

Practice, idea and criticism of a Great Books program. John Erskine and the General Honors at Columbia College (1920-1928)

Àngel Pascual Martín
Department of Education
University of Barcelona (Spain)
apascual@ub.edu

ABSTRACT: Given the recent introduction of Great Books seminars in Europe, stemming from North American collegial tradition, we aim to examine the program that led to their inception: the General Honors at Columbia, a course designed to restore the comprehensive nature of undergraduate education by exposing students to the most significant works in the world of letters. After providing a brief historical context, we delve into its organization, method and implementation, drawing from the memoirs of its architect, John Erskine, and his closest collaborators. Thereafter, we explore the theoretical foundations upon which Erskine, under the influence of George E. Woodberry, built the conception of literature and teaching underlying these seminars. Lastly, in order to assess critically the General Honors, we trace its projection on subsequent programs, analyzing some of their variations – such as adaptation to popular education or integration with instruction of the arts of language – as efforts to achieve two ideals essential to its educational philosophy: the democratization of culture and the growth of intellectual powers.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Great Books; John Erskine; General education; Literature; Columbia; XX Century.

Introduction

Contemporary efforts aimed at trying to reestablish the educational purpose of the university resorting to humanities and to renewed studies in liberal arts have led over the last decade to a nascent revival in Europe of the so-called Great Books seminars¹. Although the genesis of the corresponding formative

¹ European participation in the ACTC (Association for Core Texts and Courses), an heir

ideal dates back to the second half of the 19th century in England, its curricular implementation in higher learning institutions can be traced to the United States after World War I². Emerging in 1920 at Columbia University, the General Honors course (GH) stands as the foundational milestone for such programs focused on reading and discussing great works of literature and thought. This honor is not due to its originality or its degree of achievement, but rather the impact it had throughout the twentieth century on the rise of other courses of the same kind and, above all, on many undergraduate plans of general educational approach. Under its influence, new programs were developed from the 1930s onward at institutions such as Chicago, Virginia, St. John's and Harvard, as well as in Latin America, reaching up to the University of Puerto Rico and several others in Peru, Costa Rica and Mexico³. Such is the legacy of GH,

society of the Great Books' tradition, began in 2012. Since then, European academics have joined its Board of Directors, four conferences have been held in the old continent, and collaboration with universities, particularly from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Spain, has been strengthened for the development of these types of programs (ACTC, *ACTC History*, <<http://www.coretexts.org/organization/history>>, last access: 29.08.2023). As an illustration of the European theoretical reception of this educational tradition, see: J.M. Torralba, *Una educación liberal. Elogio de los grandes libros*, Madrid, Encuentro, 2022; E. Brooks, E. Cohen de Lara, Á. Sánchez-Ostiz, J.M. Torralba, *Literature and Character Education in Universities: Theory, Method, and Text Analysis*, New York, Routledge, 2022; E. Cohen de Lara, H. Drop (edd.), *Back to the Core: Rethinking Core Texts in Liberal Arts & Sciences Education in Europe*, Wilmington, Vernon Press, 2017.

² Regarding the origins of the tradition of Great Books and its curricular development, see: K.E. Chaddock, A.J. Cooke, *Endurance Testing: Histories of Liberal Education in U.S. Higher Education*, in M.B. Paulsen (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, New York, Springer International Publishing, 2015, pp. 187-244; T. Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; T. Lacy, *Dreams of a Democratic Culture: Revising the Origins of the Great Books Idea, 1869-1921*, «The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era», vol. 7, n. 4, 2008, pp. 397-441; K.E. Chaddock-Reynolds, *A Canon of Democratic Intent: Reinterpreting the Roots of the Great Books Movement*, «History of Higher Education Annual», vol. 22, 2002, pp. 5-32; W.B. Carnochan, *Where Did Great Books Come from Anyway?*, «The Book Collector», vol. 48, n. 3, 1999, pp. 352-371.

³ Regarding the history of the general education movement in the United States and the importance of the Columbia reforms for its dissemination: Ch.J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History*, 2nd Edition, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, p. 222; R.L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 464; A.H. Stevens, *The Philosophy of General Education and its Contradictions: The Influence of Hutchins*, «The Journal of General Education», vol. 50, n. 3, 2001, pp. 167-168; F. Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History*, 2nd edition, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1990, p. 455; G. Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 134; D. Bell, *The Reforming of General Education. The Columbia Experience in Its National Setting*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1966, p. 15. Regarding the spread of the general education programs in Latin America mainly under the influence of Columbia and Chicago, see: J. Rodríguez Beruff, *Jaime Benítez y la internacionalización de la Universidad de Puerto Rico: las redes intelectuales de la Reforma Universitaria*, San Juan de Puerto Rico, Luscina, 2023, pp. 313-482.

which still today stands as a landmark for the advocates of these types of seminars and core curriculum programs⁴.

The idea and plan of the GH rose hand in hand with a series of broader university curriculum reforms commencing in the United States in late 1910s, and culminating in an entire movement for general education⁵. After years under the influence of the German model, academically ruled by advanced specialization, technical training, and a positive and experimental approach to knowledge, the great North American universities not only had seen pushed aside its general educational purpose – historically linked to undergraduate education and the collegiate institution –, but had also attended to a drastic dismantling of a large portion of its curricular resources – traditionally rooted in humanities, mainly the classics, and liberal arts. After some time, serious deficiencies began to be noticed among graduates, not only in their ability to understand the political and social reality of their time and participate with knowledge in the course of events, but also in their capacity to understand each other, establish intellectually meaningful relationships, and weave a certain collective imagination. Concerned about such poor outcomes of undergraduate education, academic authorities started to see it necessary to reintroduce some sort of common instruction that could counteract the aforementioned trends, ensuring that all students, as citizens, had a basic understanding of the fundamental lines of thought, the most significant episodes in human history, and its major cultural creations⁶.

