A new direction in teaching the Humanities

A noted scholar and critic has come to believe that the willingness to read good books is increased by reading about them beforehand.

In 1936 the faculty of Columbia College voted to institute the course called Humanities A1-A2 and made it a requirement for all freshmen. It was taught for the first time—with a passion of enthusiasm—in the fall term of the following year. Few events in the history of American collegiate education have had so large an influence. Within a short time, faculties all over the country established courses of similar kind. They were certainly not drawn to do so by any mere spirit of emulation but rather out of their reasoned agreement with the idea upon which the Columbia College course was based. That idea was a very simple one, was simplicity itself. It consisted in the belief that no one could be thought educated who was ignorant of the chief works of the intellectual and artistic tradition of his own civilization. This single proposition comprised the whole “philosophy” of the new undertaking.

The simplicity of the originating idea of the course was matched by the simplicity of its method, which proposed to overcome the student’s ignorance of the classical works of our tradition by one means only—the student was to read the books. So far as it was practicable for him to do so, he was to read them in their entirety. He would, to be sure, after he had read a work, discuss it with his teacher in the company of a relatively small group of his fellow students, but there were to be no “background” lectures or readings, no “guides,” either in textbook or outline forms, no “secondary material” of any kind—all was to be primary.

This simplicity of method had not been arrived at without considerable difficulty and searching of the heart. The Columbia College faculty had come to its decision about the humanities course only after many years of debate, and the matter of the long disagreement had never been the purpose of the course—this was accepted out of hand—but only the method of teaching it. The issue was made by those members of the faculty who doubted that a student might gain a correct or adequate understanding of a great book merely by reading it. And no doubt it was natural for seasoned scholars to wonder how, on a single
and inevitably rapid reading, undergraduates—freshmen at that—might possibly comprehend books to whose study the scholars had devoted their professional lives. The students would not be able to look to their teachers for the help that scholarship gives, for, as the course was planned, the teaching staff was to be drawn from all the humanistic departments of the College, and this meant that what would be asked of any one instructor was the exercise not of his particular scholarly knowledge but only of his general intelligence and enlightenment. The member of the Department of Greek and Latin would be on firm scholarly ground during the early part of the course, which would begin with Homer and go on to St. Augustine, but he would have no special competence in dealing with Dante or Montaigne or Goethe. The teacher of English literature might be counted on to be knowledgeable about Shakespeare and Milton, but there was little in his professional training that equipped him to deal authoritatively with Spinoza. And so on, through the range of the humanistic disciplines.

The debate—it was not without its acrimony—was settled in favor of the party which believed that the purposes of the course and the needs of the students would be adequately served by the general intelligence and enlightenment of the teacher. The dominant opinion was surely a very reasonable one. The books that would make the substance of the course were to be chosen because they were no less pertinent now than when they had first been written, and also because their authors were men speaking to men, not to certain men who were specially trained to understand them, but to all men, so far as they were, in the French sense of the word, honest—that is to say, serious, fairminded, attentive. If a few of our authors were difficult, none was esoteric. Spinoza is an exception. He said that he wrote his Ethics for a limited group of readers, scholars of strong mind, and that he did not think it appropriate for, and did not want it read by, the general public. The Ethics, it is worth noting, has always been especially liked and admired by the students of the Humanities course. Any sort of "secondary material" was needed to make them comprehensible.

The course, then, was conceived of as having but three elements—a book; a reader coming to it for the first time; a teacher who perhaps had no special scholarly knowledge but who, by reason of his experience of humanistic works in general, could see the book as a whole and help to bring its meanings and qualities to consciousness in the student. In short, the book was to be read by a young honnête homme with assistance and encouragement given by an older honnête homme.

We who taught the course in its early years believed so strongly that there should be only the three elements that we made a point of urging our students not to consult works of scholarship and criticism. We felt that by their use some degree of the honesty would be lost. The situation seemed to us the more natural—perhaps we said more humanistic—if the special knowledge of the scholar and the highly instructed perception of the critic were excluded.

There was much in our attitude that was healthy and right. As every teacher knows, the formulations of a scholar or a critic about a great work sometimes have the effect upon the student of keeping him from confronting the work itself, from having an actual experience of it. Scholarship in the humanities proceeds on the hope of achieving an ideal reading of a work—one ought to read it, and with facility, in its own language; one ought to comprehend all its obscurities of reference; one ought to understand the tradition and the circumstances in which it was written, and so on. Criticism no less than scholarship—since the distinction between them must now be made, although once they were thought of as being the same thing—has also its imagination of a reading that is ideal. And, as so often happens in human affairs, the conception of the ideal may have the effect of nullifying what is good in the actual. We argued that the considerations appropriate to a developed familiarity with a work may be wholly inappropriate to a first reading, that they may stand in the way of its actuality, which is not necessarily the less worthy of respect because it has in it some confusion or inaccuracy of perception.

Student in Ferris Booth

"A great work makes a kind of assault upon us, and it ought to be met with an appropriate counteraggression."

