

# A Return to the Crossroads: A Maritainian View of the New Educational Reformers

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In his tragicomic essay, "The Great Liberal Death-Wish," Malcolm Muggeridge, recounts the following experience:

On radio and television panels, on which I have spent more time than I care to remember, to questions such as: What does the panel think should be done about the rising rate of juvenile delinquency? the answer invariably offered is: more education. I can hear the voices ringing out now, as I write these words; the male ones throaty and earnest, with a tinge of indignation, the female ones particularly resonant as they insist that, not only should there be more education, but more and better education. It gives us all a glow of righteousness and high purpose. More and better education—that's the way to get rid of juvenile delinquency, and adult delinquency, for that matter, all other delinquencies. If we try hard enough, and are prepared to pay enough, we can surely educate ourselves out of all our miseries and troubles, and into the happiness we seek and deserve. If some panel member—as it might be me—ventures to point out that we have been having more, and what purports to be better, education for years past, and that nonetheless juvenile delinquency is still year by year rising, and shows every sign of going on so doing, he gets cold, hostile looks. If he then adds that, in his opinion, education is a stupendous fraud perpetrated by the liberal mind on a bemused public, and calculated, not just not to reduce juvenile delinquency, but positively to increase it, being itself a source of this very thing; that if it goes on following its present course, it will infallibly end by destroying the possibility of anyone having any education at all, the end product of the long expensive course from kindergarten to post graduate studies being neo-Stone Age men—why, then, a percep-

tible shudder goes through the other panelists, and even the studio audience. It is blasphemy.<sup>1</sup>

Muggeridge here unabashedly declares that contemporary education is a failure; even worse, a deception, an institution needing, if possible, a new direction, a radical change of course. More specifically, he draws attention to the fact that so much of what passes for educational improvement is no reform at all, itself being just another consequence of the same errant educational philosophy--another instance of the status quo. What is needed, then, is a genuine reform, a wholesale change.

With this lament, Muggeridge echoes Maritain, whose own call for educational reform is recorded, among other places, in his 1943 volume, *Education at the Crossroads*.<sup>2</sup> There Maritain describes the nature of that errant philosophy which has modern education in its grip. It is a doctrine of mechanistic and social science built upon an inadequate account of human nature and born out of Enlightenment conceptions of human reason, conceptions which neglect the metaphysical and theological dimensions of the human person and which deny a tradition where they are central. Moreover, this philosophy fails from an axiological point of view because, in light of its limited understanding of human nature, it uncritically embraces pluralism, and ultimately devolves into historicism and moral relativism.

That such a philosophy still dominates education is evident in the numberless drafts of policies and strategies proposed by educators yearly. Their efforts to engineer education generally resist any attempt to understand the human being except in terms of historical, social, and cultural manifestations, cast against a background of mechanistic, empirical science generally; and this is to say nothing of the actual content of classroom instruction, where students are evangelized accord-

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<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Muggeridge, "The Great Liberal Death-Wish," in *The Portable Conservative Reader*, ed. Russell Kirk (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943). A later work on education is *The Education of Man*, ed. Donald Gallagher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1962).

ing to the gospel of Enlightenment science (or its nihilistic consequences) from faculty generally unaware of their own assumptions. Since, according to this philosophy of education, the human condition points to nothing but itself, to nothing transcendent, the principal objective of learning readily reduces to the dogma of technique or instrumentalism, according to which knowledge has value only because it is useful for individual or social advantage. Hence, the technical training and careerism rampant in today's curricula.

Instead of such a skeptical and narrow philosophy, Maritain proposes an education that retrieves the timeless principles of a Christian culture, and that also recovers the Jewish and Greek conceptions of the human condition. These elements are the constituents of a *theocentric humanism*, which provides a sure basis for education, since it understands comprehensively the nature and ends of human life. This is a humanism that honors the fact that the human person has both a secular and a trans-secular destiny, as well as a natural and a trans-natural end. To be human is to be a product of nature and of the human; but to be human is also to be a creature of God, to Whom the human person is supernaturally ordained. Theocentric humanism is an alternative to an *anthropocentric humanism*, according to which human life is explained in purely secular and natural terms, that is to say, as though the human person were sufficient unto himself. Anthropocentric humanism is inadequate, since its explication of the human condition is too narrow, focusing only on two of its causes. Clearly, with its preoccupation with only the natural and secular dimensions of the human condition modern education is an edifice built on the rock of anthropocentric humanism.

