Bodies, Artworks, and Use Values

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People like to feel useful but not to feel used, a distinction which captures something of our general ambiguity about the concept of use. Not to feel used may be to feel dumped and discarded, which is objectionable; but it may also be to feel treated as an end in oneself, which is not. Perhaps what counts is the difference between being put to use by others and being the agent of one’s own practical efforts. But this is surely not the case. For one thing, others can make use of you in constructive ways, as when they draw upon your medical skills to save their dying child. This is hardly a case of being exploited. We do, after all, speak of using someone well. “Use” here refers simply to the way we treat people, not necessarily to treating them as a means to an end. And even then, as I have just indicated, this may be entirely acceptable. To use somebody in the pejorative sense of the term is not to bend their powers and capacities to certain ends, but to do this while riding roughshod over their own interests and desires. In this sense, what is wrong with using people is akin to what is wrong with sociological functionalism. It is not that social roles and institutions do not have functions, but that they cannot be reduced to them. Nor can people be reduced to what we want from them. But we are entitled to want things from them even so, which is a matter of using them, but not in a way they can legitimately object to.

One can also use oneself in unjust or abusive ways, as when one shoots off a finger from one’s hand once a week simply for the cheap thrill of it. A tougher case is when one freely submits to being the mere tool or chattel of someone else. Someone may find supreme self-fulfilment in dressing up as a Victorian maidservant, calling themselves Milly and scrubbing five flights of stairs a day. If it is hard to see why they should be censured for this, it is equally difficult to regard it as a paradigm of the good life. That a liberal society does not prevent its citizens from using and abusing themselves does not mean that it should approve of it.

Using oneself, however, has its limits. I can certainly make use of my own body, as when I lie supine in the mud so that Brad Pitt can descend from his limousine without soiling his shoes. This is to treat my body as an instrument, which is by no means always objectionable. Think of
stretching oneself across a cleft in the rocks so that one’s companions can scramble to safely over one’s spine. Nor is it always objectionable to treat other people’s bodies as instruments. If I am too cowardly or arthritic to stretch myself over the cleft, I might secure your consent to stretch your lithe, courageous young person over it instead. A martyr is one who gives his or her body away for the sake of others.

Even so, I cannot use myself as an instrument in the same sense that I can use a fork. This is partly because a body is not exactly something that I have, even if we find ourselves speaking often enough in such terms. My relationship to my body is not fundamentally an instrumental one, even though I can speak of having the use of my legs or eyes. I can objectify my flesh to some extent, and could not function as a subject if I could not, but it is not my possession. To say that this body is mine is just a way of distinguishing between it and other bodies, not a way of saying that it belongs to me, and that I am therefore free to (say) pump it full of heroin. Morally speaking, I am no more free to do this than I am to pump you full of heroin. As far as that goes, there is no significant difference between mine and yours. Justice, love, and respect are not just other-regarding virtues.

There may be some excellent reasons for abortion, but protesting that one’s body is one’s own property, to do with as one chooses, is not one of them. It is to mistake the body for a piece of real estate. Who would be doing the possessing? Some “I” that is quite independent of one’s corporeal existence, as Descartes imagined? Besides, if there is someone or something manipulating my body from the inside, wouldn’t it need some sort of body itself in order to do so? And what would set that body in motion? How lengthy a regress of homunculi would one need to posit?

The grammatical similarity between “my body” and “my copy of Mansfield Park” is misleading. I can give away my copy of Mansfield Park, but the body is inalienable. Someone else—a slave master, for example—may be said to own it in a certain sense, but I do not. I cannot object to being enslaved by my legal owner because my body is mine and not his. I can only object to being shackled to the wall on the grounds that bodies are not possessions at all. Far from involving proprietorship, the body is a sign of our dependence on others. It is what links us to a species. To be human (though not to be personal) is to have a certain material shape. We derive our flesh from elsewhere. There might possibly have been just one hat stand or hamburger, but there could no more be just one person than there could be one number or one word.

