# LOOKING AT THE HUMANITIES FROM THE OUTSIDE*

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I am glad to be here today and to be received so kindly by a group of humanists. For a scientist a nice reception is rather rare these days; most of the time, especially among some of the more "advanced" of our young people, to be a scientist is to be hardly human and in fact to be the antithesis of anything human.

The title of this lecture presents me with a difficult task, because my life experiences, as a biologist by profession and a political activist out of necessity, have only occasionally brought me close to the field of the humanities. If something I say does not make sense, please attribute it to ignorance rather than to ill will.

A few weeks ~~ago~~ I had the fortune to be at a meeting with the German-French philosopher Eric Weil, and the essence of his talk, shortly to appear in Daedalus, impressed me, ~~especially~~ because it connected with the subject of today's talk. Weil's point was that the humanities are essentially a study of morals. I do not know whether you would agree with that, but I was thrilled by the idea that the humanities can be the source of ethical principles. It seemed reasonable and exciting to think that, if the humanities have a live human interest, if they are not to be just the New Criticism or something of that kind, it is because they are an inquiry -- and a normative inquiry -- into what people think and do in their own life and in relation to one another. And not only now, but throughout history, at any of the times that scholars, either as students of literature, or as historians, or as philosophers, have cared to explore. It seemed to me that here was an exciting

central thought, and I started asking myself whether the idea that the humanities are the study of morals can provide some sort of criterion for moral life. It seemed possible at least to formulate the hypothesis that a critical achievement, for a humanist specifically, for scholars in general, and for any human being is to fuse his scholarship or his work with his entire life, so that his professional integrity permeates his entire life. Could that be formulated as a goal? Is that what Weil had in mind?

I came back from that meeting mulling over in my mind the thought that a positive commitment to the exercise of values derived from scholarship is a proper ideal for the intellectual. Scholarship may be scholarship in the sciences or scholarship in the humanities; it is certainly closer to ethical values in the humanities. So I asked myself what my relevant experiences have been in the field of the humanities. Had I met humanists who came close to the ideal of a fusion between scholarship and practice? I could think of several, but two examples came to mind as particularly relevant, two sets of experiences almost fifty years apart in my life.

The first example was a man who had the greatest influence on my intellectual and emotional development, my teacher of Italian and Latin literature in senior high school. In Italy we had a somewhat different type of high school education than ours in the United States. I had the fortune to be in one of the best schools in the country, with teachers who were almost all scholars, or productive mathematicians, or philosophers. Augusto Monti was the name of this man. He was the author of a number of books, including several

novels, but especially he was a fearless man, a disciple of the liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce, and a staunch enemy of fascism. In 1926, Mussolini clamped down on all civil liberties in Italy, closed the opposition newspapers and the opposition parties, and had a certain number of his political opponents beaten up and killed, including Pietro Gobetti, the founder of the movement "Justice and Liberty." This name derives from a poem by Giosuè Carducci, from the line "Dear to me always were the last surviving goddesses Justice and Liberty." I remember (I was 14 years old then) that on the day when even to mention the forbidden parties was to risk one's skin and possibly one's life, this teacher walked into class, opened the book at the page of that poem, and read it. As he arrived to that crucial line tears streamed over his face. I was an ignorant and naive child and was puzzled by all that, but I inquired at home and found out. I think that none of us in that class was ever the same person again for having witnessed that act of courage -- an act that had the added impact of being tied not only to personal integrity but to professional integrity as well. The teacher would teach poetry and freedom, no matter what any government might say. The two were bound together. We were taught, not so much by words as by context, that once you had read the Greek tragedies, and Dante, and the other great writers of the past, if you had read them with intellectual integrity, you would never again be able to act without asking yourself if your actions belonged within that canon of human standards.

The next case history concerns a more recent association, one that is also closer to you. In the last several years I have had

the privilege of being associated a number of times with the great American historian Henry Steele Commager. He is a man whose life is part of his writing because it is part of American history. A few years ago he was one of a small group of people, including my wife, who went to the Department of Justice to present a petition in support of Dr. Benjamin Spock and others who had been indicted on some trumped-up conspiracy charges. When an Assistant Attorney General asked: "What are you here for?" Commager simply replied: "We are doing a bit of American history." It was more than touching; it was a perfect example of the interpenetration of scholarship and life.

