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Creative Intuition, Great Books, And Freedom of Intellect

Nietzsche—one of the bad boys of great books lists—once remarked: "Every idea has its autobiography." This provides me the initial link for Creative Intuition, Great Books, and Freedom of the Intellect in my title. During the Stanford controversy about required readings in Western Culture earlier this year, I was reading Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. Before beginning his philosophical analysis of intuition in that work, Maritain distinguishes the characteristics of Indian and Chinese art on the one hand from those of the art of the West on the other (*CI* 10–21). He draws these distinctions generously, but sharply, based on categories of a self-conscious inhabitant of the West. My own spark of intuition jumped from Maritain's powerful and magnanimous *method* to the very weak and condescending arguments about some generic need to study non-Western culture issuing from Palo Alto. And, in the same flash, I saw the deep connection of this controversy to maintaining—or perhaps achieving again—a vibrant, high, and free common culture.

Let me begin with a little further autobiography. I feel honor-bound to confess at the outset my own prejudices, if that is what they are. As an undergraduate, I attended a prestigious university, one of those described by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*. My not-so-*alma mater*, however, goes Bloom's typical institution one better; it is so open and tolerant that it prides itself on having no requirements at all. A student must only complete a certain number of courses to graduate and must work out with a faculty member something called a "concentration" (a postmodern term for a major). The abdication of educational leadership is, for me, therefore, a vivid memory.

All the university's promotional material touts this "New Curriculum" (even though it is now over fifteen years old) for its "flexibility." Now, for a student of the classical philosophy of education, this term "flexibility" may not immediately inspire awe. Plato and Aristotle seem to have thought it not worth mentioning. In fact, most theories of education until

the last few decades would have thought mere flexibility good only in so far as it permitted better approaches to well-defined and dynamically pursued disciplines. The idea that flexibility in and of itself could be grounds for choosing a school had to wait for the lucid tranquillity of the Vietnam War era to raise its shining banner on the campuses.

To be fair to the university in question, which I shall not name, the reputation for flexibility has made it one of the two or three most popular colleges in the country. The admissions office is happy, the administration delighted, the faculty (for once) satisfied, and the fund-raisers breathless at their success in luring the eager high school students of America with promises of flexibility.

The only fly in the ointment is the effect on those of us who by now have had our four years of flexibility and have gone on as other generations into the world, where the very term concentration is misunderstood and bosses are occasionally less flexible than the average Ivy League professor. Some of us who continue to work with our brains also reflect occasionally on what good and harm all this flexibility did us. A recent poll of alumni found that, in spite of all the huffing and puffing in university materials and the applause from guidance counselors' offices around the country, only about half of the university's graduates say they liked their four years because of the flexibility, and about the same number say they didn't like their four years because of the flexibility.

In my experience, people who wanted to learn at this institution (I leave the merely idle aside for some future sociological study) fell into two large categories. The first knew little, but were constantly being told they were the best and the brightest. They left the ivied halls happy and still mostly ignorant—some, the kind of feminists who make stern criticisms of Western civilization, but seem to know nothing that happened in the West prior to the 1950s. These, I am sure, along with the engineers, premed students, and so forth, make up the bulk of those who were delighted to be flexible.

The other large group, I think, seriously wanted an education, and finding none available in any systematic way, went about picking up odds and ends and reading into interconnected subjects with the passion, but also the unavoidable eccentricity, of the autodidact. These people found great books—I certainly did—but they tended to order them in personal, idiosyncratic ways that make discourse about them, even with one another, very difficult. As a result, if I remember rightly, we for the most part did our reading and conversed little with one another. Perhaps it would have been too painful to find that there was so little commmunity of thought, even among the few people trying to do some thinking.

Having been through this experience, I am probably in a better position

than most people to appreciate the inestimable value of great books courses and courses in Western civilization (I will use the terms interchangeably for the remainder of this essay, even though I know there are great differences between the two). But I think it necessary to keep in mind some principles that Maritain would have introduced into this debate. Let's begin by way of what I believe the Schoolmen called *remotion*. I want to make clear what mere lists of the monuments of Western culture are *not*.

