FIRST THINGS

DISSENTERS FROM DISENCHANTMENT

by
Mark Bauerlein
May 2018

Monterey Peninsula College is a two-year school in California. Students in the Great Books Program there don't want to live in a disenchanted world. They told me so last month, when I spent a day interviewing them and their teachers. Some followed up on email. Nobody mentioned disenchantment—that's my term—but they expressed meager yearning for the material success that so many students have made an end in itself. Some are young, not long out of high school. Some are middle-aged, with a career in the military or health care behind them, others elderly and looking for diversion. At Monterey Peninsula, students may pursue a certificate in massage therapy or enroll in "Business 30: Global Management" or "Career Planning Throughout the Lifespan," but these students preferred "Introduction to Great Books" and "Great Books and Civil Liberties."

I asked them: Why read books that have little bearing on twenty-first-century careers? What books struck them the most? They were eager to explain.

One student mentioned Kafka and noted, "Some of this stuff is devastating, and devastation is coming, and this will help you prepare for that." He'd done a tour in Iraq and didn't speak lightly. He had heard a George Steiner line in class that stuck with him, and which he'd adapted to a personal motto: "What we have inside the bastards can't touch."

Another, a woman in her late thirties with a four-year-old child, brought up *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. "It was like nonfiction. . . . I was on the edge of my seat waiting for something awful to happen, and it never did happen." She's alert to difficult situations and how people respond to them. Ivan stays alive, she wrote in a paper she left with me, because he "lived by a certain code of conduct." She emphasized a scene in *Candide*, the one in which he decides to marry his beloved Cunegonde in spite of how horrifyingly ugly and scarred she has become during their time apart.

Monterey, Carmel, and Big Sur seem a long way from misery. The college campus sits on a hill above the glorious bay. History doesn't extend much further than Steinbeck, Monterey Pop, and Monterey Jack cheese. Remnants of the counterculture blend with sky-high property values. But the students, one teacher said, "feel a companionship with Antigone." They don't need authors to "represent" them; they don't have any problem with "difference" at all. They admire talent and insight and fortitude. A student, a white man in his fifties, likes the "greatness" of the works, but highlighted the un-great circumstances of many writers (Epictetus born a slave, Boethius dying in prison, Cervantes enslaved and tortured by Muslim pirates). A young Hispanic woman aiming for a career in social welfare admits that she loves Ayn Rand's early novella *Anthem*, though she rejects Rand's libertarianism entirely. In fact, she thinks a great books course should be required of all students: "They're craving it," though they may not realize it until they get a taste of the quality and depth of the discussion.

These are not elite people. Perhaps that's why they seem to recognize the old justification for great books programs, a socio-political one. Ever since the 1980s, great books have been associated with Eurocentric superiority, the perpetuation of an inequitable society. But before that, great books courses were justified on opposite grounds. Not to teach working-class kids the heritage of Western thought and serious literature was to deprive them of crucial tools of uplift. Culture illiteracy was, progressives argued, a way to keep the people down. This is why the intellectuals at *Partisan Review* could be Trotskyites and apostles of high culture. The sociologist Daniel Bell characterized himself, with no contradiction, as "a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture."

But, in truth, politics are far from the minds of these students. Indeed, to turn great books into an instrument of social progress only reinforces the very disenchantment of the world that these readers find unappealing, so much so that they read dense, long, and remote works wholly irrelevant to job placement. A disenchanted eye looks for a more measurable and tactical achievement than the impression students take when Ahab strides the quarter deck. There is no clear and distinct knowledge, no practical skills that Melville's drama inevitably instills. Its influence on one reader and another is volatile and uncertain.

Disenchantment says otherwise. "What's the point?" it asks. When the gods have departed, everything must be rational and instrumental. What works gets preserved, and what doesn't is discarded. Indeterminate outcomes don't fit, including the struggle with Pilate's cynicism, the rape of Clarissa, and Emerson's nonconformity. "*This* is Disenchantment," Ernest Gellner wrote, "the Faustian purchase of cognitive, technological and administrative power, by the surrender of our previous meaningful, humanly suffused, humanly responsive, if often also menacing or capricious world." Disenchantment robs life of mystery and the mystical in order to reduce the unpredictability of tomorrow and enhance control of today.

People who approach their education as career-building seek to reduce risk. At Monterey Peninsula, they can study automotive technology, dental assisting, and fire protection technology, where the knowledge and facility they must acquire are set, standardized, and marketable. The materials and skills they master are straightforward and up-front. They are prerequisites for a job. We should appreciate this kind of learning for what it is. I assume that those students love what they do and bring a creative spirit to their practice. A young man at North Idaho College, a two-year school in Coeur d'Alene, told me not long ago in glowing tones how much he enjoyed his auto upholstery classes, and I believed every word. (A teacher later that day spoke of that fellow as a genuine craftsman inside a car.) But education in those classes is a linear progress with a predetermined end.

Great books aren't like that. You can't be sure about them. As David Clemens, founder of the program and now retired, said to me, "Great books aren't always good books." The moral value of a work doesn't always match up with its aesthetic excellence and historical influence. T. S. Eliot labeled Dryden "the great master of contempt," Pope "the great master of hatred," and Swift "the great master of disgust." One must be careful not to savor their satire too much. (I find it irresistible.)

The current director of the program in Monterey is Paola Gilbert, a reading specialist and a Muslim. She sees great books as preparation for the great conversation, the reading of and responding to the geniuses of the past, followed by debate with fellow students. We don't know what students will say in that conversation, but to enter it, she insists, they have to read the great books first. (The editors of the *Great Books of the Western World* project thought the same thing and titled the first volume "The Great Conversation.") Professor Gilbert insists, "The minute you stop trying to define greatness in any realm, you stop trying to think deeply about anything"—which means she expects much of her students.

What I see at Monterey Peninsula reflects an abiding truth. Young and old adults spend their energy on great books because they want depth, they want magnificence; things that have lingered for three hundred years, words quoted again and again, characters imitated by thousands of real people. Young men all across Germany started dressing like Werther because Goethe made his sad story an exalted one. They wanted to be exalted, too. As a bearded guy in his late twenties said before photographing me with his 1940s Graflex press camera, "Great books are where the ideas are; that's where history is made." The rushing surface of social media is one thing, the unchanging seven-hundred-year-old verses of *Inferno* another.

Those who read great books at Monterey know they'll never be like the youths portrayed in *The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids* (2006), high schoolers who pile up AP courses and absolutely must get into Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. The Monterey students prefer great conversationalists, Ovid and Jane Austen, not Facebook friends. They are dissenters from

disenchantment, looking for another kind of success. They carry tradition forward in the Burkean way, conscious of their responsibility to the past and their role in the future.

Forty years ago, the Hartford Appeal, co-written by Fr. Neuhaus, began with the first error of contemporary life: "Modern thought is superior to all past forms of understanding reality." The self-congratulation has only grown stronger since then, and it tells rising generations they needn't bother with dead letters. But if those old creations are momentous, brilliant, affecting, sublime, and enduring, the presentist bias crumbles. That's the best persuasion: Read the old masters and a bit of those qualities may rub off on you. One man wrote to me in an email, "As a 20-year-old, I revel in the notion that my ideas are novel—they never are." It's not a disappointment. He is ennobled rather than diminished by knowing that he learns rather than invents what is lasting.