

Why Modernize the Humanities?

We must find again what it means to discover, to aspire.

ART and literature, theology, and science are the three symbol systems by which man has imaginatively created his many different cultural worlds and, in a few cultures, has continued his search for new meanings, symbols and his enduring goal values. With the invention of new concepts and assumptions about nature and human nature, the development of new insights and sensibilities and the delineation of new areas for commitment and devotion, the prevailing climate of opinion has been altered; man has enlarged his awareness and learned to perceive the world and himself in new ways.

In our western European culture and subcultures, we can trace a succession of these changing climates of opinion, each of which has made an enduring contribution to western ways of living, especially when, as in the Renaissance period, earlier and almost forgotten manuscripts, arts, philosophy and mathematics were rediscovered.

Life Tasks

From his earliest beginnings, man has been confronted with a number of persistent life tasks, problems which can never be finally solved but must be faced

anew in each generation as long as he exists as man. Each successive age in our western culture has attempted to reformulate these persistent problems and to offer answers in terms of its contemporary orientation, which a succeeding age has partly, if not wholly, superseded with its own proposals. Thus we have a cumulative record of how western man has viewed the universe and his place therein and has sought a new image of the self for guiding his living, feeling and thinking. These survivals from the past span the whole range of our recorded and recoverable past. They cover a gamut from the earliest and more primitive to the contemporary orientation, but all express man's creative imagination and the operations of his reflective mind focused upon these basic concerns and aspirations.

In the humanities we find what the artists, poets, story tellers, dramatists, historians (continually remaking our past), the scholars and the philosophers have offered on these basic themes, utilizing the concepts and assumptions of their age to provide a world view and a philos-

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ophy of living that has been translated into these various artistic media, especially poetry and religious beliefs, and, more recently, into science. As biology and paleontology provide man with his history as a product of organic evolution, so the humanities provide man with his cultural history, showing how he has tried to humanize his mammalian organism and create a symbolic world for human personalities.

When initially produced the arts and humanities were creative challenges and bold improvisations upon the persistent themes of man's basic concerns. They were the fruits of living experience, of imaginative creation and, above all, of passionate convictions, usually expressed esthetically to evoke feelings and to win acceptance in the face of resistant tradition and often rigid institutions. Later generations found in these a version of their own perplexities and aspirations and also a source of renewed courage and dedication to the enduring goal values of western culture which the more sensitive and creative attempted to restate in terms more congenial to, and congruous with, their own age.

Clearly the humanities and arts are central to the humanization of man. Yet how they should function in formal education has become, as this issue of *Educational Leadership* indicates, a focus for critical discussion and often acute controversy. To say that the scholars have almost ruined the humanities for education may seem outrageous and indefensible. However, the scholarly analyses and dissection of the arts and literature of the past and their conversion into formal subject matter have transformed what was a genuine esthetic experience into a body of systematic knowledge, and a series of intellectual tasks of mastering the fruits of scholarly investigations and

historical interpretations. While officially students may be encouraged to read and to enjoy poetry, drama, the novels and stories of the past, they are impressed with the primary importance of the cognitive, scholarly approach to what they read and they realize that for academic approval they must be concerned, not so much with the meaning and human significance of what they read, but with memorizing actual words and phrases, dates and other minutiae derived from scholarly investigations. Here we see an expression of the educational conviction that every student is a potential recruit to the discipline or profession of the teacher and therefore must be taught and compelled to learn what the scholar has found to be essential to the practice of his discipline. It is as if no one were permitted to ride in an airplane until he has mastered the theory and practice of aerodynamics, nor encouraged to admire and enjoy plants and animals without having to learn their full evolutionary history.

