



Shedding Humanity, Shredding the Humanities

Anthony Esolen

Published online: 10 July 2018

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2018

An incident from my final year teaching at Providence College, now roiled by what has been called “identity politics,” stands for me as an example of how that new monster of man's morbid imagination has made real education in the humanities and the very notion of a common good nearly inconceivable.

A young freshman from Colombia was among a group of students who took offense at my suggesting, in an article written online for conservative Roman Catholics, that the cult of diversity, defined by a stark political monotone and divorced from interest in actual human cultures, was self-contradictory. I called out the diversitarians for their frankly expressed desire to transform the somewhat Catholic Providence College into a secular place like pretty much every other, and noted that this desire was especially visible in the college's apparent longing to join those other secular colleges in that land of sexual indifference over the rainbow.

I am not going to argue about that article here. The student did not want to argue about it, either. He and other students went straight to the president's office to demand that I be fired. Of course that was not going to happen. I had tenure. Peter Singer, the philosopher of ethics at Princeton, does not get fired for recommending the murder of *lebensunwerte Leben*, a baby here and a baby

Anthony Esolen is a writer, social commentator, translator of classical poetry, and professor of the English Renaissance and classical literature at the Thomas More College of Liberal Arts; aesolen@thomasmorecollege.edu. He previously taught at Furman University and Providence College before transferring to Thomas More in 2017. Esolen has translated into English Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, and Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*. In addition to multiple books, he is the author of numerous articles in such publications as *Modern Age*, *The Catholic World Report*, *Chronicles*, *The Claremont Review of Books*, *The Public Discourse*, *First Things*, *Crisis Magazine*, *The Catholic Thing*, and *Touchstone*, for which he serves as a senior editor. He is a regular contributor to *Magnificat*, and has written frequently for a host of other online journals.

there. I was not going to get fired for saying that people ought to learn about other cultures before they call themselves “multicultural,” as fearful as such learning might be.

I found out about the student, who was enrolled in my section of the college's team-taught program in the development of Western Civilization. I wanted to talk to him about what a culture is, why we study them, and what he might be reading with us in the spring if he stayed with the team. We would be taking a good look at the golden age of Spain, and reading, in a bilingual edition, a work by her greatest playwright, Pedro Calderon de la Barca. But he shook his head and muttered, “It's still European.” And there you have it. Calderon is an artist of the first rank, working at the end of the most glorious period of dramatic flourishing in the history of the world, but because he was European and not Colombian, or just because he was European and not something or anything else, he meant nothing to this young man. It did not matter that Spanish was the student's mother tongue and not mine. I was passionately interested in reading *La Vida es Sueno* in the original early modern Spanish, and he was not. That alone did not of course distinguish him from his fellow students, who are not known to be eager to venture forth into lands and times far distant from theirs. But some of them at least might be capable of catching the fire of the venture, whereas politics had cast a cold frost upon his mind and soul.

We might cite here the famous line from Terence's *Self-Tormentor*: *Homo sum; humani nihil alienum a me puto*: “I'm a human being, so I think that nothing human is foreign to me,” or, more colloquially, “I'm a human being, so I'm interested in anything human.” The line is spoken by a gentleman farmer named Chremes to his neighbor Menedemus, a man tormenting himself because he drove his love-sick son off into the army after giving him no end of trouble about the girl he loved. We too are interested: that one sentence involves any healthy human being, man or woman, in a human situation whose like we have known or can easily imagine. We are interested in the full sense of the verb: we have a stake in the matter. So too, by the way, in Calderon's drama. A nervous king, having fallen into a labyrinth of deterministic (and quasi-Calvinist) philosophy, has confined his own son to a dungeon, all his life long, because the stars forecast that the son would supplant the father and rule the kingdom as a tyrant. But now the father has nagging doubts, and wants to set the boy free—provisionally, watching him closely, waiting to see if the supposedly inbred malevolence will come forth. And again we are interested: we can hardly imagine that a son so raised would not desire to exact vengeance against his jailers, yet we know from the urgency of the test that he must somehow, by a supreme effort of a still free

human will, conquer himself and his desires. And his opening cries from the dungeon ring in our ears and our hearts, as he can glimpse from the window of his cell the flight of a bird newly feathered,

thinking nothing of piety,
of the nest that brought him peace,
and I, who have more soul,
I have less liberty?

Do we live in Prince Segismundo's cell, even if we had the whole world's breadth to wander? We have a stake in that question too.

