

Literature in a Technological Age

Over two centuries ago, a young man, scarcely an elder statesman then -- he was only thirty-three -- was asked to draft a formal declaration of the independence of the American colonies from the government of Great Britain. He began:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which had connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station. . . .

But I need quote no further. This audience remembers the clarity and power of that noble utterance. Last year Professor Ross Baker of Rutgers University translated Jefferson's prose into a jargon not at all unfamiliar in our own day and not wholly unknown in this very city. His account goes like this:

When at a given point in time in the human cycle the phase-out of political relationships is mandated, a clear signal needs to be communicated to the world as to why we are putting independence on-line.

Truthwise, it has been apparent for some time that human resources should be accorded equal treatment, and that they are eligible for certain entitlements, that among them are viability, liberty, and the capability of accessing happiness.

It is an amusing parody, and a useful one, for it is not too outrageous as a caricature. Every day we read prose nearly as bad.

Moreover, Baker's parody has the authentic formaldehyde stink of the synthetic prose of a technological age: gutless, bloodless, thoroughly inhuman. Wordsworth called the poet a man speaking to men; this is the utterance of a robot speaking to God knows whom. But could he be speaking to us? "

The enormous Atlanta airport, some of you may recall, has under it a miniature subway train to get passengers from one concourse to another. I asked someone the other day why the recorded voice directing traffic on the subway was so robot-like. I was told: because people could be counted on to take it seriously. When that inflectionless baritone ordered people to get back from the car doors, they got back. I got back; you can't argue with a machine. In this instance perhaps a machine voice was well chosen. But in our ordinary affairs we don't want to become mechanized by our machines.

Jefferson's noble style reflects a humanistic education. His declaration is not only stirring and resonant; even the rhythms contribute to the impact of what is declared. But it is also an exact and lucid statement. Accuracy is not sacrificed to elegance.

Jefferson, of course, lacked our modern office equipment. He had no electric typewriter, let alone a word-processor. He had only an inkpot and a goosequill pen. But he had something more important: imagination, sensitivity, and a well-stocked and disciplined mind. He knew the value of words and how to arrange them to achieve their most telling effect.

Jefferson's society was in general short on machinery, but it was very long on the essentials of a true culture. That his world of colonial Virginia was relatively small was an asset. Society

was compact and cohesive. Life was highly personal. Finally, every educated person had had a humanistic education. That was practically the only education to be had. Everyone had read the same basic stock of books.

The Latin and Greek classics of course dominated education in Virginia and in the Old South generally. My own curious first name goes back to that period. A great grandmother of mine evidently admired the Greek philosopher Cleanthes, and so started that name on its course through the family down to me. What a burden it was for a 13-year-old boy who had to wear glasses.

Jefferson's own reading, of course, went on beyond the classics to include also the historians, scientists, and men of letters of a later time: Dryden and Pope, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Molière, and Rousseau. Like Francis Bacon, Jefferson took all knowledge to be his province.

My theme song this evening, however, will not be "Carry me back to old Virginnny" -- that is, to colonial Virginia. We cannot go back, and few of us, I suppose, would choose to return. Nevertheless, we might, while retaining the advantages of our marvelous technology, hold fast to the cultural values exemplified by Jefferson. The humanist is not concerned to do away with machines, but to direct them to proper ends, for machines cannot direct themselves. The ends must be chosen for them, and one hopes chosen by wise human beings.

The problem is where to find wisdom. I propose that in our time the humanities -- history, philosophy, and literature -- may be a source well worthy of our attention. They contain the funded wisdom of the past, and that past is not to be dismissed. This

evening I shall be stressing the claims of literature rather than those of philosophy and history, not because I disparage the latter disciplines, but simply because literature is the discipline I know best. Yet before discussing the role of literature I must say a brief word about the state of our language. For language is the door through which we enter^{into} literature -- and indeed, into philosophy and history, and all other learned studies as well.

