Arts & Humanities

The Beginnings of the Great Books Movement at Columbia

John Van Doren '52GSAS reflects on the visionary thinking that inspired his father and his colleagues to bring the Great Books to Columbia College more than eighty years ago.

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It is generally agreed that what became the Great Books movement in American higher education (if “movement” will serve as a general term) began at Columbia College in 1920 with the offering of a course known as General Honors. This was the conception of John Erskine '01C '03GSAS of the English department, who thought all students should have as part of their education the experience of reading and discussing what he called great books. He believed that could best be done in a class that would not be taught in the ordinary sense by an instructor but would consist of a conversation among the students over which the instructor would merely preside—asking questions, helping the talk along, disentangling it when necessary, but in no sense serving as an authority on the work being considered. Actually there were two leaders of this kind for each section of the class, a requirement that Erskine in an inspired moment laid down, and which was designed to prevent, as apparently it did prevent—at least when the leaders were of approximately equal stature—any one person from dominating the conversation, directing all the talk to himself.

There was never a very large enrollment in the course, which against Erskine's wishes was restricted to upperclassmen, but there were enough takers so that he could not himself teach all the sections even with the help of a colleague. He found many of the senior faculty at the College were unwilling, or perhaps they had not the

courage, to take sections (they gave various excuses), so he turned to younger members for discussion leaders. Among these was Mark Van Doren '21C '60HON, who in 1923 was joined by Mortimer Adler '23C '28GSAS, with whom he led a section of the course until it was discontinued in 1928. (It was later reconstituted.) There were also, among others, Raymond Weaver, Herbert Schneider '15C, Rexford G. Tugwell, Irwin Edman '16GAS, John Bartlett Brebner, and, later, Moses Hadas. In 1929 Adler left the College for the University of Chicago, where he wrote trenchantly and often about great books, and where he also led an annual great books seminar with the University president, Robert M. Hutchins. Van Doren subsequently helped to design what became Humanities A at Columbia in 1937, a course designed for freshmen that has since evolved into Literature Humanities. By then, great books were being taught not merely at Columbia and Chicago but at St. John's College in Annapolis, where with the addition of scientific and mathematical classics examined in tutorials and laboratories, they constituted the entire course of study for the students, and still do. Without such additions, they have since been more or less established also in courses at numerous other colleges and universities around the country, as well as disestablished, lately, at some of them.

The Challenges

What was the thinking of those who instituted the study of these books in the college curriculum? Why did they hold that this study should be undertaken, not just by some students but by all? How could they maintain, as they did, that as all students should read such books, so the whole faculty of a college should teach them, irrespective of the disciplines which as professors they represented? How could they ignore, or at least put aside, questions of language, history, and criticism, which were regarded in some quarters as insuperable obstacles to the kind of study they proposed? For most of the great books had to be encountered in translation, none was considered as a product of the age in which it appeared, and no scholarly or critical interpretation of them was allowed to preempt the students' own.

Erskine himself thought that such study should be commenced because most students were simply not "well read." His list of about eighty works, to be taken up over two years, was designed to cure that defect, and while some of his titles have since disappeared from such courses, most are still encountered in them wherever they exist. Erskine defended the readings he chose, against his opponents on the

College faculty of the time, in terms that are still used everywhere to justify their presence. As that, such books were not addressed to the specialists; that they could be read at least the first time through with a decent swiftness rather than with perfect comprehension (General Honors read one book a week); that they should be encountered so far as possible in the whole rather than through excerpts; that they were not just literary works—General Honors read Homer and Shakespeare, but it also read Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and Spinoza—and that those who led the discussion of these authors should not stifle it with scholarship.

No one claimed that the kind of reading that satisfied General Honors was good enough. Erskine maintained that a lifetime was required for that. "We do not expect the students to get what they should from the readings," Jacques Barzun '27C '28 '32GSAS said (he was speaking of the later Humanities course), but what they can.”

