

The Closing of the Conservative Mind

by Thomas Fleming

Why do we call it *liberal education*? When an eighteen-year-old graduates from high school and goes off to college to pick up a smattering of history and literature, why should we describe his course of study as the *liberal arts*? Educators once knew the answers to these questions, but it has been many years since I have run into a college dean who did not explain the term “liberal education” as having something to do with liberating the young mind from the shackles of ignorance, prejudice, and tradition.

In a sense they are right, since for all practical purposes a liberal education is a system of indoctrination designed to produce liberals. In origin, however, the root meaning of liberal comes from the Latin *liber*, “free.” In phrases like “liberal arts,” *liberalis* was used to translate the Greek *eleutherios* (similarly derived from *eleutheros*, “free”), which meant something like: having the quality and character of a free man, as opposed to a slave. A liberal education, then, is an education fit for free men and one that fits them for freedom.

What did the ancients mean by such a distinction? Most obviously, freedom signified that a person was not owned by anyone else—not his body or his mind, not his time or his labor. This is not to say he was free of all obligation—quite the contrary. An Athenian or Roman citizen owed a great deal to his parents, his kin, and his country, but these were

moral and political obligations to be discharged freely and without compulsion. If he was a farmer, he worked his own land; if a merchant he did business on his own account. An employee, by this definition, cannot be free; he is simply a tool at the service of his masters.

There are many arts appropriate to free men and women, and every people decides for itself whether to include weaving (of which the Egyptians were fond) or flute-playing (which Alcibiades’ disdain made unpopular in Athens) among the liberal arts. But certain elements of the original conception are a vital core that has been preserved wherever the ancient love of liberty has been cherished. Literature is studied because the great works of imagination are among the principal agents that form the character of a people. For similar reasons history is taught, both to inspire the young with a desire to emulate their ancestors, and to infuse the debates of the present with the lessons of the past. Some training in logic is required, if a man is to think clearly through the complicated political issues that perplex the counsels of a self-governing nation. But more importantly, he must master grammar and rhetoric—the arts of speaking and writing correctly and effectively—because the object of education is a citizen who can be of service to his family and friends and to his country. Only “a good man skilled in speaking”—the best definition of an orator—can take an active part in the political life of a free society.

Such, in essence, was the ancient ideal of liberal education as we encounter it in such diverse and even opposing authors as Plato and Isocrates, Aristotle and Cicero. It was conservative in its adherence to tradition and in its commitment to social order, but liberal or even radical in emphasizing a technique of argument and dialectic that can bring out both sides of a controversy. It is a far cry from anything that goes on in American universities, where cowardice, servility, and disloyalty are the primary virtues, and contempt for the past is the sole object of teaching history.

Most of what takes place in our universities is to be explained not so much by malice as by fear. Liberalism is a timorous creed that cannot suffer the voice of opposition. Its tenets, because they are held as a religious faith, cannot be subject to questioning, much less contradiction. As each new corollary is spawned from liberal orthodoxy—minority rights, feminism, deconstructionism, toleration of perversity—some liberals are forced to destroy their careers (or become conservative, which is virtually the same thing) by bucking the latest trend. Most, however, simply go along and follow St. Paul's advice by settling their stomach with a little wine: a liberal with good intentions almost always has a drinking problem.

The conservative movement that took shape after World War II, insofar as it has been in evidence on campus, served primarily as the permanent minority, a small wedge in the door that keeps the house of intellect from falling into total darkness. The various arguments put forward by such conservative scholars as Willmoore Kendall, Russell Kirk, Stephen Tonsor, M.E. Bradford, Milton Friedman, Karl Wittfogel, and Robert Nisbet never amounted to a consensus on anything—except for dissatisfaction with the way things are. They did keep alive a diversity of political and historical argument that would otherwise have been lost, and in a few notable cases—e.g., Friedman and Nisbet—they succeeded in changing the terms of debate.

