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Re-enchanting Undergraduate Education: On the Project of Metamorphosis in English Higher Education*

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Abstract

Dominant contemporary discourse in English higher education is shaped by a disenchanted narrowly instrumentalist and economistic conception of the purposes of undergraduate studies. Though critics object to this narrowness, a lighter instrumentalism still tends to prevail within their own critiques. This chapter argues that we should embrace a re-enchanted and, indeed, Romantic sense of the purposes of higher education. To this end, it aims to explore what might be a directly experiential benefit of an undergraduate education which, though strengthened by the experience of learning, is not reducible to it. It suggests that one of these experiential benefits is the symbolic cordoning off of a space and time where the project of *metamorphosis* (i.e. a deep personal change) is fostered. Recognising that trends in contemporary English higher education weaken this symbolic cordoning off, this chapter calls for university educators to dedicate themselves to fostering nurturing classrooms where students can safely bring all of themselves.

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1. The Disenchanted World: Higher Education in England Today

> 'One in five students lose money by going to university, Institute for Fiscal Studies [IFS] finds' (Adams, 2020)

This was the headline of an article published in *The Guardian* not so long ago. The headline could have highlighted the remark, elsewhere in the article, that "after accounting for taxes and student loans, men gained on average £130,000 and women £100,000 over their careers, compared with their peers who didn't enter higher education" (Adams, 2020). Yet, I suspect that opting for the negative headline was no accident. Celebrating collective success is somehow less 'newsworthy' than decrying 'failure', however smaller it might be in relation to the 'success'. In a world where competition is taken as a given, shaming 'losers' turns out to be more exciting than acknowledging 'successes' – all the more so when talking of universities, even when they are succeeding by measures imposed upon them. The more fundamental question, of course, is whether we should measure the success or failure of undergraduate education by graduate incomes. Despite protestations from academics and students alike, it increasingly looks like this is a question which has been asked and answered by the powers that be.

In England, 'value for money', 'graduate employment', 'graduate earnings', and 'student satisfaction' are just some of the terms that have become markers of market-

sanctioned desirability in the domain of undergraduate education.[1] What these terms have in common is that they are readily expressible numerically and allow for easy aggregation, comparison, and ranking. This, it turns out, is all important since competition, apparently, has become the measure of all 'real value' and if one is going to have a competition, then one needs a scoreboard, preferably a simple one.[2] League tables are, for the most part, the scoreboard for universities (see Hazelkorn 2017). To get universities to shine in league tables, governments, media outlets, and university leaders beseech and often coerce university educators into accepting that market-based competition is the only game in town.[3] They also occasionally invent new league tables ostensibly for the purpose of reminding university educators that competition and comparison are the basis of all educative good, and that public spirit, collegiality, and cooperation must fade into the recesses of history, mere distractions from economic competition between nations and institutions.

Long gone, we are told, are the educative commitments to forming character, to preparing citizens for democratic engagement, to the transmission of knowledge, or even to helping young people grow into adulthood, or mature students undergo transformation, or to help all students discover a little more about who they are, what they think, and what they might wish to do with the little time they have ahead of them on this earth. Instead, we are told in no uncertain terms that university educators should dedicate themselves above all else to enabling the production of private wealth for fee-paying students after graduation.[4]

[1] I've written about this before (Forstenzer 2018), and I also highly recommend Tomlinson, Enders & Naidoo (2018).

[2] Rajani Naidoo's work on what she calls the 'competition fetish' is remarkably informative about how the logic of competition articulates itself in higher education. See especially Naidoo (2018).

[3] Rankings, though growingly important are not the only manner in which competition between and within nations is articulated in higher education. For a fascinating analysis of the role played by deliberate efforts at branding the UK higher education system to attract international students from 1999 to 2014, see Lomer, Papatsiba & Naidoo (2018).

[4] Compare the Robbins Report (1963) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015).

Remarkably little is said about how precisely this is supposed to be done. And yet, the insistent imperative remains. So much so, in fact, that university educators who persevere in seeking to further a more authentically developmental project in tertiary education are regularly told that they can no longer afford this 'overly-Romantic' notion; market constraints and the logic of competition must apply to all sectors of life.

