

Excitement in the Classroom

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Several years ago, seeking respite from the rigors of graduate study, I visited an archaeological museum located on the campus of one of our nation's large universities. Finding the exhibits monotonous and incommunicable, I had about decided on going elsewhere when, unexpectedly, I met the curator on one of his rounds preparing to lock the building for the day. Almost before I knew what was happening, he launched into the story of an old Egyptian woman preparing broth in the morning camps of the Fayum. Then followed some references to a collection of potsherds and an excited commentary on the strange markings which some of them displayed. At first uncertain, I soon fell victim to the energy of his unhalting fascination. He had not the slightest doubt as to the romance and significance of what he was saying. Before I left the museum, this unsolicited guide had succeeded in kindling within me what has since proved to be an unextinguishable flame of interest in archaeology.

My museum friend ran headlong over any number of canons prescribed by professionals for successful teaching. He seemed entirely indifferent to method and technique. Yet, it was clearly his novel and presumptuous manner which most captivated me with the subject about which he spoke. He was much less interested in me than in those decaying remains which lay behind the panelled glass. I had the feeling throughout the entire encounter that he would have engaged in such a monologue even if I had not been there to listen. It was, in fact, the obvious pleasure of his own indulgence, rather than any

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inherent quality in the artifacts themselves, which accounted for that vital spark making its leap from his eye to my own.

With few exceptions, the nearly unquestioned intent of educational methodology and research for the last half century has been to reduce the craft of teaching, so far as possible, to an empirical science.¹ Some recent variation is found in efforts to align educational inquiry with one of the dominant modes of twentieth century philosophy generally, viz. a rigorous semantic analysis of the verbal foundations of pedagogical thought.² Still others, chafing at the range of human angularity, find encouragement in at least a partial displacement of man's imperfections by the clean precision of technological devices.³ Throughout, the effort seems directed toward simulating the efficient productivity of a laboratory. This is to be applauded. Scientific measurement can undoubtedly improve the educational experience in many ways. The interest of this essay, however, is in contending that between the student, with all of his capacity for calculated enrichment, and the subject matter, with its potential for quantified administration, there remains an immense if amorphous promise in the shifting, unpredictable channels of the teacher's own peculiar enthusiasms and thrusts of mind.

Driven by educationists on the one side to an assiduous concern for efficiency, clearly defined concepts, neatly outlined lesson plans and course objectives, today's classroom teacher is vexed from yet another quarter by critics who insist, in one form or another, on less of the teacher and more of subject matter. And, in many cases, the frenetic appeal for greater ballast in the holds of our educational barques is fully justi-

¹See, e.g., Donald M. Medley and Harold E. Mitzel, "The Scientific Study of Teacher Behavior," *Theory and Research in Teaching*, ed. Arno A. Bellack (New York, 1963), pp. 79-90; and more recently, the following: Stanley Elam (ed.), *Education and the Structure of Knowledge* (Chicago, 1964); Marc Belth, *Education as a Discipline, A Study of the Role of Models in Thinking* (Boston, 1965); John E. Wise, Robert B. Nordberg, Donald J. Reitz, *Methods of Research in Education* (Boston, 1967), esp. pp. 1-25.

²Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Ill., 1960); B. Othaniel Smith and Robert H. Ennis (eds.), *Language and Concepts in Education* (Chicago, 1961); or, Arno A. Bellack and Joel R. Davitz, *The Language of the Classroom* (New York, 1963).

³A good statement of the expectations of those seeking the introduction of a "man-machine system" into the schools may be found in William Clark Trow, *Teacher and Technology: New Designs for Learning* (New York, 1963). Also the excellent collection of articles in A. A. Lumsdaine and Robert Glaser (eds.), *Teaching Machines and Programmed Learning, A Source Book* (Washington, D.C., 1960).

fied. But to the extent that the teacher and his play of personality are threatened by an assumed need for greater exposure to objective fact, we might wisely consider caution. However pressing the need for greater familiarity with the substantive foundations of contemporary science, however likely an historical recurrence of "oscillating philosophical systems" or the deathless relevance of the Neo Thomists' *philosophia perennis*, we can little improve upon the advice of Quintillian in the matter of education: to avoid, at all costs, "a dry teacher."⁴

Though it is often difficult for either the educationist or his critic to accept it, it seems incontrovertible that we take courses not in subjects but in their expositors. Since it is impossible to approach reality except through the human perceptive filter, the richest of understandings may well be the one most widely schooled in human response. This is a vital assumption. Innovation is often but a mutant replica, an interpretation brought away from history's vault. Ultimately, every discipline finds a place beneath the broad canopy of the 'humanities.' But if this is granted, with all its ramifications, there are grounds for profound revisions of our usual image of the school. Rather than a kind of commissary, it becomes a project for experiment in possibility. Most importantly, by crediting the work of the student and enthusiasm of the teacher as constituting a conjunctive integrity, learning is galvanized into discovery. By admitting the metaphorical processes involved in educational exchange, student and teacher are joined in a common phenomenological quest. Both are committed to research in the radical sense of the term.

