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**Title:** The Humanities and the American Promise: Report of the Colloquium on the Humanities and the American People (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1986).

**Volume:**

**Call Number:** ED295855

**Author:** Peterson, Merrill D.

**Year:** 1987

**Pages:** 43 p.

**Staff Notes:**

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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 855 SO 018 870

AUTHOR Peterson, Merrill D.; And Others
TITLE The Humanities and the American Promise: Report of the Colloquium on the Humanities and the American People (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1986).
INSTITUTION Texas Committee for the Humanities, Austin.
SPONS AGENCY Joyce Foundation, Chicago, IL.
PUB DATE Oct 87
NOTE 43p.
AVAILABLE FROM Texas Committee for the Humanities, 1604 Nueces, Austin, TX 78701 ($2.00).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021) -- Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizen Participation; Citizenship Education; Cultural Awareness; *Culture; *Fine Arts; Higher Education; History; *Humanities; Literature; Philosophy

ABSTRACT

Elaborating and clarifying the philosophy behind the national and state programs concerned with the humanities was the purpose of this colloquium. The U.S. creed, composed of the principles of freedom, equality, and self-government, can only be appreciated and made relevant to modern realities by a reflective people. Therefore, the government is compelled to provide the nurturing environment of a reflective and informed public will. A democratic culture that is the counterpart of this civil creed has evolved in the United States making an appreciation of the thought and expression of U.S. culture an imperative of good citizenship. The universities are the principal guardians and the transmitters of this humanist tradition through learning and scholarship. Other professionals who serve as trustees of the humanist traditions include: (1) the larger educational community; (2) trained professionals in museums and libraries and at historic sites; (3) professionals in the media responsible for communication and performances in the arts and humanities; (4) the voluntary associations of civic groups that engage in a variety of humanities activities; and (5) independent scholars. The document concludes with a list of recommendations for fostering the humanities in public life. (SM)

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# The Humanities and the American Promise

**Report of the Colloquium on the Humanities and the American People**

**October 1987**

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## Note

This report is a collective product. Every member of the colloquium contributed to the recommendations and to the themes and ideas developed in the report. The principal author of the report, however, is the project director, Merrill D. Peterson. In some respects, the report may not reflect the views and opinions of individual members; and it does not claim to represent the views and policies of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

# Contents

# Introduction

Over the course of more than a year a small group of scholars, writers, and educators (most members of the group were all three) met together at the University of Virginia to discuss the relationship—as it has been and as it should be—between adult Americans and those areas of intellectual activity known as the humanities. With the formidable figure of Thomas Jefferson looking over their shoulders, colloquium members went about their business by exercising the form of reasoning the humanities seek to promote: critical inquiry and discussion. Although the project was funded by the Division of State Programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the colloquium did not set out to examine or evaluate existing activities of the state councils of the NEH, nor those of any other NEH program, or, indeed, of any existing program under whatever auspices. Rather, it sought to elaborate and clarify the philosophy behind such programs, which is to say the very large matter of the humanistic enterprise in American life itself. This document—the result of those discussions—is meant as a contribution to the continuing public conversation on that large topic.

The report has a history, a provenance, a patrimony. Since 1964, when the National Commission on the Humanities issued its call for federal support of the humanities, which led to the

establishment of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a series of documents has turned the nation's attention to the state of the humanities within its borders. Among the recent and best known of these documents have been *The Humanities in American Life* (1980), from the Rockefeller Foundation Commission on the Humanities; *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education; and *To Reclaim a Legacy* (1984), which grew out of a study group brought together by William J. Bennett, then Chairman of the NEH. Each of these reports has looked primarily at one or more institutions of American society: the public school system in *A Nation at Risk*, the college and university in *To Reclaim a Legacy*, and, in *The Humanities in American Life*, a wide range of institutions, including the public library, the museum, and others outside the formal educational structure. *The Humanities and the American Promise* has a different task. It seeks to explore the relationship between the humanities and American public life. It assumes that learning in the humanities is not just for the school years but is, or ought to be, the endeavor of a lifetime. It assumes, further, that the health of the humanities is fundamental to the health of the polity.

When Congress established the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965, it identified the humanities by a listing of scholarly disciplines: "language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods." While it was doubtless necessary to draw boundaries in this way, we think it is misleading to regard the humanities basically as a set of academic disciplines or, even more restricting, as a set of "great books." We identify them, rather, with certain ways of thinking—of inquiring, evaluating, judging, finding, and articulating meaning. They include the developed human talents from which texts and disciplines spring. They are, taken together, the necessary resources of a reflective approach to life. The value of a reflective approach can be best appreciated by considering the alternative: a life unilluminated by imagination, uninformed by history, unguided by reasoning—in short, the "unexamined life" that Socrates described as not worth

living. Where the humanities are vigorous, action follows from and is guided by reflection. It is their capacity to change, elevate, and improve both the common civic life and individual lives that make the cultivation of the humanities important to the American people.

In lieu of a concise definition, we offer the following general observations on the character and value of the humanities. They may be taken as the starting points of this report.

*The humanities have both a personal and a civic dimension.* They bring meaning to the life of the individual and help define the self. They also make possible the shared reflection, communication, and participation upon which a democratic community depends. They are the basis of reasoned civic discourse; and they are centrally concerned with the relation between the individual and the community.

*The humanities take the long perspective.* There are no breakthroughs in the humanities, and no final answers to the kinds of questions they ask. They relate present danger to past danger, present injustice to past injustice, our tragedy to old tragedy, our hopes and fears to past ones. The great questions of the humanities are timeless, but they require continual redefinition and reexamination because the old answers and the old methods may no longer serve.

*The humanities represent the striving for coherence and synthesis.* In this respect they offer potentially a valuable counter to the disintegrative tendencies of modern intelligence. But the potential has not been realized for a number of reasons: the artificial gulfs between the humanities disciplines, on one hand, and the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the fine arts on the other; the fragmentation of the humanities disciplines themselves into narrower and narrower specializations; and the debate between respective proponents of elite and popular conceptions of the controlling role of the humanities in the culture.

*The humanities may be and often are disturbers of the peace.* They ask troubling questions, heighten consciousness, start revolutions in the mind, challenge the status quo, and raise expectations for ourselves and society. The humanities should be cultivated, not for intellectual adornment, even less to legitimate existing social and political institutions, but as

instruments of self-discovery, of critical understanding, and creative social imagination. They are the enemies of passivity and the abettors of vigorous intellectual life.

*The humanities have a moral dimension.* They foster awareness of the complexity of human conduct and eschew simplistic judgments of good and evil. The claim may be made, if cautiously, that study of the humanities enlarges sympathies toward other peoples and culture, other times and places. Knowledge of the humanities may reduce prejudice and increase tolerance. And it may make for healthy skepticism when we are confronted with slanted or selective history, or self-justifying, apologetic, rhetorical history—and the same with philosophy, literature, and the daily newspaper, the political speech, and so on. Yet knowledge of the humanities is no guarantee of humaneness; and the one should never be confused with the other.

*The humanities deal with ends as well as means.* They help us clarify our ideas and make choices about worth and value in human affairs. They ask where are we going. And why. As well as how. They insist that these questions guide our activity, that we look beyond the technical possibilities of the modern world and consult the meaning and the wisdom contained in the humanities.