In this context, in 1919, Columbia College permanently replaced one course in history and one in philosophy with a new program known as Introduction to Contemporary Civilization. The new syllabus inherited the approach of previous initiatives commissioned to the university with the aim of training military

⁴ Serve as an example: Torralba, *Una educación liberal*, cit., p. 44; R. Montas, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 23-26; J.S. Lee, *Invention. The Art of Liberal Arts*, Santa Fe, Respondeo Books, 2020, pp. 281, 284, 287; Id., *On educating the whole person, or learning to be a knower*, «Documentos Core Curriculum», vol. 11, 2019, <<http://hdl.handle.net/10171/56525>> (last access: 29.08.2023); Cohen de Lara, Drop (edd.), *Back to the Core*, cit., p. 84.

⁵ For a comprehensive introduction to the general education movement, see: D.N. Levine, *Powers of the Mind. The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 24-35; G.E. Miller, *The meaning of general education: the emergence of a curriculum paradigm*, New York, Teachers College Press, 1988; Graff, *Professing Literature*, cit., pp. 82-93; E.J. McGrath, *The General Education Movement*, «The Journal of General Education», vol. 1, n. 1, 1946, pp. 3-8.

⁶ Lucas, *American Higher Education*, cit., p. 222; Stevens, *The Philosophy of General Education and its Contradictions*, cit., pp. 166-167; T.P. Cross, *An Oasis of Order: The Core Curriculum at Columbia College*, New York, Columbia University, 1995; Rudolph, *The American College and University*, cit., pp. 455-456; J. Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, in *A History of Columbia College on Morningside*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1954, pp. 48-53.

personnel following the United States' involvement in World War I. Directed towards students' understanding and judgment about the most pressing issues and realities of the contemporary world, the new interdisciplinary and mandatory course was supposed to provide students with the elements of the human and social sciences, as well as a comprehensive and up-to-date outline of Western culture⁷. In parallel to the process that brought the faculty to introduce Contemporary Civilization in the undergraduate curriculum in the realm of human and social sciences, especially contemporary history and thought, a second program also general and cross-disciplinary in nature was being conceived. In this case, it fell within the humanities, more specifically, in the field of literature, and was known as General Honors.

1. *Organization and practice of a Great Books seminar*

In response to a specific concern about the literary ignorance of Columbia College students and in order to provide them with relevant topics to discuss and arguments to engage with, in 1916 John Erskine (1879-1951), a professor of English literature, specialist in the Elizabethan era, and admired poet and essayist, suggested a reading program aimed at introducing undergraduates to some of the greatest works ever written in various fields of knowledge, and to the issues they addressed. Despite being approved in 1917, the United States' intervention in the war forced the postponement of its implementation. In 1919, once the conflict had finished and Erskine was back home – after having directed the American Expeditionary Forces University in Beaune – the experimental program got permission to be carried out⁸. Thus, on the first Wednesday of the academic year 1920-1921, at 7:30 PM, at Hamilton Hall – where most of the core curriculum classes of Columbia College still take place – Erskine, along with Maynard Weaver, gathered twenty-four students to discuss and converse about Homer's Iliad, marking the starting point in GH⁹.

⁷ Stevens, *The Philosophy of General Education and its Contradictions*, cit., pp. 167-168; Miller, *The meaning of general education*, cit., pp. 35-41; Bell, *The Reforming of General Education*, cit., pp. 13-15; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., pp. 99-112.

⁸ J. Erskine, *My life as a teacher*, Philadelphia-New York, Lippincott, 1948, pp. 165-168; K.E. Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine. Shaping Mass Culture Through Great Books and Good Music*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 86-93; Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., p. 432; A. Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books*, New York, Public Affairs, 2008, pp. 15-16; Cross, *An Oasis of Order*, cit.; L. Trilling, *The Van Amringe and Keppel Eras*, in *A History of Columbia College on Morningside*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1954, p. 44.

⁹ Erskine's testimony leads to place the beginning of GH in 1920: J. Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, «The New Republic», vol. 32, n. 412, 1922, p. 13; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., p. 56; Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine*, cit., p. 93; W.B. Carnochan,

The GH program spanned two academic years, third and fourth year of college, reaching up about sixty weeks. Weekly, a reading was assigned and the homework was followed by a session for commentary and discussion, scheduled to last for two hours¹⁰. The reading list, organized in chronological order, consisted of fifty-two authors, from Homer to William James, and included over one hundred works, in some cases more than one work per author. These readings always consisted of complete works, not fragments, and were studied in their translation into English, not in their original language. The catalog, which was shaped through a long process of discussion among the faculty followed by a weekly review during the first year¹¹, was for first time established as follows:

Homer	Marcus Aurelius	Hobbes	Hegel
Herodotus	Saint Augustine	Milton	Lyell
Thucydides	<i>Song of Roland</i>	Molière	Balzac
Aeschylus	<i>Song of the Nibelungs</i>	Locke	Malthus
Sophocles	Saint Thomas Aquinas	Montesquieu	Bentham
Euripides	Dante	Voltaire	John Stuart Mill
Aristophanes	Galileo	Rousseau	Darwin
Plato	Hugo Grotius	Gibbon	Pasteur
Aristotle	Montaigne	Adam Smith	Karl Marx
Lucretius	Shakespeare	Kant	Tolstoi
Virgil	Cervantes	Goethe	Dostoevski
Horace	Francis Bacon	<i>The Federalist</i>	Nietzsche
Plutarch	Descartes	Victor Hugo	William James ¹²

The Battleground of the Curriculum. Liberal Education and American Experience, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 79. However, other testimonies date its implementation one year later: M.J. Adler, *Philosopher at Large. An Intellectual Autobiography*, New York, Macmillan, 1977, pp. 30-56, Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., p. 397; L. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1996, p. 51.

¹⁰ Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, cit., p. 13; Erskine, *My life as a teacher*, cit., pp. 166-168; M. Van Doren, *The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren*, New York, Brace & Co, 1939, pp. 131-132; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., p. 57; Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine*, cit., pp. 89-92.

¹¹ Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, cit., p. 13; J. Erskine, *The Memory of Certain Persons*, Philadelphia-New York, Lippincott, 1947, p. 343; Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine*, cit., p. 94.

¹² Columbia University, *Outlines of readings in important books*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1924; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 60-61. Scott Buchanan claims, erroneously according to us, that, at the beginning, the Great Books program at Columbia adopted Sir John Lubbock's list of the Best Hundred Books published in 1886 in the Pall Mall Gazette. (S.M. Buchanan, *Poetry and Mathematics*, Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1966). On the other hand, the catalog listed here was later extended to seventy-six authors (J. Barlett Brebner, Honors Faculty of Columbia College, *Classics of the Western World*, Chicago, American Library Association, 1927; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., p. 62).

