

THE USES OF SCHOLARSHIP

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Source: *CLA Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (June, 1972), pp. 393-400

Published by: College Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44321589>

Accessed: 01-11-2020 20:09 UTC

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JOURNAL
A Quarterly

Official Publication of The College Language Association

VOLUME XV

JUNE, 1972

NUMBER 4

THE USES OF SCHOLARSHIP *

By RUTH N. HORRY

Most institutions of higher education subject themselves to, or are subjected to a decennial self-study in depth. This kind of inventory, though often regarded with apprehension or disinterest by most of the faculty, does serve a useful function. Institutions gain an idea, sometimes superficial or even inaccurate, of where they have been, where they are, where they intend to go, and how they plan to get there. Organizations should also undergo a periodic self-examination to determine whether they are functioning in the social and academic ambience of two or three decades ago, or are meaningfully involved in the significant currents of today's world.

Since the founding of the College Language Association in 1937, the image of America has undergone a radical change. All of us are aware of this change and its causes. The impact of the forces of a highly technical nation on its people and institutions has brought about almost more than we can cope

* Presidential address delivered at The College Language Association's Thirty-Second Annual Convention, Cunningham Auditorium, Morris Brown College, Atlanta, Georgia, Thursday morning, April 13, 1972.

with. Social, political, economic, religious, and even or especially academic chaos have left their marks and we remain in confusion. The population explosion has been accompanied by an explosion of knowledge and what has been called "the ebullient expansionism of the intellectual community," this in spite of the fact that there is a persistent drop-out of students from the prep schools, some of which are closing. In a pessimistic yet realistic vein, Peter Schrag comments that the nation possesses a knowledge establishment greater than it can use, that there is a decline in the belief in the possibilities of research and education, and a lessening of faith in science and brainwork.¹ In spite of this assessment, the fact remains that our most potent tool for the resolution of current chaos is the mind, properly attuned to the fundamental needs of man.

The traditional concept of the university as the center of learning for learning's sake is slowly yielding to the pressures of twentieth-century events. No longer does the university seek to remain enshrined within the confines described by Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of a University*. In addition to being a community of scholars devoted to the preservation and advancement of knowledge and the transmission of the cultural heritage to new generations, the university is becoming utilitarian to serve the public need.

This new emphasis is observed primarily in the scientific disciplines and the social sciences. The impetus given to these areas by both governmental and private funding has had the effect of making a step-child of the humanities. Once the original core of the university, they have been displaced from the center to the periphery of higher education. Where lies the fault? Who is really to blame? If science has devoted its total effort to our desire for things, to the prolongation of life, to the survival of civilization in its material aspects, to exploring the outer reaches of the universe, it has simply worked to fulfill defined objectives within its sphere of purpose.

On every hand, we read or hear about the growing imbalance between technological advances and the improvement of hu-

¹ "What's Happened to the Brain Business?" *Saturday Review* (August 7, 1971), 15.

man relationships. In 1963, Robert Graves delivered a lecture at MIT entitled, "A Poet's Investigation of Science." He spoke of the weakness in the technologico-humanitarian symbiosis and condemned the exploitation of discoveries which rob life of its savor. Particularly, he spoke of the upsetting of nature's balance by the irresponsible use of chemicals, the weakening, because of labor-saving devices, of man's power to cope with moral or physical problems, and the dulling of the imagination by commercialization.² Today, MIT scientists, aware of the abuses of technology, are urging that the university become a pace-setter for social change, and an institution with compassion.³ This same attitude is echoed by the young activist scientists. Not at all facetiously, Kenneth B. Clark, president of the American Psychological Association, suggests the use of a drug for politicians to prevent the abuse of power in public office. Such a drug, he says, might help all of mankind by strengthening our positive human characteristics, thereby eliminating racism and war.⁴

Can we, as a group trained in the humanistic disciplines, be less concerned or do less than the scientists to erase the imbalance and restore the humaneness of humanity? If a super-abundance of technology has dulled our humanistic sensibilities, perhaps we as humanists have neglected our *raison d'être*. Carl E. Schorske, a European historian, remarked on the optimism of the Age of Enlightenment in its belief in the natural beneficence of knowledge. He said that by the end of the nineteenth century, however, intellectuals had slipped into moral and civic irresponsibility, away from Kant's universalism and into his system of scholarly autonomy.⁵ If the humanist finds himself out of things, it is because he has retreated into his own specialized world, uses his scholarship for personal edification in the eyes of other humanists, and continues to cling to the idea of learning for learning's sake. Where do we, as

² *Saturday Review* (December 7, 1963), 85.

