A Short Introduction to Classical Education

by Joshua Gibbs

What is classical education?

I've been a classical educator for nearly two decades and in that time, I've been asked this question many times. There's a long way to answer and a short way to answer, but let's start with a short answer.

Here it goes: The author Walker Percy once said, "You can get all A's and still flunk life." A classical education is the kind of education you seek if you believe this statement is true. Grades have risen steadily over the last twenty-five years, but so have suicide rates and mental illness. Plenty of people who attain great knowledge and success are miserable. A classical education is chiefly concerned with virtue, which is the health and goodness of the human soul, which means that classical educators don't believe there is any point in getting knowledge or success if it can't be enjoyed by good men and good women.

That's one answer I often give when asked to describe classical education.

Here is another: The philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila once said, "There is an illiteracy of the soul which no diploma cures." In other words, what you *know* matters far less than what you *love*. Plenty of evil people are quite smart, which means that the world doesn't need smart men and women so much as it needs *good* men and women. A classical education places good books, good music, and good ideas before students and trains them to love what is right.

How about one more?

It goes like this: Almost nothing lasts. Buildings crumble, clothes wear out, cups break, a ceaseless flood of fashionable ideas come and go. What was thought progressive and enlightened just ten years ago is thought vulgar and primitive today. Very, very few objects or ideas outlive the rise and fall of fads and fashions. However, a very small and precious number of things *have* endured the passing of time. A classical education is primarily concerned with bringing those rare things—*the things which last*—into our souls so that our souls can last, too.

These are explanations of classical education that might fit into a thirty-second elevator ride from the fourth floor to the lobby. While they aren't thorough, they do get at something fundamental which makes classical education quite different from other kinds of education. Simply put, a classical education isn't about mere knowledge. Knowledge is important, of course. It's absolutely necessary. It's entirely indispensable. And yet, merely knowing things isn't enough to lead a contented, productive life. When we meet a miserable person who seems bent on making other people's lives miserable, we don't walk away saying, "That fellow must have gotten C's in high school." Likewise, we don't assume that joyful adults with happy, obedient children must have aced chemistry during junior year.

It may seem strange to hear a teacher like myself speak a bit dismissively about the importance of good grades, but I am one of many people who has—during the last thirty years or so—come to see that there's a lot more to school than getting good grades. There's a lot more to school than just knowing the facts. There's even a lot more to school than "the love of learning," although that's become a fashionable turn of phrase lately. When I refer to the last thirty years or so, I am referring to the classical education movement, which has become increasingly popular in both the realm of private education and public charter schools.

There are many things about classical schools which parents find attractive, like smaller class sizes, uniforms, and higher standardized test scores. However, parents who send their children to a classical school in order to "get ahead in the world" will ultimately be frustrated by what they find because a classical school isn't just "a good school." It's a very particular *kind* of school with its own distinct curriculum, distinct teaching practices, and distinct goals for students.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to give readers an idea of what to expect from a classical school. It's not terribly long and you'll probably still have questions when you're finished reading, but it will give you a sense of what makes a classical school different from other kinds of schools. My goal in writing this isn't to persuade you that a classical education is right for your child. Rather, I simply want to tell you about a classical education so you can make a more informed choice.

Alright. Time to get down to business.

Let's Talk About Old Things

Classical educators love old things. They love old books, old music, old paintings, old manners, old ideas, and old beliefs. A classical education is largely centered around old things. This sets classical education at odds with modernity because many modern people *despise* old things. Modern people often characterize old things as superstitious, boring, backwards, and outdated, which means that the love of old things is one of the most difficult aspects of classical education for modern people to wrap their minds around.

However, the first thing one must understand about a classical educator's love of old things is that it is not a love of *all* old things. Classical educators don't believe that all old things are better than all new things. They happily acknowledge that some old things are wretched and that some new things are quite lovely.

So what sort of old things do classical educators love? And why do they love these things?

Let me begin answering these questions by explaining a concept which is more common than "classical," but which means something quite similar.

