

THE HUMANITIES  
AND THE CURRICULUMToward **Wide-Awakeness**: An Argument for the  
Arts and Humanities in Education

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In an ironic account of how he "became an author," Soren Kierkegaard describes himself sitting in the Frederiksberg Garden one Sunday afternoon, asking himself what he was going to do with his life. Wherever he looked, he thought, practical men were preoccupied with making life easier for people. Those considered the "benefactors of the age" knew how to make things better "by making life easier and easier, some by railways, others by omnibuses and steamboats, others by telegraph, others by easily apprehended compendiums and short recitals of everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age . . . (making) spiritual existence systematically easier and easier. . . ." He decided, he says, "with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others," to make things harder, "to create difficulties **everywhere**."<sup>1</sup>

Writing that way in 1846, Kierkegaard was anticipating what certain contemporary thinkers speak of as a "**civilizational malaise**" reflecting "the inability of a civilization directed to material **improvement—higher incomes, better diets, miracles of medicine, triumphs of applied physics and chemistry—to satisfy the human spirit.**"<sup>2</sup> He saw the individual subsumed under abstractions like "the Public," lost in the anonymity of "the Crowd." Like others responding to the industrial and then the technological age, he was concerned about **depersonalization**, automation, and the bland routinization of life. For him, human reality—the *lived reality*—could only be understood as a difficult, indeed a dread-

ful freedom. To make things harder for people meant awakening them to their freedom. It meant communicating to them in such a way that they would become aware of their "personal mode of **existence**,"<sup>3</sup> their responsibility as individuals in a changing and problematic world.

Henry David Thoreau was living at Walden Pond in 1846; and, when he wrote about his experience there, he also talked (in the first person) of arousing people from somnolence and ease. *Walden* also has to do with making life harder, with moving individuals to discover what they lived for. Early in the book, Thoreau writes:

Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the **face**?<sup>4</sup>

The *point* of this kind of writing is not simply to describe one **man's** experiment with living in the **woods**; it is to move others to elevate their lives by a "conscious endeavor," to arouse others to discover—each in his or her own **terms**—**what** it would mean to "live deliberately,"

The theme has been developed through the years, as technology has expanded, fragmentation has increased, and more and more people have felt themselves impinged upon by forces they have been unable to understand. As time has gone on, various writers and artists have articulated experiences of being conditioned and controlled. Contemporaneous with the advance of scientific and positivistic thinking, therefore, an alternative tradition has taken shape, a tradition generated by perceptions of passivity, acquiescence, and what Thoreau called "quiet desperation." It is what may now be called the humanist tradition, if the human being is understood to be someone always in search of himself or herself, choosing himself or herself in the situations of a problematic life. There are works of art; there are certain works in history, philosophy, and psychology. They are works deliberately created to move people to critical awareness, to a sense of moral agency, and to a conscious engagement with the world. As I see it, they **ought—under** the rubric of the "arts and **humanities**"—**to** be central to any curriculum that is constructed today.

My argument, as has been suggested, has to do with **wide-awakeness**,

not with the glowing **abstractions—the True, the Beautiful, and the Good**. Like Nick Henry in Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*, I am embarrassed by "Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow. . . ." <sup>5</sup> **Wide-awakeness** has a concreteness; it is related, as the philosopher Alfred Schutz suggests, to being in the world:

By the term "**wide-awakeness**" we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. Only the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake. It lives within its acts and its attention is exclusively directed to carrying its project into effect, to executing its plan. This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full **awareness**. <sup>6</sup>

This goes beyond ordinary notions of "relevance" where education is concerned. Schutz is pointing out that heightened consciousness and reflectiveness are meaningful only with respect to human projects, human undertakings, not in a withdrawal from the intersubjective world. He is also pointing out that human beings define themselves by means of their projects, and that wide-awakeness contributes to the creation of the self. If it is indeed the case, as I believe it is, that involvement with the arts and humanities has the potential for provoking precisely this sort of reflectiveness, we need to devise ways of integrating them into what we teach at all levels of the educational **enterprise**; and we need to do so consciously, with a clear perception of what it means to enable people to pay, from their own distinctive vantage points, "full attention to life."

It is, at least on one level, evident that works of **art—Moby Dick**, for instance, a Hudson River landscape painting, Charles **Ives' Concord Sonata—must** be directly addressed by existing and situated persons, equipped to attend to the qualities of what presents itself to them, to make sense of it in the light of their own lived worlds. Works of art are, visibly and palpably, human achievements, renderings of the ways in which aspects of reality have impinged upon human consciousness. What distinguishes one art form from another (music from poetry, say, the dance from painting) is the *mode* of rendering, the medium used, the qualities explored. But all art forms must be encountered as achievements that can only be brought to significant life when human beings engage with them imaginatively.

For all the distinctiveness of the arts, there is a characteristic they share with certain kinds of history. I have in mind, as an example, Edward

Hallett Carr's conception of history as dialogue. Carr talks about the historian's provisional interpretations of provisionally selected facts, and about the subtle changes that take place through the "reciprocal action" of interpretation and the ordering of those facts.

