Published in THE MID-WEST QUARTERLY Vol. 1, No. 3 (April 1914)

THE COMEDY OF THE ARTS COLLEGE

The Arts College—the Arts College. There is without doubt a savour of feebleness and effeminacy in the phrase. And on the countenance of the college itself there is beginning to appear the intense and baffled look of the subject of comedy. It is beginning to pay the price of its court of the current romantic eccentricity, of its wanderings from its ancient concern for the larger visions of the human spirit. In its older allegiance it had stood in the midst of the chaos of life, stably anchored in the flux, offering to those who came to it that detached, clarified vision and perspective to which it itself had attained. Its point of view was neither wholly æsthetic, like our modern romanticism, revelling in sensuous reaction to the drift of phenomena; nor wholly intellectualistic, like our modern science, throwing out of count the intangible elements of the human consciousness with its emotions and affections and its spontaneous intuitions; nor was it temporal, like our modern vocationalism,concerning itself with the practical affairs of making a living. It was humane. It had reached the centre. It saw life steadily and wholly, for it had attained to a point of view from which to orientate the chaos.

To be sure, it recognised that perhaps the universe was, in actuality, chaotic; but it saw too that from a stable point of view phenomena stood in steadying relations. It stood at the only centre of the whole that exists for humanity—the human intelligence. Orientation is an intellectual feat. And the human intelligence is the only intelligence which we have cognisance of for the accomplishment of that feat. It was to this point of view, therefore, this outlook upon life, this detached, disinterested, clarifying vision of the whole, that it tried to lead the intelligence of the youths who came to it. They came to it for that. Its end was moral, for it knew that wise and just conduct is based on standards that can be erected only by virtue of a detached, disinterested, clarifying vision of the whole.

Latterly, however, it has wandered from the centre. It has lost its point of view. It still attracts by its old fame a multitude of youths, but it is embarrassed by them. It says: "Go about by yourselves, look at what you will, and draw your own conclusions."

But it refuses to lead them to the centre. It has lost its own way back. Meantime the partial and disjointed interests—romanticism, science, and trade—have seized upon the parts of the college which they can turn to their own use. They know their own centres. They define their ends, and give definite bearing to the disciplines which they impart. And they are at once justified by general approval, for some point of view is better than none. Even the untrained are not wholly insensible to the terrors of the chaos about them. They want what they see to be given some larger significance, to be related to some larger whole, to bring them out somewhere. The instinctive reaching out for unity is general. When the older college lost its point of view and ceased to try to give unity to the whole, it was but natural that its youths should flock to those who could give unity to the parts.

The results, however, have been fatal to those ends for which the older college stood. If it is worth while that there should be those whose outlook upon life is comprehensive and disinterested, that outlook is lost, in as far as the college and its students are concerned, and the community of which they should be the leavening principle. Instinct on the one hand runs riot for lack of those trained to see the relation of riotous instinct to the intellectual and moral direction of life. And on the other hand science with its mechanical view of life usurps the intellectual field because of a lack of those trained to see its relations to the other interests of the human consciousness that are not mechanical but lie close to the heart of humanity itself.

I

If the essence of comedy lies in human weakness, inconsistency, foible, in the spectacle of presumption unaware of its own emptiness, pretension unaware of its own transparency, folly in the language of wisdom, blindness in the presence of the obvious, here is the comedy of the Arts College for whoever has the wit to give it its comic sock. It opens with querulous cries of helpless wonder and complaint, blaming a thankless and material age. Voices in the camp of the old Arts College—for there are camps, and strife is forward—mourn the passing of an older day when students, eager for spiritual culture, flocked to the classical courses, and lent to their studies an enthusiasm, and to their classes a spirit, that are the foundation of a good discipline. But they agree that those times are past; that that enthusiasm

and spirit are lacking to-day; and that the life has somehow gone out of the Arts College.

I dare say that there may be some truth in their belief. Clearly the spirit of the times has changed; a larger proportion of students now go in for technical studies than did so forty years ago. But I dare say, also, that the fault is not wholly with the spirit of the times; and it is not unbelievable that the fault lies even more heavily at the door of the Arts College itself than at the door of those who come to it. In spite of the "technical tendencies of the age," so vigorously defended and so bitterly decried, there is still the constant spectacle, for those who have to do with the incoming student before he is touched by the influence of the college, of his pathetic eagerness and generosity to devote himself to what he calls the higher ends of life, and a trust in the college to guide him toward those ends. The spectacle for the student himself, however, is of a college that offers him no guidance and fails to make clear to him that it in any way serves, or even conceives, the vague ends which he is so willing to pursue.

