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ABSTRACT

The author reflects on the declining appreciation of the humanities in light of the major role which technology plays in our lives today. Three issues related to this problem are identified: what educators should do about the loss of our literary heritage, what values operate in our technological society, and whether faith in man's unconquerable spirit is an adequate source of hope. Answers, or "a little good news," are sought in three 19th-century poems which present solutions to despair and pessimism. The author concludes that technology provides a means of transmitting traditional values, but in formats other than traditional literary style. He finds characteristics of wisdom and rationality in the Graeco-Roman humanist tradition and sees them as being more useful today than private selfish provision. The spirit of Don Quixote's quest illustrates that faith in man's spirit can triumph over despair. (AV)

TECHNOLOGY AND THE NATURE OF MAN -
A VIEW FROM THE HUMANITIES

By

John F. Stasny

An Occasional Paper

on

Man/Society/Technology

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Preface

This paper was presented as one in a series of seminars on Man, Society, and Technology, conducted by the program of Technology Education at West Virginia University during the 1973 summer session. Over fifty individuals, including faculty and students from the university as well as individuals associated with the university through other institutions and endeavors, participated in the seminars.

The seminars were dedicated to a better understanding of the modes of inquiry, basic assumptions, principles, and concepts used by members of various disciplines and professions as they pursue answers to questions concerning the nature of man and technology in relation to the problems and issues associated with ecology, work, theology, law, medicine, politics, education, and economics; and questions concerning values, technological assessment and forecasting.

One overwhelming conclusion was the realization that the complex issues and problems associated with technology are related directly to decisions which are functions of value systems. Values require examination and reassessment. The educated citizen of tomorrow can not be trained as a narrow specialist nor can the humanist remain technologically aloof or illiterate. Education for the future may mean a rebirth of the renaissance man and perhaps a reevaluation of the technologies and humanities and the creation of a new interdisciplinary effort called the "techmanities."

"Technology and the Nature of Man, A View from the Humanities" is an exploration of values and technology, with an admission of the failure of scholars and students in the humanities in addressing the critical value issues of contemporary society. Professor Stasny's reflections should provide the beginning of a dialogue from which the humanities might once again contribute on an equal basis with science and technology.

Paul W. DeVore
Morgantown, WV
September, 1976

A VIEW FROM THE HUMANITIES

John F. Stasny

I have given a View from the Humanities in this seminar on "Man, Society, and Technology"several times through the years, and every time I have appeared I have played the role of a Jeremiah or a Joe Betsflck--you know, that delightful gloomy character in the Lil' Abner comic strip who walks around with a black cloud over his head spreading disaster. My view from the humanities has been pessimistic. I have proclaimed the death of the humanities, the loss of the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition and the Greco-Roman heritage of rationality and humanism. I have lamented that the "Great Books" are no longer read, that the great ideas in the humanist tradition are no longer explored, that our cultural heritage has been rejected by those whom Bernard James has recently called the "learned barbarians." In the past I have relied on the pessimistic commentators on our technological society: Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Jacques Ellul, and others. I have quoted as a serious and unanswerable challenge the words of the French existentialist Albert Camus: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."

This time--amidst the energy crisis, the economic recession, and the post-Watergate disillusionment--I am determined to change my stance. I read in the Sunday, June 15, 1975 New York Times a long article announcing the revival of Arthur Miller's great modern American play, The Death of a Salesman, starring George C. Scott as Willie Loman, the salesman. The article makes the point that the play may be more meaningful to Americans now amidst lost jobs and economic depression than it ever has been since it first appeared in 1949, just after our victory in the Second World War and on the brink of twenty-five years of amazing technological progress and economic affluence. Willie Loman's tragedy is the tragedy of a man who loses his job after thirty-four years of service to the same firm, whose sons disappoint him, whose health fails him, and who finally commits suicide. It is the tragedy of the loss of the "great American dream." As I was thinking of The Death of a Salesman, I remembered a scene from the play. Willie Loman's world is starting to collapse around him and his son Biff comes in from a disastrous job interview:

> Biff: Let's hold on to the facts tonight, Pop. We're not going to get anywhere bullin' around...

