

Liberal Education: “Missing Many Allusions”

On Why Not to Study the Bible and the Classics

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In 1960, the Editors of *Delta: The Cambridge Literary Magazine* asked C. S. Lewis about a comment he had made on the presuppositions of a liberal education. An objector to Lewis' view observed that one could understand, say, the Graveyard scene in *Hamlet* without, as Lewis implied, knowing the Bible or the Classics. In his reply, Lewis made the following remark:

The complaint that many modern undergraduates know the Bible and the Classics so little that they *miss many allusions* and conscious echoes is a very old one. I have seldom, if ever, heard it contested among those who have had a wide experience of undergraduate work over the last thirty years. I said, apparently, that “most” European literature presupposed the Biblical and Classical background. There are, as you justly claim, some works and parts of works that do not. What is this in the purpose?¹

That many undergraduates, even today, know little about the Classics or the Bible is not, as Lewis said, news to anybody. The most com-

mon answer I get to the question “who wrote the Gospel of Luke?” is “I don’t know.” And even if some alert, logical soul replies to my bemused question “Luke,” he will not know that Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. Usually, he will not know even whether there be an Acts of the Apostles, let alone, like the Ephesians, “whether there be a Holy Ghost,” both of which are worth knowing about and both in the Bible.

The last academic reason anyone should offer for studying either the Bible or the Classics is the one most commonly given. Namely, students are to study the Bible and the Classics in order to appreciate, in modern philosophy and literature, the “*many allusions* and conscious echoes” originating from these famous sources. No one denies the truth of the original propositions that most literature, including most atheist or agnostic literature, is largely unintelligible without the Bible or the Classics. “The fool knows in his heart that there is no God,” as the Psalmist wrote long ago (#53). We are not, hopefully, in the business of encouraging fools. But on this point, E. F. Schumacher had it right: “To read such literature (the Classics) – even the Bible! – simply ‘as literature,’ as if its main purpose were poetry, imagination, artistic expression with an especial-

¹ C. S. Lewis, “To the Editors of Delta,” *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, edited by Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), III, 1231.

ly apt use of words and similes, is to turn the sublime into the trivial."²

The only reason to study either the Bible or the Classics is that both claim to be true.

Moreover, it is not just "literature" that will be unintelligible without biblical and classical knowledge. Science itself, as any serious student of the history of scientific thinking knows, will not be intelligible without knowledge of the Bible and the Classics. Already, in *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead said that the very possibility of science depended on the "belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedent in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying principles."³

From whence did this idea, that implied stable secondary causes and a cosmos from which something could be learned, come into the European mind? "It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher." Needless to say, this is exactly the position of Benedict XVI in his Regensburg Lecture.⁴

The Bible and the Classics are thus not to be contrasted to science as if the latter deals with reality and the former with dreams or illusions.

The danger of modern epistemological theory is such, in fact, that it is more likely to leave science in "dreams and illusions" than it is to leave students of the Classics or the Bible in never-never land. This eventuality that reality would require, that it be known, an act of faith is what the end of Chesterton's book, *Heretics*, was about.⁵

Whatever their methods and groundings, all three — science, the Bible, and the Classics — deal with the same world, the only real excuse

for anyone's paying attention to any of them. They all three claim and intend to explain *what is*, reality. A given explanation may be right or it may be wrong, but there can be no doubt that what it intends to do is to explain reality, to explain the truth of *what is*. These three — Bible, Classics, and science — do not deal with three different worlds in which each approach randomly floats around in its own separate sphere.

The Bible is to be studied primarily and honestly for what it maintains about reality, the reality of God, of the cosmos, of ourselves. No doubt there are things in the Bible that are poetic and intended to be poetic. But who ever said that, knowing what it is, that poetry did not deal with our reality? Likewise, the Classics are to be studied for what they tell us about reality. The Classics and the Bible both seek to describe the whole. Eventually both are intended to address each other. Faith is addressed to reason, reason to faith. They are not opposed to each other as "rational" and "irrational." Both, from different starting points, conceive themselves to be rooted in reason.

Neither of these sources, faith or reason, the Bible or the Classics, is to be read as if it was a version of modern philosophy that denies that either source could tell us anything about the truth we need to know to live. Moreover, accepting the notion that anything modern can be understood by beginning only with what is modern — the problem of Descartes — is, at the same time, not to know where moderns themselves began. They began with an attempt in the name of science to reject both the Bible and the Classics as sources of real knowledge about real things. They may well, in order not to go where science seems to want to go, end by denying that

2 E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 131.

3 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Mentor, 1963), 13.

