

The Moral Obligation to Be Concrete

by Thomas Banks, Petra Academy

“The law is unconcerned with trivial things.” [*De minimis non curat lex.*] It is a comfort to reflect that this saying was at one point in history common enough wisdom to pass for a cliché rather than a paradox. The people among whom

of life. Instruction in history or literature naturally brings us all, teachers and students alike, into contact with all manner of monstrously bloated ideologies; in our reading we meet rationalism, modernism, and all the other

the unstated dogmas by which the world lives, to know them thoroughly, and to winnow the wheat from the chaff. The properly trained student should be instructed accurately in the Creed which gives life, and should be able to distinguish it from those other creeds which fortuitously happen still to be living. The danger is that we should teach the student too well and too impatiently to learn all this as formula and formula alone. The learning which finds no place to taste and savor, as well as judge and classify, leaves half its work undone, and the learner unfinished. A knowledge of worldviews is necessary for the daily matter of living. For instance, the revelation that your chiropractor is a Neo-Albigensian, hateful of the body in all its sordidness and indifferent to its chastisement, is a *datum* useful to consider before you let him have at your defenseless upper vertebrae. Or consider the bit in Boswell where Dr. Johnson dined with the man who saw no evil in theft: “. . . if he does really think that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, why, Sir, when he leaves our houses let us count our spoons.”²² It may have been bad manners, but it was only practical policy. So we have it that the knowledge and experience of worldviews are handy things, like keys or buttons.

A rote knowledge of creeds can be acquired easily enough—but what of experience? It is regrettable that zoos have not evolved as we might wish. We cannot visit our local wildlife shelter and find pantheism in its own purlieu or Marxism milling about its native environment. Until such a field trip does become available, I fear that we

Every responsible teacher wants his students to graduate with an ability to recognize the unstated dogmas by which the world lives, to know them thoroughly, and to winnow the wheat from the chaff.

the proverb raises no eyebrows is a people that need not fear oppression. Of course, it says nothing for the people themselves, and down the centuries has likely consoled as many thieves as honest citizens; the humble and the iniquitous have this much in common: at most times each supposes that his day-to-day business is nothing to concern the policeman around the corner.

So it is that good laws are capable of impassivity. It is otherwise with competent teachers of the humanities. In the teaching of literature, history, philosophy or theology, things trivial—the apparently pointless tangent and the seemingly immaterial digression deserve their place, and that not despicable. If the fall of a sparrow is not beneath the notice of our Lord, then neither should our attention find no time for it. A good means of practicing this in the classroom is not to condense every sentence of every book we teach into a miniature expression of the author’s view

baggy propositions that our inner self-serious professional feels compelled to treat soberly and discreetly. He plots carefully his lecture on worldview analysis dealing in *ideas*—important ones, blast it; fundamental things, things we live by and die for, if necessary—taking very seriously what Thomas Hardy, in a moment of more than usually animated pessimism, called “this hobble of being alive.”²¹ Now, of course, worldview analysis—hideous though the phrase be—is a matter of great importance, for worldviews are the invisible goads of conduct. But we should remember that conduct is the visible thing, maddeningly inconsistent as it often is, and its interpretation at times a Delphic piece of obscurity. It is dangerous to overvalue any idea, especially the notion that a familiarity with *ideas*, that is, with worldviews, is the sum and center of a Christian liberal education.

Every responsible teacher wants his students to graduate with an ability to recognize

Thomas Banks teaches secondary Latin and humanities at Petra Academy, an ACCS-accredited school in Bozeman, MT. He is a graduate of Logos School in Moscow, ID.

The Moral Obligation to Be Concrete . . .

shall have to hunt the beasts down where we have always hunted them, in books; but at the risk of advertising the obvious, books are not slot machines and should not be studied primarily as repositories of *isms*. Isms, like murder, will out. We do not read books rightly when we read them intending only to gather and classify specimens of dead philosophies. We read stories and poetry, briefly, as the pleasurable means of illuminating creation for ourselves. When we learn to read for our own delight we come to fear and detest the lecturer who begins, “Ladies and gentlemen, notice in the poet Yeats’ ‘Song of Wandering Angus’ how the bucolic imagery bears out the author’s arcadian mysticism. Underscore those last two words, for they are important. If you take nothing else away from the poem, remember the arcadian mysticism.”

Our professor in this case, where he does not patronize us with milk and deny us meat, feeds us hot steam in place of both. Here is one of the finest poems by the greatest poet of the last century, and he has commended to us the husk while the true kernel becomes the portion of the birds.

Anyone guilty of the thoughtless presumption which stamps an author with a label (Huxley = modernism; Zola = naturalism) and says “there, I’ve finished my

work” ought to consider what his own reaction would be if an atheist or an agnostic student in a literary surveys course did the same to one of our own. Suppose an unbelieving acquaintance told you that he understood Dante thoroughly, knowing that he was a Roman Catholic, and had Bunyan boxed up nicely; he was a Baptist, wasn’t he—or a Quaker, or something?

Good habits in reading are among the best things we can leave with our students. I hope that the boys and girls I teach will learn from me not to read impatiently, forever racking their brains to discern the creative purpose of the god of Deism (long since comatose, by last reports) or if Emerson declared everything sacred and therefore nothing sacred—or was it the other way around? If nothing else, I hope that they advance into adulthood without having picked up any habits of questionable sanity, among the first of which is the impulse to practice worldview taxonomy on novels or plays that they might otherwise have very much enjoyed.

Notes:

1. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999).
2. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008).

Help ACCS Get CLASSIS to Teachers

We would like to make sure that teachers at ACCS member schools are notified when a new issue of *CLASSIS* is available.

Please send email addresses for any staff members who would like to be added to our Nuntiata mailing list to admin@accsedu.org.

All editions of *CLASSIS* are available from the ACCS website at www.accsedu.org > Publications > *CLASSIS*.