

## The Contemporary Attack On the Humanities: A Rejoinder

M. E. Bradford

### I. The Problem

MY CONCERN ON THIS OCCASION is with the relentless attack now being made within the academy on the long and well-established role of humane letters—the humanities, understood broadly—in attending to the intellectual formation and instruction of young American men and women. This attack is designed to discredit among us all the forms of nurturing customarily associated with humane learning. Below the college level it is reflected in the choice of texts and the planning of curricula for the secondary schools. At the college level it involves these choices and many others. It is nihilistic in method and (at least to begin with) nihilistic in purpose, animated by a virulent hatred for the regime which inexplicably tolerates its tendentious excesses and patiently considers its few legitimate suggestions. In sum, it is a root-and-branch critique of Western culture in all of its manifestations: a critique which looks primarily to discredit the means by which contemporary custodians of that culture set out to perpetuate it and the sedimentary process by which it was formed. With such purposes it is difficult for representatives of that culture to compromise, make armistice, or even coexist.

My awareness of this drift toward confrontation comes primarily from years of paying close attention to the conversation within my own discipline, an exchange concerning which texts are a necessary part of any reputable version of a liberal education. But this discussion of the canon of time-tested and well-respected books, questions and approaches is replicated in all of the fields customarily associated with the study of literature: and therefore is

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definitive of what we mean by “the creation of fully educated persons”—by the “transmission of civilization” as a habit of thought embodied in a durable curiosity and a set of texts: what we ordinarily contrast to mere training in various skills. It is a vital issue in the field of pedagogy, in exchanges between prescriptive teachers and aspiring reformers, in the study of “cultural self-perpetuation” and “cultural repression” by the sociologists. It has power over what is fashionable in history, political science and classics, and is even more influential in the rationalization of contemporary literary theory at its outermost fringes. We read about the subject in the press, learn of its impact on the meeting of editorial boards and the making of appointments to faculty and observe its purchase on the architects of cultural policy. In all of these manifestations of cultural rebellion anarchy holds sway, confusion of terms and of

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ends: and especially theoretical confusion about the nature of the educational process, the extent to which it embodies the experience of an entire civilization and its natural impulse to sustain itself through the generations by reproducing its finest products, literate men and women. For those who reject that civilization as hostile to their dream of self-realization, as conducive to the perpetuation of a wicked world, one in which talk of merit and achievement, of intelligence and rational distinction means primarily an indifference to the pure doctrine of equality, disrespect for ordinary humanity and the pretensions of class, race and sex, the canon is a hostile structure, to be pulled down as soon as possible. Within the academy the number of those

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thus disposed is large and growing. Yet few outside the university recognize where this development is tending or how swiftly it makes its way.

## II. Causes

THE SOURCE OF MOST of this upheaval is essentially political in character, and emerges directly from the preoccupations of public persons, writers and other authorities who follow an agenda which puts other concerns ahead of the integrity of the various disciplines which are a part of the humanities. Since the 1960's the "new wave" figures in all of these fields—the social historian, the specialist in linguistics, the feminist professor of Greek, the Marxist literary historian and the director of programs in black studies—have had in common an interest in revisionist or ostensibly neglected texts central to their *idée fixe*, books which have a purely instrumental potential: a usefulness in promoting causes which are more important to them than the proper understanding of French agricultural history or the lives of the poets, Greek drama or the generic origins of the free ode. A postulate of their argument is, of course, that history can be abstracted from any notion of a "usable past," that political traditions are a scam, that (in the language of Frank Lentricchia) "Literature is inherently nothing; or it is a body of rhetorical strategies waiting to be seized." Or that whatever literature might be, the criticism of it is a matter of personal perception rationalized after-the-fact in the creation of a theory to account for an act of judgment. Moreover, the language of criticism itself, like all other evaluative speech—indeed, like all communication—in retaining its problematical character, is imprecise in its capacity to carry the meanings we customarily attach to it.