In calling for a different foundation, however, one that recovers a different tradition, Maritain is neither a pathetic nostalgic nor an exclusivist. In the first instance, he aims to recover a tradition, not just because it is a tradition, but because it holds lessons and values for contemporary times. In the second, he has in mind a legacy that is inclusive, by virtue of its comprehensiveness and analogy, one that accommodates all peoples by not necessitating a commitment to formal institutions or canons but only to a world-view respecting the spiritual depth, dignity, and mystery of human personality.

In a Judeo-Greco-Christian civilization like ours, this community analogy, which extends from the most orthodox religious forms of thought to the mere humanistic ones, makes it possible for a

Christian philosophy of education if it is well founded and rationally developed, to play an inspiring part in the concert, even for those who do not share in the creed of its supporters....

In answer to our question, then, 'What is man?' we may give the Greek, Jewish, and Christian idea of man: man as an animal endowed with reason, whose supreme dignity is in the intellect; and man as a free individual in personal relation with God, whose supreme righteousness consists in voluntarily obeying the law of God; and man as a sinful and wounded creature called to divine life and to the freedom of grace, whose supreme perfection consists of love.<sup>3</sup>

With this statement of his philosophical anthropology, Maritain is calling for educators to change direction and to journey along another, less worn path, a road more soundly constructed and with a more definite direction. The Frenchman's call is still timely, for the same crisis that educators faced in his day is still before us. Modern education has returned to or double-crossed, so to speak, the crossroads. The intersection that defines this crossroads presents educators with one of two alternatives: (1) to continue educating according to the assumptions of a positivistic social science, pressing on with a so-called *reform* that is, in fact, no reform; or (2) to provide a different foundation for education, one which is committed to a philosophical anthropology grounded in a tradition antedating the Enlightenment and rooted in more ultimate metaphysical and theological principles, while at the same time doing justice to the fact that the human condition is also situated socially, historically, and culturally.

Now, the question that compels my interest is how Maritain, or one committed to his philosophical principles, might judge certain recent critics of education, who, like him, have challenged education to change its course. Such an inquiry has value in illuminating the thought of Maritain and the current reformers alike, since it specifies where the latter succeed and fail to make contact with the former's philosophy. In making this assessment, I must, of course, be selective; for I simply do not have the space here to examine all of those thinkers who might neverthe-

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<sup>3</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 7.

less deserve attention. Accordingly, for the sake of brevity, I will comment on the most conspicuous, or dare I say, most notorious, representatives of the new reform, whom I identify as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Ernest L. Boyer, Allan Bloom, and Mortimer J. Adler.<sup>4</sup>

That these representatives have been read by a wide audience is no good reason in itself to discount them, so long as they are responsible scholars otherwise. In fact, given my purpose here there is good reason to select them precisely because of their celebrity, for I am of the conviction that what Maritain would find most remarkable about the new reformers is that they have so effectively captured the attention of the public; and this, by no means, is a trivial matter, since, in a democratic society, after all, it is ultimately the public that will benefit or suffer from educational change.

### I. Hirsch

E. D. Hirsch contests the prevailing assumption that the American educational system has succeeded at reducing illiteracy. Of course, his point turns on the question, what is meant by "literacy." If the term signifies skill in the mechanics of reading, then Hirsch grants that Americans are relatively a literate people. However, if "literacy" refers to the ability to comprehend and to communicate cultural knowledge, then Hirsch charges that Americans are becoming woefully ignorant. Paradoxically, illiteracy in this second sense is occurring precisely because of literacy in the first. For he attributes American cultural illiteracy to an exaggerated emphasis on the teaching of developmental techniques at the neglect of content-laden curricula.

Hirsch discovers the source of this corrosive education of technique in the educational philosophies of Rousseau and Dewey, whom he labels

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<sup>4</sup>E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); Ernest Boyer, *College* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Mortimer J. Adler, *Reforming Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1988); see also Dr. Adler's article, "Great Books, Democracy, and Truth," in *Freedom and the Modern World*, ed. Michael D. Torre (Notre Dame: American Maritain Association, 1989), 33-45.

