

The Arts in a Global Village



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IN THE recent past, when we heard the phrase "international cooperation" or even "world education," we were likely soon to hear the word "man" or "mankind." Those who talked of international understanding, it seemed, were prone to rely, in the last analysis, on fine-sounding abstractions, like "respect for humanity" and "love of man." This is less likely today, but nonetheless I need to begin by asserting that the term "man"—or, if you prefer, "mankind"—means little to me, because it says nothing about men in their diversity and complexity. Nor does it say anything about their precarious condition in the universe, nor about the innumerable ways they have found for coping with it, nor the heights they sometimes attain, nor the depths to which they just as often fall.

In the so-called "global village" there are many mansions; but there are many hovels, too, many rat-infested tenements, many exposed outposts, many barren, dusty fields; and there are multitudes moving through the global village, crowds of strangers, with faces generally blurred—except, now and then, when one becomes visible to us with shocking clarity and immediacy, and we suddenly recognize a person there, an individual, perhaps a fellow-creature—and we know, somehow, it is with him as it is with each of us.

To talk of world friendship or international understanding is, for me, to talk of making such recognitions possible, increasingly possible. This is somewhat different, as you surely know, from meeting someone from another culture, someone labeled "foreign student" or "delegate from Nigeria," who seems like us in certain ways, for all the apparent differences we perceive in language, costume, and attitude toward life. Too often, when we meet an individual like this at a conference, in a class, or even in someone's living room, we identify with our roles and frequently with our cultures. We are not persons at all, full of the usual doubts, distractions, and idiosyncracies; it is as if we leave our imperfect selves, our private selves, at home, replacing them with gracious, smiling, open-minded *persona*. We become people who never looked for a job, never changed a diaper, never became angry at a job poorly done, never worried about failing an exam, never became preoccupied with meanings or purposes, never asked "What's it all for?" We are *other* to those we meet and to ourselves at once. Correct and controlled, we seldom—as living persons—meet each other's eyes.

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We are, in Ralph Ellison's sense, invisible to each other.

A Sense of Ourselves

"I am invisible, understand," Ellison wrote at the start of *Invisible Man*, "because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."¹

It is not our intention not to see. It is, again quoting Ellison, because of a "peculiar disposition" of our eyes. Our vision is often too poor to permit us to see through the Frenchness of a French person, the Korean-ness of a Korean person. We may appreciate the Frenchness and the Korean-ness. We may be eager to learn all there is to learn about what accounts for such qualities—what values, what cultural mores, what kind of education, what early childhood experiences. We may say that beneath all these we recognize a fellow-creature—in *abstracto*; that we know the Frenchman or Korean opposite is another version of "man"; but this can, as we all realize, be still another way of imposing invisibility.

A concern with invisibility—and with the difficulty of encountering another as a person—is what leads me to turn to literature and the arts as means of making understanding possible, not so much an understanding of the idea of man or the idea of mankind, as some prefer, but for a sense of ourselves and of our condition in the world—a condition which, at some level, all the world's people share. I am aware of the importance of learning rationally and empirically how other people live, certainly aware of the importance of immersion in other cultures for the sake of empathy with other human beings' designs for living and for the sake of discovering the almost infinite diversity of behaviors known to be human. Like the read-

ers of this article, I want to overcome narrowness and provincialism; most of all, I want to overcome the kind of pride which prevents people from ascribing dignity to alien modes of life. Yet it seems to me that none of this can be overcome until we overcome remoteness and the tendency to treat other people habitually as subjects of study—which is often equivalent, oddly enough, to treating them as objects, as things. There is no point in educating against provincialism if we feel ourselves to be, like Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "indifferent children of the earth."

In the recent play, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, when the two young men discover that the letter they are carrying to the English king is a letter instructing the king to cut off Hamlet's head, they are shocked at first, because, after all, they are supposed to be his friends. Then Guildenstern takes care of it for both of them by saying:

Let's keep things in proportion. Assume, if you like, that they're going to kill him. Well, he is a man, he is mortal, and consequently he would have died anyway, sooner or later. Or to look at it from the social point of view—he's just one man among many, the loss would be well within reason and convenience. And then again, what is so terrible about death? As Socrates so philosophically put it, since we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be . . . very nice.²

This is an example of what I mean: the indifference which makes it possible to speak abstractly about another person's death, other people's deaths. It is of a piece with the ability to speak abstractly, impersonally about one's self—as, indeed, Rosencrantz is able to do a moment later: "We, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from our young days brought up with him, awakened by a man standing on his saddle, are summoned. . . ." He recapitulates what has happened since they were unexpectedly summoned to Denmark, as if it were all predetermined, with effects following causes according to some external plan.