Lentricchia is a Marxist *littérateur*. Like Frederic Jameson, Robert Weimann, Richard Ohmann and Terry Eagleton, he has great difficulty in distinguishing serious literature from rhetoric and a profound hatred for everything that cannot be made to work toward the creation of the "new man" of the familiar Marxist mythology. It is his assumption that "form is a relationship of manipulation between a text and its audience—a relationship in which power is, in the same moment, given both its birth and its point of application." Since great literature has "no inherent meaning, no universal significance," it is also the task of the new school academics "to appropriate the traditional text for the goals of revolutionary change, to bring out its politically activist material." To something like this thesis many feminist and black scholars, without necessarily embracing the rest of Marxist teaching, give assent: accept it out of concern for their own group's social and political agenda, but not out of respect for the integrity of cultural history, political thought or literary criticism—all of which

are, in their view, varieties of inquiry important primarily in their partisan potentiality, and not in their own right. Aesthetic definitions and talk of intellectual standards are “nostalgic gestures toward that long [ago] dissolved consensus about what an educated person should know.” As a young professor at Duke has approvingly observed, “Students are not taught there is such a thing as literary excellence. . . [We] are throwing out the notion of good and bad [art or scholarship], or ignoring it.” Or rather, replacing it with another, social conception of those issues. In the process the long accepted standard reading lists are re-examined as instances of a “much broader social strategy on the part of a professional-managerial class”: in the idiom of Michael Foucault, as powergrabs by the bourgeoisie; in so far as they can be understood by the New Historicism, as “acts of oppression” which serve “to conceal the real workings of society from those most hurt by it.” At the center of this movement to credential a new list of “classics” with the “right political implications,” in the phrase of David Brooks in *The Wall Street Journal*, “to open the curriculum without regard to literary quality,” is the endless task of “canon revision”—a process initiated by an equally interminable labor of “canon criticism,” what the French call *ressentiment*—a radical rejection of the world as it is, one brought on by what is “given” in both the historical and ontological sense of that term.

When the fashionable new style of discourse concerning cultural and literary theory is not, as with the arguments just summarized, directly political in its origin, it is at least prepolitical in its effects: deconstructive of what Yeats calls “monuments of unaging intellect,” such icons of culture as can be expected to shape the future of a civilization as they define its past. The machinery for this solipsistic and self-reflective analysis is linguistic and anthropological—from De Saussure, Jakobson and Levi-Strauss. The post-structuralists who practice deconstruction are critics of consciousness, followers of the philosophers of language who now dominate that discipline. For them any construct of words is a self-enclosed system, and speculative criticism set in motion by inhabiting such a system is the highest form of creativity. In denying the validity of a distinction between literature and other kinds of writing intended only to inform or persuade they thunder, “There is nothing but the text,” a statement meaning just the opposite of what it says. But the substance of their labor is only theory piled upon theory, the criticism of criticism, a subjective activity which cannot reach beyond the conclusion that the role which it attempts to perform in society is an impossible one: out beyond glib ingenuity joined to arrogance and the glorification of ignorance, mere nihilism of a very elaborate kind. As a way of knowing, this critical method is obfuscatory, insisting that, in the tentative creation of meaning where nothing of

the kind has existed, it is more important than the documents which it refuses to treat with ordinary expository modesty. Obfuscatory, as is the critique of historical analysis, and the culture of cultural history. In these exercises there is nothing but opinion and fatuous irrationalism, an infinite regression perversely contrived on principle, plunging into the abyss of the imperial self, where bright Alice sits behind the looking glass and knows.

