



George McCartney, Jr.

The Uses of a Liberal Education

by Catharine Savage Brosman

ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1939, an Englishman named Harry Hinsley, walking between two lines of Nazi soldiers, crossed slowly and nervously the bridge connecting Kehl in Germany with Strasbourg in France. He made it to the French side before the border was closed. He had been warned to leave. It was none too soon; German troops had already invaded Poland, and Great Britain would declare war on Germany on September 3. Hinsley, an undergraduate at Cambridge, had spent his vacation across the Rhine learning some German. His field of study at Cambridge was medieval history; he worked on charts and other documents. What does one do with a history degree? Take up a teaching post immediately, or stay and get a postgraduate degree and then go teach, or remain forever within the college walls? Or seek other career opportunities—scholarly editing, journalism, publishing, museum or library work, a life in the clergy?

Hinsley did not yet need to choose. That autumn, he was interviewed and hired by representatives of what became Bletchley Park—the headquarters of the Government

Code and Cypher School. He was only 20 years old. Some of his colleagues in the campaign to break Germany's Enigma codes were similarly young: an Oxford mathematics graduate named Peter Twinn, aged 23, and an 18-year-old, Richard Pendered, who, after studies at Winchester, had been about to enroll at Cambridge. While Hinsley (who after the war returned to St. John's College as an historian) was helped by these two students of mathematics and others, it was he who masterminded the operation by means of reconstructing the German codes.

Among the older staff members at Bletchley Park was an eccentric former classics scholar, "Dilly" Knox, who also knew German and who liked poetry—while driving, he would recite Milton's "Lycidas." How could an acquaintance with poetry possibly be of any use? Well, during the previous war, in 1917, when he was at work on the naval flag code used by the Germans, he recognized that a piece of code was the enciphered version of a poem by Schiller, which then served as a crib. At Bletchley Park there

was also Mavis Lever, who had at age 18 interrupted her study of German at London University; she did not work on German, however, but on Italian Naval Enigma, which she was instrumental in breaking. The work of these cryptographers and others doubtless shortened the 1939-45 war, eased conditions during its course in Britain and elsewhere (by helping protect merchant shipping in the Atlantic), and saved countless lives.

The uses to which any education can be put are a function of what that education is. (Hence remarks below on what it should not be.) With the mind as both tool and target, a true liberal-arts education allows us to go beyond what we know and what we are. If properly taught, history (often deemed useless), languages (studied too much as a traveler's aid), good literary prose (not today's degraded fiction and propaganda), poetry, philosophy (including political philosophy), art history, musicology, mathematics and the mathematics-based sciences—all these develop the mind in reasoning, memory, knowledge, acumen, powers of assessment, and imagination. They prepare the learner to confront material, systematic or otherwise, that is at the outset unfamiliar, perhaps resistant. A good poem, for example, which is a small, detailed system, the principles of which may be obvious (rhyme scheme, meter, stanzas) or less so (metaphors, subtle references, interior echoes, a kind of poetic argument), may resist readers at first but yield to closer study. The Bletchley Park staff had native intelligence but also solid and broad training in fields of the liberal arts and sciences, and thus had learned how to learn. They could acquire new knowledge quickly, understand or imagine others' reasoning, assess a field, see both detail and outline, and conceive solutions. Moreover, they could harness language for their purposes.

In other words, as the French novelist Michel Butor observed about his literary endeavors, a genuine liberal education makes you more intelligent. A mental Sisyphus, you develop the "muscles" of your mind, which, provided with facts and concepts, can think, invent, and tackle a variety of challenges and puzzles, including entirely novel ones. This is important. How many of today's students, often committed early to vocational subjects such as business and finance or a program of fluff (so-called communications, sociology, or "gender" or ethnic studies, for instance), will remain for the next four or five decades in the occupational field for which these studies have, in fact or purportedly, prepared them? Many will be obliged to switch careers or face redesigned jobs, often with a consequent loss of time, income, satisfaction. Thus, whereas students and their parents commonly believe they should study what will get them

certified as soon as possible for work in a practical field, it would be more useful to prepare mentally for almost inevitable changes and disruptions. Even medicine and law will continue to change, perhaps greatly: medicine, as a result of scientific discoveries, ingenious technical applications, new legislation and insurance arrangements; law, following new and reinterpreted statutes and constitutions. Knox, Hinsley, Lever, various mathematicians at Bletchley had no idea concerning the use to which their mental skills and knowledge would be put.

We are in great need of well-trained minds with critical ability (and of courageous hearts), since the enemies are not only at our borders but also within. We should beware, however, of educational rhetoric today (in college propaganda materials, for instance) that speaks of "developing critical thinking." In the new coded language, *critical* has come to mean hostile "deconstruction" of Occidental culture, institutions, and thought, especially white "patriarchy." The cultish enthusiasts of "critical thinking" are, in fact, weak in critical faculties, as an outsider can discover by perusing their writings.

