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CICERO AND AMERICAN EDUCATION

In a gesture Cicero would understand, I begin by saluting the courage of the *Colloquium Tullianum Anni MCMXCI*. It is a brave Society indeed that departs the *terra firma* of mother Europe to examine what has become of the language and ideas of her favorite son in the vast and still developing lands of the New World. Cicero in America? The very title of our meeting is enough to make millions of American shoulders shrug, and a hundred cartoonists take up their pens.

Ask the people of New York about Cicero in America, and they will point you to a small agricultural village upstate, nine miles north of Syracuse. Syracuse, you say? O u r Syracuse? Ah yes, but that is the subject of another conference. Cicero, New York, hovers in the shadows of powerful Syracuse, a modest hamlet where cheese is made, and potatoes, cabbage, and corn are grown, named in fact after our very own Marcus Tullius. And ask the citizens of Chicago about Cicero in America, and they will tell you it is just down the road, a center of manufacturing in Cook County, maker of telephones and home appliances, of paper and clay, and rubber and wood products, home over the years to thousands of Italian-Americans, one of whom, a native of Cicero, New York, brought the name with him when he moved to the midwest.

I stress this fate of Cicero in the civic fabric of America, for it is crudely indicative of his reception in American education. Always there vaguely in name, and occasionally made explicitly the center of programs or reforms, Cicero was received in America with as much idiosyncrasy as any other element of European culture, high or low. Without very much effort, one could find in cities and hamlets throughout this land the educational equivalents of steel and cabbage, each claiming as much allegiance to the *equus* of Arpinum as the most structured curriculum in the classical *liceo*. A computer program recently developed to tutor students is known by the acronym CICERO, a worthy rival to an older one called PLATO. That is the American way.

Nearly from the moment of his death, Cicero was a figure larger than life. *Non hominis nomen, sed eloquentiae*, wrote Quintilian of his spiritual mentor, and from that time forward Cicero's name has stood for an entire pedagogical program, based in oratory, built on the linkage of

thought and expression, and directed to the formation of good and effective citizens. The program received both form and favor during the Quattrocento of Guarino of Verona and Vittorino of Feltre and came to America with the settlers, further refined by the public schools of Britain and, to a lesser degree, by the baroque schools of the Jesuits.

Once in America, Cicero (understood still as a classical pedagogical program) did not have an easy time of it. As the great, recently deceased historian of American education, Lawrence Cremin, has presented it, Americans from the start saw their obligations to youth as the systematic nurturing of piety, civility, and learning — more or less in that order. Latin and Greek were indeed requirements for admission to the colonial colleges, but they were pursued less for their own sake than as tools for the preparation of ministers and lawyers, the professions of overwhelming choice (1).

And from the start, there was in America the pull of the novel, the analytic, the experimental. In the face of this pull, writes Cremin:

Schoolmasters who had never for a moment questioned the inherent value of Latin and Greek grammar, found themselves teaching youngsters whose most ardent academic ambition was to master commercial arithmetic. And college tutors who had all their lives hearkened to the eternal truths of the ancient poets saw their best students responding to the seemingly ephemeral musings of the Bacons, the Newtons, and the Lockes. For those concerned with the formation of youth, the dilemmas of continuity and novelty were endless and insistent; and, as parents, pastors, and teachers wrestled with these dilemmas and ventured solutions, diversity flourished (2).

Just such diversity is what Tocqueville noticed when he toured our land in the 1830s: "I know of no other people", he wrote, "who have founded so many schools or such efficient ones, or churches more in touch with the religious needs of the inhabitants, or municipal roads better maintained" (3). Here, as elsewhere, Tocqueville has it right: to link school construction and road maintenance in one sentence suits the American temperament.

Still and all, by the early nineteenth century something like a master curriculum had established itself in higher education, at least in the Ivy colleges on the East Coast. In a report of 1829, the Yale faculty held that the classics of Greece and Rome and pure mathematics were *facile princeps*, equally valuable for their content and for the discipline they brought

(1) Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607-1783*, New York, Evanston, and London, 1970.

(2) *Ibid.*, 480.

(3) *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence, Garden City, New York 1969, 92.

the mind, regardless of the specialty eventually pursued (4). College presidents of this day could still speak with contempt, as Woolsey did at Yale and Barnard did at Columbia, of the doubtful contributions that modern languages and the natural sciences would make to one's mental discipline. Such courses of study were best relegated to affiliated "scientific" schools.

All this changed during the tumultuous period between the beginning of the Civil War in 1860 and the end of the Great War in 1918. As a simple rural society transformed itself into a complex industrial nation, the demand for the sciences, pure and applied, and for history and modern language studies had to be credited. Aiding the reform, if not threatening the hegemony of the traditional schools in the East, was the remarkable growth of land-grant colleges, the technical and agricultural institutions established throughout the land by the Merrill Act of 1862. Knowledge exploded and departments of instruction grew during this period from a manageable few to upwards of thirty in some colleges. In the face of such plenty, choice was needed, and it came in the form of the "elective system", pioneered at Harvard by President Charles Eliot, to replace a strictly mandated curriculum of subjects assumed to have intrinsic value. Yet more radical was an innovation at Columbia at century's end: under a system called the "professional option" a student could pass into one of the University's professional schools after a mere two years in the liberal arts.