This is the 'reality constraint' that we, mature and reasonable education professionals, must learn to make do with – or so we are told with growingly irritated impatience by a long list of ministers, regulators, and managers. And yet, despite too many of us coming from positions of antecedent privilege (at least in the UK, where too many academics are white, male, straight, and the children of middle and upper class members of society – all of which apply to yours truly), I contend that our vocation as educators is to challenge the world as we find it and, as the great Cornel West (2017) explains, "[w]e see what's really running things, this market-driven, predatory capitalism that's obsessed with short-term gain, that's obsessed with superficial success." We must therefore ask, with West: "What about spiritual issues, where greatness has to do with he or she who is serving the least of these, rather than just the smartest in the room?" The challenge before us is therefore to struggle against the cultural, moral, and intellectual impoverishment of higher education that would ultimately come to pass should the Mammonists prevail. This requires that we dedicate ourselves to fostering a special kind of educative experience. To articulate this experience, I believe that those of us who teach in higher education need to allow for and indeed cultivate a certain degree of Romanticism.

2. The Path to Re-enchantment: Reclaiming the Romantic Ideal of Undergraduate Education

Paul Auster's novel, *4 3 2 1*, opens with the telling of a family myth. According to this myth, the family name of the central character of the story, Archie Ferguson, is an inheritance born from accident. While awaiting his interview with an immigration officer on Ellis Island, Ferguson's grandfather, then a nineteen-year-old Russian Jew from Minsk by the name of Isaac Reznikoff, receives the advice from a fellow would-be-immigrant to abandon his last name in favour of something with a stronger American resonance: "*Tell them you're Rockefeller*, the man said. *You can't go wrong with that*" (Auster 2017: 1 – emphasis in original). The advice is well-taken and Reznikoff resolves to become a Rockefeller. Yet, hours pass before it is his turn to be interviewed by the immigration authorities, by which point he can no longer remember his new American name. So, when the official finally asks Reznikoff for his name, the following scene ensues: "Slapping his head in frustration, the weary immigrant blurted out in Yiddish, *Ikh hob fargessen* (*I've forgotten*)*!* And so it was that Isaac Reznikoff began his new life in America as Ichabod Ferguson" (Auster 2017: 1 – emphasis in original).

I think this brief fictional family myth presents us with a note of caution regarding the unintended consequences of even the most benign efforts to accommodate one's self to a new and challenging reality that we, self-assigned defenders of higher education against the contemporary neoliberal threat, would do well to heed. Though most critiques of contemporary trends in higher education are important and worthy of both scholarly and political consideration, they often tend to retreat from making a full-throated defence of some of the highly aspirational Romantic commitments traditionally associated with higher

learning. [5] Chief among these is the notion that undergraduate education should serve the overarching purpose of freely pursued self-discovery by enabling encounters with the world that have the potential to trigger profound personal change in an environment conducive to maturation and transformation.[6] I fear that in our desire to demonstrate our hard-headedness, our worldliness, and our seriousness in rebutting the crassest requests for financial self-justification, we subtly accommodate ourselves to a depressingly *disenchanted* notion of education by providing overly narrow instrumental replies to the question of purpose in higher education. I personally find myself often saying that higher education serves the purpose of developing moral, civic and epistemic virtues, or that it aims to foster communal goods and public value.[7] Both of which I believe to be true. But I think something else is also true: that higher education should be a valuable experience in a way that is not reducible to securing pre-determined outcomes. In other words, I believe in the liberal Romantic idea that undergraduate education should facilitate personal transformation.

I have been thinking of the steady erosion of this Romantic ideal in response to a question that's been bubbling at the surface of my mind for some time now when contemplating the state of contemporary English higher education: Why should good people

[5] In their defence, this retreat is usually avowedly strategic rather than principled, since the object for most is to "make the case" for the public funding of higher education (e.g. Collini 2012: x-xi; 115-119) in the face of staunch scepticism – indeed, even these attempts at reasonable accommodation are still often ridiculed as 'utopian' by self-proclaimed 'realists' (see Collini 2017: 7). It is also worth noting that despite this the banner of romanticism in higher education has still been valiantly carried at times, not least by Collini in defending the Humanities (2012: 68-69), but also notably by Smith (e.g. 2013).

