

CLIMBING PARNASSUS

A NEW APOLOGIA FOR GREEK AND LATIN



MONTE PARNASSO, FROM DUELLI.

TRACY LEE SIMMONS

FOREWORD BY WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

C_{CLIMBING}

P_{ARNASSUS}

A New Apologia for Greek and Latin

T_{RACY} L_{EE} S_{IMMONS}



WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

To Scot Hicks

Il miglior umanista

οὐ πόλλ' ἀλλὰ πολὺ

PARNASSUS (mod. *Liákoura* or *Likeri*), a mountain of Greece, 8070 ft., in the south of Phocis, rising over the town of Delphi. It had several prominent peaks, the chief known as Tithorea and Lycoreia (whence the modern name). Parnassus was one of the most holy mountains in Greece, hallowed by the worship of Apollo, of the Muses, and of the Corycian nymphs, and by the orgies of the Bacchantes. Two projecting cliffs, named the Phaedriadae, frame the gorge in which the Castalian spring flows out, and just to the west of this, on a shelf above the ravine of the Pleistus, is the site of the Pythian shrine of Apollo and the Delphic oracle. The Corycian cave is on the plateau between Delphi and the summit.

Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition

Acknowledgments

While very little research of the original kind went into this essay, it is nonetheless the fruit of many years' reading, thinking and, most of all, hundreds of beer-, sherry-, or whisky-soaked conversations with teachers, mentors, friends, and colleagues, not all of whom work professionally in the harvest fields of classics. I must render special thanks to my friend and former supervising director Michael Winterbottom, lately Corpus Christi Professor of Latin at Oxford, as well as Stephen Harrison, Donald Russell, the late Don Fowler, and Jasper Griffin, also of Oxford. Harold C. Goto and A. J. Christopherson have also inspired this small work in ways they can't even know. My brazen exaggerations and missteps have arisen in spite of, not because of, their teaching, advising, and erstwhile companionship. Yet just as much I must thank the friends and comrades who acted as first sounding boards for this fanciful *opusculum*: Scot Hicks, Wolfgang Grassl, Andrew Oliver II, Richard Brookhiser, Joseph Epstein, Robert Royal, James Taylor, Jack Taylor, Richard Seymann and, ever and always, the late Sheldon Vanauken.

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Foreword, by William F. Buckley Jr

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I first came across the name of this book's author when I read his review of one of my sailing adventures. I was attracted immediately by the lucidity of his writing style and by the generosity of his mind. Subsequently I encouraged a professional association that brought him, as an associate editor, to *National Review*, which I then served as editor-in-chief. A friendship evolved and as it did I became privy to his deep, and almost secret, devotion to the classical world. He has reveled in the literatures he here celebrates, in the languages — Greek and Latin — he loves, and pleads now, as fervently as someone recovered from deafness and exposed to music might do, that we understand the joy he has found, and labor to unplug our own ears.

Relax. Tracy Lee Simmons is not telling us to get off the bus and hire a Latin teacher. We aren't going to do this, most of us, but that doesn't matter, any more than a written description of music would gall the deaf man. He wants us to know what is there, accumulated over millennia, and ponder its historic achievements and unique tones of voice. ("Not to know Greek is to be ignorant of the most flexible and subtle instrument of expression which the human mind has devised," he quotes one of his authors, "and not to know Latin is to have missed an admirable training in precise and logical thought.") Simmons does not play the pedant in this graceful testimonial to the classical languages. He is the eager and eloquent reporter giving us some idea of what lies in those great repositories, so inexplicably neglected in modern schooling, and what pleasures await those whose curiosity has succeeded in awakening and how gratefully the mind repays itself when flexed on languages which are not dead because, as he quotes another author, they are no longer mortal.

Our author is greatly learned, but he rebuffs any suggestion that he is a scholar or an academic. Only in this exercise in self-abasement is he unconvincing — whatever it is that he chooses to call himself, we (I, certainly) might wish we could qualify to call ourselves. He is of course the teacher but also the journalist, and he sets out in this book to write about the classical heritage informatively and unpretentiously. And, I should stress, readably; which he succeeds in doing, probably without even noticing the odes he brings to our attention by sharp-eyed scholars who have acclaimed, for instance, the mastery of Latin because, in part, it engenders a verbal sensitivity and dexterity that lead to good writing and, prospectively, fine writing.

Mr. Simmons manages something else, difficult to do. At once he unequivocally rejects the proposition that all practitioners are equal, that just as we assert our equality at the voting booth, we cannot assume equality in achievement or in the capacity to enjoy. I welcome his ample reminder of Albert Jay Nock's stern lectures at the University of Virginia in 1931, in which Nock ate alive the preposterous idea that all who check in at school are educable, let alone equally educable. But Mr. Simmons is more genial, really, than Mr. Nock ever was, and his effort in pointing out the glory and the joys resulting from any attempt to climb Parnassus — that ancient peak symbolizing the source of inspiration and eloquence — never gives way to the exclusionist appetite of Nock. In this matter he is in the good company of Mortimer Adler, who never suggested that even his own students could rise as high as he wished, but adamantly insisted that efforts to learn were rewarding, however modest one

achievement, while Parnassus itself must always stand undiminished and hallowed. Nock's elitism can be read as a fatalistic consignment of the great body of students to the assembly-line life of the kind Charlie Chaplin memorialized. Not Simmons. No, he is here the bard of the classical legacy, and ends not by rejecting suitors, but by seducing them.

I reproduce from this book the autobiographical passage from Evelyn Waugh, because it is supremely informative, and because it achieves so masterfully the sweetness of the perfect prose. Simmons envisions and encourages:

My knowledge of English literature derived chiefly from my home. Most of my hours in the form room for ten years had been spent on Latin and Greek, History and Mathematics. Today I remember no Greek. I have never read Latin for pleasure and should now be hard put to compose a simple epitaph. But I do not regret my superficial classical studies. I believe that the conventional defence of them is valid; that only by them can a boy fully understand that a sentence is a logical construction and that words have basic inalienable meanings, departure from which is either a conscious metaphor or inexcusable vulgarity. Those who have not been so taught — most Americans and most women — unless they are guided by some rare genius, betray the deprivation. The old-fashioned test of an English sentence — will it translate? — still stands after we have lost the trick of translation.

Severe, yes, even cranky, as Mr. Waugh always sought to be. But his declaration acknowledges the high call to seek and climb Parnassus, and Mr. Simmons is himself an eloquent votary in the sacramental calling.

— WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY J

“I never touched a trained mind yet which had not been disciplined by grammar and mathematics — grammar both Greek and Latin; nor have I ever discovered mental elegance except in those familiar with Greek and Latin classics.” William Milligan Sloane, a professor of history at Columbia, uttered this monolithic ruling from on high in 1917. Here blows the confidence of a bygone era, a sentiment that went out with hansom cabs and iceboxes. Imagine these words emanating from any professor of history, or professor of anything else, in our day. This isn’t a thought likely to win friends and influence colleagues. But I cannot say that Sloane’s experience has been mine. I have known quite a few people blessed with “mental elegance” who haven’t so much as touched the hem of Greek and Latin. They got it quite on their own. One shouldn’t promise too much. It may be that the buoyant, complacent faith of statements like this one helped to sink for good the dominion of classics in American education.

Yet on the whole I believe that Sloane was ambling up the right road. Greek and Latin can certainly discipline and form the mind. But they can do far more. Taught with an aim to cultivate and humanize, they can render something more and greater to the intelligent, talented, and patient. “Mental elegance” may not be the right term — of all places, words may fail us here — but the phrase rings with truth. There’s a fresh breeze passing through it. It’s also one that hasn’t blown through public conversation in a long time. While I do not believe a classical education to be the only one worth having — far from it — I do believe that its passing from schools and colleges has impoverished our culture and, incidentally, degraded our politics. The classical languages can change and enhance one’s intellectual and aesthetic nature, shaping both the mind and the heart. And I am not the first to say so.

I seek to do at least two things within the pages of this essay. First, I hope to elucidate the centuries-long corner Greek and Latin held on school and university curricula, limiting myself, mostly for the sake of convenience, to English and American experience. Readers of English novels or American biography, for instance, have often noticed the peculiar spectacle of young innocents getting carted off to school only to be cast into the thorny thicket of these two ancient and difficult tongues. By the threat of the stinging rod, they were made to memorize the words and rules of two languages they would never speak. It was a curious affair. What was the point of it all? We stand sufficiently remote from those times to have forgotten utterly the *raison d’être* for this grueling, seemingly senseless drudgery. Here is doubtless a criminally brief account of whence classical education arose and what it set out to achieve. This book ought to be and, with sufficient leisure could have been, a multi-volume work. The theme deserves much more than I have given it. For this I can but beg the reader’s pardon.

But I try not only to explain; I try to exhort. I wish to defend, by witness and running commentary, this long path to the formed, cultivated mind even as I recount the long journey the classical languages have walked along the thoroughfares of Western history. Greek and Latin are still valuable, even today — and perhaps especially today.

I write as a layman. I am a writer, not a scholar. Although I have drunk strong draughts of classical learning in my life from a fairly young age, and owe incalculably to classical teachers and scholars both known and unknown to me, I am not myself a classical scholar, nor anything close to one. Apart from one splendid year teaching Greek and Latin in a private school, I have never made my living by them. I have no professional bed to feather. Classics have stood more in the background of my life than in the foreground. But while this book is not a work of scholarship, it's deeply indebted to the thought and scholarship of my betters. I hasten to add that this is one man's defense of an august inheritance and practice. The case here is by no means complete; brighter devotees to classics would brew their own case quite differently and just as legitimately. There's nothing definitive about mine. I have written this book for the simple, pedestrian reason that no one else more qualified has stepped forward to write it. Little original research of my own has gone into its making. Indeed this may be the most impudently unoriginal work to be published in many years. If I have brought anything *original* to the task — a tricky when not ridiculous word — other than my own limited experience, it's probably just a bit of retrograde thinking feared and eschewed by others saddled with that side-glancing reticence often awarded with academic tenure. I say here a few forbidden things.

A Few Notes at Base Camp

Anyone setting out to defend what Albert Jay Nock once called “the grand old fortifying classical curriculum” — essentially Greek and Latin — does so knowing that he flies the tattered flag of a lost cause. Surrender to the victors has already been signed, the army dispersed. The guns are silent. That day is done. Why, in the age of the Internet and the global economy, dwell upon the words and deeds of people long dead who spoke and wrote in tongues equally dead? Surely education should help us to enjoy our fair share of bread and circuses. Education should help us to get things. It’s about the future. A recent American president, after all, made much ado about “building bridges to the twenty-first century.” We had best be crossing. But the happy band of those who fend for classical education, along with other tilers at windmills, are not so easily daunted. They would make a last stand for the barricades. They have wandered as exiles in occupied territory. But the land is worth fighting for, even if the battle should yield but a few paces.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once chided the brashness of a lost cause like this one. I proffer to him my apologies. “It is ominous,” he wrote, “that this word Education has so cold, so hopeless a sound. A treatise on education, a convention on education, affects us with slight paralysis and a certain yawning of the jaws.” Ominous indeed, for ponderous books on education proliferate and provide what one historian has called a “dismal consolation to the misanthrope.” We ought to cast a caustic eye on such trickery, for the utopian promises what he cannot deliver. Beware the man with a new truth to preach. He bids to do our thinking for us. Better, in the words of Auden, to “read *The New Yorker*, trust in God, and take short views.”

The American soil is not naturally fertile for classics. The seed falls on hard clay. As another man of letters told us nearly eighty years ago, we as a nation possess “a weakness for new gospels,” a virtue but hazardous trait, as we stand in danger of discarding both the good and useful in a quest for the dubious and untried. We reconfigure our lives daily. We pride ourselves on our capacity to reach farther and entertain the fantastic idea. And we think of ourselves more as doers than as thinkers. While others waxed about going to the moon, we went. We are forever on the move. But this restless drive, which we Americans are wont to think unique to us, also fuels the rest of the frenetic modern world, particularly in the West where — despite some multi-culturalists’ claims — our civilization supplies the model most peoples around the globe wish to emulate. We spell Progress with a capital. Here the new is always better, the old worse; the new is always rich and relevant, the old threadbare and obsolete. Ours is the “shining city on a hill,” in John Winthrop’s memorable coinage, a city that could begin afresh because it had no past. We could start from scratch and travel lightly.