No doubt it is the scandal of this dependency which helps to breed postmodernist fantasies of self-invention, for which the self or the body is just so much pliable stuff to be pummelled arbitrarily into whatever
form takes your fancy. The United States is a nation restive with the idea of the given. It believes that value resides in what you make of things, not in the things themselves. As a society, it is spontaneously constructivist rather than realist. Before its taming at the hands of the pioneers, the wilderness was a place where the devil lurked. For the Protestant mind, nature is unregenerate until it is moulded by the hand of culture. Even then it is not wholly to be trusted. There is thus a lineage stretching from the Pilgrim fathers to the postmodern assumption that the world is one giant cosmetic surgery. Culturalism, for which the natural is always rather suspect and as a word has to be ritually clapped in scare quotes, is thoroughly in line with traditional American values. It is by no means as avant-garde as it imagines. Tattooing Sarah Palin’s face on your chest, like building Salt Lake City, is a victory of culture over nature. It is, to be such, something of a Pyrrhic victory, since in the end nature always has the upper hand. This is known as death.

To be able to use oneself full-bloodedly would involve standing outside oneself altogether, and this is what our creatureliness forbids. It is of the nature of humans, as opposed to earwigs, that their way of belonging to a situation involves a capacity to distance themselves from it, and that language plays a vital role in this process; but I cannot get a fix on my body from some Archimedean point beyond it. There is always some recalcitrant aspect or dimension of it that eludes us; indeed, the body as a whole gives the slip to thought, since breathing, digesting, the circulation of the blood and so on are unconscious processes quite independent of the will. Perhaps this is another reason why a society as resolutely voluntaristic as the United States has such trouble with the flesh.

Human beings are among other, more glamorous things natural material objects, and if they were not so there would be no possibility of relationship between them. Objectification is by no means always a vice. Yet the only completely objectified human body is a corpse. Even when we make objects of each other in morally disreputable ways, cynically exploiting someone else’s capabilities, we can do so only because others are more than objects—because they have creative, constructive, communicative powers which we can tap for our own ends but never entirely tabulate. The point of having a valet is for him to take initiatives on one’s behalf, not to behave like a lawnmower. It is advantageous to masters that their servants should enjoy a limited sort of autonomy. One does not use one’s butler as one uses one’s toothbrush. We speak of using human beings as objects, but even then we do not use them as we use tweezers or potato peelers. It is as humans that we exploit and objectify them. Marx held that the root of capitalist exploitation lay in the fact that what is exploited by the capitalist is not some fixed quantity
called labor but a curiously open-ended corporeal capacity known as labor-power, which is capable of producing a profitable excess.

If the body cannot be entirely reduced to a lump of matter, it is partly because it always has a certain priority over the environment it inhabits. A human body is a point from which a world is organized, a form of practice, a mode of presence to others, a way of being pitched in the midst of things, a piece of signifying matter, a transformative traffic with its surroundings. Rather as it would be a category mistake to count God as an object or entity in the world, since he is what brought the world into being in the first place (God and the universe do not make two), so it is a mistake to imagine that one can reckon up the body alongside the world it fashions, other than in the most banally arithmetical of senses.

It is natural for us to assume that we can get outside our own bodies, because there is a sense in which the body continually surges beyond itself. If we are not identical with our bodies, it is not because our true self squats secretly within them, but because they are not identical with themselves. Perhaps this is why we are reluctant to say that we are bodies, an expression which would seem to deny this sense of self-dislocation. It is not quite true that we have bodies, and not quite true that we are them either. What the word “soul” is meant to pick out is the kind of body which is self-transformative, and so never quite coincident with itself, as opposed to inertly self-identical bodies such as tea pots and escritoires. Only a body which can speak, love, and labor could be said to have a soul, an unfortunate phrase which inevitably brings to mind the idea of having a kidney or a Rolls-Royce. And only because it has a soul, so to speak, can it be used.

Most of the most precious activities—playing with one’s children, making love, dancing, enjoying festive company, playing the clarinet, cultivating chrysanthemums, and the like—are noninstrumental. They contain their goods, ends, grounds, and reasons within themselves, and as such are akin to works of art. They are forms of praxis rather than of utilitarian practice. They involve the purposive organization of the body for ends which are not extrinsic to it, which is also the case with artifacts. Bodies and artworks are also alike in that they are both pieces of signifying matter. A corpse is a body from which signification has haemorrhaged, leaving it brute, inexpressive material. Bodies and works of art are material objects, and only as such can they be bearers of meaning; but because they are inherently semiotic entities, they can never be reduced to the materiality which is the condition of their signification.

