A Gadamerian Defense of the Use of Transformative Humanities Literature in Higher Education

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I recently found myself defending the intrinsic value of a liberal arts education in a room full of arts and sciences deans and department chairs at my university. Down in the bowels of the beast, as it were. The situation was tense. The math and science folks were upset that my curriculum proposal for incarcerated students—a liberal arts certificate *explicitly rooted in the humanities*—did not contain more math and science. The question was asked: "What will the students be able to *do* with this certificate?" As in, what is the practical value of this credential? As in, how is it going to get them a job? How strange, I thought. Hadn't everybody in that room had their own experiences with a liberal education, with the ways in which it tries to give us a broader view of ourselves, of others, and of the world *and* the ways in which it enables us to make more money in our future lives, among other things? The assumption at play in the college-to-job pipeline is that what is best for the student is, first and foremost, the life of a laborer, which, we might say, entails a curious failure to recognize that a person's job takes up only some fraction of their life as a human being. While the assumption holds for both incarcerated and non-incarcerated students, the criminality of the former is commonly (and erroneously, in my view) taken to justify non-liberal, and often vocational, education under the guise of promoting their economic (and thereby social) improvement.[1]

Liberal arts higher education rooted in the humanities—as opposed to, say, vocational or professional higher education—is defensible for incarcerated students for the same reasons that it is defensible for non-incarcerated students, so long as it works toward humanization. Though my conception of humanization is broad and kaleidoscopic, this essay engages narrowly with the content of a humanistic education—specifically, with how transformative humanities literature might help us achieve a broader sense of belonging in the world. First, I examine the centrality of tradition and "the classical"—and the truths

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that speak to us out of them—within Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of human understanding. Second, I explore Gadamer's ontology of being and how a wider horizon of understanding might lead to a greater sense of belonging in the world. Third, I focus on the transformative potential of liberal higher education, especially as rooted in the humanities, which has an impressive history as a primary gathering place of those disciplines and great works which have the most to say concerning one's sense of being and belonging in the world.

TRADITION, "THE CLASSICAL," AND THE TRUTH THAT THEY SPEAK

Goethe writes in *Faust*, "What from your father you've inherited, you must earn again, to own it straight."[2] In his most influential work, *Truth and Method*, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) gives an excellent account of how this "owning straight" might go. "Even the most genuine and solid tradition," he says, "does not persist by nature because of inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated."[3] Gadamer encourages us to think about tradition and "the classical" not as some stagnant historical period or literary genre, but as something that—through our interpretation of it—speaks to us here and now. This involves the mediation between what is past and what is present. The effective history of any object under consideration is "the history of its influence."[4] We consider the effective history of something when we ask, "how did such and so come to be as I see it here and now?" Effective-historical consciousness (wirkungsgeschichtliches bewusstsein) is a consciousness that our consciousness is effected by history. It is an awareness that we are finite individuals, each with our own unique histories which produce in us certain ways of seeing (that is, understanding) the world. We do not achieve any objective view of the world, because there is not any such objective world to achieve. Instead, we develop, one hopes, a broader "view" of the world as we constantly interpret it through our biases, prejudices, and traditions which condition our existence. This is not a fault to be abhorred and subsequently overcome; this is simply the condition of our existence as finite, historically constituted human beings.

Others have rightly pointed out that, though Gadamer's explicit en-

gagement with the classics lasts a mere six pages of *Truth and Method*, the idea of the classics and the traditions of which they take part is crucial to Gadamer's hermeneutic project.[5] The classics serve as the "basic category of effective history."[6] Essentially, they are his exemplar. In the "Appendix" of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes, "I am convinced of the fact that, quite simply, we can learn from the classics."[7] Regarding this statement, Weinsheimer writes that it is indeed

> the first and last principle of Gadamer's hermeneutics. It is the fundamental presupposition of *Truth and Method*, and toward its legitimation all Gadamer's arguments tend. That we have something to learn means plainly that we have not yet achieved full knowledge, of either our world or ourselves. There is something outstanding still to be disclosed. And that we have something to learn specifically from the classics means that advancing into the future in order to remedy the deficiencies of the present will necessitate turning to the past. We do not get over the classics or beyond them, because what we have to learn from the past is not merely what someone once thought or did. It is not something that once was but rather still is true . . . Repudiation of the truth claim of the past constitutes explicit or implicit self-aggrandizement, and it explains not how interpretation is rightly to be performed but rather why it need not be undertaken at all.[8]

The important part about canonical works is that the truth claims in them have persisted, have been reaffirmed, are found again and again to be timeless. Certain works are canonical because of the truth that continues to speak through them, not because their truth or power derives from their canonical status. To repudiate the truth claim of the past is to think narrowly and rather myopically about the experience of being human. One of Gadamer's main points is that there are "modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science."[9] We could easily say the same of professional and technical modes of inquiry which share the same promise of objectivized truth by way of their methodological procedures.

