
Visions of Excellence: Jacob Klein, Leo Strauss, and Louise Cowan on Liberal Education

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Jacob Klein, Leo Strauss, and Louise Cowan were—and in various ways continue to be—leading lights of three outstanding institutions of great books education: St. John’s College, the University of Chicago, and the University of Dallas. Klein taught at St. John’s for four decades and served there as dean for one, shaping and interpreting its curriculum as no one has done before or since.¹ Leo Strauss, who founded a school of thought that now bears his name, taught for more than a decade at the University of Chicago; several of his students still teach there, while many of his students and students’ students teach great books at institutions throughout the country. Louise Cowan, together with her husband Donald Cowan, president of the University of Dallas for fifteen years, founded the undergraduate core curriculum; with Willmoore Kendall, she later founded the graduate school with its own core.

Although the wide-ranging learning of all three is manifest, each usually narrows his or her attention to subjects and questions close to their respective fields of study. Klein primarily attends to mathematics and the question of how we know; Strauss, to political philosophy and the question of the best way to live together; Cowan, to poetry and the question of how the imagination can lead human souls and shape cultures. All are meticulous students of their subjects and all are highly sensitive to the question of how those subjects have taken shape over the course of time. They are not, however, to be considered historians—at least not primarily. They studied the great works of the Western tradition, and they did so for reasons and in ways that are worthy of careful consideration.

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There are similarities among these three thinkers regarding the goal of liberal learning and even the goal of liberal education as a general enterprise; significant differences emerge, however, regarding the subject matter and manner of treatment they emphasize for achieving those goals; deeper still are differences in the attitude each appears to seek to inculcate among the liberally educated. To be more specific, the similarity of goals pertains, first, to what knowing has to do with being in the cosmos and, second, to whether and how we can and ought to deal with the gap between the goals of genuine liberal education and the tendencies of the wider culture, society or politics. Such differences in emphasis as exist along these lines correspond—but cannot be reduced—to the thinkers' respective fields of study, while the deeper differences in the attitudes they tend to inculcate pertain to other still more fundamental questions. Important in themselves, these latter differences might also point to tendencies within each of these approaches to liberal education which, once known, could be countered or at least hedged against just as they could be more fully cultivated. To that end, and before sketching out a comparison of these three understandings of liberal learning and education, I will briefly summarize each approach.

THREE ACCOUNTS OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Jacob Klein opens "The Idea of Liberal Education" by stating its goal: to clarify the problem and outline the principles of liberal education. He also signals concerns regarding the political conditions of liberal education by alluding to the attention then being paid to the role of education in waging the Cold War. He begins his substantive treatment of his topic by identifying two milieux of education, which he calls the elemental and the formal. The elemental includes everything from how we eat to what traditions we hold most dear; it arises in part in response to the challenges and troubles of life. When such obstacles become theoretical problems, formal education arises. Klein offers no examples, but it is easy to infer that he means something like this: Merchants could count coins for a long time and even invent counting aids such as abacuses before arithmetic would become a formal subject of study independent of counting *these* coins. Having asserted that formal education is thus rooted in the elemental, Klein asks *how* the former emerges from the latter. This question occasions the most important part of the essay, on questioning. Nearly all of our questioning is framed by the familiar, including questioning that is practical ("How do I?"), gossipy ("Did you hear?"), or exploratory ("Where might?"). Such questioning forms a part of daily life, which includes

the presence of both the familiar and the unfamiliar; however, it is the unfamiliar about which we generally ask our questions. When we do so, the activity in which we engage is like shining a flashlight into the darkest corners of a room. This questioning, reasonably enough, presupposes the unknown, and it does so in one of two ways. The unknown can be cast as the not-yet-known; in this guise it was approached primordially through the practice of divining, whereas it is approached here and now through science. Alternatively, the unknown can figure as the no-longer-known, the forgotten, in which case it was approached primordially by myth and in the here-and-now by history.

