

## Chapter 1

# Crumbling Cathedrals

### A Towering Problem

The majestic towers of English cathedrals, because of their height and thus their unusual weight, have become a serious problem. As they sink steadily, persistently, into the marshy soil of the sceptered isle at a faster rate than the buildings they adorn, important structural cracks and stresses have begun to appear. In some cases, such as at York, significant emergency repair to the foundations has been necessary to prevent the tower's complete collapse.

I want to draw an analogy between these cathedral tribulations and those of another but equally magnificent structure, the American system of higher education—in particular, the traditional liberal arts college, including its more recent surrogate, the university undergraduate arts and sciences curriculum. It too is a lofty accomplishment, and it too is collapsing under the weight of its own successes, not only to its own detriment but also to that of the culture it adorns. I doubt that any commission or task force admonishing that the cracks in academe be replastered, the trim replaced, and the walls repainted will be able to stop its slow but steady disintegration. The problem is with the undergirding, with the cultural pilings and intellectual footings upon which everything else depends. For that kind of problem, far more serious repairs are required.

In approaching issues about education and the social good, my tendency is to use adaptive change as the primary criterion for assessing the value of an idea or the worth of a practice. This proclivity means that my way of thinking is intertwined with two related modes of thought: pragmatism and process philosophy. It might be expected, therefore, that I would look favorably upon the crumbling of old things, such as long-entrenched educational

theories and programs of study, because of the promise of the newly emerging possibilities thereby permitted. And of course I certainly do. The issue is not change, however, but the character of that change. For the perishing of old achievement does not guarantee the fashioning of better achievement, even when the old is without question very bad and almost anything novel would seem an improvement. I am walking in the footsteps of Whitehead, James, and Dewey when I claim that we cannot live without cathedrals, even though we are always having to repair them and so are always transforming them.

The pragmatic approach to education I will develop is not opportunistic, at least not in the sense presumed by those who dismiss pragmatism as a willingness to do whatever is needed in order to get what you're after—a wily, unprincipled Machiavellian “it's true if it works.” Nor is my approach one that embraces change uncritically, that follows the logic of the Whig interpretation of history: whatever is newer is better. Educational pragmatists are adaptive, however. They prize imagination and the innovation it makes possible as crucial resources in a world where changes are rife and failure to adjust to them is a recipe for disaster. There are no treasures secure from rust or moth, no cathedrals that can get by solely on what their original builders wrought.

The pragmatic approach to problem solving is rooted in a theory of knowledge, in a claim that the best way to understand things is in terms of their use. A bit of knowledge is not a description of something but a means of interacting with it in order to achieve some purpose. What it describes is a course of action for us to follow, in order to find something we are seeking, or having found it to use it properly. That's an apple tree if when I walk up to it I can pluck its fruit and, eating it, enjoy certain predicted tastes, textures, and nutritional benefits. It's an apple if it keeps the doctor away.

Knowing changes as our purposes change and as our situations are altered. This dynamic approach to knowledge is suited to a world where there are no fixed essences, no timeless first principles or fundamental elements, no absolute origins or ultimate destinations. Permanence is crucial—form, structure, rule—to give sense, orientation, and significance to things. But whether these structures are discovered or invented, they too change, although more slowly than the things they order. The laws of nature, the axioms of logic and mathematics, the necessary conditions for organic life or personal happiness or social stability: none of them are unchanging or eternal. So my pragmatic claim about the best method for learning about a thing is tied to a claim about the nature of things. The truth-claim that works does so because of how the world works. Pragmatism as a theory of inquiry dovetails with a process ontology, a metaphysics that, while denying neither, makes change more fundamental than permanence.

Our answers to the questions of how we know and what we know shape our answer to the further question of how best we might comport ourselves

under such conditions. Our ethic, our view about what is worthwhile and what conducive to our personal fulfillment, the pragmatist says, needs to take account of the community we share with other persons and the environment of other things and organisms in which we live out our lives. We are a part of nature, interdependently changing as it changes. We are changed by what envelops us, gladly or not, voluntarily or not, and we in turn change this encompassing world because of how we know it, what we think it is and we are, and what we think it and we might best become.

