

### 3 “Education for Everybody”

#### Great Books and the Democratic Ideal

On its face, current debate about the merits of a canonical education has become a pretty predictable affair, with the opposing sides regularly convening either to decry the resilience of “the standard Great Books course” or to lament its passing. Given this context, it may be surprising to learn that the initiative to establish a wider readership for the Great Books has received some of its harshest criticism not from anyone committed to multiculturalism, feminist theory, or postcolonial studies, but rather from one of the earliest architects of the Great Books program. Indeed, Scott Buchanan, considered “the father of St. John’s College’s new program of instruction” devoted to the study of canonical texts (Charles Nelson i), condemned the approach after he resigned as dean of the college in 1946. As Buchanan put it in a letter to the college’s president, John Keiffer:

The aim of the [Great Books] program, altho[ugh] good in itself, involves a revolution, the courage, energy, and wisdom for which [are] not existent or at least not forthcoming. It should be put on the shelf and forgotten. It is not even a pattern to be laid up in heaven and beheld, if the educational house is to be put in order. It is in fact a poison corrupting a household at St. John’s, and because it is at St. John’s it will become poison wherever it is tried. (SBC 6/8/48)<sup>1</sup>

The logic behind Buchanan’s critique is obscure, but the thrust of his argument is not: those involved in trying to put together a coherent liberal arts program had created a monster, “a poison,” that now needed to be destroyed. Obviously, since St. John’s continues to offer its “New Program” at its campuses in Annapolis and in Santa Fe to this day, Buchanan’s recom-

mentation that the approach be “put on the shelf and forgotten” was ignored. Nevertheless, it is worth considering what led Buchanan to disown both the college he had helped refound and the Great Books curriculum that he himself had designed, just as it is important to understand the significance of the college’s having felt it unnecessary to heed the advice of its founding father.

While Buchanan’s rejection of the Great Books program is admittedly extreme, it does show that the community of educators, scholars, and critics interested in the Great Books is not necessarily unified in its sense of the virtues and the perils of this curricular initiative. In fact, there is considerable disagreement in this community about who should read the Great Books and how these works should be read. Thus, though one might have expected Allan Bloom and Mortimer Adler to be natural allies in the battle to salvage the liberal arts, Adler assessed Bloom’s analysis of what ails the academy in *The Closing of the American Mind* as “inaccurate and inadequate,” insisting that his “slight effort to propose a cure falls far short of what must be done to make our schools responsive to democracy’s needs and to enable our colleges to open the minds of [our] students to the truth” (*Reforming Education* xix). In the midst of this criticism, Adler asks the following startling question: “can any reader of *The Closing of the American Mind* fail to detect the strong strain of elitism in Bloom’s own thinking, as evidenced by his devotion to Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, and by his advocacy of reading the great books by relatively few in the student population, certainly not by all?” (xxiv–xxv). Adler’s own efforts to promote the Great Books are designed to counter this elitist impulse, he argues, and to rectify the lack of “a truly democratic system of public schooling or institutions of higher learning that are concerned with making good citizens of those who attend our colleges” (xxv).

To further complicate this issue of whether the Great Books ought to be considered a “poison” or an antidote to “elitism,” Adler’s own effort to assign a “democratic” impulse to his use of the Great Books has been openly ridiculed by another member of this group of devoted readers, Dwight Macdonald. Macdonald lambasted the Encyclopaedia Britannica’s fifty-four-volume set, *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Adler, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and others, for its inclusions and exclusions, for the low quality of its translations, for the absence of supporting materials to explicate the scientific and mathematical treatises, and even for the size of its typeface. But Macdonald’s gravest reservations concerned the very *idea* of putting together such a collection and marketing it to the masses: as far as Macdonald was concerned, the real motivation behind the series was “hier-

atic rather than practical—not to make the books accessible to the public (which they mostly already were) but to fix the canon of the Sacred Texts by printing them in a special edition” (257). Thus, far from seeing Adler and Hutchins’s series as the extension of a democratic effort to disseminate to the general public the best that has been thought and said, Macdonald understood the Great Books project to be the brainchild of a group of economically motivated cultural hucksters who were preying on the public’s sense that it was more important to own these books than it was to read them.

If these scuffles between the various factions of the Great Books community have been of little material consequence,<sup>2</sup> institutional responses to the Great Books curriculum have had considerable effect on what courses are made available to students, as we will see. To give a brief example: when Lawrence Kimpton was selected to succeed Robert Maynard Hutchins as chancellor of the University of Chicago in 1951, it was apparently with the understanding that he would not “undo Hutchins” by dismantling his predecessor’s initiatives that established a unified, core curriculum for undergraduates, grounded in the study of the Great Books (Ashmore 309–10). And yet, whatever assurances he may have made prior to taking control of the university, it became clear once Kimpton assumed power that his commitment to Hutchins’s curriculum was actually quite weak. As Kimpton explained years later, his own sense was that

Every queer and unusual student who disliked athletics and the normal outlets of younger people was attracted to the Hutchins College. . . . The Great Books course was a joke, and Hutchins knew it was. When I used to kid him about it, how superficial and shallow it was, he would say, “Well, it’s better than getting drunk,” and I think that’s a pretty good summary of it. It certainly made no intellectual contribution. (qtd. in Ashmore 308, original ellipsis)

Given this disparaging assessment of the “Hutchins College” and this familiar demonization of those attracted to sustained work in the liberal arts (the “queer” versus the “normal,” athletically inclined student), it is not surprising that the speaker of these words quickly committed himself to returning the university to what might be termed curricular normalcy.<sup>3</sup>

As these examples have been meant to suggest, the discursive world of the Great Books is actually a rather disorienting place, where, instead of homogeneity and general agreement, one finds confusion about who is friend and who is foe. This confusion is produced, in part, by lumping together a number of different educational initiatives under the general rubric

“Great Books,” a conflation that explains how it has come about that Bloom, advocating a return to the Great Books, is accused of being an “elitist” by Adler, who has spent his entire professional life promoting the study of the Great Books. However comical such disagreements may be, they reveal the tensions that reside at the heart of the Great Books rhetoric, as claims of a democratic intent and elitist commitments work with and against one another. Since such tensions get worked out in very different ways at the level of local institutional practice, in what follows I shift attention to the history of efforts to institutionalize the evolving Great Books curriculum. After a preliminary discussion of John Erskine’s General Honors course at Columbia in 1919, I will consider Hutchins’s efforts to redefine the mission of the University of Chicago in light of his own experiences teaching a course modeled on Erskine’s. I will conclude with an investigation of Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan’s successful establishment of a Great Books program at St. John’s College in 1937.

Throughout, I am concerned with an allied set of questions: Who was meant to benefit from this series of initiatives? What pedagogical, institutional, political, and polemical needs were understood to be met by these curricular changes? And how was pedagogical practice itself configured as both the object and agent of these reforms? In pursuing this line of inquiry, I will only briefly touch on matters pertaining to the method for selecting the Great Books and on the exclusionary nature of this process: the critique regarding the absence of women and of racial and ethnic minorities from this curriculum is already well known and need not be rehearsed here.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I will focus on a number of crucial historical points that have been all but forgotten in the ongoing debate about the purportedly hegemonic power of the Great Books. Thus, I will show that initial efforts to establish an entire undergraduate curriculum grounded in the Great Books met with sustained opposition long before the advent of multiculturalism, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies; that resistance to the Great Books approach as a *pedagogical* rather than a *curricular* reform has been, in almost all cases, an unqualified success; and that, over time, the rhetoric used to support this approach has frequently claimed for itself a commitment not to elitism but to the project of producing citizens fully able to participate in a democracy. By historicizing the development of the Great Books approach in this way, I will delineate the range of forces that enabled and restricted efforts to institutionalize this contradictory idea, which sought to unite an “aristocratic” content with a “democratic” teaching practice in order to provide, as Hutchins put it, “education for everybody” (*Higher Learning* 62).

## **“The Best Sellers of Ancient Times”: Erskine’s Initial Formulation at Columbia University**

In *The Memory of Certain Persons*, John Erskine has recorded the faculty’s response to his proposal, in 1919, that a two-year honors course in the Great Books be offered to juniors and seniors at Columbia:

How often was I told by angry colleagues that a great book couldn’t be read in a week, not intelligently! And how often have I retorted, with my own degree of heat, that when the great books were first published, they were popular, which was the first step toward their permanent fame, and the public who first liked them read them quickly, perhaps overnight, without waiting to hear scholarly lectures about them. I wanted the boys to read great books, the best sellers of ancient times, as spontaneously and humanly as they would read current best sellers, and having read the books, I wanted them to form their opinions at once in a free-for-all discussion. (342–43)

Erskine, a poet and novelist as well as a college professor, had little patience for the classicists, philologists, and his other colleagues in the English department who argued against allowing “the boys to read great books” on the grounds, first, that “the boys” weren’t adequately prepared for the encounter and, second, that in any event, such attempts should only be made in the text’s original language. As Erskine conceived it, the purpose of *his* course was to wrest control of the Great Books from the clutches of these scholarly specialists so that the reading public might use the books as they pleased. In arguing for such a course of instruction, Erskine did not maintain, as others have since, that he was restoring a more traditional curriculum in the liberal arts, one that had been lost with the advent of the elective system of education. To the contrary, Erskine rejected efforts to recall the halcyon days of a past that never was: while his colleagues contented themselves with complaining about how general knowledge of the Great Books had declined since they had attended college, Erskine admits that he “doubted whether the elders in general, even among college professors, spent much more time than the youngsters reading world classics” (*My Life* 165).

