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THE HUMANITIES: A WORKING DEFINITION

S. A. Nock

And the Judge kept explaining the law
In a soft under-current of sound.
The Jury had each formed a different view
(Long before the indictment was read)
And they all spoke at once, so that none of them knew
One word that the others had said.

The Hunting of the Snark

THROUGH the sound of the debate on educational policies that is going on all over the United States comes the soft undercurrent, the organ point, of the voices of the Humanists. They have refused to be silent as to what ought to be done in American education, even when nobody pays them any particular attention. They explain the state of the law, even if they can hardly be heard over the debate among others.

The Humanists insist that judgment is essential to reasonable living, and that only through a liberal education can a man develop judgment. They observe with dismay how little judgment shows in the actions of men in authority, as when, for instance, they remove from laboratory to Army a few thousand young men essential to the future of science in this country and negligible in the Army. They envy the sounder policy of the British, who have balanced the immediate need for men against the long-time need for sound wits.

The Humanists are hard to listen to, though, and for two reasons. The first is that there is so much noise going on among the members of the Jury. The other is that the Humanists seem to be unable to explain anything except the state of the law. They can tell us that we need to exercise judgment to live reasonably, and that liberal education will develop judgment. From there on, they too have each formed

a different view, and all speak at once. Advocates of other types educational policy, on the other hand, often enough know how to agree on what they want, and how to go about getting it.

There are those, for example, who insist that we fit our students as fast as possible to make as much money as possible in some chosen profession or job. A good many of the students who will attend our schools and colleges from now on will want just this; there are many now in college who have spent long months in the South Pacific, who quite frankly want to go to college so as to have the jump on others when the chance comes to get in on the money. They think of college education as a help to money-making, and pursue it as just that. Nobody seems to be working very hard to persuade them that this is a superficial way to go about living: in fact, a good many of our professors say that since this is what the boys want, this is what they should have.

It is an easy way to get things settled, but it reflects little credit on the wisdom and judgment of those who advocate it. It is not surprising in boys who have been yanked out of school to serve a couple of years in hell; but it is—if not exactly surprising—at least exasperating in men who are supposed to be educators. Yet the idea sounds plausible to those who do not examine it, especially when those who oppose the idea are either inarticulate or vague or downright preposterous. The notion of immediate efficiency appeals to the American business man, the American worker, and the American housewife. They approve the elimination of fiddling about and fooling away time and money. Unfortunately, they are thinking of jobs, not people.

Others, who think of man as a social creature, object that in mere training for jobs we can get nothing but workers: we can not develop citizens. Neither service men nor others should be content with such a pattern, nor should they have such a scheme offered to tempt them. After what we have gone through, especially after what service men have gone through and are yet to go through, we should all demand an understanding of the world we live in, in which we play so desperate and unhappy a role. We should all know the why and the wherefore so that we may perhaps avoid such catastrophe in the future.

Our education must therefore, they say, offer to students a comprehensive survey of the social studies. We must have an overview of all that goes on in the world of politics, sociology, economics, and business. We must learn about the world in which we work, as well as how to do the job we set ourselves to.

Others advocate one thing, and others another; and under it all rumbles the sound of the Humanists, insisting on education in the liberal arts, but getting nowhere in making clear what the liberal arts may be, what the Humanities are, or why they are essential. The Humanists cannot agree with one another, and are apt to be out of sorts, and talk in too many directions at once.

Here and there a voice is raised for the "grand old fortifying" classical curriculum of past generations. For two reasons we can afford to ignore such voices: the first is that there is little evidence presented that a study of the Classics, as it used to be pursued, will fit a man to judge of the world he lives in today. The other is that we may be reasonably sure that no one is going to consider very seriously going back to that tradition. Not even Messrs. Hutchins and Adler advocate spending years on Greek and Latin: they stick to translations and hope that virtue will shine through.

Their method of acquiring a liberal education through the reading of the greatest books of all time is a doubtful one, because so many once great books are no longer valid. They have been superseded. At one time the writings of Hippocrates and Galen and Copernicus were of supreme value; today they are of little value—although the greatness of the writers is undiminished. The first maps of America are a tribute to the courage and ingenuity of those who made them, but they are useless as methods of establishing an auto route from Buffalo to Philadelphia.

Other Humanists join the chorus of those who insist that comprehensive courses in the social studies and the natural sciences will enlighten the mind to such a degree that judgment will be inspired. There is much to be said for comprehensive systems, if only that they do unfold to students young and old the nature of the world and of man, without too much professional gadgetry attached in the form of pedantic inclusiveness. They do give young people a chance to see where they are, and to understand, to some extent, their environment, natural and social. This is a necessary condition to exercise of judgment, but we may doubt that it is sufficient.