However, there came a time when, if I may draw upon my own experience of teaching the Humanities course, the exclusion of all works of scholarship and criticism, so far from keeping the situation natural, actually seemed to have the contrary effect. It was all very well to say of the books we read that they were written by men speaking to men and that they had as much meaning for men now as when they were written. This was a true thing to say, but one came to realize that its truth depended on how one said it. If one said it with the (perhaps...
The purpose of denying the significance of the time that had passed between then and now, if one tried to ignore or minimize the massive reality of history, then one was not saying a true thing.

In the study of any literature of the past there are two propositions that must be given equal weight. One is that human nature is always the same. The other is that human nature changes, sometimes radically, with each historical epoch. The great charm—and one chief educative value—of reading works of the past lies in perceiving the truth of the two contradictory propositions and in seeing the sameness in the difference and the difference in the sameness. Some sense of the reality of the past—which is to say, its clear otherness in relation to the present—must enter into our comprehension of the works of the past. The consciousness of historicity must accompany all our other perceptions, such as the moral and the aesthetic. And I think I am reporting correctly when I say that in the pedagogic assumptions of those of us who taught the Humanities course during the early years, there was the impulse to deny, at least in some measure, the historicity of the books we read.

In the interest of asserting the diminished significance of the books, or perhaps, with some of us, in the interest of asserting the “eternity” of certain “values,” we inclined to reduce the actuality of history. It was on this impulse, I think, that we excluded all scholarly or critical considerations of our books, for inevitably such considerations would force upon us the fact of the historicity of what we were dealing with.

No one will say that a lively sense of history is one of the intellectual virtues of the American people. Certainly it is not one of the intellectual virtues of the American undergraduate at the beginning of his college career, and we were wrong to try to exclude from our students’ intellectual purview the concepts of historical thought as these relate to literature and philosophy. We did, of course, read our books in chronological order, and perhaps it can be said that the students could not help getting some sense of the past from this natural arrangement. Yet mere sequence in time can scarcely suggest the substance of the historical imagination.

There was, I believe, another and related mistake in that early purity of ours. To have made a point of excluding all scholarship and criticism from our course was to pretend that our great books existed in circumstances which were quite contrary to the fact. The great books do not have their being, as we seemed to imply, in splendid classic isolation or only in a kind of royal relation to each other. They exist in the lively milieu that is created by the responses that have long been given to them. For centuries they have been loved and admired and considered and interpreted and quarrelled over—and used, used. Some part of their reality consists in the way they have figured in the life of the world, certainly in the intellectual life of the world, a large part of which is constituted by what has been said about them.

We can grant that the scholars and critics are not minds of the same stature and powers as those they undertook to study and praise—they themselves would be the first to say so—but many among them have been fine minds and some have been great minds. In excluding them we were in effect excluding our students from the community of mind. Even as we urged them toward discourse about the classic works of our tradition, we were in effect suggesting to them that all previous discourse was of no account, that in what they said and wrote about the great books there were no models to follow, no standards of cogency (except possibly those that were provided by their teachers!). This, surely, was not good pedagogy.

And if we speak of pedagogy, there was yet another reason why our entire exclusion of scholarship and criticism was ill-advised. Almost any teacher of a humanistic subject, if pressed to name the one thing that constitutes his pedagogic purpose, would say that it is to lead the student to become more active in his dealing with works of the imagination or intellect. A great work makes a kind of assault upon us, and it ought to be met with an appropriate counter-aggression. It is in this activity that all the pleasure of humanistic study lies, and good scholarship and good criticism, no less than good teaching, have it as their intention to overcome the reader’s passivity in relation to a work, to augment his active powers.

It is no doubt true that a reader—perhaps especially a student reader—may be tempted to use a scholarly or critical essay about a work as a means of avoiding an actual, let alone an active, confrontation of the work itself. But this happens rather less often than is supposed, and in any case, there is really nothing that any teacher can do against willful evasion. As for the common belief that the fresh innocence of our approach to a work is corrupted by becoming acquainted with someone else’s ideas about it, I think that we give it too easy a credence. What we mean by a fresh innocence is often a bland passivity, and if it is, then how fortunate the fall from that Eden! Indeed, I would not even make a point of putting off the reading of the essay until the work itself is read.

I think we should be simple and pragmatic about the conduct of the intellectual life— I am sure that if any teacher refers to his own experience as I refer to mine, he will join me in saying that our curiosity about a work is sharpened and our courage to encounter it is increased by reading something about it before we engage it in its own person, just as our interest in it and our realization of it are increased if we read something about it after we have finished it. And if we should happen further to corrupt our innocence by borrowing some of the scholar’s or critic’s ideas, what else are ideas for except to be borrowed—what else is meant by the community of mind by which the humanistic tradition sets so much store? And if this is true for us, why is it not true for our students?

* On this point I should like to refer the reader to Denys Hay’s admirable article, “Learning and Literature” in Cassell’s Encyclopedia of World Literature. Mr. Hay gives a lucid and comprehensive account of the relation that obtains between the great original genius and the minds that make up the general intellectual life. I would call especial attention to Mr. Hay’s remarks on the revived tendency of scholars in relatively recent times to make their researches accessible to, that is, interesting to, the general public.