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CICERO AND THE LIBERAL ARTS TRADITION IN AMERICA

The concerns of this paper are not those of the specialist in Ciceronian scholarship, but rather the ruminations of a classicist closely involved over the past decade in the forefront of higher education's national debate about reform of the general education curriculum, a recurrent theme since the founding of this nation's institutions of higher learning. This debate, in its current form and contours, is strikingly reminiscent of the lines of the argument over specialized and liberal arts education that Cicero poses in the *De Oratore*, a work that has been acknowledged as the fullest statement of his own philosophy of higher education. In his book, *Roman Education: From Cicero To Quintilian*, Aubrey Gwynn has called it "a masterpiece which may not unfairly be called the orator's programme of general education reform" (1).

The three books of the *De Oratore* contain Cicero's mature encapsulation of a lifelong conviction about the essentiality of a broad liberal arts foundation for the practicing lawyer. That thesis, surfacing as early as his *De Inventione* — which is assumed to have been published somewhere between his 16th and 19th birthdays (2) — before he had had a chance to practice what he preached or the experience of over thirty years as the leading lawyer of his day, was further developed programmatically in the sequence of *Rhetorica*, the *Brutus, Orator*, and the missing *Hortensius* that followed the publication of the *De Oratore*. In fact, the consistency of Cicero's concern about curricular reform, the critical problems he saw in the Roman educational program, and his idealistic commitment to the practical value for Roman citizens of a core curriculum based on the Greeks' comprehensive program of studies and critical approach to learning are found *passim* throughout the large Ciceronian corpus. The educated Romans' conventional acknowledgment of their debt to Greece as their chosen intellectual ancestor is ubiquitous in Cicero's works, although it was immortalized in Horace's later poetic echo (*Epistles* 2,1,156-7): *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis intulit agresti Latio* ("Greece, conquered, took captive her savage conqueror and brought the arts into

(1) Aubrey Gwynn, op. cit., N.Y., Russell and Russell, 1964, 81.
(2) *De Or.* 1,5.

rustic Latium"). But in *Tusculanae Disputationes*, Cicero is making the point as a critic of the educational system and would-be reformer when he states in 2,27: "we, the Romans, have gone to school in Greece; we read their poets and learn them by heart, and then we think ourselves scholars and men of culture" (3). Cicero is here arguing for a more comprehensive and analytical approach to higher education in the liberal arts beyond that of the lower schools as a prerequisite not only for a professional career but for living a truly civilized life, reflecting his ideal of *humanitas* as the highest goal of his distinctive educational theory. That *summum bonum* is best expressed in the *De Re Publica* 1,28, when he has Scipio assert: *appellari ceteros homines esse, solos eos qui essent politi propriis humanitatis artibus* ("the rest are called *homines*, but only those are truly *homines* who have been *politi*, 'refined', by the studies appropriate to *humanitas*"), a term which Cicero commonly identifies as the aim of the *artes liberales* (4), and especially in the *De Oratore*, his paeon to a liberal arts education as the best preparation for a career and for a life of intellectual growth.

The focus of this paper will be on the *De Oratore* as an uncanny analysis or *Vorspiel* of two problems that I believe have most preoccupied and plagued American higher education throughout its history into the present:

1. The false dichotomy between liberal arts education and career preparation or general versus specialized education — a polarization that is educationally counterproductive not only within the academy, but in society at large. Let me note here the acute observation of Riesman and Jencks about American education in their study, *The Academic Revolution*: "The question has always been h o w an institution mixed the academic with the vocational, not w h e t h e r it did so" (5).

2. Disagreement over the definition of liberal education, especially in terms of its content, and the allegation that it is impossible or even undesirable to define what an educated person ought to know in the face of explosions of new knowledge — an argument invoked periodically for every change in the evolution of the curriculum of American higher education, whether to support greater specialization or as a barrier against attempts to restore a common general education.

In the dedication of the *De Oratore* to his brother, Cicero acknowledges that it was Quintus who had requested that he publish a book which

(3) *At vero nos, docti scilicet a Graecia, haec a pueritia et legimus et discimus, hanc eruditionem liberalem et doctrinam putamus.*

(4) *E.g., de Inv.* 1,35; *de Or.* 1,72; *Tusc. Dis.* 2,27; *Arch.* 4; *de Fin.* 3,4 (*artes . . . ingenuae*).