A New Climate

Modernization of humanities is becoming increasingly necessary as we recognize the contemporary emergence of a new climate of opinion generated by new and radically different concepts and assumptions and altered perceptions of the world and of man, as presented in the arts, literature, science and even in religion. We are witnessing the breakdown and disintegration of much of the traditional beliefs and expectations by and for which man has lived for centuries and the development of new awareness and deeper insights, many of which are now almost overwhelming, but will gradually become a part of our esthetic and intellectual orientation. Thus while we can and must emphasize the continuity with

the past we must also recognize the acute breaks with tradition, the actual or apparent discontinuities by which human advance takes place.

Despite the almost overpowering display of confusion and disorder in all our lives which is being portrayed by contemporary poets, dramatists, novelists, painters and sculptors, musicians, dancers, and architects, these creative persons are also carrying on the basic tradition in humanities of seeking new meanings and finding enhanced significance in human living. Where and by whom will our students be introduced to these contemporary productions and learn to recognize that they are carrying on the aspirations of their predecessors while endeavoring to be responsive to the needs and the opportunities of their time as their predecessors served the ages in which they lived?

We should realize that in the future, when historians and scholars look for understanding of what happened in the 20th century, they will seek for light in the arts, poetry, drama and novels of our present today, where the creative imagination of our gifted writers and artists is struggling to resolve their own and the public confusion, seeking new ways of dealing with these disturbing conditions and persistent questions that cannot be resolved by appeal to the past. These future scholars will also carefully examine what was being communicated by radio, TV, phonograph and tape recordings, comics, illustrated magazines, and especially by advertisements, the whole range of so-called mass communications, in and through which we of today are exhibiting both our dismay and our hopeful search for escape from our perplexities. Again we may ask where, when and from whom are students to find some orientation, some ways of under-

standing and evaluating these contemporary communications to which they are continually exposed?

At the risk of being dismissed with scorn by many educators, we may say that the tasks of education today are not primarily to teach "the best that has been known and thought in the past," but to orient students to the present and especially to the future in which, as adults, they will live and actively participate, assuming the various roles and carrying on a variety of activities that are both relevant and necessary in their lives, as their predecessors have done throughout the centuries. If the humanities are to fulfill their responsibilities in contemporary education they must indeed be modernized so that the scholars' nostalgic love for the past does not deprive students of learning about the present as a product of that past and as the matrix of the future. Years ago, Otto Rank, in his *Modern Education*, remarked: "We cling to the past, not because we are in love with the past but because we are fearful of the present"—and, we may add, terrified by the future, so that it is both comforting and reassuring to focus on what has passed.

The modernization of the humanities, as approached in this context, is not a petulant dismissal of the past or a rejection of history and scholarship; rather it is a plea for recognizing that we may pay our debt to the past only by doing for our day what our predecessors did for their time, thus carrying on their aspirations, but being responsive to our contemporary world and the emerging new climate of opinion, just as the significant contributors to our western culture were responsive to their climate of opinion. Equally important, modernizing the humanities may be interpreted as helping students to experience contemporary lit-

erature and the arts and also those of the past as esthetic experiences, not treated as so much subject matter to be memorized for examinations dealing primarily with the cognitive, historical aspects of what they have read and seen. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that the humanities have had a large snob appeal, insofar as it has been a mark of superior social status to recognize literary allusions and to be able to quote the classics, and thereby exhibit one's superiority to the untutored mass.

Man as Observer

But if education is to be genuinely concerned with the human personalities of its students, it should also provide a wide range of nonverbal education so that students will develop the awareness, the sensibilities, and the capacity for enjoying the actual world around them and not be limited to intellectual and symbolic communications alone. We are all exposed to a variety of sensory overloads, especially of symbolic and verbalized messages, and at the same time, we suffer from sensory deprivations, cut off from the many sensory cues for maintaining our dynamic stability and normal functioning as personalities.

With the rise of modern science we are suddenly realizing how frequently the teachers of the humanities have lacked, not only a concern for but even an awareness of the role and functions of science. Usually they have thought of science in terms of "facts" derived from empirical investigations and of rigid laws and far-reaching, but unhuman, generalizations. Apparently such teachers do not realize that contemporary science is considered, by at least the advanced scientists, as essentially a symbol system which, along with mathematics, enables man to com-

municate with the universe and to relate himself cognitively to events. Contemporary science has abandoned the 19th century conception of a wholly mechanistic world, with rigid boundaries, operating with unflinching cause and effect and subject to immense forces.