Yet having crossed the threshold of a millennium, we feel a few spiritual tremors. Impetuosity does not reflect. The superannuated, ever-changing mind cannot speak to the whole of life. It cannot contemplate; it cannot assign value. It can drive us to build new roads and bridges, but it cannot explain where we want to go. It can build rockets to Mars and beyond, but it cannot tell us whether it

wise to go there. It cannot answer questions it long ago lost the wisdom to ask. The life of the mind and soul it leaves bereft of standards, those talking points of judgment, which are acquired only with time and patient effort. We appeal to the freakish in witless arts and entertainment — to serve the boring or the bored is not always clear — leading inexorably to the shocking that melts into monotonous vulgarity in the public square. (Even shock cannot shock indefinitely.) Intellectuals are not immune. Scratch a believer in bold new ideas and find a slave to fashion, proving the adage that the newest is always the most quickly dated, whether it come from Madison Avenue or the Modern Language Association. Nor is our political life unaffected. We call for candidates with “new ideas” votaries to a perpetually malleable Future. Here is the spirit of El Dorado, the hope that riches and salvation wait around the next bend in the road. Old gospels lack the beckoning allure of the road not taken. But like explorers in the desert ever prone to mirage, we have had, along with remarkable discoveries, a few false sightings. And we are beginning to sense a certain lack of point and permanence in modern life. The new gospels have certainly delivered, but they have not saved.

Education, that vague and official word for what goes on in our schools, has also been a trinket on the shelves of snake oil salesmen and a plaything for social planners in America for well over a century. They too have been driven by the spirit of ceaseless innovation. And we have paid a high price. The peddlers have shrouded the higher and subtler goals of learning which former generations accepted and promoted. These bringers of the New have traded in the ancient ideal of wisdom for a spurious “adjustment” of mind, settling for fitting us with the most menial of skills needful for the world of the interchangeable part. They have decided we are less, not more, than wiser people have hoped humanity might become. We are masses to be housed and fed, not minds and souls seeking something beyond ourselves. Ask anyone today, for instance, to identify the aims of a “liberal education” and expect a long pause. Everett Dean Martin — he who informed us of our predilection for “new gospels” — wrote a book in 1926 titled *The Meaning of a Liberal Education*, and in 1971 another scholar produced *The Uses of a Liberal Education*. We might detect in the latter title a falling away from an older ideal. Instead of seeking to discern what a liberal education can bring to us, we now ask what we can get out of it; there’s a difference. And the benefits accrued do not exist, apparently, if they cannot be measured — and measured by tools calibrated by craftsmen out to replicate themselves. Standards require standard-makers.

Nonetheless, on the face of it at least, the question of *use* is a fair one. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead reminded us that any education not useful is wasted. An education, he said, must be “useful, because understanding is useful.” But what must we understand? If education must be useful, what uses are to be served? And, more importantly, are there differing kinds of use we should acknowledge?

The modern mind, schooled to be practical, stands ill prepared to wrestle with these questions because they are at bottom philosophical ones; our practicality has, ironically, rendered us incapable of answering them. So while thinking ourselves a knowing and enlightened lot, we stand deaf to our own ignorance, which has become a white noise. Gilded degrees hanging on our walls bear witness to our certified smarts. But we have stood Socrates on his head: Whereas the only thing that Socrates, that Athenian, knew was that he knew nothing, the only thing we *don’t* know — and with far thinner credentials, it would seem — is that we know so very little. (“He knows nothing, and he thinks he knows everything,” George Bernard Shaw put it. “That points clearly to a political career.”) We do not know, in other words, what more reflective ages have deemed the important things. And we don’t know them because they have not been taught us, or gentle prods to our self-esteem have spurred us to consult only our own druthers in deciding what is worth knowing. We have adopted the leveling assumptions we’ve inherited — *whatever works for you* — and fed off intellectual capital earned by others who, we presume, have already done the hard thinking for us. We pride ourselves on sel-

reliance while following uncritically the roadmaps of others. For an independently skeptical people we ask few questions.

Milton once wrote that the reform of education is “one of the greatest and noblest designs that can be thought on,” and many have been drawn to the drafting table as willing architects of the future. Within this workshop we have hammered out our highest aspirations and ideals. Yet few pursuits, however noble, promise so little. The wares are cheap, their shiny surfaces a veneer hiding shoddy work. “As with most gospels,” Martin observed, “we are in such a hurry to save souls that we would begin proclaiming the new salvation to the nation before pausing to find out what education is. Unable to explain what education is or is for, we have created state departments of education out of desperate hope that what we have not had the wisdom and intellectual fortitude to determine in the light of day might emerge miraculously from a flurry of committee reports, public opinion polls, and bureaucratic fiat.

So to pen — and read — still another tract such as this runs counter to that hope and makes for dreary work. We should shrink from more gospels, further means of deliverance from a predicament we do not fully understand, especially when the search is likely to prove less than edifying and cloaked in unresolved chords. I do not intend to offer a new gospel. Instead, I hope to direct our gaze behind us, so that we may more securely find our footing on the road ahead. If in fact “the past is prologue” it is only the past that can instruct and guide us. The present is too close. And the future is but a haze of possibilities and dreams. The future does not yet belong to us.



We do not lack defenses of traditional education. Disquisitions abound. They offer comfort and guidance to the seeking few. Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* set off a radioactive buzz in the late 1980s with sales no doubt astounding author and publisher alike. It was an unlikely bestseller, at once a philosophical excursion and a gripe against a noisy, tawdry world. But we don’t know who read the book. It was enough, for many, simply to buy it and add their voices to the swelling chorus of those suspecting a decline in the intellectual quality not only of educated people but also of the world they plan and steer. Its presence on the coffee table advertised one’s disquiet becoming for a moment a badge of intellectual chic. E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* described the paucity of hard information today’s high school graduates are likely to know — and to be taught — about history, science, and literature. “Illiterate and semiliterate Americans are condemned not only to poverty,” Hirsch wrote, “but also to the powerlessness of incomprehension. Knowing that they do not understand the issues, and feeling prey to manipulative oversimplifications, they do not trust the system of which they are supposed to be the masters. They do not feel themselves to be active participants in our republic, and they often do not turn out to vote.” And of course, for better or worse, many *do* turn out to vote.

What we don’t know can hurt us. With the blitzing of these two books, we began to talk openly not only about fifteen-year-olds who cannot identify the order of American presidents since Franklin Roosevelt or the century in which the American Civil War was fought, but also about eighteen-year-olds who cannot read even with ground-level competence. Granting that the world has yet to see its Golden Age in education, we began to ask: What exactly are they doing in those schools? And why do our schools’ and colleges’ graduates, so smart and promising in so many ways, not seem to know or really *know*, anything of substance? They’re heavy on proudly held opinions — opinions are always an abundant supply — but light on knowledge. Is this, we wondered, the best we can do?