I. What the Great Books Are Not

First, while great books nourish our ethical and social roots, they are not, as Jacques Maritain already saw in the 1940s, salvation from our current cultural crisis;[1] the decay is too great for that. To say that they are sufficient to our moral predicament is to argue that some secular canon, like the canon of Scripture, is sufficient. *Sola scriptura* is a bad principle in either realm.

Some advocates of great books give the opposite impression—that passionate reading of crucial texts alone will give us the guidance we need to get through the dark wood of contemporary life. The best refutation of this view that I know of is Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*. The character who gives his name to the book writes brilliant intellectual analyses of great Western books—as well as letters to their authors—but his own life is far more troubled than that of the average person. Commenting on this novel, Bellow rightly identifies *the* modern problem as first of the soul rather than the intellect.

> To finish with *Herzog*, I meant the novel to show how little strength "higher education" had to offer a troubled man. In the end he is aware that he has had *no* education in the conduct of life (at the university who was there to teach him how to deal with his erotic needs, with women, with family matters?) and he returns, in the language of games, to square one—or as I put to myself while writing the book, to some primal point of balance. Herzog's confusion is barbarous. Well, what else can it be? But there is a point at which, assisted by his comic sense, he is able to hold fast. In the greatest confusion there is still an open channel to the soul. It may be difficult to find because by midlife it is overgrown, and some of the wildest thickets that surround it grow out of what we describe as our education. But the channel

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[1]In his study *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), Jacques Maritain suggests that the reading of great authors is the usual path of acquiring natural morality (p. 68). But he rightly observes later that already in the 1940s, "The normal way ... does not suffice in the face of tremendous degradation of ethical reason which is observable today" (p. 94).

> is always there, and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves—to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgments and put everything together. The independence of this consciousness, which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings, is what the life struggle is all about. The soul has to find and hold its ground against hostile forces, sometimes embodied in ideas which frequently deny its very existence, and which indeed often seem to be trying to annul it altogether.[2]

A second preliminary point on great books, which follows from the first, is a contradiction of one of the main strands of Western high culture. *Contra* some great books proponents, I would argue that the unexamined life *is* worth living. Such a life may be virtuous and valuable without the Socratic *exetasis* entering into the question, especially when education is likely to lead to the wild thickets that Bellow mentions. We all know simple people who, without being learned, are wise and good *per modum inclinationis*. America generally depends on this repository of simple virtue for its basic functioning. Unless great books programs make it clear that they have the philosophical breadth to account for this, they tend to discredit themselves as elitist studies with arrogant and unwarranted claims.

Third, to return to the ecclesial parallel for a moment, we should be clear that there is no list of *the* great books, because there cannot be. My colleague at the Ethics and Public Policy Center Edwin Delattre, the president-emeritus of Saint John's College at Annapolis and Santa Fe, rightly changed the materials of those schools during his tenure in office to indicate that great books, not *the* great books were read there. I would go still further and say there *should* not be such a list. The canon of Scripture is defined by proper authority at a given moment. The landmarks of human history, intelligence, and creativity cannot be defined once and for all. They are either open to new arrivals and discovery of lost or overlooked eminences—in short, to active intelligence—or they are a series of fossils. Intellectual authority plays a crucial role in defining what is worthy of study and Yves R. Simon has brilliantly examined that role. But I will return to this point later.

All the misconceptions and exaggerated hopes about great books are understandable reactions to the cultural chaos in which we find ourselves. In current conditions, what could be more desirable than a manageable set

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[2]Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 16 and 17.

of readings that define what an educated person should know? In many cases, such programs probably do a good job, though I must say from personal experience that many people I meet who have been through these programs or teach in them show a good deal of narrow sectarian spirit and far less catholic intellectual tastes than I would have expected. This is a problem that does not even take us to the main questions of intellectual depth and power—the tough questions of sheer competence, both for teachers and students. Perhaps these phenomena are the counterbalance to the excessive flexibility of many educational institutions.

II. The Importance of the Less than Great

One of the most striking aspects of Maritain's reflections on the products of creative intelligence is precisely his catholicity and willingness to study less-than-great books. If you read his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, for example, you are overwhelmed with its philosophical and esthetic insight. But, even more important, you are struck with how much more "modern," in the best sense, Maritain is than most of those who prescribe great books for the ills of current culture—even thirty-five years later. Perhaps this is because he is so confident in certain truths that he finds them simultaneously antimodern and ultramodern,[3] i.e., timeless. Maritain illustrates his arguments with passages from and reflections on Apollinaire, Cocteau, Gide, the surrealists, Rouault, Chagall, Debussy, Hart Crane, Eliot, and Baudelaire, among others. His lively appreciation of true poetic intuition, that profound freedom of the intellect, leads him to understand sympathetically what is alive and what is unique in modern works that most great books advocates would think beneath their notice.

