

Ralph Lerner

449th Convocation Address: "An American Education,"

March 19, 1998

"An American Education" by Ralph Lerner

Formal occasions such as this - all too rare in our lives - mark a sense of completion and of beginning. They invite us to pause and take stock. But seeing clearly who we are and what we have been about is far from easy. We need all the help we can find. In that spirit I turn first to a critique of "kids these days" that Thomas Jefferson offered to his old revolutionary companion, John Adams, in 1814. That analysis led Jefferson to detect a challenge and to propose a solution. Then I shall turn the tables on Jefferson and attempt to judge how well he met that challenge.

"Our post-revolutionary youth," he wrote, "are born under happier stars than you and I were. They acquire all learning in their mothers' womb, and bring it into the world ready-made. The information of books is no longer necessary; and all kno[w]le[d]ge which is not innate, is in contempt, or neglect at least. Every folly must run its round; and so, I suppose, must that of self-learning and self sufficiency; of rejecting the kno[w]le[d]ge acquired in past ages, and starting on the new ground of intuition. When sobered by experience I hope our successors will turn their attention to the advantages of education. I mean of education on the broad scale, and not that of the petty academies, as they call themselves, which are starting up in every neighborhood, and where one or two men, possessing Latin and sometimes Greek, a kno[w]le[d]ge of the globes, and the first six books of Euclid, imagine and communicate this as the sum of science. They commit their pupils to the theatre of the world with just taste enough of learning to be alienated from industrious pursuits, and not enough to do service in the ranks of science. . . . I hope the necessity will at length be seen of establishing institutions, here as in Europe, where every branch of science, useful at this day, may be taught in its highest degrees." (Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 5 July 1814)

This seemingly offhand musing, like almost everything flowing from his pen, is not devoid of art. In fact, Jefferson was by no means prepared to leave this necessary work to the attention of "our successors." For the remaining twelve years of his life he would focus his astonishing energies, attention to detail, and clarity of vision on establishing the University of Virginia. Yet it would take that institution more than a century to

begin to live up to its father's expectations. And that it did so at all has perhaps as much to do with a more general transformation of the higher learning in America as with Jefferson's pains.

Jefferson's long-meditated plans for reforming education in Virginia were fired by contempt for more than those self-styled academies. He knew that not everything calling itself a university is a university. From his standpoint the then-luminaries of the American academic heaven were burnt-out bodies, good enough for producing a certain kind of preacher and lawyer (if that was what you wanted), but little else. The kind of education he had in mind presumed students with a higher level of preparation and working at a higher level of expertise. The conditions for fulfilling Jefferson's dream would come only later. It awaited the German conquest of American higher education with Daniel Coit Gilman's founding of the Johns Hopkins University in 1876 and the proselytizing zeal of William Rainey Harper in Chicago in 1891.

I wonder whether Jefferson would be pleased by what he might observe today. How would he assess us, the administration and faculty of the University of Chicago? How would he assess you, its newly minted graduates? And how would he assess the education with which we are committing you, our pupils, to the theatre of the world? The answers, as best I can construct them, are complex.

Were Jefferson to examine the academic budget and table of organization of this university in detail, he might be cool to our cries that we need more money. True, Jefferson was resigned to dealing with a niggardly legislature; he could barely get funding for eight professorships. But even his enlarged plans called for "so many professors only as might bring them within the views of a just but enlightened economy" (ibid.). And his professors had to work. Pity Virginia's poor polymath charged with teaching French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Anglo-Saxon. But at bottom the issue for Jefferson has less to do with how much money than with how you choose to spend it. He might well dismiss as wasteful this university's expenditures on subjects of no "real use in human affairs," citing especially, but not exclusively, the Divinity School, the Oriental Institute, and the Committee on Social Thought. In general, he thought, university study should focus upon subjects for which you need the support and guidance of a living teacher. Other subjects, especially history and ancient literature, could be acquired from books on your own both during and after your college years. If Jefferson was cavalier toward subjects falling outside the hard sciences, it may be owing to his peculiar strengths and limits. He was a prodigious autodidact, bringing a kind of concentration to multiple fields that would be astonishing in even one: learning the violin, architecture (to a very high level), scientific agriculture, legal history, tool making, landscape design, and more. At the same time, Jefferson did not rise above the premises of utility he accepted from Francis Bacon. I assert this, even

though as a private man he relished things of beauty and harmony for their own sakes, especially music and the Greek and Latin texts of the ancients.

