



Helen Vendler

Lecture

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The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar

By Helen Vendler

"Poetry is the scholar's art."

Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*

When it became useful in educational circles in the United States to group various university disciplines under the name "The Humanities," it seems to have been tacitly decided that philosophy and history would be cast as the core of this grouping, and that other forms of learning--the study of languages, literatures, religion, and the arts--would be relegated to subordinate positions. Philosophy, conceived of as embodying truth, and history, conceived of as a factual record of the past, were proposed as the principal embodiments of Western culture, and given pride of place in general education programs.

Confidence in a reliable factual record, not to speak of faith in a reliable philosophical synthesis, has undergone considerable erosion. Historical and philosophical assertions issue, it seems, from particular vantage points, and are no less contestable than the assertions of other disciplines. The day of limiting cultural education to Western culture alone is over. There are losses here, of course--losses in depth of learning, losses in coherence--but these very changes have thrown open the question of how the humanities should now be conceived, and how the study of the humanities should, in this moment, be encouraged.

I want to propose that the humanities should take, as their central objects of study, not the texts of historians or philosophers, but the products of aesthetic endeavor: architecture, art, dance, music, literature, theater, and so on. After all, it is by their arts that cultures are principally remembered. For every person who has read a Platonic

dialogue, there are probably ten who have seen a Greek marble in a museum, or if not a Greek marble, at least a Roman copy, or if not a Roman copy, at least a photograph. Around the arts there exist, in orbit, the commentaries on art produced by scholars: musicology and music criticism, art history and art criticism, literary and linguistic studies. At the periphery we might set the other humanistic disciplines--philosophy, history, the study of religion. The arts would justify a broad philosophical interest in ontology, phenomenology, and ethics; they would bring in their train a richer history than one which, in its treatment of mass phenomena, can lose sight of individual human uniqueness--the quality most prized in artists, and most salient, and most valued, in the arts.

What would be the advantage of centering humanistic study on the arts? The arts present the whole uncensored human person--in emotional, physical, and intellectual being, and in single and collective form--as no other branch of human accomplishment does. In the arts we see both the nature of human predicaments--in Job, in Lear, in Isabel Archer--and the evolution of representation over long spans of time (as the taste for the Gothic replaces the taste for the Romanesque, as the composition of opera replaces the composition of plainchant). The arts bring into play historical and philosophical questions without implying the prevalence of a single system or of universal solutions. Artworks embody the individuality that fades into insignificance in the massive canvas of history and is suppressed in philosophy by the desire for impersonal assertion. The arts are true to the way we are and were, to the way we actually live and have lived--as singular persons swept by drives and affections, not as collective entities or sociological paradigms. The case histories developed within the arts are in part idiosyncratic, but in part applicable by analogy to a class larger than the individual entities they depict. Hamlet is a very specific figure--a Danish prince who has been to school in Germany--but when Prufrock says, "I am not Prince Hamlet," he is in a way testifying to the fact that Hamlet means something to every one who knows about the play.

If the arts are so satisfactory an embodiment of human experience, why do we need studies commenting on them? Why not merely take our young people to museums, to concerts, to libraries? There is certainly no substitute for hearing Mozart, reading Dickinson, or looking at the boxes of Joseph Cornell. Why should we support a brokering of the arts; why not rely on their direct impact? The simplest answer is that reminders of art's presence are constantly necessary. As art goes in and out of fashion, some scholar is always

necessarily reviving Melville, or editing Monteverdi, or recommending Jane Austen. Critics and scholars are evangelists, plucking the public by the sleeve, saying "Look at this," or "Listen to this," or "See how this works." It may seem hard to believe, but there was a time when almost no one valued Gothic art, or, to come closer to our own time, *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*.

A second reason to encourage scholarly studies of the arts is that such studies establish in human beings a sense of cultural patrimony. We in the United States are the heirs of several cultural patrimonies: a world patrimony (of which we are becoming increasingly conscious); a Western patrimony (from which we derive our institutions, civic and aesthetic); and a specifically American patrimony (which, though great and influential, has, bafflingly, yet to be established securely in our schools). In Europe, although the specifically national patrimony was likely to be urged as preeminent--Italian pupils studied Dante, French pupils studied Racine--most nations felt obliged to give their students an idea of the Western inheritance extending beyond native production. As time passed, colonized nations, although instructed in the culture of the colonizer, found great energy in creating a national literature and culture of their own with and against the colonial model (as we can see, for instance, in the example of nineteenth-- and twentieth--century Ireland). For a long time, American schooling paid homage, culturally speaking, to Europe and to England; but increasingly we began to cast off European and English influence in arts and letters, without, unfortunately, filling the consequent cultural gap in the schools with our own worthy creations in art and literature. Our students leave high school knowing almost nothing about American art, music, architecture, and sculpture, and having only a superficial acquaintance with a few American authors.