Despite the nostalgic longings of these colleagues, Erskine’s proposal ran into trouble precisely because it assumed that everyone would agree on what constituted a “great book.” He reports that during the ensuing faculty debate on the matter, it “immediately became clear that the faculty could not define a great book; at least they couldn’t agree on a definition. Worn out by futile talk, the Committee abandoned the task and told me to go ahead in my own

way. The permission was granted in a tone which seemed to say, 'And may God have mercy on your soul!' " (168). In the semesters that followed the eventual introduction of the General Honors course into Columbia's curriculum in 1921, Erskine was left to his own devices to generate a satisfactory definition of a Great Book and to determine what pedagogical practice was best suited to bring students into contact with such books for the first time. In the process of trying out a set of books and a discussion method that would allow students to engage with the Great Books as they would with any contemporary best-seller, Erskine settled on the following working definition and justification for the approach: "A great book is one that has meaning and continues to have meaning, for a variety of people over a long period of time. The world chooses its great books by a social process. I wanted the boys to study great books by the same social process—by reading them simultaneously and by exchanging opinions about them" (168–69). Thus Erskine decided books that attracted "only readers and admirers of a certain temperament" did not qualify as Great Books and were, therefore, best encountered in a lecture hall rather than in the social setting of the discussion group (his examples, tellingly, are of "two extremely interesting women writers"—Amy Lowell and Gertrude Stein [169]). Those books that did qualify, though, were assigned in the honors seminars, where thirty students met one evening a week to have a "free-for-all discussion" with two instructors "selected for their disposition to disagree with each other" (170). Erskine's relative silence about the content of these discussions is a characteristic feature found in nearly all future arguments for this approach: from the very outset, it was understood that what was said mattered much less than the fact that the discussions were taking place.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, because Erskine felt that the discussions made available to the students "perhaps for the first time the basis of an intellectual life in common" (169), he apparently assumed that their basic content would be known to all who have already embarked upon such a life. Erskine was far from reticent, however, regarding the topic of who should participate in these "free-for-alls." Aside from making sure the groups had leaders "who can keep the talk going in a profitable direction," Erskine recommended "that these discussion groups should be homogeneous, with all the members on approximately the same cultural level" (173).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Erskine saw it, the best teachers of the course looked "forward hungrily to the next opportunity to read" the Great Books and had, in addition, "a personal philosophy." That is, "at the very least he must believe in a spiritual life, he must assume in every human being a soul. This minimum faith may have a Catholic background, a Protestant, or a Jewish." Under no circumstances should the discussion to be led by someone who

believed in the “impoverished philosophies which define man as a biological or chemical accident, or as the by-product of economic forces” (171).

Obviously, the “free-for-all” discussions were, in practice, neither “free” nor “for all,” apparently functioning best when a homogenous group of male students from a prestigious university was led by a male teacher who would ensure that certain godless approaches would not intrude on the seminar’s discussion of the male-authored texts. It is important to recognize, however, that neither were these prejudices inherent to this pedagogical approach nor were they its inevitable by-product. Rather, they were expressions of larger, nationally shared institutional policies excluding women and racial and ethnic minorities from higher education, as present in the other disciplines as they were in the English department at Columbia. While this does not excuse the criteria recommended by Erskine, it should make it possible to see that within an avowedly racist and sexist system, the Great Books approach offered a small, select group of students at the university direct access to some of the texts most revered by the academy. In so doing, within the context of the university system at the time, Erskine’s—perhaps minor—pedagogical and curricular intervention was seen as a clear threat to the status quo. By placing important texts in the hands of students, by providing students a social space to work out their responses to the books with each other, and by asking teachers to speak *with* the students rather than lecture *to* them, the approach disturbed, however briefly, the most fundamental assumptions about what being a student and being a teacher entailed at the university level, disrupting in the process the academy’s most familiar pathways for circulating both knowledge and texts.

With this in mind, we may find it particularly ironic that Columbia temporarily dropped Erskine’s General Honors course from its curriculum in 1929 on the grounds that it “provided specialized study for an Honors ‘aristocracy’ ” and thus was seen to be “invidious and remote in spirit from the noncompetitive atmosphere which the [university’s] new elective system encouraged” (Buchler 72). Odd as it may seem that an Ivy League university would have misgivings about making “invidious” distinctions among the student populace, Columbia did find a way around this problem when, in 1937, it made another version of Erskine’s course, Humanities A, a requirement for all entering students (73–75).<sup>7</sup> This action effectively removed the charge that the course serviced only an “aristocracy” of honors students and, simultaneously, ensured that the approach taken in the course would not spread throughout the university. It was this latter, more radically invasive version of curricular reform that was to be pursued at the University of Chicago, where Mortimer Adler, a former student and then instructor in

Erskine's General Honors course, introduced the university's new president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, to the allure of an undergraduate education *entirely* grounded in the Great Books.

### **“To Initiate the Education of Hutchins”:**

#### **Great Books and General Education at the University of Chicago**

Before discussing the migration of Columbia's General Honors course to the University of Chicago, I must first describe the curricular reforms that were already well underway before Hutchins assumed the presidency in 1929. Since the founding of the university in 1891, its presidents had been plagued by the question of what role the undergraduate college was supposed to play at a major research institution.<sup>8</sup> Conceding that proposals to eliminate the college entirely or to move it across the Midway were not feasible, Charles Mason, Hutchins's immediate predecessor, convened the Senate Committee on the Undergraduate Colleges to decide what to do about the undergraduate curriculum. Then, the day before the faculty was to vote on the committee's proposal to establish a general education curriculum for all undergraduates, Mason resigned and consideration of the curricular reforms was tabled until a new president could be found.<sup>9</sup>

Mason's senate committee, chaired by the dean of the colleges, Chauncey Boucher, had determined that two central problems confronted the college. First, the elective system had reduced the undergraduate degree to signifying little more than the successful fulfillment of “the bookkeeping and adding-machine requirement in terms of semester-hours or course-credits,” producing in the process “an academic record sheet that should now be considered worthy of a place in a museum of educational monstrosities” (Boucher 2, 14). Second, because the elective system was so easily abused, it “resulted not infrequently in a pronounced case of intellectual anemia or jaundice for the student,” who graduated only to discover that he or she had “nothing in common in intellectual experience, background, or outlook” with other graduates (26). The committee's solution, known first as “the New Plan” and then, eventually, as “the Chicago Plan,” attacked both the elective system and the intellectual contagion it released by instituting a set of core courses in the junior college that would constitute a “general education” shared by all students in the college, regardless of which area of specialization they hoped to pursue in the senior college. The committee further recommended that attendance at the core courses be optional and that progress in each area be measured through the administration of uniform, comprehensive exams applied to *all* students. Optional attendance, the

committee argued in its report, would “give the student an opportunity, which he will gladly seize, to assume more responsibility for his own education” (qtd. in Boucher 5). The anonymously scored comprehensive exams would guarantee that at least in the future, the possession of a bachelor’s degree from the University of Chicago would signify that all its bearers had performed comparable amounts of work, measured and approved by the same reliable, objective methods.

In short, the project to reform the undergraduate curriculum at the university was well under way prior to Hutchins’s arrival. In fact, Hutchins’s initial contribution to this ongoing process was purely administrative: after approving the committee’s report, Hutchins suggested that all departments in the university be collected into five divisions. There would be the college, whose work would conclude at the end of the sophomore year, and there would be the four upper divisions—the biological sciences, the humanities, the physical sciences, and the social sciences (Boucher 8).<sup>10</sup> Obviously, at this early stage the Great Books played no role in the movement toward general education at the university. Rather, the New Plan to reform the actual *content* of the undergraduate curriculum at the university was motivated by a number of other distinct concerns: getting the students to “assume more responsibility” for their education; promoting “general” as opposed to specialized education; making undergraduate education more cost-effective by delivering core courses to large numbers of students; and, finally, replacing the arbitrariness of individually designed exams with a series of uniform, comprehensive exams in order to establish an equivalence among those who were granted degrees. Within this initial cluster of concerns, then, the students were understood to be “assuming authority” by determining whether or not they would go to class rather than, as under the elective system, which classes they would take.

