
Book Reviews

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Harry Lewis, 2006. **Excellence Without a Soul (How a Great University Forgot Education)**.
New York: Public Affairs, 305 pp.

When a prestigious world-class university such as Harvard dismally fails to provide its undergraduates a world-view to help shape responsibly their future insofar as they can best fit within their country and the world at large or do the utmost they can accomplish, then such a university is soulless. This universal is the thesis of Lewis's controversial book, hence the title and its qualifying adverbial phrase.

No, the author-academician does not indict with a jaundiced eye – Lewis knows the vantage point from where he speaks of – a graduate of Harvard himself in 1964, he returned on campus in 1974 and had served his **alma mater** as professor for more than 30 years, capped by the deanship of the College of Arts and Sciences for 9 years. To make his thesis credible, he wrote the well-searched book for three years, while being “harbored” by MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and BU (Boston University). Some 29 pages of bibliographical notes attest to the depth and breadth of scholarship that went through the writing of the book, all culled from the rich historical records of Harvard since its founding in 1650, the annual reports of its presidents, as well as their inaugural speeches, the nature of the curriculum throughout the centuries, faculty deliberations, board of governors decisions, campus journals, deans reports,

appointment handbook, recruiting policies and guidelines, conditions obtaining in other well-known universities, editorials and related matters.

Interestingly, the more revealing part of the book questions, determines, compares and contrasts the achievements, the rise and fall of the Harvard presidency from the 17th to the 20th century. For instance, Charles William Eliot, a chemist by training, who at 35, became president for 40 years (1869-1909), was well esteemed by the academic community, parents and patrons for transforming the university with his twin ideals of academic excellence for the faculty and freedom of choice for the students (on the liberal education courses) as well as freedom for the faculty to teach what they want in consistence with their primary status as research scholars. These constructs to Lewis, raise three unresolved issues: (1) Will the curriculum respond to the desires of the students, the preferences of the faculty or the educational needs of society? (2) Will the students be the ones the professors most want to teach or the ones whose education will most benefit society? (3) Will the university be run for the benefit of students, faculty, or society? Then, there is James Bryant Conant, who in 1914, as President introduced the concept of meritocracy, that is, “attracting students and faculty whose distinction lay not in their social origin but in their intellect and character.” Besides, he instituted the system of outside experts to review tenure cases of appointing professors to permanent positions (Lewis argues, however, that such practice tends to make “reputation more important than reality, and not test at all a candidate’s commitment to teaching or to the welfare of the University”. The most humbling administrative debacle though happened during President Lawrence Summer’s stint at Harvard. A brilliant economist, but a poor business manager, Summer was discredited as a moral leader “whose ideas failed to meet Harvard Standard”, avoiding the use of the written word “to provide deep analysis of complex issues”. He was forced to resign in February 2006, after serving the university for five

years, “because the faculty and staff had lost confidence in his autocratic leadership, much less his lack of integrity and disclosure of apparent dishonesty.”

While Lewis assumes that universities succeed as creator and repositories of knowledge, they have side-tracked the more vital role of undergraduate education, that is “to help 18 to 22 years old grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings”. Lewis laments over the fact that universities (including parents) would rather overly-stress pursuit of knowledge, hard work and future financial success, instead of emphasize “personal strength, integrity, compassion and how to leave the world a better place than you found it.” Moreover, he chastises the fact that universities have lost sight of their educational mission of transforming teen-agers lives, “as structured by their families and their high schools” for them to reach their adulthood “with the learning and wisdom to take responsibility for their own lives and for civil society.”

To come up with such desiderata for a sound, solid, ideal university education, the author traces the historical, academic and administrative forces, tempered by the socio-political intellectual milieux in America and the global village, all conspiring factors that have helped shape Harvard to be what it is today. Focusing on the liberal education curriculum, Lewis cites the 1650 charter that stipulated “the advancement of all good literature, arts and sciences... and for all accommodations of buildings and all other necessary provisions that may conduce to the education of the English and Indian youth of this country in knowledge and godliness.” Such provision sharply contrasts to that of the Red Book in 1945 (so called because it was bound in red) which consisted of three broad areas of learning – humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences of which six of the 16 courses were required for graduation. The 2005 curriculum realigned courses into three broad categories: (1) Language, Literature, Fine Arts, Music and Philosophy, (2) Natural Sciences and Mathematics, (3)

History, Political and Social Sciences – a realignment or an “improvement” of the 1910 program that fused Math and Philosophy in the fourth division. As expected, there was much academic turfing on the part of departments and following the path of least resistance from the students who would tend to choose the “easiest courses” in each division to obtain A’s, and observably, distribution requirements “have more teeth in the sciences than in the humanities.”

