



Tradition in Education

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rent tendencies in our educational establishments, our research foundations, our learned societies, and in the mood and feeling of our people are set against this freedom.

Now, we challenge this disposition. We ask that the issue be publicly and freely joined. It is our faith that in the end, the method determines its issue. Not *what* is believed, but *how* it is believed; not *what* is true, but how its truth is established and maintained—this alone leads to the survival or extinction of ideas on their own merits. Bold intellects should come together and share the solicitude that the spirit of free, critical inquiry should prevail in intellectual enterprise, wherever undertaken, and in the national life.

“The world,” declares the hero of Santayana’s *The Last Puritan*, “is full of conscript minds, only they are in different armies, and nobody is fighting to be free, but each to make his own conscription universal.” Here, we trust, we shall each fight to be free and to make his freedom universal. Philosophy, the author observes elsewhere, “is a romantic field . . . wherein the sublimity of the issues establishes a sort of sporting fellowship even among opposite minds.” To the scientific disposition this fellowship is what brings about a consensus. Seeking this, we come together, let us hope, gaily and with gusto; there is nothing in science or philosophy which requires them to retain the ancestral solemnity of religious office, though our academic habit tends to keep them so. Philosophy and science ought to be fun, parents and children at once, of that ancient god Laughter. Let our sporting fellowship be also a laughing fellowship, whether at last we orchestrate our differences into a free consensus, or end by agreeing to disagree regarding the method of freedom whereby the arts and sciences advance. Let us proceed in temper like Pantagruel, with “a certain jollity of mind, pickled in the scorn of fortune.”

Tradition in Education¹

By Robert M. Hutchins

We are all, I take it, interested in doing the same thing for all our students. We want to lead them to knowledge, discipline, and

¹ An address given before the New York City Association of Teachers of English at New York, January 30, 1937. Reprinted from *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. VII, No. 3, May, 1937.

virtue. My thesis is that we can succeed only if we help them to understand and clarify the tradition in which they live. Society, the environment, is of course impregnated with this tradition. It is in the institutions of which we are members, like the educational system. It is in the contemporary books we read. It is in the fine arts that we enjoy. But in this form the tradition is opaque. We might as well say that scientific knowledge is in the environment because when the environment is studied science results, or that the fine arts are there because the artist finds the materials he must use in the world about him. For the individual to understand his tradition it must be explicated, actualized, revealed, and defined. The tradition must be extracted from the contemporary world if it is to be useful, and if the individual is to be propelled forward in the present by what he has assimilated from the past. What the individual requires for these purposes is certain arts.

I

There are four kinds of arts: the natural, the useful, the liberal, and the fine. The natural arts consist of all those regular operations of nature, for the most part hidden from us, containing potential symbols that we understand only when we have brought the liberal arts to bear upon them. Though the natural arts are of primary interest to the natural scientist, we can not understand the symbols they contain without the liberal arts. The useful arts, like medicine, navigation, engineering, manual training, and stenography, consist of those regular operations of human beings which we understand only when we have found and stated the rules by which means, instruments, and tools are ordered to their proper ends. The discovery and statement of these rules depend on the liberal arts. The liberal arts, which are grammar, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics, consist of the contemplation and regular manipulation of things as symbols with an eye to the truth. The fine arts consist of those regular operations which clarify the truths of individual things in themselves, and thus render them symbols of other things.

We have seen that the natural and useful arts can not become truly operative without the liberal arts. The natural and useful

arts are important in education; but they are dependent on the liberal arts, and when the liberal arts are subordinated to them the whole educational program goes astray, and the tradition in which we live is not adequately realized. It remains to show that the fine arts are also subordinate in education to the liberal arts. The fine arts are primarily techniques which implement the factor of originality in a culture, not the factor of tradition. Originality is highly important to society. If we are traditionalists in the sense that we look backward only, we may succeed in recovering the past, but it will be as much a corpse on our hands as some of the dead languages in which it is recorded. But in the order of education, tradition precedes invention. It is the originality of the educated man that makes the real advance. The discovery that counts is made by the man who knows enough not to make mere rediscoveries. The mastery of tradition is necessary to genuine and intelligent progress. Finally, art is an intellectual virtue: it is the habit of making according to a true course of reasoning. It is not an undisciplined natural power. The discipline and habituation it requires are contributed by the liberal arts.

