Liberal Education:

Books, a Balance and the Tongues of Men and Angels

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Dean

NOTE:

The first lecture of the year, traditionally given by the dean of the college on a topic in liberal education, is meant to help everyone make a good beginning with our common enterprise of learning together as we read and discuss the founding texts of our intellectual heritage. It is addressed primarily to the new students, though it should provide an opportunity for all of us, both students and tutors (who after all are merely graying students), to consider or reconsider the principles of our enterprise as we take up the autumn's work.

This lecture was given on Friday, August 25, 1995, in the Great Hall of St. John's College in Santa Fe.

The question I wish to take up here tonight is what sense to make of the phrase "the liberal arts." Does it have any genuine meaning in today's world, or does it merely continue to blow about in academe, a dry empty husk from which the kernel has long since fallen? I take up this question with due caution and without promising to deliver anything like a complete answer. I promise, while I am at it, to avoid using "the liberal arts" as an empty slogan in the course of this talk. My exploration will involve a brief look at some of the formulations the liberal arts have taken in the past. It will then indulge in speculation about what a liberal art ought to be, about the qualities it should exhibit and then attempt to make sense of the liberal arts in our day. Inevitably, there will be frequent detours into the practices and beliefs of St. John's College.

The new seal that arrived at St. John's College with the "New Program" in 1937 consists of a circle with a Latin motto running around the circumference; inside lie seven open books surrounding a balance. The seal is at once serious and playful. I like to imagine the circle itself as the *enkuklios paideia*, the circle of general learning, that the Hellenistic Greeks envisioned and that was reinterpreted in the 17th century as the encyclopedia. The motto proclaims, *facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque*. It turns on a punning use of the Latin roots: l$\breve{\text{i}}$ber meaning "book" and l$\bar{\text{i}}$ber meaning "free." It is usually translated "I make free men out of children with books and a balance." The seven open books represent the *septem artes* of the Middle Ages, the seven traditional liberal arts: the trivium, of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmony. We generally understand the balance to represent the instruments of science, though I often wonder if it is not there to weigh the competing claims to preeminence made by the seven arts and their modern equivalents. The seal we take seriously. We really do mean to pursue our vision of the liberal arts at St. John's, but we approach it playfully, that is, we mean to do this with freedom of imagination, and without a zealot's commitment to defend the seven according to a particular dogma.

L$\breve{\text{i}}$ber and *l$\bar{\text{i}}$ber* give rise to differing etymological speculation for

Liberal Arts—the *artes liberales*, arts that must have to do with either freedom or books. These possibilities will be examined further on. Whoever drew up our seal did not see fit to include in it a pitcher or wineskin. I conclude that we can safely infer no influence on the liberal arts from Līber, a Bacchus-like deity of the Romans.

What eventually became the plan for the New Program at St. John's was developed by a committee at the University of Virginia that included among its members Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr, who later became the first dean and president under the New Program of St. John's College in Annapolis. Buchanan is generally recognized as the primary author of the report. It sets as the aim of liberal education the development of the intellectual virtues described in Aristotle's *Ethics* (Smith 17). The report describes the liberal arts as follows:

> TRIVIUM
> **Grammar**, the art and science of concrete things as they are used in mediums of expression.
> **Rhetoric**, the art and science of applying such notations to things both concrete and abstract for practical and theoretical ends.
> **Logic**, the art and science of discovering and applying abstract forms.
>
> QUADRIVIUM
> **Arithmetic** and **Geometry**, the mathematical arts and sciences that correspond to grammar in the Trivium.
> **Music**, the art and science that deals with applied mathematics in all the natural sciences.
> **Astronomy**, the art and science that deals with proportions, propositions, and proofs, including mathematical logic. (Smith 18)

These definitions can be justified by the history, but they also show Buchanan's effort to accommodate the time-honored seven to the modern array of arts and sciences. They remain a step or two away from the ordinary meanings of these words: We do not ordinarily think of astronomy as including so much or of music as applied mathematics.

These somewhat quirky notions of the liberal arts had some impact on the shaping of the St. John's curriculum and evidence of them can still be found. These days, however, we tend to speak more easily of liberal education in general terms and to avoid defending the seven one by one or in accordance with Buchanan's categories. We maintain, nevertheless, an institutional commitment to certain intellectual activities—discussion, translation, writing, experiment, mathematical demonstration, and musical analysis. These activities may themselves be liberal arts or at least serve them. Regarding the dignity and order of the liberal arts, we are careful officially to make no hypothesis, as Isaac Newton was known to say, though every dean and most tutors have worked out their favorite ways of putting them together.

