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Very Professional

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We hear it often, this formula of praise. We hear it not only in connection with the classic professions, such as law, the military, medicine but also in regard to policemen, accountants, even long-distance truck drivers (whose trucks wear signs urging us to praise their professionalism by way of an 800 number). Very professional, the lawyers who snatched O.J. out of the gas chamber. But also very professional, the tight-lipped department secretary, who knows everything and reveals nothing. Very professional, the general with his finger on the nuclear trigger. In the event, would he really incinerate the world? "On that day," one such general affirmed, "I will think only of my duty as a professional."

"Professional" may indicate only generalized praise, a highfalutin variant of "competent" or "able" or "dependable"; in that case, it is of no interest, no consequence. But it is surely more portentous than that, bearing a fardel of unsettling meaning. What meaning? No doubt meaning must vary with context, but I suggest there is a generally accepted sense threading through all the particular instances of this phrase. Every invocation of professionalism celebrates standards—nay, virtues—that arise out of and are peculiar to the profession, distinct from standards and virtues shared by the rest of us in our common humanity. In some measure, these standards are set by the profession and serve the needs of the professionals. Indeed, the standards often make the work possible at all, shearing away those considerations which might complicate the work at hand, shearing away those inhibitions and compulsions that may be proper to humans but are extraneous to the profession.

In a word, professionalism makes it possible, if not downright mandatory, to be single minded.

Such cold abstractions belie the vast emotional forces at play here. Once, a professional nurse who found me alone with a new grief and a still-warm beloved body, took me in her arms and kissed me, saying nothing—what's to say about death anyway?—but with ritual gestures, stranger to stranger, bringing me out of aloneness into the concrete universal of loss, one of the dreadful ties that bind. But then, recovering her reason, she apologized stiffly for her “unprofessional conduct” and became very professional: helpful in a practical way, and humanly frigid.

Emotionally, there was a great deal at stake for this woman. It was her job, day in and day out, to visit the terribly sick at home. Even a modicum of fellow feeling might make her work intolerable. Yet detachment might divide her from herself, the self she holds in common with all the rest of us.

I hope that I am reporting the episode accurately. But I might be too naive. It is possible, or at least conceivable, that all the hugging and all the embarrassed apologies were a practiced ruse, a professional tactic learned from a textbook, another management tool, this one designed to manage the grief of clients. For comforters and mourners are also among the professionals.

In a symposium on women in the professions (in a recent *Harper's Magazine*), one participant utters these protests against an all-devouring “corporate culture”:

Yes, I define myself by my job. Is it all of me? No. But is it the cornerstone of my identity? Absolutely... the rules for success... are really a value system. The first thing I learned when I went to work was that it was more important to act right than to be right. I had to look as if work was everything... Nothing, absolutely nothing, can appear to be more important than what you do.

One must sympathize with this *cri de coeur* of a woman ostensibly torn between motherhood and executive triumph. Yet she has taken all the tension out of her dilemma. She appears to protest against the absolute primacy of the job but she has already conceded its primacy—absolutely.

And there is the nub of the issue, for men and for women: whether our humanity and our wholeness mean more than our success. To put the issue thus, starkly and without nuance, will offend practical people, who seek practical ways of finessing theoretical contraries. Yes, yes, I know, life consists of trade-offs and all that. However, the shifts and stratagems of life may obscure the insights and the nice distinctions that impractical art reveals. And so I turn to Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* for a profoundly funny study of professionalism.

Stevens, the hero and first-person narrator, is by vocation an English butler. Vocation indeed, for to a saintly degree he aims to become the best butler imaginable. This is a vast and intimidating intellectual enterprise, for he must first divine what in essence a butler is. He is a true intellectual, this man of unprepossessing mental powers, for he sets about to ground his vocation in the moral and social principles by which civilization lives and still holds head in air. He does not discount ways and means or what he calls “organizational skills.” Indeed, in his work he is consumed by details. But Stevens is ultimately concerned with ends, with large considerations like “moral worth” and “the progress of humanity.” His thinking upon such spacious themes is laughably sophomoric, when not scary. His prose is a confection of mandarin English, a butler's punctilio transferred to

prose style. But one must admire this man, even honor him. In his small way, he is a giant. Among his social and intellectual betters, those more clever and more learned, those who hold the levers of power, who attempts so much? Among those more successful in life, who looks beyond the ways and means of his profession and searches out its deepest justification? Who has reflected on his own professional *raison d'être* and located its rationale outside of himself?