Maritain does not find these works beneath his notice. He rejects the kind of prudish classicism that he calls *misoneism*.[4] Instead, he shows why, under modern philosophical and social conditions, these works are what they are. In so doing, he explains the non-representational aspect of more purely poetic modern work from a rare philosophical and psychological depth. These works have their rationale, and their rationale is modern. As he puts it, it "is difficult for a modern poet not to be the child of modern

[3]Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne*, in *Oeuvres Completes*, vol. II (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1987), 928.

[4]*Ibid., loc. cit.*

man" (*CI* 335). This method is a good corrective to the kind of great books program that eschews all discussion of context for fear of historicism or relativism.[5]

In any case, Maritain never commits the sectarian's error of dismissing work simply because it is not comparable to the greatest of the past. Even less great contemporary work is important to us because it gives us the sense of living creation that past work usually cannot. Furthermore, it is the job of intelligence to understand why modern work is what it is. Maritain beautifully presents the case for the greatness of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, for example. Dante is not only one of the greatest poets who ever lived, but he has the advantage of innocent self-assurance and the luck of a solid culture behind him. Maritain defends modern writers who lack these advantages: "it would be nonsense to require from modern poets a 'greatness,' an objective intellectuality and universality of theme comparable to those in Dante" (*CI* 399). Modern poetry gathers together for us all those bits and fragments of contemporary life into poetic intuition that hints at more *for us* at times than do the abstractly "great" works.

The reverse side of this perceptiveness is that Maritain knew early on what many more of us have come to realize in the last few decades: there are transcendently great works that must be actively appropriated if we are to make contact with the fullest range of human life we can appreciate. And, for this need, study of great books is crucial. The curriculum of a very fine school based on a modified *paideia* program defines this part of its program as the "Habitual Vision of Greatness,"[6] a striking way of putting it.

III. The Centrality of Intuition

Creative or poetic intuition bears no little importance to this full range. As Maritain sees it, the poetic and the mystical are somewhat akin, in that they are authentic human dimensions that regularly pass outside of our everyday experience without losing touch with the regulations of intelligence. In Maritain, true poetry and mysticism are never mere flights of the spririt that make their own laws as they go. Rather, he associates both with what he calls the human preconscious. He seems to think that poetic intuition is linked in some ways with the more usual function of the agent

[5]Cf. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 71: "The great books should be accompanied by enlightenment about their historical context and by counsel on the subject matter."

[6]See the brochure of the Trinity School, South Greenlawn Avenue, South Bend, Indiana.

intellect in transforming phantasms into intelligible material for the possible intellect. The difference in poetic intuition is that the human faculty does not merely grasp the object as material for discursive reason. Instead, by a kind of connaturality, it *creates* an object that trails its roots in God's larger creation and shows its affinities with Being Himself (*CI* IV). How this occurs is not entirely open to our discursive mind; but that it does occur we are sure, as anyone who has ever really "gotten" a poem can attest. Perhaps the best way to convey this point is to quote a poet, as Maritain does. In "Maid Quiet," Yeats says "The winds that awakened the stars/Are blowing through my blood." *That's* poetic connaturality.

At first sight, this may merely seem of interest to esthetics and that part of the great books course that deals with poetry or art. I think this view is a mistake, as did Maritain. And we might recall here a sentence from Saint Thomas that Maritain quotes frequently: "*Ex divina pulchritudine esse omnium derivatur*" (*AS* 31).[7] He elaborates this formula in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*:

> A kind of poetic intuition can come into play everywhere—in science, philosophy, big business, revolution, religion, sanctity, or imposture—when the mind of man attains to a certain depth or mastery in the power of discovering new horizons and taking great risks.
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> There is poetry involved in the work of all great mathematicians. Secret poetic intuition was at work in the primary philosophical insights of Heraclitus and Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, Plotinus, Spinoza, or Hegel; without the help of poetry Aristotle could not have extracted from experience the diamond of his fundamental definitions; in the background of all the ideological violence of Thomas Hobbes there was something which poetry had taught him, his awareness that he was the twin brother of Fear. Poetry helped Francis of Assisi, and Columbus, and Napoleon, and Cagliostro (*CI* 238–39).