¹ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1952. p. 7. By permission of Random House, Inc.

² Tom Stoppard. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968. p. 110. Copyright © 1967 by Tom Stoppard.

Telling it that way, seeing it that way, they need take no responsibility. Only at the last moment, just before he disappears from view, Guildenstern, reviewing it one last time ("Our names shouted in a certain dawn . . . a message . . . a summons. . ."), says "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it."³

I offer this as an example for two reasons. First, it helps me make the point that indifference breeds irresponsibility and that both are somehow functions of a feeling of powerlessness, of nothingness—of being nothing, mere shells, actors, hollow men. Second, it may suggest the power of literature and the arts to turn our attention inward, to confront us with ourselves. Strange as it may seem, I believe that self-confrontation of the sort literature makes possible is the source of the understanding which many have defined as world education's prime concern.

Need for Self-Creation

Before referring to other specific works, let me support what I am saying by recalling a number of recent discussions in this field. Some readers may be familiar with a book edited by the great educational historian, Robert Ulich, a few years ago, called *Education and the Idea of Mankind*.⁴ The philosopher, Horace M. Kallen, in a chapter on "Higher Education" in that book, treats education as the struggle of the living to perpetuate themselves. "One need," he writes, "only to look at any person's or people's history to grasp that what it records is a congeries of struggles of Selves and of the group Selves whose identities are organizational Wholes compounded by interindividual relations. . . ." And he asks, "Can whatever 'mankind' signifies as fact, idea, ideal of direct experience be rendered the object of a belief" by means of education—within the process of striving to continue an identity, a way of life?

³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴ Robert Ulich, editor. *Education and the Idea of Mankind*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964.

Mankind, says the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, consists of multitudes, each different from the others and "as different, equal to the others in the right to live and to grow." The idea of mankind, Kallen adds, is the "self-orchestration" of the diverse cultures and faiths and ways and works existing in the world into what might be called a "world community." Then he turns to the young human being asked to commit himself to such an idea and says that his growth into it must be "a self-transcendence achieving itself in a continuing orchestration of his immediate experiences with the symbolic presence of the absent singularities of the rest of humanity."

What strikes me hardest here is the emphasis on the need for self-creation and self-transcendence as primary, and on the fact that the only meaningful commitment to the idea of mankind is the free commitment, the personal commitment—and, I would append, the concerned, responsible one. This is quite different, as I know we all are aware, from a mere abstract assertion of allegiance, a generalized profession of "love" for all humanity. In an odd way, such generalized professions remind me of the hippies' watchword "love"—which, we have been told often enough, is a global feeling, not a personal one, a feeling that involves no responsibility, no face-to-face encounter, but is simply a passive submergence into an ocean some call the One.

I find support for the notion of the importance of self-commitment in Harold Taylor's report on the Conference on World Education held in December 1966.⁵ Harris Wofford, formerly of the Peace Corps, noted at one point that by thinking of the foreign student as a foreigner we make distinctions among persons in terms of geography "rather than in terms of human values." (Wofford had said earlier: "There is a worldwide generation, and Peace Corps volunteers have discovered they are part of it and that their students, fellow teachers, peers, and colleagues of other colors and nationalities are

⁵ Harold Taylor, editor. *Conference on World Education*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1967.

really marching to the same beat, wrestling with the same problems and that, whatever the problems are, Yevtuschenko is writing poetry about them." ⁶) The crucial point here has to do with commitment, with the ability to hear the beat, to find fellowship through the confrontation of related problems—of a common human condition, something an individual can only know if he is able to know himself. At the conclusion of the conference, when the students took over, Eugene Groves,⁷ then president of the National Student Association, said he thought that facts about foreign countries, foreign situations, and foreign students were largely irrelevant—"that it is more a question of feeling and belief. . . ." We need to develop concern for the person and his value judgments." The talk, interestingly enough, became talk not only about empathy for other cultures, but about identity; and this, to me, seems utterly crucial.