If you asked a hundred random people what the word "classic" means, many would probably begin by telling you it means "old." Classic films are old. Classic cars are old. Classic rock is old. The word "classic" and the word "old" don't mean quite the same thing, though. A classic is not just *any* old thing but a *good* old thing, an old thing which has held up over time. For example, *Casablanca* is widely regarded as a "classic film." It came out in 1942, but people still watch it, enjoy it, and talk about it today. If you look at a list of all the films that came out that year, you will probably not recognize many titles. This is because very few of the films that came out in 1942 were very good, let alone as good as *Casablanca*. History has forgotten most of them because they were not worth remembering. Take *Bullet Scars*, for example, a 1942 gangster film which starred Regis Toomey and Adele Longmire. There's a good chance you've never even heard of *Bullet Scars* or the actors in it, let alone seen it and contemplated it. The mere fact something is old doesn't make it a classic: a classic is something that has been appreciated and handed down by many generations because it still deserves our time and contemplation. When I say that a classic has been "handed down," I mean that it has a venerable reputation. You've heard *Casablanca* is good. You haven't heard *Bullet Scars* is good. You probably haven't heard anything about *Bullet Scars*.

Similarly, a "classical" education is devoted to books, music, paintings, and ideas that have stood the test of time. Not just any book that was around two or three hundred years ago is worth reading today. For classical educators, the question is not whether something is old, but whether it has *lasted*. When classical educators refer to "old books" and "old music," they are using these terms as shorthand for "old books *that have lasted*" and "old music *that has lasted*." They are not vindicating every book, song, and belief which existed a long time ago, just the ones which have been faithfully handed down by our fathers, grandfathers, great grandfathers, and so on.

One of the first objections which skeptics raise to classical education is the insistence that the classical

tradition vindicates everything which is old, including evils like slavery and racism. But this is simply not the case. A classical education assumes the goodness of things which last, and slavery is a human institution which has been defeated many, many times by virtuous people. It is not a tradition which has been faithfully handed down from one generation to another across the centuries, like the works of Homer or the music of Mozart. Slavery and racism are evils which wise, generous humans have battled over and over again. Classical educators believe the most persuasive arguments against racist ideologies are found not in the fashionable beliefs of our day, which come and go, but in the writings and sermons of Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, and many other classical authors.

Tour any book store in the country, though, and you will find that the classics section is quite small compared to the selection of current books. There aren't that many classics. Goodness is rare, by which I mean most things don't last. Most books, most films, and most ideas simply come and go. We care about them today, but time passes, new things come along, and we give up on last year's things without much of a second thought.

Let's consider motion pictures once more. You don't have to go all the way back to 1942 to find the trash heaps of cinematic history—relatively few of the thousands of films that came out in the 70s, 80s, or 90s are still widely viewed and discussed today. For every *Goodfellas* or *Fargo*, there are thousands of films that no one ever wants or needs to see again. This is not only true of films, though. The average Goodwill in this country is full of books, DVDs, and CDs that were wildly popular just a few years ago but which no one finds all that interesting anymore. Plenty of things are only interesting because they are new, and there is no quality which fades faster than newness. A rather staggering quantity of what passes as "culture" these days simply doesn't hold up for all that long.

By contrast, a classical education is concerned with things that *do* last because they are *very good,* and with helping people learn to understand and love them. Very good things ask quite a lot of us, and they are challenging, confrontational, and can be very draining. Developing a love for them is so difficult that very few people can do it on their own, especially when easier, sexier, and more pleasurable alternatives readily present themselves. Unless a child (or an adult) makes the effort to include old books and music in his life, he can easily go along with the flow of a passing, ephemeral, and banal culture. I'm not suggesting that we should only read Dante and listen to Bach, but a classical school is one of the institutions which makes sure that *someone* is keeping old traditions alive and passing down a love of beautiful, truly good things to the next generation.

Deep Souls or Shallow Souls?

It might seem intuitive to say that things which last are worth our time, but the claim deserves a more robust explanation. What's so great about "standing the test of time," and why is it so important to classical educators?