4 See James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 2007).

5 "We shall be left defending, not only the incredible virtues and sanities of human life, but something more incredible still, this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be of those who have seen and yet have believed." G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, [1905] 1986), 207.

the mind can know anything but itself. Not a few modern philosophies begin with the idea that the only world that exists is the one we project out there, not the one that is out there. Modernity, in this sense, is a long series of rejected initiatives, themselves intended to prove that the initial rejection was right. This is what Gilson's great book, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, was about.⁶

One of the reasons we study Nietzsche so carefully is because he told us, often with great wit, that our modern efforts did not in fact succeed. We are not floundering for no reason.

Henry Veatch, a great man who was once in Georgetown's philosophy department, remarked that modernity began with rejecting Aristotle only to last long enough to see that the reasons for the original rejection no longer held. In Veatch's view, in his really good book on *Aristotle*, this rejection of the rejection, as it were, means that it was worthwhile to take another look at Aristotle, a classic if there ever was one.⁷

And Aristotle is not about to go away if for no other reason that a few inveterate souls still read him in ever improved editions only to find out that on a surprisingly large number of issues, most of those dealing with what is most important to us, Aristotle makes more sense than anyone else writing after him. To discover this truth is one of the delights of being an undergraduate.

The Bible, likewise, is a closed book for most students. Not only do they not read it, or know how to read it, but they do not think they can learn anything from it. They do not really know this, but they take it on authority, lousy authority. Actually, as anyone who tries it will soon find out, it is pretty difficult to read much in say St. Paul or St. John and not learn something funda-

mental about reality, especially about ourselves. Someone has to work rather hard to prevent himself from learning something from the Bible. Almost any book about anything will teach us something. When a book begins to teach us a lot of things about everything, we have to wonder where it got its information. Why is it, we wonder, that we can find out more about ourselves reading a couple of hours in Aristotle or Plato or Cicero or St. Matthew, or Augustine than we can by reading much written in the past five hundred years?

II. The question comes up then "what do students learn during their college years?" I heard of a student who was assigned in a class a Spanish translation of the *Da Vinci Code*. I figured it could not get much worse. We cannot, and should not, of course, measure in economic terms what we are supposed to learn in school, however over-priced higher education may be for the average household. Still, the question about what we learn is not frivolous. Even if intangible, something is supposed to happen in our souls in college or graduate school, something that makes us more human, more of what we are supposed to be, being what we already are. We are the beings who have to become what we are. We have to choose to be what we ought to be, then take steps to do it. We can systematically teach children how to pronounce words, and in this sense how to read and write, without their ever actually coming to learn anything from their reading. Indeed, this knowing without learning is generally what happens. We learn words and even ideas before we grasp what they mean in a more universal and technical sense.

⁶ Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophic Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press [1937] 1999).

⁷ Henry Veatch, *Aristotle: A Contemporary Appreciation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).

This useful information, however, does broach the question of the place of reading in our education, especially about what was once known as "book learning." The notion of a paper-less world was once explained to me by one of my nephews. In fact, almost everything today that appears on paper first is formulated and then preserved in an electronic environment. Paper is not where we begin to write, but where we end and not always then. After about ten years of e-mail, I no longer can calculate the number of good letters I have received which have ceased to exist because they were on ephemeral electronic format and not written by hand on paper. I sometimes wonder if someone has yet written a printed book entitled, *My Favorite Deleted E-mails*. I know I could have printed them out if I knew where to store them.

To be sure, it is almost impossible to eradicate something that once appears on-line. A former Attorney-General remarked that nothing we have ever put in electronic format ever completely disappears. It is the modern version of immortality. Our bodies die; our words do not. Still, we do not usually read whole books on-line unless we have to, and even if we have to, we usually first print them out. Far from the computer eliminating paper, it is one of its primary generators. The growers of trees and other paper pulp products must love the computer.

Books irradiate their own mystique. What we mean by education, that strange word, still has mostly to do with books, books we possess, keep. A friend of mine was recently in London. There he came across Maurice Baring's *Lost Lectures*, a book published by Peter Davies in London, in 1932. The Preface begins: "These *Lost Lectures* are for the most part talks deliv-

ered to imaginary audiences." What other words does anyone need but this enticing invitation to make him hasten to join this "imaginary audience!"

After a certain relatively early age, one begins to suspect that the world is full of books that he will never get around to read. One of my definitions of a noble life, well lived, is one in which, on the occasion of death, the man in question still has many books on his shelves not yet read or completely read. This is not to deny that a man wants to reread also the books that he once read. *Tell me what you read, and I will tell you what you are*. The same principle would hold if we put it negatively, "Tell me what you don't read, and I will tell you what you are." On the other hand, the dividing line between those of us who are good and those of us who are bad does not correspond with those who do and those who do not read books. Both saints and criminals were illiterate. Both saints and criminals have written learned tomes and fascinating novels.

III. But whether in the technical sense someone is able to read or not is not the central question. To be able read is important, to be sure, but what a person reads when he is able and free to read is more important. The world is full of people who can read but who, in fact, have read little or nothing. It is also full of others who constantly read but read nothing that is noble, nothing elevating, nothing that really might move their souls. But to read well and accurately, we need grammar, we need to know the parts of speech, how things fit together. These rudiments seem basic, even when spell-check and grammar-check are on our standard computer software.