Pragmatism in this sense is an example of what David Ray Griffin calls “constructive postmodernism.” It calls into question the eternal verities that are the hallmark of modernism, the timeless and universal standards by which the fleeting and parochial achievements of the world are measured and judged excellent or deficient. But it also rejects the nihilistic attempt to demolish verities of any and every sort, to deconstruct all the traditional hierarchies based on truth, goodness, and beauty, on faith, hope, and love. The pragmatism I use and defend in this book is neither modern nor antimodern, but rather their reconciliation. It advocates hierarchies of excellence but also their critique, recognizing that no values are forever, that the best of our creations are limited and so always in need of improvement. Griffin says that constructive postmodernism “seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts” (xiii). It is therefore appropriate that this book be a part of the SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought, because it seeks to overcome the traditional modern view of an educational canon not by eliminating the possibility of canons, but by constructing an understanding of an educational canon based on a revision of its philosophical premises and traditional concepts.

Education is about how we know, about ourselves as learners and teachers of the how and what of knowing. It is about the historical and contemporaneous human communities that support and impede our learning and hence our development. And it is about the natural systems that make all of these conditions for education possible. In examining the non-pragmatic theories of education that ground many of the current interpretations of what constitutes good teaching and effective learning, I will argue that they have contributed and are contributing to the collapse of American higher education because they rest on inadequate philosophical views about knowledge, human nature, and moral value. I will sketch a pragmatic alternative to these philosophical commitments while I am developing the pragmatic theory of education I think offers a more adequate, more viable approach than those currently in vogue.

All of this philosophizing in good time, however. What follows in this first chapter is an attempt to trench around the problem of our crumbling

cathedrals of higher learning in order to identify where their foundations have been weakened and for what reasons. I hope in subsequent chapters to explain why they are in need of our urgent attention and how they might best be repaired.

## **The Growing Weight of Knowledge**

The walls of academe are out of plumb. There is more for students to learn these days than our colleges and universities have the capacity to teach. The traditional frameworks for organizing what needs to be learned are too narrow or too rigid or are wrongly segmented. They are twisted, extruded, mixed, melded, delaminated, relayered in an attempt to retain some reasonable shape and sequence to an undergraduate course of study. These patchwork attempts are sometimes clever, sometimes bizarre, but seemingly always ineffective. This incapacity is particularly evident in liberal arts curricula, which have traditionally been assigned the task of providing students with a generalized educational foundation for their subsequent career involvements or for their advanced professional and technical studies.

In the last century, however, the relevant content for such a general education has burgeoned uncontrollably. There are at least four reasons for this loss of control: the expansion of knowledge, its democratization, its globalization, and a decline in how much a student can be presupposed already to know. They are each a familiar feature of classrooms and curricula these days.

First, the expansion of knowledge. Within the traditional academic disciplines there has been an information explosion, often combined with the elaboration of whole new areas of theory or application. In the natural sciences new kinds of instruments for detecting, measuring, analyzing, and interpreting data have revolutionized both subject-matter content and method. Once upon a time, biologists studied the world's flora and fauna, observing their behaviors, analyzing their structures, ordering them into species and genera, tracing their genealogies. Now they also study atoms and molecules in order to understand and to alter the cells of which those organisms are composed. Geologists are no longer content to be earth scientists, but now they also investigate extraterrestrial landscapes. Chemists, working with nuclear resonators and magnetic spectrometers in addition to test tubes and Bunsen burners, synthesize not only new molecules but also new elements. Astronomers scan the heavens with their ears as well as their eyes, and spend most of their time peering at computer printouts. Physicists require new kinds of mathematics to permit their speaking coherently about the extremely small and the extremely large, then require new kinds of logic and a touch of mysticism in order to make quantum mechanics consistent

with gravitational theory or to justify how their account of the Big Bang could possibly be compatible with their account of time's reversibility.