The same listing was introduced to the students before the course began. This allowed students to complete the majority of readings during their vacations and review them as the sessions approached, enabling them to examine, and later think about and discuss the texts in greater detail¹³. Later on, and despite Erskine's desire for students to engage directly with the works with minimal mediation, they were provided with a supplementary guide to the reading plan. This guide included a list of recommended editions recommended, a brief secondary bibliography, as well as series of questions for each book, the purpose of which was to guide reading focusing attention on topics that could be later examined and debated¹⁴.

The course was conducted in sections of approximately twenty-five to thirty students – fifteen according to some accounts. Gathered in seminar-style classrooms, they sat around a long table with the discussion leaders at one of the ends¹⁵. Usually, there were two of them, not only to provide better group supervision and facilitate conversation, but, above all, to avoid monologues and encourage controversy and debate from different perspectives and domains. The seminar was not designed for delivering lectures, but rather for exchange and shared inquiry among the students. Thus, the instructors were expected to contribute to this atmosphere with an amateur spirit, by guiding and fostering discussion and challenging understanding in a Socratic style, that is to say, through questions, observations, confrontations, and so on. For this reason, the instructors were not selected based on specific academic or research profile or on expertise in a particular literature or field of study, but based on desire and conviction about the pedagogical potential of reading, inquiry, and discussion of books, as well as possession of a personal philosophy or spiritual life, regardless of its nature¹⁶. Indeed, the required competence to lead these courses would correspond to that of any educated person with a spirit of inquiry and a desire for self-improvement¹⁷.

In addition to participating in the seminars, students' learning was assessed at the end of each trimester. Initially, gathered in the library and allowed to use the books they deemed appropriate, the pupils had four hours to write an essay on one of the topics covered during the course. Later on, oral examinations lasting approximately thirty minutes were also used for evaluation¹⁸.

¹³ Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, cit., p. 13.

¹⁴ Columbia University, *Outlines of readings in important books*, cit.; Barlett Brebner, Honors Faculty of Columbia, *Classics of the Western World*, cit.

¹⁵ Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, cit., p. 13; Id., *My life as a teacher*, cit., pp. 169-170; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 30, 55-56, 59-60; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., p. 57.

¹⁶ Erskine, *My life as a teacher*, cit., pp. 171-172; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., p. 54.

¹⁷ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., p. 56.

¹⁸ Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, cit., p. 13; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 66, 71.

From the very beginning, the GH faced opposition from a significant portion of the faculty. The primary argument against it was that masterpieces of literature required more attention and a more careful and precise examination than what could be achieved by reading them in just one week or discussing for only two hours. According to some professors, a program of that kind, which also rejected specialized introductions, would only contribute to a superficial understanding of the thought of the authors and the content of the works, or even worse, it might entirely hinder the possibility of reading them intelligently. Others also added that true comprehension of the books couldn't be expected unless they were studied in their original language¹⁹.

2. *Literary education and great books in John Erskine and George E. Woodberry*

2.1 *Teaching to appreciate literature*

Erskine presented the Great Books seminars as the practical realization of a theory on how to convey the appreciation or enjoyment of literature²⁰. He reconstructed and continued this theory based on the example of George E. Woodberry (1855-1930); partly emulating the teaching approach of his mentor at Columbia, and partly reinterpreting one of his major works, *The appreciation of Literature* (1907). Trained at Harvard under the influence of Charles Eliot Norton, Henry Adams, and James Russell Lowell, Woodberry became a prolific critic and a founding figure of comparative literature and a legend at Columbia due to his approach to teaching English letters. With a broad and culturalist inspiration, he would illustrate the more human aspect of the man of letters, in contrast to the specialized philologist²¹.

¹⁹ J. Erskine, *The Enjoyment of Reading Classics*, in J. Barlett Brebner, Honors Faculty of Columbia College (edd.), *Classics of the Western World*, New York, American Library Association, 1927, pp. 7-10; Erskine, *The Memory of Certain Persons*, cit., pp. 166-167; Erskine, *My life as a teacher*, cit., p. 342; Trilling, *The Van Amringe and Keppel Eras*, cit., p. 44; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., p. 113; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., p. 59.

²⁰ J. Erskine, *On Reading Great Books*, in *The Delight of Great Books*, London, Nash & Grayson, 1928, pp. 20, 23-24.

²¹ Erskine, *The Memory of Certain Persons*, cit., pp. 90, 108; Erskine, *My life as a teacher*, cit., p. 20; Id., *Address by Mr. John Erskine*, in *Addresses at the University convocation in Honor of George Edward Woodberry*, New York, Columbia University, 1948, p. 28; Trilling, *The Van Amringe and Keppel Eras*, cit., p. 28; G.F. Milanese, *John Erskine, i 'Great Books' e i classici antichi*, in S. Rocca, *Dove va il latino. Latina Didaxis XXVII. Atti del Convegno*, Genova, COEDIT, 2012, p. 30; Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., p. 425; Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine*, cit., p. 27; Graff, *Professing Literature*, cit., pp. 82, 84, 93.

As Erskine recalled later, for Woodberry, «literature was life itself»²². He saw in literature the expression of life and, apart from direct experience and observation, the primary resource we as individuals have to understand it. Poets, playwrights, and novelists concentrate, reorganize, and recreate human experiences, making them more evident to reason and more appealing to emotions and sympathies. By conveying these experiences and providing a sense for them, they facilitate the mental growth that keeps us alive and leads us to truly become human²³.

For Woodberry and Erskine, literature – which had human truth and the shaping of the being as its ultimate theme and purpose, and possessed much greater illustrative power than science – stood at the forefront of humanities²⁴. However, the actual teaching of letters would ruin its extraordinary educational power. According to Woodberry and Erskine, the way of teaching letters, and especially the usual manner of teaching classical letters – the last curricular stronghold of a liberal education – would distort the artistic essence of literature and dissuade people, especially the youth, from finding in it answers to their interests and vital concerns. In the vast majority of high schools and colleges, the insistence on literary history and grammar ended up diminishing the expressive power of literature and consequently distorted its formative capacity²⁵.

