

By JOHN U. NEF

IN QUEST OF MAN

Dear Sir,

I have read with great interest your kind letter announcing the plans of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies to found, under your editorship, an international review devoted to humanistic studies. For many years I have been concerned with what seems to me perhaps the major intellectual and cultural problem of our time—that of bringing together in the service of humanity the knowledge which has been acquired by means of divers special disciplines during the past century and a half. Indeed, I have the honour to be a member of a group, founded for this purpose a decade ago at the University of Chicago, viz., the Committee on Social Thought. Therefore I think you will not take it amiss if I venture to write some random reflections concerning this problem of a synthesis of knowledge, reflections resulting both from my historical research and my experiences with the Committee on Social Thought. If these remarks are of any help to *Diogenes*, I shall be very happy.

There is a charming story about the most delicate of women writers, Jane Austen. She was one of several children born to the Reverend George

Austen, who was rector of a parsonage in the Hampshire village of Steventon. She began most unostentatiously to write in her early teens. *Pride and Prejudice*, the first of the novels that eventually brought her fame, was begun when she was twenty-one, in 1796. She never troubled her parents until she had finished it. Then one morning in the late summer of 1797, at family breakfast, she quietly said to the rector, 'Father, I have written a book.' 'Have you, my dear?' His words sounded almost absent-minded. 'Yes', she persisted, 'and I wish you would read it.' Middle-aged persons are proverbially bad listeners, but this was a remark which a middle-aged father, if he heard at all, could not easily evade. So the Reverend George Austen sought refuge in the weakness, not of his hearing, but of another of his senses. 'My eyes, my dear,' he protested, 'they could not stand the strain of so much handwriting.' It was another fourteen years before any book of Jane Austen was printed. By that time her father had gone to his rest.

History has made reparation for George Austen's weak eyes; now, after a hundred and forty years, his daughter has been more read than any other woman writer. Yet she wrote nothing between 1798 and 1809—between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-four—years which might have been productive, and it is not unlikely that her pen was paralysed partly by the lack of interest shown not only at home but by such publishers as saw her early efforts of 1796–98: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey*.

The mature professor in our time who aims to influence thought and at the same time to reach a general audience is confronted by a difficulty similar to the one which faced Jane Austen as a girl. Those whom he seeks as readers are equipped with an excuse that is more foolproof than her father's. When they are told about the professor's book or essay, they simply say, 'I couldn't understand it, it would be way over my head', or, if they want to flatter the author, they say, 'it is too profound'. As a formula for what is vulgarly called in the United States 'sales resistance', this is hard to equal. The opinion has spread that the professor is an expert who composes in a kind of mysterious and learned shorthand, intelligible only to those directly trained in his special subject. In spite of the considerable reputations as scholars which modern professors often possess, their advantages over the young unknown girl that Jane Austen was a century and a half ago are not conspicuous, when it comes to getting read to-day a work of theirs that deserves to live.

Toynbee's *Study of History* can serve as an example. Since 1946, when a condensed version prepared by D. V. Somervell was published, Toynbee has had a wide circulation in Great Britain and the United States. In the Somervell condensation, his book has been on the drawing-room tables of many American families whose normal fare is the picture magazine and the *Readers' Digest*. Yet, when the first instalment of the actual book appeared in three volumes nearly twenty years ago in 1934, it was not regarded as suitable even for the learned specialist. The editor of the *Journal of Modern History*, a highly reputable historical magazine, sent the three volumes for review to one of those professors who rank in American academic circles as leading historians. This professor was regarded by his immediate colleagues as a scholar with broad interests. After a month he returned the book to the editor. A *Study of History* did not fall in his own field, he told the editor. It fell in no field, and he was unable therefore to recommend a reviewer. For some twelve years the book was practically unknown in the United States. The late Edwin F. Gay, the dean of American economic historians, who had met Toynbee and who had most cosmopolitan associations, had never heard of this now famous work as late as 1941, when I described its contents to him.

It is often assumed that the condensation by Somervell made a *Study of History* readable. Actually Somervell employed only words and phrases which appear in the original work. Much of what is best and, above all, most readable is omitted, notably the long concrete illustrations. In its original form the book is more comprehensible as well as more valuable for the common reader.

Why does this separation exist between the scholar and the public? Is it desirable? Is it necessary? If it is undesirable and unnecessary, what can be done to overcome it? The gulf between the man of learning in the universities and the public leads us to examine the nature and purpose of graduate study and research. It leads us to ask ourselves what aims *Diogenes* and the Committee on Social Thought have in common.