By 1917 the place of the classics in American education was well under assault, so much so that a conference on the subject was convened at Princeton University. The results — part testimonials, part statistics — were gathered into a volume with a defensive title and a yet more defensive epigraph. The title proclaimed, somewhat gamely: *Value of the Classics*, and under it was run these words of Cicero: "For what is the life of man if memory of the past be not inwoven in the life of later times" (*Orator*, 120) (5).

As conferences go, it was quite some spectacle. The presidents of Princeton and Columbia led off the formal addresses, followed by the Dean of Harvard Law School (no less a person than Roscoe Pound), the editor of the *New York Times*, a Senator from Massachusetts (Henry Cabot Lodge), the heads of professional and industrial associations, and sundry professors of history, politics, medicine, law, and engineering, all quoting with wit and intelligence from Greek and Latin classics, and attesting to their value in

(4) See Willis Rudy, *The Evolving Liberal Arts Curriculum: A Historical Review of Basic Themes*, New York 1960, 1-5.

(5) *Value of the Classics*, Princeton, N.J., 1917.

disciplining the mind and conveying the values of western civilization. To the formal addresses were added personal testimonies, sent to the conference by over one hundred figures in public, professional, and academic life, beginning with Woodrow Wilson, the current U.S. president, and his three immediate predecessors. All of the witnesses worked the conventional themes about the utility of the classics, particularly Latin, but some took advantage of the historical moment — the war then raging in Europe — to argue that education must train the higher powers of the soul, not skill and courage alone, and seek to inculcate the wisdom “which springs from undying faith in truth and freedom”. Concluding the volume were a raft of statistics purporting to show that reports of the death of Latin in secondary schools were much exaggerated, and that those sitting for college entrance exams in the classics succeeded as well as, if not better than, those being tested in the modern or technical disciplines.

If the conferees at Princeton seemed vaguely desperate, it is because they were resisting not only the flood waters of changing student demands, but also the rising tide of powerful educational reform. Notably absent from the meeting was Harvard’s Charles Eliot, by now president emeritus, who published “The Case Against Compulsory Latin” in the influential *Atlantic Monthly* just a month before the seminar was held. Also absent was Abraham Flexner, a forthright exponent of modernism whose work in defining the elements of a valid profession, and the type of curriculum needed to sustain it, is influential even in our own day. It was Flexner’s essay, “A Modern School”, published in 1916, that quite possibly led to the Princeton assembly (6). A man educated in the modern sense, Flexner argued, will have mastered the fundamental tools of knowledge — reading, writing, arithmetic — but beyond that he will forego “the somewhat doubtful mental discipline received from formal studies” in favor of that obtained from “studies that serve real purposes”. He will be trained “to know, to care about, and to understand the world he lives in — both the physical and the social world”. “The extent to which the history and literature of the past are utilized depends, not on what we call the historic value of this or that performance or classic, but on its actual pertinency to genuine need, interest, or capacity”.

Flexner concludes from this that objects and phenomena, rather than books and bookish things, will play a large part in the Modern School. “The Modern School must deliberately face the problem of amplifying and enriching the child’s sense experience to the end that he may not be

(6) The essay can be found in DeCalvus W. Simonson and Edwin R. Coulson, eds., *Thought and Form in the Essay*, New York and London, 1933, 337-56.

restricted to the secondhand impressions derived from the printed page". Apart from instrumental studies — reading, writing, spelling, and figuring — the curriculum of the Modern School would be built out of actual activities in four main fields: science, industry, aesthetics, and civics. Languages found their way into the curriculum under aesthetics, but purely as instruments of communication. Latin and Greek were to be dropped because, unlike French and German, the arguments for their inclusion rested upon tradition and assumptions, not on need.

Flexner's curriculum was never implemented as such, but as a description of the general development of American education in this century it is valid. Science has been brought into the center of the curriculum, given equal status with literary studies, and in all but the most traditional colleges a host of technical and even professional studies are now seen as ordinary pursuits of undergraduates. (Flexner himself, incidentally, in 1930 became the first director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton). The creative arts are a major fixture on every campus, and yet more significant is the phenomenal growth of sociology and psychology, political science and economics, and a host of hybrid social studies. A survey of contemporary American students would doubtless reveal psychology, not history or philosophy, as the subject most likely to yield self-understanding. Literary studies have not been abandoned, but they are typically seen as filling out a curriculum, not undergirding it. The classics still occupy a quiet quadrangle on most campuses, but no less an institution than Lehigh University has recently eliminated them as a cost-cutting measure.

While many of these developments were clearly, if not crassly, opportunistic, behind them lay a serious theoretical imperative, commonly associated with the thought of John Dewey. To Dewey, the ancient distinction between the "liberal" and the "servile" arts, between the studies of the free man and the crafts of the artisan, had been destroyed by the combined impact of the industrial and scientific revolutions. This called for a new attitude toward liberal studies: no longer were they to be thought of as self-justifying, as conveying ideas of intrinsic or permanent value; they were henceforth to be seen as enterprises to liberate the human spirit, directed toward helping the student understand and solve problems of contemporary, democratic society. As Dewey expressed it: "The outstanding need is interfusion of knowledge of man and nature, of vocational preparation with a deep sense of the social foundations and social consequences of industry and industrial callings in contemporary society" (7).

