
The Mighty River of Classics: Tradition and Innovation in Modern Education

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IN SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE'S poem "Kubla Khan," one of the classic texts of English Romanticism, a "sacred river" runs for miles, "meandering with a mazy motion" through a paradise realm and then falls down through caverns to "a sunless sea." The river continues underground, then reappears as a "mighty fountain," a geyser forced up with such power that boulders are tossed in the air like "chaffy grain." The river now runs overland, only to fall again beneath the earth and disappear.

Though his setting is imperial China, Coleridge calls his river the "Alph," probably after the Alpheus, a river in the Greek Peloponnesus that flows past the sacred precinct of Olympia and was thought to pass in a single pure stream through the Mediterranean Sea until it reappeared as the fountain of Arethusa on an island in the harbor of Syracuse in Sicily. According to legend, the river god Alpheus had fallen in love with the nymph Arethusa, and when he pursued her, the virgin goddess Artemis protected her by changing her into a fountain.

By shortening "Alpheus" to "Alph," Coleridge also evokes the Christian use of the first and last letters of the alphabet as a symbol for God, who is the "Alpha and Omega," the first and the last, a paradox often illustrated in the wall decorations or mosaics of churches. Coleridge's alternately "mazy" and "mighty" Alpheus seems to me an excellent metaphor for the classical tradition in Western culture,

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which flows down like a river from antiquity and sometimes seems to disappear underground. But despite constant prophecies of its extinction, it always reappears, forced up again with renewed power.

We are in yet another period when the validity of the classics as the foundation of Western learning and education is being questioned and when there are many signs of erosion—as in the reduction or outright elimination of Latin language courses in public high schools and classics departments in American universities and when the amount of classroom time devoted to the classics in freshman survey and composition courses has in many institutions drastically diminished. There are several reasons for this. The demand after the 1960s cultural revolution for contemporary “relevance” in the curriculum produced a relaxing of academic methods and demands and a proliferation of courses oriented toward the present. Popular culture has entered the classroom as teaching tool as well as subject—a phenomenon toward which there are quite different views. I myself, as a product of the 1960s, feel that popular culture has massively shaped American society over the past 150 years and that students, who have been immersed for their lifetimes in pop, need a map to it—to understand its evolution, technology, *modus operandi*, and persistent themes. On the other hand, an education that has tipped toward popular culture at the expense of the past threatens to become frivolous, faddish, and merely reactive. There is a way to teach or discuss popular culture, I would argue, that can be integrated with and can reinforce the classics, since so much of Hollywood’s use of sex and violence—from molten sex goddesses to larger-than-life action-adventure heroes—can be seen as an analogy to and even as a direct survival of classical mythology.

A second reason for the turn from classics in the past quarter century is the new interest in multiculturalism, which also originates in the 1960s. Veterans of World War II had come home with direct experience of Europe, the Pacific

islands, the Philippines, and Japan, but in the domestic preoccupations of the postwar period and in the exacerbation of political tensions in the Cold War stalemate with the Soviet Union, with nuclear warfare hanging in the balance, a certain xenophobia took over, so that the rest of the world was sometimes regarded as picturesque to visit but always improvable if it would only Americanize. In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement and labor activism for migrant workers put the theme of racial and class justice front and center. When the controversy over the Vietnamese war split the generations, the patriotism of protestors was often questioned, partly because leftism from the mid-nineteenth century on has indeed been programmatically internationalist. Proletarian solidarity was premised by Marxism to cut across national boundaries, even though the working class from common observation has always been fervently patriotic. In cultural terms, the 1960s were also permeated by Asian influences, coming from Zen Buddhism, an interest of the West Coast branch of the fifties Beat movement, and then Hinduism as well.

Multiculturalism is in theory a noble cause that aims to broaden perspective in the US, which because of its physical position between two oceans can tend toward the smugly isolationist. It is no coincidence that much of the primary impetus toward multiculturalism began in California, because of its Hispanic heritage and its pattern of immigration from Mexico, Latin America, and the Pacific rim. What poisoned the debate over educational reform, however, was that so many of the proposals for multicultural change were explicitly political, using a leftist frame of reference that polarized the campuses. Shortcuts were resorted to to get quick results in democratizing the curriculum: the number of texts by dead white European males was reduced to make room for those by women or people of color, sometimes without due regard for whether the substitute texts, which were often contemporary, had the same cultural weight or substance as what they replaced.