Since I mean to be brief, I shall have to be blunt. Neither reading nor writing flourishes in our blessed United States. Certainly good and even great prose is being written today, and, I should add, some very great poetry. Some of it even gets read. But in important respects we are an illiterate nation. A large section of our population cannot read at all, and many of those who can read do not read books.

The two reports recently sponsored by the former Secretary of Education, the Honorable T.H. Bell, "A Nation at Risk" and "Involvement in Learning," present some very grim statistics. They tell us that 23 million of our adults are functionally illiterate; that almost 40 percent of our 17-year-olds are incapable of drawing proper inferences from written documents; and that only 20 percent can write a persuasive -- I think they must have meant to say a "coherent" -- essay. I know too many Ph.D.'s who cannot write a persuasive essay. As for our college students, the reports speak of the great number of drop-outs, of declining scores in the tests administered to those who stay, and of the shift of most of them from the humanities into purely vocational courses.

They record what amounts to a disaster, and one of Pearl Harbor dimensions.

These findings, however, do not come as a surprise to those of us who teach English language and literature. When I began my college teaching fifty years ago, the breakdown in the teaching of these subjects was plain to be seen. Why, then, did we not speak out? We did, but few -- even in the academic community -- wanted to listen. We had no privileged platform from which to speak. An English instructor's complaints about the state of English studies were to be expected. Naturally he would suppose that what he was doing was very important. At my first teaching post I quickly discovered that the English department was regarded as a "service department." That is to say, our real job was to patch up the spelling and grammar of students who were going into really important studies such as electrical engineering or biology.

Such undervaluation reflected then, and continues to reflect now, the attitude of the whole society. English grammar for most of us was a dull study, even a nuisance, and nobody could be blamed for finding the spelling of English irrational -- it is.

When the study of the language itself is in trouble, the consequences for literature are obvious. Moreover, even if the student has learned to read, and the proper books are available for him on the library shelf, the benefits of reading do not automatically follow. The moral of the old proverb about the horse that can be led to water but cannot be made to drink still has force. How does one induce the student to drink deep from the well of English undefiled? ~~By extolling~~ By extolling the wonderful taste of the Castalian spring from which, in the past, generations have slaked their spiritual thirst? I think not. A magnetic teacher or an enthusiastic parent who has

proved in other matters the accuracy of his judgments may succeed with such a method. Few others can. The student wants to be told what literature is good for.

As many of you in this audience know, literature does ~~not~~ yield a very real pleasure, but a pleasure not easy to describe to the uninitiated. Moreover, how can this rather specialized pleasure compete with those obvious pleasures with which our society showers the population? These obvious amusements promise instant gratification, call for little or no effort, and for almost no prior preparation. The average student is quite content, thank you, with the pleasures he already enjoys. Why take up others?

The greatest handicap under which literature suffers, however, is that literature is so often badly taught. It is the easiest subject to make a stab at teaching and one of the hardest to teach well. Many a person never recovers from the taste that he got of poetry, say, in the fifth grade. The one enduring lesson that he learned there was that he never wanted to be bothered again with this insipid stuff.

The great problem is the character of the age itself. A technological age -- especially an extremely brilliant and successful one -- has difficulty in finding a proper role for literature. Such a society sees literature as a diversion, as a mere amusement at best; and so it is classed as a luxury, perhaps an added grace to adorn the high culture which the technology has itself built. Yet such homage obscures the real importance of literature and of all the humanities. It classes them as decorative extras, luxuries, whereas in truth they are the necessary complement to our technological

and industrial activities.

For over a century the problem of the real relation of literature to science, theoretical and applied, has been with us. In fact, the very development of an industrial society raises the question of the value of literature.

In a famous poem Matthew Arnold tells how, on Dover Beach, he had listened to the "melancholy, long withdrawing roar" of the outgoing tide, and in it had found an emblem of the ebbtide of religious faith. Science was clearly destined to become technician-in-chief to civilization, but what about the values by which mankind lived? What was there to take religion's place? Arnold prescribed literature, and especially poetry. Poetry was invulnerable to science, for it had no factual underpinning for science to sweep away. It was fictional, a creation of the imagination.

