

# EDUCATING HEROES

by John E. Becker

"The real world." How our students love the phrase! An ex-linguist of my acquaintance, bitter from years of mistreatment in English departments, has come to rest at last behind a very large oak desk in a generously appointed office at a large university. She is coordinator of business-writing programs, and a sense of authority informs her words now as she talks of "those of us who work in the real world." Meanwhile the benighted rest of us, left behind on university faculties, complacently accept the givenness of that extrauniversity "real world." At graduation rituals we sit smiling under our tassels and hear each speaker, from the head of student government to the chancellor, from professor to famous guest, tell our students that they are about to enter the "real world."

What in the world is the real world, and who is in it? Certainly the real world into which most of the university-educated walk, and from which we all expect a paycheck, is, as a matter of fact, both in the university and out. It is that complex of contemporary social arrangements which either is or models itself on corporate bureaucracy. We take it so much for granted that we hardly ever reflect on its all-pervasiveness. Nor do we reflect that it is, like all human arrangements, artificial, arbitrary, made up of infinitely complex signal systems. Its various dress codes, from pinstripes to tweeds and jeans, are almost as reliably symbolic and personally constricting as the costumes of Chaucer's pilgrims. Its perquisites are of infinite variety and yet of quite clear significance. Everybody knows who fits where, and all of us—executives, artists, professors, lawyers, writers—live and move and have our being in this "real world."

Why? The answer is the same one Willy Sutton offered when asked why he robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is." In a sense, the reality of the world of corporate bureaucracy is grounded on the same foundation as the reality of professional sports—our other wonderful fantasy land of which there is "hard news" every day, from which there flows an infinite string of statistics, for which we reserve a seriousness claimed by no modern tragedy, and from which we expect an amusement equaled by no modern comedy. The corporate world, ball games, rock concerts, in fact most of the institutions of our culture, exist by virtue of their ability to command and control the

flow of cash. If that seems a cynical view, however, it is not really the point I want to make. The point is that whatever reality the "real world" has is not metaphysical: it is cultural. Every real world is constituted as much by cultural choices as by environment and need; its reality is the reality of artifice, and it is humanly, not divinely, constituted.

But are there alternatives? It is hard to imagine how we could simply do away with bureaucracy. Bureaucracy would seem to have acquired a kind of conditioned necessity, given our wish to support large populations in a highly technological society. I do not question here, then, the validity of a bureaucratic organization of our working life, only its absoluteness, its right to be called the "real world." Bureaucracy may very well give the only possible structure to our outer reality, but it is not necessary or good for it to structure our inner lives, where we foster and nourish a more radical and free humanity.

It is within our inner world that we shape the self-image that makes it possible for us to get out of bed and face the day and the desk, be it oak or steel. In our inner world we reject the hierarchical symbolism of corporate structures and stand free as individuals, engaging in free enterprise on all levels—money, art, thought, science, union with God.

Such a conflict between inner and outer realities is dangerous for many and difficult for all. But there are institutions in our society for mediating this conflict. They create an arena within which we may seek liberation from anyone's or any group's absolute definitions of reality. One of those institutions is the university. Its professors are learned in many "worlds": different nations, different historical eras, different styles of thought, from subatomic to astronomic. It is their work to preserve and communicate to us the wise insight that no real world is ultimately and finally real. Every intellectual discipline, in fact, from theoretical physics to lyric poetry, expends the best of its energy breaking down popular, oversimplified, and enslaving notions of the "real world," persuading us that there have been many other kinds of real worlds, helping us foster the hope that there will yet be many more.

## INVASION OF THE INNER WORLD

Such a claim as I make for the role of the university may not seem congruent with current perceptions. The university seems somewhere to have lost its grip on its prophetic mission to question real worlds. The rapid expansion of the university into an industry since World War II, the

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*John E. Becker is Literary Editor of *Worldview* and Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey.*

need to integrate massive numbers of people into the structure of our economy, has turned the university into an almost grotesque parody of St. Paul's exhortation to be all things to all men. Still, not one of these people processed through our unhallowed halls should be content with mere training for an economic function; not one can be safely left to the passivity induced by mass media. Each one has a right to precisely that which the university has to offer: the skill and the habit of questioning the realities imposed on us by the smooth and pervasive rhetoric of mass culture.