And yet, not all the most valuable acts are noninstrumental. Think of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and welcoming the stranger. Yet to describe someone as virtuous is to claim that he or she has a disposition
bodies, artworks, and use values—to perform such actions—that they are not simply the result of one-off acts of will but expressive of their moral character. Virtue is not goodness but the habit of goodness. Moreover, like all virtuous activities, they are forms of self-fulfilment as well as ways of being of service to others. The tradition of virtue ethics stands opposed to the Kantian suspicion that if it feels good, it can’t be good. So these actions are useful, but also self-expressive. They have their ends partly in themselves and partly outside themselves. As such, they dismantle any simplistic opposition between the practical and the autotelic.

If the work of art in the Romantic or modernist sense includes its ends, grounds, motives, and raison d’être within itself, what it resembles most is the Almighty. Traditionally, the most supremely useless being is God. Atheists and believers are at one in the conviction that there is no point to him whatsoever. God does not exist for a purpose. To say that he created the world has nothing to do with how the universe got started. It is to say among other things that the world is his, and thus shares his own supreme pointlessness. God created it purely for his and its self-delight—or, to adopt a traditional theological term, just for the hell of it. Thomas Aquinas and Richard Dawkins see eye-to-eye on the fact that the universe is utterly without purpose. Creation is a refutation of an instrumental rationality. This is one reason why almost all aesthetic terms are pieces of displaced theology. When the Almighty is finally toppled from his throne, the autotelism of the work of art will be one of several candidates jostling to replace him.

It is thus a choice irony that if God is the very image of the gloriously pointless, he is also what helps to bring the notion of usefulness into being. For the theological realists of medieval Europe, God has fashioned things in a particular way, which is what is meant by their having natures or essences. It is true that he could always have fashioned them differently, since the whole of creation is radically contingent. It is permanently overshadowed by the mind-warping fact that there might never have been anything at all, rather as certain modernist works of art cannot quite get over their astonishment at actually existing, however precariously or exiguously, in the unpropitious conditions of modernity, and may incorporate this sense of ontological fragility into what they do and say. Had the fancy taken him, God could always have decided that rainwater should have a high alcoholic content, or that Dick Cheney should never have been born. In the event, he was short-sighted enough to arrange things otherwise, but then nobody is perfect.

Given, however, that he has made his choices, as Americans like to say, he must stick with them. Having made his universe, he is forced to lie in it. He cannot now decide that tortoises should henceforth travel
close to the speed of light, like some pampered rock star full of capricious fancies. God must respect the nature of things, and so must we. We can make use of them, to be sure; but we must do so in accordance with their inherent properties. It is this that Karl Marx was to call “use-value.” Genuine use is not a question of arbitrary manipulation. There is a sense in which things guide our hand when it comes to getting something fruitful out of them. If there is no such thing as human nature, then one powerful case against enslaving men and women falls to the ground, which is not to suggest that there are no other arguments against slavery to hand. If phenomena are endlessly pliable, then the flipside of this pliability is the masterful will, which knocks them into whatever shape it pleases. Among other, finer things, antiessentialism is in the service of power.

The medieval nominalists rejected the realist case precisely because it seemed to set limits to God’s omnipotent will. Why couldn’t he do what he liked with his own cosmos, rather as I can do what I like with my private collection of Rembrandts? If God’s freedom was to be secure, inherent natures had to be downgraded to no more than names. Things in the world thus no longer spoke of the deity in their material being. A gap had opened up between a God who was now inscrutable to human reason, since his logic was no longer visibly inscribed in his creation, and profane phenomena, which could now be investigated not as so many symptoms of divinity but in their own right. The sacramental gave way to the scientific. The reign of utility was born. A Baconian ethic of use and service gradually ousted a religious or aesthetic reverence for the unfathomable depth of things, until Romanticism arrived to restore it in secular guise. Reality may have been disenchanted, but it was precisely this loss of aura which allowed us to seize hold of it. The world was there for us to make what we would of it, pressing it into the service of our variable needs. Nothing was now in principle off-bounds to knowledge.

