

## LIBERAL LEARNING CONFRONTS THE COMPOSITION DESPOTS

The historian John Lukacs has been telling us for nearly four decades now that we are “at the end of an age,” that we are living through—perhaps have lived through already—“the passing of the modern age.” This is a large claim with far too many ramifications to be considered here; nevertheless, one of Lukacs’s observations about the end of the modern age has a direct bearing on the topic of education in the twenty-first century, in the “postmodern” age:

It is not difficult to see that beneath the cult of youth there lurks the fear of death and even the fear of growing up: the fear of having to assume the responsibilities of maturity. The increasing “freedoms” granted to young people in the twentieth century were, in some ways, a return to the practice before the Modern Age, the treatment (or non-treatment) of children as if they were smaller versions of adults. The *education* (in the original sense of that word) of children toward maturity was another bourgeois ideal fading away.<sup>1</sup>

“Education,” in the *original* sense, is true to its ultimate Latin root word, *educere*, “to lead forth,” “to bring out.”

*Maturity*, which is its goal, thus requires an emergence from or growing out of an undeveloped or incomplete condition: that self-centeredness that seems an innate element of the human condition. The point Lukacs makes is that “the cult of youth” was undermining genuine education in this original sense throughout much of the twentieth century, even though a nostalgic—and superficial—backward glance may suggest an academic golden age.

The advantage of being at the end of an age, whatever that closure may ultimately portend, is the clarity that comes from retrospection, if it be sufficiently detached and disinterested. It has been evident for years to anyone with eyes to see that education in the United States is a failure; even liberals admit that all is not well. But what they cannot see is that it is more than a failure that might be redeemed by a series of reforms. Education reform has been the theme of political platforms and campaigns at the federal, state, and local level at least since the now defunct Soviet Union launched the first *Sputnik* satellite in 1957. Large expenditures of money—administered by newly established agencies, guided by elaborate social

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*Surveying the Educational Wasteland*

science research programs—seem only to have exacerbated the problem. Continuing decline in the performance of schoolchildren on standardized tests, along with an accumulation of anecdotal evidence, has routinely led to another round of spending, managing, and theorizing with equally disastrous results. Then the process is repeated yet again. By now it ought to be clear that we are dealing not with the failure of an educational system but rather with fraud on a grand scale. We cannot “reform” our system of education because it is not at all a system of education in the original, root sense but instead a curious and uneven amalgam of job training, indoctrination, and custodial care.

The complete collapse of the pretensions of our academic establishment—the revelation of its utter inadequacy to attain the goal that it professes and the sordidness of what it substitutes—is epitomized in the fate of what used to be both the most modest and the most necessary part of the university curriculum: freshman composition. When I first became part of

an English department faculty in the early 1970s, freshman “comp,” as it was called, was the dreaded task of assistant professors and a few adjuncts (we had only a handful then). It was an extremely laborious enterprise, involving numerous conferences with individual students and the grading of twelve to fourteen sets of papers for each section of the course. It was also a reminder of the astonishing failure of the public school system: young men and women already enrolled in a university ought not to require a yearlong course in order to learn how to write their native tongue in a literate fashion.

Nevertheless, the standard program, as it had been designed and taught for several decades, was a not unsatisfactory answer to a difficult problem. Combining intensive instruction and practice in writing with a broad introduction to literature, students were offered a course in logically organized argument, stylistic clarity, and decorous usage along with a first taste of traditional literary culture. As a rule the first class of the week would be

devoted to aspects of writing, the second to discussions of an assigned literary text, and the third to the composition of an in-class essay on the assigned topic. The elements of writing would generally be handled from general to particular: conceiving and defining a thesis; outlining the logical organization of the argument; constructing and linking paragraphs; creating grammatical, varied, and effective sentences; and finally attending to details of diction and stylistic devices such as parallelism, analogy, and tone. The literary element of the course would include non-fiction prose, fiction (mostly short stories with the occasional novel), poetry (usually short poems as a means of introducing students to verse), and drama.

