

CAN LIBERAL EDUCATION COPE?

An address to the Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs

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Like most speakers who are asked for their topics a year ahead of time, I offered up a title which did not commit me to anything. But I knew that your colleague Ray Callahan had invited me to this meeting on the basis of the CASC talk I gave in this city last year. In that talk I tried to discuss the intellectual and pedagogical dilemmas confronted by the universities of this country as they struggle to come to terms with their deteriorating political and economic circumstances. I think that Ray intended me to apply that analysis to the situation of and prospects for graduate liberal studies programs. So far, so good.

I have to confess that I know little about such programs qua programs, though I imagine that, over the course of a fairly long career, I have probably taught students who were engaged in such programs without my knowing it. So far as I can tell, my own university has no such program, and has no intention of having one. I have been helped by reading the brochure for this meeting, which informs me that graduate liberal studies programs are primarily for adult students, are non-professional and emphasize liberal arts education. More informatively, I am assured that your programs seek "more reflective, integrated study than usually provided by departmental graduate programs."

I think I know what you are driving at, and I can relate to it, since I have myself spoken and written about the shortcomings of disciplinary departments (which is what I assume you are talking about). But I am, for my sins, the Vice President (Research) of the American Historical Association, and I have earlier served as the President of both the American Society for Legal History and the Organization of American Historians. And most of you, I would guess, were trained in one of the traditional disciplines. Et tu, Brutus? What sort of subversion are we up to, my friends?

(And let me say here that I assume that your principal motivation is not simply to respond to a new consumer market for a cash-hungry university, although I understand that in these United States there is nothing wrong with making an honest buck.)

This is not the place to argue the point, but my guess is that we all recognize the necessity of continued training in the basic disciplines (and I will speak mainly to the humanities and social sciences, about which I know a good deal more than about the sciences). But we are uncomfortable about the extent to which the disciplines have become self-referential, specialized and border-policing entities. We also fear that both the courses and requirements of the disciplinary departments no longer (if ever they did) cohere with the larger educational purposes of the university -- if indeed the universities any longer stand for anything that counts as educational purposes in the traditional sense. But we are also aware that the universities have permitted, and often encouraged, the development of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and (as I prefer) nondisciplinary courses, programs, centers -- and even departments. So it must be something more than the weakness of departments that motivates the growth of graduate liberal studies programs.

I assume that that "something" is contained in the terms "integrated," "reflective," and, especially, "liberal" --that you share my sense that something is too often missing in the programs aimed at the general education of students at all levels that we offer. At the undergraduate level, many of us are concerned about the decline in what we usually call the "liberal" or "liberal arts" orientation of our programs, for reasons which have been rehearsed many times in recent years. But the notion that graduate education should be "liberal" is quite new in the history of American higher education, and I assume that one of the reasons you have focused on it is that the demography of graduate students has changed as the age structure of the population as a whole has changed. If the average age of undergraduates is today something like 27 years of age, then it is not surprising that we have increasing numbers of considerably older students returning both for (non-degree) continuing education, but also for degree programs. These are students who have mostly had vocational careers already, and so are not attracted to professional programs. I would guess that they have time, maturity, a lifetime's learning -- and a desire to integrate intellectually what they have experienced thus far. Although perhaps some of your students are in fact much younger, but have analogous reasons for desiring a liberal, integrative and non-professional graduate degree -- I would like to learn from you how many such students you have.

But the job of an after-dinner speaker is to say a few provocative things, not so provocative as to disrupt your digestive processes, but scratchy enough to keep you awake for another twenty minutes or so. And so I will put a question to you? Do you

have, in your several programs, a coherent vision of the liberal arts and an educational theory of integration and reflection? If you do, you will be among the happy few in our university systems, and perhaps you can help the rest of us. But I will come back to that challenge.

II

Last year in Philadelphia I devoted a substantial portion of my talk to a rehearsal of the views of a Polish professor of classical studies, Jerzy Axer, whom I had met the previous spring in Budapest at a meeting of Central European educators attempting to introduce liberal arts programs into the emerging structures of post-communist universities, in a region which had never had anything quite like our Anglo-American liberal arts tradition. I was struck by the bold case Axer made for the democratic political potential in the development of a liberal arts program based on the classics at Warsaw University, where he taught. His vision was so striking that I received many more requests for a copy of his speech, than for my own. And quite rightly so, I thought -- and think. The same thing is likely to happen tonight.