More and more [Arnold wrote in 1880] mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

With such a concept as this, no wonder that Arnold could claim that "the future of poetry is immense," for in effect he was ⁹entrusting to poetry the direction of the whole human enterprise.

How has Arnold's prophecy fared? Not so well, I should say. Though our intellectuals are still influenced by it, the ordinary citizen is hardly aware of it, and if he were, would be puzzled by its specifications. He wonders why science, this beneficent magician,

cannot tell us what to do as well as how to do it. In any case, he would be utterly baffled by the notion that fictions conceived by the imagination and not tied to the facts of this world could possibly interpret for us the facts of life.

I believe that in asking poetry to replace religion and philosophy, Arnold laid upon poetry a burden it cannot possibly bear. As we should expect, the religious intellectuals of our time, such as T.S.Eliot, Walker Percy,, and Flannery O'Connor, reject the notion altogether. At the other extreme, the fundamentalist man in the pew also instinctively rejects it just as roundly. Yet we owe Arnold a debt for having located the problem rather accurately and for assessing the strain that it had already set up in industrialized Great Britain by the middle of the nineteenth century.

In any case, his suggestions about the role of poetry in modern culture are worth further exploration. They have, I would point out, a peculiar relevance to culture in the United States. Let me indicate why. In the first place, we are a pluralistic society encompassing a number of religious faiths and cultural backgrounds. In the second place, our constitutional separation of church and state forbids the teaching of institutionalized religion in state-supported schools and colleges; yet the problem of the inculcation of ethical standards and ultimate values becomes more and more urgent. It is intensified by such matters as the general breakdown of various traditions, the erosion of the family, the cultural rootlessness of much of our increasingly mobile population, and the growing secularism generated by a highly technological civilization.

So even if Arnold was wrong in believing that poetry could alone

supply our culture with the proper goals, ends, and purposes, it may well be worth considering what poetry, and literature in general, can do. We are scarcely in a position to reject any available help from whatever source. Literature at least focuses attention on mankind's purposes, wise or unwise, and upon the values for which men and women had lived and died.

In fairness to Arnold, his task of analysis was more difficult than ours, for in his day the boundaries of science were not so clearly marked out as they have since become. One of the best concise statements on the limits of science appeared last year in an article entitled "The Frontiers and Limits of Science," written by Professor Victor E. Weisskopf, the distinguished physicist at M.I.T. He sums up as follows:

. . . important parts of human experience cannot be reasonably evaluated within the scientific system. There cannot be an all-encompassing scientific definition of good and evil, of compassion, of rapture, or tragedy or humor, or hate, love, or faith, of dignity, and humiliation, or of concepts like the quality of life or happiness.

In short, it is impossible for science to define for us the quality of happiness that Jefferson declared was the right of each of us to seek to attain. Each person will have to define that happiness for himself, using whatever guidance he can find. To have that choice taken away from us either by peer pressure, by the brain-washing of a totalitarian regime, or even by the seductions of our immense advertising industry is to lose some part of our

humanity. Computers are programmed by human beings: but human beings move toward the state of computers when they allow themselves to be programmed by other human beings.

Accepting, then, the fact that we cannot expect guidance from the hard and objective sciences such as mathematics and physics, what do the humanities offer in the way of guidance? And in any case, how can they make any impression on a society that prides itself on being practical and getting down to the hard facts?

An answer to the second question might run like this: a world reduced to hard facts would thereby become a dehumanized world, a world in which few of us would want to live. We are intensely interested in how our fellow human beings behave -- in their actions, to be sure, but also in the feelings, motives, purposes that lead them into these actions. The proof is to be found even in the situation-comedies of the TV show or the gossip columns in the magazines and newspapers. We want to know the facts but we crave the whole story too -- its human interest and what we call its meaning.

For example, consider a celebrated incident, the loss of the White Star liner "Titanic," which sank in the north Atlantic when she struck an iceberg. How did the poet Thomas Hardy deal with the incident in a poem which he called "The Convergence of the Twain"?