It is true that the price exacted for this liberty was alarmingly steep. We had landed ourselves with a mechanistic universe, a material environment stripped of its sensuousness, a narrowly instrumental rationality, an unfathomable capacity for manipulation, and a humanity which had inherited the sovereign will of its increasingly irrelevant Creator without also being the legatee of his unconditional goodness. Even so, there were some precious benefits. For one thing, what applied to the world applied to literature as well. We could now read literary texts in all kinds of innovative ways, free from the superstition that they were sacred. Indeed, with the rise of hermeneutics and liberal Protestantism, not even sacred texts were sacred. At a later point in this evolution, there would be a panic-stricken effort to resacralize them by seeking to fix their meanings unalterably. This is known as fundamentalism.
For the realists, things have built-in functions; for the nominalists, functions are not immanent in objects but assigned to them by the sovereign will. They are practical rather than ontological, part of how we treat phenomena rather than constitutive of their natures. There are, to be sure, a number of intermediate positions available here. Most of us would agree that objects, not least literary works, can be ascribed functions quite unforeseen by their producers, but that such functions are nonetheless constrained by the nature of the object itself. Given sufficient useless ingenuity, one might read *Othello* as an account of the Great Irish Famine, but one cannot interpret it as a vacuum cleaner.

That the realists might be right to posit a strong internal relation between the nature of a thing and its function is evident in the fact that a change of function can mean a change of nature, or what the medieval schoolmen would call “substance.” Imagine using a copy of *Anna Karenina* to wedge open the door. A small child happens along and asks “What’s that?” (“substance” for the schoolmen is simply the answer to the question “What’s that?”). The answer surely depends on what the child knows already and what it wants to know. We may happen to know that it knows what a book is, so this cannot be the correct response. The answer must be something like “a door stopper,” which the child may have never encountered before. A change of function has resulted in a change of substance, even though the book itself has undergone no physical transformation.

The reign of utility was in many respects an enlightened one. Dickens’s crowd-pleasing caricature of utilitarianism in *Hard Times* is a shoddy piece of Romantic propaganda. The fact is that some of his best friends were Benthamites, and he was well aware of how many valuable social reforms they had in hand. He himself sails close to Utilitarianism in some of his nonfictional writings, not least in his zeal for modernization and philistine contempt for the unreconstructed past. There is a dash of New Labour about Dickens, one curiously at odds with his off-the-peg Romanticism. Gradgrind may reify the facts, but facts in the right context can have a formidable force. This is why there is something painfully callow about the loose contemporary use of the term “positivism,” which was also in some respects an enlightened current in its day, to mean an excessive focus on facts. This is not only a misuse of the term; it also fails to see that there are occasions when the facts can set you free.

Utility, then, is not to be sniffed at, and neither is an instrumental rationality. It is one of the paradoxes of radical politics that it seeks to transcend such an anaemic conception of reason, but finds itself deploying it for precisely this end. A good deal of ends-means thought and practice is needed to achieve a condition in which such an approach might
exert less of a despotic hold upon us. As far as Marxism is concerned, the political goal is for practice to yield to praxis—which is to say, for an instrumentalist or consequentialist vision to give way to a social order in which labor (for example) would be as far as possible an activity whose good was inherent to it, which is to say a form of self-realization rather than simply a means to profit or subsistence. Even so, labor by its very nature would continue to have an instrumental dimension, so that the two modes are not incompatible. There are practices which are purely instrumental (visiting the dentist), others which are purely a question of praxis (playing chess), and others which combine the two (labor in nonexploitative conditions). Besides, socialism for Marx can be floated only on the back of material affluence, and it is this that the bourgeoisie, with its relentlessly instrumental activity, has unwittingly bequeathed to its political antagonists. Once again, then, one can only transcend the instrumental by virtue of it.