Axer and some of his colleagues, working with Nicholas Farnham's Educational Leadership Program of the Christian Johnson Endeavor Foundation, have begun a network of Central European liberal arts programs and institutions. Just last week the Foundation brought together an American audience to hear Axer report on the progress being made in his region, and he has sent me a copy of his text, parts of which I would like to share with you. Remember, Axer's argument is radical. It is not just that some version of a liberal arts program can cultivate those attitudes of citizenship which are the purpose usually ascribed to a liberal arts education, but specifically training in the classics -- something you may well initially regard as too narrow (and possibly even disciplinary) to be "integrative" and "liberal." But listen to the way Axer makes his case for the classics as a sufficient basis for liberal studies in Poland.

He begins with the assertion that "each one of us is anima naturaliter liberalis, to paraphrase a formula about the spiritual readiness of certain pagans to accept Christianity even before Christ was born." Acting on that premise, Axer contends that he and his colleagues have built academic programs ("structures," he calls them) that "contain asiti generis classical experience" for the students. The program is based upon their attachment to the "utmost importance" of "the Socratic poetics of dialogue," and they discourage "premature specialization," and "base the didactic process upon direct conversation in the course of interdisciplinary seminars." These goals and techniques should sound familiar to you, although in this country we use different terminology.

Axer understands that, in Europe, classical education has for long been the vehicle for the promotion of conservatism in general and conformity in particular. But he believes that the political problem of education in East Central Europe is that the parents of his students, habituated to conformity under the communist regime and desperate for their children to succeed in the newly emerging market economy, do not understand the relationship of non-vocational education to the capacity of the younger generation to reform the conditions of life in the region. Liberal studies, he argues, can become "a catalyst for the consolidation of a reform-oriented atmosphere. Thus, in our situation, what once served to render the system stable, today can be the basis of change and much-desired innovation."

Axer specifies the mechanisms through which a concentration on classical studies (and, especially, ancient languages), can serve the liberating purpose of liberal education.

The purpose of such a procedure is the "suspension" of the pressure of historical experiences and the reduction of the pressure of mass culture stereotypes. The forgotten language of tradition takes us back to the common roots of Mediterranean civilization, and thereby counteracts the habits stemming from our bad and only too recent experiences. . . . Having thus cleared the arena and by way of initiating the Socratic educational dialogue, one could attempt jointly to reconstruct the world by resorting to universal signs. This sovereign recreation anew of our civilization could awaken in the students naive astonishment and delight -- feelings which should be our fundamental goal, and which are so difficult to arouse today.

This, surely, is a very familiar definition of liberal education -- the freeing of the student's intellect to roam unconstrained by the pressures and inhibitions of the immediate environment. Further, such an approach frees the students from the normal constraints of the intellectual structure of the university:

Thus, past worlds can, at least to a certain degree, become accepted and tamed by the imagination of the young person. At the same time, they foster the atmosphere of natural interdisciplinary studies. What at school fell under different heading, and at the university became fragmented into a multitude of specialization, regains its meaning as part of the common human heritage -- the natural subject of the humanities.

And always, for Axer, there is a civic purpose to the awakening of the student to the liberal tradition.

We have left the smoldering ruins of Troy behind us, and our task resembles the mission of Aeneas, who was to revive it in another form and time. The meaning of such a mission can be formulated in the language of the classical tradition, and words which seem to be just commonplaces when heard and spoken in the squabbles and hubbub of daily life, regain their sense and authority thanks to the recollections of their original contexts. If we wish to prepare society for becoming truly civic, and make citizens ready for participation in community instead of being outside observers, we must restore the conceptual apparatus, which endows meaning to the notion of Res Publica.

In this year's speech, delivered in New York, Axer challenged his audience to consider the possible applicability of his classical tradition model to the circumstances of liberal education in this country. Allow me to quote him at length.