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It is worth remembering that Gadamer isn't suggesting that we do away with science or methodological inquiry; rather, he is suggesting that we have forgotten—and ought to admit—the truth inherent in *all* experiences, whether scientific or extra-scientific.

In general terms, critiques against the "classics" in higher education are usually leveled against a cannon that is comprised of authors who are White Anglo-Saxon Protestants or long-dead White men or works only about Western civilization.[10] I think this is a fair critique. Folks who rail against such programs that exist within these bounds are right to do so when the main criterion is something other than whether the works have truths that speak to those who engage with them. When we consider Gadamer's conception of classical works and the function they perform as conveyances of truth, we can see that there can be no objective cannon. The classics are not limited to one specific period; there is only what persists through time, what speaks through our interpretations. Gadamer writes that

> What we call "classical" is something retrieved from the vicissitudes of changing time and its changing taste . . . it is a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and is independent of all the circumstances of time, in which we call something "classical"'—a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other age.[11]

Thus, there need not necessarily be engagement with White Anglo-Saxon Protestants or long-dead White men or even Western Civilization. Critiques against "the classics" or "the classical" fall flat if they are a critique against a certain text or a certain period of history. "The classical is what resists historical criticism because its historical dominion, the binding power of its validity that is preserved and handed down, precedes all historical reflection and continues through it."[12]

Here we can see why it might be inappropriate to inquire what practical value liberal arts education has for incarcerated students. To suggest, either explicitly or implicitly, that incarcerated students cannot or should not engage with rigorous academic subject matter in the humanities is to imply that such

students cannot or should not engage with their own traditions. It is to suggest that they should engage only with that narrower band of truth (valuable as it may be) that we get from the technical and professional disciplines—that they should engage mostly with methods. It is not inaccurate to portray incarceration as the intentional separation of individuals from various societal, cultural, and familial traditions. What is at stake, then, is not simple understandings of books, but the gaining of insights and acknowledgement of truths.[13] "The hermeneutic consciousness, which must be awakened and kept awake," says Gadamer, "seeks to confront the will of man [sic] . . . with something from the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real."[14]

LANGUAGE, BEING, AND BELONGING

If we understand anything at all it is because we are finite, historical beings who grasp only small fractions of human life as it is mediated by our history and in language. Gadamer famously claims that "Being that can be understood is language." This is because "being underlies, exceeds, and makes possible language."[15] What gets created in the process of interpretation is the realization of a mode of being that hitherto has not existed. "Language is the form in which understanding is achieved."[16] For Gadamer, language is the air that we breathe. It is the water in which we swim. Or, as borrowed from Heidegger, it is the house of being.

Gadamer writes that "Everything that is language has a speculative unity: it contains a distinction, that between its being and the way in which it presents itself, but this is a distinction that is not really a distinction at all."[17] This is to say that there is no being-in-itself, only being that can be interpreted. If it can be interpreted, it will be in language. There is a certain importance, then, attached to the sentiment of finding the right words for the given object at hand. When we offer our interpretation, we select certain words at the expense of all the other words we could have selected. Furthermore, those words do not extend from us as if unattached from all the other words we did not select. They are attached to the preexisting whole of language within us. This again points to our finitude. We cannot grasp all that there is of being. We cannot grasp all that there is of language. In the event of interpretation, we choose *these* words at the

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expense of others; we focus on *this* aspect of reality at the expense of others. "All coming into language . . . has about it something of an attested quality."[18]

The idea we get from Gadamer is that the fundamental category that governs human existence may well be ontological in nature. If this is true, it seems fair to ask what this has to do with flourishing or wellbeing. We might say that to be well is to be more than we are now, to "see" more than we can at this very moment and thereafter. To be human is to exist as a finite historical being mediated by language. But we can always create new ways to express our being through language. To be more fully human is to perpetually widen one's horizon, to extend, to the extent possible, one's view of the world. "We come to realize that belonging is an ontological way of talking about the condition achieved by the fusion of horizons. When horizons are so fused that the interpretation belongs to what it interprets, the resulting whole is, as it were, greater than the sum of its parts."[19] What if the best that we strive for is an increase in being? The expansion of horizons doesn't specify that we must expand only in a positive direction. The broadest possible sense of belonging might well include ecstasy *and* despair. What we get is infinite hope, as we are unlimited in our capacity to strive at a perfect interpretation, but also infinite deferral, as we realize that the perfect interpretation, the perfect or final understanding will forever be beyond our grasp.

