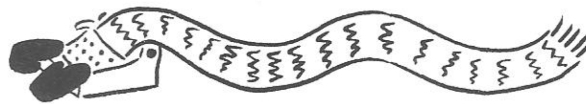
THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

TOO GOOD FOR THIS WORLD

What do we want from great-books courses?

BY LOUIS MENAND

Roosevelt Montás was born in a rural village in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States when he was eleven years old. He attended public schools in Queens, where he took classes in English as a second language, then entered Columbia College through a government program for low-income students. After getting his B.A., he was admitted to Columbia's Ph.D. program in English and Comparative Literature when a dean got the department to reconsider his application, which had been rejected. He received a Ph.D. in 2004 and has been teaching at Columbia ever since, now as a senior lecturer, a renewable but untenured appointment. He is forty-eight.

Arnold Weinstein is eighty-one. Although he was an indifferent student in high school, he was admitted to Princeton, spent his junior year in Paris, an experience that fired an interest in literature, and received a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1968. He was hired by Brown, was tenured in 1973, and is today the Richard and Edna Salomon Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature. These two men started on very different life paths and ended up writing the same book.

They are even being published by the same university press, Princeton. Montás's is called "Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation"; Weinstein's is "The Lives of Literature: Reading, Teaching, Knowing." The genre, a common one for academics writing non-scholarly books, is a combination of memoir (some family history, career anecdotes), criticism (readings of selected texts to illustrate convictions of the author's), and polemic against trends the author disapproves of. The polemic can sometimes take the form of "It's all gone to hell." Montás's and Weinstein's books fall into the "It's all gone to hell" category.

Both men teach what are called—unfortunately but inescapably—"great books" courses. Since Weinstein works at a college that has no requirements outside the major, his courses are departmental offerings, but the syllabi seem to be composed largely of books by well-known Western writers, from Sophocles to Toni Morrison. At Columbia, undergraduates must complete two years of non-departmental great-books courses: Masterpieces of Western Literature and Philosophy, for first-year students, and Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West, for sophomores. These courses, among others, known as "the Core," originated around the time of the First World War and have been required since 1947. Montás not only teaches in the Core; he served for ten years as the director of the Center for the Core Curriculum.

Although Montás and Weinstein are highly successful academics at two leading universities, where they are, no doubt, popular teachers, they feel alienated from and, to some extent, disrespected by the higher-education system. As they see it, they are doing God's work. Their humanities colleagues are careerists who have lost sight of what education is about, and their institutions are in service to Mammon and Big Tech.

It will probably not improve their spirits to point out that professors have been making the same complaints ever since the American research university came into being, in the late nineteenth century. "Rescuing Socrates" and "The Lives of Literature" can be placed on a long shelf that contains books such as Hiram Corson's "The Aims of Literary Study" (1894), Irving Babbitt's "Literature and the American College" (1908), Robert Maynard Hutchins's "The Higher Learning in America" (1936), Allan Bloom's "The Closing of the American Mind" (1987), William Deresiewicz's "Excellent Sheep" (2014), and dozens of other impassioned and sometimes eloquent works explaining that higher education has lost its soul. It's a song that never ends.

So, although Montás and Weinstein seem to think that things went wrong recently, things (from the point of view they represent) were wrong from the start. The conflict these professors are experiencing between their educational ideals and the priorities of their institutions is baked into the system.

That conflict is essentially a dispute over the purpose of college. How did the great books get caught up in it? In the old college system, the entire curriculum was prescribed, and there were lists of books that every student was supposed to study—a canon. The canon was the curriculum. In the modern university, students elect their courses and choose their majors. That is the system

the great books were designed for use in. The great books are outside the regular curriculum.

The idea of the great books emerged at the same time as the modern university. It was promoted by works like Noah Porter's "Books and Reading: Or What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?" (1877) and projects like Charles William Eliot's fifty-volume Harvard Classics (1909-10). (Porter was president of Yale; Eliot was president of Harvard.) British counterparts included Sir John Lubbock's "One Hundred Best Books" (1895) and Frederic Farrar's "Great Books" (1898). None of these was intended for students or scholars. They were for adults who wanted to know what to read for edification and enlightenment, or who wanted to acquire some cultural capital.

The idea made its way into universities after 1900 as part of a backlash against the research model, led by proponents of what was called "liberal culture." These were professors, mainly in the humanities, who deplored the university's new emphasis on science, specialization, and expertise. For the key to the concept of the great books is that you do not need any special training to read them.

In a great-books course of the kind that Montás and Weinstein teach, undergraduates read primary texts, then meet in a classroom to share their responses with their peers. Discussion is led by an instructor, but the instructor's job is not to give the students a more informed understanding of the texts, or to train them in methods of interpretation, which is what would happen in a typical literature- or philosophy-department course. The instructor's job is to help the students relate the texts to their own lives. For people like Montás and Weinstein, it is also to personify what a life shaped by reading books like these can be. "The teacher models the still living power of the book," as Weinstein puts it.