Great writers and composers have not uncommonly recommended the use of some model to beginners, not that they would become a reproduction of the man they imitate, but that only through inspired activity is it possible to discover one's self. This was surely John Dewey's meaning when he said, "learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication."⁵ To contend that knowledge of any kind, however primary, can be indifferently ingested as a filling antecedent to the more delectable puddings of a later course, promises little more than those Laputian resorts Gulliver ob-

⁴*Institutio Oratoria*, II. 4.

⁵"Communication and Communal Living," *Intelligence in the Modern World, John Dewey's Philosophy*, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York, 1939), p. 389.

served in his visit to the Grand Academy of Lagado. There, among the many mechanical absurdities which were employed for teaching the young, Gulliver found in the mathematics department the practice of writing propositions and formulae upon thin crackers which the student was forced to eat and digest on an empty stomach.⁶ If we admit essentially responsive nature of the learning act, personalization of the material by another who is, like oneself, a learner must inevitably impart an added savor to the meal. To insist, in the words of Dickens' Thomas Gradgrind, that our schools do no more than "Stick to Facts," is to deny the young and inquiring mind what it relishes most: a teacher's own reflection upon the larger meanings of the schoolroom ordeal.⁷

There will never be any argument but that an instructor must, above all else, be thoroughly familiar with the factual materials he is hired to teach. In the words of Samuel Butler, "there is no sayling in shallow watters but with flat bottomed botes. . . ."⁸ But knowledge has no purely autonomous worth. There is a sense, in fact, which would declare data, unappropriated by man, to be an epistemological contradiction. Its very identification is an exercise in metaphor. To impart, in any form, is to humanize the external world. It was an increased sensitivity to this very notion which Henry Seidel Canby seems to credit as at least partially responsible for the resurrection of intellectual inquiry among students in the Ivy League during the first years of our century.⁹ Charles S. Osgood summed it up when telling of the absorbing lectures of an obscure Hellenist which led to his own career as a classicist: "But did we catch the strong contagion of the gown from a mere printed page? Not so, for this kind comes forth only by incarnation."¹⁰

Nothing that is said here should be interpreted as argument for an absolute or preeminent validation of subjectivist views. Organized society requires that, if only for the pragmatic effectiveness of policy determination, democratic consensus be given the support of educational affirmation as well as law.

⁶Jonathan Swift, *The Travels of Lemuel Gulliver* (London, 1773), p. 184.

⁷"The One Thing Needful," in *Hard Times*, vol. I: *Charles Dickens' Works* (Copperfield edn.; New York, n.d.), pp. 205-206.

⁸*Characters and Passages from Note-Books*, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1908), p. 281.

⁹*Alma Mater* (New York, 1936), pp. 101-137.

¹⁰*Creed of a Humanist* (Seattle, 1963), p. 34.

A retreat to Idealist enclaves would threaten most of what we know today as modern civilized life. What is suggested, however, is that those responsible for administering and funding the educational establishment be respectfully aware that the system is, in fact, no more than a dispensary of historical majorities; that if progress is to continue, it will do so only so long as alternatives are available around which it is possible for consent to cluster and regroup; and that a generous ethic regarding the teacher's interpretive prerogatives is one of society's healthiest symptoms. To adapt one of Mr. Justice Holmes' aphorisms, it is necessary that "some play be allowed to the joints if the machine is to work."¹¹

Nor are these contentions to be construed as denying the usefulness of technological devices. Indeed, insofar as such tools have been shown to augment the amount of time students are permitted exposure to their instructors in more intimate arrangements, they are a distinct improvement over traditional methods. They may even provide a more dramatic illustration of how often two expositors of the same or equal expertise can honestly differ. That is to say, when polylogue replaces lecture and the instructor himself may look forward to *doing* the class rather than teaching it, then our schools will become experiments rather than factories, and the classroom itself, a forum rather than a forge. The educational enterprise will always require imaginative teachers if the needs of a dynamic and pluralistic society are to be met. Teachers, by the same measure, must be treated as a dynamic plurality if they are expected to tease minds into those planes and angles of thought equal to the problems of a changing world. Quite beyond any larger considerations, however, and more to the point of this essay, when instructors are encouraged in their own peculiar committments to truth, they make for more inspired and involved listening. As with a musical cadenza, the teacher is not only most enrapturing when left to enlarge upon the subject in his own way, but students themselves become party to the innovative impulse.

In the Fourth Book of Plato's *Republic*, there is found a superb illustration of the kind of teaching to which I refer. Socrates and his friends are scouting an idea through the forest of thought. Completely absorbed with their search, the con-

¹¹*Tyson & Bro. v. Banton*, 273 U.S. 418 (1927) at 446.

versants are lost to the dart and flitter of each mental impulse. No feint or guarded probing of the underbrush in one mind goes unheeded in the others. Like a ring of hunters, every half step of movement, every shift of position finds an immediate compensation and check in the altered positions of the rest. Joined only by the furtive circuit of language, each mind is sensitively aware of what the other is thinking. The half-light of a nearly uttered word, the partial suggestion of a broken and halting sentence instantly arouse pursuit in new and other directions on the part of a companion. Then, with an excited "haloo Glaucon," Socrates spies the game and the party forms to make a capture.

