

Doing Justice Through—and To—the Liberal Arts

Walter Reed
Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts
Emory University

“Justice?—You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law.”

So begins *A Frolic of His Own*, the novel by William Gaddis—one of the great books of the Western world published in the 1990s, I tell my students with deliberate equivocation. The book is certainly a wonderful satire on the self-serving pursuit of “justice” in upper-middle-class America, with generous references to the political oratory of Lincoln, the social theory of Rousseau and the philosophical dialogues of Plato. It is also remarkably up-to-date in its command of the intricacies of American copyright and trademark law, according of an attorney friend of mine who specializes in the area. The opening quip, made by one of the more sympathetic litigators who over-populate the novel, alludes to the famous exchange between two Supreme Court justices, Learned Hand and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. “Do justice, sir, do justice,” Hand is reported to have said to his colleague as he left their offices one day. “That is not my job,” Holmes replied. “It is my job to apply the law.” However we put it, the tension between justice (an ideal) and law (an institution) pulls us in different directions, especially when we think of the (undeniably) pluralistic society of American higher education today and the (supposedly) singular liberal arts tradition that our colleges and universities are trying to carry on into the future. We *can* educate for justice in such a society; I have no doubts at all on this score. But I think we can only do it effectively if we are willing to keep on educating ourselves as well as our students, if we are willing to think of the liberal arts as an ideal and changing process, something always renewing itself, rather than an actual, final product, something like the Harvard Classics “Five-Foot Shelf” that used to sit in my grandfather-the-lawyer’s home library, alongside the sets of Wordsworth, Conrad, Kipling, Churchill and others. We can only do justice *through* the liberal arts, I am arguing, if we do justice *to* the liberal arts.

The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, revived most recently in the so-called “culture wars” of the 1990s, is as old as the ancients themselves. If Eric Havelock is right, Plato set himself up as a newly literate modern opposed to the ancient orality of Homer. If modern biblical scholarship is right, the innovative Book of Job set itself firmly against the ancient legalism of the Deuteronomist history, even as it imitated a still more ancient, pre-prophetic wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East. The Book of Revelation set itself so starkly against everyone except the suffering saints that it made Martin Luther wish it wasn’t part of the New Testament. The lesson can be extended. It was Cervantes’ bemused observance of the battles between the innovators in vernacular romance—Ariosto in particular—and the conservators who insisted on the newly recovered authority of Aristotle’s *Poetics* that gave rise to the modern European novel, that anti-literary, literary genre that eventually became canonical. High European Modernism, represented by writers like James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Thomas Mann,

proclaimed its modernity by imitating classic narratives like the *Odyssey*, Dante's *Inferno* and the Joseph story in the Book of Genesis. You get the picture. The tradition of the liberal arts is full of paradoxical innovation, brave new talent using the great tradition as a Trojan horse, and more cultural pluralism than contemporary multi-culturalists ever dreamt of. Remember Augustine, steeped in classical poetry and rhetoric, encountering the barbaric Scriptures of the Christians? What we need to keep in mind—and be true to in our own pedagogy and curriculum-making—is the liberality of the liberal arts, its (or their) astonishing freedom of mixing and matching, of looking ahead while turning backward, of moving west while thinking east, of being absorbed by brave new worlds as well as colonizing them. Remember Columbus and the ambiguous Indies? As we think of recent Nobel Laureates and Booker Prize winners, just who do we think, East or West, has imposed on whom?

If we do justice *to* the liberal arts in this fashion, teaching the conflicts as well as the resolutions, the heresies as well as the orthodoxies, the heart-rending losses as well as the heart-warming triumphs, then doing justice *through* the liberal arts, preparing our students to do justice as well as apply the law in the society of the future they will inevitably help to shape, is not all that hard to imagine. It is only hard to imagine if we think we can do it by resting on other people's laurels and lecturing from yellowing notes.

