In Defense of the Common Lecture

In the third book of *Gulliver’s Travels*, which Dr. Johnson described as giving the “least pleasure”, a group of Laputian scientists live on a flying island, floating safely above the devastated land below. One of their eyes faces inward, blind to the world without, whilst the other is “directly up to the Zenith”, so far-sighted that it can contemplate universes far away but little nearer. The main land over which they glide is crowded with hungry beggars in tatters, having been laid waste by the experiments of Projectors from the Academy of Lagado and its sister academies, whose degenerative schemes for improvement have destroyed the good works of old in their desire for the new and superior. These Laputians spend their days in esoteric calculations, and require a “flapper” with a bladder to smack them on the ear, mouth and occasionally eyes, for they “can neither speak, nor attend to the Discourses of others” without such prodding, and “are so wrapped up in Cognition” that they “are in manifest danger of falling down”. Their wives carry on affairs in the open, and long to desert them for the mainland, despite its deprivations. Leaving the island, Gulliver finds on the mainland people who “walked fast, looked wild, their eyes fixed”, “generally in Rags”. His host, Lord Munodi, who is reckoned “the most ignorant and stupid person” in the Laputian court, alone retains an estate which, built according to the principles of the ancients, is still beautiful, peaceful and orderly, of “exact Judgment and Taste”; and his lands, farmed according to solid agricultural principles developed over time, continue to produce food for its farmers. Yet even Munodi knows his days are numbered, for the Projectors cannot long leave him alone in his good old ways: as he tells Gulliver with a “melancholy sigh”, “he must throw down his houses in Town and Country, to rebuild them after the present mode, destroy all his Plantations, and cast others in such a form as modern usage required.”
Swift’s venomous portrait of the intellectuals of the Royal Academy of his time, and his skepticism about the terrible costs of putting into practice theoretical scientific and social improvements, is permanently contemporary. In all ages, it seems, the members of the Academy of Lagado, and their disciples, will destroy what good has been achieved with great struggle, in pursuit of a newness or improvement whose very worth is a matter of doubt.

Dr. Johnson, a man secure in the worth of the common things, could afford to overlook Swift’s warning. We, who are less secure in the common worth, cannot. That which the Projectors destroy with such abandon cannot be remade so easily, or even at all, particularly if the knowledge and purpose which built it are already diminished or disappeared: and it is an insidious progress that demands destruction in its name.

The lecture, and it central place in education, is one such common good that is worth defending against the throwing down that the Projectors are now demanding, not least because it is still one thing, like common wealth, common purpose, and common sense, that we—both within and without the university—can be pleased and proud to share. Rather than tear it down, we must live up to it.

The word “lecture” means to “to read”, and when books were scarce, lecturers did read; and still should read. This notion of reading clung to the lecture even when its immediate purpose had changed, and in fact a good lecture remains a kind of reading, just as an audience remain auditors, attentive listeners who listen in common. A lecture, unlike many other things, has stood the test of time and has proven to have not only worth but an enduring flexibility. Changing with the times, it has outlived by many degrees and years its original purpose: consider that Aristotle’s Ethics are good lecture notes from two thousand years ago, while A.C. Bradley’s brilliant work on Shakespearean Tragedy is a course of lectures from less than two hundred years ago. The lecture also spans the disciplines and moves across the arts with equal ease. In this sense, it is a foundation of the university, and its eloquent practice and attendance a crown upon education’s achievement.

The recent deprecation of the lecture tells us more about problems of modern education than about the quality of the lecture itself, not least that those
who have bought the mountebank’s medications, instead of rueing their gullibility, have begun instead to resell them. To pretend that the lecture is insufficiently “engaging” or “interactive”, two words whose current abuse in the educational discourse of our days demands substantial compensation, is to claim that serious and thoughtful listening has no place in a modern university, which is as much as to say that modern universities are much less than their name implies: for an university is, or it was, a company of the non-commercial sort, a fellowship of teachers and learners who work in company and share things in common.

Moreover, this assertion has ramifications for the other stalwart of the university, and of education itself: the common book. If the lecture is outdated as a means of instruction and education, what then is the purpose of reading books? Is reading not an activity somewhat like that of listening to a lecture, but of listening in a different way, to words on a page rather than to words spoken by a person on a stage (to use Pound’s description of literature and drama’s distinction to a different purpose)? Is reading, then, insufficiently “engaging” or “interactive”? Such a fatuous notion undoes more than the last five hundred years of education, years which produced such disparate geniuses as Machiavelli, Newton, Shakespeare, Dryden, Jane Austen, Darwin, and Freud. Learning to listen is a serious and enduring part of education. It is also a serious and enduring part of friendship, love, community, politics and citizenship, and nearly every other part of human life that has mattered, and continues to matter.

Who, then, would sell to their students the snaky idea that the lecture is passive, and has therefore ceased to matter? Do modern students deserve to be sold such a charlatanism, at a very high cost indeed, both financial and intellectual? Shall they be told that nothing hard earned is worth having? Or, with equal deceit, that that are they are incapable, due to paucity of attention, imagination and effort, of worthy things? Worse yet, that there are no great matters; for all of life is flat, and readily graspable, even “fun”, “interactive”, and “entertaining” (the latter being a condition Aristotle warned his students not to mistake for happiness). Hard work is therefore not required, as a life of slothful ease is pedaled as having as much or even more merit than a hard-won life of action or contemplation. All of this, which goes
in the guise of a perverse notion of educational progress in modern times, cheapens the capacity and demeans the intellect of young people, and encourages them to think as little of themselves as possible. And it removes a powerful notion of aspiration from education. It is the grossest condescension to stupidity and arrogance, by those who ought to know better, having benefitted from being taught in ways they would deny their own students. The lecture is not, has not been, and should not be the only means of education; but it has been, and should continue to be, one of the very best of those means.

At the end of days, the Book of Revelations issues a warning: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.” The lecture teaches us, as education teaches us, how to attend. So he that hath an ear, let him hear. Let us heed the warnings of old, at least partly in the hope that it is not now the end of days, and that the mountebanks will be discovered for the frauds they are, before they have poisoned the lot of us.

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