I would like to ask you, Ladies and Gentlemen, whether the classical tradition in the United States could be an ally of liberal education. Is it reasonable to put classical masks upon the faces of the master and the pupil -- partners in the educational theatre -- in a country which has no historical experiences that call for a reconstruction of the national and cultural identity, a land where social ties and civic structures have not ever been destroyed? Does the fate of Trojans seeking their new-old native land pertain to you in any degree at all? Formulating those doubts, I do not know whether I am touching upon motifs essential for present-day disputes concerning the merits and faults of liberal education in your country. An outsider, however, finds it plausible that the classical tradition can prove to be attractive as a vehicle of liberal education for those Americans who are engaged in a quest for an antidote against uprootedness within history, the relativism of postmodern intellectual culture, and the spur-of-the-moment non-continuum of mass culture.

The Graeco-Roman tradition is no longer the voice of the white man or part of his imperial mission. Free from such encumbrances, it remains one of the most original languages of civilization, used for describing the human experience of almost three millennia. It is also an inexhaustible storehouse of precedents, encompassing both man's disputes with God, his problems with himself, and an infinite variety of relations between the individual and the group.

This is wonderfully heavy-duty stuff, but Axer never lets us forget that it has clear and present pedagogical function: "If a teacher is to be truly the agent of civilization, his basic task is to depart, together with his pupil viewed as a partner, from the domain of pragmatic activity, and to keep a proper distance. The classical mirror . . . puts into focus and renders distinct what usually remains invisible; it also blurs the contours of what we excessively concentrate on in our every day life." Axer concludes by saying that "If the master and the student 'give themselves time", there will emerge a chance for authentic contact -- the prime condition of all liberal education and dialogue. Putting on the classical mask is one of the ways of achieving this contact."

(All quotes for the manuscript of "How the Classical Tradition Can Serve to Promote Liberal Education in the Twenty First Century: The East-Central Europe Case Example," speech by Professor Jerzy Axer to the Educational Leadership Program New York Forum, 20 October, 1997)

III

Axer is in good company when he argues for the centrality of the classics to liberal education, for Martha Nussbaum has just published a compelling volume entitled *CULTIVATING HUMANITY: A CLASSICAL DEFENSE OF REFORM IN LIBERAL EDUCATION* (Harvard U. Press, 1997), which argues strongly for the training in rationality which the study of the classics has always provided. She believes that the Socratic dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living provides a guide to the process of introspection which is at the heart the logical analysis of self and the human condition which underlies the process of liberal education. A philosopher as well as a classicist, she does not advocate the classics as a cultural tradition (though you will remember that Axer is careful to avoid the conservative uses of the classical tradition in his account), but rather as a source of reasoning and critical analysis. She also contends that the philosophers of Greece and Rome were cosmopolitan in their approach to society, and thus supports multicultural approaches to the understanding of contemporary social conditions. But basically, Nussbaum believes that undergraduate education built around the study of the classics will support the invigoration of liberal education. The point, for me, is that the the classics epitomize the way in which the traditional humanities can provide a context for the reformation of liberal studies in the American university.

I do not want to be understood as pleading with you to make classical studies the core of your graduate liberal studies programs, although that might be a very good idea. Rather, I want to present Axer and Nussbaum as examples of how magnificently educated and cultured scholars can articulate a vision of how liberal education works, and why it matters. I think the challenge to each of you, and to this Association as a

whole, is to attempt such an exercise in definition and articulation of educational purpose.

Axer regards the United States, possibly in an exercise of overly sensitive gentility, as a country untroubled by the historical and civic turmoil of Central Europe. But those of us in this room, I would guess, are considerably less confident that American culture, and especially the American academy, is not in need of reconstruction. Speaking only for myself, I believe that we are in the midst of a very considerable period of crisis: financial stress, pressure for restructuring, mindless utilitarianism, creeping vocationalism, uncertainty as to social function, confusion as to the direction of the intellectual project of the university. These are all things I spoke about in my CASC talk last year, and the situation has not improved since that time. One of the problems I do not believe I mentioned, however, was the situation of liberal education in our universities.

