There are two ways in which the world is more global now than it ever has been: economically, through multinationals and massive free trade, and at the level of information exchange, through technologies. Local governments worldwide are keen to educate citizens that can function as economic or technological agents, and thus render their home countries competitive. In the face of the fragility that is built into this globalized economy, humanities are under assault. They are simply deemed unnecessary by policy-makers, and irrelevant by cultural pundits. It is true that the self-enclosed, parochial discourses generated by many humanities departments can seem far removed not only from world affairs but also from substantive intellectual concerns, leading one to wonder how these humanities can defend themselves.

So is there such a thing as a "global humanities"? Can the humanities be useful in the global world, relevant not to economics but to the culture at large, and in such a way that would justify their being placed on the list of society´s endangered species? In a networked world of instant communication, can Shakespeare matter to an audience today in the same way that he did even just twenty years ago, let alone a century or two ago? Can the canon pertinent to each local culture matter, now that local cultures and national identities have exploded? In other words, can the local still matter in our quest for universal value?

One way of answering these questions is to look back upon the pan-European Republic of Letters, which connected the intellectual and scientific elite in an age where horse-driven post carriages worked admirably fast and sufficed for nearly immediate communication. Philosophical ideas and scientific experiments were shared with intensity and published in a variety of languages, almost simultaneously. The Republic of Letters was composed in great part (not entirely) of humanists schooled in the traditional seven liberal arts - the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, astronomy, music, and geometry. These liberal arts were initially forged in pre-Socratic Greece, and then formulated in Ciceronian Rome and subsequently in medieval, then Renaissance Europe as the curriculum for proper learning, usually (not always) preparatory to a formation in theology or medicine.

For centuries, a schooling in the Greco-Roman classics, and in their literary, philosophical, historical and artistic posterity, was deemed necessary for any education worthy of its name. This long continuum in classical studies was broken in the post-colonial world, and formally came to an end with education reforms in the 1960s, when the Western canon of the humanities started coming under attack by the very people who represented the humanities in academic departments. In many institutions, identity studies took the place of the traditional humanities, pandering to a new, multi-polar world in which Europe was no longer at the cultural center because its right to political hegemony had ended: it was best studied as the colonist of other civilizations.

Out of the critique of the status quo and out of this new attention to cultures beyond borders, new ideas, concepts, and cultural as well as political possibilities emerged. But the rejection of the past was excessive, and the neglect by many humanities departments of the riches and rigors of a classically humanist education was a losing proposition. There is no doubt that one can no longer consider classical humanities as central to an education adapted to our multi-polar world. But multiculturalism does not replace them adequately: multiculturalism is the glorification of ghettoized, parallel local cultures turned into disciplines, in antithesis to the multidisciplinarity so many wish to achieve (in oft unknowning emulation of the Republic of Letters), and against a cosmopolitanism that transcends local culture in favour of what is humanly valuable. In the place of the guilt-ridden multiculturalism so many humanities departments resort to, we need to foster

the type of cosmopolitan spirit that prevailed, say, in 1920s Alexandria. We need to foster the exchange of knowledge between cultures, and indeed, the sharing of each others´ traditions.

And so, instead of doing away with the notion of classics, we need to bring them back, and widen the referent of the term to include the classics of all lettered or artistically expressive cultures - with those of India and China, for starters. India has its Liberal Arts tradition too, divided into grammar and logic, astronomy and mathematics, law, dogma, and theology, for the sake of studies of the Vedas. Nor should we forget that the Greco-Roman classics themselves survived into the early modern age in great part thanks to the translation efforts of the Arabic and Persian peoples who adopted them. In fact the very division of the world into East and West should be moot. And it is noteworthy that exchanges between ancient Greece and India shaped philosophical assumptions in both geographical areas - even then local culture was an outcome of multiple localities. A good example of global, interdisciplinary humanities would be the study of these exchanges.

But the best way to approach such studies is to begin at home. Know thyself, in order to know the world. We all come from somewhere. Those who think they can reinvent themselves might in fact be impoverishing themselves. Throughout history some of the greatest minds have been rooted within their culture, have found depth in their own backyard, breadth by looking out of their own window. Millions of people fly across the globe every day. But most of these people do come from a place, and their education will have been conditioned by this sense of place. The school curriculum of a Chinese pupil will differ markedly from that of a French, or a British, or Italian, or Polish, or Turkish, or Thai pupil. By perpetually escaping our own roots in the name of the global, by not studying our local history, we wipe out the foundations thanks to which one may understand another place. We need to hold on to a local perspective in order to understand the global.

In this regard, the European Republic of Letters remains an example that can be made use of in those countries for which local culture was once the Greco-Roman humanist heritage. It is an example of a culturally specific network of humanists that was neither specialized nor local, at a time when the all-inclusive liberal arts were still taught, and when science was called natural philosophy and practised by humanists. Of course it was an elite culture, not so different, one might argue, from the university culture of today. But given that this possibility of a network has spread beyond the elite, into the culture at large, one might want to adapt the notion of this lettered Republic to our age, and expand it to include the various cultures of our shrinking world. We cannot possibly return to the condition of early modern elites, but we can try to establish in schools an education in what is relevant within the global, information society, that is a worthy heir to the Latin studium humanitatis, in a post-Latin, post-European, post-colonial, global world.

The humanities, as the practice and history of thought, literature, poetry, art history, philosophy, and history of science, provide exactly such an education. They should be thought of as embracing not only the European heritage, but also Chinese, or Indian, or Persian, or Ottoman cultures. We should consider cosmopolitanism and human universalism the criterion for an ethical education. For the humanities tell us what is humanly relevant, what helps us understand human nature, motivations, emotions, contradictions, fantasies and tragedies, allowing our judgement not to be skewed by the desire for material gain, career, reputation, in short for what is immediately "useful" - for the "illiberal" arts, as gainful knowledge was called, in opposition to the liberal arts. One can find universal values within the most local works - Yeats´ Irishness doesn´t detract from his human relevance, for instance. The humanities are about such human values. That is their point. There needn´t be any contradiction between teaching local history and fostering a sense of

how one´s country is interconnected with the rest of the world. Connections can only be understood if they begin somewhere.

What this means is that a new, non-nationalist perspective should inform school curricula and departmental priorities. No need for broad, politically correct themes that embrace a multicultural everything and nothing, such as "gender" and "race"(and in the end may be the product of an inward-looking set of concerns that are more provincial than local). Instead, we should work towards a re-evaluation of how the local culture, history, literature and so on is connected to other local cultures. The formation of minds informed by a genuine awareness of the history and specificity of place, of what lies within the borders, is as important as awareness of what lies beyond the borders, and what forces have determined the shape of those borders in the first place. The new humanities should also embrace the sciences in a way that they haven´t since the 19th century. They should take into account the natural world, and allow for the human measure of our own comprehension of nature - epistemology, and the art of doubting by looking within, should accompany our move to examine the world without. Philosophy helps - not just western, but Indian and Chinese philosophies as well.

The acceleration of the flow of information corners the access to this sort of knowledge, and the humanities choke beneath the proliferation of data that crunches against the deep time needed to study, question, wonder, and learn about human nature, as opposed to numbers. And it is perhaps the ease, precisely, with which history is forgotten in our fast times, that breeds in our governments the anti-humanist short-sightedness of cutting funds to humanities research and education. Whether or not humanities departments are themselves to be blamed, nothing less is at stake here than cultural memory, and a more humane future.