

# *The Classics and the Traditional Liberal Arts Curriculum*

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BEFORE I STARTED writing this essay, I went to University of Colorado library and took out one of the best books in English on education, Albert Jay Nock's *Theory of Education in the United States* (1932). It is significant for our topic that, while Nock's irritable tirade, *Our Enemy, the State*, is easily available in three separate editions and is featured in most Libertarian book catalogues that come my way, Nock's masterpiece, delivered as the Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia in 1931, is difficult to find and almost unknown, although in the 1950s it won the praise of a young man named William F. Buckley, Jr.

Nock makes the central distinction without which discussion of our topic is futile, the distinction between education and training. Education is the study and mastery of a body of knowledge which is formative in character. Training involves learning information which is instrumental or banal and which serves to solve some immediate problem or accomplish some specific goal. Both training and education are important for a society. Anyone, however, can be trained to do something. (Naturally the complexity and difficulty of the jobs will vary from being a short order cook to being a brain surgeon.) Fewer can profit from education. The goal of education is to produce

thoughtful people capable of judging matters of general importance in a disinterested manner, with maturity, with a wealth of general knowledge, and with the courage of the commitment (a condition which is both intellectual and moral) to face facts. A society without trained workers will not get its work done. A society without educated citizens will collapse in times of crisis and will wither away in times of ease and prosperity.

As Nock saw, there are a number of very good reasons why a liberal arts education in our society must be grounded in the study of the languages, literatures, history and philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome. The cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, including Israel, have provided the basis of education from the Colonial and Revolutionary periods through the nineteenth century. Greek fell from its position of educational preeminence just before World War I and Latin remained a "more commonly taught language" until the 1960s. It is often asserted that the knowledge of the ancient world possessed by our nation's Founding Fathers and the generations that followed the Revolution was superficial and consisted mainly of classical tags and exempla. Even were this true, a recent popular work of Professor E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy* (1987),

has shown how significant such shared information is in creating a common culture. Anyone who reads Jefferson's literary commonplace book, however, or who peruses the correspondence of Jefferson and Adams will realize how deeply imbued America's revolutionary leaders were with knowledge of antiquity. This continued to be true throughout the nineteenth century, as William L. Vance's recent two volume work on *America's Rome* (1989) has demonstrated. Thoreau comments that the only theft from his cabin on Lake Walden was his copy of Homer. (Harvard had a Greek requirement until 1886.)

It is important to distinguish between the classics as the foundation of education, as *paideia* in Werner Jaeger's sense, and the technical scholarly study of the ancient world. The scholarly or scientific study of antiquity has been a central aspect of the history of scholarship from the late Middle Ages until today. Americans have contributed relatively little to that study, although there have been some important exceptions. By the late nineteenth century, when the Greek requirement was disappearing from American colleges and the elective system was slowly gaining ground, both under the influence of Harvard, a few Americans were beginning to show distinction in the study of classical antiquity. The creation of research institutions on the German model, such as the Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago, helped change the direction of the higher education in the United States, but in the classics these institutions rather took advantage of than created the important American classical scholars.

The *Pater Philologiae* in the United States was Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve (1831-1924). Born in Charleston, South Carolina, veteran of the War between the States, professor for twenty years at the University of Virginia, he was appointed by President Daniel Coit Gilman (1831-

1908) as the first Professor, of Greek, at the Johns Hopkins University in 1876. Gildersleeve helped found the American Philological Association, founded and edited *The American Journal of Philology*, composed a masterly edition of Pindar, and was a grammarian *par excellence*. He was a devoted Son of the South, who fought each summer in the Army of Northern Virginia, and in the 1890's defended "The Creed of the Old South" in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The generation after him included a few other figures whose contributions to scholarship are still read: Paul Shorey (1857-1934), first Professor of Greek at the University of Chicago, editor of *Classical Philology* and proponent of the theory of "The Unity of Plato's Thought"; William Abbott Oldfather (1880-1945), founder of the classics library at the University of Illinois, editor of the *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, and author of some 500 articles in the great German *Realencyclopaedie*. At Harvard, William Watson Goodwin's *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb* (1889) is still in print and still used by every Greek scholar as John William White's *Verse of Greek Comedy* (1912) is still indispensable for its field.

