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The Authority of the Teacher

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4555 words - 45 minutes

THE AUTHORITY OF THE TEACHER

Back in 1983, when we asked the National Endowment for the Humanities for a grant enabling the Dallas Institute to offer a summer institute for high school teachers, I had already taught the proposed curriculum for more than twenty years at the University of Dallas and so was certain of its power. And the faculty that would be teaching with me for that first year and, with variations, thereafter, for 22 of the succeeding years—though I stepped down as director nine years after receiving the grant—had all been students at the University of Dallas. It was not until three years ago that there was any member of the summer faculty who had been educated elsewhere. So I want to give the University of Dallas credit for its approach to the classics, specifically the “literary tradition” sequence, still in place, a study of epic, tragedy, and comedy undertaken by the entire student body. This study by genre had proved an effective structure for bringing to life the major texts of the Western world, not simply as “great books,” but as a living tradition making up what T. S. Eliot had called an “organic whole.” It was this tradition, that, up until the latter half of the past century, formed the mind and heart of Western culture. This approach to the texts, viewing them according to what Aristotle called their “kinds”—epic, tragedy, and comedy—thus shaped the Dallas Institute summer program and proved to be an astonishingly effective paradigm for this saturation course for teachers.

Successively, under Dr. Dona Gower, Drs. Glenn and Virginia Arbery, and the present directors, Drs. Larry and Claudia Allums, the program has been

enlarged to include other works, specifically those from other cultures, but the curriculum has remained basically the same for these twenty-five years of its history. Because it works. It avoids using literature as a mere vehicle for history, philosophical theme, or political issue and, rather, approaches texts, in Aristotle's words, as imitations of human actions. This means that we see poetic works as analogies, fictions, that in themselves embody universals and in such a way change and enlarge their readers' imaginations. We consider the goal of literature, then, to be not knowledge so much as wisdom.

.In these festivities, what we are celebrating, however, is not just the establishment of a teachers institute that has endured for twenty-five years, but a shared belief in this transforming effect of great literature. And our real source for joy and celebration is not just great literature in and of itself as much as it is great literature in the minds and hearts of teachers. For if teachers are to perform their age-old task (which is more desperately needed in our day than any other we could call to mind) they need access to the memorable and unaging insights of their discipline. They need authority.

And, sad to say, the authority of teachers seems at an all-time low in our schools today. Their traditional role, already shaken in the past century by dubious educational theory, has been all but demolished in the present age. Now an intensified individualism raises questions concerning the right of a teacher to use the same criteria for students of diverse backgrounds, tending to make the instructor's role that of moderator rather than teacher. Incessant standardized testing has reduced the teacher's role even further---to educational clerk or manager. Language is no longer the teacher's free field; indeed, a casual good-humored remark may cost a teacher her job, as may a consoling hand on a

student's arm. Further, the world wide web and new technologies threaten to render formal instruction irrelevant. Indeed, the moral authority of educational institutions in general has been so greatly diminished that teachers are given little control over their classes or their curriculum. They find themselves increasingly superfluous in the traditional role assigned to their profession over the ages: the presentation--to a world in the making--of a new generation shaped by the wisdom of the past-- that is, the ongoing of ideals and standards as much as of information and skills.

Nevertheless, despite whatever disregard society may have in general for teachers, to ask what authority they have is a little like asking the same question about mothers or fathers. The teacher's authority is one of those ancient immemorial verities, like a parent's, that we ought to take for granted, trusting that it is simply in the nature of things. Ardent Darwinians, who tend sometimes to advance simplistic explanations for human phenomena, might maintain that at some point in the dark backward and abysm of time, the teacher became genetically an advantage. In the grim race for survival did it turn out that tribes remembering the lore of the past produced better warriors? The species that survived thereafter, to go on with our myth, must have privileged the teacher; and the advantage became so obvious that from then on the teacher was recognized as a sacred figure in the community-- and tribes with such shamans became dominant. Or something like that. I am of course oversimplifying the account. But however elegantly it might be stated, this is hardly a satisfactory way to think of the teacher's origin in society. Poets over the centuries have given us far better images: the teacher is prior, not after. Think of the Titan Prometheus; the satyrs; the goddess Athena; the sibyl, the archetypal wise old man in so many

