PAIDEIA AND POWER: WILLIAM JOHNSON (CORY), OSCAR BROWNING AND THEIR SACKINGS FROM ETON

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To an Apostle all honours are indifferent. He cares little for praise and he does not mind censure which he is certain to receive. He is from the time of his election indifferent to public opinion. If he is bullied by Warre or sacked by Hornby he takes it as a matter of course. They are not Apostles and therefore know nothing about it. An Apostle is bound to act Apostolically, that is, to make any business with which he is connected [sic] act on Apostolic lines and this is sure to make him unpopular.

Oscar Browning

INTRODUCTION:

Hornby, the Headmaster at Eton, turfed out William Johnson and Oscar Browning because they were liberal reformers in a highly authoritarian institution. The stories of their sackings are part of the saga of the public schools in the nineteenth century. William Johnson and OB, as he would always be known, attempted to create a community where power and personality, desire and discipline, and love and learning were integrated. They committed the crime of Socrates: they corrupted youth by creating a world of multiple loyalties. These are instructive stories because they illustrate the processes of reform. The schools were bastions of privilege, but subversive elements converted them into agents of change.

JOHNSON AND OB:

When his father died in 1859, Fitzjames Stephen commemorated the families of that earlier generation. Stephen spoke of the “many strong men whose victories are little known.” Stephen spoke those schoolmasters, barristers, civil servants and (some) clergymen whose

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1 Presented to the North American Conference on British Studies meeting in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on 17 October 1998
2 Oscar Browning to E.M. Forster (from Rome), 22 May 1923, King’s College, Cambridge, Forster Papers 8/24/24.
“general level of social worth stands higher than we should have supposed.”

William Johnson and Oscar Browning came from such families and as schoolmasters at Eton they educated the children of such families. Johnson’s father was a businessman; Browning’s, a brewer. Both Johnson and Browning were educated at Eton. Both went to King’s College, Cambridge. Johnson was Chancellor’s Medallist and Craven Scholar. He took his BA in 1846. Browning was President of the Union and 4th Classic. He took his BA in 1860.

Both Johnson and Browning returned to Eton where they were highly successful schoolmasters. Johnson had the gift all great teachers have, a gift his pupils thought derived from his love of Plato and his resemblance to Socrates: the gift of giving life to other people’s ideas. It never occurred to Johnson, or to his most devoted pupils, that he was teaching and they were learning dead languages. The living voice of Virgil always came through. Johnson, according to Arthur Benson, “had a perfectly furnished mind.” It was “strong, virile, self-possessed, and liberal.” OB, like Johnson, stimulated and encouraged his pupils’ imaginations and guided them into the larger world of thought and action. Alfred Lyttelton remembered Browning’s “brilliant discussions” about history “which used to put us so much on the mental tip toe.” Desmond MacCarthy described the ways in which Browning’s teaching showed him that the “orchard of knowledge need not be explored on tip-toe, but that I, just by virtue of being young, possessed a certain blessed agility which might enable me to scramble up a tree or two and shake down

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6 Alfred Lyttelton to Oscar Browning, [1869-1878?], King’s College, Cambridge, Oscar Browning Papers.
appreciable fruit.”7 After he had been reunited with OB at a garden party at Marlborough House, Curzon told his wife, “Whatever I am, I owe it all to Mr. Browning.”8

Johnson left Eton in 1872. He returned to his family home in Devon where he had inherited an estate at Haldon and changed his name to Cory. Johnson moved to Madeira, married and had a son whom he named Andrew because no King of England and no Pope had borne that name. Cory returned to England in 1882 and resided in Hampstead giving “oral instruction” to ladies for “his own sake as well as theirs.” He died in 1892. Browning left Eton in 1875 and returned to Cambridge where he took up college and university work from 1875 to 1909. After serving as university lecturer in history and as Proctor he retired to Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex and converted to Christian Science. Then he went to Rome where, according to Lowes Dickinson, he assisted “young Italians, as he had young Englishmen, toward the openings they desired.”9

