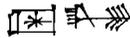


The Voice of Liberal Learning

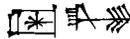
Michael Oakeshott

FOREWORD AND INTRODUCTION
BY TIMOTHY FULLER



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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A Place of Learning

1975

Un début dans la vie humaine. Paul Valéry

We are concerned with ourselves and what we may be said to know about ourselves. This comes to us, first, in what purports to be information of various sorts. We are informed, for example, that human beings are the most intricate of living organisms, that they have evolved over millions of years from less complicated organizations of chemical constituents, that each is endowed with an inherited genetic character, subject to modification, which by means of complex processes governs its

Editorial note: First presented at Colorado College as the Abbott Memorial Lecture in the Social Sciences on the occasion of the College's Centennial, September 1974. These were Michael Oakeshott's opening words: "I have crossed half the world to find myself in familiar surroundings: a place of learning. The occasion is a cheerful one: the celebration of the centenary of your foundation, and I hope you will not think me patronizing if I first express my admiration for you and all others who, through the centuries, sailing under the flag of the Liberal Arts, have, with becoming humility, summoned succeeding generations to the enjoyment of their human inheritance. But it is an occasion also for reflection. And I have been honored with an invitation to say something about the educational engagement which you and others have undertaken and to reconsider this adventure in relation to present circumstances. This is a large order, and you will forgive me if I respond to it only in part. Education is a transaction between teachers and learners, but I shall be concerned only with learners, with what there is to be learned and (in the first place) with learning as the distinguishing mark of a human being. A man is what he learns to become: this is the human condition."

movements, and that these movements are continuously directed to the self-maintenance of the organism and to the survival of the species. Alternatively, human beings are alleged to be sentient creatures all of whose movements and utterances are expressions of a desire for pleasure and aversion from pain. We are told, further, that Man was created by God, bidden to people the earth, endowed with an unlimited right to exploit its resources and directed not to be idle. And a human being has been said to be an immortal soul of unknown destiny lodged for a time in a mortal body. And so on.

Now, each of these statements about human beings is capable of elaboration in which its meaning may become clearer, thus allowing us to consider it from the point of view of whatever truth or error it may contain. They may all turn out to be (in some sense) true, or they may all be convicted of some error or obscurity. But with conclusions of this sort we are not now concerned. What concerns us is that each is itself a human utterance expressing a human understanding of the character of a human being, and that the capacity to make such utterances, whether they be true or false, itself postulates a man who is something besides what these, or any other such, statements allege him to be. They postulate what I shall call a “free” man.

A human being may become “free” in many different respects, and I shall suggest later that becoming educated is itself an emancipation; and human beings may also achieve various other degrees of what may be “autonomy”; but I am concerned now with the “freedom” (so to call it) of which a human being cannot divest himself or be deprived without temporarily or permanently ceasing to be human.

What, then, are we to understand by this “freedom” inherent in being a human and postulated in his capacity to make statements about himself? It is often identified with his having what is called a “free will.” This is usually the case when what is being considered is the kind of utterance we call an action. But it is

not a very satisfactory way of speaking. It is difficult to imagine what an “unfree” will would be. If what is being said is that human actions and utterances, properly speaking, are “free” because they are willed (that is, because they are the outcomes of desires and understandable only in terms of wants), then we are left with the question: in virtue of what must desiring be considered necessarily to be a “free” activity? Perhaps this inherent human “freedom,” exhibited when a man makes or entertains statements about himself, is better identified in terms of his ability to understand, or (of course) misunderstand, himself. He is sometimes said to have this ability in virtue of having, or being, a mind as well as a body. We must, however, be careful how we construe this distinction. What it distinguishes is not two things but, on the one hand, a process or organization of processes (the outcome of which is, for example, blue eyes or genetic resistance to malaria), and, on the other hand, the ability to understand such a process in terms of its regularities, to identify the substances involved and to discern how they are related to one another.

In short, there is an important distinction here between a chemical process and a biochemist understanding and explaining (well or ill) what is going on in a chemical process. For mind is not itself a chemical process, nor is it a mysterious *x* left over, unexplained, after the biochemist has reached the end of his chemical explanation; it is what does the explaining. A geneticist, for example, cannot be merely a clerk who records the utterances of his own genes; such a record would not constitute a contribution to a science of genetics, and in any case genes are incapable of such utterances about themselves; they can make only blue eyes or a propensity to live a long time. Mind, here, is the intelligent activity in which a man may understand and explain processes which cannot understand and explain themselves.

But this is only one aspect of the matter. Intelligence is not

merely concerned to understand physiological processes. Mind is made of perceptions, recognitions, thoughts of all kinds; of emotions, sentiments, affections, deliberations and purposes, and of actions which are responses to what is understood to be going on. It is the author not only of the intelligible world in which a human being lives but also of his self-conscious relationship to that world, a self-consciousness which may rise to the condition of a self-understanding. This inherent "freedom" of a human being lies not only in his ability to make statements expressing his understanding of himself, but also in the world's being for him what he understands it to be, and in his being what he understands himself to be. A human being is "free," not because he has "free will," but because he is *in* himself what he is *for* himself.

This reading of the human condition is familiar enough. It is embedded in the epic and dramatic literatures of the Western world and in the writings of historians: this is how human beings appear in Homer, in the sagas of Scandinavia, in Shakespeare and Racine, in Livy and in Gibbon. Not even the driest of modern behaviorists or the most blinkered neurobiologist is able wholly to reject it without rejecting himself. There have been times when this reading of human character was not only accepted but was embraced with enthusiasm. It was recognized as a glorious distinction to be welcomed, to be explored, cultivated and enjoyed; it was said to constitute the dignity of man. But, even then, this condition of being intelligent was seen to carry with it a penalty: the possibility of being wise entails the possibility of being stupid. Moreover, such a man is unavoidably responsible for his thoughts, utterances and actions. He cannot plead that his thoughts are caused by his inherited genetic character because thoughts have reasons and not causes and these reasons are other thoughts. He cannot plead that his utterances are not his own but are words put into his mouth by a god or

that they are merely electrical discharges of his brain: they have meanings for which he is responsible and are judged in terms of whether or not they make sense. He cannot plead that his actions are not his own but are merely the outcomes of irresponsible biological urges, like the branches thrown out by a tree: these actions also have meanings and are chosen responses to understood situations.