*Romantic Formalists*, committed to the view that education should be relatively indifferent to content. Confident in the native wit of the young, Rousseau and Dewey believe that, once equipped with basic skills, the student will be able to shape his life and knowledge by and for himself. This naive commitment to instrumentalism, Hirsch declares, has eviscerated academic curricula and has inevitably weakened our society itself, since citizens can no longer presume that the so-called *educated* have learned a body, however superficial, of cultural symbols enabling them to communicate with others who are likewise supposedly educated. The path to reform, then, is to restore content to curricula, so that our schools *educate* and do not merely *train*. Students need to be held accountable for knowing the chief symbols of present and past culture necessary to maintain our identity as a united and educated nation. In more specific terms, this accountability can be insured by restoring curricula that are, at once, *extensively* and *intensively* sound.

One can think of the school curriculum as consisting of two complementary parts, which might be called the extensive and the intensive curriculum. The content of the extensive curriculum is traditional literate knowledge, the information, attitudes, and assumptions that literate Americans share—cultural literacy....The extensive curriculum would be designed to ensure that all our high school graduates are given the traditional information shared by other literate Americans. This extensive network of associations constitutes the part of the curriculum that has to be known by every child and must be common to all the schools of the nation.

But the extensive curriculum is not a sufficient basis for the education by itself....The intensive curriculum, though different, is equally essential. Intensive study encourages a fully developed understanding of a subject, making one's knowledge of it integrated and coherent. It coincides with [the] recommendation that children should be deeply engaged with a small number of typical concrete instances. It is also that part of the total curriculum in which great flexibility in contents and methods can prevail. The intensive curriculum is the more pluralistic element of my proposal, because it ensures that individual students, teachers, and schools can work in

tensively with materials that are appropriate for their diverse temperaments and aims.<sup>5</sup>

With this two-dimensional curriculum, Hirsch hopes to make possible an education that both informs students and teaches them to think. Students thereby become familiar with shared symbols in the context of the culture in which they live. They learn not only the symbols, but their rationale. If such a curriculum were put in place, then educators could graduate students who can live as responsible and informed citizens in a democratic society.

**Assessment.** Hirsch has written a worthwhile volume. It is to be commended for its bold criticism of the legacies of Rousseau and Dewey in education, a legacy in which skills and *content-neutral* curricula are ultimately favored. Hirsch is also subtle-minded enough to know that cultural literacy is not just an accumulation of facts. His demand for both an extensive and an intensive curriculum is rightly acknowledged.

Yet I think that Maritain would have me criticize Hirsch nonetheless. In the first place, Hirsch is naive about what cultural literacy can accomplish. He seems to think that the beginning and end of education is cultural literacy. He fails to see that literacy is only a symptom of a sound education, rather than its cause. This error is evident in his brazen remark that "the achievement of high universal literacy is the key to all other fundamental improvements in American education."<sup>6</sup> To his mind, the condition for a sound education is committed teachers who value cultural literacy; but this is not enough. What is required are committed teachers armed with a sensible vision of education, a vision that is provided only by grappling with foundational questions about human nature and its *telos*. Unfortunately, Hirsch sorely neglects these considerations. This neglect is especially apparent when he talks about the nature of the intensive curriculum. The extensive curriculum, he grants, can accomplish little without the intensive one; but the intensive curricu-

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<sup>5</sup>E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 127-128.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

lum itself has to be grounded in a sound philosophy of education, which, in turn, depends on a philosophy of the human person. Unless these deeper foundations are supplied, cultural literacy will be no significant or lasting solution to the ills of American education. He does not recognize that a sound intensive program must address concerns about an adequate metaphysics of knowledge. Indeed, his remarks on the intensive curriculum seem to suggest that any philosophy of education which reaches a judgment about such ultimate concerns is arbitrary. Hirsch, then, is content to abandon students to the pluralistic beliefs of a diverse faculty, as if diversity, without any self-conscious direction, can provide the unity and coherence of instruction necessary for a genuine education. An education that succeeds must embrace plurality only for the sake of unity. One must distinguish in order to unite, else knowledge becomes merely data, atomized and unconnected. As a result, the merit of Hirsch's book, which is to point out that American schools simply do not educate, is compromised by his failure to provide a genuine prescription for the problem, which would consist in proposing that there are very specific ends for education because education aims to perfect human nature. A long tabulation of items constituting "what every American needs to know" is no standard for educational improvement. Given the bankruptcy of his nostrums for reform, we are left only with a *Book of Lists*, Part III.