Johnson and Browning have always made it difficult for their admirers to defend them. Johnson had an odd appearance and what one of his pupils called “queer uncouth ways.”10 He was so nearsighted that he once chased a black hen down Castle Hill thinking it was his hat which had blown off. Johnson had sensuous features, a “dreamy manner,” and his “rapt look of meditation and a sense of oriental passivity and repose” gave rise to rumors that he was an opium-eater.11 There are, it must be said, passages in Johnson’s letters, some of which he asked to be burned,12 which are open to squalid interpretations. They reveal his devotion to his students’ well-being; they also contain tempting ambiguities. Desmond MacCarthy was aware of the “imprudent protuberances” which gathered stories about OB “as naturally as those of a large

12 William Johnson (Cory) to Reginald Brett, 1 September 1873, Churchill College, Cambridge, Esher Papers, William Johnson Letters, 9/4, p. 89.
boulder gathers moss.” James Strachey (the brother of Lytton Strachey), who became a psychotherapist and music critic, described meeting OB at King’s. Heavy curtains were drawn and the room in Gibbs Building was lit by two candelabra, each in the shape of a youth whose erect penis supported tapers branching from it. The furniture had been removed except for a groaning board in the center and a couch on which his host, garbed in an oriental lace gown from Zanzibar, lay in the attitude of a Roman emperor. OB pressed an electric sonnerie and immediately the Venusberg music arose. “Your orchestra,” Strachey croaked. OB rose and threw open the doors to an adjoining room. Strachey was dazzled by bright sunlight streaming down on a group of eight old women, each sitting before a strange oblong instrument. “And now,” said the great OB as he slid back the bolts, “to business.” Not many could prick the bubble of his self-importance, but Tennyson did once. When OB introduced himself saying, “I’m Browning.” Tennyson responded, “oh no you’re not.”

REFORM:

The smell of scandal has always hovered over Johnson’s and Browning’s leaving Eton. All who knew Johnson realized leaving Eton was the tragedy of his life. Francis Warre Cornish, another prominent Eton beak, thought it would be best not to write about Johnson since “It wd only stir the wasps who sit upon the tomb.” When Hornby sacked Browning he said it was not for committing acts of “immorality in the ordinary sense of the word.” In so writing Hornby left the impression that he was sacking OB for acts which were immoral in some

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13 MacCarthy, Portraits, I, pp. 34-35.
15 A recent headmaster gives a characteristic description: they were dismissed “presumably because their love for boys did not remain strictly within the Platonic ideal.” John Rae, Letters from School, (London, Collins: 1987), pp. 150-151.
16 [O.E.], Eton under Hornby, p. 61.
17 Magdalene College, Cambridge, Arthur Benson Diary, 8(40), 25 November 1901.
18 Hornby to A.C. Ainger, 19 November 1875, Oscar Browning Papers, 3/6.
extraordinary sense. Whether Johnson’s and Browning’s enthusiasm for youth led them into improper conduct cannot ever be known. Much is suspected; nothing can be proved. What can be proved, however, is that Johnson’s and Browning’s rebellion ran deep and contested authority in many of its aspects. They redefined their status as laymen rather than as clergymen. They claimed control over educational policy. They reformed their programs of studies. They established a new relationship with their pupils.

REFORM 1: Neither Johnson nor Browning were in Holy Orders. They were among the first schoolmasters who disentangled themselves from the confessional state. It was unusual enough so that there is a photograph of Johnson in Trinity labeled “The Revd.” Like all social movements, the laicization of schoolmastering moved slowly. Of the masters in the ten largest schools in 1870, 54% were still ordained. This proportion fell to 40% in 1880, 29% in 1889, and 13% in 1906. These proportions varied from school to school. At Winchester a forth were in Orders in 1887. At Radley, very much more High Anglican, 80% of the masters were in Holy Orders in 1870, but even there the proportion declined to 40% in 1895.20 The point to make is that the declining numbers of schoolmasters in Holy Orders in not a measure of their theological or religious beliefs. They are not estimates of the growth of agnosticism. Rather, they are reckonings of professional status. They are indications of the ways in which Johnson, Browning, and others made claims for professional status on the basis of their commitments to teaching alone rather than on the basis of an attachment to official religion. In addition, Johnson, Browning and other schoolmasters represented by these figures wished to open teaching to those who had, for whatever reason, stood outside the existing system of confessional loyalties. It was

