

A Letter to the Reader

IMAGINE you reading this far in this set of books for the purpose of discovering whether you should read further. I will assume that you have been persuaded of the necessity and possibility of reading these books in order to get a liberal education. But how about you? The Editors are not interested in general propositions about the desirability of reading the books; they want them read. They did not produce them as furniture for public or private libraries.

We say that these books contain a liberal education and that everybody ought to try to get one. You say either that you have had one, that you are not bright enough to get one, or that you do not need one.

You cannot have had one. If you are an American under the age of ninety, you can have acquired in the educational system only the faintest glimmerings of the beginnings of

liberal education. Ask yourself what whole great books you read while you were in school, college, or university. Ask yourself whether you and your teachers saw these books as a Great Conversation among the finest minds of Western history, and whether you obtained an understanding of the tradition in which you live. Ask yourself whether you mastered the liberal arts. I am willing to wager that, if you read any great books at all, you read very few, that you read one without reference to the others, in separate courses, and that for the most part you read only excerpts from them.

As for me, I was educated in two very "liberal" colleges. Apart from Shakespeare, who was scattered through my education, I read one of the books in this set, Goethe's *Faust*, and part of another, a few of the dialogues of Plato, as part of my formal education. I do not remember that I ever heard the name of Thomas Aquinas or Plotinus, when I was in college. I am not even sure that I heard of Karl Marx. I heard of many of the great scientific writers, but avoided association with them on the ground that they were too difficult for me—I gloried in the possession of an "unmathematical" mind—and I did not need to read them, because I was not going to be a scientist.

But suppose that you have in some way hammered out for yourself the kind of education that colleges ought to give. If you have done so, you belong to a rare and small species, rare and small, but not unknown. If you have read all these books, read them again. What makes them great is, among other things, that they teach you something every time you read them. Every time, you see something you had not seen before; you understand something you had missed; no matter how hard your mind worked before, it works again.

And this is the point: every man's mind ought to keep working all his life long; every man's imagination should be touched as often as possible by the great works of imagina-

tion; every man ought to push toward the horizons of his intellectual powers all the time. It is impossible to have "had" a liberal education, except in a formal, accidental, immaterial sense. Liberal education ought to end only with life itself.

I must reiterate that you can set no store by your education in childhood and youth, no matter how good it was. Childhood and youth are no time to get an education. They are the time to get ready to get an education. The most that we can hope for from these uninteresting and chaotic periods of life is that during them we shall be set on the right path, the path of realizing our human possibilities through intellectual effort and aesthetic appreciation. The great issues, now issues of life and death for civilization, call for mature minds.

There is a simple test of this. Take any great book that you read in school or college and have not read since. Read it again. Your impression that you understood it will at once be corrected. Think what it means, for instance, to read *Macbeth* at sixteen in contrast to reading it at thirty-five. We can understand *Macbeth* as Shakespeare meant us to understand it only when we have had some experience, vicarious or otherwise, of marriage and ambition. To read great books, if we read them at all, in childhood and youth and never read them again is never to understand them.

Can you ever understand them? There is a sense in which nobody can. That is why the Great Conversation never ends. Jean Cocteau said that each great work in Western thought arises as a contradiction of one that precedes it. This is not the result of the perversity or vanity of these writers. Nobody can make so clear and comprehensive and accurate a statement of the basic issues of human life as to close the discussion. Every statement calls for explanation, correction, modification, expansion, or contradiction.

There is, too, the infinite suggestiveness of great books. They lead us to other books, other thoughts, other questions. They enlarge the fund of ideas we have and relate themselves to those we possess. Since the suggestiveness of great books is infinite, we cannot get to the end of them. We cannot say we understand these books in the sense that we are finished with them and what they have to teach us.

The question for you is only whether you can ever understand these books well enough to participate in the Great Conversation, not whether you can understand them well enough to end it. And the answer is that you can never know until you try. We have built up around the "classics" such an atmosphere of pedantry, we have left them so long to the scholarly dissectors, that we think of them as incomprehensible to the ordinary man to whom they were originally addressed. At the same time our education has undergone so drastic a process of dilution that we are ill-equipped, even after graduation from a respectable college, to tackle anything much above the level of the comic book.

The decay of education in the West, which is felt most profoundly in America, undoubtedly makes the task of understanding these books more difficult than it was for earlier generations. In fact my observation leads me to the horrid suspicion that these books are easier for people who have had no formal education than they are for those who have acquired that combination of misinformation, unphilosophy, and slipshod habits that is the usual result of the most elaborate and expensive institutional education in America.

For one thing, those who have had no formal education are less likely to labor under prejudices about the writers contained in this set. They have not heard, or at least not so often, that these authors are archaic, unrealistic and incomprehensible. They approach the books as they would approach any others, with a much more open mind than their

more sophisticated, or more miseducated, contemporaries. They have not been frightened by their education.

If you will pick up any one of these books and start to read it, you will find it not nearly so formidable as you thought. In one way the great books are the most difficult, and in another way the easiest, books for any of us to read. They are the most difficult because they deal with the most difficult problems that men can face, and they deal with them in terms of the most complex ideas. But, treating the most difficult subjects of human thought, the great books are the clearest and simplest expression of the best thinking that can be done on these subjects. On the fundamental problems of mankind, there are no easier books to read. If you will pick up any other, after you have read the first, you will find that you understand the second more easily than you did the first and the first better than you did before. The criteria for choosing each book in this set were excellence of construction and composition, immediate intelligibility on the aesthetic level, increasing intelligibility with deeper reading and analysis, leading to maximum depth and maximum range of significance with more than one level of meaning and truth.