While the New Plan trumpeted the virtues of receiving a general education in the fundamental concepts governing the major areas of knowledge, once the plan was implemented, its supporters went on to praise its ability to attract anything but the “general” or average student. For instance, Joseph Humphreys’s analysis of the New Plan noted that 13.5 percent of the students failed under the new curriculum, while only 2 percent failed under the elective system, a fact Humphreys then marshaled as evidence to support his conclusion that “a student body of distinctly higher mental ability is required by new-plan conditions” (139). And Dr. Dudley Reed, director of Health Services at the university, had this happy report for Dean Boucher after he and his staff had interviewed the entering class in 1934: “we feel that we are getting a much finer type of student in the main than we used to, our

observations being based on evidences of personal hygiene as well as on those of alertness, intelligence, and good family training which appear in our contacts with students” (qtd. in Boucher 133). Finally, William McNeill reproduces the university’s own way of speaking about these changes in his retrospective assessment that what “had seemed to many a very risky venture of treating undergraduates as grown-ups actually had the effect of selecting for Chicago a group of students who were in fact able to handle the freedom and responsibility the New Plan gave them” (52). In sum, by providing an educational system where students had to act as “grown-ups,” the university attracted a clientele “able to handle the freedom and responsibility” demanded by the New Plan: that is, students who could monitor their own learning and hygiene and, when the time came, were able to respond correctly on multiple-choice or short-answer exams.

As these examples suggest, the rhetoric that surrounds the project of general education implies, but does not flatly state, that the project’s intellectual rigor promotes “clean” social behaviors along with its self-monitoring reading practice. Hutchins’s contribution to this discussion was to openly insist that pursuing this project would help produce citizens better able to handle their responsibilities in a democracy. Hutchins did not, however, arrive at the University of Chicago with this conviction about the importance of a general education. Rather, his thoughts about the form and function of undergraduate education were greatly influenced by Mortimer Adler, whom he had met while dean of the Yale Law School and had subsequently appointed to the law, philosophy, and psychology departments at the University of Chicago.<sup>11</sup> As Adler tells it, Hutchins confessed early on that “he had never given much thought to the subject of education. He found this somewhat embarrassing now that he was president of a major university. I had never ever given much thought to the subject either” (*Philosopher at Large* 128–29). In their discussions on the matter, Adler described Erskine’s General Honors course and Hutchins, enthralled by the vision of a course that centered on open discussion of the Great Books, came to see that he himself needed to take the cure. Subsequently, Hutchins decided that starting in the fall of 1930, he and Adler would run a two-year seminar modeled on Erskine’s course for twenty randomly selected honors students in the college. Although the course ended up having much greater significance, according to Adler in the beginning it “was originally designed to initiate the education of Hutchins and continue the education of Adler” (129).

Thus, the Great Books honors course joined the University of Chicago’s curriculum not in response to the perceived needs of the student populace, but rather because the president sensed his training at Yale had been inade-

quate and projected his needs onto the university community at large.<sup>12</sup> To make matters worse, the introduction of such an honors course into the undergraduate curriculum ran completely counter to the reforms just approved in the New Plan, since Hutchins and Adler were proposing to offer a college-level course that was *not* open to all students, that *required* regular attendance, and that was *not* readily amenable to the strictures of an independently administered comprehensive exam. And yet, despite these significant problems with the course, there was nothing anyone on the faculty could do if the president chose to proceed in this manner.<sup>13</sup>

Accounts of the seminar show that Adler and Hutchins understood the pedagogical task of leading a discussion in significantly different ways. Adler records that Hutchins “was a witty interrogator of the students, catching them on vague or airy statements about the readings” — so witty, in fact, that the course gained a certain national notoriety and had “a constant stream of visitors,” including Lillian Gish, Ethel Barrymore, and Orson Welles (*Philosopher at Large* 138). While Adler’s description suggests the seminar had been transformed into something of a spectacle, Edward Shils tempers this view somewhat in his laudatory essay on Hutchins’s tenure at the university. Shils records that he witnessed Hutchins display “a Socratic gift for raising questions that made students aware that what was visible on the surface of their minds was insufficient. He could question without causing discomfiture, he would persist in his questions without causing embarrassment” (189). On the other side of the table, one observer noted that during her visit to the seminar, “Adler slapped the table and badgered students. He pushed the students to see the ‘errors’ in the books and the contradictions between different authors’ claims to truth” (qtd. in Dzuback 102–3). Shils confirmed this account in an unpublished earlier draft of his essay on Hutchins, where he described seeing “as harsh a piece of brow-beating of a student as [he had] witnessed, carried out by Mortimer Adler” (qtd. in Ashmore 102). It appears that in leading their discussions of the Great Books, Hutchins and Adler together played, in effect, a version of good cop/bad cop, oscillating between the extremes of charming conversation and ruthless interrogation.

Though it is unclear exactly what students were meant to gain from this pedagogical approach, there is no question that leading these discussions transformed Hutchins: they led him to conceive of a new mission for the university, one that linked “general education” with the Great Books curriculum. Hutchins’s developing argument for a general education in the Great Books crystallized in his polemical essay *The Higher Learning in America*, published in 1936. Here, the case that Hutchins makes for the New Plan

differs from the one made by Dean Boucher and others in two significant ways: first, the threatening world outside the academy figures prominently as evidence of the necessity of reform and, second, the study of Great Books becomes the foundation on which a general education program is to be built. Hutchins begins *Higher Learning* with the observation that while education had been held in high esteem prior to the Great Depression, “the magic of the name [education] is gone and . . . we must now present a defensible program if we wish to preserve whatever we have that is of value. Our people, as the last few years have shown, will strike out blindly under economic pressure; they will destroy the best and preserve the worst unless we make the distinction between the two somewhat clearer to them” (3–4). He does not specify exactly how or where “our people” have been striking out blindly, but the threat “they” pose is clear. Like the protestors at that other Hyde Park, Hutchins’s masses threaten to bring down the civilized world. And to counter this threat, Hutchins’s “we,” an ill-defined group of knowing educators committed to the study of metaphysics, must “make the distinction” between what is best and what is worst clearer to “the people.”

Although representing those outside the university as motivated by a mixture of ignorance and economic necessity is hardly unprecedented, it is surprising that Hutchins offers a general education in the Great Books as the *best* way to address the threat posed by this unsettled citizenry. In fact, by his own estimation, it is “the people’s” understanding of the function of education that is the strongest impediment to significant reform: “This is the position of the higher learning in America. The universities are dependent on the people. The people love money and think that education is a way of getting it. They think too that democracy means that every child should be permitted to acquire the educational insignia that will be helpful in making money. They do not believe in the cultivation of the intellect for its own sake” (31). Whatever it is that the people may want, Hutchins argues that the university should not be the place where “vocational training” occurs, nor should it be the home for technical and applied research: it is only the people’s love of money that has forced the university to sully itself with such practical activities.

To rescue “the higher learning” from this degradation, Hutchins proposes taking the university out of the people’s grasp and placing it in some realm beyond the economic, where it would be free from the daily turbulence of the marketplace and its members could devote themselves fully to matters of the mind. Though this seems designed to ensure that higher education would remain the preserve of those in a position to ignore daily economic demands, Hutchins insists that his intentions lie elsewhere: “The scheme

that I advance is based on the notion that general education is education for everybody, whether he goes on to the university or not. It will be useful to him in the university; it will be equally useful if he never goes there" (62).

Hutchins's "everybody" is somewhat misleading, of course, for within his scheme "everybody" comes to mean "everybody who can learn from books" — which, by his rough estimate, constitutes about two-thirds of the students in high school (77, 61). Thus, under Hutchins's plan, students who demonstrated an ability to learn from books would leave high school in their junior year and enter the college system. There, they would receive a general education grounded in the Great Books, which, Hutchins reminds us, are "contemporary in every age" and "cover every department of knowledge" (78, 81). Upon completing four years of general education at the college level, these students would receive their bachelor's degrees and most would move out into the world to pursue their careers, in which they would receive on-the-job training. Others, who wished to continue their education, would then move into the upper divisions at the university and begin to specialize in a given field or profession. Meanwhile, those high school students who had been deemed unable to learn from books would have received vocational training beginning in their junior year in high school and would already be well into their working lives. With these students siphoned off to the working world, Hutchins argues that higher education will be better off: "in a university like this it should be possible to get an education; it is possible to get one in no other way, for in no other way can the world of thought be presented as a comprehensible whole" (108).

It is not just the host of unworthy, laboring students who stand in the way of this project to present the world of thought as a "comprehensible whole," however. As Hutchins makes quite clear, the academy itself houses many factions opposed to this project: the vocationalists, the specialists, the representatives of the textbook industry, the relativist sociologists and cultural anthropologists, and those who believe in scientific progress. Dismissing research in the modern and social sciences, technical and professional training, and physical education with the assertion that "we have excluded body building and character building. We have excluded the social graces and the tricks of the trades" (77), Hutchins offers the study of the Great Books as the antidote to the social and curricular ills that beset society. As long as we pursue a general education that seeks after the metaphysical principles in order to unite all the fields of knowledge, Hutchins feels there is cause to be cautiously optimistic about the future of the nation: "It may be that we can outgrow the love of money, that we can get a saner conception of democracy, and that we can even understand the purposes of education" (118–19).