Marx believed that utilitarianism and Romanticism were terrible twins. Among other things, he meant by this that all the latter could think of counterposing to the crass utility of the former was the autotelic, and that this supposed solution was really just part of the problem. The autotelic was merely the other face of utility, yoked to it by simple inversion, rather as the image of the artist as a dissolute, shock-haired Bohemian is the respectable burgher’s fantasy of him. That Marx should adopt this attitude is surprising in a way, since he himself was a good, old-fashioned Romantic humanist. (He was also a good, old-fashioned Enlightenment rationalist, and the two could prove a potent blend.) He is indebted to Romanticism above all in his belief that human capacities should be realized as an end in themselves; that this should happen reciprocally, such that the self-realization of each becomes as far as possible the condition of the self-realization of all; and that communism is simply whatever set of sociopolitical arrangements would facilitate this moral end. There is no point or telos to it beyond this, rather as there is no point or telos to the aboriginal acte gratuit known as the universe. One cannot ask why men and women should freely realize their creative powers. It is simply of their nature to do so. “Nature” is in this sense an end-stopping term. It signals, as Wittgenstein might say, that arguments have to come to an end somewhere. Why it should be good for a clock to tell the time correctly is a matter of the definition of the word “clock.” To understand this is to answer the question.

To grasp Marx’s point, we need to reflect briefly on Romantic aesthetics. A certain Romantic conception of the work of art, one which would doubtless have come as a mighty surprise to Milton or Pope, sees it as conjuring itself up mysteriously from its own unfathomable depths
according to its own unique law, self-founding, self-validating, and self-originating, with no dependence on any heteronomous power. It is, in short, a fantasy of self-begetting, in which, in a kind of Oedipal revolt, the artwork refuses to acknowledge those inconvenient parents known as history, culture, other artifacts, and the like, and dreams instead that it is sprung miraculously from its own loins. This fantasy then serves the modern age as a model of human self-dependence, as the middle classes find in such autonomy an image of their own political desire; but it can also have a utopian as well as ideological function, providing a foretaste of a political future in which men and women would be able to flourish as ends in themselves.

What this means, then, is that the work of art is useful in its very uselessness. It is invested with a utopian function in its very dysfunctionality. If it has been severed by historical change from any very weighty social purpose, it can seize on this very lack of usefulness to foreshadow a future beyond mere utility. Much the same is true of the dandy. The dandy is fortunate enough not to have to work, but he pays for this privilege in the coin of social parasitism. He has enough leisure and resources to do as he likes, but he has nothing to do. If you are a sufficiently impudent idler, however, you can, like Oscar Wilde, regard your own delightfully shiftless situation as heralding an era in which nobody else will need to work either. This is why Wilde was a socialist as well as an aesthete, and one closer to Marx than he was to William Morris.

Aestheticism is a scandal to a society for which nothing is allowed to exist for its own sake, and as such can be a form of political radicalism. To turn yourself into a work of art is to refuse to submit your creative powers to some sour-faced tribunal of utility. The spendthriftness of the dandy, his patrician disdain for the calculable and utilitarian, his relish for the sheer gratuitousness of his own existence, is a bold-faced affront to the merchant and the clerk. No wonder Wilde ended up in Reading gaol. Sodomy was among the least of his crimes.

The work of art may be socially dysfunctional, but it compensates for this indignity by its rigorous internal organization. Functionality becomes intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Each of the artifact’s features manifests complex functional relations to all the others. It is a myth of organic unity which survived all the way from Aristotle to the New Critics, and was only first challenged on a sizeable scale by the various revolutionary avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. Function, in the sense of a set of inherent rapports between the work of art’s various elements, is elevated over use, considered as arbitrary, degrading, and extrinsic. There are internal relations between theme, character, plot, and imagery in Macbeth, rather as there is an internal relation between
my eyes turning expectantly upward as you arrive and my rising from my chair. The various parts of the body are not interrelated as cause and effect. Instead, the body’s disposition is grasped from the inside in a kind of intuitive logic, rather like the relation between the syntax of a poem and its metrical system. I do not need a compass to know where my left foot is located.

