

PERPLEXING DREAMS:

IS THERE A CORE TRADITION IN THE HUMANITIES?

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The major program session at the Annual Meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1987 was entitled, "Perplexing Dreams: Is There a Core Tradition in the Humanities?" Professor Roger Shattuck, Commonwealth Professor of French at the University of Virginia, delivered the opening lecture, which was followed by a panel discussion that included Professors Nathan Huggins of Harvard University, Catharine Stimpson of Rutgers University, Philip Curtin of The Johns Hopkins University, and Jean Franco of Columbia University. The subject of a core tradition was especially timely, and Professor Shattuck's lecture prompted a stimulating discussion both by the members of the panel and the assembled audience. ACLS is pleased to be able to present the text of Professor Shattuck's lecture here.

The eighth chapter of *Life on the Mississippi* reads like a parable on education. Mark Twain gave it a cleverly appropriate title, "Perplexing Dreams." Urged on by Mr. Bixby, an experienced river boat pilot, the narrator and cub pilot has "managed to pack my head full of islands, towns, bars, 'points,' and bends." One day when the boy has learned most of the names, Mr. Bixby turns on him.

'What is the shape of Walnut Bend?'

He might as well have asked me my grandmother's opinion of protoplasm.

By and by he said,—

'My boy, you've got to know the shape of the river perfectly. It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night.... You learn it with such absolute certainty that you can always steer by the shape that's in your head, and never mind the one that's before your eyes.'

With no time to adjust to his new task, the cub pilot learns a further factor: that the river's shape keeps changing.

Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a pilot a man had got to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every twenty-four hours.

How much comment belongs here? The classroom teacher might have a hard time with this secular American version of *Pilgrim's Progress*. How far need a teacher go to pick out the name writ large over the whole book: The River of Life? Mark Twain is content to keep the reader laughing at Twain's bedraggled self as a boy. For us here at this early morning meeting to cogitate about cores and traditions in the humanities, Mark Twain has provided a vivid metaphor for education itself. To gain initiation into the culture, you have to know the shape of things, not the names only. We shall come back to Mr. Bixby in the wheelhouse sputtering at his inept pupil.

All of us here are concerned with these cultural rites of passage not only because we may be professional educators, but primarily because we are citizens and parents. I envision the challenge that faces us in education as a two-headed dragon demanding daily human sacrifice to keep it placated and to prevent it from devouring the city. One awful head stands for the tens of millions of young minds all over the country waiting to receive nourishment, an almost sensible hunger for some

form of knowledge that will make life possible and worth living. The second head rearing up with gaping jaws represents the other side of the same situation. It symbolizes the nearly one thousand hours each student and each teacher must spend in a classroom every year, time occupied by the long battle between boredom and alertness.

These two insatiable mouths must be fed. You know as well as I the enormous obstacles that stand in our way. For two centuries now, well meaning and convinced educationalists have been telling us to allow children to follow their natural proclivities. The great defender of childhood as the period of natural freedom, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, invented a term that should have opened our eyes long ago to his program. "The first education must be purely negative" (*Emile*, Book II). He means that we should withhold any systematic or formal education, including reading, until the age of twelve. We have practiced negative education so effectively that today many students are admitted to college still unschooled and have to educate themselves six years too late, when their memories are slowing down, their doubts increasing. Rousseau devised negative education theory for a very special, highly tractable, and imaginary pupil with a full-time tutor and other privileges. Carried on by progressive schools, the misbegotten scheme of negative education intersects another present danger—not a theory but a mood. For thirty years we have been living through a series of searing national traumas. Three major assassinations and the crises of Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra affair may have left us disenchanting with the still fragile progress we have made toward true democracy and equal justice. Is it worth trying to maintain a rigorous universal education in an open, pluralistic society?

I shall not answer for others. Response must come primarily as a declaration of personal faith in chosen ideals. What I can insist on is a principle that operates as inexorably in a society as it does in physics. *Nature abhors a vacuum*. If we do not provide adequate knowledge to fill those hungry minds and empty schoolroom hours, something else will. That something else may well be deadening and corrupting—estrangement, anomie, idle vandalism, drugs, crime, suicide. These things cannot be said too often. In schools more than anywhere else, we can make an effort to establish the principle of equal opportunity by leveling everyone upward as far as possible. Family upbringing and col-

lege education quite properly tend to increase inequalities. Free public schools constitute our only major institution serving both all individuals and the national interest.