We find then that tradition is primary in education. We see that though the tradition is in the environment we do not comprehend it there by the unaided exercise of our natural powers. It is understood through the arts. The arts are understood in turn through the arts of language and mathematics, the liberal arts. Hence the liberal arts are central in education, and no other arts can be. When any other than the liberal arts are central in education or when the liberal arts are badly taught, a poor education may result. Thus we hear sometimes that Progressive Education is a good thing because it gives the students opportunities to employ their abilities in the fine and useful arts. That is a vain educational undertaking unless the students are first disciplined through the liberal arts. Any attempt to substitute the other arts for the liberal arts or to subordinate the liberal arts to the others, even the fine arts, cuts off the light, makes translation and organization impossible, and is the beginning of the degradation of the tradition.

In short, the symbols of language and mathematics are the only symbols that are actually realized in human knowledge. Natural

symbols are for man only possible, unrealized symbols. Useful symbols are only instruments and tools. Language and mathematics are our mother tongue, the mother tongue of our rational selves. We may succeed in arriving at our proper end through other arts, but only if we begin with our mother tongue. Moreover, language and mathematics are inescapable as a matter of fact. Slighting them is neglecting the most obvious power we have to extract our tradition from the environment. Finally we are interested in education in communicating what is important to man as man. We are concerned with the attributes of the race, not with the accidents of individuals. The two leading attributes of man as man are language and reason. The best exemplar of reason is mathematics. In education, therefore, language and mathematics, the liberal arts, are indispensable.

II

I have now said in as many ways as I can think of that the liberal arts, the arts of language and mathematics, must be central in an education which aims to help the student understand and clarify the tradition in which he lives. I shall now proceed to show how the liberal arts operate on books. In the most general sense, the liberal arts operate on the environment and on the environment in its widest interpretation. The environment in this interpretation includes not merely the physical world but also all our social and cultural institutions and all the works of fine and useful art currently enjoyed and employed. In this most generalized view of it, the matter on which the liberal arts operate consists of things which are potentially or actually symbols. That is, the environment has an opaque burden of significance which must be transformed by light in order to become illuminating. The transforming light is the liberal arts, the arts of language and mathematics. They are arts of making potential symbols into actual ones and of manipulating actual symbols in order to make all their meanings clear. The experimental processes of natural science can thus be seen as a reading of the book of nature. The basic rules of scientific method are the grammar and logic needed for this reading, just as the grammar and logic of the artificial language of words are the arts of reading books and writing them.

We are completely surrounded by symbols. But we see at once that symbols present themselves to us in two different ways and that the difference is of the utmost importance. On the one hand they are to be found, but only if we have the discipline to interpret and translate them, in the things of nature, in social institutions, and in works of fine and useful art. On the other hand, they are as actual obvious symbols in the words and signs of books. The liberal arts, therefore, have two different fields of operation. As the grammar, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics of scientific method they are techniques for translating potential symbols, for reading the language of nature, of society, and of the fine arts. They are the disciplines needed in education to make men natural scientists, or social scientists, or critics of the fine arts. But they are also the techniques for reading books, which are the accomplishments of the arts and sciences, past and present. Books do not teach themselves. Even though the symbols in them are actual, they are as much the passive matter of education as the rest of the environment. They must be read. Reading is an active process of interpretation. To read well the reader must have the discipline of the liberal arts.

Now the tradition in which we live is recorded in books. We can find it if we know how to use the disciplines that teach us how to read. A great book is one which yields up through the liberal arts a clear and important understanding of our tradition. Great books, in other words, contain the best symbols passed on to us by our tradition. An education which consisted of the liberal arts as understood through great books and of great books understood through the liberal arts would be one and the only one which would enable us to comprehend the tradition in which we live.

If great books and the arts of language are central in education, then English teaching and English teachers should be central in education. English teachers are teachers of language, the language of actual symbols, words found in books, and recording the whole intellectual and artistic tradition accumulated in books. English teachers must, therefore, be teachers of the arts of language, grammar, rhetoric, and logic, for these are the arts of verbal symbols. The English teacher should be the source of tradition in education. His material includes all the books, in any field,

which the student must learn to read if he is to assimilate the past. He is not limited to poetry and essays. Since grammar, rhetoric, and logic can not be taught well unless the student can be habituated to their operations, and since this requires a matter rich in symbolic dimensions, the great books of the western world must be read to teach the arts. The field of English teaching is, therefore, the arts of language and the great books of western civilization. Since the liberal arts are essential not only for reading books but also for scientific method and even to the techniques of fine and useful productions, English teaching, properly conceived, becomes basic to the whole scheme of education. The right teaching of English would be a teaching of the liberal arts not only for the sake of recovering the tradition from great books but also for the sake of the inventions and discoveries which can be made in the sciences and in the other arts.

This is what English teaching should be. A rough sketch of the history of the subjects with which English teaching should deal will show what English teaching has become.