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an aspect of reform and liberalism which hinged on their desire to open the schools to people of
talent. They wished to create a new kind of clerisy, the authority for which was lay rather than
religious. As William Johnson put it in one of his most famous poems:

You say there is no substance here,
One great reality above;
Back from that void I shrink in fear,
And child-like hide myself in love:
Show me what angels feel, till then,
I cling, a mere weak man, to men.  

These verses written at Richmond, while waiting for his fellow Apostles to gather for his first
annual dinner with them, reveal the emotional content of his professional commitments and of
the desire for status.

REFORM 2: Johnson and Browning also sought reform of school government. Just as
they sought independence from the confessional state, they wished to wrest the control of
educational policy from those who, they felt, were unqualified to speak on such matters.
Benjamin Hall Kennedy at Shewsbury quarreled with his board of governors about the meaning
of “Libera Schola.” For the governors the phrase meant an education free from fees; for Kennedy
(and for Johnson and OB) it meant independence from meddling. At Eton the problem of
government was compounded by the existence of the Provost and Fellows who had only an
indirect association with the educational functions of the school. Henry Sidgwick favored reform
because it would strip authority and resources from the Provost and Fellows, who were largely
absentee anyway, who held it as a species and remnant of the Old Corruption. Fitzjames Stephen
also objected to the official incomes fellows received and wished authority to be placed in the

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21 “Mimmermus in Church,” printed in Esher, Ionicus, p. 20.
hands of the masters who were best qualified to use it for educational purposes. Johnson put the case for his colleagues more generally when he appeared before the Public School Commission. He said, “the masters at Eton “are not so well off with respect to our position in society as we ought to be, nor have we the means of association which as a class of gentlemen it is desirable we should have.”

REFORM 3: Johnson’s and Browning’s desire for professional independence was no narrow grab for power, nor was it a defense of self-interest against accountability. Independence was the condition for an effective control over the courses of study. Johnson and Browning preserved the tradition of liberal learning, with its emphasis on classical letters, and at the same time broadened the courses of study by incorporating new subjects. Johnson’s pupils claimed that he wrote the best Latin lyrics since Horace and found it difficult not to think of him as the author when he was explaining a classical writer to them. So steeped was he in antique letters that Johnson claimed to be able to find his way around Rome without a guide, led only by his reading of Horace, Ovid, Tacitus, and Juvenal. Browning also accepted the dominant classical character of Eton’s enterprise. “Education,” he said, “must rest upon some basis, some study must be made principal and others subordinate, and a classical foundation is as good as any other and better than most, so long as it remains in harmony with the spirit of the age.” As the Johnson and Browning cases show, new studies were not introduced in opposition to antique letters. Prominent teachers of the classics wished the reform of classical studies and the introduction of modern studies was a way to supplement them. Prominent classical scholars

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24 Parliamentary Papers (1864), 21, pp. 137-138, 139, 141.
favored the abolition of compulsory Greek in the universities just as the more important men of mathematics led in the reform of the Mathematical Tripos at Cambridge. Those most opposed to change were often those with the least intellectual or technical competence to judge such matters and were often led by the symbolic significance of classics and mathematics.  