You can see the problem. Universities like Brown and Columbia make big investments in training scholars and researchers in their doctoral programs, and then, after they are credentialled and hired as professors, supporting their work with office and laboratory space, libraries, computers and related technology, research budgets, conference and travel funds, sabbaticals, and so on. Why should an English professor who got his degree with a dissertation on the American Transcendentalists (as Montás did), and who doesn't read Italian or know anything about medieval Christianity, teach Dante (in a week!), when you have a whole department of Italian-literature scholars on your faculty? What qualifies a man like Arnold Weinstein, who has spent his entire adult life in the literature departments of Ivy League universities, to guide eighteen-year-olds in ruminations on the state of their souls and the nature of the good life?

It's not an accident or a misfortune that great-books pedagogy is an antibody in the "knowledge factory" of the research university, in other words. It was *intended* as an antibody. The disciplinary structure of the modern university came first; the great-books courses came after. As Montás says, "The practice of liberal education, especially in the context of a research university, is pointedly countercultural."

Montás is using the term "liberal education" mistakenly. Virtually every course at an élite school like Columbia, from poetry to physics, is part of a liberal education. "Liberal" just means free and disinterested. It means that inquiry is pursued without fear or favor, regardless of the outcome and whatever the field of study. Universities exist to protect that freedom. But Montás is right about the countercultural part. Great-books courses tend to be taught against the grain of academic disciplinary paradigms.

This has obvious educational value. Many students who take a great-books-type course enjoy encountering famous texts and seeing that the questions they raise are often relevant to their other coursework. And some students experience a kind of intellectual awakening, which can be inspiring and even transformational. For students who are motivated—and motivation is half of learning—these courses really work. They are happy to read Dante in translation and without a scholarly apparatus, because they want to get a sense of what Dante is all about, and they know that if they don't get it in college they are unlikely to get it anywhere else.

Undergraduate teachers, whatever their training, can play a role as a transitional parent figure, someone students can talk to who is not privy to their personal or social lives, someone who will let them have the keys to the car no questions asked. And students profit from learning how universities operate and arguing about what college is for. It opens up the experience for them, gives the system some transparency and the students some agency.

So why the tsuris? At this point, great-books-type courses—that is, courses where the focus is on primary texts and student relatability rather than on scholarly literature and disciplinary training—are part of the higher-education landscape. Few colleges require them, but many colleges happily offer them. The quarrel between generalist and specialist—or, as it is sometimes framed down in the trenches, between dilettante and pedant—is more than a hundred years old and it would seem that this is not a quarrel that one side has to win. Montás and Weinstein, however, think that the conflict is existential, and that the future of the academic humanities is at stake. Are they right?

Between 2012 and 2019, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded annually in English fell by twenty-six per cent, in philosophy and religious studies by twenty-five per cent, and in foreign languages and literature by twenty-four per cent. In English, according to the Association of Departments of English, which tracked the numbers through 2016, research universities, like Brown and Columbia, took the biggest hits. More than half reported a drop in degrees of forty per cent or more in just four years.

The trend is national. Some departments have maintained market share, of course, and creative-writing classes seem to be popular everywhere. But, in general, undergraduates have largely stopped taking humanities courses. Only eight per cent of students entering Harvard College this fall report that they intend to major in the arts and humanities, a division that has twenty-one undergraduate programs.

The decline in student interest affects doctoral programs as well, and this fact is crucial, because doctoral programs are the reproductive organs of the entire system. Fewer graduate students are admitted, because the job market for humanities Ph.D.s is contracting. More important, no one is sure how to teach the students who do get in. If courses

in the traditional subfields of literary studies (medieval poetry, early-modern drama, the eighteenth-century novel, and so on) are not attracting undergraduates, shouldn't new Ph.D.s be trained differently? If so, given that faculties are mostly trained in the traditional subfields themselves, who is going to do it?

And, even if you could completely redesign doctoral education, it takes at least six years to get a Ph.D. in the humanities (the median time is more than nine years) and another six years, minimum, to get tenure. An academic discipline is a big ship to turn around, especially when it is taking on water.

Montás and Weinstein don't cite these figures. They don't cite any figures, actually, because even if business were booming it would make no difference to them. But this is the real-world context in which they are publishing their books. This is the moment they have chosen to inform readers that academic humanists are not doing their job. "Liberal education is impaired and imperiled," Montás reports. "Too often professional practitioners of liberal education—professors and college administrators—have corrupted their activity by subordinating the fundamental goals of education to specialized academic pursuits that only have meaning within their own institutional and career aspirations." "Corrupted" is a pretty strong word.

What humanists should be teaching, Montás and Weinstein believe, is self-knowledge. To "know thyself" is the proper goal. Art and literature, as Weinstein puts it, "are intended for personal use, not in the self-help sense but as mirrors, as entryways into who we ourselves are or might be." Montás says, "A teacher in the humanities can give students no greater gift than the revelation of the self as a primary object of lifelong investigation." You don't need research to learn this. Research is irrelevant. You just need some great books and a charismatic instructor.