As Woodberry advocated in his classes, to restore the appreciation for literature, one had to liberate its teaching from the academic spirit, soulless and barren erudition, and the obsession with norms, correctness, and formalism. Instead, he tried to highlight, appreciate, and confront the power that books had to appeal to, shake, illuminate, and make understandable one's own and others' life experiences²⁶. For him, appreciation of literature could only emerge from the recognition, curiosity, and interest in the life of the soul and in human nature that arises spontaneously from the encounter of the individual with the work, through the reader's personal experience²⁷.

In this respect, differences between Erskine and Woodberry arise regarding the assisting role of specialized knowledge in literary understanding. On the

²² Erskine, *The Memory of Certain Persons*, cit., p. 91.

²³ G.E. Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, 2nd ed., New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1921, pp. 3, 8, 116, 129-131; Erskine, *On Reading Great Books*, cit., p. 26.

²⁴ Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., pp. 4, 123; Erskine, *On Reading Great Books*, cit., pp. 25-26.

²⁵ Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., p. 130; J. Erskine, *Prohibition and Christianity and Other Paradoxes of the American Spirit*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1927, pp. 263-264; Id., *On Reading Great Books*, cit., p. 11; Id., *My life as a teacher*, cit., p. 24.

²⁶ Id., *On Reading Great Books*, cit., p. 28; Id., *Address by Mr. John Erskine*, cit., pp. 29-30; Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., pp. 122, 130.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4, 5-6, 12-13; Erskine, *On Reading Great Books*, cit., p. 11; Id., *Prohibition and Christianity*, cit., p. 266; today, the connection between the appreciation of literature and the development of inner life continues to be advocated by representatives of Great Books seminars (Montas, *Rescuing Socrates*, cit.; Z. Hitz, *Lost in Thought. The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020).

one hand, Erskine believed that everything we need to know about an author, namely, his mode of expression, or the context of his writing, could be found directly within the work itself. Thus, he claimed that the only assistance required to understand a literary piece was the reader's own experience of life as it accumulates, develops, and grows over time²⁸. On the other hand, Woodberry considered to be necessary the study or conscious preparation of the reader regarding an author's life and psychology, the social, political, or cultural context of production, or the language in which a work is written. In his view, the transmission of specialized knowledge, though secondary, enhanced the expressive capacity of the works and functioned as a supplement to the imagination and sympathy necessary to appreciate and understand them. However, he believed that this should be employed only provisionally and when the reader's own experiences were insufficient to empathize with those of the text²⁹.

Besides this small discrepancy, Erskine, in one of his most distinctive contributions, adds and underscores to Woodberry's theory the social nature of the process of literary appreciation. According to the former, the reception of a work, beyond the individual and inner processes of reading and reflection, occurs amidst the contrast of opinions and views, in discussion with others who have also read it or have simply heard about it. As a result of it, he advocated for the teaching of literature to replicate this process, adopting what he called a «natural social approach to literature». As Erskine claimed, while individual life becomes enriched through reading by reshaping the experience and understanding of it, social life also grows to the extent that the individuals participating in it share literary references and exchange opinions about them, laying the foundations for mutual understanding and communication and setting the basis of an intellectual life in common³⁰.

2.2 *The great books*

According to Mortimer Adler, «classics», not «great books» – an expression originally attributed to the English positivist Frederic Harrison³¹ – would have

²⁸ Erskine, *The Enjoyment of Reading Classics*, cit., pp. 7, 9; Id., *On Reading Great Books*, cit., pp. 15, 28.

²⁹ Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., pp. 13-14, 17-18, 122-123, 128.

³⁰ Erskine, *The Enjoyment of Reading Classics*, cit., p. 8; Id., *The Memory of Certain Persons*, cit., p. 91; Id., *My life as a teacher*, cit., p. 343. This idea serves as the foundation for the methodology now known as «shared inquiry», which is linked with the Great Books seminars (Great Books Foundation, *Shared Inquiry Handbook*, Chicago, The Great Books Foundation, 2014).

³¹ À. Pascual, *La raíz positivista de los programas de Grandes Libros. Frederic Harrison y la recepción victoriana de la Bibliothèque de Auguste Comte*, «Revista Internacional de Teoría e Investigación Educativa», vol. 1, 2023 (in press); Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., p. 408; Carnochan, *Where Did Great Books Come from Anyway?*, cit.

been the usual way at Columbia to refer to the works included in the GH program. Adler even attributes to himself the credit for having established the term «great books», with which he intended to avoid any connotation of «old» or «ancient» evoked by the term «classics», towards the end of 1920s, when he presented the innovative course to Robert M. Hutchins for its implementation at the University of Chicago³². However, George E. Woodberry had already been using the term since 1902, employing it recurrently in *The Appreciation of Literature* (1907), and so did John Erskine, from at least 1908 onwards – both of them employing the phrase very similarly to Adler, and most probably for the same reasons³³.

The use of the expression «great books» by Erskine and Woodberry, and later on by Adler and all other advocates of the movement, reflected two ideas that refer respectively to a couple of celebrated lines of John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold. On one hand, Ruskin's distinction in *Sesame and Lilies* between «the books of the hour and the books of all time» supported the definition of great books as literary works that, no matter how old, have been read and continue to be read, proving their significance over time for multitudes of people, even across different traditions and philosophies³⁴. On the other hand, Arnold's definition of culture served to recognize the aforementioned works as examples of the best that has been thought and said in the world, and consequently, as what we should rely on to gain a liberal education³⁵.

According to Woodberry and Erskine, the continued and widespread influence and attraction of certain books on the public could be explained for two reasons. Firstly, due to the extraordinary ability of some works to capture and portray, regardless of idiosyncrasies, the invariable and constant aspects of common human nature; in other words, the power to illustrate and communicate ideal truths by recreating what stands out in terms of emotion, action, or thought within the singularity of life itself³⁶. And secondly, due to certain works' greater willingness to engage in creative collaboration with the concerns and needs of the reading public, which allowed readers to establish connections

³² Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 30, 55.