Why did Marx clip Romanticism so scornfully with utilitarianism? No doubt because he considered that the Romantic is one who knows the value of everything and the price of nothing, and as such is a mere inversion of Wilde’s infamous philistine. Yet it is also because he was out to redefine the concept of use, rather than to dismiss it out of hand or idealize the pointless. So much is clear from his concept of use value, first laid out in volume 1 of Capital, which in Aristotelian fashion distinguishes what he regards as genuine use from that more impoverished thing known as Benthamite utility. Utilitarianism involves a kind of exchange value at the level of appetite or desire: if pushpin yields a greater quota of pleasure than poetry, then it is to be preferred to it. The idea of inherent value is on this view a piece of metaphysical mystification. What matters is pain and pleasure, however these mental states are to be measured and defined, and objects are to be valued in so far as they avert the former and facilitate the latter.

It is this hedonist commodification of things that Marx counters with his notion of use value. Use value involves putting an object to work with a regard for its sensuously specific properties, as opposed to the abstraction of exchange value. This, to be sure, can lead to a whole array of different uses, some of them perhaps mutually conflicting, and some of them at odds with the purposes for which the object was originally fashioned. All that matters is that one can discern some kind of plausible relationship between the character of the object and the ends to which it is harnessed. Otherwise it is hard to speak of a use of the object as such, just as it is in the case of commodification. It does not mean that The Divine Comedy cannot be used to throw light on Mitt Romney. It is just that you have to demonstrate it. You cannot simply claim that the former invariably generates images of the latter in your mind. This may be of interest to your psychoanalyst, but it does not count as literary criticism.

For Marx, use value is use in a constructive rather than pejorative sense. It is the opposite of exploitation. On this view, the notion of use need imply no offensive appropriation. To use perfume simply means to wear it; there is no suggestion of putting it to some extrinsic end, such as pouring it into the sink to drown a spider. To use cocaine simply means to take it. To use words just means to speak, not to devalue them.
by yoking them to some goal beyond themselves for which they may be unfitted. Or take the business of getting drunk, which a friend informs me can be a gratifying human experience. You can drink whisky because you enjoy it, and because you enjoy it you may drink it to excess; but you can also drink it simply in order to get drunk, perhaps so as to forget your sorrows. The former would be an example of use value, but not the latter. In the latter case, the relation between the whisky and the end it achieves is an arbitrary or contingent one, since something else (translating Proust into Inuktitut, for example) might have allowed you to forget your sorrows just as effectively. We speak of drinking vast quantities of wine or spirits as “abusing alcohol,” but the term is inaccurate. As long as we enjoy the stuff for what it is, it is ourselves we are abusing, not it.

In this sense, the work of art is the opposite of the commodity. Art works on us in and through its sensuous qualities, whereas the commodity qua commodity has not a particle of matter in its make-up. It is as much pure form as Jackson Pollock, no more than the abstract equivalent of another commodity. Commodities do, of course, have uses, and would not sell if they did not, but their uses are subordinate to their exchange value. Whatever vital functions they serve, they would rapidly be withdrawn from the market if they did not make a profit, which would not be the case in a socialist economy. As Marx points out, the capitalist manufacturer is perfectly indifferent to the nature of what he produces as long as it augments his capital. This is not true of Botticelli or Elizabeth Bishop. It is, however, true of a lot of popular fiction, which is often more sensuously graphic than, say, An Essay on Man but as a generator of exchange value is actually a lot more abstract.

Use value, then, is a necessary mediation between Benthamite utility on the one hand and Romantic or modernist autotelism on the other. It does not regard use as such as degrading or manipulative, simply a certain modality of it. To smell a rose, sip a glass of Chablis, or listen to a sonata would be in Marx’s view a matter of use value, though none of these activities is in the least instrumental. Like most of the finest human pursuits, they do not get you anywhere. The notion of use must be disentangled from the idea of fitting means to ends to achieve a goal independent of the means themselves. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that, as calling the emergency services might indicate, but it is not the only way to conceive of use. The work of art is a case in point. Such works represent a form of practice, as symbolic (and in some cases discursive) strategies which seek to accomplish certain goals. Like virtue for Aristotle, however, they are praxis-type practices, bearing their goods and ends within themselves. Their goals are not external to them, as the aims of a piece of propaganda are. They are more like playing tennis
than catching a train. If they breed effects in their recipients, it is by virtue of this strangely self-referential activity.

