

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Remedying the Ills of American Education

AT BEST THE PRESENT STATE of American education is problematic. The rapid emergence and spread of a techno-secular culture exacerbates the situation; and the hard realities of pluralism and multiculturalism make it more complicating to impose uniform educational standards or to sustain a core-curriculum that is allegiant to humane letters. Principled conservative critiques of the educational system by modern men of letters like Irving Babbitt, T. S. Eliot, Richard M. Weaver, and Russell Kirk are largely spurned or outrightly dismissed as irrelevant and impractical by a new generation of educational authorities whose gnostic ideas now go dangerously beyond the progressivist education and empiricism advanced in the thirties and forties by John Dewey. Educational superstructures today answer primarily and passionately to a new morality and a new social order disdainful of concepts and canons anchored in the great tradition of classical and Judeo-Christian civilization, and in the Anglo-American heritage. There are now fewer and fewer traces of reverence for our sacred patrimony, which makes it far more difficult to return to the ideas of the older educations—"restoring the sacred house

of education," in the words of Patrick James Danielson's probing introductory essay.

What Babbitt, back in the 1920s, saw as the main and guiding aim of American educational philosophy and practices, that of "training for service and training for power," has become transformed with a vengeance into dogma. The following essays, as well as several of the book reviews, examining the current ills of the American educational system at all levels, have the signal value of demonstrating to us that our escalating educational crisis mirrors the terrorism of ideology, with its obsessive abstractions, promises, schemes, and dreams of unending change and progress and, finally, what Eric Voegelin calls self-immortalization "in a period of massive deculturation through the deformation of reason." Education as the common pursuit of intellectual excellence has been turned on its head as Dewey and his even more radicalizing successors have renounced older educational norms and aims, and have triumphantly replaced them with the materialistic works of modern science and technology as the new "Palaces of Discovery."

"The fate of letters in a post-modern

age," as Thomas F. Bertonneau admirably shows in his essay, is also closely tied to the relations between the continuum of orality and training in literacy, and specifically "alphabetic literacy" as the precondition of literacy. This essay challenges the claims of contemporary theorists of pedagogy whose "standards of the English language arts" actually have nothing to do with the ordering of thought, and indeed lead to a confusion of terms. "English" as a discipline of thought, of intelligence, and of ideas (and commensurate with the "old education," individualistic and humanistic, a training for responsibility and wisdom) has been steadily sacrificed to quantitative utilitarian theories and egalitarian assumptions. In short, the literate tradition, which once shaped education, has in recent decades been denuded, leveled, by "a kind of ideology of illiteracy."

Pedagogical theory and practice today are subservient, then, to ideological edicts which erase the canon and the requirements of objectivity, judgment, and analysis; which, in effect, enshrine precisely the oral style characterized by the subjectivity, emotionality, and relativism that cultural and educational trends embrace and promote. Both the failure to understand and the rejection of the close connection of literacy and thinking are clearly at the heart of the chaos and confusion in the entire educational system. Our educational problems are inevitably emblematic of the fragmented state of our culture and of our sociopolitical conditions, as both Danielson's and Bertonneau's essays disclose both directly and indirectly.

The sad fact is that the remedies for the restoration of educational norms are too often denied or thwarted by ambitious social engineers, indoctrinators, reformers who view education as a social science and envision the aims of teaching and learning, as Gordon Keith Chalmers memorably noted in his clas-

sic *The Republic and the Person* (1952), as opportunities not for promoting ethical and moral principles, but for translating them into programs of social expediency. It is precisely this distorted and deformed view that has over the years, as A. J. Conyers shows in his essay on "Vocation and the Liberal Arts," not only prevailed in the realm of American education but has also reflected the antinomian tendencies and habits and structures of educational thinking and practice. One result is that "the concept of vocation as it is embedded in the liberal arts" has largely disappeared as the coercive powers of social organization have also increased. These selfsame powers, as Alfred North Whitehead, Simone Weil, Max Picard, Bernard Iddings Bell, and Christopher Dawson have variously observed, have a way of violating the soul of the student and in turn lead to the erosion of the faculty and habit of attention, and of moral and religious precepts.

On a higher educational level these very same powers, in the form of diversification and inclusiveness, invade and alter the literary curriculum, as the late Howard O. Brogan shows. He rightly reminds us that the ideological determination of standards and merit, by political fiat, inevitably denigrates Western culture, and specifically its "English-speaking contingent." "It is arrogant presumption," Brogan protests, "to insist that some authors and works deserve to be declared meritorious as a matter of fairness." Thus what we are witnessing is that humanistic education and thought, and literature in the old sense, are rapidly losing ground, as abstract theory and dogma undermine European intellectual foundations and literary tradition in general, and threaten "the survival of English" in particular. Ciriaco Morón Arroyo, in his book *The Humanities in the Age of Technology*, reviewed in these pages by Thomas Austenfeld, in-

sists on a pivotal point that unites the following essays diagnosing the ills of education when he identifies the possibilities and opportunities for keeping alive the humanities if only because “they reveal sides of reality which are not accessible in other disciplines, and if they contribute in some way to improving human life.”