³³ Serve as an example: G.E. Woodberry, *Introduction in One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature*, New York, The Grolier Club of the City of New York, 1902, pp. XVII, XLIII; Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, cit.; Id., *On Reading Great Books*, cit.; Id., *My life as a teacher*, cit. Cf. Milanese, *John Erskine, i 'Great Books' e i classici antichi*, cit., p. 27, who claims that «Erskine non usò mai l'espressione 'Great Books'».

³⁴ J. Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies. Two lectures delivered at Manchester in 1864*, New York, Wiley and Son, 1865, p. 13; Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., pp. 21, 119; Erskine, *My life as a teacher*, cit., pp. 168-169.

³⁵ M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, London, Smith Elder & Co, 1869, pp. VIII-IX; G.E. Woodberry, *The Torch*, New York, McLure, Phillips & Co, 1905, p. 12; Erskine, *Prohibition and Christianity*, cit., p. 252.

³⁶ Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., pp. 6-7, 130; Erskine, *On Reading Great Books*, cit., p. 24.

more easily between what they read and what they experience. That is, with these works, readers not only enriched their own spiritual life and understanding of the world and humanity, but also imbued the teachings of the literary pieces they engaged with, thus adding new layers of meaning and significance³⁷. In opposition to what scholarship suggested about the use of classics, as Woodberry and Erskine saw it, both features opened the access to great books even to the most ordinary readers and also helped the texts to become significant at any moment and context³⁸. At least according to Erskine, against the idea that classical philology had on certain works, the great books had been written to reach the ordinary people; accordingly, he claimed, we should treat them like any other work that appeared in present times and captured our attention deserving study and discussion. Thus, the designation of great books was, for him, only suitable to those works which, as evidence of their universality, had achieved popular reach³⁹.

Based on the witness of some of the greats of literature and politics regarding how these works had shaped their own education, Woodberry recommended putting these books as early as possible in the hands of the youngest men and women. To him, great books, as the most refined expression of literature, provided an introduction to life. They helped the reader to get acquainted with the existing ideas and the most vivid interests of humanity, exhibited the principles that ruled intellectual life and the aesthetic standards of taste, contributed to the gaining of historical knowledge, possessed an inexhaustible wealth for understanding and, as a result of that, awakened, encouraged, and served as a touchstone for the development of one's own capacities⁴⁰.

Guided by this very same purpose, the GH Great Books' program did not claim to set the hundred best books of all time, but rather aimed to make available the books that could best contribute at that time to the education of young people at Columbia. Erskine certainly assumed that any such list would not be able to avoid a certain degree of subjectivity, and that the place of certain titles could reasonably be taken by others without altering the collection's capacity to provide a comprehensive view of culture⁴¹. In the same vein, Woodberry,

³⁷ Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., p. 20; Erskine, *On Reading Great Books*, cit., pp. 24-29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16; Id., *The Enjoyment of Reading Classics*, cit., p. 7; Id., *My life as a teacher*, cit., p. 173.

³⁹ Id., *The Enjoyment of Reading Classics*, cit., p. 8; Id., *My life as a teacher*, cit., p. 166; Id., *The Memory of Certain Persons*, cit., p. 343.

⁴⁰ Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., pp. 118-119; Erskine, *The Enjoyment of Reading Classics*, cit., p. 10.

⁴¹ Id., *The Enjoyment of Reading Classics*, cit., p. 8; Id., *My life as a teacher*, cit., p. 170; Columbia University, *Outlines of readings in important books*, cit., p. V. Erskine's argument will be later used by Hutchins when presenting the collection *Great Books of the Western World* (R.M. Hutchins, *The Great Conversation. The Substance of a Liberal Education*, Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952, pp. XVI-XVII).

while considering it critical for individuals to become familiar with the greatest works ever written, also argued that there should be no imposition or obligation to read them. He believed that awakening a taste for literature had a higher priority over what was supposed to be read. Accordingly, if the needs, interests, and comprehension skills of the reader initially pointed towards lesser books, Woodberry thought that it should be respected⁴².

Although the openness and adaptability Woodberry and Erskine showed regarding the reading paths for aesthetic reception and human education, it cannot be dismissed that their veneration for great books also hid a certain obsession with race and its progress, with a need to preserve a certain identity, and with a desire to civilize people through the dissemination of a presumed higher culture. This becomes clear in Woodberry's writings, who openly sympathized with racist and supremacist beliefs proper of the early 20th century nativist movement. We can certainly read in him that English literature, as the ultimate expression of the «spirit of the race», was superior to all others; but also that the «white race» had a humanizing mission by the spread of European culture as concentrating the best ever said, thought, done and been in world history⁴³. In Erskine, we do not find statements of this kind. However, the particular representativeness of the reading catalog proposed for the Great Books seminars, dominated by «dead, white, European male» authors, may show that he still shared some of the same prejudices. This is reflected not only in the character of the books listed, but also in the political and social events key to the emergence of general education trends at Columbia seem to bring to a similar conclusion. The large waves of migration from east and south of Europe, and the perception created of a threat to identity and a decline in traditional values, certainly guided these programs to provide not only with instrumental skills but also with the cultural and moral heritage of the West, especially to those newly arrived students⁴⁴. Further, World War I not only demanded of Columbia, as of many other universities, to be at the service of the nation in instructing and indoctrinating the personnel forming the Student Army Training Corps (SATC), but also awoke a certain hope that culture – Western culture, of course –, could be the only way for humanity to escape the civilizing crisis. These actually were the reasons why the immediate predecessors of Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and GH – the War Issues and the Peace Issues course (1917-1918) – were launched at Columbia College⁴⁵.

⁴² Woodberry, *The appreciation of literature*, cit., pp. 121-122.

⁴³ Id., *Introduction*, cit., pp. XIII-XV; Woodberry, *The Torch*, cit., p. 12; Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum*, cit., pp. 83-94.