For the advocates of liberal culture a century ago, the false god of literature departments was philology. Today, the false god is "theory." Montás complains that contemporary theory—he calls it "postmodernism"—subverts the college's educational mission by calling into question terms like "truth" and "virtue." A postmodernist, in his definition, is a person who believes that there is no capital-T

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truth, that "true" is just the compliment those with power pay to their own beliefs. "This unmooring of human reason from the possibility of ultimate truth in effect undermines all of Western metaphysics," he tells us, "including ethics." (He blames this all on Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he calls "Satan's most acute theologian," which is an amazing thing to say. Nietzsche wanted to free people to embrace life, not to send them to Hell. He didn't believe in Hell. Or theology.)

Weinstein's criticism of theory is somewhat less apocalyptic. For him, theory represents a desperate and wrongheaded attempt—he calls it "the humanities' 'last stand' "—to introduce rigor and objectivity into literary studies. He doesn't think rigor and objectivity have a place in an undergraduate literature course. "You won't find very much of them in my classroom," he assures us. "In my crazier moments I think that rigor may be akin to rigor mortis."

But questioning the meaning of accepted values has been a major theme in Western thought since Socrates, and "truth" and "virtue" were never exempt. Postmodernism is not a license to shoplift. People who see "truth" and "virtue" as functions of power relations tend to be hyperethical, because they see power disparities everywhere. Postmodernists do not run more red lights than evangelicals do.

And if, as these authors insist, education is about self-knowledge and the nature of the good, what are those things supposed to look like? How do we know them when we get there? What does it mean to be human? What exactly is the good life?

Oh, they can't say. The whole business is ineffable. We should know better than to expect answers. That's quant-thinking. "The value of the thing," Montás explains, about liberal education, "cannot be extracted and delivered apart from the experience of the thing." Literature's bottom line, Weinstein says, is that it has no bottom line. It all sounds a lot like "Trust us. We can't explain it, but we know what we're doing."

In the creation of the modern university, science was the big winner. The big loser was not literature. It was religion. The university is a secular institution, and scientific research—more broadly, the production of new knowledge—is what it was designed for. All the academic disciplines were organized with this end in view. Philology prevailed in literature departments because philology was scientific. It represented a research agenda that could produce replicable results. Weinstein is not wrong to think that critical theory has played the same role. It does aim to add rigor to literary analysis.

For Montás and Weinstein, though, science is the enemy of ethical insight and self-knowledge. Science instrumentalizes, it quantifies, it reduces life to elements that are, well, effable. Weinstein can see that students might think that science courses are useful for a successful career, but he thinks that "success" is just another false idol. He writes, "One has read a great deal about 'quants' being gobbled up by investment firms, hired on the strength of their mathematical prowess, hence likely to add to bottom lines. What actually does a bottom line mean? Is anyone asking about judgment? Does any university or graduate school transcript even whisper anything about judgment? Values? Priorities? Ethics?"

Weinstein won't even call what students learn in science courses "knowledge." He calls it "information," which he thinks has nothing to do with how one ought to live. "Life is more than reason or data," he tells us, "and literature schools us in a different set of affairs, the affairs of heart and soul that have little truck with information as such."

For Montás, the trouble with science is that it answers the important questions—Who am I? How shall I live?—in "purely materialistic terms." He blames this on a writer who died in 1650, René Descartes. "Today, the heirs to Descartes's project are perhaps most visible in Silicon Valley," Montás says, "but the ethic that informs his approach is pervasive in the broader culture, including the culture of the university."

What did Descartes write that set us on the road to Facebook? He wrote that scientific knowledge can lead to medical discoveries that improve health and prolong life. Montás calls this proposition "Faustian." He says that it implies that there is "no higher value than the subsistence and satisfaction of the self," and that this is what college students are being taught today.

Humanists cannot win a war against science. They should not be fighting a war against science. They should be defending their role in the knowledge business, not standing aloof in the name of unspecified and unspecifiable higher things. They need to connect with disciplines outside the humanities, to get out of their silos.

Art and literature have cognitive value. They are records of the ways human beings have made sense of experience. They tell us something about the world. But they are not privileged records. A class in social psychology can be as revelatory and inspiring as a class on the novel. The idea that students develop a greater capacity for empathy by reading books in literature classes about people who never existed than they can by taking classes in fields that study actual human behavior does not make a lot of sense.

Knowledge is a tool, not a state of being. Universities are in this world, and education is about empowering people to deal with things as they are. Students at places like Brown and Columbia want to make the world a better place, and they can see, as Descartes saw, that science can provide tools to do this. If some of those students make a lot of money, who cares?

Isn't it a little arrogant for humanists like the authors of these books to presume that economics professors and life-science professors and computer-science professors don't care about their students' personal development? The humanities do not have a monopoly on moral insight. Reading Weinstein and Montás, you might conclude that English professors, having spent their entire lives reading and discussing works of literature, must be the wisest and most humane people on earth. Take my word for it, we are not. We are not better or worse than anyone else. I have read and taught hundreds of books, including most of the books in the Columbia Core. I teach a great-books course now. I like my job, and I think I understand many things that are important to me much better than I did when I was seventeen. But I don't think I'm a better person. ♦