Bainard Cowan

University of Dallas

Liberal Education in the College

We tend to handcuff ourselves when we think about the liberal arts and college education. We can consider the liberal arts as primarily a matter of expertise, assuming that colleges are therefore at a disadvantage in comparison to research universities in being at a further remove from innovation and new theories. Further, we can think we must train students to be outstanding performers in a designated set of skills--rhetorical, historical, critical: masters of how to do things with words, and semes, and memes.

The “mind-forg’d manacles” I have most frequently encountered in the work of those writing and thinking about the humanities come from a kind of false subservience to a master discipline outside one’s own -- to philosophy, ill understood, picked up at second hand, as it were, or to the scientific method, or to psychology. If we believe we cannot speak of ideals because of some kind of Kantian prohibition, or because of deconstruction (whether we can explain it or not), or the historical difference of our times from the epoch of the work, or because the enunciation of ideals inevitably reflects the needs of a ruling class, we are forgetting that philosophy and poetry are to serve life, and life more abundant--not the other way around.

Once we have removed those manacles, we should be able to see that a college operates with less disadvantage than might be thought in comparison to the research university. In fact it has the advantage of being able to define its mission more clearly vis-à-vis the liberal arts -- without the mystification occasioned by hothouse research formulations. A college should stand a greater chance of unifyingthe various aspects of education, making each branch make sense as part of a coherent and growing whole. But its curriculum must reflect the urgency of the task; that impetus will not happen on its own. Its faculty tend to come from research universities and to bring that ethos of the scarceness of knowledge with them as they come. A college must refound itself as its own authority on education and must take the formation of the minds of its students, not the preparation of their careers or the achievement of cultural or scientific literacy, as its greatest task. For college students are not subjects; nor are they experiments or primarily workers: they are citizens. It is ideals that citizens need if they are to rise to their historic duties; it is ideals with which great literature inspires readers. A fog of theoretical preoccupations should not obscure the need for a vivid grasp of ideals.

Then again, one could say perhaps with equal pertinence that it is *reality* that citizens need and that education should help them grasp. It is precisely at the moment that the mind begins to make sense out of the endless instructions it has received that college makes its demands. Do those instructions cohere and make a world? How does reality have priority over our wishes, and why should we be grateful for the fact that it does?

Liberal arts are those that are free, that is, they are the study of what is or should be universally discernible. The same kind of education that prepares people best for thinking and acting and leading in a crisis also prepares them for the building of good relations and institutions in happier times. Robert Maynard Hutchins’ words from 1952, introducing the first edition of the Great Books, are still apt today: “the idea that liberal education is the education that everybody ought to have, and that the best way to a liberal education in the West is through the greatest works the West has produced, is still, in our view, the best educational idea there is” (46). Elsewhere he has said, even more succinctly, “The best education for the best is the best education for all.” Hutchins advances many of the ideas I want to stress -- the pervasive unifying quality of the educated mind; the connection between democracy and education; and the existence of a higher aim than the political:

Any republic maintains its justice, peace, freedom, and order by the exercise of intelligence. Every assent on the part of the governed is a product of learning. A republic is a common educational life in process. So Montesquieu said that as the principle of an aristocracy was honor, and the principle of a tyranny was fear, the principle of a democracy was education….The republic of learning is that republic toward which all mere political republics gravitate, and which they must serve if they are to be true to themselves….It is time to take education away from the scholars and school teachers and to open the gates of the republic of learning to those who can and will make it responsible to humanity. (73)

The revolutionary ring in that last sentence reverberates in our time. There is talk about the coming demise of traditional forms of education and their replacement by online education. Indeed colleges may become an endangered species. However, Hutchins should help us remember that education has larger goals than the current mania of training. The task of readying people to be members of the republic of learning has not been accomplished. Indeed, in the past half century we seem to have been running away from that responsibility at full tilt.

So are these merely outdated ideals? Is it preposterous to parade them before you in their ruffled collars and velvet coats, as in a period drama--or in a dream? I say rather that we had better wipe the sleep from our own eyes that makes us see things only conventionally. A democracy must renew its *demos* with the ability to rule: to renew in them the quest for the cardinal virtues -- prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance -- else that democracy fails pure and simple.

No one has put this challenge to democracy more forcefully than José Ortega y Gasset, in his classic essay *The Revolt of the Masses*. In the empowerment of a greater portion of the people than ever before, he also observes a greater sense of purposelessness:

we live at a time when man believes himself fabulously capable of creation, but he does not know what to create. Lord of all things, he is not lord of himself….