Indeed, for some in this movement, questions of quality were fundamentally elitist, having been created, it was alleged, by a cabal of imperialist white males to perpetuate their own power. The actual mechanics of canon-formation over time were either unknown or ignored: in point of fact, major writers and artists have rarely possessed or were significant beneficiaries of power in the political sense; in most cases (as in that of the embittered Dante) they were eccentrics or social failures. Second, only sporadically, as in Victorian England, can it be shown that major art was primarily a political vehicle—and even then, it had little effect on the curriculum, which was still based on the classics. When scrutinized over a time-span of thousands of years, canon-formation, a process always fluid and open to dispute, is more intimately linked to artistic impact than to political ideology. We declare something is important and assign it to the curriculum when we find evidence of its influence on *other* artists. In other words, the canon is really about artistic or intellectual fertility; it's the dynasty of works that have generated other works. To return to my river metaphor, art is a cascade down the centuries, like the cataracts that mark the changes of level of the descending Nile.

The laudable mission of multiculturalism also unfortunately got entangled with academic careerism. Job creation, recruitment, and promotion became attached to multiculturalism. Some established academics were so resistant to change that as universities sought diversity in the student body and curriculum, an add-on strategy was hastily adopted. New programs and departments multiplied so that diversity was achieved not by genuinely revising the curriculum but by turning the campus into a crazy quilt of competitive fiefdoms.

Furthermore, the nascent multicultural programs were more allied with campus administrators than with the older professors with their classical erudition. A host of assistant deanships were created nationwide whose positions and budgets were wed to particular campus constituencies and

which therefore fostered divisiveness rather than reconciliation. Over the past thirty years, American education at both the primary and secondary levels has been deformed by a steady expansion of bureaucracy that not only drains resources and usurps prerogatives that belong to the faculty but that sometimes encourages administrators to be more committed to external public relations than to internal academic quality.

In this first decade of the new millennium, I remain to be persuaded that college students are graduating even from the elite schools with deeper or broader knowledge. They are certainly well tutored in sentiment—that is, in how to project approved attitudes of liberal tolerance, though how well these will survive the test of adult life remains to be seen. Too much academic writing in multiculturalism, whether about the Americas or the Indian subcontinent or the modern Mideast, has been filtered through poststructuralism—which is ironically just about as Eurocentric and elitist a technique as can be imagined. Furthermore, too many proponents of multiculturalism have adopted the social realist or Stalinist view of art as an instrument of indoctrination, deploying positive social messages as a prelude to political action. However, on the other extreme, those most intellectually prepared to give multiculturalism a scholarly system—the professors of ancient history and classics—frequently did not respond to the demand for change except as a challenge to their survival. They set no counterproposal before the nation and lost the opportunity to take control of the momentum of reform.

The grand sequence of the classical tradition, which extends in various strands through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the scientific Enlightenment and modern era, is actually a master paradigm for how to structure an authentically multicultural curriculum on a global scale. All students abroad as well as in the US need to learn the general contours of the world's major artistic and cultural traditions. These long channels of lineage can best be understood as

streams—mighty rivers that are fed by tributaries and that are a confluence of mixed and varied material. The great rivers of cultural tradition are nearly always powered by religion, even when they slow down and spread out into the secular delta of modern life.

Thus my premise in understanding art and culture is always *continuity*. From Egyptian and Greek sculpture to Hollywood movies and rock music, I believe in creative influence over time. I categorically reject the view of culture as disconnected fragments or as the breakage of meaning—an insular fiction fostered by depressive intellectuals who lack the long view and whose ability to weigh or negotiate historical evidence is questionable. The modernist delusion of fragmentation can be traced to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," published in 1922 in the aftermath of the disaster of World War I. Its use in the chic postmodernism of the closing decades of the twentieth century descended from European writers and intellectuals in crisis after World War II. Lamentably, this outdated and provincial point of view has been given canonical status by those who evidently cannot see the patterns in culture and who have imposed their own limitations on hapless students.

