

THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE TRADITIONAL AMERICAN COLLEGE (1638-1870)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the earliest period of American higher education, the period of the traditional college, when the humanities, and especially literature and language, reigned supreme as curricular subjects and when college students were obliged, since their curriculum was almost entirely prescribed, to focus on such subjects. I aim to show, first, how the traditional college was organized, second, what subjects formed the prescribed curriculum, third, which pedagogic methods were used and, fourth, how and why literature and language were taught. After this, I will review the social, cultural and intellectual aims of the traditional college and discuss the role played by the study of the humanities and, more specifically, by the study of literature and language. Finally, I will discuss the reasons for the decline of the traditional college system and the consequences this had for the academic study of the humanities and of literature and language.

Keywords: *American higher education, traditional colleges, classical colleges, classics, classical rhetoric, English rhetoric, English departments, English literature, English major*

GELENEKSEL AMERİKAN ÜNİVERSİTELERİNDE (1638-1870) DİL VE EDEBİYAT ÇALIŞMALARI

ÖZ

Bu makale, sosyal bilimler ve özellikle de edebiyat ve dil bölümlerinin öğretim programlarında ağırlıklı programlar olduğu ve üniversite öğrencilerinin müfredatlarda neredeyse tamamen öngörüldüğü için bu konulara odaklanmak zorunda oldukları, geleneksel üniversite dönemi olan, Amerikan yüksek öğreniminin ilk dönemini incelemektedir. İlk geleneksel üniversitenin nasıl yapılandırıldığını, ikinci olarak öngörülen müfredatın hangi konulardan oluştuğunu, üçüncü olarak hangi öğretim yöntemlerinin kullanıldığını ve dördüncü olarak da edebiyat ve dilin nasıl ve neden öğretildiğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktayım. Daha sonra, geleneksel üniversitenin sosyal, kültürel ve entelektüel amaçlarını değerlendirecek ve sosyal bilimler, özellikle de edebiyat ve dil çalışmalarının oynadığı rolü tartışacağım. Son olarak, geleneksel üniversite sisteminin çöküşünün nedenlerini ve bu durumun sosyal bilimlerin ve edebiyat ve dil alanlarının akademik çalışmalarındaki etkilerini tartışacağım.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Amerikan yüksek öğrenimi, geleneksel üniversiteler, klasik üniversiteler, klasikler, klasik retorik, İngilizce retorığı, İngilizce bölümleri, İngiliz edebiyatı, İngilizce dalı*

Introduction

The English major, for many decades one of the most popular majors in American colleges and universities, has declined precipitately in importance over the past several decades. In the 1970-71 academic year approximately 7.6% of all undergraduates were majoring in English, whereas in the 2003-04 year the figure dropped to 3.9% and has continued to drop over the past decade (Chase, 2009: 1; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012: Table 244). Various causes have been adduced to explain this but, at the most obvious level, the decline would appear to be part of a larger decline of student interest in the humanities as a whole. Thus, whereas in the early 1970s humanities majors accounted for 30% of all undergraduate majors, they now account, according to some statistical analyses, for less than 11.5% (Humanities Resource Online: Indicator II-1). This shift away from the humanities in American higher education is, however, the latest of several such shifts. The first shift, and by far the most important, occurred as a result of the higher educational reforms of the late 1860s and the 1870s which swept away the traditional college system, with its narrow, prescribed liberal-arts curriculum, and put in its place the modern American university, with its elective system of undergraduate coursework, its numerous specialized departments of study and its focus on the augmentation of knowledge rather than its preservation.

American institutions of higher learning have a history which stretches back almost four centuries. In colonial and early republican days, the ruling elite established and funded colleges in order to transmit its social and cultural values to subsequent generations of religious, cultural and governmental leaders. These social and cultural goals shaped the institutional goals of the colleges, the chief of which were to provide students with a common social and intellectual outlook and to educate students to be pious, well-rounded and well-mannered gentlemen. The institutional goals, in turn, influenced how the colleges were organized, which curricular subjects they offered, and how the curriculum was taught. The organization of the colleges was relatively simple: all students in the same year studied the same subjects and all students passed through four years of mostly prescribed studies. The curriculum emphasized humanities subjects and was centered on the study of classical language and literature. The pedagogic method depended primarily on rote and recitation, which meant that students were required to memorize, by rote, the lines to be covered in each day's classes and then to recite these lines in class. In effect, this meant that relatively little material could be covered during the four years. This did not, however, pose any significant problems since the colleges placed a premium on the preservation of traditional values and concepts and did not encourage either the questioning or the augmentation of this knowledge. Since all colleges taught the same subjects in the same fashion, a college education functioned effectively to inculcate the social, cultural and intellectual values of the ruling elite in students who, for the most part, came from that elite and, thus,

to prepare them for their various social and cultural roles. The aims of American higher educational institutions, as well as their administrative structures, their organization of studies, their pedagogic method and their curricular focus, remained largely static until the traditional system was swept away by the educational reforms of the late 1860s and the 1870s.

1. The Institutional Aims and the Organization of the Traditional Colleges

Of the 20,000 colonists who landed in New England between 1620 and 1640, around one hundred had received higher education, some seventy at Cambridge and thirty at Oxford (Morison, 1935: 161-70, 359-410; Hall, 1930: 97). The majority of the hundred were clergymen. Most were leaders in their separate communities; some were involved in the larger governance of the new colonies. It was at the instigation of such men that in 1636, some sixteen years after the landing of the *Mayflower*, Harvard College was created by order of the General Court of Massachusetts. The immediate aim was to raise up a broadly educated clergy in order not “to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the Dust.” Harvard was not, however, intended as a mere seminary, for from the outset it was declared that the college’s purpose was also “to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity” (*New England’s First Fruits*, 1643: 23). Moreover, though Harvard’s general tone was profoundly religious, its curriculum was primarily focused on classical language and literature, and to a lesser extent on classical history, classical philosophy, ethics, political philosophy and basic sciences, that is, on what was considered at the time to be the foundation of a liberal education.