Hence the strange combination of a sense of power and a sense of insecurity which has taken up its abode in the soul of modern man. To him is happening what was said of the Regent during the minority of Louis XV: he had all the talents except the talent to make use of them. [45]

Reading these lines we are immediately enabled to see the decadence beneath our plenitude and to know the reason: we are not lords of ourselves. Because of the need for models if we are going to learn such self-mastery, the problem all comes down to education--and our current failure is the culmination of a failure that began a hundred years ago, as Ortega sharply observes:

In the schools, which were a source of pride in the last century, it has been impossible to do more than instruct the masses in the technique of modern life; it has been found impossible to educate them. They have been given tools for an intenser form of existence, but *no feeling for their great historic duties*. (51, emphasis added)

Their great historic duties—this stirring phrase reminds us of what we no longer seem to remember: that in American democracy the people are called to rule; not simply to enjoy freedom; and that ruling is no simple matter. Granted, their rule is not direct; but their will is still expressed in a panoply of unmistakable ways. Complaints aside, it remains true that a wise people produces a better polity than an unwise people. In any political philosophy political wisdom comes down to having the good and the prosperity of the people constantly in mind.

As Ortega notes at the outset of his book, “it is not rare to find to-day amongst working men, who before might be taken as the best example of what we are calling ‘mass,’ nobly disciplined minds” (16). So what is needed to actualize this power? The problem is not in the potential of the people. It is rather in our thinking. “The characteristic of the hour,” he remarks -- and again I note that he is writing in 1930 -- “is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to…impose [the commonplace] wherever it will” (18). For modern Americans disposed to heed Ortega’s insights and his warnings, it is liberal education that must dedicate itself to challenging that fatal shortcoming he detects in the people by awakening in their souls those ideals that will keep us free.

But even this broad demand may be too narrow to see the matter aright. A wise people is one that is whole in judgment and sensibility, knowing that there is life both beneath and beyond politics, grasping life in its multi-dimensionality. Out of a soul that knows itself the ideal of freedom will come spontaneously. A liberal education is what is needed to make any individual reflect on this innate capability of one’s mind and seize hold of it as a known accomplishment.

A classic representation of this wholeness as a moment of coming to self-consciousness is in the *Divine Comedy*, perhaps at the last moment when Western society could achieve an encompassing view of all the spheres. Scholars have brought to light Dante’s debt to the invention of the university in his age: he takes the imagery of the institution and raises it to the level of the whole soul, mortal and immortal. At the summit of Mount Purgatory, after Dante has passed all his preliminary examinations, Virgil says to him:

I’ve brought you here through intellect and art;

from now on, let your pleasure be your guide…

Await no further word or sign from me:

your will is free, erect, and whole—to act

against that will would be to err: therefore

I crown and miter you over yourself. (*Purg*. 27:130-31, 139-42)

Although that level of metaphysical and moral transparency is beyond the practical aim of education below the Mountain, the wholeness, autonomy, and authority implied as the goal of education are unmistakable. We recall John Henry Newman remarking in *The Idea of a University* that a liberal education “brings the mind into form” (7) -- by which he means that “the intellect…properly trained and formed to have a connected view or grasp of things…makes itself felt in…good sense, sobriety of thought, reasonableness, candour, self-command, and steadiness of view” (8). He stresses that notion of connectedness further on in his essay. And in general his lists of general qualities that a liberal education fosters in people -- “freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom”; “a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life” -- are what he calls “a habit of mind,” another way of saying that the mind has been “brought into form” and connected things together, unifying them.

Possessed of this real illumination, the mind never views any part of the extended subject-matter of Knowledge without recollecting that it is but a part, or without the associations which spring from thie recollection. It makes every thing in some sort lead to every thing else; it would communicate the image of the whole to every separate portion, till that whole becomes in imagination like a spirit, every where pervading and penetrating its component parts, and giving them one definite meaning.

To have even a portion of this illuminate reason…puts the mind above the influences of chance and necessity, above anxiety, suspense, unsettlement, and superstition, which is the lot of the many.

In this remarkable summation of his earlier descriptions we recognize the traits of what Samuel Coleridge called organic form: when an entity has it, every part relates to every other part and to the whole, and it is not static but active and constantly interchanging and intercommunicating. This is the hallmark of that “form” that the mind is meant to achieve, that gives it its responsiveness and reasonableness in all things. These are the very features of what our day calls self-organizing systems, and the mind formed by such an education would be praised as having “emergent properties.” It is a sad irony that we are so proud that the machines our society builds now possess the powers of self-organization and emergent properties, while the human beings our society educates more often than not have those same powers drained from them.