While Erskine's Great Books course briefly irritated his colleagues, its small scale and modest ambitions did not warrant much of an organized response, beyond a certain scowling in the halls. Hutchins's proposal, in contrast, incited the faculty both at Chicago and at universities around the country to question the politics that lay behind his commitment to "society rationally ordered" and his desire to produce citizens who "prefer intelligible organization to the chaos that we mistake for liberty" (119). John Dewey, for instance, questioned Hutchins's insistence on the existence of ultimate first principles:

Doubtless much may be said for selecting Aristotle and St. Thomas as competent promulgators of first truths. But it took the authority of a powerful ecclesiastic organization to secure their wide recognition. Others may prefer Hegel, or Karl Marx, or even Mussolini as the seers of first truths; and there are those who prefer Nazism. As far as I can see, President Hutchins has completely evaded the problem of who is to determine the definite truths that constitute the hierarchy. (104)

Closer to home, Harry Gideonse, one of Hutchins's own faculty members, penned *The Higher Learning in a Democracy* in order to show that this commitment to metaphysics as the principal concern of the university was "essentially a claim to intellectual dictatorship" and that Hutchins's proposal had been "conceived and born in authoritarianism and absolutism, twin enemies of a free and democratic society" (30, 33). Most important, though, Gideonse wanted to assure his readers that the program Hutchins described in his tract was *not* the program of general education then offered at the University of Chicago, where the contributions of modern science were, in fact, readily acknowledged, where research and empirical work continued to be pursued, and where all departments retained their relative autonomy and determined their own disciplinary "truths." And this, Gideonse averred, was exactly as it should be: "The unfettered competition of truths — which is 'confusing' and 'disorderly' — is at the same time the very essence of a democratic society" (25).

Thus, to underscore a point that has escaped the attention of those fighting the culture wars, when Hutchins proposed a general education based in the Great Books he was accused, *in his own time*, of being fascist, authoritarian, dictatorial, and opposed to the free flow of thought in the unregulated, democratic marketplace of ideas.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, once Hutchins linked the Great Books approach to general education, resistance to both projects *increased* dramatically, not so much because of the content of the Great Books or because of the pedagogical approach used in their instruc-

tion, but because this effort to overhaul the entire curriculum was seen to deny students and faculty access to the “fundamentally democratic” elective system and to reject the institutional model of professionalism and expertise. In other words, what made the Great Books approach so threatening in this instance was both its broad *inclusiveness* and its insistence on the ultimate integration of all knowledge, goals that, if pursued, would require the institution of general requirements for all students and the disintegration of disciplinary specialties. When Hutchins took up the Great Books as his concern, the perceived problem with the approach ceased to be restricting access to “the cultural goods” to an “aristocracy” of honors students and became, instead, requiring all members of the university community to consume those goods.

This battle over the form and function of the curriculum at the University of Chicago, variously called “the Chicago Fight” and the “facts versus ideas debate,” was intensely waged, with the faculty more often than not represented as the enemies of change, clinging to their privileges within the current system, reluctant to move out of their safely protected disciplinary niches.<sup>15</sup> For our purposes, the most critical moment in this struggle occurred the same year that Hutchins published *The Higher Learning in America*, for in 1936 Hutchins also formed the Committee on Liberal Arts, whose charter was to consider the place of the liberal arts in modern education. The committee’s ten members, handpicked by the president, included Adler, Richard McKeon (whom Hutchins had brought to the university in 1934), and Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr (both of whom had been lured from the University of Virginia where they, too, had been involved in designing a curriculum based on the Great Books). While the minutes from the committee’s first meeting show that the members charged themselves with a modest three-year assignment to produce “a list of a hundred books, combining the Columbia list and the Virginia list” (HL, “Minutes,” 10/3/36), suspicion among the faculty ran high that the committee’s real purpose was to provide Hutchins with a blueprint for sneaking his cronies and his curriculum in the back door of the university. It became clear soon enough, though, that the faculty had little to fear from this committee: in their only report to the president, the committee members stated that they had “no intention of considering *at any time* questions of organization or administration. We are concerned with subject-matter and methods of study” (HL, 3/25/37, emphasis added). Their conclusion was even less ambiguous about what the committee was willing to do: “We wish to devote ourselves exclusively to this project and do not wish to be diverted by teaching, administrative, or departmental obligations.”

What these reassuring words about the committee's harmless intentions conceal is the remarkable fact that the catastrophic internal difficulties experienced during its first meeting effectively neutralized its ability to function at all. That is, although the committee members had been selected on the basis of their belief in a liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Great Books, by all accounts the participants displayed such animosity for one another that they quickly splintered into factions and abandoned their communal project entirely. In a letter to Hutchins, Buchanan explained, "These meetings were discontinued when it appeared that civil conversation to say nothing of intellectual discussion and reading of texts was impossible" (HL, 2/12/37). Adler's description is blunter: "After a few meetings of the group as a whole, in which we could not agree about what books to read or how to read them, the committee blew apart" (*Philosopher at Large* 176).

Explanations for why the committee could not hold vary. Adler casts the central conflict as being between himself and McKeon over how one should read the Great Books; while he came "down flatly in favor of certain propositions as true, rejecting their contraries or contradictories as false," McKeon was willing to "accommodate, or even to attempt to reconcile, conflicting points of view" (175).<sup>16</sup> Buchanan saw the battle as being between three different positions—his own, McKeon's, and Adler's—which "separately had absorbed and accumulated the energies of our associates." When these positions came into contact, "heat and light became thunder and lightning. There was never another general meeting of the whole committee. We agreed to disagree and to pursue our separate courses" (13). Harry Ashmore has it that Adler felt work should begin with Aquinas, Buchanan preferred Aristotle, and McKeon wanted an initial investigation of liberal arts in the present (139). William McNeill notes only that Barr and Buchanan, as newcomers to the university, "began by quarrelling and ended by sulking" (71). And J. Winfree Smith asserts that McKeon, Adler, and Buchanan actually attempted to read one of Aristotle's works together, but had to stop because there quickly ensued "vehement accusations of distortion of the text" (20). Regardless of the specifics of what happened behind those closed doors, the end result was that the various factions went their separate ways and the committee failed utterly to fulfill whatever role it was to have had in advancing curricular reform at the university. As Buchanan explained it to Hutchins, once Adler and McKeon abandoned the committee, the rest of the group was left to discuss the Virginia list "in the hope that either Adler or McKeon or both would be induced to join later when time and inclination would permit, but that hope gradually disappeared" (HL, 2/12/37).

The spectacle created by this congregation of specialists opposed to specialization—these men utterly devoted to sustaining “the great conversation” but wholly incapable of speaking to one another<sup>17</sup>—is more than just comical. It is also evidence of the unresolved pedagogical and theoretical contradictions that lie at the heart of this movement. Though defenders of this curriculum could imagine arguments as occurring between books’ authors, though they could maintain that the Great Books were best studied through discussion, and though they could insist that such discussion provided the foundation for the production of good citizens in a democracy, they could not, in fact, provide a constructive way for members of the academy to participate in such conversations nor could they provide a record of or a model for what such a democratic exchange might be. Thus, from the outset, the attempt to establish a Great Books curriculum at the university level was hobbled *from within* by questions like “Great to whom?” and “A conversation about what? beginning where? and to what end?” When such questions could not be raised even among friends and fellow believers, it seemed clear to all concerned that the expanded Great Books curriculum had no lasting future, at least not at the University of Chicago.

But as fate would have it, with the threat of the United States’ entry into World War II, opposition to Hutchins’s reforms temporarily declined as a result of faculty enlistment and the science faculty’s involvement with the war effort. Consequently, Hutchins was able to force a version of his curricular program through the Faculty Senate. Yet while a version of Hutchins’s four-year general education curriculum based on the Great Books was offered for a few years at the university, in the end Hutchins didn’t succeed in converting a significant portion of the faculty to what he himself had termed an “evangelistic movement” (*Higher Learning* 87), nor did he leave behind a system of reforms secure enough to survive his own departure. In assessing his twenty-year reign at the university, he concluded that “the triumphs of natural science and technology have convinced everybody that they are important. The Great Books program is convincing some people, I believe, that understanding the ends of human life and social organization and sharing in the highest aspirations of the human spirit are undertakings quite as significant as prolonging life and improving the material conditions of existence” (*State of the University* 34). But whoever those people convinced by the Great Books approach were, they certainly did not comprise the majority of faculty members at the University of Chicago, for within two years of Hutchins’s resignation in 1951, the reforms he had shepherded through the institution began to be dismantled. The awarding of the bachelor’s degree by the college at the completion of the sophomore year was rescinded; the in-

dependent board of examiners was disbanded and comprehensive exams as a substitute for course credit were revoked; most of the large, introductory general education courses were dissolved; and, under the command of Hutchins's successor, Lawrence Kimpton, the university came more and more to resemble its East Coast rivals (Ashmore 299–310).

While it is undoubtedly true that students enrolled at the college during the short time it approached Hutchins's ideal were afforded a unique educational experience, from an institutional vantage point it is impossible to judge Hutchins's attempt to establish a unified undergraduate curriculum grounded in the Great Books as anything other than a complete failure. Incapable of reproducing itself, unable to convert resident institutional resistances into support for the program, powerless to combat the successes of the sciences, Hutchins's version of the Great Books approach proved, in the end, to be no match for the established model of undergraduate education provided by the university system. However complete this defeat was at the university level, though, outside the academy the approach prospered. Hutchins and Adler's Great Books seminars for members of the business community eventually led to the creation of the Great Books Foundation in 1947, which continues to this day to offer Great Books curricula to public schools and adult education discussion groups alike. *Great Books of the Western World*, the fifty-four-volume set edited by Hutchins, Adler, Barr, Buchanan, Erskine, and others, originally published in 1952, has since been expanded and is still marketed alongside the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.<sup>18</sup> And, finally, Adler himself has devoted considerable energy since leaving the academy to devising and promoting his Paideia Proposal, his own version of a Great Books program for children in public schools. In each of these instances, the Great Books approach has been presented as a fundamentally democratic venture, intent on making the best reading material available to "the people" for their consideration. The Great Books approach has also survived in the academy, most notably at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and at its sister campus in Santa Fe, New Mexico. How the approach found a home at this institution will be the next focus of discussion.