⁴⁴ Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind*, cit., pp. 57-59; Cross, *An Oasis of Order*, cit.; Bell, *The Reforming of General Education*, cit., pp. 13, 20-21; P.D. Royster, *Silence in the Western Canon*, in *Decolonizing Arts-Based Methodologies. Researching the African Diaspora*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2020, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind*, cit., pp. 56-57; Miller, *The meaning of general*

It would not be until the emergence of the cultural and racial conflicts of the sixties, especially critical, among other constructs, of the Western cultural canon, that strong objections were raised against the idea of Great Books as a prerogative of the West, identity and colonial in spirit. As time went by, even though collections like *Great Books of the Western World* by Encyclopaedia Britannica – continuing the tradition initiated by John Erskine – were revised and corrected in the 1990s with a renewed sensitivity, many still found in it an evident Eurocentric, racist, and patriarchal bias⁴⁶.

3. *Beyond the General Honors*

3.1 *The democratization of culture*

As its name suggests, the GH was part of one of the courses required to graduate with honors in Columbia. Unlike Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, the first major general education initiative, the GH never had a place in the recently established common curriculum requirements⁴⁷. Following the same pattern, between 1920 and 1937, within the entire North American collegial scene, all programs akin to GH were reserved for a highly skilled and carefully selected minority⁴⁸. In 1934, after years of suspension of the GH, when the reading and discussion seminars were reinstated at Columbia through the Colloquium on Important Books, the same fashion endured⁴⁹. Outside Columbia, the courses not only followed that pattern but also retained the declarative designation of their honorary and selective nature. That was the case of General Honors 110 – Readings in the Classics of Western European Literature, an analogous module initiated in 1930 in Chicago and led by Mortimer Adler and Robert M. Hutchins⁵⁰, but also with another General Honors, less attended

education, cit., p. 35; Bell, *The Reforming of General Education*, cit., pp. 14-15.

⁴⁶ Royster, *Silence in the Western Canon*, cit.; Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., pp. 134, 204; Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time*, cit., pp. 125 ff., 157 ff.; D.J. Flynn, *Blue collar intellectuals: when the enlightened and the everyman elevated America*, Wilmington, Isi Books, 2011, p. 64.

⁴⁷ Erskine, *General Honors at Columbia*, cit., 13; Trilling, *The Van Amringe and Keppel Eras*, cit., p. 44; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., p. 57.

⁴⁸ W.N. Haarlow, *Great Books, Honors programs, and Hidden Origins: the Virginia Plan and the University of Virginia in the Liberal Arts Movement*, New York, Routledge Falmer, 2003, p. 27; cf. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, cit., p. 467.

⁴⁹ Cross, *An Oasis of Order*, cit.; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., pp. 72, 74, 122-123. However, some argue that the *Colloquium* reduces the exclusivity of the Great Books seminars (Montas, *Rescuing Socrates*, cit., p. 25; Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine*, cit., p. 167).

⁵⁰ A. Pascual, *Estudio Introductorio. Una Educación General en la Universidad*, in R. Hutchins, *La educación superior en América*, Pamplona, EUNSA, 2021, pp. 11-57; J.W. Boyer,

but much more ambitious (with up to two years entirely dedicated to reading great books), the one at the University of Virginia, designed by Scott Buchanan, Stringfellow Barr, and Robert Gooch⁵¹.

Starting in the 1920s and coinciding with the birth of the Great Books seminars, there was a boom in honors programs in the United States. To a large extent, these programs responded to an increasing massification of higher education, as well as the spread of a certain conception of university life, becoming less and less focused on study. Taking the tutorial system of Oxford and Cambridge as their model, the new honors programs aimed to recognize and promote talent and intellectual work, specially focusing on the liberal arts, as well as on a return to a more intimate and personalized teaching⁵². This could suggest that that would be the spirit of the Great Books programs too. However, even though some of the previously mentioned programs certainly received influences from this trend⁵³, neither the ultimate reasons for incorporating them into curricular pathways of excellence nor the philosophy of their promoters aligned completely with this phenomenon.

In reality, honors programs were the only curricular space in which faculty and academic authorities, who were resistant to radical and far-reaching reforms (especially in the context of World War I and the Great Depression) and skeptical (if not hostile) to the nature of the proposal, were allowed to grant to Great Books seminars⁵⁴. Contrary to the exclusivity in which such programs ended though, Erskine, as well as Adler, Hutchins, Buchanan, or Barr, would rather attempt to an operation of democratization of culture, that is, of equitable distribution of cultural goods, with a view to an intellectually solid performance of citizenship. The promoters of the Great Books seminars, while sympathetic to a genteel and elitist notion of culture inherited from the great Victorian figures of the 19th century, were also influenced by the concern and desire typical of the reformist spirit of the time, both Victorian and Progressive, for the necessary education of the working classes and the citizenry in general⁵⁵.

The University of Chicago: A History, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 241; Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time*, cit., p. 44; Graff, *Professing Literature*, cit., p. 164.

⁵¹ Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, cit., p. 464; W. Haarlow, *Great Books, Honors programs, and Hidden Origins: the Virginia Plan and the University of Virginia in the Liberal Arts Movement*, New York, Routledge Falmer, 2003.

⁵² Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, cit., pp. 458-467; Rudolph, *The American College and University*, cit., pp. 456-458.

⁵³ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 131, 143-144; Haarlow, *Great Books, Honors programs, and Hidden Origins*, cit., pp. 44-67.

⁵⁴ Erskine, *The Memory of Certain Persons*, cit., p. 342; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 174-176; Haarlow, *Great Books, Honors programs, and Hidden Origins*, cit., p. 39.

⁵⁵ Erskine, *Prohibition and Christianity*, cit., pp. 235-242; Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit.; Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine*, cit.; Chaddock-Reynolds, *A Canon of Democratic Intent*, cit.

Until 1937, the Great Books seminars did not manage to settle in undergraduate curriculums beyond honors programs. At Columbia, in response to a feeling that the existing mandatory common courses were not enough to provide a general education for all, and aware of the existing formative gap in the humanities, two additional requirements were added to those established in 1919. One of them, the Humanities A, also known as Literature Humanities, adopted the form and the original idea of the Great Books seminar; and the same happened few years later with the older Introduction to Contemporary Civilization. Coming to the present day, both have become basic essentials in Columbia's core curriculum⁵⁶.