Occasionally, however, instead of converting the unknown into the known, the known is converted into the unknown, the familiar into the unfamiliar:

We suddenly do not feel at home in this world of ours. We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We re-lect. Plato has a word for it: *metastrophe* or *periagoge*, a turnabout, a conversion. We detach ourselves from all that is familiar to us; we change the direction of our inquiry; we do not explore the unknown anymore; on the contrary, we convert the known into an unknown.²

This *metastrophe* is something we have all experienced: it is that moment of true wonder at something which *before had not* been put into question but now is put into question, and in such a way as simultaneously to provoke the additional question: How could *I* have thought *that*? What am I to have been able to think that? The temporary result is to become blind to the familiar as familiar and to see it and ourselves as though for the first time. The experience is vertiginous; at a minimum it is the moment of recognizing that the physical tool we are using to fix something is the wrong tool; at a maximum it is amazement in the face of the question of *what* I am to have thought this thing. Klein goes on: "This metaphoric reflection in conjunction with our exploratory questioning, leads us to the establishment of the formal disciplines." Liberal education can take place when the kind of reflection that is the *precondition* of the formal disciplines becomes the goal of the use of those disciplines. What this means is: That which was accessed in the knower and in the world by the wondering which went into the mathematics that makes, e.g., suspension bridges possible—*that* is the end or purpose of our activity in this case; the mere corollary or byproduct is a car driving safely across the suspension bridge.

2 Klein, "The Idea of Liberal Education," 162.

But it also means that the wonder an engineer experiences in his moments of stepping back from his hard work designing a bridge is an echo of the original wonder-filled moment. A way of questioning is thus, by Klein's account, the end of man. Klein is sure to mention, and my examples are meant to illustrate, that this way of knowing is by no means restricted to the humanities. Klein concludes his account by mentioning three obstacles to liberal learning: the stifling routine endemic to institutionalization; the sedimentation of knowledge that occurs within a tradition; and the political community that must try to subordinate liberal education, reducing it to a means rather than allowing it to be the end.

The treatment of liberal education by Klein's close friend, Leo Strauss, is in some ways the most general and straightforward writing in a body of work that is otherwise especially difficult. "What Is Liberal Education?" addresses a subject with which we are more or less familiar; it is short, and it offers the benefit of being one of only two writings by Strauss whose titles take the form of a Socratic question. By the end, however, we have not been supplied with an answer to the question—in fact, almost all we know is that liberal education appears to be impossible for reasons I will describe. And along the way Strauss does more than a few strange things: In eight short pages he offers and himself rebuts an a-political definition of liberal education; puts forth but seems to balk at a very political definition of it; and lands on a definition that is political in a sense but, as I indicated, impossible.

Strauss begins by defining his subject as "education in culture" and by identifying its practice as reading with the proper care the books written by the best minds. He promptly objects to his own definition and characterization of the practice, pointing out that since the greatest minds contradict one another it is unclear, to say the least, what studying them with the proper care could mean (though it is clear it cannot mean indoctrination); he further indicates that since there are many cultures it is not easy to determine which one to study. Strauss asserts that this fact makes the choice of our own culture seem like mere parochialism; he sets aside as absurd the opposite tendency to embrace the study of any and every culture however manifestly low. His initial, simple characterization of liberal education having failed, he asks a new question: What can liberal education mean here and now? This formulation provokes a foray into a version of political philosophy from the perspective of the citizen. He suggests that democracy as it ought to be is a universal or near-universal aristocracy in which most or all are virtuous and wise. Heeding loud cries of opposition that mass culture is so predominant and so vulgar that it

needs a “counterpoison,” he suggests that liberal education is the attempt to found an aristocracy within modern democracy that can cultivate deeper qualities, such as dedication and concentration, lacking in mass culture. The task of liberal education would, on this understanding, consist in reminding those within modern democracy of human greatness. Strauss goes on to consider what this education of and to human greatness might consist in, but only after a digression. In the digression he first rebuts a call to return to preliterate tribalism as the best alternative to modern democracy; he then puts forth a striking model of a good reader of great texts and a teacher of gentlemen and gentlemanship: Socrates. In the accounts from which Strauss draws, Socrates uses his own judgment and his friends’ conversation to find what is good and useful in great books; Socrates also states his assumption—call it a principle of interpretation—that the things he does *not* understand in such books are great and noble even if extremely difficult to know.