What Plato illustrated in this perceiving description of a discussion about justice is the magnetic effect created by the teacher who is himself primarily a student. We cannot overestimate the value, in the words of Susan K. Langer, of carrying "suggested ideas on to their further implications."¹² But more urgent than this, if we wish to have minds capable of precariously weighing alternatives, minds which are eager, possessing a taste for intellectual style, they must be groomed with the example of those who, above all else, are earnest devotees of the search themselves. And this is possible only when one takes his chief and surpassing pleasure in the hunt rather than its trophy. It is less the object than one's obsession and fascination with it which is contagious. Like that Roman soldier in Plutarch's "Camillus" who, by the wonder of his storytelling led an enemy enthralled and dumb into the Roman camp, so with the teacher free to pursue his academic infatuations, even hostile students fall victim to his art. We are fortunate that novelty and imaginative vigor are so serviceable to man's many historical missions. These same conditions are powerful generators of human excitation as well. And it is the charisma of excitement, I am contending, more than any immediate end in view, which promises most from the educational encounter.

The objection will undoubtedly be made that what I am describing is less a school than a seminar. And many are likely to see little here that would accommodate the systemic imperatives involved in the instruction of large numbers. But even in the most routine assumptions governing any classroom

¹²*Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Mentor, 1948), p. 20.

or lecture hall, there is among teachers, I would expect, a considerable latitude of individual difference. These varieties of subjective employment, I am saying, when properly exploited, assure both the best thinking and the best teaching. For it is precisely in the breach of divergence that liberation and perspective occur. History is a firm witness that the greatest teachers have been distinguished no more by the actual substance of what they said than by the disturbing integrity of their life styles. The learner is exposed to fare and returns the more palpable when they arise from the drama of unusual personal encounter. Preserved Smith remarked that as a student he found James Harvey Robinson's paradoxes more instructive than other men's orthodoxies.¹³ A heightened awareness attending the spectacle of novelty, the transport of personal discovery, if we permit them, are common to any circumstance where men and children come to learn. The delicious perils of original thought require only the freedom of original expression. This is what Marshal McLuhan is suggesting when he says that if contemporary education is to survive it must transform its purpose "from instruction . . . to probing and exploration. . . ."¹⁴ If civilization expects cultural innovation it must first learn, as Johan Huizinga has so capably demonstrated, that man's most distinctive quality is his capacity for fun and play.¹⁵

The singularity of the igneous and sympathetic in human character is, in a sense, the capital stock of the race. An ample investment in its possibilities remains the best assurance we have for the development in our youth of that "condition of unstable equilibrium" which Toynbee posits as the chief guarantor against cultural decline.¹⁶ Michel de Montaigne, nearly four hundred years ago, remarked that he could less believe in mankind's "constancy than any other virtue, and believe nothing sooner than the contrary."¹⁷ Yet, this very ubiquity stamps the genius of our kind. And nowhere should we see its Protean quality so much in display as in academic dis-

¹³Howard W. Odum (ed.), *American Masters of Social Science* (New York, 1927), pp. 380-381.

¹⁴*The Medium is the Message An Inventory of Effects* (New York, 1967), p. 100; and the very suggestive work of Robert J. Schaefer, *The School as a Center of Inquiry* (New York, 1967).

¹⁵*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston, 1955).

¹⁶*A Study of History* (London, 1939), IV, 128.

¹⁷"Of the Inconstancy of our Actions," *Essays*, II. 1.

course; nowhere should there be such proof of the varied pleasures of thought and the rich returns of human society as in the classroom.

I often think of the museum where I met the curator late that winter afternoon. He had such disregard for formality and effect. Ignoring my initial reticence, he swept us both on, away from the present with all its practical urgencies, on to lost and other worlds which his imagination conjured from the forms which lay about us. There was no paraphernalia, no lesson plan, not even an introduction to give the episode the dignity deserving such high stylistic example. And few I am sure would see, as I did, a meaning in that experience for the trials of a third grade class in arithmetic or the laboratory rigors of a university course in mineralogy. But if, as Emory Neff has said, "the highest step in human culture will be to comprehend humanity,"¹⁸ perhaps life's greater lessons are not to be found in the unyielding environment of fact so much as in the malleable and varied responses of mind. Both the curator and myself sensed that, driven by his own high zeal, we had launched on an adventure which was sure, at any moment, to open to our vision that last great arcanum of original explanation and historical light.

Henry David Thoreau, while recording the thoughts of one day's experience in his journal, was moved to wonder at nature's plentitude, the marvel and delicacy of her achievement. How such fecund variety, such careful embroidery and detail? The answer came and was written. While his words had reference to snowflakes and dew, there is for me an even greater wisdom in their human relevance. The beauty of awakened and sensitive minds, he seems to be saying, will ever elude the caliper requirements of a purely scientific grasp for "in truth they are the product of *enthusiasm*, the children of an ecstasy, finished with the artist's utmost skill."¹⁹

¹⁸*The Poetry of History* (New York, 1961), p. 3.

¹⁹*The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston and New York, 1906), X, 239-240.