The Judge in Cormack McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* may be one of the most terrifyingly evil literary figures of all time. So, it comes as a surprise when he makes a point in the novel that is oddly congruent with Gadamer's: we cannot hold the world in our hands as an object to examine any which way that we please. Standing by the fire, he says:

> The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass,

that mind itself being but a fact among others.[20]

Yet it doesn't seem to follow, as Judge Holden would have it, that what we get instead is absolute chaos—or, in Gadamerian terms, complete subjectivity. What Gadamer gives us is a way between the rock and the hard place—a way of conceiving the mediation between the object at hand and the subject who is taken up by it. There is no relativity because there are not two things to be compared. There is only the fusion of this interpretation with the one before it, and the one before that, and so on. Nothing is ultimately revealed. Nothing is ultimately disclosed. Gadamer highlights the dialectic of question and answer. In seeking understanding, we ask questions of things, of books, of people, and so on. But things, books, and people can also ask questions of us; they can put us into question right back. Lots of different types of media can perform this function, but I'm going to return to the point about the classics, or, what I'm treating as the same here, great books and transformative humanities literature.

LIBERAL EDUCATION, THE HUMANITIES, AND TRASNFORMATIVE TEXTS

The structure that a humanistic education captures so well is that of excursion and return: an initial befuddlement as we encounter something alien to us, and—in the process of understanding it, of making the strange familiar to us—a return with a broader view of the situation, of ourselves, and of others. This back and forth that is so characteristic of humanistic education is simply a formal pathway to Gadamer's fusion of horizons. The humanities, in other words, put the dialectic of question and answer to good use. The simple point I aim to make here is that using transformative humanities literature in higher education has massive potential as a way for individuals to increase their sense of belonging in the world, to expand their horizon of understanding. A chance to access higher education is a chance to access being, which is itself a chance to access belonging in the Gadamerian sense. The importance of access to humanities-based higher education is not just the possibility of movement away from something; it is also a movement toward something. Once again, we should note that this holds for both incarcerated and non-incarcerated students.

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With an analysis that spans from Plato to Hegel, Gadamer argues that "the normative element in the concept of the classical has never completely disappeared. It is still the basis of the idea of liberal education."[21] Deresiewicz puts it this way: "Creating a life, inventing a self, developing an independent mind: it all sounds rather daunting. How exactly is college supposed to help? By deploying that most powerful of instructional technologies: a liberal arts education, centered on the humanities, conducted in small classrooms by dedicated teachers."[22] An important caveat that I want to acknowledge here is the problem of access. We want to believe that that those from lower echelons of society can make their way toward upper echelons, especially via higher education. Perhaps the main point of Paul Tough's 2019 book, *The Inequality Machine*, is that the odds of this happening are stacked against the *vast* majority of people.[23] Yet, instead of zeroing in on how this phenomenon plays out for that vast majority at, for example, non-elite institutions, Tough, Deresciewicz, and Montás focus on elite institutions. Non-elite college students garner little attention, less still those students who are the most vulnerable and marginalized, such as first-generation students, incarcerated college students, and the like. Liberal education rooted in the humanities—historically reserved for elite students—is, in some degree, wasted on elite students. If one of the aims of liberal education is to "liberate out students from the contingencies of their backgrounds," then the prime recipients of such an education are non-elite students.[24] Hitherto, their sense of being in the world, of belonging to it, have been unnecessarily restricted in a way that it has not for many elite students. Though my explicit argument here is that transformative humanities education is helpful to all, it should be understood that part of the work that must be done is to expand access to those typically excluded.

Transformative humanities literature is but one way to help us engage with the perennial questions of the human experience. Because they are a part of a tradition. Because they have persisted. Because they have persevered. Because they are reaffirmed. Because they are cultivated. Because they speak to us—and through us. Because they not only make sense to us but of us. Franz Kafka wrote in one letter that "Some books seem like a key to unfamiliar rooms in one's own

castle," and in another that "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us."[25] Reaffirming Gadamer's take on the cannon, Deresciewicz writes that

> The crucial thing is to study, not the Great Books, but simply, great books. The idea is to find yourself a few of Kafka's axes; anything that has the necessary edge and heft will do. It doesn't matter who created it or when, as long as it can do some damage, as long as it inflicts that wound.[26]

Far from being old, crusty works to be ground through and blindly accepted, great works allow those who engage with the truths in them the potential to access a greater sense of belonging in the world.

