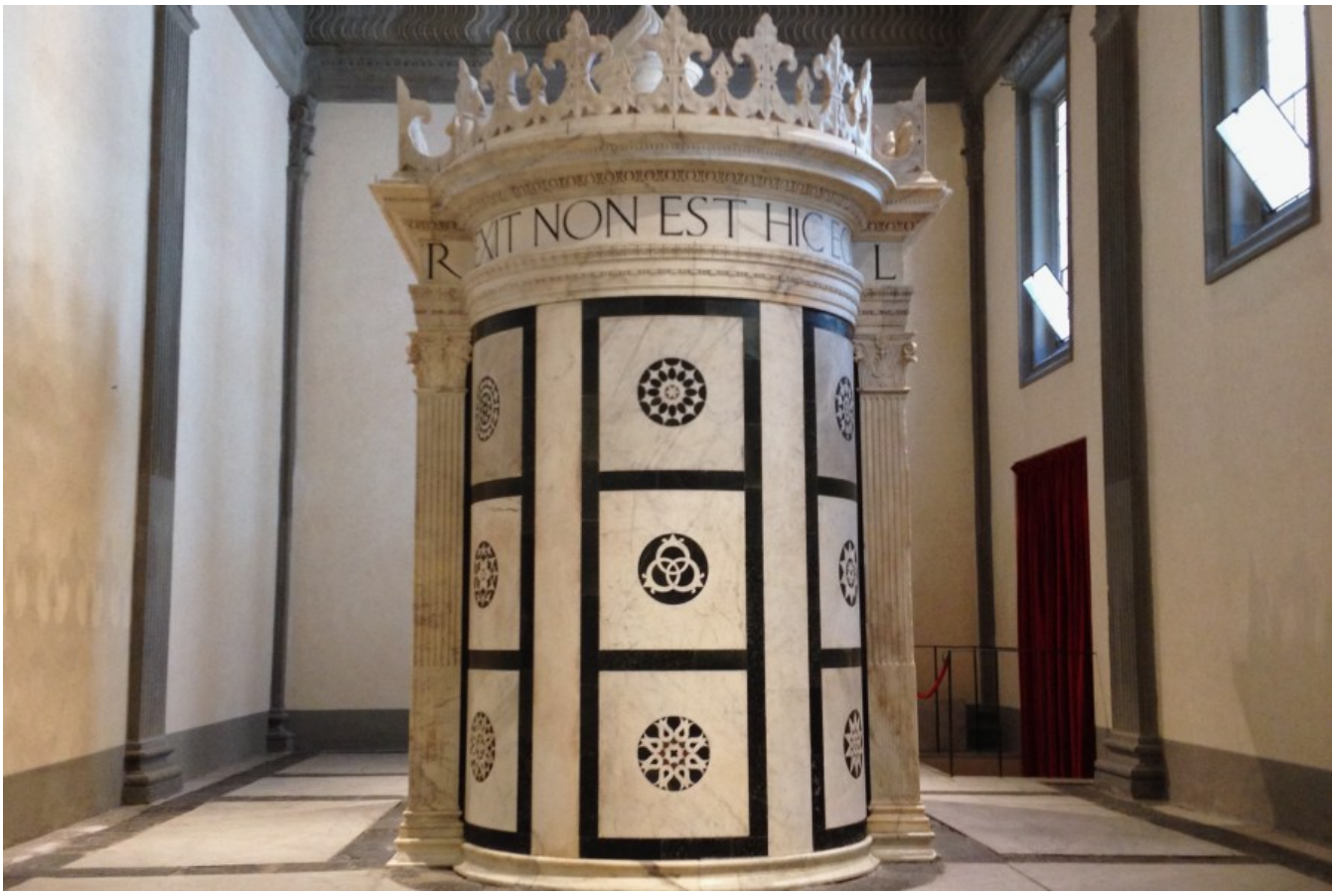

Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

> *The value of an education … is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks*
>
> Albert Einstein

This title, proposed by Princeton University Press and authored by Scott Newstok[1], has rightly become a successful reading. It addresses the downsides of American education suggesting solutions inspired by Renaissance practices and masterfully combines the academic style with the pragmatic approach of guidebooks. Divided into fourteen concise chapters with equally concise titles[2], the volume is likewise an extensive compendium of ideas on education spanning from classical antiquity to our days, due to the numerous citations that support the author's position. In addition to its critical and erudite dimension, the book has a poetic quality, discernible in the illustrations that add visual metaphors to the topics at hand, and in the chapter *Of Technology*, an inspired literary essay built on the analogy of technology and sand[3], setting out from Borges' Book of Sand, a book without a

beginning and an end, and continuing with the way sand accompanied the formation of knowledge and the thought expression in famous cases from Archimedes and Shakespeare's plays to Blake's *see [ing] the world in a grain of sand* (p.71).

