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ABSTRACT

Intellectual refinement and spiritual evaluation have been the traditional goals of the humanities and should remain so. If these aims are given up, then the noble endeavors in the humanities such as sustained reflection, intensive research, careful scholarship, inspired teaching, deep learning, and serious discussion will all become discredited and eventually disappear. The reason the term "humanities" seems meaningless is because the activities undertaken in its name no longer stand for a unified set of principles or a coherent body of knowledge. In the past the aim of humanities education was the cultivation of free men and women--freed from ignorance and callousness. Today, many people interpret cultivation or the aim of cultivation as an imposition of arbitrary standards, an obstacle to personal expression, or even a limitation on student freedom. In place of cultivation, "awareness" is advocated. Humanities education is no longer an introduction to or an immersion in the best thought and knowledge. It is, instead, a collection of disconnected and often eccentric areas of inquiry. It is, therefore, not surprising that the humanities have so much trouble evoking the enthusiasm of scholars and teachers, capturing the allegiance of students, and gaining the financial support of public and private institutions. It is the responsibility of every generation of scholars and teachers not only to maintain the tradition of the humanities, but to extend and refine this tradition through new ideas and works and to see that the humanities are studied in a coherent and serious way. (HOD)

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

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"THE SHATTERED HUMANITIES"

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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The author Robertson Davies said that "the purpose of learning is to save the soul and enlarge the mind." I fear that there are not many people responsible for elementary, secondary, and higher education in America today who would be prepared to defend that statement.

The simplicity and starkness of the statement is striking; and, therefore, to many it is immediately suspect. It is not in keeping with the increasingly convoluted defenses of our educational system.

When most people think and talk of education in the humanities -- philosophy, history, literature, and so on -- they have other, more opaque things in mind. They talk about something called "personal development" and say it is desirable. They say that technical training is useful. They talk about the advantage of professional preparation. They may even regard political activism as a benefit to society or at least a "learning experience" for those who engage in it. But to the advocacy of intellectual refinement and spiritual elevation in the cause of human excellence, many would say no. They would insist that such refinement and elevation is anachronistic, confining, even oppressive. They have, as C.S. Lewis would put it, the horror of the same old thing. They are too contemporary to ratify an uncomplicated but ennobling view of education.

Yet, intellectual refinement and spiritual elevation are the traditional goals of the humanities and should remain so. We need these goals now as much as before. And, the question is, if we reject these goals, what better purposes could replace them? Survey the flabby defenses of education in our time, and you will conclude that Davies' formulation does not have a good competitor. Consider the weight of the formulation and its pedigree. Matthew Arnold said we need that education that enlarges the mind and life itself by putting us "into relation with our sense for conduct, our sense for beauty." What committee has improved on that? George Eliot wrote that excellence encourages us about life generally; it helps us to believe in the spiritual wealth of the world. What is, where is the better opinion? What commission has ever told us anything more appropriate -- and told us as well?

I believe that if we stop thinking of education in the humanities with these purposes in mind, the study of the humanities can easily become, as it has now become in many places, irrelevant -- and that the enterprise of the humanities, our enterprise, can become phony and empty. If we give up these aims, then noble endeavors in the humanities such as sustained reflection, intensive research, careful scholarship, inspired teaching, deep learning and serious discussion will all become discredited and eventually disappear. There are signs this already is happening.

I believe that the greatest threat to the humanities does not come from a tiny reduction of government support (which in turn represents a minuscule fraction of a single percentage point of support for the humanities overall in the nation). Nor is the threat from a lack of leadership on the part of educational administrators (though leadership matters). Nor is the greatest threat the indifference or hostility of many citizens to the humanities, for that indifference is understandable and it can be turned around. Rather, I believe the greatest threat to the humanities lies within -- within the boundaries of current practice and doctrine, or more accurately, non-doctrine.

Let me try briefly both to establish and illustrate this point. Is there any more telling indictment of much current practice in the humanities than to recognize that the term "humanities" is itself in danger of becoming meaningless? This isn't because the term is too difficult to understand. It isn't. Nor because it often is confused with humaneness or secular humanism. These confusions are easily corrected. Rather, the reason the term "humanities" seems meaningless is because the activities undertaken in its name don't seem to add up to anything; they don't define anything. The studies we associate with the humanities today no longer stand for a unified set of principles or a coherent body of knowledge.

The disciplines, the areas of study that used to be at the heart not only of the humanities but of all education, have become frighteningly fragmented, even shattered. Rigorous modes of inquiry in organized fields of knowledge have been replaced by a jumble of indiscriminate offerings. It is a jumble that proceeds from no rationale and offers no guidance or coherence for the mind or imagination -- no position from which to assess the human condition. It offers neither the educational institution nor the student what Flannery O'Connor called "the promise of being whole."

The great works of the humanities possess an unparalleled power to instill and evoke powerful ideas as well as noble sentiments. To read those books, to reflect on them, to discuss them, to write about them -- these activities were once thought to be considered essential steps in the development of a person's mind, spirit, and sensibility. In the past, the aim of humanities education was the cultivation of free men and women -- men and women freed from ignorance and callousness. It was the process by which a person grew by acquainting himself with the great traditions of civilization, traditions that were considered his proper inheritance.