I do not mean to evoke a scene of paradisiacal innocence: teaching the course was exhausting and often frustrating, and the students were rarely enthusiastic about the refinements of style and subtleties of mimesis they were presented. Nevertheless, they were offered an opportunity to learn the basic skills of composition and practice them relentlessly under the tutelage of trained scholars who were, in most cases, working on their own writing while they taught. The introduction to literature provided at least a sampling of the humanist culture of the Western world and an invitation to participate in the perennial conversation that constitutes its intellectual tradition. Professors in upper-level literature courses could casually allude to works such as “A Modest Proposal” or “Politics and the English Language,” Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” or Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” *Antigone* or *Othello*, and Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* or Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in the almost certain knowledge that his students had read at least some of them in freshman composition. What is more, the combined study of composition and literature—of

reading and writing—were mutually reinforcing. Although it is heresy according to current composition dogma, I think it not even worth arguing that close reading of complex literary texts with the corollary enhancement of vocabulary, attentiveness to nuances of style, and augmentation of knowledge and imaginative and intellectual range will improve any student’s writing. Similarly, the effort to write clearly and convincingly about a work of literature will increase his understanding of the work.

Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the like—while essential elements in writing instruction—were by no means the principal end. Like the trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic in the Middle Ages, freshman composition, until the last quarter of the twentieth century, was the foundation of liberal education. John Lukacs insists that our knowledge is necessarily shaped by the kind of beings we are, and that we are creatures who by nature understand historically: “What historicity gives the mind, at best, is not a dose of relativism; it gives us certain standards, the power to contrast, and the right to estimate.”<sup>2</sup> Real human learning is a matter of personal knowledge and comprehension, not a mere accumulation of facts and mastery of techniques. It involves judgment and discrimination: “We are responsible for what we think,” Lukacs says, “because we choose our thoughts.”<sup>3</sup> Education is the means of helping students to make these choices consciously and conscientiously; it is the guidance that we provide the young that they may grow up into reflective, responsible adults. It is this kind of education that constitutes liberal learning—*liberal* insofar as it is the means by which rational creatures attain the full liberty of thought and will that distinguishes them from brute beasts and enables them to make responsible choices.

Liberal education is, moreover, deeply satisfying because it is *liberating*; in some measure, it frees a man who has acquired it from the constraints of self-interest and self-delusion that afflict both individuals and communities. “Possessed of this real illumination,” Cardinal Newman observes,

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 this 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 one definite meaning.

Real learning, then, is not merely an accumulation of information or techniques; it is a comprehensive vision of reality, seeing beyond the immediate horizon while knowing the limits of its perception. “To have even a portion of this illuminative reason and true philosophy,” Newman continues, “is the highest state to which nature can aspire, in the way of intellect; it puts the mind above the influences of chance and necessity, above anxiety, suspense, unsettlement, and superstition, which is the lot of the many.”<sup>4</sup> The man of genuine education will thus not be startled by headlines or mesmerized by “talking heads.” He will have sufficient historical knowledge to weigh the fashion of the moment in the balance of traditional wisdom; his analytical skills will be adequate to penetrate the sophistries of pundits and politicians.

Newman’s Victorian England was of course a far more hierarchical, class-conscious society than ours, but the qualities imparted to citizens by a liberal education

are more crucial for a republican polity than a nation governed by leisured aristocrats:

University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, and to discard what is irrelevant.<sup>5</sup>

No one who has been following our current political campaigns or debates over various public issues will, I trust, fail to see the pertinence of the personal qualities proffered by liberal education to contemporary American society.

These qualities are not, to be sure, nurtured by the education establishment, which has been dominated for years by ambitious bureaucrats and utopian ideologues. About the last thing they wish to witness is someone “purifying the national taste” or “supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration.” Much that is currently offered on college and university campuses as education is merely banal; courses and programs that prepare students for particular jobs like parks-and-recreation management and physical therapy are

crowding actual humanities courses out of the curriculum. Still worse, however, is the expropriation of the traditional courses for the political agenda of those who do not merely ignore liberal learning but actually subvert it. This process is nowhere more advanced than in freshman composition—the very course that used to furnish ill-prepared American high school graduates with the reading and writing skills necessary for serious intellectual endeavor. Over the past three decades, freshman writing instruction in most of the institutions of higher education in the United States has gradually been taken over by composition theorists, who hold literary study in disdain and insist that reading and writing are different skills with no necessary connection. Freshman composition, which was often a waste of time in the past, has become a means of deadening the intellect and sensibilities of college students. Many of them have to be virtually “deprogrammed” in order to read and write effectively in serious literature courses.