Stevens' method is, unwittingly, exactly Aristotles' (in the *Ethics*): to infer the qualities of greatness (goodness, for Aristotle) from examples of great butlers. And Stevens, who never heard of Pico della Mirandola, comes to Pico's conclusion: dignity is all. Great butlers possess or "inhabit" dignity. Much of the novel then traces Stevens' effort to determine "of what 'dignity' is comprised"? It is an authentic philosophic enquiry, however puerile its level. And Stevens' conclusions, as dangerous as fascism and as naive as a freshman theme, represent not willfulness, but a philosophical subjection of the will to the imperatives of reason. Socrates himself did not more cheerfully quaff his hemlock in deference to Reason than Stevens submits his selfhood to the mystery of profession.

Dignity, it turns out, amounts to "the ability not to abandon the professional being [one] inhabits." Stevens is not satisfied to work as a butler, to be competent at his job; he aspires to *become* a

butler (*italics in original*). He goes on: "A butler. . . must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly and fully: he cannot be seen casting it aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume." This is identity unalloyed with baser metal. Is his job the cornerstone of his identity? Absolutely. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can appear to be more important than what he does.

It hardly matters that Stevens' passionate declaration of identity is occasioned by his own betrayal of it: he has been seen reading a book—a novel at that! And being a man who sets the highest standards for himself, he is properly contrite.

Stevens' total investment of self in his metier amounts to a repudiation of the republican ideal. That is to say, speaking more generally, that professionalism is an exacerbated instance of the division of labor, and the professional stands apart from the undivided father-farmer-citizen-soldier-legislator who is the ideal person to "inhabit" a republic. The true profession of such a person is to integrate his diverse functions into a coherent self, one at home in a community that reflects that self. The man must see to it that his personal morality is in harmony with his public persona and with the needs of the social body. And vice versa.

Such scrupulous coherence distinguishes republican man from the specialist in a supposedly homeostatic polity. The theory behind a self-regulating society—most relentlessly articulated by the avatars of the Market—is that there is an unseen hand which so guides all self-regarding behavior that it will automatically serve the larger good. In an adversary legal system, for example, lawyers need not reflect on justice, let alone seek it: justice will automatically result from the interplay of prosecutors and defenders. That both may have selfish ends in mind is nothing to the point.

Stevens argues with a certain primitive logic that he can best be a citizen by practicing his profession and leaving to other professionals the management of government. Or, more precisely, he accepts his employer's primitive logic. Does Stevens know whether "the debt situation regarding America is a significant factor in the present

low levels of trade"? Obviously not. Does he know whether "the currency problem in Europe would be made better or worse if there were to be an arms agreement between the French and the Bolsheviks"? Again, obviously not. Then the obvious conclusion must be that the "present parliamentary system," which puts matters of this sort into the hands of "a few million others like [Stevens]," is at the root of our troubles. His employer looks to Hitler and Mussolini as fit models: "Germany and Italy have set their houses in order by acting. And so have the wretched Bolsheviks in their own way." When Stevens meets a primitive democrat he reacts with discreet condescension. The democrat believes "you're born free and you're born so you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament. . . . That's what dignity's really about." This notion of dignity strikes Stevens as "nonsense." It is not for the likes of him to "meddle in the great affairs of the nation. The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of such as you and I, and those of us who wish to make our mark must realize that we best do so by concentrating on what is within our realm." Stevens has discovered government by experts—professionals.

Stevens' aspirations—to become or inhabit his occupation, to serve "the progress of humanity" by sticking to his vocation—preclude not only any "meddling" in citizenship but also any role as lover or father or even son. During his most triumphant week, managing the logistics incidental to an important conference, he denies himself a visit to his dying father. (It is, after all, just what his father, himself a devout ex-butler, would have wished.) Stevens also rejects the love of a good woman—indeed, he does not allow himself to acknowledge either the claims of love or the needs of a fellow human, since to be aware of those claims might suggest that he begrudged his total professional commitment. Only at the end of his life does he realize he had broken her heart. And in his remorse for this waste of life, his and hers, he discovers that "my heart was breaking." In his whole life—or, more accurately, in his whole

career—this is the only insight that we can call redemptive. And this insight is not the result of philosophical acuity; he is redeemed by tears, human tears hitherto locked and frozen in a butler's eyes.

The professions were not always regarded as occupations wherein the practitioner dissolved his humanity and his social conscience. John Ruskin exalted professionals as workers motivated by "social affection," by a sense of service and duty toward a social body one loves. In "every civilized nation," he avers,

The Soldier's profession is to defend it. The Pastor's, to teach it. The Physician's, to keep it in health. The Lawyer's, to enforce justice in it. The Merchant's, to provide for it. And the duty of all these men is, on due occasion, to die for it.