This we can say: Publicly funded ignorance began to seem a positive liability. It became the family lunatic we finally consented to bring up in mixed company. But these books did another

salutary thing: they directed us to question the uses of the tools at our disposal. On the one hand, there is the skill needed to use the proverbial wrench properly and efficiently, on the other the judgment required to use it for right and good purposes. Bloom and Hirsch drew us back to fundamental questions, throwing light not only on what ought to be taught in our schools and universities, but on goals, on the kind of citizens we wish to create and the kind of polity we wish to engender. For education is never neutral. Embedded within any course of study lie assumptions about what people ought to know, and about human nature itself: Are we Man or Machine? Education is, in the end, an auxiliary philosophy — an embodiment of aims and ideals. It was therefore fruitless for President Clinton to demand that politics “stop at the school house door.” Perhaps politics cannot stop there because philosophy and idealism cannot stop there.

And the anxiety spreads. With each new bit of bad news issued from think tanks and blue-ribbon commissions, the same *dramatis personae* pound out newspaper and magazine commentaries, taking to cable talk programs to spout their views and entertain rejoinders from viewers across the country, usually with no one understanding the essential matters at stake. (Watching cable call-in programs is like listening to the desperate yawping of thousands mesmerized by the sounds of their own voices.) Back in the mid-1980s, a National Commission on Excellence in Education — an instance of grandiloquent dubbing — released a study called *A Nation at Risk*, which contended that “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves...we have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.” Whatever the nature of our troubles may be, they are deeply rooted. But a backward glance at history reveals that we have been here before.

Nor are our troubles confined to our shores. Sir Richard Livingstone, once president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, wrote in 1944 on the ferment in England for reform in education. The worries were many, he wrote, including the “obvious and increasing importance of knowledge to life; a sense of the great possibilities of modern civilization and of its disorders and dangers; the perception that our democracy is very ill-educated; a realization that in foreign politics between 1919 and 1939 we [Britain] threw away a great victory with a rapidity and completeness perhaps unexampled in history and that this has been partly due to political ignorance; [and] the need of extending education if equality of opportunity is to be more than a phrase.” The parallels to our own day suggest themselves. But they go further. Livingstone added that the interest given to education in his time was “political and social rather than educational.” Such interest was, in other words, not intellectual. It was not about the mind.

Much the same may be said of contemporary schemes to reform our schools, whether inspired by the Left or Right. Politics has come with a vengeance. But the modern political impulse — the outraged mania for incessant, stupid interference — has little to do with intellectual formation and higher aims. Those dealing the thrusts and jabs today do not seem fit with the calm, disinterested intelligence distinguishing those of true philosophical temperament. Battles rage out there. Partisan angles provocatively to “empower” hitherto neglected groups, but the struggle has become a play for power, not a sober philosophical or cultural inquiry. Whatever be the relative merits of these laboring schemes, we must not fail to note that markedly less light is now thrown on matters of actual learning: how students’ minds will be altered, formed, and filled, and their abilities to think enhanced. This is modern shortsightedness at its most vexatious. The intoxication of politics has poisoned the debate, making it narrow, strained, and fraught with hazards to disputants’ reputations. Dissent carries a high price, especially in the Age of the Open Mind.



But we are still dogged by a practical question: Why do our schools and universities seem to accomplish so little for individual minds? One answer is that instead of doing a few things well, we have tried to do many things and have done them badly. We have striven, historian Jacques Barzun has written, “to make ideal citizens, supertolerant neighbors, agents of world peace, and happy families of folk, at once sexually adept and flawless drivers of cars.” Our schools have been a place where high hopes have gone to die. Education is the *tabula rasa* on which we inscribe all our social desires and expectations. But Isocrates, a Greek rhetorician of the fourth century B.C., got it right. “If all who are engaged in the profession of education,” he wrote, “were willing to state the facts instead of making greater promises than they can possibly fulfill, they would not be in such bad repute with the public.” Many centuries later — a tale that ought to serve as an object lesson for today’s evangelists for the New Age in education — a German reformer out to emend the crusty old classical curriculum was eventually thrown into prison and released only after confessing that he could not deliver what he had promised, for he had promised too much. The Latin stayed.

“Forget Education,” Barzun has written, clearing the board. “Education is a result, a slow growth and hard to judge. Let us talk rather about Teaching and Learning, a joint activity that can be provided for, though as a nation we have lost the knack of it.” We have lost the knack of it as a culture, too. We must limit our promises and rein in our expectations. But first we must define our ideals. We need to describe the ideal type of human being we wish to see around us. Do we wish merely to produce better skilled, smoothly cut cogs in the elaborate machine we now call the “global economy”? Have we finally determined that supertolerant neighbors and sexually adept, flawless drivers are all we can hope to be? Is this the juncture to which 3,000 years of civilized life have brought us?

Somehow we think not. And we sense that the ideals adopted from the previous couple of generations stand pale when compared to those of other ages. History and literature rebuke our self-sufficiency; that’s one reason why we ought to study them. It’s not so much that people of olden times were the finest exemplars of higher humanity, for they too fell short of their ideals, as must all who aspire to higher things — that’s what ideals are for. It’s that we have abandoned those ideals once animating our civilization, refusing to learn them anew with each generation. We have assumed the transfer to be automatic. We have not indeed jettisoned the hope and drive that keep us working for a better world (that’s the good news), but we have forgotten to cultivate ourselves as *individuals*. We drive by autopilot. We measure our Gross National Product, but we are left with a hunch that getting and spending don’t quite make for the fuller life we read about and fear exists somewhere beyond our avarice and ennui.

So we live in an era propitious for a re-ignited conversation not only about pedagogical methods — those quotidian details of teaching and learning — but also about the aims those methods serve. We need to ask first questions. And we need to answer them without political posturing, perhaps a Herculean task in a politically charged age. We need to freshen our vision and, at least momentarily, put our modernity aside and try to see the world as others have seen it. We must try to transcend ourselves. We are not compelled in doing so to reject modern concerns, but simply to view them with new eyes. G. K. Chesterton once said that there are two ways of getting home, and one of them is never to have left. That last path is shut to us; we have strayed too far. We must circumnavigate the entire world until we arrive where we started and, as T. S. Eliot wrote, “know the place for the first time.” We need to shore up our foundations. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*

But I have gone further than I am fit to go. For this is not a case for educational reform of the garden variety. We need sway no public officials. I have happily abandoned hope for change in the sphere. Yet we can lengthen our prospect, broaden our view, and clear a path back home. We need simply to recommit ourselves individually to a rich and humane heritage long neglected, the effects of which neglect appear in a diminished, where not impoverished, intellectual and cultural life. This

not to be another tiresome case for “educational standards” merely confirming assumptions of the intelligentsia about what must be known. Let them crunch numbers as they may. We must ask not only what ought to be known by educated people, but — given what *can* be known — what should be taught in our schools and what left to acquire outside school doors. (It’s of paramount importance, for example, whether vocational courses like computer training, or “lifestyle” courses like driver’s education and home economics, should be placed on par with the purer — because cultural or theoretical — subjects like French and physics.)