Strauss returns to liberal education as education to greatness, asking by what means it reminds one of human greatness and turning for help to Plato’s suggestion that education in the highest sense is philosophy. Although philosophers, or more generally the greatest minds, do not possess the comprehensive knowledge of the highest things, which is what they seek, they nonetheless possess all the excellences of which the human mind is capable; they are therefore the only true kings. “We,” on the other hand, do not possess these excellences; we can, however, love philosophy or try to philosophize by listening to the conversation among the greatest minds—Western and non-Western, if we had languages we lack. Strauss then raises a massive difficulty: It is both necessary and impossible to judge among the greatest minds. Since the greatest minds contradict one another we *must* judge among them; but since we must admit our incompetence to do so, we cannot judge among them. Historicism and relativism enable us not to notice—let alone face up to—this situation: All simply authoritative traditions in which we might trust have been lost in the wake of the collapse of the attempt to form a simply rational society; each of us must therefore find his bearings by his own meager powers. The only consolations are the moments of godlike understanding of our own acts of understanding, moments that make us aware of the dignity of the human mind and its home in a world that has some goodness. Strauss concludes with the assertion that liberal education is training in the highest form of modesty, since it requires constant intercourse with the greatest minds; it is also training in boldness, since it requires students to break entirely from the vanity of the intellectuals and the vulgarity of

the crowd; liberal education provides the experience of beautiful, noble things.

Experiences of beauty and nobility figure even more prominently in Louise Cowan's case for the necessity—the absolute necessity—of the classics. The classics are necessary for individuals to experience the whole range of human sensibility, especially the nobility of soul, and they are needed to give form in human culture to the creative energy of the human soul. Her article, "The Necessity of the Classics," is bounded by reflections on heroism, but the bulk is devoted, first, to defining classics and the central and even predominant place of poetry in liberal education; next, to describing the operations of poetry in the soul and the world; and finally, to how Greek poetry has provided, and can continue to provide, three crucial things: the basis of the drive toward nobility, the preservation of Western Civilization's ideals of justice and truth, and categories for other cultures both to know themselves better and to join themselves into one polyphonic cultural whole that continues to make possible the full range of human sensibilities.

Cowan nearly concludes with an evocation of the heroic paradox, whose classic expression we inherited from the Greeks but which constitutes a fundamental and universal pattern in the human soul. The heroic passion consists in the impossible drive to transcendence, to exceed the bounds of our civic order and, indeed, of our human order altogether: in the face of one's mortality to seek to become divine. In order to be awakened, but then not become distorted, this pattern requires a tradition of reverence. She concludes with a summary of the necessity of reading the classics that steps beyond their Greek origins: Such a reading recaptures the spirit of high nobility and magnanimity, order and excellence, within a framework of democracy engendered by a biblical culture of radical openness. To understand this concluding phrase we would need to recur to the companion article, "Jerusalem's Claim on Us," in which Cowan lays out the deep, creative tension between the Hellenic tradition of noble magnanimity and Hebraic spirit of humility before God's majesty and power. In it she writes beautifully of the creative spirit of the ancient Hebrews as openness to the gift of God's burning love.

THE THREE ACCOUNTS COMPARED

We are now in a position to consider together these thinkers' similar treatments of the goals of liberal learning and liberal education, their different emphases regarding the subjects and the means of study, and, finally, the divergent—perhaps even opposed—attitudes their accounts

seem to encourage in students.