## II. Boyer

Under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ernest Boyer has put together a highly readable study, under the title *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*. It supplies a wealth of information, and it also furnishes some interesting historical narrative about the way American pluralism and social values have influenced and shaped higher education over the centuries. Concerning the current state of higher education, his findings are paradoxical. On the one hand, the American university enjoys a certain vitality, making it "the envy of the world." On the other, "it is a deeply troubled institution." Its vitality is, of course, due to a democratic pluralism, which inspires the university to make a place for any and every point of view. However, this cause of vitality is also the same condition of divisiveness and fragmen-



tation. This fragmentation is far-reaching and, in various forms, it is behind most of the afflictions of academe, but especially behind the failure of the academic community to agree on common goals and curricula. Boyer's study is a contribution to the debate on higher education precisely because it appreciates the problem of disunity in the academic community.

Boyer understands the embarrassment that comes with this fragmentation, since the very words "college" and "university" derive from Latin roots signifying "unity." It is a problem, he notes, that has not been un-noticed by students. Each of the sixteen researchers he sent forth with the mission to collect data so as to diagnose the ills of the American university (a *diaspora* which itself might create the impression of fragmentation, even if there were none) reports that students commonly express a dissatisfaction with curricula that need integration. In other words, students long for coherence.<sup>7</sup> The present generation of college professors does not seem to supply it. Boyer's prescription: design curricula in such a way so that students have an opportunity to integrate their knowledge before graduating, while also benefitting from a diversity of course offerings and majors. This is the problem of educational reform as he sees it: to bring unity out of the richness of diversity.

**Assessment.** Boyer's comments on the current state of higher education contain a number of explanations and recommendations which merit a response from Maritain's point of view. First, Boyer is right to recognize in America's democratic pluralism a valuable feature of our educational experience. It is delightful to read how Boyer describes the way in which this diversity helped change the nature of universities in America's history. Secondly, he is to be commended for recognizing that, as de Tocqueville prophesied, this diversity could become problematic for institutions of higher learning. Without coherence and synthesis, knowledge cannot be wisdom; and if educational institutions fail to lay, at least, the foundations of wisdom, they simply fail to educate.

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<sup>7</sup>Ernest Boyer, *College*, 85.

It is on this point, however, that Boyer can give us little, if any, direction. Just as Hirsch, Boyer is a tinkerer who does not really understand the deeper problems. Again, educational reform is empty talk unless it addresses the problem of the foundations of knowledge and does not ignore the ends of the human person. Re-engineering of curricula is not enough to achieve coherence; the curricula must themselves reflect a coherent philosophy of education. If that is not provided in the first place, then curricula and the classroom experience itself, for that matter, are structures built on shifting sand.

In fairness to Boyer, it may be that, given the current state of American education, neither faculty nor administrators may be inclined or capable of wrestling with such ultimate issues. Indeed, it may be that the hope for educational reform is no longer realistic. It may be that, at last, the radical pluralism of American education has become an insuperable barrier to integral education according to an integral humanism. If that is so, then bad education may be the price we pay for living in the kind of democratic society we have (a question I will take up again at the conclusion of this article); but resignation is not the same as reform--and Boyer claims to be a reformer rather than an advocate of surrender. If Boyer will not have us surrender, what can he prescribe to transcend the fragmentation that he identifies and laments? He can prescribe nothing sensible unless it is rooted in the deeper considerations regarding metaphysics and philosophical anthropology. By neglecting these foundations, Boyer is a *reformer* in name only.

### III. Bloom

Few writers among the current generation of scholars have been so successful at inciting outrage as Allan Bloom. His efforts at polemic have been so dramatic that they may create the impression that his indignation expresses profound truths; but, alas, an expression of moral indignation does not an argument make, and I fear that Bloom, except for an episodic chapter here and there, has written more of a Jeremiad than an argument; but there can be no doubt about one contribution Bloom (or his editor) has bequeathed us: a title. His title is a lasting achievement, one of those gradiose and gutsy *rouse-the-crusaders-and-impale-the-infidels* kinds of titles. It reads *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher*

*Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students.*<sup>8</sup> Now this is a title that, on the face of it, would accord with Maritain's own judgment about the limitations of American education. For a moment, let me savor its three parts from a Maritainian perspective, keeping in mind that what Maritain might argue to justify Bloom's title might not at all accord with what Bloom himself argues.

