

HUMANE LETTERS AND MODERN FRAGMENTATION

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■ More than a hundred and twenty years ago, John Henry Newman, in his letters on the Tamworth Reading Room, predicted the decay of civilization that would result from the divorce of secular and religious knowledge. He delineated that mistaken and presumptuous application of the "scientific method" to morals, politics and human ends and means to which we now apply the derogatory term "scientism." The subject is examined further, of course, in *The Idea of a University*.

Newman's high and powerful criticism of the fallacies of Bentham, Brougham and Peel was the work of a man of letters with all the eloquence and insight conferred by intimacy with the great heritage of our culture, from Homer and Job to Shakespeare and Dryden. Newman was philosopher and theologian and polemicist, but pre-eminently he was the man of letters he himself describes in his lecture on Literature (1858):

A great author, Gentlemen, is not one who merely has a *copia verborum*, whether in prose or verse, and can, as it were, turn on at his will any number of splendid phrases and swelling sentences;

✓ The first of two addresses on politics and the university delivered at the convention of the National Newman Club Federation, Pittsburgh, Pa., August 28, 1962. Mr. Kirk, assistant professor of history of civilization at Michigan State College, is generally regarded as a spokesman for the conservative position. In the second address (see p. 11), Jerome N. Eller, who would prefer to shun the "liberal" label, speaks as a "practitioner on the art of politics."

but he is one who has something to say and knows how to say it. I do not claim for him, as such, any great depth of thought, or breadth of view, or philosophy, or sagacity, or knowledge of human nature, or experience of human life, though these additional gifts he may have, and the more he has of them the greater he is; but I ascribe to him, as his characteristic gift, in a large sense the faculty of Expression. He is master of the two-fold Logos, the thought and the word, distinct, but inseparable from each other. He may, if so be, elaborate his compositions, or he may pour out his improvisations, but in either case he has but one aim, which he keeps steadily before him, and is conscientious and single-minded in fulfilling. That aim is to give forth what he has within him; and from his very earnestness it comes to pass that, whatever be the splendor of his diction or the harmony of his periods, he has with him the charm of an incommunicable simplicity. . . . He writes passionately, because he feels keenly; forcibly, because he conceives vividly; he sees too clearly to be vague; he is too serious to be otiose; he can analyze his subject, and therefore he is rich; he embraces it as a whole and in its parts, and therefore he is consistent; he has a firm hold of it, and therefore he is luminous. . . . He expresses what all feel, but all cannot say; and his sayings pass into proverbs among his people, and his phrases become household words and idioms of their daily speech, which is tessellated with the rich fragments of his language.

As Newman emphasizes repeatedly in *The Idea of a University*, literature is the foundation of any university; and so this conference, concerned with "The University City" and the fragmentation of modern culture, does well to turn for healing to the works of one of the masters of English prose: to Newman, who knew that the logos is at once idea and expression.

Now the purpose of humane letters is not amusement, or self-expression, or beauty of style, or even jobs for professors of English. At many American universities and colleges, one might suspect that the liberal arts were intended simply to occupy the time of young people incapable of studying anything else. Yet this unpleasant phenomenon is not the true study of humane letters, but only one aspect of modern intellectual decadence and fragmentation.

■ The real end of great literature is to teach us what it is to be a man: to depict the norms of human existence. From the Book of Job and the tragedies

of Sophocles to the criticism of Samuel Johnson and the allegories of Hawthorne, the aim of humane letters has been ethical. "The enduring things," as Mr. T. S. Eliot calls them—the standards which inform human beings of their dignity and their rightful place in the scheme of things—are the themes of the major poets and novelists and humane philosophers.

True humanism, far from being opposed to sacred learning, consists in an ethical discipline derived from transcendent truth. Such is the humanism of St. Augustine and St. Thomas More, of Erasmus and Newman. Its tool is the power of the word, illuminated by the higher imagination.

Surely this understanding of the truly human person, and this model for human conduct, cannot be derived from the study of natural and physical sciences. The recent controversy between Dr. F. R. Leavis and Sir Charles Snow carries on, in some sense, the intellectual struggle between Newman and Peel—or, more erring than Peel, the Benthamites. "Scientific" studies, as Newman declared, cannot be a consolation in death, nor a sure guide to the conduct of life. Nor can humane letters be converted into mere reflection of social tendencies, or into an instrument for adapting modern man to "scientific" innovation—the implication which seems to lie behind Snow's assault upon modern letters. As Leavis suggests, Snow (failing altogether to recognize the mission or character of truly humane literature) confounds literature with diversion or—at best—"social awareness." But the great writer, transcending the ephemera of his time, seeks to rouse conscience and sustain just authority. He teaches us what it is to be a man, in the image of God.