The Greeks did not invent the arts of language. They are natural to man; we all use them every day. The Greeks began to think about the power of man to use language and the ways in which he did it. They distinguished between the use of language to communicate knowledge, to influence the actions of men, and as the material for artistic creations. They named and made explicit what was involved in the use of language intellectually or speculatively, rhetorically or poetically. They related these usages to a psychological analysis of man's intellect, imagination, and emotions. They applied these analyses to the great literature of their day. For the Greeks the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic were separated only for the purpose of analytical exposition. The interdependence of these arts was always recognized. Their coordinated treatment was always insisted upon.

The Romans emphasized oratory. They studied grammar in so far as it was useful in training orators. This resulted in the distortion of the arts of language. They made no new contribution to logic. They ignored most of it and what they did not ignore they confused. The Greeks were interested in the arts of lan-

guage primarily as a method of investigating the truth. The Romans were interested in them primarily as a means of influencing action.

In the Middle Ages men were interested in the arts of language principally in relation to reading books and the exposition of their content. In this period the interrelation of the arts was once more appreciated. Thinking about them began again. The tradition of the Greeks was recaptured, exploited, and developed.

Since the Renaissance two tendencies have been in process: on the one hand, the arts have been separated from one another; at the same time they have been confused among themselves. By the nineteenth century the teaching of logic had become fatuous discussions of terms, propositions, and exercises in rote memorization of the forms of syllogisms. Unrelated to this discussion and unrecognized as grammar and rhetoric, the study of logic included isolated remarks about common and proper names, so-called abstract and concrete terms, and some tidbits about the sophistical fallacies. This instruction had little bearing on either the practical or intellectual problems of students, and by the opening of the century they were no longer required to submit to it. Now such instruction is in many places no longer offered at all. Grammar understood as the analysis of the nature of symbols and the principles of combinations of symbols came to mean the teaching of the conventional usages of particular languages. Rhetoric became either instruction in elocution or the study of figures of speech and exercises in literary composition.

The history of the notion that education consists largely in reading and analyzing the best books that can be found has been more remarkable and no less depressing. From earliest antiquity until a few generations ago, and still today in some countries, people had the naive idea that reading these books was a good thing to do. Many of these books were written in languages long since dead. The teachers did not always understand their contents and devoted themselves to having the pupils do philological tricks. Efforts to preserve these books in education on the ground that they were good history failed because history could ordinarily be better taught by history teachers. Efforts to preserve them on the ground that they were the sign of a cultivated gentleman failed be-

cause they were recognized instead as the sign of an outmoded bourgeois gentility. As the languages could not survive bad teaching and an inadequate rationale, they disappeared from the curriculum, and with them the books which were used to teach them. In this result the textbook racket cooperated, and so successfully that I am willing to wager that in no school in this country are six really great books read in their entirety today.

It is commonly said that great books are too difficult for the modern pupil. All I can say is that it is amazing how the number of too difficult books has increased in recent years. The books that are now too difficult for candidates for the doctorate were the regular fare of grammar-school boys in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Most of the great books of the world were written for ordinary people, not for professors alone. They are in some sense a basic language about everything.

Once one textbook helped to understand another. Now almost the opposite is true. Nothing helps one to understand a textbook in logic, nor does a textbook in logic help to understand anything else. The great books of the world help each other mutually and serially. The last helps to understand the first, as Freud helps to understand Sophocles and Sophocles Freud. Euclid helps Newton as Newton helps Euclid. Mutual implication in subject matter increases the ease of learning at a terrifically high rate. Isolation of subject matters reduces ease of comprehension to the slowest possible rate.

The tradition in which we live and which we must strive to help our students understand and clarify is hidden from our sight because of our own defective education. We are all the products of a system which knows not the classics and the liberal arts. There is every indication that that system is growing worse instead of better. Every day brings us news of some educational invention designed to deprive the student of the last vestiges of his tools and to send him for his education helpless against the environment itself. The worst aspects of vocational education, Progressive Education, informational education, and character education arise from the abandonment of our tradition and the books and disciplines through which we know it.

III

The custodians of what is left of tradition in education are the teachers of English. The remnants of grammar, rhetoric, logic, and the classics are in their hands. Let us see what they are doing with them. Before the end of grammar school they are teaching the history of English literature. After that, aesthetics appears under the name of literary criticism. Literature as a fine art receives attention but without any attempt to understand the nature of the fine arts in general or of the special kind that uses language as its materials. In connection with work in composition, logic and the method of science enter the teaching of English. The pupil must learn the significance of definitions, the collection of evidence, and demonstration or proof.