LIBERAL STUDIES ARE PRACTICAL. They have civic and cultural use and a personal function, the two often intertwined. If properly defined and well carried out by learned and intellectually honest teachers, liberal studies ground students in disciplined thinking and free them from ignorance, foolishness, and dangerous illusions, thus preparing them to live intelligently and responsibly. Such studies even save time: Stendhal's demonstration of the mechanisms and consequences of political venality is concise, persuasive, and entertaining, unlike sociology textbooks. Where traditional subjects have been thrown out, and rigor and objectivity are not stressed, the mind achieves little; it is easily misled, warped, or lured into a false appraisal of its capacities. In the milieu that Jonathan M. Smith and Jim Norwine, two antirevisionist geographers writing in *Academic Questions* (Fall 2009), call "the bawdy saloon of progressive politics, cultural nihilism, and subjective epistemology," so-called education is in fact dangerous for students and poisonous for society, though profitable for its purveyors.

Subjective epistemology amounts to the pernicious belief that opinions have fact-value and the stubborn rejection of the ancient principle that judgments, to be valid, must be founded. What remains is an indiscriminate acceptance of everything—except what the purveyors of "progressive" politics do not like. Consequently, there is no judgment—merely imitative, tropistic reaction, with a usual preference for everything permissive or base. Insofar as feeling is to

be part of judgment—and there is no implication here that emotion should be removed from the range of legitimate human responses—it, too, must be properly weighed and justified, not merely the reaction of an impulsive, silly biped. Says the student devotee of *Beloved*: “I just feel that Toni Morrison is a great writer.” If one accepts the view of minimalist sculptor Donald Judd (who disfigured some fine desert landscape in Presidio County, Texas, with his huge horrors), to wit, “If you call it art, it is art,” the only result will be degraded taste and judgment tending toward nihilism. Think of the late Mr. Mapplethorpe.

Classes in the humanities and social studies have become a cursory examination of materials (good or less good) for the purpose of forming and expressing opinions—by mindlessly but militantly liberal instructors and then students, who write up their derivative views in papers that suffice for passing grades. In multicultural studies especially, *a priori* suppositions, clichés, and shibboleths rule. Though students believe they think for themselves, they are, in fact, often docile and content to regurgitate platitudes and classroom dogma, thereby demonstrating that they belong to what Harold Rosenberg called “the herd of independent minds.” “Question Authority,” says a bumper sticker. Whose authority? Those duped by this precept—victims but accomplices, too—willingly assail family, church, the Boy Scouts, and patriotism but can eagerly swallow and process a whole stinking stew of ravings by an unkempt neo-Marxist or a feminist determined to subvert traditional institutions. What could be easier? And ease is the other side of the subjectivity coin.

The reduction in core requirements favors these trends. The University of Arkansas recently reduced its general-education demands for the B.A. from 66 hours to 35, eliminating foreign-language requirements and watering down science. Likewise, standards of grading have been lowered and requirements relaxed. (“I just feel that Bernanos is too hard, and we should not have to read this.”) Some years ago it was reported that at Duke University, one of the hotbeds of postmodernist brainwashing, more than 60 percent of the graduates were awarded honors. What extraordinarily gifted instructors and students! Soon everyone will graduate at the top of his class and be equally superior. That may be all right in “gender” studies; I wouldn’t like it in, say, ophthalmological surgery or suspension-bridge engineering.

Cultivation of self-image is another unfortunate strain in humanities courses (hence the popularity of creative-writing curricula). A philosophy professor of my acquaintance taught yearly “The Philosophy of Self.” It had a very large

enrollment, much larger than the courses on Plato and Aristotle offered by a learned and well-regarded teacher. Such self-cultivation is, by and large, useless or, worse, a harmful indulgence; it certainly is not mind-training. As for such abominations as “feminist mathematics,” no comment is necessary.

A proper liberal-arts education is an expensive enterprise for students, parents, state, philanthropists, society as a whole. (That is unless it is the result of self-teaching—reading, reflection, short courses, exchanges with others. Autodidactic training is now better than much of what can be purchased.) Four expensive years, with little to show except arcane erudition, mental agility, and awareness—quite some holiday, right? What, however, is the social and political price of ignorance, blindness, incompetence, and the total neglect of our patrimony? Alas, we see too well.

