

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 14

Article 7

10-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

Rule, S.J., Philip C. (1998) "The Liberal, Liberating Art of Reading," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 14, Article 7.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol14/iss1/7>

The Liberal, Liberating Art of Reading

PHILIP C. RULE, S.J.

In its long journey from the ancient world to the present, “liberal education” has evolved much. It originally described an education suitable for free men. Slaves received a “servile” education, women little or none. In the middle ages it described two systematic branches of study, the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music). From the Renaissance to today, wherever it survives, liberal education implies general as opposed to specialized or vocational studies. It is in this modern sense that John Henry Newman spoke of “liberal” as opposed to “useful” education in arguing the central point of his *Idea of a University*: knowledge is its own end, i.e. training the mind needs no further justification than the resultant quality of mind.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the ancient idea of an education suitable for free men became the focus of revolutionary demands as slaves and women began to want what free men took for granted. They wanted literacy because it was the beginning of freedom, the beginning of being accepted as a human being, a free fellow individual. In this sense reading is “liberating.” In 1789, three years before Mary Wollstonecraft made her appeal for female education in *A Vindication*

of the Rights of Woman—based on the simple claim that as human beings women were possessed of reason—the former African slave Olaudah Equiano describes what I have found the most touching plea for literacy ever written. “I had often,” he writes, “seen my master and [his friend] Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning. For that purpose I have often taken up a book, and talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent” (43-44). I have often sat in my office and tried to imagine a student in my nineteenth-century novel course pressing a novel to her ear hoping the book would talk to her, to yield up its mysterious meaning!

I say this seriously, for it is my growing conviction after thirty years of teaching that reading holds a primacy in liberal education, in any education that proposes to humanize a person. For while liberal education

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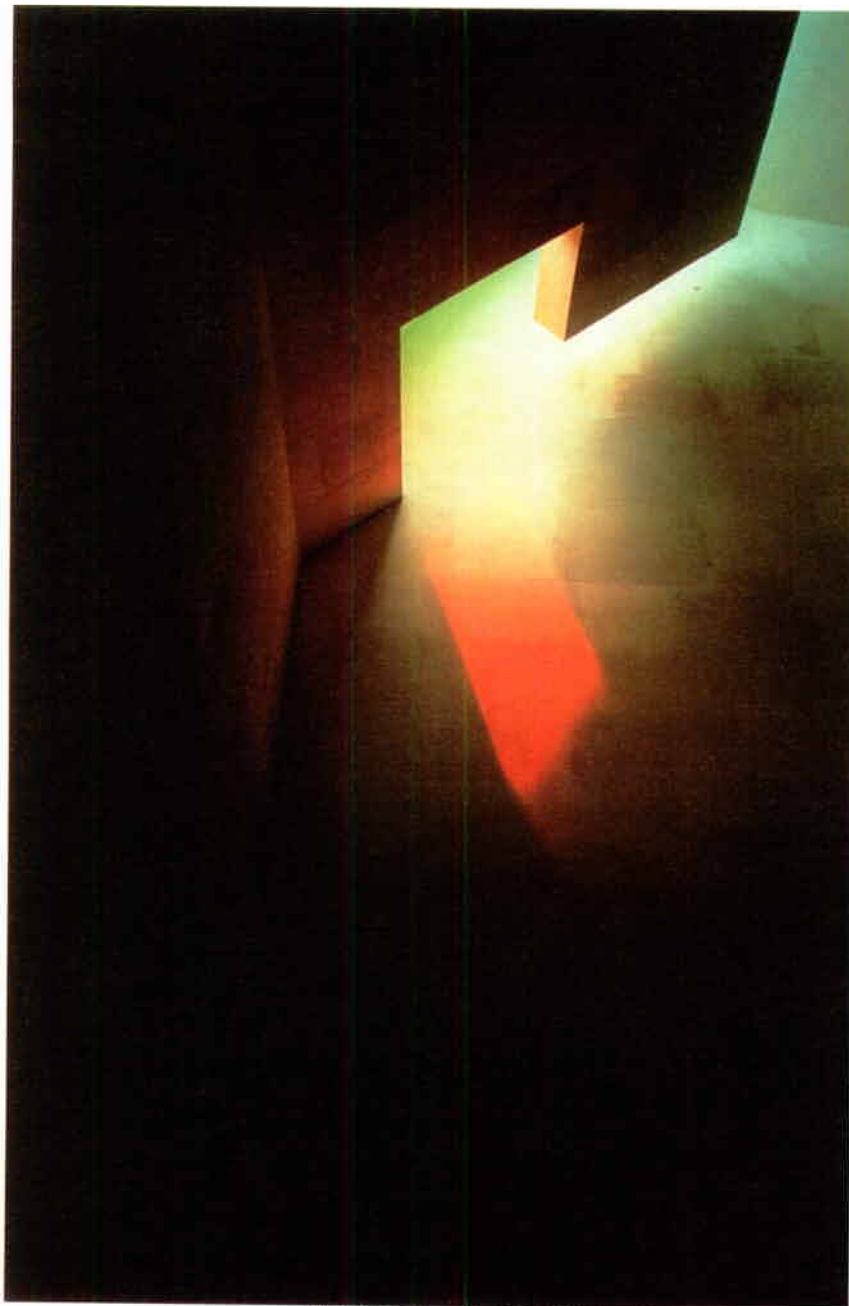


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has evolved from studies that centered almost exclusively on “letters” (literature) to programs that include state-of-the art biochemistry and neurophysiology at the undergraduate level, what the slaves and women began to demand is still that which makes us “more human.” While the etymology of “*litterae humaniores*” (using the adjective in its comparative form) is somewhat uncertain, some scholars suggest that literary studies were simply considered more humanizing than other branches of learning. I would suggest that today, as much as new disciplines now rightly constitute part of what it means to be liberally educated, the study of literature still plays a unique role.

