

# *Who Killed the Liberal Arts?*

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THE "POOR OLD LIBERAL ARTS", as the title of one book calls them, have been for some time in galloping retreat before the encroachment of "scientific" and practical studies. Even in France, traditional home of classical education, the school system is currently being revamped to eliminate such impractical courses as compulsory Latin and provide for the training of more technicians. In the United States, those who care about the decline of humanist studies (and there does not seem to be a great number of them) busy themselves with identifying the villains responsible for the sorry state of affairs. We are told that the Deweyites are to blame, or the scientists, or technological society. In a recent article in *Harper's* concerning the teaching of classics, the point was made that it is the teachers who have let us down and who must become more dynamic and fire their students to appreciate and even compete with great literary masterpieces.

The fact is, however, that none of these elements could have prevailed against the ancient ideal of humanist education without the cooperation of the liberally educated themselves, who thus become perhaps the ultimate villains of the piece. It is entirely possible nowadays for a man to be "liberally educated"—that is, to be steeped for at least four years in the classics, in philosophy, in all the ancient liberal arts—to enjoy his studies, even to excel in them without being permanently affected by them. By the time he has been out of school a few years and is ready to educate his own children, he no longer sees why they should learn Latin, (for he can't remember a word), nor recalls what it was that once made Homer and Plato seem important. It may seem to him that his studies were only a pleasant and useless interlude, suitable only (as the modernist cliché has it) for men of leisure and not for those who must take up a profession. He

ends by convincing himself that it is better for his sons—not necessarily the daughters—to undertake more scientific and practical training in preparation for jobs, or, if he is not quite so utilitarian, he believes that they should at least learn things which will equip them to understand the rapidly changing “modern world”: of what use is Latin for that? The modern world, it is universally held, is best grasped through the study of economics, psychology, “contemporary affairs,” seminars in the “histories” of the “emerging nations,” sociology and anthropology. All of these fields are, of course, foreign to the classical curriculum.

In developing these views, such a man has obviously been affected by the arguments of the ubiquitous anti-liberal-arts factions. The real reason, however, why a liberally educated man comes to regard liberal education as irrelevant is that, viewing his years of study as something completed rather than something just begun, and by neglecting the seeds meant to be nurtured over a lifetime, he cannot really profit from a humanist education. For such a man a liberal education is no more than a refreshing but brief flow of water over the mental dam; he becomes intellectually indistinguishable from his technically trained brother. In one sense then, the Deweyites are right: if classical education has no discernable effect on its students, has no relevance to their intellectual or moral lives, it deserves to be abandoned.

Before contemporary educated man throws in the towel and leaves the pursuit of learning entirely to the -ologists, it behooves him to take a hard look at what humanist education used to be and how he differs from his counterpart in previous centuries.

Humanist or classical education had its roots in the classical culture of ancient Greece. Historian Henri Marrou, author

of *Education in Antiquity*, defines such a culture as “a unified collection of great masterpieces existing as the recognized basis of its scale of values.” Greek education aimed at the development of the student through mental immersion in these masterpieces. It was not, however, for the Greeks a mere bookish mastery of an accepted canon of works. It had at its heart an ethical purpose—to bring the young mind into contact with ideals which would uplift it, with larger-than-life characters whose example one should strive to imitate. Homer, at first, literally *was* Greek education: it was he who taught manly courage, virtue, beautiful language. As Greek civilization progressed, the canon of “classics” was enlarged to include various types of works—the students even studied contemporary literature if it was judged sufficiently valuable. In spite of the development of bookish education (as opposed to the system of individual scholars nurturing individual students) and the decline of the physical training once so much a part of Greek education, the basic ideas behind such learning remained. It was taken for granted that the classics were to be studied because they had something to teach about how one should live: they provided examples to be followed; they led the mind to truth; they inspired. Another characteristic of Greek education was its lack of any strictly practical orientation. Its object was the development of the human mind, character, and to a lesser extent, body. All students, whether noblemen, sons of merchants, or slaves sent to school by their masters, were given the same training. If one who had studied rhetoric became a lawyer or a student of philosophy began to teach what he had learned, this was incidental. It was assumed that the educated man could later acquire any practical skills needed for a job. The purpose of classical education was to aid the student to become fully a man—

in Plotinus' happy phrase to "carve his own statue."

This was the ideal of education which persisted through Roman times, through the Middle Ages, and down to the twentieth century. It remained essentially unchanged, even by Christianity, which added new content while preserving old educational forms and aims. And what of the product of this education? How did he differ from the twentieth century version?