Push-pin is not as good as poetry, except when "poetry" has become the versifying of decadence. Poetry matters not because it is pretty, but because it goes to the heart and seeks out the truth of our souls in ways that science and logic cannot find.

On nearly any American campus, nowadays, the departments of classics and English literature and foreign languages are housed in the most decrepit and obscure buildings—a sign of their present low estate. In no small part, this fall from favor is the fault of the humanists themselves. At the beginning of this century, Irving Babbitt, in his *Literature and the American College*, predicted a time in which the teaching of literature would consist of reading Keats and Shelley to a class of girls. What with the pedantry of philology on the one hand, and a vague estheticism on the other, the venerable discipline of humane letters now has arrived at this shabby condition, with an honorable exception only at this university or that.

And when this internal decay of the humanities is joined to the 20th-century passion for technology and utilitarian training, the normative content and function disappear almost wholly from the modern university. Time was when everyone assumed that the examination of humane letters must be the essence of a university's curriculum. Even today, when a new chair is proposed at Oxford or Cambridge, the formal question is put, "To what body of literature does the proposed chair refer?" By its nature, the university is a place for the careful reading and discussion of important books, well written by men of intellectual power. This gone, the university declines to a mere congeries of vocational or specialized courses with no central core.

Great literature, of course, deserves study for its own sake. And so, such consequences are lamentable to all who still believe in the Logos. But the practical consequences to a society are also felt in short order—in private judgment and in public life. Once the study of politics, for example, is alienated from humane letters, it becomes very difficult to apprehend norms of order and justice and freedom. In the universities and the schools, for centuries the close study of Cicero and of Plato formed the minds of the rising generation of political leaders at every level of the commonwealth. But in the leading departments of political science in 20th-century American universities, statistics is king, and "behavioral" notions have supplanted the great traditions of political theory. Increasingly, therefore, academic political science—afflicted by this positivistic scientism, and indifferent to both the nature of man and the wisdom of humane letters—is divorced from political reality. Whatever the intellectual deficiencies of our practical politicians, those gentlemen rightly sense that great states are not governed in freedom by opinionaires and neat graphs. And so the practical politicians find it necessary to reach their decisions without reference to the fragmented university.

It was otherwise in the infancy of this nation. If one pokes into what books were read by the leaders of the Revolution, the framers of the Constitution and the principal men of America before 1800, one finds that nearly all of them were acquainted with a few important books: the King James version of the Bible, Plutarch's *Lives*, Shakespeare, Cicero's speeches and *Offices*, something of Virgil. This was a body of highly normative literature. The founders of the republic thought of their new commonwealth as a blending of the Roman republic with prescriptive English institutions; and they took for their models in leadership the prophets and kings and apostles of the Bible, and the noble Greeks and Romans of Plutarch. Cato's

stubborn virtue, Demosthenes' eloquent vaticinations, Cleomenes' rash reforming impulse—these were in their minds' eyes; and they tempered their actions accordingly. "But nowadays," as Chateaubriand wrote more than a century ago, "statesmen understand only the stock market—and that badly."

normal from great
■ From the great men of letters—from Sophocles and Plato and Cicero and Dante and Burke, for instance—we learn more of political wisdom than we can get from innumerable courses in political administration and statistics. I offer here, as an example of what I mean, a passage from Newman's *Patristical Idea of Anti-Christ* (1835), in which—13 years before the *Communist Manifesto*—he touches upon the decay of our times when mere anarchy is loosed upon the world:

At this very time there is a fierce struggle, the spirit of Anti-Christ attempting to rise, and the political power in those countries which are prophetically Roman, firm and vigorous in repressing it. And, in fact, we actually have before our eyes, as our fathers also in the generation before us, a fierce and lawless principle everywhere at work—a spirit of rebellion against God and man, which the powers of government in each country can barely keep under with their greatest efforts. Whether this which we witness be that spirit of Anti-Christ, which is one day at length to be let loose, this ambitious spirit, the parent of all heresy, schism, sedition, revolution and war—whether this be so or not—at least we know from prophecy that the present framework of society and government, as far as it is the representative of Roman powers, is that which withholdeth, and Anti-Christ is that which will rise when this restraint fails.

