"I Hate Books," or Making Room for Learning[1]

"Strength is the foundation
of all virtue" (444).[2]

"When one emerges from a state of ignorance
into a state of knowledge, one must either be learning
from someone else or discovering the truth for himself.
But learning which is from someone else
remains someone else's, while what
we discover by ourselves becomes our own."
Archytas[3]

I

"I hate books" (184) ....

"I hate books." So writes one of the authors on the St. John's Great Books program..., one, moreover, who subtitled the book in which this striking remark is found "On Education."

We take reading, books and education for granted. But in so doing we run the risk, according to this author, of undertaking the process of our own formation uncritically. It is "a dangerous trail to blaze," he says (320), and books, are "...instruments of our greatest misery" (116). Plainly he means to shock us into considering anew what we have, perhaps, not adequately considered before.

In the education of his time—or as he says, in those "laughable establishments called colleges" (41)--all the ingredients of a genuine education were present but one. There were learned teachers, promising students, and there was surely much worth learning. But the laugh was, in this author's view, that learning didn't take place, or at least not of the sort and to the degree that it should. For the process was wanting that would lead to real growth, strength, and virtue. Indeed he was concerned that what actually occurs led to the very opposite, to intellectual vices that undermined the possibility of a real education.

II

Thus we must attend to the mode of education, not just to its content. Indeed he cautions us: "each sort of instruction has ...its dangers, which must be avoided" (328).

When we hear such a caution, we--in this technological age--often think of the problems that have come along with our "advances." In part, so does the author. "All the instruments invented to guide us," he says, "...cause our [own faculties] to be neglected. The more ingenious our tools, the cruder and more maladroit our organs become" (176). This too we readily recognize. It was a commonplace observation some years ago—and the source of much amusement—that we all forgot how to add when hand held calculators became inexpensively available. And, nowadays, with the introduction of automatic spell checkers on our word processing programs, many of us (including myself) have given up any hope of ever learning

how to spell. Not to mention television...with its concomitant loss of the ability for sustained attention and cognitive initiative.

In such cases of intellectual transference or "displacement," what happens is not only that devices and machines do the work for us, but that we in turn lose the ability to do so for ourselves. The undeniable benefits that come with greater ease and productivity are thus offset by the de-actualization of the very abilities in ourselves—if not in fact de-potentialization–that would otherwise have been required to accomplish those ends. "Displacement" thus really amounts to "replacement."....The paradox can be put in this way: though more productive, we end up being personally less able. "By dint of gathering machines around us," he says, "we no longer find any [resources] in ourselves" (178).

Our mind's abilities can so atrophy that the author offers up this frightening image. He compares our increasing intellectual dependency to "...the body of a man who...waited on [hand and foot] by his servants and drawn [about] by his horses, finally loses the strength and use of his limbs" (178). Unwittingly, seeking to make things easier and to accomplish more—to make life better, as we say--we end up dis-empowering ourselves, becoming weaker, other-directed and dependent, that is making our lives worse.

Though perhaps most clearly seen in such cases, the problem of displacement is not alone limited to technical instruments. The author's criticism goes much deeper and extends even to those most noble of "instruments" of learning, books and teachers.

III

"The manner of forming [one's] ideas is what gives character to the human mind" (203).

Our first masters, the author urges us, must be our own faculties. "...To substitute books [for our own "efforts of full discovery"[4]] is not to teach us to reason" or to think for ourselves. "It is [rather, he says, only] to teach us to use the reason of others" (125).[5]

Odd though this sounds, books then can be vehicles of mislearning, though not only in the way we first think. We usually take this to mean that someone might misunderstand what a writer intends. But there is a profounder and more consequential form of mislearning, one moreover that very much resembles the genuine article.

"Instead of teaching us to reason [for ourselves], [a writer is allowed to] reason for us, and [thus] exercises [not our thinking but] our memory" (145), he says. Memory, however, is only an external mode of appropriation. Memory abbreviates, if it does not short-circuit, the process of acquisition and misleads us into thinking that we can forgo the long and arduous process of making another's thoughts our thoughts. Memory, in short, allows us to take possession of ideas but without making them our own. Thereafter we mistake familiarity for insight. Thus the author says "the abuse of books kills [learning {science}]. Believing we know what we have read, we believe that we can dispense with learning it. Too much reading only produces"—and here he insults us—"presumptuous ignoramuses" (450; cp. 176), presuming more than we rightly should, incognizant of the truly limited nature of our grasp.