To all such trendy nonsense practiced humanists should be able to respond that they recognize the rootedness of discursive language, the problem of how subject relates to object, the link between perception and projection. In particular, rhetoricians know that most human choices are made *on balance*, without anything more than a reasonable preponderance of evidence to support going in one direction and refusing to go in another. In their company, to prove uncertainty is to prove nothing. Most of them (and most expository critics of literature) would concede that no critical description of the *form* of any serious imaginative creation is commensurate with the experience which it attempts to render. This much may be granted. The form—the achieved design, the interior action—of any text is also an argument, as are its verbal texture, its style—and our account of both. Granted, once again. But to make such concessions *is not* to agree that no one account of structure—and therefore of meaning—is, in reason, more persuasive and valuable than any other; or to give way to a willful and arbitrary spirit which insists that the critic must have complete liberty *qua* license and that his only obligation is not “to mean” but merely “to be”: the spirit summarized by Geoffrey Hartman when he asserts that “literary humanism is dead” and then expands upon that judgment by insisting that “given our present sense of the momentum in science, in politics, in the psyche—totalitarian terror, atomic terror and Freud’s hypothesis of an instinctual drive into death—given all these types of holocaust, it is hard to maintain the humanist’s faith in the person. . . .” Or his faith in the efficacy of choice.

Post-structuralism and social determinism create terrible problems for those who would defend the value of literary, historical and philosophical studies in a post-industrial, democratic society. These formulations generate an “artificial reality” which stands between the student or scholar and the open experience of a subject. But Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Roland Barthes and Jonathan Culler have not produced a calculus more distortive or abstract in its misunderstanding of the imitation of nature or the operations of creativity than what has also flourished by their side in theories of the repression of the artist by his inherited culture or of the “anxiety of influence.” From Edmund Wilson to Leslie Fiedler, Lionel Trilling to Harold Bloom, psychological reductionism has searched for the

grain of discontent in the poet as oyster and oversimplified all of the literature it touched in the process—just as psychobiography reduces to behavioral explanations the lives it examines and social history makes something automatic and impersonal out of the record of nations. And this is to say nothing of the “straightjackets” of gender and race—which resemble nothing so much as bygone religious zealotry in their impact on the world of letters. Alienation is a self-defeating formula in the study of any high culture, one which precludes taking seriously the idea of human responsibility which defines Western civilization.

### III. Solution

TO CONTENTEND THAT there is no truth to be maintained about literature (and no truth rendered by it), or that poetry is merely a reflection of compulsion or mania or economic forces is to propose a system in the study of the humanities that is, in our time, difficult to answer. Furthermore, the same may be said about deterministic *schema* for the reading of history as a mass phenomenon, and of politics as mere manipulation. For there can be no rational response to the errors of judgment and analysis made by persons who have absolutely no respect for the evidence of reason. Young people who have been taught to distrust all authority as a deception recently exposed—who have experienced too much change to believe in permanence—agree easily that

nothing can be taught or learned. They gravitate naturally toward responses to reading and information that search only after relevance—often an anachronistic or far-fetched connection to the tendentious and/or topical concerns of a particular political subculture. For them reading and interpretation are merely private acts about which almost nothing can be communicated—a communion in *rejection of their culture as it has been* and of its would-be preservers, a rejection of legitimate authority. The nature, meaning and purpose of education in the humanities cannot be understood on the basis of these presuppositions.

To confront the impasse created by this explosion of cultural theory requires the creation of a better account of how the contents of the canon came to be included there, of the reasons for adding to or demoting within the canonical list, for interpreting these components on their own terms, in relation to one another and against a background of the milieu in which they were generated and requires also that such components be considered in their relation to the revealed truths of a religion. That the canon is a living force which has a history of its own and a capacity to impact upon what is said and written today—even if it is *against the canon*—must also be recalled, as it was half a century ago in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” To indulge discussion of the canon by its enemies while ignoring such evidence is to neglect the educators’ historic task of communicating to posterity a society’s understanding of itself, both as it is and as it would like to be. It is to be guilty of what Allen Tate called “provincialism in time.” The grounds upon which we refuse to make such a mistake need now forcefully and without compromise to be declared regardless of the antagonistic spirit of the age: so asserted unless we are prepared to retreat into the barbarism where as children we all begin.