Klein, Strauss, and Cowan all discuss the moment of genuine learning in terms I think even Cowan herself would be willing to call poetic. From modern and post-modern points of view, their evocations of the soul's luminous moments of learning are hopelessly naïve—yet every last one of us knows exactly what they are talking about, sensing as we do that within such moments reside the keys to the very purpose and pleasure of our lives. It is no coincidence that at their most poetic all three seem to feel compelled to leave the languages of our modern world and adopt a great language of the ancient world, even as they open the possibility of peering into the world itself: for *metastrophe*, *noesis noeseos*, and *mimesis* are the respective watchwords with which each—without a trace of pedantry—directs us to our goal.

Klein is the most tentative about the cosmic consequences of the moment of liberal learning, but he describes the moment itself with singular vividness. After noting that the forms of our questioning—the *whys*, *hows* and *whats* of Aristotle's logic—prefigure the very structure of our world, and after describing the ordinary exploratory learning process as the indefatigable transformation of the unfamiliar and unknown into the familiar and known, Klein depicts the metastrophic moment, described above, of transforming the familiar and known into the unfamiliar and unknown. He continues his description by noting the apparently paradoxical result of the self-detachment: "We wonder ... It calls myself in question with all my questioning. It compels me to detach myself from myself, to transcend the limits of my horizon; that is, it educates me. It gives me the freedom to go to the roots of all my questioning."³ As mentioned above, Klein goes on to explain how such questioning leads to and remains embedded in the assumptions of formal disciplines. They are there for us (like the engineer in my illustration) to rediscover, and they provide models of at least part of what we are really looking for: rigorous knowledge of the nature of things.

For his part, Strauss, the political philosopher of reason-versus-revelation fame, waxes not just poetic but downright theological on the question of the goal of liberal learning. Strauss first forces us, in an almost brutal manner, to face the near-hopelessness of our situation described above: We are readers who both must and cannot judge among the greatest minds if we are to learn what matters most. Yet Strauss discusses the same phenomenon described by Klein, albeit in different words. He speaks of the "awareness of our understanding... the understanding of

3 Klein, "The Idea of Liberal Education," 162.

understanding... *noesis noeseos*, and this is so high, so pure, so noble an experience that Aristotle could ascribe it to his God." The exalted, pure and beautiful character of thought thinking itself enables us to suffer all hardships nobly "in the spirit of good citizens of the city of God." Arresting as this formulation is, it pales in comparison to the next—one that should give pause to even the most hard-boiled of Straussians: "By becoming aware of the dignity of the mind, we realize the true ground of the dignity of man and therewith the goodness of the world, whether we understand it as created or as uncreated, which is the home of man because it is the home of the human mind."⁴ When we know our knowing of the world, we know the world is good, because we know that learning itself is good, and we know the world as our home because it is the home of that which knows—and all this whether the world is uncreated or created. To begin truly to appreciate this passage we would need to understand the most poetic passage Strauss ever published, which appears in the sister essay, "What Is Political Philosophy?" It speaks of the human soul as being the *only* part of the whole that is open to *the* whole, thereby awakening us to our dignity; it also speaks of being graced by nature's grace in our never-completed striving to know the most important things, thereby revealing us in our neediness which is nonetheless not ugliness.

In a very different key, but nearly as confident as Strauss regarding the cosmic significance of human knowing, Cowan tells us of poetry's connection to knowing. Early in her treatment of the necessity of the classics, and after boldly claiming the moniker "classics" for works of poetry above all others, Cowan speaks of "*poiesis*" as "an entire cast of mind." She says:

Poiesis was considered to be a making process governed by *mimesis*, the envisioning, or imagining, of fictional analogies, a kind of knowing different from philosophy or history and yet occupying an irreplaceable position in the quest for wisdom.... Poetry appeals to the imagination, that faculty of the mind which enables the intellect to know the things of the senses *from the inside*.... It is a mature and vigorous act of the mind and heart, oriented toward reality, expanding the cosmos within which the knowing mind dwells.⁵

Surprising to today's ears is the claim that poetry is governed by a kind of knowing, rather than a mode for the expression of feeling. Stranger still

4 Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?", 8.