Yet think for a moment. No authoritative document sets out what high school students should know. Powerful legal suits challenge school boards for doing their duty. Can we blame state boards of education for wobbling? One readily available reference is the booklet, *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*, published by the College Board (1983). In science and mathematics, the booklet describes fairly well-defined content requirements. In the humanities (English, the arts, and foreign languages) the emphasis falls entirely on what I call “empty skills”—to read, to write, to analyze, to describe, to evaluate. To what specifics or content are these skills to be applied?

Silence. Not a single work of art or literature is mentioned. One could surmise that basic academic competencies can be acquired by working with any materials at all. Still, someone will decide on substance; too often the buck is passed down to the individual teacher, who must fill all roles—planner, helper, taskmaster, and final judge. We are here to reflect on the question, “Is there a core tradition in the humanities?” Our answers should do something to help embattled teachers trying to maintain standards and should help put substance back into the humanities—and do so for the majority of students, not exclusively for the college-bound who read the College Board booklet.

The core of the humanities, as I envision it, is shaped less like the proverbial onion than like a simplified orange with three large sections or segments fitted closely together. My analysis leans inevitably toward a definition of culture, a term we have had in English in its general sense for barely a hundred years.

1. Official rituals and ceremonies and celebrations; monuments like the Statue of Liberty; the flag; the national anthem; the pledge of allegiance. These elements are mostly associated with some form of public enactment.

2. A loose, shared store of stories (legendary and historic); folklore (including proverbs); ideas and concepts; historical and presumed facts. This common knowledge may remain unwritten and orally transmitted.

3. A collection of concrete, lasting works (images, buildings, music, writings in poetry and prose) considered significant or revealed or great or beautiful.

All I ask of this schematic division is to help us deal with questions of content in education. Segment two, the common fund of lore and knowledge, corresponds to all the names cub pilot Mark Twain learned—and did well to learn—in order to begin to know the river. Segment three, the lasting works and particularly books used in schools, provide Mr. Bixby's "shape of the river"—never beheld all at once, endlessly changing, yet a shape held in the mind to refer to under the most difficult conditions. Reading is the principal activity that allows us to move between these two segments, a kind of two-way membrane or circuitry that makes the connections between an amorphous mass of materials and a collection of recognized forms. Reading gains pertinence when it mediates between our available cultural knowledge and another realm loosely called literature.

Schools are concerned with all three segments of the humanistic orange. Fortunately I am not going to have to talk about the whole fruit. Recently my colleague E.D. Hirsch at the University of Virginia published a book called *Cultural Literacy*. This intelligent synthesis of history of education, developmental psychology, and recent research on perception, memory, and reading eloquently reaffirms the principles of universal education in a democratic society. He diagnoses our national illness as a condition based on misguided educational theory after Rousseau and on a faulty conception of pluralism that dismisses a common culture. What Hirsch establishes persuasively is a truism we shouldn't have to be shown again.

But we do. Unless you know enough—enough facts and names and ideas—you cannot read. Decoding words and sentences will not produce meaning unless the reader knows the variety of items to which the passage refers. Then Hirsch has the imagination and the courage to go a step further. He answers the sassy question that may follow: So who's to decide what every American needs to know? He takes the dare himself. In 60 pages and about 5,000 entries he and two collaborators list the items you probably have to be able to recognize and identify in order to read and understand a newspaper.

Of course, such a list makes addictive reading, something between a quiz program and a collective psychoanalysis. Any citizen, reasonable or bigoted, can find fault with the entries. Most directly and importantly the list represents a challenge to all the rest of us educators who have evaded the task of defining what we expect students to know. Hirsch's book is a wonderful reciprocating engine: in order to read, you have to know a lot about the world as our culture conceives it; in order to acquire that knowledge, you have to read writing that will expand your mind. Here, to help in that process, is the best existing approximation of what you have to know and what our schools should aim to teach as a minimum. A list won't do the job; a list will help set the sights. If we put our minds to it, many more citizens could really read. No utopia here, rather a concise and exciting contribution.