Given the world’s fixation on technology and all things financially gainful, that “grand old fortifying classical curriculum” requires not an uncritical re-adoption (of which there’s no chance anyway) but a sympathetic reappraisal, if for no other reason than that so many men and women of centuries past who established and refined the standards by which we live today held that gem in such high esteem. Thus can we regain some sense of history and our place along its timeline. Gratitude, according to Chesterton, is the truest sign of happiness in individuals. A safe corollary seems then to be that a happier society would feel a debt to the past and its treasures, and this debt would be paid gladly by those taught in the ways of respect and humility. For those without respect and humility stand to these riches as those without a knowledge of geometry once stood before the gates of Plato’s Academy: they are forever excluded. Such respect (if not always such humility) classical education fostered for centuries. It lent an anchoring to intellectual life and provided all educated people, as we now say, with a common set of references. Or, to switch metaphors, it placed a true north on our cultural compass. It maintained a horizon. We could see where we were.

But before we trudge forward, let’s clarify a few key words and terms.



Just what is *classical education* nowadays? We find that, in an uninstructed age, the old regime needs not only defending but also defining. Once classical education pointed to an elite course of instruction based upon Greek and Latin, the two great languages of the classical world. But it also delved into the history, philosophy, literature, and art of the Greek and Roman worlds, affording over time to the more perspicacious devotees a remarkably high degree of cultural understanding, a understanding that endured and marked the learner for life. Classical education was classic immersion. Students in the great and exclusive Public Schools of England were once made to learn far more about the archons of Greek city-states and emperors of Rome, and commit to memory far more lines of Greek and Roman poetry and drama, than they ever had to learn about Tudors and Stuarts about Chaucer and Shakespeare. But the languages never took second seat: mastering them came first, and doing so became the crowning achievement of a classical education. Why? Because knowledge and information were not quite enough.

Classical education did not set itself to instilling knowledge alone; it also sought to polish and refine. And neither rigor nor beauty in one’s use of language obtained firmly without Greek and Latin. Together they provided both a mental gymnastic and a training in taste.

Today we use the term licentiously. We apply “classic” or “classical” to anything we believe to be excellent and universal. Once I was asked my field of study. “Classics,” I replied. To which my interlocutor responded, “Oh, you mean Dickens, Melville, and all that?” — a response common and understandable now. *Sic semper verbis*. Also, the field of classics, while still signifying the original meaning (Greek and Latin) to most of the intellectually inclined, has been extended to embrace the study of the classical world innocent of the languages, a sense we readily recognize in university course catalogues as “Classical Civ.” and “Classical Literature,” both customarily indicating (often fine) courses of readings in translation. The chains have loosened.

Thus nowadays may classical education refer to something not linked to the classical world at all — never mind the languages — and get equated with what might once have been called simple traditional or orthodox education. This is schooling based on “classics,” on books of the Great Tradition, an education that serves to inform us of the best works of our civilization and to provide us with models for spotting ethical and aesthetic norms. These two functions the valuable “Great Books” programs try to perform. Used in this way, classical education describes the quest for what has also been called a “liberal education” or, more particularly, an education in the “humanities.” And no legions of well-intending home schoolers rush to put dibs on the term and bask in the light of the glory they believe it to exude. To many home schoolers, “classical education” simply means the opposite of whatever is going on in those dreaded public schools. We can sympathize with them. I will only say to all these good people that extending “classical” to mark an approach or course of study without reference to Greek and Latin seems an unnecessarily promiscuous usage. But I am afraid we’re stuck with it.

Here I trust that the reader will allow me the archaism of reverting to the older definition of classical education as a curriculum grounded upon — if not strictly limited to — Greek, Latin, and the study of the civilization from which they arose. For though my allies have appropriated the term for good purposes, I can find no other that carries the weight of classical study as does “classics,” the pursuit of which results, if we’re lucky, in a “classical education.” To use any other term would also break my rule of respecting the past, not to mention causing a semantic severance with generations of men and women who used the term quite differently and, I think, more accurately. I’ll stick to the antique ways.



Mount Parnassus, a limestone mass hovering over the ancient shrine of Delphi, has stood as the prime symbol of poetic inspiration and perfection since the dawn of the West. It fixed anxious eyes on the heavens. The Castalian spring, being a sacred source of life-sustaining water, trickled far below. The hushed tones of ritual echoed from its slopes. But over time it came to embody those things which man, at his best, wishes — and ought to wish — to achieve. It became a sign of his better, divine-inspired self. To “climb Parnassus” was to strive after the favor of Apollo and the nine muses — Calliope, Erato, Clio, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polymnia, Thalia, Terpsichore, Urania — ensconced up there, forever unseen. While representing the unattainable for most pilgrims, Parnassus also pointed to those treasures bestowed by the muses upon the faithful and diligent ones who wait and work. Among those gifts most sought was the civilizing, cultivating boon of eloquence, of right and beautiful expression. Throughout the centuries to come, this forbidding image got lifted from its geographic and mythological settings to be transposed, in the wake of Renaissance Humanism, as an emblem of linguistic flair. “Climbing Parnassus” eventually became a code for the painfully glorious exertions of Greek and Latin.

The hard, precipitous path of classical education ideally led not to knowledge alone, but to the cultivation of mind and spirit. Knowledge did not, in and of itself, justify the sweat. The climb was meant to transform one’s intellectual and aesthetic nature as well. The classical course held sway over the Western mind for centuries, right up until three or four generations ago. Much of our intellectual history from the Dark Ages, through the Renaissance, and on to the modern world witnessed the assiduous spadework of clerics and lay scholars alike reaching back to the ancient world to retrieve, preserve, and propagate the wealth of learning and experience it held. And the classical languages enshrining that wealth had to be taught. Thus a classical education was the queen of all scholastic endeavors; it constituted the original humanities curriculum. Whatever hodgepodge of diverse and

disconnected topics humanistic studies have become — their emaciated children now simply called “the humanities” — they were once, first and last, a prolonged inquiry into Greek and Roman achievements in literature, history, thought, and art. That path, as I hope to show, is still a valid one to tread.