I quote this passage at length because I think it confirms an important insight that the truly great thing in these diverse figures, before the more humble application of discursive tools, is this larger human insight that makes great the work not only of a Homer, or Dante, or Shakespeare, but of a Newton, Einstein, or—Cagliostro. Prudence, the virtue of art, and science all have a deep and common root in this view.

If our students are not awakened to this greatness of conception, this light flooding things from the preconscious or agent intellect or some other

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[7]The citation is from Aquinas' *Expositio Super Dionysius De Divinis Nominibus*, c. 4, lect. 5.

source, they may be tempted to think that the figures we hope they will familiarize themselves with are merely "clever" thinkers, or, still worse, convenient political props for the Western system.

It is no accident that the radicals who chant, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture 's gotta go" at Stanford have put themselves in the same position as the Soviet cultural bureaucracy. Whenever the free play of intellect—a freedom, I repeat, Maritain reminds us is not mere license, but a freedom of connaturality with reality—is subordinated to a political orthodoxy, the human prospect narrows. This should not come as any surprise to us, even if the political vision claims to be human and broad. Politics by nature is only a part of human life, but precisely the part we are most tempted to substitute for the higher things, which occupy only a tenuous hold on the modern world.

I have already mentioned my worries about the sectarianism I have encountered both among teachers and students of *the* great books, but that problem pales in comparison with the recent threat to the freedom of intellect reflected in the politicization of the teaching process. The advocates of this politicization argue that the choice of what to study has been politically determined already: we just are not yet conscious of it. This is a minor charge, one that should be kept in mind to make us wary of unintentional blindness, but it entirely misses the main point of education. Education is not simply an indoctrination in correct political views. The radicals themselves are always decrying that. But, in fact, the free play of intellect, that unpredictable arrival of poetic intuition in a really well-wrought work, is constantly now being submitted to political tests.

IV. The Hospitable Canon

I am in favor of keeping our vision of truly great books open to the arrival of new masterpieces. But the current plea for opening up the list shows how feeble the alternatives are on the one hand, and how strong the West is on the other. Writing a blank intellectual check to non-Western cultures without specification of what work is worth studying, strikes me as condescension of the worst sort. We do not insist that students simply study some work from Britain, or Germany, or France, as a sop to those who think these nations important. We read Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Goethe, and would want to read them in whatever tongues they had written.

The current weakness of many Western intellectuals in the defense of the West has two causes, one legitimate and one not. The legitimate reason for wanting to look beyond Western culture is that what goes by the name is not even a full representative of the West—only a modern ghost of the riches actually within Western traditions. Hutchins and Adler mentioned

this in the introduction to their series of great books.[8] The desire to break the stranglehold on what passes for *the* Western tradition is not only just, it is devoutly to be wished.

Another stream plays into this one, however. There are many who want to go outside Western traditions because they think them deeply racist, sexist, imperialist, and so forth. The irony that these terms have been developed in the West, because we are concerned to answer the legitimate question that they raise, is unknown to the cultural radicals. Around the time that the controversy was raging at Stanford, for example, an Indian scientist wrote in to a Washington magazine to say, "Nearly all the knowledge of the past glories of these non-Western cultures—in which their intelligentsia take such great pride—is the result of Western scholarship. These cultures, for all their greatness, have little history and and no archeology. So they owe a great debt to Western culture."[9] This debt is so great, in fact, that it induces great resentment—something that we should understand, but reject sympathetically.

One of my colleagues gave a speech recently in which he mentioned that he and his daughter have put their desks next to one another at home under a bust of Aristotle so that they can study together. A woman in the audience rose after his presentation to express her puzzlement that he would have anything to do with Aristotle since he regarded women as by nature inferior and also believed in slaves. My friend replied, as is quite true, that the remedies for these blind spots may be extracted from Aristotle himself, and that it would be a shame if so much intellectual treasure were discarded because of some errors.