**"The Common Intelligible Way of Learning for  
Both Good and Mediocre Minds":  
Barr and Buchanan Reinvent St. John's College**

When Hutchins's Liberal Arts Committee collapsed in disarray in 1936, Scott Buchanan turned his attention to writing a series of position papers for the president, which he titled "The Classics and the Liberal Arts." In the

first of these papers, he set out to establish that “the only available medium which is adequate to the intellectual salvation (education) of the American student is the great European tradition” (HL, “Number 1” 1). Drawing on T. S. Eliot’s argument in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Buchanan saw this salvation as being achieved by an educational system that sought to “understand and organize the whole, literally the whole, of European history and bring it to bear on each individual in a single proper way and order” (5–6). With this vision of the educational mission in mind, Buchanan then argued against Hutchins’s implicit position that such salvation should be extended only to the nation’s “intellectual aristocracy”:

I doubt if there can be an American intellectual aristocracy unless the whole mass is somehow brought a little higher than it is being brought by our public education. I can think of no more effective or fit way to accomplish this preliminary task than the general reading of the classics with as much of the liberal arts as can be recovered and made effective at present. I am here following the parallel with the sacraments. They are the minimum of discipline and they are for everybody. (9–10)

Buchanan’s contorted logic here might best be read as evidence that he was still very much in the process of deciding who should read the Great Books and why. At this stage in his thinking, he saw disseminating the texts widely as making an “American intellectual aristocracy” possible.

Buchanan retained this missionary imagery in his second position paper, where he informed Hutchins:

Most of the classics were written for ordinary people, not for the academic world only. They are in some sense a basic language about everything, and if they are chosen for their excellence as fine arts as well as for their excellence as liberal arts, they will have an immediate intelligibility for anything that they are saying. They are like the sacraments in that; they talk about water, wine, bread, and oil in such a way that the incarnation and transubstantiation are conveyed. Grace is infinite, therefore sufficient for your needs. (HL, “Number 2” 18)

Here, the texts are reconceived as a sort of secular sacrament, available to “everybody,” to all “ordinary people.” And though, or perhaps because, they constitute “a basic language about everything,” they are “sufficient” to the task of providing one’s intellectual salvation. It is, obviously, an odd analogy, for within ecclesiastical traditions, sacraments certainly are not for “everybody.” However, the analogy succeeds in capturing Buchanan’s sense that these texts, in themselves, could redeem the nation’s fallen educational system.

Even though the Committee on Liberal Arts had declared that it had “no intention of considering at any time questions of organization or administration,” Buchanan soon found himself deeply mired in such work, when the Board of St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, invited Stringfellow Barr to become the college’s president and Barr, in turn, recommended that Buchanan be appointed dean.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the board was moved to this action by their favorable assessment of the intellectual merits of Barr and Buchanan’s proposal to establish a “Great Books College,” but they were also driven by desperation: the college, teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, had lost its accreditation in 1936 when it was disclosed that the president had awarded a degree to a student who hadn’t successfully met the requirements for graduation (J. Smith 7). In fact, the dire financial and academic state of the college actually served Barr and Buchanan well, for it provided them with a warrant to implement sweeping changes in the curriculum and among the remaining personnel. Although Barr was frankly surprised, on assuming the presidency, to learn of the magnitude of the college’s problems, he confessed to Hutchins: “My only consolation is that had the College not been in this desperate condition, its Board would never have turned to so drastic an educational solution as ours. I have also felt that the alternative to Saint John’s was either a similarly run-down college or starting a new college at much greater cost” (BC, 7/30/38). Thus, by assuming control of a college near collapse, Barr and Buchanan were at liberty to build their liberal arts program from scratch, bringing onto the faculty like-minded colleagues from the defunct Committee on Liberal Arts, Catesby Taliaferro and Charles Glenn Wallis, converting resident instructors to their approach, and firing the rest.<sup>20</sup>

Provided with the college’s physical plant and the freedom to do as they pleased, Barr and Buchanan did not have to worry about being hounded by the kind of organized, institutionally structured resistance that had confronted Hutchins and Adler at Chicago. Without a resident tenured faculty to deal with or cadres of preeminent scholars and scientific researchers to appease, Barr and Buchanan were, by comparison, relatively free to redefine who the “real” teachers and who the “real” students were in the program. As Buchanan put it in the college’s 1939 catalogue: “the real original and ultimate teachers at St. John’s are the authors of some hundred of the greatest books of European and American thought. . . . These are the real teachers, but we also have a secondary faculty of tutors and fellows who act as auxiliary intermediaries between the books and the students” (*St. John’s College Catalogue* 24). This reconceptualization of where the students’ attention ought to be focused meant in turn that the more familiar pedagogical rela-

tionships had to be reworked in the new curriculum. Thus, from the advent of the New Program, it was understood that students and tutors alike would come to the college to learn from the “ultimate teachers,” the authors of the Great Books.<sup>21</sup> In addition to requiring this reconfiguration of the student-teacher relationship, Barr and Buchanan also insisted that the program at St. John’s was “not conceived as only for the better students, but rather as the common intelligible way of learning for both good and mediocre minds” (qtd. in J. Smith 23).

It is certainly true that a financially imperiled institution, without accreditation, would stand to benefit by assuming such a principled position, since opening the program to all comers would serve to increase the number of potential consumers of the educational product. It is also true, however, that this position allowed the college to begin to act on its fundamental belief that all who cared to read the books could participate in the conversation: while Hutchins talked about the approach as “education for everybody,” St. John’s has, from the outset, admitted most students who applied to the program (and in the early days, to be sure, there weren’t many).<sup>22</sup> But whatever the ultimate motivations were for admitting students with “good and mediocre minds,” the goal “of the teaching and learning [in the New Program] is,” according to the college catalogue of 1939, “the production of good intellectual and moral habits which provide the basis for human freedom” (*St. John’s College Catalogue* 28–29).

In practice, the route to this “human freedom” was through a curriculum that offered the students no electives: throughout their four years, all students in the New Program were required to attend seminars in the Great Books; tutorials in mathematics, the language arts, and laboratory; and a weekly lecture. In each area, the students were expected to work through the relevant Great Books chronologically, starting with the Greeks freshman year and finishing with the German philosophers senior year, because, as the catalogue explained:

Although each book must tell its own independent story, it is an important fact, which we regularly exploit, that one great book talks about the others, both those that came before, and, by anticipation of doctrine, those that come after. Each book in a list of classics is introduced, supported, and criticized by all the other books in the list. It thus gains pedagogical power and critical correction from its context. (26)

In order to ensure that the students actively participate in this dialogue between the Great Books, classes are kept small (annual attendance since the seventies has hovered around four hundred students; during the forties, the

college struggled to keep its enrollment above one hundred students) and the instruction is discussion-centered. Although students are graded for their work, this type of evaluation is understood to be a necessity forced on the college by outside accrediting agencies: the “real” assessment of student work occurs at the end of each semester, when each student’s tutors come together to give the student an oral evaluation of his or her performance during the term.

Although this structure has been tinkered with over the years, St. John’s College still adheres to Buchanan’s basic curricular design. There is much to admire about the pedagogical practice that resides at the heart of this structure: the curriculum presents students with the occasion to work with some of the most revered texts in the academy; the college provides an environment where talk about those texts, both inside and outside of class, is valued and encouraged; the seminars and tutorials are resolutely student-centered, focusing on the students’ engagement with and evolving understanding of a remarkably various set of materials; the sequence of core courses in the intimate college setting produces for the students a sense of community—what Erskine called “an intellectual life in common”—that is simply unavailable within the elective system or on a university campus; the requirement that tutors teach throughout the curriculum enacts an alternative model of mastery to what is found within traditional fields, where specialization receives the highest valuation. In fact, this list of the admirable aspects of the curriculum and its pedagogy makes Buchanan’s repudiation of the program, cited at the opening of this chapter, all the more mysterious. How is it that he came to see the program as a “poison corrupting a household at St. John’s”? Why did he and Barr resign so precipitously in 1946, wishing, as Buchanan put it in a letter to Alexander Meiklejohn, to sever all ties to the college “in spite of the feeling we all have that we have parental responsibilities to the College we have smashed in Annapolis” (HL, 1/3/47)?

