AN INTERNATIONAL SERIES OF
OPEN LETTERS

1

A LEAGUE OF MINDS

LETTERS OF

HENRI FOCillon
SALVADOR DE MADARIAGA
GILBERT MURRAY
MIGUEL OZORIO DE ALMEYDA
ALFONSO REYES
TSAI YUAN PEI
PAUL VALÉRY

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF INTELLECTUAL COOPERATION
2, RUE MONTPENSIER - PALAIS-ROYAL - PARIS
A LEAGUE OF MINDS

Copyright by
Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle
1933
Limited edition, numbered consecutively from 1 to 2,000.

No. 505

A LEAGUE OF MINDS

LETTERS OF

HENRI FOCILLON — SALVADOR DE MADARIAGA — GILBERT MURRAY
MIGUEL OZORIO DE ALMEIDA — ALFONSO REYES — TSAI YUAN PEI
PAUL VĂLEȘY

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF INTELLECTUAL CO-OPERATION
LEAGUE OF NATIONS
1933
INTRODUCTION

by

MM. PAUL VALÉRY and HENRI FOCILLON
THE League of Nations has decided "to instigate a Correspondence between the qualified representatives of higher intellectual activity", and has charged the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation with the responsibility of assuring its publication.

The first subject envisaged for discussion may be summed up as follows:

Could not those whose function it is to produce and organize ideas, giving them life through expression, come to an understanding so as to ensure the representation and action of the intellectual "order" in the general life? Of what character ought this "order" to be and what place, beyond the interests of class, party
and nation, could it occupy in the contemporary world?

Mr. Paul Valéry and Professor Henri Focillon, two members of the League of Nations’ Permanent Committee on Arts and Letters, have been persuaded to evolve ideas which at the Committee’s request they have formulated in the following introductory statement. This is followed by replies from Mr. Alfonso Reyes and Mr. Ozorio de Almeida, as well as an exchange of letters to which it gave rise between Mr. Tsai Yüan Pei and Professor Gilbert Murray on one hand and between Mr. Salvador de Madariaga and Mr. Paul Valéry himself on the other. A second exchange of letters—between Professor Einstein and Professor Freud—is being published in the next volume of this series.

"By inviting men of thought to consult amongst themselves and to exchange views on the great problems of the life of the mind, on the present and on the future of intellectual activity, the League of Nations is carrying..."
as obstacles, should not harden in isolation, should not become impervious to change. "The League of Nations assumes that there is a League of Minds."

The League of Minds is not a fiction. It has always existed, though with varying strength according to the period. The essence even of the thought that is most solitary, that is elaborated in the greatest secrecy and the most jealous independence, is communication of itself, is its power to stir far-off harmonies and affinities or even the contrary reactions that vindicate its quality. Thus, the history of civilization and the life of civilization is made up, not only of public acts and written documents, but of enormous numbers of mute dialogues and conversations without words between those who think. Superimposed on this network is another, which consists of conscious exchanges, of understandings—accidental or methodical—of colloquies, of correspondence. In our own time we have seen the necessities of scientific research outlining and bringing into existence the different institu-

In introduction of a kind of city of intellect that is spread over the whole earth. The interests of science, the intellectual interests of men of science, constituting a scattered nation that is nevertheless more solid and more compact than certain political formations, are aware of themselves, are thought out, organized and defended with remarkable vigour and lucidity. The League of Nations has done much in that order of ideas. Wherever an organ of liaison seemed to be in danger of collapsing it has set it up again and maintained it. It was aided in this task by the powerful bonds that are forged for a single group of seekers, of which the members are scattered over the entire planet, by common discipline, specified techniques and the clearly defined exigencies of given needs. Laboratory research, like the processes through which metals are put in factories, implies division of labour and the standardization of instruments—expression, these, of considered agreement and a common order.

