

# Introduction

Evelyn Waugh's gently satirical *Scott-King's Modern Europe* follows the declining career of a classics teacher at Granchester, a fictional English public school. Granchester is "entirely respectable" but in need of a bit of modernizing, at least in the opinion of its pragmatic headmaster, who is attuned to consumer demands. The story ends with a poignant conversation between Scott-King and the headmaster:

"You know," [the headmaster] said, "we are starting this year with fifteen fewer classical specialists than we had last term?"

"I thought that would be about the number."

"As you know I'm an old Greats man myself. I deplore it as much as you do. But what are we to do? Parents are not interested in producing the 'complete man' any more. They want to qualify their boys for jobs in the modern world. You can hardly blame them, can you?"

"Oh yes," said Scott-King. "I can and do."

"I always say you are a much more important man here than I am. One couldn't conceive of Granchester without Scott-King. But has it ever occurred to you that a time may come when there will be no more classical boys at all?"

"Oh yes. Often."

"What I was going to suggest was—I wonder if you will consider taking some other subject as well as the classics? History, for example, preferably economic history?"

"No, headmaster."

“But, you know, there may be something of a crisis ahead.”

“Yes, headmaster.”

“Then what do you intend to do?”

“If you approve, headmaster, I will stay as I am here as long as any boy wants to read the classics. I think it would be very wicked indeed to do anything to fit a boy for the modern world.”

“It’s a short-sighted view, Scott-King.”

“There, headmaster, with all respect, I differ from you profoundly. I think it the most long-sighted view it is possible to take.”<sup>1</sup>

And there ends the story of Scott-King’s misadventures in the modern world. Any teacher who has endured a similar conversation sympathizes instinctively with poor Scott-King. His dignified but stubborn resistance to the wickedness of making students fit for the modern world speaks to the heart of teachers who, like Scott-King, take the long view. It is to these teachers, then—and to like-minded students, parents, and administrators—that this anthology of classic writings on education is addressed. This collection from what has been called the “Great Tradition” is intended to supply an arsenal of the liberal arts for those who would wage war—covertly or openly—on the side of an education rooted in the classical and Christian heritage. It will, I hope, inspire modern misfits who seek to initiate themselves and their students into an ancient way of teaching and learning much larger than themselves, and who recognize that their task is chiefly formative rather than instrumental. Readers looking for up-to-the-minute advice about innovative teaching methods and classroom technology, or about how to prepare students for the “real world” and tomorrow’s top-ten careers, will be gravely disappointed.

By design, this anthology offers nothing new. As C. S. Lewis remarked in his preface to *The Problem of Pain*, any originality here is unintentional. Furthermore, this anthology is meant neither to be a documentary history of education in the West nor a comprehensive survey of competing philosophies of education. It excludes utilitarians, romantics, and progressives; there is nothing here by John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or John Dewey. Instead, it follows the trail of an older, more noble, and continual conversation about what it means to be a truly educated human being.

More than two hundred years ago, the utilitarians disconnected themselves from liberal education and the Great Tradition, redefining and redirecting the “useful” away from that which forms the “complete man,” and toward that which primarily promotes man’s material well-being. Of course, education has always aimed to be useful. The question has been, and continues to be, useful to what end? The modern age, often with good intentions, has defined educational usefulness as that which leads to material results that can be weighed and measured and counted. Thus, it is no surprise that it has been darkened by the spiritual “eclipse” that Saint Augustine warned us against so long ago in his *Confessions*. The Great Tradition, in contrast, anchored in the classical and Christian humanism of liberal education, has taken the broader view that what is useful is that which helps men and women to flourish in nonmaterial ways as well—in other words, that which helps

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1. From an abridged version originally published in 1947 in the *Cornhill* magazine and reprinted in *The Complete Stories of Evelyn Waugh* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1999), 328–76.

them to be happy. Indeed, what the Great Tradition has meant by the words “humanism,” “liberal,” and “education” will emerge from the full context—spanning a breathtaking twenty-four centuries—of the remarkably intelligible, unified, and coherent conversation that unfolds in these pages.

Of course, the writers anthologized here do not always speak with one voice. No group of statesmen, philosophers, schoolmasters, historians, theologians, architects, and critics could possibly reach unanimity. There are tensions and inconsistencies within the Great Tradition. Indeed, a few of these authors would be surprised to find themselves in each other’s company, at a loss to guess what strange principle of selection had landed them all in one book. This is especially true for Protestant Reformers and their Catholic adversaries, such as John Calvin and the Jesuits, respectively. But this anthology attempts to recover an *educational* legacy, not a theological one. It takes no position on matters of theology. It draws wisdom from the Eastern and Western church, from Catholics and Protestants and also Jews, but it claims no ecumenical synthesis in matters of faith; its only ecumenism is built on the ground of respect for liberal learning, an ecumenism so broad that for the sake of this task it embraces pagans, skeptics, and agnostics as well. So, whenever possible, these authors have been allowed to choose their compatriots, in the hope that a transgenerational conversation would emerge organically from the selections themselves.