As the history of Toynbee's book suggests, the scholar who tries to create an enduring work of general and perennial interest, finds himself separated from direct communication with both scholars and the public. This situation has many causes. Among them are the course recently taken by university work, the instruction that has come to be given in what are called graduate schools in the United States, the kind of preparation now usually provided for the young scholar in all countries.

When the training in universities is not superficial and empty, it tends to be more and more highly specialised. In the United States this tendency has been carried to something of an extreme, and unfortunately foreign countries are often inclined to imitate our worst habits. Except for a few universities in the United States, there is no division into colleges, as in Great Britain, or into semiautonomous faculties and institutes, as in France. The division is into 'departments', and these are everywhere supreme when it comes to the professor's scholarly allegiance. During the past thirty-five years the tendency in the United States (and elsewhere too) has been to expand the number of departments.

My father, who died in 1915, was head of the department of chemistry at the University of Chicago from the time the University was founded in 1892. I remember his colleagues well. All of them could gather easily round the dining-room table in the modest flat in which we lived when I was a child—say seven or eight at the most. Recently I was astonished to find how all this had changed. (I should explain that in the United States the English habit of eating in colleges has been little developed, and that a single faculty club usually provides the setting for any lunch or dinner of a faculty group.) On entering our faculty club at Chicago one day, a year or so ago, I noticed that the solarium, a large hall where the professors ordinarily lounge about reading newspapers, was given over to a meal for well over a hundred guests. The head waitress told me that this was a meeting of the department of chemistry!

By expanding departments during recent years we have seldom enlarged the range of human vision. In spite of all the criticism that has been levelled recently, nowhere perhaps more vigorously than in the United States, against specialisation in university work, the fractionisation of knowledge, which had gone far at the time of the First World War, has continued. The subject matter has been divided and then subdivided. In the process of making appointments to cover each subdivision the need for men of general culture has been increasingly ignored in practice, whatever tribute is paid to such men in theory. So the tendency has been to narrow the vision of the professor. With the mechanisation of life his imaginative faculties have not been encouraged to develop. He is usually without intellectual resources that might enable him to break through the barriers which have been raised by the departmentalisation of knowledge.

The notion that the most learned professor is he who writes most unintelligibly has gained ground. For this the professors themselves are partly responsible. There are among them some who almost take perverse pride

in being unintelligible. I am told that an Oxford University scholar of reputation recently entered the common-room of his college and announced triumphantly to his colleagues: 'At last I have written a really good book. Not only will no one read it; no one *can* read it!'

Specialisation in university work has done much for learning, and the right kind of specialisation is not the enemy of intelligibility. An outstanding example of the value of specialisation can be found in the history of the Normans. During the ninth and tenth centuries this Viking people from Scandinavia raided the coasts of continental Europe and settled in the area of north-western France along the English Channel, in a stretch of lovely country to which they gave their name—the dukedom, and later the province, of Normandy. They soon adopted the ways of Europe, including the Christian religion, and merged with the local population until Normandy became one of the strongest feudal states of the eleventh century. As every schoolboy used to know, that was when the Normans conquered England. Other Normans attacked the Arabs in Sicily and part of southern Italy and established another state. Later Anjou, Poitou and Aquitaine were brought into the Norman orbit through the fortunes of marriage. During the last half of the twelfth century the Norman empire rivalled in extent and political power the kingdom of France and the imperial dominion of Frederick Barbarossa. Yet, as a separate bit of history, the story of the Normans ends in 1204, when the French king, Philip Augustus, made the duchy of Normandy an integral part of France, or at the latest in 1250, when, with the death of the emperor Frederick II, who was half Norman, all Norman dominion ended in Italy.

The history of the Normans might never have been written had it not been for the age of specialisation in learned work that began in earnest about a hundred years ago. If Norman history was to have a general interest, it had to be studied minutely. At the same time the specialist had to be a person of wide culture, with a clear view of history as a whole, with a firm philosophical grasp of the significance of man and his destiny, as these were understood in the classical and the Christian traditions, and with a mastery of the literary art. As fortune had it, three men who possessed these qualities and who were also human beings with a charm that has a universal appeal, were attracted by Norman history at a time when the possibilities in historical specialisation, based on short periods and small territories, first became apparent, and when this kind of historical specialisation provided a fresh form of creative expression. The oldest of the three was a Frenchman, Léopold Delisle, the great archivist