We will ultimately want to teach, with justifiable pride, our national patrimony in arts and letters--by which, if by anything, we will be remembered--and we hope, of course, to foster young readers and writers, artists and museum--goers, composers and music enthusiasts. But these patriotic and cultural aims alone are not enough to justify putting the arts and the studies of the arts at the center of our humanistic and educational enterprise. What, then, might lead us to recommend the arts and their commentaries as the center of the humanities? Art, said Wallace Stevens, helps us to live our lives. I'm not sure we are greatly helped to live our lives by history (since whether or not we remember it we seem doomed to repeat it), or by philosophy (the consolations of philosophy have never been very widely received). Stevens's

assertion is a large one, and we have a right to ask how he would defend it. How do the arts, and the scholarly studies attendant on them, help us to live our lives?

Stevens was a democratic author, and expected his experience, and his reflections on it, to apply widely. For him, as for any other artist, "to live our lives" means to live in the body as well as in the mind, on the sensual earth as well as in the celestial clouds. The arts exist to relocate us in the body by means of the work of the mind in aesthetic creation; they situate us on the earth, paradoxically, by means of a mental paradigm of experience embodied, with symbolic concision, in a physical medium. It distressed Stevens that most of the human beings he saw walked about blankly, scarcely seeing the earth on which they lived, filtering it out from their pragmatic urban consciousness. Even when he was only in his twenties, Stevens was perplexed by the narrowness of the way in which people inhabit the earth:

I thought, on the train, how utterly we have
forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it
from our thoughts. There are but few who consider
its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still
a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes & barrens
& wilds. It still dwarfs & terrifies & crushes. The
rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds
still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens
& orchards & fields are mere scrapings.
Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out
the face of the giant from his windows. But the
giant is there, nevertheless.

[*Souvenirs and Prophecies*, ed. Holly Stevens
(New York: Knopf, 1977), note of April 18, 1904, p.
134]

The arts and their attendant disciplines restore human awareness by releasing it into the ambience of the felt world, giving a habitation to the tongue in newly coined language, to the eyes and ears in remarkable recreations of the physical world, to the animal body in the kinesthetic flex and resistance of the artistic medium. Without an alert sense of such things, one is only half alive. Stevens reflected on this function of the arts--and on the results of its absence--in three poems that I will take up as proof--texts for what follows. Although Stevens speaks in particular about poetry, he extends the concept to *poesis*--the Greek term for making, widely applicable to all creative effort.

Like geography and history, the arts confer a patina on the

natural world. A vacant stretch of grass becomes humanly important when one reads the sign "Gettysburg." Over the grass hangs an extended canopy of meaning--struggle, corpses, tears, glory--shadowed by a canopy of American words and works, from the Gettysburg Address to the Shaw Memorial. The vacant plain of the sea becomes human when it is populated by the ghosts of Ahab and Moby--Dick. An unremarkable town becomes "Winesburg, Ohio"; a rustic bridge becomes "the rude bridge that arched the flood" where Minutemen fired "the shot heard round the world." One after the other, cultural images suspend themselves, invisibly, in the American air, as--when we extend our glance--the Elgin marbles, wherever they may be housed, hover over the Parthenon, once their home; as Michelangelo's Adam has become, to the Western eye, the Adam of Genesis. The patina of culture has been laid down over centuries, so that in an English field one can find a Roman coin, in an Asian excavation an Emperor's stone army, in our Western desert the signs of the mound--builders. Over Stevens's giant earth, with its tumultuous motions, there floats every myth, every text, every picture, every system, that creators--artistic, religious, philosophical--have conferred upon it. The Delphic oracle hovers there next to Sappho, Luther's theses hang next to the Grunewald altar, China's Cold Mountain neighbors Sinai, the B--minor Mass shares space with Rabelais.