First, it is all too apparent that the minds of modern educators and their students are closed. This is the inevitable consequence of embracing a narrow, positivistic account of knowledge, which carries with it other allied skepticisms, leading ultimately to the dismissal of axiology and metaphysics as genuine knowledge, since such disciplines are beyond empirical verification. In spite of the decline of logical positivism as a school of philosophy, its skeptical assumptions still generally flourish in academe; or, at least, its various by-products, emotivism, relativism, and historicism, may be said to still thrive. The result is ironic in that the closedness of the American mind is related to its supposed openness. Since openness means that any and every idea that is not "verified" by empirical science is not genuine knowledge, and since this is true of all metaphysical and axiological discussions, then such ideas are reduced to sheer opinion. Thus, nobody can argue that one moral or political or metaphysical judgment is, in the last analysis, any more sensible than any other. Accordingly, the standards of these disciplines undergo a kind of democratic leveling according to which everyone has as much intellectual right to speculate about such matters as anybody else, regardless of background or expertise. For expertise has to do with knowledge, not mere opinion. Hence, education on morality, metaphysics, and religion becomes no more instructive than a casual hour with Phil, Oprah, or Geraldo, where every audience member for a moment can be an authority, using up a slice of that fifteen minutes allotted each of us by Andy Warhol.

Another serious problem with this skepticism, of course, is that convictions regarding the value of education itself are compromised,

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<sup>8</sup>Bloom originally preferred the title "Souls Without Longing." For an interesting comment on this, see Eva Brann's review in *St. John's Review*, 71 (1988), 38.

since they are axiological in nature. Indeed, the relationship of education to the civic good is also no longer a pressing issue, since the question of the social good has dissolved into the vortex of sheer opinion. The only time such a question becomes salient is when Americans begin to worry about their ability to compete economically with other nations. Except for this utilitarian interest, our own educational system actually undermines the belief in the structures and values necessary for the maintenance of our democratic way of life. Hence, Maritain would have us approve of the second expression in Bloom's title: American education has failed democracy, specifically in that it has failed to address those abiding concerns of philosophical anthropology and ethics necessary to make sense of our social lives.<sup>9</sup> Since such concerns are dismissed as unscientific, they are simply no longer a part of education, except as the objects of opinionated free-for-alls.

Maritain would also commend the title's third part, regarding the impoverishment of the souls of today's students. If education is sound only because it is responsive to the multi-dimensional ends of human nature, and if modern education is unable to contribute to these ends because it no longer makes sense out of the metaphysical and axiological principles necessary for understanding human existence, then education can no longer even begin to teach the human being what it is to be a human being. If so, the student ends his education as he began it, with no wisdom about himself. Hence, his soul is indeed impoverished, for, *even in general outline*, he cannot answer the question, what is it to live a human life? His education has failed to teach him how to understand himself and how to relate to his world.

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<sup>9</sup>As I speculate at the conclusion of this article, it is difficult for education to serve democracy, since the latter manifests so many tendencies contrary to the aims of authentic education. Here is a paradox: democracy is vitalized by education, and yet democracy threatens to resist and undermine education. Education, then, is of incalculable value in that it can enhance democracy's finest features, while at the same time resisting its leveling influences. The best educational institutions, I suggest below, are religious-sponsored schools, because they can manifest a self-conscious and effective resistance to these leveling effects.

This failure to cultivate in students a due regard for their human nature sufficient to inspire them to believe that to live the human life is to live a life according to reason accounts, in my judgment, for the exaggerated careerism and bourgeois individualism among the youth today. Because education no longer assists students even in those first faltering steps toward wisdom—which, at minimum, is to exercise confidence in the conviction that reason, to a significant degree, equips one to deal with life effectively—students have come to fear the world and human life as an absurd, dangerous, and wholly mystifying place. Since they have not been taught to value or to depend on reason, they suppose that the world is, in fact, irrational. Since this condition makes for an insecure existence, they turn delusionally to the mystique of *job* and *technological expertise* to provide them security. For them a job is the only security possible in a world beyond the reach of reason.

