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In this and the following issues of the Bulletin we shall endeavor to present the picture of the curricular activities of the College that take place in our seminars, language tutorials, mathematics tutorials, laboratories, and formal lectures. These activities, taken together, represent a single, unified course of study in the liberal arts, organized around the literary and scientific tradition of Western Civilization as contained in a representative list of great or important books. The Bulletin will aim to present not only the ideal toward which the College aspires in this program, but also certain problems and difficulties which arise in the actual operation of the program.

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THE SEMINAR

The seminar on the Great Books is the heart of the St. John's program, and we shall discuss it from the standpoint of its organization, its functioning, and its purpose.

ITS ORGANIZATION

A seminar consists of from fifteen to twenty-five students, with two or three faculty members as leaders, all sitting around a large table. It meets twice a week, on Monday and Thursday evenings, from eight to ten. The session can continue well beyond ten, if the topic under discussion has aroused a sustained and lively argument. The books are read in a sequence which is roughly chronological: the Greek books in the first year; the Roman, Mediaeval and Renaissance books in the second year; the seventeenth and eighteenth century books in the third year; and the nineteenth and twentieth century books in the fourth year. However, the fourth year also includes a small number of first-year books; the repetition having the effect of completing a circle, and confronting the student with his starting point. The preparation for each seminar meeting amounts, on the average, to one hundred pages of reading. The reading assignment may be very short if the text is a very difficult one. It may be lengthy if the text lends itself to an easy perusal.

HOW IT FUNCTIONS

The functioning of the seminar differs essentially from either polite conversation or the method of formal lecture or recitation. A number of persons, for the most part young, of varied backgrounds, and faced with a text which may present ideas largely foreign to their experience, attempt to talk rationally with one another. Such communication presupposes a certain community of feeling, despite differences in vocabulary; more immediately, the seminar presupposes the willingness on the part of its members to submit their opinions to a critical scrutiny. The demands of the individual and those of the group are in continual interplay; and, within the limits thus set, the discussion moves with the utmost possible freedom. The only rules are: (1) politeness towards each other so that everybody's opinion can be heard and explored, however sharp the clash of opinions may be; (2) the supporting of every opinion by argument—an unsupported opinion doesn't count.

WHAT IT DISCUSSES

The discussion begins with a question asked by one of the leaders. Once underway, it may take any one of many forms. It may concern itself primarily with what the author says, with trying to establish the course or structure of his argument; or it may concern itself with the

interpretation of a difficult passage in the text, the definition of a term; or with prior or more general questions that insist on being considered first; or with a comparison with similar or opposed views discussed in earlier sessions of the seminar. It may range from the most particular to the most general. It may stay entirely with the book or leave it altogether.

In a freshman seminar the students tend to express their opinions with little regard for their relevance or relation to the opinion of others. Only gradually, under pressure of the group, does the student learn to proceed analytically, sticking to the topic and trying to uncover the meanings of the terms which he uses. Such progress in method may be crowned by sudden, if rare, insights and illuminations on the part of individuals, or—an even rarer occurrence—by teamwork in which the seminar, as a whole, explores the interconnection of ideas.

“FOLLOWING THE ARGUMENT”

The course of the discussion can not be fixed in advance; it is determined rather by the necessity of “following the argument,” of facing the crucial issues, or of seeking foundations upon which a train of reasoning can be pursued. The argument does not necessarily lead to the solution of a problem. More often than not, the problem remains unsettled with certain alternatives clearly outlined. The progress of the seminar is not particularly smooth; the discussion sometimes tends to branch off and to entangle itself with irrelevant difficulties. Only gradually can the logical rigor of an argument emerge within the sequence of analogies and other imaginative devices by which the discussion is kept alive. A seminar may also degenerate into rather empty talk or into dull and shallow meandering, without being able for a long time to extricate itself from such a course. Or it may climb to heights accessible only to a few of its members.

ROLE OF THE LEADER

Under these circumstances the role of the leaders is not to give information, not to correct errors, not to produce the right opinion or interpretation. It is to guide the discussion, to keep it moving, to raise objections, to help the students in every way possible to understand the author, themselves, and each other. The most useful instrument for this purpose is the asking of questions; perhaps the most useful device of all is the one question: “Why?” But a leader may also take a definite and positive stand and enter directly into an argument. If he does so, however, he can expect no special consideration. Reason is the only recognized authority; all opinions must be rationally defended and any single opinion can prevail only by general consent. The aim is always to develop the student’s powers of reason and understanding and to help him to arrive at intelligent opinions of his own.