*The humanities cultivate critical intelligence.* They may not be very good at "solving" practical problems, but they develop the capacity to evaluate and judge that is a necessary part of the solutions. The humanities involve what Matthew Arnold called the "free play of the mind on all subjects it touches." Their study develops habits of mind applicable to virtually all human endeavors.

We undertake in this report, first, to state the case for fostering the public currency of the humanities in America; second, to describe the status of the humanities in the two realms, the academic and the public, and, more importantly, the relationship between them; and, finally, to offer a number of recommendations for fostering and strengthening the humanities in the nation's life.

# Case for the Public Humanities

To contend, as we do, that the humanities require public fostering, as essential to the common good, is only to insist that we be true to the traditional creed and culture of this nation. In what follows we argue that the identity of the American people derives less from an inherited high culture, as in other nations, than from certain political principles that were adopted and articulated at the nation's founding. Whatever disintegrative forces there may be in American society, a persistent integrating force is this common creed. But a creed composed of principles of freedom, equality, and self-government can only be appreciated and made relevant to modern realities by a reflective people. We go on to argue that there developed in the United States a democratic culture that is the appropriate counterpart of the civil creed upon which our institutions are founded. We suggest, indeed, that an appreciation of the thought and expression of American culture is an imperative of good citizenship in this democracy. Finally, we contend that if American government is to justify its claim to authority, as resting on the will of the people, it is then committed to providing the nurturing environment of a reflective and informed public will.

### *Unity in Creed*

A distinctive humanist tradition arose in America. Although rooted in Europe, and from there back to the Classical world, it was invested with a mythology of the New World that set America apart from Europe and, in Bishop Berkeley's vision, made it "Time's noblest offspring." Berkeley's celebrated verses sang of "another golden age, the rise of empire and of arts" on a virgin continent untouched by "the pedantry of courts and schools" Europe bred in her decay. The American founders absorbed this vision of a rebirth of arts and learning and in 1776 joined it with the vision of a new political order. In the minds of philosopher-statesmen like Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson, the American Revolution would justify itself ultimately by the advance of arts and learning. The motto engraved on the Great Seal of the United States, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*—New Order of the Ages—is a testament of this grand vision.

The motto on the other side of the Great Seal, *E Pluribus Unum*—One Out of Many—is also suggestive of the unique character of culture and learning in America. Although the English stock was dominant, already in 1776 America was a haven of refuge for peoples of many lands, and the waves of immigration would rise higher and higher in the nineteenth century. Uprootedness, entailing a constant search for new definitions of self and community, became a fundamental condition of American life and thought. The uprooted of Europe joined with those whose presence told the story not of choice and freedom but of force and tears—the Native Americans displaced on their own continent, and the Africans, involuntarily uprooted from another. The amalgam would make the United States, in Whitman's phrase, "a nation of nations." The steady influx of new peoples and cultures—in time Asian as well as European and African—contributed to the shaping of a dynamic tradition, one continually faced with the challenges of ethnic and cultural differences, one continually open to change and renewal, and enriched by the mixture of new elements in its composition.

The advancing settlement of the continent was still another experience of uprootedness, adaptation, and change. In the mythology of the American West, the country was constantly beginning over again on the frontier. The idea of "extended

genesis," of continual rebirth and renewal as successive generations took possession of the virgin continent, entered into the spirit of American culture, enduring long after the frontier disappeared. Jefferson expressed this spirit in his favorite idea of "the sovereignty of the living generation"; Alexis de Tocqueville, in his classic commentary from the 1830s, acknowledged it when he observed that in America "every man forgets his ancestors" and "each generation is a new people"; and it underlay Frederick Jackson Turner's famous theory of American history based on the frontier experience.

In the absence of a particular ethnic or religious tradition or of a tradition of high culture in the European sense, one that is the pride of class and is passed down through the generations, the American people found their identity in the political principles and ideas enunciated at the nation's birth. The principles of freedom, equality, and self-government—the inalienable rights of man—contained in the Declaration of Independence, along with other founding documents, became, as Lincoln said, "the definitions and axioms" of American society. In the two hundred years since the founding, foreign observers have often spoken of the bonding effect of shared moral principles and purposes in America and of the people's consciousness of participating in a great experiment to determine whether people can be trusted to govern themselves. As Justice Holmes once wrote, "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to *be* one."

Some forty years ago the Scandinavian social scientist Gunnar Myrdal, in the opening chapter of his monumental study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* found the cement—the only real cement—of "this great and disparate nation" in a common social and political ethos that he traced to the Declaration of Independence and called "The American Creed." America, beyond any other country, said Myrdal, "has the *most explicitly* expressed system of general ideals in reference to human interrelationships. This body of ideals is more widely understood and appreciated than similar ideals are anywhere else....To be sure, the Creed....is not very satisfactorily effectuated in actual social life. But as principles which *ought* to rule, the Creed has been made conscious to everyone in American society." Unfortunately, as

Myrdal's study documented in detail, the costs of consensus were paid by those excluded from it, in particular the American black people. The oppression, violence, and prejudice they experienced testified to the failure to fulfill the American promise—to "an American dilemma." And yet, as Myrdal might have predicted, the consciousness of the American Creed and the recognition that racism and discrimination stood in contradiction to it became a powerful force in the civil rights revolution of our time.

No nation ever began its career with a more far-reaching commitment to the human person than that contained in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and similar founding documents inspired by the hopes of the Enlightenment. It was a humanistic commitment as well as a political one. Ranking in importance after the Declaration and the Constitution, if indeed second to either, was the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, drafted by Jefferson and enacted under James Madison's influence in 1786. The statute, which, with the aid of the First Amendment, became the cornerstone of the tradition of religious freedom and separation of church and state, proceeded from the heretofore unheard-of premise "that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry." This exclusion of religion from the civil realm instructs us that the integration and the workings of a free society have not required agreement on ultimate values, other than the secular value of freedom itself. The statute was a directive not only for religious pluralism, contributing further to a uniquely plural culture, but for freedom of mind in the widest latitude, unconstrained by civil or ecclesiastical authority. The counterpart of the exclusion of religion was the inclusion of education in the civil realm. Placing the school before the church, Jefferson, with many of his contemporaries, sought to make education a paramount republican responsibility. And the recurring need to nurture and strengthen republican citizenship in new ways is a primary consideration in the public support of the humanities in the United States.

### *Democratic Culture*

In the long tradition of the humanities in the West, the idea

of a "democratic culture" was a contradiction in terms. In England the cultivation of those branches of knowledge commonly called the humanities was the province of a privileged upper class buttressed by the public schools, the universities, the church, and the higher civil service. Culture, in R. H. Tawney's stinging phrase, was "an assortment of aesthetic sugar-plums for fastidious palates." For the masses it was, at most, "bread and circuses." America, of course, lacked the infrastructure for a hierarchical kind of culture. A fluid class system, ethnic and religious diversity, geographical mobility, and shared democratic values militated against any American imitation of the European tradition.