The Western tradition in humane letters, in political theory, history, and literature avoids the vanity of glorifying the judgment of one particular generation, and most especially if that contemporary judgment instructs the educator that his task is not transmission but rather animadversion upon the present order of things. To relearn, on grounds that are universal and topical (presently persuasive) that our culture is a universe of discourse which conditionally validates a set of assumptions or questions in company with the best available answers about man’s permanent nature and place in the creation, is to be free of the merely political, manipulative view of education. It is further to see in our intellectual patrimony an identity with the best of human effort—an aristocracy of judgment and discriminating choice, of liberty in the power of languages of which our country will always have need if (as Mr. Jefferson insisted) our institutions as a free society are to be preserved. This inheritance, of course, can be communi-

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cated only to those who will receive it, and only on the condition that the honored dead who formed and shaped that legacy continue to be given a vote where questions of preservation are at issue: or rather, where the issue is either whether it shall continue *or* what it shall contain. Within these limits we should acknowledge that the canon is flexible. But not otherwise. Within these limits, out of a history of its accomplishments and origins, out of the very different history of its adversaries, we must restate the case in its behalf, especially to those young people who have not yet made alienation into a matter of principle.

First of all, the argument employed to discredit the process by which liberal learning has come down to us from Erasmus, Colet and More must be disinterestedly reported and its incidental merits recognized; then it must be criticized without timidity and compromised defensiveness where it is inaccurate, unreasonable, beside the question and theoretically shallow. Finally, an alternative theory, illustrated out of persuasive working examples, must be constructed: a theory which functions well inside the verbal

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context created by all of this negative commentary on canon formation, confronting it honestly but without conceding so much to its ideological sources and justification as have recent apologies for the “funded wisdom” of the tradition. We can recognize a lack of sophistication and intellectual rigor on the part of many of these timid defenders of our inheritance in what Burke called “the bank and capital of the ages.” Now is the time for confronting and rejecting the motives behind the generic, root-and-branch attacks on the canon and the cultural tradition embodied there. For if all canons are “the epiphenomena of a critical theory,” we should be able to state a theory of our own, given the record our version of the tradition has made in the history of civilized man, and the pedigree it can display.

#### IV. Overview

OF COURSE IN PHILOSOPHY there are traditional courses defined by the subdivisions of the subject. And from rhetoric and history we learn to examine in context all discourse concerning the perennial questions, realizing that the particular evidence we are considering reaches toward universal significance out of a firm grounding in the concrete, “messy” details of human experience. We reason at our best when we keep dialectics to a minimum and treat no artifact made of words as if it were a dish served up to

the gods. Even so, in the long intellectual history of Western man we have, in a corporate way, by trial and error (and by brilliant flashes of individual insight), discovered that certain documents speak more persistently to durable human concerns, issues important to us because we are human beings, than do any others. From the time of Homer, Hesiod and the Greek historians, the canon of Western classics has been discovered in the same way that old-fashioned British judges “found the law.” Aeschylus asks us why men presume against the gods, and at what cost. Homer asks why men will risk their lives, and what home means to mortal men and women who wish to fulfill their nature. Moreover, along with Herodotus, Homer asks what it means to be Greek and a man of the West, as opposed to Trojan (Persian) and Asiatic, as does Xenophon in *The Anabasis*. This is why the little book of the march of the 10,000 was cherished—why it was the first reading in Greek for schoolboys down to the time of my father’s education in a small academy in Tennessee. What the boys learned of Cicero and Xenophon at Hall Moody’s school would have made sense to the Renaissance humanists; and not only in classics, but also in British literature and British and American history, civics or government and Friday “declamations.” Each of the great texts considered in this tradition was a locus of meanings gathered in upon it by usage and also part of a great conversation going on between itself and other texts of equivalent importance—a conversation which became as much a part of the tradition as the text itself: a conversation of interest to all manner of men by reason of their generic humanity, regardless of their lesser identities—even though these are also part of us, by nature. And what I say of Greeks (who are not so much my favorites as Romans) might also be said of those who came after them, and after the sons of Abraham—and about others who stood on those mighty shoulders.