Here we may encounter the objection, that an oppressed people have no leisure to absent themselves from the blood, sweat, toil, and tears of political action, but must fight on the beaches, in the trenches, on the sea, in the air, and whatnot; but if this is true, then the conclusion to draw is not that they should study this rather than that, but that they are in no position to study at all. I do not expect the soldier in the field to read *War and Peace*. But then why attend a college? Presumably someone who has essentially hired people to teach him things has at least some leisure to learn them. And if the watchword is “diversity,” why should the student who cannot find any immediately political or intensely personal reason to read Terence or Calderon not welcome the opportunity to leave those political and personal reasons behind? He cannot have things both ways. If he says that Terence is not important to him because Terence does not provide him with any political confirmation or ammunition, then let him admit that “diversity” is not really his goal. If he says that “diversity” is above all to be pursued, then let him acknowledge that he ought to study Terence precisely because he does not identify with the author.

If cultural diversity is what he wants, then to be set free from the small cell of your contemporary excitations, and to walk with a human being who lived four hundred years ago, in a Spain that does and does not any longer exist, an artist contracting his brow to disentangle the sinuous ivy-strands of free will and determinism, a poet who was also a Catholic priest in a time when the Catholic Church and the culture of Spain were like the interweaving voices in a polyphonic chorale, well, that should be for him as it was for the prince Segismundo suddenly set free—an invitation into a human life in all its bewildering variety. If he does not like Calderon, then let him take up Terence, that is Publius Terentius Afer, born in Africa (Carthage) as his surname denotes, a Roman slave but taken up into a group of young and wealthy Romans, the seemingly innumerable Scipios and their friends. Terence wrote

in Latin, deriving his themes and the inspiration for his art from the so-called “New Comedy” of the Greeks, humane, witty, and tolerant of human faults. We have no idea of Terence's race, just as we have no idea of Augustine's race or Tertullian's, whether Semitic or Berber, Negro or Roman or Greek, because the ancients did not consider the matter to be of any importance. When Terence was still a young man, hardly older than my student, he traveled to Greece to perfect his craft, and died there from some accident.

If that student should ever trouble to read Terence's *Self-Tormentor*, he would find a combination of the familiar and the unsettlingly alien. Familiar would be the foibles of human beings, male and female, with the foibles taking recognizable forms in each sex: the irresponsible young man in love with a spendthrift woman, a courtesan on the take; another young man with a hot-head for a father, who now punishes himself with work to make up for driving the lad from home; the scheming family servant who schemes almost too well for his own good; the sweet young woman whom anyone would want for a daughter-in-law; we know these people, we know their motives. And yet we do not, not quite; for the plot hinges upon a classical discovery, that the good girl is actually a long lost daughter, whom her father Chremes had ordered to be exposed. Chremes is not portrayed as a monster, and is reconciled to his son in the end. Terence, a slave himself, accepts servitude as a plain feature of ordinary life, and if we can say that he views the exposure of infants as an evil, it is as a man may sense something wrong in the deep heart of a culture, without however believing for a moment that anything legal could be or should be done about it.

The *studia humanitatis* take for granted that there is a humanity to study; and that is one of the things you notice when you take a stride into another culture or another era. Calderon's King Basilio is the epitome of a generally good man who in his intellectual pride is led to do a wicked thing, and who nearly pays for it in the end by the loss of the very kingdom he had hoped to save. Has not everyone met such a man? Is it not one of the pitfalls of human existence itself? Suppose you seek liberation for your people by means of denying the goodness of studying all other people, and by focusing intensely upon yourselves and the evil things that other people have done to you, or, since human beings are never entirely to be trusted with their own cases, the evil things that other people are supposed to have done to you. That is to seek freedom by imprisonment; it is as if you were your own Basilio and Segismundo both, with your political calculator sentencing your still human soul to the cell of identity politics. Or it is to reverse the words of the humane Terence, and to suggest that since there are human affairs which you have dismissed as alien to you, you are no longer fully human.

So far I have suggested that identity politics is inconsistent with humane learning. But what if the aim is frankly political? My soldier in the field may not be reading *War and Peace*, but I can hardly blame him for tossing grenades or stabbing with a bayonet. Here too, though, the identity politician must end at a blank wall, a wall of futility, self-imprisonment, and contradiction.

There is a good reason why Aristotle suggested that mathematics was the fit object of study for young men, while politics was for their later years; the object of political study is mankind, and man cannot be reduced to mathematical formulae. That was the error of Calderon's foolishly intellectual king, and when he suddenly set his son Segismundo free and gave him, provisionally, rule over his realm, we are not surprised when Segismundo behaves not simply with the rashness of a young man, but with something bordering upon madness, the madness of someone who has had no experience at all with the temperaments of men, and no experiences upon which to build a just estimate of his own self. You need human experience to be a fit ruler, whether of a kingdom or a household, or of the little world of the self, which so far from being a realm of peace is more often in a state of uneasy truce between hostile powers. Such experience comes with the years, so long as you do not confine yourself, as our professors and political leaders now commonly do, to people who live in the same gated community where you live, whether the gates are of iron, or of ideology, or of certain lines of work. The wide experience also can come from humane reading and study, where you benefit vicariously from the observations and experiences of wise men who have come before you. When people asked my young daughter why she was reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the third time, I advised her to answer, "So that I will know what is going on in the world."