and librarian, whose long life ended just before the First World War. Like the others, he combined political with constitutional history and with the history of ideas, and, in addition, he inquired exhaustively into economic history. His book on the agriculture of medieval Normandy, first published a century ago, is still the most informative work on medieval agriculture in existence. The second was Charles Haskins, of Johns Hopkins, Wisconsin, and Harvard. His powers for carrying on minute research in medieval manuscripts gave him a fine scholarly reputation at an early age. His subsequent Lowell Lectures, *The Normans in History*, revealed an equally remarkable capacity for historical generalisation, which was made possible by a gift for disentangling the important from the unimportant. This is a book that the common reader could read with profit and pleasure, although, as a matter of fact, it is hardly read at all. The third, Sir Maurice Powicke, of the Universities of Manchester, Belfast, and Oxford, is one of the most lovable characters that the age of specialised scholarship has produced. His first book describes with admirable comprehensiveness the background of the loss of Normandy to France. Between them, Delisle, Haskins, and Powicke made the history of the Normans the important episode that it was, by weaving that episode into the whole of history.

Like all procedures that are open to the human mind, pushed beyond a certain point, specialisation yields diminishing returns. A year ago I presided at a meeting in Paris, one of many such meetings held by the International Congress of the Historical Sciences. This meeting was devoted to medieval social and economic history. A learned English scholar read a paper on medieval charters, in which he remarked that Haskins' studies have not exhausted the material in the charters issued by the dukes of Normandy. The thesis of this scholarly gentleman, if I understood it rightly, was that much more research should be done on these charters. I do not say nothing would be added to knowledge if this research were done, but I do say that books of the quality and general interest that we have from the pens of Delisle, Haskins, and Powicke are not likely to emerge from such research.

What is becoming true of ever more minute specialisation as the principle of research in historical study is coming to be true of specialisation in nearly all branches of higher learning. The Delisles, Haskins, and Powickes of the future (and we can only hope that their ilk return) will not be harvested from the kind of fragmentation of research that has become the main preoccupation of graduate schools in Europe and the United States.

When, during the last half of the nineteenth century, these men were young, a need was felt among the scholars who were devoting themselves to special branches of knowledge to form small groups—most of them national, but some international—to hold sessions periodically, at which they could meet and discuss their problems, particularly when these problems cut across the lines of their own special fields of study. Some problems of method recurred in all departments of specialisation; in historical work, for example, every specialist had a common problem in the interpretation of documents. And this matter of evidence was not confined to history: for writers of detective stories, like Conan Doyle, for lawyers and judges, like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., for students of literature, like John Livingston Lowes of Harvard, who published a book of some five hundred pages in which he analysed the mind of the great poet Coleridge, questions of documentary evidence present similar aspects. Such questions occur even in the daily life of the ordinary man and woman if they engage in correspondence with their friends and relatives. Evidence of the same species becomes a heart-rending problem in many a love letter. We have only to think of the pages of uncertainty which Proust devotes to his relations with Albertine in *The Sweet Cheat Gone*. Is Albertine really in love with him or not? Every scrap of evidence has to be sifted and considered in every possible light.

When they were formed, the learned societies had matters of general interest to discuss, and the meetings with peers provided a congenial setting for the discussions. What has become of such meetings? Anyone engaged in the hotel business of a large city in the United States is likely to have seen that, in their outward aspects, they are difficult to distinguish from meetings of rotary clubs, of automobile manufacturers, of chain store executives, of presidents of universities, or of national college fraternities. Some of the learned associations have grown so large that three cities—New York, Boston, and Chicago—alone have hotels big enough to take care of them. It was the proud boast of the builder of the Stevens Hotel in Chicago, in the midst of the building boom of 1926, that one could live in the new structure ten years and occupy a different bed every night. It is no wonder that the Stevens became the mecca for learned associations.

The growth and multiplication of these associations may have contributed a mite to the expansion of the hotel business, but in most cases it has contributed nothing to constructive discussions among men of learning and culture. It is on references to recurring universality that creative

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intellectual conversations thrive. Most of the learned associations in the United States meet between Christmas and New Year's Eve, at a time when the chief need of most professors is quiet recuperation from an exhausting three months of teaching. One of the chief objects of a faculty member seeking promotion is to get his name on the programme of his association so that he can show it to his chairman, who shows it to his dean, who in turn shows it to the president. One leading subject of conversation at the meetings is the vacancies (with the war crisis it is rather the lack of vacancies) for specialists in each university in the fields of teaching covered by the association. Candidates are advised by the chairman of their departments to be on hand and to circulate through the hotel lobbies, so that each university may display its wares for the others to see, much as the publishing houses take booths in the same hotel to display the textbooks, which provide a very mediocre substitute for the works of general interest with the composition of which a few talented scholars ought to concern themselves. If there are good papers, and sometimes there are, few men hear and fewer still discuss them. The great conversations of half a century ago have almost disappeared, and so have the subjects, like the nature of evidence, which touch us all as human beings. The most depressing thing is that the distracted persons who assemble at each of these association meetings now provide the major constituency for the scholar, the only audience that he has outside the classroom.