Not so long ago, the effects of a cultured man's education showed themselves in his speech, in his letters (carefully modeled after classic examples), and in the books he chose to read. He was expected to be cultivated, to read philosophy, to be able to discuss great questions. It would be naive to claim that classical allusions and elegant phrases did not often serve merely as required social veneer, or to deny that many a budding "gentleman" would have been better off in one of our modern shop classes than plowing through his Plato. Still, there is no question but that humanist education could profoundly affect its students. I believe it was Kurt von Schuschnigg, Austrian chancellor at the time of the Anschluss, who wrote of an incident which took place in a concentration camp where he was imprisoned. As he and a group of his fellow-prisoners were gathered together one of them began, "Arma virumque cano. . ." And the others continued, each reciting a part. In a concentration camp! We could hardly find a more striking confrontation between the civilized spirit and barbarism.

This type of educated man is on his way out, if he has not already disappeared. Certainly, the assaults of the educationalists and the technicians have helped break down the formerly universal acceptance of the humanist ideal of education. Their arguments are challenging, and reflect a radically different view of man and the world

than that upon which classical education was based. Although it is not the purpose of this article to discuss these in detail, the most important attacks on the classical system may be summarized in three points: (1) Man is essentially different from what he was—after two world wars and Freud he can no longer profit from the old ideals of culture and learning; (2) The world is a different place—humanism cannot fit the mind to understand all facets of the modern world; science alone can do that; (3) Truth is not necessarily knowable—the cult of irrationality excludes Greek philosophy; modern man's "identity crisis" is more important to him than objective knowledge, which may in any case be impossible to achieve.

Because liberally educated men have ceased to pursue humanist ideals and fail to see clearly the issues involved, they are affected by such arguments. Even when they attempt to defend classical education, they often commit the fatal blunder of trying to defend it on the wrong grounds. An example is the battle (more of a rout, really) to eliminate Latin as a compulsory subject in schools. The educationalists, with their life-adjustment, practically-orientated ideology, attacked the study of Latin as useless and impractical. Instead of protesting that the "practicality" of Latin is irrelevant, the humanists attempted to counter the argument on the educationalists' own grounds. Latin is so practical, they crowed, because it makes the learning of modern romance languages easier. All that remained was for an educational psychologist to come, to test, to proclaim that Latin does not make other languages easier, and that particular cause was seriously damaged. Something similar happens occasionally with the teaching of logic, when someone "tests" students who have studied logic and others who have not, and concludes triumphantly that logic

has no effect on the ability to reason. Somehow we believe that everything can be tested and measured instead of regarding the testers with the same cynical skepticism with which they regard us.

If liberal studies are to survive and preserve what little vitality they have left, the liberally educated themselves must decide if they are worth preserving. To accept traditional education means assuming, to a certain degree, that classical education represents an achievement which has never been surpassed. It requires a view of human nature as a fixed essence which can profit as much now as in Greek times from the classical training of the intellect; it requires a view of the world as knowable and intelligible; it requires a concept of moral values as eternally relevant.

But the survival of humanist education and of humanism itself demands more of a civilized man than tacit approval of these principles. They must remain alive and important to him throughout his life, and not be lost through mental laziness. Classical education is "education for life" in a much deeper sense than the Deweyite curriculum could ever be. Formal course work can only provide the framework which has always been intended not as the finished product but as the stone from which to carve the statue of a lifetime of learning and meditation.

The pressures of modern life, the competition of myriad forms of entertainment

and amusement, are adduced as reasons why the pursuit of anything more than topical knowledge stops after graduation. But now, more than ever, there is an increasing need to get away from pressure, and our leisure time is increasing to the point where we worry about how to fill it. The fact is that it was always as difficult as it is now to sit down with a demanding work of philosophy, or meditate in a disciplined manner on some intellectual problem, or listen undistracted to an intricate piece of music. Intellectual labor has never been easy, but formerly it was expected of a cultivated man, and so it was done and he profited from it. In our age, when everything is supposed to be comfortable and effortless, and learning is supposed to be fun, there is a grave temptation to avoid the difficult and most of us, even though we know better, have succumbed to it. If the neglect and indifference continue we will be stuck with the current hazy idea that only a dash of humanist studies is desirable to season the human personality. By this is usually meant the "western civilization" courses sometimes required of technical students, and a proliferation of survey and "appreciation" courses. When these non-courses come to be synonymous with liberal studies, humanism will have had it. And it will all be the fault of that clumsy, unfinished statue, the poor old liberally educated man.