To use a biological metaphor, the conservative role has been to preserve genetic diversity in our intellectual population. Liberal intellectuals resemble nothing so much as a domesticated species of grain or bird or tree. They flourish, so long as there is no dramatic change in the conditions for which they were created, but a shift in climate or the arrival of some new disease or predator threatens them with extinction, because all the little genetic variants that might have proved successful in adapting to change have been bred out of them.

By keeping alive the minority opinions on free enterprise, limited government, traditional morality, and patriotism, conservative intellectuals helped to make the counterinsurgency of the Reagan years possible. They had not succeeded in convincing very many scholars and intellectuals, but they had made a respectable showing over the years, sufficient that when the cataclysm of the Carter administration took place and many people—in and out of academia—began to entertain doubts, they could hardly fail to consider the conservative alternatives.

A number of groups are responsible for preserving conservative alternatives, but none is older or more important than the *National Review*, which over the years has published articles from Birchers, segregationists, libertarians,

traditionalists, agrarians, neoconservatives, and not a few liberals. Throughout the 50's and 60's, when most people thought of conservatives, their first impression was of William F. Buckley Jr., the polysyllabic Yale who took on the opposition with the sort of heroic chivalry displayed by Richard I and Saladin in their unholy wars over the Holy Land.

But if NR was eager to preserve conservative alternatives, the magazine also seemed determined on deciding who was and who was not entitled to use the name. Over the years, NR editors read a fair number of alternatives out of the party. Poet and scholar Peter Viereck was among the first to be relegated—for holding affirmative views on the New Deal that were somewhat to the right of *Commentary* in the 1980's. If Viereck was an enemy on the left, Ayn Rand and the John Birch Society were enemies on the right. Rand was read out for her libertarian/libertine views, and the Birchers expelled for their zany conspiracy theories. The attack on the Birchers was a costly move. While Robert Welch had clearly gone off the deep end in declaring President Eisenhower a conscious agent of international Communism, the Society, nonetheless, included a great many people who were neither dangerous nor crazy. They were the representatives and heirs of the older conservatism that tended to be Middle American, Protestant, isolationist, and anti-urban—a combination of Bob Taft Republicans and Southern Democrats that continue to be the heart, if not the mind, of the American right.



Whatever the reason, today there is probably less freedom of opinion on the right than on the left, and, what is more significant, most of the clauses in the new conservative credo would have been viewed, ten or fifteen years ago, as either false or unimportant.



With the exception of these anathemas, NR and indeed the entire conservative coalition were marked by an intellectual freedom that put the "free-thinking" left to shame. But if the great merit of conservatism has been to keep alive a diversity of opinion, that merit evaporated in the 1980's. Some attribute the hardening of conservative ideology to the election of Ronald Reagan, an event that gave the movement its first chance for power. Others blame the arrival of the neoconservatives, whose leaders were seasoned veterans of the civil wars fought out between the various sects that revere the memory of Marx and Lenin. Still others have pointed to the demise or retirement of a great many intellectual leaders of the Old Right.

Whatever the reason, today there is probably less freedom of opinion on the right than on the left, and, what is more significant, most of the clauses in the new conservative credo would have been viewed, ten or fifteen years ago, as either false or unimportant. The old conservatives believed in limited government, small-town America, free enterprise; they were suspicious of the intellectual and political elites

and wanted to roll back government involvement in the economy; above all, they hated anything that smacked of globalism. On the far right, they wanted us out of the UN, and all were contemptuous of any ideological commitment to the human race.