The administrative organization of Harvard, and of the colleges founded over the next two centuries, was directly borrowed from English models, particularly from Cambridge and Oxford. As in England, the final authority was vested neither in the students nor in the state but in the “trustees,” who “hold the property of the Institution, appoint and remove all officers of instruction and government, fix and alter their salaries, enact all laws and see these laws are carried into effect” (Wayland, 1842: 23). In America, the main (and initially the sole) officer of government was the college president, to whom authority was usually devolved both over faculty appointments, over curricular decisions and over serious disciplinary matters. The officers of instruction included the president and several professors, all of whom were responsible for broad areas of the curriculum, along with several tutors, usually recent graduates who were made responsible for first-year coursework.¹

¹ The number of instructors remained low even at leading colleges until well into the nineteenth century. In addition, few of the instructors possessed much expertise in the subjects they taught, though some college presidents and the occasional professor did acquire wide, if not necessarily profound, learning. In America, prior to the educational reforms of the late 1860s and 1870s, serious scholars and scientists typically earned their livings as clergymen, doctors, writers, or touring lecturers; they generally pursued

From 1638, when Harvard first opened its doors, until late in the nineteenth century, admission was limited to those students with the means and leisure to acquire a fluent knowledge of Latin, which was initially the language of instruction, and a basic knowledge of Greek (Morison, 1935: 33; Kelley, 1974: 156). As in the English academic system, all students were put through the same studies, all were obliged to reside in the same buildings, and all were subject to the same rigid discipline. As Wayland put it:

Both [systems] adopt the principles of established classes, to each of which a whole year of study is allotted; of a fixed course of study for every pupil;...of residence within the college premises; and...of responsibility in the officers for the moral conduct of the pupil, and connected with this a provision for the students' board. In other words, every college is a large boarding school for pupils of an advanced age, providing for each student, board, lodging and oversight, and obliging every one to go through the same course of studies within the same time, and terminating, unless for some special cause, in the degree of Bachelor of Arts. In all these essential points of the system the English and American colleges exactly coincide. (1842: 20)

The only significant administrative innovation in America was the extension, at Harvard in 1654, of the prescribed course of studies from three years to four, which remained the norm from that time forward. Apart from this, American colleges survived right through to the 1870s without significant changes being made either to their administrative system, their organization of studies, or their pedagogic practices. The patterns established at Harvard in the mid 1600s were closely imitated at William and Mary (founded in 1693), Yale (1701), Princeton (1746), Columbia (1754), Pennsylvania (1755), Brown (1764), Rutgers (1766) and Dartmouth (1769), as well as the colleges founded after the American Revolution.

2. The Curriculum of the Traditional College

The prescribed curriculum was, however, somewhat less static than the other elements of the traditional college system. Harvard's first printed curriculum, issued in 1643 in the *New England's First Fruits*, reads as follows:

The second and third day of the weeke [Monday and Tuesday], read Lectures, as followeth. To the first yeare [students] at 8th. of the clock in the morning *Logick*, the first three quarters, *Physicks* the last quarter. To the second yeare [students], at the 9th. houre, *Ethicks* and *Politicks*, at convenient distances of time. To the third yeare [students] at the 10th. [houre] *Arithmetick* and *Geometry*, the three first quarters, *Astronomy* the last.

research as a part-time avocation (Jencks and Riesman, 1968: 236-37; Conser, 1993: 11-12).

Afternoone. The first year disputes [i.e., engages in philosophical disputations] at the second hour. The 2d. yeare at the 3d. houre. The 3d. yeare at the 4th [houre] every one in his Art.

The 4th. day [Wednesday] reads Greeke.

To the first yeare the *Etymologie* and *Syntax* at the eighth houre. To the 2d. yeare at the 9th. houre, *Prosodia* and *Dialectic[s]*.

Afternoone. The first yeare at 2d houre practice the precepts of *Grammar* in such Authors as have variety of words. The 2d. yeare at 3d. houre practice in *Poësy*, *Nonnus*, *Duport*, or the like. The 3d. yeare perfect their *Theory* before noone, and exercise *Style*, *Composition*, *Imitation*, *Epitome*, both in Prose and Verse, afternoone. *The fifth day [Thursday] reads Hebrew, and the Easterne Tongues.*

Grammar to the first yeare houre the 8th. To the 2d. *Chaldee* at the 9th houre. To the 3d. *Syriack* at the 10th. houre.

Afternoone. The first yeare practice in the Bible at the 2d. houre. The 2d. in *Ezra* and *Daniel* at the 3d. houre. The 3d. at the 4th houre in *Trostius* New Testament.

The 6th. day [Friday] reads [Classical] Rhetorick to all [years] at the 8th. houre. Declamations [in Greek and Latin] at the 9th. So ordered that every Scholler may declaime once a moneth. The rest of the day vacat Rhetoricis studiis.

The 7th. day [Saturday] reads Divinity Catecheticall [to all years] at the 8th. houre, Common places at the 9th. houre. Afternoone. The first houre reads history in the Winter, The nature of plants in the Summer. (1643: 28-30)

In short, students attended 6 days of prescribed classes, the exact content of which depended on the year which the student was in: 1 day was spent on Greek language and literary studies; 1 day on classical rhetoric, that is, on Greek and Latin composition and declamation; 1 day on biblical languages; 2 days on logic, mathematics and moral philosophy (including ethics and politics); and 1 day on doctrinal studies, plus ancient history and natural science.

