

## **Some Thoughts on the Liberal Arts and the Teaching of Latin in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*an address by Allen Ward, University of Connecticut professor emeritus, past president of CANE, and recipient of the Barlow-Beach award, on the occasion of the 2010 Annual Meeting at Moses Brown School, Providence, Rhode Island*

When Jerry Mead asked me to be the “after-dinner entertainment” tonight, I almost fell over. I think of myself as many things: an historian who loves details; a punctilious grammarian who enjoys finding historical infinitives and datives with compound verbs of motion; a carpenter who can spot a stud 1/32 of an inch out of plumb with the naked eye. But an entertainer?! I think not! I told Jerry that I was flattered and deeply honored to be asked. After all, my longest and happiest membership in a professional organization has been with CANE. Moreover, I would be getting a chance to speak in Providence, called the true Athens of America by Charles Alexander Robinson, Jr., my old ancient history professor at the other Brunonian institution, despite the claims of those who live in the city to which he referred as “that whited sepulchre to the north.” After all, the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations **is** America’s only city-state, being barely a third larger than Attica at 1214 square miles, having a rich naval history, and flourishing still as a center of art and culture with its great schools, universities, museums, and active arts communities. (See what I mean about details, and notice the strict grammatical parallelism of the three participial phrases!)

At any rate, I told Jerry honestly that I could think of only serious things to talk about like the role of the Liberal Arts or Latin in 21<sup>st</sup> –century education. I figured that would be unentertaining enough to scare him off and save me from weeks of reading and

thinking and being so nervous today that I would not enjoy the papers that I wanted to hear. To my chagrin, he replied that my suggestions were just what he was looking for. When I complained to my wonderful wife that now I was stuck with having to talk on matters about which I had little current knowledge, she gave me the look that only one's better half can give, and I said, "Yes, I know. That never stopped me before."

On another occasion, my good friend and colleague Tom Suits expressed regret that a recent operation on his vocal chords might prevent him from attending the meeting and hearing me. I said that it might be a blessing for him, and I could just e-mail him a copy of my text. He hoarsely replied, "But I would miss all the harrumphing!" Then I realized why I might be considered entertaining, and so, I shall harrumph away!

Most of us know that Latin, Greek, and the Classics in general are now not alone among the traditional Liberal Arts in facing a crisis that threatens their continued viability within the American system of education. The number of liberal arts colleges, "defined as institutions awarding more than half their bachelor's degrees in those fields," has been declining since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Witness the shockingly cynical moves by the trustees of the so-called Antioch University to close the venerable Antioch College. They are fully described in the November-December 2009 issue of *Academe* from The American Association of University Professors. Moreover, as post-secondary enrollments have grown, particularly within institutions that call themselves universities, the number of students majoring in the liberal arts has stagnated. The liberal arts are facing extinction and not just in small, poorly endowed liberal arts colleges like Antioch. As the generation that came of age during the late 1950's and early 1960's , **my**

**generation**, dies off, there will be less and less tax-payer and alumni support for the liberal arts curriculum in public and private universities.

Now the causes of this crisis are many, some of them self-inflicted and others external. The first is rooted in a debate that has raged since colonial times over the value of a utilitarian or vocational education versus a classical or, more generally, liberal arts education in subjects like literature, art, music, classical and modern languages, philosophy, history, the social sciences, and the mathematical and theoretical sciences. Beginning in the 1950's and 60's, college and university administrators and public relations departments increasingly gave up the complex argument that reflects the ultimate utilitarian value of a Liberal Arts education properly conceived, that is as a liberal education: to wit, it fits students to become intelligent and informed adults who can master complex information, analyze problems, understand their causes, and propose solutions in clear and thoughtful ways.

Instead, to boost enrollments, administrators began to appeal to those who looked to education mainly as training for a good job. Radio and television were flooded with advertisements stressing the economic benefits of a college education: college graduates get good-paying jobs and achieve higher earnings over a lifetime than non-college graduates. Historically, that was true especially true when college graduates were a small percentage of the population and came from the kind of social and economic background that would naturally give them access to good jobs. The utilitarian economic argument was reinforced in the post-Sputnik era as the government poured money into higher education to provide scientific researchers and technicians in the space and arms races and to supply competent workers during the huge growth of public-sector employment as

even many conservative politicians sought to ameliorate the ills that might make disadvantaged people look favorably on communist ideology.