This remark, or should I remind us insult, is followed by a yet more surprising assessment: **"Among all the literary ages there has been none in which men read *so much* as in this one and [yet] none in which men are *less* knowledgeable."** More has led to less. This critique is especially noteworthy for it is not offered by some twentieth century thinker,

overwhelmed, as we all are, by heaps of books, paper and now electronic data (in this revealingly named "information age"),[6] but is offered by someone 250 years ago, in 1750. Reading, he says, too often only teaches us "to believe much but to know little" (125). Thus he offers another paradox: "the harm [in education] is not in what a student does not understand but [rather] in what he [falsely] believes he understands" (167). Much more is required of us when we read than simple retention.

To be given "answers," "solutions," "results" in a book is to be given at best a seed, one however without the prepared soil in which it could flourish. An answer can be no answer for us unless the question it responds to has also become our question; a solution is no solution for us unless the problem that led to it has first of all been our problem; and a result is only a dangling datum unless the process that yields it is one we ourselves have comprehended. Books, then, can be just words--empty, superficial, rootless, meaningless, that is "mere words"—and thus objects worthy of hate--if readers have not themselves made the formidable effort to prepare the soil of themselves in which words can root and grow, to build the foundation in themselves on which they can stand, or think them through so they are not simply groundless beliefs (cf. 102, 107,109, 171, 319). The task of the reader is thus a formidable one. The reader must assume responsibility for and take possession of the questions, the problems, the processes, that is to discover for him or herself the origin of the book, what gave rise to such thoughtful activity in the first place.[7]

This reassessment of learning is not simply a reaction to the free floating generalities and excessive abstractness of his overly-speculative age—though that surely was a problem—but to the age old dilemma of teaching and learning. One who might assist another in their primary effort of learning can be no conventional teacher. Since teachers, like books, like all instruments, can replace our own efforts and create a relationship of dependency, the function of the true teacher cannot be that of professor. Someone who steps in and replaces our ownmost possibilities for discovery is no genuine benefactor.[8] Indeed he denies us our potential. Restraint and indirectness are the virtues of teaching in such a view. Thus the author says "I call the master of this science [of education] governor [or what some other place might call "tutor"] rather than preceptor [or what other places call professor], because his task is less to instruct than to lead. He ought to give no precepts at all; he ought to make them be discovered" (52).

IV

Something we too often forget is that the reward of an activity is not to be found exclusively in the end result or product but in the process of discovery and development, strengthening and enlargening of the faculties required to achieve those ends. It is the process, not the product, that is enabling. Authentic education must not forget this. Thus our author says that "the goal [of education] is less to teach...a truth[,] than to show...how one must go about discovering the truth" (205). The old truism applies even here, somewhat adapted, about teaching someone how to think as opposed to thinking for them.

Here we begin to see something of the meaning of another of his puzzling assertions, namely that "education is surely *only* habit" (39). Habits are very powerful and often are nearly invisible, but once established, they are difficult to resist. They delimit our possibilities and thus define who we are.[9] Surely, then, they must be the object of our most careful attention, especially our intellectual habits.

The consequences of intellectual displacement are considerable. By forgoing the effort of full discovery for ourselves, we unknowingly fall into the habit of relying on others and thence being overly dependent on them. Therewith one's own reason becomes, as he says,

"...accustomed to a **servile submission to authority**" (176). Rather than self-reliant and self-resourceful—that is, truly independent—we become other-reliant and other-resourceful—that is, truly dependent.[10] And once a learner "...substitutes the **authority** [of others] for reason, he ...no longer reason[s] [for himself]." We become, according to our author, again in a frightful image: "nothing more than **the plaything of others' opinions**" (168). This is servitude. What is at stake in reading, then, is more than one might think; it is nothing less than our independence and integrity.