I remember the great scholar of Modernism who became my dissertation director at Yale, Charles Feidelson, Jr., being asked to give his highly successful undergraduate lecture course on 19th century American literature one more time. He agreed reluctantly, because he had decided that the course would have to be totally reconfigured to reflect what he now understood to be going on in the so-called American Renaissance as it prefigured twentieth-century Europe. So he spent the summer writing a whole new set of lectures, instead of the next chapter of his book (never to be completed, alas) on Henry James. The last time I saw him—the editor, with Richard Ellmann, of the masterful anthology *The Modern Tradition*—he was studying ancient Egyptian and Hebrew. “I was always interested in ancient cultures,” he said. “This modernism business was supposed to be just a detour.”

Let me offer a more recent and more sanguine example of the inevitable re-conceiving of tradition that I think is necessary today, as it always has been. I have the privilege at Emory of directing an interdisciplinary program known as the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts, which has both graduate and undergraduate students and faculty dedicated to the program as well as on loan from other departments. In its present form, it has tracks in American Studies and in Culture, History and Theory (beyond but also including the United States), and it has been a seed bed for interdisciplinary, liberal arts studies at Emory for the last 50 years. At a lunch for faculty and graduate students in the Culture, History and Theory track last semester, we were randomly assigned to different tables and asked to come up with hypothetical courses around a common topic of our choice. Quite by accident—I did not load the dice, I promise—our table ended up discussing a set of courses addressing the topic “Justice and Reconciliation.” One student imagined a course on the rhetoric of individual rights and identity politics, from the

debates over gay rights in Berlin of the 1920s to the rhetoric of civil rights in the American South in the '60s, and back to Germany and the problem of immigration in the '90s. Another proposed studying the social frameworks of African countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia that might support reconciliation after the devastating effects of current civil wars. (She had come to our program from ten years of work with the NGO Doctors Without Borders.) A third student imagined a course on the violence against women depicted in Japanese and African folk traditions. Still another described his work on the way the Internet was developing religious nationalism in India and among the Indian communities living abroad. A faculty member described a course she had recently given on representations of social justice in the post-colonial literature of these same Indian communities. Another sketched a course she planned to offer next year on the function of public memory and public monuments in dealing with the Holocaust and other catastrophic genocides of the 20th century.

Such a brave new version of the liberal arts may seem a little daunting or alien to older liberal arts hands. I confess that it did to me. But consider a more traditional piece of curriculum from another Emory program I'm involved with, our Program in Comparative Literature. We have a two-semester sequence, called "Major Texts of the Western Tradition": texts "Ancient to Medieval" in the fall, "Renaissance to Modern" in the spring. One or the other of these courses is required of all undergraduate majors in Comparative Literature, and either of them fulfills one of the College's general education requirements. We teach 50-60 students each semester, in several small sections. How do we educate these students for justice, you ask? Well, think of a typical syllabus, in which the very conflict between the ideal of justice and the reality of law might provide the organizing theme. The conflict of tribal *nomos* and individual *ethos* in the *Iliad*. The human rhetoric of justice countered by the divine rhetoric of providence in the Book of Job. The conflict of family values and political values in *The Oresteia*, ending in the invention of trial by a jury of one's peers. The sacrifice of heroic *ethos* to imperial *civitas* in the *Aeneid*. The conflict of loyalty and betrayal in *The Song of Roland*. The eschatological justice and natural, moral law of Dante's *Inferno*, an epic apocalypse that tries to do justice to both the classical and biblical traditions. How could such a traditional expression of the liberal arts not be educating students for justice in their own world?

Someone might object—I can imagine my new undergraduate dean at Emory, for whom we are currently searching, objecting—as follows. "How can reading all these difficult and distant books by dead white men (assuming the students really do read them) produce up-to-date citizens dedicated to doing justice in the ethnically multi-cultural, religiously plural, and ethically individualistic society that the United States of America has now become? How can we measure the outcomes of such education in terms of justice-doing activity and law-abiding behavior among our alumni?" I am of course imagining a dean I hope I never have to answer to, but in the event I do, here is what I would say.

