For The Season

January passes, my resolutions fail--
the holidays go swimming by
like fish that will not take my bait.
This year I'll mail my Christmas cards
before July--and tell you once again
the very best intentions pave
my special road to hell--
and wish you godspeed on your own,
and grace and love and peace.

Dear friends, the weather here
is always 28 below--
I celebrate the season,
a haystack looking for a needle
in the snow.

MARK VINZ

Literature: A Cushion for Future Shock

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Many English teachers have to deal with the present shock of dwindling enrollment in elective courses. Students are seeking "more relevant, more practical courses" we're told. They want courses geared to get them through tomorrow's problems.

One of these problems, according to Alvin Toffler, in Future Shock, is that

> there are discoverable limits to the amount of change that the human organism can absorb, and that by endlessly accelerating change without first determining these limits, we may submit masses of men to demands they simply cannot tolerate.

As an English teacher wanting to serve the student, other English teachers, and society as well, I thought I'd suggest a mini-course to minister to the "human organisms" that Toffler is talking about.

To show the world what even Toffler should know--that the problem is age-old--I'd begin with Medea, the Greek play by Euripides. We hear the chorus chant:

> Gone is the grace that oaths once had.
> Through all the breadth of Hellas, honour
> is found no more; to heaven hath it sped
> away. For thee no father's house is open,
> woe is thee! to be a haven from the
> troublous storm, while o'er thy home is
> set another queen, and the bride that is
> preferred to thee.

Here the chorus laments the loss of stability that oaths once gave. Later in the play we see Medea's reaction to the sudden change forced upon her. She murders her two children. She does so to get revenge on Jason, true, but the murders might just as accurately be explained as the

result of "future shock." Medea's "stability zone"--her home--had been pulled from under her when Jason took another wife. Hence her irrational murders of her two children. Naturally, not all "human organisms" who suffered from "future shock" can serve as models to emulate. But even so, seeing we are not the first to suffer "future shock" may stabilize us.

Next I'd study Hamlet by William Shakespeare. It may be true that the famous bard never heard of "future shock," but he certainly wrote about it. Changes must be occurring too rapidly for Hamlet's system to assimilate them, as Toffler would say, for Shakespeare writes:

> ...and yet, within a month--
> Let me not think on't!--Frailty, thy name is woman!--
> A little month, or e'er those shoes were old
> With which she followed my poor father's body,
> Like Niobe, all tears,--why she, even she--
> O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
> Would have mourn'd longer--married with my uncle,
> My father's brother, but no more like my father than
> I to Hercules; within a month,
> Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
> Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
> She married.

Here the repetition of "within a month" indicates that the speed at which his mother changed bothered Hamlet more than the actual changes. True, a violation of the mores for the mourning period may be the real problem, but even such mores no doubt became established as much to cushion the mourners from future shock as to respect the dead. So a violation of a mourning period was not shocking merely because a more had been broken. It was shocking because the sensibilities which demand such a more had been trampled on. Hamlet too suffered from "future shock," if we want to use Toffler's terminology.

Next, I'd study a few poems. William Butler Yeats felt so strongly about chaotic change in "The Second Coming" that he wrote:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
> everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

A nation which has lived through Watergate might think this had to have been written in 1974. In finding that, in fact, Yeats wrote this certainly before 1924, present readers find that if things seem to "fall apart" today, they seemed to do so before too when even the best men lacked "all conviction."

I'd like to study, too, a poem by W. R. Rodgers who helps us understand why the pace of change may seem too overwhelming just now. He writes:

> The World moves not with meant and maintained
> pace
> Toward some hill-horizon or held mood,
> But in great jags and jerks, probed and prodded
> From point of anger, exploded
> By each new and opposed touch.

Although this was written in another generation, and probably surprises us in its perception, perhaps it ought to tell us that we are experiencing a jerk right now, not so different from the "jerks" others before us have experienced. And if our change today is different, its "shock-rating" is probably no more devastating than the "shock-rating" of changes in other eras.

