

Alone, With Others

The word *human* is inextricably lodged inside the word *humanities*. It stubbornly adheres to it: a bodily memory. The concept of the human, which enrages so many postmodern thinkers, is the foundation of what we talk about when we talk about the humanities. So, too, the concept of “humanity” poignantly lurks within the idea of “the humanities” (the Latin *humanitas* or “humanness” originally pertained to human nature, the qualities and feelings characteristic of human beings). The question of the future of the humanities inevitably carries with it a question of the future of humanity, especially that much maligned figure, that relatively recent “invention,” the individual human being—solitary, fragmented, flawed—as well as of the larger collective, the social realm, the macrocosm of society itself. The burden of a gathering such as ours is to think not just about the nature of our studies, the future of what in the Renaissance was called the *studia humanitatis*—those collective fields deemed “the humanities,” which have their own common history and distinctive individual histories—but also about who we are and might become, what we think about and create, how we act in relationship to each other. Our existential condition suggests that each of us is fundamentally alone, with others. The aesthete Wallace Stevens titled one of his poems “How to Live. What to Do.”

Education is first and foremost an act or process. It is secondarily a knowledge or skill developing out of that process. We risk being limited by an entirely empirical or instrumental view of knowledge geared exclusively toward profit. The arts and humanities provide us with a different kind of interpretive scope, a different mode of critical thinking, and open the space for another kind of creativity, which is a celebration of the unexpected, what D. W. Winnicott calls “the doing that arises out of being.” Robert Kegan contends that “the world is made up of processes as much as entities,” and he conceives of “human being” as an activity, “the doing that

a human is.” That “doing” also includes the psychological necessity of play, the imaginative process of making something that didn’t exist before, the sheer aesthetic thrill of it. And there is the shiver and bliss of encounter and immersion—in a piece of music, say, which gives us a time-based experience, or a work of visual art, which gives us a spatial one.

I believe that education in the humanities, which can never be completely quantified, puts us in a special kind of relationship. In a dehumanizing world, a humanly-centered education first of all places us in relationship to ourselves—our interior and affective lives. “The purpose of poetry,” Czeslaw Milosz asserts in his poem “Ars Poetica?”, “is to remind us / how difficult it is to remain just one person, for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, / and invisible guests come in and out at will.” We are both familiar and strange to ourselves, riven creatures, and the integrity of the self—who anyone is at any given moment—is always at risk, perennially under assault. Our education also places us in relation to various fields of knowledge, to particular domains of learning—the nature of people acting in groups, for example, or the history politics, or the character of religious life—and also to each other. Our education in what Nietzsche playfully calls “the *unnatural* sciences” suggests that what is closest and most familiar to us is in some ways the hardest to understand. As he formulates it in *The Gay Science*:

The familiar is what we are used to, and what we are used to is the most difficult to “know”—that is, to view as a problem, to see as strange, as distant, as “outside us”...The great certainty of the natural sciences in comparison with psychology and the critique of the elements of consciousness—with the *unnatural* sciences, one might almost say—rests precisely on the fact that they take the *strange* as their object, while it is nearly contradictory and absurd even to want to take the not-strange as one’s object.

The arts especially estrange and “de-familiarize” reality. Literature gives us fictive stories, it represents imagined lives, and it provides us with what Kenneth Burke calls “equipment for living.” The humanities offer critical models and forms to think with, questions and

interpretations that connect us on a human level. Relationship is based on a mutuality of interests. “One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation,” Martin Buber states in his treatise *I and Thou*: “relation is reciprocity.” We become more fully ourselves—indeed, we make something of ourselves—in full relationship to each other. Empathy matters. We construct meaning between us.

“These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts,” Martha Nussbaum explains in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*: “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.” I believe that we are not simply given our humanity—rather our humanity is something to be attained, something to be strived for. We aspire to become deeper human beings, to evolve more fully. My own vocation, my chosen lifework, is poetry, and I believe that poetry in particular, and art in general, enables us to dramatize, enact, and connect our inner and outer lives. Poetry delights, disturbs, confronts, consoles. It presents us with what John Keats calls “the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination.” I am thinking here both of oral and written poetry, which provide two different communicative models.

The oral poem is a particular mode of communication usually transmitted by word of mouth and performed in face to face interaction. It is a verbal art characterized by a heightened awareness of the act of expression—how it says what it says—and it is marked, framed, and identified by the community as poetry. It is an emergent art that unfolds in performance. It binds people together through language. Oral poetry includes miniature genres, such as the proverb, a short pithy saying that takes a personal circumstance and embodies it in impersonal form. The linguist Roman Jakobson calls it “the largest coded unit occurring in our speech and

at the same time the shortest poetic composition.” The proverb is normative, consensual: *Live and learn; Live and let live*. It is connected to the riddle, its inverse form. The riddle, which is possibly the earliest form of oral literature (the oldest riddles on record are preserved on a clay tablet from ancient Babylon), is both an interrogative and an expressive form. It poses a question and misleads by indirection. It draws attention to our cognitive categories—a formulation of thought, a mode of association, a metaphor. Whereas the proverb is reassuring and reinforces social wisdom, the riddle creates a situation that is vexing, verbally aggressive, socially disruptive. It uses small things to illuminate large mysteries. Here, for example, is a Persian riddle that gives a feeling of sudden liberation, like a Japanese haiku:

A blue napkin full of pears—
Sky.

