

# Experiencing Civilization

by Brian Robertson

*"The great difficulty in education is to get experience out of ideas."*

—George Santayana

**Poetic Knowledge:  
The Recovery of Education**

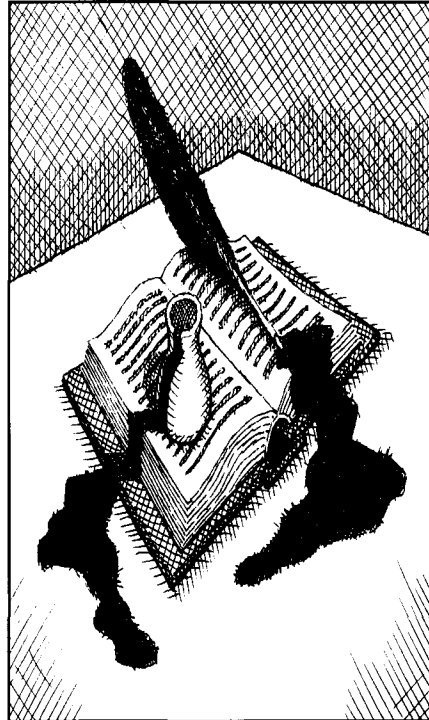
by James S. Taylor  
Albany: State University of New York  
Press; 211 pp., \$59.50

**The Restoration of Christian Culture**

by John Senior  
Fort Collins, Colorado: Roman Catholic  
Books; 244 pp., \$19.95

When *The Restoration of Christian Culture* was first published in 1983, the Integrated Humanities Program, founded by John Senior and his fellow University of Kansas professors Dennis B. Quinn and Franklyn C. Nelick, had just had its funding withdrawn by the university's administrators, in spite of having been a minor sensation in more traditionalist academic circles since its founding in 1971. While IHP was known for its unorthodox attempts to transmit the cultural heritage of Christendom to students by means of direct experience rather than bookish study, the burden of Senior's book was that the concept of education by osmosis, in the experiential mode, is hardly "unorthodox." Rather it has a long and dignified tradition dating from the ancients, and it is precisely the loss of that tradition in modern academia that accounts for the sterility of higher education in America. The republication of *The Restoration of Christian Culture* and the release of a new study firmly in the IHP tradition entitled *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* by James S. Taylor make this

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Stephen Schildbach

a good time to examine the current state and future prospects of IHP's educational theory.

While part of transmitting the Western tradition is a matter of education, the project depends largely on the pre-existence of a cultural context promoting an inherent feeling for Western modes of thought and contemplation. *The Restoration of Christian Culture* described a revitalized Christendom and set forth a program for achieving it. Rereading Senior's book today, those in sympathy with his goals should be sobered by the recognition that we are considerably further from his ideal of a Christian culture than we were when the book was first published 15 years ago.

Senior rightly saw the home as the primary transmitter of the traditions, mores, and customs of Christendom. Contrary

to this is the passive, ersatz "culture" of mass entertainment, the goal of which is to stimulate the senses and appetites of "cultural consumers" with a prepackaged "product." When this anti-culture predominates, the result is the deadening of the imaginative faculties as well as the destruction of the contemplative sense necessary to all rational human activity. Today, with domestic life weakened further by the continuing flight of married mothers to the workplace, the dominance of the entertainment culture is greater than ever before.

While not a Luddite, Senior sees clearly the inherent destructiveness of technological developments such as television, which militate against the home environment, replacing it with an illusory sense of community and purposeful action. "Technology," he writes, "must be relegated to the proper dimensions of the human good—and not the other way around." Here one finds an echo of Pope John Paul II's repeated insistence that all systems and institutions must have as their end to serve man, who can never be relegated to the status of means to some greater end, be it cultural, intellectual, economic, or technological.

