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ABSTRACT

A disturbing trend is developing in higher education which may jeopardize the quality and importance of the classical tradition in education. This trend is exemplified by demands that the liberal arts be made relevant and comprehensible to the student and that they be related in some way to the search for a good job. The great classical literature, such as "The Republic," "The Iliad," or "Medea," are relegated to the useless or the irrelevant, while examples of popular culture, such as "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Shane," and "M.A.S.H." are elevated to the position of "modern classics." Popularity and cleverness have become the criteria for judging value in art, literature, and music, replacing such qualities as universality and historical judgement. These new criteria would have consigned "Moby Dick" or the works of Gauguin to permanent obscurity, since they failed according to the criterion of popularity. The classics, however, have had a profound influence on the understanding of significant issues, moral concerns, and enduring questions that have confronted mankind during the ages. They have provided links between peoples, systems, and disciplines; and, despite the challenges of high-speed information processing, sythesized and summarized learning, and popular culture in general, the classics and liberal arts offer the only genuine, lifelong answers to the perennial questions of human existence. They must be elevated above any attempts to bend and shape them into superficial job-related worlds and needs. (HB)

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In Defense of Tradition

by

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For the past two thousand years, we have held a tradition of learning, labeled the Liberal Arts, to be essential to our moral and ethical progress. This tradition has managed to survive the rise and fall of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations to the decline of learning during the so-called Dark Ages, from the diverse social and political movements throughout the Middle Ages to the re-awakening of interest in the classical

worlds in the Renaissance, from the rapid expanding of learning in the Enlightenment to the modern era characterized by rationalism and skepticism, in relatively intact form.

Now, a disturbing trend is developing in higher education which may, if not reversed, jeopardize the quality and importance of that classical tradition in education. The underlying dangers posed by this threat to Western Culture are evident in such slogans as: Make the Liberal Arts relevant to today's student; Show our students what the Liberal Arts really mean; or the Liberal Arts can't help anyone get a good job.

The Liberal Arts have come up hard against the Twentieth Century, the Age of Relevance, the time when the facade of learning and culture hangs like a polyester cloak over all. Today's culture is often acquired from digests that summarize hundreds of journals and periodicals, capsulated news programs that reduce the events of a given twenty-four hours into twenty-four minutes, or television sit-coms that supposedly reflect the majority's wishes, hopes, and values. If one cannot glibly evaluate the

essence of a work of art in one sentence, list the authors and titles of the New York Times bestseller list for any Sunday, or name the Oscar nominees and winners of a given year, he is uneducated. Detailed examinations of plot summaries or characterizations are not sought; only the single incisive line will do. There is little inclination to become part of the complex social interactions requiring sustained personal effort--often hours--to learn more about a subject than that offered in a one-page magazine summary or a dust jacket blurb.

There is also a declining interest in seeking out those classic works that have formed the bases of our humanistic values and ethical standards. Such works as the Republic, Iliad, or Medea have been accepted by past generations as being essential to Western Culture; today, they are being relegated to the world of the useless or irrelevant. The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Shane, Superman, and Archie Bunker are the newest "classics." The supporters of the Popular Culture movement seem not to care that a modern classic is often little more than a

slightly updated version of a "classic" from a previous generation or that the "singularly most important contribution to fiction" is replaced, within a few years, by other modern classics. A treadmill from instant popularity to darkest obscurity is created to serve as the conduit for modern works of popular culture; only the names of the most recent riders of that treadmill are remembered, soon to be replaced by others and shunted to the darkness of the abyss of forgotten modern "classics." Faces change, but the language describing the various works of art remains the same; it is as though an office of Instant Classics exists to label and provide order to much of the mundaneness of modern culture.

At a recent conference on re-discovering the Classics, several participants were enlightened to learn that Elvis Presley, the Beatles, comic books--not the Classic Comics--and Jaws, both book and film, are classics and ought to be considered equal to the Iliad, Orestia, and Aenid. Two of the criteria given for defining such excellence were Popularity--defined as sales or viewer

numbers--and Uniqueness--synonymous with cleverness; qualities such as Historical Judgement or Universality were never considered. The instant classic exists when a work sells two million copies or is viewed by a majority of Nielsen families.