The narrow grammatical teaching of classical letters alarmed Johnson because what interested him was the moral and political ideas they contained. What he enjoyed most about teaching was “the sudden originating of things whilst talking; to do this is the one thing that compensates for great privations.” Therefore, Johnson did not restrict himself to drilling his boys in their Horace and Thucydides (“gerund-grinding,” he called it). He taught history and science and wished to revise the school schedule to allow for time for mathematics, mechanics and astronomy. He wished to increase the teaching of French so that it would be taken as seriously as Latin and Greek and he encouraged the appointment of masters to teach German and Italian. Johnson wanted an education which would produce discrimination and taste. In his contribution to Farrar’s Essays on a Liberal Education (1867) he described how boys could learn to evaluate their preconceptions through the study of history, science, and modern languages. He wanted an education which would teach the provisional nature of truth; one in which his pupils would put forward their own ideas “for trimming and pruning.”

Oscar Browning deployed Eton’s system of placing each boy under a tutor for “private business.” This system, according to Browning, gave the tutor “complete control of the body, mind, and spirit” of the boys for six years and enabled him to keep the spirit of classical studies.

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consistent with the spirit of the age. The tutor came “to understand [the boy’s] character, the quality of his disposition, and how he might be molded to the greatest advantage.” In such less formal circumstances comradeship could develop as masters and boys came to know each other. This was the opportunity to teach and learn modern languages, history and literature. OB and his pupils read Ewald’s History of Israel, Lightfoot’s edition of St. Paul’s epistles, Scrivener’s Textual Criticism of the New Testament, and, in Italian, Dante’s Divine Comedy. Such a program encouraged religious and cultural skepticism and even such a bold spirit such as Fitzjames Stephen thought Browning went too far in having his pupils read Omar Khayyam.

It is extremely difficult to estimate the consequences of these programs of study for the actual minds of Johnson’s and Browning’s pupils. For many they may have meant nothing; for some they may have blunted the dreariness of the schoolroom; for a few the effect was magical. It was a magic, however, which was achieved indirectly and often unexpectedly. Henry Nevinson said there was nothing artistic about what he learned at Shrewsbury. No one expected to find beauty or pleasure in what they read; and they found none. “Our sole duty was to convert, with absolute precision so much Greek into so much English.” Yet, he also pointed out how beauty, just as happiness, sometimes comes by accident. “I first learnt what style is from the renderings of the head-boy when he mounted the ‘Rostrum.’” Nevinson also described a Sunday afternoon walk with a boy from the upper-six, “who is now an earthly saint.” They walked along a hillside and Nevinson had no thoughts for anything but the beauty of the western mountains. His companion talked about Greek. He described the significance of various forms and of the most telling ways of producing particular meanings. Nevinson remembered, especially, “the

cunning idioms by which the idea of ‘self’ might be rendered in verse, either with emphasis or with modesty.” The school “breathed Greek….Winged iambics fluttered through the air; they hung like bats along the shelves, and the dust fell in Greek particles.”

REFORM 4: As a fourth aspect of reform, Johnson and Browning turned their attention to their relationship with their pupils. Far from being aloof disciplinarians, they became comradely. They attempted to transform their schools from what the sternest critics of the schools considered places of incarceration for unruly brutes into places where culture was possible. Consequently, Johnson’s and Browning’s greatest influence was not upon letters, public commissions, and governing boards, but upon the imaginations of their pupils. The young, for William Johnson, were exciting and thrilling, and he gained great satisfaction in discovering life’s meaning with them. As one of his pupils put it, “Johnson thought of youth as the continual fountain pouring down fresh up-land waters into work-a-day world.” Youth was charmed for him. As Johnson put it: “[y]outh that hopes, youth that listens, youth that becomes fragrant in the rapid germination and decay of ideas and impressions, like the ash trees in Siberian springs.”

As a house master at Eton, and later at his “at-homes” when he returned to King’s, OB opened to any who would attend to him, a wider world of good food, chamber music, and talk about Ruskin, Pater, George Eliot and all the other great and famous this tremendous snob claimed to be on familiar terms with. As OB pointed out, it was the function of a tutor to supply “the deficiencies of the regular curriculum.” The tutor took the place of his pupil’s parents, and,

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understanding his pupil’s spirit and disposition, prepared him for later life. Teaching of such a sort required a sympathetic imagination. Rather than “superimposing new knowledge,” the tutor practiced the “maieutic art,” the gift of one of Plato’s intellectual midwives, and “brought to birth knowledge already generated in the mind of the pupil, yearning to be born.”