What is needed to meet these conditions constructively is not merely small reforms. What is needed is refoundation: university work of a new kind which cuts across all the present special fields of knowledge and claims a different kind of audience for its work—the kind of audience for whom a writer like Jane Austen composed. If that kind of audience no longer exists, the new university work should create it.

No person could claim that he has found a perfect formula for the graduate school that is needed. Formulas are not what the mind requires, especially to-day, when there is a disposition in the world to plan and determine our lives independently of the right of the human person, to express what is best and most precious, most personal, and at the same time, for that very reason, most universal. But we have the right to discuss the nature of such a graduate school. This right becomes a duty for a person like myself, who, during the past ten years, has been part of a group which might hope to provide the nucleus of such a graduate school, or at least to set an example for other, better qualified groups.

How would it be possible to combine the discoveries in numerous

special fields of knowledge which have a significance for the nature and destiny of man? How could some common understanding be reached concerning the new, more general problems that confront the mind to-day? By what methods should scholars work towards the solution of such problems? These, it seems to me, are the important questions which face us. They cannot be dealt with by anything resembling a mass movement. The universities are now too many and too large to swing their full energies in the right direction. That must be rather the function of small groups such as the Committee on Social Thought and of an international review like *Diogenes*. Yet, at the same time, the audience with which the university man who belongs to such a committee or writes for such a review is provided by his classes and by the learned associations to which he belongs is not enough. Such an audience often presents him with valuable and suggestive criticism and with useful information concerning materials for study which might otherwise escape him. But it is as a man of letters, or even as some other species of artist, more than as a professor in the conventional sense, that the member of our new graduate school would need to approach his work. Therefore no subject of inquiry can properly be left outside the scope of such a school.

During the past hundred years learned men have confined themselves more and more to matters that can be proven by positive evidence. Positive evidence has come to be identified with men's sense perceptions. If all competent astronomers, looking through a telescope at a star, agree upon the existence of some observable property in the star, we have knowledge. If all competent chemists in bringing several substances together as an experiment observe the same reaction, we have knowledge. If all competent historians study a document and agree on a text or some particular point in a text, we have knowledge.

For example, an eminent German scholar named Brunner, a great historian of medieval jurisprudence, attributed two twelfth-century Norman documents (both with a considerable importance for the institution of trial by jury) to Henry Plantagenet, count of Anjou, duke of Normandy and also King of England as Henry II. Later Haskins carefully examined all the documents which form the cartulary of Bayeux Cathedral known as the *Livre noir*. On the margin of these two writs, and of ten other documents, he found the initial G clearly traced in a twelfth-century hand. Thus Haskins *proved* that the critical writs were not by Henry, but by his father, Geoffrey Plantagenet. There was no disputing the matter if you had a good pair of eyes or could employ a magnifying

glass, even before a change in modern technology made it possible to clarify the MSS. with the help of recently discovered ultraviolet rays.

The limitations inherent in rigidly confining knowledge in this way to matters that can be materially proven, have become more apparent during the last half century than they were during the nineteenth century. Two kinds of intellectual inquiry have revealed these limitations.

For one thing it has come to be recognised, in the work of Sir Charles Sherrington, for example, that the human mind cannot be explained adequately in physiological terms, as some men, like Jacques Loeb, once supposed it might be; and that we cannot *know* the mind in the same way that we know by our eyes that the letter G rather than the letter H appears in the *Livre noir*. My colleague Professor F. A. Hayek of the Committee on Social Thought is at work on a book which suggests that it is, indeed, impossible for the mind to fully explain *itself*. What is required for a satisfactory positive explanation of anything is, objectively, independence from what is to be explained. Consequently, while it is possible to explain the functions of the body *scientifically* in biological terms, it would be open only to a higher perception, independent of the mind and independent of human desires, passions, weaknesses, and qualities, to explain the mind.

Now it is only by virtue of this same mind that a man can arrive at any knowledge whatever. Even the positive knowledge that we possess is presented to us in the light of the peculiar human attribute, the mind. So everything we are taught about the physical universe and the biological universe is contingent upon the working within men and women of a human attribute whose nature and limitations none of us can know objectively. Therefore we cannot claim that any of our conclusions in the realm of fact have absolute validity. Viewed in other terms than those of the human mind, they might appear in a different light.