Thus in conclusion I maintain that, regardless of how we respond to it, the great tradition of Western learning *is*. Our presence here in considering its merits and shortcomings, friends and enemies, specifies that it exists. Indeed, it is the only imaginable context for that deliberation, as conducted on civil and disinterested terms. The alternative approach, as set in action by the essentially political spirit of canon reformation, is the dismemberment of the university as we have known it into a set of professional courses supplemented by a set of mutually exclusive cultural curricula, each designed to reinforce some “group identity”—with “group” here signifying providential distinctions such as age, race, and gender, or certain cultural boundaries brought into being by history, language and lifestyle. This approach seems to be a species of affirmative action conducted by reference to origin in the handling of books and ideas—respectful toward a few items from each source,

regardless of intrinsic merit. On the principle advanced by the most mindless of curriculum reformers such as insist on "quota" representation of texts, approaches and issues of particular interest to their subculture, flattering to its self-importance apart from any question of achievement, the life of the mind as we have known it for 2500 years disperses into little sectarian seminaries: establishments like those frequented by the disciples of the Ayatollah near Qom. Soon thereafter, all conversation comes to a conclusion, leaving intact only a little scope for shouting, imprecations and threats. Beyond these gestures, as Allen Tate observed, "there is more in killing than in commentary."

At this point we confront a paradox. If the peoples of Northern Europe in the time of Charlemagne had said (as do now the ingrate beneficiaries of a rich and established culture not made by their own forebears), "What have I to do with Rome and Athens and Jerusalem?"; if they had asked, "Why should I consider the handiwork, the thoughts, of these swarthy fellows who resemble me in almost nothing?", then the modern history of Europe would have been a very different matter than what we have seen, and the power of societies organized by persons of North European descent a thing of no importance. The framework of patient interest in and attention to seemingly outrageous

opinions which gives a hearing to the would-be reformer of curricula, the reviser of canons made up of intellectually unavoidable and universally valued texts – and of the larger network of commentary gathered around and between them – is one created by those texts, those questions, that commentary. If we assumed that nothing but power counted, in the end we, the sensible majority of educated men and women, would not allow the proponents of radical cultural theory a place in our fragile universities. But we are patient. And we also agree with the old theory that frontier wars with the aborigines and punitive expeditions against savages are necessary to the preparation of warriors before the great contest comes, giving them a sense of their vocation, an awareness of the dangers faced by and the value of what they agree to in theory and stand ready to defend and perform by custom, out of respect for ancient authority. But once the agenda of the enemy is identified as a plan to destroy our civilization within its citadels, once the implacability of their hostility to the permanent things is recognized for what it is, the time for patience is at an end. At that moment our duty is to expel those enemies, to leave them in a context of their own making, there to vex one another without any more "darkening counsel" within "the precincts of light."

## Ryn Gives Lectures on 'Value-Centered Historicism'

NHI CHAIRMAN CLAES G. RYN delivered a series of four lectures at a conference on "Cultural Relativism and the Crisis of Civilization" sponsored by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. The conference, held at Bryn Mawr College from July 30 through August 5, was attended by approximately 50 college and university faculty members from across the United States.

In his lecture series, entitled "Overcoming Relativism: Toward a Value-Centered Historicism," Ryn examined the existence of a universal moral order and its relation to concrete historical experience. He noted that there have long been signs within contemporary social and political thought of a reaction against nihilism and relativism and an apparent willingness to consider that life is subject to a universal moral order. Yet very different – frequently conflicting – ethical and political objectives claim to be sanctioned by moral duty, and this very diversity of views concerning the content of moral good is seen by those who reject the idea of a universal moral order as confirmation of the truth of moral nihilism or relativism. For many in this latter camp, moral relativism is seen as synonymous with "pluralism"; it signifies a welcome abandonment of out-

dated, static moral notions and recognizes that in establishing necessary public order and social cohesion, the consent of the governed should be obtained since evolving agreements on how society should be structured or how individuals should behave are merely conventional and open to constant revision by members of society.