If there did not exist, floating over us, all the symbolic representations that art and music, religion, philosophy, and history, have invented, and all the interpretations and explanations of them that scholarly effort has produced, what sort of people would we be? We would, says Stevens, be sleepwalkers, going about like automata, unconscious of the very life we were living: this is the import of Stevens's 1943 poem "Somnambulisma." The poem rests on three images, of which the first is the incessantly variable sea, the vulgar reservoir from which the vulgate--the common discourse of language and art alike--is drawn. The second image is that of a mortal bird, whose motions resemble those of the water but who is ultimately washed away by the ocean. The subsequent generations of the bird, too, are always washed away. The third image is that of a scholar, without whom ocean and bird alike would be incomplete:

Somnambulisma

On an old shore, the vulgar ocean rolls
Noiselessly, noiselessly, resembling a thin bird,
That thinks of settling, yet never settles, on a nest.

The wings keep spreading and yet are never wings.
 The claws keep scratching on the shale, the shallow shale,
 The sounding shallow, until by water washed away.

The generations of the bird are all
 By water washed away. They follow after.
 They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away.

Without this bird that never settles, without
 Its generations that follow in their universe,
 The ocean, falling and falling on the hollow shore,

Would be a geography of the dead: not of that land
 To which they may have gone, but of the place in which
 They lived, in which they lacked a pervasive being,

In which no scholar, separately dwelling,
 Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia,
 Which, as a man feeling everything, were his.
Collected Poetry and Prose (New York: The Library of America)

Without the bird and its generations, the ocean, says the poet, would be a geography of the dead-- not in the sense of their having gone to some other world, but in the sense of their being persons who were emotionally and intellectually dead while alive, who lacked "a pervasive being." To lack a pervasive being is to fail to live fully. A pervasive being is one that extends through the brain, the body, the senses, and the will, a being that spreads to every moment, so that one not only feels what Keats called "the poetry of earth" but responds to it with creative motions of one's own.

Unlike Keats's nightingale, Stevens's bird does not sing; its chief functions are to generate generations of birds, to attempt to sprout wings, and to try to leave behind some painstakingly scratched record of its presence. The water restlessly moves, sometimes noiselessly, sometimes in "sounding shallow[s]"; the bird never settles. The bird tries to generate wings, but never quite succeeds; it tries to inscribe itself on the shale, but its scratchings are washed away. The ocean is falling and falling, the mortal generations are

following and following. Time obliterates birds and inscriptions alike.

Imagine being psychically dead during the very life you have lived. That, says Stevens, would be the fate of the generations were it not for the scholar. Stevens does not locate his scholar in the ocean or on the shale, the haunts of the bird; the scholar, says the poet, dwells separately. But he dwells in immense fertility: things pour forth from him. He makes up for the wings that are never wings, for the impotent claws; he generates fine fins, the essence of the ocean's fish; he creates gawky beaks, opening in fledglings waiting to be fed so that they may rise into their element, the air; and he produces new garments for the earth, called not "regalia" (suitable for a monarchy) but "personalia," suitable for the members of a democracy. How is the scholar capable of such profusion? He is fertile both because he is a man who "feels everything," and because every thing that he feels reifies itself in a creation. He gives form and definition both to the physical world (as its scientific observer) and to the inchoate aesthetic world (as the quickened responder to the bird's incomplete natural song). He is analogous to the God of Genesis; as he observes and feels finness, he says, "Let there be fine fins," and fine fins appear.

Why does Stevens name this indispensable figure a "scholar"? (Elsewhere he calls him a "rabbi"--each is a word connoting learning.) What does learning have to do with creation? Why are study and learning indispensable in reifying and systematizing the world of phenomena and their aesthetic representations? Just as the soldier is poor without the poet's lines (as Stevens says elsewhere)¹, so the poet is poor without the scholar's cultural memory, his taxonomies and his histories. Our systems of thought--legal, philosophical, scientific, religious--have all been devised by "scholars" without whose aid widespread complex thinking could not take place and be debated, intricate texts and scores could not be accurately established and interpreted. The restless emotions of aesthetic desire, the wing--wish and inscription--yearning of the bird, perish without the arranging and creative powers of intellectual endeavor. The arts and the studies of the arts are for Stevens a symbiotic pair, each dependent on the other. Nobody is born understanding string quartets or reading Latin or creating poems; without the scholar and his libraries, there would be no perpetuation and transmission of culture. The mutual support of art and learning, the mutual delight each ideally takes in each, can be taken as a paradigm of how the humanities might be integrally

conceived and educationally conveyed as inextricably linked to the arts.