During the eighteenth century, numerous science professorships were established and the science coursework was radically revised to banish the vestiges of scholasticism and to incorporate the researches of Galileo, Boyle, Bacon, Descartes, Newton and others (Guralnick, 1975: 6-17; Snow, 1907: 81-82, 93-97). Yet, despite this, Yale's curriculum of 1779, as noted down in President Stiles' diary, 9 Nov. 1779, does not appear substantially different from Harvard's 1643 curriculum, except that the Semitic languages have now disappeared, somewhat more scientific work is being taught, and English rhetoric has entered the curriculum:

Freshman Class: Virgilius, Ciceronis Orationes, [Atkinson's and Wilson's] Greek Testament, [John] Ward's Arithmetic.

Sophomore Class: [Atkinson's and Wilson's] Graecum Test. [continued], Horatius, [Robert] Louth's [Introduction to] English Grammar, [Isaac] Watt's Logic, Guthrie's Geography [William Guthrie's *New Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar*], [Nathaniel] Hammond's [Elements of] Algebra, [John] Holmes' [Art of] Rhetoric [Made Easy], Ward's Geometry [from John Ward's *Young Mathematician's Guide, Including Arithmetic, Geometry, Conic Sections*], [Thomas] Vincent's [Explanations of the Assembly's Shorter] Catechism, Saturdays Ward's Math.

Junior Class: Ward's Trigonometry, Atkinson's and Wilson's Do. Graec. Testament [continued], Cic. de Oratione, [Benjamin] Martin's Phil[osophical Grammar], 3 vol., Vincent [Shorter Catechism] Saturdays.

Senior Class: Locke's Human Understanding, [William] Wollaston's Rel[igion of] Nat[ure] Delineated, and for Saturdays, [Johannes] Wollebius [Abridgement of Christian Divinity], [William] Ames' Medulla [SS. Theologiae], Graec. Test. (or Edwards on the Will [Jonathan Edwards' *Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will*], sometimes discontinued), President Clap's Ethics [Clap's *Essays on the Nature and Foundation of Moral Virtue and Obligation*]. (qtd. in Snow, 1907: 79)²

In the 1820s, the curriculum was extended to include coursework in the newer sciences, including work in plane, spherical and analytical geometry, in mechanics, optics and astronomy and in chemistry, botany and biology; these materials were made part of the prescribed curriculum (Thwing, 1928: ch. 13; Guralnick, 1975: chs. 2-6). Several institutions also began to offer courses on the vernacular languages and literatures and on modern history; these courses were, however, only offered as upper-level electives. The first college to offer a course on English literature was Amherst. In 1826, the Amherst trustees roundly declared, in their *Second Report of the Amherst Faculty*, that "the time has come for the more critical study of some of the admired classics in our own language, by a portion at least, of the liberally educated in every College" since "no subject has higher claims upon the American scholar [i.e., student], or can more richly reward his diligence" (qtd. in Foster, 1911: 104). Yet, English literature was only offered at Amherst as an optional course in the final year and by 1830 it was discontinued. Also in the 1820s, Harvard and Dartmouth managed to set up optional courses on English, French, German and Spanish language and literature, though they were discontinued at Dartmouth in the

² Other frequently studied authors include Homer, Xenophon, Euripides, Demosthenes, Sophocles, Lucian, Tacitus, Sallust and Longinus. Precisely which authors were covered appears to have depended largely on the tastes of a college's president and trustees, though these tastes no doubt depended as well on wider shifts in public tastes.

early 1830s. Even at Harvard, they continued to be offered only on an occasional basis.³ In the end, the innovations of the 1820s did little to affect the college's basic curricular orientation. As Yale's President Porter noted in 1870, "The American Colleges have been first and uniformly schools of classical study and learning...This has been universally true, the few exceptions being too inconsiderable to deserve attention" (39).

3. The Pedagogic System of the Traditional College

The standard pedagogic method was rote memorization and in-class recitation, a method which remained unchanged for the entire history of the traditional college. Philosophical disputations were held from time to time during the year; rhetorical declamations, in Greek and Latin, were required of students at fairly regular intervals (Morison, 1936: 169). But recitations were a daily matter and preparing for them consumed a great deal of time. Students were obliged to memorize passages from textbooks, word for word, and then to recite these passages daily to their instructors. Typically, students were required to attend two or three one-hour recitation classes per day; instructors did their utmost to ensure that students spent the hours between recitations, and a certain amount of time in the evenings, preparing for their classes by memorizing from textbooks.⁴

The way in which recitation classes were conducted did not change greatly over time. Lyman Bagg, who looked back fondly on his years at Yale (1865-69), describes the system as follows:

The recitations [i.e., classes] are held daily—the first immediately after prayers in the morning, the second at half-past eleven, and the third at 5 in the afternoon—except on Wednesday and Saturday, when the latter is omitted. Each is an hour in length, and as there are 35 or 40 [students] in a division...less than half can be individually called upon, each time. In all the classes, therefore, most of the officers [of instruction] call up their men, by lot,—drawing their names, haphazard, from a box which contains them,—and so making each individual liable to be examined on every day's lesson. (1871: 551)

Brander Matthews, who looked back unfondly on his years at Columbia (1868-72), describes the same pedagogic system with rather less enthusiasm:

³ English language and literature courses did not take a *permanent* place on any college curriculum until the 1850s—first at Harvard, then at Lafayette, Middlebury and several other colleges. These exceptions aside, courses on English language and literature were not offered on a regular basis in American colleges until the higher education system was reformed shortly after the Civil War.

⁴ To ensure that students' time was spent on such profitable matters, fairly draconian rules appear to have been required. For examples, see Harvard's "Rules and Precepts [of 1646]," rpt. in Morison, 1935: 333-337; Yale's "College Laws of 1745," rpt. in Dexter, 1896: 402; and Hamilton's "Proceedings of the Trustees...1816," rpt. in Ibbotson, ed., 1922: 173-74.

