no longer mine. As in none. It's possible that somewhere in all that boilerplate was a prohibition against dreaming about it without prior permission! Buying a book is capitalism writ small. Buying the rights to a book is capitalism writ large, the ticket price, really, for the potential to become a countable author, to become, in short, eligible for the brand of hyperobjectivity the academy traffics in.

Secondly, my self-published books are available in PDF form for free for anyone who wants them, and I intentionally price the paperbacks "at-cost," so I don't profit from that side of equation, for the deeply personal reasons I've explained. Not making money may not be an essential element of non-hyperobjectivity, though intentionally choosing not to at least provides me some traction for the "resistance" I'm claiming a right to. Thirdly, as I said, my readership is "small," so small I often feel I am writing primarily to and for myself and fully

control my own work. Hyperobjectivity generally requires more than that, in terms of scale and out-of-controllability.

Fourthly, and primarily, this book could never have been written had I not first written all of the more experimental books that preceded it, making it akin to them aforehand. Books in the alternative mode I've been practicing for almost a decade now are more like *hypo*-objects. They find their way deep "under my skin," course around inside me in the most therapeutic ways, inoculate me against some of the most insidious kinds of externally-imposed nonsense that seek, these days especially, to create and control closed minds via those "simplistic stories of good and evil" Naomi Klein forewarns us about in *Doppelganger*. That may seem, again, a specious, even duplicitous defense—implying that my maybe-book is not what it aspires to become—neither of which makes it necessarily untrue. As neuroscientists who study the quantum properties of the human brain have demonstrated, it seems expressly designed to hold two (or more) seemingly contradictory positions simultaneously without short-circuiting. Poets (like Keats) have known that for centuries, perhaps millennia. It is in fact, I believe, the distinctive human quality that will most likely be hardest to replicate via AI, thus ensuring a place for people in even the most dystopian visions of what the world will look like a few generations from now, robots in charge, humans being sidelined, or worse.

Which gets me to my final point: change, and how books, including mine, should it become countable in the marketplace of ideas, can effect it. As I said above, I do not read for "pleasure," have no idea what that might feel like, except maybe in the rarified sense that Wordsworth uses that term in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. I don't write for "pleasure"

either (again, see Wordsworth.) I write to change, same reason I read, except from the inside out instead of the outside in, to find out what I don't yet know so I can change *myself,* first and foremost, before I give even the slightest thought to changing others. My books "educate" me in the root sense of that word: They "lead me out" and "bring me forth" in the most salutary ways. When I share them, I hope to persuade others not to follow my lead, but to lead themselves out, in order to change on their terms, not mine, maybe even write books of their own to help them do that. In other words, I am far more interested in what books can *do*, under the skin, than in what they *are* in the pantheon of cultural icons.

My need for a unique "education" of this type was precipitated, as I said, by trauma. Trauma is often associated with creative production. It is rarely associated with scholarly enterprise. That binary makes no sense to me any longer. As I look back now on my last decade, I see the long path I have had to take to reanimate myself as a public intellectual, which demands an inner spirit that is patient (it takes a long time to find a publisher for a book); persistent (one needs, I know from my long experience publishing in the academic marketplace, to become inured to rejection, which is quite common in this process), and confident (which derives from a clear sense of exactly where one wants to stand in relation to the larger cultural marketplace of ideas, a firm identity, in other words.) It is very difficult to muster those qualities sustainably while one is in the midst of a hard reboot.

Here is an excerpt from a poem by Li Bai that says something pertinent to this:

> Here, after wandering among these renowned
> mountains, the heart grows rich with repose.

Why talk of cleansing elixirs of immortality?

Here, the world's dust rinsed from my face,

I'll stay close to what I've always loved,

content to leave the peopled world forever.

