

THE DECLINE OF THE UNIVERSAL

AND THE CHALLENGE TO 21ST CENTURY LIFE AND ART

by

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*It is inevitable that the wind
whip up poetry,
that the rising sun raise
demands for drama,
that the day pulse
with sudden meaning,
that silent surges of energy
from unknown sources
stir consciousness and expression.
My feet planted on the ground
are part of the same body*

*whose hand
in a burst of motion
can reach upward and outward
into the limitless expanse
beyond my fingertips, into
a space felt but unseen,
connecting with other motions and forces
in the fullness of time and space.*

*These lines, now freed from my consciousness,
greet you
at some unexpected time and place
upon this page you turned
with your own hand.
It is a greeting, not to be seen
only as cast in my words,
but felt, in the fluid passage
of this and every moment,
as a force flowing
in a dimension
all its own –*

*connecting me to you, one to all,
through vast undulating waves,
loose binding bands
weaving through a universe
both as real and as insubstantial
as the solid earth I press beneath my feet
and the inviting space my fingers feel
as my hand is extended to you.*

“Greeting” from Drawn by the Creek, 2003.

It is truly a pleasure to address you today.

I have chosen to talk to you about a deeply troubling phenomenon affecting American culture and, by reason of America’s economic and technological reach, the rest of the world. I am deeply troubled by a culture that makes it harder and harder to connect with people on a basic human level, a culture that separates us from the pleasures that make us distinctly human, a culture that exalts the virtual over the tactile, a culture that diminishes the value of reality itself.

I have an immense dismay when I consider the extent to which the consuming economic juggernaut has relentlessly gone about seizing and privatizing nearly everything in its reach, creating a new feudal order of corporate royalty at the expense of present-day serfs in bondage to their credit cards. Life has suffered. Art has suffered. Our noblest esthetic impulses and aspirations, the quality of our education, our common heritage as citizens of the planet have all been

beset by separatist tendencies of one form or another, dividing up and packaging what is universal in the human experience into narrowly focused special interests. It is a process driven by prevailing economic and technological forces, forces that cast deepening shadows of factionalism and strife over our outlook for the future.

As a student of language and literature I am compelled to ask whether all I want to say about this subject can be approached frontally in prose, or whether the indirect approach of poetry may be the more powerful one. I will hedge my bets by giving you some poetry in this address as well as prose. The syntactical requirements of discursive argument in prose subject one to deconstructive analysis as surely as simple trust in the truism that seeing is believing. Case in point: the 1992 trial of an entire group of Los Angeles policemen accused of viciously beating without due provocation a black man (Rodney King) at the end of a car chase. King was being pursued by the police following a traffic violation. A witness at the scene captured the event on videotape, which was entered in evidence and viewed by the jury. To the prosecution, the action clearly showed the intent of the police and the needless brutality they exercised in apprehending Mr. King. The defense attorneys deconstructed the tape frame by frame however, and their close analysis of the parts, denying the self-evident character of the whole, concluded that King provided sufficient provocation for the beating in resisting the officers' efforts to subdue him. The jury agreed, the officers were acquitted and the black community of Los Angeles erupted into riot. The point of this story for our purpose here is that the slow and laborious process of logical prose can often not communicate the larger overall impact of what poetry can, in presenting rather than analyzing a phenomenon. Poetry, for me, deals in the gestalt. It recreates the vibrancy of reality, the whole experience of the event to the extent its author sees it. It does not deconstruct a phenomenon through fragmentary analysis of its parts. So, on to the topic at hand.

So many aspects of living our lives in the 21st Century are the fallout of a nuclear explosion of specialist taxonomies. Medicine has devolved into specialties – eye doctors, ear-nose-and-throat specialists, cardiologists, orthopedists, podiatrists, and many more. Even so-called holistic medicine is but another specialty. In academe, universality –our shared human condition—is continually being deconstructed and our language subjected to specialist taxonomies and ideologies. Jacques Derrida has even been able to convince many of our modern language departments that our ability to find meaning in language itself is only a fragmented and transitory illusion and adherents to this viewpoint expend all their energies endlessly demonstrating just that. Our electronic media, which Marshall McLuhan told us back in the optimistic Sixties would unite us in a global village of world understanding, now serve more readily to separate us. The Internet and television deliver a Babel of different voices giving anyone exactly what he or she wants to see and hear, most of it partisan opinion rather than fact. Even to try to get the basic news of the day, we can seldom view any reportage as giving the whole picture without some form of bias that needs to be sorted out before we can understand the “real” story. The sense of trust and authenticity engendered by an Edward R. Morrow or a Walter Cronkite are long gone. In their place we have a multitude of commentators, each needing to be given “equal time” by those news outlets purporting to be fair and unbiased. Fine as far as it goes, but in giving everyone a fair chance to be heard, regardless of reputation or credentials, we have all but lost a more traditional respect for the objectivity of research and soundness of reasoning, attributes we used to associate with a good education and relevant experience. On balance, I do not feel the electronic media have fostered respect for the values of truth and authenticity, much less inculcated a sense of how to recognize them in the first place. They have engendered more separatism than universality in our world view, so much of what we encounter being the cant of special interests and marketplace forces. Dealing with all of this on a daily basis tends to consume our time and keep us from more important things in life.