Dewey wrote these words toward the end of the Second World War,

(7) Cited in *The Evolving Liberal Arts Curriculum*, 132.

at a moment when the power of American technology and industry was being demonstrated and, more pertinently, when the social progressive ideas of early twentieth-century America were laying the foundation for a new world order. However valid Dewey's ideas were, and remain, as to the transformation of liberal studies, the implication they contained about the translation of theory into action, specifically the role of education in remaking human society, is surely a reflection of the exuberance and easy confidence of his day.

The America of 1991 is much changed from the day of Dewey. If we have learned anything in this country in recent years, it is the fragility of the American notion of progress. First through the bitter experience of losing a foreign war — a war, in fact, that had been mounted, in official rhetoric, as a contest of democratic freedoms against a variety of tyrannies (and, incidentally, a contest of modern technology against largely pre-modern modalities of production and social organization); and secondly, through a forced retreat from Lyndon Johnson's plan for a "Great Society", and a partial abandonment of the very ideals that led to so bold an experiment — through both of these setbacks, one internal, the other external, but both fundamental to the national psyche, the American sense of self has been altered. Gone is that blitheness of spirit that both inspired and amused the world, that fresh, devil-may-care attitude that greeted every new day as an utter novelty and saw every obstacle near and far as just another frontier.

With this newfound sense of limitations has come an equally profound sense of foreboding about the shape of things to come. For all the variety of programs mounted, and for all the billions of dollars expended, we have not as a society managed to repair the rendings that have been with us from the start. Inequities abound, and varieties of thought, habit, and purpose are increasing, not decreasing. A melting pot we may be, but, critics charge, the elements of the stew are decidedly European. The rest lie about on the table, untried and unregarded. Nor will the future bring any relief: in just several decades' time, fewer than half of Americans will trace their roots to Europe.

In attempting to come to terms with our contemporary predicament, literary scholars and humanists generally have not been entirely helpful. Some of us are impelled by no greater a motive than that of destroying the remaining vestiges of literary authority. Under the watchful eye of a modern Gallic Trinity — Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida — a Trinity born in France, but made in America, we have reduced all literature to text and denied integrity to authors and their meanings. At the same time, others of us have rushed in to fill the void, demanding that hitherto excluded voices — those of women, minorities, and supposedly lesser cultures — be

heard. Both of these tendencies in current humanistic scholarship have legitimacy, but each poses its own kind of risk. The risk of deconstructionism is to turn the fragmentariness of human discourse into an argument for its baselessness. The risk of new criticism is to challenge — legitimately — the priority of one culture by — illegitimately — putting another in its place.

It is time for a new beginning in the humanities. It is time for America in particular to resume, both more intensively and more extensively, the engagement with the past of its own humanity. The path to that past will continue to be, as always it was, the path of language and myth, of religion and law, of art and philosophy. In taking that path, I hope it is not obtuse to suggest that we will find in Cicero something of a model for our work. For the Cicero I know put language at the middle of his enterprise, examined and savored its structure and variety, saw its limitations, but exploited its capacity to both reveal truth and move men to action. The Cicero I know saw that society is essentially fragile, and that the truths it embraces are necessarily partial, and thus devised a method for legal disputation that endured for centuries, allowing Rome to preserve its own Civil Law while reforming it over time with the customs and laws of multiple invading or invaded nations. And the Cicero I know found wisdom on many shores, above all on those of distant Greece, merging truths wherever he found them into a system of thought that would cause us to criticize our humanity, and yet respect it.

If to some, then, Cicero is a figure of a narrow and constricted past, one of the “dead white males” whose language and thought are central to the currently maligned Eurocentric culture; to others — and I readily count myself among them — he is both symbol and actor in an era of profound social and cultural change, a man of clay feet and magnanimous spirit, alternately venal and generous, who on one day could brand his personal enemies as enemies of Rome, and on another challenge the cramped and petty visions of his compatriots by insisting that their future is compromised without the critical importation of foreign (in this case, Greek) wisdom.

Of the many statements of an educational ideal that Cicero left behind, none strikes me with greater force than this one in *De oratore* (3, 35):

I give full leave to anybody who wishes to apply the title of orator to a philosopher who imparts to us an abundant command of facts and of language, or alternatively I shall raise no obstacle if he prefers to designate as a philosopher the orator whom I on my side am now describing as possessing wisdom combined with eloquence, only provided it be

agreed that neither the tongue-tied silence of the man who knows the facts but cannot explain them in language, nor the ignorance of the person who is deficient in facts but has no lack of words, is deserving of praise. And if one had to choose between them, for my part I should prefer wisdom lacking power of expression to talkative folly; but if on the contrary we are trying to find the one thing that stands top of the whole list, the prize must go to the orator who possesses learning.

That was the ideal he set for himself. We could do no better than to follow him.