Further, because this “freedom” inherent in the human condition is not gratuitous and has to be paid for in responsibility, it has been viewed with misgivings and even counted a misery to be escaped, if only escape were possible. How much less burdensome to be incapable of error, of stupidity, of hatred and of wrongdoing, even if this meant the surrender of truth, wisdom, love and virtue. But it is impossible. The very contemplation of such an escape announces its impossibility: only mind can regret having to think. Instead of deploring our condition we would be better employed considering exactly what price we pay for our unsought and inescapable “freedom.”

I have called this price “responsibility,” although the word has an inappropriate moral overtone. It suggests that we might refuse to pay for the freedom inherent in intelligent activity and that this refusal would somehow be a dereliction of duty. However, it would be merely a failure to recognize a necessary condition. What distinguishes a human being, indeed what constitutes a human being, is not merely his having to think, but his thoughts, his beliefs, doubts, understandings, his awareness of his own ignorance, his wants, preferences, choices, sentiments, emotions, purposes and his expression of them in utterances or actions which have meanings; and the necessary condition of all or any of this is that he must have *learned* it. The price of the intelligent activity which constitutes being human is learning. When the human condition is said to be burdensome, what is being pointed to is not the mere necessity or having to think, to speak

and to act (instead or merely *being* like a stone, or growing like a tree) but the impossibility of thinking or feeling without having slowly and often painfully learned to think something. The freedom of a human being inheres in his thoughts and his emotions having had to be learned; for learning is something which each of us must do and can only do for ourselves.

This inseparability of learning and being human is central to our understanding of ourselves. It means that none of us is born human; each is what he learns to become. It means that what characterizes a man is what he has actually learned to perceive, to think and to do, and that the important differences between human beings are differences in respect of what they have actually learned. There is little doubt that our ability to learn has increased during the last million years or so, and that this ability is greater at some periods of our individual lives than at others. Perhaps also there are some genetic differences in our several abilities to learn. The human significance of these changes and differences, however, lies only in their reflection in what a man has actually learned to think, to imagine and to do; for this is what he is. It means also that these differences are not merely those of more or of less success in learning, of better or worse achievements in becoming human, but are also incommensurable differences of human individuality. In short, this connection between learning and being human means that each man is his own self-enacted "history"; and the expression "human nature" stands only for our common and inescapable engagement: to become by learning.

But what is this engagement I have called "learning" in which alone we may become human? Let me notice, first, an account of the matter which, whatever its shortcomings, is at least clear. A biologist will tell us that a living organism (an octopus, for example) exists in relation to its environment. The organism is a continuously changing chemical structure sensi-

tive to its circumstances and equipped to react to the stimulus of its surroundings. Its reactions are movements, not always successful, favoring its survival. The inputs it receives from its environment are not uniform or necessarily favorable, and in order to survive the organism must be versatile in its reaction. Indeed, it is equipped with mechanisms which favor and record for future use successful or “correct” reactions and suppress or disfavor those which have been unsuccessful or “incorrect.” This process in which an organism adapts itself and records its reactions to its environment is called “learning”; indeed, it is spoken of as a process of acquiring, storing and retrieving useful information, and in a human being it is said to be only more versatile than in an octopus.

We need not question this account of metabolic and evolutionary change, rich in anthropomorphic analogy though it be. Nor need we doubt that some such process goes on in the early days of our postnatal existence. Yet clearly the learning in which we may become human is very different from this process of organic adaptation to circumstances. Indeed, the latter is not a recognizable description of the learning by means of which the biologist himself came to discern and to understand the organic process. Is Dr. Watson’s discovery of the helical structure of DNA molecules properly to be described as itself a chemical reaction to an environmental input which promoted his biological survival?

The learning we are concerned with is a self-conscious engagement. It is not an induced reaction to a fortuitous environmental pressure but a self-imposed task inspired by the intimations of what there is to learn (that is, by awareness of our own ignorance) and by a wish to understand. Human learning is a reflective engagement in which what is learned is not merely a detached fragment of information but is understood or misunderstood and is expressed in words which have mean-

ings. It has nothing to do with organic survival and much of it has little to do even with that selective “getting on in the world” which is the human counterpart of organic homeostasis; it is concerned with perceptions, ideas, beliefs, emotions, sensibilities, recognitions, discriminations, theorems and with all that goes to constitute a human condition.

In these respects, human learning is distinguished also from other experiences, or alleged experiences, with which it is sometimes confused. Human learning is not acquiring habits or being trained to perform tricks or functions; it is acquiring something that you can use because you understand it. Further, the feelings of euphoria, of illumination or of depression which are induced by drugs, by flashing lights or by electrical currents are no more learned than the unconsciousness induced by an anesthetic, and they are no more significant; they make no contribution whatever to the achievement of a human condition. Indeed, insofar as they suggest that this condition can be acquired by chemical stimulus or by magic they obstruct the arduous self-conscious engagement of learning in which alone we may become human. Being bewitched is not learning. Nor is learning a teleological process in which a suppositious seed of *humanitas* in each of us grows and realizes or develops what is already potential in it. The nearest we can get to what may be called a distinguishing “natural” human equipment is self-consciousness; that too, however, is learned, although it begins to be learned very early in our individual lives. And while self-consciousness is the condition of all human intellectual and imaginative achievement, the vast variety of these achievements cannot be said to be potential in it.