Of many of the facts Hardy makes no mention at all. He does not tell us that the date of the disaster was April 15, 1912 and that it happened on the Titanic's maiden voyage; that she was at 46,000 tons the largest ship afloat; that over 1200 lives were lost; that the ship, though warned of ice ahead, was traveling at high speed; or that she was regarded as unsinkable, with double bottoms and sixteen water-tight compartments.

Hardy does refer to some of these facts early in the poem, but only obliquely -- by references to the pride that the Titanic excited and men's confidence that they had at last conquered the sea itself with this mighty craft. What evidently most caught Hardy's imagination was that the ship and the iceberg had, with precision timing, arrived at the same spot at the same instant, just as if destiny had employed a split-second time table for the whole affair; and he reminds his reader that while the liner was being built in the Belfast shipyard, nature had all along been preparing the mountain of ice far away on the coast of Greenland. Here are the closing stanzas of the poem:

And as the smart ship grew
 In stature, grace, and hue
 In shadowy silent distance grew the iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be:
 No mortal eye could see
 The intimate welding of their later history.

Or sign that they were bent
 By paths coincident
 On being anon twin halves of one august event,

Till the Spinner of the Years
 Said "Now!" And each one hears,
 And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

I remarked earlier than as human beings we want more than mere information. We want meaning and we want wisdom, but that elusive

commodity is always in short supply. In the Book of Proverbs we learn that "wisdom crieth . . . in the streets" but it goes on to imply that "no man regardeth." If this was the situation several millenia ago, it remains so today. Secretly we may hunger for wisdom, but our overt craving nowadays is, of course, for information. Data banks are much in vogue and they are highly useful, but they are not equipped to pay off in the currency of wisdom.

A recent New York Times editorial matter-of-factly referred to ours as "the age of information." The poet T.S. Eliot makes much the same point but with a rather different implication.

Endless invention, endless experiment
 Brings knowledge of speech, but not of silence,
 Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word. . . .
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The first line quoted involves a serious pun. "Endless" invention and experiment means, of course, unceasing invention and experiment, but "endless" also means "without purpose, goal, or end," experiment conducted for its own sake, invention carried out merely to be inventive. In Eliot's verse the two diverse meanings actually support and emphasize each other. In this way poetry is often packed more richly with meaning than is prose.

Yet it is important that we understand how wisdom is mediated to us through literature. It had better not be presented didactically. In my boyhood days, as I recall, our scornful retort to an exorbitant demand was "You must want salvation in a jug." Salvation does not

come in a jug, nor is wisdom a bottled essence. Of all people, the literary artist must not seem to be running an old-fashioned medicine show, entertaining us in order to persuade us to buy a product. John Keats, that remarkable poet and very wise young man, put it well: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us."

In an [redacted] all-too-well-known poem, Longfellow tells his reader that

Life is real! Life is earnest!
 And the grave is not its goal.
 Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
 Was not spoken to the soul.

Such moralistic doggerel is not poetry, and it obviously does have a palpable design on us. Whatever the merit of that palpable design, the verse is tired, limp, and insipid. Jefferson was wise in these matters. He once remarked that "A lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading [Shakespeare's] King Lear than by all the dry volumes of ethics. . . ."

In a poem entitled "Provide, provide," Robert Frost has used a cunning device to remove any taint of the didactic. On the surface the poem, in [redacted] sharp contrast to Longfellow's, seems to be giving his reader the same counsel that the villainous Iago gave to his dupe Cassio: "Put money in thy purse." Wealth will solve all problems. It also seems blatantly didactic.

Frost's poem begins:

The witch who came (the withered hag)
 To wash the steps with pail and rag,
 Was once the beauty Abishag,

 The picture pride of Hollywood.
 Too many fall from great and good
 For you to doubt the likelihood.