And this reciprocal action also involves reciprocity between present and past, since the historian is part of the present and the facts belong to the past. The historian and the facts of history are necessary to each other. The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historians are dead and meaningless. My first answer therefore to the question, What is **history?**, is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, and unending dialogue between the present and the **past**.<sup>7</sup>

What is striking here is the emphasis on selecting, shaping, and interpreting, the ordering of raw materials according to distinctive norms. The process itself is not unlike the process of **art-making**. The crucial difference is that the historian is in quest of truth, in some degree verifiable; while the artist strives for coherence, clarity, **enlargement, intensity**. Even more important: in the aesthetic experience, the mundane world or the empirical world must be bracketed out or in some sense distanced, so that the reader, listener, or beholder can enter the aesthetic space in which the work of art exists. Captain Ahab's manic search for the white whale cannot be checked in any history of the whaling industry; its plausibility and impact have little to do with a testable truth. Thomas Cole's painting "The Ox-Bow" may look in some way like the river; but, if it is not encountered as a drama of color, receding planes, and light, it will not be experienced as a work of art. A historical **work—Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, John B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress*, Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform—refers* beyond itself to events in time past, to the changing situations in humankind's ongoing experience, to whatever are conceived to be the "facts."**

Most significant of all, however, is the possibility that these histories, like Carr's own history, can involve their readers in dialogue. Reading any one of them, the reader or the student cannot but be cognizant of a distinctive individual behind the inquiry. He or she cannot but gain a sense of a living human being posing questions to the past from his own standpoint and the standpoints of those he chooses to be his fellow-historians, working at different moments in time. The student may well come upon the insight Jakob Bu'rckhardt describes when he speaks of history as "the break with nature caused by the awakening

of **consciousness**.”<sup>8</sup> He or she may begin, from his or her own vantage point, to confer significance on moments in the past, to push back the horizons of the meaningful world, to expand the scope of lived experience. Maurice **Merleau-Ponty**, speaking of what this kind of awareness can mean, writes: "My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must be strictly speaking an **intersubjectivity**. . . .”<sup>9</sup> Engaging with the kind of history I have been describing, the individual human being can locate himself or herself in an **intersubjective** reality reaching backwards and forwards in time.

These are the reasons why I would include certain works of history in an arts and humanities **program—works** that provoke wide-awakeness and an awareness of the quest for meaning, which has so much to do with feeling alive in the world. I would exclude from the program (although not from the total curriculum) mathematicized or computerized history, exemplified by, say, *Time on the Cross*.<sup>10</sup> I would approach my choices in philosophy, criticism, and psychology in the same fashion: those works that engage people in posing questions with respect to their own projects, their own life situations. William James, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, George **Santayana**, Alfred North Whitehead, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty: these, among the modern philosophers, are likely to move readers to think about their own thinking, to risk examination of what is presupposed or taken for granted, to clarify what is vague or mystifying or obscure. To "do" philosophy in this fashion is to respond to actual problems and real interests, to the requirements of sense-making in a confusing world. It may also involve identification of lacks and insufficiencies in that **world—and** some conscious effort to repair those lacks, to choose what *ought* to be. Some of the humanistic or existential psychologies may function similarly, as they engage students in dialogue about what it is to be human, to grow, to *be*. If the humanities are indeed oriented to wide-awakeness, if dialogue and encounter are encouraged at every point, it might be possible to break through the artificial separations that make interdisciplinary study so difficult to achieve. If students (and their teachers **as** well) are enabled to pose questions relevant to their life plans and their being in the world, they might well seek out answers in free involvement with a range of disciplines. Once this occurs, new perspectives will open **up—perspectives** on the past, on cumulative meanings, on future possibilities.

The important thing is for these perspectives to be sought consciously and critically, and for meanings to be perceived from the vantage points of persons awake to their freedom. The arts are of focal significance in

this regard, because perceptive encounters with works of art can bring human beings in touch with themselves. Jean-Paul Sartre writes that literature addresses itself to the reader's **freedom**:

For, since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of **men**.<sup>11</sup>

I believe this may be said, in essence, about all the arts. Liberating those who come attentively to them, they permit confrontations with the world as individuals are conscious of it, *personally* conscious, apart from "the Crowd." I would want to see one or another art form taught in all pedagogical contexts, because of the way in which aesthetic experiences provide a ground for the questioning that launches sense-making and the understanding of what it is to exist in a world. If the arts are given such a central place, and if the disciplines that compose the humanities are at the core of the curriculum, all kinds of reaching out are likely. The situated person, conscious of his or her freedom, can move outwards to empirical study, analytic study, quantitative study of all kinds. Being grounded, he or she will be far less likely to confuse abstraction with concreteness, formalized and schematized reality with what is "real." Made aware of the multiplicity of possible perspectives, made aware of incompleteness and of a human reality to be pursued, the individual may reach "a plane of consciousness of highest tension." Difficulties will be created everywhere, and the arts and humanities will come into their own.

1 Soren Kierkegaard, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the '**Philosophical Fragments**,'" in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 194.

2 Robert Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 21.

3 Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), pp. 45-53.

4 Henry David Thoreau, *The Variorum Walden* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), pp. 66-67.

5 Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (London, U.K.: Jonathan Cape, 1952), p. 186.

6 Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers*, ed. Maurice Natanson, Vol. I (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), p. 213.

7 Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967), p. 35.

8 Jakob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (London, U.K.: George Alien & Unwin, 1959), p. 31.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, U.K.: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 448.

10 Robert William **Fogel** and Stanley L. **Engerman**, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of Negro **Slavery*** (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1974).

11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1965), p. 63.