

The Humanities as Half-Knowledge: Two Romantic-Period Examples

I want to take this occasion to address one of the most prominent criticisms of the humanities today. I am not referring to criticism of more recent vintage, which takes to task the humanities for a supposed excess of political correctness; this complaint we can set aside as the ideologically motivated lament that it surely is. Rather, I'm speaking of the more long-standing critique that takes the humanities to task for its inconsequence, its uselessness. The presumption that underwrites this critique is simple: its claim is that we do not learn anything by attending to the objects of humanities research. These objects – a poem, a film or play, a piece of music, or what have you – do not furnish our minds with information we can use. No special knowledge is required to enjoy these objects, and no useable knowledge is furnished through their study.

For the canonical version of this critique, we have to go back to the ancient Greeks. In one of Plato's great dialogues, the philosopher Socrates enters into a debate with Ion, a rhapsodist or reciter of poetry, and a great admirer of Homer in particular. At stake in the debate between these two is what the poet (and by extension the rhapsodist) knows, what knowledge they draw on for their art. As Socrates compels Ion to acknowledge, the poet does not know much of any thing at all: early on, he tells Ion, "not from art and knowledge comes your power to speak concerning Homer" (532c). If Ion's rhapsodizing were an art, Socrates reasons, Ion would be able to speak just as passionately and eloquently on all poets. But Ion can speak authoritatively only about Homer. ("Art" might be understood here as synonymous with "craft," or a practice with a clearly established set of rules and protocols.) What Ion knows cannot be systematized; the skills that he exhibits in discussion of Homer are not applicable to all types of poetry.

Not only is the skill of the poet or rhapsodist not an art, according to Socrates; it is also not founded in any determinate knowledge. Homer writes about the charioteer, for instance, but does not possess knowledge equivalent to that of the charioteer himself; he writes about medicine and medical practitioners, but if we happen to break our leg chances are good that we will not entrust the care of our injury to a poet! There are, quite simply, no facts uniquely at the poet's disposal – at least, none that wouldn't be better picked up from others.

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Socrates does grant that the poet's skill is in some respects a wondrous thing. But in establishing that this skill comes neither from art nor knowledge, Plato identifies what in his view is the essential irrationality of poetic thinking. Poetry does not produce knowledge because it does not originate in rational thought. In a famous passage, Socrates tells us that "lyric poets are not in their senses when they make these lovely lyric poems...the poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself and reason is no longer in him" (534a-b). This critique of the poets is sharper still in the 10th Book of Plato's Republic, where Socrates famously gives his reasons for wishing to expel poets from the ideal city-state. In this book, Socrates insists that the irrationality of the poets is a scandalous offense to the rational pursuit of truth. They represent a distraction from the business of truth-seeking, and something of a dangerous one at that.

I come before you neither to bury nor to praise the illustrious Plato. And I believe that it's important to take such criticisms seriously. Indeed I can assure you that, as a professor of the humanities at MIT, it is virtually impossible not to do so. It seems that the humanities is often called upon to justify its existence, and at no times more so than in moments of financial crisis; here at MIT, at this temple dedicated to the great and noble end of problem-solving, we are no exception. But what kind of justification can we produce for a kind of knowledge that is not quite knowledge, that does not solve real-world problems? Even if we are not prepared to go quite so far as Plato did, and denounce the poet for actively obstructing the search for truth, we may still need to answer to the charge that the objects of humanities research – I'll follow Plato in taking poetry as the paradigmatic example – teach us nothing. We need to ask then: what does the poet, or what does the humanist, know?

I now want to turn to two poems of the British Romantic period that offer perspectives on this very question. We will recognize that in neither case is an unequivocally affirmative answer provided to the question of what the poet knows. Indeed, both poems would seem to confirm the premises of Plato's criticism, inasmuch as they give expression to a type of knowledge that can barely be called knowledge as such, since it remains necessarily speculative, provisional, and incomplete. As I've suggested,

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this has been the ground on which the humanities has long seemed weakest in the eyes of its critics. Whereas Plato regards this kind of poetic thinking as useless and worse, however, we find in these poems a qualified defense of not-knowing, and a concomitant claim on behalf of what the poet John Keats called “half-knowledge.” Both poems make a brief for the importance of attending to thoughts principally characterized by their incompleteness and open-endedness; they embrace a kind of thinking that pointedly does not resolve into determinate knowledge. And both paradoxically ask us to accept, if only provisionally and for a time, this half-knowledge as a kind of fulfilled and complete knowledge in its own right.

In William Wordsworth's “The Thorn,” an idiosyncratic narrator explores a mystery attached to a landscape and to the natural objects therein. We learn that a woman named Martha Ray is often seen near an aged thorn, where she cries “O misery!” Village gossip has it that this woman was deceived by her lover, Stephen Hill, and abandoned by him when she was pregnant. But any further reason for her distress, and the significance of the thorn by which she constantly sits, is otherwise entirely unclear. As the narrator unfolds this tale, questions as to the cause of her misery, and about her attachment to this particular spot, come thick and fast, as in the following stanza:

Now wherefore thus, by day and night,
In rain, in tempest, and in snow,
Thus to the dreary mountain-top
Does this poor woman go?
And why sits she beside the thorn
When the blue day-light's in the sky,
Or when the whirlwind's on the hill,
Or frosty air is keen and still,
And wherefore does she cry? –
Oh wherefore? Wherefore? Tell me why
Does she repeat that doleful cry?

