

The Chains of the Skyway: Freedom in the Liberal Arts

For those who did not recognize the quotation in the title, here's the last stanza of Bob Dylan's "Ballad in Plain D":

All my friends in the prison, they ask unto me,
 "How good, how good does it feel to be free?"
 And I answer them, most mysteriously,
 "Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?"

Last term Jon Lenkowski gave what I think was the first informal talk to introduce one of our discussions on the liberal arts. In describing the internal experience of radical questioning, he made use of Dodo Klein's picturesque phrase, "deep sea fishing." Jon's talk was deep in many ways, not an easy act to follow. Today, departing from my avian beginning, I will start by being shallow, and instead of embarking on deep and troubled seas, I will be shooting fish in a barrel. That barrel is the College motto, *Facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque*, "I make free men out of children by means of books and a balance." It's familiar to us all, prominently displayed on the New Program Seal and much in evidence both in our promotional literature and on ceremonial occasions. As a way of reflecting about what we do and how we represent what we do, to ourselves and to others, I want to raise a few questions about it.

I think we are often a little bit embarrassed by this phrase, and I think that embarrassment is well justified and does us credit. For one thing, the rhetoric of ringing changes on the word *liber*, "free," seems to be somewhat smugly self-satisfied, as if epitomizing our activity here were as easy as making a series of puns. It doesn't sound either classical or biblical to me-- it sounds like a modern academic showing off a little bit of the Latin he has studied. Eva tells me that she once tried to track down the author of this *bon mot*, without success; but I did see it alleged online, by Barbara Goyette, that it was a friend of Stringfellow Barr, a faculty member at UVA. Probably not someone in the Classics Department, I think.

The motto on the New Program seal compares unfavorably, in certain respects, with the motto which captions the Great Seal of the College, dating back to 1793. There we find a Masonic image- a

man preparing to scale a mountain, atop which there is a temple of wisdom. The motto reads *Est Nulla Via Invia Virtuti*, "there is no road impassable to virtue" (or "to courage," depending on how we construe *virtus*). It's true that this motto is also alliterative and witty, but there is at least a reason: It's a slightly modified version of a half verse of Ovid: *invia virtuti nulla est via*, found in *Metamorphoses*, Book XIV, line 113, spoken by the Sibyl to Aeneas before the descent into the underworld. So it sounds more like real Latin because it is real Latin. We expect wordplay and wit from Ovid, and we expect a canonical Roman source for our motto, even if the *Metamorphoses* has not been found worthy of inclusion in our seminar readings. There is a certain piquancy about appropriating a tag from Ovid as a gloss for a piece of Masonic moralism. And in 1793, it's likely that some at least of the entering freshmen would have recognized the allusion.

I've looked at hundreds of college and university mottos in my oracular source, Wikipedia, from colleges and universities around the world in languages living and dead. Many are in Latin, frequently quotations from the Vulgate translations of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Some are single words or phrases, like Harvard's *Veritas* (VE- RI- TAS), or Yale's *Lux et Veritas*. Many of the Scriptural ones appropriate statements that would have been more directly applicable back when the institution in question had an avowed religious affiliation: for example Columbia's motto, shared by some others: *In lumine tuo videbimus lumen*, "In your light we shall see the light" (Psalms 36:9). Not so applicable to Columbia any more-- its undergraduate core curriculum, such as it is, has been described as "Jews teaching Christianity to atheists." The Ovidian motto on our great seal was intriguing to Charlotte Fletcher, our grand old librarian who wrote about the Masonic, non-denominational source of the name of the College, when it was changed after the American Revolution. "Virtue" is a good thing, but it covers a lot of ground. So does "freedom." Which brings us back to *facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque*.

It's an odd locution for a college motto, and I don't remember even one other that speaks in the first person singular. Which leads me to ask, Who is the "I" that is speaking? Certainly it can't refer to an individual-- no single person would claim so much agency. It is a far cry from the midwifery that

Socrates claims, somewhat ironically, for himself. Is it then the College personified that claims this demiurgic power of molding free adults from children? Would we feel better if the first word were *facimus*, "we make"? (As in, "We sell shoes.") Or would the metaphor of artisanship still seem to claim too much?

