Blurred Vision

The Future of the Humanities: A New Approach to Teaching Art, Religion, Philosophy, Literature and History by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Reader's Digest Press, 226 pages, $8.95.

Walter Kaufmann thinks the humanities today are peculiarly "adrift" and "in deep trouble," and he believes that "what is at stake is nothing less than the future of humanity." He blames this situation primarily on the humanities teachers themselves. They ought, he tells us, to be devoting themselves to the examination of faith and values, specifically by means of "the conservation and cultivation of the greatest works of humanity"; by encouraging students to reflect on the purposes of life; by teaching "vision" (he seems to mean something like openness of mind); and by fostering "a critical spirit."

He associates the performance of these tasks with "the Socratic ethos." Only Socratic teachers, he argues, only critics of all conventional wisdom who make a point of their ignorance rather than their knowledge can administer the "culture shock" that is necessary to liberate students from their unexamined beliefs and so equip them to deal independently and constructively with the supreme issues of life. Unhappily, most teachers in the humanities have forgotten that this is their primary responsibility. Seduced by the research model of the social sciences or the transitory popularity of journalism, they play specialized and trivial games within the context of a narrow "scholastic" consensus or sacrifice their integrity to the low standards of mass communication. In either case, they are not themselves liberated and are therefore unable to assist in the liberation of students.

It is difficult to discern much novelty in Kaufmann's "new approach," which reflects a fairly common formulation of the aims of a liberal education; and I find surprising the notion, on which this book appears to be based, that teachers in the humanities are generally complacent about the present situation. But novelty in discussions of education is not necessarily a virtue; and a carefully constructed argument, based on a sensitive analysis of contemporary realities, would be welcome. This book does not provide such an argument. Kaufmann has much to say that is true, and he sometimes says it in felicitous and arresting ways. But whatever wisdom he has to offer is seriously compromised by its presentation, which is confused, rambling, incoherent, and repetitive.

Even his prescriptions for restoring health to the humanities, some offered in considerable detail, seem oddly incongruous with his diagnosis. He proposes, for example, that the study of comparative religion be given a central place in undergraduate education; and he describes at some length courses of his own devising that other teachers might profitably imitate. But these courses are unlikely to induce the culture shock he considers desirable. The introductory course he would require of all students seems only another rapid and superficial survey; and his proposal for a more advanced course based on *Genesis* is chiefly remarkable for its failure to recognize that an exposure to the Old Testament is likely to prove "shocking" only if it is approached as a religious (rather than literary) document shaped by its own complex history. Kaufmann's notion of teaching religion is to domesticate it. On other important matters, such as interdisciplinary teaching, his remarks are too perfunctory to be useful.

But my major difficulties with Kaufmann's argument go deeper. For example, he seems unable to look outside the humanities for an understanding of their present situation. This, I take it, is why he so easily blames the humanities teachers, as though education were some kind of high and autonomous activity carried on independently of the society that surrounds it. He is innocent of sociological and indeed (except in the most superficial way) of historical insight. His indifference even to the history of the humanities leads him into revealing mistakes. Thus he suggests that classical studies once occupied a prominent place in the schools because they were thought to give students "some historical perspective and a grounding in a culture different from their own." Here, it seems to me, the contrary is true. The classics were seen not as the embodiment of a culture but of that high culture common to civilized men; they were valued because they transcended cultural particularity.

I find this mistake of some significance. It is hard to be sure about the intent of a book that is so little concerned to examine, or even to acknowledge, its own assumptions. But in the end, despite his insistence on exposing students to cultural diversity, it seems to me that Kaufmann is aiming at the recovery of some such transcendence of particularity. His Socratic method is intended to free young minds from any inherited or merely human consensus so that, with the help of critical reason, they may join together in the appropriation of universal Truth. Kaufmann is, after all, confident that the ultimate consequences of shocking students will be constructive; and I cannot see what else he might mean. The future of humanity, to which he believes the humanities can contribute so positively, seems therefore to be the future envisioned by the philosophes of the Enlightenment, though without quite their practicality. It is a vision that does not seem persuasive for the twentieth century, with its very different understanding not only of culture but of human nature.

The aggrieved tone of much of this book leaves me with the impression that Kaufmann feels isolated in the contemporary academic scene. But in fact, concern over the plight of the humanities is widespread; and, however inadvertently, his book helps to explain the peculiar malaise that afflicts many teachers in the humanities, I suspect that the vision implicit in this book of what the humanities ought to be accomplishing is also widespread; and because nothing of the sort is occurring, humanities teachers sometimes conclude that the humanities are in some sort of "crisis." I find this conviction a bit odd when it can be demonstrated that so large a proportion of mankind, at least in the West, is interested in ideas, literature, and the other arts.

Kaufmann's book suggests to me that the alleged crisis resides not so much in the humanities (though doubtless much is wrong with them) as in those teachers who still somehow cling to the notion of the humanities as an opening into a realm of transcendent wisdom and perennial values. The real issue with the humanities, ignored in this book, is whether such a conception of their function is still possible. For there is an alternative: what might be called the secularization of the humanities. They can still provide welcome nourishment for the shifting intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic needs of citizens whose ultimate values are drawn from other sources. If Kaufmann and the rest of us could accept this humbler conception of the humanities, we might feel less burdened by our singular responsibility for the future of humanity—and more appreciated.

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