William Johnson and Oscar Browning, though their careers were dashed in tragedy, were not the only schoolmasters laboring in this dispensation. Bowen at Harrow, Farrar at Marlborough, Edward Mallet Young at Sherborne, Arthur Sidgwick and Lee Warner at Rugby all engaged in similar programs of reform. Bowen came a-cropper of Welldon when Henry Montagu Butler left as Headmaster to become Dean of Gloucester and Master of Trinity. Sidgwick and Lee Warner were engaged in a bitter struggle at Rugby when Hayman, the conservative, replaced Temple, the liberal, as Headmaster. Young was forced out of Sherborne as Headmaster and took a country living. They wished to create a new paideia: a world in which new communities mirrored new minds. Therefore, I wish to conclude by throwing my net wider and attempt to capture the general implications of the Johnson and Browning cases. If this goes beyond what the empirically pure might consider proper, I hope I may be forgiven.

These conflicts mark the ideological dimensions of the search for status in the nineteenth century. It was a search which marked not only schoolmastering, but also the lives of lawyers, writers, university dons, and physicians. Status is the kind of concept which is extremely difficult to interrogate. It does not represent merely technical expertise. Understanding it requires a consideration of status as a political matter, as the relationship between the professions and the state, the church, their clients, their occupations and the forms of learning on which they were

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36 Browning, Memories of Sixty Years at Eton, Cambridge, and Elsewhere, pp. 63-67, 69.
Status is not merely a quantity of which there is more or less. It is also a quality that is thin and thick, it is narrow and wide. And it has texture. It is shifting and uncertain. The professions and the world of letters in the nineteenth century was a social world which assumed multiple and overlapping identities and loyalties. When G.O. Trevelyan famously remarked on his deathbed that his Uncle Tom was not a gentleman, he was giving voice to the thought that Macaulay’s status did not rest on birth, wealth, or land, but on his political, administrative, and literary success. Status was not ascriptive; it was based on achievement. Status and authority are tied together. Therefore, the conflicts of which the cases of Johnson and Browning are examples have social, imaginative, political, and emotional implications.

As Lord Chesterfield told his son, “if you have not got liberal and engaging manners you are no body.” A century later Jowett translated Plato (Republic, IV, 335): “[t]he free use of words and phrases…is generally characteristic of a liberal education.” Here there is a displacement of one form of status by another. The new people of status were neither courtly nor military. They were literary. They made the professions the lynch-pin of society. Johnson, Browning, and those like them made the schools and the universities the agents of change. Burke’s Peerage and Landed Gentry, which measured status by birth and land, became less important as guide-books to prominence. The increased frequency of their new editions and their enlarged size is in fact an index to the social anxiety of the families who are listed there. The Dictionary of National Biography, which measured status by imagination and education, was the new guide to status. For the nineteenth century there are 955 entries for soldiers, 1,585 entries for

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clergymen, and 1,674 entries for writers. What was true for Britain was true for Germany. In the nineteenth century nearly half of those listed in the Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie were raised in the home of a Protestant pastor. The country parsonage was the nursery of the bourgeois society. This bourgeoisie was the “forgotten middle class,” as one prominent social historian has called them. They were the people of the professions. Promethean, unattached to old families, land, and often wealth, they were rootless and had to make their way by their talent and ability. They constituted a group, or groups, which became more important in the world of civil society, that regime of voluntary associations distinct from the state, the market, and one may add, from the family.

