

THE LAND OF HEART'S DESIRE: "COLLEGE PREPARATION" AND COLLEGE ENGLISH*

A GOOD many years ago I had a course in the Bibliography of English Literature from that very great gentleman, the late Tom Peete Cross of King William County, Virginia, and the University of Chicago. In his first lecture Mr. Cross made a memorably wise and characteristically witty remark. "In order to take this course successfully," he said, "you should already have taken this course." I feel very much the same way today: in order to speak to you effectively on the integration of high school and college English, I should like first to have attended this present conference. Well, of course I did attend the morning session, and at one time I planned to insert at this point some complimentary statements about how much I had learned from those deliberations. However, as you will infer from the manuscript I hold, this address was prepared before the meeting. Once when I was serving in an administrative office at another university, during a period of leisure I dictated a personal letter to a high school principal conveying my regrets sprinkled with words of consolation for poor grades earned in our first examination period by certain freshman students in whom he had expressed a special interest. The letter, suitably postdated, was typed and stored away, and I give you my solemn word that in due time it was mailed unchanged after the examinations had actually been taken and the grades recorded. So you see that I am not above a bit of prophetic deception, but in this instance I think candor is the better part of discretion. Although I listened closely to

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what was said this morning, the few remarks I am about to make were meditated independently and in advance.

The integration of high school and college English is an *end* about which there is absolutely no disagreement on any side, no dispute that I have ever heard in the secondary school or the university, among parents, students, or the community. But the means—ay, there's the rub. It is a problem with which educators of all classes, kinds, and degrees have struggled manfully and sincerely; and what is the result? I will tell you: this meeting, in which we gaze on one another with wild surmise, while our hearts toll a heavy fear lest the struggle naught availeth.

Perhaps you will be even more apprehensive when I tell you that today I am going to be theoretical rather than practical in my approach to the problem. My motive is simple enough. Since before the memory of man, we teachers have dealt with the problem practically, or tried to do so; and we have failed. Unless theory point the way, we may wander in a maze of trial and error, lost forever.

At the outset I must state a perhaps unpalatable truth: It is impossible for the high schools to prepare the total population for the university, because *the university has nothing to do with the total population*. In consequence, the heart of our problem is the need to identify future matriculants, or potential matriculants, into higher education as early in their secondary schooling as possible. As usual, the solution is more easily stated than executed. I am told that a few years ago, in a city not far from where I stand, a dual program of college-preparatory and non-preparatory high school education was shipwrecked on the rock of snobbishness, manifested as a general parental unwillingness to permit

Johnny to take other than the supposedly more socially distinguished curriculum. I do not know the whole story, and I certainly would not presume to rebuke or instruct those who do; but my first thought is that any confusion of social with intellectual distinction would best be thwarted by attaching such pains and penalties to the preparatory course as would effectually discourage both slugs and butterflies. Ideally, the college-preparatory course should be analogous in the high school to what the premedical curriculum is in the college of liberal arts and sciences: it should be serious; it should be hard; and it should be easily abandoned, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in favor of a less rigorous program. Before raising your brows, please remember that I am talking theory, and as Tennyson said, "I *know* my words are wild."

When I wish to shed light on the educational problems of our time I often try to catch a reflection from the brilliant gleams of Cardinal Newman. Speaking of his own time, he also spoke prophetically of ours when he said: "I will tell you . . . what has been the practical error . . . It has been the error of distracting and enfeebling the mind by an unmeaning profusion of subjects; of implying that a smattering in a dozen branches of study is not shallowness, which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not . . . All things now are to be learned at once, not first one thing, then another, not one well, but many badly. Learning is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil; without grounding, without advance, without finishing. . . . Wise men have lifted up their voices in vain; and, at length, lest their own institutions should be outshone and should disappear in the folly of the hour, they have been obliged, as far as they could with a good conscience, to humor a spirit

which they could not withstand, and make temporizing concessions at which they could not but inwardly smile."