A former movie idol has squandered or perhaps been bilked of her fortune and now ekes out her existence as a scrub woman. Such things do happen to screen beauties, former heavyweight boxing champions, and even rock stars. But why does Frost name this woman Abishag? With a certain grim humor Frost went to the Bible for his movie star's name. When King David grew old and ill, and, even when covered with bedclothes, couldn't get warm, his servants and courtiers scoured the whole land to find a beautiful maiden to put into the royal bed to warm the poor old fellow up. The beauty's name was ~~Abishag~~ Abishag. But King David still "gat no heat" and was soon gathered to his fathers.

The poem continues with Frost's advice to the reader on how to avoid this modern Abishag's fate. But we had better take the whole poem into account for a proper understanding of just how seriously Frost is speaking when he says to his reader:

Die early and avoid the fate
 Or if predestined to die late,
 Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!

If need be occupy a throne

Where nobody can call you crone.

Some have relied on what they knew.

Others on being simply true.

What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starred

Atones for later disregard,

Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified

With boughten friendship at your side

Than none at all. Provide, provide.

"Go down dignified," "boughten friendship" -- these very phrases are instinct with Yankee folk wisdom. Boughten friendship -- store-bought friendship we would say in the South -- is cold comfort indeed on one's death bed. No much warmth in that; still, it's better than nothing at all.

In spite of this outward show of worldly wisdom, the poet has hinted of other ways out. He reminds us that some have relied on "what they knew" and others on "being simply true" -- on knowledge and integrity. Yet why does he throw into his poem this allusion to the philosophers and the saints only as a kind of afterthought -- almost like a man saying: oh, by the way, I'll just mention this for the sake of the record, though I ^u assume you wouldn't be interested? He does so because the cunning old artist knows that no emphasis often constitutes the most

powerful emphasis of all.

Poems that nourish the human spirit can be as dry and witty as this one rather than exalted and sonorous like the poems of Aeschylus and Milton. The house of poetry has many mansions.

Yeats's "Prayer for My Daughter," a very different kind of poem, also contains wisdom, and even a strain of prophecy. But true to its title, it is content to be a troubled father's prayer for his child. Because of its prophetic character, it may be interesting to put it beside John Maynard Keynes's celebrated book, The Economic Consequences of the Peace. Keynes's treatise^{se} and Yeats's poem were, by the way, both published in 1919, the year after the end of the ~~the~~^{War} to End^{All} Wars.

Keynes foretold the disastrous consequence of the Treaty of Versailles, predicting what would happen under the peace terms to the economy of defeated Germany and the consequent ruin of the rest of Europe.

Yeats's focus is on the future of his infant daughter, and he envisages the troubled years through which she must live. Yeats could not and did not specify the terrible happenings ahead, but he correctly sensed the dangers, and now in 1985 it is easy for us to name them: the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War, the Cold War, and the threat of nuclear destruction.

The poem tells of a stormy night in the west of Ireland. The wind is howling in off the Atlantic, past the medieval tower in which the poet was then living. As he paces beside the cradle that holds his sleeping child, he tells us

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
 And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
 And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
 In the elms above the flooded stream;
 Imagining in excited reverie
 That the future years had come,
 Dancing to a frenzied drum,
 Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

In this context we are likely to associate innocence with the infant daughter, but the poet speaks of the "murderous innocence" of the sea. The phrase may be startling, but it is accurate. When we have in mind the destructiveness of a hurricane or a great earthquake, "murderous" seems a proper adjective, yet we know that there is no murder in the heart of nature -- no motivation at all, mere senseless indifference. Indeed, the Good Book itself tells us that the rain falls upon both the just and the unjust, and so apparently do the showers of volcanic ash. We have to acquit all of them of guilt. They are innocent by virtue of their sheer mindlessness.

Yet we have not done with the word innocence: late in the poem Yeats will set forth a third kind of innocence, the innocence which is not at all mindless, but the product of love and self-discipline

What are the gifts which the poet prays his daughter may receive? Beauty, yes, but not so much as to make her vain and haughty. He wishes for her a "glad kindness" and courtesy. These hoped-for endowments are summed up in one concrete image:

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
And have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound.
Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in ~~some~~^{one} dear perpetual place.