Ruskin thus exalts the professions and includes the Merchant in their moral sphere in order to discredit the science of economics, which scorns social affection as "inconstant" and pretends to erect a community upon the basis of the ever faithful profit motive. Ruskin would shape the ambitions of the Merchant in ways any business school would find droll:

The Merchant—What is his "due occasion" of death? It is the main question for the Merchant, as for all of us. For, truly, the man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live.

Ringling, glorious words, as inspiring and civilizing now as then, words that offer life as a moral business—indeed as a heroic enterprise. It is delicious to observe that *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* sniffs haughtily at Ruskin's "windy hysterics":

[Ruskin's] challenge to orthodox economics came from too far outside accepted economic discourse to have troubled its practitioners.

And there we have it, together with the modifier—orthodox—that has glued itself to economics. Here is the explicit acknowledgement that professional virtue is defined by the priesthood, and laymen had better stand clear.

Ruskin was no joke to other thinkers. At the other end of Europe, Leo Tolstoy pondered carefully those windy hysterics. But Tolstoy, writing representational fiction rather than high-minded exhortation, was forced to acknowledge that, alas, avarice and social competition (staying ahead of the Joneses) are the usual motive forces of human endeavors. In "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," Tolstoy portrays the total and typical professional. Ivan, a prosecuting magistrate and later a judge, has more status than Stevens but not more vital concerns. "The whole interest of his life. . . centered in the official world and that interest absorbed him." His relations with wife and children are at best exercises in propriety—and he willingly dives into his work to escape those relationships. But even in his work, which touches so many lives so momentarily, even so traumatically, Ivan remains singularly insensitive, empty of fellow feeling. He has power over the lives of others but is not interested in how law touches lives and so is incapable of wielding power either for benign or cruel ends. Law, for him is an abstract system, full of technical problems to be solved by the "paragraphs of the Code applying to them." And so, in his work, "the thing was to exclude everything fresh and vital." To a pathological degree, he is all of a piece: outside of work, his only interest is in bridge, which we may also regard as abstract, non-vital, and self-referential.

When Ivan becomes sick he faces his counterpart in the doctor. Ivan wants to know whether his illness is serious, but for the doctor this is an irrelevancy, an “inappropriate question. . . . the real question was to decide between a floating kidney, chronic catarrh, or appendicitis.” Ivan tries again: “Is this complaint dangerous or not?” This is a vital question, Ivan has discovered. But now he looks the doctor in the eye—and sees himself:

The doctor looked at him sternly over his spectacles with one eye as if to say, “Prisoner, if you will not keep to the questions put to you, I shall be obliged to have you removed from the court.”

It is piquant to note that the doctor looks with one eye: both he and Ivan are, figuratively, one-eyed, lacking in depth perception. Total professionals.

In Tolstoy’s view, it seems, such are the consequences, personal and social, of that specialized labor we call a profession: the desiccation of the individual sensibility and the irrelevancy of others. But that great enthusiast of the division of labor, Adam Smith, might take another view. He might point out that Ivan’s attention to “paragraphs of the Code” signals a rational and consistent legal system, if not the triumph of justice. Smith contrasts the democratic courts of ancient Greece with the professionalized courts of Rome. In Greece hundreds of ordinary citizens issued collective judgments, hence judgments tainted by mass emotions, by “clamour, faction, and party spirit.” In Rome, where law became a “science,” judges were few and therefore, unlike a mob, could be identified with their decisions. Simply as a matter of self-justification, judges would be guided by precedent, reason, evidence. If Ivan, as an example of *deformation professionnelle*, is contemptible, that is too bad for Ivan but it is good for the legal system. We must remember Smith’s abiding contempt for the merchant class; again and again, he refers to their “boundless rapacity,” their “mean and malignant expedients,” their “interested falsehood,” and so on. Yet he honored their vices out of respect for the wealth produced.

Here is the paradox, as Bernard de Mandeville put it, of private vice and public virtue. Whatever Tolstoy intended, maybe Ivan should be regarded as Smith regards merchants: a man pitiable but useful. Maybe.

Or maybe that paradox is only a confusion. In several places in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith shows he is aware of the fate of workers under the regime of division of labor (a regime he considered to be good for civilization). He says this of a man's job:

[The job makes him] as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country, he is altogether incapable of judging.