Seemingly without end, this inexorable expansion in the content of the natural science disciplines creates a difficult pedagogical conundrum. Instructors brood over how to reconcile the difference between, on the one hand, what most students must know in order to possess a basic understanding of the everyday natural world around them and, on the other hand, what students need to know as the first step toward becoming a professional scientist. Take biology, for example. Learning how to identify the backyard birds and roadside flowers in a region, or studying how the sexual practices of various kinds of mammals have evolved in order to provide an insight into human sexuality: these would be wonderful ways to kindle the interest of casual students in biology. Potential majors, however, need to learn the basics of taxonomic theory, the Latin names of key kinds of flora and fauna, and both the molecular and ecological mechanisms explained by the neo-Darwinian synthesis. How can any introductory biology course accommodate both these agendas?

Combine these incompatible student needs and interests with the problem of learning how to use increasingly complex instruments in order to gain access even to the basics, and the very notion of a general science course becomes an oxymoron. The choice seems to be either a superficial science appreciation course or a prematurely narrowing introduction to a scientific subdiscipline—either a nonlab “Science for Dummies,” a course that is about science but does no science, or an introductory survey course limited to a restricted subject area such as botany or inorganic chemistry or discrete mathematics.

Not only is there so much more content to teach these days, but it seems less and less to be composed of elements that are related in a systematically hierarchical fashion. The problem is not simply that chemistry presupposes physics, biology both, and geology all three. It's that aspects of each intertwine and then branch off in surprisingly independent ways, so physicists investigating subatomic phenomena need to know topology rather than calculus and find they have more in common with molecular biologists than physical chemists. What a biology major needs to study in order to be prepared for a career as a molecular biologist has little to do with what another biology major should take in preparation for becoming an ornithologist. The forks in the road leading to scientific competence come sooner than they once did, and the roads diverge more sharply. We can only wonder how long it will be before a student's first science course options are limited to an array of very narrow access points to very narrow non-overlapping fields of study.

Social studies has fared no better, having become over the last century a collection of social sciences. In economics and psychology, statistical analysis and mathematical modeling now serve as tools making the prediction of

human behavior a reality—or at least a plausible expectation. Anthropologists now do their fieldwork in Chicago as well as in New Guinea and, while the physical anthropologists are now hard to distinguish from biologists, the cultural anthropologists are easily mistaken for social psychologists or semiologists. Popular culture replaces the circulation of elites as the focus of social analysis; historians become sociologists and sociologists historians. Political scientists these days learn their theory by reading Foucault as well as Plato and Machiavelli, they study American government not only by reading the *New York Times* and the *Congressional Record* but by manipulating data bases of precinct-by-precinct voting patterns, and they use systems theory to guide them through a comparative study of the various extant and historical forms of governance.

For the humanities, philosophy is no longer limited to its traditional concerns about the nature of Being, the conditions for happiness or justice, and the proper method for discerning universal and necessary truths and maybe even Truth Itself. It has also taken a linguistic and a phenomenological turn, attempting to clarify the meaning of scientific, moral, artistic, and commonsensical truth claims—and more recently attempting as well to deconstruct any and all such claims. Religious studies now finds its subject matter as much in the social sciences as in theology and ecclesiastical history, as much in the mass media as in scripture. Foreign language courses have expanded into the equivalent of area studies programs, and literary criticism has interpreted the notion of a text to include a motley range of cultural artifacts. The fine arts, outdoing themselves in shattering conventional standards of taste, topic, and style, have turned art and music historians into psychologists, biographers, and gossip mongers concerned more with connoisseurship and patronage practices than with matters of iconography, provenance, and formal analysis.

This expansion in knowledge has not meant that the old learning is repudiated; it goes on as before. But to it is added all this newness, and there is no end of it in sight. At the same time, however, these mainstreams of knowledge have lost their monopoly on determining the intellectual currents of the day. There has been a democratization of what counts as knowledge, and it constitutes a second reason why educators have been losing control over the content that a general education should provide.

