

## **Pre-Christian Classics in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

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I remember vividly the first seminars I participated in as a student, thirty years ago, on Plato’s dialogues. The few weeks of seminar that preceded them, on Homer, are hazier to me—I think because there is something so intrinsically absurd about Achilles, and something so alien about the honor/shame culture these epics presume; but more fundamentally, this quite different impression shows how uniquely transformative the reading of philosophy (and, later in the curriculum, theology) is to someone in early adulthood. However badly we had read and interpreted literature in high school, and however badly it had been taught to us, we had at least read some literary works, even some from ancient Greece, and experienced some of their beauty. We could imagine ourselves as either the characters in the books we read, or even as the authors of such books; some of us even dabbled in sophomoric fiction and poetry writing. But who among us could imagine writing a philosophical or theological essay at that age? Who among us could imagine being a philosopher (whether the first philosopher we encountered was Socrates or Confucius), or later on, who could imagine following a life of contemplation or religious devotion, a life far more alien to us than the life of ambition and striving we were raised to expect and excel at?

I said before that Achilles is absurd, but he was only slightly more absurd to me than Hamlet or Laura Wingfield, whose stories I had read the year before in high school; and part of maturing is to see none of them are any more absurd than I myself was at that age (and beyond). But when I and my classmates first encountered and considered a philosopher or theologian—such people did not just appear absurd, but incomprehensible (to me at least), the way poor Mrs. Hopewell cannot understand or even speak of her daughter in the Flannery O’Connor story “Good Country People”: “You could not say, ‘My daughter is a philosopher.’ That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans.”<sup>1</sup> But most eighteen-year-olds are not as deeply committed to false (or any) values, as Mrs. Hopewell is, and so the confusion that sends her into existential despair instead enthralled and energized many of us when we were younger. I could identify more easily with Achilles or Antigone, but I instantly wanted to be Socrates.

As I’ve taught such texts—both philosophical and literary—for the past twenty-one years, I’ve seen such transformation often repeated in my students. Indeed, among the best of my students, the transformation has been to a much higher plane of realization and thought than I had at their age: such are the joys of teaching, similar to how Cicero described the joys of parenthood, when he said of his son, “You are the only one among all men, whom I would wish to surpass me in all

things.”<sup>2</sup> But the difference in setting is worth noting: I first encountered these texts in a completely secular setting, one that celebrated and studied the works only as products of Western civilization, at an institution with no religious affiliation, and with no presumption of any religious commitment on the part of its students or faculty. Since then, however, I have always taught them as part of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition at Catholic colleges (Notre Dame, Villanova, and Iona College). This setting does pose different challenges for these pre-Christian works (and these apply equally or more so to those non-Western, non-Christian works I have likewise often taught at these institutions), because the temptation is always to treat them as partial revelation, as it were, imperfect expressions of the fuller, Christian truth that would come later (or elsewhere).

Studying these works is then a sort of process of plucking out the “Christian truth” like a jewel from a faulty, broken setting, or of scraping away all the dirt of pagan, non-Christian falsity, until something approximating Christian belief can be found, hidden away and usefully (if incongruously) revealed. Both styles of reading and studying these works fail ever to consider the Truths contained therein on their own: rather than building up to the Truth, they seek to disassemble or unravel the work to find the Truth, in a process more of creative destruction than following an argument to its conclusion or appreciating an aesthetic experience for its intrinsic, natural beauty. We are like those Medievals who used Roman and Greek buildings and works of art as quarries, mining them for resources but destroying them in the process, overlooking the value and beauty they already had, because it did not fit with their Christian worldview. With a “Catholic Intellectual Tradition” already in place, and its truthfulness already taken for granted, it’s as though the seeker already has the Truth, and holds it up like a ruler or model next to the object or work under consideration, when the essence of the Socratic method is to know that one does not know, that one is on a journey of discovery with fellow seekers—other students, teachers, and even the authors of the works being studied—all of them capable of attaining and recognizing the Truth, but none fully or finally in possession of it.