That these ends are left vague is quite conceivably one reason why he so readily abandons them. The Arts College uses, it is true, such phrases as "culture," "the training of the mind," "the development of the spirit," in its attempt to formulate the purpose for which it exists. But for the student they are, at best, only phrases. As for the Arts Faculty themselves, whatever their individual conceptions may be, they make as a faculty no such conclusive demonstration of their own clear sense of the meaning of those phrases as would emerge, say, from a fixed curriculum. That there would be great difficulties to-day in the way of such high-handed dogmatism is not to be doubted; but such difficulties do not invalidate the general conclusion that, given a course so definite in its requirements as clearly to lead somewhere, and so definite in its aim as clearly to show by its requirements that it knows whither it is leading, the student could be made aware that something clearly conceived was signified by the phrases that are so empty to him now. As it is, however, the fact that almost no requirements are imposed upon him, and that he is left to determine the purpose of his own course, may quite logically lead him to measure the indefiniteness of the cultural purpose by the indefiniteness of his own mind. It is not too much to say that the student makes his choice of studies,

when it is not purely fortuitous, from a sense of the end he hopes them to serve. If, therefore, he goes over into the technical school, or chooses his studies for other than a cultural end, it may, at least in part, be due to the corporate vagueness of the Arts Faculty as to what a cultural end is. In its present state the Arts College, to guide him in his choice, sets before him no end whatsoever.

From this cause the Arts College suffers also by direct comparison with the technical school. The student, for all his boyish assumption of independence, looks to the college for guidance, and the technical school gives him guidance. The Arts College alone refuses him the authoritative direction which the technical school is able to offer and to enforce outwardly in the definiteness of its requirements. As a consequence, in contrast with the technical school, the Arts College is the refuge—whatever worthier students it may still retain through a lingering extramural tradition—of the incompetent, the lazy, the artful dodger among snap courses, the sentimentalist, the dilettante, the weak-minded, who find the vagueness of the elective system suited to the vagueness of their own minds. Such is the spectacle which it offers to the student during his period of decision. He sees in it the home of the purposeless. It has never made him aware that it has a purpose.

No doubt the end in view in a cultural course is harder to define than the end in view in the technical school. It is more dependent upon intangible standards and values. It is, we might say in large terms, ultimately dependent upon a philosophy of life. The very qualities, however, which make it so hard to grasp and retain, would seem to suggest, not the futility, but the greater necessity, of such a definition. It is more than a trifle inconsistent to shift the difficulty to the student, for the student's very presence is an acknowledgment of his inferiority in just those intellectual qualities that are needed to solve the difficulty. Moreover, even the most vigorous advocates of the elective system are, in theory at least, rigidly deterministic within the limits of a single course of study. Logically it is hard to conceive why, once registered in a course, a student who has been trusted to choose for himself in the whole vague field of human knowledge should not be allowed to choose for himself within the narrow range of a particular study. Yet it is hardly too much to assume that no teacher allows his student such freedom. The teacher's

sense of what ought to be known within the narrower range is so keen as to justify even to himself the arrogance of rigid prescription. In theory, then, prescription is sound. It is, after all, only self-distrust that prevents the fixing of a whole curriculum.

The first implication of such a criticism is that the Arts Faculty has abandoned or lost its sense of what a student ought to know. But to state to-day as a criticism that it has abdicated its dogmatic authority in this matter is only to repeat ineffectively what was the prime argument in favour of the elective system in the mouths of its advocates of thirty years ago. For to-day, in as far as the elective system remains by argument and not by inertia, it remains on the plea that no faculty is capable of determining a curriculum suited to the needs of all its students.

In view of this assertion, however, there is something not quite frank in the supporting assertion that "anyhow, for cultural purposes, one subject, if well taught, is as good as another." The believers in election are hardly prepared to say that within the limits of a single course one set of facts is as good, for cultural purposes, as another. Brought down to such narrow bounds, they are guided by a sense of what "belongs," and what does not, a sense of relative importance, a sense of proportion, and a sense of the structure of the limited body of knowledge with which they are dealing. These are intellectual perceptions, and are undoubtedly implied by the phrase "if well taught." But why they should apply within the accidental limits of a single course, and not also to that larger body of knowledge implied by a curriculum we should have some trouble to say. Logic would be rather put to it to bow to the vagaries of the college catalogue. Moreover, an alert malice might logically point out that if, for cultural purposes, one subject is as good as another, a rigid curriculum would be at least as good as any elected course that leads to bachelorhood.