Broadening our scope beyond the confines of St. John's College, we find the topic of liberal arts a bit of a quagmire. The phrase hangs on in the modern university as a quaint relic. In American universities, a common way of describing them, is to say (as one of Socrates' sophistical interlocutors might have put it) a liberal arts education is the kind of education that is produced in a liberal arts institution. Honestly, this sort of explanation is really given every day (Kimball 4). Only slightly less vacuous is the approach that separates out the liberal arts from professional studies, and often, curiously, from the sciences, lumping together subjects—history, literature, philosophy— without any effort to provide an account or rationale.

Despite the generally slight grasp of what the phrase "liberal arts" means, what it could mean, and where it comes from, it is good that it lives on as a staple of educational discourse and that it continues to command respect and foster a sense of dignity. We all have a serious stake in pursuing the question of the liberal arts, in considering and reconsidering what might be the best kind of education for the rising generation. Clearly this question is not a matter of merely academic or personal interest. And, while we may not be willing to go as far as Aristotle when he claims that citizens do not belong to themselves—they all belong to the state (*Pol.* 1337a25), the kind and quality of education bear most intimately on the kind and quality of future life in our society.

Some History

The phrase "liberal arts" comes with a rich and long history. This history, as I see it, is important for several reasons. It shows how the idea developed over time. It constitutes a mine of possibilities worth considering again, but more importantly, this history forms a tradition. One's relation to a tradition is a tricky business. We can see ourselves both at its end, in a sense, and at the same time at its cutting edge. As T.S. Eliot says, "novelty is preferable to blind repetition of the past" (38), but more valuable by far than either is the deep grasp of the tradition that binds the present to the past, the timeless to the timely. And this understanding can only be attained with great labor.

The many conflicts in the last two thousand years among contenders in the arena of the liberal arts have given rise to a system of tensions that embody the most important issues about what the liberal arts are or should be. Understanding something about the competing claims can help us greatly as we come to terms with our present circumstances.

The progress of the liberal arts has been examined with great care by generations of scholars. Two of the most helpful accounts are given by Otto Bird's *Cultures in Conflict* and Bruce Kimball's *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Ideal Liberal Education*. Rest easy. My purpose here is not to retell the whole tale, but to highlight a few salient moments that might aid us in understanding our own relationship to the liberal arts.

Though the "liberal arts" as a defined body of doctrine did not begin to take shape until later, some of the most powerful ideas behind it can be found in fifth and fourth century Athens. Aristotle succinctly lays out the main lines of the question when he asks whether education should be more concerned with "the useful, or virtue, or the higher knowledge" (*Pol.* 337a41). He begins to address the question by distinguishing between liberal and "vulgar" occupations:

> Any occupation, art or science, which makes the body or soul or mind of the free man less fit for the practice or exercise of virtue, is vulgar; wherefore we call those arts vulgar which

> tend to deform the body and likewise all paid employments, for they absorb and degrade the mind. (*Pol.* 1337b9)

Aristotle was interested in the education (*paideia*) appropriate to the free man (*eleutheros*). A "free man" was free in the sense of not being a slave. From our present vantage point this may sound "elitist," an unjustifiable enhancement of the accidents of wealth or birth. But in the aristocratic regime Aristotle envisioned, some men are endowed by nature with the qualities appropriate for governing others and ruling cities. They need to be freed from the press of responsibilities in order to pursue those studies that can improve them with respect to both the moral and intellectual virtues, studies that would at the same time prepare them for the life of the mind and for the civic responsibilities they would bear. The word that is translated as "vulgar" (banauson) more properly means having to do with trades or occupations, such activities as are undertaken for the sake of something else, and not as activities worthwhile in their own right.