In our colleges the curriculum is often so arranged that taking one course is made prerequisite to taking another. The pedagogical habit ingrained by such arrangements may prompt the question: What reading is prerequisite to reading great books? The answer is simply None. For the understanding of great books it is not necessary to read background materials or secondary works about them. But there is one sense in which the reading of a great book may involve prerequisite reading. Except for Homer, the authors of great books who come later in the course of the Great Conversation enter into it themselves as a result of reading the earlier authors. Thus, Plato is a reader of the Homeric poems and of

the tragedies and comedies; and Aristotle is a reader of all of these and Plato, too. Dante and Montaigne are readers of most of the Greek and Roman books, not only the poetry and history, but the science and philosophy as well. John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, William James, and Sigmund Freud are readers of almost all the books in this set.

This suggests that we, as readers of a particular great book, can be helped in reading it by reading first some of the books its author read before writing it. The chronological order of the works in this set is a good reading order precisely because earlier books are in a way the prerequisite reading for later books.

But though earlier books prepare for later ones, it is also true that reading one great book makes reading another easier, no matter in what order they are read. Though earlier books contribute to the education of the authors of later ones, the later authors do more than reflect this influence. They also comment on and interpret the meaning of the earlier works; they report and take issue with the opinions of their predecessors. Looked at forward or backward in the time-sequence, one great book throws light on another; and as the number of great books one has read in any order increases, the voices in the Great Conversation tend more and more to speak in the present tense, as if all the authors were contemporaneous with one another, responding directly to each other's thought.

It takes imaginative and intellectual work to read a book, and facility and achievement grow by exercise. In this set each book is readable ultimately because of its place in the tradition. These books are aware of and responsive to other books, to those which come after them as well as to those which came before. Any good book that is not in the set should be able to find itself subsumed under and related to these great books. Any man should be able, perhaps with some

effort, to find his own mind belonging to the discourse in these books. Some degree of understanding of these books should convince you that you are able to read and understand progressively any good book, and to criticize with integrity and security anything written for publication. These books are genuinely intelligible, perhaps late and with difficulty, but ultimately and intrinsically.

Do you need a liberal education? We say that it is unpatriotic not to read these books. You may reply that you are patriotic enough without them. We say that you are gravely cramping your human possibilities if you do not read these books. You may answer that you have troubles enough already.

This answer is the one that Ortega attacks in *The Revolt of the Masses*. It assumes that we can leave all intellectual activity, and all political responsibility, to somebody else and live our lives as vegetable beneficiaries of the moral and intellectual virtue of other men. The trouble with this assumption is that, whereas it was once possible, and even compulsory, for the bulk of mankind, such indulgence now, on the part of anybody, endangers the whole community. It is now necessary for everybody to try to live, as Ortega says, "at the height of his times." The democratic enterprise is imperiled if any one of us says, "I do not have to try to think for myself, or make the most of myself, or become a citizen of the world republic of learning." The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.

The reply that Edmund Burke gave to the movement for the extension of the suffrage is the one that the majority of men unconsciously supports. Burke developed the doctrine of "virtual representation," which enabled him to claim that all power should reside in the hands of the few, in his case in

the hands of the landed aristocracy. They had the qualifications for governing: intelligence, leisure, patriotism, and education. They "virtually" represented the rest of the community, even though the rest of the community had not chosen them to do so. Burke was not interested in the education of the people, because, though government was to be conducted in their interest, it was unthinkable that they could determine what their interest was. They had neither the information, the intelligence, nor the time to govern themselves. "I have often endeavoured," he says, "to compute and to class those who, in any political view are to be called the people. . . . In England and Scotland, I compute that those of adult age, not declining in life, of tolerable leisure for such discussions, and of some means of information, and who are above menial dependence (or what virtually is such), may amount to about four hundred thousand." At that time the population of the British Isles was between eight and ten million.

This is indeed the only reply that can be made to the demand for universal suffrage. It is an attack, and a direct one, on the essential principle of democracy. The virtual representatives of the people are, in Burke's view, in no sense accountable to them. They are responsible to their own consciences, and perhaps to God. But the only way in which the people could call their virtual representatives to time would be through revolution, a prospect that Burke would be the first to deprecate. In his view only those in possession of power are in a position to decide whether or not they should have it. On this principle any totalitarian dictatorship can justify itself.

Dramatically opposed to a position such as that of Burke is the American faith in democracy, and in education in relation to democracy, stated succinctly by Jefferson: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but

the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

We who say, then, that we believe in democracy cannot content ourselves with virtual education any more than we can with virtual representation. We have not the option of deciding for ourselves whether or not we shall be liberal artists, because we are committed to the proposition that all men shall be free. We cannot admit that ordinary people cannot have a good education, because we cannot agree that democracy must involve a degradation of the human ideal. Anything less than the effort to help everybody get the best education necessarily implies that some cannot achieve in their own measure our human ideal. We cannot concede that the conquest of nature, the conquest of drudgery, and the conquest of political power must lead in combination to triviality in education and hence in all the other occupations of life. The aim of education is wisdom, and each must have the chance to become as wise as he can.