By the late 1960's and early 1970's, millions of students seeking upward economic mobility had flooded onto greatly expanded college and university campuses. To many of them, the liberal arts, which were the core of most curricula, bore no relevance to their narrow career goals, goals that soon became harder to reach because a college graduate's seller's advantage had turned into a buyer's advantage with so many more college graduates flooding the labor market. Still, as the message that a college education was the ticket to economic success went unchallenged, colleges and universities found that they could charge higher and higher fees, which people accepted in view of an expected post-college payoff. As costs kept outpacing inflation by obscene degrees, more and more students and parents demanded curricula geared to training for high-paying jobs.

On the other hand, many students exposed to a liberal education in the liberal arts curriculum applied the critical faculties and political sophistication that they had acquired to question and protest the injustices and antiquated views of the older generation. On the good side, they produced the pressures that resulted in the enactment of civil rights and great-society legislation and in a questioning of the Cold-War ideology that got us trapped in a tragic and hopeless war in Viet Nam. On the bad side, the violence and ideological extremism of some, often misguidedly supported by left-wing liberal-arts faculty, caused a conservative backlash among right-wing political, religious, and corporate leaders, who came to see the liberal arts and liberal education as fostering the kind of behavior and ideas anathema to them.

Right-wing politicians and their socially conservative and corporate allies have mounted an increasingly effective campaign against government programs and agencies associated with the liberal arts: for example, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and National Public Radio and Television. Moreover, they are starving the social and educational programs designed to level the educational playing field for the poor and the underprivileged, creating unfunded mandates, underfunding schools in general, demoralizing teachers at all levels with overly broad charges of incompetence and irresponsibility, and then damning the whole system, which they have hamstrung, for failing to educate students.

Unfortunately, these attacks are made more acceptable and effective by what has happened within education and by the decline of the liberal arts, which these attacks fuel. Education has become an enormous business run by people who have not had a deep grounding in the liberal arts and sciences, but who have come out of narrow professional programs in education administration and business management. Neither teachers nor scholars, they are imposing the kind of corporate, top-down, one-size-fits-all regimen that stresses the market appeal of subjects rather than any larger intellectual, educational, or societal value. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult for Classics and many other liberal-arts disciplines to survive.

At the college-level, faculty, particularly faculty in the liberal arts, are increasingly marginalized in decision-making processes. Administrators trained as managers to act like corporate CEO's with huge salaries and lavish perquisites way beyond those enjoyed by mere liberal arts faculty do not want to listen to the honest criticism and debate

necessary to sustain the principle of shared governance that was once a cornerstone of academic management.

Furthermore, to distract faculty and justify their high salaries or polish their resumes by citing the increased academic prestige of the institutions that they run, administrators have encouraged faculty to retreat into the world of increasingly narrow, esoteric, and specialized research in a vicious competition for promotion, tenure, and, in the liberal arts, only modest salary increases. The inhuman pressure to publish a steady stream of books and major articles is partially relieved by granting tenured and tenure-track faculty more freedom from undergraduate teaching. Course sizes are increased and more and more basic teaching is left to harried and exploited graduate students and adjunct faculty. This system is fueled by the over-production of Ph.D's, the teaching of whom is a mark of increased status and prestige for their professors and their institutions. All of this drives up the cost of a liberal education, makes teaching in the liberal arts less effective, and produces a lot of shoddy, faddish, and jargon-loaded research that opens the whole academic world to sometimes justified ridicule. It is not too far fetched, for example, to imagine some history, literature, philosophy, sociology, or anthropology professor coming up with a book entitled *Transnational Gender Categories in an Emerging Global Metahistorical Discourse from a Narratological Perspective: Public, Private, and Pubic from Foucault to Habermas*.

How do we save ourselves and our liberal-arts brothers and sisters from this dangerous state of affairs. In an age when right-wing ideologues have turned the word "liberal" into the equivalent of a socially unacceptable four-letter word, we shall have to use all of our skills as teachers, individually and collectively, to teach citizens and political leaders that

the study of the liberal arts is not unpatriotic and will not undermine our democratic republic and free-enterprise system. What **we** know, but what the general public has lost sight of in the din of the culture wars and partisan wrangling is that our democratic republic and economic system based on freedom of choice are the products of the kind of thinking fostered by the liberal-arts curriculum in the schools and colleges spawned by the Eighteenth-Century-European Enlightenment, which emphasized individual intellectual, political, and economic freedom.

