The Liberal, Liberating Art of Reading

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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” (3-4). 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

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 “literæ 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” (Ideas 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), de-emphasis 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 unremit-
ting work of involving the reader in the moral life, invit-
ing him to put his own motives under examination,
suggesting that reality is not as his conventional educa-
tion 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 enter-
prising 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 Massa-
chusetts Medical School, she focuses on the current
concern in medical education about “care” taking
precedence over “cure,” i.e., the treating of patients as
generalized objects rather than individualized subjects
(Murgia passion). 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 incorpo-
rate the study of literature in medical programs, recog-
nizing 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 vulner-
able 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 indi-
viduals 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 propaideutic 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. Dis-

cussion turns quickly to substantial issues. And recently


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