Even in manifest destruction, I see construction or the possibility of cultural recovery and transformation. A superb example is a church in Rome, Santa Maria sopra Minerva, a medieval church with a Renaissance facade. Built in the thirteenth century in the Gothic style—the only one of its kind in Rome—it sits on the foundations of an ancient Roman temple to the virgin goddess Minerva. That in turn was built over a sanctuary to the mother goddess Isis, whose cult had spread from Egypt to Greece by the fourth century BC and from there throughout the Hellenized Mediterranean. Isis worship was very popular with the masses in ancient Rome, though it was intermittently opposed by religious conservatives. Everywhere in the rites of Isis the sacred waters of the Nile were used; a cistern to store them has been excavated at the remains of the Isis shrine in the buried city of Pompeii.

The passage in just this one building of Santa Maria sopra Minerva from Isis to Minerva to Mary, who is both virgin and mother, encapsulates the entire cultural history of the West. Such examples of cultural overlaying can and should be found for every major tradition in the world. In this age of mass media, when students are swamped by the present, it is a teacher's obligation not to tear down or deconstruct our artistic and intellectual heritage but to reveal the invisible foundations or hidden roots of the present.

In 1665 an Egyptian obelisk, clearly belonging to the original sanctuary of Isis, was dug up in the garden of the Dominican monastery at Santa Maria sopra Minerva. Pope Alexander VII asked Gianlorenzo Bernini, the genius of the Italian Baroque, to design a pedestal for it so that the obelisk could be displayed in the street in front of the church. Possibly after consulting with the renowned Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kircher, who would publish a treatise on the hieroglyphics of this obelisk in 1666, Bernini produced one of his most charming works. Today the obelisk, carried on the back of a muscular elephant beckoning toward passersby with its trunk, remains one of the most beloved works of public art in Rome.

When they were unearthed during the rebuilding and expansion of the city of Rome during the Renaissance and afterward, obelisks, four-sided pillars capped by a pyramid, were interpreted as symbols of divine illumination. Like the tendrilous Gothic spires of Northern European cathedrals whose stone seems to dissolve in midair, obelisks carried the eye and mind skyward, toward a realm of greater permanence. In Baroque Rome they were usually crowned with a bronze crucifix, signifying the triumph of Christianity over pagan religion. In ancient Egypt too, obelisks, which were hewn by virtuoso engineering in the quarry as single, fragile blocks of stone, also signified a yearning for ultimate reality as they soared toward the divine disc of the sun.

The obelisk, therefore, in its simple, clean, sharp-edged geometry, can be seen to embody a long line or current of

idealism in the Western tradition that connects pagan with Christian thought. It is precisely that idealism that I find missing in contemporary higher education, which in its laudable movement toward secularism—that is, freedom from sectarian coercion or dogma—has ended up with a chaotic, diffuse humanities curriculum that is too often simplistic in content and spiritually empty, despite its claims to be the agent of social good.

Many members of my 1960s generation followed the High Romantic pattern of critiquing politics and rejecting organized religion—both of which were viewed as forms of outmoded masculine authority. But the sixties counterculture, like Romanticism, retained a religious perspective and sense of the sacred by honoring nature: hence the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was expelled from Oxford University for writing a manifesto in defense of atheism, could write an ecstatic ode to the highest mountain in Europe, “Mont Blanc,” with its awesome spectacle of cold, brute power. American Romantics like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman explored religious traditions outside the West, specifically Hinduism, which was assimilated into 1960s music as well as the transcendental meditation movement. But the Romantic comprehensiveness of sixties consciousness was almost immediately lost by the 1970s, the hedonistic disco era.

Massive drug-taking in the sixties, notably psychedelics used to gain visionary insights, became a substitute for serious spiritual inquiry and took a great toll personally and psychologically on some who, urged on by new-minted gurus like Timothy Leary, chose to become dropouts from the career system and public realm and thus were unable to effect authentic and enduring change. But I respect those psychedelic explorers of inner space who destroyed themselves in a genuine quest for truth. On the other hand, I lament the tragic waste, for these were the idealists of my generation, the ones who should have been the real educational reformers of our time.