"To modern thinkers who assume the inescapable subjectivity of human desires and think of social and political order in terms of convention or social contract," said Ryn, "a belief in ethical universality seems to represent a distasteful rigidity and preference for political authoritarianism. Accepting a transcendent moral order is regarded as tantamount to discounting or ignoring personal individuality and the variability of circumstance."

Unfortunately, said Ryn, many of the contemporary thinkers "who espouse a universal standard of right confirm these suspicions by placing their concern for higher principles in opposition to stressing the particularity, diversity and changeability of human existence. To emphasize the historical nature of life, they assert, is to undermine a proper regard for universality. The ultimate standard of right must be independent of historically derived beliefs and condi-

tions. How else could the particularities of history be assessed?"

A serious defect of this essentially pre-modern, anti-historicist position, according to Ryn, is its insufficient attention to the normative authority within concrete human experience. By contrast, value-centered historicism takes account of the vital and necessary connection between man's historical sense and his ability to discover and promote universal values. History contains evil as well as good. It follows that discrimination is necessary and that progress is not inevitable. Still, the realization of universal values is never separate from concrete experience. It is through civilization's concrete examples of the good, the true and the beautiful, as revealed in concrete instances of morality, philosophy and art, that the individual is oriented to life's higher possibilities. The universal is not an ideational abstraction. Universal values become known to man in actual experience. The highest achievements of humanity embody the universal, however imperfectly. They give a structure to experience that invests it with special significance. To the extent that this structure is maintained, it initiates new generations to the reality of higher values. It is pregnant with new possibilities for realizing good. Universal values are never exhausted by history, and they point beyond their own particular circumstances. But their nature becomes known to man only through their concrete manifestations.

Even tradition at its best cannot capture the essentials of universal values once and for all, Ryn noted. Changing circumstances and the chronic presence of human limitations and flaws make necessary a continual struggle to articulate man's higher purpose. This task is not a matter of copying a standard already at humanity's disposal but must be a continuing discovery. Sound tradition is not mere repetition of the past. Creativity and renewal are necessary to maintain and develop the sense of universality in forever new circumstances, some of which may be highly detrimental to the task. Thus, said Ryn, "Proper traditionalism does not leave the great examples of human moral, philosophical and aesthetical achievement in the past but makes them an inspiration in the present. When tradition achieves its highest purpose it is a *living* past, which means that it joins past and present in a new, direct apprehension of universal values. From within that apprehension of the enduring higher good, society can be continuously assessed."

Ryn noted that the higher purpose of education and upbringing and of civilization in general is to give the individual the moral, intellectual, and aesthetical range of experience that will qualify him to judge how human beings should live. The widening and deepening moral, intellectual and aesthetical activity of the individual puts him in a better position to rank experiences. Some experiences are discov-

ered to be more deeply satisfying than others. Some prove merely transitory or disappointing in the longer run. Others are pleasurable but nevertheless destructive of a more fundamental harmony. If the individual has sufficient character, priorities will be formed and maintained with the objective of building into experience as much lasting happiness and enjoyment as possible. Because of weak character or poor guidance, some individuals will come to live by the thrills and pleasures of ignoble experience and never escape a sense of the final meaninglessness of human existence.

What kind of individual is in the best position to judge life's different possibilities? One who is able to compare all significant possibilities to each other, one whose sense of proportion and priorities is the result of intimate familiarity with the leading alternatives, not only in his own time and place but throughout human history. Since no individual can try out all serious possibilities for himself in actual life, he has to rely at least in part on careful examination of the evidence of others. The considered and repeated judgment of past generations will carry considerable weight. Much of the human range that he cannot or would not experience in action he will come to understand through creative literature.