(5) Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, N.Y., Doubleday, 1968), 199.

would address the issues of their disagreement over what kind of education is required to produce professional excellence. The thesis is specifically formulated in terms of Cicero's conviction that *eloquentia* depends on the trained skill of the most highly educated men (*prudentissimorum hominum artibus*) and his brother's equally strong position that it must depend rather on natural talent (*ingenium*) and practical training (*exercitatio*), not learning (*doctrina*) (1,5).

The setting of the dialogue is thirty-five years earlier (91 B.C.) at the Tusculan villa of Antonius, with the problem dramatized as a debate in which the two major interlocutors, Crassus and Antonius, are symbolic stand-ins for Cicero and Quintus. Time permits only selective treatment of their detailed points of view in which Crassus calls for the broadest liberal education, requiring *maximarum rerum scientia*, and Antonius rejects the need for wide knowledge in a career as practical as law and maintains that it is even counterproductive, since such knowledge leads to an approach that is too conceptual or abstract to be useful. (Let me add as an *obiter dictum* Crassus' rejoinder that the school curriculum for the major in rhetoric has not produced the ablest lawyers, affording a very perceptive and perhaps currently relevant critique of specialized training that passes for education.) Commenting on the components of the standard curriculum — practical exercises on cases taken from real life, the writing of compositions, paraphrasing Greek poetry and prose from memory, voice training and gestures (to which he would add observing actors as well as orators), and public speaking exercises —, he strongly asserts that it is essential to move beyond that sheltered training ground to require the widest possible curriculum, where critical studies in the liberal arts would include reading the poets, as well as experts and writers in all the *bonae artes* (1,158), an informed grasp of history, law, political philosophy, the procedures of the senate, government policy, and the rights of allies, treaties, and conventions, not only to gain knowledge of all these fields, but to criticize, refute, raise questions, and be required to argue on both sides of every question. This programmatic objective reads very much like the goals of liberal education one typically finds in college catalogues of our day. Moreover, a powerful practical rationale for requiring the study of a foreign language is contained in Crassus' acute observation on the efficacy of a practice he followed, when somewhat older, of translating speeches of the best Greek orators freely into the best Latin he could muster.

Antonius has the last word, challenging Crassus with the counterargument that what is needed is not general knowledge, but the ability to use language that is pleasing to audiences and convincing arguments that can win cases in law courts and the public forum, of course abetted by natural

endowments of voice, delivery, and charm (*voce et actione et lepore* 213). Cicero even goes so far as to aim a blow at his own favorite pursuit, when he has Antonius adamantly reject the study of philosophy, dismissing *philosophorum libros* as fine reading for a restful holiday in the country, and — to add insult to injury — suggesting that the pursuit of philosophy might be counterproductive to successful practice, since it could lead to disapproving as unethical or unseemly some of the most effective techniques in pleading cases (227). Indeed, he would not even recommend wide knowledge of the law in educating for the legal profession, for it is not *scientia iuris* that wins, but delivery (239), noting that one can always look up special points of law. (An interesting contradiction of that view can be found in the explicit advocacy by our law schools of a broad liberal arts pre-law curriculum.) Antonius' clinching argument is that of the narrow specialist of any day, that, while he does not object to studying everything, the fact is that the expert specialist needs to spend all his time on his single vocation (260).

In case we missed Cicero's subtlety, the author begins the second book of the *De Oratore* by providing his brother with the proof of the pudding in admitting that both Antonius and Crassus have had the best kind of liberal arts education, deriving their *eloquentia* from the fullest knowledge (*summa scientia*) of all matters, thus artfully swiping at Antonius' cynical assertion that his speeches would be more acceptable *nostro populo*, if it were thought that he had never engaged in study at all. We are hereby reminded that popular suspicion of the intellectual is not a native product of our time or country. That brings to mind another endemic phenomenon with which the American academy has had to cope, the endless multiplication of new and narrower specializations leading to the fragmentation and disconnectedness of learning, which Cicero presciently deplored in *De Oratore* 3,132, when he cites the diminution or great losses to the *magnitudines artium* (great scope of the *artes*) from being split up into separate parts. It is not hard at the end of the 20th century to echo his *o tempora! o mores!*.