What do the new conservatives believe? Virtually none of the above. They like government and don't mind expanding its powers, so long as they can put their friends into jobs in the White House. They want to make the welfare state more efficient, but would never dream of dismantling it. So far from disliking the elites, their fondest wish is to form an elite class that will share power with the left. Most importantly, they are the biggest globalists in American history. The American people, in their view, must be willing to bear any burden, pay any price in carrying on a crusade for global democracy, eliminating all trade barriers, and opening the country to unrestricted immigration. If anyone is foolish enough to express contrary views, he runs the risk of being eliminated as a nativist, an anti-Semite, and a factious sectarian—the three charges that have been leveled against *Chronicles* by Richard John Neuhaus and Norman Podhoretz and repeated fervently by the less reflective representatives of the established right.

As Podhoretz (editor of *Commentary*) wrote to Neuhaus in a letter that the former Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor chose to share with the press: "I know an enemy when I see one, and *Chronicles* has become just that so far as I am personally concerned." Neuhaus and Podhoretz, by making these public accusations, apparently meant to turn a guerrilla campaign against free expression into an all-out war against any variety of conservatism or liberalism with which they happen to disagree. In this case Mr. Podhoretz was annoyed by what he chose to call the "nativist bigotry" of the March '89 *Chronicles* perspective on immigration and the "anti-Semitism" displayed in Bill Kauffman's article on Gore Vidal.

No defense of either piece should be necessary in a free country. Mr. Vidal, although he has been roughly criticized in *Chronicles* over the years, is a serious and influential writer. Whether Mr. Kauffman was correct or incorrect in locating him within a reactionary tradition that includes Henry Adams is hardly the issue. Apparently, the first rule of the conservative coalition is that no magazine editor may ever publish anything without first checking with Norman Podhoretz, the Mrs. Grundy of the American right. Henceforth novelists are not to be judged on any but political standards, and those standards are set by *Commentary*.

The immigration issue is far more serious than the censorship of literary opinion. Across the political spectrum, thoughtful writers have been making the case for an immigration policy in the national interest. Similar arguments have issued from academic leftists like Michael Walzer to such centrist liberals as Richard Lamm and Senator Graham of Florida to such diverse conservative writers as Wayne Lutton and Peter Brimelow. If a few conservative ideologues succeed in silencing all serious debate on such vital national issues, then the long-term prospects for American conservatism are very dim indeed.

To anyone who has read *Chronicles*, the charges are "ridiculous"—as the publisher of *National Review* declared unequivocally to *The Washington Times*, and as both

Jacob Neusner and Robert Nisbet told *The New York Times*. But the war against free expression extends beyond our magazine. Midge Decter is now referring to a speech of Russell Kirk's as "a bloody outrage, a piece of anti-Semitism." After Kirk, conservatives are wondering, who is next in line to be denounced? Miss Decter and her husband hint that it is George Bush. According to Mr. Podhoretz, the administration is drifting "towards changing its position of adamant opposition to a PLO state," while his wife denounces our Middle East policy as "a disaster for some time" and—in the same breath—Mr. Bush's presidency as a "Philistine administration," by which she does not mean, presumably, that she disagrees with its arts policies. By implicating President Bush in their conspiracy theory, the Podhoretzes have joined the ranks of Robert Welch, and one might update Russell Kirk's response to Welch's denunciation of Eisenhower ("Ike's not a Communist: he's a golfer") by saying of the President that George Bush is not an anti-Semite: he's a fisherman.

It is interesting to note that none of our accusers has managed to lay a glove on the magazine by finding a single jot or tittle that could be plausibly construed as evidence of bigotry. They have to fall back on the last resort of the calumniator: "code words" and "insensitivity." The most dishonest attack was the suggestion that *Chronicles'* criticisms of the Northeastern literary-intellectual establishment have been aimed only at Jews, and that references to New York and Scarsdale and Brookline are anti-Semitic "code words." It's news to us, as it will be to the people of Massachusetts, where Brookline is associated with upper-middle-class liberalism. If anything, the community has a reputation for anti-Semitism.