[6] I am thinking here of Rabelais' educational utopia of the Abbey of Thelema where "[i]n all their rule and strictest tie of their order there was but this one clause to be observed, Do What Thou Wilt" (Rabelais 1894: Chapter 1.LVII.). For a rich discussion of the promise of Romanticism in contemporary education, see Halpin (2006).

[7] Returning to the *Guardian* article mentioned at the outset, we find this kind of understandably instrumentalist flavour in what the politically astute general secretary of the University and College Union, Jo Grady, says in response to the IFS study: "It is vital to recognise that education is about much more than just financial benefit. Focussing on future income following university ignores the wider benefits that education brings to individuals and to society." (Adams 2020)

considering university study right now actually choose to undertake an undergraduate education, rather than dedicating themselves to something else? In one sense, I think this question emerges because I am less confident in the benevolence towards students of higher education institutions in England today than I once – perhaps wrongly – was.[8] But another reason to ask this question is to answer a motivational problem. For many people contemplating studying at university, the motivations associated with improved job prospects and fulfilling familial and social expectations are reasons enough to embark on the undergraduate journey. Yet, for others, these reasons will be and often are insufficient. Within this recalcitrant group, we might find a subset drawn to the idea of moral development, of educating themselves into virtue. But others still who are dedicated to improving the world may not be moved either by improving their own job prospects or in engaging in the project of personal edification within formal education. So, in this chapter, I propose to investigate a further dimension of an undergraduate education that might still be attractive to those potential students, namely, that of a time in one's life dedicated to the project of *metamorphosis*.

3. The Existential Ground

The question of the benefit of an undergraduate education for someone seeking to improve the world but who is unmoved by the traditional personal and collective benefits of undergraduate education was put to me in a relaxed conversation over coffee in the spring of 2011. My conversation partner was a young, highly morally driven, ebullient student

[8] Minimally, recent images of fenced in students suggest that this sense is well-founded in at least one major Russel Group institution (Kennelly 2020).

activist. Earlier that academic year, we had taken part in various protests against the trebling of undergraduate fees together in Sheffield. But Anna – that was her name – had decided that, although she loved the life of the mind, her studies were a self-indulgent waste of time when so many people in the world were suffering so much. She explicitly asked me to convince her otherwise, so I tried to talk her out of quitting, reasoning that she could do more good with a degree from a good university than without one, that she would learn important things, that she would have a better life, and so on. But my words had no effect. I knew it, Anna knew it. We hugged, did *la bise*, wished each other the very best and she left the coffee shop with a skip – quite literally – and a smile. She quit university shortly after and marched into the world of activism.

I did not hear much from or about her for a number years after that. That is, until one day in 2018, when chancing upon the website of a national newspaper I came across a picture of Anna's smiling face. I did not smile back at her, because the article explained that Anna had perished at 26 years old, as a soldier in a faraway land, defending the rights, hopes, and dreams of a long oppressed people, and especially its women.[9] I was awe-struck with what I learned about who Anna had become and what she had done to try to make the world a better place in the intervening years. The power of her moral commitment and the depth of her courage came across in all the articles and private reactions to her passing I became privy to. And yet, despite witnessing the accounts of Anna's highly moral – indeed, heroic – life leading to a sense of warmth and pride in having been graced by her presence for a brief period in my own life, the sadness of her passing led me to think again about our conversation all those years before… Was there something anyone could have said to her that might have

[9] Blake (2018) is the article I happened upon.

convinced her, on the merits, that completing her undergraduate education would have been worthwhile? Would that have mattered in any way? I suppose, there is a good deal of self-indulgent magical thinking at play here: "if only… if only… if only…" And yet, when one believes in the redemptive qualities of education for our broken world – as I do – one has an obligation to try to spell out what it might actually *do* for those who are most able and willing to work towards the wider goal of making the world a better place. Anna was most certainly one them.