The power of seeing and knowing is innate in people, but it must be awakened and enlarged. This is the point on which Donald Cowan insists in his essay “Universal Liberal Education.” Despite what one might expect from the title, what Cowan maintains in this essay is not that universal liberal education is a difficult but achievable goal through some sort of ambitious national project, but that it is founded in our nature--that it ought not be seen as a tremendous feat of lifting up some enormous inert weight but rather as a bringing out of what is already waiting to come out, as a conversational response to a curious child. His recurrent image in this essay is the child with its innate curiosity. This perspective also creates a certain distance on the topic: “truth to tell, the liberal arts are no more ends than they are idols or instruments. They are merely means toward a goal which has never been and perhaps never can be overtly stated,” but which might be described simplistically as “to enable a person to achieve the true form of his life” (93). That “true form” cannot be known in advance; it is something like Aristotle’s *energeia*, sometimes translated as “being-at-work,” in which a human being exercises his true nature.

To achieve this goal, however, Cowan goes on to say, “Nothing short of a complete rethinking of our entire educational scheme will suffice--a reconsideration of the problems raised by the seeming paradox of requiring both excellence and equality in a curriculum” (97). Not only having run from conceiving that responsibility as a whole, modern education, he contends, has gravely neglected the development of the one faculty that could surmount this challenge, namely imagination. The ability to grasp any subject so that it is active and activating in one’s mind, and not inert, depends on imagination, which wakes up and calls out to all faculties of the mind. “Essentially, one might say, the human person is a soul--a soul from which emanates and which then governs a veritable cosmos, an individual microcosm homogeneous with the larger orders of which it is both a part and an image.” To address that cosmos, education must be mythopoetic, “for any knowledge we have of the whole of the human person has come to us through images, symbols, and analogies.” Such a mythopoetic understanding is to be had from “the heroic, tragic, comic, and lyric modes,” which “form a myth of human nature and destiny.” Sadly, however, “it is precisely this poetic structure that educational systems have deliberately excluded.” The future of college education depends on reversing this trend.

Cowan’s mythopoetic understanding as well as Newman’s habit of mind are readily to be found in the great works of literature. Literature plays a special role in the curriculum because of its special relation to imagination. Classic English and American poetry teach that balance of mind. Shakespeare’s plays often feature as a protagonist a man who is basically good but who learns a particular and decisive virtue for his life:

Malcolm in *Macbeth*, who learns that though he considers himself a sinful wretch he must courageously take the part of the good;

Hamlet, who learns at last not to be mastered by his sorrows and his anger at injustice and betrayal but to act with resoluteness and purpose even when it seems too late;

Prospero in *The Tempest*, who learns not only to bring his knowledge to bear in action, and to act when the moment is right, but supremely to forgive even his enemies who have wronged him;

Vincentio, the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who, seeking behind the scenes to observe his community and assess the judgment of his deputy, utters these brilliant but seldom-noticed two lines: “God doth with us as we with torches do:/Not light them for themselves.” If God endows any of us with a particular brilliance, it is a light that we must use and in using it give it to others--because that is the nature of light, to banish the darkness for everyone around. A torch is not lit to please the torch! The notion is wonderfully self-evident. Yet how often today are “gifted” people encouraged to indulge in self-congratulation and self-promotion for merely their own ability.

Some of Shakespeare’s sonnets are superb studies of virtues: love, courage, judiciousness in the use of power (“They that have power to hurt and will do none”), constancy in devotion (“Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments”). His sonnets generally feature the persona of a man facing aging, misfortune, and death and probing the value of love and friendship as future solace in his decline and as legacy after his demise (“When to the sessions of sweet silent thought”).

All these poems mean more if we see them as exemplifying a quality of mind we are seeking to build in our teaching. Robert Frost, similarly, creates a persona who must take in a complex, modest but profound experience and make some sort of decision on what to do about it. His poems are often about the effect of some small experience on a person of sensibility: “The Oven Bird,” “Stopping by Woods,” “The Road Not Taken,” “Dust of Snow,” “Design.”

In teaching works like these--and they are in other words the works that form our whole lasting canon of great works-- we teach not only a way that images suggest meaning, but also the habit of analogy by which the mind at the center of the poem unfolds those meanings. The habit of analogy used to be the possession of an entire culture, in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; then in the age of the book it retreated into certain books, and it became a matter of either education or chance that a reader would encounter those books and be changed by their significance. Now as we have evidently started a new age, those books have perhaps an even more precious content, since what they echo is seldom found in the culture around us; but the *form* of our interactive technological culture is reminding us that people, especially the young, even in their leisure, are eager to learn, even though their game designers make rather poor teachers for life.