Think, for example, of W.H. Auden as he sat in "one of the dives of Fifty-second Street" in New York in 1939. He describes his feelings thus:

> Uncertain and afraid
> As the clever hopes expire
> Of a low dishonest decade:
> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright
> And darkened lands of the earth,
> Obsessing our private lives;
> The unmentionable odour of death
> Offends the September night.

That was indeed a time when the future was threatening, holding no certainty and little hope. Auden describes men's reactions to it in this New York bar in a later stanza:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Perhaps most people will still react as did the men along the bar and "cling to their average day." In fact, these seem to be the very people Toffler is describing when he writes:

> And finally, the confusion and uncertainty wrought by transcience, novelty and diversity may explain the profound apathy that de-socializes millions, young and old alike.

But having seen Auden give form to this human dilemma, we are less shocked, less frightened, because we feel we perceive the experience for what it is. We may even see ourselves as "clinging to our average day," but even so, knowing ourselves can also be a stay against confusion. So I'd use Auden's poem, "September 1, 1939" too.

To let me sense how "cognitive overstimulation interferes with our ability to think"--Toffler's words--I'd study "Change" by Stanley Kunitz. He writes that man

...lifts his impermanent face
To watch the stars, his brain locked tight
Against the tall revolving night.

And by reading the rest of the poem, I'd see that "cognitive overstimulation," in spite of what Toffler suggests, does not explain why man can't think clearly in periods of rapid change. Kunitz explains better when he writes:

Here, Now, and Always, man would be
Inviolate eternally;
This is his spirit's trinity.

Neither man gives a blue print for action, but Kunitz's explanation at least affords man the serenity of knowing that it is not merely his unlucky fate of being born in the 1970's, but his condition as man that makes him seek security before the face of Heaven.

Next I'd study an old favorite of Robert Frost entitled "The Road Not Taken," to teach my students of "decision stress." Toffler wrote that non-routine decisions

> force us to make one-time..decisions that will establish new habits and behavioral procedures...These decisions are non-programmed. They are high in psychic cost (p. 356).

But Frost tells us of a "non-programmed decision" more memorably in his poem:

And both roads that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

And he catches the "high psychic cost" more profoundly in his last stanza:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence.

Here we sense the feeling that Toffler's jargon blurs, and sensing it we are prepared for whatever cost our own decisions may entail. No futurist's conjectures of what the respective roads hold for us could do as much.

Next Toffler says that one response of victims of future shock is that they deny that the stimuli invading them is real. Men find security by insisting that what to all appearances is happening, isn't. To get a student to understand this human tendency, I'd let him see Macbeth's tenacious clinging to the witches' promise in spite of all evidences of his impending defeat. The war is practically lost, and Macduff has invaded his castle. All the promises of the witches have been proven false but Macbeth still clings to hope of victory on the chance that Macduff was born of woman. As he duels Macduff, Macbeth says:

Thou wast born of a woman.
But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.

Let the student see Macbeth, and in Macbeth, see himself. Then he will not just see the disaster of denying the reality of "invading stimuli," but feel it.

Another wrong response to future shock, according to Toffler, is "obsessive reversion to previously successful adaptive routines." Examples of this response surface in left-wing communes, bucolic romanticism, a return to nineteenth century terrorism, and a contempt for society. Well, literature speaks precisely to people who have responded or might be tempted to respond thus to modern life. So I'd use "Carpe Diem, " by Robert Frost to give this warning to those who wish to "seize the day of pleasure" as romantics might advise:

> ...bid life seize the present?
> It lives less in the present
> Than in the future always,
> And less in both together
> Than in the past. The present
> Is too much for the senses,
> Too crowding, too confusing--
> Too present to imagine.

Frost saw long before Toffler that the present was too confusing to be assimilated. And finding that Frost can give form to our dilemma helps us respond reasonably to change rather than dropping out in defiance or despair.

Further advice to potential drop-outs of society comes in Frost's short poem, "Nothing Gold Can Stay":

> Nature's first green is gold,
> Her hardest hue to hold.
> Her early leaf's a flower;
> But only so an hour.
> Then leaf subsides to leaf.
> So Eden sank to grief,
> So dawn goes down to day.
> Nothing gold can stay.