Taylor's book is focused more exclusively on restoring the culture by thoroughly reforming our idea of what constitutes education. Its thesis is that any successful attempt at passing on the cultural heritage of Western Christian civilization in an academic setting must be based on a personal love for, and appreciation of, Western culture by the student himself. While laborious study involving textbooks, footnotes, memorization of facts, and the ability to regurgitate those facts in formal exam settings may be necessary at a certain, more spe-

cialized, level of “liberal arts” scholarship, unless those tools of the modern academic method are firmly based on and sustained by the pleasure derived from personal enjoyment, they will fail completely in the aim of transmitting the tradition. “It was never the plan of the IHP,” Taylor writes, “to simply teach the books of Western culture, but rather to discover the roots of that culture and give, to the extent possible, the actual experience of that civilization.” His book is an impressive attempt at tracing the idea of poetic knowledge in the Western tradition. Along the way, Taylor investigates the reasons for the concept’s virtual demise in Western educational theory and considers the prospects for its revival, which do not appear to be promising. Taylor argues persuasively that, the tradition of poetic knowledge having been lost in the post-Cartesian era, what is known as a “liberal arts” education—to the extent that it survives at all—is increasingly regarded as just one specialized field of education among many others: a practical preparation for an academic “career” rather than the essential bedrock underlying Western citizenship and a vital link to a living cultural tradition. As Dennis Quinn observed,

The humanities have been professionalized and scientized to the point where the ordinary undergraduate with a budding love for poetry or history or art or philosophy finds his affection returned in the form of footnotes, research projects, bibliographies, and scholarly jargon—all the poisonous paraphernalia that murders to dissect.

Taylor’s book is most useful for its examination of how the tradition of forming students’ minds by communicating “the actual experience of civilization,” or “poetic knowledge,” has been lost in the theory and practice of education. The experiential mode of teaching was strongly present from the time of the ancient Greeks through the late scholastics, constituting an essential part of the standard curriculum in European schools as late as the Reformation. It was only with Descartes’ establishment of the scientific method of systematic doubt as the way to sure knowledge that the classical notion of learning in the “poetic mode” began to be neglected. Since poetic knowledge entails direct experience of real and objective essences outside the

mind, and the mind’s intuitive identification with those essences, it was attacked for being empirically disprovable, hence invalid. The exaltation of the experiential mode of knowing in the Romantic era proved a short-lived reaction to the hegemony of the scientific mode, while in the modern era John Dewey, more than anyone else, is responsible for the triumph of the systematized and sterile approach to learning that dominates American education today.

Taylor and the school of poetic knowledge he defends seem to be right on the money in their identification of what is wrong with our current system of education and why it achieves such dismal results, particularly in the all-important task of transmitting what remains of our cultural tradition. A large part of the abysmal and demonstrable failure of our schools and universities to capture the attention, imagination, and energy of students today is the remoteness of the subjects they encounter—and the way in which those subjects are taught—from the love of knowledge for its own sake and the enthusiasm that accompanies the thrill of enjoying the beautiful, making study mere drudgery to be borne for the sake of the utilitarian, careerist ends it serves. Unsurprisingly, the reaction of young people, most of whom have no intention of entering into academic life, to such an atmosphere is the determination to escape it as soon as possible and get on with the business of living—an urge di-

rectly comparable to the desire to escape the drudgery of sweatshop labor held by their counterparts in a previous age.

While Taylor’s conclusions regarding the weaknesses of the modern educational system are sound, some of the anti-modernism inherent in the IHP philosophy he champions is questionable. Contrary to the contentions of Taylor and Senior, the specialization of professional life and technological development does not necessarily preclude the cultivation of a sense of wonder in leisurely contemplation of reality. One could reasonably argue, indeed, that it makes contemplation possible for a greater number of people than ever before in history. And while the conditions of modern life work against the contemplative attitude necessary for learning in the poetic mode, this simply makes the project of restoring that essential aspect of any curriculum more important.

Further, the most promising development of recent times for those who maintain the primary place of poetic knowledge is the rapid growth of homeschooling. In the home, away from the scientific model that permeates our Deweyized, politically correct classrooms, young children can experience the thrill and wonder of discovering our common cultural heritage in the company and under the direction of the persons best situated to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their development.

