

**Eva Comas**

# A museum piece

## *The role reserved for the Humanities in the Knowledge Society*

I seek, in the reading of books, only to please myself by an honest diversion; or, if I study, 'tis for no other science than what treats of the knowledge of myself, and instructs me how to die and how to live well.<sup>1</sup>

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, *Essays* (chapter x, *Of Books*)

**In selling the properties of an illegitimate son of the Duke of Alba, King Phillip II of Spain acquired one of the most enigmatic pictures ever painted. It now hangs in the Prado Museum and was painted around 1510 by Hieronymus van Aeken (also known as Hieronymus Bosch). The painting in question is actually a triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, comprising three panels each with its own theme. The work is a conundrum that has mystified generations of art scholars from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present.**

■ <sup>1</sup> Translator's note: Here I unashamedly offer Charles Cotton's superb translation rather than my own (*Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, Translated by Charles Cotton, edited by William Carew Hazlitt, 1877).





In the Darkness II (En la foscor II), Jaime Plensa (2008)  
Mixed media and collage on paper, 110 x 100 cm



**The cavorting nudes and animals** that Bosch painted in the triptych left the experts speechless and with no option but to take the enigma seriously and put the Flemish artist's masterpiece in a museum display case. Ironically, this pomp and reverence contrasts starkly with Bosch's wild fantasies and gift for poking fun at human foibles and weaknesses. Here, Bosch teases the beholder just as Cervantes teased readers with his intricate word play or Shakespeare his audience with Hamlet's cynical, searing criticism of Court life. Bosch, Cervantes and Shakespeare want to take us in. Their appeal lies in the ambiguity they create and the gratuitous diversion it gives rise to.

In all three cases the works are highly original and hence cannot be pigeonholed in cultural movements of the time or explained away as the fruit of social and historical forces. According to Harold Bloom, this genius is what confers on Shakespeare's, Cervantes' and Bosch's works an aesthetic value that will ensure the survival of Western culture.

Studies on works of art such as *The Garden of Earthly Delights* or works of literature such as *Don Quixote* and *Hamlet* currently come under the head of the Humanities. Various cultural institutions in Spain insistently use the term "Humanities" as a badge of quality. Such clamorous defence of the humanities is an unmistakable sign that they are under threat. This article warns that contemporary society tends to see the humanities as mere ornament and as somehow lying outside the realm of "true knowledge".

Western Civilisation represents the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of two and a half millennia. It is thus little short of astounding that political institutions have recently chosen to dub our brave new age as "The Knowledge Society". It is as if the preceding twenty-five centuries counted for naught. That some cultural organisations have jumped on this bandwagon is even more disturbing —they at least might be expected to know better. The Knowledge Society is a slippery term but it always seems to stress the future and be seen in terms of some great challenge. By contrast, "The Humanities" takes on connotations of the classics and of bringing tradition up to date. That is because the two mask models of knowledge that are not only different but are often at odds with each other. The Knowledge Society is symbolised by quantified, classified information, for which the computer is a good metaphor. The Humanities, on the other hand, are based on relating knowledge and may thus be likened to the model underpinning an encyclopaedia or a library.

The reason for the replacement of the Humanities model by the Knowledge Society one can be found in technological change, which wreaks havoc on epistemology and language. This is so because knowledge is shaped by how it is created, disseminated and kept. For example, the introduction of alphabet-based writing in Ancient Greece led to swift changes in the concept of knowledge. Hitherto, the performance of tragedies and the recital of epic poems dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century were considered highly educational. Yet they came to be thought of as mere entertainment once knowledge began to take new forms. The change wrought in Hellenic society helps us understand the approaching epistemological revolution in our own age. This revolution is a technological one and has largely come about through the Internet.

This article does not seek to deny the great possibilities opened up by technology but rather to ask whether the brave new world of the Knowledge Society contemplates the ambiguities and diversions contained in the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and

Bosch —in a word, by the Humanities. Or are we to believe that knowledge is confined to the quantifiable, provable and “useful”?

The unwillingness of the apostles of the Knowledge Society to consider the Humanities valid and useful reveals the same kind of scorn Plato poured on the epic and tragic poets of Ancient Greece.

Plato not only reviled their morals, he also considered their works imparted no useful knowledge to the *polis* because they were not framed in the language of truth: “measure, name and weight”. Fortunately, history proved Plato wrong, as the works of Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Aristotle and Sophocles show. Though Plato considered their works to be misleading and trivial, they are of key importance. They not only define our culture but also constitute some of the most amusing, passionate and enigmatic tales ever told.

