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The Power of Art in a Political Age

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I sometimes feel I'm in a daily struggle not to become a shallower version of myself. The first driver of shallowization is technology, the way it shrinks attention span, fills the day with tempting distractions. The second driver is the politicization of everything. Like a lot of people, I spend too much of my time enmeshed in politics — the predictable partisan outrages, the campaign horse race analysis, the Trump scandal du jour.

So I'm trying to take countermeasures. I flee to the arts.

I'm looking for those experiences we all had as a kid: becoming so enveloped by an adventure story that you refuse to put it down to go have dinner; getting so exuberantly swept up in some piece of music that you feel primeval passions thumping within you; encountering a painting so beautiful it feels like you've walked right into its alternative world.

The normal thing to say about such experiences is that you've lost yourself in a book or song — lost track of space and time. But it's more accurate to say that a piece of art has quieted the self-conscious ego voice that is normally yapping away within. A piece of art has served as a portal to a deeper realm of the mind. It has opened up that hidden, semiconscious kingdom within us from which emotions emerge, where our moral sentiments are found — those instant, aesthetic-like reactions that cause us to feel disgust in the presence of cruelty and admiration in the presence of generosity.

The arts work on us at that deep level, the level that really matters. You give me somebody who *disagrees* with me on every issue, but who has a good heart — who has the ability to sympathize with others, participate in their woes, longings and dreams — well, I want to stay with that person all day. You give me a person who *agrees* with me on every particular, but who has a cold, resentful heart — well, I want nothing to do with him or her.

Artists generally don't set out to improve other people; they just want to create a perfect expression of their experience. But their art has the potential to humanize the beholder. How does it do this?

First, beauty impels us to pay a certain kind of attention. It startles you and prompts you to cast off the self-centered tendency to always be imposing your opinions on things. It prompts you to stop in your tracks, take a breath and open yourself up so that you can receive what it is offering, often with a kind of childlike awe and reverence. It trains you to see the world in a more patient, just and humble way. In "The Sovereignty of God," the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch writes that "virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is."

Second, artworks widen your emotional repertoire. When you read a poem or see a piece of sculpture, you haven't learned a new fact, but you've had a new experience. The British philosopher Roger Scruton wrote, "The listener to Mozart's Jupiter symphony is presented with the open floodgates of human joy and creativity; the reader of Proust is led through the enchanted world of childhood and made to understand the uncanny prophecy of our later griefs which those days of joy contain."

These experiences furnish us with a kind of emotional knowledge — how to feel and how to express feelings, how to sympathize with someone who is grieving, how to share the satisfaction of a parent who has seen her child grow.

Third, art teaches you to see the world through the eyes of another, often a person who sees more deeply than you do. Sure, Picasso's "Guernica" is a political piece of art, about an atrocity in the Spanish Civil War, but it doesn't represent, documentarylike, an exact scene in that war. It goes deeper to give us an experience of pure horror, the universal experience of suffering, and the reality of human bloodlust that leads to it.

Of course "Invisible Man" is a political novel about racial injustice, but as Ralph Ellison later wrote, he was trying to write not just a novel of racial protest, but also a "dramatic study in comparative humanity which I felt any worthwhile novel should be."

I haul myself off to museums and such with the fear that in a political and technological age, the arts have become less central to public life, that we don't seem to debate novels and artistic breakthroughs the way people did in other times, that the artistic and literary worlds have themselves become stultified by insular groupthink, and this has contributed to the dehumanization of American culture.

But we can still stage our mini-rebellions, kick our political addictions from time to time, and enjoy the free play of mind, the undogmatic spirit and the heightened and adrenalized states of awareness that the best art still provides. Earlier this year I visited the Edward Hopper show at the Whitney a couple of times, and I got to see New York through that man's eyes — the spare rooms on side streets, and the isolated people inside. I forget most of what I read, but those images stay vivid in the mind.

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