myths and legends; Merlin, the magician of the Arthurian romances; on up to Prospero in the *Tempest*. And in all of these, the teacher is connected somehow with the community's origins, with that transformation that enabled them to think of themselves as "we." The teacher in these myths, in fact, is endowed with a kind of magic or at least some sort of occult power. This sorcery is an important symbol, for it signifies the ability to enchant and hence to point to another dimension within the ordinary. After Prospero renounced his magic, however—standing on the brink of modernity---there have been few teacher-figures in literature; and those coming after Prospero have had to work with something less overt than magical spells. Stepan Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* turns his classical knowledge into a rather silly aestheticism and destroys his students' lives; and Marlow in Conrad's *Lord Jim* finds no supernatural standards for defining the hero. But Faulkner's Sam Fathers of *Go Down, Moses* still has the magic--the tribal lore of the ancient predecessors who, though they have died, have not quitted the earth. In the portion of the novel called "The Old People," Cass Edmonds says to his cousin, Isaac, after the boy has shot his first deer and has seen what looked like the phantom of a huge buck walk out of the wilderness:

. . . all that must be somewhere. (He is referring to all the creatures that have lived and died.) All that could not have been invented and created just to be thrown away. . . Look at the seed, the acorns, at what happens even to carrion when you try to bury it: it refuses too, seethes and struggles too until it reaches light and air again, hunting the sun still. And they—" the boy saw. . . the sky where the scoured and icy stars glittered. "—they don't want it, need it. Besides, what would it want itself, knocking around out there, when it never had

enough time about the earth as it was, when there is plenty of room about the earth, plenty of places still unchanged from what they were when the blood used and pleased in them while it was still blood?

But we want them,” the boy said. We want them too. There is plenty of room for us and them too.”

They have to go somewhere, as Cass says. We have to have somewhere in our imaginations for the dead, (I am not speaking theologically, but poetically)-- some sort of cosmos, some design equal to our human aspirations, not simply infinite dark matter and black holes. For after losing the Ptolemaic image of the universe, with its crystalline sphere surrounding the precious terrain--the *paradiso* into which Dante the poet makes his way at the summit of his journey--where do we say, mythologically, that the souls of the dead go? Teachers need some alternative to the bare and inadequate fact, some symbol of the spiritual realm, the larger imaginative whole, to which great literature takes us. They need, further, to be able to inculcate some image of a living heritage to which their students feel a stirring of loyalty, one to which they owe allegiance. To accomplish this feat teachers possess something of an occult power; but in a radically neutralized world, they are allowed to use this gift less and less until finally it disappears. One thinks of Glendower's boast: "I can call spirits from the vasty deep," and of Hotspur's cynical reply: "But when you call them, will they come?" Teachers are likely to feel themselves challenged in that same manner.

Yet though they are increasingly prevented from exercising their full

spiritual power, we can say at the outset that teachers are not, can never be, mere educational tools or equipment. Nor are they simply *in loco parentis*, an adjunct to the family, though families have their own role in teaching children values. But teachers bear a responsibility to the human race not to be found in the blood line; they are emissaries for a heritage other than the DNA structure. And in the same way, they are not part of the political establishment. Their work is to impart not official knowledge, subject to the politics of the day, but a timeless heritage, a body of wisdom belonging to the community, which, however, teachers alone transmit. This last is a strong statement, that, I must admit, seems on the face of it highly questionable. Surely learned scholars, writers, readers of every sort could be said to access this repository of human wisdom. But only teachers represent an entire body of knowledge (they do not of course possess it); they are emissaries---a bridge to it---by their very act of commitment, and they perform this role no matter how inadequate their own education may be. Through their dedication to their work, not simply through their brilliance or originality, they have a key to another world, which, like magic, they carry about as an inner power to transport others. So it is not facts or any sort of ready-made learning that distinguish the effective teacher; it is a commitment to and a faith in, intangibles, qualities, moral and spiritual values, carried on the back of the information being taught. What alters their students and gradually transforms them is the “signals of transcendence” that the teacher gives out. (I am not speaking of religion, but of a sacred quality present in the world around us--the transcendental dimension that matter possesses). This spiritual perception is necessary to the body politic; in fact, it is irreplaceable if a community is to produce free persons. Hence, though this repository of wisdom to which (I am maintaining) teachers bear witness

