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The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education

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Our term "liberal education" is far older than the use of the word "liberal" as a term of politics. What we now call "liberal studies" go back to classical times; while political liberalism commences only in the first decade of the nineteenth century. By "liberal education" we mean an ordering and integrating of knowledge for the benefit of the free person—as contrasted with technical or professional schooling, now somewhat vaingloriously called "career education."

The idea of a liberal education is suggested by two passages I am about to quote to you. The first of these is extracted from Sir William Hamilton's *Metaphysics*:

Now the perfection of man as an end and the perfection of man as a mean or instrument are not only not the same, they are in reality generally opposed. And as these two perfections are different, so the training requisite for their acquisition is not identical, and has, accordingly,

been distinguished by different names. The one is styled liberal, the other professional education—the branches of knowledge cultivated for these purposes being called respectively liberal and professional, or liberal and lucrative, sciences.

Hamilton, you will observe, informs us that one must not expect to make money out of proficiency in the liberal arts. The higher aim of “man as an end,” he tells us, is the object of liberal learning. This is a salutary admonition in our time, when more and more parents fondly thrust their offspring, male and female, into schools of business administration. What did Sir William Hamilton mean by “man as an end”? Why, to put the matter another way, he meant that the function of liberal learning is to order the human soul.

Now for my second quotation, which I take from James Russell Lowell. The study of the classics, Lowell writes, “is fitly called a liberal education, because it emancipates the mind from every narrow provincialism, whether of egoism or tradition, and is the apprenticeship that every one must serve before becoming a free brother of the guild which passes the torch of life from age to age.”

To put this truth after another fashion, Lowell tells us that a liberal education is intended to free us from captivity to time and place: to enable us to take long views, to understand what it is to be fully human—and to be able to pass on to generations yet unborn our common patrimony of culture. T. S. Eliot, in his lectures on “The Aims of Education” and elsewhere, made the same argument not many years ago. Neither Lowell nor Eliot labored under the illusion that the liberal discipline of the intellect would open the way to affluence.

So you will perceive that when I speak of the “conservative purpose” of liberal education, I do not mean that such a schooling is intended to be a prop somehow to business, industry, and established material interests. Neither, on the other hand, is a

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liberal education supposed to be a means for pulling down the economy and the state itself. No, liberal education goes about its work of conservation in a different fashion.

I mean that liberal education is conservative in this way: it defends order against disorder. In its practical effects, liberal education works for order in the soul, and order in the republic. Liberal learning enables those who benefit from its discipline to achieve some degree of harmony within themselves. As John Henry Newman put it, in Discourse V of his *Idea of a University*, by a liberal intellectual discipline, “a habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; of what.... I have ventured to call the philosophical habit of mind.”

The primary purpose of a liberal education, then, is the cultivation of the person's own intellect and imagination, for the person's own sake. It ought not to be forgotten, in this mass-age when the state aspires to be all in all, that genuine education is something higher than an instrument of public policy. True education is meant to develop the individual human being, the person, rather than to serve the state. In all our talk about “serving national goals” and “citizenship education”—phrases that originated with John Dewey and his disciples—we tend to ignore the fact that schooling was not originated by the modern nation-state. Formal schooling actually commenced as an endeavor to acquaint the rising generation with religious knowledge: with awareness of the transcendent and with moral truths. Its purpose was not to indoctrinate a young person in civics, but rather to teach what it is to be a true human being, living within a moral order. The person has primacy in liberal education.

Yet a system of liberal education has a social purpose, or at least a social result, as well. It helps to provide a society with a body of people who become leaders in many walks of life, on a large scale or a small. It was the expectation of the founders of the early American colleges that there would be graduated from those little

institutions young men, soundly schooled in old intellectual disciplines, who would nurture in the New World the intellectual and moral patrimony received from the Old World. And for generation upon generation, the American liberal-arts colleges (peculiar to North America) and later the liberal-arts schools and programs of American universities, did graduate young men and women who leavened the lump of the rough expanding nation, having acquired some degree of a philosophical habit of mind.