Irritating as it must be to the epicene young conservatives who only recently came down to the City from the Ivy League, there actually are people who think New York can never be part of any solution; that, for all the good people who live and work in Manhattan, what it has come to represent is everything that is alien and hostile to whatever is best in the American tradition. As Hank Williams Jr. sings: "You can send me to Hell or New York City. It'd be about the same to me." What the future of Manhattan-style conservatism can be, God only knows, but Henry Regnery—whose powers of prophecy no conservative will deny—as early as 1953 was telling Mr. Buckley that any new conservative magazine should be "edited and published outside New York."

But times have changed since 1953, and any criticism of New York is now taken as evidence of bigotry. The world is a simple place for single-issues voters and conspiracy-theorists. If they know where a man stands on nuclear energy, the Trilateral Commission, the Palestinians, or the gold standard, they can locate him precisely on the grid of their paranoia. Years ago *National Review* attempted to free conservatism from this sort of paranoia.

Such an effort would now encounter almost insupportable obstacles. If the older conservative and libertarian heroes were literate, broadly educated, and intellectually serious—one has only to think of H.L. Mencken, Albert Jay Nock, James Burnham, and Russell Kirk—their successors have been, by and large, men of a different stamp. In

the conservative movement of the 1980's there are men and women of doubtful reputation and dubious education who have clawed their way to the top by means that Lyndon Johnson would have approved of. Real scholars, like M.E. Bradford and Paul Gottfried, are viewed with barely concealed resentment and contempt: if they're so smart, why ain't they rich?

This contempt for learning and principle has been communicated to the younger generation of conservatives who are hardly out of school before they have managed to write books on vast subjects that it would take an educated person several years to master and a "third generation conservative" at least a decade.

Far more serious than their lack of information on church fathers, fundamentalism, the American Constitution, or nuclear physics is their more basic educational deficiency. A college graduate in the 1980's probably has learned very little worth knowing of history, philosophy, literature, and foreign languages. Without these basic tools provided by liberal education, a "journalist"—for that is what they aspire to being—has no sense of proportion, no standards by which to measure the experiences of the present. Since virtually none of the aspiring Buckleys have done postgraduate research or apprenticed themselves to a decent newspaper, they are in the comfortable position of being able to adopt any opinion that is handed to them by their masters. So far from displaying the impudence and arrogance of youth, they are pathetically eager to ingratiate themselves with the influential editors and foundation executives who decree the rule on what is acceptable opinion. Only ignorance, vast and deep, explains the conservative about-face on globalism, immigration, the congressional role in foreign policy, free trade, and the welfare state.

A similar judgment might be passed on most young

journalists—a class of men that has never been noted for intelligence, learning, or probity. But these kids may be among the best and brightest. They could easily have gone on to graduate school or learned the not-entirely-contemptible trade of the newspaper reporter. Instead, we have educated most of them so rapidly that they do not even know what they have missed. They write books on "global democracy" without knowing any history and criticize the style of St. Augustine without bothering to learn Latin. They offer to write reviews sucking up to conservative celebrities—one of them tried to bribe me into taking his impudent attack on Harry Jaffa by promising to write a favorable review of *The Conservative Movement* (which I co-authored). Fortunately, there are other young conservatives who have lagged behind in pursuit of celebrity and who, like the proverbial tortoise, may begin to win the race in the 90's. That, at best, is my pious hope. If not, the rapidly closing conservative mind may slam shut, double-locked with deadbolts.

This will be no earth-shattering event. For one thing, the so-called conservative movement is still less rotten, more idealistic, and more exuberant than its leftist analogues. In addition, there has always been a gulf separating the ordinary, instinctive conservatives of Middle America from the various leaders that have risen up to speak in their name. Sometimes they have fallen for rank imposters like Huey Long, Father Coughlin, or George Wallace. But they have also found more responsible political spokesmen—from William Jennings Bryan to Jesse Helms. If they are divorced, as I believe they are now invisibly divorced, from the northeastern establishments—conservative as well as liberal—it will not take too long for another intellectual/political coalition to arise.