The program of studies was rigidly restricted and it did not vary year after year....At ten our solid class went to its first recitation; at eleven it moved on for another; at twelve it presented itself before a third professor....When I say that we went to three recitations a day, I mean it; we recited exactly as we had done in school. We were expected to prepare so many lines of Latin and Greek, or so many problems in mathematics, or so many pages of the text-book in logic or in political economy; and in the classroom we were severally called upon to disgorge this undigested information. And it was information that we were expected to acquire, rather than the ability to turn this to account and to think for ourselves. (1917: 106-107)

Even as late as the 1860s, the core recitation classes on Greek and Latin were typically taught by having students recite literal translations, then analyze difficult grammatical matters and perhaps repeat memorized rules. As Lyman Bagg observed:

In a Latin or Greek recitation one [student] may be asked to read or scan a short passage, another to translate it, a third to answer questions as to its construction, and so on; or all this and more may be required of the same individual. The reciter is expected simply to answer the questions which are put to him, not to ask any of his instructor, or dispute his assertions....Sometimes, when a wrong translation or a wrong answer has been given, the instructor corrects it forthwith, but more frequently he makes no sign, though if the failure be almost complete he may call upon another to go over the ground again. Perhaps after the lesson has been recited the instructor may translate it, comment upon it, point out the mistakes which have been made, and so on. The 'advance' of one day is always the 'review' of the next, and a more perfect recitation is always expected on the second occasion;—a remark which is not confined to the languages but applies equally to all the studies of the course. (Bagg, 1871: 552-53; cf. Smyth in Morison, ed., 1930: 55-56)

The sciences, along with other subjects, were typically taught, right up to the 1870s, in the same way as the classics, by rote memorization from textbooks and by daily recitation. Andrew D. White, Cornell's founding president, recalled that, in his natural science class at Yale in the 1850s, the class "text-book was simply repeated by rote....and the men who could give the words of the text most glibly secured the best mark" (White, 1905: 27; cf. Guralnick, 1975: 17). Typically, the only exception from the regimen of rote and recitation was the set of lectures in the fourth year, which were usually given by the college president and which concerned moral philosophy and its larger social, political and ethical implications.

Learning by means of rote memorization, in-class recitation and the correction of recitations did not, of course, permit rapid progress. Though texts

were studied intensively, the list of the works covered over the four years of the bachelor degree was very short. Lyman Bagg recalled that:

The [Yale] class of '69, during all the first term of the freshman year, pursued the study of...four works...In the Odyssey, beginning at the seventh book, 850 lines were read, —about 20 lines being the ordinary lesson...In Livy (Lincoln's) part of the first two books, 32 pages, were read, —the ordinary lesson being from half a page to a page in length. In Euclid (Playfair's), the first five books, with a very few omissions, were recited, —in lessons of two pages each, after the first two books, with which the student was supposed to be familiar when he entered, has been more rapidly gone over. In Algebra (Day's), eight sections were recited, beginning on page 107 with 'simple equations containing two or more unknown quantities,' and ending on page 289 with the 'involutions of binomials'. (1871: 558-59)

In all, first-year Yale students in the late 1860s only studied *parts* of some *ten* texts. Many students, at Yale as at other institutions, engaged in a wide range of extracurricular reading but little of it appears to have been connected to the class texts since ancillary reading was neither necessary nor generally encouraged (Matthews, 1917: 107).

4. The Uses of Classical Literature and Classical Rhetoric

The prescribed college curriculum covered a variety of materials, including ancient history, political philosophy, ethics, theology, mathematics and, especially after the 1820s, a considerable range of basic scientific materials. Yet, from the foundation of Harvard in the 1630s through to the educational transformations of the late 1860s and the 1870s, the intellectual culture of the American college remained predominantly literary. In the first place, the study of the classical literary works took up as much as thirty to forty per cent of the four-year course of studies. It is true that students were rarely fluent in Greek or Latin when they entered college and that, even in their final college year, the coursework on Greek and Latin focused primarily on close textual analysis, that is, on grammatical construction, lexical analysis, scansion, pronunciation and translation. Yet, despite this rather mechanical pedagogy, the traditional college did manage to instill in most students an affection for classical literature and culture. Indeed, it was not until the mid nineteenth century that college graduates began to complain in any numbers about the classical curriculum and, then, the complaints were mainly centered on the inadequacies of the traditional curriculum in preparing them for the new social, political and economic realities of American life.

The traditional college's intellectual culture can also be seen in its curricular efforts to inculcate the essential elements of "good" literary and oratorical style. The classical literary works on the curriculum, from Homer's epics and Demosthenes' orations to Juvenal's satires and Pliny's epistles, were studied in part because they offered models of good style in their various

genres, as did Thucydides' and Livy's histories and Aristotle's political and ethical studies. To reinforce the college's curricular focus on proper style, the classes on classical rhetoric obliged students to memorize and recite from manuals that laid out the basics of each genre of oratory and writing. Rhetorics used in the early days included Cicero's *de Oratione*, as well as Athonius' *Progymnasta* (a fourth-century Greek rhetoric) and Thomas Farnaby's *Index Rhetoricus scholis et institutioni tenerioris aetatis accomodatus* (a popular Renaissance rhetoric). By the mid eighteenth century, Quintillian's *Institutio Oratoria* had joined Cicero as the standard college Latin rhetoric (Snow, 1907: 59, 93; Morison, 1936: 172-73, 177).

