

Through the prism of human collectivity

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WILLIAM Wordsworth tells us that it is only in retrospect that one can sort out what has been most significant, most telling, in our experience. In his epic poem *The Prelude* he writes, "There are in our existence spots of time,/ Which with distinct pre-eminence retain/ A renovating virtue," and says that it is to these "spots of time" that we return, again and again, for emotional nourishment, for a sense of what the world is and who we ourselves are within that world.

Recently, I had business which took me to New York City for a week. I attended an academic seminar which was far livelier and more engaged than most intellectual affairs. I found the time to visit two of the world's great museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art. On the weekend I saw a Broadway show.

One of the great pleasures of modern life is walking in and through large cities. When I taught for five months at Calcutta University, for instance, I often spent an hour, or two, or three, walking through the streets of Kolkata, walking and watching. More than those who only ride in cars or taxis might expect, a city lives on its streets. A great cross-section of people pass by. One has glimpses of family life, of what is for sale and what people buy, of the great diversity of class

was receiving instruction in how to iron properly. The man in the window was of early middle age, seemingly of Central American background. He was totally focused on his work.

So that was it, my "spot of time," my peak experience. A moment — 15 minutes, actually — of observing menial work in the modern city. Only the work was not menial, even though its status, and no doubt the ironer's pay, were low. The man I watched took great care with what he did, and seemed in a quiet and unobtrusive way to be proud that he ironed shirts well. Would a customer have noticed if he ironed more quickly, and the shirt were not as perfect as he strove to make it? I doubt it. But the man who ironed worked to a different standard. If his labour was worth doing, it was worth doing well.

He seemed to understand what Wallace Stevens, the

the bedrock on which all human society and culture rests. Wallace Stevens wrote poems; my Central American acquaintance irons. Work, prideful work, in the world.

When he reached 50, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda decided he should write not just for the literary world, but for his neighbours. The Orissan poet Jayanta Mayapatra made a similar decision a number of years ago when he decided to write in Oriya, so his neighbours could read and understand what he wrote.

In Neruda's case, he turned from writing poems of love — he was one of the greatest love poets of the just-concluded century — and Latin American epics, to writing odes about the simple objects that surround us in daily life: tomatoes, lemons, bicycles, socks.

The first of these new odes was *The Invisible Man*. In it, Neruda begins by telling us how he admires the old poets, those who write of how they love, how they feel when the walk through the streets — but that on the streets those poets write about, no one else exists. All people other than the poet and his lover are invisible.

Neruda himself walks through streets populated by people — "everyone passes by, and everyone/ tells me something,/ look at all the things they do!/ They cut wood, string electric lines,/ bake bread late into the night,/ our daily bread,/ with an iron pick/ they pierce the entrails/ of the earth" — but like each of us he is too busy to celebrate these people all around him who do their work and live their lives. "As I

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and caste and dress and gesture that comprise the populace of a contemporary urban setting. There are continuities with the past to be seen, and as well auguries of the various futures struggling to be born.

So, in New York, with the long summer days, I had wonderful opportunities to walk through that city's streets, sometimes staying up till past midnight as I moved from one downtown district to another. I had a Wordsworthian "spot of time" in New York, and it was not in a museum or a fine restaurant. It occurred as I wandered the streets of upper Manhattan — walking leisurely towards a museum with no particular timetable in mind.

As I walked, I passed a dry cleaner's shop. At its front, immediately behind a large plate glass window, was a man ironing a shirt. I stopped and watched. (I should mention that I like ironing my own shirts. In America, ironed shirts are an expensive luxury unless one does it oneself; and I have found that the repetitive motions of ironing, and the concentration required to assure that one iron wrinkles out and not in, is a restful activity. For me.) He ironed, and I watched. And watched. He ironed one shirt, then a second. There was a defined progression for each shirt. First, he sprayed the shirt lightly with water to dampen it. Then, as he ironed each successive portion of the shirt he sprayed on a light dose of starch to make the fabric stiffer. He proceeded to iron the collar, then carefully laid out each sleeve and ironed them, one at a time. Then he starched and ironed one half of the shirt, placed flat on his white-cotton clad ironing table. When he was done, he lightly touched the iron to the middle of the collar at the back of the neck — just a small crease so it would fold properly. He hung the shirt on a hanger, and proceeded to the next.

I, an amateur, iron quickly. He, a professional, did not. He took care, making certain that each sweep of the iron made a flat expanse of brilliant white fabric.

As I watched him, I realized I

American modernist poet, meant when he began his great lyric *Of Modern Poetry* with the fragment, "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice." For the man in the window, ironing, doing his work well, was the lynchpin on which the entire world depended. Ironing a shirt — to most observers scarcely a world-shattering event — was, nonetheless, the entire universe writ small, a synecdoche, a part standing for the whole, of the heroic stature of human existence.

Is that too strong a statement, a poeticizing of an ordinary urban sight? (I have seen men ironing in the streets of Kolkata, only without the protection of that glass window I was too self-conscious to stop and observe closely. I have seen people ironing in Paris, and in the back room of laundries in my own hometown.) The Stevens' poem about modern poetry I cited above ends, "It must/ Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may/ Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/ Combing. The poem of the act of the mind." It could as well have added "a man ironing". Stevens understood that in the gestures of modern life we create a place for ourselves in the world in which we live and thus we find ourselves.

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The man ironing with such self-contained pride in his work makes a gesture that is appropriate for all of us. It is of course not enough, just by itself: we all have political roles to play, for society is ours and not the sole possession of a ruling class or small group of political professionals. But doing our work with attentiveness, doing it well, taking pride in whatever work we do in the human community, is

walk by, things/ ask me to sing them, but I haven't time," he laments. But then he realizes — Neruda would have no trouble, no trouble at all, understanding why I was so impressed with the man ironing in that New York City window — that he must celebrate them. "I want/ them all to live/ through my life./ to sing through my song/ I am not important/ I have no time/ for my own affairs./ night and day/ I must write down what's happening./ not forgetting anyone."

I quote Neruda because he understands so deeply, so fully, what I saw in the man ironing: each of us has work to do and a life to live, and we are fully alive when we do our work and inhabit our lives, even if our work is ironing.

Neruda's poem is a song to solidarity, "the song of the invisible man/ who sings with all men." I cannot claim as much for myself. It was not solidarity I felt on the street as I watched a man ironing, but a sense of the fullness of work, how an embrace of work can fill our lives. The man I watched was as good at what he did as the finest batsman or actor or political figure, and took pride as least as great as they in doing his work well.

He exemplified for me, also, the pleasure of cities, the exciting sense of sharing, that Neruda so lyrically shapes for us. "When I get up/ the night is gone, the street has awakened before me,/ the poor girls of the neighbourhood/ are on their way to work,/ fishermen are returning/ from the sea,/ miners/ in new shoes/ are going down into the mines/ everything's alive/ everyone's hurrying to and fro,/ and I scarcely have time/ to get into my clothes./ I must run:/ no one must/ pass by without my knowing/ where's he's going,/ what he's doing."

Perhaps what I felt was not just the pride of work, but a sense of solidarity as well. For we are, each of us, joined with one another in this vast enterprise called life, and the work we do — and do well — is what connects us to the human collectivity.

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