Hirsch calls his list "the *extensive* curriculum," by which he means the basics of generally held information. Such basics will make available to everyone who masters them the elements of the culture through which we communicate with one another, particularly in writing. He hopes and I hope that more of these basics can be conveyed to students by revising our readers, by modifying our current approach to reading as a mere skill, and by making sure that all students, not just those from middle-class homes, learn the facts and ideas essential to understanding prose on the level of newspapers. Hirsch does not address except in passing the matter of the *intensive* curriculum—what specific books Johnny and Jenny should read in order to learn and apply these enhanced reading abilities of full literacy. Hirsch is perfectly right to proceed one step at a time. He already has an undeclared war on his hands with what I shall call—naturally—vested educational interests. Still, someone will have to talk and finally decide about the intensive curriculum; we shall talk about it here and now.

Hirsch, then, to my great satisfaction and with my vigorous support, has demonstrated the crucial role of section two in my three-section humanities orange. He has picked up the challenge of collecting what Mark Twain refers to as the names of the places and features along the river. You have to know them in order to talk with others about the river. As the cub pilot soon learned, however, the names do not give you the river's shape. That shape, elusive, mysterious, frequently changing in detail, belongs to section three, around which I wish to build the centerpiece of my sermon.

Any discussion of a humanistic core, of how to recognize a classic or a masterpiece, of what makes up a canon, rests on three tacit presuppositions. Perhaps there are more. We assume a profound continuity in human life; to track and to measure that continuity we turn first of all to the immense palace-archive of history, which sits at the heart of the humanities. We expect to find continuity both in the macro realm of culture—mores, institutions, artifacts—and in the micro realm of human character, of human nature.

Here, I can do no better than produce two of my favorite quotations. Ortega y Gasset saw very deep. “Man has no nature. What he has is history.” Emerson had passed that way earlier and left his unmistakable markings. “Properly speaking, there is no such thing as history. There is only biography.” Whatever its precise form—history, biography, literature, the arts—a belief in the continuity of the human over many millennia lies behind any discussion of a tradition in the humanities.

Second, within that continuity of perception and imagination we have developed a limited number of versions of human greatness. These ideals—warriors, saints, martyrs, explorers, prophets, chiefs, sages, artists—provide several scales of human eminence, qualities to admire and perhaps to emulate. I cannot think of a culture, I cannot imagine a culture, without its accepted versions of greatness.

Third, human beings long ago came to believe that continuity and greatness are effectively conveyed and celebrated in lasting artifacts or masterworks. Greek theater, Medieval stained glass windows, modern Islamic festivals for reciting *The Qur'an* serve the purpose of broadcasting cultural traditions to a large audience. As that cultural function has become increasingly concentrated for developed societies in organized public schools, school systems have universally found that the most practical and economic instrument of acculturation is the printed book. No other teaching aid even begins to rival it. The world has three great faiths that speak of themselves as the religions of the book. In its schools at least, the United States remains, and should remain for the foreseeable future, a culture of the book.

These presuppositions—human continuity, greatness, and recognition of them in masterworks—often remain undiscussed. Yet they

belong to my definition of the humanities—indeed to my deepest sense of humanity. I shall proceed to how, as a teacher of a course in masterworks of Western literature since 1650, I deal with the task of selecting books out of the vast number put forward by tradition and by available anthologies. A classic that stands up through years of teaching will display a series of what I used to see as polarities. I now consider them to be complementaries. A classic will make its historical moment vivid and important; it will also have other features that make it remain contemporary. In other words, it is at the same time a period piece and forever young. In my course I would cite Molière to illustrate the point; Shakespeare does so even better.

A masterwork displays aspects that allow us to perceive in it a strong element of simplicity and clarity. It also awes us by the mystery and complexity it contains. We may well find it both reassuring and scary. Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* will serve as an example. A masterwork will create the sense of confronting concrete, individual situations and characters, which at the same time reach toward the domain of the general, the universal. In her best poems, Emily Dickinson's literary persona becomes a very concrete universal.