So, as a counter to the destructive wind, the poet proposes the laurel, hidden and sheltered from the blast and firmly rooted in its own "perpetual place."

Yet likening his daughter's thoughts to the songs of the linnet perched in the tree, especially when coupled with the father's petition that she may "think opinions are accurst" is probably calculated to affront every woman in this room. Does Yeats want the girl to grow up to be a pretty little charmer without a thought in her head -- to possess no opinion of her own?

By no means. Yeats knew his Plato well, and he is here following Plato's distinction between opinion and an idea. An opinion can claim at best to represent no more than probability. Absolute truth is to be found only in the divine ideas implanted in the soul and to be recovered by the deepest self-discovery. The later stanzas confirm that such is his meaning, for the poet will declare that the worst of evils is the "intellectual hatred" characteristic of an aggressive, opinionated mind, and that if the soul can rid itself of all hatred it will ~~recover~~^{recover} radical innocence" and find

that it is self-delighting,
 Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
 And that its own sweet will is heaven's will;
 She can, though every face should scowl
 And every windy quarter howl
 Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

Here the earlier figure of the laurel tree, "rooted in one dear perpetual place," is still very much alive in the poem. Consider the phrase "radical innocence." For radical comes from the Latin radix, a root, and a radical innocence is not merely a basic or essential innocence, but one that is rooted deep in the soul.

Why the poet's reference, however, to "bellows" in the last line of the stanza? "Or every bellows burst, be happy still"? Because the poet wants here to give the scourging wind a human reference. The aggressive opinionated person imitates the destructive wind by pumping his own malice out of a mind full of hate.

Earlier ~~in the poem~~ the poet had remarked that he had himself seen the "loveliest woman born / Out of the mouth of ^Plenty's horn" -- that is, out of the very cornucopia of richness, a woman dowered with all the gifts that nature could give her -- "because of her opinionated mind" exchange them "For an old bellows full of ⁿabgry wind." This is a bitter lament for what Yeats believed had happened to Maud Gonne, the woman he had loved so passionately earlier in his life.

In the concluding stanza of this poem, Yeats turns his thoughts to the kind of bridegroom he could wish for his daughter. He prays that whoever he may be, he

will bring her to a house
 Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
 For arrogance and hatred are the wares
 Peddled in the thoroughfares.
 How but in custom and in ceremony
 Are innocence and beauty born?
 Ceremony ^{is} a name for the rich horn,
 And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

Ceremony's

We miss the point and vulgarize this noble poem if we read the last stanza as a prayer for a wealthy son-in-law. The authoritative words are "accustomed" and "ceremonious." These qualities have nothing to ^{do} with conspicuous display, or even the mere possession of wealth. A word to which I would call your attention once more is "innocence." Beauty and innocence, which we usually assume are the random gift of nature, are in fact, so the poet here insists, born out of ceremony. Ceremony is the true horn of plenty, and the laurel tree which can withstand the storms of history is custom. This indeed is to invert our usual notions. For bodily beauty -- Yeats again is borrowing from Plato -- is the outward reflection of a beautiful soul. Yeats's innocence is the fruit of the disciplined soul that has come truly to understand itself. Such a person is incapable of harming anyone. So the term "innocence" is here neither the babe's lack of experience, nor the blind indifference of nature, but the soul's clear-eyed mastery of experience and of itself. Perhaps this is the kind of wise innocence to which great literature may return us if we can learn how to read it.

In this magnificent poem every word plays its proper part and every image breathes life into an idea. For the poem is also a powerful humanistic document; not the bare skeleton of an abstract argument, but that argument fleshed out into an entity that possesses a life of its own.

Yeats's prayer for his daughter may not be at all your prayer. You are not asked to accept it as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But who of us could not find mind and imagination stimulated by it? The poem is not didactic in any school-masterish sense. Perhaps this is just the value of poetry and of literature in general: it lets us observe and overhear men and women as they choose, make decisions, or express their inmost hopes and fears. That in itself is a service of the utmost importance, for we can learn from the experience of others.