Such examples are rather rare. They are rare, I believe, not because people are fearful or do not have integrity, but because the structure of our society, the fabric of our life is becoming disruptive, is tearing us apart, so that the ability to make one's life coincide with the content of one's professional scholarship and integrity becomes increasingly difficult. It becomes difficult to integrate one's scholarship into what I may call a pattern of connectivity between one's work and one's social activities as well as between different individuals and different groups in different areas of work. As a result of this lack of connectivity there emerges between society and the world of scholarship a situation resembling what Herman Hesse portrayed in Magister Ludi: the intellectuals playing a bead game in a castle named Castalia, while the rest of the world goes on living in a way that Castalia never cares to deal with but which determines the course of the real events. As long as this

separation exists, the greatest success that a magister ludi can achieve -- in Castalia as in our world -- is to receive a Nobel Prize or some other recognition with no relation to the life of society. This is, therefore, an empty success.

I have tried in my own naive way to react against this state of affairs within my own small bailiwick, to fight the trend of separation between life and scholarship as well as the separation between branches of scholarship. Apart from my involvement in politics, I did for four years (although not in the last three) take a group of first-year graduate students in biology -- brilliant students since our department has the reputation of being one of the best in the country -- and, realizing that they risked to have no time to read anything but science, I set up a literature seminar. The group came every Sunday night to my home. My wife, who is a psychologist, and I, and each of the students had to read a certain assignment, not casually chosen but part of a plan trying to trace through world literature some line of thought that we believed was relevant to the human condition, more specifically as seen by a biologist today. One year, for example, we started to trace the existentialist anguish from Sophocles through Lucretius and Saint Augustine, through the Middle Ages from Dante to Pascal, to the 19th Century French and Russian novels, and we finished with Joyce, using Albert Camus' The Rebel as a guide throughout. This was a tremendously exciting experience despite the handicap of my profound ignorance. Yet with the arrogance of ignorance I did not worry too much whether what we did was wise. What mattered was what the students were extracting

out of me and I was extracting out of them and what we were absorbing from those books working together as biologists -- our common anguish, our unity.

The main reason why this seminar has not continued in the last few years is relevant to today's topic. I started finding that those among our students who were interested in literature seemed to be infected with irrationalism. They were fascinated with the Bhagavad Gita and other aspects of oriental thinking and religions. Now I see nothing wrong with this literature as literature, but I find it irrelevant to the "connecting" purpose of my seminars. I find it fascinating, in fact, but completely irrelevant to my human experience in our society. I enjoy reading it for education, but I did not feel that I wanted to encourage these students to spend hours on it. That was probably just my limitation, but that is how it ended.

Yet I still believe that the responsibility to create bridges, to generate connectivity, to search for unity hidden in the variety of our tasks and our function is a major responsibility and, if I am not pursuing it in that way, I still try to pursue it in others.

But there are some powerful forces in our society that militate against connectivity, forces that make for fragmentation. The first one is the complexity of our social organization. There is no question that no one person can master this complexity, and complexity can actually be used to prevent us from wanting to master reality. For example, there is the claim of certain types of natural or social scientists that what they are doing (often for the government) is too complicated for others to understand. They

have the key and they alone. This is what we had to fight in the late 50's in the battle to get an atom bomb test ban.

Next there is the fragmentation by specialization, which is different and also dangerous. It takes the form that we just have to concentrate more and more on our own tasks if we are to do our job competently at all. If I have to know all that mass of biological literature and to understand each of the experiments, I obviously just have no time to read PMLA or the New York Review of Books or the Monthly Review. Professionalism militates against culture and political involvement. This fragmentation by specialization can be fought. Our role as teachers can help.

Then there is another fragmentation, which I shall call fragmentation due to noise. By noise I mean the irrelevant input that our society produces and sells and thrives on, the TV programs, the radio in every car (I have to pay $15 when I buy a car in order to have them remove the radio) -- and even the faculty meetings. I suspect my criticism of mass input has an element of elitism, but that is not what I mean. I believe that we can teach our students, we can impress on them the importance of not accepting useless input, irrelevance, distraction. Why should mass media be allowed to distract us (except when we are very tired or depressed) when there are so many books waiting to be read? Why should one read the funnies when there is so much good writing available and even so much good walking to do? I have the feeling that we can do something about this problem. This is where the college comes in.

A few years ago, I authored together with my wife an article entitled "The University: Ivory Tower, Service Station, or Frontier Post?" You will guess, of course, that we were not campaigning for the ivory tower; nor were we proposing that a college should be only a service station (although I have nothing against service stations when I need them). What we meant by frontier post was that the college is and must be in the forefront of society's struggle for progress. I do not imply that the college can be the place where the battles of society are fought. That would be ridiculous: the battles of society are fought in the social, political, economic arenas. But colleges and universities can be the place in which people are made aware of the struggles of society, of the forces within society. Social inquiry studies can be a powerful force in the program of a college. But these studies should not in my opinion be separate from the traditional curriculum, they should be integrated closely with the teaching of literature, of philosophy, of history, of the sciences, and even of what they call political science -- whatever that may be.