"Somnambulisma" is the illustration of Stevens's adage that "Poetry is the scholar's art." What is necessary, asks "Somnambulisma," for creative effort? Emotion, desire, generative energy, and learned invention--these, replies the poem, are indispensable in the artist. But there is another way of thinking about art, focusing less on the creator of art than on those of us who make up art's audience. What do we gain in being the audience for the arts and their attendant disciplines? Let us, says Stevens, imagine ourselves deprived of all the products of aesthetic and humanistic effort, living in a world with no music, no art, no architecture, no books, no films, no choreography, no theater, no histories, no songs, no prayers, no images floating above the earth to keep it from being a geography of the dead. Stevens creates the desolation of that deprivation in a poem--the second of my three texts--called "Large Red Man Reading." The poem is like a painting by Matisse, showing us an earthly giant the color of the sun, reading aloud from great sky--sized tabulae which, as the day declines, darken from blue to purple. The poem also summons up the people of the giant's audience: they are ghosts, no longer alive, who now inhabit, unhappily (having expected more from the afterlife) the remote "wilderness of stars." What does the giant describe to the ghosts as he reads from his blue tabulae? Nothing extraordinary--merely the normal furniture of life, the common and the beautiful, the banal, the ugly, and even the painful. But to the ghosts these are things achingly familiar from life and yet disregarded within it. Now they are achingly lost, things they never sufficiently prized when alive, but which they miss devastatingly in the vacancy of space among the foreign stars:

Large Red Man Reading

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear
his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue
tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that
had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read
from the poem of life.
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table,
the tulips among them.
They were those that would have wept to step

barefoot into reality,

They would have wept and been happy, have
shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over
leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on
what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of
the purple tabulae,
The outlines of being and its expressings, the
syllables of its law:
Poesis, *poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic
lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those
spended hearts,
Took on color, took on shape and the size of
things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what
they had lacked.

The ghosts, while they were alive, had lacked feeling, because they had not registered in their memory "the outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law." It is a triple assertion that Stevens makes here: that being possesses not only outlines (as all bodies do) and expressings (in all languages) but also a law, which is stricter than mere "expressings." Expressings by themselves cannot exemplify the law of being: only *poesis*--the creator's act of replicating in symbolic form the structures of life--pervades being sufficiently to intuit and embody its law. *Poesis* not only reproduces the content of life (its daily phenomena) but finds a manner (inspired, vatic) for that content, and in the means of its medium--here, the literal characters of its language--embodies the structural laws that shape being to our understanding.

Stevens's anecdote--of--audience in "Large Red Man Reading" suggests how ardently we would want to come back, as ghosts, in order to recognize and relish the parts of life we had insufficiently noticed and hardly valued when alive. But we cannot--according to the poem--accomplish this by ourselves: it is only when the earthly giant of vital being begins to read, using poetic and prophetic syllables to express the reality, and the law, of being, that the experiences of life can be reconstituted and made available as beauty and solace, to help us live our lives.

How could our life be different if we reconstituted the humanities around the arts and the studies of the arts? Past civilizations are recalled in part, of course, for their philosophy and their history, but for most of us it is the arts of the past that preserve Egypt and Greece and Rome, India and Africa and Japan. The names of the artists may be lost, the arts themselves in fragments, the scrolls incomplete, the manuscripts partial--but Anubis and the Buddha and *The Canterbury Tales* still populate our imaginative world. They come trailing their interpretations, which follow them and are like water washed away. Scholarly and critical interpretations may not outlast the generation to which they are relevant; as intellectual concepts flourish and wither, so interpretations are proposed and discarded. But we would not achieve our own grasp on Vermeer or Horace, generation after generation, without the scholars' outpourings.

If we are prepared to recognize the centrality of artists and their interpreters to every past culture, we might begin to reflect on what our own American culture has produced that will be held dear centuries from now. Which are the paintings, the buildings, the novels, the musical compositions, the poems, through which we will be remembered? What set of representations of life will float above the American soil, rendering each part of it as memorable as Marin's Maine or Langston Hughes's Harlem, as Cather's Nebraska or Lincoln's Gettysburg? How will the outlines and the expressings and the syllables of American being glow above our vast geography? How will our citizens be made aware of their cultural inheritance; how will they become proud of their patrimony? How will they pass it on to their children as their own generation is by water washed away? How will their children become capable of "feeling everything," of gaining "a pervasive being," capable of helping the bird to spread its wings and the fish to grow their fine fins and the scholar to pour forth his personalia?