The propositions underlying what Erskine himself first conceived as a kind of gentlemanly acculturation became clear with practice. They may be sought not only in his writings but in those of Adler and Van Doren, who wrote of them at length in his *Liberal Education* (1944), and of course a number of others, among them Hutchins. Scott Buchanan, dean of St. John's and the author of the college catalogue of 1937 in which its program was set forth, was a source of ideas for all of them. Adler and Van Doren taught with Buchanan at the People's Institute of Cooper Union in New York in the 1920s, where classes in the great books for adults were offered to immigrants and native laborers who were eager to acquire the education that circumstances had deprived them of. Buchanan thought such classes were really the forge on which much of his understanding of how great books might best be used to teach and learn—how instructive they really could be—was hammered out.

Of these propositions on which the study of such books was thought to stand, not all were adhered to by Erskine himself, at least not to the same extent that others did. Two that were essentially the same, and which everyone held to, were, first, that there is something common to us as human beings, whatever divides us, which the great books may be said to address; and second, that there exists what might be called a permanent present in which books of this kind may be found—they are contemporary to every age,” Hutchins said—and in which they can always be profitably read. The first of those assumptions has lately been challenged by those who find our differences—of culture and gender—more important than our similarities, and doubtless such differences deserve more consideration than they

were likely to have had in 1920: They have been recognized partly by the addition of an Asian Humanities requirement at Columbia and, at St. John's, Santa Fe, a faculty study group for Asian great books. On the other hand, the notion of a permanent present has always been rejected by those who insist that the great books are products of history, that what we have from that source is intelligible only as an expression of it, and that to consider any writing without reference to this, through the learning that conveys it, is hopelessly misleading.

The Test of Truth

A third proposition, that the great books are not without defects—more, that their contentions are sometimes wrong—and that the business of their students is to recognize the first fault and correct the second for the sake of their own understanding—was equally important to Van Doren and Adler, particularly the latter, who said that Erskine, though a naturally great teacher in his day," treated all such books "as if they were *belles lettres*" and sought only the recognition of them as literary works—fine art like painting or sculpture, which it would be presumptuous to question. Adler thought philosophical and other expository works, at least, should stand the test of truth. If Aristotle, for instance, says that some men are natural slaves, we must reject the argument not because we do not like it but because it leads to the impossible conclusion that there are two species of human being: We may suppose that Aristotle was misled by the limitations of the slaves he saw about him and "mistook their nurture for their nature," as Rousseau observed, but we cannot call him right. Van Doren thought even works of poetry had better be as true as possible. He noted that *Paradise Lost*, seeking as it does to explain why things are as they are, is weakened by its Ptolemaic scheme of heaven, which Milton knew was false (as Dante, who also used it, did not) but which he thought more suitable for his purposes than the Copernican one; and by a theology we can't believe, which allows Christ to be reassured by his Father, before his earthly career begins, that he need fear nothing because he will be taken back to his throne after his sufferings are over—as if the world would have found itself in a savior who never had to doubt the salvation of his soul. By comparison, Erskine could only explain his dislike of *Othello*, which he thought "full of splendid verse," as a latter-day refusal to accept that "in the supposed circumstances of the play, [Desdemona] just naturally had to be smothered"—a judgment that seems not so much a claim of truth as an expression

of taste.

Both Adler and Van Doren paid a price for taking positions of this sort. Adler, who thought much philosophy was false and said so, was routinely dismissed as doctrinaire by colleagues who did not recognize the doctrine implicit in their own belief that their discipline does not comprehend truth at all, but deals only with opinion. Van Doren was taken to task for presuming to argue, in *The Noble Voice* (1946), that whatever their virtues, Wordsworth and Byron, like Milton and Vergil, were unsuccessful when it came to writing narrative poems, as compared with Homer, Dante, and Chaucer. The reviewer of the book in *The New Yorker* complained that “Mr. Van Doren cites no authorities.” “It didn't seem to have occurred to her,” he said, “that I was trying to be one.”

An Act of Intellectual Courage

One further proposition, regarded by these figures as fundamental to the study of the great books, was that such books are their own teachers, as distinct from the instructors who conduct classes in them. This is true of any book taken in and for itself, rather than as a window through which we look at a “subject” it may be said to reveal. But other books have less to say for themselves, do not raise so well the questions implicit in the ideas they contain or the actions they render. It is because the great books do both of these things, Erskine sensed at the beginning, that they are best considered round a table of which they may be said to occupy the center, equidistant from everyone present. “General Honors” had such a table, as does the St. John's seminar. A defect of Columbia's “Lit Hum” is arguably that it does not, and that instructors must resist a temptation to direct the talk toward the front of the room.