George Washington, that conservative icon, thought that such an education was so important for the young American Republic that he endowed a classical academy to provide a free liberal education to both boys and girls. With the same impulse, Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia, which he listed in his epitaph along with his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and Virginia's Statute of Religious Freedom as one of the three things for which he most wanted to be remembered. Benjamin Franklin's thinking paralleled Washington's and Jefferson's when he founded what became the University of Pennsylvania. Even George F. Will, one of today's more thoughtful conservative pundits, echoed their ideas when he wrote, "The term 'liberal arts' connotes a certain elevation above utilitarian concerns. Yet liberal education is intensely useful." Will understands that the ideal of freedom, which all conservatives claim to uphold, is supported by a liberal education, the education worthy of a free person. The study of the Liberal Arts and Sciences through a liberal education allows us to be free by being able to learn from the past, understand the present, and conceive a better future. That is the message we need to keep reiterating to the public and political

leaders at school board meetings, in newspaper op eds, and through computer chat rooms and social networks.

More than that, however, our discipline-based and professional organizations must work together to advocate for a core secondary and collegiate liberal-arts curriculum that guarantees a truly liberal education, a curriculum that allows the various subjects taught to be seen as part of a larger and more meaningful whole. They should also insist that teachers should have academic degrees in the subjects that they teach, that administrators at all levels have academic degrees and significant experience as classroom teachers before they are appointed to administrative positions, that college and university professors have some basic training in pedagogy, and that faculty at all levels have a meaningful voice in matters concerning curriculum and policy. Furthermore, they must insist that, at the college and university level, the emphasis on the quantity of research needs to be reduced in the favor of quality, which takes time, thought, and careful review. Resources need to be shifted from the over-production of Ph.D.s in favor of assigning more full-time faculty to teach undergraduates.

In the midst of all this, we classicists must insist that our discipline, beginning with the study of Latin in the schools, is one of the strongest foundations for a liberal education. The continued vitality of the Classical tradition in our culture is everywhere in evidence. Just yesterday, I walked into a shop among the sushi bars, art stores, and antique shops on Wickenden Street here in Providence and found two new books on Latin for everyday use. Consider, also, the constant stream of movies and television productions like *Troy*, *Alexander*, *Gladiator*, *The 300*, *The Odyssey*, *Rome*, the new *Spartacus*, and the new *Clash of the Titans*. Look at the popularity of classically themed historical novels and

murder mysteries. Behold the numerous borrowings from and allusions to classical history, literature, and mythology in video and computer games, as ably analyzed by my colleague Roger Travis. That a knowledge of Latin is still essential for understanding modern Western culture has been made clear by my downstate colleague Joseph Solodow in his fascinating new book, *Latin Alive: The Survival of Latin in English and the Romance Languages* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). It is not just about linguistic heritage, but about the way in which Roman history and culture still inform who we are. It is a resounding answer to the negative judgments about the value of Latin recently expressed in Françoise Waquet's *Latin, the Empire of a Sign* (Verso, 2001), and Nicholas Ostler's *Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin* (Walker & Co., 2007).

It is clear that the study of Latin as articulated in the *Standards for Classical Languages and Learning* developed by the ACL, APA, CANE and the other regional Classical associations is one of the best foundations for a modern liberal education. After rereading these standards, reviewing the modern textbooks designed to meet them, and immersing myself in Richard Le Fleur's invaluable *Latin for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: From Concept to Classroom*, I am bowled over by the level of creativity and sophistication that is being brought to the teaching of Latin in the schools and sometimes even in the colleges and universities. While the ultimate goal of the standards and innovations in pedagogy is to enable students to read the Classical Latin texts that are at the heart of much Western thought, art, literature, and historical consciousness, they emphasize also the social, cultural, and historical context that is essential for reading and understanding those texts and perceiving how they relate to later history and our own times. In other

words, they strive to provide the foundations for a liberal education that used to be taught in the separate subjects of earlier secondary curricula.

