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The Seminar at the Collegiate Level

The seminar as an educational device has been known to the graduate schools in American universities for three quarter of a century. But it would be a mistake to identify the graduate school seminar with what goes by the same name in an increasing number of Liberal Arts colleges. If we were asked to distinguish between them, I suspect that all our answers would be reduced to this: that while the seminar at the graduate level is immediately and primarily concerned with the subject-matter under consideration, the collegiate seminar is preoccupied with the mind of the student and its growth in the liberal arts. Unlike the graduate seminar, the seminar in a Liberal Arts college views subject-matter as an indispensable means, not as an end.

What is the Seminar?

The seminar at the collegiate level is a cooperative enterprise in which books, teachers and students have a contribution to make. It engages the best efforts of teachers and students jointly to grasp the meaning of books that have been formative of western thought. The significance of the book, the problems to which it gives rise, the validity of its solution, the relation of this book to others in the tradition, all of these combine to create and maintain what is probably the essence of the seminar, viz., a dialectical situation. Rightly understood the seminar is an exercise in the *art* of logic. It recognizes that the science of logic is an abstraction without significant content for the student who has not previously used his mind on real problems. It is aware that Aristotle's logic is a codification of the dialectic of Plato, and that without Plato *The Organon* would never have been written. The seminar is an exercise in responsible conversation in which both teacher and student are held strictly accountable for the positions they may take.

How does a college justify itself when it abandons the leisurely convenience of the lecture system to adopt the unmistakably arduous job of educating through the seminar? The college would have to go to some pains to show that its action is based upon two fundamental principles—call them articles of faith, if you will. The first is that all experience presents aspects that are completely mysterious to unaided sense-knowledge. The second principle might be stated something like this: aspects of reality lying beyond the competence of sense-knowledge can only be begun to be dealt with adequately by the arts of a trained mind. These are the liberal arts. Like other arts the liberal arts are acquired by repeated exercise in them. The seminar comes much closer than the lecture to see that this exercise is had. The comparison, however, is unjust; the lecture system assumes that

the students who submit to it are already liberal artists. Contemporary education experience only goes to show how false that assumption is.

Naturally enough, the most considerable opposition to the collegiate seminar directs itself against one or the other or both of the above principles. There is a good deal of old-fashioned insistence on the exclusive rights of the measurable to the title of knowledge, and, therefore, on the inutility of spending four years developing the arts that search out something that often enough cannot be measured. In so far as the second principle demands that education respect the way in which the mind learns, those who prefer to indoctrinate rather than teach have expressed some misgivings about the hazards of the seminar.

Books of Power in Liberal Education

The cultivation of the natural qualities of wonder, curiosity and admiration in the mind and heart is not achieved by our current educational practices. It is incredible that the normal youth can actually be educated by material that is hopelessly desiccated; by methods—lectures; outlines, textbooks—that exhibit the scholarship of the authors but prevent and make unnecessary the intellectual process in the student; by artificial motives and objectives, “majors and minors,” devised in a system no longer directed to the perfection of its subjects. But this problem—the object of education—is thought to be less real than the student. It is only fair to say that the progressive educators, who showed that current educational methods have little or no constructive influence on the student, are uncertain about the directives and purposes of education. Or they conceive purposes contrary to the traditional religious, social or moral customs, and plan to condition American children to a new state by surprise.

In such a time it becomes imperative, if Christian civilization and culture are to be remembered and perfected, to plant the ideas that have made the West supreme in the minds of our youth.

“Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.”

Dante, in the *Inferno*, has Ulysses repeat this ancient charge of Homer to his men:

“Consider all that to your race is due;
Ye were not born as brutes to live and die,
but gain in knowing and right deeds pursue.”

Perhaps it is more than a coincidence that Laurence Binyon translates the first line of this passage: “Think on the seed ye spring from!” Our roots lie deep in the literature and history and wisdom of the past, and one has but to learn to read to be nourished by this hidden source. But in order to share our cultural heritage it is essential to read our literature with ease, our history with forethought, our philosophy with understanding.

Alas! Our students now “short-circuit” their task, reading a history of literature, an outline of history, and a story of philosophy.

It is in the present deplorable state of academic policy and pessimism that makes it difficult to revive the reading of significant masterworks in place of the moribund substitutes that have taken their place. Though there is still a living memory of boys reading Homer and Thucydides, Cicero and Virgil and Tacitus, in the original Greek and Latin, by our progressive standards they are judged too difficult to read in English! A fair trial would reveal that a student improves with amazing rapidity in a book which challenges him at every level, and satisfies him progressively as his comprehension deepens.