Yet this too we must admit all these centuries later. Classical claims, while bolstered by tradition and intellectual coherence alike, cannot be advanced with proof. They are not the stuff of Venn diagrams. We cannot cash them at a bank. A classical education is different in kind to the training of a technician, where the trained man demonstrates his training with a testable skill. This, we may say, is *training* in the narrow sense, not an education — and many people today, without admitting it, prefer training to education, and they must have their heart’s desire. Much of the value of classics we must take on the witness of mellowed experience. Arguing this case now is partly an impressionistic exercise; it always has been. A firm knowledge of the classical languages, history, and culture will not of itself create virtue. It cannot shine a light into corners we have elected to keep dark, nor into those that cannot be illumined. But this knowledge can form the mind and light a path to understanding. For it is noble to rediscover and attend to the voices of the past. We ignore them to our peril and to the peril of all those whom we would presume to teach. Without a finely tuned and oft-nourished sense of the past, both near and distant, we have no culture.



And immediately we are thrown into another thicket. What do we mean by these mushy words *culture* and *cultural*? This ubiquitous idea too requires clarifying, and maybe a little fumigating. I do not use these words exclusively as we hear them bandied about by many who rant from the ranks of the politically concerned when discussing ethnicity and “multiculturalism,” that is, merely to describe group identities. Everyone has a “culture” now: we have African-American culture, Hispanic culture, corporate culture, youth culture. This use of the word hails from the halls of anthropology. If only there it had stayed. But it slithered forth from the laboratory to infect us all. “From the anthropologists,” Barzun has explained, “the public picked up the word *culture* in [this] overarching meaning, and then proceeded to reapply it for various purposes. For example, the artist is ‘conditioned by his culture’ (meaning social circumstances); he also fights against his culture (meaning certain beliefs and mores).” Here was a word hot for serving up on a steaming platter to the over-degreed and half-educated. It not only exfoliates before our eyes; it excuses ignorance and inoculates the ignorant from any responsibility to know anything beyond their kith and kin. Culture now “makes neurotics — they are the ones who can’t fight back. Not long after such twists and turns the term *culture* began to split like an atom, and we have had to cope with the two cultures, the counterculture, ethnic culture, and any number of subcultures. Culture now is any chunk of social reality you like or dislike. Occasionally I use it in this its sociological sense, though I trust rarely enough and judiciously.

While I do not eschew this newer sense of the word entirely, I wish to restore the older parlance a place in our social lexicon. Therefore, my use of *culture* is often unapologetically evaluative. It refers to lower and higher, better and best. A “cultural” achievement elevates. It improves. Once we could talk unselfconsciously of symphony concerts, opera performances, museum exhibitions, and poetry readings as cultural events. They did not merely entertain; they exposed us to something better than we could find elsewhere. And we hoped that such exposure would make us better as well — healthier intellectually and emotionally. Now, of course, this older idea is not quite safe, or at least not safely expressed, because it attributes higher qualities to some people and things and not to others (“Who are *you* to tell me what’s good?”) Mozart’s music is not better than rap, just different, we say today. It’s the great democratic hedge. Here the anthropological invades a realm properly guided by

the aesthetic, perverting both thought and sentiment. But some judgments cannot be made by a show of hands. ~~The majority doesn't always rule. Nor in some matters — and here's the rub—should~~ Classical education was thought to *improve* the learner, not simply to make him more knowledgeable or tolerant or mentally skillful, but better and stronger, just as there survives today a residual belief that one who has, say, read and digested all of Shakespeare is better, more insightful, than one who has not.

Perhaps this very attribution of quality to those equipped with classical learning poses the most formidable barrier to its return. We talk no more about “better people.” No one wishes — and certainly do not — to revert to rigid class lines, to a time when only the well-to-do learned Greek and Latin and all they have to offer, leaving the lower classes to learn the trades and mop the floors. (Again, no chance of that.) But neither should we confuse contingency with necessity. That which may cater to the privileged in one period might prime the aspirations of democracy in another. Nonetheless, we ought not to shy away from confronting views of former ages simply because they don't conform to current notions, for doing so exposes us to the most blinding of parochialisms: the glaring assumption that one's own time, particularly our own with all its hypersensitivities, is always right.

So here *culture* often refers to *high culture*. It's about cultivation and refinement, about what makes one thought or act or expression better than another. This kind of culture embodies, as I shall repeat later in the words of fairer lights, “the conscious ideal of human perfection” and “the habituation to a vision of greatness.” I once heard a tweedy, bespectacled professor of archaeology pause during a lecture on primitive peoples to remind his class that when he spoke of culture, he did not refer — holding to his eye an imaginary monocle — “to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.” Sometimes I do mean it that way. Culture is that which climbs high on the scale of human achievement, is not easily apprehensible to all, and requires patient thought and sympathy. We are not born into culture; we acquire it. And we can lose it.

Climbing Parnassus once helped to form the unformed mind. The arduous ascent fostered intellectual and aesthetic culture within those who had endured the strain. It helped to bring mental and even emotional order out of chaos. And a classical training still provides the surest footing for the educated mind and a high perch from which to view other periods and nations. The foundations of the modern world are viewed more competently from this height. Poetry, drama, democracy, idealism, scientific curiosity, and so much else furnishing our minds are better grasped, and better judged. We drift without classics, floating on our own deracinated, exiguous islands. And we become fodder for demagogues. We need not a revolution, but a restoration.

The classical pursuit fosters gratitude for the fruits of the past and feeds the sense that we stand on the shoulders of giants. The student of history gains a means of judging other times seriously and fairly. He learns to see that a civilized culture is a delicately poised edifice, a fragile creation, erected with monumental exertion, yet easily destroyed. The historian Christopher Dawson once wrote that culture — in the older sense here — is “an artificial product. It is like a city that has been built up laboriously by the work of successive generations, not a jungle which has grown up spontaneously by the blind pressure of natural forces. It is the essence of culture that it is communicated and acquired, and although it is inherited by one generation from another, it is a social not a biological inheritance, a tradition of learning, an accumulated capital of knowledge.” And one, we may add, always in danger of perishing. The Greeks dreamed, in the words of Werner Jaeger, of “building a state so skillfully that it might keep strength and spirit in perpetual equipoise,” while recognizing that “even the most solid of earthly powers must vanish into the air, and that only the seemingly brittle splendor of the spirit can long endure.” The classical world is a richly instructive model of civilized life. We are bound as heirs to ask anew what made it great, with all its faults, and why it expired, with all its strengths. We

knows? We may find ourselves on the decks of our own listing ship someday.