What were the students supposed to learn from such books? Erskine said that they would derive a sense of the culture in which they lived and the tradition from which, whether they knew it or not, they came. This is less persuasive if you come, say, from Korea. Van Doren contended merely that “the common possession” of the great books “would civilize any society that had it.” But he and Adler and Buchanan insisted also that what the books would give any student who read them seriously was a grasp of the liberal arts—the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, or reading, writing, and thinking—which, they pointed out, was after all the aim of the liberal

education the student was trying to acquire. On any subject, what terms are proper to what we wish to say? What is the best way to say it? How can this be structured so as to be both intelligible and defensible? That most of us tend to feel helpless when we must respond to these questions is a sign that we are not very competent in the liberal arts. The authors of the great books can be seen as good practitioners of them. What they say may strike any reader as wrong in a given case rather than right, but it will be in large measure his familiarity with the sort of books they wrote that teaches him to know the difference. So armed, he or she will have a fair chance of arriving at a better view of that subject along with a just judgment of the book's attempt to deal with it. This is what led Adler to define the liberal arts as “the basic skills of learning.”

Implicit in the phrase “liberal arts” is the idea that such arts in fact are liberating, and if the authors of the great books were and are good liberal artists, then it is freedom in some basic sense that they help us to attain. The figures remembered here who urged their study deeply believed that this was so and would have been skeptical of those among us now who seek the study of such books from a conviction that they provide us with a canon or tradition or culture by which we may be safely anchored. There is nothing safe about the great books. Even Marx's “Manifesto,” the doctrine of which we dismiss, must shake our capitalist complacencies. In political terms—and the freedom such arts aim at is partly political—what is to be sought, Buchanan argued, is the ability envisioned by the Founders of the Republic to create and maintain a government of free human beings. This is far beyond what is usually perceived as provided by the Bill of Rights. “Civil Liberties are permissive,” Buchanan said, “but they are not enabling.” To recognize the forces that contest the present world, to sort out the claims made for and against them, and to decide between their encouragement or restraint, is the hard task of a citizenry that cannot make good choices without the arts whose object is to free it from ignorance, gullibility, and confusion.

A prior freedom is intellectual, and the weakness of the liberal arts among us is still more radically indicated by the fact that our minds are shackled by the very education that is supposed to deliver them. So at least Buchanan, again, believed, pointing out that this education has led us to suppose that our intellects are incapable of arriving at the truth of most things, certainly those outside the area of specialization in which we have undertaken to train them. We think we cannot grasp mathematics or science or philosophy or poetry, as the case may be. Thus we allow

ourselves—will ourselves—to become “cripples in our minds and fractions of men in our lives,” Buchanan said. “Some of us,” he added, “are willing to crush the Socratic formula (‘I know what—or that—I do not know’) and say ‘I know nothing.’”

The reading of the great books, each of which may be said to constitute an act of intellectual courage on the part of its author—a willingness to try to state what had not been stated, or stated so well, before—was intended by the figures recollected here as in some degree an antidote to this self-inflicted poison. Was that good medicine? Those who urged their study believed that such books address us as if we could see the truth in them or recognized its absence, not as if this were beyond our capabilities. For anyone, from whatever cause, that may prove not always to be the case. To the extent that it does, however, such books would seem to demonstrate, as their protagonists believed they would, that each of us has an intellectual faculty, and that, while its strength varies, its nature is the same in us all—that we are all capable of what Socrates called “following the argument.”

There are many who doubt this, denying the presence of the intellect, at least in most of us, beyond what may serve to store the lessons of those who, somehow provided, impress them upon us, whereby we are in a manner stamped—informed, if you prefer. This may be so sometimes. Perhaps that is all that be achieved in certain cases. But such a credo seems better suited to a zoo than to a college, let alone a commonwealth. At any rate the conviction of those who instituted the great books, and of those who still teach them, was of a different kind, and is. Perhaps we have to leave it there.

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