A particularly egregious illustration may be found in a recent book, *Composition, Sexuality, Pedagogy* by Jonathan Alexander, currently associate professor of English and campus writing coordinator at the University of California, Irvine. The book is not merely fanciful theorizing: the author assures us that it is based on his own teaching methods and experiences at the University of Cincinnati, where he previously taught and, for four years, served as composition director.<sup>6</sup> The mission of this book is to establish the teaching of what Alexander calls “sexual literacy” as a primary task in college composition classes. “I believe that work in critical pedagogies and feminist pedagogies,” he writes, “as well as the emerging work of queer compositionists, have opened up spaces for us to begin considering sexuality and sexual

literacy as significant components of a socially conscious, critical pedagogy in composition studies.”<sup>7</sup> Such a “pedagogy” comes in tandem with an ideological agenda that would fill a boxcar: “Sexual literacy,” Alexander opines, “should be much more than just *knowledge* about sex and sexuality; it should also be an *intimate understanding of the ways in which sexuality is constructed in language and the ways in which our language and meaning-making systems are always already sexualized*.”<sup>8</sup>

Most conservatives will, understandably, be alarmed at the content of Alexander’s classes, but this is not really the issue here. To be sure, his doctrinaire imposition of his own view upon the class is troubling: he begins with the assumption that “sexuality is constructed”—that is, an arbitrary product of cultural discourses and practices without an inherent normative configuration arising from human nature—and nothing in the book suggests that any serious challenge to this view is ever allowed time in the classroom. “Homophobic” student writing is addressed only as a problem, not as a principled response based on a legitimate alternative view of human nature. Such an attitude suggests a very selective tolerance in a setting in which “transgressive” viewpoints are routinely welcomed.

Nevertheless, it is crucial that a conservative response involve more than sheer outrage and recognize that the particular content of Alexander’s program is actually its least worrisome aspect. First, it is the use of the classroom for the advocacy of a deeply personal political and moral perspective that is principally culpable, whether his choices are regarded as rebarbative, as a matter of indifference, or even as cause for celebration. Further, while his focus is somewhat unusual, it is by no means outside the mainstream and is unlikely to rouse much hostile comment

within the field of composition or the academic world as a whole. Ire should be directed less at Alexander, who has merely proceeded to the next logical stage in the politicization of the university curriculum, and more at the entire system which has allowed the process to begin in the first place. In any case, the content is not as destructive of the education and intellectual refinement of students as the method, which serves to infantilize them rather than lead them to maturity.

Both aspects of the “pedagogy” of “sexual literacy” are on blatant display in a chapter entitled “Queer Theory for Straight Students.” Here Alexander provides an account of a “pedagogical experiment in which, using the Daedalus Interchange, students logged on using pseudonyms to a synchronous chat space and participated in a discussion of what their experiences would be like in a world in which homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuality is the stigmatized sexual orientation.” Alexander was not altogether satisfied with this device, “because the primary premise—a fantasy in which homos are the norm—was just that: a fantasy.”<sup>9</sup> Hence, he “created a hoax site, a personal homepage, about a straightboy, Dax, who has a ‘secret.’ His site, Straightboy4Nsync . . . , is about a college-aged male student who is trying to ‘come out of the closet,’ as it were, about his fascination with the boy band Nsync.”<sup>10</sup> Alexander never explains why a “hoax” is preferable to a “fantasy,” but he is convinced that it provided students an opportunity for what nowadays passes for “critical thinking.” Reflecting on the exercise, he writes, “in many ways, the hoax site and discussion board helped me and my students turn a critical lens on ‘straightness,’ disrupting my own and my students’ sense of the normal so we could question how identities are narrated, life stories constructed, and rhetorics of nor-

malcy and the normative maintained.” “This critical awareness alone,” he maintains, “powerfully demonstrated to me the need to develop a pedagogy of *sexual literacy*.”<sup>11</sup>

A few samples of this exemplary “critical awareness” will furnish a sense of the real effect of the “pedagogy.” The first is the only one that “seemed blatantly homophobic” to Alexander:

WHAT IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT IS HOLY IS THIS GUY THINKING !?!?!?! Of course people would wonder about his straightness, this band consists of an undertalented group of pretty boy singers with monotonous songs, no song writing ability and some snazzy dance moves. FOR GODS SAKE PEOPLE PLAY A FREAKEN INSTRUMENT!!! A giutar, the drums, an accordian SOMETHING!!!!!!<sup>12</sup>

Alexander appears to misunderstand the student’s argument, assuming that he thinks “questionable taste in music” is necessarily linked to “potential queerness,” when in fact the student is rather suggesting that since the band offers no musical attractions, the only possible appeal must be erotic—certainly not an unreasonable inference.