Still, all of the elementary Latin textbooks like Oxford, Cambridge, *Ecce Romani*, Jenney, *Latin our Living Heritage*, *Latin for Americans*, *Latin for the New Millennium*, Wheelock, *Classical Latin: An Introductory Course*, etc. have their weaknesses as well as strengths in regard to modern standards and goals. There is no time for a close analysis of each, but I shall make some general comments and, drawing from their best features, outline what I think would constitute the ideal beginning text for high school and college. First, the modern emphasis on speaking and listening to Latin is essential and cannot be separated from the reading of Classical texts. Those texts were meant to be spoken aloud and heard, not silently read. If one gets used to the accents, stresses, phrasings, and rhythms of Latin, its written texts become easier to understand. Therefore, any beginning Latin textbook should start out, as many do, with a clear explication of the Latin alphabet, the pronunciations of consonants, long and short vowels and diphthongs, the proper division of Latin words into syllables, and the proper placement of the accent within words. Also, from the start, the book should deal forthrightly and clearly with the nature of Latin as an inflected language. I think that the presentation of subsequent linguistic material within the context of a continuous story line, whose episodes and accompanying visuals each illustrate some significant aspect of Roman society, culture, or history makes eminent sense.

I do not, however, think that it makes sense to throw students into such readings at the beginning of chapters without any idea of the new elements of Latin that they present and which cannot be understood without constant reference to the accompanying words and

phrases translated for them. Far better, it seems to me, is to introduce the relevant new vocabulary and grammatical and syntactical concepts and terms before reading the connected text used to illustrate them. Oh oh, I have used the word *grammatical*, which refers to *grammar*, which begins with *g*, which rhymes with *t*, and that spells trouble, trouble with a capital T. Actually, as Solodow points out in a delightful passage, *grammar* is the same word as *glamour*, which I always thought it had.

Well, just as Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain, le bourgeois gentilhomme, was speaking prose all along without knowing it, so he was using grammar without realizing it. Therefore, I have no quarrel with the idea that grammar should be taught more organically through use than just by brute force of memorization out of context. Still, as B. D. Hoyos makes clear in his excellent CANE booklet, *Latin, How to read it Fluently: A Practical Manual*, one has to have real mastery of all the major elements of Latin grammar if one is to read and understand a real Latin sentence fluently as its ancient author wrote it. Therefore, it helps first to acquaint students explicitly, through brief explanations, examples, and exercises, with the relevant new vocabulary and grammatical material to be met in a chapter's story. These exercises should be oral, aural, active, and written. After the reading, should come more oral/ aural and written exercises, games, and activities to reinforce the understanding and retention of both the story and its grammatical and cultural material.

Beginning texts like Oxford, Cambridge, and Ecce have stories that are well integrated with material portraying Roman social life, art, classical mythology, and material culture. Unfortunately, they seem too juvenile for students beyond middle school and do not really prepare the way for classical authors like Caesar, Nepos, Cicero, Catullus, Sallust,

Livy, Horace, Virgil and Ovid, authors whom students usually meet first in reading real Latin. Indeed, the stories in *Ecce* and Cambridge are set in the second half of the first century A.D., whereas the authors mentioned above lived 50 to 100 years earlier, in the time of the late Republic and Augustus.

What I would like to see for high-school and college students is a first-year book whose made-up readings are based on a major historical figure whose life and family are well documented in the ancient sources for the late Republic and the Principate of Augustus. My choice -- **surprise, surprise** -- would be Cicero. His family life as a boy, brother, husband, and father, with its very human problems of death, divorce, and a son who caused him worry before achieving success and prominence under Augustus, his relationship with his slave/freedman Tiro, and his origin as an *equus* from an Italian town give plenty of opportunities to explore Roman social life. What Cicero would have studied as a schoolboy and youth should provide ample opportunities to bring in Classical mythology, the legends of early Rome, and the major events and cultural developments in prior Roman history that informed so much of Classical Roman literature. Cicero's and his son's public careers would allow the introduction of the major political, intellectual, and literary figures of the late Republic and the Augustan Age. Thus a connected story line based on Cicero, his real family, and their private life would provide many opportunities to meet the Five C's of the national standards -- Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities -- while it would prepare them well for reading and understanding the major texts of Classical Latin authors in the Republican and Augustan eras. In the process, it would lay a good foundation for a liberal education.

Well, I have harrumphed enough. You can all wake up now and enjoy the rest of the evening.