Finding the answers to these questions is not an easy matter, in part because the questions touch on an embarrassing chapter in the college’s history that the community itself would rather forget. Indeed, at a recent alumni homecoming at the college, all was forgiven: Barr and Buchanan were celebrated as “buccaneers, boarding academic ships in distress, saving what they wanted and throwing overboard the rest” (J. Van Doren 10); Buchanan was posthumously made a member of the class of 1944 (Barr had been inducted into the class of 1949 years before); and plans were announced to name the new library after the New Program’s founding fathers. The function of alumni fund-raising events is, of course, to generate sanitized versions of the alma mater’s institutional past that, in turn, foster nos-

talgic yearnings. Unfortunately, the sole effort to provide an historical account of Barr and Buchanan's tenure at St. John's is similarly hamstrung by the author's close ties to the institution. While Barr himself had intended one day to write a history of the college, as did his successor, John Keiffer, the job ultimately fell to J. Winfree Smith, who studied under Barr and Buchanan at the University of Virginia and subsequently became one of the college's most respected tutors. Smith himself concedes, in his preface to *A Search for the Liberal College*, that some feared he "might be partial to the curriculum and to the men who had most to do with starting and establishing it," but, he assures the reader, he has done his best just "to stick to the facts" (vii). While Smith does provide a remarkably detailed description of the events leading up to the founders' resignation, he ends up skirting the issue of why Barr and Buchanan became so disillusioned with the college. As a consequence, Smith celebrates the very fact I want to puzzle over—namely, how is it that the college survived the efforts of its founders to "smash" it? Answering this question will reveal how the success of the Great Books curriculum at St. John's was the result of a linked set of historical contingencies and local institutional constraints that, as Barr and Buchanan discovered too late, could not be replicated elsewhere.

In order to track Buchanan's growing dissatisfaction with the institutionalization of the Great Books approach, we must first consider the effect that the United States' entry into World War II had on the college. As we have seen in the preceding discussion, the war had an immediate impact on student enrollment and faculty retention nationwide. St. John's, because of its small size, was particularly vulnerable to shifts in its personnel: thus, though the size of the student body remained relatively constant immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, by the following academic year the college had only forty-two students enrolled in the three upper classes (J. Smith 61). Forced to find bodies to fill their courses, Barr and Buchanan resorted to admitting fifteen-year-old high school students in September 1943 and then added a summer session so that the new students could complete their work for the degree prior to being eligible for the draft (62). While this attracted enough students to keep the college open, Barr and Buchanan also had to respond to another unforeseen problem precipitated by the war—the effort by the United States Naval Academy, located across the street from the college in Annapolis, to seize the college's property under "eminent domain." Although the navy's plans for the property were never terribly clear, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal began negotiating with the Board of Visitors and Governors in June 1945 to determine a reasonable cost for moving the college to another location so that the navy

could take over the land. Preparation for these negotiations produced a flurry of activity at the college: Buchanan made notes estimating the cost of moving and reestablishing the program elsewhere, deciding on a figure near four million dollars (HL, 7/5/45). These calculations were reworked in a draft of a policy statement and then abandoned altogether in the final version, as the board broke off the discussions with the navy, declaring that “further negotiations under circumstances that imply sharing by the Board of the responsibility for unjustified damage to the College are impossible” (HL, “A Restatement of the Policy of the Board of Visitors and Governors,” 7/21/45).

What happened next is more than a little bizarre. Although the board’s statement made clear its commitment to keeping the college in Annapolis and to having its case heard by the courts, Buchanan responded by threatening to resign from the board as a vote of no confidence in its actions. Apparently, though Buchanan himself drew up the figures to determine the value of the campus and the curriculum, he appears, on reflection, to have had a change of heart: as he put it in a memo titled “St. John’s versus the Navy,” “the moral and legal right of the Government to destroy or move institutions of learning is in question” (HL, “St. John’s versus the Navy” 6). Focusing on this matter of principle, Buchanan declared in his statement resigning from the board that accepting the navy’s argument without going to court would be to sacrifice

the integrity of the institution and [the Board’s] right to be trusted further with a campus or a curriculum, neither of which is worth very much without the other. As holders of property we shall have lost our rights because we didn’t know them or our duties with respect to them. As promulgators of a curriculum we will turn out to be exploiters of an old college for publicity and fake reform. This will be so even if some of us think that our educational function would be more effective elsewhere. We cannot honorably move without an unmistakable mandate from the sovereign. (HL, “Resignation Statement” 6)

In effect, this battle with the navy over the fate of the college forced Buchanan to confront the institutional and legal realities of the college’s existence not simply as the embodiment of a set of curricular ideas but as a set of buildings, a plot of land, and a chartered agreement dating back to the seventeenth century.

Suddenly, Buchanan was waist deep in the very kind of administrative and practical matters that years before he had said held no interest for him: now, in the face of the navy’s efforts, he was compelled to meditate on what

the relationship between the college and the state was, what status a college had as a legal entity, what fiduciary responsibilities a college's board could reasonably be expected to perform, and how and where one could locate the "value" of an educational system. Does the value of an educational institution reside in its students? its faculty? its buildings? its location? its curriculum? Buchanan taunted the board with this last possibility by praising the New Program in terms of its

high publicity value, its high doctrine, its major controversial character. After eight years of startling public success, all out of proportion to its real effectiveness, it has gone through a year of the hottest kind of debunking criticism from rather unscrupulous enemies. At this juncture we get the Navy to move us and endow us. We look like clever fellows and some of us think we are. We ought to use the money to set up a big advertising firm. The whole thing has been a publicity stunt. (7)

The problem with this "publicity stunt," as Buchanan saw it, was that it failed to recognize that the campus itself ought to be considered to be a kind of fixed endowment, for "it is by its nature unique and incomparable, therefore not replaceable" (9). In fact, because the value of the campus continues to improve over time, to "sell out without the highest justification [is] . . . in effect destroying an infinite endowment" (9)!

What makes this interchange bizarre, aside from the thunderous and contorted rhetoric, is that Buchanan is arguing with a board that is apparently in total agreement with him. That is, at the time Buchanan was composing his resignation statement, the board had already stated unequivocally that it was unwilling to continue negotiations with the navy. And should there be any lingering doubt about the board's position, the members announced at a meeting on October 2, 1945, that they "would not willingly sell the historic campus at any price." Then, when no decision about the matter was seen to be forthcoming from Washington, the members declared on November 21, 1945, that they regarded "the unfortunate episode as concluded, and trust that the Naval Academy and St. John's are now free to proceed in mutual respect and harmony, as neighbors, to get on with their respective functions" (qtd. in J. Smith 78). Although the mystery surrounding Buchanan's response to the board may never be fully explained, it is safe to say his dissatisfaction with this conclusion arose because he wanted to see the issue of whether or not it was in the nation's interest to preserve and protect liberal education resolved through rational argumentation, rather than through the machinations of politicians and the local business community. Indeed, Buchanan became fixated on the issue of how

one could disprove the notion that it lay in the “national interest” to condemn and reclaim property on which the business of educating the nation’s citizenry was conducted.

Buchanan started to work out the details of this insight in a “Dean’s Statement,” to which he gave the preliminary title “In Search of the Authority for Teaching.” A meditation on what Buchanan had learned as a result of the battle to save St. John’s, this essay argues that the college must be seen as a “corporate body, whose properties are nonetheless immortality and individuality” (HL, “Dean’s Statement” 1). Buchanan then goes on to observe that “as teaching has made the curriculum blossom and bear fruit, so has administration progressively uncovered and revealed the character and soul of this artificial body” (2). It was this dawning understanding of “the character and soul” of the artificial, bureaucratic body of higher education that threatened to shatter Buchanan’s sense that teaching and learning could be “free human activities.” What the fight with the navy showed Buchanan, instead, was that imagining the college as a space governed by academic freedom

ignores the institutional problem of responsibility, and at the same time implies and imposes an impossible burden of protection upon the corporate entity. It asks the institution to guarantee the individual freedom of its members against all interference from within or from without, but it does not provide either the authority or the power to fulfill its duty. Spirit is everywhere free, but body, including artificial bodies like institutions, are everywhere limited by power. (2–3)

In effect, Buchanan recognized that the ongoing existence of a college interested in sustaining the “great conversation” would always be contingent upon a compliant power structure and, for this very reason, such a college would never be able to guarantee its members the freedom necessary to pursue *any* open educational venture. To see that institutions “are everywhere limited by power” is to acknowledge, however fleetingly, that Reason will never rule. It is also to see that one’s job as an administrator in an educational institution is not to pursue reasoned debates—for example, about what constitutes “national interest”—but rather to be locked in a constant war of position, where rhetoric and capital are one’s only resources for keeping one’s home institution open for business. As it happened, though, Buchanan never worked this insight out, nor did he distribute this statement to the college community: instead, his deliberations about the “authority of teaching” stop just at the point where he was to consider the ways financial constraints influence decisions about teaching. Perhaps these fiscal, political, and bureaucratic realities were something he just couldn’t bear to think about.

