Humanism Through the Humanities

THE COMMISSION ON THE HUMANITIES

Nailed to the ship's mast in Moby-Dick is a gold doubloon stamped with signs and symbols "in luxuriant profusion." The coin is Captain Ahab's promised reward to the crewman who sights the white whale, but in its emblem each man reads his own meaning. As Ahab says, "This round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self."

Like the bright doubloon, the humanities mirror our own image and our image of the world. Through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question: what does it mean to be human? The humanities offer clues but never a complete answer. They reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope, and reason. We learn how individuals or societies define the moral life and try to attain it, attempt to reconcile freedom and the responsibilities of citizenship, and express themselves artistically. The humanities do not necessarily mean humaneness, nor do they always inspire the individual with what Cicero called "incentives to noble action." But by awakening a sense of what it might be like to be someone else or to live in another time or culture, they tell us about ourselves, stretch our imagination, and enrich our experience. They increase our distinctively human potential.

The humanities presume particular methods of expression and inquiry—language, dialogue, reflection, imagination, and metaphor. In the humanities the aims of these activities of mind are not geometric proof and quantitative measure, but rather insight, perspective, critical understanding, discrimination, and creativity. These aims are not unique to the humanities, but are found in other fields, in images from the arts, and in new forms of expression created by film, television, and computers. No matter how large their circle, however, the humanities remain dedicated to the disciplined development of verbal, perceptual, and imaginative skills needed to understand experience.

For centuries the fields of knowledge most often viewed as humanistic have been languages and literatures, history, and philosophy. To these the Commission on the Humanities of 1963-64 added the arts, "the history and comparison of religion and law," and "those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods." Legislation authorizing the National Endowment for the Humanities now also includes linguistics, archeology, and ethics. This Commission, too, sees languages and literatures, history, and philosophy as the central humanistic fields, and we accept these additions. But fields alone do not define the humanities:

At their most vivid, the humanities are like the arts as well as the sciences. The humanities are that form of knowledge in which the knower is revealed. All knowledge becomes humanistic when this effect takes place, when we are asked to contemplate not only a proposition but the proposer, when we hear the human voice behind what is being said (Charles Frankel, speech in Austin, Texas, December 1978).

Whether defined by questions, methods, or fields, the humanities employ a particular medium and turn of mind. The medium is language. Discourse sets in motion and supports reflection and judgment. The humanities close ties not only with speech but especially with writing and the thought processes writing makes possible. Study in the humanistic disciplines is not limited to texts—oral cultures have reflected deeply on human experience and have achieved great wisdom—but it cannot proceed without creating and using texts. In our time the humanities necessarily have to do not only with the written word and print, but also with the electronically processed word. While the medium in the humanities is language, the turn of mind is toward history, the record of what has moved men and women before us to act, believe, and build as they did. Conscious of our links with the past, we achieve a deeper understanding of ourselves in the present and discover possibilities and limits that will shape our future.

The essence of the humanities is a spirit or an attitude toward humanity. They show how the individual is autonomous and at the same time bound, in the ligatures of language and history, to humankind across time and throughout the world. The humanities are an important measure of the values and aspirations of any society. Intensity and breadth in the perception of life and power and richness in works of the imagination betoken a people alive as moral and aesthetic beings, citizens in the fullest sense. They base their education on sustaining principles of personal enrichment and civic responsibility. They are sensitive to beauty and aware of their cultural heritage. They can approach questions of value, no matter how complex, with intelligence and goodwill. They can use their scientific and technical achievements responsibly because they see the connections among science, technology, and humanity.

No conception of the humanities is complete if it omits humanism as a civic ideal. In the European Renaissance many humanists connected learning with civic duty and declared what they took to be the pedantic, unworldly attitudes of medieval scholasticism. Since the Renaissance the connections between education and public life have multiplied. Democracy rests on the principle of enlightened self-rule by the entire citizenry. So, in a sense, does our modern system of cultural patronage. In the Renaissance the humanities depended on a few patrons; today support for and participation in the humanities are public forces and public responsibilities on a large scale. Finally, though slowly, the meaning of cosmopolitanism has broadened, and with it the idea of citizenship. We cannot afford to look parochially at other cultures as curiosities, "like us" only insofar as their members have converted to Christianity or studied at Oxford or Yale.

These important social changes do not point to a simple or single ideal of civic virtue. Our republic stands on a belief that educated citizens will participate effectively in decisions concerning the whole community. Humanistic education helps prepare individuals for this civic activity. The humanities lead beyond "functional" literacy and basic skills to critical judgment and discrimination, enabling citizens to view political issues from an informed perspective. Through familiarity with foreign cultures—as well as with our own subcultures—the humanities show that citizenship means belonging to something larger than neighborhood or nation. Complementing the political side of citizenship is the cultural. A literate public does not passively receive cultural works from academic guardians, but actively engages in the interpretation, creation, and re-creation of those works. Participation in the republic of letters is participation in community life as well.

Although the humanities pertain to citizenship, they also have an integrity of their own. They are not always relevant to urgent social or political issues. They are not simply a means to advanced literacy or cultivation. Nor are they a duty, a requirement, or a kind of finishing-school concern—but froth on the brew, embroidery on the blanket. If to grow in wisdom—not simply in cleverness, or dexterity, or learning—is practical, then the humanities, properly conceived and conveyed, are decidedly practical. They help develop capacities hard to define clearly and without cliché: a sharpened critical judgment, a keener appreciation of experience. Study of the humanities makes distinctive marks on the mind: through history, the ability to disentangle and interpret complex human events; through literature and the arts, the ability to distinguish the deeply felt, the well wrought, and the continually engaging from the shallow, the imitative, and the monotonous; through philosophy, the sharpening of criteria for moral decision and warrantable belief.

These capacities serve much more than the notion that, as a member of a community or state, the individual has civic duties and virtues. There are other values besides civic ones, and they are often found in privacy, intimacy, and distance from civic life. The humanities sustain this second conception of individuality, as deeply rooted as the other in our cultural inheritance, in three important ways. First, they emphasize the individual's critical vigilance over political activity. This is a form of civic participation, but it demands judgment acquired through detachment and circumspection. Second, teaching and scholarship in the humanities frequently consider subjects beyond those of immediate public concern; the humanities pursue matters of value without defining value as social utility. Finally, the humanities offer intensely personal insights into the recesses of experience. Ultimately, the individual interprets what appears in the gold doubloon.