In my own experience as peripatetic speaker and consultant across this country and Canada on campuses where faculties are in search of a formula and the courage to restore some commonality and coherence to general education, and indeed as observer of heroic efforts to restore some balance to the career-weighted baccalaureate curricula of so many undergraduate institutions, I have witnessed the waging of bloody battles over the general and specialized components of baccalaureate education along the same polarized arguments that Cicero so eloquently embodied in the *agon* between Crassus and Antonius in the *De Oratore*. I also can testify to a trend toward the same rational solution to be found in Cicero's advo-

cacy of a general liberal arts education as the best foundational equipment to complement specialized training in order to produce the best kind of professional excellence. There are a growing number of institutions that have successfully restored some balance to their curricula through reconceptualizing and totally redesigning into a coherent liberal arts program the always existing and often begrudged number of credits allocated to "general education".

As for the first colonial colleges, whose acknowledged mission was vocational in training for public employment in church and the civil state, the standard curriculum was the Greek and Latin course of study (with the addition of Hebrew as a staple of a puritan community) which they brought along with them as appropriate baggage for the educated person. In a sense, the mission of the American curriculum has always to some degree been vocational and oriented toward social usefulness. The historian Frederick Rudolph has noted the influence of ancient literature and the study of the Latin and Greek languages on the political education of the founding fathers, and through the work of classicist Meyer Reinhold we have available published illustrations from the classical authors read by "the founding fathers and their contemporaries" (6). However, the history of American higher education can be seen as a series of periodic attacks on the classical tradition, often served up as the ideal scapegoat for accommodating a succession of curricular changes. The following catalogue of changes is offered as illustrative rather than exhaustive: an enlarged role for the sciences (with the breakdown of natural philosophy into separate disciplines) and for mathematics, especially after the enlightenment, as well as recognition of modern language study in the required curriculum at the beginning of the nineteenth century and incursions by new branches of social science later in the century; incorporation into the already crowded and disconnected curriculum of the specialized purposes of the German university without benefit of the European gymnasium and lycee (7); successful efforts to professionalize faculties and upgrade training and credentials for occupations formerly gained through apprenticeships (e.g., law and medicine); and the general impact of rapid technological advances in an industrialized society where more material and secular values became the coins of prestige and where institutions of higher education had multiplied and diversified with the advent over time of land grant colleges with their

(6) Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum. A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco Washington London 1978; Meyer Reinhold, *The Classick Pages. Classical Reading of Eighteenth-Century Americans*, American Philological Association 1975.

(7) The first Ph.D.'s were awarded at Yale University in 1860.

emphasis on agriculture and mechanical arts (8), comprehensive and research institutions (9), two-year junior and community colleges, and the multiversity concept (10) — to meet the accumulated and often conflicting expectations of a democratic and pluralistic society. The impact of direct and indirect attacks on the classical curriculum (despite substantive defenses like the landmark Yale report of 1828) was further compounded by the export of Charles William Eliot's triumphant elective system from the Harvard pulpit at the turn of this century, purportedly dealing the near-death blow to the concept of a liberal education foundation and the unity of knowledge. After the second world war, Harvard's "Red Book" (*General Education in a Free Society*, 1945) and, over three decades later, its spearheading of the national core curriculum revival (which at home produced a compromised model, offering an even wider election of courses organized under a new brand of distribution areas) may be viewed as attempts at atonement to reverse what Charles Eliot Morison described as the harm done to American education by President Eliot's reform (11). Yet, all that erosion of the classical curriculum, dramatically and extensively analyzed in Rudolph's book, and the additional onslaught of rampant careerism in recent decades were never able to stifle entirely America's kind of love affair with the liberal arts tradition.

This leads into the heart of the second problem and most difficult stumbling block to liberal arts reform today, consensus on the content of a general education program, often couched in terms of whether any faculty can or should even try to define what the liberal arts are or even what minimally it would like every one of its undergraduates to learn. Book III of the *De Oratore* will serve as our text on this thorny impasse.