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Why is she there? What has happened for her to be so miserable? As the narrator repeatedly says, “no one knows.” He frequently confesses his ignorance of these details: “I cannot tell, I wish I could”; “No more I know; I wish I did,” and so on.

The problem that Wordsworth's poem presents us with is one of causal inference. What can we ascertain of causes that are evident only in their effects? How can we assess within some reasonable degree of certainty the event that happened? We see the narrator of the poem go through various procedures in an attempt to get at the truth of Martha Ray's predicament – to grasp hold of some fact or piece of evidence that would either confirm Martha Ray's innocence, or prove her beyond a shadow of a doubt as the murderer of her child. He scans the landscape for clues and evidence, mapping and measuring the surroundings. He records the testimony of villagers who have seen or known Martha Ray, and who might be able to shed light on her attachment to this spot. And once, he tells us, in a violent rainstorm, he encounters Martha Ray, stationed by the thorn as she always is, crying “O misery!” Yet none of these details yield determinate knowledge of Martha Ray's story. No “facts” that we are capable of assembling are sufficient to produce a fully satisfying account of what truly happened.

We will readily acknowledge that causal explanation, the delineation of why things happen in the world, is one of the highest achievements of rational thinking; causal connections give us certain knowledge about the world. Rather than showing us the fulfillment of this impulse, however, Wordsworth illustrates its failure, as our knowledge of the tale is left pointedly incomplete. With what may seem to be an utter disregard for the conventions of plot or narrative explanation, Wordsworth prevents us from fully understanding Martha Ray's character or story. Something about her remains resistant to our prying gaze; her speech is indecipherable except as the expression of human suffering. The one thing of which we can feel certain in “The Thorn” is that there is a striking object in the landscape with which some tragic story seems to be associated. So the poem begins with and keeps coming back to this thorn; the very title of the poem – “The Thorn” as opposed to say, “The Ballad of Martha Ray” – displaces the focus of the tale from the ostensible figure of the story to the object powerfully though ambiguously associated with her. “There is a thorn, it looks so old, in truth you'd find it hard to

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say..." The solitary thorn on the hillside is made to stand as a repository for our feelings and an emblem of what we don't and can't know about Martha's tale. The call to content oneself with that minimum of information is heard clearest in the narrator's invitation to visit the spot oneself: he says, "Perhaps when you are at the place, / You something of her tale may trace." We know little about her tale; but for the purposes of our moral feeling, that "something" we know may turn out to be enough.

Let me shift now to the second of the Romantic poems that I wanted to discuss, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Keats's famous Ode is perhaps best known for its concluding aphorism, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," which is the message that the speaker finds to be embodied and as it were uttered by the urn itself. The sublime abstraction of this statement – sufficiently closed-ended in itself, to be sure – represents a clear enough argument against Plato, who found the artist's work to be an evasion or even corruption of truth rather than its embodiment. But we'll note that this imagined statement of the urn is a curious kind of non-answer to the flurry of questions that precede it:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

From the beginning of the Ode, the speaker poses questions ostensibly intended to get to the bottom of what this beautiful object is about, what it means. We might recall Wordsworth's similarly insistent interrogatives in "The Thorn": "Wherefore, tell me why, does she repeat that doleful cry?" Well, just as in "The Thorn," where "I cannot tell" is the only definitive answer that the speaker is capable of returning to these questions, the questions in the Ode go unanswered. "[L]ittle town," he writes (that is, the town depicted on the surface of the urn), "thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate."

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As his poetry often does, Keats presents us with a little drama of aesthetic experience: the encounter of a beautiful, seemingly eternal object with a mortal speaker who wishes to understand it – and who must in the process come to terms with what “understanding” in this context means. For this silent, ancient object rebuffs the speaker’s inquiries. He grows frustrated with this urn as the poem goes on, and in the final stanza unleashes some of this frustration at the object itself: “Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!” The speaker rebukes the urn for its “coldness,” as if he were a jealous and heartsick lover – which in a sense, of course, is exactly what he is, spellbound by a beautiful object that refuses to be possessed fully by the understanding. The urn, like any great art object, gives us nothing in the strict sense. Yet this object remains, paradoxically as may seem, “a friend to man,” whose “friendship” consists in the momentary experience that it enables; indeed even in the questions that it raises and leaves unanswered. As the speaker of this poem comes to recognize, the non-answer that the urn returns is itself a kind of answer, complete in itself. The urn at once “teases us out of thought” and produces new channels for thought.

Even more explicitly than Wordsworth’s earlier poem, Keats’s Ode is an allegory of the kind of thinking that goes on in poetry. This is the kind of thinking that Keats famously named “negative capability,” and which he took to be the mark of genius in the poet. Keats defines this as the ability to remain in a speculative state “of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” This suspension or experience of temporary release from rational thought does not in any way entail the relinquishment of reason, as Plato would have it. But it does require us to perceive the necessary incompleteness and open-endedness of half-knowledge as a momentarily fulfilled knowledge in its own right. Art asks that we make a temporary home in ideas or experiences for which there can be no easy explanations.

I want to suggest that the very ground on which Plato and many since have dismissed the humanities is in another view the basis for the enduring and vital importance of the humanities today. It is worth remembering that problem solving – the activity prized above all others at an institution such as MIT – is made possible only through the prior activity of problem making. Problem making begins with the

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recognition that there are questions that have yet to be asked, latent possibilities that remain unexplored. And this, ultimately, is where the humanities may have most to offer us. What may seem like the mere multiplication of “uncertainties” and “doubts” might equally serve as a conduit to new thoughts, fresh insights, and creative solutions.