After the last war, when a generation was noisily and rather ridiculously "lost," there was little chance for young people to find out where they were. They could see only the superficial indications of the Harding and Coolidge regimes, and there was nothing there to encourage rational action. Of the possibilities latent within the human being

qua human being, they seem to have had as little notion as we have today. As they knew so little about their environment, and so little about themselves, many of the postwar generation went abroad and got "lost." It was a wasteful and absurd procedure.

We may now begin to offer all sorts of comprehensive courses to those who remain and those who come back; but unless there is some way for our students present and future to appreciate the values in what they are studying, then they can, with the best will in the world, use very little of what they are exposed to in developing judgment. You can't merely tell a man that something is more worth while than something else, and expect him to develop independent powers of evaluation.

Furthermore, you can't put everything in front of some one who doesn't quite know what he is supposed to look for, and how to pick it out when he sees it, and trust him to select what is best for him or for the rest of us. People who know nothing beyond what they rather suddenly find before them are only bewildered. Possibly the bewilderment of the educational population of the country is the result of lack of a background for judgment.

The Humanities, we must suppose, furnish such a background—if we define our Humanities to make them furnish such a background. The attempts at definition so far have not been very successful, ranging all the way from the grand old etc. tradition to an inclusion of practically everything that any one can study that does not immediately concern him professionally. Perhaps we can find a new definition of the Humanities that will include a good deal of what we have called the Humanities, and will at the same time show why their study is enlightening. It is worth the attempt, at any rate; for if we can get people to thinking towards establishing a satisfactory basis of judgment, we are doing a good job, however we go about it.

Suppose, then, that we define the Humanities as those results of human activity that have not been superseded. Immediately we shall hear objections, one of the first² being, perhaps, that this will include the Fine Arts as well as the Humanities. Here is a quarrel about words, for we have always included one of the Fine Arts, literature, with the Humanities. If poetry is one of the Humanities, why should we exclude music, painting, sculpture, and architecture? At any rate, they all share the characteristic, in their supreme manifestations, of not being

superseded. To that extent they form a basis of judgment, for they are the eternal verities, as far as we can judge of eternity.

We shall also hear that all kinds of literature, music, philosophy, and so on, have gone by the board, and are lost never more to be found. That is true, too; but it is not important. We need not suppose that because Justice Holmes would read Plato to improve his mind, all other philosophers must be of equal value. It is Plato's philosophy that has not been superseded in stimulating men to think on their problems. Plato's conclusions are not of much value to us, perhaps; Plato's presentation of problems will, as Justice Holmes observed, improve the mind.

The questions of philosophy have not been superseded. The answers to them have been, and continue to be. We have so many answers extant because the questions invariably drag answers with them down through the ages. Nor is this altogether regrettable, for we can now judge of many answers that occur to us without taking the time and trouble to work them all out again. They have been proved and found wanting.

Here, by the way, is evidence that survival alone is not enough to guarantee value. Answers to the questions of philosophy survive because the questions that inspired them are not superseded. Sometimes atrocities of heavy architecture survive because they are too hard to tear down. Oddities of art survive because they are odd. It takes more than mere existence to assure the value of anything.

It is those things that survive because men will not let them die that are the Humanities, those things that have not been superseded in the estimation of men.

Much that man did in the past was as foolish as what he does now. To know only that fact is of little value, unless you want to laugh at yourself and your fellow men; but to observe how and when men have done what they have done is worth a good deal. For instance, when we hear so much about what we are going to do after the war in the way of preparing a federation of the world, when we are dreaming dreams of peace and universal brotherhood, it is salutary to read Xenophon.

It was salutary to read him after Pearl Harbor, because the story of the heroism of the Greeks as told in the *Anabasis* is the sort of story to make us gird up our own loins and go out to battle with a stout heart. Men were lost before, we learn, but refused to be lost, and won

their way to the sea, so that their cry of joy still raises the hair on the back of the neck when we read of the mad group on the hilltop shouting, "The sea!"

It was salutary to read Xenophon after Pearl Harbor, because we could find out what men can do in the face of disaster. It is salutary to read him now, because he gives us such a vivid picture of what men do when danger is past. Not what men ought to do, but what men do do. As soon as the Greeks arrived at the sea, as soon as peril was past and home was in sight, they began to bicker. They went right on bickering. The heroes became little quarrelsome swashbucklers.