My argument is, then, that the arts have a crucial role to play in the search for international understanding or in world education because of the contribution engagement with the arts can make to a sense of identity, a sense of self. I realize that alternative justifications for the use of art are frequently given, and I do not mean to challenge these but, rather, to complement and supplement them. A familiar one is that, through engagement with a novel or a film, a student has a better opportunity to grasp the actual stuff of life in a different culture than he might have simply by reading *about* that culture in a text that did not engage his imagination nor make possible vicarious identification.

To a great extent this is the case, especially when aesthetic experiences are judiciously linked to—and distinguished from—inquiries in the social sciences. I have no

⁶ Harris Wofford. "Programs and Concepts in International Education." In: *Conference on World Education*. Harold Taylor, editor. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1967. p. 120.

⁷ Eugene Groves. "The Role of Students in World Education." In: *Conference on World Education*. Harold Taylor, editor. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1967. p. 41.

doubt, for instance, that the films of Styajit Ray have done much to give people a sense of Indian life, just as the films of Fellini and Antonioni and others have done much to give young people a full, a palpable imaging of certain dimensions of Italian life. I am not willing to say that encounters with films necessarily increase the chances of empathy or the understanding some have in mind; but, if properly fostered, they lay a foundation which may well be made productive in time to come.

To Enter Unfamiliar Worlds

Another justification for the use of the arts has been defined by my colleague Francis Shoemaker in an article in the April 1968 issue of the *Teachers College Record*. Called "New Dimensions for World Cultures," ⁸ this article discusses the development of what Dr. Shoemaker calls "a serviceable design within which to observe and compare" the ideas and values of diverse societies in the modern world. He writes, therefore, of a world constituted of four major world cultures—Judeo-Christian, Islamic, Hindu-Buddhistic-Taoist, and African. He proposes a study of these cultures by means of the humanities, particularly literature, which offers—he suggests—multiple opportunities to "deal in life-like simultaneity with wide spectrums of materials and values." The idea of coming to know and to empathize with a culture by developing an awareness of its core values is not new, as we realize; but Dr. Shoemaker's design—which is potentially usable in secondary schools—more than likely is. The justification for using the humanities is that, above all things, works of literature are bearers of values, presenters of values, as it were, offering occasions for participation by readers free enough to enter unfamiliar worlds.

Again, I would not challenge this idea; I would only complement it, although—in my personal priority scheme—self-discovery by means of literature must precede the confrontation Dr. Shoemaker describes. Yet how does self-discovery occur? What does it have

⁸ Francis Shoemaker. "New Dimensions for World Cultures." *Teachers College Record*; April 1968.

to do with the "understanding" world educators want to make possible?

Let me use as an example a familiar passage that seems peculiarly appropriate at this point:

Men may seem detestable as joint stock companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meagre faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. . . . this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spoke; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God, Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!⁹

That is from *Moby Dick*, from the chapter in which Starbuck, the first mate, is introduced. I use it not only because it is a symbolic rendering of a world composed of "multitudes"; the Pequod crew, after all, is a crew made up of men from diverse cultures. The book itself seems to be a rendering of the first principle (or what I believe to be the first principle) of many philosophies of world education. The principle is that at the highest level of abstraction—that below the surface—mankind (which may signify man in the ideal) is essentially noble, immaculate, and that we are to understand each other—for all our differences—in terms of that nobility, which each of us possesses. Here, however, the principle is transmuted, made concrete and particular.

Melville is presenting, as it were, the form of his feelings about the ideal significance of democracy. But he does this immediately after he has introduced the pious, intrepid, practical Starbuck who "was no crusader after perils" and who could not withstand spiritual terrors or doubts—and immediately before bringing onto his stage happy-go-lucky Stubb, ignorant, irreverent Flask, Queequeg, the Indian Tashtego, and



the whole strange crew of Islanders—Isolatoos, Melville calls them, each "living on a separate continent of his own." The novel, as you know, is about a search for identity—and about one of the Isolatoos, Ishmael, who discovers his identity and, indeed, a new life through learning what it is to squeeze another's hand. Engaging with *Moby Dick*, readers discover a thousand singular things—because the book itself is like a white whale, encompassing an endless range of meanings; but whatever is discovered is found within the individual reader—enacting with Ishmael his journey from the rainy street and the coffin warehouses and the thoughts of suicide—to the open, dangerous sea—to comradeship—to shipwreck—and, at last, to rebirth.