II

To smile at the advocates of the elective system, however, is but forlorn pleasure. In their younger days they were wrestling with a difficult problem, and wrestling with it seriously; and if they fell into errors which time has made ridiculous, they at least had not the help of time to see their errors. For us, however, time has done its ironic service, and brought out a further inconsistency in that phrase to which so much saving grace was

entrusted—"if well taught." For it would seem that whatever may be the truth as to the inability of a faculty to make a wise curriculum, "well taught" is a condition *dependent upon* a curriculum—upon a determined correlation of studies. It is generally admitted that the best discipline is effected to-day, not in those schools where the student may choose one study as well as another, but in the technical schools of law, engineering, and medicine, where the choice and arrangements of studies are minutely determined by an arrogant faculty. I am not sure that the relationship between good teaching and such a curriculum has been specifically pointed out, though it will, I trust, seem obvious when the two are brought together.

In the first place, when a certain variety of studies is piled one upon another in a definite order, as in a technical course, there is possible the double advantage that some structure may be building, and that the teacher may know what structure he is helping to build. The student, moreover, has a defined end to pursue, and with it whatever stimulus comes from his knowledge as to what he is driving at. No doubt he is essentially vague as to the full significance of that end, but he can have faith that his college is clear about it, for it sets down a succession of studies that leaves him for the whole period of his schooling with virtually no choice either of subject or arrangement. Such thoroughness and inclusiveness are for him significant. And he himself is at bottom content. Perhaps the explanation is that he comes to each study definitely prepared to understand its significance and its substance; or that the instructor knows how to build his material into a foundation already laid. Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that the technical student submits himself to compulsion, not perhaps without a murmur—to murmur is the student's privilege—but with a trust and respect that the student of the Arts College is far from feeling.

There is, moreover, the advantage of the spirit that comes to a class that is all pursuing the same general course, founded on the same preliminaries and working toward the same end—an *esprit de corps* that alone makes for enthusiasm for learning, that provides classmates with common topics of conversation, bases friendships on a foundation deeper than football or the dance, and makes emulation and friendly rivalry possible.

There is, too, this advantage—and it is a hard saying—that in a required course only does intellectual discipline take place.

The resistance of the human spirit to discipline is strong. It can be overcome only by the most careful provision. The giver of the elective course must, like the shopkeeper, live by attracting customers. If he makes his goods unpleasingly hard to take, his customers will go to other shops. A few of them will remain, no doubt, but the bulk of them will go to the pleasanter shops that give unlimited credit, that provide rest rooms and entertainment, and deliver the goods at the door. No blame to the customers; they are good, healthy, normal, easy-going human beings lovable, resistant to culture. Little blame even to the individual instructor. The system forces him to compete for customers. Blame only to the system—a system calculated to exercise every human weakness of both instructor and student.

To the giver of the prescribed course, on the other hand, intellectual discipline is reasonably possible. The students are there, not by their own favour in electing the course, but by an established, impersonal compulsion. The instructor need not look forward to the filling of his classes in the future. Whatever he does can be intrinsic to the subject in hand. He can teach his students without fear of driving them away. And not merely might the teacher, under such conditions, make his course an intellectual discipline, but in a way he must. For whereas in elective courses no one but the instructor himself ever knows how poorly he teaches—and alas not always he!—in a curriculum where the later studies are founded on the earlier, there is the constant test of his teaching in the actual attainment of his students as shown in their later courses. Not only does he have no temptation *not* to teach well; this impersonal criticism gives him every incentive *to* teach well.

Add to these important but incidental advantages that other highest essential of real teaching—that the teacher should know just where his subject fits into the whole structure—just what it builds upon and what it builds up to—what knowledge he can count upon and what he cannot—given this, and we have conditions which make for genuine instruction. Under such conditions the teacher has before him at any stage a class that he knows. He knows, for one thing, that since all are pursuing the same end he can reach them all by the same appeal to their common ambition, their common interest. For another, he knows that since they have all had the same preceding courses he can give instruction to all his class at once. And, most importantly, he

knows what those preceding courses were. Knowledge is organic. It can come to anything only if it is placed with wise judgment upon definitely known preliminary knowledge and training, and leads up to definitely anticipated subsequent knowledge and training. Wisdom is structural, not piecemeal. If we should examine the curriculum of any school that knows definitely what it is driving at, we should discover a recognition of this fact in a correlation of studies—these first, these next, these next. Under such conditions real instruction can take place.

There is a temptation to assert that these are the only conditions under which real instruction can take place. To say nothing of the almost incredible laxity of intellectual discipline to-day in elective courses, and to say nothing of the lack of emulative enthusiasm among the students, the sheer weakness in theory of the organisation of the Arts College is pathetically inconsistent with its traditional association with human wisdom. This theory—that knowledge is not structural, but piecemeal; that education consists in putting into the mind unrelated lumps of learning; that their interrelation is no part of the process; that no whole is to be built up by the successive accumulation of organic parts—this theory is so at variance with the simplest wisdom that those who hold it may expect little else than the demoralisation that to-day characterises the anarchy of the Arts College.