Too often nineteenth century intellectual life is described as a conflict between utilitarianism and romanticism or between religion and science. Actually, it was more interesting than that. Liberalism, which I take to be one way of describing nineteenth-century thinking, was, as George Watson has pointed out, a literary creation. Liberalism was not a doctrine, or a philosophy, or a series of policies. Liberalism was the several points on a continuum (or the several points on several continuums) at which writers and people of the professions arrived as they negotiated the political and social dimensions of civil society. Since it was itself multidimensional, liberalism was created by and found its perfect expression in letters, both

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antique and modern. The technical power of letters, as taught by Johnson, OB, and those like them, gave it the capacity to describe and organize political, social, and economic experience. At the same time, the transcendental, power of letters made it a recentered form of cultural authority, criticizing fragmentation and materialism in a form that Matthew Arnold celebrated. Liberal letters could be stabilizing and subversive at the same time. Liberal letters was simple and sophisticated. It worshiped both mental life and sensuosity.

Johnson and Browning, with their special gifts as men and teachers, demonstrated that authority based on coercion and force is a nonsense. For them, authority rested on personal relationships, friendship, talent, and ability. Such a program sought to establish the school as an alternative center of loyalty which rivaled both the family and the state. Friendship and learning provided freedom and spontaneity and ran against the claims of domesticity and politic. Friendship assisted in the creation of new communities of the competent which inspired generations of schoolboys. Friendship was the emotional component of liberalism and served as a cardinal element in self-formation and the search for vocation. In a world whose metaphors were drawn from the antique past, it is unsurprising that friendship should provide abiding values. Friendship’s authority had been a fundamental truth in ancinet republics. It was Greek and involved the love of teachers and pupils; it was Roman and involved the love of equals; it was, as St. John’s Gospel show, Christian also. Friendship was more than a literary thing. It provided the code and social solidarity for young people as they sought self-formation and vocation. More than companionship, friendship represented a means of social and personal

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46 Kincaid, Child-Loving, pp. 231-234.
survival in a contested world. It was the avenue through which they could escape the rigid confines of family and religion and even from the schools themselves. It was also the means for confronting the most personal and elemental events of life. And it was a bridge young people crossed from self-formation to vocation. It assisted them in dealing with the cross-pressures of duty to self and professional obligation.\textsuperscript{49} It allowed them to ask and give answers to the question of to what and to whom one should be loyal. Freed of family restraints and social convention, young people pitched themselves in a risky world where friendship galvanized and sustained them. Consequently, E.M. Forster’s strange motto “only connect” seems, therefore, not very strange at all.

CONCLUSION:

William Johnson and Oscar Browning were not merely attacking Hornby’s position; they attempted to create a different kind of community united by a different kind of authority. Separation from of the confessional state, the professional control over the courses of studies, reformed classical and modern letters, and friendship were the reforms though which they attempted to create a modern world with it multiple centers of authority and status. Stabilizing and destabilizing at once, the work of their careers accepted the discontinuous and fragmentary character of modern life\textsuperscript{50} at the same time their work attempted to make sense of it. The quest for status exposed them and made them vulnerable. Multiple senses of status and identities, multiple loyalties, their skepticism, their independence from the state and the family made them suspect. And, as Freud realized when he arrived on the Acropolis and experienced the sensation


of forbidden satisfaction, accomplishment also produced feelings of guilt.\textsuperscript{51} Theirs was a literary world where letters both structured the symbolic order of the community and provided models for those living in it.\textsuperscript{52} Johnson and Browning work helped create an undifferentiated and indeterminate status regime with an undifferentiated and indeterminate literary regime. According to Schlegel, “[a] fragment should be like a little work of art, complete in itself and separated from the rest of the world like a hedgehog.”\textsuperscript{53} Johnson and Browning lived their lives as fragments, increasingly isolated and distrusted as their search for new forms of status led them into an increasingly contested world. It is little wonder that they made Hornby jumpy.

\textsuperscript{52} For this literary model see James Livesley and Stuart Murray, “Post-colonial Theory and Modern Irish Culture,” \textit{Irish Historical Studies}, 30 (May 1997), p. 453.