It is important to keep in mind exactly what we are discussing. To the remarks just quoted, Newman added: "All I say is, call things by their right names, and do not confuse together ideas which are essentially different. A thorough knowledge of one science and a superficial acquaintance with many, are not the same thing . . . Recreations are not education; accomplishments are not education. . . . Education is a high word; it is the preparation for knowledge, and it is the imparting of knowledge in proportion to that preparation." He was talking, as you know, about "The Idea of a University"; and so am I, or more precisely about the university in relation to an efficient preparation for it. Nothing that I shall say today is to be taken as even in the remotest way bearing critically upon the non-college curriculum. If this were the proper place and occasion, I would, on the contrary, sing a paean in honor of many high schools which I have officially visited, and in which I have seen evidence of the most brilliantly successful instruction in cooking, dressmaking, room decoration, joinery, printing, and tonsure. I really have no significant ideas about the curriculum suited to children not destined for higher education, but such glimmers of ideas as I do have are entirely favorable to those kinds of practical training for average, normal life. The necessary equipment appears considerably more costly than algebra textbooks or Latin readers, but just the same I am inclined to think that it represents public money well spent. If it ever came to a direct vote, I should not hesitate to cast my ballot for the kitchens and barber shops and model bedrooms and all the rest. At the same time, I would hope that a class in Virgil elected by perhaps only a very few registrants would not be canceled as an undue drain on school funds.

Suppose we were able to identify and isolate genuine college material (oh, horrendous word) in time to treat it as such in a secondary program. We should then, at last, be able to abandon the irrational compromise by which at present we attempt to prepare such people, as we say, "for life" as well as for the university. The music teacher training a gifted pupil does not think in terms of "life" but of the conservatory, and I submit that the horizon of the preparatory school or preparatory curriculum is purely and simply the university. The implications of this rather obvious truth may not have been sufficiently pondered.

If I were the admissions officer of a university and could prescribe the ideal matriculant, what would be my specifications? He would not need to know many things, but only to know a few things extremely well. First of all, he would have such a thorough command of correctly written and spoken English that no formal instruction in composition (much less in spelling, punctuation, and the like) would be needed at the university. Knowing as I do by experience, some of it sad experience, how seldom this specification is met, I am of the opinion that most of the time in high school English will have to be given to the language skills. Under this heading, or closely related to it, is the need to make sure that no student—absolutely not one—is certified as ready for college if he is unable to read. For a quarter of a century I have taught college English, and my special administrative work during several years of that time brought me into close contact with those wrecks and shards of student life, the probationers and the failures. I will lay my hand to my heart and say that beyond all the medical, emotional, intellectual, family, and financial causes usually blamed for academic trouble there lurks the demon of non-reading, whose name is Legion. His victim may be the dullard who

belongs elsewhere than in college, but he may equally be the quick-witted student whose native ingenuity has enabled him to idle through high school without reading or learning to read. Unfortunately, the non-reader usually does not know his own plight, for he imagines that if he is physically able to run his eyes across twenty pages he has read a twenty-page lesson. His sense of inadequacy is more likely to be the fear that he does not drive his eyes fast enough in this ritualistic scanning, and so he may fall victim to quacks with their mechanical reading devices. He will be saved, if ever, only by the discovery that reading means the groping and grappling and grasping of one mind for another mind through a symbolic wall of words, a process that is often slow and even when fast cannot be performed to the beat of a metronome.

Clearly, the more the high school English department devotes its time to the techniques of composition and reading, the less the proportion that will be available for literary study. I take comfort from an observation that lingers in my memory from an otherwise forgotten course in that curious discipline called Education. Speaking of the appropriate materials of the fifth grade, the sixth, and so on, the professor snarled (he had the habit of growling and snarling in place of lecturing): "*Save something!*" It was good advice: we teachers are all prone to forget that our victims will continue learning after they have escaped our clutches, and that the paradoxical secret of integration is division, even specialization.

Beyond command of the native tongue, I would expect a really firm grasp of another language. I should be inclined to specify Latin, for many reasons that I need not elaborate before this audience. Needless to say, there is no harm in

more than one language; but there is always harm when a potpourri of credits is offered in substitution for mastery of a single subject, and I believe this mischief is especially rife in the field of foreign languages. I certainly should prefer four years of Latin to, say, two of French and two of Spanish—or even to two of French and two of Latin, though the latter combination is not altogether inadvisable.

Next I would list real command of the principles and techniques of algebra, geometry, and trigonometry. Here I touch upon a sensitive nerve, for the Rice Institute has spent over forty years trying to persuade the high schools to send it students solidly grounded in the elements of mathematics. I daresay that Rice is the only university within hundreds, possibly thousands, of miles that requires of its freshmen a genuine course in college mathematics—that is, calculus and analytical geometry—in place of the bogus so-called college (actually elementary) algebra generally offered but seldom required except of technical majors. And what is the consequence? Every September most of our incoming freshmen voluntarily arrive on campus ahead of the official opening of the session, to be first reviewed or instructed in basic mathematics by the Institute's own teaching staff before being turned over to the Dean of Students, the Student Council, and those merry men, the sophomores, for the more ordinary kinds of orientation.