The academic tradition has come under attack by voices representing concerns and perspectives it had typically neglected. Women have called into question the male dominance of what the disciplines find worth studying—and the culture worth doing. Racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities—Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans—insist upon their own agendas with respect to what issues need to be analyzed, what experiences celebrated, what assumptions affirmed or jettisoned. Gays and lesbians come out of the closet and demand that their stories also be taken

seriously. Even Americans of European origin follow a similar pathway, insisting upon a curricular way to study, and hence to celebrate, their often newly rediscovered immigrant heritages.

The proliferation of studies programs in all these areas has followed roughly an identical pattern. Initially there are ad hoc discussion groups and courses, supported by ad hoc collections of interested faculty and students advocating the significance of their interests by quiet persuasion or shrill proclamation, by negotiation and compromise or by confrontational agitation. From these experiences, interdisciplinary courses and programs emerge, which eventually develop into disciplines in their own right, complete with majors and a scholarly tradition of central texts, key concepts, landmark events, and a proper methodology. American Studies was the pioneer and paradigm in the second half of the last century for this extension of the franchise of academic respectability. It was soon followed by Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Women's Studies, Black Studies, Hispanic Studies, more recently by Africana or Diaspora Studies, Gay or Lesbian Studies, Celtic Studies, Aboriginal American Studies, Gender Studies.

Advocates of positions or methods not in general favor—advocates of Thomistic ontology, Marxist economics, Personalist ethics, enactment language instruction, holistic therapy, extrasensory perception, animal rights, detective fiction, creationism—have taken heart from these developments and set about forming their own academic interest groups. Caucuses of these rebels against the taken-for-granted began to appear at professional meetings half a century ago and by now have matured into subdisciplines and even whole new disciplines, complete with their distinctive methodological claims and a growing body of books, articles, journals, and conferences.

So add this democratization of relevant knowledge to its expansion, a growth that complements the thickening of traditional knowledge by increasing the scope of what is considered legitimate and important. But now also add deparochialization as a third reason for why we no longer can agree on what the content of a basic education should be, much less on how to design an introductory course that would have any warrant for being called a survey of its salient features or even of the key points of access to those features.

Our academic disciplines are at last taking effective cognizance of subject matters other than Western civilization and of bodies of learning other than those created by Western scholars. This has resulted in the spread of comparativist approaches. A political science course on the city is now likely to involve Tokyo and Mexico City, Peshawar and Chichén Itzà, as well as London and Paris, New York and Chicago, Athens and Jerusalem. A religion course on the nature of belief will not take Christian or Judeo-Christian approaches as normative, but will attempt to develop suitable categories out of a survey of the world's religions, including the practices of precivilizational cultures.

And through the history of science we have become increasingly aware that modern science is dependent on nonscientific attitudes and habits, on culturally constrained interpretive frameworks and conceptual paradigms, that need to be understood in order to understand the limits and the potential of science as currently practiced. Knowledge has become a global phenomenon.

To these three widenings of the perimeter of the things needing to be learned, we must also add the increased educational burden placed on the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum by a significant decline in the taken-for-granted knowledge traditionally provided by home, religion, and school. Our students arrive on campus at the beginning of their freshman year knowing shockingly little of the facts, ideas, and practices that constitute the repertoire of information and skills that is the necessary presupposition for the metaphors, allusions, examples, and routines—the habits of head, hand, and heart—that make teaching possible.

Governing concepts and guidelines, information as structured by some principle or purpose, are things we typically convey by their analogy to everyday experience, commonsense belief, and childhood memory. The texts and artistic creations studied in the humanities were created by people steeped in the history and culture of Greece and Rome, Judaism and Christianity, infused with the exacting rhythms of farm work and craft guild, permeated with the tricks and sensitivities needed to survive the relentless onslaught of violent storms, cruel barbarians, and hard-hearted tax collectors. Science as a method, a body of truth, and a technology was fashioned by these same people and is a creature, thus, of these same steepings. But things have changed. The Good Shepherd has little meaning as a religious symbol for a person raised in an urban environment. The resonance Huxley intended by titling his futuristic novel *Brave New World* is unheard by ears unaccustomed to Shakespeare. The point of calling the outermost planet of our solar system Pluto is lost to those who think it was named after a Disney cartoon character.