Aristotle in another place provides a further hint of what an appropriate education for a free man might be:

> Every systematic science, the humblest and the noblest alike, seems to admit of two distinct kinds of proficiency; one of which may be properly called scientific knowledge of the subject, while the other is a kind of educational acquaintance with it. For an educated man should be able to form a fair off-hand judgment as to the goodness or badness of the method used by a professor in his exposition. To be educated is in fact to be able to do this; and even the man of universal education we deem to be such in virtue of his having this ability. It will, of course, be understood that we only ascribe universal education to one who in his own individual person is thus critical in all or nearly all branches of knowledge, and not to one who has a like ability merely in some special subject. For it is possible for a man to have this competence in some one branch of knowledge without having it in all. (*Parts of Animals* 639a1,ff)

This passage is worth quoting at length because it clearly states a

main aim of liberal education. Aristotle's "educational acquaintance" is not at all the cafeteria notion popular today that prescribes a portion from each of the four intellectual food groups. Aristotle's view rests on two complementary premises: First, humans are seen as creatures of intelligence, intelligence that can be effectively directed at the whole range of intellectual objects, intelligence with universal scope. Second, it envisions a world each of whose parts is governed by principles. These principles, if not identical for all parts, are at least given in a common idiom. Thus the human mind and the world it attempts to understand are naturally suited to one another.

Aristotle's view contrasts sharply with the current view that focuses on aptitudes—say for mathematics, literature, or more specifically, computer programming or business—and which points to early subject specialization, as though mind were given not as something whole, but only in its parts. It contrasts as well with the educational notion that progress in specialized areas is the only important end of education. This notion flows from the intensive division of labor and leaves people, like colonies of bees or ants, highly skilled in specialized areas, but often clueless about the whole or the ends their activities serve.

These few slender lines (as James Joyce might say) that I have quoted from Aristotle are richly loaded with possibilities. Aristotle does not provide a worked out version of a liberal arts education, though Jaeger and others have shown a rather full picture of the varieties of education in ancient Greek city states.

In fact the term "liberal arts" or "*artes liberales*" was not coined until Roman times, and the number seven was not set until the Middle Ages. Though there are many interesting twists and turns in the history of the liberal arts, it will serve my purpose sufficiently here to mention just three: First, the orator-statesman idea of Cicero; second, the theologically centered ideal of the Middle Ages; and finally, the scientific model that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Cicero in the first century B.C. and Quintilian a little later are the most important of those who held to the ideal of the orator-statesman

who combined eloquence with philosophy. Cicero says that the orator must know many things, poetry, history, law, political philosophy, but he does not emphasize the search for the truth. He presumes the true orator is in possession of the truth and can give his attention to teaching and persuasion (*De oratore*, vol. 1, ch. 34). The aim of liberal education is not knowledge as an end in itself; if education is geared to the preparation of public men, leaders of the state, rhetoric or oratory becomes the leading art.

The theological ideal grows out of the Roman rhetorical tradition. The most important early shaper of this part of the tradition is St. Augustine, who, trained in the arts of rhetoric, underwent a conversion to Christianity in his mid-twenties. For Augustine in the fourth century A.D., the emphasis remained on the language arts, but instead of serving the ends of secular morality and the state, liberal education was to be aimed first and foremost at reading the scriptures and thereby finding God. After showing the mysterious nature of words and the sense in which they are signs, Augustine concludes his dialogue "Concerning the Teacher," with the following response:

> I have learned through being reminded by your words that man is only prompted by words in order that he may learn, and it is apparent that only a very small measure of what a speaker thinks is expressed in his words. . . Moreover, when He [Christ] spoke among the people, He reminded us that we learn whether things are true from that one only whose habitation is within us, whom now, by His grace, I shall so love more ardently as I progress in understanding. (56)

Rhetoric retains its importance, but language in the service of Christianity with a Neoplatonist bent rests on a very different conception from Cicero's.

A succinct and rather beautiful description of the quadrivium and a justification for fitting the mathematically based arts into a Neoplatonist scheme is given by Boethius, who invented the term "quadrivium" (Kimball, 47). Writing in the early part of the sixth century A.D., working from earlier texts of Nicomachus,[1] he describes the quadrivium as a

"four-way path" that leads to comprehension of reality, the wisdom of things "that partake in immutable substance" (Boethius, 24-30). The account is inextricably bound to a full-blown conception of the cosmos and of the ultimate reality of "God the creator of the great universe." To state it briefly, he divides essences into two classes: First, continuous magnitudes, for example, lines or space that admit of infinite division without reaching something that cannot be further broken down; second, what he calls multitudes, discrete entities that are countable, such as numbers, books, and human beings. He adds two further distinctions: First, that between things at rest and things in motion, and second he distinguishes between arts that are pure and those that are applied or related to something else. From this his account of the quadrivium follows:

> Arithmetic explores that multitude which exists in and of itself, whereas the appropriate admixtures of musical modulation become fully acquainted with that multitude which is related to something. Geometry professes knowledge of immobile magnitude, whereas the skill of the astronomical discipline claims knowledge of mobile magnitude. (Boethius 28)

He completes the account by setting the four in order: Arithmetic, he claims, "holds the first principle and position of a mother...to the others" (28), for God, he argues, set up arithmetic as his first model of reasoning, and also, number is logically prior to things: If you have five apples, you can destroy the apples but you cannot destroy the number five. Arithmetic is also superior to geometry for a concept in geometry like triangle depends on the idea of threeness supplied by arithmetic. If you could imagine destroying the idea of a triangle, you would still be left with the arithmetic threeness.

Moreover, music comes after arithmetic because, whereas the objects treated in arithmetic exist in themselves, music applies arithmetic to other things. He leaves this account general because music

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[1]It is interesting to compare Nicomachus' own account in his "introduction to Arithmetic," *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britanica, 1952) vol. 11, p. 813-814.

in this scheme applies to more than merely the arrangement of tones, as it does for us. Astronomy comes last for two reasons: It comes after geometry because it deals with things in motion. This conclusion follows from the premise that things at rest are prior. Astronomy follows music, because, as he says, "The very motion of the stars is resounded in harmonic modulations," and "therefore [music] precedes the courses of the stars in authority" (29).

His odd locution, "the appropriate admixtures of musical modulation become fully acquainted with that multitude which is related to something," may remind us of Scott Buchanan's claim, cited earlier, describing music as "the art and science that deals with applied mathematics in all the natural sciences."

Music has proved the most difficult of the seven for which to provide a convincing modern account. Needless to say, in the parts of our program that are labeled "music," students actually sing, play the piano, and talk about what they are doing, in language that is not limited to that of mathematical physics. The best and most beautiful account I have seen of music as a liberal art in this sense is that given by my colleague Bruce Venable:

> The coincidence of the soul and the mathematical must be understood as reciprocal: not only does the soul move in mathematical proportions but, conversely, these proportions are motive and living.... There are no dead forms in nature: even a crystal *grows*. The harmonious movement of the world soul, impregnating nature with number and measure, is the eternal melody of its inner life, knowing and loving itself and its creator and making all natural things aware of one another as joined in a single being. Human music, too, simply because it is number in harmonious motion, sound arranged in shapes and lines, is an image and participation of this life moving peacefully within itself, simple and self contained. (299-300)

This passage is actually an explanation of the Neoplatonist view of Plotinus, a view borrowed in the early Middle Ages by many important Christian theologians.

From the perspective of the world as an ordered whole, a liberal education frees those who receive it from the lower aspects of human existence and prepares them to appreciate the higher order, even the divine nature of the cosmos. And further, these students are themselves ordered and improved by being educated. Seen in this way, the liberal arts free human beings from whatever keeps them from achieving human excellence. Further, these arts prepare them for the possibility of the gift of grace—a divine gift that might carry the faithful beyond the natural human realm.

Now, this conception of the cosmos, its relation to the creator, and the corresponding liberal arts, present a beautiful and consistent account. It may even be the best account or the right account. For a variety of good reasons, however, one can no longer assume general assent to the whole of it. And without that assent to the cosmological-theological account of which it was a part, the medieval conception of the liberal arts may seem an interesting but not particularly useful relic.

The third and final moment in the history of the liberal arts that I would like to note is the rise of the scientific ideal in the 17th and 18th centuries. The beginning of the modern age can reasonably be set near the beginning of the 17th century with Francis Bacon, the Lord Chancellor of England under Queen Elizabeth in the time of Shakespeare. The moderns including Bacon, Descartes, Harvey and many others meant to free themselves from the scholastic tradition and set science and all knowledge on a new footing. A most important general feature of this modernism is its skeptical character. The philosophical groundwork for this new skepticism was worked out by Hume, Kant, and others in the next century. It is, of course, an act of irreverence to mention so many important writers with their bold and differing ideas in a single paragraph. You will have the opportunity to look at each of them with some care in the next four years. The point I mean to make here is that these new ideas in philosophy and science required a rethinking of liberal education. Reading the book of nature could no longer be seen as it had been. The quadrivium, for example, in the wake of the Cartesian revolution could not possibly be seen as Boethius had described it or as it had been worked out in the later

chapters of scholasticism. The modern approach to science developed by Descartes relied on developing a pure symbolism of mathematics, an algebra, that would provide a more systematic structure for science, even if it turned out to be significantly more removed from the objects of science. For better or worse, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmony—except by the greatest stretch of the imagination—no longer seemed to be the comprehensive four-way path.