Society can either stifle or facilitate this kind of comparative assessment of the potentialities of life. In a society that tends to indulge its members' whims of the moment and to ignore the rest of humanity or mankind's past, the citizenry will still experience much, but they will not be in a position to assess their own preferred enjoyments in relation to possible experience of a very different kind. They may have an appreciation for rock music, but lack the preparation for absorbing Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. They may have a large appetite for simple popular entertainment but know nothing of Shakespeare, Dante and Sophocles. They may develop the technical skills necessary for acquiring creature comforts but know little about how to satisfy spiritual needs. They may liberally indulge their desire for food, drink, sex, and other pleasures but have no understanding of the deeper and lasting satisfaction of happiness that the classical heritage associates with ethical self-restraint. If such a society, caught up in its own idiosyncrasies, attempts to pass judgment on what lies beyond its own familiarity, it can interpret it only in the terms known to it and will wholly distort it.

The truly civilized society, on the other hand, is more versatile. Its rising generation is not confined to the tastes of the moment. On the contrary, it is prepared through schooling and other upbringing to absorb the great achievements of the past in ethics, philosophy, and the arts and to assess these possibilities of experience in relation to each other as well as in relation to more recent claims to

attention. The civilized society encourages its inhabitants to live the kind of life that seems to represent the best judgment of the ages, yet allows the freedom to enrich, expand, and deepen this heritage. This kind of society, said Ryn, is best prepared to judge how man should live. In a sense, it knows all the possibilities and is generally familiar even with what it rejects. "The more versatile society," Ryn explained, "has no difficulty understanding the ways of the idiosyncratic society. There is little in the latter that does not fall within its own experience in some way. But, because of its greater experiential range, the versatile society also recognizes the severe flaws of the idiosyncratic society and accepts some of its predilections only in tempered and revised form. Its sense of priorities is much different. It has a different sense of what is trivial and important to the fulfillment of human existence. The truly civilized society cultivates an openness to experience, but it is an openness that is structured and disciplined by its evolving sense of higher direction. This ordered openness is its ground for judging.

"The discrimination between experiences of high and low dignity falls in the end to the truly well-informed, cultivated individuals whose vantage point lets them identify the low by its distance from the high. Insofar as people in general incorporate some of this experiential vantage point, they too help impart to society a sound sense of priorities and proportion. To object to this argument that there are many different traditions in the world and thus many different ranges of experience is merely to draw attention to the high qualifications for judgment. Only people of exceptional breadth, depth, versatility, and sensibility, people who know man's history, can judge possibilities of life with authority."

By way of contrast, Ryn stressed, an "abstract, purely intellectual notion of what is required to determine high and low" is morally escapist. The great appeal of such a position is that "it presupposes little in the way of character and general cultural preparation": qualities that are attainable "only through difficult and protracted effort."

## *President Nixon Joins NHI Board*

Former President of the United States Richard M. Nixon has joined the National Humanities Institute as Honorary Chairman of its Board of Trustees. President Nixon, the author of an impressive series of books and articles on politics and world affairs, is recognized throughout the world as probably the most thoughtful of America's living former Presidents. At age 76, the former Chief Executive not only continues as an active writer—his new book will be published either late this year or early in 1990—but he will soon be completing his successful leadership of the drive to build the Nixon Presidential Library, which will open next June.

Though known as a tough-minded politician and statesman, Nixon has taken an active interest in history, philosophy, and political theory throughout his adult life. In pursuit of those interests, the former President became familiar with the writings of several NHI scholars, including Institute Chairman Claes G. Ryn and Academic Board member Paul Gottfried, and this in turn led him to take an active interest in the NHI program.

In accepting the invitation to become associated with the National Humanities Institute, President Nixon wrote: "I am making an exception to my usual policy and have indicated my willingness to serve as an honorary chairman of the board of the NHI. . . . I welcome the opportunity to be associated with such a distinguished group."

President Nixon's involvement comes at a time when the Institute is aggressively expanding its fund-raising and development activities, with the goal of evolving into a mini-university that is recognized for special expertise and authority in key areas of the humanities. The Institute seeks to create the intellectual foundation for transforming the destructive intuitive mind-set that underlies many of today's serious social and political problems and thereby to help revitalize Western civilization.

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