In order to answer these questions, we need to consider how rare it is that anything stands the test of time.

Why are some songs that were wildly popular just ten years ago not popular at all today? Conversely, why is the music of Beethoven still performed in symphony halls across the globe two hundred years later? Why don't the most popular novels of the 1980s sell many copies now, while people have been slowly, steadily buying books like *Paradise Lost*, *Don Quixote*, and *Frankenstein* for hundreds of years? Why do we get tired of some things after just a few years while other things continue to hold our attention for centuries—or even longer?

When I explain the importance of old books to my students, I often lead them through these questions. When I name a song that was popular three years ago, they groan just to hear it mentioned and I ask, "Why is that song not popular anymore?"

Their most common answer is, "Because people got tired of it."

I ask, "Why did people get tired of it?" and they answer, "Because they heard it too often."

I reply, "Why?" and they say, "Because it sounded good for a while, so they listened to it over and over, but then it stopped sounding good."

While their answers are very simple, they are entirely correct. The most popular songs are not beautiful or wise. We do not listen to them because they are good for us, but because they are pleasant. We consume them like potato chips, which are tasty enough to keep eating but not satisfying enough to put down.

On the other hand, people who enjoy Beethoven tend to not consume Beethoven's music like potato chips. They do not listen to the same Beethoven symphony over and over again until they are sick of it. After listening to a Beethoven symphony, very few people immediately listen to *another* symphony. Instead, they listen to nothing at all. They are content to simply think about what they've just heard.

This is because the qualities which draw us to popular music are very different from the qualities which draw us to classical music. From one week to the next, the most popular song in the country is something which is catchy, clever, sexy, spectacular, shocking, or slick. Such qualities are easy to enjoy because they appeal primarily to the senses, which means that their appeal is immediate and doesn't ask much of us. It is for this reason that our interest in popular music goes in great waves. We become suddenly very interested in a new song, then just as suddenly lose interest in it, which is why the most popular song one year has no chance of being the most popular song the following year as well.

Our interest in things which have lasted tends to be lower, and yet it never goes away. This year, Beyoncé will outsell Beethoven. This century, Beethoven will outsell Beyoncé. This is because the same qualities which make an artist the most popular this year also guarantee their unpopularity in fifty years. The sort of music which lasts is not catchy, clever, sexy, spectacular, shocking, or slick—at least, these are not words most people would use to describe the music of Brahms, Haydn, or Mozart.

Put another way, the sort of music that lasts for centuries does not appeal to us merely because it pleases our senses. We tire of sensual art rather quickly for many reasons, the chief of which is that it's easily replaced by something even *more* sensual (and less spiritual, less intellectual). As Roger Scruton notes in the film *Why Beauty Matters*, what is shocking the first time is boring the second time.

Again, movies make for a convenient example. The sort of cinematic violence that wowed audiences back in the 1950s now seems dull by comparison. What passed for alluring and seductive clothing in the 1950s could now be worn to church. It is fairly easy to make a new film more exciting than the last: it simply needs to be faster, louder, and have more explosions and shorter skirts than whatever came before it. These sorts of intensifications do not require a deep intellect or profound soul, even if they do produce a massive box office.

It is not difficult to make a dress more alluring, you simply lower the neckline and raise the hem. However, one cannot make a story more beautiful in the same sort of simple, mechanical way. Neither can one make music more profound by turning a dial. Things that last have qualities which cannot be acquired easily or quickly. The works of Homer, Augustine, Dante, Bach and so forth are not praised because they are exciting or clever, but because they are beautiful and wise. Beauty and wisdom are so rare that whenever and wherever we find them, we hold on to them with all our might. This is why people are still reading the works of Augustine, still listening to the music of Bach, and still traveling thousands of miles to see the paintings of El Greco and Caravaggio.