Even so, in the developing life of the new nation, elite groups—southern planters and lawyers, northern merchants, clergymen, and men of letters—inhabiting mainly the eastern seaboard, drew their ideas and values, like their china, largely from England and implicitly claimed cultural superiority. They wrung their hands over the poverty and inferiority of what passed for American culture. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* echoed their fears. A multitude of factors had concurred, he wrote, "to fix the mind upon purely practical objects." The cultural equivalent of the rule of the majority in the political world was mediocrity and conformity—a downward leveling of literature, philosophy, and the arts to the dull average. Democracy and individualism induced a passion for business callings and mere physical prosperity. The "virtuous materialism" that Tocqueville ascribed to the Americans did not corrupt but enervated the soul.

As the nation matured, it surmounted Old World doubts and fears, without ever entirely vanquishing them. America discovered its own culture, its own voice, its own folk traditions, its own materials for literature, the beauty and power latent in its own experience. It thereby overcame that separation of the American intellect from practical affairs and the common life that George Santayana named "the genteel tradition." Walt Whitman, as Santayana recognized, was the first authentic voice of the new cultural ideal. America would never fulfill itself, the poet wrote in his ruminating essay *Democratic Vistas* (1871), "until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists, or that

has been produced anywhere in the past, under opposite influence." He called upon his countrymen to abandon the "ultramarine full-dress formulas of culture" and promulgate their own standard—"a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, the workingmen, the facts of farms and jackplanes and engineers, and of the broad range of women also." In his poetry Whitman exemplified just such an ideal. Simultaneously, in prose, Mark Twain won a huge following by adapting vernacular materials to literary forms. Choreographers and composers later found ways to incorporate movements and melodies from the folk tradition into sophisticated forms of dance and music. In the twentieth century the American people manifested a voracious appetite for forms of art and literature that, although novel, rapidly achieved academic respectability, becoming objects of study by those we call "professional humanists."

The civil creed, which took shape in the American Revolution, thus attained its cultural dimension. The values of openness and diversity, of individualism and democracy, of pragmatism and progressivism that are associated with historical American institutions have imbued American thought and expression, so much so that a public curriculum in the works of American writers, historians, philosophers, and artists is virtually an imperative of citizenship. Emerson's essays, *Leaves of Grass, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the music of Charles Ives and Aaron Copland, the ballets of Martha Graham and Agnes De Mille, the philosophies of William James and John Dewey, the anthropology of Margaret Mead, the histories of Daniel Boorstin and C. Vann Woodward, the pathos of black spirituals, the anger of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the vision of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*—without some comprehension of such manifold works of the mind and imagination it is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the meaning of America and the aspirations of its people. To this we add a cautionary note: nothing about democracy guarantees significant intellectual or artistic attainment. Indeed, as Richard Hofstadter demonstrated a quarter century ago, the ugly strain of anti-intellectualism in American life stems, in part, from egalitarian and populist sentiments. It is always present. Humanists

should understand it and be prepared to combat it.

The ideal of public school education, substantially realized by 1900, implied belief not only in equal opportunity for all but in the possibility of a universally acceptable body of knowledge and a corollary set of democratic beliefs. School children each morning pledged allegiance to the flag, promising to uphold a republic with liberty and justice for all. They were trained in what Lawrence Cremin has called the "national *paideia*," uniting "the symbols of Protestantism, the values of the New Testament, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, and the *Federalist Papers*, and the aspirations asserted on the Great Seal." Like the ancient Greek *paideia* (one of the origins of the humanistic tradition), the public schools prepared children for citizenship, although the task was immensely complicated by the diversity of the society. Children learned the values and rewards of individual opportunity, of self-help, of being a good Christian and getting rich at the same time. Patriotism seemed easy: after all, the nation offered a place to everyone. Civic celebrations and political orators inculcated this faith. Thus the culture understood itself.

This *paideia*, however, asserted ideals more than actualities—and the gap between the two was readily apparent. In a famous July Fourth oration, Frederick Douglass had pointed out that the day of rejoicing for a white majority celebrating independence constituted a time of mourning for the blacks they oppressed. He spoke when this democracy built on principles of equality still included a slave population; but long after slavery disappeared, blacks remained largely invisible to many proponents of democracy. So, in a different sense and for different reasons, did women, relegated to domesticity, deprived of political voice, suffering economic and educational injustice. The poor were always with us, and few thought about what *rights* they might have. New immigrant groups supplied needed workers—for railroads, factories, farms—but too many did not enjoy the blessings of liberty, opportunity, and justice. Not everyone was a Christian, not everyone could get ahead. To many, Poor Richard seemed utterly irrelevant.

The multitudinous problems of school and society in our time tell us how extremely difficulty it must be to realize the ideal of a common and shared culture. In pursuit of this ideal,

the report *To Reclaim a Legacy* called upon colleges and universities to return to "a common curriculum with the humanities at the core" and then defined this curriculum in terms of traditional literary texts ranging in time from Homer to Eliot and Faulkner and limited to Western civilization. Education in the humanities would consist largely "in being in the company of great souls." The literary theorist E. D. Hirsch has proposed to restore something like the national *paideia* through a program of "cultural literacy." (This should not be confused with "functional literacy," which goes with reading and writing.) From his research into the teaching of reading and writing, Hirsch has concluded that literacy is not just a system of skills but a system of information. The many different populations of American society can communicate with one another only through a common vocabulary, not just words, but a specific body of information reflecting the cultural content people share. Moreover, such a common vocabulary is necessary, Hirsch contends, in the modern industrial state, which demands a literate, communicative, mobile, adaptable population. Although not aiming to propose a canon of texts, Hirsch would seek to acquaint all Americans with a common fund of knowledge, such as may be necessary for entrance into public dialogue. Acculturation in a national literate culture might be defined as learning what the "common reader" of a newspaper, specifically the *New York Times*, could be expected to know—about eight thousand items of information. Hirsch claims that such a vocabulary exists among the groups that dominate American society, and that to withhold it from any individuals or groups tends to keep them from effective participation in the society.

We are impressed by Hirsch's theory to the extent that it identifies the problem of cultural literacy; but we cannot concur in his remedy or, certainly, in any canonical remedy. The task of constructing a common cultural vocabulary, like a common curriculum, is beset with peril. It flies in the faces of the openness and diversity of American society. The genuine sharing of cultural knowledge on which communication and understanding is based recognizes the importance of the dominant tradition but demands active reaching out to all parts of the American population. American culture incorporates the heritage of many peoples; and only determined effort to stretch and expand the

predominantly held culture will enable us to realize the democratic goal of a truly shared culture. The understanding and study of the literature, history, myths, folklore, music, art, and ideas of all the American people may contribute to this end.

The division between "high" and "low" culture and their respective audiences, though many Americans participate in both, offers still another challenge to the ideal of a common culture. Television is most often cited as the cause of a severe split between elite and popular culture, but the split antedates television and manifests itself as well in such phenomena as rock music and supermarket romances. What relation can humanists find between their ways of thinking and knowing and the huge body of cultural products that resemble works of art and intellect yet appear to make no serious claim for themselves?