What about you? he might ask. O students at this handsomely endowed school, have you made maximal use of its incomparable research facilities and laboratories? Have you found friends for a lifetime, friends worthy of your highest aspirations? Your answers would matter to his assessment. He would surely find you more manageable than the students he knew at Virginia - and would be glad for that. Those young men, sons of slave owners, were marking time while awaiting the inheritance of estates. They had a bent for spiritedness rather than sobriety and were more fit for becoming cavalry officers than organic chemists. Jefferson thought this would be a happier and healthier world if we had more of the latter.

Finally, what of the education you have been given? Have you been fitted for "the theatre of the world"? Jefferson would congratulate you if he were persuaded that you have indeed been launched on the information superhighway crossing the bridge to the twenty-first century. Yet it seems to be true of a superhighway, whatever its name, whatever national territory it traverses, that it has no distinctive, hence distinguishing, character of its own. It is utility triumphant over a sense of place, a memory, or a vision. Ought an education to be as devoid of national character, as deracinated, as a superhighway?

Let me now press my assessment of Jefferson. Strange to say, this articulator and defender of the spirit of '76 may be faulted for having failed to provide an American education for the students at his university. Might he have thought it enough to prepare them to be useful in the transnational republic of science and commerce where origin or allegiance would be irrelevant? I doubt it. For although Jefferson surely ranks among the most cosmopolitan of human beings ever to arise in America, he also had an exquisite sense of the connection between who he was and where he had been formed. Furthermore, he knew that the mighty efforts he, Adams, and their old companions had made in war and peace would find lasting success only if the American people were capable of responding with good judgment to the urgings of would-be leaders. Long ago Jefferson had proposed a system of publicly financed elementary education that would have given every freeborn boy and girl in Virginia at least the rudiments of a grounding in the American past and in American political principles. But nothing came of that. So he had rather to presume that his students would be as innocent of any useful knowledge of their common past as, say, those entering the University of Chicago today. Yet Jefferson expected his university to form the coming generations' statesmen, legislators, and judges. How did he propose giving their education an American character? Why should they especially care for the good and ornament of their country, as he himself had, so passionately, through all his long

lifetime? Indoctrination by a politically "orthodox" professor of government and law would hardly fill the bill. Where and how would the new generation of leaders develop the needed dedication and thoughtfulness?

Another oddity for which Jefferson may be faulted: He seems never to have drawn a connection between his own excellent liberal and classical education and the kind of critical, rooted cosmopolitan he grew up to be. To an extent barely imaginable today, Jefferson's own education immersed him in studies directed at enlarging the mind, developing taste and sensibility, and challenging unexamined premises. He enjoyed not a year of "common core" curriculum (so to speak), but more than a decade. The different perspective offered by such studies can help a young man or woman develop independence of mind. It works against patriotism degenerating into jingoism. It helps reinforce a love of our own - but without illusions. In contrast, the higher education Jefferson had in mind for future generations seems unlikely to nurture rare individuals such as himself.

Your individual decision, a few years ago, to enroll in the University of Chicago opened opportunities for you that fall outside the Jeffersonian mainstream. This school has invited and perhaps even compelled you to engage in some studies without regard to their foreseeable usefulness or professional relevance. It has for a time involved you with texts of high quality that provoke inquiry rather than set answers. It has initiated you in the ways of serious listening and responsible speaking. This place has tried to strengthen habits for a lifetime of thinking for oneself. You are very fortunate to have had such opportunities in a world that generally ignores or undervalues such things. And you are to be praised according to the use you have made of those opportunities.

Now you are in a position to begin making a connection in your own life between that kind of education and the kind of thoughtful, rooted human being you would wish to be. All of us here congratulate you on what you already have learned and wish you well in what you have yet to discover.

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