My three presuppositions and my rules of thumb for recognizing masterworks bring me to a far more important point about a core tradition in the humanities. A meeting such as the present one would never have occurred in Europe before the 18th century, nor would it occur in most Islamic countries today. For those societies, the core has been revealed from on high and creates a center around which most aspects of life find an appointed place. For us, perhaps because some of us have lost our faith, certainly because of our hard won "wall of separation" between church and state in public schools, the core cannot be presented as revealed. I would go so far as to say that in this open, pluralist society, the core is not even given. We have traditions and institutions and conventions. But they must answer to many pressures, political and commercial and religious. It seems more accurate to say that the past constantly *offers* a core tradition in the humanities, an offer each of us plays some role in refusing or accepting. Can one say that each generation comes to a decision about these traditions? But what is a generation? School principals and school boards and college professors wrestle with these decisions in terms of curriculum and requirements. As long as the people involved are

acting on the basis of actual reading on their part and careful reflection about cultural literacy and the shape of the river, these debates can be exciting and fruitful. The “intensive” curriculum of books read in class should not be handed down from on high by a Minister of Education to all schools in the nation, as happens in most parts of the world for reasons of national unity. There are less implacable ways of establishing a core, especially for a system like ours that must incorporate into its curriculum such essentials as healthy skepticism, verification of asserted facts, scrutiny of logical argument, minority views, and “critical thinking.”

Teachers and professors all over the country should be spurring one another on to select the knowledge students need most in order to face a citizen’s responsibilities—not just empty skills—and the books they should not leave school without having read. Choices will vary; a few brash committees will seek consensus. The federal government may wish to favor selected programs. States may decide to establish lists of works from which school districts may choose. Publishers will play a major, yet unpredictable, role. Blue-ribbon panels may make useful recommendations.

All this swirl of seeking and dissent will contribute to the improvement of education at all levels as long as one principle stands. Even in our pluralistic society the humanities have a core the way the river has a shape. The very process of discovering and gradually modifying that shape lends meaning and excitement to the intellectual life of a community. The most stimulating discussions I have had with my colleagues have dealt with specific content of curriculum change and how to define the knowledge we would require of all students and why. The answers may not satisfy everyone, but without those questions seriously pressed we resign ourselves to an invasion of empty skills and a confusing dispersion of minds. The Greeks, of course, already had a word for this state of things in which one learns primarily from the search, from the debate itself. A heuristic exchange of this kind will help us prevent education from becoming empty, the way it tends to be now, or rigid, the way some would like to see it. Established lists and recently published surveys demonstrate that a good deal of agreement already exists among educated citizens about the shape of our river. My own informal soundings on this subject over the past twenty years tell me that even a randomly picked group of intelligent and educated people will agree on a

handful of books that everyone should read at some point, in some form. Then the going becomes very slow. Mark Twain seems to point at these dilemmas with his title, “Perplexing Dreams.”

It is time for a few specifics. If we are going to pick school books not entirely by reading level and word frequency, but by culturally useful content and effective writing, then the whole category of biography and autobiography falls beautifully into place. One of the most eloquently written and humanly valuable personal accounts available to us already fills many classroom shelves. Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* makes the essential revelation that what we too easily think of as a given, the very condition of being human, is not given but learned. Deprived of the two senses we rely on most, living by touch alone, this magnificent woman can help us learn courage and imagination and appreciation of the simplest acts of living. Every detail provokes reflection. Only late in her childhood under a teacher of genius did Keller learn not to register on her face, as though through a window or on a screen, all her inner feelings. She discovered how to write fine English without ever hearing the language.

Another modern autobiography has been almost entirely forgotten by school programs. After a colorful early life as barnstormer, army pilot, and mail carrier, Charles Lindbergh helped design the single-engine, high-wing, almost windowless monoplane in which he had to fight sleep for hours and navigate alone and without radio from New Jersey to Paris. The book he wrote himself the same year, at age twenty-five, about his youth and that historic flight, rivals Plutarch in its depiction of small qualities of character that add up to greatness.