Part of the problem of the university today is its failure to understand the function of its own inner divisions. If the division into disciplines was at first a natural and inevitable division of the task of education, it has become, by now, a mythic war of rival intellectual kingdoms. One of the false banners under which a significant and threatened part of the university struggles is the banner of "the humanities." In the minds of many students the term itself stands for precisely the pursuit of an unreal world. And it is a bad term, often self-righteous and defensive—defensive, presumably, against science, though scientists are creative and human too, sharing the same bewilderment before blank data as the poet or the painter before blank paper. It is not even a useful pedagogical term. Renaissance humanism was a return to literary study, a rejection of scholastic logic-chopping. But today *all* the intellectual disciplines, and especially those categorized as the humanities, have floundered into their own modern forms of scholasticism, hyperspecialization, rarefied jargon, the defense of disciplinary turf at the expense of education.

We recently have had a national "Commission on the Humanities," the title of whose report, *The Humanities in American Life*, was broad and aroused hope. But if the title led us to expect an analytic foray into deeper meanings and long-range significance, the form was the anomalous one of a bureaucratic memo, concluding with a set of recommendations—and numbered ones at that!—as though there were a decision-maker behind a desk somewhere to check them off.

Here our problem becomes clear: The usefulness of bureaucratic organization is too easily perverted into the mythological forms of bureaucratic culture. In this case it produced a work of pure fantasy. There is no bureaucrat to act on the recommendations of the Commission on the Humanities, and there cannot be. Educating the autonomous inner hero is not a process reducible to a set of definable, manageable, numberable problems. That the "real world" is made up of solvable problems is a bureaucratic myth.

How then can we carry on our reflection on the university? We must first of all step aside from the academic infighting generated by the bureaucratic structures of the academy. Though there are real and profound differences among ways of thinking, the rivalry between disciplines most often has its roots in organizational structures. And so we have to shock ourselves into the recognition that, whatever the traditions of learning or the changes in popularity among them, there are certain human activities that will not stop as long as men and women live and share their lives in community. We will keep on singing, dancing, story-telling, remembering something of our ancestors and of important events; we will also go on worshiping, designing and decorating our homes, looking at the stars,

exploring, inventing, competing in games. Neither science nor technology will destroy these human activities.

Where then lies the threat? It lies, I think, in the same quarter from which come the rivalries among disciplines: the invasion of the inner world of freedom by the irrelevant and extrinsic values of a bureaucratic culture. Though we may have to live in a bureaucracy, we need not erect its seeming efficiencies into an inner ideal. For that means the death of personal responsibility as well as of personality itself. The bureaucrat dissipates the force of human choice and will along the attenuating lines of authority by which bureaucracy traditionally defends itself. And with the loss of responsibility there emerges bureaucratic man, a modern slave.

Slavery is exclusion from "the people," from their cultural ideals, their cultural life, their memory, their hopes. Bureaucratic man is not excluded by others; he excludes himself, rejects all this as irrelevant to his "real world." He derives his identity from his bureaucratic function and often evaluates himself by the size of his paycheck. His slavery is, paradoxically, both self-congratulatory and democratic. We have long been acquainted with slavery's extrinsic forms. We are just beginning to discover its inner possibilities and their amazing depths.

#### THE RISK OF DISCOVERY

The Western world has built up an immense and rich reserve of culture, towers of words that enable us to contemplate the terrible beauty born of human struggle. For too many of us, however, it begins to seem too rich. A series of dichotomies has been constructed in the popular mind that brackets serious human reflection, sets it aside and makes it irrelevant. What isn't a numberable problem with economic measurability doesn't exist. Both poetry and the sciences have been left to elites—intellectual elites, economic elites, cultural elites. In attempting to overcome these dichotomies, educators inherit the task of not so much protecting the deposit of human culture as tearing down the psychological barriers that bureaucratic man has erected around himself.

But why may he not have his own, limited, popular culture? Why must he be pursued and persecuted with the intricate, hypersophisticated expressions of the traditional culture preserved in, among other places, the universities? Isn't there a legitimacy to the idea of popular culture? Isn't it better? Homer's audience, after all, did not have to be university taught.