In a similar way, we might wonder: How worried we should be that the same word is used for "free person" and "child"? Describing children as "free" is only a transferred usage of the word, and it's hard to know why the Romans thought it was appropriate. The Greek word *παῖς*, "child" or "slave," implies the opposite metaphor. Using the word twice in such short succession, with the same accent placement and distinguished only by a case ending, might seem to imply that there is no great distance between the freedom, if any, of a child and the freedom of an adult. (Even worse, it's only the context that prevents us from translating, "I make children out of free men..." rather than the opposite.) It would seem to follow that there is far less agency in the process than is claimed by *facio*. I'm sure that the anonymous wit who coined the motto did not intend this implication; but left to its own devices, perhaps the motto suggests to us that we are less like artisan-creators than we are like the Wizard of Oz, conferring ceremonially a freedom that our young people always already had, but didn't know it. I hope I'm not being perverse in suggesting this. As Curtis Wilson memorably said in a commencement address, "Let's not be so foolish as to claim that we teach our students to think." Is the kind of freedom that liberal education claims to give ever conferred by one person or institution on another person? Don't our students always educate themselves, in the most important sense of the word? Perhaps the pun in the motto speaks more wisely than it intends.

The motto appears on the New Program seal encircling a group of seven books, with a balance in the middle. The books, we are told, represent the seven arts of the trivium and the quadrivium, while the balance implies that the way we investigate natural objects in the laboratory uses some other art or arts. These arts, seven or perhaps more, are traditionally known as liberal arts, so that the visual image continues the play on the word *liber*. And of course, the same wordplay reminds us that more generally

we claim to be engaged in liberal education. (Incidentally, I infer from the Lewis and Short Latin Dictionary that the word *liber* meaning "book" is not etymologically related to the word for "free person"; the "i" for the first is short, and for the second, long. Nor is *libra* ("balance, scale") from the same root as either of these.)

Are the liberal arts the freeing arts, and what freedom do they offer? Does liberal education make us free? In what sense? And if so, what is the relation between freeing arts and a freeing education? It seems that originally the association of freedom with education was a sociological statement: A free person, usually well-born or at least wealthy, had the leisure to pursue personal development, without the need to struggle in the practice of a trade or the earning of a livelihood. We see this usage in Plutarch's story of the Spartan in Athens who asked to see the Athenian, prosecuted for idleness, who was fined for living as a free man. On this showing, freedom is not the outcome of education but a necessary preliminary condition for it. (We may think that such a view belongs only to the aristocratic ideology of the ancients-- but it is sadly true in our society today that a liberal education is often regarded as a luxury, the birthright of the upper middle class. Our lofty practice of opposing liberal education to "mere" vocational training runs the risk of denying certain freedoms to those who don't yet have them.) The Latin word *liberalis* similarly seems to refer to what characterizes someone who is already free, rather than someone or something that confers freedom on another. (The same is true of the Greek words ἐλεύθερος and ἐλευθέριος.) If freedom really is a precondition, again we can claim little agency in offering it; we are back to the Wizard of Oz. Or maybe we are restoring it? By this account, our students are born free, but everywhere they are in chains-- everywhere but here, where their shackles are stricken off and they can stand tall. We often claim that the freedom we seek, for ourselves and our students, is the freedom from the tyranny of received opinions and cultural dogmas: the freedom of desedimentation, of finding strange what others ignore because it is familiar. Once again I ask, how new is this freedom? Do we learn to wonder, or is it a faculty we're born with but often lose? Are we merely learning what we already used to know, by unlearning what we more recently thought we knew? I'm not sure whether I'm

channeling Socrates or Meno in making this suggestion. But it has the disadvantage of appearing to characterize our educative activity only negatively. The proximate goal seems to be the recognition of our own ignorance through the elenchus of dialectic, the sting of the torpedo fish. In our aporetic condition, we are now free to seek better opinions; but it's far from clear what our next step should be.