5 Cowan, "The Necessity of the Classics," 5.

may seem the idea that the kind of knowing in question is an envisioning of fictional analogies that correspond and give life and structure to the realms of being itself. In its knowing of things from the inside, poetry, through the imagination, broadens the world within which the mind dwells. Note that, like Strauss, Cowan asserts that the mind dwells within the cosmos. Yet for Cowan, as the mind, by means of the imagination, knows its way into things, its world grows, not as a fantasy but as a shared reality which would otherwise remain forever closed to it.

While Klein suggests it only tentatively, all three agree that the moment of liberal learning is when or where mind and cosmos meet or re-cognize their always-having-already met. Indeed, for all his lack of certainty on this count, Klein's use of the metaphor of home perhaps provides the best conclusion. Having begun his account with the seriously playful assertion, "All I want is to remind you of things you do know," in passing he later dubs the world which is prefigured in the forms of our questioning as "our not too hospitable home."⁶ "Not too hospitable" is not as comfortless as "inhospitable," and "home" is "home."

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND SOCIETY: INCOMMENSURABILITY, AMELIORATION, AND TRANSFORMATION

Our three thinkers differ more clearly on the goals of liberal education as an enterprise within society, even if they still clearly share one thing in common: Liberal education is a stranger in a strange land. Its goals are simply not those of society and, indeed, the latter tend to run counter to the former. The differences begin to surface in a qualification Klein would be quick to make: This is *always* so, and always in the same way. For Klein, the relation is and must remain essentially one of great tension arising from essential incommensurability. I cannot resist briefly recounting Klein's conclusion of his entire account of liberal education—with the story of Archimedes's death. Archimedes had done his civic duty by using his knowledge of geometry to keep the Roman besiegers at bay, when the city finally falls. A Roman soldier comes upon Archimedes drawing his figures in the sand. The "Roman soldier," as Klein quotes Plutarch, "running upon him with a drawn sword, offered to kill him.... Archimedes, looking back, earnestly besought him to hold his hand a little while, that he might not leave what he was then at work upon inconclusive and imperfect; but the soldier, nothing moved by his entreaty, instantly killed him." Klein comments that the story illustrates both the "precarious position" of real learning and the "ultimate incommensurability between...the basis of all

6 Klein, "The Idea of Liberal Education," 157, 161.

liberal learning...and the implacable conditions of our existence."⁷

For Strauss the relation of liberal education to society is less like Archimedes's to the Roman soldier and more like that of a beleaguered but happy outpost on the wild plains or badlands, potentially but not—as for Klein—necessarily the victim of its surroundings. It is also potentially a source for the amelioration of the harshness of the environs. For Strauss suggests, "Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, ... the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness."⁸ This characterization is too political—not least because it explicitly adopts the distorting views of democracy that then predominated in Strauss's profession—yet it conveys the dual sense of liberal education. It is depicted as a good in itself, in that it is *of* the best, and a potential if pungent good *for* the democratic society in which it finds itself.

For Cowan the outcome is surely as uncertain as it is for Strauss, but the potential is not merely for hanging on at the margins while helping here and there; on the contrary, it is for renewing the full spirit of antiquity in the milieu of our current biblical-democratic context. She speaks of the classics' absolute necessity if we are "to preserve the full range of human sensibility. What is needed is to recapture their spirit of high nobility and magnanimity, of order and excellence...in a framework of democracy engendered by a Biblical culture of radical openness." Cowan sees poetry at the center of what would be a polyphonic world culture. Whether it will be ennobling or debasing depends in no small part on whether and how we embrace our destiny, our *fatum*, as heirs of the Great Tradition of poetry.⁹

All three thinkers see great tension between liberal education and society. For Klein the tension is met in a spirit of resignation in the face of incommensurable demands; for Strauss, with modest hopes for limited amelioration; for Cowan, with high hopes of potential transformation on a grand scale.