Our intellectual heritage in its most fundamental aspects is deeply imbedded in the habits of thought and practice that define our world. But if this stock of cultural know-how has not been inculcated in the young before they arrive on campus, then the higher in higher education is undermined. In order to teach college-level materials, the undergraduate faculty increasingly must first teach the taken-for-granted materials those presuppose. Faculty, however, are usually not prepared to do so. Consequently students are taught theories and interpretations of facts that they lack the proper cultural background to grasp. Faculty complain about lazy students, then adapt to what they take to be a realistic assessment of how things are by lowering their expectations, and eventually assign students grades that imply they know more than clearly they do. When the wellsprings of our creativity dry up, when we let down our guard, when we reap what we have sown, when the



yoke of our oppression becomes unbearable—or rather, when these metaphors die but nonetheless remain in our speech as mere clichés—it is no wonder that our imagination fogs over, our ideas are put in irons, and we are in danger of wrecking on conceptual shoals of our own making.

In sum, knowledge has become for us more complex, broader in kind and in scope, thicker in theme and content, its presuppositions no longer presupposed. The sheer mass of what we need to learn is too much for the connective mortar that has traditionally held it together. Because the pointing has cracked and is falling away, the bricks and stones are loosening, shifting, breaking apart. Its walls no longer running true, the cathedral of learning is in danger of collapse.

### **The Disintegrating Foundations of Knowledge**

If there are problems with the walls and the mortaring, the cause might have to do with the foundations. Perhaps we are putting an inappropriate amount of weight on them. Or, given that the superstructure has grown, perhaps the foundations need to be strengthened. In either case we would be well advised to ask about the fundamentals that undergird what we know. We need to pay attention to whatever basic ideas or first principles or primary facts there are that support the remainder of our ideas, methods, and information.

The aim of education, if we take this approach, is threefold. First, we need to do the best we can to bring our intellectual disciplines into harmony with these fundamental features of knowledge. Second, we need to transmit this precious heritage of what we know to the members of each new generation so that tomorrow's leaders will be able to see to the heart of things in order thereby to grasp firmly their enduring meaning and significance. For, third, it is only in this way that nature can be predicted and controlled, our communities made secure and just, and ourselves fulfilled. Only by knowing—and knowing how to utilize—basic truths and the methods for obtaining them, will our lives be constructed on a firm foundation, secured against the shifting sands of change and chance.

Notice the Aristotelian perfection of our argument. Students are the material cause of education: the unformed, unlearned raw material. The formal causes of education are the basic governing principles of the various academic disciplines. The final cause or goal is that those fundamental truths be actualized in the students, making them at least informed and at best learned young men and women. The efficient cause is the desire of students to fulfill their potential, to be responsible citizens, effective workers, and good persons.

The process of educating the nation's youth, when thus construed, will work as it should just so long as everything about it is so organized that these

four conditions for education are in harmony: basic knowledge taught in the proper way to rightly motivated students who are expected upon graduation to become a new generation of leaders. Wherever this harmony breaks down, we think the fault must lie in some unfortunate intruding distortion. For only when the education process has somehow gone awry does the acorn grow into a stunted oak, the child become an irresponsible adult, the society suffer the taint of injustice. Only when the foundations of the cathedral of learning are undermined does truth come into conflict with hope, moral rectitude find itself at odds with societal authority, the welfare of others seem incompatible with our own happiness.

And yet, as we have seen, this Aristotelian view of things is in disarray. The problem has not been a distortion of knowledge but just the opposite: its increasing weight has been more than its ancient foundations can bear. The distortion has not come from some external intrusion, some invasion of barbarians intent on razing the cathedral of learning. It has come from the faithful themselves, building their tower too high, overburdening the carrying capacity of its foundations.