The central discourse is on the insufficiencies of thought emerged within the present system. Adjusting them is perceived by the author as an urgency:

> … the failure to cultivate thinking is a potential killer. Faced with existential crises in the environment, human migration, creeping authoritarianism, and the specter of artificial intelligence, a world without a broadly disseminated capacity for thinking is severely exposed. (x)

The implication is that future generations cannot cope efficiently with these complex issues if their schooling is based on incongruities, starting from the very understanding of education, Newstok defines as *a worrisome muddle* (ix). One of the consequences is *a host of wrong educational binaries*: "we now act as if work precludes play; imitation impedes creativity; tradition stifles autonomy; constraint limits innovation; discipline somehow contradicts freedom; engagement with what is past and foreign occludes what is present and native (xii). Conversely, "Shakespeare's era delighted in exposing these purported dilemmas as false: play emerges *through* work, creativity *through* imitation, autonomy *through* tradition, innovation *through* constraints, freedom *through* discipline" (xii)

This builds the framework of a compare-contrast examination of the current system of education and the one Shakespeare benefitted from. In that period schools had a clear goal: to improve human nature by teaching virtue and train the youth in good citizenship. According to Newstok a clearly defined goal of education is missing today and this has degenerated into mistaking means for ends: *… the ed-tech-industrial complex's fetishizing of means is symptomatic of our deeper ailment, the inner contradiction of an end that is the endless production of means without an end* (p.14). Replacing the principle of quality by methods of quantification like assessment factors is associated with a truncated sense of the utility of study reduced to *only that which provides quick and direct returns. The speed with which a student gets a first job, the entry-level pay; the quarterly, at best yearly, return on investment.* (p.22)

The major difference between today's schools and the Renaissance ones is the introduction of

technology, which has had many effects on the formative process. Already in the 19th century men of culture reflected critically on inventions, as this citation from Henry David Thoreau proves:

> Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at… We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate (p.57).

One consequence of the use of technology is distraction, a phenomenon so predominant in our world, that Newstok thinks Hamlet's reference *to this distracted globe makes for a grimly accurate subtitle for our own era* (p. 59). According to Immanuel Kant *distraction is the enemy of all education* (p. 55), while Charles Darwin claimed that *hardly any faculty is more important for the intellectual progress of man than the power of Attention* (p.56). Besides being detrimental to learning, addiction to technology creates what the author calls *device-induced zombie-ism* (p.71), which translates as being absent to oneself and to the others around, shutting off consciousness, the most precious human resource.

The imponderable space of the digital world has reduced the direct interaction between students and teachers and among students themselves as demonstrated in the chapter *Of Place*. This undermines the bond of trust the relationship between master and disciple was once grounded in, and diminishes the socializing capacities of students. No matter how sophisticated technology is, on-line education is less vibrant than the exchange of ideas, emotions, and energy that occurs within a traditional classroom.

As it is obvious now, computers have not improved learning, and according to the author *naïve enthusiasm for digital technology often derives from an unspoken hostility toward teachers – a hostility that seeks to eliminate the human element from education by automating it* (p.64), an idea reinforced by a citation from Howard Mumford Jones: *Ours is an age which is proud of machines that think, and suspicious of any man who tries to* (p.65). Newstok pleads for a return of the teacher's central role along with personalized learning where the bet has been on technology: *True tailoring comes from teachers who know the needs and potential and aspirations of their students – and who have the time to adjust, to fit the task to the student, the student to the task* (p. 43).

A valuable idea borrowed from the Renaissance is that *an apparently inflexible program of study induced liberated thinking* (xi) which is developed throughout the book and finalized in the correlated chapters *Of Constraint* and *Of Freedom*. Today's understanding of freedom as lack of constriction results in lack of discipline, lack of rigorous exercise and unguided impoverished thought. Creativity as an expression of freedom emerges only after experiencing limitation, as confirmed by the philosophers and artists Newstok quotes[4].