Oral literature also includes larger narrative forms, such as the ballad, where the individual singer stands in for the community, serving as the deputy of a public voice, and the epic—a long narrative poem, exalted in style, heroic in theme—that tells a representative story. The epic is inherently nostalgic; it looks back to greater and more heroic times—the emergence of tribes, the founding of countries, the deeds of legendary figures. It moves beyond individual experience and harkens back to an outsize communal past. It instills a sense of collective grandeur.

Poetry is a highly concentrated verbal medium, a form of imaginative thinking, a type of rapid acceleration in language, and the words of the poem are a means of connection, a chosen method of transport. The written poem, especially the lyric, my own domain, fixes the evanescence of sound in print. It foregrounds language as a medium. The poem takes on a concrete visual as well as auditory life. The written lyric is a passionate form of communication between strangers. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam spoke of the mutual relationship—the contractual

agreement—that obtains between the poet and the reader, the writer and the hidden addressee of a literary text. Mandelstam writes:

At a critical moment, a seafarer tosses a sealed bottle into the ocean waves, containing his name and a message detailing his fate. Wandering along the dunes many years later, I happen upon it in the sand. I read the message, note the date, the last will and testament of one who has passed on. I have the right to do so. I have not opened someone else's mail. The message in the bottle was addressed to its finder. I found it. That means, I have become its secret addressee.

As a reader, I am overwhelmed by a sense of providence when I discover an uncanny message in a bottle, a poem that speaks to no one in particular and therefore seems unexpectedly addressed to me. The discovery has the element of freedom, the fresh air of surprise, of speaking from the unknown into the unknown. It is a gift from a human beyond, but one that the reader, in turn, daydreams into existence and expands with thought, bleeding with experience, gifting with intimate life.

The German-speaking poet Paul Celan was strongly influenced by Mandelstam's key notion that "though individual poems, such as epistles and dedications, may be addressed to concrete persons, poetry as a whole is always directed toward a more or less distant, unknown addressee." There is something secretive in it. Poetry may seek transcendence, but it always does so with a human horizon, since, however uncertainly, the writer nonetheless posits a future reader—a distant heir—as surely as a speaker implies a listener. Thus Celan suggested that a poem may claim the infinite but it always does so by reaching through time, "not above and beyond it." He echoed Mandelstam when he wrote:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could be washed up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are under way: they are making toward something.

The poem is *en route*, Celan suggests, sometimes for centuries, and longs for a hearing; it

survives by moving “toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality.” “The poem is lonely,” he says, and it breathes—it inhales and exhales—*“in a mystery of encounter.”*

The dynamic between the writer and the reader is what Buber characterizes as a greeting of human spirits. “In the beginning is the relation,” Buber argues. The relation precedes the Word because it is authored by the human. Or as Rainer Maria Rilke put it in a letter: “instead of possession one learns relation.” Rilke, Mandelstam, and Celan all teach us that lyric poetry can only exist in dialogue one on one, in just such a human form of greeting and recognition, in relationship. Poetry is a non-utilitarian form of knowledge that teaches us to move beyond the literal and think metaphorically (Robert Frost considered it a form of education by metaphor.) It is a species of play spiritually dependent upon the dynamic relationship that exists between two unknowns, writer and reader. That’s why the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva suggested that “reading is complicity in the creative process.”

One might say that the poet and the reader of poetry are bound together by a necessary consensual compact, by the ways in which they employ lyric poetry itself to exchange dizzying signals, urgent and disturbing messages, some of them social and historical (think of protest poetry, or the warnings of the biblical prophets), some strange and otherworldly (Mandelstam said that “Exchanging signals with the planet Mars...is a task worthy of a lyric poet”). Poetry connects us more deeply to ourselves even as it connects us more fully to others. It delivers on our spiritual lives precisely because it gives us the gift of intimacy and interiority, of privacy and participation. It is a form of dynamic spiritual exchange. Poetry “pitches persons toward one another full of news” (Allen Grossman). Our inner lives have been given form. We are enabled to achieve more fully our own personhood.

These two modes of literary connection, of aesthetic encounter, the oral and the written—one face to face, the other physically removed—provide us with two models of human engagement, two ways of helping us to live in the world. We are interdependent. On a human scale, they address both the inevitability of our separate solitudes and the necessary consolation of intimate interchanges between individuals. Like the humanities in general, poetry teaches a species of understanding that relies not on quantifiable certainties, but on nuance, ambiguity, and complexity. It employs modes of expression and discernment that are not measurable and cannot be grasped formulaically. It requires the exercise of critical thinking and evaluative judgments. And it assumes that all of us must navigate our relationships with each other and with our environments. We must develop our deepest convictions about how to live ethically, by means of emotion, interpretation, intuition, and imagination. In an increasingly technological world, the empathic connections fostered by the humanities become more than ever a necessity for our survival, and for our very future. We, too, must figure out how to live and what to do.

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