

Art, Politics, and the End of Education

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Part 3

In this century, humanity will face the consequences of its unrestrained ambitions. If we are to successfully confront and face the lengthening shadows cast by violence, terrorism, war, corruption, and the growing disparities between nations and among individuals within nations that are creating new and more permanent and insidious forms of slavery and suffering, we need to prepare a generation differently from the way we have been doing. In education, more of the same is not better. We must, through our educational project, establish clearly the link between what is learnt and the responsibilities of individuals to other individuals, to their societies, and to other societies; we must find ways and means to link educative projects to the most basic of human desires as well as the most noble of human aspirations.

In a forthcoming publication I argue that perhaps the human desire “to make beautiful”—art—can serve as a necessary mediator between the brutalising tendencies of universals and the urgent need to develop practical wisdom, prudence, or *phronesis* in education and society by helping us to responsibly connect the most powerful universals of human culture with the most familiar, meaningful, and resonant particulars of individual lives. Drawing on the scholarship of James Linker, who argues that, “...all politics has an aesthetic nature...The political...represents the entire field of human relations and production. The aesthetic is the *performativity* of those relations...the aesthetic shapes the political, is the source of its power, and the political provides context for the aesthetic,” provides a productive way into discussions about the practice or performance of politics in classrooms, schools, and the wider society.

In *Art and the Teaching of Love*, Didier Maleuvre argues that Art has a lot to teach us but this teaching is less about accumulation and reproduction of facts about the world than “about how to stand in relation to it, how to find our place in it, and live with it.” He also points to the role of Art as a means to addressing moral issues. Art, he says, “is especially suited to decry the mutilation of human life... The violence that lacerates beings by the same token lacerates art...Violence maims, mangles, humiliates, and reduces persons to meat. It denies the victims language and self-expression. It punctures the human conversation that holds us above animality...[works of art] teach us to take care; to pause; to heed; to orient our attention away from egotist concerns; to attend to the other; to enter into a relation; to participate; to see as also we are seen.” Art teaches how to learn how to feel and be in the world. It offers us an opportunity to reconnect with the most fundamental aspect of modern schooling, of being with others.

Elaine Scarry, too, suggests that beauty can assist in addressing injustices. One of the many analogies that she draws upon is the aesthetic quality of symmetry. She asks, “What happens when we move from the sphere of aesthetics to the sphere of justice? Here symmetry remains key...in periods when a human community is too young to have yet had time to create justice, as well as in periods when justice has been taken away, beautiful things hold steadily visible the manifest good of equality and balance...” In this time when justice seems to have been taken away, we need Art to help orient us back towards equality and balance. Solzhenitsyn declares

that it is the task of the artist “to sense more keenly than others the harmony of the world, the beauty and the outrage of what man has done it, and poignantly to let people know.”

Naipaul’s criticism that *nothing* has been produced here is true if “thing” is akin to a well-defined object that is reproducible, commodifiable, and easily exportable to other contexts. However, no *mere thing* has been produced here; rather, what has and is continually produced is not as simple as a thing. No, what is produced here is *performance*. And if we wish to say that our culture and cultural products, and, indeed our educational projects, are *per-formative* (*for* formation or *to* provide completely) then the criteria for evaluating such performances are different from the criteria for things and objects that we have been using. This concern with the performative dimension provokes for the educator the question of *a* standard to be used to evaluate the performance. I want to propose that such *a* standard is to be found in a renewed conception of the Holy. This conception demands a commitment to perform ourselves differently.

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