Let me sum up this part of what I have to say. A human life is not a process in which a living organism grows to maturity, succeeds in accommodating itself to its surroundings or per-

ishes. It is, in the first place, an adventure in which an individual consciousness confronts the world he inhabits, responds to what Henry James called “the ordeal of consciousness,” and thus enacts and discloses himself. This engagement is an adventure in a precise sense. It has no preordained course to follow: with every thought and action a human being lets go a mooring and puts out to sea on a self-chosen but largely unforeseen course. It has no preordained destination: there is no substantive perfect man or human life upon which he may model his conduct. It is a predicament, not a journey. A human being is a “history” and he makes this “history” for himself out of his responses to the vicissitudes he encounters. The world he inhabits is composed not of “things,” but of occurrences, which he is aware of in terms of what they mean to him and to which he must respond in terms of what he understands them to be.¹ Some of these occurrences he learns to recognize as expressions of human thoughts and emotions — stories, poems, works of art, musical compositions, landscapes, human actions, utterances and gestures, religious beliefs, inquiries, sciences, procedures, practices and other artifacts of all sorts, which, again, he is aware of only in terms of his understanding of them. Others he learns to recognize as intelligent persons whom he is aware of in terms of who and what he understands them to be, and to whom he is related in terms of transactions and utterances which have meanings and may be understood or misunderstood. In short, he inhabits a wholly human world, not because it contains nothing but human beings and their artifacts, but because everything in it is *known* to him in terms of what it *means* to him. A

1. Moreover, human beings, although they do not have the godlike power to confer self-consciousness where it is absent, do have the power to individualize and endow into historical life things and creatures which are not themselves historical: horses, dogs, trees.

human being is condemned to be a learner because meanings have to be learned. Whatever a man thinks or says or does is unavoidably what he has learned (well or ill) to think, to say or to do. Even a human death is something learned.

2

For a human being, then, learning is a lifelong engagement; the world he inhabits is a place of learning. But, further, human beings, insofar as they have understood their condition, have always recognized special places, occasions and circumstances deliberately designed for and devoted to learning, the most notable of which are the human family, school and university. The human family (whatever form it may take) is a practice devised, not for the procreation of children, nor merely for their protection, but for the early education of newcomers to the human scene: it recognizes that learning begins slowly and takes time. School and university are unmistakable; they are successive stages in this deliberate engagement to learn, and it is with these that we are concerned.

The distinctive feature of such a special place of learning is, first, that those who occupy it are recognized and recognize themselves preeminently as learners, although they may be much else besides. Secondly, in it learning is a declared engagement to learn something in particular. Those who occupy it are not merely “growing up,” and they are not there merely to “improve their minds” or to “learn to think”; such unspecified activities are as impossible as an orchestra that plays no music in particular. Further, what is to be learned in such a place does not present itself by chance or arise circumstantially out of whatever may happen to be going on; it is recognized as a specified task to be undertaken and pursued with attention, patience and determination, the learner being aware of what he is doing. And thirdly, learning here is not a limited under-

taking in which what is learned is learned merely up to the point where it can be put to some extrinsic use; learning itself is the engagement and it has its own standards of achievement and excellence. Consequently, what is special about such a place or circumstance is its seclusion, its detachment from what Hegel called the *hic et nunc*, the here and now, of current living.

Each of us is born in a corner of the earth and at a particular moment in historic time, lapped round with locality. But school and university are places apart where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired, and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed. He finds himself invited to pursue satisfactions he has never yet imagined or wished for. They are, then, sheltered places where excellences may be heard because the din of local partialities is no more than a distant rumble. They are places where a learner is initiated into what there is to be learned.

But what is there for a human being to learn? A large part of human conduct is, and always has been, concerned with exploiting the resources of the earth for the satisfaction of human wants, and much of human learning is concerned, directly or indirectly, with this endlessly proliferating intelligent engagement. This certainly is genuine learning. An otter may be equipped with what, for want of a better word, we call an instinct which enables it to catch fish, a beaver in response to some biological urge may build a dam and an eagle may swoop down and carry off a lamb; but a fisherman must learn to catch fish and he learns to do so well or ill and with a variety of techniques, the engineers who designed and built the Boulder Dam were equipped with something more than a biological urge, and to breed sheep for meat or wool is an art that has to be learned. In respect of being concerned to exploit the resources of the earth a current human being is, then, an inheritor of a

vast variety of instrumental skills and practices which have to be learned if they are to yield the satisfactions they are designed to yield. Moreover, the inventor and the user of these skills and practices is not Man or Society; each is the discovery or invention of assignable men, a Prometheus, a Vulcan, a Bessemer or an Edison. It is not Man or some abstraction called "medical science" which cures the sick; it is an individual doctor who has himself learned his art from some assignable teachers. There is no such thing as "social learning" or "collective understanding." The arts and practices we share with one another are nowhere to be found save in the understandings of living, individual adepts who have learned them.

And further, the satisfaction of human wants is pursued in transactions between human beings in which they compete or cooperate with one another. To seek the satisfaction of a want is to enter into relationships with other human beings. This human association is not the interaction of the components of a process, nor is it an unspecified gregariousness or sociability; it is made up of a variety of different kinds of relationships, each a specific practice whose conditions must be learned and understood if its advantages are to be enjoyed. Incomparably, the most useful of these relationships is that which subsists between those who speak a common language in which to communicate their wants and to conduct the bargains in which they may be satisfied. Such a language, like all other conditions of human association, has to be learned.

To be human, to have wants and to try to satisfy them, is, then, to have the use of particular skills, instrumental practices and relationships. There is no action which is not a subscription to some art, and utterance is impossible without a language. These skills, practices and relationships have to be learned. Since this learning, so far as it goes, is genuine and may be extensive, it is no surprise that there should be special places devoted to it, each concerned to initiate learners into some

particular instrumental art or practice and often equipped with the opportunity of “learning on the job,” as it is called: medical schools, law schools, language schools, schools of journalism or photography, schools where one may learn to cook, to drive an automobile or to run a bassoon factory, and even polytechnics where a variety of such instrumental skills may be learned.