**Assessment.** While these comments might express how Maritain would approve of Bloom's title, I am not so sure that, as I cautioned above, Bloom's rationale for the title would accord with Maritain's. I fear that, except for a few priceless passages and insights, the substance of Bloom's book is at loggerheads with Maritain's philosophy. In the first place, Bloom's prescription for reopening the American mind is unacceptable. His call is to recover reason, but his conception of reason is so narrow that what Bloom would have us in fact recover is only another version of a closed mind. For it is evident that when Bloom talks of reason, he has in mind a reason shaped and constricted by Enlightenment assumptions of human understanding.<sup>10</sup> According to these as-

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<sup>10</sup>In point of fact, Bloom is ambivalent about his Enlightenment allegiances. While Bloom has affinities with the Enlightenment in that his philosophy promotes an alienated reason, a reason separated from revelation and cultural tradition, he does not represent the Enlightenment in that he condemns instrumentalism, which is an important theme in his provocative chapter "From Socrates' *Apology* to Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede*." By "instrumentalism," Bloom has in mind a view of knowledge which perceives learning as only a means to utilitarian or egoistic ends. This view of knowledge was engendered by Baconian science but

sumptions, human reason can be relatively indifferent to its cultural situation, since, in the last analysis, it is the only significant factor in culture. Genuine education cultivates pure reason, becoming somehow counter-cultural precisely to the extent it is isolated from culture; and the way, as it turns out, to nurture this transcendent reason—a reason that can perfectly assess culture because it is the only standard of value for culture—is to teach the student the Great Books, preferably after the fashions of Straussian interpretations.<sup>11</sup> The Great Books will acquaint students with pure philosophical personalities, such as Socrates, whom Bloom names as the paradigm mind that students should emulate. Socrates is presumably a precursor of Bloom's life of reason because he regards education as an instrument to criticize culture rather than as a means to rationalize it, but Bloom has set up a false dichotomy. It is true that reason should not be the blind thrall of culture, but reason itself demands the acknowledgement of other dimensions of human life besides the development of sophisticated, academic reason. A healthy reason knows that intellectual virtue is ordained to the full complexities of culture. Socrates himself understood this only too well, and, for this reason, Bloom has misrepresented the ancient Athenian in making him

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acquired influence through the advocacy of the Enlightenment *philosophes*. By the nineteenth century, this epistemology began to transform universities into institutions of technical training, pandering ultimately to individualist or utilitarian interests. The deformation of the contemporary university is the result of this legacy. For a clear treatment of how Enlightenment sources influenced modern education see Thomas A. Michaud, "An Indictment of Enlightenment Technique," *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual European Studies Conference*, K. Odwarka, ed. (Cedar Rapids IA: University of Northern Iowa, 1988), 193-202.

<sup>11</sup>For a critical review of such an educational use of the Great Books see Mortimer J. Adler, "Great Books, Democracy, and Truth." For a helpful reminder of Strauss's influence on Bloom, see George Anastaplo, "In Regard to Allan Bloom: A Respectful Dissent," in *The Great Ideas Today* (1988, 252-273). Reprinted in *Essays On The Closing Of The American Mind*, Robert L. Stone, ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1987), 267-284.

the standard of Bloomian education. Socrates believed that his culture could benefit from the criticism of reason, but only because reason was not disconnected from or contemptuous of culture in the first place. While Socrates criticized the Athenian community, he did so as a political conservative, deeply committed to the Athenian way of life and ready to take up dialectical combat with the sophists to defend it.

In the main, Bloom's reason is only an abstraction, an anemic, rarefied reason that misrepresents the philosophical life as incompatible with the rest of human experience, especially religious faith. As a product of the Enlightenment, Bloom dismisses the religious life as something beneath the life of the truly educated, the life of the *philosophe*; but if philosophy, while a valid science, is nonetheless a limited one, the philosopher himself may have to look to revelation to explicate the drama of human history and to make sense of elements of his experience still mysterious to reason. As Russell Hittinger has pointed out, this false dichotomy between the life of reason and the life of faith has only recently become axiomatic among academics, and only among those of Bloom's ilk. History would remind us that the very education Bloom values so much was first made possible by medieval intellectuals working within a religious milieu. Indeed, Bloom's entire enterprise is shot through with irony, for the chaos of modern academe, which disturbs him so deeply, seems itself to be rooted in the irreligious Enlightenment deformations of reason which he so enthusiastically advocates.<sup>12</sup>

Since Bloom invests no value in religious faith, and thus would not connect the decline of education with the waning of religious values (not directly, at least), what, or rather, who for Bloom can be the cause of the erosion of education? It must be philosophers themselves who, somehow, have lost their way. Who else but nineteenth and twentieth century German thinkers could be the culprits? Of course, Maritain might argue