The skirmish with the navy came to a similarly abrupt and inconclusive end, precipitated by events that were wholly outside the control of the college or the Naval Academy: with the conclusion of World War II, the navy's argument that it was in the nation's best interest to move the college elsewhere at such great expense ultimately couldn't be credibly maintained. Though many in the Annapolis business community were bitterly disappointed when they learned of the House Naval Affairs Committee's decision on May 22, 1946, to quash the navy's plan to acquire the campus, the governor of Maryland, Herbert O'Connor, went so far as to issue a statement requesting the navy to announce that it would abandon "permanently the move for the acquisition of St. John's" — a request to which the navy never formally responded (HL). As if to confirm Buchanan's greatest misgivings about the ways decisions about educational matters are inextricably woven into a web of political power, the governor went on to explain that the state had much to gain from keeping the college in Maryland: "the educational institutions of the state, as well as throughout the country, are overcrowded and thousands of returning veterans and others are desirous of taking advantage of higher educational opportunities." In short, inasmuch as the college generated revenue for the state, it warranted the governor's protection: and so, in effect, the governor's statement of open support actually served to underscore the college's precarious reliance on the kindness of strangers for its continued existence.

There are, then, many reasons that might explain why Buchanan failed to be satisfied with the college's apparent complete triumph over the navy: the victory was inconclusive because the legal status of the argument regarding "national interest" was never settled in court; the Naval Academy never formally renounced its claims on the college and thus the threat was never completely put to rest; and finally, and perhaps most important, the very contingency of the victory challenged the central assumption upon which the Great Books curriculum rests, that ideas are understood to exercise power outside of and over historical circumstance. To elaborate on this last possibility, it is worth considering Smith's explanation of the role that the study of history is meant to play in the Great Books curriculum: "Teachers and students have no interest in studying the past as past. They have an interest in reading certain books that were written in the past because those books raise important perennial questions, questions which are always live and present questions if we let our thought get hold of them" (54). Given this understanding, it is not hard to see how the historically contingent solution to the "perennial" question of the state's relationship to education would gall someone who took the notion of the great conversation seriously. For the

battle with the Naval Academy showed with startling clarity that what mattered most, in the world of material relationships, was not who had the best argument but who had the power to make the decisions that others had to abide by. The battle showed, in other words, that the fate of the college would always rest in the hands of others. In realizing this, Buchanan saw, however briefly, that teaching can never be “free”; it can only be made to appear so through the maintenance of a willed blindness to the administrative, institutional, and national structures that make teaching possible in the first place.

There were other forces besides the failure to resolve the intellectual issue of “national interest,” however, that motivated Buchanan’s rapid withdrawal from St. John’s, which began when he took a year’s leave of absence in June of 1946 and culminated in his resignation six months later. To start with, in the midst of the fight with the navy there emerged a real alternative to going on with the project in Annapolis, an alternative that appeared to offer Barr and Buchanan a way to escape all the problems involved with running an institution that had a preexisting charter, a resident Board of Governors and Visitors, a newly settled faculty, and an administrative and curricular structure already tending toward rigidity. It took the form of Paul Mellon’s instruction to the Old Dominion Foundation that they distribute \$125,000 annually to develop “the type of education now carried on at St. John’s College” (HL, letter from Mellon to Barr, 4/16/46). Mellon, who had attended St. John’s briefly in 1940,<sup>23</sup> had developed a commitment to the idea of the program and to Barr and Buchanan while there. In light of this experience, he informed the trustees at the foundation that they were to rely strictly on Barr’s “personal judgment as to whether St. John’s can be expected to preserve its campus, or whether some other college [Barr] may designate will better carry out my intention and thereby become the beneficiary of these funds.” This offer, in combination with the announcement that the navy’s plans had been disapproved just a month later, would seem to have provided Barr and Buchanan with ample reason to believe that the venture in Annapolis was secure.

And yet, much to the board’s astonishment, Barr decided that it would be best if the funds from the Old Dominion Foundation went to some other institution! As Buchanan laid out the rationale for this decision in “The Dean’s Nine Year Report,” the project of liberal education had to be expanded beyond what was possible at the college: to revitalize the project would demand “the rebirth and completion of a true university whose other parts are, first, a school of liberal arts for adults . . . and, second, a graduate school devoted to the search for the unity of knowledge and wisdom, which would continually discuss and revise what all men should know” (SBC, 7/31/46, 1). It is more

than ironic that Buchanan proposes to replicate the very system of specialization the Great Books curriculum had from its inception explicitly set itself against: for here, as Buchanan begins to spin a fantasy about ways to promote the program's "colonization" of the uncivilized world, what emerges is a plan to provide an institutional home for a core of liberal arts specialists who would engage in ongoing research into what should be studied by others. Attached to this liberal arts research center would be two schools, one to disseminate the research findings to the undergraduates and the other to pass it on to adults in continuing education.

When this vision of the program's future was formally offered to the board as an appealing alternative to life in the shadow of the Naval Academy, the board declined Barr and Buchanan's invitation to join them on this next journey, as did the faculty at the college. Although accounts of the specific reasons for rejecting this proposal are not readily available, it is not hard to imagine why the board and the faculty would have decided to stay put. To remain at the college was evidence of a commitment both to the program and to the students; and it was, as well, the safest bet that one was going to keep being paid for services rendered. Buchanan met with a series of similarly stunning and unambiguous defeats from his old friends when he tried to drum up interest in the colonizing ventures of the corporate entity he and Barr had formed, "Liberal Arts, Incorporated." In a letter to Adler, Buchanan describes his plan for a new university and then issues what might be read as either a threat or an invitation: "The Chicago–St. John's axis has got to be abolished. You have either got to join us or be suppressed. We need what you've got and can give us, and you need what the new venture can give you" (HL, 8/14/46). Buchanan then proceeded to denounce the Encyclopaedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World* project, which Adler and Hutchins had commenced: "I am now quite horrified at the job of selecting books that we did, and wish I had stuck to my resignation [from the series' editorial board].... [The encyclopedia's] money has corrupted and stolen good members of our faculty, and has made all of us look like go-getters to ourselves. The burden of selling the books has given your activities in adult education a fever that also horrifies me." Using this rhetorical approach, in turn, on Adler, Hutchins, McKeon, and Mark Van Doren, Buchanan found that none of his fellow believers were willing to follow him to the farm Liberal Arts, Inc., had purchased just outside of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to create a new institute for studying liberal education.

Buchanan's pleas to his longtime friends reveals yet another facet of his dissatisfaction with the form that education had assumed at St. John's: in addition to the college's proximity to the Naval Academy, the legal and philo-

sophical issues raised by this proximity, and his dawning sense that an institution's history brings with it certain inescapably confining and constraining fiduciary responsibilities, Buchanan felt quite strongly that something had gone awry with the New Program at St. John's. While Smith repeatedly cites Buchanan's negative assessment of the program as contradicting Buchanan's own assertion that the college had experienced "eight years of startling success" (J. Smith 76, 81, 85), Smith's elision in the material he cites is itself responsible for the apparent contradiction. As we've seen, Buchanan asserted that the college had had "eight years of startling *public* success," but he also observed that this success was "all out of proportion to [the New Program's] *real* effectiveness" (HL, "Resignation Statement" 7, emphasis added). Buchanan elaborates on this point in a letter to Hutchins: noting that the initial effort at St. John's did succeed in getting "some liberal arts into motion within a framework of the Great Books," Buchanan concedes that it "is clear now that we don't know what it is that we are teaching and studying, and it is also more than clear that we ought to find out" (HL, 12/5/46). And in a letter to A. W. Schmidt of Liberal Arts, Inc., Buchanan develops this idea further still, explaining that the goal of the new project in Massachusetts is to rework the relationship between mathematics and language in order to rethink all the subject matter in the sciences and the humanities:

If we're going to find out what every man should know, we've got to make some knowledge that will dissolve present subject matters, courses and departments and re-crystallize them as vitamins for our whole culture. This calls for nothing less than the sacrifice on the part of natural scientists and teachers of humanities of their stock-in-trade and an all out effort to acquire by learning and relearning something that is worth teaching. (HL, 3/13/47)

In short, whatever the public perception was of the program's relative merits, and however the faculty and the board at St. John's assessed the program's success, Buchanan was firm in his conviction that much more important work remained to be done not only on the curriculum but also on the very way knowledge was constructed and categorized in the modern world. In fact, years later Buchanan confessed that as far as he was concerned, there was nothing magical about the Great Books themselves: "I'm not stuck on the classics at all. . . . The classics are important, but I was immediately embarrassed when we got to be exclusively connected with the classics and the classical tradition [at St. John's]" (qtd. in Wofford 157).