There is much more that might be said about this activity of exploiting the earth, of the arts and relationships used in the satisfaction of human wants and the learning these entail. It is certainly genuine learning, although the special places devoted to it are appropriately limited in their aims and in their seclusion from considerations of utility. To learn an instrumental art is not merely being trained to perform a trick; it entails understanding what you are doing. And learning a practice is not merely acquiring a mechanical contrivance and knowing how to work it. A human art is never fixed and finished; it has to be used and it is continuously modified in use. Even using a language to communicate wants is itself an inventive engagement. But I do not propose to explore further this engagement in learning; there is something more important for us to consider. We catch a glimpse of it when we recognize that choosing wants to satisfy is also something that has to be learned and that the conditions to be subscribed to in making such choices are not the terms of the instrumental arts and practices in which chosen wants may be conveniently satisfied. It is never enough to say of a human want: “I know how to satisfy it and I have the power to do so.” There is always something else to consider. But what comes into view is not merely an extension of the field of instrumental learning but an altogether different engagement of critical self-understanding in which we relate ourselves, not to our inheritance of instrumental arts, but to the continuous intellectual adventure in which human beings have sought to identify and to understand themselves.

To recognize oneself in terms of one’s wants, to recognize the

world as material to be shaped and used in satisfying wants, to recognize others as competitors or cooperators in this enterprise and to recognize our inheritance of arts and practices, including a common language, as valuable instruments for satisfying wants — all this is, unquestionably, *a* self-understanding. It gives *an* answer to the question, who am I? And indeed there are some who would persuade us that this is all we know or can know about ourselves and that all other thoughts human beings have had about themselves and the world are idle fancies and all other relationships are shadowy reflections of this relationship. But they refute themselves. In purporting to make a true statement about human beings and their relationships they identify themselves as something other than mere seekers after contingent satisfactions; they assume a relationship between themselves and those whom they address which is not that of exploiters of the resources of the earth but that of persons capable of considering the truth or falsehood of a theorem.²

But be that how it may, it is unquestionable that human beings, without denying their identities as exploiters of the resources of the earth, have always thought of themselves as something other than this and that they have been tireless in their explorations of these other identities. They have engaged in manifold activities other than this — adventures of intellectual inquiry, of moral discrimination and of emotional and imaginative insight; they have explored a vast variety of relationships other than this — moral, intellectual, emotional, civil; and they have perceived, dimly or clearly, that this identity as exploiters of the resources of the earth is not only evanescent and insub-

2. When Francis Bacon identified human beings as exploiters of the resources of the earth and language as a means of communicating information about wants, he added that this identity had been imposed upon us by God — thus identifying human beings *also* in relation to God. Even Karl Marx, inconsistently, recognized something called “scientific” inquiry independent of the current conditions of productive undertaking.

stantial when set beside those others but is itself conditional upon them. They have recognized that these understandings of themselves, and these valuations of occurrences, like everything else human, are themselves human inventions and can be enjoyed only in learning. Even in the most difficult circumstances, overwhelmed by the exigencies of the moment (life in the covered wagon, for example), they have carried these identities with them and imparted them to their children if only in songs and stories. Whenever opportunity has occurred they have set aside special places and occasions devoted to this learning, and until recently schools and universities were just such places of learning, sheltered enough from the demands of utility to be undistracted in their concern with these adventures and expressions of human self-understanding.

3

This, then, is what we are concerned with: adventures in human self-understanding. Not the bare protestation that a human being is a self-conscious, reflective intelligence and that he does not live by bread alone, but the actual inquiries, utterances and actions in which human beings have expressed their understanding of the human condition. This is the stuff of what has come to be called a “liberal” education — “liberal” because it is liberated from the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants.

But why should we be concerned with it? If it purported to provide reliable information about “human nature” our concern would be intelligible. But it does not. There is no such thing as “human nature”; there are only men, women and children responding gaily or reluctantly, reflectively or not so reflectively, to the ordeal of consciousness, who exist only in terms of their self-understandings. Nor is being human itself a special instrumental skill like that of an electrical engineer. And if our

concern is with human self-understanding, why all this paraphernalia of learning? Is this not something we each do for ourselves? Yes, humanly each of us is self-made; but not out of nothing, and not by the light of nature. The world is full of homemade human beings, but they are rickety constructions of impulses ready to fall apart in what is called an “identity crisis.” Being human is a historic adventure which has been going on since the earth rose out of the sea, and we are concerned with this paraphernalia of learning because it is the only way we have of participating in this adventure. The ancient Greek exhortation Know Thyself meant *learn* to know thyself. It was not an exhortation to buy a book on psychology and study it; it meant, contemplate and learn from what men, from time to time, have made of this engagement of learning to be a man.

Human self-understanding is, then, inseparable from learning to participate in what is called a “culture.” It is useful to have a word which stands for the whole of what an associated set of human beings have created for themselves beyond the evanescent satisfaction of their wants, but we must not be misled by it. A culture is not a doctrine or a set of consistent teachings or conclusions about a human life. It is not something we can set before ourselves as the subject of learning, any more than we can set self-understanding before ourselves as something to be learned; it is that which is learned in everything we may learn. A culture, particularly one such as ours, is a continuity of feelings, perceptions, ideas, engagements, attitudes and so forth, pulling in different directions, often critical of one another and contingently related to one another so as to compose not a doctrine, but what I shall call a conversational encounter. Ours, for example, accommodates not only the lyre of Apollo but also the pipes of Pan, the call of the wild; not only the poet but also the physicist; not only the majestic metropolis of Augustinian theology but also the “greenwood” of Franciscan Christianity. A culture comprises unfinished intellectual and emotional jour-

neyings, expeditions now abandoned but known to us in the tattered maps left behind by the explorers; it is composed of light-hearted adventures, of relationships invented and explored in exploit or in drama, of myths and stories and poems expressing fragments of human self-understanding, of gods worshipped, of responses to the mutability of the world and of encounters with death. And it reaches us, as it reached generations before ours, neither as long-ago terminated specimens of human adventure, nor as an accumulation of human achievements we are called upon to accept, but as a manifold of invitations to look, to listen and to reflect. Learning here is not merely acquiring information (*that* produces only what Nietzsche called a “culture philistine”), nor is it merely “improving one’s mind”; it is learning to recognize some specific invitations to encounter particular adventures in human self-understanding.