You will have gathered already that I do not believe it to be the primary function of formal schooling to "prepare boys and girls for jobs." If all schools, colleges, and universities were abolished tomorrow, still most young people would find lucrative employment, and means would exist, or would be developed, for training them for their particular types of work. Rather, I believe it to be the conservative mission of liberal learning to develop right reason among young people.

Not a few members of the staffs of liberal-arts colleges, it is true, resent being told that theirs is a conservative mission of any sort. When once I was invited to give a series of lectures on conservative thought at a long-established college, a certain professor objected indignantly, "Why, we can't have that sort of thing here: this is a *liberal arts college!*" He thought, doubtless sincerely, that the word "liberal" implied allegiance to some dim political orthodoxy, related somehow to the New Deal and its succeeding programs. Such was the extent of his liberal education. Nevertheless, whatever the private political prejudices of professors, the function of liberal education is to conserve a body of received knowledge and to impart an apprehension of order to the rising generation.

Nor do I think it the function of genuine schooling to create a kind of tapioca-pudding society in which everybody would be just like everybody else—every young person, perhaps, to be the recipient eventually of a doctoral degree, even if quite innocent of philosophy. Instead, a highly beneficial result of liberal education,

conservative again, is that it gives to society a body of young people, introduced in some degree to wisdom and virtue, who may become honest leaders in many walks of life.

At this point someone may mutter, knowingly, "An elitist!" Living as we do in an age of ideology, nearly all of us are tempted to believe that if we have clapped a quasi-political label to an expression of opinion, we have blessed or damned it; we need not examine the expression on its own merits. In educationist circles, "elitism" is a devil-term, for isn't everybody just like everybody else, except for undeserved privilege?

Yet actually I am an anti-elitist. I share T. S. Eliot's objections to Karl Mannheim's theory of modern elites. I object particularly to schemes for the governance of society by formally-trained specialized and technological elites. One of my principal criticisms of current tendencies in the higher learning is that, despite much cant about democratic campuses, really our educational apparatus has been rearing up not a class of liberally-educated young people of humane outlook, but instead a series of degree-dignified elites, an alleged meritocracy of confined views and dubious intellectual and moral credentials, puffed up by that little learning which is most truly described by that mordant Tory Alexander Pope as a dangerous thing. We see such elites at their worst in "emergent" Africa and Asia, where the ignorant are oppressed by the quarter-schooled; increasingly, if less ferociously, comparable elites govern us even in America—through the political structure, through the public-school empire, through the very churches.

Such folk were in George Orwell's mind when he described the ruling elite of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

...made up for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians. These people, whose origins lay in the salaried middle class and the upper grades of the working class,

had been shaped and brought together by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralized government.

Now it is not at all my desire that university and college should train up such elites. When I say that we experience an increased need for truly liberal learning, I am recommending something to leaven the lump of modern civilization—something that would give us a tolerable number of people in many walks of life who would possess some share of right reason and moral imagination; who would not shout the price of everything, but would know the value of something; who would be schooled in wisdom and virtue.

I am suggesting that college and university ought not to be degree-mills: they ought to be centers for genuinely humane and genuinely scientific studies, attended by young people of healthy intellectual curiosity who actually show some interest in mind and conscience. I am saying that the higher learning is meant to develop order in the soul, for the human person's own sake. I am saying that the higher learning is meant to develop order in the commonwealth, for the republic's sake. I am arguing that a system of higher education which has forgotten these ends is decadent; but that decay may be arrested, and that reform and renewal still are conceivable. I am declaring that the task of the liberal educator, in essence, is a conservative labor.

The more people who are humanely educated, the better. But the more people we have who are half-educated or quarter-educated, the worse for them and for the republic. Really educated people, rather than forming presumptuous elites, will permeate society, leavening the lump through their professions, their teaching, their preaching, their participation in commerce and industry, their public offices at every level of the commonwealth. And being educated, they will know that they do not know everything; and that there exist objects in life besides power and money and sensual

gratification; they will take long views; they will look forward to posterity and backward toward their ancestors. For them, education will not terminate on commencement day.