Marx’s goal is leisure, not labor. He believed that there were ways of deploying the fabulous wealth accumulated by capitalism which might release as many men and women as far as possible from degrading forms of toil. This, then, would mean using those resources in the name of a certain creative uselessness. Marx was scandalized by the fact that in the midst of the greatest affluence in human history, capitalism by its very nature compels individuals to work harder than our Neolithic ancestors ever did. No doubt he would have been particularly astonished, as many contemporary Europeans are, by how punitively hard Americans work, and how absurdly early some of them rise in order to do so. Marx of course believed that material production would continue under socialism. Yet since this kind of labor would be for use and not profit, it could combine its practical value with being an end in itself. In serving society, it would also act as a form of self-realization for its own sake. What Marx objects to in Romanticism, then, is not the idea of autotelism as such, but the assumption that this is necessarily distinct from the concept of use.

The same, one might claim, applies to human beings. A great deal in Marx’s thought is by no means original, and some of what is original is fairly problematic. He did, however, make one philosophical move which he himself was aware was strikingly innovative, which was to begin from men and women as practical agents, rather than as contemplators of their world or passive recipients of its sensory vibrations. It follows from this that to treat individuals as ends in themselves—to see them for what they are—is to treat them as practical beings; and this in turn means to treat them as useful. In this sense, too, the distinction between practicality and autotelism can be dismantled. To disregard human practice in order to examine what human beings are really like would be rather like killing a patient in order to investigate more closely the circulation of his blood.

With the concept of use value in mind, it is surely clear that we can speak of using literary works without assuming that this involves extracting sententious moral tags from them, finding convenient role models in their characters, deploying them as Tea Party propaganda, or using them as a kind of ready-to-hand therapy for one’s marital problems. From Marx’s viewpoint, none of these functions would constitute a genuine use of the literary object, precisely because they are likely to abstract from its sensory form and presence, and thus do not really count as a use of the thing in its own right. Much the same can be said of so-called wild interpretation, of the kind which takes the words “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” to mean “Never turn your back on a psychopathic
dormouse.” The problem is how such an interpretation could logically count as unpacking the meaning of this particular line, as opposed to using it as a springboard for one’s own inventions. How is it a matter of use value, any more than drinking to get drunk is? Bertolt Brecht speaks somewhere of the need to “get something out of” a literary work, and the expression, though calculatedly crude, is surprisingly apposite. We use works by getting something out of them. But this something is not distinct from the performance of the work itself, and it must be in some sense inspired by the text itself if the claim that our interpretation is an interpretation of it is to hold water.

Imagine a novel which provides us with a recipe for making a venison pie. One could use the recipe to bake the pie, but this would not be engaging with the use value of the work. It would mean deliberately not attending to a vital property of the recipe, namely that it is fictional. It is not fictional in the sense of being false or misleading, but in the sense that it is not offered as factual information in its own right, any more a novelist transports his or her hero from Stockholm to Trieste in order to give the reader a geography lesson. To call the recipe fictional is to describe its function in relation to the text as a whole—to claim that it exists as one feature of a more general rhetoric, and is to be assessed on these terms rather than in isolation. We can certainly make use of the recipe, but we do so by “getting something out of” the fiction to which it contributes, not by dashing off to the kitchen.

Let us return finally to that copy of Anna Karenina used as a door stopper. Of course it would always be possible to say “That’s a book I’m using as a door stopper.” But for how long would we go on saying this? If the volume was never picked up and read but remained propping open the door, it is likely that over time it would exchange the name of book for the name of door stopper. Which is to say that use tends to end up as usage. It is no longer imposed by the arbitrary individual will, but nor is it necessarily a question of some divinely appointed function. Instead, it is a matter of customary collective practice. In the end, individual uses tend to sediment into what we know as tradition. If we cannot just decide to interpret Othello as being about the Irish potato famine, it is partly because of usage, which is to say of the accumulated interpretations of others. God might be able to legislate his own meanings into existence because there is only one of him, but we are not so fortunate. Without common usage, we would not even be able to identify a literary work, let alone interpret it. Usage means that I cannot use something simply as I please. There can be no private enterprise when it comes to meaning. But this does not mean that we do not continually bring something rich and strange into the world that was not present before.

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