Many lessons are to be learned from the progress of the liberal arts over the centuries. The one I stress here is that the liberal arts have always been and continue to be in the service of large ideas about what we are as human beings. This has remained true whether one holds that we have natures either human or divine that we can perfect, or, on the other hand, that we are just peculiar animals characterized by a debilitating *amour propre*, more hopelessly in the dark than we often imagine. Each full-blown conception of the liberal arts requires important decisions about our proper work (if we have any), whether our civic activity, the quest for truth, or our individual development should take precedence.

It should be clear by now that the liberal arts have gotten into their present muddle not from a scarcity of meaning, but from just the opposite, a rich abundance of possibilities for understanding their terms. The problem of squaring the traditional terms can be quite interesting from a scholarly standpoint. Actually, it is a scholar's paradise. For our purposes, however, it is much more important to ask the question plainly in a way that will point to the most useful understanding of liberal arts for our time. Nevertheless, we are not free willfully to choose a version of the liberal arts, to pick one we like off the shelf, nor are we utterly free to invent a version for ourselves. The tradition continues to bear upon us.

The tensions between competing views of the past provide the context in which we must make our way. Kimball claims that the most important tension exists between those versions committed to liberal education as a means of transmitting information (the oratorical side) and those committed to seeking truth, to teaching students to

learn for themselves (the philosophical tradition). Some of the other important tensions we must keep in mind are philosophy's long-standing quarrels with both poetry and theology, and perhaps most pressing, the quarrel between science and virtually everything else. This quarrel was taken up quite literally some forty years ago by C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis in their battle over the two cultures, and the dispute remains alive today. Each of these tensions deserves careful review and reconsideration; there is not space to pursue them further here.

WHAT A LIBERAL ART OUGHT TO LOOK LIKE

This section will make a new start, asking what we should look for in a liberal art, how we might recognize one if we found one. It will speculate about the qualities appropriate to an art that could be rightly called liberal.

Dorothy Sayers, who is perhaps best remembered for her detective fiction, was also an impressive Dante scholar and moreover a thoughtful and sensible voice on a variety of subjects. In 1948 she wrote a brief essay entitled, "The Lost Tools of Learning." In this essay as a metaphor for the liberal arts, she introduces the carpenter's tools. She proceeds cleverly, only suggesting this image and stops prudently short of pursuing the questions it raises:

> We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all tasks. Instead of them, we have merely a set of complicated jigs, each of which will do but one task and no more. And in using which eye and hand receive no training, so that no man ever sees the work as a whole or "looks to the end of the work." (263)

Like any metaphor, the "tools" can succeed only so far; but it is worth following as far as we can. The "tools" suggest a hierarchy of skills, skills that are propaideutic to the other arts and sciences. In this metaphor several points of comparison are worth noting: First, tools are indifferent to the end, good or ill, that they serve. Second, master craftsmen, once they have learned a tool, use it without paying

much conscious attention to it. The tool becomes an extension of the body, something one works through. Third, there is a strong element of transferability: the skilled carpenter can build most anything using just the basic tools. These are the very qualities one might seek in "liberal arts" that would provide appropriate intellectual preparation for all other arts and sciences. The metaphor begins to weaken when we recall that tools or instruments literally are means exterior to ourselves that we employ for a particular physical purpose. A liberal art would necessarily be more intimately ours.

Ms. Sayers' image so far does nothing more than suggest a possible shape for the answer to the question: What is a liberal art? It suggests that we should be looking for a rather elementary answer, but one not to be overlooked or underestimated for being elementary.

It may be useful at this point to focus again on the words themselves, "Liberal" and "Arts." The word "art" suggests a capacity for doing or making. Aristotle distinguishes between doing and making (*Nic. Eth.* 1140a1), but the liberal arts would seem to encompass both.