Long after Liberal Arts, Inc., had folded and its assets had been liquidated, Buchanan clung to this sense that the curriculum at St. John's had

failed because it had neither determined what it was that students should learn nor what it was that was worth teaching. When Buchanan was invited back to St. John's to participate in a three-day colloquium on the state of liberal arts education more than twenty years after his resignation, he made it clear that his assessment of the college had changed little. Asserting that the goal of the curriculum ought to have been sustaining an investigation into "what a liberal arts college ought to be," Buchanan concluded with this bleak assessment of the outcome of this search at St. John's:

We never found out, and haven't yet, I take it from all the signs, what we're teaching. We have all the conditions for teaching, but we've never decided what we're teaching and therefore have never been able to revise the program. . . . I'm not talking about a doctrine. I'm talking about a subject matter, a direction, an intention. I suppose the best word for it is the truth. . . . And I think we have to find out in the contemporary world just where we find our truth. (SBC, 1/25/68, 84-85)

It is here, perhaps, that we find the source of Buchanan's assessment that the New Program at St. John's was "a poison"—its very institutional and curricular stability implied that the search for a liberal education in the Great Books had come to an end. This final critique of the program suggests that in the end, Buchanan may also have been disillusioned with the discussion-oriented pedagogical approach that underwrote the curriculum, an approach that had failed to produce "truth" and instead had only allowed the great conversation to roil on endlessly. This, at any rate, was the conclusion that McKeon had reached, as he explained to Buchanan in a letter turning aside the invitation to join the project in Stockbridge:

I am inclined more and more, since the visit in Annapolis, to the conclusion that if you are out of the project [at St. John's], the project as we have been talking about it for some twenty years is not feasible, and I shall not get into the new version of it [in Massachusetts] either. I am losing faith in the effectiveness of the dialectical process: it may give another fellow a good subject matter for dialogue, but it seems to be designed for a hemlock ending. (SBC, 2/9/46)

"A hemlock ending" of another order awaited Barr and Buchanan once they left St. John's and commenced their efforts in earnest to establish their "true university" in Massachusetts. Aside from failing utterly to attract others to their project, Barr and Buchanan quickly realized that the funds allocated by the Old Dominion Foundation were wholly insufficient to the task of building a college from scratch: they just didn't have enough money to

establish a library, stock laboratories, convert existing buildings to dormitories, build a dining hall, attract faculty, and so on. Thus, in less than six months, it was clear to everyone involved that the former president and the former dean of St. John's College were in over their heads and that the project needed to be terminated as quickly and as tidily as possible. In desperation and suddenly bereft of any institutional affiliation, Barr and Buchanan asked Mellon to authorize the Old Dominion Foundation to distribute the funds to Liberal Arts, Inc., anyway. Mellon was unequivocal in rejecting this plan:

As an alternative [to the failed plan in Massachusetts], you have requested Old Dominion Foundation, through me, to release the entire benefits of the endowment fund to Liberal Arts, Inc. (which I have always understood to be a temporary legal vehicle for the purchase of land and to obtain a Massachusetts charter for an undergraduate college) for purposes which seem to me extremely vague and which you have not expressed in any definite or detailed form, either verbally or in writing. I now gather that Mr. Quirico [a lawyer involved in the process] feels that it would be unwise to express them. (HL, letter from Mellon to Barr, 6/24/47)

Although Mellon remained committed to the project of advancing the study of the Great Books, Barr's refusal to state openly his intentions for the monies left Mellon with no alternative but to authorize "the abandonment of the entire project on the ground that it has been practically impossible to carry out under the legal terms of the letters of agreement, or in compliance with the real intentions of the principal individuals involved." And so, by the end of 1947, the funds and the attendant endowment of some four million dollars reverted to St. John's College and Barr and Buchanan were left to fend for themselves.

To imagine Buchanan as the tragic figure in all this is, I believe, a mistake, for what the preceding analysis of the trajectory of the Great Books approach has shown is that Buchanan, like Hutchins before him, had failed utterly to understand that the attractiveness of any curricular reform depends not on "a reasoned assessment" of the virtues of the reform but on the social, cultural, and economic benefits that accrue to those who will be influenced by the reform. And, as we've seen, the perceived merits of the Great Books curriculum vary wildly at the extreme poles of an established research university and a small, financially imperiled liberal arts college. At the University of Chicago, the effort to reconstruct the undergraduate curriculum was eagerly embraced by those few intellectuals who were new to the community and who had the most to gain from the program's success—

as specialists in general education, the designers of the Great Books curriculum and their followers stood to become the new experts in the university system, while those hired under different terms with different teaching expectations would have to retool if they hoped to have a future in the new university. However, those elements of institutionalized education designed to ensure that the academic status quo and its values are preserved—the tenure system, the division of knowledge into discrete fields of expertise, the accreditation system—all worked as required, with the result that the university flexed enough to accommodate the demands of its nonconformist president and then constricted at the first opportunity, returning to a form roughly homologous with that of its peer institutions. At St. John's, Barr and Buchanan faced a significantly different situation; by doing such a good job of handling adversity, they established a community that has long outlived its abandonment by its founders. Though Barr and Buchanan may have dreamed of producing a rootless community of scholars, students, and board members willing to move at their command to continue the search for truth, they discovered that their successful introduction of a curriculum into an institutional vacuum at St. John's had reinvigorated a corporate body they could neither control nor terminate.

### **“Overestimating the Average Ability of Students”: The Great Books as Content and as Pedagogical Practice**

In looking at these linked efforts to develop a liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Great Books, we have seen that the sense of who should receive such an education and what the fruits of such an education should be has varied over time.<sup>24</sup> With his modest goal of getting upper-level honors students to engage in “free-for-all” discussions of the Great Books, Erskine set out to unite a popular reading practice (consuming best-sellers) with texts revered by the academy, all in the hopes that the combination would bring the books to life for the students. This marginal venture was transformed into a central concern when it was combined with general education at the University of Chicago, where the Great Books approach took on an open contempt for vocational training and utility. Defining higher education in opposition to the prime reasons motivating students to continue their studies (a better job, increased earning potential, the acquisition of know-how), at Chicago Hutchins purposefully created a program at odds with traditional students and their teachers, turning a deaf ear to economic concerns and refusing to entertain the possibility that contemporary work in philosophy, sociology, cultural anthropology, educational theory, or the

sciences had anything of value to contribute to the great conversation. With its contempt for money and all things of this world, Hutchins's initiative was never able to build a strong enough following to survive the departure of its high priest. The initiative at St. John's, in contrast, succeeded where Hutchins's had failed, partly because the college's desperate circumstances made it possible for Barr and Buchanan to, in a sense, wipe out the institution's immediate past, removing all employees who did not fit the needs of the New Program, while implementing curricular reforms designed for a small student populace—those with “both good and mediocre minds”—who had specifically elected to pursue the approach.

Throughout this discussion, the world outside the walls of the academy has had a shadowy, if increasingly threatening, presence—it has been figured as a space one gestures toward in order to justify a set of educational initiatives principally concerned with dismantling the influence of relativism and reinstating the reign of Reason within a democracy. Yet despite these vaunted goals, it would be difficult, given the events recounted here, to represent either Erskine's General Honors course or the curricular reforms realized for such a brief time at the University of Chicago or even the successful installation of the Great Books approach at St. John's as having traced out a trajectory of institutional dominance. And, though there can be little doubt that the Great Books continue to appear on the syllabi of literature courses across the nation,<sup>25</sup> the *pedagogical* approach advocated by Erskine, Adler, Hutchins, Barr, and Buchanan has found few places where it is welcome: the small classes, the discussion-based format, and the redefinition of mastery all require material resources and a commitment to revising standard teaching practices that remain in short supply at our institutions of higher learning.

But while resistance to the Great Books curriculum extends back to its inception at Columbia in the twenties, it is important to recognize that the grounds of contestation have shifted in the present moment. For our purposes, the most important shift is this: whereas the approach initially was accused of being “elitist” because access to the Great Books was restricted to a handful of students and of being “antidemocratic” because the goal of *the pedagogy* was to establish a unified body of metaphysical principles, it is now *the list itself* that is understood to be elitist and antidemocratic because it excludes women and minorities and because it tacitly celebrates a tradition of Western domination. Adler's position on such charges perfectly illustrates the limited effect this line of criticism has had on those promoting the great conversation. As he sees it, “the fact that, in the Western tradition until the nineteenth century, there simply were no great books written by

women, blacks, or non-Europeans, does not make those that were written by white males in the earlier centuries any less great" (*Reforming Education* 334). In short, although the critique mounted against the Great Books curriculum has shifted from the question of who should be allowed to read the books on the list to that of which authors should appear on the list, the participants in the great conversation still aren't listening to what those on the outside have to say.

What tends to get misplaced in these debates about the Great Books as a kind of content is the potentially empowering pedagogical project that resides at the heart of the Great Books approach. Although the preceding discussion has shown the variability with which "the student" can be constructed within this curricular regime, it has also shown that the early history of this approach records an evolving commitment to the image of the student of the Great Books as an ordinary, common reader who can nonetheless establish a meaningful and productive relationship with a wide range of immensely complex texts. This flies in the face of prevailing assumptions about average students, who are regularly constructed by the textbook industry and by the professoriate at large as needing to start small, slow, and easy, and who are somehow never seen to be quite ready to fully participate in or understand discussions about ideas, great or otherwise. Thus, there is a fundamental and fruitful contradiction between the "aristocratic" arguments for pursuing the study of the Great Books and the "democratic" impulse in the approach's pedagogical assumptions about the average reader. This disjunction unquestionably constrains who can participate in the discussion and what can be discussed. But, at the same time, it also allows those who enter such a program of study the opportunity to generate and test their own interpretations, to work across disciplinary boundaries, languages, and historical periods, and to study in an institutional community that self-consciously seeks to produce a shared body of literate experience. We will see, in the following chapter, how this disjunction between the promotion of privileged cultural material and the provision of a comparatively democratic pedagogical practice gets reversed at Britain's Open University, where the university's reliance on technology to deliver distance education has given it access to a wider audience while, at the same time, greatly constraining the interactions of the course designers and their students.