Thucydides shows it, too. And so do other histories, age after age. We can see how men have done, and we may guess how men will do. After the last war, we elected Harding—perhaps we don't have to go back to Xenophon to see what we may soon be up to. Yet to have the whole account, from Xenophon on, will give us a much surer foundation for judgment than merely the events of the last thirty years.

This is by no means to say that we shall have to do what was done before. It is rather to hope that we may not. On the other hand it is to say that we know what to look for.

So with literature, which is so largely a history of ideas, in whatever literary form expressed. When we know what men have observed and thought, when we have some sort of perspective of the ideas and notions that have prevailed from time to time, we may judge better of the value of those that we have today. We can see what has worked, and why it has worked, and what has not and why it has not. Then we need not be tempted into high enthusiasm for proposals that sound very attractive but have already been tried out before.

It is quite true that the shrunken world requires revision of attitude and opinion. What was once true of the world is no longer necessarily true, but those facts that have endured throughout history are apt to be pretty stubborn, and we might as well know all about them, if only to refute them. It is hard to refute what we know nothing about, or to judge entirely in the dark. The history of mankind has not been superseded, and as long as there are men, it cannot be. Consequently, whether for approval or contradiction, all history, of fact and of idea, is a basis for our judgment today.

A comprehensive course in social studies that takes no note, or very little note of what has happened to man in his long fool's errand

to the grave, is merely a light froth of the obvious, or a sad attempt to learn all over again what men have known for ages past. We cannot afford to remain in the early high school stage of development in our judgment of social affairs.

A comprehensive course in the sciences may have value, but only if students have some idea what to do with what they learn. To pump biology into a head where there is nothing to act on it, is to waste time and energy. And how are our students to know what to do with the biology they learn? They can find out, if they are properly encouraged, how to judge biological facts against the experience of the race: that which has not been superseded.

The sciences have long been excluded from the Humanities; and perhaps a good many would exclude them under the definition we have suggested here. One day's experimentation may upset all experimentation that has gone before; yet the sciences have contributed one element in human affairs that has not been superseded, and is not likely to be: method. A knowledge of scientific method, as employed in scientific investigation, is essential to an understanding and evaluation of our world. The method is not hard to understand: it consists very largely in pursuit of inquiry in the light of hypothesis; performance of symbolic operations as a means to solution of problems; and checking symbolic operations against nonsymbolic facts before assigning validity to conclusions. It consists in looking at what is before you, operating with it to get answers to questions you may ask, and abiding by results. Abiding by results. There is a good deal that mankind has to learn about abiding by results.

The sciences, insofar as they represent method, have not been superseded.

The Classics have not been superseded, of course. On the other hand, we must consider the great barrier that they place before our students in the requirement of *mastery*—not acquaintance—in the field of language. It is quite desirable for us to get from the Classics all that we can; but perhaps we can do better by concentrating on what we can get in translation, so that we may not miss much more elsewhere that the old tradition did miss, and that is just as important to our judgment as the Classical verities.

So we may go on. This is merely a suggestion that we look over all our disciplines to find that in them which has not been superseded. We can judge of what we have today if we have some idea of what

the past has given us. We can refrain from exaltation of inferior results of trivial conception, and we can rejoice in recognition of superlative creation.

The advocates of practical education may dismiss the Humanities as "less important" than social studies. Somehow that type of dismissal is neither right nor wrong: it is nonsense. It doesn't mean anything. It is to say: throughout the course of mankind's history, mankind has selected certain results of his own activity to which he tries to give immortality, because they are worth more than all the rest of his doings put together; these are less important than the temporary relations of a generation within itself.

The Humanities endure. We may look at our little problems as a child looks at them when he wakes in the morning—with nothing behind him on which to base judgment except whim. Or we may look at them with the experience of the ages behind us, and be able to judge of our affairs in the light of what mankind has not permitted to die. This is the value of the Humanities, if we take as the Humanities those results of human activity which have not been superseded.

If we do not dwell with the wisdom of the past, then we assume that we are capable of settling everything better than any one has ever settled anything. Children think that way sometimes, and have to learn better. The Humanities bring adulthood.

In our very childish, very absurd world, adult judgment will do good. It need not be solemn, for adult laughter is good, whether in Aristophanes or in Herriman's cartoons. It need not be complicated, for greatness is seldom complicated. It need not be at the expense of anything else, for capability of judgment will bring with it an ease of assimilation, and ability to acquire and to eliminate, that will make future effort less tiring and more productive.

Living with what has not been superseded requires a certain amount of wit and wisdom, as does living on good terms with a great personality. Vicarious experience builds character in that it brings to our judgment the findings of those who have thought and wrought well. The Humanities are our best stimulation and guide to judgment.