In the same year that Columbia opened the Great Books seminars to the entire student body, the New Plan at St. John's College, created under the influence of the emerging movements and programs in Chicago and Virginia, established a four-year, fully mandatory curriculum, dedicated almost entirely to the reading and discussion of the great works of the Western tradition⁵⁷. Even though the reach of these programs in the North American college landscape still remained relatively limited, the shift operated by the latter had a significant impact on a series of reforms that would indeed leave their mark on a vast majority of institutions across the nation. The most significant reforms were the new college plans of 1942 and 1946 taking place at the University of Chicago's College, and the general education program approved in 1945 at Harvard and documented in the so-called Redbook. Although none of these developed actual Great Books programs, they did incorporate many classics of Western literature into the *syllabi* of generous core curriculums⁵⁸.

However, for obvious reasons, the democratizing aspirations of Great Books' advocates, if they were to be fully realized, did so not within the university context but rather in popular adult education. The real test to the practical challenges concerning the democratization of intellectual life, and the final proof of the effectiveness of Great Books for the education of the entire citizenry, initially passed through the School of Philosophy of an educational institution associated with the labor movement in New York City, the People's Institute. From 1926 to 1928, funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, together with the push of Mortimer Adler, and the collaboration of several Columbia faculty members, supported the Institute's School of Philosophy to held up to six seminars in the style of Great Books programs with immigrant and

⁵⁶ Van Doren, *The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren*, cit., pp. 210-211; Buchler, *Reconstruction on the Liberal Arts*, cit., pp. 72-75; Cross, *An Oasis of Order*, cit.; Bell, *The Reforming of General Education*, cit., p. 21.

⁵⁷ St. John's College in Annapolis, *Catalogue for 1937-1938. Announcements for 1938-1939. Official Statement of the St. John's Program*, Annapolis, St. John's College, 1938.

⁵⁸ Pascual, *Estudio Introductorio*, cit., pp. 22-37; Bell, *The Reforming of General Education*, cit., p. 26.

working-class students all around the city boroughs⁵⁹. Although experimental as it was, the experience run at the People's Institute preceded other similar enterprises such as the Great Books Foundation (1947), established after years of collaboration between the University of Chicago and the city's public library⁶⁰, or the American Heritage Project, launched by the Ford Foundation in collaboration with the American Library Association⁶¹. All of this has led some scholars to consider the People's Institute program to be, instead of the GH, the one that most influenced the Great Books idea during the 20th century⁶². The spirit of this experimental program even reaches the former President of the University of Chicago, Robert M. Hutchins – who also promoted the other aforementioned initiatives – in promoting and editing of the famous collection *Great Books of the Western World* (1952). This was some time before the commercial interests of Encyclopaedia Britannica undermined any aspirations Hutchins had for the collection to provide a liberal education for all American citizens, and turned it into a successful consumer product of the mass publishing industry⁶³. This latter episode entices scholars to suspiciously regard the campaign to generalize culture within the framework of the Great Books movement. According to some of them, that campaign could be seen as taking part in an operation initiated by the elites, which, far from promoting a genuine cultivation of the intellectual powers of the citizens, would actually seek, through the provision of a rather prefabricated culture, a sort of lightweight Americanization of the population that would help dissipate political and social tensions, especially those related to race and class issues, without any need to distribute power and wealth⁶⁴.

⁵⁹ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 87-88; Buchanan, *Poetry and Mathematics*, cit., pp. 11-21; Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., pp. 23-24.

⁶⁰ Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time*, cit., p. 65; Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., pp. 34-36.

⁶¹ B.A. Alvarez, *The American Heritage Project: A Legacy of Public Libraries and Community Discussions*. «Libraries: Culture, History, and Society», vol. 5, n. 1, 2021, pp. 76-101. J. Preer, *The American Heritage Project: Librarians and the Democratic Tradition in the Early Cold War*, «Libraries & Culture», vol. 28, n. 2, 1993, pp. 165-188.

⁶² T. Lacy, *Fostering Unity Amidst Diversity: The People's Institute and Great Books Idea, 1897-1930*, «The Historical Society's 2008 Conference. Migration, Diaspora, Ethnicity, & Nationalism in History», Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, June 5-7, pp. 1-2, <<https://www.bu.edu/historic/conference08/Lacy.pdf>> (lat access: 23.09.2023).

⁶³ Hutchins, *The Great Conversation*, cit., pp. 52-65; Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture*, cit., pp. 63-79; Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time*, cit., p. 97.

⁶⁴ J.W. Schneider, *Remaking the Renaissance Man: General Education and the Golden Age of the American University*, «American Quarterly», vol. 73, n. 1, 2021, p. 56; J.S. Rubin, *The Making of the Middlebrow Culture*, Chapel Hill & London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

3.2 *The arts of language and the growth of intellectual powers*

When Erskine started to teach literature, he found out that college students, in addition to being unfamiliar with the masterpieces of literature, barely mastered the elements of language necessary for an effective comprehension and self-expression of thought. Despite having completed elementary and secondary education, very few of them were linguistically proficient, and many were unable to correctly spell. Initially, Erskine focused on teaching the normative foundations of language, including grammar, punctuation, argumentation, and compositional structure in texts. However, twenty years later, he viewed his past efforts in teaching the laws of language and their proper use rather than being of assistance to comprehension and expression, as an obstacle to appreciating literature, delving into the experiences contained in books, and nurturing a creative imagination. Accordingly, in his English literature classes as well as in the Great Books seminars, he abandoned the teaching of the arts of language in favor of sparking interest in life through literature, and promoting extensive reading among students⁶⁵.

In spite of that, his approach was not strictly followed by some of his disciples, whose slight changes in the content and method of Great Books programs might have seemed an effort to correct the master, a correction not very well taken in his turn by Erskine⁶⁶. In the 1930s, some of the programs carried out at the University of Chicago and, especially, those developed at the University of Virginia and St. John's College – all stemming from the Committee on Liberal Arts of the prominent Midwestern university – combined reading and discussion seminars with systematic instruction and practice in the arts of language, that is, with modernized teaching of the medieval *trivium*⁶⁷.