Alexander finds the following “post” more “sympathetic” and apparently a more acute instance of critical awareness:

i think that this site is trying to get guys to admit that they like bands like Nsync and that it is ok if they do—it doesn’t mean that they are gay if they do—i think it could be successful—people might think its cool and funny—and go along with it—others might reject it—you



never know—i think its cool for a guy to admit that he likes Nsync—its cute<sup>13</sup>

Finally, here is a comment that Alexander finds “particularly telling” in its “questioning of Dax’s sexuality and self-identification”:

Well . . . I mean Is this more of a personal webpage Im some what confused. The fact that he likes NSYNC is fine I dont think its that big of a deal. The only thing is that he has to say StraightGuys for NSYNC and if hes straight then why does he have to announce it. The same as if he was gay he would need not to say Gayfor NSYNC it just stirs unneeded contravercy and here say, from my opnion. It has nothing to do with a preference in music hes some what sterotyping but then again Tis His Own!!:)<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps you have been wondering what the contemporary educational establishment means by “critical thinking”? Now you know.

Jonathan Alexander’s preoccupation with “critical awareness” seems not to extend to an awareness of the norms of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and teaching “sexual literacy” seems not to require teaching ordinary verbal literacy. Apart from these students’ obliviousness to the traditional stylistic standards of written English, what is most striking about the comments of these student “posters” is the mind-numbing banality and sheer vulgarity of what they say. While the evident attempt to undermine the distinction between normal conjugal sexuality and what the West has traditionally regarded as abnormal is most likely to seize the attention of conservatives, it is important

to realize that changing the topic would hardly enhance the educational value of the exercise.

Alexander is, moreover, probably correct in asserting that sex and sexuality are not yet “a crucial component in any literacy education.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, topical issues with a decided ideological bias *are* the subject matter of most current composition programs. Alexander quotes a certain Kurt Spellmeyer, who “lambastes composition’s ‘lingering legacy of literary studies and cultural studies,’” which are “‘marginal fields where scholars write largely for each other.’” Instead, composition should deal with terrorism, the “various crises in the Mideast,” genetic technology, the environmental crisis, globalization, and other similar issues,<sup>16</sup> which—*of course*—fall within the competence of academe’s highly trained cadre of freshman comp teachers.

Paradoxically, the specific content of indoctrination displayed in Jonathan Alexander’s composition classes is probably their least pernicious aspect. The truly destructive element in his “compositionist pedagogy” is that it denies the students the knowledge and intellectual tools to resist the blandishments of the merely sensational and ephemeral, the means to raise “the mind above,” in Newman’s words, “the influences of chance and necessity, above anxiety, suspense, unsettlement, and superstition, which is the lot of the many.” Classic works of literature, history, philosophy, and the like have been disdained, deconstructed, and dismissed from the composition curriculum. Students have instead been immersed in a commercialized popular culture of unprecedented depravity and then invited to proffer any random notions that creep into their heads as “critical” insights, with no attention to the subtleties of style that provide writing with precision and profundity.

It is difficult to imagine a more effective means of manufacturing followers of demagoguery than by setting ignorant young men and women to the task of babbling about the sexual significance of “boy bands” and then calling it liberal education. Would a student who had truly been taught to comprehend and appreciate the power of a Mozart string quintet or a Shakespeare sonnet have any patience with Dax’s obsession with \*N Sync? Or with the shabby excuse for political discourse that is the stalking horse of despotism in our time?