In fact, this anthology explicitly struggles against the modern tendency to value the past merely as a precursor to the present. Typically, ancient and medieval writers on education have been praised (and anthologized) not for their own sake but for the degree to which they anticipate the future. They have been held to matter only insofar as in their writings one is able to catch a prophetic glimpse of Bacon or Rousseau or Dewey. Too often, we praise only those authors who most resemble us or prefigure an imagined future, never allowing the wisdom of the past to sit in judgment on our own prejudices and activities. The great twentieth-century Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield described this progressive habit; his warning should be heeded by anyone attempting to understand educational theory and practice: “The curious fact is that the historian has to learn—and he has had to learn it consciously by discovering that the alternative method produces unsatisfactory results—that the generations of the past are not to be dismissed as subordinate to the later ones, mere stepping-stones to the present day, merely preparations or trial shots for authentic achievement that was still to come.” Striking even closer to the fallacy that this anthology seeks to correct, Butterfield warned nationalist Britons to “stop regarding the Anglo-Saxons as mere links in a chain leading to us, mere precursors, significant only because of what they contributed to the modern world.”<sup>2</sup>

The authors anthologized here are indeed links in a chain, but they are not simply links that derive their truth and significance from what comes next in the sequence. The Great Tradition has no desire to escape from the past, recognizing instead the continuity of a world larger than the momentary self. It willingly accepts the present’s obligation to pass on what it has received. It fears that if it “wipes the slate clean” it will in turn be swept away

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2. *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 65. The brief essay “Kafka and His Precursors,” by Jorge Luis Borges, offers a literary take on nearly the same point. It is included in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 199–201.

by some future generation armed with an equal zeal for innovation. (Readers who find their appreciation for the past enhanced by this anthology may wish to go beyond the brief biographical essays that introduce each selection and reconnect these links into a narrative whole. If so, two books will be particularly helpful: Arthur F. Holmes's *Building the Christian Academy* and Christopher Dawson's *The Crisis of Western Education*, especially the first few chapters.)

This sense of obligation to both the past and the future is an inescapable feature of the Great Tradition. It was captured well in the fifth century by Macrobius's advice to his son Eustachius. In the preface to *The Saturnalia*, he wrote, "This, then, is what I would have this present work to be: a repository of much to teach and much to guide you, examples drawn from many ages but informed by a single spirit, wherein—if you refrain from rejecting what you already know and from shunning what you do not—you will find much that it would be a pleasure to read, an education to have read, and of use to remember. . . ."<sup>3</sup> In the twelfth century, John of Salisbury wrote that the same spirit animated his own teacher, Bernard of Chartres: "Our own generation enjoys the legacy bequeathed to it by that which preceded it. We frequently know more, not because we have moved ahead by our own natural ability, but because we are supported by the [mental] strength of others, and possess riches that we have inherited from our forefathers. Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to [puny] dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature."<sup>4</sup> The "single spirit" that Macrobius detected in authors "from many ages" unified the Great Tradition in the Middle Ages and continued to do so for centuries. John Henry Newman spoke of "a continuous historical tradition."<sup>5</sup> Herbert Butterfield wrote, "Whether our establishment is a new one or an old one, we ought to have the sense of belonging to a single great tradition."<sup>6</sup>

The Great Tradition is so vast that this anthology could have comprised an entirely different set of authors, or at least different excerpts from these same authors. No doubt some readers' favorite writers and passages are missing. But this anthology is not an end in itself. It must not replace the reading of these authors and their works as a whole. Rather, I hope that it will whet readers' appetites, inviting them to further exploration and reflection. This invitation goes out to all teachers, parents, and students who seek ways to defend liberal learning from the onslaught of careerism, utilitarianism, and numbing technique that threatens public and even private and Christian education, who seek to reconnect themselves with an ancient yet living tradition. The Great Tradition embraces an enduring community of learning that values liberal education for its own sake; desires to educate for wisdom and virtue, not power and vanity; finds tiresome the present age's preoccupation with utility, speed, novelty, convenience, efficiency, and specialization; and refuses to justify education as a means to wealth, power, fame, or self-assertion. The Great Tradition is a gift to be received and passed on to the future, not the imagined "Future" of progressive fantasy, but the real human future of our posterity.

3. *The Saturnalia*, trans. by Percival Vaughan Davies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 28.

4. *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. by Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1955), 167.

5. *The Idea of a University*, ed. by Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 83.

6. *The University and Education Today* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 26–27.

In the 1930s, Albert Jay Nock nearly despaired “that our American society will ever return to the Great Tradition.”<sup>7</sup> But he also laughed at those who thought their own meager contributions to its survival were indispensable: “We can do nothing for the Great Tradition; our fidelity to it can do everything for us.”<sup>8</sup> The Great Tradition patiently endures, ready to speak on its own behalf, ready to challenge narrow prejudices, ready to examine those with the courage to be interrogated by it, ready to teach those who are willing to be made unfit for the modern world.

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7. *The Theory of Education in the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 159.

8. *Ibid.*, 155.