The college can in many ways be the place where the disruptive forces, the disconnective forces of society can be fought. But here colleges must be careful, because they are subject to opposing tendencies. On the one hand, the traditional departmentalization in terms of subject matter tends to become a source of compartmentalization in intellectual terms. When this happens, it plays into the hands of the disruptive forces in society. This is the argument commonly heard against the departmental structure. On the other hand, we must remember that in the colleges and universities the departments

are the keepers of the professional quality, the watchdogs of intellectual discipline. But this does not mean that they have to function in isolation. They can and should function in integration. For example -- and this is by no means a unique example at M.I.T. -- I am trying to organize, together with another biologist, a chemist, and a humanist, a one-year integrated course in which the students will study organic chemistry, biology, biochemistry and genetics in a coordinate fashion tied in with relevant studies of literature, philosophy of science, and sociology. If nothing else, students might emerge from such a course capable of comprehending both the scientific realities and the sociological distortion of current arguments about race and I.Q.

The role of the college as a frontier post, in other words, can be to help create a world in which the kind of morality of which I spoke earlier, the morality that stems from the integrity of one's scholarship and the fusion of one's scholarship with one's social life, is more generally practiced.

In the struggle to bring about a greater fusion of intellectual and social morality, one must fight a series of corruptions. I mentioned earlier a series of forces in society that tend to disrupt connectivity. But now I am talking about forces that tend to corrupt and destroy the integrity of the individual. And these are forces that can be fought from the university.

First, there is corruption by trivialization: trivialization of life, that is, the structure in society that tries to make ourselves and our children into consumers, people whose function is to keep an

economy going by consuming things they don't want, don't need, and cannot afford. This sort of trivialization goes deeper than just the waste, in the sense that if you keep wanting things that do not fulfill any function in your intellectual growth, in your intellectual integrity, you become corrupted in the exercise of that integrity. This is something that college must train students against, something whose degrading futility it must expose. And if it is not done in the departments of economics, if it is not done in the departments of sociology, it can be done by humanists in the departments of English, in the departments of philosophy, and even by teachers of science.

The second one I could call the corruption by robotization. By this I mean the instillation of ideas that are to be accepted emotionally, without critical analysis, such as nationalism and national superiority, racism and racial superiority -- that human differences are somehow a source of social contempt rather than of curiosity and excitement. This, of course, goes directly to what I said of the integrity of the individual. The racist, for example, is not a person who hates others. The racist is a person who, because he has been taught to despise someone else, continuously asks himself the question, am I contemptible to others? As soon as one thinks of others as inferiors, one raises the question of one's own inferiority. He who believes that Vietnamese are expendable is asking the question, am I expendable? In fact, he is. If he goes along with Lyndon Johnson, if he goes along with Richard Nixon, he is expendable. Their actions put him on the level of those whom they destroy.

The third corruption is corruption by intimidation. Let me just give you an example. In the last few weeks before the presidential election I was involved in collecting names for a newspaper advertisement denouncing the Nixon Administration. A distinguished physician associated with a prominent medical school was rather enthusiastic when asked to put his name on the advertisement. But then he called and asked to have his name taken off, because he had submitted an application for a large research grant from the government and feared that the Administration, if they saw his name on the ad, might take revenge. I consider this as an example of corruption by intimidation. By many more or less covert acts, either purposefully or by lack of wisdom, the Administration had spread the fear that revenge might be taken on its critics.

Nothing scares me more than that. Nothing is more debilitating to the integrity of individuals and to the morality of the commonwealth.

When I set the correction of corrupting influences as a task for the colleges, and more specifically for the stewardship of the humanists in the colleges, I am well aware that it is a hard task. It is much harder than taking a group of students and helping them over a hurdle in their intellectual development. It is to help them also to become better men and women, ~~and~~ better citizens, and wiser creators of their future world. It is a hard job indeed and one that requires a great deal of patience. But it is a patience of a special kind, a patience made not of resignation but of confidence of success.

As I was thinking about this lecture some days ago, I happened to read the Nobel Prize address by Pablo Neruda. In that address he cited the following line of a poem by Rimbaud that I had not read for at least 20 years: "At dawn, armed with a burning patience, we shall enter the resplendent city." I think it is a marvellous line. The vision of the poet is not a promise, of course, it is not a program. It is like a motto on a flag. I believe it is a flag under which, humanists and scientists, we all can march proudly.