The poem provides a philosophical viewpoint that all utopia-seekers would do well to review. It might save them from future shock whenever reality breaks in upon their romantic enclaves.

And I think I'd end my mini-course by studying one of the choruses from "The Rock" by T.S. Eliot. Toffler writes that

> Sanity...hinges on man's ability to predict his immediate personal future...When an individual is plunged into a fast and irregularly changing situation or a novelty loaded context, his predictive accuracy plummets. To compensate for this, he must

> process far more information than before and fast. Yet we are finite.

True. But Toffler does not see what conclusion this should lead him to. T.S. Eliot, equally concerned about the same problem, not only knows why we are in trouble, but where we can find help. In one of the choruses he writes:

> The endless cycle of idea and action,
> Endless invention, endless experiment,
> Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
> Knowledge of speech, but not of silence,
> Knowledge of words, and ignorance of The Word.

Toffler and Eliot agree that "endless invention, endless experiment" benumb our sensibilities today. But Eliot cites as the fundamental cause of future shock something that might indict Toffler as well--ignorance of The Word. So I'll conclude my mini-course for future shock with Eliot, both for the form he gives to our dilemma, and for the solution he implies.

But setting up a mini-course for future shock is not the only, nor even the best response to Toffler. A better response might be having literature teachers, operating from a knowledge of Toffler, show that much literature, not only ministers to the problems that Toffler isolated, but also corrects the faulty solutions that he proposed. For we can't merely sneer at him as a philistine, as I've done here, and then ignore him with impunity, suffering as we are from present shock as students select classes in movies, pop culture, TV, or journalism over literature courses. We must show that literature solves more problems than Toffler's sociology.

II.

And that's what I aim to do now--show that literature is a safer bet to solve problems than Toffler is. Toffler says that people in a "state of change" can be helped by "situational groupings" and "crisis counseling." Surely misery still loves company, so "situational groupings," where people equally disturbed by change can huddle together, may ease some hurt. But situational groupings will only provide lasting help if, first, some member of the group has something worthwhile to offer that would be applicable to others. And second, such groupings would only help if members of the group shared the same basic values so that one's advice would indeed help and not frustrate the next guy. Toffler at times seems to forget

that some men have insights, that some men do have something to offer, while others don't.

But here an English teacher must realize that not all literature is helpful either. Literature which bewilders the reader may be salt, not salve to a wounded psyche. Either teacher or student must discern between books which help and books which hurt so that a literature class is more than a perplexed artist sharing his nightmares with equally perplexed students. Otherwise literature classes, like "situational groupings," will result in little more than a pooling of anxiety.

Toffler also speaks of a "small group of top social scientists..hammering out among themselves a set of well-defined values on which a truly super-industrial utopian society might be based." The kind of values they would compromise on would likely be more depleted than defined. But values endure; man's basic needs have not changed, at least not since he began recording his wisdom. And although if I had to choose between some literary loco-colorists and Toffler's committees, I might give the nod to Toffler's committees, nevertheless I'm still certain of this: one group of top present-day social scientists can only produce values distorted by a provincialism of time that English teachers should continue to fight.

This provincialism of time, is, of course, evident in Toffler's own proposals. Ours is the age of committee, so he says we need committees since futurist novelists are in short supply. Can he think successive generations will ever cherish committee reports for their insights into the human condition as they have cherished novels? Furthermore, the futurist novelists that Toffler mentions--1984, Brave New World, and Walden Two--are all criticized by Toffler for reverting to simplified social and cultural relationships. Similarly Toffler criticizes "intentional communities" or utopian colonies for their "powerful preference for the past." But doesn't this preference for the past suggest what artists know, but some social scientists rarely learn, namely that the future must reflect past values, not merely because the past came first, but because man is still man.

Yet Toffler says that we need to encourage experimental utopias which are trying new social arrangements, arrangements based on super, rather than on pre-industrial forms. While both utopian novelists and the people most sensitive to the dehumanization of society revert to "pre-

industrial" ways and seek direction from our traditions, Toffler suggests that we pattern tomorrow after today's nightmares. I suggest that enduring literature will provide a better pattern for tomorrow's dreams.