What are those more important things in life? History is always a good teacher, and life in past eras often provides a better mirror in which to see and understand ourselves than simply looking at reflections of our own preoccupations today. In Netherlandish visual art of the 17th Century there was considerable interest in what was called “vanitas painting,” which characteristically depicted still life scenes with eschatological import, mostly table settings on which certain objects were displayed and arranged to make a symbolic statement. One from 1627 by Pieter Claesz, entitled “Still Life with Lighted Candle,” is particularly memorable. On a dimly-lit draped table are arranged a candle (burned nearly to its end), a roemer wine glass half full, two closed leather-bound books, one open book with a pair of eyeglasses resting on top, and a candle snuffer. The scene suggests that this table was just left by someone, probably an educated reader or writer, and that it is uncertain whether he or she may be coming back to finish whatever was left of the wine or the book before the candle burns down to its end or needs to be snuffed out. The joys of life – love of learning, the pleasures of wine -- are certainly there, but the painting suggests the trappings of classical and medieval meditations on the brevity of life and the vanity of thinking there will ever be world enough and time to do everything we might ever wish to do. It is a memento mori that accommodates both pagan classical and Christian possibilities for response. A 17th Century viewer would have immediately grasped the symbolic values and the sweep of historical tradition inherent in the scene. The 17th Century viewer would also have derived some comfort and pleasure in viewing familiar objects of the world about him invested with an appealing visual realism, and admired the skill of the individual artist who created the composition.

Today we need the benefit of a good education to engage this painting. The material culture of our world is different. Were there any interest in doing so today, what might we include on a 21st Century vanitas table? Well, how about setting upon it a cell phone, a Blue Tooth, an iPod, a Blackberry, an open lap top, a digital camera, a Kindle, an iPad. Truly these objects have something to say about the vanity of human wishes in their vain attempt to capture

everything imaginable and to contain it in as compact a form as possible. The irony is that in themselves these objects are inert and unusable. They need to be powered on and they need to have invisible software loaded into them. And what they will come to contain once they are booted up will be nothing real. It will all be virtual reality, and the outer containers housing the software subject to such rapid design change that they may even cease to be universally recognizable material objects a generation from now.

21st Century vanitas, to be sure. And none of the material objects on this contemporary Table with Cyber Life will connect us in a self-evident, sensate fashion to esthetic and philosophical tradition as does the 17th Century "Still Life with Lighted Candle." But we could add one other object to our contemporary vanitas table, perhaps thereby injecting a bit of parallelism with the 17th Century burning candle. Let that object be a digital clock. Let us power up that object to display the time. Any time would do, but let us make it 11:55 PM for the sake of a parallel dramatic effect. One other visual element we might add would be a piece of printed text. Many of the 17th Century vanitas still life paintings that included images of books also displayed readable excerpts of bits of text printed on the page to which the book was opened. Setting the scene in this way I am put in mind of a poem I once wrote, which we may cast as a lone leaf of yellowed and ruffled paper on the modern table of vanities. I will quote that poem here:

Something's Lost

Who looks at wall calendars anymore?

Digital clocks do not need to tick.

We've lost something

*of the shape and sound of time,
the stretch of our vision
beyond the bound numbers
now compressed
on insubstantial displays
lit by the power
that charges reality
with a bright and blinding glow.
Something's lost,
but we've forgotten what it is.*

....from Drawn by the Creek, 2003

It would be an endless subject of debate to determine whether the revered modern artist Andy Warhol knew what was lost or whether he was simply focused on applying the subjects and techniques of commercial design to high art. In his contemporary still-life images, the point he was apparently trying to make was made endlessly, time after time giving us repetitively silk-screened images of identical commercial products such as the ubiquitous Campbell's Soup cans we see lined up on supermarket shelves. Certainly the philosophical point is well taken, but again, how many times do we have to be subjected to its reiteration in visually numbing images? Warhol, as so many other contemporary artists, seem bent on punishing our sensibilities in their merciless reiteration of unappealing graphic visualizations of their private intellectual realizations.