These challenges are real, and I’m sure that readers have experienced them too, but let’s also not exaggerate them. After all, how different is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition from any other tradition, any other community of interpretation, that privileges certain readings and interpretations over others? Any school of interpretation (left, right, or center) feels the pull—the temptation, we would say as teachers—to sift through the past to confirm and “prove” its previously determined orthodoxy, to show how the past leads triumphantly to the beliefs held at present. We may guard against this as much as possible, and encourage our students’ freedom and openness, but it is almost an epistemological need of our species. For consider: What would we think of someone who returned to a previously analyzed text so open and receptive that she came up with a new interpretation upon each new reading, as though the previous readings had never occurred, or as though she had no connection to her fellow interpreters, or the time in which she lives? We should counsel humility (both individual and corporate) but we cannot assume (nor would we want,

ultimately) disconnected naiveté. (And hence, we older people in the classroom must always remind ourselves: the first encounter with a work really is unique, it is what makes being a freshman so exciting, and what we find so exciting about teaching first-year students, for we are in the presence of a first encounter between a seeker and the Truth, something that can never be repeated.)

So my misgivings about this process are not based on its Catholicity, Christianity, or religiosity, but on its present-centeredness, a temptation shared by any hermeneutics I can think of. If anything, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is considerably broader and more adaptive and flexible than many others in what it allows into the Great Conversation, and how many interpretive paths or streams contribute to it. If being a part of a tradition is necessary for studying anything, then the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is no worse than most, and better than many others.

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As I considered what would be the right or best way to incorporate pre-Christian truths into a curriculum otherwise dominated by Christian works, or indeed, how more generally to fit ancient and more modern ideas together in a way that does justice to both, a Pauline quotation came to me, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4). (And not having been raised as a fundamentalist, or even as a Christian, the quotation only came to me gradually, perhaps like the truths I’m trying to tease out here.) What I’m struggling to articulate, and what I think we all struggle to instantiate in our teaching and in our communities, might be relatable to this idea of the “fullness of time.” (And given how wildly different are the translations of this verse, it seems as though it is a hard concept to express.)

What Paul is saying, I think, is that Christ came at the right time, in the right way, at the right place—that that moment, and place, and person were all uniquely suited to bring all humanity closer to God, to fulfill all the purposes that Creation has. But the more I thought about it, the more that moment expanded backwards and forwards in my thinking and analysis: if the moment the Son came into the world was the completely right moment, then all the moments leading up to it become a part of it—they are all leading up to the “fullness of time,” helping to make it “full” in ways not completely known when they actually occurred (or even after), though partly glimpsed and intuited along the way. And all the moments that come after that “fullness of time” unfold under its influence and as continuation of it. So all of history, all of Being, has a part in the “fullness”—a part and a meaning no part can have, if what we have to do with is all just randomly, chaotically, meaninglessly occurring events and temporary, purposeless creatures. Because one moment was the “fullness of time,” all moments are right and fulfilling their own unique purpose. That really is the most basic mantra or creed of all education—that the universe is full of meaning,

and that meaning is graspable by the human mind (indeed, that the human mind is uniquely suited to this task, and only satisfied and fulfilled when seeking such knowledge).

Though to us that creed may be so natural it needs no defense or articulation, and though everyone may pay lip service to it everywhere all the time, it is anathema to anyone who regards education as instrumental, as means to the true (and only real) goal of procuring employment. For if the universe really has a meaning, that meaning must be much more important and constitutive of human happiness and fulfillment than mere wage earning could ever be. Or as one *New York Times* essay recently put it: “Unless you share the same existential goals as protozoa, [the pursuit of material well-being] is often flat-out wrong.”<sup>3</sup> There really could be no more fundamental disconnect and internal dysfunction than a community that claims there are such objective realities as the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and claims to bring people closer to these realities, while simultaneously saying in all seriousness that such a practice admits of quantification and measurement by gathering and calculating the average income of its graduates.