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## THE MODEL OF KNOWLEDGE EMBODIED IN "THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY"

The model proposed by the Knowledge Society is one based on quantifiable, classifiable information that is highly specialised in character and of direct use in changing the world. As we noted earlier, a computer is a good metaphor for this kind of knowledge and to appreciate this, one only has to read *The Universe in a Nutshell*, the latest work by Stephen Hawking. In the last chapter of the book, the world-famous British cosmologist peers into the future of mankind over the next few centuries. One of his predictions is that computers will reach the same complexity as the human brain within twenty years. According to Hawking, Man will have to compete with electronic systems and be forced to enhance his physical and mental abilities if he is to come to grips with an ever more complex world and to face new challenges such as space travel. Man will also have to increase his complexity if biological systems are to stay ahead of electronic ones<sup>2</sup>.

Hawking puts forward various way in which Man’s intellect might be enhanced. One suggestion is to have the foetus grow outside the uterus so that the brain’s early development would not be constrained by the width of the birth canal (which sets a practical limit on the unborn child’s skull size). Another possibility would be to increase brain function through neuronal implants. According to Hawking, “Neuronal implants

■ <sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: This is my back translation from S. HAWKING *L’univers en una closca de nou*. Columna, Barcelona, 2002, p.165 (Catalan translation of *The Universe in a Nutshell*). By a rich irony, the vagaries of the Internet and copyright make it easier for one to track down the classics than to unearth the scribbles of the prophets of

“The Knowledge Society”. For good or ill, it seems such recent works lie beyond the “event horizon” of “The Knowledge Society” —anyone wishing to read them has no alternative but to do so in a format that dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and Johannes Gutenberg.



offer greater memory capacity and complete information packets, for example an entire language. Thus the contents of this book could be learnt in a matter of minutes". Although these forecasts seem like stabs in the dark, they shed light on the model of knowledge adopted by one of the greatest scientists of our age. It is obvious that the model is inspired by the potential of computers and their lightning speed. It is well known that a computer can "learn a language" or the "contents of a book" in a matter of minutes. However, Hawking conveniently forgets to say what he understands by "the contents of a book" because having *The Odyssey* on a brain chip is a far cry from assimilating the work through reading Homer's epic poem aloud for hours on end. One of the reasons for reading *The Odyssey* is the possibility of sharing Ulysses' feelings and experiences during his epic voyage. The reader may weep with him in the Phæacian court as the horrors of The Trojan War are recounted, recoil with him in horror as the Cyclops slaughters his companions, and be awe-struck as he is hidden by Athene's magic arts. Yet what boots it to read *The Odyssey* in a flash if its meaning is lost? Slipping a chip containing the masterpiece into someone's skull for "neural processing" ignores the Ricoeur school of hermeneutic theory, which argues that a text is uniquely interpreted in the light of a reader's knowledge, experience and values.

Another of the premises of The Knowledge Society is that information is different from knowledge because it has become a commodity. Manuel Castells reveals this line of thought when he writes: "The Information Society is characterised by a form of social organisation in which the creation, processing and transmission of information has become one of the wellsprings of productivity and power in the new technological context"<sup>3</sup>.

Paraphrasing Castells, The Information Society or Knowledge Society differs from previous societies because whereas technology was hitherto used to produce and distribute products, it is now used to produce and distribute information. This Sociology professor argues that in the new model of society, "These technologies act on information in general, not only on information concerning technology, which was the case in previous technology revolutions". We are therefore dealing with a society in which information technology feeds back into social and technological change.

■ <sup>3</sup> CASTELLS M., *La era de la información. Economía, sociedad i cultura*, Alianza, Madrid, 1997, p. 47.



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The Knowledge Society not only conceives of information as a product, it also sees information as a way of transforming the real world. In this respect, one might say the model of a *Knowledge Society* is based on the scientific-technical paradigm of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe's scientific revolution. According to the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, back then scientists began to specialise so that science could advance. However, the author of *La rebelión de las masas* argued that this scientific specialisation had flung European civilisation back to the Dark Ages. Gasset stated: "Today's man of science is the prototype of mass-man. It is neither coincidence nor the result of individual failings that science turns its followers into mass-

## The possibilities of unlimited progress have earned Science immense prestige

men, in other words, into modern savages"<sup>4</sup>.