This journey takes us high into the uplands of thought. Whitehead claimed all modern philosophy to be mere footnotes to Plato. An expedition into the classical world will lead us to philosophy, the highest of human quests after the spiritual, and a pursuit Plutarch once called “the head and font of all education.” We see philosophy wooed in those days when she still held a link, and perhaps a key, to wisdom. Matters of ethics, morality, and politics jostle as the *vita beata*, the good or happy life, delineated, as it so supremely was during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. in Greece, an age that according to Livingstone, “had to face the questions which — now veiled now visible, now removed now insistent — constitute the eternal human problem: what should men believe about life, how should they live it, in what state of society can the good life be best lived, [and] how can we create such a state?”

B. L. Gildersleeve, an American classicist who flourished a century ago, once said that while, for the ancients, the actual conduct of life took precedence over its contemplation — that is, to do rather than thinking about it — still the wisdom informing the good and fruitful life came of contemplation and of humble learning. This is why we should sup at their table. “It seems to be impossible,” Gildersleeve said, “to live in constant communion with the first minds of antiquity and not imbibe something of their spirit of moderation, of self-control, of cautious wisdom, that breathes through their counsels,” for “there is no department of human thought or endeavor in which the counsel of antiquity is not directly or indirectly valuable.” Even if all one has gained from a classical education were to be forgotten in later life, anyone trained, at least for a time, to view the world as the Greeks and Romans saw it may learn to ask pregnant questions. And even if the ancient answers be rejected, the student — of whatever age — will know what they are, and approach his own world with freshened vision, one no longer blinkered by ideology and the reigning fashion. He would have a liberal, because liberating education indeed. No longer would he be imprisoned exclusively within the velvet walls of his own world’s preoccupations and fetishes. No longer would he be just and only a child of his own time. He might even partake of the divine.



Classical education again needs defending. We labor, after all, under the modern and, for that reason, rarely challenged belief that the classical world and its works have little to teach anyone but specialists, scholars, and teachers of classics. Let there be no mistake. For well over a century of classicists themselves have helped to create this fix. They have encouraged classical teaching to emulate the (necessarily) precisian methods of technicians. They have tried to habituate classics to the halls of science and, in doing so, have ignored or obscured those humanizing balms many of us believe classics to apply. If indeed classical study is to consist merely, and for everyone, in nothing but memorizing grammar or toting up the number of slaves lugging amphorae in the Athens of Pericles, then truly classics has become a domain of specialists only, warranting no more — though no less — reverence and respect than any other worthwhile scholarly pursuit. This is the way many professional classicists would have it be, to which we can say only that they have their reward.

Here I should draw a distinction between classical *scholarship* and classical *education*. They are not the same thing. Classical scholarship inhabits a province in which few of us are equipped to travel, either by training or temperament, as scholarship requires not only devotion to a subject, but also entails years of painstaking preparation and the fine tuning of precise judgment. Fine classical scholars, like fine nuclear physicists, are rare birds. Would that they were a little rarer. As with nuclear physicists, few are needed in a healthy, intelligent society. Classical *education*, on the other hand, comes as the result of a classical course of study, usually lasting several years, often, though not

necessarily, through one's undergraduate days. Perhaps classical education isn't as profound or as exacting as classical scholarship — though one may suspect that many tenured classics professors today would be hard pressed to compose Greek iambics the way classically trained adolescents once could. Classical education aims at larger numbers; it's fit to serve more people. Some of those blessed with the benefits of an early classical training may be well suited to the scholarly life, even if they do not opt for it. Nonetheless they will have been transformed by that training. I don't dismiss the importance of high scholarship; I owe too much to too many scholars, and there can be no classical education without classical scholarship. Indeed I would hope that a select few of the talented would be attracted to the academy to teach the languages, edit texts, elucidate ideas, dig shards, and think great thoughts. But it is primarily classical education — Parnassus — not scholarship, I argue for in this essay. The world could do with fewer scholars and more cultivated people.

If classical study is to survive to guide our intellectual life, we must reassert its cultural significance and value. Classics must make a difference not just in the way we think, but in the way we live. Its humanistic roots cut in an era hounded by utilitarian demands, classics has found itself in recent decades jockeying to justify its place in the cluttered academic catalogues to a technological and driven age. Ours is a time and place where many have decided, through ignorance or neglect, that the culture, whatever it is, will somehow take care of itself.

Yet the Greeks and Romans taught us, by edict and example, the dangers of cultural complacency. Culture does not breathe on its own; it is preserved by those convinced of its value. This is not a new gospel. It is simply true. The classical vision has been renewed time and again down the long centuries after being threatened with extinction by prophets touting their New Jerusalems. But for students of history, the burden of proof must lie on the shoulders of those who would deny that vision's value. The case for classical education is not airtight, nor can it be; it contains too many provisos. But it deserves another hearing. Homage has been paid to it before our time, and by finer minds.



Lastly for a delicate matter. And here I part company with many apologists for classical education, especially in modern America. Greek and Latin, this unique and rarefied base of education, revered so long by the best and brightest, is not for everyone. The tireless study of classics has always been — put it bluntly — an elite pursuit, a privilege of a comparative few. We should not skirt this fact. Classical education must not be patronizingly defended, must not be sold, for its “democratizing” traits the way some of our allies spearheading the “Great Books” have done. These traits exist — knowledge and understanding and taste all serve splendidly the interests of a democratic people — but they are accidental, not essential. Classics serves no class. Tyrants and oligarchs can quote Cicero to their hearts' content. Critics of classical education have, in one sense, been right for centuries: classics is, in at least one inescapable sense, *elitist*. But so what? We may admit this, while also saying that this does not tell the whole story. Anyone with a modicum of talent and energy can take on large dollops that classics offers; it is a mansion with many rooms and corridors. But the indisputable fact is that those of high culture have perennially constituted those few at the top who, through their gifts and privileges, have influenced disproportionately the larger society of which they are members.

Still, I believe that the size of this minority as a proportion of the larger literate populace need not be infinitesimal. While initiates into classical learning have always been small in number, the number was always too small. Talent is no respecter of social status. No one with the requisite abilities need be left out. Parnassus can be scaled by anyone with intelligence and curiosity who is also possessed of a doggedness for detail. With so much of the climbing gear available now to the disciplined autodidact in the forms of books, films, and computer software, the vistas have never been

accessible to so many. Despite other disadvantages of a world unfriendly to the rigors and elevation of classical learning, we can in this day bypass the oversights and soft ignorance of the educational “experts” who have maintained a stranglehold on our schools for generations. We have the liberty of free agents. We should use it.

