Julia Lupton gives us a virtuous Shakespeare, one who continues, with his own means, certain conceptions of virtuous action going back to Aristotle. From this rich tapestry of text and implication, philosophy and literature, she outlines what she calls a “Humanifesto,” a statement about the essential benefit of a humanities education. She writes: “How does literary education make students braver, more attentive, and more resilient? How do literary and philosophical texts orient readers in the world? And how can we help students translate and appropriate those capacities to new scenes of use as they move beyond our classrooms into employment, citizenship, and love?”

Two threads here are familiar to me—though more elegantly stated than usual—from my reading of defenses of the humanities: call them the argument for flourishing and the argument for capacities. On the one hand, attentive reading helps produce certain stances to the world that endow our actions with significance: from this, we lead a meaningful life—an intentional life, intention being the permeating medium of all virtue: we flourish. On the other hand, these capacities are portable: they do not inhere in literary or humanistic reading alone any more than virtue inheres in any single specialized activity. I actually think these two arguments have pretty good traction with many, perhaps especially if they are banalized to “education in ethics” and “education in skills.”

But I wonder about a third dimension, clearly essential in Julia’s account but I think harder to make visible today. Call it an argument for tradition, for an actively pursued understanding oneself as belonging to the past, and not merely the present and some scary future to be leaned into or leaned back from. If texts “orient” us in the world, it is because we have an antecedent expectation that they might do so—that is, we open ourselves to the claim they have on us, we feel responsible to them and the meaning they contain, what Julia calls “the wisdom manifested in the texts entrusted to our care or appropriated through our acts of curation and judgment.” Curation here is not merely a process of assembling, recovering, or selecting. It is a whole attitude to the value of tradition: this last argument is fast becoming harder and harder to advance compellingly, it seems to me, even to our students most hungry for what it can provide them. It is this attitude toward a lived relation to the past of thought that seems to be on its last legs.

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