The opponents of those who advocate focusing education on the inculcation of basic truths argue that such a monochrome approach may have been thought sensible when the students in our colleges and universities were all middle- and upper-class white protestant boys preparing for the professions. Students then all seemed the same, and seemed to need the same truths and ideals in order to flourish, because the cultural influences shaping them were pretty much the same. It was easy enough to turn the familiar and recurrent into the universal and necessary, and to ascribe ultimacy to the harmony between what we taught and what our students and our nation needed.

But now add WASP girls, add blacks, add Lithuanians and Vietnamese, add Spanish-speaking Catholics and saffron-robed Buddhists, add the poor. Add young people who see themselves as alienated from the cultural mainstream, those who want to be caught up in its currents as soon as possible and those who want to divert it or dry it up. Add the worlds of style and mood, of metaphor and imagination, found on MTV, in the shopping malls, and on the street corners where drugs are bought and sold. From this welter arises no single shade of potency, no primary colors in which to paint one's life, no palette of goals and callings normatively suited to the fully functioning adult. Whatever our students make of themselves by their own arbitrary, context-bound choices, is what they will fundamentally be. These acorns won't all become oaks, and some may not wish even to be trees. That's their own choice, we say, and their own choice is as good as any other choice.

So we imagine a new sort of educational cathedral. We talk confidently, with the casual air bred of familiarity, about the cultural relativism of art and morality, the ideological basis of social belief and practice, and even the

revolutions in scientific paradigms. We revel in the relativism, in a polymorphous embrace of all the various knowledge structures. Each of us is our own god creating our own worlds, all of them valid, none of them able to withstand the argument that their claims to special status reduce merely to special pleading. In our cathedral there are many rooms, each with their own foundations or built as temporary modular units that need no foundations at all. What we had once thought were objective truths, we now see as only historical conveniences. Our politics, our science, and our morality are all strategies of social control, matters of asserting hegemony rather than truth.

We go even farther, for we are invited to invent new realities with our fertile imaginations and then, assisted by our Macintosh graphics programs and our Microsoft spreadsheets, to explore their possibilities, to delight in our new-found liberation. But we no longer think that what we create are models of anything more basic than themselves. We think that what we know rests on nothing more fundamental than someone's inventiveness. Our intellectual and moral disputes, the clash of our interests and our armies, are conflicts among our various world-creations. We should respect each other's differences, argue our own case, seek to persuade others to our point of view, invent new and reconciling perspectives. But beyond or behind this interchange there is nothing, no hierarchy of importances, no objective order of things, no self-evident truths, no commonly accepted commonsense guiding principles. No authorized referee exists who can settle our disputes and crown the rightful victor with the laurel wreath of objectivity, certitude, completeness, or legitimacy.

These days, when we are all our own truth makers, there may no longer be a need for cathedrals in which we might come together in order to acknowledge a common authority for what counts as true and so for what justifiably commands our allegiance. We should be pleased to have come to a realization that a conversation among the pluralism of voices clamoring to be heard in the intellectual marketplace is all that viably remains.

Now apply these relativist developments to the academic curriculum. Surely there is more to studying than learning the ways by which the sons of the governing white elite can best prepare themselves to carry on the tasks set them by their fathers. Even were this race-class-gender elitism still our aim, the explosion in that knowledge has made the old listing of the needed courses woefully inadequate. But there are now all those other new kinds of courses evoked by new definitions of the elite and by anti-elitist alternatives. There are all those courses that have nothing to do with preparing students to govern but are focused instead on how to secure a job or retrain for a new one, that offer senior citizens a substitute for shuffleboard. It should be no surprise that the listing of courses in a college catalogue nowadays often looks something like the *Weekly Shoppers' Guide*, and the members of the

curriculum committee seem like politicians trying their best to cope with the multiple pressures of conflicting special interest groups.