Most of these men had German dissertations and German scholarly ideals. The Great War of 1914-1918 saw the virtual disappearance of the study of German from American high schools. Since most important work in the humanities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been done in German, Americans were cut off from the possibility of making significant contributions to the study of many aspects of the ancient world. It is possible to draw up a small list of exceptions in language and literature and philosophy. In the areas of ancient history and archaeology there has been a continuous tradition of accomplishment and even excellence. The general trend can be briefly exemplified. After World War

If the American Philological Association published the first volume of a new critical edition of the most important ancient commentator on Virgil, the fourth-century A.D. scholar, Servius. Under the direction of the noted Ovidian, E. K. Rand, the "Harvard Servius," as it came to be called, employed the work and scholarship of many of Harvard's most promising younger scholars. It was reviewed in the *Journal of Roman Studies* in a massive two part-review in 1948-49 by Eduard Fraenkel, a student of the great German scholars of the previous generation who fled to England because of his Jewish ancestry. The point was made devastatingly that one German classicist was worth the most prestigious Classics Department in the United States. The next volume of the Harvard Servius appeared two decades later and the work has yet to be finished.

It would be possible to mention a few American Hellenists whose work has won considerable attention in Europe and influenced the course of scholarship. Milman Parry (1902-1935) was the founder of the scientific study of "oral poetry." Trained at Berkeley and the Sorbonne, he published significant work while at Harvard and trained Albert Lord of the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard. George Melville Bolling (1871-1963) of the Ohio State University has won much attention in Europe for his work on the text of Homer. Few American classicists know his name. In the 1960s Elroy L. Bundy of Berkeley transformed the study of Pindar, although Americans had to wait for German and Scottish scholars to point this out to them. It may be no accident that these three men were educated in the West and South. One occasionally comes upon American scholars at Ivy League schools who had great influence on a field, such as William Scott Ferguson (1875-1954) at Harvard or Gregory Vlastos at Princeton, but they are both Canadians.

It is hard to characterize the contemporary situation of the classics in America. The necessity of a command of Greek, Latin, and German for serious research tends to discourage the type of publication now so common in modern languages. People committed to "literary theory" have been successful in discouraging serious research and open discussion, but they have not been able to win prestige or recognition for themselves. The gap created has been filled by many foreign scholars, only a few of whom are of genuine international distinction, but none of whom is interested in sacrificing himself to develop a distinctive American philology of high quality. It is possible to hope that classics will be spared the almost total collapse of scholarly standards that characterizes the study of English and the modern European languages. It is hard to see the rise of a new creative generation.

When the *Chronicle of Higher Education* announced in the summer of 1990 the near completion of the Plato Microfilm Library of Plato manuscripts at Yale's Sterling Library, it also announced that time had passed the project by and that "literary theory" was the route to success in the humanities. The sponsor of the project was a member of the philosophy department, Robert Brumbaugh. When Donald Kagan, an ancient historian, addressed the National Association of Scholars in June 1990, he said that as new Dean of Yale College, he planned to improve the quality of the faculty by hiring scientists. He had given up on the humanities. Yale in the past decades has had excellent scholars of high standards on its faculty, Robert Brumbaugh of Philosophy and Fred Robinson of English, to name only two. The *kudos*, however, went to Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, *et al.* I myself believe that Classics Departments in America have produced younger scholars capable of distinction and creativity. For the most

part, however, they have never held tenure track positions or hold them in institutions unlikely to support demanding scholarship. Classics, however, still has much to offer America as a source of culture and education.

In the 1890s dissatisfaction with the general quality of our educated citizenry and a commitment to egalitarianism and democracy caused a revolution in our institutions of learning. In fact, those institutions were beginning to produce educated citizens, but, as Tocqueville said of the French Revolution, half way down the stairs we threw ourselves out of the window in order to reach the ground more quickly. The ideals of education were replaced with those of training. The change was not accomplished overnight and remnants of the old order remained. The facts, however, are very clear. The theories which have governed educational reform in the United States (since Harvard sold out the past by the abolition of the Greek requirement and the introduction of the elective system in the last decade of the nineteenth century) are the theories of Rousseau, Condorcet, and the leaders of the French Revolution. They had their say in America in the period following our Tax Revolt against the English Parliament, but their advice was ignored. They returned with a vengeance in the 1890s and have remained in control ever since. The revolution in curriculum came before World War I with the introduction of the elective system into high schools and colleges, that is, by the expulsion of Greek and Latin from the humanities curriculum and their replacement by courses in English.