A large dose of humility is the first requisite for the humanist contemplating material for which old terms and standards do not necessarily suffice. As the changing curricula of our colleges and universities attest, the boundaries of the culturally respectable have shifted a great deal in recent years. Since Gilbert Seldes, in 1924, identified *The Seven Lively Arts*, some, like film and jazz, perhaps even the comic strip, have made the passage from lowbrow to highbrow culture. Instead of just laughing at Charlie Chaplin, or listening to Charlie Parker, we now study them. The voices of previously invisible members of society make themselves heard, with immediate cultural effects. The women's movement and ethnic-consciousness groups have called attention not only to specific works of art, music and literature previously ignored but to *kinds* of work once not admitted into our canons. Exhibits of quilts now hang on museum walls, as tapestries have hung in the past. The stories told by American Indians, collected into books, attract broad attention. Literary critics pay new attention to such genres as personal letters and diaries, genres for which no serious literary claims were previously made. There has been of late a radical extension of the whole notion of textuality and new understanding of how texts are constructed, whether by author or readers. The very concept of a *text*, the verbal core of humanistic study, has been relativized by anthropologists to include rituals, performances, and other "social dramas." Thus Clifford Geertz has studied the

Balinese cockfight as a text to be read for meaning as a literary scholar might read *King Lear*. Such developments have made the humanities more exciting than before for everyone.

While recognizing this, and sharing in the excitement, we also caution humanists against embracing every cultural product or resource with equal enthusiasm. True, humanists can say something about almost anything: Several critical studies of popular romances have appeared in recent years. True, the popular is not necessarily the bad: Garrison Keillor, for instance, continues the tradition of Mark Twain in a new medium. True, humanists can adapt film and television, the most powerful media of our time, to their own purposes. Public television has presented splendid programs in the humanities based upon the work of scholars but intended for general audiences. It is manifestly important that humanistic knowledge and values should be communicated in this way; the trend can only be applauded. But is is also important for humanists to continue to make and to try to enforce value discriminations in the customary ways of scholarship.

The goal of the humanities is to heighten consciousness. Much popular culture—most obviously the general run of commercial television—apparently aspires to deaden consciousness. Humanists must accept responsibility for insisting on that point. Some forms of pop culture are antithetical to the reflective life. To the extent that they provide material for reflection, they are not, of course, at odds with the purposes of the humanities. Humanists need to rethink and rearticulate standards of quality in changing cultural contexts; they need to look closely at what their society offers them to look at; and they should not be quick to reject the new and the different. But they also need to be willing to say *no*, to say it out loud, where people listen. The forums of the public humanities offer them opportunities to engage in educational programs that counteract the passivity and flaccidity, the dullness and the discord induced by the mass media.

### *Uses of the Humanities*

Despite the intrinsic value of the humanities, they have never been self-justifying to the American people. From

Benjamin Franklin to John Dewey to the establishment of the NEH, proponents have employed the characteristically activistic, utilitarian, and pragmatic idiom of American thought to justify the humanities in the nation's public life. This emphasis on the instrumental value of the humanities—for citizenship, for socialization, for national prestige—has kept them from confinement in ivory towers and hothouse gardens, but it has also subordinated the humanities to objects that are extrinsic to them. The danger persists that the humanities will be absorbed into the modern industrial state, as has, in fact, occurred in totalitarian regimes, and in the process be devalued, trivialized, and marginalized.

The humanities cannot be held to the test of raising the GNP, of improving the nation's competitive edge in world markets, or of training men and women for "high tech" employment. They are nevertheless essential for any worthy human endeavor and for any worthy national purpose. In the Age of the Computer, information swamps intelligence, indeed, is often mistaken for it. Humanists know that thinking is an art, that it cannot be reduced to a computer program, that the mind works in ideas, not simply in information; and while they welcome the computer as a useful tool of analysis, they should insist on this distinction. For the humanities to have an effective public role, they must resist the encroachments and enticements of technocratic power, either from industry or the state, and forcefully maintain an independent "critical presence," to use Sheldon Wolin's term, in the society.

The public use of the humanities begins with the formation of individual mind and character and widens outward to the workplace, associated life, and the duties of citizenship; it encompasses educational institutions and institutions such as museums and libraries devoted to preserving and interpreting the cultural heritage; it reaches finally to the world community of nations. The action of the humanities always starts with the sovereign individual who reads, writes and reflects, and makes moral judgments. To this extent, education in the humanities is a do-it-yourself activity, albeit one that is socially conditioned and publicly supported in various ways. What is important is not only the object—a text or an artifact—but also the mode of study. Disciplined attention to literature, for instance, helps one

to think clearly, to search and find meaning; it teaches the urgency of making distinctions, both moral and aesthetic, and enriches the resources of reflective life, which we consider a leading purpose of the humanities. They offer the possibility for a kind of self-realization, even in today's deeply compacted society, predicated upon the consciousness of characters and events, ideas and visions distilled from the study of other times and places. The act of reading, whether in literature or history or archaeology, involves imaginative projection into dimensions of human experience outside the self. The public import of this can scarcely be over- estimated. A citizenry that is humanistically aware is a citizenry that is capable of confronting diversity, ambiguity, and conflict, overcoming prejudice and self-interest, enlarging its sympathies, tackling tough public issues, and envisioning possibilities beyond the limits of circumstance.

Education as an instrument of republican citizenship has provided the primary rationale for the public support of the humanities. Thus the "Declaration of Purpose" of the 1965 law creating the NEH stated that "democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." The report of the Rockefeller Commission in 1980 observed, "Our republic stands on a belief that educated citizens will participate effectively in decisions concerning the whole community." And such participation, as the report went on to argue, was enhanced by the substance and the methods citizens got from education in the humanities.

The government of the American democracy justifies its authority on the claim that it embodies "the will of the people." That is a very large claim, of course. The mobilization of consent in a highly differentiated electorate, to say nothing of the implementation of the popular will once registered, is a difficult and uncertain process. But the degree to which it is achieved depends fundamentally on the quality of public debate and discussion. The giant liberties of the First Amendment—of thought, speech, press, and assembly—are not only guarantees of individual rights against government; they are also the positive means for carrying forward the civic discourse that is the lifeblood of democratic government. Political liberty is but one necessary condition, however. Another is the education of citizens in ways that strengthen responsible participation.

The humanities, quite beyond what was once called "civics"

and is now, in the schools, absorbed in "social studies," are crucial in this education. Philosophy teaches the evaluation of argument and the weighing of ethical imponderables; history teaches understanding of the past, yet more importantly liberates us from it by showing that the future is not destined; anthropology offers the knowledge and, again, the freedom that comes from cultural comparisons; language and literature cultivate sensibility and sympathy. All such teaching serves citizenship. One of the dangers of democracy, long recognized by students of politics, is that the populace will fall prey to demagogues and sloganeers who abuse the liberties democracy affords. But this is unlikely to occur among citizens who deploy the faculty of critical reasoning. Such citizens are not easily persuaded; they can distinguish logic from demagogic rhetoric, argument from slogan, evidence from unfounded claim; they can detect crass appeals to racial and religious prejudice. Such citizens reject the presumption of totalitarian governments, both left and right, that history, literature, philosophy, and art are instruments of state power and social control. The spirit of democracy, whatever else it may be, is the volatile spirit that derives consent from the free expression and the critical reasoning of the people.