KINDS OF LEARNING: KNOWING, POLITICS, AND POETRY

Obviously, all three of these components are strongly present in the accounts of each of our three thinkers. But shadings of differences among them can and do have large implications. Little more need be said

7 Klein, "The Idea of Liberal Education," 169-170.

8 Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?", 5.

9 Cowan, "The Necessity of the Classics," 6, 8, 11.

about Klein's emphasis on knowing and Cowan's on poetry. But about Strauss's emphasis on politics in "What Is Liberal Education?" more is required. On the one hand, this piece is decidedly un-Straussian: no gigantomachia between ancients and moderns, no real examination of the regime question, no discussion of liberal democracy as such, no explicit exotericism-esotericism distinction. On the other hand, there is still a deep undercurrent of political philosophy. To see this, consider the context of passages we have dealt with. At a pivotal point in the argument, Strauss gives two extreme depictions of democracy: on the one hand, as a nearly undreamt-of universal aristocracy in the full sense of virtue and wisdom for all; on the other, as an equally extreme degraded and degrading mass culture. The two extremes are pushed forward and the reader is forced to lurch from one to the other, until being brought to an unstable rest in the half-way house of aristocracy-within-democracy. Then, after a strange digression regarding Socrates as the ideal reader, Strauss arrives at what one might hope would be an understanding of liberal education that transcends politics, which it nearly does. He says:

Wisdom is inaccessible to man, and hence virtue and happiness will always be imperfect. In spite of this, the philosopher, who, as such, is not simply wise, is declared to be the only true king; he is declared to possess all the excellences of which man's mind is capable, to the highest degree. From this we must draw the conclusion that we cannot be philosophers—that we cannot acquire the highest form of education... but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize...[by] listening to the conversation between the great philosophers or greatest minds.¹⁰

Notice the layers of moderation Strauss depicts: knowledge of all things, wisdom, is not to be expected and therefore virtue and happiness will remain imperfect; and although we non-philosophers can love philosophy, we are not philosophers and therefore cannot actually philosophize. Notice as well the understated insertion of a fundamentally political category, that of the "true king." For Strauss the question of who ought to rule cannot be fully abstracted from even when discussing liberal education in nearly transcendent terms. Yet the political category provides the horizon within which one can and must find the strength to seek to peer over the horizon toward where one "is declared to possess all the excellences of which man's mind is capable." This passage will be especially useful as we consider the attitudes encouraged by these accounts.

10 Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?", 7

ATTITUDES OF LEARNING: RECOLLECTION, PHILO-PHILOSOPHY, AND REVERENCE

The attitudes towards learning and teachers which these three seek—or seem to me, at least, to tend—to inculcate are at least as different as their emphases in subject matter and manner of treatment. For Klein, it is as though there are no teachers in practice, just as there are basically none in principle. In a lecture that supplements “The Idea of Liberal Education,” Klein says, “There are...two ways of describing teaching in an appropriate manner. The one is that of begetting and conceiving.... The other ... is that of eliciting answers and gaining insight from within. [And] a program of liberal education implies teaching both as begetting and eliciting; in fact, more the latter than the former.”¹¹ The language of “eliciting” draws from Plato’s metaphor of the “teacher” as midwife, while that of “begetting” alludes to Aristotle’s more didactically oriented account. There is at least as much seriousness as playfulness in the suggestion that we need only be reminded of what we already know: More than taking in new things from outside, including things from teachers, we need to clarify our own initial awareness of the world.