There are in this issue other essays and reviews that augment and heighten the thoughts and concerns of the writers who grapple directly and intensely with the educational crisis that besieges public education from the elementary level to higher learning. Mordecai Roshwald, in a balanced essay on “Democracy and Elite,” brings to our attention socio-political conditions that affect leadership and the pursuit of excellence, and that ultimately and by extension impinge on the state of our culture, including our educational system. Roshwald thus cautions that “the possible threat of political degeneration is clearly discernible, and its prevention demands vigilance, reconsideration of prevalent attitudes, and civic commitment on the part of the people and their elected representatives.”

Joseph Pappin III, in his “Freedom and Authority: Burke and Sartre in Dialogue,” helps pinpoint “the abiding distinction” between Jean-Paul Sartre’s “radical subjectivism and the primacy given to the ‘will’” and Edmund Burke’s “realistic, intellectualistic political thought applied to man’s situation,” stressing “political reason” as against “the false utopianism” sought by Sartre. The “end of authority,” the search for egalitarianism, and the elimination of all hierarchies, for which Sartre pleaded, also characterize the general attitudes of nihilism blighting modern Western culture. Inevitably the scourge of impiety, as John Attarian reminds us in his review of *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver*, is one that was to fall heavily on the educational realm in the

twentieth century.

Despite the climate of impiety and decadence that has darkened the house of education in our time, there are, as the writers demonstrate in this issue of *Modern Age*, redeeming examples of dissent that encourage continuing resistance to the forces of disorder in the civilization in which we live. John Ferns’s reconsideration of Q. D. Leavis’s achievement as an English literary critic and teacher illustrates the kind of commitment that aspires to excellence even in the midst of the relativism and indiscriminateness that are symptomatic of the ills of education. In an age in which critical theory and methods have gone amuck, Mrs. Leavis has provided for us critical paradigms that any serious teacher of literature at the present time should find sound and intelligent and remarkably free of ideological biases—and follies.

Ferns gives us the measure of Mrs. Leavis’s achievement, and instances the principles and values that shaped her writings and that, sadly, are repudiated in contemporary literary criticism, and in the teaching of literature in the educational establishment: “Q. D. Leavis’s concern as a literary critic of the novel is to reach from the sociological to the timeless. Social history is where she begins, but reality is where she ends. In fact, to her, excellent novels provide the best social history because they dramatize and embody reality.” These particular words should help us to put into proper perspective the quintessentially American phenomenon of, say, the daunting popularity and influence of an Ayn Rand, whose fiction, it can be said, is nothing but pernicious in its view of the civic social order and the moral imagination. She has, to recall Russell Kirk, “an inverted religion—an ideology of efficiency and self-satisfaction—in economics, in politics, in sex.”

Words that appeared in an editorial in *Modern Age*, entitled “Education for All

Time" (Winter 1987), remain even more pertinent today, fifteen years later, as our educational ills seem to worsen and multiply: "We can no longer locate a center of values in the realm of education; no body of knowledge, in its continuity and tradition, is any longer commonly shared by or expected of those who are being educated." To be sure the editorialist's words are solemn, perhaps even grim, in meaning and context. They may also be telling us, given present conditions and circumstances, that education is still another of those lost causes that vex American civilization. But that, in itself, should not weaken the courage and determination of those who actively seek to remedy the ills of American education and who give stalwart witness to their dissent.

No cause is absolutely lost as long as there are those, however small their number may be, who believe absolutely that it is possible to "locate a center of values"—that the "enemies of the permanent things" do not and will not have the last word. In his poignant testimony, "Reflections of a Head Master," John A. Pidgeon emphasizes that it is necessary to keep ethical values alive and to resist the great beasts of careerism, objectivism, expansionism, and technicism that impede the true purpose of humane education as a reverent discipline in the common pursuit of virtue. The art of teaching is at its highest a sacramental act, Pidgeon reminds us in pleading for civility and good manners. "Good manners," he observes, "are like sacramentals—outer signs of inner grace."

In his perspicacious review of Jeffrey Hart's *Smiling Through the Cultural Ca-*

tastrophe, Mark C. Henrie no less appropriately reminds us that the diminution of the "authority" of the humanities is still far from being complete or final as long as the exponents of "the serious business of humane learning" are clear about what exactly their task is and how, too, they are to accomplish this task on the strength of their belief in humane learning. "The best defense of the humanities," declares Henrie, "is the activity itself.... The way for humanists to recover their cultural authority is by doing what they do best: reading and explaining and criticizing the old books." No words can be more forthright or more remindful of the basic aims of humanistic inquiry than these. And no words can warn us more against the sham methodologies and literary fashions that have been allowed to invade and to deflect our loyalty to the humanistic disciplines and the common culture.

The writers, then, who present here their diagnoses of the reckless shifting and drifting of educational standards and principles, and who go on bravely to prescribe remedies, are inescapably aware of the realities of our educational troubles. Finally, and above all, they testify to the enduring validity of what F. R. Leavis wrote in *The Living Principle* (1975): "The massively ignored human need in such an age as ours achieves self-recognition and voices in the relatively very few; but...the measure of importance in this realm is not quantitative; decisive changes of consciousness are initiated by tiny minorities; our civilization affords much excuse for dwelling on those truths."

—George A. Panichas