The first program to follow this format was a preparatory course of the Chicago Law School designed by Mortimer J. Adler, and functioning from 1934 to 1937. Its goal, in addition to providing an initial exposure to the humanistic tradition, was to equip aspiring students with the essential tools for reading and writing, as well as listening and speaking, which would intellectually assist them not only in their academic career, but also in professional practice and civic engagement. The so-called Trivium Course – the teaching experience of which Adler used to write the best-seller *How to Read a Book* (1940) – was organized around two axes. On one hand, it laid out the theoretical foundations of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, often complemented by analytical exercises. On the other, through detailed reading and discussion of a classic work – usually only two or three per academic year – the rules of writing, reading, and ora-

⁶⁵ Erskine, *My life as a teacher*, cit., pp. 21-26.

⁶⁶ Id., *The Memory of Certain Persons*, cit., p. 343.

⁶⁷ Haarlow, *Great Books, Honors programs, and Hidden Origins*, cit., p. 39; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., pp. 174-176.

tory previously studied in the theory, were meticulously put into practice. Thus, reading took on a new dimension, not only in terms of a higher understanding of the work, that is, of its subject matter and the author's thoughts, but also in terms of a practical use of language tools as instruments for comprehension and thinking.

Following the same structure, in 1935 at the University of Virginia, under the guidance of Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr, a new honors program for undergraduates was launched. With a separate program for junior and senior colleges, instruction in the first two years was based solely on reading, analysis, interpretation, critique, imitation, and discussion of great books. Not only seminars, but also lectures, tutorials, and even laboratory work – just in natural sciences –, were the different methods of teaching and learning the content of the great works forming the program. But what particularly set the Virginia Plan apart from previous programs was to reserve specific focus and attention on certain works such as Plato's *Cratylus*, Aristotle's *Organon*, or Horace's *Ars Poetica*; works the object of which was none other than language itself, its structure and combination, the different forms of poetic expression, the formal syllogistics, and the modes of presenting scientific knowledge⁶⁸.

Lastly, the New Program at St. John's College extended Virginia's junior college structure to a full four-year program, becoming, for some, a nationwide benchmark of what a liberal education should be⁶⁹. St. John's maintained the specific focus on the most significant contributions of thought to grammar, rhetoric, and logic, but also introduced further methodological innovations that intensified the mastery of these arts of language. Although books were still read and discussed in their English translations, as it used to be in GH, at the same time, students were intensively introduced to the knowledge of the original languages, and the study of grammar rules was addressed through analysis, translation, and imitation of passages from the works read and discussed. The goal of these exercises was not specialized philological mastery in Greek, Latin, or French, nor critical erudition about the style of an author or a specific work. Instead, the aim was to contribute to a universal understanding of grammar and its rules, based on the great examples of the expression of thought, in order to enhance the general ability of the students to read any type of text. At the end of the day, this one once was the authentic purpose of teaching classical languages for all⁷⁰.

With their respective peculiarities, all of these programs recognized that engaging with great books, as significant examples of expression and thought, fostered the development of aesthetic criteria and reasoning, enabling students

⁶⁸ Haarlow, *Great Books, Honors programs, and Hidden Origins*, cit., pp. 73-79, 84-93.

⁶⁹ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., p. 208.

⁷⁰ St. John's College, *Catalogue for 1937-1938*, cit., pp. 25-33; J. Klein, *On liberal education*, in R.B. Williamson, E. Zuckerman, *Jacob Klein: Lectures and Essays*, Collegeville (MN), St. John's College Press, 1965, p. 265.

to make intelligent judgments and act thoughtfully on any of everyday matters. However, contrary to Erskine's approach, some of his disciples also assumed that such development did not occur naturally and spontaneously, but required sustained effort and the acquisition of a certain mastery in reading, without which it became nearly impossible not only to understand some texts but also to think rigorously about some issues. Erskine seemed to take for granted that, at a certain age and after some years of schooling, students would already know how to read effectively any type of text, or that the mere accumulation of readings – the more, the better – and the natural exchange of opinions around them, regardless of one's practice and skill, would simply enhance their overall ability to comprehend reality and form a righteous opinion about it. In opposition, what some of his most prominent disciples demonstrated was that, in order to truly learn from books – especially books that had been the result of employing extraordinary linguistic and intellectual skills –, it was indispensable to possess (or be on the way to possess) a certain mastery of the same linguistic skills with which they expressed thoughts and ideas⁷¹. Therefore, for a curriculum designed to foster the intellectual development of students, such as the Great Books program attempted, it was not enough to make the intellectual legacy of humankind available and to engage with it in reading and discussion with equals. According to Jacob Klein, the celebrated German Jewish philosopher who taught at St. John's, such program must also nourish the acquisition of those arts that aided in the understanding of this heritage, that ensured its certainty, and that revealed the limits of human knowledge expressed through words⁷².

Erskine likely had a point in thinking that formal logic courses or traditional language lessons historically fostered a certain disinterest in literature, and even failed to educate ordinary citizens in the habit of applying the rules of language to speaking, listening, reading, and writing. But such failure would not demonstrate in any case the non-existence of alternative methods to get to know and use these rules correctly, in the same correctness with which the great masters of literature and thought did; neither would it demonstrate the impossibility to teach them without burying the vitality and life significance of their creations and ideas. Even less so, such failure could justify giving up their teaching, for the consequences it could have on the ability of the students – or say citizens – to read and, in general, to communicate, or, what is more important, on their ability to understand and reason⁷³.

⁷¹ M.J. Adler, *How to read a book. The art of getting a liberal education*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1940, pp. 9-34; R.M. Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1936, pp. 136-137.

⁷² Klein, *On liberal education*, cit., pp. 264-265.

⁷³ Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America*, cit., p. 136; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, cit., p. 156.

In conclusion, despite Erskine's emphasis on his sole intention to teach how to read, and despite the fact that some of his disciples confessed to having found in GH a genuine school of reading⁷⁴, Erskine's rejection of any kind of instruction in the arts of language raise serious doubts about the course's effectiveness in that respect. But what is more important, despite Erskine's insistence on the need to cultivate intelligence above other virtues⁷⁵, and despite the GH's aiming at intellectual preparation for citizenship, serious doubts arise about its real assistance in the development of the students' intellectual powers, that is, serious doubts about its success in teaching future citizens how to think.

⁷⁴ Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented John Erskine*, cit., pp. 95-96.

⁷⁵ J. Erskine, *The moral obligation to be intelligent*, New York, Duffield & Co, 1915, pp. 24, 27, 28, 30, 31.