We can see this dissolution of the traditional justification for foundational knowledge in the trajectory over the last two centuries of the requirements for graduation at most American undergraduate arts and sciences colleges. At first, everything was required because it was generally agreed that to be educated meant to study certain specific subjects and to acquire certain specific skills. Not only were Latin, geometry, and moral philosophy high on that list, but these fields had an unambiguous content. Studying Virgil, Euclid, and Aristotle was the necessary condition for attaining civilized adulthood.

Eventually “all” became “some” as electives were introduced. One needed geometry but not necessarily Euclid, science but not necessarily geometry. Laboratory work need not be replicating standard experiments in physics or chemistry but might instead involve specimen collecting in botany. Philosophy could mean not just the Greeks but modern philosophers: Descartes, Kant, the Scottish commonsense realists. It was even possible to substitute a modern language for Latin, with English literature therefore added as an alternative to the classical literatures. If an elective curriculum meant that it might henceforth be possible to graduate from college without having read Virgil, one could at least take comfort in knowing that the student was reading Shakespeare instead.

The “some” became over the decades increasingly attenuated, however, and was defined eventually in terms of very broad ranges of academic endeavor. Some natural science was required, some social science, some humanities—the choice was the student’s, properly advised by a faculty mentor. Now we no longer can agree that there is any one text or author that a person must have studied to be worthy of an undergraduate diploma: neither Plato’s nor Whitehead’s philosophy, neither the Preacher’s nor the Buddha’s wisdom, neither Galileo’s nor Einstein’s physics, neither Shakespeare’s nor Woolf’s fiction, neither Machiavelli’s nor Strauss’s advice, neither Yung-lo’s nor Norton’s anthology.

Nor can faculty agree on any short list of concepts that are musts for an arts and sciences undergraduate student to know: not the second law of thermodynamics, not the dialectic of class struggle, not the evolution of species, not formalist criticism, not multiple regression analysis, not the Whig interpretation of history, not the hermeneutical circle. Where once our predecessors had agreed that some very specific ideas and methods are absolutely essential to know and be adept at utilizing, we can say now only that some vaguely defined general kinds of such things are important.

There are those in higher education who have given up even this pale confidence in the difference between the important and the trivial, the worthwhile and the fashionable. In many institutions, a content requirement has

been completely eschewed and graduation expectations defined in terms of skills, of competencies learned and demonstrated in whatever subject context the student might prefer. Other undergraduate programs have abandoned even this. Graduation for them has become the accumulation of a certain total of academic credits involving classes, internships, life-experiences, self-instructional packets, distance learning contracts—a course of study the mix and pattern of which results from personal choice, perhaps influenced by faculty advice but not requiring faculty consent. These free choice schools still insist upon a major, however, inverting in interesting fashion their eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century predecessors who insisted upon the breadth of one's study but had no notion of a major. Before too long, however, even the major will likely disappear as a graduation requirement.

We are left with curricula that express the likes and dislikes of faculty whose personal preferences have shaped the scope of what they are competent to teach. This palette of offerings is then modified by the likes and dislikes of students whose preferences multiply the sections of some courses and sound the death knell of others, causing business courses to burgeon and sending Milton scholars into early retirement. And our curricula often express as well the likes and dislikes of benefactors and legislators who exact a price for their financial largesse.

## Ruined Choirs

The trajectory is manifest: from objective truth to cultural worldviews, from universal norms to personal preferences. Our deconstruction of learning in the name of intellectual liberation from the arbitrary tyrannies of traditional, mainstream, and regional objectivities entails the arbitrary elimination of any and every imposed definition of what subject matters we must study, what skills we must acquire, to what virtues we must aspire. When anarchy is loosed upon the educational world, hierarchies of knowledge and developmental sequences from basic to specialized learning fall apart. Is this collapse good or bad? Do the foundations need to be restored, remodeled, or eliminated? Is the cathedral to be shored up, or should it be torn down and a new one built in its place? Or is the cathedral simply best left in ruins?

