

The Writer as Seer

In his December 5, 2011 article on the writer Neal Stephenson, John Schwartz extols the uncanny prescience of Stephenson's novels, pointing to his predictions in *Ice Crash* with its Metaverse, "a virtual place where people meet, do business and play, presenting themselves as avatars." Schwartz goes on to discuss Stephenson's other predictions as well as his new novel, *Reamde*, whose protagonist has created a multiplayer online game that has hauntingly real-world stakes. The novel's tagline says it best: "When the virtual world becomes real, you win or you die."

In light of this prescience, which could even be called futurology, for which it seems Stephenson is well known, Schwartz claims, "the title of seer falls to the novelist now and then." I haven't read Stephenson, although I was weaned on sci-fi from the tender pre-sixteen teen years when I was a premier member of the Sci-Fi Bookclub that delivered a box of books by lesser- and well-known authors to my door every month. And since then remain a geeky fan of layman theoretical physics and shows like *Battlestar Galactica*. But the point I want to make is that the novelist, or, more importantly the writer of prose and poetry, is *always* a seer.

With all due respect to sci-fi, while there is an inordinate amount of imagination that the writer of sci-fi must employ, she operates more like her colleagues in the natural sciences, not so much as a mystical seer as a positivist extrapolator, much as Sartre explains it in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, pointing to a thesis of Bachelard: "The only presupposition of the *praxis* of the natural sciences is an assertion of *unity* conceived as

the perpetual unification of an increasingly real diversity. But this unity depends on human activity rather than on the diversity of phenomena... It is action asserting itself within the undertaking, in the explanation of the field and the unification of the means by the end..." Any act of writing is, in essence, an act of unifying diversity, of selecting and organizing an infinity of options into a set of memes and monads, of words and sentences. There's no doubt about that. But the sci-fi writer uses this type of approach to extrapolate the future. It's easy to make the stretches: Listserv becomes Facebook, big computer becomes small computer, slow computer becomes fast computer, circuits become qubits, chunky satellite phone the size of a brick becomes an obnoxious bluetooth earbud and now we wander around looking like we're talking to ourselves. I pads become enhanced reality screens that mount weightlessly on our heads, and, yes, finally the lines between virtual reality and real reality blur to the point of elusiveness. As Baudrillard writes in *The Perfect Crime*: "The perfect crime is that of an unconditional realization of the world by the actualization of all data, the transformation of all our acts and all events into pure information; in short, the final solution, the resolution of the world ahead of time by the cloning of reality and the extermination of the real by its double."

My point is that extrapolation is much like the perfect crime converting our world into pure information, and it shouldn't be confused with the mystical realm of the seer. I would argue that the imaginative extrapolation in sci-fi generally results in what Sartre might call the practico-inert. Once the future is extrapolated, it only leaves behind a trace, it becomes obsolete from the moment of its inception, particularly if it proves prescient, because it will only be overwritten by its own actualization. But to compare it to the

transcendental project of the seer is to vastly undervalue the role of the writer as seer. Some might posit that sci-fi vis-a-vis the writer as seer could fall into the category of speculative fiction, but I'll argue that our writer defies genre. My aim here isn't to nitpick semantics or to judge Stephenson's writing or the value of science fiction or any type of writing, for that matter. But when I read Schwartz's article it got me to thinking about this concept. A sentence from the above quote, "But this unity depends on human activity rather than on the diversity of phenomena," goes to the heart of the matter at hand, and I'd posit that the writer as seer, and, indeed all writers of outstanding merit, are capable of capturing the diversity of phenomena without falling pray to the unifying effect of empirical human activity.

Which brings me to a short story I recently read by Nerval, a member of what Christian Gauss, in his 1908 review of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* by Arthur Symons in *The North American Review*, would call "the strange group of literary figures ...[who] were for the most part dreamers of millennial dreams who failed altogether when brought *aux prises* with reality." This would seem to discount Nerval as a seer, at least one with any credibility, but that's only if you narrowly define what this act entails, and, more importantly, if you look at it without a metaphysical lens. Sure, perhaps the esoteric writing of Nerval wasn't immediately relevant, but a millennial dreamer has hundreds of years to prove herself. Gauss' critique, though, is purely Apollonian, with little regard for the darker Dionysian art of the writer. But if one were to give more credence to this "strange group" of symbolists, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme et al., fathered as much by Poe as by Nerval (who was born six months before him) one might begin to distinguish the febrile etchings, like the neurotic scratches of a

seismograph catching the briefest hints of a tremor, of a mind painfully attuned, as if in a true séance, to the unseen spirits of history and the future that remain with us as much today as yesterday and tomorrow.