Rather, the intent of science today is to develop a system of postulates and assumptions with which to observe and perceive and to interpret events, recognizing that the scientist-observer is in the picture and that whatever he observes and interprets is patterned by his basic conceptions, his criteria of creditability, and the use of the symbols he employs for communicating with others and for reflective thinking. Indeed, it is not too much to say that we are seeing the emergence of a scientific humanism which is restoring man as the observer and the interpreter of observations, to the center of the universe as it is now scientifically conceived. To perpetuate the split between *Two Cultures*, as described by C. P. Snow, is not only an anachronism but an imposition of wholly misleading viewpoints upon young and trusting students.

For almost two hundred years we have lived upon the fruits of the Great Enlightenment of the 18th century from which we have derived the guiding models for educating our children, organizing and operating our national government, carrying on our economic, financial and commercial activities, and trying to order and manage our social living. These 18th century models were essentially Newtonian and have now become not only obsolete, but frustrating and self defeating. Thus the great task we face is to do for today in terms of contemporary science what was done by Locke, Hume, Adam Smith, Bentham, and the French philosophers, who used Newtonian science

to formulate the then new models and theories for the guidance of human living. Moreover, the poets in the 18th and 19th centuries reflected Newtonian science, the conception of natural law, and the belief in the rationality of the human mind. The modernization of the humanities, therefore, may find a highly appropriate and entirely relevant pattern in what was done in the 18th century, but must now be undertaken again in terms of modern science and the problems of the 20th century world.

Another task for a modernized humanities program is to reduce, if not eliminate, the nationalistic, often chauvinistic, emphasis and to orient students to an understanding of the many different cultures around the world, each with its symbol system and language and its often unique design for living. If we are to avoid the imposition of a monolithic world state, we should prepare our students to live in a world community as an "orchestration of cultural diversities," each of which is to be recognized and its integrity respected and maintained as an expression of the creative imagination of the human race. For this, of course, the teaching of foreign languages must be rescued from their customary pedantic presentation and humanized as modes of communication.

Perhaps we can speak of modernizing the humanities as primarily an attempt to shift the emphasis in teaching from factual information to a communication of the meanings and significances of materials being presented and especially to help the student to "live at the height of his times," as Ortega y Gasset has expressed it, capable of participating in this most exciting of all times in which every individual has both the privilege and the opportunity actively to participate.

Likewise, modernizing humanities may

be approached through greater recognition of individual cognitive styles or "learning by discovery," that is, encouraging each student to gain understanding by his own idiosyncratic recognition, interpretation and acceptance of the materials being presented, as contrasted with learning a fixed body of facts and demonstrating their mastery on examinations. This in no way denies the importance or excludes the possibility of training future scholars who must learn these facts and historical material and be prepared, so to speak, to "dehumanize" the arts and literature as a biologist must be prepared to dissect the living organisms he studies.

Finally we may say that the humanization of knowledge is essentially a process of communicating analogically the basic concepts and assumptions, the patterns of perception, and of presenting a variety of models for direct experience, as far as possible, whereby a student learns to orient himself and to summate, coordinate, integrate or orchestrate what he is learning. If education is to be more than the training of future scholars and scientists and professional workers, we must thus humanize what we teach so that, as personalities, students will be helped to learn to live in our contemporary world, neither wholly ignorant of the contemporary world nor completely immersed in the past.

The "humanities idea" today may be as fruitful as was the earlier humanist movement that brought into European education the larger concern for human living and achievement in this world and gave rise to the succeeding period of the Renaissance. Or the humanist idea may generate a new Enlightenment and thus carry on the humanistic ideal of man's unending quest for meaning and for fulfillment of his ever-rising aspirations.

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