Things that are exciting, sexy, funny, clever, and spectacular, on the other hand, are a dime a dozen. They come along all the time and so we have little incentive to cling to them or return to them again later, which is another way of saying they don't last. Such things are also easy to find—we simply need to follow the masses because the masses are always looking for instant gratification. However, if a man wants wisdom, he is looking for something rare and

cannot merely follow the crowd. Instead, he must seek out a consensus of the centuries.

The curriculum of a classical education is designed to be that consensus. The books, art, ideas, and music which constitute a classical education are those which have been sought out again and again, not because they are pleasant, but because they are good and true and beautiful. Put another way, one might say that the works of Homer and Augustine *are* given to us by a crowd, albeit one which has accumulated slowly across a long passage of history. It is not a crowd of people who are exactly like us, with our prejudices and weaknesses and strengths, but a far more diverse crowd from different eras, different incomes, different traditions, and different nationalities. The crowd includes some strangers, but also our own fathers, grandfathers, great grandfathers, and so on who have preserved the classics for us. They were under no obligation to read the works of Augustine and play the music of Bach. They might have chosen the instant gratification of popular, sensual entertainment, but instead they chose to keep the classical tradition alive. In this way, classical educators view classics as heirlooms they must steward.

Like other sorts of heirlooms (antique furniture, say), classics tend to have an unassuming dignity. They are not glitzy or flashy, and yet they command our respect and attention. The dignity which classics possess intimidates and confuses shallow people, who are always tempted to sell heirlooms and spend the profit on their own pleasure. A quilt made in Pennsylvania six generations ago might be worth twenty thousand dollars (and have taken one hundred and fifty years to accrue such a high value), and yet the flighty heir of such a quilt might reason that a twenty-dollar blanket from Target could keep her just as warm and thus sell the heirloom to travel, shop, and gratify her vanity. Neither classics nor heirlooms flatter our tastes or desires. Their appeal is more spiritual than sensual, which is to say that they require patience to understand. In this, classics call us to refine our tastes and desire higher, better things, with the refinement taking place over a lifetime.

Unlike most new books, classics are not read once and then set aside forever. New books are generally written in such a way that one read is sufficient to fully grasp the plot, characters, argument, facts, and themes, which means that we usually don't have lifelong relationships with them. But because classics exist for something other than pleasure, we can return to them across many decades. The boy who reads *Paradise Lost* at sixteen can read it again at twenty-six, when he is newly married, and find something more profound. The words on the page are the same but his adult experiences allow him to read deeper into the book and haul out more of its wisdom. The same wisdom which the book offers on a second read will allow him to get deeper still on a third read, years later, after he has become a father. This is truly a *relationship*. The wisdom gleaned on a first read enables a deeper second read, and the deeper second enables a third which is deeper still. The more wisdom the reader brings to a classic, the more wisdom the classic can give back, and this symbiotic relationship need never end.

When people only read books once or only listen to music which is popular now, they do not develop deep loves. A classical education aims at producing students who love good things deeply. A deep love is not a new love. A deep love is a love which has endured over time, a love which has been tested and suffered, a love which has evolved and matured. Very few pop culture artifacts can sustain a lifelong relationship. Their appeal is simple, shallow, and primarily based on pleasure, which means we aren't willing to suffer anything on their behalf. If the only point of a thing is pleasure, the moment it becomes difficult or trying is the moment we abandon it. What's more, there is no point in *learning* to enjoy something which only exists to offer pleasure. For this reason, if a man is listening to the radio and a new song comes on which he does not like, he has little incentive to learn to like it—he is better off finding a different station which is playing something more to his taste.

While the books, music, and art which comprise the classical tradition are often quite beautiful, their primary purpose is not to give pleasure, which means they can be quite difficult to enjoy. In this, classical things are very different than most contemporary things. The point of the classical tradition is to do

people good, and most things which are good for people are also a little unpleasant. In the same way that people know they ought to lose weight, drink less, and look at their phones less, many people know that they ought to have better taste. They stand in a book store and thumb through a copy of *Paradise Lost*, read random lines from the middle and think, "I wish I understood this sort of thing," then set the book back on the shelf and look for something easier. Or they scan around a radio, pause for a moment on a symphony, and think, "I really wish I could get into classical music," but then find something more accessible on another station. The sorts of things many people wish they could understand and enjoy are what make up a classical curriculum.

