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THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
AND THE CLASSROOM

(Speech to National Council of English Teachers in New York City on 10/25/66)

When the President and the Congress charged the National Humanities Endowment with the task of developing a broad national policy of support for the humanities, just as they charged the Arts Endowment with a similar task for the arts, they did so not to please us, but because they believed that the pursuit of these activities and their consequent use was in the national interest, partly as a means of enriching human life, but also to provide, particularly in the case of the humanities, the knowledge and the judgment on which sound decisions may be made.

Before I confine myself to the work of the Humanities Endowment, I should point out that the work of the Arts Endowment is of equal, and perhaps even greater, importance

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to teachers of English and literature,
for one of its principal tasks is to foster
the creation and dissemination
of the best literature of our day. Perhaps,
however, much of what it does will affect your
successors, rather than you, but some of its
present and proposed programs for poetry and drama
in the schools are of great interest to you.

To accomplish its mission, the Humanities
Endowment seeks to help humanists
to provide knowledge and understanding
of what is past and what is abstract, aesthetic,
or not material, so that thinking men
may realize their full potential
through achieving greater perspective and be
inspired to a vision of achievement,
have the material with which to develop their wisdom,
and the time in which to do it, and ultimately
to master themselves and their environment,

including that part of the environment that we have made ourselves through our technology.

These things, taken together, are the ingredients of the nation's spirit, its ethics, and its morality.

They are the basis of the judgments of value involved in all important decisions,

whether they be public or private.

They are bound together by the relevance of man's knowledge and thoughts to his actions.

More specifically, the Endowment seeks to carry out its mission through three channels: first, by providing individuals with opportunities for their own development; second, by supporting the creation and the dissemination of knowledge; and third, by attempting to improve education both in and out of organized educational institutions, or, in other words, in or out of school.

In doing so, we work closely with the Arts Endowment and with the Office of Education.

Those of you who have met here, Miss Kizer and Miss Bloom, will quickly be aware how pleasant but how different it is to commit liaison with their organizations.

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Our task is large and inspiring. The boundaries imposed upon us by fiscal exigency are small and exacting. I, myself, am glad that our budget for this year is very limited, for lack of means forces us to make decisions with great care and to select very carefully from the many proposals that we receive from outside, and the many ideas that are generated from within.

I shall not, however, remain happy with this exigency for long, and I hope you will not either, for the teachers of English are a large minority group, larger, perhaps, than mine -- New England Yankees, and the country is particularly sensitive to the cries of minorities in these days.

Let me speak very briefly of some of our specific programs, or, rather, of our broad categories of programs, and then of some

of the specific ones that will affect you.

The first program, that for the development of individuals, is essentially a fellowship program, through which we seek to provide scholars with the time in which to carry on their researches and to develop their thoughts. It is aimed primarily at university teachers and college teachers, and for two of the three programs a doctorate is a pre-requisite. High school teachers are not excluded, if they have the doctorate, but we do not expect that we will have much impact on the schools through this program. This is not because we are unconcerned with the professional development of teachers in the primary and secondary schools, but, rather, because we feel that this work belongs properly to the Office of Education. Possibly in the future we shall develop more meaningful programs of fellowships for teachers in the schools, but probably not for some time, and more likely they will be served by other agencies.

The second program is aimed at the development of knowledge, to which the work of the Fellows in the first program will of course contribute. This program is aimed primarily at the professional scholar rather than at the professional teacher. Again, teachers in the schools are quite eligible, but it is doubtful that many will apply for research grants in the sort of research that we subsidize, but rather will apply for research grants from the Office of Education. Nevertheless, since one of the main objectives of this program is to reduce the time gap between the discovery of knowledge and its application, it will doubtless have a bearing upon the schools through the improvement of teaching materials, including textbooks. A specific example of use to you in this program is the grant to the Modern Language Association's Center for the publication of definitive editions of

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great American authors. These we hope will quickly find their way into inexpensive form, at least those volumes that are suitable for instructional purposes in colleges and schools, and with the very rapid development of better curricula in literature in the schools, will doubtless be useful in an important way. Possibly Silas Marner may yield to Huckleberry Finn, an event which I and the other members of the Abolish Silas Marner Society, of which I am the founder, will happily celebrate.

Other programs and books that will be of interest to the schools will emerge from this division, particularly in the field of American history, or, better put, the history of the Americas.