The true teacher is what is missing. Contrary to all the trends in American education today, the teacher must become an even more important figure than in the previous age. But teachers can become important only if they have wisdom to import. But as Job asks, “Where shall Wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” You teachers, who are already engaged in your priceless calling, must be a source of wisdom for your students. You have it; your reading in the classics will steadily accrue more; you must take your wisdom seriously and seek to create your own authority in pronouncing it. Not in combat with others, nor in placing your own findings beyond question; indeed, dialogue and criticism must be part of wisdom.

We participate in great poetry by hearing, reading, and discussing it in an open way that submits to its power, taking the noble wager that its power is not such as to dominate us but to deepen us. Poetry does the work of freeing us from enslavement to our inner needs, those needs that we have the most difficulty coping with rationally. What is addressed in epic is the need for a hero, which seems to be innate in the human race, since epics have sprung up everywhere around the globe spontaneously, in nations and peoples without cultural intercommunication. Yet if that impulse emerges raw, as it were, from that mysterious source in us, without the intermediary of poetry, the impulse to admire, to adulate, to be led by, a hero can reap dire consequences in politics -- Caesarism, charismatic tyranny, even the grim dictatorships of the twentieth century.

If citizens learn how to read and read rightly, however -- and I mean great literature -- epics, dramas, novels, films -- the forms of heroism that these works bring to life are placed in the firmament of our imaginations, where we may contemplate them safely, to influence us in our daily life and at moments of crisis. We are then no longer *enslaved* to the hero. It is by participation in such images that we learn to discern what separates a true hero from a false one.

Our heroism is poorly imagined if we try to read the great epics literally. We must read them in their historical complexity, but they do not belong to the past; they exist now in what Walter Benjamin called “the afterlife of the work,” shedding their influence on us in new ways for every generation. They speak to us not about the literal *kinds* of action we must aspire to, but about the qualities of the soul we must develop in ourselves.

Against the background sketched by this brief tour of Ortega, Newman, Hutchins, and Cowan -- an awareness of common peril; a call to remember a forgotten attitude; and the necessity of envisioning living models of this attitude -- that I want to bring back before us the example of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in hopes of wiping the dust off this classic, a fine dust that I think still coats even our most sophisticated readings of it today.

Dismiss for the moment if you will that Aeneas starts as a warrior aristocrat, a retainer of the king, and the son of an Olympian goddess. If we look at what Virgil stresses in portraying him, Aeneas is a family man and a home defender and is extremely reluctant to take on any other role no matter how much the moment might demand it. Unwilling to be warned off even by the apparition of the dead Hector, he is closing in on killing Helen when his mother, the aforesaid Olympian Venus, appears to him in altogether maternal guise and appeals to his sense of family:

Why such fury? And the love you bore me once,

where has it all gone? Why don’t you look first

where you left your father, Anchises, spent with age?

Do your wife, Creusa, and son Ascanius still survive? (95)

He is someone who does not know how to govern and is disconcerted to find that people look to him to lead:

And at last the night was over. Back I went to my people

and I was amazed to see what throngs of new companions

had poured in to swell our numbers, mothers, men,

our forces gathered for exile, grieving masses.

They had come together from every quarter,

belongings, spirits ready for me to lead them

over the sea to whatever lands I’d choose. (102)

He holds a series of false hopes: of a city that only needs its walls built, which he names after himself; of an easy occupation of an already founded state (Crete, and later Carthage); of evading the necessity of founding -- because, as the line ending the proem has it, “Such a long hard labor it was to found the Roman people” (*Tantae molis erat… condere*…). Even the call of his own heart to a great love with Dido proves to be false. But in each case, through pain and grief, he comes closer to learning what his true calling is, what the form of his life must be -- to found a people (…*condere gentem*). When, late in the poem, he sums up what he must teach his son, he tells Ascanius, “Learn courage from me, my son, true hardship too./Learn good luck from others” (369). It is quite plausible to read Aeneas, then, as an ordinary man who lays hold of his historic duty (*Romanam condere gentem*). Through the darkness and smoke he must encounter, through the heroic and tragic shapes his story takes, Aeneas shows us the form of our own self-knowledge. And out of that knowledge grows what we call civilization.

Works Cited

Cowan, Donald. “Universal Liberal Education.” *Unbinding Prometheus: Education for the Coming Age*. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988: 93-103.

Dante Alighieri. *Purgatorio*. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. Vol. 2. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Random House, 1982.

Hutchins, Robert Maynard. “The Great Conversation.” *Great Books of the Western World*, 1952: 46-73.

Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. Ed. Frank M. Turner. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996.

Ortega y Gasset, José. *The Revolt of the Masses*.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 2008.