Growing specialisation, according to Gasset, inescapably led to the mechanisation and dismembering of knowledge. Gasset, writing in the nineteen thirties, argued that thought should be all of a piece, even if this meant a certain loss of precision: "When knowledge was more elemental and natural, it was more likely to be felt and assimilated by the common man,

who could revel in it and give it new force. This explains the monstrous paradox of the last few decades in which a giant cultural step forward has spawned a new kind of man, who is much more barbarous than his forebears of centuries past"<sup>5</sup>.

However, the increasing compartmentalisation of Science is not the only force shaping the model of scientific and technical knowledge. While the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries marked a flowering of scientific knowledge, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was one of invention. Alfred North said that the idea of invention itself was actually the 19<sup>th</sup> century's greatest invention. The union of scientific and technical knowledge thus gave birth to a new paradigm of knowledge. Ortega noted that there was not always a link between technology and science: "Our Stone Age forefathers who wrought flint axes knew nothing of Science but that did not stop them from developing their own technology". This was in stark contrast with our age, in which technology is the fruit of Science: "Only the technology of modern Europe is rooted in Science and it is this that holds out the prospect of endless progress"<sup>6</sup>.

The possibilities of unlimited progress have earned Science immense prestige. While no one would deny that Science has showered Mankind with great benefits, many have misunderstood it as a magic wand that can cast any spell that takes their fancy. That is why an American author, Neil Postman, called the application of the scientific method to human behaviour an aberration. Postman strongly criticises Daniel Goleman, author of the best-seller *Emotional Intelligence* (sic). Goleman, says Postman, really believes that the application of the principles of the physical and biological sciences to human behaviour would yield experimental results, theories and deep understanding of the human condition and even universal laws on the subject<sup>7</sup>.

■ <sup>4</sup> ORTEGA Y GASSET, J., *La rebelión de las masas*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> ORTEGA Y GASSET, J., "Lecciones de metafísica", in *Obras completas*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> ORTEGA Y GASSET, J., (1993).

<sup>7</sup> POSTMAN, N., *Technopoli*, Llibres de l'Index, Barcelona, 1994 (back translation).

## THE HUMANITIES' MODEL OF KNOWLEDGE

The Humanities' model of knowledge is based on artistic creation and differs from the scientific-technological model. The latter looks to the future and in so doing, consigns past breakthroughs to the dustbin of history. The Humanities, by contrast, fix their gaze on the past. Cultural tradition is the yardstick of humanistic knowledge, without which it would be impossible to measure or achieve originality. As Harold Bloom put it in his work *The Western Canon*, influences need to be ever stronger if we are to foster originality within the rich framework of the Western literary tradition. This tradition is not a mere legacy but rather the result of endless conflict between the genius of the past and the ambition of the present. The prize is literary survival<sup>8</sup>.

The preceding works of the humanist tradition act as models and inspire new creators—that is why great writers both embrace the literary tradition and build upon it. Figuratively speaking, Thomas Mann converses with Socrates and Phaedrus in *Death in Venice*, William Shakespeare converses with the authors of the Latin tragedies, the Romantic poets with the troubadours, Larra is read by Cernuda, who in turn is read by Gil de Biedma. That is why Italo Calvino defines the works of these creators as classics, arguing that “The classics are books bearing the fingerprints of those who read them before us”<sup>9</sup>.

George Steiner in one of his latest works—*Grammars of Creation*—defines humanistic knowledge by contrasting it with scientific knowledge. Steiner considers artistic works as analogous to divine creation, the only difference being that God started from scratch. Man has no choice but to work his creations from something that already exists. Even so, it is thus that Man tries to reveal every facet of his nature even though he never quite manages to pull it off. “One might say that the composition and finish of works of art never express the absolute truth, harmony or perfection sought by those who created them. Even the greatest masterpieces can only hint at something greater”<sup>10</sup>. According to Steiner, unlike Science, Art brings together both what is present and what is absent. According to Steiner, this is so because Art brings together both what is present and what is absent whereas Science excludes everything that is not axiomatic. Art, on the other hand, lies in the twilight zone between what exists and what might have been. This unfinished quality explains why Art is capable of “dignifying the useless”, is capricious and indulges in fun for its own sake. Science and invention differ from art in this respect. For Steiner, “invention is purposeful and useful, noble and dynamic”.

The avatars of Science and Art trace different paths through time. Science and the inventions that stem from it take straight paths from an old to a new theory and the theories themselves are established by proofs or refutations. Along the path, each step can only be taken if the one before it has already been trodden—new truths supersede the old ones. By contrast, Art's path through history rules out this notion of progress—a work of art neither proves nor refutes its predecessor. Indeed, the relationship between the two is ambiguous and may imply imitation, rejection, variation,

■ <sup>8</sup> BLOOM, H., *El c anon occidental*, Columna, Barcelona, 1995 (back translation).