We must also possess what Dorothy Sayers once called the “tools” of learning, which she said, in a famous essay that can still be easily found on Google, were in fact “The Lost Tools of Learning.” She meant logic and dialectic, rhetoric and composition. Still, the most important thing that students can possess in their young souls is not just the “tools” of learning, but the desire, the *eros*, the love and passion of learning. Socrates knew what he was talking about when he spoke of “philosophic *eros*.” Augustine talked of his “restless heart” because it was restless and he wanted to know why.

To all of us, there must come, as Plato said in the seventh book of the *Republic*, that awakening of our minds, minds we already have. We encounter someone, something. We “turn around.” We are astonished that something exists that we do not know about but, beholding, we want to know. If our schools or universities conspire, by their theories or by their atmosphere, to prevent us from wondering about the highest things, we are on our own. We can wash our hands and souls of them. We need not be defeated by a very expensive education that teaches us that relativism is true, or by a free education that encourages things that corrupt us. Eric Voegelin said somewhere that no one has to participate in the disorders of his time.

When an academic year ends, we want to say to students, especially to those whom Plato called the “potential philosophers”: “Do not be defeated either by one’s own vices or one’s own ideology or one’s own lethargy.” But we can only act on this advice if we suddenly are alerted by something outside of ourselves, something that is true or beautiful, something *that is*. The world exists so that we know that we are incomplete in ourselves. We suspect that our

completion includes, somehow, what is not ourselves. Aquinas called this completion, as it finally ended in us, knowledge, truth. And all knowledge is of what is not ourselves. We even know ourselves, that great Socratic project, by first knowing what is not ourselves.

Fortunately, not a few passages can be found in the Bible and in our literature that serve to alert students, to wake them up. Their souls, one way or another, have hopefully acquired some virtue, some grammar, some curiosity. To these, I would suggest two passages for their wonderment. The first is from the Bible, from the Gospel, about the rich young man, what he must do to be “perfect?” Imagine asking anyone that! Christ admired this young man. He told him to keep the commandments. The young man protested that he had always done this.

Finally, Christ told him that one thing was left, to sell his riches, give it to the poor, and follow Him. In one of the most poignant passages in the entire Bible, in Mark’s Gospel, it simply says that the young man went away “sad,” for he had many riches. The point was not really that there was anything wrong with riches as such or that the young man was violating some commandment. He wasn’t, as he said. It was that there are glories that are offered to us that we can, even without sin, reject.

The second passage is from a modern classic, from Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* The day was Tuesday, October 19, 1768. That morning Boswell and Johnson breakfasted on the Island of Col. They took leave of “the young ladies, and of our excellent companion, Col, to whom we had been so much obliged.” Finally they land on “that illustrious Island, which was once the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage clans

and roving barbarians derived their benefits of knowledge and the blessings of religion."

Johnson, in seeing this place, was much moved by the scene before him. Fortunately for us, Boswell was there to record what he said, which was as follows:

To abstract the mind from all local emotion would be impossible, if it were endeavored, and would be foolish if it were possible. Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses, whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me, and from my friends, be such frigid philosophy as may conduct us indifferent and unmoved over any ground that has been dignified by wisdom, bravery or virtue. That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of *Marathon*, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of *Iona*.

Should potential philosophers in whatever college, in whatever place, not know of the rich young man or of the plains of *Marathon* or of the ruins of *Iona*, they can assume they have lost much time in what is politely called their education.

In a footnote to this passage, Boswell adds: "had our Tour produced nothing else but this sublime passage, the world must have acknowledged that it was not made in vain. The present

respectable President of the Royal Society was so much struck on reading it, that he clasped his hands together, and remained for some time in an attitude of silent admiration." We can find much in local things. If we have never sensed what it might mean to "go away sad," or if we have never stood before something that moved us to "silent admiration," we have not begun our properly human lives.

We can read without learning at all. We can have read only one book, the Bible or Shakespeare, but read it well. We can read many things, none of which move our souls to attend to *what is*. Johnson was right. That man is "little to be envied" who can come across great, pious, and noble things but without their causing a ripple of light in his soul. What makes education worthwhile are precisely those defining moments of "turning around." These are moments of being struck by something that calls us out of ourselves. They may be "many allusions" from the Bible or the Classics, or the *Lost Lectures* of Maurice Baring, or the "Lost Tools of Learning" of Dorothy Sayers. It may be the Rich Young Man in Mark, or, finally, the plain of *Marathon* or the ruins of *Iona*, where our patriotism should "gain force" and our piety grow "warmer." It is with such experiences that we begin to wonder about *what is*, why it is, rather than is not.

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