Allow me to pick another example perhaps too close to home. I would like to think that in a book for high schools it took me five years to write, *The Forbidden Experiment*, I learned something from Keller and Lindbergh. For the story of the Wild Boy of Aveyron—not necessarily in my version—deserves its place, in my estimate, among these stories and in the core we are seeking and constituting.

I am not going to propose an exhaustive list for a core curriculum or even a short list. Rather, I advocate the heuristic goal of arguing over and drawing up such lists without neglecting modest candidates like Sherlock Holmes, folktales and fairy tales, the great religious works of the

Greeks, the Jews, and the Christians, along with biography and autobiography.

Two prickly problems raise their heads immediately before we even begin to outline a core. First the question of timing. Is there an optimum moment to read *Hamlet*? When should we read *Huckleberry Finn*? *The Republic*? *Candide*? Should there be a national agreement on which works will be kept for college students? Which could be read in primary school—perhaps in a simplified version? And there is the second problem already. Should we tolerate or even encourage the rewriting and adaptation of significant works in the humanities? *Don Quixote*? *War and Peace* for the schools? I once read and remembered large parts of *Moby Dick* in such a version. There is no categorical answer to any of these questions. My own experience tells me that skillful editorial work or even a complete retelling (like the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare*) can serve a valuable function in schools and in homes. But edited and truncated versions must be prepared with enormous skill and devotion.

Everything I have said up to now will come to nothing unless we adopt in our schools and maintain in colleges a coherent set of examinations on the subjects taught, on the content of books read. I shall have to summarize here an argument I set out at greater length in another place ("Helping Teachers Do What They Cannot Do Alone," *The Virginia Assembly*, Institute of Government, University of Virginia, 1984). Our present high school diplomas certify very little—mostly perseverance. Probably on a voluntary basis to start, our high schools should offer a state diploma based on a defined curriculum and on examinations in five basic subjects (English, history and geography, mathematics, science, foreign language). The New York State Regents examinations and the International Baccalaureate program adopted by a number of public high schools, demonstrate the feasibility of such a scheme.

Objections will come tumbling out from all sides. Standardized examinations lead to teaching to the test. Some teachers will feel that their autonomy is being invaded. But the advantages outweigh the criticisms, I believe. Only outside examinations will establish anything resembling quality control. Grades given by classroom teachers make an unreliable guide to what their students have learned. State certification based on examinations will give genuine integrity to the high school diploma, help

employers choose workers, and begin to break the pro-higher education prejudice, which implies that in order to be adequately educated you have to go to college. The reinstatement of meaningful, earned high school diplomas will help every aspect of our society. Furthermore, classroom teachers could benefit enormously from the coach-helper relationship that obtains in athletics and dramatics. An outside examination provides a kind of performance in preparation for which everyone can work together without the adversary relation that may set in between a student and teacher who awards the final grade.

I began by comparing the core tradition in the humanities to the shape of Mark Twain's elusive and shifting Mississippi. I shall close with a second analogy. It reveals another aspect of our cultural survival. Almost immediately after fertilization, the human embryo sets aside a few cells that are sheltered from the rest of the organism and from the environment. These cells retain a special ability to divide by meiosis into haploid cells needed for sexual reproduction. Our gonads represent the most stable element in the body and are usually able to pass on unchanged to the next generation the genetic material we were born with. Except for radiation and a few diseases, the life we live does not affect our gonads. They guard the status quo; they change very slowly by mutation (usually rejected) or by other processes we do not understand.

A core tradition in the humanities, the three aspects of it that we expect schools to convey to all our children, operates on the essentially conservative principle of gonads. A dynamic culture needs a steady center. After we have been to school, we may decide to test the center or challenge it or revise it in the give and take of democratic process. First, we should know where the center lies. It is not idealism, but deep skepticism about meliorism and about the witless inflation of our needs and desires that leads me to this analogy. Unless we teach in our schools a fairly steady sense of our humanistic traditions, of what has been called our civil religion, I envision a run-away culture seeking all extremes at once.