The remedies to these problematic issues imply practical steps like a structured and graduated curriculum (p.111), imitating good models (pp.73-83), practicing conversation (pp.97-105), introducing more exercise that *both strengthens and sharpens the mind* (pp.25-35), combining thinking with making (pp. 131-9), abolishing the binary *skills versus theory* by cultivating the students' craft that is *both cognitive and embodied* (pp.25-35).

Newstok's thought-provoking discourse leaves the reader with various questions. The most compelling one is whether his suggestions are feasible without a drastic change of mentality and context. The content and forms of instruction are decided nowadays mostly by administrators and entrepreneurs, while English grammar schools were created with the contribution of humanists with a vision[5] and were supported by monarchs with a clear educational policy like Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The purpose was to raise the intellectual and moral level of their subjects by creating uniformity as a prerogative for social harmony. Today's vaguely formulated ideal of creating unity in diversity, stressing the value of diversity, is hard to achieve, while technology has contributed to an atomization of social consciousness. Humanism was introduced in England after centuries of Latin liturgy, that unified consciences, made Latin and antiquity a familiar presence and furthered versatile biblical hermeneutics. The study of Latin and Greek and their respective cultures made young students live mentally concurrently in the past and the present, in a Christian and in a pagan culture, and in different linguistic realities. There is no such tradition the present education can rely on and no consolidated habit to think in metaphors; in addition, the 20th century legacy of two world conflicts and a cold war has radicalized thought, reducing it to binaries.

In Shakespeare's time imitation taught in schools was instrumental in shaping virtue and in creativity. Our world praises originality without understanding that in humanities *originality is nothing but judicious imitation*, according to Voltaire's famous *mot* (p.76), and the young people's models are not historical, religious or mythical figures, but successful money-makers who built their fortune by talented entrepreneurship or simply by placing themselves at the center of the public stage for

whatever reason. The Renaissance study of rhetoric and the practice of imitation as impersonation prompted students to think like others stimulating their mental flexibility and expanding their emotional range and empathic potential. On the contrary, concepts like *opinionated* and *confirmation bias* widely circulated now reveal the prevalence of rigid thinking, the rejection of dialogue, the tendency to close off to challenges and take refuge in echo chambers. Last, but not least, Renaissance students and their masters lived at a different pace, they had a diverse relationship to time and space. Today's world moves fast, we drive through places or fly over them, we can make things happen with a click, ours is an era of short-cuts.

Another question is whether the author's proposals are pertinent only to the study of humanities, in particular literature, or could be extended to other domains. Having a solid humanistic education before going to university could be useful to any profession, including scientific ones, as the Italian experience with graduates from classical high schools confirms.

If to think *like* Shakespeare may appear as an arduous if not impossible task, thinking *with* Shakespeare, trying to absorb the complexity of his reasoning, would be a good enough exercise in nuanced thinking and daring creativity. In fact, the chapter *Of Freedom*, introduces personalities like James Baldwin, Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King Jr. (pp.141-151) who declared Shakespeare's impact on their thought. This book sends its readers back to school in search of masters of thought with more substance than the figures popular in the media, it is an attempt to oppose genuine culture to indistinct information, and *concentrated consciousness* to the fractured minds produced by *the merchants of distraction* (p.56).

Notes

1 – Scott Newstok, professor of English and founding director of the Pearce Shakespeare Endowment at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.

2 – *Of Thinking, Of Ends, Of Craft, Of Fit, Of Place, Of Attention, Of Technology, Of Imitation, Of Exercises, Of Conversation*, *Of Stock, Of Constraint, Of Making, Of Freedom.*

3 – *There's something about sand that lends itself to infinity, just as there's something about the computer* (p. 64)

4 – Ludwig Wittgenstein: *[we] have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the tough ground!* (p.120) Dorris Lessing: *Perhaps giving oneself a tight structure, making limitations for oneself, squeezes out new substance where you least expect it (p. 120)*. Igor Stravinsky: *Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit.* (p. 120) Søren Kierkegaard: *The principle of limitation [is] the sole saving principle in the world. The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes*. (p.121). A.W. Schlegel: *The poetic spirit requires to be limited, that it may move within its range with a becoming liberty*. (p.121).

5- Thomas More, John Colet, Thomas Linacre and William Lily.