First-year students were expected to be already fairly proficient in *reading* ordinary Latin texts, as well as simplified Greek texts. They were, however, not expected to *write* much more than a basic Latin and a very basic Greek. One of the aims of the classical rhetoric classes, which usually took up one day per week in each of the four years, was to ensure that students ended up writing both classical languages in an idiomatically correct style. But the rigorous training in Greek and Latin composition had a further purpose as well, for "it was all done in preparation for delivering orations, both in the classical tongues and in English" (Morison, 1936: 179).⁵ In its emphasis on *oral* literary culture, the traditional college was of course simply responding to the needs of a society where books were initially scarce and expensive and where opinions were, even after the scarcity and price of books were no longer an issue, still "influenced more by the orator than by the author" (Thwing, 1906: 28). The traditional college's emphasis on oral rhetorical training and all that improved oratorical facility, including training in Latin and Greek composition and enforced memorization of quotable literary texts and diverse tags, made sense when, as was the case well into the nineteenth century, the majority of graduates were likely to become clergymen or to hold other positions of authority which would require them to address public gatherings with some frequency.

5. The Teaching of English Rhetoric and Its Uses

Initially, in the traditional American college, the language of instruction and of all textbooks was Latin. In the early eighteenth century, English took over as the language of the classroom and of most textbooks (Morison, 1936: 169, 179). English rhetoric, however, did not enter the curriculum until the mid eighteenth century. English literature, with a few minor exceptions, did not enter the curriculum at all until after the higher educational reforms of the late 1860s and the 1870s. Thus, while students minutely studied a wide range of classical literary works, they did not typically encounter any English literary

⁵ Presumably, students were expected to apply to their native tongue the same rhetorical principles they employed to render the ancient tongues eloquent.

works in the classroom, except for the brief excerpts found in their English rhetorics (Matthews, 1917: 108; Dwight, 1903: 153).⁶

Even after English rhetoric received curricular status, it remained relatively unimportant in comparison to Greek and Latin rhetoric. Students were typically required to attend English rhetoric classes in each of their four years but, in the mid and late eighteenth century, one or other of these classes might, even at leading institutions, briefly drop off the curriculum due to staffing shortages (Snow, 1907: 48).⁷ Initially, the textbooks used to teach English rhetoric were merely imitations of the simplest sort of Latin rhetoric and were often little more than compendia of tropes. Works in this vein include John Holmes' *Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* (London, 1738), which was on the 1779 Yale curriculum cited above. Such rhetorics aimed, as one writer put it, to help students acquire "a Plenty of Words and Matter" that they could use "for avoiding of the odious repetition of the same words and phrases; for the beautifying of Speech with a grateful variety of Expressions; for the more easie translating Authors into another Language...; for an extemporary declaring of the mind, either in Word or Writing" (Poole, 1663). To ensure that students acquired a variety "of Words and Matter" and received the benefits attendant upon such acquisition, rhetorics of this sort exposed students to scores of tropes which they were duly required to memorize and then recite in class.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, English rhetorics underwent significant changes, evolving from compendia of tropes into more systematic introductions to the various forms of literary and oratorical composition. This new sort of rhetoric was quickly appropriated by the colleges since it effectively reinforced the aims of the classical rhetorics already in use, that is, not simply to provide samples of pretty writing and useable quotations but also to inculcate the basics of good style in the various literary and oratorical genres. Leading the way was John Ward's *System of Oratory* (London, 1759), which made its way onto college curricula within a decade after its publication. In two volumes covering some eight hundred pages, Ward examines various oratorical genres, with their different styles of argumentation aimed at influencing different kinds of audiences. From there, he proceeds to analyze the main rhetorical devices, complete with examples ancient and modern, and then discusses several compositional genres and concludes by inspecting the mechanics of pronunciation, enunciation and gesture.

While Ward is somewhat lacking in expository clarity and critical incisiveness, his defects were more than remedied by Hugh Blair in his equally long *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London, 1783), which entered the

⁶ Students did, however, do a great deal of extracurricular reading of literature as is evident in Hammond, 1846-48: passim.

⁷ The sciences fared little better in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for during this period the colleges rarely had more than a president, a professor or two and several tutors (Guralnick, 1975: 2-3).

curriculum at Yale in 1785 and at Harvard in 1788 and remained the standard rhetoric in American colleges right up to the 1830s and, at some colleges, up to the 1860s.⁸ Blair, who was Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University from 1762 to 1782, reconnected with the expansive vision of rhetoric found in the best classical and Renaissance texts. Like Ward's *System of Oratory*, Blair's rhetoric focused on expressivity in prose, poetry and speech, expounding in detail on the diction appropriate to each genre, on the creation of harmonious sentences, on the proper use of tropes and on sundry other matters to be mastered in order to orate (and write) persuasively. Yet, whereas Ward mostly limited himself to the standard oratorical styles described by Aristotle (in his *Rhetoric*, book 1, chapters 3-10) and by other Greek and Roman rhetoricians, Blair addressed these as well as the newer forms of oratory used in the pulpit, the courtroom and the legislative assembly. And, while Ward only briefly examined several literary genres, Blair led his readers through detailed analyses of a panoply of genres, ranging from pastoral poetry to lyric, didactic, descriptive, epic and dramatic poetry and from "fictitious histories" and "familiar novels" (such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gil Blas*) to historical expositions and philosophical studies.

Though Blair's *Rhetoric* remains highly prescriptive (his prime concern is in each instance to establish the rules applicable to a particular genre, to a particular form of argument, or to a particular trope), he stands out from his predecessors and successors for the persuasive manner in which he moves from generalizations to classifications to specific examples and, finally, to criticism. Indeed, Blair's text was the first book used in American colleges which offered students a systematic and inclusive view of English rhetoric and which provided them with a real glimpse of English literature (albeit in brief excerpts) and of extended critical analyses. Yet, for all that, in Blair's work and in American imitations such as John Quincy Adams' *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (1810), literature and criticism were presented not so much as subjects worthy of interest in and of themselves, but as aids for developing proper oratorical and writing styles. And, as ever, students were expected simply to memorize sections of their rhetoric textbook and to recite these in class.