In asserting this primacy I am not: (1) a neo-luddite attacking technology, for writing itself is a remarkable product of human technology; Walter Ong asserts that “more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (78); (2) a neo-Arnoldian giving literature some vague sacral role as a surrogate for religion or philosophy; (3) a reactionary claiming any particular canon of authors, although I do have in mind largely “works of the imagination.” I contend that reading for its own sake, liberal reading, reading for pleasure, call it what you will, engages a person in a way that nothing else in the “educative process” does.

Reading deepens one’s sense of interiority, inwardness, self-reflexivity. In discovering the meaning and artistry of the work, one discovers one’s selfhood. Ong says writing “makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set” (105).

In trying to explain how one can develop a reflexivity that makes one aware of one’s spiritual nature, what I would call one’s moral self-consciousness, Samuel Taylor Coleridge compares the reading of two kinds of texts, scientific and literary. He invites his fellow readers to recall “the state of our consciousness, while we were following Euclid through the 37th proposition and then our state while we were perusing the pages of Tacitus or contemplating the creation of Milton.” He points out that in the “purely scientific exertion of the mind there is no excitement of the sense of our own individuality” (III, 168). And it is this sense of individuality that is our most defining human characteristic. In the writings of John Henry Newman, from his early sermons to his capstone work, the *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, there appears in one form or another his

seminal insight: “Everyone who reasons, is his own center; and no expedient for attaining a common measure of minds can reverse this truth” (217). Whether it was a question of how to explain the development of doctrine or how to educate young Catholic men in Dublin, Newman understood that “Knowledge, viewed as knowledge, exerts a subtle influence in throwing us back on ourselves, and making us our own center, and our minds the measure of all things” (*Idea* 214-15).

I am convinced, through my own experience and critical reflection, that young people can develop their individuality most fully through reading. And what is there that most distinguishes human beings from other living beings but our conviction that in spite of attempts to categorize us, we are each unique? We become “more human” by deepening our individuality.

If I have heard a common complaint from colleagues over the years it is that students come to us well trained but passive and lacking in a healthy sense of individuality. From early IQ tests through the SATs and GREs we have ignored Newman’s sage advice and given in to the “expedient for attaining a common measure of minds.” As a result we have unwittingly tried to level or normalize individual minds. A further observation, made by colleagues across the disciplines, is that students are less and less skilled at and comfortable with reading. It is easy to point out culprits: television, computer games, short-cut reading (Cliffs Notes), deemphasis on grammar and critical skills at the primary and secondary level of education. A lot of students confess they find the act of reading difficult. Even most of my superior students don’t seem to read much on their own. This is regrettable.

For what will shake them from the very passivity we lament? Franz Kafka passionately believed that good reading challenges our passivity. “If the book we are reading,” he asks, “does not wake us as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it, so that it shall make us happy?”

Good God, we should also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen within us. (28-29)

Thus Lionel Trilling could say that “for our times the most effective agent in the moral imagination has been the novel of the past two hundred years” because “its

greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it" (214-15). If we want students to be truly "liberally" educated, we can never lose sight of the primacy of reading in liberating their individuality.

I recently had the privilege of co-directing an enterprising student's interdisciplinary major in ethics. She handed me her capstone report just as I began this essay. It offers striking confirmation of the point I have been trying to make here. In describing her internship with the Ethics Committee of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, she focuses on the current concern in medical education about "cure" taking precedence over "care," i.e., the treating of patients as generalized objects rather than individualized subjects (Murgia *passim*). Research suggests that many young doctors find it difficult to be empathetic with patients "while maintaining a sufficient sense of self to permit cognitive structuring of the experience" (More 3). To remedy this, medical educators have begun to incorporate the study of literature in medical programs, recognizing the ability of literature to allow simultaneous emotional engagement and detachment.

Thus young doctors can develop through the reading of literature a sense of self, of their own individuality, strong enough to enable them both to diagnose an illness and to be empathetic with and therefore vulnerable to the fellow individual who is ill. Had these young physicians been exposed to this kind of reading in their undergraduate education, they might have moved a long way toward being "more human" before beginning professional studies. The same, of course, applies to future lawyers, business people, and scientists. One will be more prone to treat others as inviolable individuals if one has a strong sense of one's own inviolable individuality. There may yet be some truth to the Renaissance educational dictum, "*bonae litterae, boni mores*" (good literature is the companion and begetter of good morals), if only in the sense that an increased sense of one's own self is propaedeutic to a sense of respect for oneself and others. So strong has this belief become that I radically changed my teaching methods some ten years ago. I no longer "lecture on literature." Each day I "walk" my students through as much of a text as I think they can prepare for class. For example, I divide Jane Austen's *Emma* into three assignments. The week before, I pass out a list of some ten or fifteen

detailed study questions for each section. For example, "Why are cheerfulness and openness valued in this society?" "How are individual characters bringing out Emma's character?" "How are theme and the formal elements of fiction interacting?" Then each class begins with a five-minute factual quiz designed to weed out Cliffs Notes readers, lazy readers, and non-readers. Discussion turns quickly to substantial issues. And recently technology has ironically come to the aid of reflexivity. For I now communicate regularly with all my classes by e-mail, only to find them sending to me reflections they hesitate to bring up in class or adding to reflections they or others made earlier. I cull these each day and bring them back anonymously into the ongoing discussion. The upshot is that my students are reading and reflecting. And for me what really matters is their personal and private engagement with the text outside class when, like Equiano, they press the book to their ears hoping it will answer them.

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