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The Art of the Humanities

Humanitas vitae magistra

The pace and speed of technological changes are overturning the metaphysical rhythm and meaning of contemporary life. A strain in the Western scientific and materialist tradition converges with its humanistic and artistic strand, dual streams flowing seamlessly into the sea of epistemology. Declining to swim in these waters is not an alternative. Yet the arc of humanity is too fast, too hurried, too rushed. As the means of communication become unmistakably and increasingly more rapid, the ends of understanding become more frayed. To rest, to slow down, to be less efficient, is a civilizing response to a modern pace.

The destruction of Palmyra was the symbolic decline of Western civilization. The “liberation” of Palmyra by Assad forces expunged ISIS; it did not restore the Pantheon. There is no straight line from Mesopotamia to contemporary society. But the pace and brutally “modern” destruction of irreplaceable antiquities of historical memory parallel the havoc technology is weaving on the pattern, content and shape of contemporary life. Perforce to say, modernity is distinct from civilization. Modernity is draped with the vocabulary of science - progress, speed, and efficiency. Civilization rests its laurels on the veritable disposition of the humanities – detachment, equanimity, and deliberation.

The impressive new breakthroughs in science and technology are fanning the scientific mindset to encroach on the very question of knowledge and meaning. Resistance and pushback are required. A swath of territory for the arts and the humanities needs to be carved out. Science exudes an absolute view of the world but does not possess a *Weltanschauung*. The former is totalistic in nature, the latter is philosophical in application. While science can take us part of the way, art takes us the rest of the way, to the discovery and expression of meaning that lie beyond the realm of positivism.

Science and technology deserve their due. No humanist in his right mind denies the progress in knowledge provided by scientific discoveries and technological advancement. It deserves credit and reverence.

But for some scientists, this preemptive respect is insufficient. They want the humanities to submit to the sciences. They do not distinguish the difference between the natural world and the human world, between modernity and civilization because of their presumption of universal sameness, their *singular* realm. They believe that art is a branch of knowledge within the overarching universality of science. This is, in part, a refutation of that disposition.

The difference turns on the word, “efficiency.” The word efficiency is a powerful and bullying word. A search for its antonyms yields the following – inability, inadequacy, incompetence, ineffectiveness. Who would WANT to be on the other side of efficiency?

The pursuit of efficiency undergirds modern capitalism but the concept has mesmerized its detractors. In his struggle against society’s inefficiency – and by conjugation, its decadence, Marx anticipated the nature and meaning of fascism in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

In extrapolating on the rise of fascism via democratic disorder, Antonio Gramsci postulated that the democratic order reduced the working class into “a disconnected, fragmented, scattered mass.” (“Democracy and Fascism,” *L’Ordine Nuovo*, November 1, 1924).

For other Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg, the answer was straight forward. She envisioned a socialist utopia where “no time is wasted, no material squandered, that good, efficient work is done.... cause no friction or confusion.” (“What is Bolshevism?” *Die Junge Garde*, December 4, 1918)

Again, in the name of efficiency, in the name of optimal, scientific efficiency.

The “efficient” understanding of historical developments underscores a Whiggish interpretation of history, a tedium that suggest that progress is linear and teleological. Humanists do not despise efficiency. They just know its limits, its hollowness, and accept the frailty of the human condition. The neat sanitary state collectivism always appears stronger – and thus, more legitimate - than unruly ‘dirty’ market individualism. Democracy and free markets are not orderly; they are rowdy and “unclean.” Democracy is not “efficient” – it is messy.

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* alludes to the paradox of modern man as a perennial inmate who is always “the object of information, never a subject in communication”. He was underscoring the ironic distillation of modern information and understanding, to wit, that men have been reduced to serving as a recipient of information rather than its participant.

In the opening stanza of *Choruses from the Rock*, T.S. Eliot wrote:

“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.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

Eliot’s lamentations are juxtaposed against Milan Kundera’s reminiscences in *Slowness*, the latter no less penetrating on account of its tenderness. It is worth quoting at length:

“There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting.... A man is walking down the street. At a certain moment, he tries to recall something, but the recollection escapes him. Automatically, he slows down.... Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time.... In existential mathematics that experience takes the form of two basic equations: The degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.”

The speed of technological change, then, leaves us in a timeless present without awareness, devoid of meaning. There is little left to influence, let alone control. But control is not tantamount to discipline. Control requires suppression. Discipline presupposes freedom, even as the apparatus of state power can force men into *self*-discipline, a far more effective method of social control than the

brute power of the state. The process of true learning mandates the habit of practice, the instillation of discipline. As Picasso said, "Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist."

Like an artist... practice and master... then defy the rules... by writing your own rules.

Science informs but life is more than the amalgamation of atoms and molecules and matter. The limit of scientific understanding is the beginning of artistic meaning. Science is but the ancilla of art. In the end, the essence and meaning of life resides - always has been, always will be - in the *art* of the humanities.