Controlling Our Passions

Many non-classical educators claim that, alongside passing on knowledge, one of the greatest ends of education is to help students discover and pursue their passions. However, a classical education does not place a priority on the discovery and pursuit of passions. Classical educators do not believe that all human passions are self-justifying. They believe that passions for goodness, truth, and beauty are justified, but not all of them—some passions are wicked, some passions are shallow, and that many passions are simply not worthy of pursuit. Alcoholics have a passion for liquor. Gluttons have a passion for food. The lazy have a passion for sleep and entertainment. If we are honest, we must admit that it's possible for a man to be passionate about selfish things which will destroy himself and others.

Even among morally allowable passions, not everything is equally *good*. Society is far more in need of people who are passionate about curing cancer and fighting poverty than people who are passionate about playing video games, even though playing video games is morally allowable. Some passions are bad, some passions aren't bad but not all that good either, and some passions are noble. A classical education is concerned with helping students refine their passions into noble, generous, wise pursuits which genuinely serve their families and communities. This is the classical curriculum's reason for existing! Classical educators believe that when students encounter books which last, music which lasts, art which lasts, and ideas which lasts, they too will commit their lives to ideals which last—even when these ideals are less popular than the fashionable ethics and slogans which typify our restless, churning culture.

What About Good New Things?

The depth of classic works like *Paradise Lost* or the *City of God* means they are difficult to read, but this is one of the reasons they are taught in classical schools. New books do not require a teacher. New books are written so that contemporary readers can understand them without a guide. What would be the point of teaching books in school which students could understand on their own? Having taught both new books and old books in a classroom setting, I can tell you that students who are assigned recently published books are far more apt to lose interest in school than students reading books which require the help of a teacher. The more recent a book is, the less confidence students have that anyone will care about the book in twenty years. Homer, on the other hand, will matter just as much in twenty years as he does now.

If you look at a list of the one hundred best-selling books in the country, you will find most are not terribly old. The excitement and conversation which surrounds new books means they do not need to be *assigned* by a teacher. People find them on their own. There are new books worth reading, new films worth seeing, and new music worth listening to, and yet most people find such new things on their own, through reviews or recommendations from friends. What is more, new things tend to not require an explanation or a due date. Classics are assigned in classical schools not just so teachers can explain them, but so teachers can hold students accountable for finishing them. Classics are difficult enough that very few people read them on their own. If you did a survey of all the people who read *Paradise Lost* last year, I'd wager that most of them did so for a class they were taking. Most people are only willing to read difficult books if they have to, or

if someone they trust puts it in their hands and says, "You need to read this."

On the other hand, we don't need anyone to hold us accountable to do easy, pleasant things. A classical education is an education which requires discipline and discipline is never pleasant, though it always pays huge dividends on the back end. I don't mean that a classical education is all pain and drudgery; however, a classical education does not prioritize good feelings, choice, or comfort, even though these things are prioritized at other schools. Rather, the sort of relationship one has with old things demands patience and humility—patience because old books demand multiple reads and humility because old books don't tell us what we want to hear. This is putting it mildly, though.

Standards of Goodness

While every student is a unique individual, a classical education is far more concerned with what students have in common than with what makes each one of them special and distinct from one another. This is one of the reasons why classical schools have dress codes. It is more important for students to *look* like students and *act* like students than it is for them to "just be themselves." A classical education is predicated on the belief that there are kinds of people, and that every kind of person needs to behave in a manner appropriate to their kind. A man is a kind of person, for example, and there are good men and bad men. A girl is a kind of person, as well, and so is a boy, a teacher, a student, a musician, a senator, a doctor, a lawyer. Thus, there are good teachers and bad ones, good students and bad ones, good citizens and bad ones.