In case it is not yet clear, Anna was simply unmoved by the traditional instrumental goods offered by undergraduate education in university brochures or the project of personal edification outlined most famously by John Henry Newman. So my goal here is to explore a directly experiential benefit of an undergraduate education which, though strengthened by the experience of learning, is not reducible to it. I will suggest that this experiential dimension has to do with allowing one's self to engage in *metamorphosis*—a deep personal change.

4. Metamorphosis and the Halcyon Days

Much is made in contemporary culture of the unique opportunities presented to students during an undergraduate education. It is typically thought of as a period of 'firsts'. For many, it is the first time they live away from their parents, take on the basic responsibilities of adulthood, the first time that lasting adult loving relationships are formed, and the first time it becomes a realistic possibility to engage in a wide range of what John Stuart Mill (1977: 260-7) once called 'experiments in living.'

This experience of the new is phenomenologically remarkable. The experience of novelty is rather distinct from the repeated: a first kiss strikes more deeply than a thousandth kiss, even though we may love more truly on the thousandth than on the first; the first time we read a book provides a thrill in a manner that re-reading the same book does not, even though we may understand it much better the second or third time around. One of the distinctive features of undergraduate residential education, for most students, is the multiplication of firsts (or 'events') in a relatively short timescale. This period of life is fraught with fragility and peril, as well as promise and excitement. I suspect that it is this acceleration of novel and often emotionally-charged and challenging experiences, without the establishment of a firm sense of routine and expectations, or a clear mental vision of a time where the sense of the quotidian will emerge, which creates a different sense of temporality and which upon recollection often leaves a sense that the collegiate memories of former students point back to a kind of 'time out of time' when thinking of their undergraduate years.

The idiom 'halcyon days' is often used in reference to this experience of a dislocated sense of temporality, and specifically with reference to undergraduate education or university life more generally (for just one example, see Clatworthy & Clatworthy 2007). In fact, for some former students, undergraduate years even become a quasi-mythological time, where the significance of events and stories stand above all others, as if in some way they represent the fulfilment of all that has come before while also pointing to a beyond that is not quite yet here. In Auster's *4 3 2 1*, we are presented with four versions of the same life, but for the two versions of life in which Ferguson engages in undergraduate studies the drama that occurs during that time carries the special significance of ultimately shaping his vocation as a writer,

his political sensibilities, and his love life.[10] I suspect that this heightened emotional salience of the period of undergraduate studies in Auster's story throws us back to a complex and unsettling combination of grief at the loss of a previously valued state of being (i.e. childhood and its associated comforts, for most undergraduates),[11] as well as dread and delight in the face of beginning in earnest one's new, less predictable, more independent life. Of course, the potential for metamorphosis and the direct experience of liminality can be found throughout one's life in non-educative social and personal experiences as well (entering marriage, a divorce, losing one's parents or partner, becoming a parent, moving across the world, or engaging in a renewed period of professional transition can all summon this experience). Yet, the years of undergraduate education are traditionally and symbolically cordoned off from wider life experiences, as if its distinctive ups and downs are best kept at a remove from the sense of quotidian adult life.[12] In fact, I think the expression 'halcyon days' captures well a uniquely important feature of undergraduate education, namely: it is a phase of life which is, in a sense, supposed to be dedicated to a process of metamorphosis, which though less so than childhood proper remains fragile and crucially important to the processes

[10] In fact, the long and rather remarkable description of anti-war protests at Columbia in 1968 (see especially Auster 2017: 805-8819) strike a rather strong chord for me, marking off university life as a space and time in which students encounter the world in a novel and challenging way. For me, this is reminiscent of the stories of the 1960s protests at Reed, Berkeley and Stanford I grew up hearing about from my father. It also matches my own sense of the significance of the 2010-11 student protests in the UK.