The Principle of Selection

The choice of texts to be read in a liberal arts education may be a moot question in respect of particular selection. But the principle is clear: *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. Sir Richard Livingstone illustrates its application: “Why Socrates, St. Bernard, Sir Thomas More, Shaftesbury, Lincoln, Masaryk, rather than Frederick the Great, Napoleon and Bismarck? Why Aeschylus, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth, Robert Bridges, rather than Villon, Marlowe, Congreve, Sterne, Byron, Heine, Stendhal, Housman? It is not a question of mere greatness—if so, the choice, at least in some cases, might have been different—but of what is first-rate in ideals and conduct.... The science, the politics, the commercial and industrial systems, the social life of the age of Aeschylus, or Plato or Dante or Shakespeare have passed away and become matters of antiquarian interest, but the writings of these men, mere words, have survived, as fresh and living as on the day there were written down. They meet some permanent need not only of these own epoch but of all time, and in a world of change and death each possess the secret of immortality.”

A student who has exercised his imagination in Homer and Virgil, Cervantes, Dickens and Dostoyevski; his dramatic sense in Sophocles and Shakespeare; his mind in Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas; his heart in Augustine, Dante, and á Kempis; his spirit in the Gospels, Acts, St. Paul and the Apocalypse, will have good reason to face tomorrow; and tomorrow; smiling and unafraid.

Reading as a Preparation for Philosophy

Philosophy can be described as the continuing attempt to resolve the great problems that arise from human experience in and by self-evident propositions. It supposes first of all human experience and problems coming from it. A rich and elaborated philosophy supposes a rich and elaborated experience and is only intelligible in terms of it. For instance, the work of Plato and Aristotle is only conceivable as accompanying a great literary tradition, an advanced mathematical science, a highly developed and evolving state, and a search for a deeper religious life. All these factors in Greek civilization raised questions; and so it was that you had men trying to answer them.

As a result of this relationship between philosophical problems and the absorbing human interests from which they arise, the usual introduction to philosophy in the United

States is a course in the history of philosophy. This might be adequate if the aim of teaching philosophy were to make students acquainted with what has been thought by certain great men. It is altogether inadequate if the purpose of learning philosophy is that we may philosophize. For this it is not enough to know that other men had problems and that they solved them in characteristic ways. To philosophize we must wrestle with questions that we see as significant; that is to say that we have to work from our own experience toward an evaluation of it.

It is true that there is another procedure in vogue in some schools, particularly Catholic schools. This procedure is the giving of summary courses in all the main divisions of philosophical inquiry and then teaching the history of philosophy at the end of the four years. This is not much worse than doing the same thing in the opposite order. In fact, the two processes only differ in this: one assumes that philosophy must begin with questions, albeit somebody else's questions; while the other assumes that it is best to begin by studying the answers to questions we are not aware of. What is wrong with either order of teaching is that through it philosophy must necessarily appear as something achieved, something finished before our time, instead of a task that every one must apply himself to if he would discover the sense that there is in life.

In a true liberal arts program what is intended and the means used are very different. The means are primarily a consideration of the great human problems as they arise in the context of the great books. In these books we are confronted with men who were highly conscious of one or more great human problems and who have formulated more or less satisfactory answers. When we read them we are challenged to make up our own minds or to question ourselves more profoundly. The only criterion that is really relevant is our own experience and Divine Revelation.

Fructification of Experience

The young man who is reading Homer and his teacher who is reading it with him can say something valid about the love of Helen and Paris or of Hector and Andromache only if he considers carefully what Homer says of them. He can only judge of this by reconsidering and evaluating his own experience. The judgment that he then makes will be challenged again when he reads Plato's *Symposium*, or when he consults some further and more significant private experience. This process of fructification of experience by reading and of enrichment of reading through experience can go on through the first Epistle of St. John and the *Troilus and Criseyde* of Chaucer straight up to Graham Greene and Huxley. In short his education will enable the student to comprehend and judge his own experience and that of his contemporaries. It will be aiding him to do humanly and in a Christian manner what he now does so badly in "bull sessions" and the reading of cheap magazines.

It may be objected that the same thing can be done just as well in a "course" of the conventional type. I do not think so, because a course does not, *per se*, force a student to articulate and judge his own experience. A course is well-taught if the prescribed matter is covered and sufficiently illustrated. A student cannot be too active in presenting his necessarily limited views and forcing the discussion to work from them, or the "matter" won't get covered. Besides the course isn't sufficient challenge to both pupil and teacher to

initiate a vital dialectic; or, at least, it is only in the rare case when an inspired teacher decides to concern himself with his pupils and not his subject. Such a man would probably want to use the books any way.

In any case, the real defense of the use of the great books is that they are rich enough to raise all the significant human problems. A class that abandons itself to the “hazard” of discussing the issues that will present themselves to a seminar group over the years will have small reason to fear that anything of great significance to the race will have been omitted. Besides, and in a sense this is most important, in discussions arising from the books no problem is really isolated. The problem of love mentioned above has important connections with “the one and the many,” the Holy Trinity and modern psychology. Thus in discussion, issues will be interconnected as they are in life.

A student whose mind has been awakened to these relationships and who has been aroused to the seriousness of the questions he has recurrently met will be eminently possessed speaking of the liberal arts, said “*his quasi quibusdam viis vivax animus ad secreta philosophiae introeat*” (De Trin. Q.5, art. 1, ad 3).