

A Contribution to Vital Curriculum

by

Thomas E. Rinkevich

Classical Mythology (Classics 180), now brightening the lives of over 300 students a year at UNL, was just another course of moribund factuality when I took it over nearly 10 years ago. I devised and introduced a new method of presentation whereby students might discover or investigate further the roots of their culture in the living context, rather than in the tasteless and lifeless textbooks that have plagued such courses in the past. I had the students read carefully selected ancient sources from which the development of ideas from age to age, the influences of one culture upon another, and the purposefully different uses of myths and characters in various authors would become apparent (aided by my sound instruction, of course). From this comes perspective and insight.

When I began this new approach I was unaware that anyone else in the country might be using it. Quite recently, however, I have noticed that approaches similar to mine in the same kind of course are being described as innovations. (I can cite an article discussing such a course at one of the highly respected Eastern colleges— Foreign Language Annals 6 (1976), 530-531. A phenomenal increase in enrollment occurred there, too, after the introduction of a similar approach.) As I say, I have been doing it for nearly 10 years this way.

I suppose, to coin a term, one could call my approach "organic mythology." The students can study living things in a whole, artistic context, observing functions and ends;

and though these living things are ancient, they work better than ever today. The students can more easily and profitably observe similarities to and differences from other living things, including themselves.

One of the most important features of this approach is that it does not promote a doctrine, but encourages a reasonable and educated flexibility and stimulates the imagination (aided, of course, as mentioned before, by the sound assistance of the instructor). It is also an efficient method in that a great number of topics and ideas are always available, to be used according to the needs of each particular class. This method has quite a range of appeal also, providing the greatest good for the greatest number. This is proved by the wide range of enrollment from the University, and by the general satisfaction at the end of the semester. The course is profitable to students of literature as well as to those who need to know how to spend their leisure time.

I have used the method for nearly 10 years, and I am gratified to see the success of similar approaches elsewhere in the country. I believe this "organic mythology" is a course that really "works". For underclassones it is a golden opportunity to organize imagination and ideas that are useful across the board; for upperclassones it is an eleventh-hour opportunity before they are cast adrift.