In attempting to characterize the freedom we hope to find, it may help to ask ourselves, do we, the tutors, actually feel free? And in what part of our activity do we feel most free? Plutarch's Spartan seemed to associate freedom with leisure. Usually when we introduce the word σχολή to our freshmen, with its English cognate, we smile somewhat ironically, in awareness that school in general and our school in particular must not seem very leisured to them. And of course, we work hard too. (When I say "we," of course, I mean "you," not me-- not any more.) Do we, the tutors, feel free-- freer than most other people because more liberally educated? Maybe this question would be better asked in September, when we are enticed by the immediate prospect of new discoveries and not yet oppressed by the spring crush of essays and deadlines. But September also often brings fears about mastering a new body of technical material.

Is an artist most free when she is practicing her art? It might seem that the protocols of a skill or craft impose restrictions that must be observed narrowly, especially by one who is still learning. An apprentice is "bound to service," free perhaps to ask questions, but not free to question or judge the authority of the art itself. Even the artist who is no longer a learner may not consciously feel free in the midst of the process. But I may here be confusing freedom and the consciousness of freedom. Perhaps the liberal arts are not exactly τέχναι, the crafts or skills of an artisan? I'm wondering whether our appropriation of the trivium and quadrivium is at odds with their traditional use. If it is true that in our hands they become freeing instruments, is that because we allow ourselves to reflect on them, interrogate them, evaluate them, as a cobbler would never do with his craft? (A professional grammarian or geometer might not either.) If so, then perhaps our professed piety toward the seven liberal arts is a little like our use of Latinity to characterize ourselves. We claim implicitly to be transmitting a tradition

whose fixity we should and do distrust. The free and speculative component in our tutorials seems to emerge from the acquisition of art or technique, but not to involve it directly. In certain classes the two activities may seem to clash-- Freshman Language, for example, which is sometimes a continuing conversation about "language as such" and sometimes only a class in the grammatical rudiments.

Eva Brann has characterized our program as consisting of "authors and arts," and it seems to me that our freedom depends on our challenging the arts as we challenge the authors. But our emphasis on questioning has not always been how we regarded ourselves. When Dan Harrell and Lijun Gu started leading the faculty seminars on the liberal arts, the first year or two was spent in looking at very old Catalogs and Statements of the Program, dating from the 1940's. Many of us were surprised that those older documents often seemed to claim that the College inculcated enduring truths, rather than raising enduring questions. I suspect that our claims about freedom are now more justified than formerly, precisely because we are more institutionally sceptical.

As I've said, it is my experience that we feel most free not in the application of the repertoire of specific techniques offered by the so-called freeing arts, but rather in the speculative activity, often inchoate or even shapeless, that Jon Lenkowski characterized. The authors we read do make us more free, by example, because they themselves are free. The authors raise questions, and questions are freer than answers. The merit of the New Program motto, which perhaps I have treated too roughly, is that it raises freedom for us as a question . Does liberal education give us the freedom to question, or did we always already have it? It may be that we have gained a greater skill in framing questions-- Many utterances that seem to end in a question mark are not really questions, as we can see from the 24-hour news stations. If we can acquire or impart the skill of asking a genuine question, we leave our interlocutors more free, and their freedom becomes ours as well. Then too, we can also be our own interlocutors. In either case, we must ask ourselves what conditions make us more able to frame questions. Even if the impulse to question is inherent in us, it does seem to me that we need the space

that is opened up by reflection-- the word "leisure" might describe it-- to be better questioners and to make ourselves more free.

It seems to me that I have now located the relative freedom offered by liberal education not in freeing arts and not even in authors, but in our pedagogical practice. We could be reading the same books and acquiring the seven quadrivial and trivial arts, without gaining or giving any greater freedom. And it may well be possible to acquire the same degree of freedom using different materials-- different books, different arts. If so, we would do well to temper our rhetoric: We can do justice to the distinctiveness of our College without claiming that it alone offers a true liberal education. I would even venture to suggest that our distinctiveness may consist less in the habits of mind that we succeed in inculcating than in the character of the community which we make and in which we live. We find freedom in that community, but we are also bound to it. We are like the birds in Bob Dylan's skyway, or like the child in "Fern Hill": We sing in our chains like the sea.

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