Homer's culture was an oral culture, traditional in a way that is hard for us to reconstruct. It was a culture that based itself on a sense of the real world so absolute that any change, other than the trajectory of life toward death or the inevitable upheavals of conquest and disease, was hardly conceivable. One of the advantages of such a world was the harmony of vision between thinker-singer-artist and the rest of the populace. There was no need to call the facts of the world into question, no need to produce men who could see beyond present realities and prepare for new realities to come.

The security of Homer's unchanging "real world" is long gone. The attempt today to reassert the harmonies of his changeless culture, its sense of timeless relevance, is to court passivity before the false Homers of mass culture; it is to court oblivion. We need another mode of under-

standing and transmitting our culture than popular culture can offer. We need another mode, and we have one.

From the time of Plato and the Hebrew prophets we have known culture to be not only a tradition but an avenue of liberation from the "real world." Education arose not simply to facilitate the work of any given civilization but to allow as well for the achievement of a point of freedom outside ordinary experience from which ordinary experience can be seen and judged. We can see this throughout the long history not only of the humanities but especially of the sciences. Plato's *Republic* is a critical reflection on the easy inconsistencies of Homeric faith. The prophets of the Bible raged against popular notions of a cozy relationship with God. And scientists were burned by a church whose conventional vision they had upset.

The prophet, of course, is not so comfortable a culture-

hero as the bard. His business is to cast a cold eye on the limits of a given culture and to corrode away the rusts of cultural hypocrisy. With varying intensity at various periods of Western history the prophetic voice has intruded its disturbing warnings. Poetry, art, history, philosophy, science have all been the medium of prophetic insight. In education the commitment to open and honest analysis in all disciplines is a prophetic commitment.

The cry for "analytic habits of thought" is a virtual refrain in contemporary discussions of the failings of education. Most speak of this simply as a matter of training and intellectual skill. But an analytic habit of thought has a moral dimension: It asks a student for courage, not merely the intellectual courage to investigate the roots of received wisdom, but the personal courage to stand aside from his culture, to accept—at least for a time—a certain disorien-

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## SAN SEPOLCRO

In this blue light  
I can take you there,  
snow having made me  
a world of bone  
seen through to. This  
is my house,  
  
my section of Etruscan  
wall, my neighbor's  
lemons, and, just below  
the lower church,  
the airplane factory.  
A rooster  
  
crows all day from mist  
outside the walls.  
There's milk on the air,  
ice on the oily  
lemonskins. How clean  
the mind is,  
  
holy grave. It is this girl  
by Piero  
della Francesca, unbuttoning  
her blue dress,  
her mantle of weather,  
to go into

labor. Come, we can go in.  
It is before  
the birth of god. No-one  
has risen yet  
to the museums, to the assembly  
line—bodies  
  
and wings—to the open air  
market. This is  
what the living do: go in.  
It's a long way.  
And the dress keeps opening  
from eternity  
  
to privacy, quickening.  
Inside, at the heart,  
is tragedy, the present moment  
forever stillborn,  
but going in, each breath  
is a button  
  
coming undone, something terribly  
nimble-fingered  
finding all of the stops.

—Jorie Graham

tation, alienation, rejection. Analysis is often corrosive; it is nagging, unsettling, argumentative in its insistence on seeing through and around cultural deception.

We have not thought enough about the threatening quality of such an enterprise. I suggest that this threat is one of the causes of mass man's rejection of the broader and deeper objectives of education. Men may always sing and dance, but fewer and fewer of them seem willing to learn the words or dance to tunes out of rhythm with the music of the mass. While all songs unite us with the human community, some of them do so by making us face our own isolation and naked individuality within it. But we need such songs. The world desperately needs the penetration of unique and personal vision.

Education in any field requires a certain freedom, an openness and a willingness to follow human quests wherever and against whatever they may lead. But to commit oneself to the study of human culture is to risk discovery of the self-deceptions at the heart of any culture, perhaps at the heart of one's self. It brings the clash of inner heroism and outer anonymity into the open, where it is potentially intolerable, though subject to the healing force of contemplation or, one might say, a tragic vision.