Ideology does worse, however, than prevent you from going forth into that real and confusing world of men with all their virtues and vices, their wisdom and their folly. The cell window through which Segismundo looked upon the world at least showed him that world, or what little he could see of it, truly. When Terence has Chremes advise Menedemus about how he should allow for the headstrong passions of young men, and not expect from his son the cool temperament of age, he is speaking truly, without the warping of any ideological commitment. So it is that ideology, which is played as a trump card to carry the trick against common sense, common observation across cultures and ages, and often the very biology of human beings male and female, young and old, prevents you from learning anything reliable about the purported object of your study. We do not do to dogs what we do to ourselves, when we fall to ideology. The dog trainer works with the nature of the dog, which nature he cannot derive from some canine theory, but from experience and observation. Ideologues are

the madmen who would have human beings walk on their hands. It cannot be, and when human beings disappoint the ideologue, as they will, the ideologue will not give up his first principles, since he believes that man *must submit* to them; they are not the results of long, careful, equable, and broad-ranging thought about himself and mankind generally. They are *a priori* demands. So it is that every ideologue is a totalitarian at heart, and ultimately the antithesis of a genuine political actor. If that is true of the ideologue, it is true all the more of the identity ideologue, and here a little knowledge of Greek goes a long way. The Greek word for someone who did not involve himself in public affairs, but like the Cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey* minded his own cheese-making and did not care about the common good, was *idiotes*—English idiot. The idea was that you were trammled up in yourself, your identity as it were. To the extent that you say you are essentially a Colombian (as my student was) or an Italian-American (as I am) as over against the common humanity you share with everyone else who has walked the earth, you are not political at all, but idiotic: passionately concerned with your own.

Now, it is a good and patriotic thing to be concerned with your people, and to wish to advance their fortunes in the world, to love and promote their art and music, and to tell their stories. But consider what that means, in practice, in a world wherein not everybody is a Colombian or an Italian-American, or a Greek-speaking slave from north Africa, or a Spanish priest living in the seventeenth century. If you are to your people as the Cyclops is to his cave, his sheep, and their milk, then you consign your people to an insular existence. Is that what the purveyors of political identity want—confinement? If it is true that the Hatfield boys, who live on one side of a mountain, might be enriched by dancing with the McCoy girls, who live on the other side of it, and not any longer treat them as if they belonged to a different species, despite their perfectly incomprehensible accent and their downright criminal way of making moonshine and fatback, then surely it must also be true that Colombians might be enriched by an encounter with their Spanish ancestors, just as I the Italian-American have been enriched by an encounter with mine from Italy; and then we move forth from home or near home to places with such wild names as “Ireland” and “Poland,” and forms of art that bewilder the mind, such as “Baroque” and “Byzantine,” and music that is eerily polyphonic, such as Palestrina wrote for choirboys, and Zulu warriors sang before battle.

So we find that a concentration on political “identity” leaves you perhaps rich in Cyclopean cheese but poor in humanity. What does it do for politics? The question is readily answered. It makes politics quite impossible. That is not only because you will not have learned enough about mankind to distinguish the

common good from its many impostors. It is because the precondition for political action properly speaking is the willingness to submit your own desires to the adjudication of the greater group. King Basilio allowed his personal fears and preoccupations to take the place of law and morality, and when he reversed himself he left his land vulnerable to foreign invasion. Terence's self-tormenting Menedemus could not set aside his stubborn demands as regards his son's future marriage, and ended up risking not having a son at all. The idiot is not just a bad politician. He is someone who has yet to learn what the political is in the first place.

But just as education is not the aim of those who march in single-file to a monophonic diversity, so it may be true that political victory is not the aim of the identity politicians. For victory would burden them with responsibility for other people, and would take from them the fiery pleasures of *ressentiment*, vindictiveness, self-pity, and hatred. For I have long noted that feminists, to take an example, hate the art of men more than they love the art of women, because what you love you wish to share for its beauty and goodness, and what you hate you wish to confine, to calumniate, to scorn, and to destroy. Their line is not that men have unfortunately missed out on wonders, but that men have unfairly visited their miserable works on everyone else. So too the identity politicians. They are characterized not really by what they love, since love breeds generosity in both giving and receiving, patience with the shortcomings of others, and humility as regards your own works and days; they are characterized, indeed they characterize themselves, by what they hate, what they oppose, and you need not take my word for it. You need only read the self-descriptions of every program in identity politics in the country.

Dear students who may be reading these words: Terence and Calderon are not your enemies. People who want to introduce you to Socrates, Milton, and Bach are not your enemies. It is not a crime to take one small step toward learning how to paint in oils as Titian did. Japanese watercolors are not for the Japanese alone. Do not be your own King Basilio. Ignore your keepers and leave the cell. For why should you, with your human soul, not enjoy the liberty of a real education?