The original mission of the NEH encompassed the application of humanist forms of understanding to public affairs, but only with the creation of the state humanities councils in 1970 was the effort made to draw professional humanists into the public arena to discuss policy issues in the light of their disciplines. Since then thousands of scholars have participated in public programs on a wide range of issues and topics. A new class of humanists, so-called applied humanists, whose mission is precisely to apply the resources of the humanities to public problems, has come into being. Applied humanists, like their academic counterparts, normally lack the technical competence to solve the problems, but they offer new approaches to understanding them and to determining what should go into the solutions. With their range of knowledge and their conceptual skills, humanists may usefully mediate between countervailing experts on many public problems. The complexities of technology in the Computer Age have given birth to entirely new vocations, for instance, "risk assessment" specialists. Since

technology is not risk free—there are carcinogens in the workplace and nuclear power plants are liable to accident—specialists have been trained to weigh the costs against the benefits. Typically this is too important a question to be left solely to engineers and economists or specialists spun off by them. Humanists, whose concern is with what is humanly desirable rather than what is technically feasible, ought to have a part in the making of society's risk assessments.

Scientific literacy is a major theme in all the recent discussion of American education. The lack of it—scientific illiteracy—is what has supposedly placed "a nation at risk." Without arguing this question, or exploring the relationship between scientific literacy and cultural literacy, we make several observations on the place of the humanities in the public understanding of science. First, creativity in the natural sciences has many parallels to creativity in the humanities. Rather than constituting a separate culture wholly unintelligible to the humanities, science and the humanities impinge upon and intersect each other. Humanists have much to learn from the way scientists work, and they may on occasion be more effective interpreters of science to the public than scientists themselves. Second, scientific literacy for responsible citizens consists less in substantive knowledge than in the capacity to see, to weigh, and to understand the real-life impacts and repercussions of science and technology. What is involved is not the complexity of the science itself but the uncertain, unintended, and ambiguous consequences of scientific discoveries after they have left the controlled environment of the laboratory. The resulting problems are often not correctly addressed by experts. Humanists, in the way they address them, may contribute to reasoned public deliberation and response. Third, humanists should therefore become actively engaged in the public conversation about science in order to have an effective voice in decision-making. Although knowledge of science itself would enrich their contribution, it is not a prerequisite for entering into a conversation that concerns larger public means and ends.

If meaningful reflection informs decision-making on public issues at home, the nation is likely to assume a more responsible position in world affairs. The United States stands for an ideal, an ideal implicit in the founders' vision of a developed

democracy, an ideal symbolized in the Statue of Liberty, the name of which, it is well to remember, is "Liberty Enlightening the World," and so much else. It is not merely an academic question whether this nation, the world's oldest and most powerful democracy, can display in its foreign policies that range of sensitivity, sympathy, and understanding that we associate with humanistically grounded reflection. For American leadership should express something more than national interest narrowly conceived. It should be moral, yet free of the arrogance of self-righteousness along with the arrogance of power. It ought to express knowledge, respect, and understanding of national differences. This may mean that American representatives abroad become, in a measure, practicing humanists as well as foreign service officers. American leadership indeed, while firmly grounded in its own tradition, should encompass in its international outlook keen understanding of the traditions and aspirations of other cultures.

Voltaire once defined the educated man as "one who is *not* content to survey the universe from his parish belfry." Extending that wisdom to the world community of nations in the last quarter of the twentieth century, we think the educated American is one who knows more and cares for more than his or her own history and tradition. The vision here evoked—of an educated citizenry sharing fully in the civic life and of a nation leading the world by the power of its example—may be criticized as unrealistic. Yet the vision is well founded in the history of the American experiment; and in our time it has been renewed and revitalized by the growing recognition that education in the humanities is a necessary component of the ongoing experiment. For the government to invest in the humanistic learning and action of its citizens is an act of national faith and national courage. It may not guarantee anything, but it declares the willingness to take seriously the moral and intellectual requirements for the good health of a nation conceived in liberty.

# The Humanities in University and Society

The universities are the principal trustees and transmitters of the humanist tradition. There, in closely bounded academic disciplines, learning, often of an esoteric kind, is perpetuated and scholarship advanced. But university scholars who engage in research on the frontiers of knowledge, those we have sometimes called professional humanists, represent only one of several humanities communities in the United States. We also mention, first, the educational community, consisting of teachers of humanities subjects in schools and colleges as well as in the universities; second, trained professionals in museums and libraries and at historic sites, whose mission is curatorial and also interpretive to a broad audience; third, professionals in the media responsible for communication and performance in the arts and humanities; fourth, the voluntary associations of civic groups that engage in a variety of humanities activities, often with the aid of NEH state-based programs; finally, the growing numbers of applied humanists and independent scholars located somewhere between the academy and the public. All of these communities make valuable contributions to the public life of the humanities, and all would benefit, we believe, by more interaction and interchange among them.

### *University*

Universities articulate as well as influence ideas and

assumptions about the cultures they inhabit. Different historical periods, different cultural situations, alter the specific balance of forces between the academy and its ideological surroundings, but no system of education flourishes apart from its environment. Creative tension has always characterized relations between the university and society. Institutions of higher learning function, in part, as guardians of tradition, thus opponents of the up-to-the-minute. They concern themselves, typically, with Shakespeare rather than with the Grateful Dead. On the other hand, universities are innovators. They insist on the value of certain new ways of thinking even when those ways seem irrelevant or foolish to the community at large. Hostility to the very idea of higher education on occasion develops among those who fear the demise of common sense in instruction preoccupied with the esoteric and the recondite.

Yet the community outside the university often generates the questions by which education proceeds. A scandal among stockholders encourages new kinds of concern with problems of ethics—problems that soon find their way into classrooms. New awareness of Hispanic populations stands behind new courses in Spanish and Latin American history and literature; an enlarging sense of tradition results from the presence of vocal minority groups. In the humanities, more than in the sciences, as much perhaps as in the social sciences, responsiveness to social currents helps to determine the focus of at least some teaching and learning.

The balance between the university's resistance to and incorporation of ideas from the larger community has shifted over time. In the beginning, in America as in Europe, universities served a small elite, for well into the nineteenth century an exclusively Protestant white male elite. They educated mainly in the Western classical tradition. But the population seeking higher education rapidly enlarged, to include those destined for the new professions, to prepare women for teaching and missionary work as well as for their maternal responsibilities, to provide the training of engineers and farmers and businessmen, of Jews and blacks, of Irish, Asian, and Italian Americans. State universities proliferated, implying an ideal of democratic education. The steadily increasing supply of institutions of higher learning reflected a corresponding rising demand, but that

demand, as it spread through the wider population, meant many different things. A college education might fulfill a hunger for knowledge or provide a means of rising in social class or supply an appropriate spouse or lead to an appropriate job. The diverse purposes of the growingly diversified mass of students, together with the diversity of the institutions, produced general confusion about the functions of higher education—confusion that has increased to the present moment.

Social pressure on the humanities—pressure from the world outside the academy—has taken three contradictory forms, all currently alive and well, all responsible for both constructive and destructive effects. Pressure is felt in the universities, first, for the humanities to adopt the methods and achieve the objectivity (or what seems to be objectivity) of the sciences and the social sciences; second, to preserve intact a hallowed and increasingly threatened intellectual tradition; and third, to demonstrate the immediate relevance of the humanities for remunerative employment.