Willy: (angrily) All right, now listen to me...
Biff: Why don't you let me finish?
Willy: I'm not interested in stories about the past or any crap of that kind because the woods are burning, boys, you understand? There's a big blaze going on all around. I was fired today.
Biff: (Shocked) How could you be?
Willy: I was fired, and I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother...

And so there it is; in my view from the Humanities this time "I'm looking for a little good news"--this may also be my shortest presentation in the history of this seminar!

To show you what my problem in finding a little good news is I decided on a little experiment. I have given you three poems to read (see Appendix). Can you identify the authors of the three poems? Do you recognize the allusions in "To a Friend" and "Dover Beach"? That is, who are the three men who prop the poet's mind in "To a Friend"; who is Sophocles, who is referred to in "Dover Beach"? Now, I do not intend this as in any way a "put down," but I wager that very few of you can answer these questions. Let us take our experiment farther. Each of the three poems presents a solution to the problem of despair or pessimism; can you put into your own words those solutions? If we were to take our experiment farther and ask whether any of you would feel confident in giving a critical appraisal of the merits of the poems,

would any of you be willing to try? I can predict that for most of you the experience of these poems is a rather meager one. I find this distressing--"little good news" here. You are highly educated people--graduate students--and almost unanimously unfamiliar with three well-known poems from our literary heritage. One of the suggested readings for this seminar is C. P. Snow's "The Two Cultures"; you have just had an example of what he is talking about.

In my search for a "little good news" from the humanities, I can not find any in what I fear is the almost total rejection of our literary heritage by the majority, even among the highly educated, of modern men and women. I wish as our session develops today we would talk about this problem: what are we as educators going to do about the loss of our literary heritage? The options are stated clearly in a fine little book called In Bluebeard's Castle published in 1971 by George Stiener. Stiener says:

> In the United States there have appeared versions of parts of the Bible and of Shakespeare in basic English and in strip-cartoon format....We are being asked to choose. Would we have something, at least, of the main legacy of our civilization made accessible to the general public of a modern, mass society? Or would we rather see the bulk of our literature, of our interior history, pass into the museum?

Perhaps, however, we can still find a little good news. Perhaps we can accept the loss of our literary heritage and say that the traditional values incorporated in that heritage are still alive and are transmitted through some other agency to the modern masses--after all, the humanities are important only in so far as they serve to mold men into better human beings, in so far as they serve to make individuals better able to form among themselves satisfying and mutually supportive societies, and in so far as they provide individuals and societies with a meaningful and purposeful existence. Technology provides us with all sorts of means--rapid transportation and communication, a multitude of technological marvels for feeding us, clothing us, and sheltering us--but the humanities are interested in ends, in answers to the question "why?," in providing values. What are the values that operate in our modern technological society? Where do these values come from? Are they traditional humanist values? This problem of values is the second problem I would like our session to explore. To illustrate what I would like to do, let's look at our three poems again and this time a little more closely. Let's take first "God's Grandeur." The poem was written about a hundred years ago (1877 to be exact) and yet it deals with

a very modern technological problem--environmental pollution. Note the values implicit in it. Hopkins writes with a Judeo-Christian sacramental respect for nature--"The world is charged with the grandeur of God." He writes also within a Judeo-Christian ethical context of moral responsibility: "Why do men then now not reck his rod?" God holds men morally responsible; men are "charged," i.e., held accountable for "all that is seared with trade; bleared smeared with toil." Finally, Hopkins expresses the Judeo-Christian optimism, the theological virtue of hope in divine providence: "the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods." Hopkins, in other words, brings to a modern technological problem the Judeo-Christian solution in our humanist tradition. Theologians talk about our era as the "post-Christian era." Hopkins' values gave meaning to efforts to eliminate pollution. What values operate in our current concerns with the environment?