The religious impulse and cosmic perspective of the sixties

shifted not into education but in diminished and sentimentalized form into the New Age movement, which has become a highly commercialized farrago of self-help therapies, mystical lore, and sometimes quite beautiful, atmospheric trance music, Asian or Celtic in mood. New Age, another creation of the West Coast, is syncretistic in the way it fuses Asian and European influences, but as an approach to life, it is all-accepting and undemanding, suspending guilt and judgment. It offers a psychology without conflict, and a subjective ethics without challenge or moral responsibility.

Elements of New Age sensibility seem to have entered American Catholicism, which in the 1950s was already moving away from its *déclassé* ethnic roots and Protestantizing itself through a startling drabness of church architecture and décor. The folk songs, Protestant hymns, affable sermons, and literal hand-holding in today's suburban Catholic churches illustrate mellow New Age principles of inclusion and harmony and reinforce the casualness of the vernacular Mass and the slackness of unpoetic contemporary translations of Scripture. Priests, meanwhile, are now being trained to be social workers; theology and learning *per se* are no longer as heavily emphasized. The priest, with his public performance of the mysterious Latin Mass, was once an embodiment of learning for ordinary people. Latin, which I still believe to be the basis of most strong writing in English, was intrinsic to a priest's official identity and gave churchgoers a moving sense of historical continuity with classical antiquity, when the Christian story began. The priest, in other words, was an educator, just as university education began in the Middle Ages as training for priests.

In the wake of the 1960s cultural revolution, organized religion in America has clearly tempered its authoritarianism and tried to make itself more user-friendly. But in this welcome process, which posits the parish as a happy family, what has been lost is the sense of theology as intellectual history, complex and daunting. Jesuit colleges, following the mandate of early Jesuit missionaries to learn native languages and cus-

toms, tended to be hospitable to the post-sixties movement for multiculturalism. But I am not aware of Jesuit voices taking a leading role on either side of the public debate over poststructuralism, which seeped into American universities in the 1970s and early 1980s and has in my view damaged the humanities in ways that it will take a half century to repair. Surely Jesuit professors, with their scholarly training and tradition of disputation, could have been in the vanguard of engaging poststructuralism in its own terms as a putative philosophy and freeing nascent multiculturalism from its grip. Certainly the response to the theory trend by the professoriat at secular institutions was too slow and feeble, so by the time the general alarm sounded, it was too late.

Nothing has been more deleterious than the common error that poststructuralism is a product of 1960s leftism and therefore an agent of progressive political change. This misconception was made possible only because authentic American radicals of the sixties rarely if ever entered or completed graduate school in the humanities or made their way up the academic ladder. Poststructuralism was two generations older; it was a product of the school of Saussure, a system of linguistic theory predating World War II and subscribed to by French intellectuals who were heavily influenced by the pessimistic modernism of Samuel Beckett. The American sixties believed in social reform, in individual identity, in emotional intensity, and in nature; poststructuralism believes in none of these things. It asserts that there are no "facts"; that language constructs or mediates all reality, that political power is created and sustained through language, and that, conversely, an alteration in language will somehow produce political change. Poststructuralism is simply a new version of verbalism—the excessive preoccupation with words—that has repeatedly plagued the history of Western education, even in ancient Rome. The sixties cultural revolution, as energized by mass media, was grounded in the sensory—and it should have produced a massive reform of education in this era of cutting-edge science and technology by moving the hu-

manities curriculum forcibly toward the arts. That leftist politics *can* be synthesized with traditional erudition and passionate respect for the arts is proved by Arnold Hauser's Marxist study, *The Social History of Art*, a magnificent magnum opus in the tradition of German philology.

America is presently suffering from an effete, cynical pseudo-intellectuality in the universities, a manic rotation of superficial news cycles in the media, and a generalized hypochondria in the professional middle class, as shown by its preoccupation with stress-related ailments and disorders, buffered by tranquilizers. From a distance, this affluent society, with its avalanche of high-tech toys, must look as if it can barely survive the anxieties of freedom. In a secular society where commerce is king and where the fine arts have never been deeply rooted, it is up to professional educators to provide the sustaining material of culture. But when they themselves cannot agree on what constitutes a basic body of knowledge for the young, then education disintegrates and the humanities are inevitably marginalized, disdained and ignored by average Americans busy with their daily lives.