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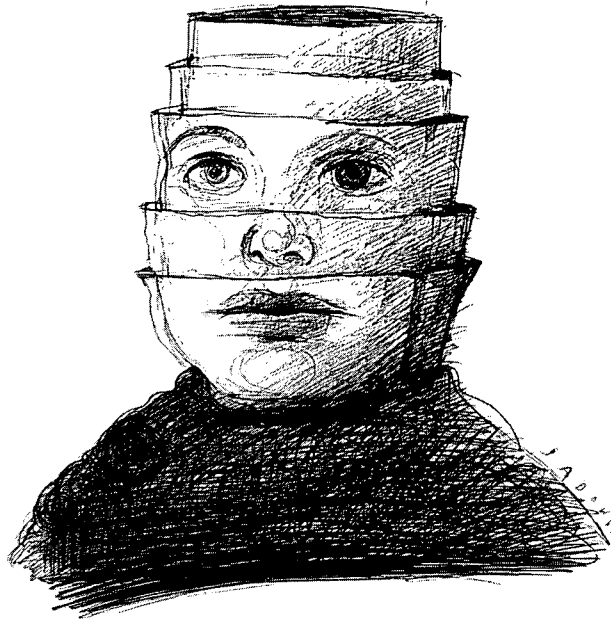
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The Spiritual Meaning of Philosophy

by Stephen R.L. Clark

In 525 A.D. the Lady Philosophy reminded Boethius, in his death-cell, that true philosophers must think body, rank, and estate of less importance than their understanding of what was truly their own. This understanding of philosophy, which is also Epictetus's and Aurelius's, as something more than a pleasant enough word game, has been neglected by modern sophists, though "taking one's troubles philosophically" is still a common enough phrase. Those ancients who, not being Socrates, still thought they ought to want to be Socrates, thought of the Hebrews as a nation of philosophers, not because they asked questions, or practiced a careful casuistry, but because they served God, because they saw our ordinary "waking" world as fragmentary or dreamlike by comparison with reality.

If moderns discuss the thought that our present life is a dream, it is as a problem in epistemology to be neutralized—like other great problems—by suggesting that it is somehow impossible to question the fundamental framework within which we live. A better understanding of that thought is as an ethical one: are we right to assume that things are as they appear to us, under the influence of desire or fear or self-esteem? The ancient answer, still worth considering, is that they are not, that this life is, in Marcus Aurelius's words, "a dream and a delirium," that we do not see things straight until we see with the eyes of Reason.

The moral dangers of thinking this life but a dream are not so great: Epictetus believed that we began to wake up precisely through our recognition of moral duty. The

thought was not intended to deaden but to increase our moral seriousness. If the real world is not what the "true philosophers" thought, we have no good ground to think that wisdom is worth pursuing, or even attainable. If we take philosophy—or science in general—with proper seriousness, we must try to wake up and remember who and what we are, and what is ours. Remembering that, we can begin to glimpse, "as through a narrow crack," what the Lady Philosophy intended.

Sophists and Sages

Even today philosophical texts, at least in public libraries, are usually found next to the volumes of moral or spiritual uplift, but few people would find it natural to turn to modern analytical philosophy as consolation for their troubles, as they might pick up a book of crossword puzzles, or the latest thriller. People may still imagine that philosophy is "what you need in times of trouble," or that it offers the appearance of occult or esoteric knowledge. Once they find out what modern philosophers actually do, they are rapidly disillusioned.

It is perhaps no bad thing, of course, that university lecturers have fewer pretensions than the "wise men" whom Socrates interrogated. We are paid to teach those who wish to have a university qualification, and to write books and articles on selected texts and topics. We are not paid to prepare ourselves, our pupils, and our readers for disgrace and death, to stand out against unjust rulers, nor even to practice more than the bare minimum of civil virtue.

Stephen Clark is a professor of philosophy at the University of Liverpool.