"To a Friend" was written by Matthew Arnold in 1849, but he too seems very modern in his pessimism and his search for meaning and values. The poem asks where can one go for values in these bad days. And his answer is to go to the Greco-Roman humanist tradition of our Western cultural heritage. He finds his values first in

Homer, in the Odyssey, which is literature's greatest celebration of man's desire for adventure, exploration, and satisfaction of curiosity and in the Iliad, which incorporates within itself the ancient Greek's view of life in its infinite possibilities for joy and sorrow. He finds other values in Epictetus, the Roman slave, whose answer to "these bad days" is grim stoic resignation and acceptance. But most of all he finds values, or wisdom, in Sophocles, the author of Oedipus the King, who "saw life steadily and saw it whole." It seems that Sophocles was the first practitioner of systems analysis, of the ecosystems that Barry Commoner talks about in The Closed Circle. The Greco-Roman tradition emphasized man as the possessor of "imaginative reason"; rationality was its highest value. Does the heritage of this rationality still survive?

Finally, let us consider Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867), one of the most famous modern poems: What is its value system recommended as a response to a world that "Hath neither joy, nor love, nor light, / nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain"? Arnold says, "Ah, love, let us be true to one another." His value sounds like the cop-out, the opting out of the system to make private selfish provision. It's the "I've got mine,

Jack" attitude of an uninvolved, ad-hoc counter culture. It also sounds something like Voltaire's eighteenth-century advice in Candide that each one of us should cultivate our own gardens. Unfortunately, the option to withdraw into an egocentric isolation is less and less available. It is truer now than it was in the seventeenth century when John Donne said that "no man is an island entire of itself....Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." The sound of funeral bells, however, does not really seem appropriate in our search for a "little good news." But our world of technology apparently does not allow much of a place for a Polyanna or an Alfred E. Newman and his motto, "What, me worry!" If I must find "good news" though, perhaps I can find it in the humanist tradition of the "unconquerable spirit of man" or in the spirit of Don Quixote's quest for "the impossible dream." Let us make this our third problem for discussion: Does our good news lie in our faith that man is unconquerable and will escape from present dangers as he has so often before even though it be, as Thornton Wilder has it in his play, by The Skin of Our Teeth?

I'll conclude with the somber "good news" or optimism from Stiener's In Bluebeard's Castle which I mentioned earlier. Stiener concludes his book by saying:

> There are two obvious responses to [our present situation]. There is Freud's stoic acquiescence, his grimly tired supposition that human life was a cancerous anomaly, a detour between vast stages of organic repose, and there is the Nietzschean gaiety in the face of the inhuman, the tensed, ironic perception that we are, that we always have been, precarious guests in an indifferent, but always fascinating world....Personally, I feel most drawn to the gaia scienza, to the conviction, irrational, even tactless as it may be, that it is enormously interesting to be alive at this cruel, late stage in Western affairs.

APPENDIX - 3 POEMS

TO A FRIEND

Who prop, thou ask'st, in these bad days, my mind?--
He much, the old man, who, clearest-souled of men,
Saw the Wide Prospect, and the Asian Fen,
And Tmolus' Hill, and Smyrna Bay, though blind.
Much he, whose friendship I not long since won,
That halting slave, who in Nicopolis
Taught Arrian, when Vespasian's brutal son
Cleared Rome of what most shamed him. But be his
My special thanks, whose even-balanced soul,
From first youth tested up to extreme old age,
Business could not make dull, nor passion wild;
Who saw life steadily and saw it whole;
The mellow glory of the Attic stage,
Singer of sweet Colonus, and its child.

DOVER BEACH

The sea is calm tonight,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits;--on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegaean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled,
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

GOD'S GRANDEUR

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
  It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
  It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
  And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil,
  And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell--the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
  There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
  Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
  World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

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