To be sure, Smith is here thinking about the "inferior classes," dehumanized wretches toiling in the dark Satanic mills. Even when he says that "the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments" he has "common people" in mind. But it seems both logical and evident from observation to generalize this

statement, applying it to merchants and judges as well as truckers. Indeed, this seems to be the universal opinion: whenever two strangers meet, the first question is "What do you do?" Knowing that, they know all about one another, except for a few incidentals. And Smith says as much—even going so far as to suggest that the only autonomous, non-determined spirits are those who have no occupation, who are free of that brutal Necessity which Smith considers the constant motive of human endeavor and the motor of progress:

In a civilized state. . . though there is little variety in the occupations of individuals, there is an almost infinite variety in those of the whole society. These varied occupations present an almost infinite variety of objects to the contemplation of those few, who, being attached to no particular occupation themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people. The contemplation of so great a variety of objects necessarily exercises their minds in endless comparisons and combinations, and renders their understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive.

Those "attached to no particular occupation"? Who could he have in mind? Himself, quite plausibly, for he is not so hopelessly attached to economics as to cease yearning after "generous, noble, or tender sentiments"—like Ruskin's idealized professionals. Or maybe his words adumbrate an intelligentsia, a class of thinkers free of the Market, hence morally engaged but materially detached, disinterested, Olympian—public intellectuals, minds not held to the metalled ways of appetency but soaring into the Empyrean. Just like tenured professors in the humanities.

Well, that was my attempt at humor, but I think that tenured professors of literature will not be amused. For—if I may generalize wildly for the purposes of argument—they are deeply skeptical of the possibility of disinterested art or art criticism, and they yearn for the status of professionals, with all the exclusiveness thereby implied. Far from being public intellectuals, think-

ers speaking to fellow human beings, they aspire to speak only to their fellow professionals (and not even to colleagues in nearby offices but to that "community" of sub-specialists which meets in the journals). They cultivate that forbidding jargon which Geoffrey Hartman defended by comparing it to a secret handshake: it's the sign by which initiates recognize one another. (The language philosopher John Searle, however, reproaches the jargon—Theoryspeak—for giving bullshit a bad name.) And they imagine that literary study is a discipline—like physics, say—with its own conceptual foundation, its own method, its own standards which can be tested only within the discipline.

Admittedly, these are generalizations, but they are not so wild after all. They are indeed the official vaunts of the profession. About nine years ago the profession sought to justify itself in the face of attacks by William Bennett, Allan Bloom, and Lynn Cheney. The American Council of Learned Societies charged six high-powered literary scholars with the task of "Speaking for the Humanities," the presumptuous title of their "report."

In regard to Bennett, Cheney, and Bloom it would seem that satire would be the sane and judicious response, and a natural gambit for literary scholars. And indeed one review of Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* was a hilarious—and lethal—spoof. The reviewer, the philosopher Robert Wolff, pretended that *Closing* was a novel written by Saul Bellow (who actually did write the Foreword). The sole character in this novel is a fictional professor named "Bloom." He is a burlesque of a pedant, an egregious philosopher who "[supposes] that it is ideas that are real, and the people in this world who are mere epiphenomena." And so on. Great fun.

However, the six scholars who speak for the humanities are absolutely humorless; and indeed the satire on Bloom, slightly retrofitted, might apply to them. For the six confirm the suspicions of their critics. They betray their science envy by an insistent comparison of literary study with physics. They argue that their jargon is as natu-

ral and as necessary as the arcana of physics. They would have done better to heed the words of J. K. Galbraith, that noble model of the public intellectual, to the effect that there is nothing in economics that cannot be explained in plain language (and economics, after all, has some claim to being a discipline). They would have done better to take as model John Rawls' magisterial *A Theory of Justice*, which treats a matter of universal concern in language as simple as the matter allows.

But the six, defending their professionalism, fulminate against "a non-professional corps of collectors," against "the gentlemanly ideal," against "amateurs—belle lettrists who unselfconsciously sustain traditional hierarchies." Literature—even great literature—may have been written for amateurs, for those seeking "understandings" or a personal encounter with another mind, but only professionals know how to deal with it.