Such is the service rendered by great literature throughout history. It provides dramatic accounts of men and women in conflict with nature, and with other human beings, and often with themselves. This last conflict William Faulkner regarded as the greatest theme possible -- the "human heart in conflict with itself." But though the phrasing is Faulkner's, the theme itself is found as early as in Homer's epics.

The conflict within the heart -- the tug between two loyalties, two evils, or what appear to be two equally precious goods -- is probably the most instructive of all. Sophocles' Antigone and his Oedipus, Shakespeare's Othello, Macbeth, and Mark Antony, are only a few of an illustrious company. They are not properly called role models, for they represent failure as well as triumph, and for most of us

any direct imitations of them would be out of the question. But an acquaintance with them through literature provides something far better than simple imitation. The way they live and choose to die tests the human spirit to its limits. Through the magic of language their creators can pass on something of their experience to us.

The humanities cannot be eliminated from our culture, but they can be debased. They cannot be eliminated because as long as mankind remains human, his yearning for the song, the story, and the drama cannot be suppressed. People are interested in amounts of human behavior, in suspense and conflict of interests, in the expression of emotion, in motivation. If they don't have Shakespeare or Jane Austen or Melville to read, they will read something far less rewarding, too often utter trash.

Long ago someone said that when the true gods leave the scene, the half gods come out of the bushes, and I say that when the true muses retire from the scene, the bastard muses are ready to take over. Their names are Propaganda, Sentimentality, and Pornography. The shared trait that proves their sisterhood is this: all three are bent on distorting the human dimension. Propaganda does so by pleading, sometimes unscrupulously, for a special cause or issue at the expense of total truth. Sentimentality does so by working up emotional responses unwarranted by and in excess of the occasion. Pornography does so by focusing upon one powerful human drive at the expense of the total human personality. In short, the spurious muses offer partial and biased accounts of life in its fullness. Their productions do not nourish, but are debilitating.

With regard to human purposes and values in a technological age, mankind's need of guidance has not ~~diminished~~ diminished but has actually increased. The evidence is everywhere. In the city in which I live I have never heard wisdom crying in the streets, but on Orange Street house after house exhibits neatly printed placards stating that counseling is to be had within. It would be comforting to think that in 1985 Dame Wisdom has simply conformed to the times and chosen a less primitive method of announcing her presence and marketing her wares. But I wonder. It is not for me, however, to say whether the counsel given on Orange Street is not worthy of that of Solomon. Perhaps it is. I mention the number of these counselors only as evidence of what is obviously a felt need. There is abundant evidence that many Americans yearn for guidance. Today we have a host of psychiatrists. There are certainly many in New Haven. Never have so many self-improvement books been published, or manuals offering instruction in how to conduct your marriage, or, if it is already pretty far gone, how to mend it; how to improve your face, or figure, or friendships; how to prop up your sagging psyche. For happiness, even for those possessed of adequate material means, continues to elude so many of us, and the pursuit of it proclaimed by Jefferson has often become an exhausting rat-race. For some it may have become even worse: a race like that at the dog-track in which the mechanical rabbit cannot possibly be caught.

If Jefferson could return to present-day America he would find much to marvel at and much to approve. How primitive would seem his own scientific efforts, and even those of the Dr. Priestlys of his day. Jefferson would doubtless admire our machinery, so

powerful and intricate, machinery that has done so much to relieve human drudgery and extend the possibilities of human life. But I believe he would be shocked to find how many of us still cannot read, and even more shocked to learn what those who can read do read.

With reference to our schools and colleges, I wonder whether the proud founder of the University of Virginia might not say something like this: Though your students devote so much of their time and energy to securing the means by which to achieve for themselves the good life, I am puzzled that they should devote so little serious reflection on what a good life really is. They seem long on means; perilously short on ends. That imbalance might imperil democracy itself.

Cleanth Brooks