³ Victor Gunn, "MIT Trying to Foster New Respectability for Science." *The Washington Post*, Reprinted in *The Durham Morning Herald* (September 5, 1971), 14D.

⁴ Frank Carey, *The Durham Morning Herald* (September 5, 1971), 15A.

⁵ "Professional Ethos and Public Crisis: A Historian's Reflections," *PMLA*, 83 (September, 1968), 980.

a community of humanists, stand in the face of this denigration of humanistic scholarship? Does the College Language Association dare to evaluate itself? Do other similar and more prestigious organizations dare? How have we made use of our scholarship and the tools of research? Are we simply talking among ourselves for ourselves, or do significant ideas radiate toward a larger sphere of individuals? Are we a closed society, or do we really realize the invalidity of knowledge for the sake of knowledge?

At this point in history, it becomes important to redefine the uses of humanistic scholarship in a confused society. Philosophically, the new, concerned, and involved humanism should have as its goal the resolution of the disorders of the human spirit. More specifically, the new humanism must work actively toward establishing the fundamental dignity of each human being, because of his humanness. It must re-emphasize the real and sustaining values of human existence. It must indicate the bonds which should exist among peoples of dissimilar cultures, races, and political ideologies. It must encourage the old virtues of tolerance, understanding, and fair play. It must foster the recognition of the true, the good, and the beautiful wherever found and by whomever presented. These old and time-worn clichés must be rejuvenated and made meaningful and significant. There is entirely too much human stratification based on invalid premises. Our entire effort should be directed toward human solidarity. This is the work of the intellectuals: poets, teachers, linguists, novelists, essayists, and all persons engaged in scholarly endeavor.

Though one of his goals in eighteenth-century France was to insure support for the mechanical arts, Diderot was also attempting to remove the elitist label from the intellectuals. Because of their facility with language, their role was to show the worth of the artisans and others who worked with their hands. The whole thrust of the last part of that century reflected what Paul Hazard termed the "*crise de la conscience européenne*," and was an effort to establish the value of the individual.

In this era of negative ideologies and values, we are witnessing a drastic breaking away from traditional modes of thought

and action, quite justifiable in some areas. One could make a rather lengthy catalogue of the anti-labels which characterize much of the thinking of twentieth-century man. We recognize that this is the thrust of the new and sometimes older generation, and a by-product of the social revolution, if not the revolution itself. It seems important that some kind of meaning and purpose be restored to the fact of existence, assuming that we do exist. It would be exceedingly naïve to believe that as teachers in the area of the humanities we could reverse patterns of thought and action. However, some effort should be made to mitigate the effects of that which we as adults and intellectuals have helped to create by acts of commission or omission. There are, of course, partisans on both sides of the question of the involvement of Academe in non-academic affairs. At the rate we are moving, the whole question may become purely academic. Since a teacher never can know how far his influence will extend in the lives of his students, he should, within the discipline and through his scholarship, emphasize humanism as something of value.

In this organization, we are poets, teachers, essayists, linguists, journalists, and critics. We are a part of the great force of twentieth-century intellectuals. Teilhard de Chardin set forth our role in the title of a speech, "Sauvons l'humanité." He was speaking about civilization besieged by evil, and the change in the general structure of the human conscience. In the face of such change, he said, one could not remain indifferent.⁶

Foremost in the hierarchy of intellectuals is the poet. It is his vocation to turn chaos into order. It is he who has the sensibility and the intuition to see things as they are and as they should be. Paul Claudel, Teilhard de Chardin, Saint-John Perse, and Léopold Senghor concur on these points. According to Claudel, the poet imitates the gestures of the Creator by establishing harmony and unity. Teilhard de Chardin, in an essay entitled "How to Understand and Utilize Art," writes that the more the world becomes rational and mechanical, the more it requires "poets" as the saviours and the ferment of

⁶ *Cahiers Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), III, pp. 67-97.

its personality. It is art which represents the zone where new-born truths are condensed before being formulated.⁷ Saint-John Perse sees the poet as a Prince nourished by the breath of earth, the Healer and the Assessor at the sources of the spirit, an adventurer of the soul. In this, he is very close to Senghor who stresses the affinity of the poet with the earth as the source for relating that which is basic for the expression of larger spheres of thought. This is especially true for the African poet who identifies himself with the soil and every other manifestation of the life forces which animate the universe. This contact creates within the poet his mystique of intuition.