But there are problems which have not yet
A LEAGUE OF MINDS

defined their technique and which are not
to be treated in factories. They are, at once,
very urgent and very general. They concern
all man, and concern also, if one may put it so,
the risk to his higher destiny. Every critical
epoch poses them with insistence and in such
fashion that they become almost an obsession.
It is about them that the League of Minds
is always crystallized. And, no more than the
scientists, are politicians able to solve them
with the mere resources at their command.
They must have recourse to all those who
think in terms of man, his condition, his future,
man in the past and man in the present, in
poetic life and in fiction as in the life of his-
tory and philosophic meditation. What do
we want to do with man and what do we
want to produce? Neither the doctrine nor
the method will emerge from a parliamentary
debate. Yet the parliaments need to know, if
it be true that the art of government supposes
not only knowledge of the secret springs of the
human soul, but at least a vague idea of the
aims of social existence. It was for no other

16

INTRODUCTION

reason that, in the most virulent periods of the
League of Minds, the masters of the Renais-
sance, the founders of classical thought, the
philosophes of the xviiiith century, question-
ed each other, corresponded, engaged in con-
troversy. The notion of a "Republic of Let-
ters" is not to be applied to a professional
group, but to men diversely penetrated with
a unique feeling for the great urgencies of the
mind, men consecrated in essence to intellec-
tual action and organized so as to ensure its
efficacy.

In the past, the best instrument of this
organization, for the exchange of views that
it constantly demands, was correspondence.
Nominally this took place between two men
and, as it stands, it is admirable in its abun-
dance, its regularity and, more especially, its
tone. In reality it was addressed to a wider
public. It circulated, was commented upon,
was a semi-public expression of the confidences
of the mind. It went from person to person
but it resounded beyond the circles in which
it was read. It may be maintained that were

17
the history of the intelligence known to us only by these kinds of letter we should, nevertheless, be pretty well able to grasp its essential aspects from them. In any case they give them to us in a warmer, livelier form than works deliberately contrived to offer resistance to time. We perceive in them the quality of a sketch (the quality of which the true painter is proudest and most jealous). It is not there merely for the delectation of the lettered, it is the sign of authenticity, the mark of high passion strongly experienced.

We are trying to bring this antique means of exchange back to life—not in order to resuscitate a genre, but to allow of a debate. Enquiries are collections of opinions. The reader is free to compare them, to mix them up, but the authors write for themselves or for their public. The same is true of reviews and of diverse periodicals. They are like provisional anthologies or collections of information. The press is far from having replaced everything. Polemics are not correspondence. We need written conventicles. A letter is the work not only of the man who writes it but of the man to whom it is addressed. It is a dialogue even before it is answered. Even made public, even if intended to be made public, it retains this special quality. Only the bad actor turns from his fellow-player and, seeking for effect, plays to the gallery. This snare, this danger, does not menace either the correspondents or the readers in the present case.

It was a first part of the task of the League of Nations to set up organs for the unification of efforts and co-ordination of methods of work, in order to facilitate research. These organs are functioning. It will now be possible for it to tackle another essential piece of work, the study of problems concerning man. In founding the League of Minds and the new Republic of Letters, the League of Nations means to respect unique qualities; in asking some thinkers to agree to an exchange of letters, to choose, each one, his own correspondent, known or unknown, because he seems an affinity or because he
has the attraction of an opposite, the League hopes for variety. An idea in itself is not enough. The manner in which it is received by men capable of welcoming it and for whom it has been specially formulated, counts also. Thus a kind of counterpoint is substituted for pure parallelism and theoretic objection.

The first problem we submit to corresponding authors is the more general. In the present state of the world, what is the role of mind and what ought it to be? All modern activities, and politics and economics to a singular degree, are dominated and commanded by mythical ideologies. On the other hand men exist whose function it is to produce and organize ideas and to give them life in expression. Could they not agree to substitute, at least for themselves, firmer and higher views for these systems and that inferior vocabulary, and so form an intellectual “order”. This “order” is not altogether defined by the notion of class. It has more general and more urgent interest than corporate ones, to be studied and defended on the international plane by the League of Nations. What will become of the man of thought if the intellectual order is not well defined, if it is not established that beyond the animality of instinct, beyond the interests of class, party and nation, there are higher interests, for which the intellectual order is responsible?

If these questions were to remain unanswered or if the discussions they raised were interpreted as a pure play of the intelligence, it would be clear (as many people tend to believe is the case) that thought is not the rule of civilization but merely an ornament, and we would see a clarification and a hardening of the antagonism of two humanities—the one living according to the dictates of mind, holding aloof or mixing in affairs only to bring about its own decline, the other living by instinct and under the empire of interests vulgarly formulated as to doctrine and tolerating mind only as an added luxury."