A man’s culture is a historic contingency, but since it is all he has he would be foolish to ignore it because it is not composed of eternal verities. It is itself a contingent flow of intellectual and emotional adventures, a mixture of old and new where the new is often a backward swerve to pick up what has been temporarily forgotten; a mixture of the emergent and the recessive; of the substantial and the somewhat flimsy, of the commonplace, the refined and the magnificent. Since learning is not, here, merely becoming aware of a so-called cultural inheritance but encountering and seeking to understand some of its specific invitations, a special place devoted to such learning is constituted only in terms of what it is believed there is to learn. Of course, this belief is itself a response to what may be called the “educational” invitations of the culture. To talk of being “culturally conditioned” is rubbish; a man is his culture, and what he is he has had to learn to become.

The wandering scholars who, in the twelfth century, took the road to Paris, to Bologna, to Chartres or to Toulouse were, often

unknown to themselves, seeking within the notions of the time a “liberal” education; they are our forebears in this adventure. You and I were born in the twelfth century and although we have traveled far we still bear the marks of our birth-time. But when two centuries later the expression “liberal studies” acquired a specific meaning, it stood for an encounter with a somewhat remote culture which was slowly being retrieved from neglect — the Greek and Latin culture of antiquity. Some of the achievements of this ancient civilization had never been lost: the Latin language as a medium of communication, some useful information (mostly legal and medical) and some notable pieces of writing. But the educational adventure of the fourteenth century sprang from an ever more extended recovery of this almost lost culture which revealed itself not only to have been one of great intellectual splendor, variety and reflective energy but also to be one in which a man of the fourteenth century could identify himself and which offered him a wealth of hitherto unheard-of invitations to explore and to understand himself: languages recognized as investments in thought; epic, dramatic, lyric and historical literatures which gave a new dimension to human relationships, emotions, aspirations and conduct; inquiries (including those of the early theologians of Christianity) which suggested new directions for human reflection. Thus, “learning” was identified with coming to understand the intimations of a human life displayed in a historic culture of remarkable splendor and lucidity and with the invitation to recognize oneself in terms of this culture. This was an education which promised and afforded liberation from the here and now of current engagements, from the muddle, the crudity, the sentimentality, the intellectual poverty and the emotional morass of ordinary life. And so it continues to this day. This education has had often to be rescued from the formalism into which it degenerated. Its center of gravity moved

from the culture of antiquity but without any firm settlement elsewhere. We have seen, sometimes regretfully, bits of this education fall away, having lost their compelling interest. It has been extended to include new and substantial vernacular languages and literatures. It has accommodated, somewhat reluctantly, the novel and still inadequately self-understood inquiry which has absorbed so much of the intellectual energy of modern times, namely the natural sciences. It has had to resist the seductive advances of enemies dressed up as friends. And what now of its present condition?

The engagement has survived. We do not yet live in the ashes of a great adventure which has burnt itself out. Its self-understanding is not at present very conspicuous, its self-confidence is fluctuating and often misplaced, its credit is stretched and it has borrowed when it would have been better to economize, but it has not been lacking in serious self-examination. The torch is still alight and there are still some hands to grasp it. But I shall not dwell upon its present vitality, such as it is; our concern is with its infirmities and with those that may be counted as self-betrays — not to censure them but to try to understand them.

Its most naïve self-betrayal is merely to have listened to the seductive voice of the world urging it, in the name of “relevance,” to take up with extraneous concerns and even to alter course. When, like Ulysses, we should have stopped our ears with wax and bound ourselves to the mast of our own identity, we have been beguiled, not only by words but by inducements. To open a School of Business, to undertake the training of journalists or corporation lawyers seem harmless enough concessions to modernity; they may be defended by the specious argument that they certainly entail learning; they give a place of liberal learning an attractive image of “relevance,” and the corruption involved may be written off as negligible. Events,

however, hardly confirm this optimism. Having no proper part in liberal learning, these appealing divergencies are difficult to contain; they undermine rather than assail the engagement. Their virtue is to be evanescent and contemporary; if they are not up-to-date they are worthless. And this unqualified modernity rubs off on the proper concern with languages, with literatures and with histories which are thus edged into the study of only what is current in a culture. History is contracted into what is called contemporary history, languages come to be recognized as means of contemporary communication and in literature the book which “verbalizes what everyone is thinking now” comes to be preferred, on that account, to anything else.

But the real assault upon liberal learning comes from another direction; not in the risky undertaking to equip learners for some, often prematurely chosen, profession, but in the belief that “relevance” demands that every learner should be recognized as nothing but a role-performer in a so-called social system and the consequent surrender of learning (which is the concern of individual persons) to “socialization”: the doctrine that because the current here and now is very much more uniform than it used to be, education should recognize and promote this uniformity. This is not a recent self-betrayal; it is the theme of those wonderful lectures of Nietzsche on the *Future of Our Educational Institutions* delivered in Basle a century ago in which he foresaw the collapse which now threatens us. And although this may seem to be very much a matter of doctrine, of merely how education is thought about and spoken of, and to have very little to do with what may actually go on in a place of learning, it is the most insidious of all corruptions. It not only strikes at the heart of liberal learning, it portends the abolition of man.

But if these are the cruder subversions of liberal learning there are others, more subtle but hardly less damaging. It has come to be thought of as a “general” education; that is, as learn-

ing not only liberated from the here and now of current engagements but liberated also from an immediate concern with anything specific to be learned. Learning here is said to be “learning to think for oneself” or to be the cultivation of “intelligence” or of certain intellectual and moral aptitudes—the ability to “think logically” or “deliberatively,” the ability not to be deceived by irrelevance in argument, to be courageous, patient, careful, accurate or determined; the ability to read attentively and to speak lucidly, and so on. And, of course, all these and more are aptitudes and virtues that a learner may hope to acquire or to improve. But neither they, nor self-understanding itself, can be made the subject of learning. A culture is not a set of abstract aptitudes; it is composed of substantive expressions of thought, emotion, belief, opinion, approval and disapproval, of moral and intellectual discriminations, of inquiries and investigations, and learning is coming to understand and respond to these substantive expressions of thought as invitations to think and to believe. Or, this word “general” is used to identify and to recommend an education concerned, indeed, with the substance of a culture, but so anxious that everything shall receive mention that it can afford no more than a fleeting glimpse of anything in particular. Here learning amounts to little more than recognition; it never achieves the level of an encounter. It is the vague and fragmentary equipment of the “culture philistine.”