Thus, despite the improvement in rhetoric textbooks in the late eighteenth-century, the pedagogic method employed in rhetoric classes remained entirely unaltered and was, indeed, to remain so right up the late 1860s. The organization of the prescribed English rhetoric courses also remained unchanged: when staff numbers permitted, students in the first year typically focused on the basics of grammar, oratory and written composition, in the second and third year on the advanced principles of oratory and writing and, in the fourth year, on the principles of forensics (that is, formal argumentations).

⁸ Blair's rhetoric went through 131 editions through to 1911, some 37 of these being published in America (Harding, 1965: vii-viii, xxviii).

The main focus remained on *oratorical* composition and practice rather than on *written* composition and practice. This focus was quite practical since, as we have suggested, most college graduates still went on to a career in commerce or to a career in one of the three traditional professions (medicine, the law and the ministry) and, in order to gain respect in these occupations, they would need to possess a good oratorical style.⁹ This was especially true if they were to be lawyers or ministers,¹⁰ but also true if, in time, they stood for public office, for the surest path to political fame, even in the mid nineteenth century, was through brilliant oratory, as was shown by John Calhoun, Henry Clay, Stephen Douglas and Daniel Webster.

Instruction on writing in English was rather more paltry. Students were, of course, required to memorize the rules governing the various genres of writing as well as the tropes appropriate to the various genres, but they were usually given “little or no instruction in the art itself, in the actual practice of writing” (Matthews, 1917: 108). Nevertheless, they were expected to produce a certain number of written compositions on set themes (or, if they were lucky, on themes of their own choice), in which they were expected to display their knowledge of the various matters recited in class. Once a month (or once a term or, at laxer colleges, once a year), students were also obliged to hand in an extended composition in English, exploiting the various tropes they had learned, on themes such as “Prudence or the most difficult of all Virtues,” “No Sin can be Committed unless one is a Free Agent,” “On Cheerfulness,” “On Taste,” and “On the Usefulness of the Passions” (qtd. from early college catalogs in Thing, 1906: 27-28; Campbell, 1957: 59). At some institutions, it seems that neither professors nor students took English compositions too seriously; at such places, when students received back their “more or less regular exercises in English composition,” the instructor’s comments typically dealt with “minor points only, and were of no significant value or importance” (Dwight, 1903: 153). At other institutions, the teaching of English composition was taken more seriously. At Harvard, for example, Edward Tyrrel Channing, the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory from 1819 to 1851, provided several generations of students, from Holmes, Dana and Lowell to Thoreau, Emerson and Parkman, with rigorous instruction in rhetoric and with systematic correction of written work (Hale, 1886: 60-61). Channing’s classroom practice,

⁹ Timothy Dwight noted that even as late as 1849, when he graduated from Yale, of the 94 students who graduated with him, 76 went into the professions or into commerce: 35 as lawyers, 25 as ministers, 7 as doctors and 9 as merchants or businessmen (Dwight, 1903: 61).

¹⁰ Classical rhetoric (and classical quotations) remained particularly important for future ministers and lawyers. Students memorized and recited “quotable expressions” from Latin and Greek authors because it was commonly felt that a “sermon or...lawyer’s plea ...lacked professional style if it had no happy quotations of that sort” (March, 1893: xix).

like that of Francis Child, who succeeded him as Boylston Professor, looked forward to the composition course which emerged in the 1870s and 1880s, where actual practice in writing took precedence over the memorization of rhetorical rules and tropes. But such classroom practices were the exception until the post-Civil-War academic transformations when the four years of prescribed English rhetoric courses were rapidly abandoned in favor of one year of prescribed English composition at the freshman level.

6. The Social, Cultural and Intellectual Roles of the Traditional College and the Function of Literary Culture

The traditional college's prescribed liberal-arts curriculum was designed to help form the minds of the young men destined for the learned professions, for the higher commercial realms and, perhaps later in life, for civic, state or federal government. While the curriculum covered a variety of humanities and science subjects, the central focus was on the study of literature and rhetoric and more specifically on the study of classical literature and rhetoric. In part, this emphasis was purely practical. Whatever the deficiencies of the instructional methods, the training in classical rhetoric and English rhetoric, and the use of classical works as models of excellent style, was an effective way of preparing young people for their future positions since it taught them the oratorical and writing skills that they would likely need in their chosen professions. The traditional college did not, of course, provide direct training in professional matters, but it did control access to the learned professions, for admission to the specialized academies that trained candidates for the legal, ministerial and medical professions was, until the mid nineteenth century, almost invariably limited to college graduates.¹¹ Furthermore, the colleges also largely controlled access to positions in government and in the higher realms of commerce, for those hoping to achieve such positions would be expected to possess the attitudes and the polish supplied by a classical education (Porter, 1870: 94).

The traditional college did, not, however, simply aim to provide general training for future careers or to act as a gateway to the professions and to higher positions in government and business. The college also aimed to instill a specific sort of mental culture, one which was marked by attitudes of intellectual balance and of gentlemanly amateurism. The unspecialized liberal-arts curriculum was designed, as the Yale catalogs of the 1840s put it, "to maintain such a proportion between the different branches of literature and sciences, as to form a proper symmetry and balance of character." The

¹¹ Initially, the professional academies were entirely separate institutions. According to the *American Almanac* (cited in Wayland, 1842: 8, 45), there were by 1842 some 39 theological seminaries, 31 medical schools and 10 law schools in the United States. In the early nineteenth century, some of these began to attach themselves to the colleges, but such attachments as existed tended to be rather nominal until after the academic reforms of the 1860s and 1870s.