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<sup>12</sup>Russell Hittinger, "Reason and Anti-Reason in the Academy," *The Intercollegiate Review* (Fall, 1987), 63-64. For a fine discussion of Bloom's commitment to Enlightenment presuppositions regarding the nature of reason, see Marion Montgomery, "Wanted: A Better Reason as Guide," *Modern Age*, 32, 1, 1988, 39-44.

that a more convincing case can be made that educational decline is the result of the ultimate effects of thinkers like Descartes, Rousseau, and Luther. German philosophers are comparatively only marginal players; but even if one looks for more recent villains, German philosophers still may be an implausible choice. In fact, as Mortimer Adler has been quick to point out, more likely agents of decay hail from Britain rather than from Germany. He has in mind thinkers such as Stevenson, Russell, and Ayer, champions of ethical non-cognitivism. Non-cognitivism, rather than Nietzschean nihilism, is a more plausible source of moral, cultural, and educational decline.

Yet it might be that Bloom and Adler have arrogated too much to the influences of philosophers in the first place, a professional hazard I think that Maritain would warn us against. This excess is natural enough for Bloom, however, who does not seem to allow for other forces in culture besides the intellectual. Robert Paul Wolff has eloquently captured this intellectual *hubris* when commenting on the odd insularities of the University of Chicago, where Bloom resides.

[the] virtue of a Chicago education was a certain intoxication with ideas, especially philosophical ideas, that sets off graduates of the Hutchins era from everyone else in the American intellectual scene ... [But] the vice of that same system is a mad hermetic conviction that larger world events are actually caused or shaped by the obscurest sub-quibbles of the Great Conversation. By a fallacy of misplaced concreteness...Chicago types are prone to suppose that it is the ideas that are real, and the people in this world are mere epiphenomena.<sup>13</sup>

### III. Adler

As a philosopher himself, Mortimer J. Adler has proposed some remedies for education; and there is no doubt that Maritain would approve of the general outline of Adler's philosophy of education, includ-

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<sup>13</sup>Robert Paul Wolff, Book Review: "The Closing of the American Mind," *Academe*, Sept.-Oct., 1987, 64-65.



ing his specific recommendations in the *paideia* proposal.<sup>14</sup> Maritain would commend Adler's proposal as a genuine effort at reform, since it does not supply band-aids but instead addresses the roots and causes of success and failure in education. As a fellow Thomist, Maritain was acquainted with Adler's reflections on learning. In *Education at the Crossroads* he lauds Adler's efforts. What merits Maritain's approval is that Adler, unlike so many other reformers, realizes that education can take place only when an understanding of human nature and its ends are vigorously evident and operative in the mission, curriculum, and instruction of a learning institution. Since this understanding is generally ignored by systems of education today, one must regrettably conclude that only nominal education is taking place. Universities may still impart knowledge, but this has only to do with data and technique. There is little effort to connect knowledge with those principles of coherence sufficient to make knowledge relate to human life and its ends. Hence learning in today's school system is about more or less discrete knowledge, but not really about education. Taking to heart the Latin root of education (from *ducere*), there is simply little, if any, leading out of ignorance to an enlightened reckoning of what it is to realize the potentialities of human life. Adler, however, understands that, without these ultimate foundations, there is no education. His *paideia* proposal, which accords with his earliest recommendations for educational reform, dating back to his association with Robert Maynard Hutchins in the thirties, is a program aiming to supply these foundations and, thereby, to bring about lasting educational improvements. His recommendation, like Bloom's, is to return to the Great Books; but whereas Bloom would have the Great Books be read authoritatively, according to the supervision of an autocratic, preferably Straussian, steward of the text, Adler proposes that these classic works be taught dialectically. In this way, instructors can better cultivate in students those intellectual virtues, such as independence of mind, which made possible the production of great books originally.

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<sup>14</sup>See Adler's *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Macmillan, 1982); *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* (New York: Macmillan, 1983); and *The Paideia Program* (New York: Macmillan, 1984).

This also sets up the conditions so that education can contribute to the moral and political reflections necessary for the formation of citizens in a democratic society.

**Assessment.** I have always admired Mortimer J. Adler as a thinker and a teacher. I even own a set of the Great Books. I especially marvel at his unfailing optimism. In spite of so much evidence to the contrary, he heroically maintains that Americans can be educated and labors tirelessly to support the conditions necessary for that education. His *paideia proposal* is undoubtedly a noble effort. Unfortunately, I cannot share his optimism. Why? Because I have come to doubt whether education and modern democracy can ever be happily joined.