Nevertheless, a place of liberal learning is rarely without a shape which purports to specify what there is to be learned. And its present shape in most such places bears witness both to the ancient lineage of the engagement and to the changes our culture has undergone in recent centuries. The natural sciences, mathematics, the humanities and the social sciences—these are the lineaments of this education as it comes to us now. Let us briefly consider these constituents.

Liberal learning is learning to respond to the invitations of the great intellectual adventures in which human beings have come to display their various understandings of the world and of themselves. The natural sciences, before they could be recognized in this character, had not only to offer something specific capable of being learned but also to present themselves as a distinctive inquiry or mode of human understanding. That is to say, they had to appear as very much more than somewhat mysterious information about the natural world which no educated man should be without, and something very much less than an unconditional or definitive understanding of the world. In respect of the first they have amply succeeded: every natural science now presents itself to the learner as a related set of theorems which invite critical understanding. In respect of the second they have been hindered, not by any inherent self-deception, but by two unfortunate circumstances. The first of these is the relic of a disposition to value themselves in terms of the use which may be made of the conclusions of their inquiries. This, in a place of liberal learning, has sometimes led to a proliferation of what may be called semisciences — organizations of information in terms of the use which may be made of it. But this is not a very important hindrance. The more serious encumbrance comes in some absurd claims made by others on their behalf: the claim that they themselves compose a distinctive culture (the silly doctrine of the “two cultures”); the claim that they represent “the truth” (so far as it has been ascertained) about the world; and the claim that they constitute the model of all valid human understanding — a claim which has had disastrous consequences elsewhere. But in spite of these hindrances, the natural sciences have unquestionably earned a proper place for themselves in the design of liberal learning and know how to occupy it. No doubt, for example, a biological identity is not itself a human identity, but one of the significant

self-understandings which human beings have come upon and explored is that of persons concerned with a specifically “scientific” understanding of themselves and the world.

Of the humanities I need say little. They are directly concerned with expressions of human self-understanding and their place in liberal learning is assured and central: languages recognized, not as the means of contemporary communication but as investments in thought and records of perceptions and analogical understandings; literatures recognized as the contemplative exploration of beliefs, emotions, human characters and relationships in imagined situations, liberated from the confused, cliché-ridden, generalized conditions of commonplace life and constituting a world of ideal human expressions inviting neither approval nor disapproval but the exact attention and understanding of those who read; histories recognized, not as accounts of the past focused upon our contemporary selves purporting to tell us how we have become what we are and containing messages of warning or encouragement, but as stories in which human actions and utterances are rescued from mystery and made intelligible in terms of their contingent relationships; and philosophy, the reflective undertaking in which every purported achievement of human understanding becomes the subject of an inquiry into its conditions. If any of this has got driven off its course it is by the winds which forever blow around the engagement of liberal learning, menacing its seclusion from the here and now or driving it upon the rocks of abstract aptitudes or socialization.

But what of the latest-born component of liberal learning: the social sciences? They are a mixed lot. Among them we may expect to find sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, perhaps jurisprudence and something called “politics.” They purport to be directly concerned with human conduct. These are what used to be called the “human sciences” — *Geistes-*

wissenschaften—in order to make clear that their concern is with human beings as self-conscious, intelligent persons who are what they understand themselves to be and not with human beings in the loose and indistinct sense of highly evolved organisms or processes of chemical change, the concern of natural sciences. And insofar as these human sciences are what they purport to be (which is not so in every case) it would seem that they belong properly to the “humanities.” But distinguished they now are; and if the project of distinguishing them from the “humanities” was an unfortunate mistake, the terms of the distinction are nothing less than a disaster. These terms are specified in the words “social” and “science.”

“Social,” of course, is a cant word. It is used here to denote an inquiry about human conduct concerned not with substantive actions and utterances, but with the relationships, the associations and the practices in which human beings are joined. This focus of attention is not, in itself, corrupting. It is that upon which most histories of law are centered; and it is the focus, for example, of Maitland’s *Constitutional History of England*, which, he tells us, is designed to be an account, not of human struggles, but of the results of human struggles in constitutional change. But it is chosen here, and is labeled “social,” in order to allege (or to suggest) that human beings and their performances are what they are in terms of these relationships, associations and practices; and to suggest, further, that these relationships and practices are not human devices, autonomous manners of being associated, each with its own specified conditions of relationship but are the components of an unspecified, unconditional interdependence or “social” relationship, something called a “society” or “Society.” In short, the contention is that this unspecified “social” relationship is the condition, perhaps the determinant, of all human conduct and that to which human actions and utterances must be referred in

order to be understood. To substitute the word “social” for the word “human” is to surrender to confusion: human conduct is never merely a subscription to a practice or to a relationship, and there is no such thing as an unconditional “social” relationship. This confusion is partnered by a commonplace corruption of our language in which the word “social” has become the center of endless equivocation. John Selden in the seventeenth century said of the cant expression *scrutamini scripturas*, “These two words have undone the world”; a single word has sufficed to undo our cruder twentieth century.

It might, however, be supposed that in connecting the word “science” with the word “social” something has been done to restore exactness. But the outcome of this conjunction has been to add a ruinous categorical confusion to what need not have been more than a permissible partiality in considering human conduct. For the word “science” in this context is intended to denote a natural science of human conduct; that is, to mean the investigation of human actions and utterances and the practices and relationships to which they may subscribe as if they were nonintelligent components of a “process,” or the functional constituents of a “system,” which do not have to learn their parts in order to play them. The design here is to remove human action and utterance from the category of intelligent goings-on (that is, chosen responses of self-conscious agents to their understood situations which have reasons but not causes and may be understood only in terms of dispositions, beliefs, meanings, intentions and motives); to place them in the category of examples of the operation of regularities which do not have to be learned in order to be observed; and to remove human practices, relationships, associations and so forth from the category of procedures whose conditions have to be learned and understood in order to be subscribed to and can be subscribed to only in self-chosen actions and utterances, and to put

them into the category of “processes.” Rules are misidentified as regularities, intelligent winks as physiological blinks, conduct as “behavior” and contingent relationships as causal or systematic connections.