One had to labor to possess what was inherited, as Goethe said, but the labor of cultivation was based on a faith in, and conviction about, the enterprise. It was strengthened by coherence and it was sustained by consensus. But now, the

faith has disappeared, the coherence has disintegrated, and the consensus has been shattered. Today, many people interpret cultivation or the aim of cultivation as an imposition of arbitrary standards, an obstacle to personal expression, or even a limitation on student freedom.

So, what have we put in its place? In place of cultivation, we advocate something called "awareness", which may be defined as a state of indiscriminate perception and uninformed judgment. Instructors in many places consciously have ceased aiming at such cultivation and have opted for awareness. Some teachers have reduced themselves to awareness facilitators, awareness guides, multi-cultural travel agents.

Humanities education is no longer an introduction to, and immersion in, the best thought and known. It is, instead, a collection of disconnected and often eccentric areas of inquiry. It is all too familiar to see humanities offerings in the following shape: an obscure interpretation of literature here, a skinny piece of somebody's history there, a dose of a few philosophical dilemmas and conundrums, a dash of anthropological relativism, and then an exhortation to think of all this in connection with current events.

What does this add up to? From what rationale for education does this proceed? With this in front of us and our students and the broader public, it is not surprising that the

humanities have so much trouble evoking the enthusiasm of scholars and teachers, capturing the allegiance of students, and gaining the financial support of public and private institutions.

What are the causes of this sorry state of affairs? There is, first, and one must be candid about it, a kind of perverse embarrassment one sees in many places about the achievements of our civilization. As corollary, there is embarrassment about the intellectual, moral, and spiritual taproots out of which it grew. There is, consequently, a loss of faith in the tradition of the humanities, a tradition through which our civilization both kept stock of itself and came to know what was worth defending. Related too, as cause, is the decline of educational quality, and of course, the rise of intellectual as well as moral relativism. It is easier to doubt than to believe, but it is perilous to education to make doubt the animating spirit of a curriculum.

In this regard, I recently read an article by several college administrators asserting, in a self-congratulatory way, that the proper aim of their general education program was to encourage students to think relativistically. Now surely we want more than that. Surely encouraging students to avoid judgment is not the way to encourage students to think seriously. But again, what is the promise, the hope, the high end of an education that urges students to think that all ideas

have the same value? Why would one bother? Why spend the money? Or the time?

I am reminded of a student I recently met who told me that he wasn't taking any religion courses at his university because no one in the religion department believed anything, and he wasn't taking any philosophy courses because no one in the philosophy department recommended anything. Students want and need to know where educated people stand, not on passing issues but on matters of enduring importance, matters that always have been the concern of the humanities: courage, fidelity, friendship, honor, love, justice, goodness, ambiguity, time, power, faith.

We can see the symptoms of the fragmentation of the humanities everywhere. Almost all requirements are gone. Where we see efforts to restore them, we see that most of these efforts are ineffective, murky, half-hearted. Buzzing around them and in them we see the proliferation of unrelated, mediocre, and uninspired offerings "in the humanities," where any course is defended on grounds that it might be "interesting" (like a new wine or cracker dip), never on grounds that what it will offer is true, or good, or noble. Increasingly, we read or try to read self-isolating vocabularies that abound within sub-disciplines. There seems to be a competition for complete unintelligibility. A popular movement in literary criticism denies that there are any texts

at all. If there are no texts, there are no great texts. And if there are no texts, there is no argument for reading.

In many settings, course after course caters to contemporary fascinations. Daniel Boorstin calls this "presentism." I call it being mesmerized by the moment. Of course the issues of our time are necessarily our issues; but the humanities address enduring issues, and the enduring, as we must always remember, is contemporary for every generation. But, instead of the discipline of tested excellence, our students and many of our teachers and scholars serve the tyranny of fashion. We have yielded to the bullying of those fascinated with the merely contemporary.

What ought to be our response? I believe that, if we want to reaffirm and revive the tradition of the humanities, we need to remember that regeneration always comes from within. Those who know most and care most about the humanities are scholars and teachers. Individually and through their professional organizations, they can and should demand of educators, of public officials, of colleagues, of students, that the humanities be studied in a coherent and serious way.

In talking about coherence and seriousness, of course, we need to recognize that our choice is not between a static curriculum on the one hand and an anarchic one on the other. We do not have to choose a curriculum that is frozen for all

time, a single list of books that ignores the significant works of our era or the great works of other cultures. That petrified list is not the only choice, any more than the current style of "anything goes" is the only choice. Such a choice is a case of insufficient options.

After all, it is the responsibility of every generation of scholars and teachers not only to maintain the tradition of the humanities, but to extend and refine this tradition through new ideas and works. But if these new ideas and works are to be regarded not as contributions to the tradition, not as things that carry and move it forward, but as substitutions for it, then they must take on the responsibility of explaining to us why they are better, why they should take the place of what was there before. And these new works will not prevail unless they can withstand criticism, reflection, and argument. Subject to this, many of these works cannot and will not stand. They will pass into richly deserved obscurity.

Great works, important bodies of knowledge, and powerful methods of inquiry constitute the core of the humanities and sustain the intellectual, moral, and political traditions of our civilization. And I think that it is to them that we turn when we decide that the purpose of learning is indeed to save the soul and enlarge the mind.

If we neglect, as we are neglecting, the essential core and rationale of the humanities, if we permit the fragmentation of the humanities to continue, then we will jeopardize everything we care most about. And as a final irony, we thereby may lose the very language needed to describe, and the very perspective needed to grasp, the significance of the catastrophe we let happen.