To link, by language, feeling to phenomena has always been the poet's aim. "Poetry," said Wordsworth in his 1798 Preface, "is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science."² Our culture cannot afford to neglect the thirst of human beings for the representations of life offered by the arts, the hunger of human beings for commentary on those arts as they appear on the cultural stage. The training in subtlety of response (which used to be accomplished in large part by religion and the arts) cannot be responsibly left to commercial movies and television. Within education, scientific

training, which necessarily brackets emotion, needs to be complemented by the direct mediation--through the arts and their interpretations--of feeling, vicarious experience, and interpersonal imagination. Art can often be trusted--once it is unobtrusively but ubiquitously present--to make its own impact felt. A set of Rembrandt self--portraits in a shopping mall, a group of still lifes in a subway, sonatas played in the lunch--room, spirituals sung chorally from kindergarten on--all such things, appearing entirely without commentary, can be offered in the community and the schools as a natural part of living. Students can be gently led, by teachers and books, from passive reception to active reflection. The arts are too profound and far--reaching to be left out of our children's patrimony: the arts have a right, within our schools, to be as serious an object of study as molecular biology or mathematics. Like other complex products of the mind, they ask for reiterated exposure, sympathetic exposition, and sustained attention.

The arts have the advantage, once presented, of making people curious not only about aesthetic matters, but also about history, philosophy, and other cultures. How is it that pre--Columbian statues look so different from Roman ones? Why do some painters concentrate on portraits, others on landscapes? Why did great ages of drama arise in England and Spain and then collapse? Who first found a place for jazz in classical music, and why? Why do some writers become national heroes, and others not? Who evaluates art, and how? Are we to believe what a piece of art says? Why does Picasso represent a full face and a profile at the same time? How small can art be and still be art? Why have we needed to invent so many subsets within each art--within literature, the epic, drama, lyric, novel, dialogue, essay; within music everything from the solo partita to the chorales of Bach? Why do cultures use different musical instruments and scales? Who has the right to be an artist? How does one claim that right? The questions are endless, and the answers provocative; and both questions and answers require, and indeed generate, sensuous responsiveness, a trained eye, fine discrimination, and a hunger for learning, all qualities we would like to see in ourselves and in our children.

Best of all, the arts are enjoyable. The "grand elementary principle of pleasure" (as Wordsworth called it), might be invoked more urgently than it now is to make the humanities, both past and present, mean something relevant to Americans. Once the appetite for an art has been awakened by pleasure, the nursery rhyme and the cartoon lead by degrees to Stevens and Eakins. A curriculum relying on the

ocean, the bird, and the scholar, on the red man and his blue tabulae, would produce a love of the arts and humanities that we have not yet succeeded in generating in the population at large. When reality is freshly seen, through the artists and their commentators, something happens to the felt essence of life. As Stevens wrote in the third of my texts, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," the angel of reality then briefly appears at our door, saying:

I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again.

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man--locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of half meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am
gone?
["Angel Surrounded by Paysans"]

That art--angel of the earth, renewing our sense of life and of ourselves, is only half meaning, because we provide the other half. Among us are the scholars who interpret those half--meanings into full ones, apparelling us anew in their personalia. In the apparels of his messenger, Stevens is recalling Wordsworth's great ode:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and
stream,
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

The secular angel refreshing our sense of the world, apparelling in Wordsworthian light, stays only for a moment, our moment of attention. But that moment of mental acuity recalls us to being, the body, and the emotions, which are, peculiarly, so easy for us to put to one side as we engage in

purely intellectual or physical work. Just as art is only half itself without us--its audience, its analysts, its scholars--so we are only half ourselves without it. When, in this country, we become fully ourselves, we will have balanced our great accomplishments in progressive abstraction--in mathematics and the natural sciences--with an equally great absorption in art, and in the disciplines ancillary to art. The arts, though not progressive, aim to be eternal, and sometimes are. And why should the United States not have as much eternity as any other nation? As Marianne Moore said of excellence, "It has never been confined to one locality."³

Notes

1. Epilogue, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."
2. Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)
3. "England," *the Complete Poems* (New York: Macmillan and Viking, 1967)