I myself spoke in Washington last year, to a group of students from Notre Dame University, and one woman confidently informed me after my presentation that the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, the Romans, the Fathers of the Church, Aquinas, and many other major Western figures right up to the present were hopelessly "sexist." "I've already looked into them," she said with finality. Look into them for a few more years, I said, and then let me know who else is more worth reading. I'm not waiting for a reply.

I think the great books or Western civilization programs leave themselves open to these ignorant attacks if they try to present themselves as what they are not: as some sort of ideal intellectual order. If, instead, some of the

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[8]Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. I, *The Great Conversation* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Brittanica, 1952), chap. 9, "East and West," particularly 70–71.

[9]*Insight*, April 11, 1988, 4.

figures just mentioned are presented as moments of great human intuition involved in the ongoing human task of better understanding and enriching human life—that enjoying Shakespeare does not mean you cannot enjoy some non-Western dramatist of equal power and depth—mere honesty will lead most students to see the obvious.

V. The Complexity of Translation

On this point of non-Western figures, I'd like to make a clarification. I've spent a good deal of my formal education learning Greek, Latin, and several modern languages. I'm familiar with philosophical, historical, and literary works in original texts. My experience leads me to believe that to read great books in English translations and to think you are getting most of what you need from them is a chimera. To take a crucial example, the Greek term *eudaimonia* is not exactly the same as *felicitas*, and neither is what we call loosely *happiness*. I still dip occasionally into classical scholarship and I'm repeatedly surprised at how little most of us see when we read the text of Homer or Virgil. The worlds they represent need varied exposition and hard study at the original languages: no easy task. Otherwise, we are simply using our great forebears as mirrors for our ignorant selves. And these works are supposedly in our Western tradition.

I can believe, on the basis of my own reading, that highly important works exist in other cultures. I think of Confucius or the Bhagavad-Gita. But the quick insistence on non-Western works, without specification of what we are talking about, is likely to be far less intellectually respectable than even a superficial reading of a great Western book in translation. Are the advocates of these additions interested in them because they are great human achievements, or just because they are non-Western? As William James might have put it in his much understood phrase, what is the cash-value of these non-Western works? Even if this question can be answered, how are students really to understand these works without large chunks of time being devoted to linguistic, historical, and cultural matters? We already have plently of difficulty teaching works drawing on concepts within our own general culture.

We should be wary of a second problem of translation also. It is the very core of modern cosmopolitanism to believe that all works are transparent to the modern eye. There is great reason to doubt this. Many works, I would place the Bible among them, require strenuous and long habituation before we even begin to understand them adequately. In his recent book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Alisdair MacIntyre puts the case forcefully:

> The type of translation characteristic of modernity generates in turn its own misunderstanding of tradition. The original locus of that misunderstand-

> ing is the kind of introductory great books or Humanities course, so often taught in liberal arts colleges, in which, in abstraction from historical context and with all sense of the complexities of linguistic particularity removed by translation, a student moves in rapid succession through Homer, Sophocles, two dialogues of Plato, Virgil, Augustine, the *Inferno*, Machiavelli, *Hamlet*. . . . If one fails to recognize that what this provides is not and cannot be a re-introduction to the culture of past traditions but is a tour through what is in effect a museum of texts, each rendered contextless and therefore other than its original by being placed on a cultural pedestal, then it is natural enough to suppose that, were we to achieve consensus as to a set of such texts, the reading of them would reintegrate modern students into what is thought of as *our* tradition, that unfortunate fictitious amalgam sometimes know as "the Judeo-Christian tradition" and sometimes as "Western values." The writings of self-proclaimed contemporary conservatives ... turn out to be one more stage in modernity's cultural deformation of our relationship to the past.[10]

Whether he is right or not about the original locus of the problem—that part of his argument is historically doubtful—MacIntyre develops a very interesting idea of tradition in his latest book which may help us in our reflections here. Modern cosmopolitan culture thinks of itself as a neutral observer of all particular traditions, says MacIntyre. In fact, however, it has turned into one more tradition, and a tradition with so many internal problems and self-contradictions that we are justified in looking upon it with a cold eye. There are competing main traditions, at least in the West: those deriving from Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Hume. We might want to add to MacIntyre's list Kant as well. MacIntyre ultimately favors the blend of Aristotle and Augustine carried out by Aquinas, but his view of this blend is different from the usual Thomism.