Finally, a concession. Many wonder whether the classical languages themselves make for an absolutely essential ingredient in a classical education. Can someone be “classically educated” without a reading knowledge of Greek and Latin? This sticky question, despite dogmatic claims on both sides, should not be answered glibly. One must probe a little to discover precisely what kind of knowledge the questioner wishes to gain. The judgment of history is No. And certainly I argue for the full package, the deluxe deal — declensions, conjugations, syntax, lexicons, verse exercises, and all. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that we can procure, with enterprise, certain intellectual and cultural benefits of classics by means other than a formal classical schooling. Not all knowledge worth having need be worn with scholastic exactitude. Acute intelligence matched to an active imagination can do wonders. Many paths can lead us home. If we can say anything with hopeful certainty about the future of classical education, it is that there will be many steep and dusty roads back to Rome.

Bent Twigs and Trees Inclined

Classical education, that odd and antiquated custom setting generations of bewildered youth suffering the inky travails of learning Greek and Latin, two languages they would never speak, can hardly be defended or even explained without a long look at the nature of liberal education. Nor can we neglect to tap the roots of that distant descendent of humanist learning, the modern “humanities,” where we now find classics nestling obscurely in college catalogues. For at the pinnacle of both sat the classical curriculum. But while granting that, once upon a time, classical learning might have borne some relation to professional skills, surely, we think, it has failed to remain useful in an age no longer requiring the services of scholastic monks, courtiers, and imperial civil servants. So does this curriculum remain at all relevant in a world that measures success in stock averages and megabytes? For as classical scholar Gilbert Murray once conceded, “Even if we neglect merely material things and take as our standard the actual achievements of [the Greeks] in conduct and knowledge, the average clerk who goes to town daily, idly glancing at his morning newspaper, is probably a better behaved and infinitely better informed person than the average Athenian who sat spellbound at the tragedies of Aeschylus.”

That clerk cannot be too badly off; he gets along. And if education is not to promote material success, what should it do? Must we lend any legitimacy to an older idea that education exists primarily to form the inner man as well as to impart those all-important skills for making a living? Have we in fact grown out of that ideal? Or have we fallen so far short of it that we cannot even spy its majestic peaks?

We praise liberal education zealously. It’s a term of marble grandeur. But few of us know what it means. It has become grist for commencement addresses and high-flown commentary expounding the true mission of our schools and universities, best used by people removed from the rough and tumble of life. As with pornography, we cannot define it, but we think we know it when we see it. Liberal education rests comfortably in a haze where it no longer calls us to commit to anything exemplary, hard, or heroic. For some, liberal education has become synonymous with the “humanities,” that free-for-all of open curricula where the dazed and confused spend irreplaceable years browsing among survey courses, taking ant bites out of whatever nuggets randomly lie among the crumbs, learning little or nothing in particular. The humanities provide a direction for the directionless, a path for the pathless, certifying ignorance in the guise of a “knowledge” too easily acquired. This wandering listlessness can envelop teachers of the liberal arts as well, the average figure being, according to Mark Van Doren, too often “neither lay nor learned, but a bored fellow who mixes prescription wherein all tastes are flat or bad. So much knowledge ‘about’ one thing and another, and never the tincture of wisdom.” To others liberal education has become wedded to the propounding of social grievances — “freedom studies,” we might call them. To others still it marks an expenditure of time and effort largely wasted when a technological world wants technologists. Liberal education, in short,

means today whatever we wish it to mean in all our idealistic or disputatious moods. It is like a loose constitution, open to any fanciful interpretation of the moment. But some contemporary thinkers have tried to spy its essence.

Philosopher Leo Strauss once defined a liberal education, nebulously, as one “in culture or toward culture,” in doing so drawing on the ancient metaphor of agricultural husbandry. “‘Culture’ means, chiefly the cultivation of the mind, the taking care and improving of the native faculties of the mind in accordance with the nature of the mind. Just as the soil needs cultivators of the soil, [so] the mind needs teachers.” Further, liberal education “consists in reminding oneself of human excellence, of human greatness,” and in “listening to the conversation among the greatest minds” as heard through the channel of great books, an idea owing more than a little to Matthew Arnold’s ideal of culture and trumpeting forth the “best that has been thought and said.” A. Bartlett Giamatti, a staunch defender of the principles of liberal education as he saw them, described it — again, not too clearly — as an “attitude of the mind toward knowledge the mind explores and creates. Such education occurs when you pursue knowledge because you are motivated to experience and absorb what comes of thinking — thinking about the traditions of our common heritage in all its forms, thinking about new patterns and designs...whether in philosophic texts or financial markets or chemical combinations — thinking in order to create new knowledge that others will then explore.” Here the *new* presides; knowledge is not to be learned so much as created. Indeed, it exists almost for what it produces.

Broad claims like these typify the rhetoric of liberal education, and such definitions can be both revealing and helpful. But somehow they smell of formaldehyde; they seem just a bit sterile. We are still daunted and challenged, though, by Everett Dean Martin’s spirited declaration many decades ago that the best education is “the organization of knowledge into human excellence.” An education, he said, is not “the mere possession of knowledge, but the ability to reflect upon it and grow in wisdom. Liberal education ought to aim not just at furnishing the mind with serviceable knowledge and information, nor even at habituating the mind to rational methods, but at leading it to wisdom, to a quality of knowledge tempered by experience and imbued with understanding. It should, in a word, humanize. Unguided by such an aim, education loses its true character and finds itself degraded to servile training for the world’s daily drudgeries. Liberal education civilizes. It transforms us. We are better for having run its course.

Nonetheless, these flourishes of eloquence glow with the light of dying embers. The case must be made, but hope for the cause has long since waned.

We lose an opportunity if we accept defeat too quickly. Not in decades perhaps — at a time when our schools have lost the capacity either to kindle a passion for history, or even to teach it intelligently — has there been a better time to search out our roots and recover our identity as citizens of the West by reasserting an intellectual training that reminds us who we are, where we came from, and the heights to which we have aspired, and to which we might aspire again. We have a large and many-branched family tree to trace. So before we explore the history of a *classical* education, let’s examine further the meaning and growth of *liberal* education and the subsidiary curriculum known as the *humanities*, winging a few theoretical flights along the way.



Take a classroom example. Imagine we are teachers trying to define liberal education for students. We may do so by shaving off its political barnacles and drilling down to its etymological source. We may say that “liberal” derives from a Latin word for freedom. “So what makes an education liberal?” we may plead, our target in the scope. “It’s an education that makes us free, an education that liberates us.” Then we roll in the big guns. Robert Hutchins once explained that the “liberal arts are the arts

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