It is the common fashion among certain writers to blame the current woes of the academy on the sixties. Anyone who believes that the poor preparation of our students is due to the sixties should read Nock. Anyone who thinks that the politicization and anti-Americanism of

the academy were the invention of the sixties should dust off his copy of Mr. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* (1951). That book is not about communists at Yale but about liberals who politicized the elective system and filled it to the brim with attacks on and sneers at the American way of life. A return to the 1950s in the theory and practice of our elementary or high schools ("Back to Basics") or of our colleges and universities will accomplish nothing. It will not be a conservative movement but a last ditch effort to salvage the failures of radicalism. Professor Thomas Short of Oberlin College tells us in *Academic Questions* (1988) to call the college curriculum of the 1950s "the traditional liberal arts curriculum." Of course, we are free to call it anything we like and to repeat the phrase over and over, in the great tradition of Lewis Carroll's Bellman, who proclaimed, "What I tell you three times, it is true." But we should not deceive ourselves. The college curriculum of the pre-sixties era rested on the same commitment to mediocrity and hatred of excellence, the same devotion to egalitarianism and democracy, that is the foundation stone of today's radicalized academy.

Of what, then, does a traditional college curriculum consist? We must inquire after the elements of a traditional elementary and high school curriculum. First, children should learn the old three R's, the use of the alphabet and numbers. The list of subjects to study after that stage, to quote Abraham Lincoln, is short and sweet, like the old lady's dance: Latin, Greek and mathematics. Other subjects, including history, mythology, English vocabulary and syntax, even the basics of our government, can be taught in connection with those subjects. Later we may want to add the study of modern languages, which will vary as time goes by. Today, of course, German is essential for commerce and scholarship. Good secular schools may want to offer other

languages, e.g., French, Russian, and Italian. Religious schools, of course, will insist on Hebrew. The principal goal of all language study must be the command of significant works of literature in that language and an understanding of that language's role in our common culture. Oral and written proficiency have their place, but must take a back seat to formative knowledge.

This is not a visionary fantasy. I have visited Latin classes all over America, from the Francis Scott Key Elementary School in the slums of Philadelphia to the Silverthorne Elementary School in the mountains of Colorado. Children before puberty learn languages easily, especially if the languages are related to their own language and culture. Teachers are excited by the challenge of real teaching. The curricula and texts are there, even for pre-school Latin.

What about computers? The use of the computer should be learned the same way the knowledge of English should be learned, at home. School time should not be wasted on it. As for the physical sciences, my impression is that good science programs in major universities waste time in teaching the latest results of their own research to young people who have to be untaught what they learned in their advanced placement courses in high school, when they could have been mastering higher levels of mathematics or learning another language, the elements of which will not be rendered obsolete by further research.

If young people have learned the elements of several difficult languages in elementary school, before the changes attendant on puberty have destroyed their natural aptitude for language learning, and then go on to perfect this knowledge in high school, they are ready in college to read widely and with a semblance of maturity. Over a thousand years of experimentation, ignored by generations of educationalist radicals

with the word "experiment" always in their mouths, indicate that the subjects best suited to provide the basis for this formative education are Greek and Latin. There is more evidence than language arts through Latin programs in Philadelphia and Los Angeles and Indianapolis. There are also concrete examples such as Montaigne and William Shakespeare, Ernst Renan and John Stuart Mill.

The advantages of this curriculum are enormous. Even students who do not go on to college, who do not finish high school, will have learned an enormous amount of English vocabulary. Most English words come from Latin or Greek. Although the 100 most commonly used words in English are rarely of Latin origin, the vocabulary of the professions and of serious discourse on most matters is ancient in its origins. The masterpieces of our language and important books that are published now are written in a heavily latinized English. Extensive work in language arts through Latin programs in inner city and rural schools proves that it is neither difficult nor expensive to give Latin, the basis of our culture, to poor children. We might consider putting off the promotion of "Global Democracy" until our own poor youngsters can understand the vocabulary used in discussing important public policy issues.

Albert Jay Nock spoke of the "formative character" of the study of ancient civilization in words that are worth quoting:

The literatures of Greece and Rome comprise the longest and fullest continuous record available to us, of what the human mind has been busy about in practically every department of spiritual and social activity; every department, I think, except one—music. This record covers twenty-five hundred consecutive years of the human mind's operations in poetry, drama, law, agriculture, philosophy, architecture, natural history, philology,

rhetoric, astronomy, politics, medicine, theology, geography, everything. Hence the mind that has attentively canvassed this record is not only a disciplined mind but an *experienced* mind; a mind that instinctively views any contemporary phenomenon from the vantage-point of an immensely long perspective attained through this profound and weighty experience of the human spirit's operations. If I may paraphrase the words of Emerson, this discipline brings us into the feeling of an immense longevity, and maintains us in it. You may perceive at once, I think, how different would be the view of contemporary men and things, how different the appraisal of them, the scale of values employed in their measurement, on the part of one who has undergone this discipline and on the part of one who has not. These studies, then, in a word, were regarded as formative because they are *maturing*, because they *powerfully* inculcate the views of life and the demands on life that are appropriate to maturity and are indeed the specific marks, the outward and visible signs, of the inward and spiritual grace of maturity.