Warhol's background in commercial design, however, and his appropriation of the visual imagery of consumer products bring us to one of the underlying major challenges facing life and art in the 21st Century --- the consuming nature of corporatism. It is a truism that the profit motive is the sole purpose of business, but the reach of business today into every aspect of our lives and the power it exercises by reason of its technological capabilities is unprecedented. As a contemporary social critic, Chris Hedges, has said recently: "Corporations are ubiquitous parts of our lives, and those that own them and run them want them to remain that way. We eat corporate food. We buy corporate clothes. We drive in corporate cars. We buy our fuel from corporations. We borrow from, invest our retirement savings with, and take out college loans with corporations. We are entertained, informed, and bombarded with advertisements by corporations." (Empire of Illusion: the End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle. New York: Nation Books, 2009, p. 162)

Hedges and others, I being one of them, see corporations as the true governors of the republic. Having already succeeded in "privatizing" many traditionally governmental functions, we are daily forced to bear witness to their unrelenting efforts to retain their stranglehold on American healthcare. But most pernicious is the corporate dominance of American education and how life and art are affected by the commercialization of learning.

The liberal arts, now more commonly called the humanities, are sinking into neglect and disregard in our universities today. To a large extent the humanities departments themselves have contributed to their own marginalization by parsing themselves into more and more specialized fields of inquiry, cutting themselves and their students off from larger, overarching questions about the nature of man, his history, his institutions and his art. Separatism, some might say chauvinism, rules much of what goes on in ethnic and gender studies, and in any number of other narrowly conceived academic majors. Like the jurors at the Rodney King trial, faculties and administrators have fallen under the spell of the parts at the expense of the whole. "General

studies” curricula market themselves to uninitiated students through a fashionable catalogue of narrowly conceived topical offerings purportedly representative of the broader disciplines from which they are extracted. Those encyclopedically conceived survey courses, courses that were to foster more universal standards of understanding through a broadly shared vocabulary and knowledge base are now old-hat. Students have become customers who must be given what they want, whether it is in the best interests of their education or not, or they will go elsewhere and threaten the economic viability of the institution. Sounds like a business doesn’t it? And indeed various aspects of business are what an ever-increasing number of students choose as major courses of study. True, that’s where most of the jobs are, and careerism is a powerful driver. But business in one form or another is all that many students really know of the world and its wonders before getting to college, thanks to relentless corporate marketing of toys and other goods to them from their earliest years. Their experience of the way the academy conducts its own affairs simply reinforces that awareness. Chris Hedges put it rather directly when he said, “Too many students and professors are distracted, specialized, atomized and timid. They follow trends, prestige, and money and so rarely act outside the box (p.93).” That ability to act outside the box is arguably the principal thing we need today to address the complex problems of our world.

American business produced all the digital devices placed on that contemporary Table with Cyber Life I presented to you earlier. All were designed to enhance efficiency in mercantile pursuits. All are essential to today’s managerial class. But they are also a considerable source of distraction for the young, enmeshing their sensibilities in a world of games and other diversions. Cell phones and I Pods separate so many of their users from the very world about them, and the much touted ability of the digitally savvy set to multi-task, even while out in public, is often not only a public annoyance but an inhibition to their users’ ability to sustain deep thinking about issues which are not reducible to the process of point- and- click. The computer and the Internet have been touted as the road to a superior education since their inception, an assumption that has

never been seriously challenged in comprehensive educational and philosophical terms, certainly not by a business community that has made a lot of money from their insinuation into every aspect of society. Most educators simply avert their gaze when asked to seriously examine how growing up with the computer affects basic literacy or the ability to formulate a written argument utilizing sequential logic. As long as money is being made in accepting without question the underlying values of digital technology, few can dare be out-of-step.

Universality, I assert, lies in tangibility. Reality is not in virtuality, video games and digital toys, no matter how sophisticated, clever, and even educational their manufacturers claim them to be. The manufacturers never point to what is lost, or what might be gained by keeping some of what went before honored and alive. Let the elementary schools in America that have let the skill of cursive writing fall into disuse take note. It is good thing to learn to type at an early age, but block letter printing is a frustrating thing for students to use on an essay exam or in any situation in the outside world where there is no keyboard available. And the quality of life suffers in so many other little ways by not being able to communicate with ease in one's own hand, even the now quaint practice of writing a letter. As the 17th Century English poet John Donne once said: "What printing presses yield we think good store/but what is writ by hand we reverence more."