To a great extent, though, modernity has rejected the idea that there are kinds of people, which means that everyone is free to determine for himself what it means to be a man, a student, a musician, or a citizen. If we are all free to determine what it means to be a man or a woman, there's really no such thing as good men or bad men. The very idea of "a good man" presumes that a man *ought* to be something in particular, and that some standard exists which is indifferent to our feelings. But if there is no such thing as "a good man," it means that men aren't good for anything and that society doesn't really need men. While our society promises endless personal freedom to individuals and the right of the individual to determine absolutely everything about himself, many people end up discovering that such freedom robs them of the will to live, thrive, and do good. If every man is free to do whatever he wants, it means the world has no use for him. If he gets out of bed in the morning, fine, and if not, fine. It's all the same to the world. No matter what the individual does, society looks on approvingly.

On the other hand, a classical education is chiefly concerned with helping boys become good men and helping girls become good women. No man is free to determine for himself what makes a man good or what makes a woman good. Rather, our ancestors have handed down to us a standard of goodness by which we may all seek out stable, satisfying, productive lives. This standard of goodness is not merely an abstract set of laws but is discerned in all the novels, poems, paintings, proofs, symphonies, histories, philosophies, and theologies which have survived over the centuries. Just as an old woman has nothing personal to gain from passing on an old quilt to her granddaughter, so our ancestors had nothing personal to gain from commending Milton, Bach, and Rembrandt to us. They didn't bequeath us these things for their own pleasure, but for our own benefit. Much like teachers, our ancestors were not merchants trying to sell copies of classics so they could become rich. An entertainer has to please his audience and may do whatever it takes to secure as large an audience as possible. However, a classical educator may only teach whatever will do his students good.

Critical Thinking

As I mentioned earlier, modern people tend to like new things and despise old things. This is not merely an aesthetic preference, though, because modern people also tend to think that any opinion on race, gender, or authority which is more than a few years old is racist, sexist, or hopelessly out of touch. The sort of opinions about race which were thought progressive

and enlightened during the Clinton years were regarded as primitive and backwards by the Obama years. In the last twenty-five years, multiculturalism has gone from a sign of sophistication to an embarrassing social blunder, and what passed as feminism fifty years ago seems patriarchal today. At the same time, modern people tend to be blissfully unaware that the beliefs which are currently thought progressive and cosmopolitan will be regarded as crude and provincial just a few years down the road. They assume that they live at the apex of human history and that after thousands of years fumbling around in the dark, mankind has finally figured out what is right and true about the most important matters. All that's left is the work of purging the world of all the people who are stuck in the past.

Some people understand the rapidity with which popular thought changes and are content to believe whatever most people believe now simply because it is easiest. When popular thought changes ten years from now, their own thought will change, as well. They do not have the courage to resist the flow of culture and are carried along from one intellectual fad to the next, entirely indifferent to the moral content. They watch whatever most people are watching, no matter how stupid. They read whatever most people are reading, no matter how insipid. They listen to whatever most people are listening to, no matter how wretched. Their lives are not regulated by belief, conviction, or even contemplation, but chance. Should their culture take a definitive turn toward brazen wickedness, they would, too.

However, popular beliefs are not the only beliefs there are. One of the greatest benefits of reading old books, listening to old music, and discussing old ideas is the constantly-growing awareness that there is an entirely different set of beliefs to consider than just the ones that "everyone" accepts today. While it takes courage to withstand the flow of culture, it also takes the right tools. Someone who has blindly accepted popular opinions for years may see that popular opinion on an important matter is changing and not like it, but he may simultaneously not know how to resist it. If he is honest with himself, he will admit that the old popular opinion was no less arbitrary than the new one: the old popular opinion emerged from an even older one, and he recalls condemning his elders for holding to that opinion, just as he himself is now condemned for not moving on to the latest popular opinion. So it seems that every generation declares anew what is right, pronounces stern judgement on the generation which came before, and awaits stern judgement from their own children. A classical education provides students the tools necessary to resist this flow of culture, to not be swept along with every wind of new secular doctrine, and to not have their tastes dictated by advertisers.

What are these tools?