With annual endowments amounting to billion dollars (\$8 billion alone in 2005), Harvard could afford to have classes in the undergraduate with 8 to 20 students (on the other hand, some lecture classes run to hundreds); offer unusual courses such as cuneiform, samurai culture, moral reasoning, gendered communities (Women, Islam and Nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa), scientific literacy, History of American Institutions, World War and Society in the 20th century – you name it and they have it. Admittedly, the huge budget could accommodate freshmen students coming from a much more geographically and socio-economically representative of the USA – thus, more deserving scholars from low-income families either from whites or blacks find their luck in the university, live in residential facilities on campus, join co-curricular activities to round off their education, engage in games and recreation to let off steam, so to speak, commit themselves to outreach program.

Given these ideal conditions then, a privately run university like Harvard would appear unruffled with administration and academic problems. Far from it, the University equally shares its pitfalls along lines of leadership models. To Lewis, “Harvard needs leaders whom others will follow, not unquestioningly, but with confidence and respect.” He goes on to say that “Harvard is not an autocracy either, but more like a volunteer agency” – starting from students goaded to do good work “only if they are inspired to do so, only if they believe in the importance of what is asked of them to the faculty who do because they have come to believe in its

importance and rightness, not because someone above their pay grade tells them they should do,” and ending on the support staff who “absorb the spirit of the institution and convey its values to the students everyday.” Above all, Lewis decries the poor advising done to undergraduate students either in their academic and personal problems, just as he sees the tyranny of grading as an “external credential that distracts rather than supports learning.” To this effect, as of 2006 only 5% of the total student populace graduated **summa**, in contrast to 80% graduating **magna** or **cum** in Spring 1997, the soft grading traced to consumerism to justify larger budgets among departments.

On a much sordid note, the scandal of rape on campus rears its ugly head, let alone inebriation among youngsters in pubs also stalled on university premises. Then, the perennial reconciliation of athletics supremacy and scholarship demands, even the admission of Jewish Americans and other immigrant stocks.

“How then can Harvard reclaim its soul?” Lewis inevitably asks. The solution he offers appear feasible: 1) Ideas and idealism have to be articulated from the top; 2) The alumni need to recognize (and act vigilant) what has happened or what is happening to their University; 3) Engage the faculty to work for changes that will make Harvard graduates both excellent and prepared to serve their roles in society; 4) Develop honest means of evaluating teaching, as honoring good character, other than the rigorous system of external reviewer used to assess the scholarship of tenure candidates; and 5) The counseling and therapeutic services for undergraduate must share the stage with a less clinical treatment of students hearts and souls.

Indeed, the Philippines higher educational institutions could draw much insight from this book, if not stand to benefit from Harvard’s experiences these past three hundreds years or so.

Barack Obama, 2004. **Dreams from My Father.**
New York: Three Rivers Press, 457 pp.

“What is a family? Is it just a genetic chain, parents and offspring, people like me? Or is it a social construct, an economic unit, optimal for child rearing and division of labor? Or is it something else entirely: a store of shared memories, say? An ambit of love? A reach across the void?”

Probably, in these provocative questions lies the burden of Obama's book which the writer himself neither classifies an autobiography, or family history, oral history, as much as a memoir. Plausible enough is his reason: an autobiography, he avers, implies “a summing up, a certain closure” when Obama admits he has yet “to charter his way through the world.” In a larger sense, though, Obama more than traces his African roots in Kenya or feels proud of the Spartan upbringing his American mother Stanley Ann, an anthropologist, had imposed on him, the memoir attempts to help bridge the socio-economic political gap that has existed from the time the Black Africans had been shipped to American shore to work as slaves in the vast plantations to the 1960s and beyond when Black Americans would demand their human rights and dignity to live in equal footing with the whites. Hence, it would be wise on the part of the reader to have grasped the seminal ideas of W.E.B. Dubois, Frederick Douglas, Jean Toomer, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, among other Black intellectuals that labored and fought for the esteem their people deserve amidst racial bigotry and social discrimination.