I do not need to rehearse the history of liberal education for this audience of liberal educators. I am sure that you know how we arrived in our present situation. But I do want to remind you of one important element of the liberal tradition, and element I think of as the project of general education. To oversimplify, this was the effort, epitomized by the programs first at Columbia University and later at the University of Chicago, to avoid the educational chaos of Harvard's Charles Eliot's free elective curriculum, and to remedy the incoherence of Princeton's James McCosh's distribution system, by compelling students to engage with at least some of the elements of the Western intellectual tradition in addition to their more specialized or professional study. This pre-World War II innovation was reinvented as "general education in a free society" at Harvard after the War, and later repackaged at Harvard and elsewhere as the "core curriculum."

Most undergraduate educational institutions have some variety of either general education/core curriculum or distribution requirements, which work in tension with the departmental majors. They are intended somehow to provide at least a more general intellectual context for the specialized work of the student in his or her area of concentration. Sometimes they are also intended to build basic skills (quantitative or logical, for instance) which can be used throughout the curriculum, and in life after the university. But I think I am not alone in fearing that the traditional aims of liberal education, reduced to the ideal of general education or core curriculum, have lost their punch. They are too frequently viewed by students as add-ons, nuisances in the road to specialized learning. They are perceived as mechanical contrivances, intended to correct the tendency of learning to move in the direction of specialization, epicycles in a system which has spun badly out of balance. Ironically, it may be that those of you attempting to provide liberal education at the graduate level are in a position to help those of us more focused on undergraduate education, since neither you nor your

students are obligated to the departmental or, worse, vocational track that dominates the collegiate experience. You can help us, however, only if you can explain to us what makes your programs liberal, and how they can work as liberal learning experiences.

But the deck is stacked against you, as it is stacked against all those of us who want to restore the liberal ideal to the core of post-secondary education, for the ongoing transformation of the university is unlikely to provide the structures and conditions congenial to the accomplishment of your goals. As those of you who heard me last year will remember, I have been brooding about the current brutalization of the university for some time, but my own feelings have been intensified by reading the remarkable book, *THE UNIVERSITY IN RUINS* (Harvard University Press, 1996) written by the late Bill Readings.

Readings shares my sense that the university as an institution is in deep trouble. He contends that the popular and media criticism of the higher education system reflect what he calls "a deep uncertainty as to the role of the University and the very nature of the standards by which it should be judged as an institution." (p.1) His sense is that ". . . the wider social role of the University as an institution is now up for grabs. It is no longer clear what the place of the University is within society, nor what the exact nature of that society is, and the changing institutional form of the University is something that intellectuals cannot afford to ignore." (p.2) The heart of Readings' analysis is his argument that " : . . the current shift in the role of the University is, above all, determined by the decline of the national cultural mission that has up to now provided its *raison d'être*;" ". . . the University is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture;" (p.3) "The University . . . no longer participates in the historical project of humanity that was the legacy of the Enlightenment: the historical project of culture." (p.5)

The model from which the modern university (and Readings seems to be thinking of the entire western world when he speaks of "the University") has departed is the German, Humboldtian university of the last century. Readings understands the German nineteenth-century archetype as a creation of the state intended to serve the state by identifying and representing the national culture.

The life of the Kantian University is . . . a perpetual conflict between established tradition and rational inquiry. This conflict is given a historical force and becomes a project for progress by virtue of the fact that it is dialectical. The conflict between the tradition established in the three higher faculties (theology, medicine, and law) and the free inquiry of the lower faculty (philosophy) leads towards a universally grounded

rationality. Each particular inquiry, each discipline, develops itself by interrogating its own foundations with the aid of the faculty of philosophy. Thus, inquiry passes from mere empirical practice to theoretical self-knowledge by means of self-criticism. Each discipline seeks its own purity -- what is essential to it. (p.57)

And in such a university, the difficulty is to move from what Schiller called the "state of nature" to the "state of reason" without destroying nature. And the answer was to develop a sense of culture understood as aesthetic education. This process, called Bildung, "is a process of the development of moral character that situates beauty as an intermediate step between the chaos of nature and the strict and arbitrary structures of pure reason." "It is a fundamentally historical process: reason is given organic life through historical study. Humanity does not achieve the moral state by rejecting nature but by reinterpreting nature as a historical process." (p.63)