<sup>9</sup> CALVINO, I., *Por qu  leer los cl asicos*, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> STEINER, G., *Gram ticas de la creaci n*, Siruela, Madrid, 2001 (back translation).



parody, direct or indirect citation. As Steiner put it, truths are the only thing that age. Thus the relationships of Art and of Science to history and progress differ greatly and this arises from the different ways in which each field treats time. While Science follows a Platonic clock which mathematically strikes the same time for everyone, Art's clock is an anarchic one in which emotions mark the hour. Thus each artist creates his own time in striving towards something of timeless value. As Steiner says, the root of art lies in the artist's desire to break the laws of time and to create something that transcends his life. Steiner argues that this makes artistic creation more important for Man than Science.

### THE SEED OF WESTERN EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONFRONTATION

The current attempt to sideline past knowledge in embracing new knowledge has historical precedents. As we noted earlier, in the *Book 10 of The Republic*, Plato proposes removing poems for teaching purposes from the *polis*, in other words, censorship. However, these passages also reveal an epistemological clash. Plato's ranges his philosophical discourse based on "name, weight and measure" against the mythic narrative of Homer and Hesiod. Plato considers reason should occupy the sphere of human experience —something that today would be pigeonholed under "storytelling". His approach, which sets logical discourse against myth, was to return with a vengeance in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the Enlightenment, it was seriously proposed that cold reason be applied to every aspect of human experience and that superstition, myths and religious beliefs be abolished. The current clash between the model of knowledge based on scientific rationalism and one based on Art is thus nothing new.

Thinkers proclaim and university students learn that the rationalist ambitions of the Enlightenment have failed us. Yet all academic studies nowadays are sifted using Plato's rigorously rationalist "name, weight and measure" approach no matter what field they concern. Harold Bloom and George Steiner compelling denunciation of the over-scientific approach being adopted in the Humanities has had little effect. The reason for the current crisis, according to Ferran Sáez Mateu, is the way in which myth has been rationalised and reason mythicised: "The conceptual threshold between *The Illiad* and Plato's *Dialogues* does not lie in the fact that the former was 'irrational' and the latter 'rational' but rather that the place occupied by the rational and irrational is radically different in the two

works. In our striving to preserve the foundational story in Western Culture (the step from myth to *logos*), we have tended to forget that establishing the boundaries of rationality depends on applying reason to fields where it can yield useful results"<sup>11</sup>. However, if one reads *Book 10 of The Republic* carefully, one will find the germ of our modern epistemological disarray, namely the desire to sweep away mythic and narrative knowledge to allow logic-based knowledge to seep into

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every nook and cranny of human existence.

Interestingly, Erik A. Havelock<sup>12</sup> argues that the reason for the clash between argumentative, scientific discourse and narrative discourse in Plato's work is a technological one. There was

a profound change in communication technology in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century that was spearheaded by Hellenic civilisation. The Greeks perfected a new writing system. Hitherto, their alphabet-based system had not gone beyond syllabic representation. The new writing system was a giant leap forward because it also rendered pure consonants. The centuries between Homer and Aristotle saw the gradual extension of the writing system and, although literacy was far from universal, Ancient Greece became the first alphabet-based civilisation.

The invention had more implications for knowledge than one might think. Havelock argues the way we use our senses and think are closely linked. The step from the oral tradition (where hearing and voice play the leading roles) to writing (where sight is of paramount importance) changed the relationship between the senses and hence the nature of consciousness itself. This in turn led to a crisis in knowledge of the real world.

In the era preceding the introduction of writing, Greek institutions from the family to government, legitimised themselves through the spoken word. This language was a special one that aimed to maintain stability and perpetuate customs, morals, practical knowledge and legends. The spoken language was highly ritualised and had to be memorised in the cadences found in epic and tragic poetry.

Havelock notes that poetry performed two roles in Ancient Greece. One was ceremonial, linked to feasts and holy days, the other was as the sole repository of the knowledge of Hellenic civilisation. Homer's and Hesiod's epics not only set out rules of behaviour but also contained lessons on things such as how to build a ship. For Havelock, the poets not only conserved the past and chronicled their times, they also epitomised the oral tradition.

In epic and tragic poetry, tradition is not taught through ideas and concepts but rather through learning works by heart and scene-setting. The language used was that of narrative discourse, replete with verbs of action, of augury, of great deeds, of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The words employed dealt with tangible things, not abstract ideas. Havelock argues that the oral tradition did not set out the nature of things but rather who did what to whom<sup>13</sup>.