How is one to experience rebirth except in terms of one's own life history, one's own consciousness of what it is to feel "a damp, drizzly November" in one's soul, to think of suicide, to risk voyaging, learning, expansion of horizons—yes, and even shipwreck? And, is it not the case that, if one does experience that way, if one draws to the sur-

⁹ Herman Melville. *Moby Dick*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1930. p. 166.

face of consciousness all those elements of half-forgotten feeling, imagings, yearnings—through the use of one's imagination—one somehow ends up knowing himself, forming the sense of himself in a novel way? And is it not the case that, if one considers—subjectively, perhaps—one's own understanding of alienation and venturing outward and squeezing others' hands, one is in a position to understand (as he could not understand before) what "divine equality" and understanding of others mean?

Continuities in Life

I am suggesting that great art has the capacity to move us in this fashion: to move us into ourselves to rediscover our humanity, which is, fundamentally, our consciousness of ourselves, our potentially self-transcending identities.

A poem written by Birago Diop of Senegal, "Breaths," begins:

Listen more often to things rather than
beings.

Hear the fire's voice.

Hear the voice of water.

In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees,

It is our forefathers breathing.

The dead are not gone forever.

They are in the paling shadows

And in the darkening shadows.

The dead are not beneath the ground,

They are in the rustling trees. . . .¹⁰

And so on about the continuing life of the dead. You can tell me things you learned from anthropologists about the attitudes of certain African tribes to their ancestors and to their dead, and to the continuity in life; and I will be interested if you do. You can show me photographs of Senegalese leaning over fires in the forests, and point out the peculiarities of their dress, their gestures, their handling of the things of which the poet speaks; and, again, I will be interested, and probably I will learn. But when I read the poem, I must read it myself; and I can only read it with my own memories, and my own feelings within me; and I can

¹⁰ Birago Diop. "Breaths." In: *African Heritage*. Jacob Drachler, editor. New York: Collier Books, 1960.

only enact it in terms of my own existing self. If I do, I confront certain feelings I have about continuities—and about the earth—and the degree to which my father has gone forever—and the degree to which he survives. If I can respond to the poem at all, even in translation, I shall be more alive, more myself—less one of the indifferent, irresponsible children of the earth. And, because I also know what it is to mourn and to strive for a continuation of life—because that, in fact, is an aspect of the human condition—perhaps I can begin to open myself to the Senegalese on that level; perhaps I can begin to understand.

There are so many instances of works which involve us with alien cultures and which are, on one level, extremely potent for the sense they provide of another way of life—for the introduction they offer to core and sustaining values—but which are, on the fundamental level, at least for me, powerful for the illumination they provide of my own selfhood, my own existential reality. I think of Marguerite Duras's *The Sea Wall*,¹¹ an account of an aging Frenchwoman in Indochina, who tries to farm in a barren part of what is now Vietnam—a land full of starving, kindly, prolific peasants somehow resigned to the yearly flooding of the rice paddies, which the dogged Frenchwoman simply cannot accept. She and her family build a seawall which is thrown down in a single night—they challenge the land agents—and it is useless, of course, tragic, heroic—and all the more so because of the sense of eternity, of resignation in the peasants who endure.

There is, of course, tremendous vicarious involvement in the life of Vietnam in the days when the French were still there, and the possibility of an awareness of the Vietnamese people no newsreel can provide. Yet, I think, the understanding that takes place or may take place is derived from the reader's own inner experience with seawalls and battles against resignation—and desires to survive. One somehow moves upward from the fundamental recognition of shared

¹¹ Marguerite Duras. *The Sea Wall*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 1967.

predicament, and of responsibility, to the empathy with Indo-Chinese life which the story somehow insists upon—but which can be realized only when the reader first makes the tragedy his own.

For a sense of connection with human existence in the U.S.S.R., consider what is enacted by means of *Doctor Zhivago*,¹² the private man caught up in the fantastic movement of history in the days after the Russian Revolution, becoming sickened by artificial conversation, by what becomes—as he puts it—“nothing but words—claptrap in praise of the revolution and the regime.” He says he is sick and tired of it. “And it’s not the kind of thing I’m good at.” Obviously, some people are good at it; but engaging with our own responses, we can understand them too. Confronting the tension between our personal inclinations—the kinds of things we are good at—and the demands imposed upon us by our environment, we may well be coming close to understanding Russian people by means of a predicament we share. “I stand alone,” writes Pasternak in the poem called “Hamlet” at the end. “All else is swamped by pharisaism. To live life to the end is not a childish task.”