The split between the humanities, on the one hand, and the sciences and social sciences, on the other, extends back to the last century. The sciences have been associated with progress, the humanities with stasis. Science undergirded technology, which generated industrial and military preeminence; science promised the future. When the Englishman C. P. Snow, in 1959, announced the existence of "two cultures" (science and the humanities), he did not mince his opinion of the special urgency of understanding modern science. Science, he implied, defined the very nature of reality. Long before that, the new social sciences, having established their independence from the humanities, took the so-called exact sciences as their model and set out to explain human behavior without recourse to the learning of the humanities. Increasingly relegated to realms of high culture and of irrelevance, the humanities lost stature in the university. For many people they came to stand for elitism and marginality.

Yet the physical sciences produced the atom bomb and the terror of universal destruction; technology, while enhancing the quality of life for millions, also polluted the environment; the social sciences appear to have explained relatively little. In their defense, humanists have devised university courses, established university forums, and engaged in research programs to

demonstrate the inadequacy of technical or positivistic approaches to human problems. Studies of the real-life impacts of genetic engineering or of morality in international politics draw on knowledge from the sciences and social sciences, or involve collaboration of scholars from different disciplines, but they are centrally humanistic forms of investigation.

The social sciences themselves are now drawing on the humanities. Many social scientists, disappointed by the results of survey research and quantitative analysis, have returned to interpretative or qualitative explanations of social data. In economics, political science, and sociology, the acknowledged failure of attempts to find predictive general laws has caused investigators to reexamine the notion of rational choice on which many of their theories were based. As the economist Albert O. Hirschman points out, the "means-end, cost-benefit model is far from covering all aspects of human activity and experience." Sociologist Robert Bellah calls for return to an older tradition in which social scientists were moral philosophers speaking out on the ethical questions of society.

Concern with values in the community at large has generated pressure on English faculties to increase their emphasis on the classical and Christian texts—*The Illiad, The Aeneid,* Plato, *The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost*—that comprise the foundation of long-established Western tradition. Such pressure wars with that for broadening the tradition to include previously underrepresented elements of our heritage. The successive editions of the Norton anthology *World Masterpieces* provide an instructive example of the fruitful coexistence of incorporative and conservative tactics. Continuing to include Homer, Sophocles, Racine, Melville, and T. S. Eliot, the most recent edition has added, for instance, Mme. de Lafayette and Frederick Douglass to its authors. In this it accurately reflects current tendencies in the university, as humanists work to make the past vivid and vital to their students and to represent the complexity of that past as richly as possible.

Of course, universities also continue to protect and facilitate a kind of scholarship that appears narrow to the public at large: the working out of obscure linguistic problems, concentration on the minutiae of a historical moment, labor on editions of minor poets, investigation of philosophic dilemmas that may seem

comically irrelvant to the man or woman in the street. Specialization is essential to the advancement of knowledge, however; and scholars must continue to resist the forces of popularization, even at the risks of becoming unwilling candidates for Senator Proxmire's Golden Fleece Awards. Obviously the marketplace will not support the work of the humanities on the frontiers of knowledge. Public support is necessary, first in the form of fellowships for scholars; second, in maintaining archives and research libraries; and third, in subsidies for the publication and dissemination of scholarly work.

New definitions of the proper concerns of the humanities are originating outside the academy, and the kinds of investigation they foster in universities, in turn, move outward into the community. Although the number of majors in such standard subjects as English, history, and philosophy has declined nationwide, students are drawn to innovative courses and programs—Women's Studies, American Studies, Film Studies--that combine methods of inquiry from several disciplines. The serious academic study of film depends on insights from art history, literary criticism, aesthetics, psychology, social anthropology, and history; investigation of the nature and achievements of women draws together biology, history, religion, anthropology, literature, psychology, and sociology. Thus practitioners of traditionally disparate disciplines discover common concerns and learn the important truth that it is the synergism among the disciplines, fostered by the humanities, that is especially valuable.

Not only is there more traffic across disciplines but the boundaries of individual disciplines have enlarged. Course offerings in an English department may include such subjects as the Literature of Colonialism (politics and literature studied together) or the Anthropology of Romanticism, while philosophy courses may treat Biomedical Ethics or the Vietnam War in American Thought. In undergraduate and postgraduate education, new material enters old disciplines. The serious study of English literature can now include science fiction and popular novels and folktales; history concerns itself with women, the family, the social history of communities as well as the political history of nation-states; philosophy expands to include the morality of public policy. Such a traditional academic journal as

*Publications of the Modern Language Association* now prints articles on American Indian legends. Religious Studies departments have multiplied, making the comprehensive study of religions and religious experience, free of any sectarian purpose, a humanities discipline in itself. In new ways, the world penetrates the academy and the academy asserts its meaning for the world.

As the cost of higher education soars, beneficiaries of that education—and their parents—insist on clear returns on their investments. Although survey after survey show high correlation between liberal arts education and success in business, law, medicine, and other professions, many students nevertheless find it hard to discern the practical value of courses in literature, history, and philosophy. Nor do professors of these disciplines generally wish to claim an immediate monetary payoff for what they teach. They can, however, and with increasing fervor do, claim the intellectual excitement of humanistic study as it is currently envisaged and practiced; and they can claim with conviction, as humanists have always claimed, that they help individual human beings toward the fully developed consciousness necessary for reflective life.

Paradoxically, forces working to marginalize the humanities in our universities have heightened the energy and commitment of those practicing them. The chief disciplines have been ventilated with much fresh air. Their need to defend themselves has generated healthy self-examination and new forms of self-assertion. Even the professional schools have opened their doors to the humanities, thereby communicating to their aspirants a keener awareness of the human dimensions of the careers they are to enter. Given a political and social situation that challenges the assumptions of the humanities as traditionally defined, teachers of the humanities in many institutions have devised more powerful and effective modes of presenting their subjects not only to their students but to the larger community of learners.

### *Society*

The humanities are not the possession of an academic priesthood. As we have noted, there are many humanities

communities outside the university. To achieve for the humanities that critical presence in society which we advocate, it is necessary to look beyond the university. "What keeps the humanities going," the philosopher Charles Frankel once wrote, "is that people really want to know, does man have free will; that people really respond to Hamlet's predicament and to his eloquence; that people really would like to get some sense of how the past held together and why it fell apart. All of these are permanent...impulses in any civilized society. And so we have the humanities just as we have sports and games and love and politics and other things for better and for worse....History, literature, philosophy, these are the disciplines that are everybody's business. You can live without it. But not to know whether there's a God or immortality, not to have any ideas on it, not to have a notion whatsoever, well, you might just as well be dead. You are dead."

The humanities are an integral part of human life. That aspect of our being of which the academic disciplines are but the form—the institutionalization—lives and sometimes flourishes outside formal bounds—and sometimes in an undiluted purity not discovered in the academy—around the campfires and kitchen tables, in church basements and meeting halls, in workers' leagues and women's societies, in the newspaper philosopher and the schoolyard wit. Wherever human beings remember, think, interpret, analyze; wherever they deal seriously with each other's conduct; wherever they try to understand life's meaning, giving to life that examining without which it was long ago said to be not worth living—there we see the fundamentally human impulse from which the humanities spring. But, like most things in nature, the humanities are improved by art—giving form to what is raw, spontaneous, and disconnected and offering a disciplined medium for the study of burning human questions.