Poor Nerval. Never given his due. Walking his pet lobster on a leash of blue ribbon through the gardens of Palais-Royal, erratic in his writings as in his travels and synapses. Yet he gave us these lines, where the Caliph of Cairo, in a moment of revelation addresses the residents of his city: “ This city is yours, my children, a city fattened on fraud, usury, rapine and injustice; its plundered stolen treasures are all yours! Take justice into your hands and rise up against the sham of luxury, the falsity of virtue, the fraudulence of privilege acquired at the price of gold, the masquerade of treacher that has sold you to the enemy under the trapings of peace!” And his words incite a revolt: “The burning and plundering of the city lasted three days. The inhabitants of the wealthiest quarters had taken up arms to defend themselves; a detachment of Greek soldiers and Barbary troops (ketamis) under the command of Argevan clashed with the prisoners and general population who were following Hakim's orders. The vizier had spread the rumor that Hakim was an impostor and that the real caliph was with his army in the plain of Gizeh; as a result, fierce clashes erupted in the public squares and gardens, illuminated by the flames of the burning city.”

The ancient city of Cairo, or today's global economic crisis? The French seer scribbling his fevered hash dreams in “The Tale of Caliph Hakim” relays these strange words to us 164 years before Cairo's Tahrir square revolt and only one year before the 1848 revolt in his own country. Au prises reality? I'd say so.

Is the seer attuned as much to the past as the future, or is it more that the seer is attuned to the universal, able to conjure from the long line of existence a perpetual unification of history and an increasingly real future, is she “*situated* in the world, penetrated by every cosmic force, and treating the material universe as something which gradually reveals itself through a ‘situated’ *praxis*.” Or has she “appropriated the vocabulary of science in order to express ideas of such poverty that one can see straight through them.”?

Nerval’s story opens with, “Sometime after the year 1000, that is in the fourth century of the Hegira there was a small village...” It unravels through a hashish dream in which, for the Caliph, taking it for the first time, “was as if he had fallen prey to some extraordinary exaltation. Heretofore unheard-of and inconceivable thoughts swarmed through his mind like a whirlwind of fire; his eyes gleamed as if lit up from within by the reflection of an unknown universe...” The nature of the seer.

Nerval claimed, according to a piece in the October, 2008 issue of *Harper’s* that lobsters were better than other domestic animals because, “they are tranquil, serious and they know the secrets of the sea.” And he, as seer, looked for the secrets of the world.

In *Rings of Saturn*, Sebald writes, “The denial of time, so the tract on Orbius Tertius tells us, is one of the key tenets of the philosophical schools of Tlön. According to this principle, the future exists only in the shape of our present apprehensions and hopes, and the past merely as memory.”

It wouldn’t be a stretch to place Stephenson in this camp. In this regard we might call him a seer along the lines of the medium at a séance. We are gathered around to hear

him relay news from his contacts in the future, what that future, no more than fear married to hope, will look like.

Sebald conveys the exploits of the 19th century Chinese Dowager Princess who ruled over her vast country through guile, deception and filicide. While, of course, he has the luxury of hindsight, something in the way he captures the description of a devastating drought that gripped the country hints at the mystic:

“Travelers who were in China between 1876 and 1879 report that, in the drought that had continued for years, whole provinces gave the impression of expiring under prisons of glass. Between seven and twenty million people—no precise estimates have ever been calculated—are said to have died of starvation and exhaustion...A Baptist preacher named Timothy Richard, for example, noted that one effect of the catastrophe, which grew more apparent week by week, was that all movement was slowing down. Singly, in groups and in straggling lines, people tottered across the country and the merest breath of air might suffice to topple them and leave them lying by the wayside forever. Simply raising a hand, closing an eyelid, or exhaling one’s last breath might take, it sometimes seemed, half a century.” There is something of the future in those words, more than any historic tract could convey about the human condition. The future, as they say, lies in the past.