traditional course of studies ensured that graduates could converse intelligently, as gentlemanly amateurs were expected to, about “the principles of science and literature” which formed “the common foundation of all high intellectual attainments” (excerpted in Dwight, 1903: 91). As one observer noted, the chief value of the traditional academic system did not lie “in the scholarship or absolute knowledge with which it supplies a man, but rather in that intangible thing called culture, or discipline, or mental balance, which only its possessor can appreciate, and which he cannot describe” (Bagg, 1871: 702). Clearly, however, the study of the humanities, and especially classical literature and rhetoric, took precedence in creating a balanced mental outlook. Typically, all the science subjects together amounted to little more than 20-25% of the prescribed coursework. Furthermore, in the antebellum college the study of science, however necessary it might be for symmetrical intellectual development, was typically considered a distinctly second-rate activity, “relegated to a subordinate role in academe” and “frustrated at every turn” (Smith, 1990: 43). It was generally taken for granted that the humanities, not the sciences, had taken the leading role in shaping European and American culture and, thus, that familiarity with representative literary, philosophical and historical texts, such as those offered on the prescribed curriculum, was the mark of an educated man. The possession of a bachelor degree meant that “a man had passed through that course of liberal study which, in the judgment of the community in which he lives, is necessary to a well educated man” (Wayland, 1842: 45).¹²

The traditional college system also aimed to form the character of young men and, in so doing prepare, them to take their elite social, religious, professional and economic positions. Here again the humanities portion of the prescribed curriculum played a central role. The coursework on moral philosophy (which covered both ethical issues and political philosophy) promoted the social attitude of disinterested public service while the coursework on theology (together with the obligatory attendance at chapel) fostered a Christian ethical outlook. In sum, the traditional college aimed “to prepare a select group of young men, taken for the most part from the educated and governing classes, for the learned professions” and, through its prescribed liberal-arts curriculum, to convey to them “knowledge...that would lend support to the political institutions, the moral habits, and the religious convictions acceptable to the best progressive-conservative thought of the time” (Becker, 1943: 19).

¹² Graduates also discovered, when “entering upon the active duties of life,” that their college degree had a distinct “material value,” for it created “a presumption in [their] favor, which is no contemptible thing” (45).

7. The End Of Patrician Rule And The Decline Of The Classical College

When changes came to the traditional college, they came rapidly, even suddenly. After the changes were instituted, the humanistic intellectual culture that had dominated in the traditional college now had to compete against a vast array of new scientific, vocational and utilitarian curricular contents. The radical restructuring of American higher education in the late 1860s and the 1870s occurred primarily because the old ruling elite, which founded, supported and utilized the colleges, suffered an irreversible loss of power and influence as a result of social, political and economic reforms initiated in the 1830s. The suddenness of the educational changes occurred largely because the patrician elite which owned and controlled the colleges successfully resisted most efforts at gradual reform until it was too late for the old system to be salvaged.

After the revolutionary break with England, the old colonial elite managed to retain most of its social and political authority until, in the late 1820s, a populist mood of assertive egalitarianism raised Andrew Jackson to the presidency and ushered in the age of the "common man."¹³ During the 1830s, long-standing fears that the old ruling elite was evolving into a permanent aristocracy prompted the enactment of legal measures aimed at reducing restrictions on suffrage and at eliminating the old elite's control over the civil service. The right to vote was permanently extended to all white men, thus ensuring the perpetuation of egalitarian sentiment in American political life. The old ruling elite was, by these and other legislative measures, muscled out of its former position of dominance.

The rise of Jacksonian populism and, subsequently, the rise of laissez-faire economic principles, generated social, political and economic changes that undermined the traditional college's central social functions. These changes disrupted, even destroyed, the old connection between the acquisition of a classical education and the acquisition of positions in the main religious hierarchies, in civic, state and national governments, and in the higher realms of commerce. First of all, populist impulses resulted in the decentralization of religious authority and, thus, in the decline of the authority of the traditional Congregational, Presbyterian and Episcopalian denominations and the authority of their seminaries. Few of the newer sects required formal education for their ministers or for their leaders. Secondly, the democratic populism of the 1830s and 1840s resulted in the decentralization of political power and, thus, in the decline of the old elite's political authority. Furthermore, politicians were no longer expected to be well educated. While most American leaders during and after the revolutionary period were college graduates (Chamberlain, 1901: 36),

¹³ The following analysis of mid nineteenth-century America derives in part from Schlesinger, Jr., 1945, chs. 1-5, 24-29; Hofstadter, 1963: 154-55, 164, 170, 187-88; and Blau, 1947: xiii-xxvi.

by the 1830s the colleges began to be “viewed with indifference, not to say skepticism, by the leaders in our...political life” (Hart, 1874: 344). Thirdly, at the same time that democratic populism was trimming the old ruling elite’s social and political power, the rise of laissez-faire economic principles was paring away its economic power. Beginning in the 1840s, the monopolistic commercial practices which had favored the patrician class were relentlessly attacked and laissez-faire principles were increasingly incorporated into state and federal legislation. After the mid 1860s, the new economic principles triumphed and America embarked on a period of intense and chaotic economic expansion. The industrial factory and the entrepreneurial business emerged as central features of American life. Patrician wealth, which had been based largely on property and on commercial activities, was quickly outdistanced by the wealth of a new class of entrepreneurs and industrialists.

Fourthly, at the same time that the rise of democratic populism and laissez-faire economics led to the severing of the old tie between classical education and prominent social positions, the rapid industrialization of the economy and the growing influence of middle-class utilitarianism and pragmatism resulted in increased demands for specialized occupational training and increased dissatisfaction with the unspecialized classical curriculum. In and after the mid century, the deepening division and specialization of labor in America, resulting in large part from the increasing reliance of industry on technological advances and of business on expert managerial skills, created whole new sets of occupations comprised of subspecializations ranging from structural engineering to cost accounting. Specialized knowledge and skills were increasingly required for the pursuit of careers both in the newer occupations and in the older ones (including the learned professions which were now reestablished on more systematic principles). The modern conception of the “occupational career” emerged as a result of the new demands for services, for technical expertise and for trained management. In short time, the occupational career replaced inherited wealth, familial background and classical education as the main guarantor of status and income in America (Elliott, 1972: 15-16).