There are two main models of humanities programming in the larger society. One is the bridging model. It calls for the universities, in this instance its humanities faculties, to bridge the gulf between the academy and society and communicate their learning to public audiences. The model assumes that professional humanists—not all of them in the university—are the trustees, the communicators, the movers and shapers of

truth and learning in the humanities. The other model calls for grassroots programming by the people themselves. It emphasizes the intrinsic humanistic content of ordinary life in democratic society and urges the importance of cultivating the resources of intellectual discovery and imagination among the people. Although the models are usually placed in competition with each other, and associated with opposing cultural strategies in politics, we think both are valuable, worthy of support, and susceptible to improvement.

The antecedents of university-centered activity, apart from formal academic instruction in degree programs, lie in schools of adult or continuing education. Some made notable contributions. Generally, however, these schools, at least with respect to the humanities, appeared to dispense education more or less as an afterthought at the university's back door. Adult education stood apart from the university's primary mission; the professors, like the students, were different; and the instruction was usually considered cut-rate. The system rarely served the humanities well. Today only a small fraction of the courses of instruction are in the humanities.

The creation of the NEH, more particularly the affiliated State Humanities Councils, provided a new vehicle for the delivery of humanities education to adults. The councils are independent grant-making agencies, but in the nature of their work they form ties with colleges and universities and involve academic scholars in programs for nonacademic audiences. The programs are quite informal; often they are sponsored by community organizations that have institutional purposes of their own; they do not, with rare exceptions, carry academic credit or lead to an academic degree. They represent a new and loosely structured form of adult education in the humanities.

The bridging between the academy and the community is immensely valuable to both. Professional humanists, unlike the academic practitioners of most professions (law, medicine, business most obviously), have generally had no direct connection with nonacademic audiences, or with other humanities communities, or with the real-life experience of their disciplines among the laity—responding to the ideas and feelings, queries and perplexities, truths and errors of adult learners. The writing of most humanists is addressed, generally, to circles of

fellow humanists in the same esoteric specialization; accordingly, it is inaccessible to the public at large. Yet many of these scholars are willing and able to communicate with adult audiences. They are quite able to interpret their own work in accessible fashion. They are ready to discuss new and challenging questions within the discipline, and to draw upon reserves of knowledge to illuminate issues before the community. The potential benefits to the public are manifest. The benefits to the scholars, while no less important, are often overlooked. Scholars are stimulated, and their own human sympathies are extended, by communication and sharing of ideas with groups of people in the community; interaction with mature audiences may force them to rethink ideas that had never before been vented in this way; and, most importantly, this activity across the wall between the academy and the community returns the scholar to the honorable republican role of teacher, interpreter, and mediator on matters of high public concern.

Critics of this model charge that it is prejudicial toward both the academy and the community. It assumes that academic scholarship should be something more, or less, than it is; and that by placing the scholar in a kind of missionary role, it is patronizing to the general public. The criticism has some merit. Certainly it points up dangers to be avoided by careful planning. We strongly encourage humanities programs designed to further the communication of academic scholars with nonacademic audiences. The universities themselves should assume leadership in this effort. Increasingly, public humanities teaching should become a normal part of the responsibility of substantial numbers of faculty members in colleges and universities. Accomplishing this may require a transformation in the structure and the understanding of teaching and research in the humanities. It will certainly require new goals and new levels of planning and administration. And it will require modification of the reward system of most university faculties to recognize effective public humanities teaching.

The alternative model, which finds the nurturing environment of the humanities outside the university, is more difficult to describe, just as its programs are more difficult to evaluate in the absence of proven standards. Its cultural antecedents lie in American habits of self-help and in voluntary associations, in

women's clubs, theater clubs, literary societies, historical societies, trade unions, civic associations, religious fellowships, and the networks of Mechanics Institutes, Lyceum, and Chautauqua in the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, the vitality of these agencies of intellectual culture has declined as the number of Americans receiving higher education has increased, and stewardship of the humanities has been centered in the universities. A vigorous new initiative, conjoining both models and opening promising new directions in the public humanities, has come from the State Humanities Councils. Since 1970 they have given shape to a curriculum in the humanities that differs markedly from the formal curricula of schools, colleges, and universities, yet treats the same fundamental questions of the quality of life and provokes public discourse about them. The curriculum appears to satisfy a real social need, even a hunger, felt by many adults. Every year, according to the *Fifteen-Year Report* of the Federation of State Humanities Councils in 1985, upwards of twenty-five million Americans take part in about four thousand humanities programs under the full or partial auspices of fifty-three state councils (including the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico). On occasion the councils initiate programs, but for the most part they act as funders and facilitators of programs generated by individuals, community associations, and other nonprofit groups.

So diverse are these programs—lecture series and conferences; radio, television, and film productions; exhibits and publications; performances and special events; applied humanities—that they can be characterized only by specific examples:

**Doing Justice: Literary Texts, Professional Values and the Judicial System,* funded by the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and Public Policy, brought professionals in the state judicial system together with scholars to discuss texts—*King Lear, Billy Budd, Heart of Darkness,*—in order to stimulate inquiry into the nature of justice and the role of judgment in our society.

**A Cowhand's Song: Crisis on the Range*, a film funded in part by the Nevada Humanities Committee, depicted the history of cattle-ranching in the Nevada-California borderland and sparked public discussion of environmental protection, mineral development, and proposals

to limit grazing in recreational areas.

*A *Share of Honor: Virginia Women 1600-1945*, a three-year project initiated by the Virginia Foundation for Humanities and Public Policy, built upon research into the history of women in the Old Dominion, culminating in a book, symposia, film and curricular materials, and a major exhibit (followed by a traveling exhibit) that broke all attendance records at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

**Chautauqua '84: Jefferson's Dream and the Great Plains Experience*, a humanities interpretation and revival of the Chautauqua movement, conducted by the state councils in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. Two communities in each of these states heard presentations by four archetypal Plains characters—Hamlin Garland, Mary Ellen Lease, Old Jules, and Red Cloud, the Sioux chief—about their experience. On the fifth and final night a scholar in the role of Thomas Jefferson led a discussion with these characters and, later, with the audience, which compared the reality of Plains life with the Jeffersonian ideal.

**The Mexican Legacy of Texas*, on the occasion of the sesquicentennial of Texas' independence from Mexico, was conducted by the Texas Committee for the Humanities. The year-long program included a special session of the Texas State Historical Association, which addressed such questions as the emancipation experience in Mexico and Texas, the development of border culture, and the significance of a bilingual culture. The project supported lectures, conferences, reading and discussion programs, exhibits, and newspaper articles on contemporary Mexican-American literature, art, folklore, and history in communities across the state.

**A Common Property of Western Culture: The Household Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, funded by the Delaware Humanities Forum on the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Grimm brothers, analyzed the contributions of their tales from mythological, feminist, Freudian, and contemporary literary perspectives.

*The New Hampshire Council for the Humanities

supported a *philosopher-in-residence* in its state legislature, where this practicing humanist with academic credentials in ethics examined materials in the state's Sunset Office and assisted lawmakers in evaluating departments and programs whose authorizations were due to expire.

*State Humanities Councils have funded hundreds of reading and lecture series in literature, philosophy, history, and related fields in *public libraries* across the country, demonstrating that adults will gather over a period of weeks to discuss books on themes of interest to them, and confirming in new ways the truth of the observation by the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities that the public library is "the single most important cultural institution in most communities."