Here's an example. Recently, when reading Nella Larsen's *Passing*, I was struck by the extent to which the tension Larsen creates between the characters in the book was resonating with me. As a white male, being Black and passing as white is something about which I know nothing. A Black person found to be passing as white knew that the stakes were high, often a matter of life or death. There is also the burden of living with constant tension in the fabric of one's reality. To live under such circumstances for given periods of time means, quite often, that much of one's psychic energy is given over to this cause. In the book, there is a small gathering in which Clare introduces her husband, a white man named John, to her friends Irene (our unreliable narrator) and Gertrude. Clare, Irene, and Gertrude are Black and passing as white. The scene explodes when John enters, drops a *very* offensive racially discriminatory term, and goes on to say some excessively hateful and ignorant things about Black people generally. Irene and Gertrude do their best to compose themselves. The narrator reflects on the sheer and almost absurd tension of this situation:

> It was, Irene thought, unbelievable and astonishing that four people could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, shame. But no, on second thought she was forced to amend her opinion. John Bellew, most certainly, was as undisturbed within as without. So, perhaps, was Gertrude Martin. At least she hadn't the

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> mortification and shame that Clare Kendry must be feeling, or, in such full measure, the rage and rebellion that she, Irene, was repressing.[27]

One of the many things I can appreciate about *Passing* is the way in which it weighs the (in)stability of one's close personal relationships against the (in)stability of one's personal identity. And how we can live in and with that tension. My intersection with this idea was not with race but with sexual identity. As a person whose sexuality has been thrown into question relatively late in life, I immediately recognized a bit of what it might be like to build a social and emotional world around a personal characteristic one once thought unquestionably stable. It is the case, of course, that all of us change in various ways over time. But, for the most part, we expect that if we are engaged in, say, a strictly monogamous heterosexual marriage, it will continue as such without out the bounds of that relationship changing wildly. My reality is that I spent a full year worrying that my being bisexual would mean that all would be lost: my relationship with my partner, my relationship with my children, my living situation and location, everything. These worries consumed copious amounts of my mental capacity, constantly demanded my attention. This aspect of the novel made sense to me; it helped me make sense of myself.

One more example, this time with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein.* For the record, the story that we have inherited from pop culture is grossly inaccurate. Frankenstein is not the creature that is created but is himself the creator. The creature, who did not ask to be created, was immediately abandoned by his creator. We should also note that more recent feminist literary analysis has yielded the importance of viewing the book through the lens of motherhood and bringing children into the world. Shelly's mother, leading literary figure Mary Wollstonecraft, died giving birth to Shelly. Several of Shelly's own children died young. As a parent, the part of the story that resonated with me was the idea of intentionality in parenting.

In the story, we see Victor Frankenstein blinded by the desire to create life. This intentionality consumes him to a degree that is mentally and physically unhealthy. We see this in his seclusion and bodily appearance, and this by his

own admission.

> The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep.[28]

Victor works restlessly to bring this creature into being and then immediately abandons it. Being the product of an unwanted pregnancy myself, it was important for my partner and I to be secure in our desire to have children. Since having children, however, I've had to confront that part of me that wishes (at some points) that I did not have children, which is something I could not have known without first having children. Now, it is not my intention to argue that we should interpret the entire novel from this lens. I bring up this example because it helped me understand one aspect of my being in the world.

Given all that has been said here, how can we not engage with tradition and transformative humanities literature if through it we come to access a broader "view" of our being in the world and in so doing a better sense of our belonging in it? Gadamer offers us a lens through which we can profitably look at liberal higher education and see (and admit and remember) its value and relevance beyond job placement and the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

CONCLUSION (PUNCH LINE)

As my long-winded speech ended, the Dean turned to the group and said, "So. Now we may perhaps begin the meeting?"[29]

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1 And even those who recognize the non-economic, non-instrumental goods of higher education often reduce them to "soft skills" (as opposed to "hard skills") out of convenience and necessity. Critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and the like, as valuable as they may be, are far too narrow to capture the transformative potential of a humanizing higher education. I take it as a given that the humanities are struggling to retain their once prominent and self-evident place in liberal higher education. Thus, I will not recite the statistics regarding declining enrollment, scarcity of tenure track positions, the merging and elimination of certain academic departments, etc. Furthermore, I take it that we cannot "prove" that the humanities have more value than this or that alternate approach to higher education. What we can do—and what I try to do in this paper—is work to remember their value. And help others to admit it.

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4 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xix.

5 François Renaud, "Classical Otherness: Critical Reflections on the Place of Philology in Gadamer's
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7 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 490.

8 Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 133.

9 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xii.

10 David Denby, *Great Books*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 31.

11 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 256.

12 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 255.

13 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xi.

14 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxv-xxvi.

15 Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)": https://iep.utm.edu/gadamer/.

16 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxii.

17 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 432.

18 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 445.

19 Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 251.

20 Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 245.

21 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 255.

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26 Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, 168.

27 Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 43-44.

28 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein. Or, the Modern Prometheus* (New York: Signet Classic, 1983), 56.

29 Compare with Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 274.

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