V

You may think that the upshot of the foregoing remarks is to urge the Surgeon General to place a warning label on all books: WARNING! BOOKS MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH. This is not the author's intention, but rather to develop in us a second order self-awareness about the activity we are about to undertake together, so that our organs might not become "crude and maladroit," that we not end up "the plaything of others' opinions," nor intellectually servile, and especially that we not be denied our ownmost powers (83). It is a curious fact of human formation that we do not, indeed cannot, know in advance of what we are each individually capable.[11] Yet we should not preclude possibilities from the outset.

Like Socrates, this author has sought to curb our pretensions to knowledge in order to make room for learning. Thus he would have us be suspicious of reading and books, if not actually hate them...that we may continue to love learning. Alone in such a view can reading be seen as a liberating activity, and hence as leading to our true freedom, that of thought, and therewith, empowering us, to virtue. In this way, and in this way only, does reading serve the true ends of liberal education (444).

So we ask you today to risk being less enlightened and "edified"—and hence less interesting and impressive at cocktail parties (cp. 451)—that you might conserve your abilities, reclaim your ownmost possibilities and be more thoughtful in your lives.

So we ask you today to imagine[12] a place of learning—call it a college (even if our author would shun the name)--where **the fundamental problem of learning** is not lost sight of, and to imagine a mode of education that seeks to address its disenabling shortcomings. And we ask you today to make it real, both for yourselves and for your fellow learners.

Thank you.

Oh...the author of great books so critical of the enterprise of reading? ....Rousseau.

The author's parting wisdom:
the "example [of your lives] will
serve...better than all our books" (474).

Endnotes

1 A convocation address given on June 15th, 1997 to open the 31st summer session of the Graduate Institute in Liberal Education, St. John's College, Santa Fe. Such occasions are nice opportunities to resay what others have said before (and no doubt better), to emphasize anew what is otherwise known, if not appreciated as it once was.

2 Rousseau, Jean Jacques, ***Emile or On Education,*** translated by Allan Bloom, New York, Basic Books, 1979. All parenthical page references are to this edition.

3 DK fr. B3 (cp. p. 176).

4 This memorable and noble phrase is the formulation of Jacob Klein (***A Commentary on Plato's Meno,*** Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1965, p. 21).

5 This remark echoes the earliest concerns of our tradition. In his dialogues ***Phaedrus*** and ***Meno,*** Plato too shocks us by warning that the invention of writing, and therewith reading, is no simple gain but can lead to shallowness rather than depth, to a false sense of facility and achievement rather than growth, to a misguided sense of empowerment rather than virtue. (Hegel, too, much later, speaks with disdain of "edification").

6 The problem we face because of the over-abundance of our tradition is rendered by the author in the sad image of a child on a beach collecting seashells but, because there are so many to choose, he goes home with his pail empty. "When I see a man enamored of various kinds of knowledge, let[ting] himself be seduced by their charm...run[ning] from one to the other without knowing how to stop himself...throw[ing] some away and pick[ing] up others, until overwhelmed by their multitude..., he ends up throwing them all away and returning empty handed" (pp.171-2; also 240, 469).

7 See ***Republic*** VI 510b. Also Husserl's "The Origin of Geometry" and his discussion of the problem of the obscuring of original meaning or sedimentation and his consequent call for a "regressive inquiry" to unearth the "inner structure of meaning" (***The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy,*** Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, pp. 354-370); Klein, "Phenomenology and the History of Science," ***Lectures and Essays,*** edited by R. Williamson and E. Zuckerman, Annapolis, St. John's College Press, 1985, pp. 65-84.

8 In addition to Socrates' treatment of the slave-boy in ***Meno,*** see also Heidegger's distinction between modes of solicitude or concern, between "leaping in" and replacing another's possibilities and "leaping ahead" and preparing their actualization (***Being and Time,*** Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962, H 122).

9 Cf. Aristotle, ***Nicomachean Ethics,*** II.

10 "He who begins to become alien to himself does not take long to forget himself entirely" (p. 243).

11 "In these time who knows to what point of virtue a soul can still attain?" (p. 50). "We do not know what our nature permits us to be" (p. 62).

12 Cp. pp. 318, 321, 329. Also the story of "Mamun, son of Harun al Rashid" quoted in Hocking, William Earnest, ***The Self, Its Body and Freedom,*** New Haven, Yale University Press, Chapter III.