This project of collecting together a number of respectable inquiries under the head of “the social sciences” and the attempt to impose this equivocal character upon them has not met with universal acceptance but it has gone far enough to have deeply damaged liberal learning; no other failure of self-understanding in the humanities has generated such confusion. It is all the more damaging because, in putting on the mask of “science,” some of these departments of learning have succumbed to the temptation to understand and to value themselves in terms of the use that may be made of the conclusions of their inquiries. Their recognition as the appropriate equipment for new technological enterprises and for the new and proliferating profession of “social worker” has corrupted liberal learning. But this does not mean that, individually, and when properly recognized as *Geisteswissenschaften*, they have no proper place in liberal learning; it means only that they have been misidentified. Jurisprudence, until it was confused with a vapid concern for so-called social and psychological needs and became part of the equipment of “social engineers,” was a profound philosophical inquiry, one of the most ancient and respected components of liberal learning. Sociology and anthropology are respectable and somewhat attenuated engagements in historical understanding; they are concerned with human practices, procedures, associations and so forth, and their contingent relations, and with human actions and utterances in terms of their subscriptions to the conditions of practices. Psychology has long ago declared itself a “natural,” not a “human,” science. It is not concerned with substantive human

thoughts, beliefs, emotions, recollections, actions and utterances but with so-called mental processes which are vulnerable to reduction to genetic and chemical processes.

5

Putting on one side engagements in learning that have no proper place in a liberal education, there are, then, departments of liberal learning in which self-consciousness has not yet been transformed into the self-understanding upon which authentic inquiry and utterance depend. But the more serious consideration for anyone who undertakes to review the present condition of liberal learning is the terms of the self-understanding of the engagement itself.

As it emerged in Western Europe, liberal learning was understood to be a concern to explore the invitations of the culture of antiquity, to hold before learners the mirror of this culture so that, seeing themselves reflected in it, they might extend the range and the depth of their understanding of themselves. This idiom of the self-understanding of liberal learning was never very satisfactory; it was substantial, not formal, and it has long since passed away. It has been succeeded by other, similarly substantial, self-identifications. For example, when I was young it was thought (or at least suggested) that the whole of liberal learning might properly be understood in terms of a somewhat extended study of Geography: liberal learning was urged to find the focus of its attention in “geographical man.” And we have since become familiar with a claim of this sort made on behalf of Sociology; if every department of liberal learning is not itself to be turned into sociology (philosophy into the sociology of knowledge, jurisprudence into the sociology of law and so forth) then, at least, none is as it should be unless sociology were added to it. These, of course, are fanciful notions, but they

are not unconvincing merely on account of their contingent implausibility. They are unacceptable because the identification of liberal learning they suggest is of the wrong kind. The self-understanding of liberal learning must, I think, be sought in the recognition that its component inquiries, in spite of their substantial differences, have a common formal character and that they are related to one another in a manner agreeable with that formal character.

I have already suggested that the components of a liberal education are united and distinguished from what does not properly belong to it in terms of their “liberality”; that is, in terms of their concern with what Valéry calls *le prix de la vie humaine*,³ and their emancipation from the here and now of current engagements. But beyond this general consideration, these components may be resolved into and understood as so many different languages: the language of the natural sciences, for example, the language of history, the language of philosophy, or the language of poetic imagination.

Languages in a more commonplace sense are organizations of grammatical and syntactical considerations or rules to be taken account of and subscribed to in making utterances. These considerations do not determine the utterances made or even exactly how they shall be subscribed to; that is left to the speaker who not only has something of his own to say but may also have a style of his own. Of course, no such language is ever settled beyond the reach of modification; to speak it is a linguistically inventive engagement. The conditions imposed upon utterance by these languages of understanding constitute not merely linguistic idioms, but particular conditional modes of understanding. Learning here is learning to recognize and discriminate between these languages of understanding, is becoming famil-

3. “Tout ce qui fait le prix de la vie est curieusement inutile.”

iar with the conditions each imposes upon utterance, and is learning to make utterances whose virtue is not that they express original ideas (that can only be a rare achievement) but that they display genuine understanding of the language spoken. It is on this account that a learner may be recognized to understand a language such as that of philosophical or historical understanding and yet not be a philosopher or a historian; and also that a teacher may be recognized to have something into which he may initiate a learner which is not itself a doctrine. But since none of these languages of understanding was invented yesterday and each is the continuous exploration of its own possibilities, a learner cannot expect to find what he seeks if he attends only to contemporary utterances. These languages of understanding like other languages are known only in literatures.

What I am suggesting, then, is that from the standpoint of liberal learning, a culture is not a miscellany of beliefs, perceptions, ideas, sentiments and engagements, but may be recognized as a variety of distinct languages of understanding, and its inducements are invitations to become acquainted with these languages, to learn to discriminate between them, and to recognize them not merely as diverse modes of understanding the world but as the most substantial expressions we have of human self-understanding.

Yet the identity of a culture and of liberal learning remains obscure until we have some conception of the relationship of its components. Now each of these languages constitutes the terms of a distinct, conditional understanding of the world and a similarly distinct idiom of human self-understanding. Their virtue is to be different from one another and this difference is intrinsic. Each is secure in its autonomy so long as it knows and remains faithful to itself. Any of them may fail, but such failure is always self-defeat arising from imperfect understanding of itself or from the nonobservance of its own conditions. They may

not all be equally interesting and they may compete for our attention, but they are not inherently contentious and they are incapable of refuting one another. Hence, their relationship cannot be that of parties in a debate; they do not together compose an argument. Further, they are not differing degrees of divergence from some suppositious unconditional understanding of the world: their relationship is not hierarchical. Nor is it either a cooperative or a transactional relationship. They are not partners in a common undertaking, each with a role to perform, nor are they suppliers of one another's wants. What then is left?