BACKGROUND: THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

It is apparent that a free discussion of this kind can not be carried on in a so-called academic or scholarly vein. The students approach the problems raised by the books with assumptions taken from their own experience and determined by the contemporary scene familiar to them. Wars, national politics, movie stars, and big league baseball may all crop up in a seminar. In continuing the discussion of a particular problem through the four years, the students gradually acquire a sense of historical perspective which allows them both to recognize the sameness of a problem and the historical variety of its aspects. The so-called historical background of a book—the knowledge of which is ultimately founded on the reading and interpretation of the testimony contained in the Great Books themselves—is never given to the students as a basis for the discussion. It is, of course, inevitable that some information on difficult points related to some specific historical situation is obtained by the students through collateral reading or from the seminar leaders who might have some special knowledge of the subject. In the main, the problems are not discussed with a view to ascertaining how things were, but how things are; of ascertaining the position which the student might decide to take on rational grounds in the conduct of his own life. That does entail, occasionally, a complete disregard of historically pertinent facts.

THE AIMS

The free discussion which we have outlined, continuing over a period of four years and dealing with persistently recurring questions, problems, and ideas, in the varied and changing context of the Great Books, is the core of the St. John’s program. The aims, which it sets itself, have perhaps become clear in our description of the way in which it functions, but an attempt will be made to summarize them here. The members of the seminar learn to examine their opinions rationally, to put them to the test of argument, and to defend them in free discussion. They likewise acquire a familiarity with the great problems and ideas of Western thought. They gain a better understanding of the terms in which these problems and ideas are expressed, of their ambiguity, and of their deeper meaning. And this in itself is one of the great goals of a liberal education. It is the ultimate aim of the seminar that the process of thought and discussion, thus commenced by the student at St. John’s, should continue with him throughout life.

COLLEGE NEWS

On September 17, 1949, the Board of Visitors and Governors elected Richard D. Weigle as the eighteenth president of St. John's College. Mr. Weigle has been a teacher and executive secretary of Yale-in-China, an instructor at Carleton College, and an army officer in India and China. He comes to St. John's from four years in the Department of State.

LECTURES AND CONCERTS

- OCTOBER 14 Mark Van Doren: *Goethe*
NOVEMBER 2 Edgar Wind, Professor of Philosophy and the History of Art at Smith College: *Raphael's School of Athens*
NOVEMBER 18 Leo Strauss, Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Chicago: *Natural Right and History*
DECEMBER 9 Edward Stevens, Professor of Classics at Muhlenberg College, Pennsylvania: *On Pity*
JANUARY 9 Robert Lowell: Reading of Poems
JANUARY 27 Howard P. Vincent, Chairman of Language, Literature and Philosophy Department at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago; *On Moby Dick*
FEBRUARY 3 J. Alister Cameron, Professor of Classics at the University of Cincinnati: *On Oedipus*
FEBRUARY 17 Richard Courant, Professor of Mathematics at New York University: *Principles of Maxima and Minima in Mathematics and Physics*
MARCH 3 Dino Bigongiari, Professor of Romance Languages at Columbia University: *Dante and Natural Law*
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- NOVEMBER 11 The Juilliard String Quartet
JANUARY 20 Doda Conrad, Bass
MARCH 10 Simon Goldberg, Violin Recital
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One of the entering freshmen this fall is a DP student of Lithuanian descent, sponsored by the student body on its own initiative, and brought to the United States through the office of the World Student Service Fund. The Board of Visitors and Governors voted him a tuition scholarship, while the students are providing for all other expenses. Only \$1,000.00 is still to be raised for the four years. Anyone desiring to share in this project may address The Student DP Committee, St. John's College.

The following two graduates of St. John's have received Fulbright scholarships:

Irwin Robert Tucker, '44 (for France)
John N. L. Opie, '47 (for Italy)

William Warfield Ross, '47, has been awarded a scholarship sponsored jointly by the Yale Law School Association and the Yale Law School itself.