Not long ago I spoke at a reputable liberal-arts college on the subject of the order and integration of knowledge. There came up to me after my lecture two well-spoken, well-dressed, civil graduating seniors of that college; probably they were "A" students, perhaps *summa cum laude*. They told me that until they had heard my talk, they had been unable to discover any pattern or purpose in the college education that they had endured for four years. Late had they found me! Where might they learn more?

I suggested that they turn, first of all, to C. S. Lewis' little book *The Abolition of Man*; then to Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, and to William Oliver Martin's *Order and Integration of Knowledge*. Were I speaking with them today, I should add an important book I have read since then, Stanley Jaki's *The Road to Science and the Ways to God*.

Those two young men went off in quest of wisdom and virtue, of which they had heard little at their college, and I have not beheld them since. I trust that they have read those good books and have become members of that unknowable Remnant (obscure, but influential as Dicey's real shapers of public opinion) which scourges the educational follies of our time.

If college and university do nothing better than act as pretentious trade-schools; if their chief service to the person and the republic is to act as employment agencies—why, such institutions will have dehumanized themselves. They will have ceased to give us young people with reason and imagination who leaven the lump of any civilization. They will give us instead a narrow elite governing a monotonous declining society, rejoicing in a devil's sabbath of whirling machinery. If we linger smug and apathetic in a bent world, leaving the works of reason and imagination to molder, we all come to know servitude of mind and body. The alternative to a

liberal education is a servile schooling. And when the floodwaters of the world are out, as they are today, it will not suffice to be borne along by the current, singing hallelujah to the river god.

Some of you may have seen the edition of Irving Babbitt's *Literature and the American College* which I brought out under the auspices of the National Humanities Institute, and the edition of Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership* which I brought out through Liberty Press. Babbitt's warning, in 1908, about the decay of liberal education has taken on grimmer significance since he wrote. Permit me to quote here the concluding sentences of his *Literature and the American College*:

Our colleges and universities could render no greater service than to oppose to the worship of energy and the frantic eagerness for action an atmosphere of leisure and reflection. We should make large allowance in our lives for 'the eventual element of calm,' if they are not to degenerate into the furious and feverish pursuit of mechanical efficiency.... The tendency of an industrial democracy that took joy in work alone would be to live in a perpetual devil's sabbath of whirling machinery and call it progress.... The present situation especially is not one that will be saved—if it is to be saved at all—by what we have called humanitarian hustling.... If we ourselves ventured on an exhortation to the American people, it would be rather that of Demosthenes to the Athenians: 'In God's name, I beg of you to *think*.' Of action we shall have plenty in any case; but it is only by a more humane reflection that we can escape the penalties sure to be exacted from any country that tries to dispense in its national life with the principle of leisure.

By "leisure," Babbitt meant opportunity for serious contemplation and discussion. On the typical campus today—particularly the

vast confused campus of what I call Behemoth University—there is opportunity aplenty for hustling or for idleness, but the claims of true academic leisure are neglected. Much more has been forgotten, too, especially the notion of the philosophical habit of mind.

Perhaps I have been somewhat abstract. Permit me, then, to suggest briefly the relevance of liberal education, in its conservative function, to our present discontents.

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Nowadays I frequently visit Washington—this city of which Joseph de Maistre said that it never could become a capital. In one sense, de Maistre is vindicated: Washington remains a dormitory town rather than a true national capital, no center for right reason and imagination, a confused and confusing locus of administration, rather than of decision. A good many friends of mine—some about my own age, but most of them a generation younger—have taken office recently; they profess their eagerness for guidance.

They find themselves struggling to act decisively within a vast proliferating bureaucracy, interested seemingly in its own power and preferment. There is urgent need for great decisions; but thought is painful; and the bureaucracy prefers boondoggles and stagnation. Great decisions cannot be long postponed, for the foreign and domestic concerns of the United States will not stay long for an answer.

You may recall the medieval legend of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay. Bacon had constructed a head of brass, which he expected to speak and reveal the secret of defending England against England's enemies. But exhausted by his labors, Friar Bacon found it necessary to nap while waiting for the brazen lips to part; so he appointed his apprentice, Friar Bungay, to wake him the moment the Head should utter a word.