[11] I should note two things: (i) many students are mature students and for them I suspect the experience of undertaking undergraduate study is rather different and (ii) for many childhood is not a period of comfort, but rather of intense survival and developmental challenge (especially those children that have survived abuse and/or had to take on responsibilities that were beyond their developmental capacities). Nevertheless, most undergraduate students in the UK right now are not 'mature students' and my sense is that, for most of them, the comforts of childhood at least involve (a) the sense of having a path laid down before one's self as well as, typically, (b) less individual responsibility for one's own care and survival than in post-university early adulthood.

[12] This is not to say that they actually are mutually exclusive. Once upon a time, it was not uncommon for students to become parents while at university. Working class students often cumulate caring responsibilities and work, alongside their studies. Today, more and more students in the English system take on significant periods of paid employment during and outside of term and they also encounter a great variety of other life challenges that exceed their studies. I will come back to this in the final section.

of biological, cultural, civic, and intellectual maturation. As a result, it ought to allow the student to escape the bulk of the demands of ordinary adult life and operate in a separate temporality from mere routine pressures.

We inherit the phrase 'halcyon days' from the ancient Greek poem which recounts the story of Ceyx and Alcyone. It concerns the depth of transformation, vulnerability, and emotional dislocation involved in metamorphosis and stresses its connection to the loss of a previously valued state of affairs. In Ovid's rendition of the myth, the King of Trachis, Ceyx and his wife, Halcyone (or Alcyone in some translations), the daughter of Aeolus, ruler of the winds, suffer a grave tragedy.[13] Set on seeking counsel from the god Apollo, Ceyx is forced to go by sea to Apollo's temple in Claros because the road to Delphi is beset with robbers. Struck by a foreboding sense of dread, Halcyone seeks to dissuade Ceyx from taking to the sea for fear of encountering a devastating storm. She further pleads for her husband to take her on the journey as well if truly he must go by sea, but to no avail. And lo! Ceyx ultimately sets off by ship, encounters a sea-storm, and dies in the ensuing shipwreck. It takes a while before Halcyone becomes aware of the tragedy, yet when she does her anxiety turns into immense grief. Ultimately, the Olympian Gods take pity on the couple and transform both Ceyx and Halcyone into halcyon birds, who fly near the surface of the sea. Aeolus then curbs the winds for seven days in winter to enable Halcyone to nest her eggs safely at sea. In Ovid's (1922: Book 11, 736-748) immortal words:

> and through the pity of the gods above,
> at last they both were changed to flying birds,

[13] See Ovid (1922: Book 11).

together in their fate. Their love lived on,
nor in these birds were marriage bonds dissolved,
and they soon coupled and were parent birds.
Each winter during seven full days of calm
Halcyone broods on her floating nest—
her nest that sails upon a halcyon sea:
the passage of the deep is free from storms,
throughout those seven full days; and Aeolus
restraining harmful winds, within their cave,
for his descendants' sake gives halcyon seas.

Readers of the poem may well be drawn to focus on the contrast between the storm which causes the tragedy and the quiet calm in which the narrative plot culminates. Indeed, the phrase 'halcyon days' is typically taken to refer to the peaceful lull granted by divine intervention to the sea-birds that Halcyone and Ceyx ultimately become. Yet, the quality of this peace is intimately linked with the preceding turmoil (see Griffin 1981: 152-4). The theme of transformation and its associated temporalities are strewn throughout the poem: stasis, tumult, confusion, uncertainty, grief, and peace succeed one another. This sequence of complex emotions and associated experiences of temporality parallel those typical of the experiences associated with any emotionally intense and disruptive life event which ultimately leads to loss, metamorphosis, new life, and peaceful fertility.

