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Selections from Rediscovering the West: An Inquiry into Nothingness and Relatedness

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Selections from *Rediscovering the West: An Inquiry into Nothingness and Relatedness*

I continue to have faith in the transformative power of liberal education as a practice. Out of direct experience with my students and colleagues I have evidence of the capacity of the Socratic method of dialectical inquiry to enable us to turn around from the shadows of illusion, and move out of the Platonic “cave of ignorance” and into the light of being fully human. My experience has been that this essential turning around of liberal education, from illusion to reality, can happen within a fairly wide range of institutional and pedagogical options such that what is fundamental to the practice of liberal education is somewhat illusive. David Bromwich has made this point in an illuminating way:

Another name for the subject of debate about the humanities today is “liberal education.” The phrase is still in common use because it has a sound that is flattering to Americans. But, in practice, the thing has never been as common as the phrase. The process it names cannot, in fact, be formulated as an official policy or embodied in a state curriculum, for it describes a tacit way of thinking and acting in a moral community. A liberal education tries to assure the persistence of a culture of responsive individuals—people who, in the course of the long experiment in learning, will have discovered the habits of attention that will make it possible to be at once thoughtful and critical citizens.

In relation to basic Western educational experience, from secondary schools through the university, the occasions and conditions of thought and action which lead to and sustain this experience of attention or attentiveness, most arguments about curriculum and discussions of the philosophy of education and “science of learning” are pale at best, frustrating distractions at worst. Though these discussions and the endless commission reports they generate sometimes contain statements to the effect that finally everything depends on the practice of the teacher and the immediate

conduct of the classroom, they mostly slide off of this point, into statements that are either merely theoretical or concern shallow technique. Liberal education, as not just information but transformation, is missed in either case. What is missing is the sense in which, as Whitehead says, “the essence of education is that it be religious.”

But what is that illusive center of practice in liberal education, this attentiveness, and in what sense is it religious? Bromwich, again, this time through his citation of Michael Oakeshott, helps:

Perhaps we may think [of the components of a culture] as voices, each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of the culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in a conversation—an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all. And perhaps we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices.

Conversation IS the practice...I would only add to what Oakeshott says that conversation is that mode of human interaction in which truth in the Greek sense of A-LETHEIA occurs, truth as disclosure, the unveiling of reality—and of real or authentic experience. It is in this sense that the practice of dialectical inquiry that is liberal education becomes religious: through the conversation, through participation in the “moral community” that cultivates “habits of attention,” we come into contact with both reality itself and our deepest self—and the point of contact between the two. “Attentiveness” indicates the moment in which this occurs.

How far our world has moved away from dialectic and conversation was brought home to me one day when a colleague appeared in my office in despair. This particular colleague is a teacher and a public person, one who is profoundly serious about the practice of liberal education, and who has served on university commit-

tees for many years in a way that has caused him to be described as a “moral center,” a consistent voice against “politics” in the low sense as mere acquisition of “turf.” He has stood for “the public” as the open and free space in which human beings can be present to one another in the full complexity of their similarity and difference, in the relatedness of dialectic. The focus of his despair on this particular day was not the limitations of students, as is so frequently the complaint of faculty today, but rather the university itself, what it has become, how it has moved from the genuine politics of conversation and the public of learning community to a relativistic chaos, a “war of all against all,” a situation in which the public, in the essential sense of this word, is all but completely lost.

He had with him two books. One was Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Contingencies of Value*, published by Harvard University Press. My colleague pointed with astonished urgency to her central thesis about “the inexorability of economic accounting in and throughout every aspect of human—and not only human—existence,” and her argument against “the recurrent impulse to dream an escape from economy.” To this author that escape is impossible; the university—and the world—are essentially about the economics of separative individualism and exchange.

The other volume was Ellen Rooney’s *Seductive Reasoning*, published by Cornell University Press, with its aspiration “to be an instance of anti-pluralist practice, to break with pluralism in the very act of disclosing its ideological ground.” Her point is that “pluralism produces seductive reasoning, that is, produces reason as a universal seduction. Pluralism defines reason itself as the assumption of the theoretical possibility of general persuasion.” Her argument is against the “seduction” of reason and for an “emphasis on the gesture of exclusion [that is] based on a critical awareness that historically irreducible interests divide....” She gives an example of what this amounts to from a classroom in which students refuse to take a text seriously. At first the professor chastises them, but then “acknowledges the force of their ‘frivolous’ reading and their indifference.” To this my colleague responded with a horrified exclamation: “We are guilty of ‘universal seduction’ by making students read well enough to understand a text?!”

My colleague went on: these authors are examples of what David Bromwich refers to as the “culture of suspicion” that is taking over higher education and culture at large. The culture of suspicion rejects both the conservative “culture of assent” and the liberal or Enlightenment ideal of persuasive reason: “Faced with a choice between the conservative belief that culture is sacred and the liberal belief that it is a common possession of some utility, the truly suspicious reply that it is always partial, always compromised.” My colleague points out that Smith and Rooney are established figures, writing under the imprint of old and prestigious publishers, writing books that are unabashedly antihumanist and antiEnlightenment.

In relation to this disturbing new culture my colleague identifies a passage in which one of the authors confesses that she herself is the product of recent university life, characterized by “wide-ranging political agitation from the left in concert with disciplinary upheaval, the fall into theory, and a number of consciously politicized critical and theoretical movements.” As such she has had no experience with the liberal culture that Bromwich seeks to revive and extend, with what he calls the paradox of a “nonrestrictive tradition,” “a tradition that is not the property of any party,” one that is the necessary presupposition of a liberal education:

A tradition on this view, far from being fixed forever, may be shaped by the voluntary choices of readers and thinkers. Indeed, it exists not only as something to know, but as something to interpret and reform. But a difficult paradox holds together the idea of a nonrestrictive tradition. Before it can be reformed intelligently, it must be known adequately; and yet, unless one realizes first that it CAN be reformed, one will come to know it only as a matter of rote—with the result that the knowledge of tradition will seem as unimaginative a business as the knowledge of an alphabet or a catechism. Difficult as it is, the liberal understanding of a tradition was for a long time promoted by American politicians, shared by public servants, exemplified by artists, critics, and freelance citizens. The process of sifting the tradition still continues, or we would be dead as a society. Our agreement that it ought to continue, however, is weaker now

than it has been for several generations.

What we see with Smith and Rooney, then, is a forgetting of and hence failure to transmit the essence of tradition in this nonrestrictive sense. In the absence of any other coherent sense of tradition, education and culture are both reduced to interactions of self-interest and irresolvable conflict, descending to the low level of “might makes right,” reflecting “the growing distrust in America of any common discourse.” Amidst the clashing of interests, there is no room for nonrestrictive tradition, something shared that can be interpreted and reformed. In such a climate, even when nonrestrictive tradition does appear for a moment, it is quickly reduced to a function of the interests of the one who brings it forth into the space of interaction.

Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994. 62-63, 94-96.