Since composition can not avoid content, and since we want to cultivate the intellectual and moral virtues, we teachers of English have recourse to moral and political philosophy and edify the young with scraps of Voltaire, Burke, Carlyle, Ruskin, and H. G. Wells. Since we are beginning to understand that we are not training pupils to be poets or writers but citizens of the community, we take in current events and the social sciences. In order to arouse the interest of the pupil, we wander through astronomy, geography, botany, history, physics, chemistry, and anything else we can think of. In addition, of course, we must have training in oral English, elocution, and dramatics. In his spare time the teacher develops tests, marks papers, and deals with student problems.

It is no wonder that the teachers of English are disturbed and even disheartened at the task demanded of them. No group of teachers could possibly carry it. There is a general feeling in the profession that something is wrong somewhere. Discussion of what was wrong (or right) with Latin and Greek proceeded by oratory. Discussion of what is wrong with English is proceeding by more modern methods. We are now being scientific. This means that we conduct investigations to establish particular facts, for example, the percentage of pupils in the eighth grade who use singular verbs after singular pronouns, or how many say *raise* when they mean *rise* or *lay* when they mean *lie*. This kind of informa-

tion doubtless has its uses. It will not tell us what is wrong with the liberal arts today.

We also engage in what is known as experimentation. We try different ways of teaching. We introduce lantern slides into the teaching of poetry, map-making into the teaching of Shakespeare, and vary the monotony of the usual presentation by the panel and round-table methods. It is doubtful if these efforts, laudable as they are, will show us what is involved in the custodianship of the classics and the liberal arts.

Nor will surveys and questionnaires sent to thousands of teachers, pupils, parents, or employers give us the answer, unless they are based on a critical analysis of our problem. An analysis of the arts of language is basic to an understanding of what is involved in training in the arts of using our own language. Such analysis is just as scientific as the kind of investigations, experiments, and surveys I have referred to. It consists in an analysis of principles, the making of definitions, and distinctions between disciplines and subject matters. This kind of scientific method does not mean thinking in a vacuum. It is as much based on experience as those I have mentioned. Nor does it mean turning to ancient writers as authorities. It means turning to anybody who has anything to contribute to the analysis, living or dead.

Unfortunately, to conduct this analysis of their teaching and to teach in accordance with it the teachers must have had what none of us has had, a liberal education. The teacher can not teach the arts of language independent of subject matter. He can not consider the style of Euclid as one kind of intellectual exposition and the style of Herodotus as another without knowledge both of the arts of language and of the contents of Euclid and Herodotus. He can not make clear the distinction between these and the form of *Paradise Lost* without understanding the content of the poem as well as the difference between intellectual and political literature. Within the field of the poetical he must understand the distinctions between the lyric, the epic, and the dramatic, and he must be able to present the most important and effective examples of each. He must have mastered the liberal arts and the great books of the past and present. He must have had a liberal education.

If we have not had a liberal education, it is not too late for us to

get one, and perhaps we might make a beginning now by attempting in a very meager, sketchy way the kind of analysis of our teaching that I have suggested is necessary. What are grammar, rhetoric, and logic? The principles of grammar considered generally are speculative or philosophical or universal grammar. Examination of these principles shows what is natural and what is conventional in a particular language. It shows what is basic in the natural power of man to communicate by symbols and what is distinctive in particular determinations of this power. Universal grammar deals with the nature of a symbol, the distinctions between kinds of symbols, the principles of combining symbols to make complex symbols and to make the units of communication called "sentences." Sentences, in turn, are composed to make more complex units, the paragraph, and those which go to make up the unity of the composition as a whole. Universal grammar uses the grammar of a particular language to exemplify its general principles. This procedure, of course, illuminates the particularity of a particular language. Grammar analyzes the nature and function of the ambiguity of symbols. Through it we understand the role of ambiguity in the invention of metaphors for purposes of imaginative or poetical literature. Through it we understand, too, how ambiguity is controlled to make symbols express clear ideas clearly for the purposes of intellectual exposition. In recent times, logic and mathematics have made new contributions to grammar which extend its usefulness beyond words to include the notations of mathematics. This alliance seems to be providing grammar itself with a new language, a special language of notations. The rediscovery of speculative or universal grammar is recent. That is one reason why we were so unfortunate as to miss it in our own education. Today we must look to logic and mathematics for the reformulation and development of this grammar. Sooner or later this work must be taken over by students and teachers of particular languages. This work makes it clear once again that grammar is a basic discipline among the arts of language.