As he views Saint Thomas, Thomist thinking is an open-ended advancing tradition that establishes itself on a broad ground of reality and seeks to incorporate new material and the solutions of new problems into the tradition. The good Thomist will not only internalize Thomas' views, he will move them forward in ways that Aquinas could not have foreseen, but would have approved. The very idea of a "tradition"—a handing down of wisdom and knowledge requires this dynamic. A culture *is* the incarnation of such a tradition. Culture provides us with a starting point for thinking without which progress is not possible both for lack of a place to stand and for the infinite complexities that would overwhelm any inquiry

[10]Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 385–86.

we think we can undertake *de novo*. As G.K. Chesterton put this, "culture is the mental thrift of our forefathers."

VI. Taking Our Bearings

Recognizing that we can only make intellectual progress as part of some tradition is anathema to the modern *paideia*, though it is practiced by all those who belong to the modernist tradition. The principle value of great books, as I see it, is that they help us to locate ourselves among the traditions. I don't think I'm alone in having had the experience of reading some great text that suddenly explains where basic beliefs I have long held took their origin. Granted, most undergraduates will leave such a program with little idea of what it all means. Some will think they understand everything on this brief acquaintance. But those who learn what large task really lies ahead will be worth the failures of the program.

This leads me to another serious modern problem: how do we deal with the mass of secondary materials that have now proliferated around every subject? Each person knows and can know only a small part of even his own field. What does this mean for the organic nature of culture?

I think the work of the chemist turned philosopher Michael Polanyi is very useful here.[11] Polanyi did fine work, not only on epistemology, but on the idea of tradition, the scientific tradition in his case. When a discipline is in good condition, as science is in our time, the vast network of individual researchers and writers organizes itself into a self-criticizing mechanism that resolves small-scale problems. As regards the grand scale, Polanyi's vision is similar to Maritain's in that he sees the big advances in science as not merely the result of logical increments, but also as the effect of scientific intuitions that take a great step beyond the available evidence without being mere fantasy. Einstein, Heisenberg, and other great figures of twentieth century science all had intuitions of theoretical truths long before data could be obtained to confirm or falsify these truths.

The difference between natural science and what we may broadly call culture, however, is that modern culture is not in good condition. Its subject matter differs from natural science in a way that calls for a different method of procedure. Failure to recognize this has led to theories like deconstruction, which assert that because a text is unknowable in its totality it is unknowable period. In some ways, I would argue, this is merely a reflection of the situation in which many professors find themselves:

[11]See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

they are constantly inundated with a flood of contradictory readings of texts and events. It's no wonder that their characteristic *deformation professionelle* is to regard them as all plausible without possibility of rational choice among them.

Such a predicament underscores the need for a developing tradition of reason that will preserve us from the perturbations of mere logic. I disagree profoundly with those great books advocates who would seek to save the situation by throwing out secondary materials entirely—a recommendation unfortunately embedded in the original great books program. I do not know how I personally would have benefitted from not reading secondary materials, and I assume others would be equally crippled by this limitation. One of the tasks of modern teaching is to show students what is and is not important among the secondary material. If I can revert to my ecclesiastical metaphor, we need to have an idea of who are the good expositors and theologians of the developing secular canon if we do not wish to be cultural fundamentalists.

The best reason for seeking to avoid this fate is that, as in religion, there *is* no valid reason for such a narrow conception of human culture. We may forgive its advocates, who are reacting to what they quite rightly see as cultural chaos. But, as in religion, the answer to chaos is not fundamentalism. The answer to chaos and fundamentalism alike is today, as it has always been, catholicity, in the sense of universality, supported by legitimate authority. In this, the great books will be helpful to us, but not if we sin against the light.

VII. The Question of Authority

And, as in ecclesiastical matters, we must at some point confront the question of authority. I am not a deep student of Yves R. Simon, but I have found *A General Theory of Authority* very helpful. The experts on Simon may recall that he says in that work that "when the issue is one of action, not of truth, the person in authority has the character of a leader; but when the issue is one of truth, not of action, the person in authority has the character of a witness" (*GT* 84). This is very good and distinguishes between two functions, both of which the university educator must possess because he is involved both in the action of teaching and learning, as well as in the pursuit of truth.