Here, in this observation upon our legacy of law and order received from the Romans, Newman unites with high theological learning the insights of humane disciplines. Without such an integration of the sources of normative knowledge, the statesman of the 20th-century is purblind and groping when he confronts the ruthless ambition of the ideologue.

poetry
■ I am arguing, in brief, that to understand the shape of society, we must understand poetry; that to know how men should be governed, we must apprehend the ends and norms of the truly human person. In the long run, nothing is more urgently practical than humane letters. For the sake both of the human imagination and of the just, civil social order, the humane

studies must be reinvigorated and redirected to their normative purpose.

Though, in these few minutes, I cannot lay before you a detailed program for the revival of genuinely humane studies in the university—those literary disciplines that teach us what it is to be a man—I venture to put forward these suggestions:

1. There can be no successful linking of theology and science and letters in the university, so far as the great majority of students are concerned, until American primary and secondary schools are persuaded to rise above their present infatuation with socialization, "permissive" and "progressive" doctrines and methods, and what has been called "the Freudian ethic." A primary reason why university students suffer academic fragmentation is simply that they learn next to nothing before they come to college. And in order for college and university to remedy their deficiencies, in whatever field, the institutions of higher learning feel compelled to push students into compartmentalized training, with no integration of disciplines at any level worthy of respect. Because the arts student has been coddled with a diet of Steinbeck and Gunther in high school, he must be fed with amorphous "Survey of English Literature" courses in college, when he ought to be reading critically Spencer and Dryden, Thucydides and Aristophanes. Because the science student knows only primitive physics and chemistry, he must acquire the rudiments in his college years—with no time left for humane disciplines. Because almost no American students are introduced to church history, let alone ethics or morals, the university student of theology, short of time, must remain ignorant of the arts and the sciences.

It is sufficiently ironical that the Soviet Russians—despite their ardent emphasis upon applied science—do a more respectable work, by far, of acquainting primary and second students with serious Russian literature than we do in English and American literature. For all their dialectical materialism, the Russian Communists still recognize some place for the imagination and for the reading which forms character.

2. It will not suffice to pretend to integrate the principal university disciplines by woolly "survey" courses, required of freshmen and sophomores, under the grandiose titles of Natural Science and Humanities and Social Science and the like. A little learning really is a dangerous thing. To expose all freshmen, say, to a whirlwind *omnium gatherum* called "Humanities," compounded of snatchies of history and literature and the arts, will accomplish no more than to convince the average student that humane literature, like the rest of college, is a boondoggle. And to assume that biology, physics, geology, the higher mathematics, chemistry and other disparate scientific disciplines all can be comprehended in two semesters of Science Survey is

an insult to the intelligence. The remedy for fragmentation cannot be found in reducing higher education to the lowest common denominator.

3. Recovery from our present plight is quite possible. Proper general preparation at primary and secondary levels can free college and university for their prescriptive tasks. The quantity of factual knowledge is, of course, greater than it was in the 13th century, or the 17th. But, with discriminating selection and attention to general principles rather than to vocation preparation, time can be found in our universities to teach arts students something of real science and real theology; and that is as true of the present deficiencies of science and theology students. The cafeteria-style curriculum must go by the board; a hierarchy of studies must be restored; but the vast, expensive, ineffectual apparatus of the 20th-century American college and university still can be directed toward the formation of imperial intellects.

I emphasize the cause of humane letters because my own principal interests lie in this realm, and because it is the liberal arts which are most sorely neglected today. Scientific study has behind it all the pressure of modern technological development and of military necessity; theology, at least, has the support of great organized churches. But letters, intended to stimulate the liberal imagination and form the character of the just leader, through the teaching of norms, is pushed by no lobby. As Cardinal Newman knew, science without morals, and theology without imagination, condemn a civilization at first to a dreary Benthamite domination—and ultimately to dissolution.

GUIDING THE REVOLUTION ■ *There is a revolution going on in the world today. The revolution has been under way for some time. It is social, economic, political and spiritual. We cannot stop this revolution. It will go on with us or without us. We can only join it and hope to give it the proper direction. If we do not enter the fight, it will be an atheistic revolution. As Cardinal Suhard warned: "the greatest error of Christians in the 20th century ... would be to let the world take shape without them, without God."*

—M. A. MOTTET IN TODAY, May, 1962.