Divided into three major parts – Origin, Chicago, and Kenya, this memoir subtly speaks and bats for cultural tolerance, sense of belongingness and compassion, reveals the effect of mixed marriages on children, but most of all, stresses love for the family that goes beyond race, even religion, or political persuasions. The first part traces Obama's

antiquarian roots both from his maternal and paternal sides – he lovingly, fondly recalls his Hawaiian sojourn with his mother (while she was taking her master’s degree, to the time she divorces Barack’s father, till mother and son live in Indonesia after marrying Lolo, his step-father. Here the young, impressionable youth tries to assimilate as much as he could about the harsh limitations of Third World life could offer, draws insights into the corrupting influence of politics on Indonesians, the pervasive poverty, despite the country’s wealth.

The second portion unravels Obama’s involvement in community work as an organizer in 1983 (when he was 22), mobilizing the Blacks – the underprivileged, the marginalized poor, to have decent homes (without asbestos), to be able to send their children to decent schools, while appealing to the white/black authorities to improve sanitation services, provide parks and playgrounds, or sponsor career days for area youth. In particular this section has given the author much reflection on political maneuverings, religious conflicts, apathy and solidarity on the part of the aggrieved party to go on fighting for their cause. That Obama has empowered them, and, in turn, has been empowered by them is subtly indicated here. For one, Black family squabbles, even disunity in time of rallies, he questions and accepts objectively; for another his ideas and idealism have been shaped and humbled and crashed, as he rubs elbows with politicians, businessman, parishioners, religious leaders, and yet, in the process, he never loses his sense of humanity, much less his firm grasp of the volatile situations he finds himself enmeshed in.

The final part serves like a coda in that the unresolved issues in the first part are disentangled here: how, for example, Obama’s visit to his kinsfolk in Kenya discloses “the skeletons” in the closet, his father’s other wives’ claim for inheritance; Barack’s grandfather’s (Onyango) idea on self-reliance and stubborn, dogged will, as influenced by his living with the whites as their cook; Barack’s relatives eagerness to please him

for making it to Harvard Law School, even their downright asking him to give them presents from America (very Asian or Filipino in practice); his reunion with his other half-brothers and sisters (The Old Man Obama had two American wives and two Kenyan wives). More important, it dawns on Obama that modernity has eroded Kenyan traditional values, because of white colonization, the youth much affected and alienated from their elders, the natives trying to live the lifestyle of their former colonists.

Also in this concluding portion Barack – “blessing, child of God” in Lou – a Kenyan tribe, comes to terms with his father’s rebellious spirit. Awed by his latent intelligence (The Old Man has a doctorate from Harvard), Obama grasps his father’s disenchantment over Kenya’s governmental affairs after his return from America, overcomes the “shame in the silence fear had produced in the first to the third generations of the clan” – his grandfather Oyango, his own father – pieces of his soul – and in himself, as Barack weeps over their unmarked graves in the backyard of the Obamas (This reviewer now senses why his own daughter who gave him the book has shed a tear or two in reading Barack). In the epilogue, Barack, now married to Michelle, revisits Kenya after six years to renew his blood ties with his relatives.

But Barack could write, as opposed to his claim that he would wince for using certain diction, overly expressing “indulgent emotions” or resorting to “mangled sentences.” In a very engaging, sustainable style, Obama writes with elan, he could wax literary in some parts (other readers note the novelistic-like tendency), slangy in a few instances, as he catches Black American lingo, yet never judgmental in others, as he discusses issues on identity, social stratification and racial issues.

Indeed, this riveting book could not be put down, once the reader takes hold of it; a few may resort to begin with the Chicago part to gain an inkling into how Obama, before serving

as an Illinois Senator, eventually emerges unprecedentedly the first Black American President of the United States. All the groundwork, the inherent talent, the stamina, the idealism and fever of youth, the passion, the strong, vibrant human relations, the belief in the goodness of human beings have been foreshadowed here; above all, his keeping up firmly his article of faith in the ability of people and the system to change – the buzz word that would catapult him to the White House 25 years later.