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But does the universe and knowledge of it have to be unified by belief that the Son has come into the world? Does the kind of education I’ve described and praised thus far have to be “Catholic” in the sense of affirming or arising from the beliefs of Catholic (or any) Christianity? No: the fact that He came into the world and fulfilled all its purposes—this is what unifies all history, science, art, knowledge, and education, whether those who pursue these things acknowledge his Sonship or not. I am not longing for something more like a Medieval monastery, where education is pursued by the likeminded with much presumed commonality in perspective among students and teachers. (Indeed, having been an atheist when I entered college, such a model runs contrary to the very real transformation I saw education accomplish in my own life.) I’m enough of a child of the Enlightenment that I will always believe the diversity and contentiousness of the modern world can be enhancements to education. It is not the supposed relativism of modernity that threatens education, but the very ancient devotion to earthly success at the expense of pursuing real, heavenly riches. Current challenges to Catholic education seem to me the direct descendants of the Athenians who killed Socrates, much more so than they are the offspring of any modern or post-modern boogeyman that has been proposed.

I nostalgically remain influenced and enchanted by my own undergraduate experience, which was very loud and proud about how tutors and students came to the texts with no presumed ideological common ground, no “right” starting point or conclusion that had to be affirmed by the group, beyond faith in reason and dialectic. It is this lower-case “C” catholic in the sense that all people long for this kind of knowledge and liberation, it is universal, that I would insist is the most legitimate and viable unifying purpose and perspective of a Catholic college. It is a fundamental

claim about humanity that I think is held with great intuitive, commonsense force by most people—a sense that quite enough of life is taken up by pursuing and worrying about money, that some small space can still be carved out in early adulthood, in which to pursue knowledge and habits of mind that will guide and sustain one for the rest of one’s journey.

But if I naively hold out hope that a university could be constituted with as minimal a level of agreement as the proposition that the Good, the True, and the Beautiful exist and should be pursued, I would have to admit that I have consistently worked in environments where such a concept is ostentatiously praised while being constantly and covertly undermined, ever since I left St. John’s College twenty-six years ago. (And even there, I have seen recently in alumni posts on Facebook, there has been controversy over a proposed “rebranding” of the school, so as to make it more attractive and less “bookish,” since many “customers” don’t like books, which may be hurting the college’s plans at growth and success. Success at what, one would have to ask, if one has capitulated and minimized the presence of books at the Great Books school?)

Like Tolstoy, I still cling to the idea of the masses possessing deep, basic goodness and insight—that they, better than elites, see the value and beauty of ideas first articulated by elites. I know the “Great Man” theory of history is in great disrepute, but let me indulge in it for a moment here at the end. It was sixty-two years ago that Hutchins and Adler created the Britannica Great Books of the Western World, so that office and factory workers such as my father could buy them on a payment plan and have those fifty-four impressive volumes on a book shelf—because such buyers knew, somehow, that ideas matter, and the ideas therein were better, more important, more transformative than others. It was twenty-seven years ago that Allan Bloom made his cranky splash into the non-academic world by chiding pretty much the whole population for what he saw as the neglect and debasement of appropriately deep thoughts; his critique was eagerly bought up by the many who still agreed that some ideas deserve our attention and devotion more than others. The only similar public intellectual I can think of in the contemporary world is Neil deGrasse Tyson, who I hope does wonderful things to improve knowledge of the physical sciences, but who has on several occasions publically mocked philosophy—in comments that I think would be equally condemning of anyone “wasting” his or her time on any of the other humanities, let alone on something as specious and harmful as theology. So my hopeful speculation is that we need someone with the wit and eloquence to articulate and advocate for what most of our students and their parents know: namely, that education is for something other than job training, that knowledge for its own sake is not just an intellectual decoration, but a fundamental human need that everyone can pursue in its basics, and a few should be encouraged and rewarded for pursuing to its highest levels.

## Notes

1. O'Connor 1971, 276.
2. Cicero 1972, 332.
3. Brooks 2014.

## Works Cited

- Brooks, Arthur C. 2014. "Love People, Not Pleasure." *New York Times* July 20. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/20/opinion/sunday/arthur-c-brooks-love-people-not-pleasure.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/20/opinion/sunday/arthur-c-brooks-love-people-not-pleasure.html?_r=0). Accessed January 24, 2015.
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