Students in the contemporary university are given no opportunity, however, to develop a sense of history, a knowledge of the works that mark the great achievements of the human mind and spirit, or an ability to read, think, and write competently. The new “smart,” digital classrooms have become the contemporary version of Plato’s Cave. The cave, as Plato describes it, functions almost literally as a movie theater, but its current equivalents are television, the Internet, and the entire panoply of digital media—what Richard Weaver described as “the Great Stereopticon,” source of a “constant stream of sensation.”<sup>17</sup> Reading, thinking, and writing—persistently, reflectively, and according to a rational plan of study that acquaints the student with the great tradition of Western civilization—provide the escape route from the cave, but reading is primary and most significant.

A man who never reads, or reads in a desultory fashion, will never think clearly and independently and never write with force or finesse. So it is no coincidence that modern “educationists,” with the “compositionists” now in the forefront, have decoupled writing from reading and virtually banished serious, disinterested thought. Students are thus deprived of an attainment well delineated by A. G. Ser-

tillanges almost a century ago:

It is not what the writer says that is of first importance to us; the important thing is what *is*. Our mind has the task not of repeating but of comprehending—that is, we must “take with” us, *cum-prehendere*, we must vitally assimilate, what we read, and we must finally think for ourselves. When we have heard the words, we must, after the author and perhaps thanks to him but in the last resort independently of him, compel our own soul to re-express them. We must recreate for our own use the sum total of knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

It is this capacity that marks an educated man or woman, and it is impossible to attain without broad, deep, and intelligent reading carried out during childhood and youth under the guidance of patient, learned teachers. It is only with a comprehensive knowledge of the literature of the past that a student has a basis for the comparisons that make possible judicious assessment of what he reads. Only this frees him from his own whims and passions and from the sensations and fashions of his time. Such is liberal learning, and modern “education” discourages—nay, seeks altogether to banish it—because men able to think clearly and impartially and to bring the latest fad to the test of traditional wisdom do not fit well into the secular utopia, comprising contented consumers and conformist cubicle sitters.

It is futile to guess what the future holds for higher education, but it is difficult to imagine how it might be auspicious. The financial calamities of the past few years have dried up many sources of funding, and both legislators and private donors are likely to view with increasing skepticism the actual results produced by



an arrogant academic establishment driven by ideology rather than learning, and bloated with excessive administration. It is doubtful whether “business as usual” can continue indefinitely. There are too many interested parties with a stake in the current corrupt system, however, to allow for the likelihood of genuine and sufficiently severe reform. While it is quite conceivable that higher education in this country will endure a severe curtailment and radical restructuring, the quiet scholars who promote liberal learning and the life of the mind are generally not equipped to survive a mad scramble for place and influence.

At the end of *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre remarks that the world is waiting not for Godot but for a new St. Benedict.<sup>19</sup> When Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger took the name Benedict upon his election to the papacy, an important motive may well have been to inspire a renewal of the civilizing work of Benedictine monasteries amidst societies in cultural decline during the anarchy of the Dark Ages of the first millennium. Perhaps a new “Benedictine moment” is already at work during our current era of cultural decline, carried out quietly and modestly by dozens of small liberal arts colleges, many of them Catholic or Protestant, by private preparatory schools and high schools, by institutes and foundations dedicated to nurturing the Western tradition, and by homeschooling parents and associations. The monks inspired by St. Benedict withdrew from a corrupt, chaotic world to do their work of restoration; the small traditional centers of liberal learning in our time are regarded with disdain—if noticed at all—by the progressive elites who dominate the decadence and disorder that we observe all around us. Nevertheless, the seeds planted in obscure corners may one day flourish, and the meek may indeed inherit the earth, as modernity at length completes its

slow disintegration, displaced by a renewal of tradition.

## NOTES

- 1 John Lukacs, *At the End of an Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 24. See also John Lukacs, *The Passing of the Modern Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
- 2 Lukacs, *At the End of an Age*, 76.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 4 John Henry Newman, “Discourse 6,” in *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (1960; rpt. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 103, 104.
- 5 *Ibid.*, “Discourse 7,” 134–35.
- 6 *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008), 25.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 18. Italics in original.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 112–13. The anomalies in spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc., are all in the original student texts.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 17 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1948, rpt. 1984), 111.
- 18 A. G. Sertillanges, O.P., *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*, trans. Mary Ryan (1948; rpt. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1980), 170.
- 19 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd edition, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.