Havelock says that the advent of writing was important in this context, producing an epistemological sea change. Writing meant that knowledge did not need to be placed in a setting so that it could be memorised. As a result, the language characterising narrative discourse began to give way to a different kind of language altogether, with copular verbs, predicates, subordinate clauses. This in turn gave rise to logic, given that one could

## For Plato, the truth became forever wedded with the written word and divorced from the senses

■ <sup>11</sup> HAVELOCK, E., *Prefacio a Platón*, Visor, Madrid, 1994 (back translation).

<sup>12</sup> HAVELOCK, E., *La musa aprende a escribir*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1996 (back translation).

<sup>13</sup> POSTMAN, N., *Divertim-nos fins a morir*, Llibres de l'Index, Barcelona, 1990, p. 33 (back translation).



reflect upon written language. Alphabetic writing meant the discourse could be separated from the speaker and one could grasp concepts such as *thought-object*. According to Havelock, writing brought a revolution because the oral tradition in Greece could never have given rise to the notion of thought-object.

Although Plato did not know it, he represented Greece's new written culture. Plato founded a new epistemology and rejected the old means of relating Man and the world and which made no distinction between subject and object. In memorising and listening to epic poems, the Ancient Greeks could not help identifying with and acting like their protagonists. Plato, by contrast, demanded one distance what was said from who said it, and object from knowledge.

## This article exhorts humanistic knowledge as a living thing fostering dialogue

Plato's writing undoubtedly changed the

meaning of "truth" and "reality". In the oral tradition that gave rise to the Homeric poems, truth was linked to the sensuality of the spoken word. In tragic plays, the truth was linked to the senses of sight and smell, allowing onlookers to understand the characters' actions. However, when these words were written down and sundered from the sights and smells of live performance, it was harder to grasp their true meaning. For Plato, the truth became forever wedded with the written word and divorced from the senses.

"The concept of truth", says Neil Postman "is intimately linked to prejudices concerning forms of expression. The truth is never naked. It has to be properly attired if it is to be accepted"<sup>14</sup> Plato believes he has stripped away the robes of poetical works to reveal the unadorned ideas beneath. Yet Plato does realise that he merely clads them in a new robe — "truth" — spun from name, measure and weight.

Plato hit the mark when he saw the robe worn by Homeric "truth" (which was shaped by narrative discourse, the oral tradition, and identification with the characters) as the key to the spectator's understanding. However, he was wrong on two scores: 1) in considering narrative discourse as a mere shell devoid of truth; 2) in believing that his concept of truth walked stark naked. Plato's truth was dressed in the robes of argument and philosophy that were only to be had in a civilisation that had mastered writing.

### AGAINST MUSEISTIC KNOWLEDGE

The tools with which Men communicate are of key importance in creating knowledge. When there is a major shift in technology there are always those who are keen to throw the baby out with the bathwater and have us believe that all past knowledge is valueless. This goes for Plato in the ancient world and for the modern apostles of the *Knowledge Society*. In our hyper-sensitive Western Culture, the prophets of the *Information Society*

■ <sup>14</sup> SÁEZ MATEU, F. *Dislocaciones*, Ediciones 314, Valencia, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> BLOOM, H., *Com llegir i per què*, Barcelona: Empúries, 2000, p. 15 (back translation).

<sup>16</sup> OLIVIA, S., *Introducció a Shakespeare*, Barcelona: Empúries, 2000, p. 147.

do not openly repudiate the classics but rather treat them as if they were museum pieces to be gawped at but of no relevance to the present. For them, the classics might just as well be so many stuffed Dodos in a display case.

This article exhorts humanistic knowledge as a living thing fostering dialogue. Shakespeare, Cervantes and Hieronymus Bosch are geniuses who playfully entertain and hoodwink us at every turn. That is why Michel de Montaigne invites us to read the classics because they are the most entertaining works ever written. Given that the media are awash with mediocrity and vulgarity, Harold Bloom provides another compelling reason to drink at the spring of humanistic knowledge: "Maybe there is no one way of reading well but read we must. "We have a vast amount of information at our disposal but where shall we find wisdom?"<sup>15</sup>.

At the end of the day, the humanities shall never be lost for, as Salvador Oliva says in his book *Introducció a Shakespeare, Man needs Art*: "If pure reason could wholly embody and explain the great literary works of history, they would have vanished long ago. They exist precisely because much of what they contain escapes rational explanation"<sup>16</sup> ||

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