The word "liberal" was touched on above. My first effort following its connection to Latin *līber*, "free," led us back to Aristotle's "free man"—suggesting that liberal education is the education suited to the free man, and all that meant for Aristotle. Freedom, however, in the theological sense meant the freedom to avoid error and to embrace the wisdom of the scriptures. The root also brings the sense of political liberty, the "liberalism" of our governmental framework in this country. In this context, of course, "liberal" does not refer to that camp of politicians the conservatives are fond of blaming for everything that has ever gone wrong. It is closer to what must have been meant by the founding fathers in the phrase "a liberal democracy"—a regime dedicated to the free consent of the people, the *demos*.

In a republic like ours dedicated to religious pluralism, a version of liberal education appropriate for all citizens cannot be dedicated exclusively to a religious, scientific, or cultural ideal. Paradoxically, it must if it can leave open the possibilities for religious, scientific, polit-

ical or philosophical commitment. An important question persists: Can any form of education remain free from these larger commitments and at the same time leave open a genuine possibility for them?

The freedom that to me has always seemed most appropriate to the liberal arts, however, is the freedom to find out for oneself, the freedom to make informed judgments. This sense seems to be present in part at least as far back as Plato with his image of the cave, but the emphasis on the self is directly influenced by the skeptical, scientific, modern turn in the tradition. Freedom to wonder, to inquire, freedom from unexamined opinions and freedom from undetected ignorance in preparation for exploring the great domains of intelligence for themselves—this must be the kind of freedom most central to a present-day liberal education, an education in which one always asks "why" and often wonders "what if," taking little on faith, but not preempting the possibility of conviction.

On balance, it is probably better for such an education to err on the side of skepticism, just as long as it is a wholesome form of skepticism, not darkened or hardened into cynicism. This approach would seem to set up each individual and not a religious, scientific, or political community as the judge of what is important, what is true. It is the proper work of liberal education, it seems, to do just that, even though this position inevitably overstates the case for human choice. The greatest issues in one's life are influenced by many forces. Deliberate choice is only one of them, and not always the determining one, but it is the one that education can affect.

To Ms. Sayers' intriguing image of the tools and the notion of freedom sketched above, I would add as a further criterion—at the risk of sounding dangerously Aristotelian—that a liberal art ought also to address, mold, even perfect a part of us that is characteristically human.

PRIMACY OF THE LANGUAGE ARTS

This section will discuss the language arts as the most fundamental and enduring of liberal arts. Aristotle is fond of saying that the defining characteristic of man is rationality. The Greek word for

"rational" is "*logistikos.*" Its root, logos, signifies a myriad of senses including, "joining together," the "rational", which is literally "forming ratios" or comparisons, and finally "the use of language." Aristotle is clearly aware of this dual sense of rationality and language. He claims also that man is the only animal with the power of speech. (*Pol.* 1253a10) In more famous passages he describes man as the political animal and the animal who desires by nature to know. But prior to both of these, man must be first and foremost the linguistic animal, for living in a *polis* or Greek city state and being able to pursue the desire to know both depend on the special capacity of the human being for language.

We do not really need ancient authorities to prove what is clear to anyone who gives the problem a moment's thought, that language is the most obvious distinguishing human quality. I do not deny other creatures their due, some of them are able to communicate limited kinds and amounts of information to one another, but none of them has been shown to have anything that much resembles the instinct for complex language using arbitrary signs that characterizes human language (Pinker 334).

So far this is not saying much; barring accidents, all humans participate in language, but not all use of language, however, should be construed as liberal. Our everyday way of using language is to look right through it. We anchor our attention on whatever it is we are talking about, the thing signified, or the person we are addressing, paying little or no attention to the medium in which all of this takes place. Even though we may have a knack for succeeding without paying any mind to language, I propose that language can only be a liberal art when we have begun to notice it lying there between us and the world or, as St. Augustine would have it, between us and heaven, and when we have begun to ask seriously about what it is and how it functions, when we have begun to appreciate the wonder of the simplest acts of speech.

Adam's first task in the book of *Genesis* is to give names to the animals:

> And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto

> Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. (2:19)

We might wonder for a moment why giving names is singled out as such an important responsibility that even the creator allows himself to be governed by it. Adam does not, as a popular view would have it, create his own reality in language. He is not imprisoned within the domain of language. Rather, by giving names and organizing them in a system of language, Adam brings the world into the human realm, addressing it in our proper medium in such a way that we can share it with one another and probe its mysteries.

