Graduating in the Humanities

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1995

Everybody in this room is graduating with a degree in the Humanities, but my guess is that if anyone here were asked what knowledge is in the Humanities that person would hem and haw, especially if that question were put in a skeptical tone by someone invested in some other kind of knowledge (scientific knowledge, say, or business know-how). What kind of truth do you learn by studying literature? Now the person who asks that question is asking what facts you know from reading The Scarlet Letter, and is not especially interested in what it meant to you, which to that person is something mushy and indistinct and “personal.” Well, you may sheepishly say, I learned from reading 19th century American literature what some people in America were reading in the 19th century, and what they thought about what they read. That’s factual information all right, but what do you know when you know that? And in what way is that really what you mean when you say you really learned something from reading The Scarlet Letter? Learning what a book means is different from learning what other people thought about it when they read it. And the first thing one notices if one takes books seriously as books is that what one learns from them is not in any important way factual knowledge.

So what kind of truth is literary truth? The quick answer is: no truth at all, if verifiable (or falsifiable) claims about the external world are what truth is. Literary art provides us with neither inductive nor deductive ways of testing claims. That’s why Plato wanted to keep the poets out of his Republic. Maybe, one rushes to reply, literary works somehow embody and transmit the prevailing values of their culture. But that’s still worse: then literature is not founded in truth but in the unconscious conformities of the people who read it and who coerce the minds of others by its means. That’s why Marx and Freud and Foucault wanted to keep the poets out of their
Republics too. If one is going to point a moral, as opposed to examine the human experience of moral life, then moral argument is a better device — and a greater instrument of intellectual freedom — than literature is. And using literature to point morals is somehow as disappointing and reductive an approach to literature as using it to record facts is.

I want to argue — rather, sketch in an argument — that literature is a kind of investigation into truth after all, but to see in what ways it inquires after truth one must start from an old-fashioned and by now rather discredited notion, the notion of the autonomy of literature. The autonomy of poetry has a bad name nowadays, not least because it was defended in ways which raised more problems than it solved. When Keats says “Oh, for a life of sensations rather than thoughts!”, when Pater asks us only to burn ever with that hard, gemlike flame, when Woolf argues that a work of art must be purified of all merely personal urgencies, when MacLeish says that a poem should not mean but be, or when Auden says that poetry makes nothing happen, we are at risk of taking them more literally than they mean. To claim autonomy for poetry is somehow to reduce it — to claim that it must make no commitments (somehow “the autonomy of poetry” came to be a coded way of asking poets to shut their mouths about political topics). And it seems a claim that poets shouldn’t mess with ideas, lest the poets mess them up (or the ideas mess up the poets). And it seems a claim that a poet shouldn’t care too much about moral issues because we all know what didacticism does to poetry — look what it does to Dante and Milton! To argue that poetry should be autonomous seems at first to give up too much to the people who want to argue that poetry is not an examination of knowledge at all, to the people who want to say that poetry is a kind of subintelectual expressive speech, a kind of howling or mating call of the animal species homo sapiens. Autonomous poetry, I was brought up to say, is trivial poetry. A poem that doesn’t mean but simply is is a sound-jingle, a lullabye, a tink and tank a tunk tunk of sound that changes our consciousness perhaps but only by charming it out of thought, which is to say, by putting it to sleep.

All of this however is to get what poetic autonomy means quite backwards. When Keats argued that a poet should not preach or prove but should demonstrate the ability to dwell among doubts and mysteries concerning his or her ideas, he wasn’t arguing that the poet should not have ideas, but that the poet should see them as a human being, should play ideas on the pulse. When Keats invented that notion he called “Negative Capability” he meant to say that it is not the poet’s task to calculate the truth of a proposition,
but to examine life under the illumination of an idea, and to test the idea by examining the prospect of life it opens for those who take it seriously. When he rejected poets who substituted argument for Negative Capability he did it not because values do not matter to him but because such poets sacrificed the way poetry is good about thinking about value in favor of a way of thinking about value which poetry does badly. If poetry is to be an assay of ideas, it must examine them by its own poetic means, and must not be stampeded or trampled by urgencies that arise from outside of poetry, however serious or personal those urgencies are. But that is not to say that poetry is not responsive to those urgencies, only that it is responsive to them as poetry.

All ideas, let us remember, are larger than our statements about them. Whenever we take an idea seriously we do far more than merely assent to the correctness of a statement of fact. We give ourselves to that idea, we attempt to see how it clarifies our otherwise obscure experiences, and to see what new areas of experience swim into our ken when we peer through that idea.

Every idea is very closely tied to some small but undetermined set of other ideas — those it follows closely from, those that closely follow from it, those that demonstrate a commandingly similar logic in some other area, those that bear a striking analogy to it, and so on. When one commits one’s self to an idea, one commits one’s self to at least the most proximate portion of a network of other ideas. I’m not talking here just about the case where one agrees with a proposition, or with an argument about a proposition, but about those times when an idea has somehow seemed to one to clarify a larger area of one’s experience in ways that are at first rather difficult to articulate. When one is “taken with” an idea, one grants, however provisionally, that there is more to that idea than one can quite state, and that if one follows out the trains of reflection that idea sets going that one will come upon new ideas that have the same charm but which one did not have explicitly in mind when one made the original commitment. One might call this halo of other ideas which an idea we are “taken with” organizes around itself (if not to the extent of moving our uncritical acceptance of those ideas, at least to the extent of requiring us at least to take them with high seriousness), the charismatic horizon of an idea.