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## Scorched Earth

by Thomas Fleming

**Who Killed Homer? The Demise  
of Classical Education and the  
Recovery of Greek Wisdom**  
by Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath  
New York: The Free Press;  
290 pp., \$25.00



The great debate over the humanities curriculum is the one that never took place. What some disgruntled academics call “the traditional curriculum” is really the hopeless hodgepodge that was cobbled together in the period that stretches, roughly speaking, from the end of the Great War to the Vietnam era. The true traditional curriculum (that is, the classical curriculum) had already been destroyed by the great vandals—Harvard’s President Eliot (a mediocre chemist) and the disciples of John Dewey—and out of the rubble a sterile and generic humanities curriculum had been patched together by well-intentioned and desperate men (Hutchins in Chicago, Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin). It did not work, it could not work, and the only people who mourn its passing are themselves the victims of a dumbed-down system that annually cranks out English Ph.D.’s like so many cheap VCRs: they may have the wiring to show films of Hamlet, but the only videos available are of Brian Di Palma’s latest or old Doris Day movies.

Although both Thomas Molnar and Jacques Barzun have had valuable things to say, the last really good book on the collapse of American education was Albert Jay Nock’s Page Barbour lectures. For their subtitle alone, the authors of

*Who Killed Homer?* deserve our gratitude for reopening the one really important question in higher education, namely, the indispensability of classical education.

Hanson and Heath begin, appropriately enough, with the sterility of the classics profession, with what Jacques Barzun once called the “scorched earth policy” of the American Philological Association that turned the study of Greek and Latin literature and history into a social science designed, apparently, to stifle any serious interest in what the ancients have to teach us. “Why,” they ask, “do few professors of Greek and Latin teach us that our present Western notions of constitutional government, free speech, individual rights, civilian control over the military, separation between religious and political authority, middle-class egalitarianism, private property, and free scientific inquiry are both vital to our present existence and derive from the ancient Greeks?”

In the course of their useful and important book, the authors take up the death of Homer (and Greek literature), the decline of classics, and the useful lessons taught by the ancient Greeks. They are merciless on the faddists who have reduced the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to a *corpus vile* on which they can practice their theories—gay studies, literary theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, and the form-analysis practiced by more traditional scholars. If anything, they do not go far enough and should have reached back a few years to include all the foolish “new criticism” introduced in the 1950’s.

On the other hand, proper credit is not given to the contributions made by hard-working pedants who may not engage in the higher criticism or expatiate on the glory that was Greece, but who have cleaned up ancient texts and elucidated them with useful commentary, who have wasted their eyes poring over papyrus scraps and inscriptions, finding useful information that helps us to make historical sense of ancient masterpieces and, in some cases, actually adding to our store of literature. Pedants have given us big pieces of Bacchylides and most of what we know of such lyric poets as Alcaeus and Stesichorus. It is the pedants,

by the way, who are most likely (in my experience) to display a genuinely humane appreciation of ancient literature. My own mentor, Douglas Young, was best known for his edition of Theognis, but when he was asked what he was qualified to teach, he answered, “Greek literature from Homer to Nonnus” (about 12 centuries), and he was not exaggerating.

I also recall T.R.S. Broughton, who had spent most of his career cataloguing the magistrates of Republican Rome—“ancient telephone books” as they were referred to dismissively by puny literary critics not fit (in all senses of the word) to carry his books to the library. Broughton was a plodding teacher, at least in his old age when I took a class in Tacitus with him, but outside of class he was unfailingly helpful and curious as a precocious child about any subject from American place-names to the lyrics of W.S. Gilbert.

Hanson and Heath have, nonetheless, drawn up a telling indictment of the profession, but they have also offered a few ground rules for its reconstruction and some practical recommendations on the study of Greek literature. Here they are, perhaps, less successful. Their account of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, for example, provides many useful insights into the relevance of the play for modern students, but their search for useful lessons reduces the play to the sort of propaganda that might find its way into the *Book of Virtues*.

The story of the play is quite simple. The sons of Oedipus quarreled over their inheritance, and Polynices was expelled. He returned at the head of an invasion force, and in the course of the battle he and his brother killed each other. The new ruler, Creon (their maternal uncle), forbids the burial of Polynices’ corpse, but the boy’s sister, Antigone (engaged to be married to Creon’s son), is caught in the act of performing a ritual burial and is condemned to death. Creon’s son and wife both commit suicide.

It is a rich and complex play that combines politics with religion and contrasts family obligation with human presumption. Here is the authors’ summary of the great choral ode on the wonders of man, which addresses some of the play’s central themes: “Science, research, and

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