November 15 (letter 4)

Dear Colleague:

Students are reluctant to learn place-names and geographical distances because they feel intuitively that such concrete knowledge may disable them from surviving in abstract space. Consider two common kinds of experience. In the first, you are on your way to the football stadium. As you drive on the highway you see clearly the stadium's dome to your left. A big sign tells you, however, to turn right if you want to reach your destination, and you obey. This is the sort of thing we all learn to do. The other example is this. Nowadays, if you travel frequently by air, knowing the actual geographical distances between places can prove to be a handicap. Knowing the distances, you will reasonably assume that it is much cheaper to go from Madison to Minneapolis than from New York to Los Angeles. But you may well be wrong.

A Chippendale chair, if it can be copied and mass produced, will lose a bit of its glamor. People will feel less interest in the real thing if the copy seems as good and is much more accessible. Destruction of the genuine historical artifact--a church or a neighborhood district--will not be as tragic if people feel that they can reproduce it, whenever they want to. My own heart doesn't seem all that important to me now because it can always be replaced by some one else's or by a plastic model. In the course of time, the idea "reproduce" itself loses its literal meaning of manufacturing an exact copy. It can be more abstractly interpreted to mean, for instance, photographs and models of the original. André Malraux even said, I think, that you can gain a fuller experience of the masterpieces of sculpture by looking at the photographs taken from a multiplicity of angles than by going to the museums and confront the real artworks. While I am on this subject, let me suggest that the declining respect for the real or original work explains in part the arrogant posture of the new critics, who appear to say that the original text has no special prerogative: it is, in itself, sort of dumb. The reproduced text--the one that appears in the reader's mind and especially in the sophisticated critic's mind--can be as good if not superior.

Americans are a nonaggressive people. If a really convincing piece of evidence is needed, I would point to their lack of knowledge of the geography of other countries--their ignorance of the population, the resources, the depths of harbors (whether they can be converted into naval bases), etc. Why is geography a strong school subject in England and France? One answer is that these countries were former, imperial powers. As Germany's imperial ambitions increased, its government found it expedient to persuade the universities to accept geography as an academic discipline and teach it to students. Even now, in the United States, a common argument in favor of more geography in the schools is that it will help us win the trade war against Japan, or that it will help us win allies in the potential real war against the Evil Empire.
By the way, the schools that teach the most geography are the military and semi-military schools of Texas.

Knowledge is power, as we all know: it is appropriative. Since our brief stay in the Garden of Eden (where stood the Tree of

knowledge of good and evil), humans have always been somewhat ambivalent about knowledge and power. The problem is not merely the possible misuse of knowledge. At a deeper level, the problem is the vague awareness that knowledge can become an armor or shield that stands between us and Truth or God: knowledge, in other words, can be a hindrance to further knowledge. We are never sure whether the House of Intellect, built individually and collectively, is an illuminating model of the real and a means of access to the real, an artwork in its own right, or a shuttered haven--even a sort of tomb--that keeps out the light of the sun. Or is it all of the above?

When I look at a contoured map, I can envisage the slope of the mountain I intend to climb and say, well, it is too steep for me. When, as a physicist, I look at a set of mathematical equations, what is it that I see--what comes to mind? Curved space? But curved space is just a poetic metaphor; it is less real than the mathematical equations, whereas "steep slope" is clearly more real to me than the contours on the map.

Let me return to the problem of construction. "Typically, a civilization constructs. It is occupied with building an ever more complicated structure. And even clarity is sought only as a means to this end, not as an end in itself. For me on the contrary, clarity and perspecuity are valuable in themselves. I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings." This comes out of Wittgenstein's posthumous Culture and Value. What is paradoxical is that Wittgenstein himself was an architect of note: he built a remarkable modern house for his sister (I think) in the 1920s. Why couldn't he just have a perspicuous view of a possible house and show the plan to his sister and be satisfied with that?

Best wishes,

Yi-Fu