certainly exists on its own in books or manuscripts, accessible to private individuals, it is through teachers that its life is preserved and constantly explored. Only the teacher approaches this wisdom not to possess it but to channel it, to profess that it exists. I do not mean to argue that teachers have or even should have an encyclopedic knowledge or that they are in any sense gurus; I am suggesting that, as teachers, they bear witness to the transforming power of the realm of intangibles which is their specific charge; they bear witness as members of a profession and a calling that in representing a cumulative body of knowledge, satisfies a necessary need in society. This need is the why and wherefore, as Faulkner would say, of the professions. Without lawyers, we would certainly still have to try to arbitrate, to make just decisions, as we would have to make medical ones without doctors; but those decisions would be erratic and difficult, some brilliant and some misguided. The same may be said of the teaching profession: people can learn without it—and certainly will, nowadays, from the world-wide web and constant tv coverage; but, without a teacher, their learning will be erratic, some of it enlightening but a great deal of it misleading and even dangerous. What I suppose I am saying is that teachers are members of a necessary and heretofore respected profession; that their concern for learning is a concern for others and hence a service to the community; that society cannot do without them; and that what they profess is the moral and spiritual wisdom necessary for the survival of our civilization. Individuals can no doubt make contact with this vast reservoir of achieved knowledge on their own; but its full volume and in a sense its public dimension are lost if we ignore those who take as their life work its dissemination. It is not that teachers know all that wisdom, but that they believe in it. And the perspective the classroom generates is a long memory free of the

prejudices of the day. This is why it is a violation to politicize the classroom. Its serene air offers a larger view of reality than the immediately political. The classroom opens up a timeless perspective. It was in the classroom that Melville's masterpiece *Moby Dick* was seen to be what it is, one of the world's classics, having long been dismissed by readers and reviewers; it is in the classroom that Shakespeare has been kept alive, even though sporadic performances of his works have been from time to time produced onstage. Milton would be a rarity indeed had not *Paradise Lost* been studied in the schools. But we are losing these texts, as we have lost the *Iliad*, the plays of Aeschylus, and the *Divine Comedy*. We are in process of losing the *Aeneid*, though it was one of the founding documents of our nation and the most widely read book through the nineteenth century, apart from the Bible. The way we keep these great works alive is for our teachers to know them and refer to them.

The authority of teachers comes, then, not from having an extraordinarily large body of information themselves, but from a commitment to the age-old heritage of wisdom in their keeping, from consenting to be its medium and using whatever spiritual powers are available to effect its transmission.

We must differentiate the teacher, then, as we have said, from the hired worker, the family member, and the political appointee, but as well from the moralist, the tale-teller, the entertainer. It is tempting to identify the teacher with these latter figures; but teachers do not as their main task set up moral standards, carry within themselves the tales and gossip of the community, nor as a rule tell very good jokes. Teachers are the bearers of something they consider more significant than themselves, more important than any method, something of

enormous value to the culture; They have faith in education; they believe that people can be changed. And they make themselves vehicles for this transformation; they transmit, attempting to become less and less their private, personal selves and more and more the conveyor of what they bear across to others. There are many metaphors for them. Socrates called teachers midwives, which is a good figure; but I should prefer to think of them as Hermes figures, as guides, for they do not simply bring to birth something already present in the pupil though hidden—they actually conduct their students into new territory, first having imported, as it were, postcards from that territory into the classroom. There are so many metaphors! Teachers are the bearers, further, of memory, of what is worth saving from the past, memorable because in it is a record of humanity exceeding itself; a wisdom and a craft which, when conveyed to the young in the present, produces some sort of alchemy that we might call, with the poet Keats, “soul making.” It might be said that soul-making, then, what the Greeks called *paideia*, is the occupation of teachers, even when they are drilling their pupils in facts and skills.