This statement on poets is important because all of us are poets in the sense that we engage to some extent in intellectual creativity. As teachers of literature, the measure of our effectiveness is determined by the degree to which we are able to create new ideas and revitalize old ones. Literature is a point of fusion for many disciplines: anthropology, history, religion, ethnology, philosophy—in fact, for almost any area in which knowledge, reason, imagination, memory, and intuition are utilized in describing the heritage and the activities of man. Through the centuries, this broad scope has allowed literature to moralize, propagandize, polemicize; to support or condemn ideologies, isms, or social conditions. In the teaching of literature, formalistic criticism notwithstanding, we may extrapolate that which has significance in regards to the universal dignity of man. Both teacher and critic must give priority to what Eliot calls the extra-esthetic qualities of literature. Those ideas which portray the tenacity of the human spirit, which reveal the splendor of man's intellect and his capacity for good; those ideas which condemn man's inhumanity, his perfidy, his penchant for violence; and those which delineate or suggest modes of action for the improvement of human relationships, all possess an essential humanism.

The creative writers among us have therefore a centuries-old precedent to validate the use of their talents in the cause of man. Black writers also have the model of Aimé Césaire who wrote in order to expose actualities, to highlight the tragedy

⁷ *Cahiers*, III, p. 103.

of his countrymen, and to bring about respect for human values. Similarly, Senghor invokes the black artist to work "to restore the unity of Man and of the World: to bind the flesh to the spirit, man to his fellowman, the pebble to God. In other words," he continues, "the real to the surreal, with Man not at the center, but as the hinge, the navel of the World."⁸

In recounting or portraying the black experience, many of our artists rely heavily on the sensational and the naturalistic. As artists, they express their experience and what they know at first hand, and this experience is often raw and sensational. The purpose of this kind of writing may be to shock or to reveal the effects of brutalization in this society. It would seem that for those among us who are committed to under-girding the black ethos, the humane aspects of the black experience need greater emphasis. That which diminishes the black personality scarcely needs to be perpetuated. Art, though based in reality, must transcend it in order to be efficacious. In a 1971 CLA lecture, Phil Petrie of Morrow and Company warned about the increasing number of books that deal with the pathology of blacks rather than with their humanity. James Weldon Johnson, in the Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921), suggests that the black poet find a form to express the spirit of the race in which he will use symbols from within rather than from without, and thus he would be able to voice the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations. Teilhard de Chardin says that Art materializes the anxieties, hopes, and enthusiasms of man, and gives to these *élans* a sensible form, idealizes and intellectualizes them.⁹ Yevtushenko likens art to a rainbow which touches both sides of the river. The higher purpose of art must be to unify, harmonize, and humanize.

Senghor speaks of the necessity of balance in recounting the black experience, balance between instinct and imagination, reason and intuition, in order to present a more humanistic position. Further, he advises that man must be creative in his cultural activity which is revolutionary action. This action, this creativity must transform not only social and eco-

⁸ "Ce que l'homme noir apporte," in *Négritude et Humanisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1939), p. 38.

⁹ *Cahiers*, III, p. 102.

conomic structures but also the ideological superstructures. This cultural creativity goes beyond the bourgeois concept of culture as a literary or artistic ornament and diversion. It must modify relationships among men.¹⁰ I have cited from the writings of Léopold Sédar Senghor several times because he uses his scholarship to effect change; because he is trying to restructure a society; because he is concerned with undergirding the City, the Nation of tomorrow.

In this paper, it has been my purpose to underscore the necessity for putting our scholarship to work, and to suggest some means of making it more effective. Language, as the major tool of our scholarship, is the focal point of culture. It is the expression of culture and ranges from the oral language of the several sub-cultures in America to the refined speech of the intellectuals. Those of us who make up the scholarly community must be accountable, and must remain aware of a responsibility to order, to preserve, and to transmit those facets of culture which distinguish, ennoble, and illumine our humanism.

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¹⁰ "Le Problème de la culture," in *Négritude et Humanisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1939), p. 95.