We have all become bored by the lament that college graduates can't read or write. Writing, the basic tool of analytic thought, requires more than knowledge of something to write about and skill at writing. Writing requires the clear adoption of a personal point of view from which one navigates, sentence by sentence, to a personally embraced conclusion. Writing reveals a part of one's unique and perhaps uncertain self to strangers. Bad writing, bureaucratese, is the wish to do precisely the opposite: to hide the self and to avoid the realities of decision or commitment.

As for reading, the same wish to conceal the drives of the inner hero wages an impressive and effective campaign to fit into the daily nine-to-five routine of the "real world." Artists, historians, anthropologists, poets, scientists are always raising questions; but so many students don't seem to see them when they're raised. Many people simply can't afford to read *Moby Dick*. No, not because it's too long—though it may be—and not because the words are difficult. Rather, one hears people insist that it's only a story of whaling, and "all that other stuff" is boring. The book, of course, is suffused with Melville's rage and bewilderment; he baptized it in the name of the devil. "All that other stuff" is precisely Melville's calling everything about the "real world" into question, relentlessly and at all levels of metaphysical, theological, and sociological reflection. There is nothing disturbing in the idea of a story about whaling, and so readers see only a story about whaling. They tend to "civilize" what they read; they take an artist's or a thinker's most violent protests against God, man, society, or the biological fact of death and turn it into a piece of reassuring conventional wisdom.

### A SUSPICION OF QUESTIONING

No matter what we professors think we are doing in our classrooms, no matter how determinedly we define our classrooms as havens beyond the reach of bureaucratic culture, our students are conditioned by a societal bias in favor of training for the "real world." They have learned to articulate their motives for going to college in terms of

job preparation. They may obscurely wish for more, but how to define and talk about that *more* is a mystery to them. It is our work to define it for them in spite of the fact they have acquired wonderful defenses against our wish to seduce them into the dangerous regions of analysis and understanding.

But we are, many of us, ourselves subverted by bureaucratic culture. As long as we think of our discipline as a self-sufficient, free-standing, and autonomous component of an education somebody else has to put together, we make ourselves mere bureaucrats without responsibility for education. Responsibility is passed off elsewhere through the bureaucratic structure—to the admissions office, where "bad" students are allowed into the university; to the dean's office, where there is a failure of leadership; or to the development office, where inadequate funds are generated. Too many of us in academe have isolated ourselves in our quarter of the library, becoming bureaucrats of learning rather than prophets of shifting but radical vision.

There is, moreover, another danger that confronts us—the danger of an ineffectual response to the rising voice of conservatism, which has always been suspicious of the relentlessly questioning activity that goes on in universities. The conservative complaint is that the "intellectual establishment" fails to recognize the values of our free, democratic, and capitalist society and fails to protect our students from the subversions of leftist thinking. The conservative complaint misses the point of the prophetic role of the university, and so it insists that the work of the university is the production of industrious and loyal citizens.

Conservative reaction also fails to understand what is at issue between us and the societies they want us to warn against. The external threat and the internal threat are, in one way, the same threat. Totalitarian, authoritarian, communistic societies explicitly deny what bureaucratic cultures deny implicitly: the distinction between outer bureaucratic function and inner hero. We are amused by the "hero medals" of the Communist world precisely because we think of heroism in terms of Achilles and Faust and Huck Finn, all struggling to act in terms of an inner vision and a personal commitment. A hero of the masses, working feverishly to exceed his production quota, is a joke, a contradiction in terms. If the societies that threaten us are societies that know what the "real world" is with an unquestioning faith or a cynical fidelity, bureaucratic culture similarly thinks it knows what the "real world" is and won't allow itself any doubt. Because of both these threatening certitudes, we cannot afford to allow our sanctuaries of unique vision to evolve into factories for the production of loyal citizens.

We may have many grounds for attacking the university, along with those other institutions that are supposed to be protecting the possibilities of a unique and personal vision. But we cannot afford to attack them for questioning, for doing that for which they are valuable, that which they would not be allowed to do in a totalitarian, authoritarian, or communistic state. We may have a difficult task before us in making our universities live up to their prophetic role. But they must be allowed to have it, to induce the process of questioning and persist at it, no matter what it reveals about the false realities we hug to our anxious breasts. Only in this way can we start on the real heroic quest. To do otherwise is merely quixotic. WV