English language, foreign language, mathematics; what else? Opinion might differ, but I would strongly urge a long, comprehensive program of historical study—ancient, medieval, general modern, and American—as an essential background for a university career. Everything that happens or ever has happened is history, and I think there is no better mental frame for the organization of knowledge than the

formal study of history *as* history. We have all had in our classes the student who thought that Shakespeare flourished immediately after Chaucer because their names were not far separated in the textbook. I for one despair of the college student who speaks of Wordsworth as living in the "olden days" and writing "Old English," or who identifies 1492 as a date in the fourteenth century. Nor am I hopeful of one who seems never to relate Newton or Faraday or Copernicus or Lavoisier to any events, literary or historical, outside the realm of science.

And so, by a nimble transition, we come to the question of science in the college-preparatory program. Here I will-ingly confess (to my shame, not credit) that I am out of my element. Two opinions I will venture: one dogmatically and the other hesitantly. The first is that mathematics is infinitely more important than natural science as a basis for college work, and that if for any reason one or the other has to be slighted, it should be the latter. My second, and more tentative, opinion is that high school is the place for a descriptive, general, and synthetic study. I know that "general science" is a despised term, probably because the subject has been taught in a despicable manner. But I come back to that useful rule of education that was snarled at me in my student days: "*Save something!*" The intensive, systematic investigation of the individual sciences can, I think, wait upon the college or university. Yet one would like to be able to count upon matriculants who have a general view of the physical universe, from the subatomic particles to the spiral nebulae, and in particular of the earth with its life including man, reasonably in accord with the closer view of certain of these areas that will be appropriate to his later studies. More especially, one would hope that the student will enter col-

lege with some real grasp of the aims, attitudes, procedures, and self-imposed limitations of scientists—in short, of the scientific method. It is at least pathetic, and may be tragic, when a college man or woman imagines that Newton achieved intellectual supremacy by noticing for the first time that fruit may fall upon the head of an idler under the old apple tree, and imagines that Darwin shamefully populated another tree, the family tree of man, with rhesus monkeys and orangoutangs.

You see that I have cast my net far, instead of confining myself solely to the special question of this conference: the integration of high school and college English. For that problem is part of the whole question of the general integration of school and college. I have—arbitrarily, I well know—assumed that the potential or the certain college matriculant can somehow be identified early in life, and I have attempted to state those programs of secondary study that might best prepare him for work in almost any branch of liberal, technical, or scientific learning. So far as English is concerned, it follows from what I have advocated that he might reach the university ignorant or largely ignorant of *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Paradise Lost*; even Shakespeare might be little more than the echo of a name. If the preparatory courses are primarily devoted to composition and reading as skills, the study of literature becomes not only secondary but, almost inevitably, functional. Looked upon as a source of ideas or a model of style for high school themes, Milton, for example, hardly towers large. Neither, I think, do Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and others I refrain from mentioning for fear of recrimination. Before the secondary teachers in our midst set me down as a raving madman, let me beg them to ask themselves two questions: When

you were in high school, was your own impression of, let us say, *The Lady of the Lake* and *Silas Marner* one of delighted discovery of literary value or one of distaste? Second, in your own teaching, do you feel a sense of achievement or, instead, of an assigned task dutifully performed when you have explained the mythology, figures of speech, and structural symmetry of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"? Add a third and a fourth question, if you will: Have you observed any effect, beneficial or otherwise, of these texts on the style of composition of your students? And when you assign a theme upon them, does the subject matter seem to have penetrated to the hearts of your young writers and genuinely affected their thoughts or habits of thought? I have an idea that your answers may be a little different if you have been having them read, for example, Thomas Henry Huxley—or, for that matter, either of his grandsons, Aldous or Julian. Without in any way implying a judgment of relative literary value, I will say that my personal education would have been less bungled and delayed if instead of *The Last of the Mohicans* the syllabus in literature had called for *Tono-Bungay* or *Main Street*.

No doubt you observe that I seemingly recommend for high schools mainly the use of selections in prose. Frankly, I do—on the principle, once again, of saving something for the university; let Austin have its swink to it reserved. Still, a suitable introduction to the pleasures and techniques of verse obviously is appropriate—I am inclined to say essential—to the preparatory course. I certainly am not trying to write the secondary curriculum in detail across this table, and so I will only suggest that the rich variety of poetry in the English language makes shameful the choice of poems that might tend to give children in their middle teens an

impression that verse is an arcanum or an affliction. A bit of Poe for mystery and romance, a bit of Tennyson for metrical and verbal delight, and a bit of Whitman (carefully selected) for democratic, patriotic fervor might be a pretty firm core for further reading and appreciation of poetry in more mature years.