Added feature to the memoir are excerpts from his other best-selling book – *The Audacity of Hope* – but that is another story/book review to tell.

Jerry B. Gracio, 2006. **Apokripos**. Diliman, Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 111 pp.

Maengganyo (o mapupukaw?) ang mambabasa na bilhin ang katipunan ng mga tulang ito, dahilan na rin sa pasaring o babala ni Virgilio S. Almario, **National Artist for Literature**, sa **blurb** sa likod ng libro: “Inirerekomenda kong basahin ito agad bago mabalitaan at pakyawin nina Urbana, Tandang Basio, at Fray Salvi.”

Tama’t mali si Almario, sapagkat maide**deconstruct** ang kalipunan ng tula ni Gracio na banal-bastos, payak-malalim, kimi-maharot, matabil-pipi, mapagtiis-lumalaban, hayag-lihim. Sa apat na seksyong walang pamagat, hinati niya ang 67 tula – 25 sa unang bahagi na iba’t ibang aspekto ng pag-ibig ang tinatalakay, 9 sa ikalawang bahagi na ugnayan ng mga magulang at anak ang sinasapo, 22 sa ikatlo na halos ‘sinasamba’ at ‘dinadakila’ kung di man ipinangangalandakan ang tawag ng laman, at 11 sa ikaapat na dumadalumat sa hininga, puso’t kaluluwa, at pagyakap sa Maykapal na sinasambit niluluwalhati ng mga sinaunang tao – sina

Abraham, Zaqueo, Magdalena, Mahal na Birhen at mga personalidad sa Bibliya.

May mangilan-ngilang tulang aakit sa mga feminista, ngunit tatapatan rin ang mga ito ng ilang taludtod na isusuko ng babae ang sarili sa (patriyarkal na) kapangyarihan ng lalaki.

“Hindi ko nman pinapangarap
na magluto para sa iyo
o magsaing, maglaba...
Gampanan ang katungkulan
ng isang babaeng inaalipin
ng kanyang asawa;
Hindi...
Basta ang importante’y magkasama tayo.
Ikaw, Ako.”

Bakit **apokripos** ang kabuuan ng aklat? Galing ito sa salitang Griyego patungkol sa mga “lihim, lingid”, na mga librong di naisama sa Bibliya, hiniram ng Ingles at naging **apocryphal**, nangangahulugang “kahinahinala ang pagkakasulat o kadudadudang pahayag”. Totoo man o hindi, matabil ang makata, walang habas, ika nga, malayang-malayang isinasataludtod ang haraya, lalo na sa pagniniig o pagsisiping. Samakatwid, yaong mga salitang **taboo** o pinagbabawal ang hayagang ibinabandila, ibinubunyag at “sinusuob” sa mga naghuhumindig na seksyon ng libro (mamumula sa kahihyan maging si Walt Whitman, ang makata ng demokrasyang Amerikano, na ipinagdiriwang at inawit ang “kuryenteng katawan” sa **Leaves of Grass**). Samantala, babawi ang Graciong pangahas sa ganitong “kalapastanganan” sa tradisyunal na sensibilidad sa mga tulang pinagbubulay-bulay ang relihiyon na kanyang dinadamitan ng mga imahe’t simbolong **metaphysical** o lampas sa pisikal o pagkataong anyo, tulad, halimabawa nang isinasaad sa “Matandang Ahas”, “Zaqueo”, “Paglingon”, “Sa Bundok ng Sinai”, “Ang Paglingon”, “Ang Panaginip ni

Magdalena”, “Sa Golgotha”, “Ang Kanyang Lirio”, “Anunsyason” at “Padugo”.

Sa mga tulang nilimi ni Gracio sa ika-4 na bahagi, makikilatis ang **henyo** ng makata (**dwende**, ayon sa makatang Kastilang Federico Garcia Lorca) na lalampas, higit pa, sa ispiritwal ang mga lirikong nabanggit at karampatang ihanay sa mga dakilang obra nina Rainer Maria Rilke, ang makatang Aleman, Emily Dickinson – hermitanyong makatang Amerikana, John Donne – ang Ingles na teologong makata ng ika-16 na siglo, ang nasirang Polakong cisne – Papa Juan Pablo III (Karol Wotyla), maging ang mga sinaunang salmo ni Haring David sa Bibliya.