These functions have been ill served by a false conception of teachers and students as merely and equally pursuing truth. As Simon says elsewhere commenting on the relationship of liberty and authority, both are necessary and only prudence can correctly determine the degree to which each is needed in given circumstances (*NF* 5). Unfortunately, many of those called to authority in modern higher education have abdicated,

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And, as in ecclesiastical matters, we must at some point confront the question of authority. I am not a deep student of Yves R. Simon, but I have found *A General Theory of Authority* very helpful. The experts on Simon may recall that he says in that work that "when the issue is one of action, not of truth, the person in authority has the character of a leader; but when the issue is one of truth, not of action, the person in authority has the character of a witness" (*GT* 84). This is very good and distinguishes between two functions, both of which the university educator must possess because he is involved both in the action of teaching and learning, as well as in the pursuit of truth.

These functions have been ill served by a false conception of teachers and students as merely and equally pursuing truth. As Simon says elsewhere commenting on the relationship of liberty and authority, both are necessary and only prudence can correctly determine the degree to which each is needed in given circumstances (*NF* 5). Unfortunately, many of those called to authority in modern higher education have abdicated,

refusing either to lead or to witness. An administrator at my *alma mater,* admittedly an extreme case, explained a couple of years ago why there are no requirements at the university: "We admit highly intelligent and very motivated students to this institution. The least we can do for them when they arrive here is to get out of their way." As a parent of young children who struggles to make ends meet, I think I speak for many when I say, "If this is true, why bother to send children to such institutions at all?" Although this is an extreme form of an attitude present in higher education today, it is a pure sample that shows better than anything else the root of the problem.

My administrator, and thousands like him not carried by their own emotion to make explicit the principle, thinks universities and their faculities have no responsibility to lead, in Simon's sense. They do not see learning as an action that may be performed better or worse, in which an experienced leader might have anything to say to new arrivals. Such educators make themselves into mere technical facilitators, or less, not leaders in a great tradition.

One of the odd things about teaching that allows such a confusion to occur is that it lies on the borderline between action and truth. The action of teaching truth calls for educational leadership. We have always tacitly acknowledged as much by creating institutions that require certain types and levels of performances, by empowering teachers to evaluate student achievement. The authority of truth, Simon's witnessing, is the essential element in education, but only after students have been *led* to the essential *foci* of significant action—the perennial human questions reflected in the wisdom of the race.

Some people are quick to blame the cowardice of current education for the failure to lead and to witness. I think educators have simply been hoodwinked, like much of the rest of the society, into believing that authority is in and of itself evil, that we are all pretty much on a plane of equality, and any privileging of some persons or some ideas over others sets us inexorably on the road to totalitarianism. On this view, authority must be authoritarian.

This is almost the precise opposite of the truth. The petrification of intellectual life for political reason, a danger more likely to come from broad anti-Western forces today than from the tradition itself, is a tyranny already in place in some institutions and threatening others. At Stanford, a coalition of black, Hispanic, and Asian students were reported to have called the Western Culture course a "year-long class in racism." The irony here, of course, is that it is only in Western or Western-style terms that African tribalism, Asian caste systems, and Western slavery may even be rejected under the label "racism." But even worse is the uninformed and

presumptuous reduction of the immense fruit of Western history, matching the achievements of any known human culture, to a paltry political category.

Only a properly constituted authority may begin to address this youthful presumption and ignorance. Great books programs try to correct prejudice of this sort by teaching what it means to be a "truly educated person." I have no objection to this goal, but the somewhat priggish tone of the phrase may put off the very people who need teaching most. Instead, I would approach the problem by quoting the authority of a non-Westerner, Confucius, on his own path to wisdom. He said:

> 1. At fifteen, I wanted to learn.
> 2. At thirty, I had a foundation.
> 3. At forty, a certitude.
> 4. At fifty, knew the orders of heaven.
> 5. At sixty, was ready to listen to them.
> 6. At seventy could follow my own heart's desire without overstepping the t-square.[12]

The Chinaman's geniality and self-deprecating humor not only give us a better idea of the lifetime task of learning, they also remind us that the ultimate end of education is not merely to have the right political views nor to become a "truly educated person," but to know and *listen to* the orders of heaven.

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[12]Ezra Pound, *Confucius: The Unwobbling Pivot, The Great Digest, the Analects* (New York: New Directions, 1928), 198.