The Sense of Self

Or, for another mode of awareness, we may turn to the Russian poets: Vladimir Mayakovsky, who died in 1930; Voznesensky, who is still very much alive. In 1925 Mayakovsky visited the United States and wrote a poem called “Brooklyn Bridge.” The second stanza begins:

Blush
at my praise,
go red as our flag,
however
united states-
of -America
you may be.
As a crazed believer
enters
a church,
retreats

¹² Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*. New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1958.

into a monastery cell,
austere and plain;
so I,
in graying evening
haze,
humbly set foot
upon Brooklyn Bridge.¹³

Mayakovsky writes of the drone of the elevated trains, the masts passing under the bridge; and he says that if our planet is ever smashed to bits and only the bridge remains, in the dust “from this bridge, a geologist of the centuries will succeed in recreating our contemporary world.” Surely it clears the eye to see for a moment as a foreigner sees, to reorder our visions by means of his. This may be an instance of how we can come closer to others, by looking—with the aid of others—at ourselves. Suppose, just for one moment, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could have seen themselves through Hamlet’s eyes. . . .

“Who are we?” asks Voznesensky, and the “we” includes us, if we permit it to, along with Voznesensky’s own countrymen:

Who are we? Ciphers or great men?
There is no physicist no lyricist blood.
Genius is in the planet’s blood.
You’re either a poet or a Lilliputian
We are inoculated
Against time, with time—whatever we are.
“What are you?” jolts and spins the head
Like a race car.¹⁴

These, I think, are the fundamental questions, questions addressed to the condition that we share. And, perhaps in response to them, encounters between us may be achieved.

I would say the same thing about, for example, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and about some of Harold Pinter’s plays, especially those in which people find refuges

¹³ Vladimir Mayakovsky. “Brooklyn Bridge.” Reprinted by permission of The World Publishing Company from *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry* by Vladimir Mayakovsky, edited by Patricia Blake. A Meridian Book. © 1960 by The World Publishing Company.

¹⁴ Andrei Voznesensky. “Who Are We?” In: *Antiworlds and the Fifth Ace*. Translated by Stanley Moss. Patricia Blake and Max Hayward, editors. © 1963 by Encounter, Ltd. © 1966, 1967 by Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York.

against nameless dangers in shabby little rooms—rooms in English towns, of course, rooms with all the appurtenances of the plain people's England: teapots, boxes of cornflakes, gas meters, worn cardigan sweaters, stained caps worn in the room as well as out in the cold. Listening to the banter, the chillingly familiar crosstalk, we experience English life in several of its dimensions; but we also experience ourselves, building our own designs for living, talking and talking to each other to keep the alien thing, the menace, from coming through the door.

I think of Gunther Grass's presentation of German life and Polish life along the Vistula, of Kazantzakis' island of Crete, of Cortazar's Argentina, Borges' Brazil, Nadine Gordimer's or Alan Paton's South Africa, Graham Greene's and Doris Lessing's England and Africa, of Sartre's Paris and Camus's Algiers or Oran—of Liverpool and London in British films, of the French airports and cafes in Godard films, of the schoolrooms and bars in Truffaut films, of the Kafkaesque cities and the haunted countryside in Bergman films—and I know well that they have made it possible for us to visualize the many facets of the global village, that they have in some measure exposed us to the values of diverse cultures. Yet, when I think back upon my

experience with such works—as when I recollect paintings, poems, pieces of music—I remember, somehow, what I felt, what I discovered in myself.

The resources are multiple. The reader knows them as well as I do. I would only plead that they be used in such a way that students find in them occasions first of all for discovering themselves. The person who can create himself—choose himself—is the one who can overcome the feeling of nothingness and hopelessness that breeds indifference and lack of concern. Once he becomes visible to himself, he may find his vision clearing, he may find that he is transcending himself. He may find self-commitment possible—the commitment to orchestrate himself with the selves of others with whom he can empathize as a fellow-creature confronting the same crucial human problems, moving to the same beat. The sense of self comes first, then the squeeze of the hand, and then, hopefully, identity in its fullest sense—an opening outward to the multifarious world. At that point there can be an effort to encourage understanding *about* the global village by those who have learned in time that there are moments for choosing—who will forever refuse to be indifferent children of the earth. □



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