In the context of higher education, most students leave behind a relatively static sense of the finished possibilities of childhood for the sake of receiving a widened sense of adult possibility. Along the way, they meet the storms of novelty, challenge, disillusion,

disappointment, and ultimately expansion. Yet, this experience of tumult and displacement sits side-by-side with peaceful hours of contemplation, the warmth of new friendships, the excitement of new interests, as well as bouts of often pleasant solitude.[14] This combination of intense stimulation and stretches of relaxed repose is rather propitious for learning, but it also invites students to reach for and allow themselves to evolve into a different kind of person. Though I have little doubt that this metamorphosis requires much active effort and conscious choice, I am doubtful that the exact direction we each end up taking on this journey is a pure matter of will: the features of the world (its contingency and the resistance it presents to us) and of our personality reveal themselves to us at least as much as we are capable of shaping our response to them.[15]

5. Putting the Romantic Into Practice

Today, many undergraduate students in England have no other choice but to combine long periods of paid work with their studies. The logic of high fees, stagnant maintenance loans, and pressures to prepare for a lifetime of employment during undergraduate studies invite an erosion of that symbolic cordoning off which facilitates attending to the project of metamorphosis. The longing and indeed, I would say, the need for the suspension of quotidian (minimally, economic and familial) pressures during undergraduate studies is still very much present and reveals itself in student concerns about well-being. In 2017, another

[14] For an excellent reflection on the temporalities involved in a full university setting, which is all too often suppressed by managerialist imperatives in contemporary universities, see Mahon (2021).

[15] This semi-active form of engagement (a kind of giving up of oneself to an experience which combines the active - giving oneself up- and passive – where the experience takes over) is called by Beatrice Han-Pile and Robert Stern (forthcoming) 'meso-passive'. I think it applies nicely to my understanding of the mode of engagement with the project of metamorphosis in the context of undergraduate education.

impressive Sheffield-based student leader, said that her generation "live and breathe in the context of a complex and constant mental health crisis" (Mulvaney 2017: 8). The causes this leader identified extend beyond the fees arrangement into graduate prospects, the cost of housing, and even social media. But one thing that emerges from this worsening state of student unwellness is the sense that they are exposed to most of the same pressures as the adult population at a time in their lives when they have comparatively less financial resources and when they are already experiencing painful developmental shifts. Increasing the provision of mental health support on campuses is clearly desirable, but doesn't cut to the heart of the problem: undergraduate education in the English residential model stretches students in ways that far exceed the curricular challenges we present them with. The benefits are clear and impressive: graduates of English universities are typically highly professionally and culturally agile. But, in a tough social and economic context, we cannot expect a model of whole person education to continue to deliver these benefits without attending to the full needs of our students.

While we, as educators, have little control over the wider political climate, the economic conjuncture, fees arrangements, decisions made by university management, and – importantly – we are not trained mental health workers, we still have quite a lot of control over what happens in our classrooms. So, I suggest that it is in our classrooms that we can and must build spaces that allow for the authentic interests and developmental needs of our students to emerge in open and free discussions. To this end, we must also do our utmost for our learning spaces to be nurturing spaces. We must curate interactions that are to them what the halcyon seas were to Halcyone: a fertile safe haven amidst the high seas.

bell hooks (1994: 8), perhaps the most evocative visionary of the power of pedagogic vulnerability, explains how we might actually do this on a regular basis:

> To begin, the professor must genuinely *value* everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning environment.

While this is a high bar to meet, I believe that we must make the attempt, over and over again, for the sake of opening and holding the space of metamorphosis for our students. hooks goes on to explain that we, as educators, do this best by cultivating a sense of excitement by emphasising "the pleasure of teaching" (hooks 1994: 10) to counter apathy and, I would add, anxiety. It is not an easy task, but, minimally, I contend that it is aided by not shying away from Romantically reenchanting our sense of educative purpose and ensuring that students can safely bring all of themselves into the classroom.

Finally, returning briefly to Anna's case, it seems likely to me that by the time she left her studies she had already undergone the kind of metamorphosis she had been looking for. Indeed, her grieving father recounts:

> "It began when she went to Sheffield, when she went to university. She fell in with a group of quite radical left-wing thinkers. I know that before she went to Sheffield, she hadn't developed a core direction. But after Sheffield, it began to emerge quite unmistakably." (Dirk Campbell in Parker 2019: 4:52 to 5:20)

Had she chosen to stay in education, Anna might have undergone a few more metamorphoses before graduation. Yet perhaps, she made the right decision and evolved in a way that suited

her best outside of academe. Through the actions she went on to take, she made a difference to the lives of many and continues to serve as a powerful example to many more.

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