It remains for us to say something about which dimensions of language study are truly liberal and how they are to be taken up. A decent case can be made for breaking out grammar, logic, and rhetoric as the appropriate triumvirate in liberal language study. Through the ages, however, we have seen the meanings of these terms vary greatly. "Grammar" has meant everything from learning Latin (and lamenting the fact that English functions with different categories) to studying the highest forms of literature. Logic has ranged from Aristotle's formal treatment that never quite lets go of referents, to the icy intentional emptiness of modern symbolic logic, and yet further to the anything-but-empty logic of Hegel. Rhetoric, which was the Latin translation for the word meaning eloquence, has become an almost entirely pejorative term. It was once seen as the most important member of the trivium, the art that characterized a statesman. Statesmen have fallen a notch or two in becoming today's politicians, as has the dignity of their "rhetoric."

There is, nevertheless, a genuine importance in retaining the time-honored categories, even if we must reconsider what we mean by them, either rediscovering an original sense, or reconstituting one for them. In place of defending or framing definitions for grammar, logic, and rhetoric, it may be more useful simply to muse briefly about some important considerations under each of these headings.

Grammar

When we think of grammar, I suppose, the two images that rush to mind are learning the rules for decoding a foreign language and in our own language mastering the conventions of a standard dialect, conventions that are sometimes still taught by the best secondary school teachers. The prescriptive school grammar, with its warnings about splitting infinitives, ending sentences with prepositions, using relative clauses properly, and so on, is a worthy work of knowing, for in large part it constitutes the set of conventions that stand as credentials for entry into the republic of letters.

Some of our learning necessarily involves memorizing words and their meanings and mastering linguistic structures, the grammar of Greek, or of French, and with luck of our own language. It involves building an internal lexicon that relates little noises we make with our mouths or the smudges that represent them in the written form to all manner of things beyond the language. On average we add a new word to our vocabulary every ninety minutes through our whole waking lives (Pinker 150), and we do this ordinarily without paying any attention, though the nature of this "pointing," as many philosophers of language have shown, remains genuinely mysterious.

Learning these conventions remains the starting point for any study of grammar, but it provides only a beginning; grammar in this sense is not yet a liberal art. Grammar becomes a liberal art only when curiosity and wonder give birth to speculation, when mere decoding gives way to a realization of what a strange business it is to translate from one language to another, when the mind begins to puzzle over how words are cut, planed and joined differently in different languages, and when, finally, we are able to bring these insights back to bear on a more mindful use of our own language.

Rhetoric

The noted grammarian Otto Jespersen says that the purpose of language is "to give expression to our thought and feelings" (16). Expressing ourselves, being able to verbalize our wants and opinions, conveying information, is often spoken of as the principal function of

language. Actually, it is only one of many important works of language, and is perhaps not the most interesting of them.

An important work of language, not always given its due, concerns our sense of when to say what to whom. This may be the place to locate a modern understanding of Rhetoric. We might think of it as that part of language study that pays particular attention to the complex of relations between the speaker and the listener. In the *Odyssey*, as Telemachos undertakes his journey in search of his father—a journey both literal and symbolic of his advance from adolescence to adulthood—he learns many lessons. Among the most important, he learns how to use his language with more art, how to go beyond mere linguistic pointing or conveyance of information. Telemachos and his use of the language are shown against the model of his father, Odysseus, the consummate rhetorical master, who, in every speech, carefully weighs the knowledge and psychology of his interlocutors and crafts his words accordingly.

Logic

I cannot improve on Buchanan's description of logic as "the art and science of discovering and applying abstract forms." It is, of course, an important dimension of language study, as it addresses the structuring of arguments and even of whole disciplines, and also as a realm of investigation in its own right. Logic is the only member of the trivium that seems to require a caveat. We may be tempted to think that understanding is completely accomplished by uncovering and extracting the logic of a passage. But brute logic chopping by itself does not constitute artful use of language. One cannot simply plunder the riches from the temple of wisdom with logic alone. An ear and tongue, an eye and pen sensitive to grace, elegance and what suits the moment, are also required for the most significant penetration of language.