I do not want to be misunderstood here. I am by no means arguing that democracy is an undesirable form of government. I agree heartily with Maritain that, given the dignity and spiritual significance of every human personality, democratic social and political life is the most appropriate life for the human being; but at the same time a modern liberal democracy is a very challenging social order, and that challenge applies especially to education. It seems that democratic life, perhaps because its modern character has been too much influenced by seventeenth and eighteenth century ideologies, is committed to assumptions that dynamically resist education. These assumptions may have become lasting impediments, making the attainment of a genuine education virtually impossible today, at least with reference to our institutions. One such assumption is the suspicion against intellectual virtue. In a democratic society, such virtues suggest the resurrection and maintenance of aristocracy, in the form of an intellectual elite. Accordingly, citizens are as suspicious about high educational standards as they are about more obvious conspiracies; but if a society cannot prize intellectual virtue, it cannot educate, for, in the last analysis, education is about perfecting a human being--that is, about making him or her virtuous. In fact, this neglect of virtue is the source of many of our social ills, if we are to believe the likes of Bellah, Lasch, and, before them, de Tocqueville.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>See Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper and

There also appears to be a second suspicion militating against education. This is the tendency in democracy to doubt the validity of tradition, through which standards having to do with intellectual and moral virtues are transmitted. This suspicion, no doubt, in large measure results from the Enlightenment genesis of modern democracies, during which time ideologies contemptuous of tradition (especially, revealed tradition) championed human freedom. This suspicion, likewise, undermines education. For it is difficult to imagine how education can occur in a society which treasures no legacy. One cannot educate *ab ovo*. The student cannot be like Adam on the day of creation, connected with no authority from the past and with no inherited perspective on life. Education requires a starting point, and democracy may be unable to give him one.

If there is some substance to these reflections, they may intimate a vindication of religious sponsored education. Such schools may be of incalculable value in a democratic society, because they still make possible a system of learning where intellectual virtue and tradition are premiums. In light of this, religious sponsored institutions can be like oases in the desert, a desert created by democratic leveling. These oases can water and nourish that desert. Unfortunately, it appears that the sands of the desert are rapidly encroaching on these oases, and their future as distinctive, alternative systems of learning may also be in doubt.

Yet even if one can, on point of principle, reasonably protest my reservations about the compatibility of education and democracy generally, one will be surely challenged to muster a plausible objection with specific reference to American democracy. While, perhaps, ideally democracy and education may be able to wed, it seems, at this point in our history, counter-intuitive to suppose that *American* democracy and education can marry happily. Why? Because the cultural temperament of America, which inclines toward bourgeoisie individualism, an ideology that fos-

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Row, 1985); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1978); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed., J.P. Mayer (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1969).

ters the tyranny of the majority as does nothing else, has been and seems destined to remain anti-intellectual. As a result, education, in spite of periodic spasms of indignation (recall Hutchins, Lasch, Barzun, Adler, and Bloom), will remain a low priority. It will only be seriously addressed to the extent that other priorities (for example, consumerism, international economic competition, private and public technical competence) seem for a time dependent on education; but our ideological soil will probably remain barren, meaning that learning will never be valued as a sacred thing; and if that never happens, education will not be truly reformed, not even by educators of Adler's stature. It may be that we must at last wake up to the possibility that institutions of American education are sick and destined to remain so. *Reformers* will come and go, continuing to overlook that the patient is terminally comatose, or worse.

Where does this leave us committed teachers? Am I prescribing that we abandon our vocations? No. As someone once put it, even if the world ends tomorrow, it still may be our Christian duty to plant our apple tree today. In other words, I am not advocating surrender, but realism. We must now appreciate the irony of our circumstances: that we may be called to educate with more devotion than ever precisely at a time when the institutions that employ us have abandoned, perhaps unwittingly, their mission. Institutions of learning have now been so compromised by the leveling effects of American democracy that they are beyond reform. It is a condition that we must simply live with. Reform can now only meaningfully apply to individual educators, or their *little flocks*, not to their institutions, which have meant so much to education in the past.

I realize that this is a rather mournful note, but it has its consolation. For now the vocation of teaching has signal significance for history. We must become that *diaspora* of enlightened educators about whom Maritain prophesied, a *diaspora* laboring in *the twilight of civilization*. It is a labor, I am confident, that Providence can put to a purpose.