Last, but not least, the Greek and Latin languages are the means of the transmission of our culture. For centuries Homer, Plato, and the New Testament, Virgil, Cicero, and St. Thomas, have introduced young people into the meaning of being citizens of our civilization. Our children need to get to know them, too. There is no reason to be satisfied with the useful but jejune translations, which is all we can offer them now. White Europeans have a right to their culture as much as Afro-Americans and other people of color. The radicals who have run our educational systems since the 1890s have robbed us of our cultural heritage. It is time to revolt and take it back.

Let me discuss some practical results of this cultural highjacking in two professions, chosen not quite at random, the mainline Protestant clergy and physical scientists.

The need for proper command of an-

cient tongues for the clergy will probably not be disputed by most people. Martin Luther and John Calvin, the founders of Protestant Christianity, were both published scholars. The primary task of the Protestant clergy since its founding has been the correct exegesis of the Scriptures. Those Scriptures are written in Greek and Hebrew, and the major aids in reading them are written in Latin and German. In the formative years of America, colonial and republican, the clergy provided the educated backbone of our nation's elite.

Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a determined effort, described by Ann Douglas in her *Feminization of American Culture* (1977), to turn the clergy from intellectual rigor and the masculine virtues into a caring service profession, typified by the female virtues. This largely successful movement has had many ramifications. One result is the virtual disappearance from the clergy of professional knowledge of the sacred tongues. I have seen Protestant clergy who cannot transliterate the Greek text of the New Testament, who explicate an English translation in direct contradiction to the clear meaning of the Greek, and who make grammatical and exegetical errors. This indifference to minimal standards has, of course, opened up the profession to nitwits too dumb to read the Bible and to people who could not succeed in other professions.

I am speaking now of the mainline Protestant clergy, where you may not be aware of the seriousness of the situation. The plague of both ignorance and sexual pathology in the Catholic and fundamentalist clergy is a national scandal. How many of these horrible situations would not exist if a decent language requirement were a prerequisite for entering the clergy? The Elmer Gantries would be frightened off before considering the profession and would betake themselves to

fields more suited to their inclinations and abilities. Intelligent men would again take seriously a call to a profession where they could work with other intelligent men.

It is not so obvious that physical scientists need a liberal arts education, rooted in the study of language. They themselves assert that they have no time for it. They have insisted on the abolition of language requirements in almost every university graduate program in America. This development is directly related to the massive amount of fraud which now typifies scientific publication in this country. The scientific community has lost track of the historical and ethical roots of our civilization, the only civilization which has fostered the scientific ethic and considerable scientific research and discovery. Increasingly young men enter the sciences who do not understand that science is not a given, but an achievement, a tradition of research and discovery which is the hard-won accomplishment of one culture, fostered carefully and slowly for millennia until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Scientists have lost touch with their own culture. They live without a narrative structure which frames and makes moral sense of their lives. They seem to belong to no culture and feel the claims of no cultural norms, claims that would be introduced and reinforced by a rigorous study of their own cultural traditions over the past twenty-five hundred years. For such people the borderline between fudging, misreporting of results, and outright fraud becomes as unclear as their own cultural heritage. All too often it is those who report or investigate such fraud who find themselves de-funded by the "profession." The attainment of truth is possible only within a tradition, as

Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested. A rootless, traditionless, monoglot scientific elite has lost the basis of discovery, in science or any other area. Since they cannot discover truth and will not live without grants, they must lie.

Recently conservatives have talked much of valuing creativity and an openness to the real world. If such an attitude is to be more than talk, we must face the fact that creativity is not found in every tradition. Ours is one of the few creative ones and we must work to re-establish our children's direct contact with that tradition, which is their own, after all. Despite all the changes recent decades have seen, culture is still transmitted primarily through language. The essential works necessary for understanding and transmitting our culture were written in Greek and Latin. Translations are marvelous tools, but no translation can be safely used or taught except by one who knows the original tongue. An educational curriculum founded on Greek and Latin gave us Jefferson and Adams, Burke and Samuel Johnson, not to mention Copernicus and Newton, Luther and Calvin, Michaelangelo and Bach. Educators have developed curricula and texts which can teach these languages on any level from pre-school through college. Most subjects that are important for formative education can be taught through and with these languages. The materials are out there, lying in the warehouses of the Cambridge and Oxford University Presses. We have in our hands the making of a reactionary revolution of excellence. The questions we must ask ourselves are the following: Do we have the will to give our children their own culture back again? Do we have the courage to restore meaning and creativity to our nation?