By the same token that I would specialize the preparatory program in English largely upon composition, I would specialize that of the colleges upon literature, viewed historically, internationally, and in its various forms and genres. I wonder whether it has begun to occur to you that if this division of functions were accomplished, in the long run college English might tend to lose its position as a required subject in the curriculum. Now, you see, I also wring the withers of my university colleagues. However, anyone who has thoughtfully observed students, often indeed the same students, in courses they have been required to take and those they have freely elected will perhaps decline to weep. I have never heard of English I winning any popularity contests.

With the abandon of the theorist, I have so far neglected a crucial question: What happens to the student who elects the college-preparatory course but in the end does not go to college, or on the other hand to the student who fails to choose it and later finds his means and inclination to lie in that direction? The first class does not trouble me; if we have any faith at all in what is called liberal education, it is hardly consistent with that faith to suggest that a boy or girl thoroughly and successfully educated in the use of his native tongue as a medium of reading and self-expression, in mathematics and the scientific method, in a foreign language with a sampling of its literature, and in world and American

history will be an unhappy or misfit citizen. If he can learn all that, he probably can learn a trade without difficulty.

The other group are our real problem children, and I cannot arrange any easy rescue for them from their own mistake or that of their parents or counselors. Clearly, the rescue must be effected by postgraduate high school or sub-college instruction of some type, and I have an idea that the best agency of mercy will prove to be the junior college. Let me say that I have the greatest and most genuine respect for the municipal, district, and consolidated junior colleges whose advent has been such a prominent educational feature of our generation. Apparently their resources, patience, and ingenuity are inexhaustible. They seem eager and able to make themselves all things to all the men, women, and children of their constituency. Their registrars dexterously arrange fantastic schedules for days, nights, and Saturdays that rival in complexity the astronomical tables. Their deans conjure apparently out of the whirlwind qualified instructors for dozens of unexpected, unscheduled sections of English and mathematics, as well as the specialists to fill unheard-of demands for courses in igneous petrology, motel management, or celloidin-section techniques. Their presidents hold in an impossible balance of good will the irrecconcilable educational and civic interests of the community. Their boards of control wring from the tax rolls funds for acres of shops and laboratories, auditoriums seating half a city, and fleets of busses that twice daily move the student population of whole counties. There is nothing these institutions seem reluctant to undertake, and so with some confidence I fling upon their broad backs the problem of the aspiring college student who has not prepared himself for college. I might illustrate by mentioning the fact that appli-

cants for admission to the Rice Institute are sometimes advised to spend a year of additional preparation on another campus. I refer, of course, not to straight transfers into sophomore standing, but to students who deliberately improve their preparation for entrance as freshmen by an extra year concentrated upon mathematics, English, foreign language, science, or whatever combination of subjects seems needed. The results are—as one might expect—almost uniformly good, and I cannot recall that I have often heard any foolish talk about a “lost” year on the part of students or their parents after the benefits of that program have become evident.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you have been very kind to invite and hear me as a speaker before this conference. I have brought you no special insights, no experimental data, no pat formulas for solving the problem you are so gallantly confronting with your collective will and intelligence. It is a problem on which I have brooded privately since first I began to teach. Today I have told you a few things I have long been thinking; and as I have put them into consecutive words, in the main for the first time, I have been aware of how far from practical reality I must appear to some of you to have wandered. Ours is the age of mass-everything, including mass education, and yet here (without actually employing the expression) I have been talking of an aristocracy of intellect. Well, where else is the problem? If the high schools are concerned with very nearly the whole population, and if the university takes up that same burden, it will perforce take it up where they have set it down; there will be no more discontinuity than between the sixth and seventh grades or between the ninth and the tenth—which is to say,

essentially none at all. The supposed difficulty becomes, then, hardly more than a mote in the eye of university idealists reluctant to confess their actual position as the teachers of grades thirteen through sixteen. If, on the other hand, we conceive of the university as a radically different order of institution, bearing, as I have already suggested, a relation to the high school analogous to that of the medical college with respect to the college of arts and sciences, then the problem takes on the validity and urgency implied by the kind of meeting we are having today. May our deliberations be blessed with wise and fruitful issue.

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