As the great scientist slept, the brazen oracle commenced to

addressed the Head foolishly. "Time is!" the Head proclaimed. Still Bungay babbled. Then the Head exclaimed "Time was!" and burst into a thousand fragments. When Bacon awoke, the opportunity was lost forever.

So matters stand in Washington nowadays. Irrevocable decisions must be reached before that tide in the affairs of men has begun to ebb. Those of my friends who are possessed of a liberal education have the sort of reason and imagination calculated to provide us with prudent and far-reaching decisions. But they stand a small minority among the specialists and technicians, the elite, who dominate the operation of the enormous federal machinery. And sooner than we expect, the Brazen Head may thunder, "Time was!"

Some years ago, President Nixon, in the course of an hour's conversation, asked me, "What one book should I read?" He added that he had put that inquiry, more than once, to Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Henry Kissinger; but they had given him lists of a dozen books, and the President, under the pressures of his office, could find time for only one seminal book. What should it be?

"Read T. S. Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*," I told Mr. Nixon. He wanted to know why.

"Because Eliot discusses the ultimate social questions," I replied. "He deals with the relationships that should exist between men of power and men of ideas. And he distinguishes better than anyone else between a 'class' of truly educated persons and an 'elite' of presumptuous specialists—remarking how dangerous the latter may become."

President Nixon discovered not long later that the elite of his administration were deficient in that wisdom and that virtue so much needed in America. A liberally educated man learns from Plato and from Burke that in a statesman the highest virtue is prudence. The sort of high prudence required in great affairs of state has not frequently been encountered in Washington during

the past several decades. One reason for this deficiency has been our American neglect of liberal education, as defined by John Henry Newman. I remind you now of Newman's definition:

This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own object, and for its own highest culture, is called Liberal Education; and though there is no one in whom it is carried as far as is conceivable, yet there is scarcely any one but may gain an idea of what real training is, and at least look toward it, and make its true scope, not something else, his standard of excellence.

True liberal education, that standard of excellence, that conservator of civilization, is required not in Washington alone, but everywhere in our society. Most possessors of a liberal education never come to sit in the seats of the mighty. Yet they leaven the lump of the nation, in many stations and occupations; we never hear the names of most of them, but they do their conservative work quietly and well.

I mention here my grandfather, Frank Pierce, a bank-manager. Although he spent only one term at college—studying music at Valparaiso University—he was a liberally educated gentleman; for liberal education may be acquired in solitude, if necessary. On the village council and the school board, he was a pillar of probity and intelligence. From his example I came to understand the nature of wisdom and virtue.

Frank Pierce, possessing four tall cases of good books—chiefly humane letters and historical works—was able to reflect upon the splendor and the tragedy of the human condition. He was no prisoner of the provinciality of place and circumstance, nor of time.

Such conservative people, endowed with a liberal understand-

ing, have taken a large part in giving coherence and direction to our American society. I do not know what we Americans might have become, had we not such men and women among us. I do not know what we will do if they vanish from our midst. Perhaps then we will be left to celebrate "a devil's sabbath of whirling machinery," supervised by specialists—an elite without moral imagination, and deficient in their understanding of order, justice, and freedom. And after that, chaos.

Much needs to be conserved in these closing decades of the twentieth century, when often it seems as if "Whirl is king, having overthrown Zeus." One benefit of a liberal education is an understanding of what Aristophanes meant by that line—and of how Aristophanes, and Socrates, retain high significance for us. If you have studied Thucydides and Plutarch, you will apprehend much about our present time of troubles; and if you cannot order the state, at least a liberal education may teach you how to order your own soul in the twentieth century after Christ, so like the fifth century before him.

If, in a way that is at once conservative and radical and reactionary, we address ourselves to the renewal of liberal learning, conceivably we may yet live a life of order and justice and freedom. But if we linger smug and apathetic in a bent world, increasingly dominated by squalid oligarchs, we shall come to know servitude of mind and body. If our patrimony is cast aside, Edmund Burke reminded his age, "The law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow."

When liberal education is forgotten, we grope our way into that antagonist world—if you will, from space to anti-space, into Milton's "hollow dark."