The State Humanities Councils are unique institutions that testify to the American genius for cultural improvisation. They are neither state nor federal agencies, nor private foundations, yet possess attributes of all three in the way they are funded and governed and in their style and purposes. By Act of Congress they are required to receive not less than 20 percent of the program funds of NEH. Matching formulas leverage private support; and several councils receive state appropriations as well. They might claim to be the unheralded success story of the "new federalism." They constitute fifty-three laboratories for experimentation in the public humanities, with each council responding to the needs and interests of its own constituency. Of an earlier invention Henry Thoreau remarked, "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." And so it may be, though we trust not, with respect to the humanities today. In any event, Maine and Texas may, and indeed do, engage in quite different programs. The federal character of the enterprise is also a healthy impediment to the growth of a centralized cultural authority—a ministry of culture—in America. While there is always the danger of political abuse in government programs for the arts and sciences, the vigor of American democracy, the tradition of American culture, and the individualistic habits of mind generated by the humanities themselves provide valuable safeguards.

The work of the State Humanities Councils, the Public Programs Division of NEH, and the several humanities communities we have identified should be viewed as parts of a grand design for lifelong learning in the United States. The report on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, held up this ideal in a brief section headed The Learning Society. "At the heart of such a society," it said, "is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes." No school or college or university can educate young men and women for life. The best it can do is to dispose the mind toward learning, to enable one experience to serve another, and to lay the foundation for what Dewey called "continued capacity for growth." The natural sciences offer striking examples of the rapid obsolescence of knowledge in modern society: the physics or genetics or astronomy of a decade or so ago has been superseded. The humanities contain no parallels to this. The disciplines change slowly, yet they do change, as anyone who learned literary criticism and theory a quarter century ago and returns to it today can attest. More importantly, in today's career-oriented society the demands for technical skill and expertise are so urgent that no mature and thoughtful person is content to go through life with whatever he or she may have learned of the humanities in school.

Robert Hutchins once wrote with penetrating insight: "The great works of art and literature do not convey their full message to the immature. The reason why the prospect of the learning society is so alluring is that the notion of cramming everybody in school with everything he will ever need to know can be abandoned. The traditional teaching of the past, in which a child read Shakespeare at the age of sixteen and never looked at him again, meant that Shakespeare's intention was never communicated. The boy 'had' Shakespeare but could not understand him." Learning, whether of Shakespeare or Dostoevski or any number of authors and subjects that enliven and enrich human consciousness, is no longer something that was done once and for all in school. The modernized life cycle, emerging about a century ago, that drew boundaries between stages of life—youth, adulthood, and old age—and enforced a

linear separation of education, work, and leisure, is being replaced by a more flexible conception, one that takes account of varying paces of maturation, answers to changing needs and interests, and reflects the social reality of a growing elderly population.

Of course, the foundations for learning in the humanities are laid in the primary and secondary schools, about which little has been said in this report. We applaud the special efforts of humanities faculties in a number of colleges and universities to strengthen teachers' mastery of the subject matter of the humanities and their commitment to teaching it. Renewed emphasis on the liberal arts education of teachers is echoed in the recent Carnegie Report on Teaching. We have spoken of the universities, in which the humanities are, if not flourishing, showing signs of renewed vigor and vitality. We think, further, that the time has come for the universities to make major new commitments to the education of adults in the humanities. Such programs ought to be developed as a regular part of university education, offered not as an afterthought, but as a forethought, and at the front door rather than the back door of the academy. The pressures of demographic and technological change and the imperative of an educated citizenry require that higher education face up to the demands for lifelong learning. The State Humanities Councils have an enlarging and increasingly important role to play in this effort, but it is not the same role, nor is it a substitute for what colleges and universities can achieve in the continuing humanities education of Americans.

# Recommendations

Our recommendations are made in the light of other recent reports on the humanities and may be considered supplementary to them. All the recommendations look to the advancement of a learning society in which the humanities have a major place. We urge that the humanities be viewed not merely as so many academic disciplines, or only as sentinels of tradition, but also as the necessary resources of critical intelligence, of self-awareness, and a reflective approach to life. We reaffirm the Declaration of Purpose of the law establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965 that "democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." We believe that sustained public support of the humanities is essential to the national purpose. The goals of personal self-fulfillment, of democratic culture and citizenship, which belong uniquely to American tradition and institutions, ought not be left to the whim and caprice of the marketplace. The humanities enterprise, although centered in the university, has grown in richness and complexity; and all the components of the public humanities merit cultivation and support for their special contributions to civic understanding in a democratic society.

1. The most important public mission of the humanities is improvement of the quality of civic discourse. The mission should be a serious concern of all humanities programming.

2. The humanities, too long considered an ornament or a diversion, should reclaim a role of leadership in American democracy. They should be a critical presence in the discussion of vital public issues, which means that they can neither be insulated from politics nor sheltered from controversy. Only through the humanities may public issues be examined and explored in all their complexity.

3. Because long-run improvement in the appreciation and the understanding of the humanities must begin in the schools, we urge continuing support for efforts to strengthen the humanities education and commitment of schoolteachers.

4. In colleges and universities, where the humanities have been on the defensive, we urge the different faculties to develop innovative courses and programs that should help to restore the humanities to the central place in liberal arts education. We particularly encourage multidisciplinary activity, not only among the humanities disciplines but with the social and the natural sciences and the fine arts, based upon the recognition that disciplinary boundaries are not rigid and research and teaching should not be tightly constrained by them.

5. Because of the importance of an informed citizenry, and in keeping with the goal of a learning society, we recommend that colleges and universities undertake bold new initiatives in public humanities education; moreover, that academic humanists, with the support of their institutions, assume as part of their acknowledged responsibility communication with nonacademic audiences.

6. We endorse disciplined efforts to advance cultural literacy, although we are skeptical of programs that rely upon a canon of texts or a cultural lexicon, and we urge recognition of the diversity and multiplicity of the American heritage.

7. Believing that the developed tradition of the humanities in America is open and democratic and responsive to a wide range of social and intellectual experience, we think that public humanities programming, especially the State Humanities Councils, should offer plenty of breathing space to ideas and projects generated by groups of people,

including the heretofore unacknowledged and uncertified in local communities.

8. While humanists should be receptive to new forms of thought and expression that hold the promise of enriching the resources of reflective life, they also have a responsibility for maintaining standards and so should not hesitate to criticize cultural manifestations that enervate or deaden the capacity to respond thoughtfully to the world. The tension between these imperatives points up the difficulty as well as the challenge of the humanities enterprise in contemporary society.

9. We recommend and encourage the new roles for humanities scholars as public historians, humanists-in-residence in legislative bodies, hospitals, and elsewhere; and we urge much more significant interaction between academic humanists and other humanities communities. The State Humanities Councils are well positioned to further this objective.

10. Many issues critical to the future of the humanities, barely touched upon in this report, merit careful and sustained study in their own right. We refer, for instance, to cultural literacy, popular culture, the problem of communication between academic disciplines, the implications of the computer and newer technologies, the humanities in local communities, and so on. We recommend that the NEH, the State Humanities Councils, and appropriate university departments encourage research on such problems.