The third program is to encourage the development of the teaching of the humanities in schools, colleges, and universities, and among the public at large, in order that

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we may bring into all our present activities and thought the wisdom that may be gained from a contemplation of the past.

This is probably the most important of the objectives of the Endowment, since it brings the humanities to bear on important questions of public and private life, but it is also the most difficult to accomplish. We hope to help inspiring teachers in schools and colleges to excite the initial interest of citizens in the whole subject of man and his activities and their best expression. We hope to help inspire teachers who are not.

I had thought initially, before I really went into the question, that we should devote a major effort to the development of curricula and materials for use in the elementary and secondary schools, but when I learned how much has been done toward this end by the Office of Education and other public and private agencies, I concluded that we would be wise

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to cooperate with them, and especially to seek to encourage the use of what has already been accomplished, and to improve its dissemination. We feel, for example, that many excellent curricular proposals are in local or otherwise limited use, and we feel particularly that the admirable summer institutes, and even the academic year programs, however great may be their effect upon the participants, do not have as considerable a continuing effect as they should, simply because they are a brief and transient experience. We seek particularly to encourage continuing relationships between universities and schools within a convenient geographic area, in developing and using the best that can be done in humane teaching and in the improvement of not a few, but all, of the present and future teachers of the humanities in that region.

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We are trying to find a way into vocational education at the secondary level, or close to the secondary level, because we feel that vocational education will be better if the students are helped to think by the humanities, as well as to know how to do their vocations well. We do not know this way, and we would like help.

We hope to find a way in which the humanities can be made more meaningful to students who are culturally deprived, whether they are in ordinary schools or in the many special programs now being developed. My preliminary guess, however, is that art will initially be more meaningful to them than literature.

These are some examples of what we may be able to do to help you in your professional lives. We hope, further, to help you by improving the level of the environment from which your students come and to which they return. Television, movies, and radio, for example,

are a very important part of the environment of all of your students, and of some of you.

It is natural that those who operate these media provide what is wanted at the moment.

Enormous sums of money have been spent and more will be spent to improve educational television, as well as instructional television.

We feel that this medium is an excellent one through which to present the substance of the humanities and the arts, and with the little money we have, we shall try to prepare material to help humanists tell their story better.

We are empowered by the Congress to work on talking books for groups handicapped by other disabilities than blindness. One of the most handicapped groups in our society are the commuters, who spend from 30 to 60 minutes a day in automobiles listening to the radio. Next year, many new model cars will be provided with radios equipped to receive cartridges

of recordings which contain selections of the driver's choice. I have looked at the catalogue of these cartridges. The change in the fare will not be conspicuous. We hope that we can find a way to influence the programming of those so that good music, good literature, good thinking, will become available to the commuter while he commutes.

I hope that our program to improve museums will be of more than peripheral interest to teachers of English, for through good museums the environment in which authors wrote and characters lived, or pretended to live, may become far clearer to the student. None of your students have lived in a rural, unmechanized society. Few ever will. How are they to understand how people lived before 1900, without such museums as at Mystic and Cooperstown? It is our intention to provide opportunities to the staffs of museums to develop themselves professionally. It is also our intention to set up

pilot programs through which museums and school systems will be brought together more closely than they sometimes are now.

These are small steps toward our great goal, and all of them are, in their beginnings at least, difficult and complicated. Obviously, the most difficult task of the Endowment is to increase the interest in and the use of the humanities by the citizens and governors of our country, and to improve their access to them. Teachers of the humanities must often be concerned with the past, for their work is by its nature retrospective, but they must also illuminate the present, and in presenting the fundamental knowledge and thinking that makes the humanities, they may serve as guides to the future. As the President put it, the need is not only to enrich scholarship, but life for all men. If this were the only value of the humanities, it would be sufficient argument for the program.

There is, nevertheless, a more practical need to be accomplished, namely, to make available past knowledge, and by vicarious experience learn from the history of past judgments and literature, which can greatly assist people in making present and future decisions of value in public and private life.

The secondary need, which must preoccupy teachers, is to assist people while they are young to find worthwhile uses for the ever-increasing leisure they will have as they age.

Both objectives depend upon self-knowledge, traditionally the ultimate contribution of the humanities to man's life.

In seeking to carry out all these purposes, we urgently need your help.