The six scholars take great pains to deny the possibility of detachment or disinterested thought. Instead, they insist that "ideology" underlies everything, especially literary works. Ideology is a close relative of self-interest but it is by no means as forthright and evident. It is covert, "unselfconscious," subverting every work of art. And only a professional can expose it. The work of detection and arraignment is the vital social service performed by literary critics. The

six scholars remind us of that abiding conundrum embedded in capitalist theory, the flaw in the Smithian notion of a homeostatic society: that self-interest does not always promote social good. Or, to connect with the current politics, you can't be devoted to the Market and to family values, to "corporate culture" and motherhood. Well, the six have discovered all this. They see that it is "[a mistaken belief]. . . that members of a society can act against their own self-interest, recognizing a larger good." And they see that the larger good won't just take care of itself: "The belief that all thought inevitably derives from particular. . . interests would seem to subvert the moral order." But they are working on this old puzzler: "The apparently abstruse and professionalized theories with which the humanities disciplines work these days are often attempts to confront this problem." Nor have these attempts been fruitless, for the solution to this problem is to know thyself and to look sharp at the people around you: "Allowing for the possibility of one's own interests, one can look for irrational elements in otherwise rational arguments, or for disguised ideological assumptions."

Be wise: know thyself and think critically. Who could quarrel with such an ambition? But the notion that there is a discipline, a profession that can teach wisdom is, at best, fatuous.

But the six scholars do not even intend to teach wisdom; they propose to discover it and then hand it down ready-made, *exactly* as physicists present, or impose, their discoveries:

We do not expect physicists to work within their disciplines only in language that non-physicists might comprehend, although we do expect the ideas of specialists to be made available to the lay reader. Physicists speak to a popular culture only when they are not doing the scientific work that makes a difference in their fields. We are interested in what they say because they have made a difference. . . in the way we live now.

The professionals will work out, among themselves in their private lingo, the method for reading poems and then tell us "lay readers" what they have concluded. And that information will make a difference in the way we live now. Like $E=mc^2$.

My natural timidity, not to mention my professional irrelevance, would prevent me from speaking in my own voice about such matters. And of course, to challenge six paladins of professionalism, all at once, would be a romantic folly beyond my aspirations. But I am made bold by divers challenges from within the professions. The example I find most delightful is the recantation of Frank Lentricchia, once advertised as "the Dirty Harry of literary theory." He gives an account of his death and rebirth, his death as a professional enemy of literature and his rebirth as an amateur, a lover, of literature. So graceful and so moving is this born-again tale that any summary must be a travesty. Yet this personal statement, this re-enactment of an internal drama, is also substantial, and that substance can be suggested by summary.

In the course of his account, Lentricchia repudiates the orthodoxies of professional readers. But this repudiation follows from, and is only incidental to, his elaboration of one foundational truth, that reading is as radically subjective as a mystical event. It is "ravishingly pleasurable, like erotic transport." (Sounds like John Donne in union with the Divine Ground.) While reading, "the words of someone else filled [him] up." For Lentricchia, any theory of literature that does not

proceed from this experience is false. Nonetheless, any critical commentary that turns away from this core experience in order to make a point about "racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism" is still revealing. It reveals, among other things, the critic's self-righteousness, his sense of being "morally superior to the writers that one is supposedly describing." It also reveals the belief that "a literary critic, as a literary critic, could be an agent of social transformation." It also reveals that a literary work is being "pre-read," which is to say that it is looked at in the light of a prior agenda: "Tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say about any work." It also reveals that the critic is doing what it takes to succeed in the academy.

And all of these revelations may be recapitulated thus: the critic "is [refusing] to take the literary measure of the subject, whatever the subject may be." It is a refusal to look at objects as part of a "stylized and imaginative landscape":

The literature student sees the objects that historians and sociologists see, but . . . through the special lens of literature. The authentic literary type believes with Oscar Wilde that life is an imitation of art. Sociologists don't believe that; philosophers don't either. Why should they? They're sociologists and philosophers, who know that life is an imitation of sociology and philosophy

There is much more in this testimonial, especially about how a literary attitude works in the classroom. But for my purposes now, I cherish Lentricchia's belief that "professional literary study is a contradiction in terms." Reading poems is not a discipline, with "a method and rules for the engagement of the object of study." Instead, reading—and teaching—literature engages us as total humans, calling upon our love of beauty, our judgment, our sensibility, our experiences as readers and as persons. It calls upon our capacity for rhapsodic feeling and our willingness to display it. And it depends upon our desire and ability to travel, to journey into the thoughts and emotions of others. Or, as Adam

Smith might put it, the "contemplation of so great a variety of objects necessarily exercises [our] minds in endless comparisons and combinations, it renders [our] understanding . . . both acute and comprehensive."

None of this is even passably amenable to method, rule, and measure. None of this derives from some overarching theory. No formula can contain such imponderables. Administrators would never allow "endless comparisons and combinations" to complicate their careers. Nor will professionals. In some not very demonstrable way, such considerations make for our dignity as humans, but they are just not very professional. ♦

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