The threat to liberal arts education these days is not a pluralistic society. The liberal arts tradition is the special creation of pluralistic societies throughout the ages, of political minorities like the Jews and the Athenians living in the shadows of more powerful

empires, as well as of the more enlightened thinkers from the ruling peoples within such empires. The threat to liberal arts education in general and to educating for justice in particular is the pre-professional, vocational model of education that has become so prevalent in higher education today, even in so-called liberal arts colleges and graduate programs. To put it in terms of the opposition I began with from Gaddis' novel (which might well serve as the last book a student read in "Masterpieces of the Western Tradition: Renaissance to Modern") the greatest obstacle to educating students to pursue justice is training them—training them prematurely and hence exclusively—to apply the law. The liberal arts insist, always and everywhere, that free learning for its own sake, across the disciplines and not just inside one of them, is the foundation of a just society. Professional formation—narrow and rigorous training to practice law, do medicine, engage in commerce, or even to teach an academic subject within the setting of a liberal arts institution—must be built on this foundation. Or else the larger social edifice will come to grief.

This is not my grandfather's liberal arts. Or rather it isn't and it is. It *is* the kind of education my grandfather received, at Yale, from 1906-1910, an education which prepared him to practice law—he worked for most of his career in the Federal Reserve Bank—but which also led him, toward the end of his life, to advise me not to become a lawyer, because of the lack of intellectual freedom the profession allowed. But the liberal arts I'm talking about is *not* the monument to such an education represented by his "five-foot shelf" of the Harvard Classics, the museum or mausoleum of the muses which some well-meaning defenders of the liberal arts tradition seem to think is what we should be somehow giving to our students in our generation and theirs.

It is not my intention to blame the professions or professional schools for the plight of the liberal arts in higher education today. Pre-professionalism and pseudo-professionalism, as well as the genuine article, are rampant throughout our society. Furthermore, those of us who promote the liberal arts, even as we profess one discipline or another, are just as much if not more at fault when we act as if the most rewarding students to teach our subject to—English or history, psychology or anthropology, physics or mathematics—are those who want to go on to graduate school—those who want to turn the central experience of their liberal arts education into the basis of a professional career. We are just as much if not more at fault when, as senior faculty and higher administrators, we place the value of effective, inspiring teaching of undergraduates so far below the value of publishing research for the edification of our fellow professors in considering colleagues for hiring, promotion and tenure that the social value of higher education has become politically suspect to the rest of our society. There is more than enough blame to go around.

But also, I would like to say in closing, more than enough hope. Jeremiads are invigorating, but the *Book* of Jeremiah, from which the popular term and the traditional American genre comes, is full of promises of wonderful things, as well as awful things, to come. If we are true to the liberal arts tradition, if we go back and read through it again for the larger vision it offers of cultural coherence in the midst of social disarray, if we think of ourselves as continuing students and of our students as emerging teachers in their

own right, we will find that pluralism only enriches our sense of what the liberal arts is about. Instead of deploring militant Islam outside (or, heaven forbid) inside our borders, instead of pretending that English and not Spanish was the first European language to be spoken on what is now known as American soil, instead of assuming that the African roots of American popular music make it somehow inferior to the European music which Americans have adopted as “classical,” we can put the Koran and the *Arabian Nights*, the poetry of Sor Juana de la Cruz and Pablo Neruda, the blues of Robert Johnson and the jazz of Charlie Parker, into the mix and into the midst of our liberal arts curriculum. It may not bring in the messianic kingdom, but it will keep the liberal arts alive and well in the sweet land of liberty, as it used to be called, in the next decade or two. It may not give us justice, but it will help us endure the law.

Works Cited

Gaddis, William. *A Frolic of His Own*. New York: Poseidon Press, 1994.