The second development in recent intellectual history which has undermined certainty in the realm of positively ascertainable facts is the recognition among great natural scientists themselves of the limitations of their work, a recognition brought about by some of the discoveries to which their positive methods have led them. As a result of the theory of relativity, the quantum theory, and the general progress of nuclear studies, the idea has disappeared that there is any ultimate material foundation for matter, space, and time. Here the human mind, in its search for the structure of the physical universe, has revealed the incompleteness of positive knowledge in examining the very subjects in which scientific methods, as exploited with unprecedented zeal since the sixteenth

century, proved so extraordinarily illuminating. The universe is perhaps finite, but who can say that it is final?

These discoveries have cut the ground from beneath the feet of nearly all learned work done in the universities. They have perhaps undermined the foundations of all intellectual life. As Alfred North Whitehead expressed it, the system of concepts for scientific research, according to which 'every university in the world now organises itself, . . . is quite unbelievable'. The situation which these new discoveries present provides the setting for any new graduate school, if it hopes to measure up to its responsibilities. The way in which the mind now meets these new discoveries is of overwhelming importance to the human race.

If I am not mistaken, it is your purpose, as editor of *Diogenes*, just as it is mine, as a member of the Committee on Social Thought, to meet the problems raised by these new discoveries with a single intention—that of serving truth. Is it not of great moment both for *Diogenes* and the Committee to recognise that the truths we seek are not to be found by a slavish adherence to the established methods of research any more than by a slavish adherence to the current divisions into which knowledge has been split? Is it not of great moment to recognise that the truths discovered in the natural sciences, and still more those discovered in the social and humanistic sciences by positive methods derived from the natural sciences, are limited truths? Whitehead refers very justly to the 'inherent confusion introduced by the ascription of misplaced concreteness to the scientific scheme of the seventeenth century'. That century, he explained, 'produced a scheme of scientific thought framed by mathematicians for the use of mathematicians'. It is essentially the system which 'dominates every university in the modern world. The great characteristic of the mathematical mind', he goes on, 'is its capacity for dealing with abstractions; and for eliciting from them clear-cut demonstrative trains of reasoning, entirely satisfactory so long as it is those abstractions which you want to think about.'

I would suggest that as scholars and thinkers concerned with the synthesis of knowledge, with bringing together what man has learned about the physical and biological world in relation to the more profound issues of his nature and destiny, we can no longer confine ourselves to the system of concepts which now prevails in universities. We cannot confine ourselves to what is demonstrable in palpable terms. The 'scientific scheme of the seventeenth century', the mathematical and

experimental approach to knowledge have amazingly helped men to produce more goods and to live longer, to become more numerous: they have swung the emphasis in men's thinking to matters of *quantity* which are by their nature particular. The great issues that face the world to-day are how men can live together better and more peacefully, how they can enrich human experience and develop charity, love, and tenderness which it was one of the great achievements of Europe and America—of the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon peoples—to cultivate in the presence of the hard labour and the profuse bloodshed of centuries. What is needed to meet these issues is an emphasis on matters of *quality*. If we are to ask the right questions concerning the problems that face a new graduate school or a new international review concerned with all the university disciplines, the accepted methods of these disciplines are not enough. In the search for what is good and what is beautiful it is to faith, to wisdom, and to art that we must turn. Here science, as it came to be understood from the late sixteenth to the early twentieth century, is an extremely useful servant, but it is a poor guide, and it may well prove a fatal master. Many years ago Miguel de Unamuno, the distinguished man of letters who was rector of the university of Salamanca, stressed the antithesis between science as it came to be understood in modern times, and wisdom. 'Science robs men of wisdom', he wrote, 'and usually converts them into phantom beings overburdened with facts.' It is wisdom that treats matters which are of universal concern to men and women everywhere and always. I would suggest that these are the matters which ought to preoccupy both *Diogenes* and the Committee on Social Thought. As I have sought to show in a pamphlet on 'The Universities and World Community', prepared for the new International Association of Universities, it is the responsibility of the creative scholar, the thinker, the artist, and the man of letters, to replace the scheme of thought first developed in the seventeenth century by a more complete and a more human scheme. It is part of our task to talk and write as specialists about subjects that are of universal concern to man, and in terms that can be universally understood and enjoyed by reasonably well-educated men. The vocabulary we should seek is the vocabulary of the world of letters at its best and its most intelligible.

The mind has played a greater role in modern history than most of us realise. It may play such a role again. Whether it plays such a role, and whether the role is for good or evil, depends in no small measure upon the ways in which we meet the tasks of synthesising knowledge.