For the Arts College is an anarchy. Even with the mild restrictions of the group system, it makes so little demand as to what should be pursued and in what order, that an instructor, looking over his class as it comes to him after registration, can be sure of only one thing—that no two students have been prepared for that class by the same previous instruction. As to what they have studied outside his own department he has no idea. In all matters pertinent to his function they are utter strangers. There has been much talk in recent years of the value of close relationship between teacher and student. Like much current educational discussion it has gone about and about and pulled up with a non-essential. The result has been an unprecedented amount of association, but almost wholly in affairs irrelevant to the situation—smokers, dances, athletics—while the real breach, so fatal to effectiveness of relationship, has been constantly widening. What is essential would seem, on calm

reflection, to be an intellectual sympathy which would make what the instructor says in class come home with intimate appeal to the heart and mind of the student as he sits day after day in the presence of a revelation of mind and character that no casual social intercourse could reveal. As it is, however, the learner comes to the teacher with a mind unprepared for the only real acquaintance which would be possible between them. And the teacher, for his part, though he were omniscient, and knew the mind of every student before him, could reveal himself at best to only one or two, so diverse is his class in the one thing essential to their relationship—intellectual preparation to understand what he has to give them.

He can not, however, know his students. As a consequence, his main problem —to make his instruction take its proper place in the evolution of their minds—he can in no way solve. All he can do is to put before them what he has to offer, and satisfy himself that for the nonce they have swallowed that lump. Whether they have retained anything of what they have studied before he cannot tell. He does not know what they have studied before. Whether they will retain anything of the present lump nobody can tell. They will never be asked. The official be-all and end-all of the course is attained when at the end of the semester the registrar rushes in, note-book in hand, and records before it is forgotten that on such a day they had swallowed such a lump. The student can then sigh a sigh of relief. He can realise that never again will he have to know anything about that subject. When he is graduated it is not by virtue of his being educated. No one asks him whether he is educated. He is graduated by virtue of a book-keeper's record—not a record that he has attained to a certain quality of mind and soul, but a record that for the nonce on such and such a date he knew this, and for the nonce on such and such another date he knew that, unrelated lump of knowledge. In contemplating this situation we should realise that even this record is made by an instructor who has relaxed the discipline of his course in the interests of trade.

Nothing is so easy as to exaggerate. Nothing is so easy to exaggerate as evil. Are, after all, these old considerations, with their clinging odour of triteness, and their hint of asperity, really pertinent to the academic situation to-day? Is the college quite so bad as all that? It is a chastening thought that the alternative,

the fixed curriculum, is susceptible of grave evils—of narrowness, of inelasticity—that it was perhaps these evils that gave cause for the remedy of election. But even such mild modesty implies a penetration that could not be blind to the purposelessness of the Arts College, or to the lack of logic in the theory on which it is drifting. It scarce requires a mind predisposed to the exaggeration of evil to suspect that such purposelessness, even though it is admitted, is in reality a weakness. Everywhere where intelligence is in command and where the end is definitely conceived, the means are carefully adjusted to it. The cant phrases "culture," "mental development," etc., are hardly calculated to obscure such a lack of definite conception, so thinly do they cover it, so easy is it to see that a definite conception would lead to a definite course of study. Nothing but frankly admitted indefiniteness could say to the incoming student, as the Arts College says to him, "We don't know what you ought to have; help yourself." If the Medical Faculty should establish an elective system, it would be a confession of their vagueness as to what a doctor ought to know in order to be the best possible doctor. They are not vague, and consequently they guide their students through a rigidly fixed curriculum. The lawyers and the engineers do likewise. Even the schools concerned with the most inspirational of subjects—music, painting, acting—conceive clearly their ends and establish disciplines to accomplish them. What everyone else should know is definitely established; but what an educated man should know—no one knows. Even those who have his instruction in charge shake their heads in modest deprecation. Harvard has done something. But even the modifications of the elective system now on trial there and elsewhere do little to straighten out its main illogicalities. They leave the classes as mixed, and the instructor as much an intellectual stranger to his students as ever; they leave the Arts College still open to the charge of having lost its sense of what it is driving at. Not to determine its aim convicts the Arts Faculty of corporate weakness. If the aim is clear in their minds, the only logical demonstration of such clarity is a definite curriculum to compass it. It is certainly illogical for them to cry out against the spirit of the times before they have put their own house in order.

S. B. Gass.

University of Nebraska.