

## Untimely Education Today

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### Abstract

At the present moment, there is a danger facing the proponents of liberal arts education. In trying to salvage the liberal arts tradition, its apologists risk diluting it to the point of unrecognizability. Invoking the Nietzschean category of untimeliness and drawing out the importance of reading the writings of the dead, this essay examines the contemporary cultural landscape and offers a critical assessment of the ongoing mechanization of human beings. It suggests that for liberal arts education to mean something substantive today, it must assume, in opposition to this dehumanizing process, a less acquiescent stance towards the environment in which it is imbedded.

*Keywords:* education, liberal arts, untimeliness, reading, mechanization, Nietzsche

An enthusiasm for innovative practices in contemporary pedagogy has led to a state in which novelty itself has become an object of fetishization. The desire to be up to date and the concomitant fear of being outmoded often serve to reinforce, unreflectively, dominant tendencies associated with the cutting edge. Against a conformism in the face of such tendencies, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche's third *Untimely Meditation*, published in 1874, provides a subversive alternative stance on pedagogical practice and the ends at which education should aim. For a contemporary meditation drawing inspiration from this work, the concept of untimeliness constitutes an instructive category for thinking through the task of education today. More specifically, Nietzsche's insistence that the education we need must be untimely supplies us with a fruitful point of entry for asking ourselves what a liberal arts education can possibly mean and what it might still have to offer in the twenty-first century.

Writing in the 1870s, at a time of perceived cultural crisis, Nietzsche lamented the poor state of contemporary education and the sorry condition of German culture. He looked around at the world he found

himself in and found it to be lacking. Perhaps such discontent is something of a transhistorical constant; no matter what place or time we transport ourselves to, we can always find some people in it who are not happy with it. Some of Nietzsche's objections to the age in which he lived are no longer relevant to us—after all, a century and a half has elapsed since he wrote; other protestations of his seem more pertinent now than then—perhaps because the tendencies he identified, in their nascent form, have been amplified with the acceleration of modernity. The significance of Nietzsche's pedagogical intervention lies less, however, in his specific claims about the state of modernity than in his revaluation and creative deployment of the concept of untimeliness. For Nietzsche, untimeliness means being in opposition to the dominant tendencies of one's age; it suggests a kind of dislocation, an incongruity between self and world. It is closely tied to a refusal of mass conformity and to an assertion of that which is distinctive to the individual.<sup>1</sup> One of the virtues of a liberal arts education resides in its potential to help us to place ourselves at a remove from prevailing currents; it may encourage, both among

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<sup>1</sup> The project of realizing individuality announces itself at the outset of *Schopenhauer as Educator*, where Nietzsche reminds us of the singularity and uniqueness of our existence before he goes on to address what he judges to be the deficiencies of contemporary education.