At the University of the Arts in 1990, I collaborated with Lily Yeh, a professor of painting and art history and a social activist born in China, to create an experimental course called "East and West," the notes for which were published in my first essay collection in 1992. We sought to identify the major themes in Western and Asian tradition that could provide the foundation for a curriculum not just for American but for global education. I certainly expected to see more evidence over the past decade that college teachers understood the urgent need to address the general public about educational reform. But American humanities departments have been amazingly stagnant in this period, demoralized in some cases by factionalism or by financial pressure. Few new ideas have emerged, and no rising major critics or scholars are visible on the horizon. Bread-and-butter issues have come to the fore, such as the long overdue recognition by the profession of the outrageous exploitation of part-time teach-

ers and graduate students.

Radical change would be needed for the universities to shift to a truly global curriculum. But the Western classical tradition would nevertheless retain centrality because of the sheer massiveness of its documentation, as well as the unrivalled interrelationship of its artistic genres. In my own experience over thirty years as a teacher in a wide variety of schools—including, when I was a struggling adjunct, adult night classes at a helicopter factory in Connecticut—I have found that archaeology captures students' attention. They are transfixed by material about the destruction of great civilizations. Because they inhabit a superefficient world of plastics and stainless steel, where the old and worn simply disappears, they find particularly sobering images of the catastrophic effects of *time*. The contemplation of ruins, in all their decay and devastation, was basic to European education in the eighteenth century. Engravings of the broken, half-buried remnants of the Roman Forum, then an overgrown pasture for herds of sheep and goats, provided a melancholy object lesson on human vanity and mortality.

Archaeology is a fusion of the arts and sciences, of theoretical speculation and engagement with the stubbornly concrete material world. It is in the recovery, identification, and conservation of objects from the past that the West has distinguished itself. My proposed reform of education would put the world's major religious traditions at the center of the curriculum and present them in an Old Histori-cist, multi-tiered way as a combination of ritual, text, artifact, and architecture. Through archaeology conjoined with anthropology—and here I am deeply influenced by the early twentieth-century Cambridge school of classical anthropology—religion can be taught in a non-doctrinaire way that expands and develops the student's mind and opens up the distant past without smothering it with contemporary assumptions and political projects.

Occupying the center of Rome's spacious Piazza Navona, whose oval shape follows that of the ancient stadium of the

emperor Domitian, is another splendid monument by Bernini, the Fountain of the Four Rivers, commissioned by Pope Innocent X and built between 1648 and 1651. A mammoth Egyptian obelisk, ringed at its base with papal insignia, rests on the grotto of a hollow travertine mountain in front of the church of Sant'Agnese. At the foot of the mountain sit, gushing spouts of water, colossal sculptures of the four great rivers of the world: the Danube, representing Europe; the Ganges, representing Asia; Argentina's Rio de la Plata, representing the Americas; and the Nile, representing Africa. Carved around the fountain are allegorical inscriptions by that omnipresent Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kircher, whose treatise on this recently unearthed obelisk was published in the Holy Year 1650.

Bernini's stunning design for the Nile sculpture seems to me a great metaphor for culture in general and particularly for European culture, which descends from the warring tribes and empires of the ancient Near East. The Nile is depicted as a burly, nude, adult man wrapping a shroud around his head—signifying that the source of the Nile in central Africa was still unknown. These pagan river gods ringing a North African obelisk before a Catholic church represent the mighty force of tradition feeding and irrigating the present. But the Nile god's masking shroud suggests that all earthly knowledge is partial and contingent. This is no discovery by modern theorists but a basic perception of most major philosophers since Heracleitus, the pre-Socratic who said you cannot step into the same river twice.

The Baroque era, in which St. Ignatius' Society of Jesus flourished, produced a public art that teaches without condescension, that translates big ideas into passionate, theatrical, accessible form. Counter-Reformation Baroque, in which religion was turned into grand opera, has more in common with Hollywood than with the wizened creeds of our current campuses. Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers, fusing pagan and Christian and incorporating the entire known world, is multiculturalism at its best. It presents culture as massive and

monumental yet at the same time in perpetual flux. It is a perfect symbol for enlightened education, whose energies must be constantly renewed by the interplay and confluence of tradition and innovation.