Simply put, a student of the classics gains an understanding of *what people used to believe*. This sounds rather tidy, and I don't mean to suggest there was some bygone golden era in which all the people on planet Earth held the same opinions and priorities. It is not as though all old books are in perfect agreement, but there are many beliefs about important matters which are shared between authors as diverse as Homer, Moses, Plato, Confucius, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Bach, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Frederick Douglass, and Dostoyevsky. Classical educators talk quite a bit about "truth, goodness, and beauty," and while there are many reasons for this, one of the main reasons is that classical authors and artists (like the ones I just mentioned) tend to agree on quite a bit when it comes to these three concepts. These authors and artists came from different nations, different classes, different centuries, different millennia, and different religious traditions, and yet they had many beliefs and convictions in common. Granted, they described truth, beauty, and goodness from different perspectives, and with different points of interest, but this is why classical educators read and study broadly.

While a classical curriculum borrows from pagans, Jews, Catholics, Anglicans, Puritans, Presbyterians, Greeks, Italians, Africans, Americans, Arabs, Russians, Germans, and the Chinese, and draws from antiquity, the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Reformation,

and the Enlightenment, one of the most common complaints made against classical schools is that their curriculums aren't diverse enough. While demands for more diversity have an appearance of generosity and open-mindedness, the sort of people who complain about a lack of diversity in classical schools are typically interested in adding just one kind of literature to the curriculum: *new* literature. Most classical educators are content to teach nearly anything which has lasted, no matter what kind of person wrote it, composed it, or painted it. However, the sort of people who only accept popular opinions understand that old books are largely in agreement on matters of truth, goodness, and beauty, which is why they aren't content with the female authors or the minority authors in the classical tradition. Many of them don't actually want diversity, they simply want fewer old ideas being taught. They want new ideas to be treated with the same dignity and respect we afford old ideas, even though new ideas haven't earned it.

Old ideas offer a vantage point from which new ideas can be evaluated. The man being hustled from one fashionable idea to the next may sense that the latest ideas are unreliable and fleeting, but unless he has a stable place to stand that is outside the flow of culture, his objections to the hustle won't be based on anything other than feeling and suspicion. It is not enough to realize new ideas don't last and don't work. Unless a man knows of older and better ideas, he may despair that *any* ideas work. A classical education offers rich and varied proof that there is something outside the whirl and chaos of fashions which now drive our culture. Some ideas do last. Some beliefs do prevail over time. Some convictions are strong enough to survive the centuries.

Conclusion

There is a certain sort of person who reflexively claims that the only point in studying the past is to escape it. "Those who don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it" is a proverb which many modern people repeat reflexively when asked about the value of reading old books and studying old ideas. To some degree, this proverb makes sense. Indeed, much of the past is quite sad and quite terrifying. A thorough examination of the past finds every sort of villainy, wickedness, evil, and every imaginable vice.

Nonetheless, classical educators do not believe the past is a thing which anyone is "doomed" to repeat.

Why?

Because villainy, wickedness, and evil are not the only things we find in the past. We also find rousing examples of courage, wisdom, and justice. We find noble men who fought for Truth. We find noble women who did what is Right. And we find such men and women not only in recent history but also in the distant past. In this distant past, we also find beautiful paintings and poetry which hold out for us a vision of a virtuous life. We find music which fills our souls with wonder and inspires us to contemplate of eternal things. We must look to the past not only so that we know what to avoid and shun, but also so we know what to praise and cling to. The latter is just as important as the former. Unless we cling to the right and noble traditions which have been handed down to us, we are left to reinvent the moral wheel every generation, condemning our grandparents and waiting for our grandchildren to condemn us and clear away our life's work.

A classical education is devoted to those things which have endured, those things which are worth preserving. Such an education is not suited to those who want to find themselves and do their own thing, but to those who want to find the Truth and to do Good. Finding the Truth and doing Good are not easy tasks, nor are they lucrative, but for those willing to sacrifice temporary pleasures to acquire transcendent virtues, there is no other way.

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