How does one begin to shape a life of authenticity and meaning in the world as we have it? For one thing, we need not be Luddites and seek to go around indiscriminately smashing the machines that have dehumanized us in so many ways. They all carry some positive benefit and cannot simply be rejected en masse. So perhaps our approach as an enlightened society might be to take a simple but profound lesson from the Amish. We can determine to utilize only those aspects of technology that societal consensus deems to be in our best human interests and supportive of the quality of life we desire. Whatever choices we make must be deliberate, willed from within rather than imposed

from without by the dominant sales and marketing culture. Failing to successfully challenge the moneyed interests and achieve that goal on a societal level, we can always choose to live life on a personal level in a more deliberate, inner-directed way that puts a greater emphasis on enduring human values. Everyone in America is coming to realize that the financial special interests have sold the general public an unsustainable consumer dream. Pursuit of a simpler life on a broader human level may not be an entirely quixotic hope, and such fundamental changes of attitude are often the byproduct of financial distress.

I would be entirely too academic in nature if I failed to tell you of my own inner-directed response to the conditions I observe about me. And much of this I must do in poetry:

Pastorale

*We are like dogs to the gods
of consumption,
and the literature that
comforted the ages is
cast before the swine of technique,
in the writing and the reading,
and in the publication.
We should rejoice it took
such a long time to die,
Western Civilization.*

*But from this Chaos,
what is to come?
Where are the true believers?
Where the new wine-dark seas?
Where the dawn of common recognition,
the tapestry, the weaver
to bring the unraveled threads together?
All is in shreds to the lions of industry
and slavery has come again.
All that can be is simply there
to be bought—
here, there and everywhere,
for ever and ever—
the “amen” sticks in my throat.
Whatever time remains
can best be spent
in unbought contemplation.
Only in simple reverence for
the gifts of life and learning
in nature and in art
can the totalitarian hunger of industry*

*for adoration be thwarted,
and some measure of promise glimmer
in the rosy-fingered dawn.*

... from Drawn by the Creek, 2003.

For me, art, music and poetry deliver needed solace and bring purpose to life, a phenomenon some honor in formal religion. I do not look beyond this world for solace, however, and find the fullness of my purpose in singing hymns of praise to this world and its wonders, the only one we know and have, and must honor and preserve. The practice of poetry enhances the vibrancy of being truly alive, as does my late life occupation of antiquarian bookselling. Releasing a poem from my hands or selling a fine old book in my bookshop embodies my dedication to expanding the horizon of the world into which I was born, and for me links past to present in a persistent hope for the future. Physical books are an enduring form of connection across time and space. Arguably the finest of the ancient epics, the Gilgamesh epic, rooted in Iraq's past, continues to speak to our troubled future. The reality of that connection endures, preserved on clay tablets carved some four thousand years ago and delivered to us with no need for a power connection, hardware or software. It is all there.

So, I am proud and honored to be an "Old Bookseller," the title of the poem I will read to you now.

I am a book keeper.

Like a bee keeper

*I care for them.
They have never stung me.
I wear the mask and gloves
of cultivation
when I touch them,
seeking the honeycomb,
taking it from the hive.
I consume some of it,
but most goes to others,
sweetening their drinks
and confections and dispositions.
Brought to a store in jars,
it can sit on the shelf for a long time,
but eventually finds
its way to the spoon
of the mind. Poured over
madness or sadness
it sticks to the mouth,
turning the corners
of a smile with silent satisfaction.*

... from Drawn by the Creek, 2003.

Finally I will leave you with a statement of my dedication to the art of poetry. It is called simply, "Commitment."

I resist as best I can

the forgetting of my dream

drifting into and out of dozes, cat naps,

awakening and writing in the dark,

trying not to fall back asleep

with glittering day ahead –

the dawn coming

for me in a world of my making.

I resolve to get up and go as far as I can

before another drift

into another sleep.

I once made poetic gestures

in my callow youth.

I now gesture again

in the fullness of imagination

recording once unrecorded

*and discarded dreams
seeing and remembering
in starts from the sudden dark
what has continued beyond
my wildest wonder.*

*I bring these dreams to you, my reader,
glowing in my knowing
that they have been worth
the emerging
from the long sleep that awakens into life.
And as the drowsy time comes on again
I will not fail to keep and set down
every dream I can, for you.*

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