
The Humanities and Substance

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Defining the Humanities: How Rediscovering a Tradition Can Improve Our Schools, With a Curriculum for Today's Students, by Robert E. Proctor. *Second Edition. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. 264 pp. \$35 cloth. \$15.95 paper.*

"For one man writing is the beginning of insanity," wrote Petrarch, "for another, the way out of it." The recent spate of books on educational reform can be divided into either of these categories according to one's values. Although there is consensus among them that the ivory tower is under siege by a variety of intractable enemies of Western civilization—usually liberals, feminists, and multiculturalists—no clear battle plan has emerged. Instead there is name-calling or nostalgia for a mythical time when the academy was an unassailable fortress of unquestioned authority.

Consequently the reissue of Robert E. Proctor's calm and carefully argued book has come at the right time. Written in a scholarly rather than polemical style, the book debates the is-

sue of a structured curriculum without resorting to jargon or rancor. Having originally published the book in 1988 as *Education's Great Amnesia: Reconsidering the Humanities from Petrarch to Freud*, Proctor changed his diagnosis when he realized that "you can't forget what you never knew"(ix). Although the humanities were once synonymous with the study of the languages and culture of ancient Greece and Rome, he found that the term now refers to a grab-bag of college courses without any historical connection. Proctor deplors the general notion of the humanities as "a group of disciplines, juxtaposed to other groups, such as the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts, and with no particular connection to Western civilization"(ix). Hence his new title, *Defining the Humanities: How Rediscov-*

ering a Tradition Can Improve Our Schools, With a Curriculum for Today's Students. A professor of Italian at Connecticut College, Proctor stresses the "precise content" of the original *studia humanitatis* which arose in fifteenth-century Italy "as a cultural revolution calling for the imitation of classical, as opposed to medieval, Latin, and for the study of Roman, and to a lesser extent Greek, literature, history, and moral philosophy as guides to individual and collective behavior" (xxiv).

Published a decade before the battle of the books was in full force, Proctor's recommendations can now be reevaluated in light of the many volumes on curriculum revision that have followed. In a new preface he distinguishes himself from those reformers who would structure the curriculum around a canon of texts designated "classics" by aesthetic rather than historical criteria. Shakespeare's works, for example, are "classics" in the former sense but not in the latter. For this reason he rejects the "Great Books" approach advocated by William J. Bennett ("To Reclaim a Legacy: Text of Report on the Humanities in Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 29, November 28, 1984); Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994); and David Denby (*Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). While Proctor prefers "Great Books" curricula to "the fragmented, incoherent programs now in

place," he is convinced that "studying the tradition of the humanities is an even better approach to general education because it forces us to think historically, and thus critically, about our cultural inheritance, including Great Books programs themselves" (xi).

The masterpiece theory of education, based on the belief that contact with great minds will beget more great thinkers, is not easy to justify in the present intellectual environment. Because the notion of "greatness" is too subjective to define and the number of worthy authors too large for a single foundation program to encompass, a canon will necessarily reflect personal tastes. Assertions of the universality of particular books inevitably meet with resistance from students who do not identify with the authors' points of view. Moreover, the presumption that the texts that have inspired me will inspire others generates resentment because it denies the historically conditioned nature of individual experience.

To his credit, Proctor does more than offer his favorite texts for universal consumption. He has designed a curriculum with historical and thematic guidelines but has wisely avoided a dogmatic insistence on specific texts. He wants to restore the historical perspective that is lacking in the typical "menu" structure of foundation programs in which students select credit hours in courses that fit their schedules and tastes. Proctor is right that such ahistorical curricula deprive students of a fundamental awareness of the historical continuity

of knowledge. Furthermore, without the shared experience of a common set of texts, meaningful discussion becomes impossible and the university becomes a Tower of Babel rather than an intellectual community. From this historical disorientation flow the moral torpor, helpless resignation and lack of creativity that characterize the contemporary response to social problems.

The solution, according to Proctor, is to give students historical alternatives to contemporary concepts of self and society by introducing them to the tradition of the humanities. "The Renaissance humanists can give us the courage and inspiration to do as they did," he writes, "turn back to classical antiquity in an effort to understand and evaluate the moral and intellectual life of the present" (175). Proctor's interdisciplinary curriculum, however, would not be restricted to either Renaissance or ancient literary works. He proposes a history of the ideas that have inspired the literature, philosophy, and sciences in the Western world since the Renaissance.

By starting his curriculum in the Renaissance rather than antiquity, Proctor identifies himself as a humanist rather than a classicist. The growing number of educators calling for a classical revival in the schools think students should begin their course of study at the beginning of Western civilization. In *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), authors Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath distill the classics to the Greek tradition, which they believe "alone inaugu-

rates the Western experience" (88). While one cannot argue with their chronology, certainly no responsible historian would deny the enormous contribution of the Roman civilization to all subsequent cultures of Europe and the United States (the dome of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., if nothing else, should have brought this point home). An omission of this magnitude represents just the type of truncated vision of the past that a classical education should prevent. A balance between the two pillars of antiquity is restored by E. Christian Kopff in *The Devil Knows Latin: Why America Needs the Classical Tradition* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1999). He recommends that Latin and Greek be restored to the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools.