In the mid nineteenth century, however, the trustees and presidents of the traditional colleges were still drawn almost exclusively from the old patrician elite and few had any affection for middle-class values of pragmatism and utility or for middle-class aspirations for specialized, occupational training. Despite the colleges’ radical decline in importance after the 1830s, college trustees and presidents continued to resist demands for specialized training and for other academic reforms and to ensure that patrician values continued to dominant in higher education long after these values had lost out in the social, political and economic spheres. By the mid century, however, graduates of the colleges were themselves fully aware of the disconnection between their college studies and actual occupations, of the fact that a classical education no longer

functioned either as a guarantor of status nor as a path to powerful or influential careers. Their complaints about the prescribed curriculum, especially the focus on Greek and Latin, became increasingly vocal (see Emerson, 1844: passim; Ruggles, 1854: 11-13). They were fully aware that a classical education no longer even functioned as the guarantor of a solid intellectual education: scholarly and scientific knowledge had by this time far outstripped the meager offerings of the traditional curriculum. For these reasons, the patrician class itself began to turn away from its colleges. By the mid century, many young Americans, both from the old elite and from the new middle classes, were heading to German universities in order to acquire the specialized scholarly and scientific training that was not available in America.¹⁴ Others simply ignored college altogether and, as a result, college enrollments declined markedly in America during the whole period between the mid 1830s and the late 1860s. Enrollments only started to climb again (and then, often very quickly, to surpass the earlier levels) when the traditional academic system was swept away and the classical college was transformed into the modern American university.¹⁵

8. Conclusion: The Rise of the Modern American University and Its Effect on the Study and Teaching of the Humanities

The widespread dismissal of classical education (a dismissal that was in fact a side-effect of political democratization, economic deregulation and rapid industrialization) prepared the way for successful attacks on the traditional curriculum in the post-Civil-War period. At that time, a new breed of college presidents emerged and set about dismantling the old system. Even though these figures were almost without exception born into the old patrician class, unlike their predecessors, they favored middle-class egalitarianism, pragmatism and utilitarianism over patrician social and educational values and thus set out to fashion an academic system that provided the specialized training which occupations and professions in the real world now required. The system they created in the late 1860s and the 1870s, entirely uprooted the traditional college system. By the late 1870s, transformed traditional colleges and newly established universities boasted an academic system where the preservation of

¹⁴ Although American students began to travel to Germany for advanced studies as early as the late 1810s, it did not become common to do so until the 1840s. Over the course of the century, more than 8000 Americans were, according to German government statistics, matriculated in German universities, with thousands more attending as auditors. The administrators who transformed the traditional American colleges in the postbellum period (and the prominent scholars who supported them) almost all received their advanced training in Germany (Thwing, 1906: 40-45; Herbst, 1965: 1-2)

¹⁵ For example, at Amherst, a typical mid-sized college, enrollments declined precipitately from 259 students in 1836-37 to 118 students in 1845-46. Enrollments did not recover to the earlier levels until the early 1870s when curricular innovations began to be introduced. From this point on they increased steadily (Tyler, 1895: 102, 299-300). For similar enrollment statistics at larger institutions, see Rudolph, 1977: 99-101.

traditional knowledge was dismissed in favor of the augmentation of specialized knowledge by scholars housed in specialized academic departments, where in-class recitations were replaced by lectures and curricular prescription by elective choice, and where the narrow unspecialized liberal-arts curriculum of the traditional college was supplanted by a wide-ranging curriculum which offered specialized coursework on any subject for which there was student demand and which placed liberal-arts courses exactly on par with utilitarian courses on accounting, professional courses on engineering and vocational courses on agriculture.

The rise of the modern academic system radically downgraded the influence of the humanities in American higher education. On the one hand, the various humanities subjects that had formed the core of the traditional curriculum were now each housed in a separate department governed by disciplinary experts who were charged with the duty of augmenting knowledge in their special area of knowledge. But humanities subjects themselves were no longer central to the curriculum nor did students typically have to take more than a couple humanities electives during their four years of studies and these could be on almost any specialized subject that tickled their fancy. Some students did of course continue to focus on the humanities, but the transformed traditional colleges and newly established universities were quickly dominated by practical-minded students from the upsurging middle classes and such students were typically more interested in scientific, vocational, utilitarian or professional studies than in humanities subjects.

The effect of the modern academic system on the classics was especially catastrophic. Greek and Latin were housed together in one department but it was accorded no special distinction. Prescribed courses Greek and Latin literature and rhetoric, which had once formed up to forty per cent of the entire curriculum, were now completely abandoned. Already in the 1870s, many institutions had released students from the requirement of taking even one classics elective. By 1900, almost all institutions had done so. In short time, the classics subsided into a relatively unpopular undergraduate major.

The modern academic system had a rather mixed effect on the study of English literature. On the positive side, English literature was finally accorded full academic status in the newly established departments of English language and literature that came into existence as part of the modern American university. Like other academic fields, the study of English was now fully professionalized, that is, turned over to expert scholars who made it into a professional scholarly discipline based on the continuous production of specialized research publications. In addition, even though the traditional college's four-year English rhetoric class had been collapsed into a one-year English composition class, this course was now the only course, of all the courses on offer in the newly expanded curriculum, that was prescribed for almost all undergraduates (and, in some institutions, is still the only such

course). On the other hand, even though professors in the newly established English departments quickly began issuing masses of research papers and monographs, the teaching of literature itself, not to mention the teaching of rhetoric, was no longer in any way central to the aims of American higher education. English was merely one of many departments in which students could choose to do their major—or not.

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