Perhaps we may think of these components of a culture as voices, each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in a conversation — an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all. And perhaps we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversational relationship and thus to make our *début dans la vie humaine*.

6

Liberal learning is a difficult engagement. It depends upon an understanding of itself which is always imperfect; even those who presided over its emergence hardly knew what they were doing. And it depends upon a self-confidence which is easily shaken and not least by continual self-examination. It is a somewhat unexpected invitation to disentangle oneself from the here

and now of current happenings and engagements, to detach oneself from the urgencies of the local and the contemporary, to explore and enjoy a release from having to consider things in terms of their contingent features, beliefs in terms of their applications to contingent situations and persons in terms of their contingent usefulness; an invitation to be concerned not with the employment of what is familiar but with understanding what is not yet understood. A university as a place of liberal learning can prosper only if those who come are disposed to recognize and acknowledge its particular invitation to learn. Its present predicament lies in the circumstance that there is now so much to obstruct this disposition.

There was a time, not so long ago, when liberal learning was, not better understood, but more generally recognized than it now is and when the obtrusive circumstances of the early upbringing of many (and not merely of the better-off) were such that they did not positively stand in the way of the recognition of its invitation. They were, indeed, circumstances where the localities in which one was born and grew up were more enclosed than they now are and certainly less superficially exciting. Memorable experiences were fewer and smaller, there was change but it moved at a slower pace; life could be hard but the rat race as we know it now was in its infancy. They were also somewhat narrow circumstances which bred little concern with what might be going on outside the locality and none at all with world affairs. But they were intellectually innocent rather than positively dull, uncrowded rather than vacant. For there was in these circumstances a notable absence of the ready-made or of oppressive uniformities of thought or attitude or conduct. If experiences were fewer, they were made to go further; if they were smaller, they invoked imaginative enlargement. The natural world was never so far distant as it now often is and the response to it was allowed to be naïve and uncluttered, a response of won-

der and delight. In all this, school was important; but it was a place of its own. I often recollect that memorable sentence from the autobiography of Sir Ernest Barker: "Outside the cottage, I had nothing but my school; but having my school I had everything." There, in school, the narrow boundaries of the local and the contemporary were swept aside to reveal, not what might be going on in the next town or village, in Parliament or in the United Nations, but a world of things and persons and happenings, of languages and beliefs, of utterances and sights and sounds past all imagination and to which even the dullest could not be wholly indifferent. The going was hard; there was nothing to be got without learning how to get it, and it was understood that nobody went to school in order to enjoy the sort of happiness he might get from lying in the sun. And when with inky fingers a schoolboy unpacked his satchel to do his homework he unpacked three thousand years of the fortunes and misfortunes of human intellectual adventure. Nor would it easily have occurred to him to ask what the sufferings of Job, the silent ships moving out of Tenedos in the moonlight, the terror, the complication and the pity of the human condition revealed in a drama of Shakespeare or Racine, or even the chemical composition of water, had to do with *him*, born upon the banks of the Wabash, in the hills of Cumberland, in a Dresden suburb or a Neapolitan slum. Either he never considered the question at all, or he dimly recognized them as images of a human self-understanding which was to be his for the learning. All very innocent, perhaps even credulous; and in many cases soon overlaid by the urgencies of current engagements. But however superficially they might be appreciated, these were not circumstances which generated a positive resistance to the invitation of liberal learning in a university. Indeed, their very innocence nurtured a disposition to recognize it.

But these circumstances are no longer with us. The way we

live now, even though it may contain notable relics of the earlier condition, is somewhat different. The world in which many children now grow up is crowded, not necessarily with occupants and not at all with memorable experiences, but with happenings; it is a ceaseless flow of seductive trivialities which invoke neither reflection nor choice but instant participation. A child quickly becomes aware that he cannot too soon plunge into this flow or immerse himself in it too quickly; to pause is to be swept with the chilling fear of never having lived at all. There is little chance that his perceptions, his emotions, his admirations and his ready indignations might become learned responses or be even innocent fancies of his own; they come to him prefabricated, generalized and uniform. He lurches from one modish conformity to the next, or from one fashionable guru to his successor, seeking to lose himself in a solidarity composed of exact replicas of himself. From an early age children now believe themselves to be well-informed about the world, but they know it only at second hand in the pictures and voices that surround them. It holds no puzzles or mysteries for them; it invites neither careful attention nor understanding. As like as not they know the moon as something to be shot at or occupied before ever they have had the chance to marvel at it. This world has but one language, soon learned: the language of appetite. The idiom may be that of the exploitation of the resources of the earth, or it may be that of seeking something for nothing; but this is distinction without a difference. It is a language composed of meaningless clichés. It allows only the expression of “points of view” and the ceaseless repetition of slogans which are embraced as prophetic utterances. Their ears are filled with the babel of invitations to instant and unspecified reactions and their utterance reproduces only what they have heard said. Such discourse as there is resembles the barking of a dog at the echo of its own yelp. School in these circumstances is notably unim-

portant. To a large extent it has surrendered its character as a place apart where utterances of another sort may be heard and languages other than the language of appetite may be learned. It affords no seclusion, it offers no release. Its furnishings are the toys with which those who come are already familiar. Its virtues and its vices are those of the surrounding world.

These, then, are circumstances hostile to a disposition to recognize the invitation of liberal learning; that is, the invitation to disentangle oneself, for a time, from the urgencies of the here and now and to listen to the conversation in which human beings forever seek to understand themselves. How shall a university respond to the current aversion from seclusion, to the now common belief that there are other and better ways of becoming human than by learning to do so, and to the impulsive longing to be given a doctrine or to be socialized according to a formula rather than to be initiated into a conversation? Not, I think, by seeking excuses for what sometimes seem unavoidable surrenders, nor in any grand gesture of defiance, but in a quiet refusal to compromise which comes only in self-understanding. We must remember who we are: inhabitants of a place of liberal learning.