For Strauss, there is a harsh insistence on an unbridgeable gulf between all of us and the greatest minds, and on our simultaneous need and inability to judge among them, which requires each of us to find “his bearings by his own powers.” This situation, according to Strauss, is due to the fact “that we have lost all simply authoritative guidance because our immediate teachers and teachers’ teachers believed in the possibility of the rational society.”¹² Our comfort in this quandary is to be found not in hopes for recovery or renewal of an authoritative tradition but—if anywhere—within the very activity of thinking itself cultivated within an “experience of things beautiful” provided by liberal education.

For Cowan a similar vast gulf exists, but poetry inspires godlike aspiration by providing a vision of the noble in the midst of a tradition—and therefore in the spirit—of reverence. She says:

Admiration for the heroic principle will surface from time to time in surprising ways; but without a tradition of reverence it is likely to be deformed and misplaced. A godlike aspiration, a selfless desire for a commitment to a calling, a sense that honor is far more valuable than life—these are aspects of the soul that must be awakened by a vision of

¹¹ Klein, “On Liberal Education,” 267-268.

¹² Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?”, 8.

the high and the noble.¹³

The sustaining vision for the West had long been Virgil's *Aeneid* and its heroic tale of duty and mission in the founding of Rome; Cowan, following T.S. Eliot, has no illusions regarding the loss of the poem in our "culture"; she derives a measure of hope, however, from the thought that "we are still in a sense citizens of that city, the eternal Rome,"¹⁴ a hope that the heroic principle and a guiding reverence can be recovered and even extended beyond the city's walls.

The attitudes toward learning—and especially toward teachers—that emerge from these accounts are quite different. Kleinian recollection of what we already know, which really means the clarification and deepening of our awareness of the world, seems likely to diminish the apparent importance and need for teachers; it would be accompanied by a strong emphasis on the need to discuss what we see and think as we search for the as-yet-unexamined assumption of a given discussion, the discovery of which leads to metastrophic vertigo. Straussian emphasis on the gulf between non-philosophers and philosophers would seem to lead to deep respect for philosophy and the cultivation of philosophy-once-removed, a kind of philo-philosophy, which makes the student neither a philosopher nor a stranger to philosophy; his stance toward his teachers is likely to be governed by the question of whether they are, or are like, philosophers or are at least teachers who recognize the political, i.e., pedagogical and literary, implications of the difference between non-philosophers and philosophers. Cowanite attention to *poiesis* is likely to be accompanied by a highly developed sense of taste in matters of beauty, a deep reverence for the divine, or a combination of the two; teachers themselves are likely to become the objects of that taste and reverence even as they seek to direct students toward still worthier heights.

CONCLUSION

We have considered divergent emphases, attitudes, and tendencies in Klein's, Strauss's, and Cowan's views of liberal education, divergences which give rise to vibrant communities of learners, each with its distinct way of participating in the great conversation of liberal learning. It is nonetheless important to remind ourselves that each of these three thinkers and communities recognizes the necessity of studying those realms of being which are emphasized by the others. This holism is evident in,

13 Cowan, "The Necessity of the Classics," 10.

14 Ibid., 9.

among many other things: Klein's persuasive justification of all aspects of the St. John's curriculum, not just math, science, and philosophy; Strauss's evocation of the charms of both reverent awe and exacting knowledge akin to mathematics, even as he defines political philosophy¹⁵; and the evolution of the impressive graduate school founded by Cowan to include the three fields of philosophy, politics, and literature.

Indeed, the fact that the same three-foldness characterizes each of these accounts cannot help but make us wonder whether their combination is more than happenstance, that is, whether they may draw support from the very nature of things. At least it calls to mind the truly fundamental and—to my knowledge—ultimately unaccountable community of ideas to which the emphases of their accounts respectively correspond: that of the true, the good, and the beautiful. In order for each to constitute a whole, each must be independent of the others; for each to be a part of the whole community of ideas, each must depend on the others. It may not be possible fully to understand such independence-and-dependence; as difficult as such understanding may prove to be, it is at least as imperative that we try.

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15 Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?", 39–40.