A novelist friend of mine conveyed a disturbing story of clairvoyance that occurred to him in his writing. Late in 2009 he was working on a novel about the history of offshore oil drilling with a parallel plotline that takes place on a future moon colony inhabited entirely by families with names like Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush. The story

goes that a super-deepwater oil well was being drilled off the coast of California. He sent me the prologue:

The end, which would take place over 50 years, began off the bucolic coast of Big Sur, in the year 2020, on a sunny May day, the coastal fog freshly burned off and the ocean a field of shimmering crystal. The second of a pair of offshore oil wells slated for the Big Sur area, and one of several planned up and down the coast, was being scudded near a deep fault line. The site, while riskier due to the instability of the bedrock, promised far easier access to the pay zone than the more conservative site, which would have put the platform a mile farther from shore in waters prohibitively deep. It was the maiden voyage for an advanced platform using the latest technology (albeit untested) named New Kermac after Kermac 16, the first offshore oil well ever spudded out of site of land back in '47 when Kerr-McGee and Brown & Root won the bid by Philips Oil to drill in an area of the Gulf of Mexico where the water was a modest 20 feet deep. At the Big Sur sight, by night the steel beam seamounts flickered with lights suspended from the derrick work and seemed to hover over the winedark sea, giving the illusion of being just out of reach yet in fact more than ten miles from shore.

That May morning back in 2020, the drilling engineer, despite his reservations about the order that came from higher up, commenced to spud the extra-wide borehole. The Board had debated the risks, and had voted that the need for a high-volume flow rate outweighed any other considerations. He was a little uncomfortable, given the vast quantity of drilling fluid and mud that would be required, the added stress of a wide borehole and subsequent mud weight on the surrounding shelf, and the risk of a fault rupture, given the well's proximity to a number of micro faults threading out from the Sur fault zone. According to daily drill records, over the next several weeks all went smoothly to 12,500 feet. At 12,800 feet they hit an unexpected subsurface formation. It was remarkably porous and low pressure, and should have showed up on the satellite imaging, but it hadn't. Before it was breached, the bottomhole pressure was within reasonable limits, even though it was quite high because of the depth of the well. The low resistance within the reservoir blew mud into the cavity, and acted as a kind of lubricant. The abrupt buildup of pressure opened up a small fracture, which, in itself wouldn't have been a problem, except for the fact that that fracture in turn spread to a deeper rift and a deeper subsurface formation, the payzone, helped along by the drill mud. With the added pressure from the bottomhole buildup, a subsidiary fracture split to a nearby rift that then spread all the way to the Sur submarine canyon. With the

sudden loss of bottomhole pressure, and expecting a boomerang kick, the drilling engineer ordered an immediate kill. The next several hours were tense, but no kick ever came. The loss of pressure was attributed to the unexpected subsurface formation. The blowout preventer was reopened and additional mud pumped into the bore to reach pressure. Soon operations continued as usual. But no one could have predicted—or if they had, they kept mum—that the oil forced into the fracture would make its way to a dangerous strike-slip fault, where it would lubricate the plates and kick off a 7.5 submarine quake that would open up a breach several miles long, from which a tide of crude oil would spill forth unabated. The quake also sheered the platform from its mooring, and broke open the borehole. Within hours, the same amount of oil that had spilled from a similar incident in Santa Barbara back in '69, where they had blown open a fracture in the ocean floor from a well a mere 3,500 feet deep, which released a comparatively modest 200,000 gallons of oil over 11 days, had gushed from a series of fractures along the Sur fault zone. And with the platform sheared from its moorings, there was no way to “plug the drain.” Everyone just stood by watching as the ocean turned black for thousands of miles, as the crushed bones of dinosaurs, as the mulch of millions of years poured forth from ancient burial grounds, awaking now to the brilliance of the sun, blossoming like a necrotic flower over the waves unfurling from the soil of a warm spring day. And then it all caught fire.

50 pages into his book, my friend had been taking a break one morning to check out the news on the NY Times website. Which is when he saw the Deepwater Horizon in flames. Faulty blowout preventer. He wasn't able to write another word after that.

But the list goes on, Shelley and her heterogenous monster, Kafka and his prisons, Orwell and his Newspeak, Mann and his Alpine retreat of no return, J.G. Ballard and Dick, Porter and her *Ship of Fools*. The list goes on, seers all.