Finally, Toffler could be right that we need a utopian vision to formulate our social goals, and that we need the contribution of various ethnic groups and fringe groups, or in his words, that we need "anticipatory democracy." But when he says that "Rising novelty renders irrelevant the traditional goals of our chief institutions--state, church, corporation, army, and the university" (p. 471), he is absurd.

First of all, to lump the widely divergent traditional goals of the church and the state, the army and the university, into one package of goals which have been "rendered irrelevant" does not help us sort out meaningful from meaningless goals. And secondly, to suggest that the goals of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness for all citizens; or goals of freedom of inquiry; or of loving one's neighbor as oneself and God above all, have been "rendered irrelevant" by mere "rising novelty" is sophomoric.

As several of the selections I've already cited have shown, many generations have felt threatened by change. But none before ours has had the short-sightedness to think that the fundamental needs and fears of man for whom state, church, and university exist, had changed. No generation before ours has thought the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness--all traditional goals--could be sacrificed with impunity for the right to abort, offend, and pursue titillation. Some knowledge of man's great literature stretching back over the centuries would sober us with that fact.

The question is not whether we are for or against change. The question is what gives us direction amidst change. I submit that an English curriculum, though never a neat, practical guide, may imply direction as well as cushion us against the future. For example, I look forward to change after reading these lines from "Two Voices" by Alice Corbin:

> But would you stay as now you are,
> Or as a year ago?
> Oh, not as then, for then how small
> The wisdom we did owe!
>
> Or if forever as today,
> How little we could know.

I know my claim for the usefulness of literature must seem like a claim raised too late for an art form too outmoded. But to say that we can learn more from the accumulated wisdom of the past than from the pooled ignorance of the present should not seem an unreasonable claim. I'll take my stand with Stephen Spender who wrote in "Statistics":

> Lady, you think too much of speeds,
> Pulleys and cranes swing in your mind;
> The Woolworth Tower has made you blind
> To Egypt and the pyramids.
>
> Too much impressed by motor-cars
> You have a false historic sense.
> But I, perplexed at God's expense
> Of electricity on stars,
>
> From Brighton pier shall weigh the seas,
> And count the sands along the shore:
> Despise all moderns, thinking more
> Of Shakespeare and Praxiteles.

I'd want The Word that Eliot refers to also, to put the stars and Shakespeare in proper perspective. But I do want knowledge of literature. The future is less of a shock to the man who knows where his race has been and where his race is leading him.

Writer In Residence

muttering
master of parentheses,
he wears his desk
like an overcoat
two sizes too small

tornadoes rummage
his eyebrows,
his hair a snow cloud
lost since
sometime in the last century

twice a day
pockets crammed with searchlights
he stalks the ferocious silence
the shadows of unbelievers
just beyond the door

MARK VINZ

On The Function Of "The Custom House" in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

By Claude Brew
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The function of "The Custom House" in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter is a matter of considerable uncertainty. Editors sometimes omit it, and critics usually dismiss it as either a lame attempt on Hawthorne's part to establish the historicity of his tale or to relieve its gloom. In omitting it from The Portable Hawthorne, Malcolm Cowley explains:

> He [Hawthorne] was afraid that the public would be repelled by this intense monotone, so he prefaced the book with a long humorous account of his adventures in the custom house.[1]

In summarizing critical treatments of "The Custom House," Sam S. Baskett points out that even critics who have given it "a closer look" tend to

> relegate it to a precariously tangential position in relation to the principal part of the book. The implication is that the reader of The Scarlet Letter, if he likes, may legitimately ignore "The Custom House."

Baskett and others[3] go on to give "The Custom House" a fuller treatment, seeing it as extension and clarification of the main tale or some of its themes, or as ironic counterpoint.

It is not my intention here to quarrel with any of these theories concerning "The Custom House." They all, as a matter of fact, have a certain validity. One need go no farther than the sketch itself, or perhaps some of Hawthorne's letters, to find support for any of the views so far expressed. The reader with sufficient determination