As Bill Readings points out in *The University in Ruins*, the trope of a culture in ruins has a long history, one that has relevance for the meaning of higher education. The ruins of Nineveh and Tyre, of the Athenian Acropolis and the Roman Forum, engage our emotions. They are sermons about the fleeting character of human accomplishment, the vanity of believing that one can defy the ravages of time. But they are also celebrations of a former glory, of a time of grandeur, of noble achievement. They show us a social good

that our ancestors once possessed but that has since been lost: a golden age commanding our admiration. Ancient ruins evoke in us a romantic nostalgia for lost causes, for ideals no longer realized or never realized. But they also stir us to dream of revival. Perhaps we can reconstitute what has been lost in a way and form appropriate to our own times. We can restore the glory that was Greece; we can create a New Rome as the worthy successor of the Republic or the Empire.

In this phoenix-like trope of a culture rebuilding itself out of its ruins, the educational institutions are taken as the builders, as the instruments of the reconstruction. They will take up the shards of the past and make them whole again. The culture that remains, the cultural remains of a former glory, will be wrought by education into that glory *redivivus*. According to this understanding of what a ruin means, the mission of the liberal arts in the contemporary world should be to effect “the mediating resynthesis of knowledges, returning us to the primordial unity and immediacy of a lost origin” (Readings: 169). First, the arts and sciences faculty should teach their students how the traditional academic disciplines, now so deeply fragmented, can be integrated. Second, under the aegis of the ideal of a culture’s integrity—what Hegel called the spirit of an age, a *Weltanschauung*, a cultural framework of beliefs, values, and practices—an actual intellectual unity should then be hammered out and inculcated in the rising generation. Third, these students should carry this ideal and its abstract theoretical expressions into their homes and workplaces, and there begin to build the institutions that will give it concrete historical embodiment.

Thus, educators are attracted to ruins because they imply an aspiration. The task of education is to transform a dead or dying past into a vital living present. Our problem, however, is that it is this instrument of renewal itself that is dead or dying. Not only is the metropolis of Western civilization, and with it the American city on a hill, becoming a ruin, but so also is the cathedral of learning that offers us a possibility for rebuilding it.

Over the course of the next three chapters, I will explore what I take to be the primary ways in which it is proposed that American undergraduate education in the liberal arts be revitalized. Each of those ways centers around the notion of an educational canon—the first based on content, the second on method, and the third a repudiation of canons of any sort. My strategy will be, first, to look at the philosophical presuppositions of each proposed approach, its presumptions concerning what knowledge is, how humans can acquire it, and for what purpose. In the light of these presuppositions, I will then explore the claims each approach makes about what is most important for students to learn and what irrelevant, what crucial and what discretionary—the normative guidelines for becoming properly educated. I will conclude by sketching some of the curricular and pedagogical implications of

these considerations. In chapter 5, I will consider a fourth approach, that of relativism, but will argue that its various versions turn out to be temporalized restatements of the first two approaches.

The three approaches to a revitalized educational mission, featuring three differing notions of the canonical conditions for a proper education, can be ordered historically—first the classical/medieval and next the modern, both of them hierarchical approaches, then on to the deconstructive postmodern egalitarian alternative. These approaches are better taken, however, as competing voices in a current debate. They should not be understood as stadia on a downward or upward trajectory, neither desirable phases of a progressive emancipation of learning from the straitjacket of tradition nor dolorous moments in the progressive loss of a nurturing tradition. They are plausible, but seemingly incommensurable, positions: each vying for our attention and commitment.

Indeed, I will argue, the most important features of the various approaches to education have to do with a dispute about the nature of hierarchies, and so the first two approaches can be taken as more similar than different. The debate, therefore, is basically a dialogue, a disputation between canonists of all kinds and anti-canonists, between those who believe in natural hierarchies and those who find hierarchies artificial and harmful. After examining these views and their underlying polarity, I will be ready, beginning with chapter 6, to elaborate a middle way, a nonpolarizing approach to education and its canons—a pragmatic theory about how best to conceive of the higher learning with regard to its philosophical grounds, its normative character, and its practical dynamics.