Proctor's ideal program would also begin with high school students' acquiring "a working knowledge of Greek and Latin" which would prepare them for reading bilingual texts in college (197). While he agrees with the classicists that the "crisis of the humanities" (xxiv) came about when the Greeks and Romans were exiled from the curriculum, he stresses that the idea of a classical education was a creation of the Renaissance humanists and should be rediscovered through the filter of their texts. His book is designed to make this point. Part One describes "The Birth of the Humanities in the Renaissance"; Part Two analyses the forces from within and without that brought about "The Death of the Humanities in the Modern World"; and "Part Three, "Look-

ing Forward,” argues for the relevance of the ancients for the moderns and includes a model curriculum for undergraduates. In the second edition Proctor also discusses an undergraduate program he designed for Connecticut College in 1989 which teaches the humanities in the context of international studies.

Since students today are unaware of “the radical differences between ancient and modern categories of thought” (177), they can learn about both traditions simultaneously by beginning their studies with the Italian Renaissance. Reading the works of early humanists, such as Petrarch and Leonardo Bruni, will recreate the shock of historical self-consciousness that accompanied the initial encounter with antiquity. Petrarch and his fellow humanists realized that “the ancient Greek and Roman experience of a fundamental harmony and symmetry between the soul, the State and the universe” (23) had been lost with the fall of their civilizations. The self that evolved in its place stood in spiritual isolation from the cosmos and the polis. Lost in the dark wood of material existence, the medieval soul sought salvation to transcend the burdens of earthly life in order to return to its original heavenly abode. The rediscovery of the ancients taught the humanists that theirs was not the best of all possible worldviews but one among many; that the self and the State are artifacts fashioned by will as much as destiny, that Nature is not foreign to us, it is our homeland. Armed with these ancient ideas, the humanists remade themselves, their

culture and their institutions.

This cultivation of the inner life of the individual, “a self-consciously unique and autonomous center of cognition, volition and feeling” (72), is the unifying theme of Proctor’s curriculum. His ideal education would enable students to create their characters from the inside out rather than be empty vessels filled by the existing culture; to find their own spring of “wisdom and virtue” when society’s has run dry; to withstand fate and to claim a place in the community. This noble ambition will no doubt be scoffed at by skeptics and criticized by narrow-minded pragmatists who reduce education to vocational training, but it is not a pipe dream. History teaches us that the European world was reborn in the image of the ancients not once but at least three times: the Carolingian Renaissance in the eighth century, the Italian Renaissance in the fifteenth century and the Neoclassical movement of the eighteenth century. In each of these eras, the revival of ancient values inspired the imitation of the behavior that embodied those values, and a culture-wide media campaign in the fine arts and literature disseminated those values. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Neoclassicism was the creation of a new nation based on the model of the Roman Republic: the United States of America. If, like Petrarch or Jefferson, we emulate those Greeks and Romans whose “extensive” sense of self was identified with the social and natural orders, we can also improve our institutions.

Renaissance humanism was a reaction against the intellectual and political oppression of individuals by the aristocracy, the university and the Church. These institutions were eventually revolutionized by the humanists. Why then do we need another renaissance? Proctor believes that modernity—with its denigration of the past, sterile methodologies and pervasive materialism—has brought us to our present position of moral paralysis and cultural stagnation. In an economy ruled by “the bottom line,” profit is the only value. Morality declines because the corporation man of a capitalist society feels no personal responsibility for the crimes of management while the managers deflect responsibility to the “system.”

In the “methodological fads” of the university culture, in particular, Proctor sees a “striking similarity between our time and the period in which the humanities emerged” (25). Like their thirteenth- and fourteenth-century counterparts, the new scholastics place more value on the methods of research than the subject. Similarly, they distract themselves from addressing the critical issues of the time by engaging in an exclusive conversation that is neither useful nor intelligible outside of the academy. “The creation of mathematical models without empirical data in the social sciences, and deconstructionism in the literary disciplines, are examples of total intellectual permissiveness” in Proctor’s opinion; “anything goes, because there are no pragmatic criteria, as there are in the natural sciences, to test a particular theory or in-

terpretation” (148). By following the example of the humanists who rejected the tedious mental exercises of the scholastics and restored substance to discourse, we can revitalize learning. “Choosing the specific books and authors that students will read is vastly more important than deciding how they will read them,” Proctor asserts, “just as choosing the food we eat is more important to our health than deciding what utensils we will eat it with” (144).

If we are, psychologically, what we read, then reading Petrarch may prove more useful to us than reading Freud. Proctor argues that Freud’s theory of the unconscious effectively replaced the tradition of *Bildung* with “a technique of self-analysis notable for its tolerance of ambivalence and fluidity of commitment” (115). Although Freud’s theories formulated rather than caused what Proctor calls “the pathological narcissism of our time,” the self-referential process of psychoanalysis only exacerbates the problem. “One can ponder, study, even brood over the image in the mirror,” Proctor observes, “but he can never emulate it” (110). Consequently, psychoanalytic theory tends to undermine historical consciousness:

Freud, good scientist that he tried to be, arrived at an understanding of the human psyche which is essentially ahistorical: like the human body itself, the fundamental structure of the human psyche, along with the laws of its operations, remains the same throughout history. This belief has given rise to the academic subdiscipline “psychohistory”,

which is based upon the assumption that what we know about human psychology today can help us discover the motivations of human actions in the past. . . . [I]n seeking to understand Petrarch's transformation of the ancients, we discover that they thought of their individual lives as part of the whole world of being, while the only whole we can envision lies within. We are thus led to the realization that our own sense of self is historically unique, that it is not biologically determined. . . (83).