In one of the oldest stories we have of the teacher, Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, we are told that Prometheus, the Titan, took pity on human beings in their ignorance:

I found them witless and gave them the use of their wits and made them masters of their minds. . . for men at first had eyes but saw to no purpose; they had ears but did not hear. Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their long lives and handled all things in bewilderment and confusion.” Prometheus taught them all the arts and crafts. But chiefly he transformed them by enabling them to see and to understand.

The interesting aspect of this story, based on the ancient mythological fable, is that Prometheus' crime is also described as stealing fire from the gods; apparently, in order to teach the various skills, he brought to the human race *dike*, the divine fire, intellect, or right judgment, which had been formerly Zeus's alone. He taught these pitiful humans not only *techne*, craft, but *dike*, intellect. What the fable seems to indicate, then, is first, the lack of separation between intellectual and technical skills, indicating that skills have to be informed by right judgment; and second, that the human race is changed in kind by possessing the divine fire of understanding, which is not innate but must be transmitted. Prometheus is our archetypal image of the teacher, someone who undergoes torment so that humankind can have *dike* and *techne*.

In Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*, Isaac McCaslin, the young heir of a wealthy plantation-owning family, is taught the skills of the hunt by Sam Fathers, son of a native American chief and a creole woman. One of the sections of the novel, "The Old People," shows Isaac putting his skills into practice by killing his first deer, with his mentor at his side.

"Don't walk up to him in front," Sam said. "If he aint dead, he will cut you all to pieces with his feet. Walk up to him from behind and take him by the horn first, so you can hold his head down until you can jump away . . . The boy did that—drew the head back and the throat taut and drew Sam Fathers' knife across the throat and Sam stooped and dipped his hands in the hot smoking blood and wiped them back and forth across the boys face. . . and he had nothing to do now but stand straight and not let the

trembling show. “Did he do all right, Sam? his cousin McCaslin said.
“He done all right,” Sam Fathers said.

We are told that Sam has spent long hours preparing Isaac for this moment:

He taught the boy the woods, to hunt, when to shoot and when not to shoot, when to kill and when not to kill, and better, what to do with it afterward.

Such skills are all important to the boy. But they go hand in hand with a different kind of teaching, even more important: Sam taught the boy how to see and respect the “old people,” the spiritual voices of the wilderness that represent the body of wisdom of which the teacher is guardian. And Sam’s method is the method of the teacher:

The boy would just wait and then listen, and Sam would begin talking about the old days and the People, whom he had not had time ever to know and so could not remember . . . and as he talked about those old times and those dead and vanished men of another race from either that the boy knew, gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boys present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening. the men who walked through them actually walking in breath and air and casting an actual shadow on the earth they had not quitted . [and it would finally seem] that it was he, the boy, who was the guest here and Sam Father’s voice the mouthpiece of the host.

No passage in literature more fully captures the sense of magic educed by a teacher. The great figures out of the past take over: these long departed figures

out of Sam Fathers' tales dominate the scene, just as Achilles when brought into the classroom dominates its space. Students with a good teacher are as mesmerized by Helen as the elders of Troy who view her as she walks by them on the ramparts of their besieged city; Odysseus charms his audience, with his "mind like the gods"; Hamlet and Lear are so imposing that students come to feel they are these famous people's guests—and might just be considered intruders.) And in the education of Isaac McCaslin, what the boy learns from Sam Fathers is not shaped by his preferences or his abilities; rather, he is shaped by it; he has to take in the material, maintain an openness to it, accommodate himself to it, measure up to it, learning, as he says, both humility and pride in the process. The wilderness, where the hunt occurs, is the symbol for the numinous presence for which the boy must be readied, a universal realm of memory that the Greeks called *kleos*. To Isaac, before he was old enough to go along on the hunt, watching the others disappear into the wilderness, it, the great forest seemed "brooding, secret, tremendous, almost inattentive." . . . By the time he is allowed to go on the bear hunt with the men, we are told,