IT MIGHT BE OBJECTED that, if the college population studied nothing but ancient philosophy, medieval history, English poetry, theoretical mathematics, or similar subjects, there would be insufficient numbers of technicians, managers, and others to run the country. (Not that such have done a fine job recently.) Ah, but if the college population were reduced to what it should be—those who really want higher learning, not just a vocational certificate—then society could easily afford to provide, with less indebtedness, the sort of education sketched out here and would be better off for it. These educated people would in many cases be more imaginative, attentive, and successful than those ostensibly trained for such posts. (In a May *New York Times* article, Jacques Steinberg urged consideration of “Plan B: Skip College.”) If the present trend continues and nearly everyone aged 18 attends college, as MM. Clinton and Obama have wished, and thus vocational instruction elbows out the rest, at least students could be obliged to take courses in ethics that start with the ancients and include, for example, just-war principles.

Society is served by the development of minds and mastery of liberal branches of knowledge; national survival might depend on such education. For most of us, however, it is impossible to contribute much to this nation of 300 million, which groans under a yoke of atomized machine-and-mob rule and oligarchic control—and presently suffers, as Tom Piatak pointed out in these pages (“Bringing Back the Old Economy,” *Views*, April), from the negative effects of globalization. The ancient ideals and modes of civic life on which our republic was founded have been so abandoned or crushed, and the economic system so altered, that few of us can, as the expression goes, make a difference.

What we can do with our learning is exercise our good judgment and live well for ourselves, our families, those in our circles, and others whose welfare may be partly in our hands. To say that begs the question: What is living well? Merely a personal choice, some would argue; one may choose to watch a monster-truck derby, read a trashy best seller, attend cult gatherings at sweat lodges, or use “recreational” drugs in the evening, or, in contrast, meet discerning friends at dinner (“Conversation forms the mind,” wrote Pascal), visit a worthwhile art or science exhibit, spend time with children, listen to music (the time-honored kind), or read the classics, history, and good contemporary books. As Thoreau asserted in “Reading,” “Books are the treasured wealth of the world, and the fit inheritance of generations and nations. Books stand naturally and rightfully on the shelves of every cottage.” William Chase echoed him in *The American Scholar* (Autumn 2009): “Knowledge of those books [standard literary works] and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in and of itself.” The whole point of the learning promoted here is that it enables us to go beyond indiscriminate choices in a life that otherwise risks being “nasty, brutish, and short” (think of young Hollywood “celebrities” recently deceased) or at least tedious, and to distinguish the good from the less good—then share this understanding with others. Dilly Knox of Bletchley Park had liked Schiller’s and Milton’s poetry for its own sake, for what it offered his mind and heart. (Wallace Stevens observed, “The purpose of poetry is to contribute to man’s happiness.”) It was almost serendipitous that Knox could use his acquaintance with poetry to break a code. Almost serendipitous, but not entirely, because the classics and poetry had afforded training as well as pleasure—the sort of training that allowed him to identify a clue. As Robert Friedel wrote in a 2001 essay, “Serendipity is no accident.”

With luck and prudence, one’s mind lasts as long as one’s life, and a true education can provide decades-long satisfaction through intellectual grasp and aesthetic pleasure. The cultivation of one’s garden is the cultivation of oneself. What will our fellow countrymen do with themselves in a future time of leisure, or, if like Dante, in exile? Watch reality shows or play video games? My grandfather, a physician and researcher who retired at age 70, read, traveled, listened to recorded music on his Zenith phonograph, and wrote for the next 24 years. His previous endeavors as a humane scientist and lover of knowledge had not only enabled him to serve others well but prepared him wonderfully for his old age.

Since this is *Chronicles*, I am preaching to the converted, except for those few who may have come to scoff but

“remain’d to pray.” I invite readers to reflect on these matters, however, and make these points to others, especially young, naive acquaintances unfamiliar with such thinking; then, if circumstances allow, repeat these arguments before school boards, librarians, institutional trustees (when universities beg for money), legislators, and others in power, and thus prove me partially wrong about “making a difference.”

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A Talisman Against Falling

by Stella Nesanovich

It must be a spirit that catches you,
keeps you from falling, stumbling
toward the ledge of tall buildings,
lifts you after tripping face forward
on rugs in halls, sunken living rooms,
upending tables and lamps.

Perhaps it is fear itself that cautions:
avoid elevator shafts, high expressways,
mountain roads coiling like kites
toward heaven. High up, dizziness
begins, spins out of control. Your fall
will break circuits of trees, chevroned leaves
like cascading walls unblocking descent.

An unbalanced element of earth, some say
and urge crawling to steady your vision.
It’s the sky, you want to tell them:
its limitlessness and endless promise,
and the sudden nudge to jump from heights:
Haven’t you felt it, the desire to leap?
Sweet earth beckons, pulls you to her bosom,
pushes you forward with grace. She wishes
you knew the rapture she offers: salt and brine
of water-fringed beaches, damp, yielding sand.