Dorothy Sayers says that the trivium, learned in childhood, "is a sufficient education for life" (260). She emphasizes their propaideutic aspect, that they are the preparation for learning the greater subjects. She is partly right about this. It is important to remember, however, that we are never finished with learning the arts of language, but

must constantly be willing to reopen issues about language that we had tentatively settled. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric like the arts of medicine or architecture are never mastered utterly by anyone. There is always something deeper to discover by pursuing them. One never gets to a point beyond which a fresh look from a grammatical, logical or rhetorical standpoint can bring new insight. The language skills are not to be learned and taken for granted, like walking or riding a bicycle. In our efforts to understand and communicate, we must constantly revisit the most basic problems of words, how they are used, how they relate to thought and image, to the logic or consistency, and to the complex of issues of intention and impact.

Though we may think of writing and speaking as active and reading and listening as passive activities, we would do well to consider how we can apply our full grammatical, logical and rhetorical powers actively with all four of them.

I may be rightly accused here of avoiding the harder issue of defending the quadrivium or something like it, but I think there is a case for finding a sufficient set of liberal arts, understood in a certain way, within the domain of language. Even the mathematical arts can be seen as specialized arts of language. Their technical languages have their basis in natural language, even algebra, that has systematically eliminated ambiguity.

But returning to our Latin roots, "liberal" is also akin to *liber*. There must therefore be some justice in thinking of the liberal arts as the "bookish" arts. Language is the gateway to all other domains of learning. A subject can only be addressed in a liberal fashion once it has been taken over into language, or perhaps, as in the case of music, until a critical language has been constructed for it. I would argue that though music may affect the soul directly it only becomes a liberal art to the extent that we can examine it, question it, speculate about it through language.

In the bookish sense the liberal arts must be those arts that enable us to undertake the acts of doing or making in the greatest

realms of human understanding: philosophy, religion, poetry, history, mathematics and science, and they all take the form of linguistic structures, preserved in books.

To approach the question of the relationship of language to thought, we must proceed through the portal of language. Though all of our public activity of making occurs in the realm of language, it is most unlikely that thought or imagination can be reduced to an internal or silent "language" activity. When Plato in the *Republic* puts us in a position to entertain the forms of reality, or Aristotle, at the other end of the spectrum, asks us to consider primitive, formless matter, both succeed with words alone, though the thoughts and images these words cause are of utterly different orders. It is language that opens to us the suggestiveness of Plato's cave, or the vision of marital happiness that Prospero paints for Miranda and Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, or the imaginative excess of William Blake's vision of a "world in a grain of sand, a heaven in a wildflower" ("Auguries of Innocence").

Conclusion

In two and a half millennia, though much has changed, certain important features of liberal education have remained the same. It still strives for the educational acquaintance with the principles of all worthy subjects that Aristotle called for. It remains true that a fully developed system of liberal arts implies a defined religious or philosophical commitment, and the language arts retain their primacy.

A final image from Aristotle may be helpful. In his book on the soul, he says, "The hand is the tool of tools" (*De Anima*, 432a1). The hand both uses tools, and it is the tool *par excellence*, the tool that defines other tools by its use, but also it is their literal source in that it actually makes every other tool. Aristotle compares the hand to the soul, but the human capacity for language is also something like this. It is the most basic of liberal arts and at the same time, constructs or gives rise to all the others. We join word to word, sentence to sentence, word-smithing, as with a carpenter's plane and chisel, at times building large structures where the main concern is strength, at times artfully shaping and polishing lines of the finest poetry where the aim is beauty.

At this college we all work at a unified undergraduate program, a single list of books, but we are not committed to a single interpretation of them. Each of us takes up the books, finding what we can. The books, as Ortega suggests, like all sorts of objects in our lives, are thrown at our feet, "the useless remains of a shipwreck" (31). It is up to each of us to discover as well as we are able, by means of our skilled use of language, their fullest significance, at times uncovering a vision of the world as a whole, at times entertaining an organized assault on the very possibility of meaning itself.

It occurs to me that I may have erred earlier in slighting the god Liber. The "skilled use of language" sounds rather heavy. And clearly, study can easily degenerate into a dreary, wooden, methodical business if it is not undertaken in an appropriately playful spirit. Though disciplined effort is a necessary condition, the most beautiful discoveries come unexpectedly after effort, but not as a direct result of that effort. So, let me close, offering a libation to the god Liber, and a prayer that we may remain open both in our reading and listening to being surprised and moved by the books and by our fellow learners.

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