In logic we find terms, propositions, and syllogisms the analogues of simple symbols, sentences, and paragraphs in grammar. Logic is concerned with the identification of kinds of terms, propositions,

and syllogisms. It examines the basis of sound definition, the validity and ordering of propositions which we call the process of proof, and the organization of sets of propositions into an expositional unit.

Although an analysis in grammar may and must be carried on independently of an analysis in logic, we must recognize how these analyses depend on and supplement each other. Grammar can not understand the nature or function of a declarative sentence without understanding a proposition. Logic can not distinguish in its own terms alone the difference between a paragraph which consists of a set of syllogisms and an analogous unit, a stanza in a poem. For the purposes of analysis, grammar and logic may be considered separately; their significance can be grasped only when they are seen in their mutual dependence.

Grammar and logic deal with the analysis of different aspects of the elements or parts of a composition. Rhetoric treats the composition as a whole. It distinguishes theoretical compositions from practical compositions and both of these from poetical. In the theoretical or intellectual category it distinguishes historical from scientific, and among these major groups it makes subordinate distinctions. In practical rhetoric we find the legal, the forensic, the eulogistic, etc. Under the poetical fall the narrative, or epic, the dramatic, and the lyrical. Obviously, rhetoric depends on grammar and logic.

Grammar, rhetoric, and logic, which I have outlined in a brief crude way, are the arts of language. These are the arts which the English teachers of the country are now attempting to teach. They are teaching them, whether they know it or not. They might teach them better if they knew they were doing it.

They are doing more. They are doing such teaching of great books as remains in our educational system. We must, therefore, carry our analysis through the question of instruction in such books. It is important to notice that the teaching of the arts of reading and expressing one's ideas or emotions in language can not go on independently of the context of the reading or the expression. When I insist on the need for making the principles of these operations explicit and for exposing their foundations in man's natural powers, I by no means suggest that we should teach the rules of

grammar, rhetoric, and logic as isolated statements to be learned by heart. Nor do I mean that we should waste time on vague theoretical distinctions and fine points of analysis sharpened just to show how fine they can be made. Rules, distinctions, and analysis must be found in and brought to bear upon what the pupil reads and writes. In suggesting that the great books of the western world should be the books on which the student's reading and writing should center, I am not calling for the imitation of classical models, that post-Renaissance sport which was another good reason for dropping Greek and Latin from the curriculum. The great books of the western world are useful in two ways. First, they are examples, and the best examples we have, of the use of language for intellectual, practical, and artistic purposes. They are thus of the first importance in the teaching of the arts of language, and the cultivation of those arts in the student. In the second place, these books provide us with the ideas that constitute our tradition. The teacher of the arts of language must have a broader education in these books than any other teacher, for he will be called upon to show what various fields have in common and how they differ in their use of language to attain their various purposes.

I do not wish to return to the study of Greek and Latin for all pupils in the public schools. I do not wish to impose the liberal arts as they were understood in the Middle Ages upon them. I do wish to get whatever of value Greek, Latin, and the liberal arts had for the American boy and girl today. The classics degenerated into musty formalism. Grammar, rhetoric, and logic got a bad name which they richly deserved. The classics and the arts fell into disrepute. But great writers are still great writers, and the present generation should not be deprived of their wisdom because our predecessors taught badly the languages in which great writers wrote. The arts of language are still the arts of language. Our pupils must employ them and should not be deprived of instruction in them because our predecessors made them a synonym for everything dry, dusty, mechanical, and remote. The task of English teachers is first to discover what their task is. Instead of trying to become statisticians or sociologists so that they can be respectable in a world which honors nothing that is not statis-

tical and contemporary, teachers of English should realize that their task is to act as custodians and promulgators of our tradition. They should set themselves to revive, reformulate, and purify the teaching of the arts of language and the classics, adapting it to contemporary needs.

There is general agreement that the duty of the educational system is to educate students for intelligent action in society, to adjust them to their environment, and to help them to cope with the contemporary world. We have seen, however, that these processes do not go on automatically, or by merely producing direct contact between the pupil and the contemporary world. Our purposes can only be accomplished by the assimilation of the young to the tradition in which they live. This is, in turn, achieved through the traditional arts. The arts central in education are grammar, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics. The liberal arts are understood through books, and books are understood through the liberal arts. The tradition is incorporated in great books. The teachers of English are the last defenders and exponents of these books and of the arts of language. They are the last performers in the tradition. They must do consciously, intelligently, and well what they now do badly, blindly, and unconsciously. They must maintain the dignity of their calling by realizing the inherent worth and vast importance of a subject matter which is nothing less than the great tradition of the western world. In this tradition it is our duty to educate ourselves and our pupils, to the end that the virtues, moral, intellectual, and theological, shall not disappear altogether from our country.