he had already inherited then, without ever having seen it, the old bear with one trap-ruined foot that in an area almost a hundred miles square had earned for himself a name, a definite designation like a living man.

In the boy's imagination, from having been taught,

it ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it. It

loomed and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, tremendous, red eyed, not malevolent but just big . . . It was as if the boy had already divined what his sense and intellect had not encompassed yet, that doomed wilderness

whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name and through which ran not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the little puny humans swarmed and hacked at

in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant—the old bear, solitary, indomitable, and alone; widowed, childless and absolved of mortality—old Priam reft of his old wife and outlived all his sons.

Sam's tales and visions of the heroic tradition of the past, along with his coaching and drilling in the techniques of woodsmanship, brings the boy into the presence of the bear, who finally shows himself to the boy as in a theophany, like a god.

The boy's entire life will be shaped by this experience, which would not have been possible for him without Sam's tale telling and his coaching and drilling. But the teacher did not produce the vision; the teacher must simply be convinced that the vision is possible, that what he teaches is real. And it is this aspect of the teacher's work that is in danger today; it is the belief in the vision of the bear that is being lost in our schools. The teacher has to have seen the bear, has to believe in it, respect it. And this is where the teaching of the classics comes in.

Go Down Moses, then, is not simply about the life and death of a

teacher (for we are made aware of the death of Sam Fathers and later of Isaac himself in these stories) but about the way in which the teacher's authority functions. And though we have to grieve that society does not recognize that authority, we still know that it exists and that it shapes lives. And we still know that we are preparing the young not just for success, but for struggles and hardships. And some of us intuit that in our time those hardships may be greater than ordinary. As Donald Cowan, the former president of the University of Dallas, wrote in *Unbinding Prometheus*,

“...an age with which we are familiar has already ended [he wrote this in the 70s] new forms and structures are already carrying the burden of the energies of our society; young people sense this change in the depths of their being and are seeking ways to fulfill the new sorts of tasks to which they are called; educational systems in our time have for the most part ignored the realities of such a change and seek only to restore the structures of a former epoch or else with a show of ingenuity to foster various fads. . .

Later on, [he says]

when a potentially violent situation is triggered, it could set off explosive reactions in many areas at once, initiating a general conflagration of great magnitude . . . [and he speaks of the uncomfortable premonition that some thirty years from the time he was writing—which is now] the social scene will contain imbalances interlocked enough for one misadventure to cause a general catastrophe. [He goes on, however, to point up the possibility of hope:]

Education in the specifically human qualities (what we have long called a liberal education) is the only heritage we can give a generation that will have to make the transition and thus for a time bear the world on its shoulders, like Herakles relieving Atlas. . . .

Responding to that challenge, we reply with some seriousness that the burden of this education falls on teachers, who must prepare these young heroes destined to carry on our tradition of freedom and dignity. To undertake this task, teachers must be given the authority of their disciplines. How do we regain that authority? The answer is from within. Teachers find their inner authority awakened and enhanced by an experience with the immortal works of Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, and Dante. And, as a matter of fact, it is in these great works that the heroic images that shaped our civilization are to be found. And so we come, finally, to the important issue that this evening is all about: the necessity of keeping alive the tradition, the classics of the Western world, without which teachers lack their “magic.” To relinquish our connection with these texts is deliberately to choose our decline as a noble people. As Lynne Cheney once declared, when she was still head of the NEH, the teachers’ summer program at the Dallas Institute is indeed a model for the nation.