The course of all knowledge depends upon this ability to be taken with ideas — not just poetic knowledge, but scientific knowledge as well. When I was in college — I studied Biochemistry then — I learned that knowing all
of the facts and theories of Chemistry did not go very far towards making one a Chemist. One became a Chemist by learning to think like a Chemist, and thinking like a Chemist involved seeing the new questions that are raised by every answer, involved peering not so much into what one had knowledge about but into what one could only have informed opinions about, involved not knowledge, and not speculative leaps either, but glimpses into that area between the reach and the grasp of the intellect and where the mind works in its most specifically human way. Even disciplines which leave behind them bodies of fact move forward only by means of essentially poetic insights into the unarticulated possibilities an exciting idea is rich with. Like a train at night, knowledge lights its way through the dark with poetry, with the sense that its ideas have an organizing power never fully to be exhausted because every articulated idea brings still more unarticulated possibilities with it.

I started this talk wondering in what sense knowledge about literature is knowledge at all, but I see here that all knowledge is poetic to the extent that knowledge happens by means of the organizing charisma of ideas. If the half-light of suggested but never-to-be-fully articulated possibilities is the place where poetry shades into science, it is the special province of poetry to enable us dwell in, to attune ourselves to, the never-to-be-exhausted felt life in which our knowledge has meaning. A proposition can be true or false, but an idea is something that asks one to be true or false to it, to live out the life it discloses — or half-conceals, half-discloses — to our imaginations. When we know a proposition, we know it as we might know a telephone number — we can repeat it, and we can test its accuracy. But when we know an idea, we know it as we know a person — which is to say we know that we will never know it all the way through and all the way down to the ground, for each thing we know raises more things we might want to know. We know persons when we know them well enough to know that they will never be exhausted by our theories about them — only about people we neither know nor care about does it occur to us to say that we “have their number.” Those who we know well we know well enough to know that we always be unknowing about them. And a real idea is also something about which we will always be unknowing, something we live with or live by, not something we prove. It is this sense that real knowing is also unknowing that Keats had in mind when he praised Shakespeare’s “Negative Capability,” his ability to be in mysteries and doubts about what he believed.

A poem cannot prove or disprove a proposition, and it cannot make or unmake a moral deduction, but it can give us a revealing glimpse into the
life that idea offers us. When one asks for poetry to be autonomous one recognizes that the kind of assay it offers of ideas — the sense one learns from poetry that this idea opens a livable life before us, but that that idea does not — is a way to truth uniquely in poetry’s power. And it gives us truths that induction and deduction sometimes fail to. We all know the nightmare world of Swift’s Laputa, where reasonable persons lead (like university professors) lives that are perfectly logical although totally crazy. And we’ve all had the experience of arguing ourselves into corners which only something like “knowledge of life” (if not just plain good luck) got us out of. It’s poetic knowledge, in a way, which saves us when we are too smart for ourselves.

Consider the example of the poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren. He grew up in Kentucky and Tennessee in the first quarter of this century, and like many white men of that time and place accepted in an unthinking way the prevailing racial segregation. When he was twenty four he wrote a very glib, very foolish essay in defense of it, an essay called “The Briar Patch,” in which he at least had the grace to argue that if one is going to spring for “Separate but Equal” one had better be willing to be good for the “Equal” part. By the early 1930’s, however, Warren had changed his mind about this, and in the Fifties and Sixties became, with C. Vann Woodward and others, one of the leading White advocates of racial integration in the South and elsewhere. Now how did this come about? Ralph Ellison asked Warren about this in 1957, and the story he told is very interesting: He had written “the Briar Patch” not in America but in England, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. Having finished that essay, he set to work on his first extended piece of fiction, a novella about a revolt of tobacco growers against the control of the tobacco agents and buyers. Warren told Ellison that it was writing that novella — later called *Prime Leaf* — that changed his mind. The interesting thing about it is that the novella isn’t really about racial conflict at all but about class conflict. How did this novella change its author? Warren’s answer is that writing the novel somehow required him to picture the South in ways that even living there he had never quite been able fully to do, and that as he wrote the novel he realized that he could never make it live so long as it was informed by the things like the desire to defend segregation. The point here is that writing the novella brought Warren into contact with the felt life of his own ideas, and put exactly what those ideas came down to to him with such clarity that he had to reconsider them: the essay is only what he thought he thought, but it’s the novella that taught him what he really thought. It’s the autonomy of poetry that changed his politics, because it
showed him things which all his arguments could not have shown him. It enabled him to reach a little beyond everything that he thought he knew about himself. St. Augustine once prayed not to receive what he wants, but to want something worthy of him. I think it’s only poetic knowledge that tells us what that thing is.