It is perplexing to find Proctor, after having written the above, stating that a curriculum derived from the tradition of the humanities does not specifically address the "problems of women and minorities" because the contemporary relevance of this tradition concerns issues which transcend gender and race, such as the nature of civic virtue, the uses of historical consciousness, the relationship of mind and nature, and the mystery of human existence (188). If our sense of self is "historically unique" and "not biologically determined," then there is no transcendent human nature that partakes of civic virtue; there are only historically unique individuals acting within a specific cultural context. Feminists have argued for centuries that biology is not destiny, that the essentialist theories of the female self are designed within cultures to justify the exclusion of women from civic life. The role of gender in society is not a contemporary problem extraneous to the humanist tradition; it is a product of that tradition. The modern

feminist consciousness emerged in 1405 with Christine de Pisan's *City of Women*, the first foray in the battle of the sexes. The revival of antiquity prompted the humanists to write treatises reappraising the nature of women and their place in society: Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, Alberti's *On the Family*, and a section of Castiglione's *The Courtier* are a few examples that attest to a rising controversy concerning women's social status.

The problematic nature of the relationship between the sexes is the earliest theme in Western civilization. Consider Homer: the plots of both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are driven by women. The Trojan War is fought over a woman, and the outcome is determined by the conflict between Greek warriors over the possession of the Trojan women they claim as prizes. But Homer's female characters are not all trophies: Penelope and Clytemnestra are active players who determine the course of events. The psychological power of sexual relationships is one of the profound insights of the ancient Greeks which can be studied in their epics, plays, lyric poetry and philosophy. If we included gender as a content of the humanist curriculum, we could raise the level of discourse above the tautological methods of gender theory. Wouldn't our male and female students benefit from the knowledge that ancient societies also had to come to terms with the issues of gender politics and human sexuality? Although the humanities may not be able to address the specific problems

of contemporary minorities, the humanist tradition can provide historical perspective in this area as well. The Greeks and Romans employed the term barbarian to designate foreigners as social inferiors, a concept useful in justifying conquest and enslavement of captive peoples. The institution of slavery was endemic to Greece and Rome and coexisted with the democratic institutions and rule of law that we admire. The moral and political aspects of slavery were widely discussed in antiquity, notably by Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Zeno, Varro, Tacitus and the former slaves Aesop, Epictetus, Menippus, and Terence. The bibliographies compiled by M. I. Finley in *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* (1968) and W. L. Westermann's *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (1955) provide lists of sources that could serve as appropriate reading for the course on moral philosophy that Proctor includes in his curriculum. American students, in particular, should learn that the moral contradiction of our antebellum slave-holding republic was possible because it was sanctioned by antiquity. For the humanist tradition to have credibility it must be critical as well as celebratory. We need to understand the ancients, not worship them. The unwillingness to confront the self-serving hypocrisy and injustice that is also part of Western civilization is the cause of the wholesale rejection of the tradition by those members of society who are perceived as barbarians at the gate.

In "The Relevance of the Ancients," Proctor demonstrates the ways in

which the ancients can help us with our present environmental crisis. "People all over the world are beginning to be troubled by modernity's relationship to nature," he observes. The ecological catastrophes that are becoming more frequent "constitute a series of increasingly urgent warnings that unless we stop turning nature into an object which we ruthlessly exploit, all organic life, including our own, may someday become impossible on earth" (159). The abuse of nature results from the loss of the ancient belief that the earth is a sacred space. Proctor urges us to "overcome the modern objectification and desacralization of the natural world, and recapture the ancient vision of the unity of all being" (159). To that end, he recommends that students read Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, a dialogue that summarizes various ancient attitudes towards the environment and explains the Stoic ideal of living in harmony with nature.

Proctor puts forward an ambitious agenda of curriculum reforms to counter the ills of our materialistic culture, but he also is concerned with the survival of the humanities in the global context. In this new edition of his book, he shares the results of the program he developed for the Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts at Connecticut College in 1989. Now that globalization is rapidly effacing national boundaries and homogenizing culture, the preservation of the history of Western civilization is not a subject to be taken lightly. The early part of that history has been lost before; and despite the

devoted efforts of medieval scholars, Renaissance humanists and modern archaeologists, only about ten per cent of Greco-Roman literature has been recovered. The forces of internationalism, useful though they may be in increasing our appreciation of other cultures, should not distract us

from the task of preserving the history of our own civilization by requiring that our students learn about it with all its shortcomings. Proctor offers us a blueprint for a curriculum that combines the historical traditions of the past with the global perspective of the future.

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