All of this focuses on the student:

Educated properly, the subject learns the rules of thought, not a content of positive knowledge, so that thought and knowledge acquisition become a freely autonomous activity, part of the subject. . . . The teacher does not transmit facts . . . but rather does two things. First the teacher narrativizes the search for knowledge, tells the story of the process of knowledge acquisition. Second, the teacher enacts the process, sets knowledge to work. What is taught is thus not facts but critique -- the formal art of the use of mental powers, the process of judgment. (p.67)

This is high octane stuff, but it should sound quite familiar to those of you whose programs are based on contemporary notions of active learning, upon the work of Jerome Bruner, Lee Shulman and Howard Gardner. What is unfamiliar, besides the overlay of German Romanticism, is the linkage of recognizably modern pedagogy (though only recently rediscovered in this country) to an uncongenial notion of the relationship of the university to the state. For Readings argues that the traditional European university was inextricably linked to the state.

The University is not just a site for contemplation that is then to be transformed into action [the American notion]. The University . . . is not simply an instrument of state policy; rather, the University must embody thought as action, as striving for an ideal. This is its bond with the state, for state and University are two sides of a single coin. The University seeks to embody thought as action toward an ideal; the state must seek to realize action as thought, the idea of the nation. The state protects the

action of the university; the University safeguards the thought of the state. And each strives to realize the idea of national culture. (p.69)

But Readings (an Englishman who taught at the University of Montreal), recognizes that the relationship of the university to the state has always been different in the United States.

. . . the role of the American University is not to bring to light the content of its culture, to realize a national meaning; it is rather to deliver on a national *promise*, a contract. . . . [T]his promissory structure is what makes the canon debate a particularly American phenomenon, since the establishment of cultural content is not the realization of an immanent cultural essence but an act of republican will: the paradoxical contractual *choice* of a tradition. Thus the *form* of the European idea of culture is preserved in the humanities in the United States, but the cultural form has no inherent content. The content of the canon is grounded upon the moment of a social contract rather than the continuity of a historical tradition, and therefore is always open to revision. (p.35)

It is for this reason, Readings believes, that the current degradation of the American university to what he terms "the University of Excellence" has been so easily accomplished. The notion of culture, and with it the concept of the organic transmission of culture in the university is so weak in our tradition that a crude utilitarianism has won out. He defines "Excellence" the rationale for the current restructuring of American higher education, as an "empty notion" that "refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ratio in matters of information." (p.39)

But Readings does not despair. He asks the question, ". . . how Thought . . . may be addressed in the University. We should be clear about one thing: nothing in the nature of the institution will enshrine or protect it from economic imperatives. . . .the question posed to the University is thus not how to turn the institution into a haven for thought but how to think in an institution whose development tends to make Thought more and more difficult, less and less necessary." (p.175)

In other words, the ruins of the University must not be, for students and professors, the ruins of a Greco-Roman temple within which we practice our rites as if oblivious to their role in animating tourist activities and lining the pockets of the unscrupulous administrators of the site. (p.175)

Readings' counsel is that to dwell "in the ruins of the university" is ". . . to try to do what we can, while leaving a space for what we cannot envisage to emerge." He does not foresee the possibility of what he calls "a generalized interdisciplinary space," but

rather "a certain rhythm of disciplinary attachment and detachment, which is designed so as not to let the question of disciplinarity disappear, sink into routine. Rather, disciplinary structures would be forced to answer to the name of Thought, to imagine what kinds of thinking they make possible, and what kinds of thinking they exclude." (p. 176)

Which brings me the long way round to my challenge to those of you working to keep interdisciplinary liberal studies programs alive. Readings' advice to us is to act pragmatically, to create spaces and possibilities within the structure of a university that is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to the ideals of thought and pedagogy which we espouse. I think he would want me to ask you whether your programs are, or could be such spaces -- places where the found culture of the American contractual society can work to permit students to discover themselves, their relation to society and the environment, and in which students and teachers can work out a humane, interdependent manner of seeking truth. I urge you, therefore, to think beyond your charge to find new markets for cash starved institutions, and to strive to use these worthy programs as an opening in our efforts to save the soul of the university.