Had popularity standards been a major criterion for judging artistic quality, we would have been deprived of some of our greatest creations; plays, novels, poems, and other works of art which have become part of our traditions of excellence would have been buried in obscure libraries or depositories for only the scholar to experience. Such a work as Moby Dick would never have achieved the highest levels of universal acceptance it currently enjoys. Melville's masterpiece sold less than two-thousand copies during his lifetime; for most of his life, Melville was only remembered as the man who wrote adventure books--Typee and Omoo--about living with cannibals on a South Pacific island. That his work is a continued example of significant contributions to literature and ideas argues well against the populist viewpoint, to our advantage. Such a limited

perspective would also have deprived us of the works of Paul Gauguin who lived as an artistic outcast from the influential salons of Paris, the Principia Mathematica of Newton deliberately written in a less-than-popular language, or the Trojan Women, which describes a world that could never have existed in the Greece of the time of the play.

The pragmatists have attempted to bend, shape, and twist the classics to their own ends; yet, the power of the classics is such that their strengths arise above the often superficial interpretations and, by comparison, reveal the ineptness of the modern adaptations to show relevance. A recent film adaptation of Medea, for example, which attempted to make the heroine into a modern twentieth century activist, failed in its "contemporary" theme; the power of the original was too strong and the modern Medea assumed the classical qualities of her past counterpart of mythology and drama.

The Classics have formed the basis of Western Civilization, have laid the foundation for its ethical and moral value

systems, and have helped create means for dealing with the confusions and contradictions of our age. To suddenly take such a powerful and long-accepted tradition and claim that its elements can only be understood and appreciated if they are related to some career or job or, by some adept intellectual manipulation, to a specific event, is myopic; such an approach compares to the view that the Classics and the Liberal Arts must be taken out of the Tower and adapted to fit the often superficial Plane of the Marketplace.

One ought to be able to study the Classics and the Liberal Arts for the sake of broadening his personal and ethical horizons and for enjoying the traditions and greatness of the past. To insist that such works as Thucydides' History of the Peleponnesian War must be read merely to gain insight into political institutions and warfare is ludicrous. Thucydides can be read because his work is exciting, fascinating, stirring, revealing, and literate and not because it is a treatise which must be revised or molded to conform to a pragmatic application.

Such is also argued for Achilles, Odysseus, and Electra; they exist of and for themselves and ought not to be forced into becoming role models for psychologists seeking to better understand the modern world. That such classical figures often serve as reference points or architypes for several disciplines argues well, though, for the universality and timelessness of the Classics. Will the characters and plots of M.A.S.H. have such universal appeal three-hundred years from now--let alone during the next decade--despite several sets from the series being enshrined in the Smithsonian Museum?

While the Classics represent only part of the Liberal Arts, they have a profound influence on understanding those significant issues, moral concerns, and enduring questions that have confronted mankind during the ages. Relationships among and between peoples, universal truths and ethical systems for governing societies, and hopes and dreams of humanity are posed and explored in the Liberal Arts. The interrelated disciplines of History, Humanities, Science, Art,

Philosophy, and Literature offer insights and alternative perspectives on the days of Agamemnon and Oedipus, Macbeth and Lear, Ahab and Kurtz.. Such an unbroken legacy is a phenomenon quite remarkable, considering the grandiose rhetoric surrounding the many cultural fads and artistic figures of today being praised as "classic" figures in their fields. Yet, the Classical tradition endures, firmly established and ready to challenge the fads and attempts at relevance of today.

That the Liberal Arts and the Classical Traditions are being challenged by the various technologies of high-speed information processing, synthesized and summarized learning, and superficial lifestyles is evident in the rise of Popular Culture; yet, the Liberal Arts and the Classics offer the only genuine, lifelong answers to the lasting questions that disturb us and that can, through their answers, provide meaning in a technological existence that is frightening in its demands for conformity and catastrophic in its power to dehumanize. If only to make sane the

insanities of modern life, the Liberal Arts and the Classics must continue.

They must be elevated above any attempts to bend and shape them into superficial job-related worlds and needs. They must be permitted to be studied for the inherent values they contain; if not, they will be lost and we will begin our agonizing cultural death.

END