As I say in “Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole,” Li Bai left “the peopled world” late in his life, lived in solitude in the service of his spirit. That’s what my work over the last ten years has been about for me. I left “the peopled world,” quite literally, not only in professional terms but in social terms, have lived in self-absorbed solitude, working diligently to rebuild myself from the ground up. My first steps along this path were actual steps: I spent an hour or two every morning doing what the Japanese call “forest bathing,” first in the stand of woods outside Pittsburgh my wife and I had walked together through for decades, then in the various temperate rain forests I found when I arrived here in Olympia, luxuriating in the healing mist of phytochemicals always in the air there, and even more so in the redemptive aura of care that leafy things exude when they are allowed to grow together in their natural habitats. Flora in such settings, especially trees, once they know for sure you are not there to “harvest” them, which takes just a few weeks, are extraordinarily receptive, compassionate even, happy to welcome grieving visitors into their communities, unlike the human universe, these days so death-averse, friends frozen with fear, like deer caught in headlights.

And I wrote, fiercely, copiously, book after book, initially about these walks, then, serendipitously, about a wide array of philosophical and poetic matters that emerged for

me to think through as I worked out my path forward, all based on copious reading. That I am now not just ready but eager to return to the fray of public life as a creative thinker, via this project and several others that are happening concurrently, is both stunning and heartening to me, verification for what writing and reading can do to promote change, fundamental change, the kind that alters lives, that heals. I felt 10 years ago that, like Bai, I was leaving the peopled world forever. It is my writing and reading, or more precisely my writing about what I was reading, that opened a way back for me. All of that work is, and will likely remain, largely "beached in . . . oblivion," given how, as a culture, we commodify authorial status via "the book." It is certainly fair, then, to ask: Was it worth all the trouble? As Seneca says:

> "For whose benefit, then, did I learn it all?" If it was for your own benefit that you learnt it you have no call to fear that your trouble may have been wasted. (Seneca, 18)

And further:

> Equally good is the answer given by the person, whoever it was (his identity is uncertain), who when asked what is the object of all the trouble he took over a piece of craftsmanship when it would never reach more than a few people, replied: 'A few is enough for me; so is one; so is none.' (Seneca, 19)

Where, in my case, the "none" was just me. Worth "all the trouble?" Well, it brought me here, to this grand (re)opening, hopeful again, patience, persistence and confidence restored. So, yes. Absolutely. Yes, indeed.

Which takes my "runway" all the way back to its origin moment: Given my strange perceptual relationship with print texts, that ambition for all-at-onceness I described earlier, I didn't start reading "real" books (as opposed to schoolbooks) until I was a teenager, mostly poetry, which I fell in love with. I felt for the first time in my life that I was being changed in ways I had never imagined were possible. I loved that effect, the ongoing change, even more than the media that were instigating it. So, despite the work involved, I began to read voraciously. Because I was extremely adept at math, I majored in physics in college, which was a breeze for me. But it was also boring, changed me not at all in those fundamental inner ways I had become addicted to. So late in the game, I changed my major to English and set myself on a path toward teaching others how they, too, could use books to do what they were doing for me. I have spent a lifetime in that pursuit, in little rooms with young, lively minds and via the many kinds of writing I have done, including now this new work, which exemplifies exactly what I most value. I am not proffering here a *theory* of reading; I am enacting a *method* of reading, demonstrating at a granular level not what to do, as an assertion of authority, but how *I* do it, in case you're interested in trying it.

The sentence that opens my first book, *Writing/Teaching*: *Essays toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*, is "To teach is to change." Unless a book changes me in some way as I read it, I find it tedious. I give the two books I've been writing about here full credit for doing that, changing me, I mean, as my unexpected revelatory turns prove. I could never have thought those things apart from all that reading. Which is also to say: My reservations concerning McLuhan's and Morton's books are not to suggest they are not wonderful books, well worth reading, books that merited all the time and attention I lavished on them, books that changed me in exactly

the way I always hope a book will when I turn the first page. It is simply to say that their authors seem to me to overlook alternative modes of presentation that might have been more effective without accounting for why, a blind spot that is not individually but culturally induced, which is my point. That, finally, may seem a specious, even duplicitous addendum, neither of which makes it necessarily untrue.