While Cicero's simple reference to teachers (*magistri*) of the *artes liberales* in his youthful *De Inventione* (1,35) demonstrates that it was a commonly understood term, in *De Oratore* III he does not equivocate on defining the content of the liberal arts curriculum. He has Catulus note that the famous Greek sophist of the 5th century, Hippias, boasted that there was not a single thing in any discipline of universal knowledge that he did not know and that he had mastered the *artes quibus liberales doctrinae atque ingenuae continerentur* (*De Oratore* 3,127) — the education or, literally, arts that comprise the studies or disciplines, in Rackham's

(8) Under the Morrill Act of 1862.

(9) Cornell as a comprehensive university in the 1860's and Johns Hopkins as a research university in the 1870's.

(10) See Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard U. Press, 1963.

(11) *Three Centuries at Harvard, 1636-1936*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard U. Press, 1936.

Loeb translation "that form the basis of the liberal education of a gentleman". Obligingly for our purposes, a list follows identifying the components of a liberal arts curriculum: *geometria; musica; litterarum cognitionem et poetarum; de naturis rerum; de hominum moribus; de rebus publicis.* While Crassus' curriculum for the orator, as noted above, was more extensive than Catulus', there is a closer resemblance between these components and the required subject areas of conventional general education programs in American colleges, whose core courses or distribution choices usually include: mathematics; music (or one of the fine arts); literature (a Greek and Roman category that included the genre of history) and poetry; natural sciences; ethics (or more broadly philosophy); and public affairs or political science (more widely interpreted as subsuming the social sciences, themselves offshoots of the ancient genres, philosophy and history).

Perhaps a gloss is in order on Cicero's views in regard to two areas whose inclusion in the required college curriculum has often been in dispute among American educators — national history and foreign languages. The significance Cicero attached to the study of history is attested in *De Oratore* 2,36, where he extols its educational value as a link with the past in such laudatory terms as "witness of the ages, light of truth, life of tradition, teacher of life, messenger of antiquity". Gwynn (12) claims that Cicero's theory of historical criticism and scientific approach to the discipline "would do credit to any modern university professor", noting his insistence on accurate knowledge of chronology and geography, causes behind superficial phenomena, human psychology, etc. While Roman school exercises included declamations from Greek history, but allegedly neglected available texts on Roman history such as Naevius' *Bellum Punicum* and Ennius' *Annales*, Cicero's emphasis on the educational necessity of studying national history rings loud and clear in his *Orator* (120): "to be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to be a child forever. For what is the life of a human being, unless interwoven with the life of those who came before us by that record of past history?" Perhaps a closer translation of the Latin *memoria rerum veterum* would be "remembrance of things past", to borrow Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (13). Although history was never taught as a separate subject, probably because the schools of the republic preferred

(12) Op. cit. For a fuller treatment of Cicero's views on history, see pages 102-107.

(13) *Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contexitur?*

Greek literature to Latin, we do have on record Cicero's complaint in his preface to the *De Legibus* (1,5-8) that Latin literature has no Roman historian. (Livy later more than filled that hiatus!) As for a foreign language requirement, it is easy to assume that that principle was taken for granted in a curriculum in which facility in Greek was a *sine qua non* for understanding its content, and Cicero certainly argues the untold benefits of studying a second language for improving skills in one's native language.

In any case, although the traditional account of the origin of our concept of the liberal arts is usually traced to the *trivium* and *quadrivium* of the Middle Ages, in my judgment, the American concept of a liberal arts curriculum comes closer in its general outlines to the major categories and purposes of the Ciceronian ideal, although admittedly in practice it falls far short of both. The eternal battle over its content is now manifested in the western versus non-western tug-of-war, unfortunately raging in the wake of the Stanford contretemps. In some of its less productive nuances the whipping boy is turning out to be the classical tradition, with Greek civilization being resurrected as villain in a new chapter in the evolution of higher education in America's multicultural society. As for the insinuation of a new and invidious buzzword, "political correctness", into the academic debate, the glaring incongruity of even using the term in the very stronghold of open inquiry and pluralism makes it not only un-Ciceronian, but downright un-American. A more optimistic reading of the controversy is not as an attack on the principle of liberal education, (and no one either side can make that interpretation with certainty) but rather as an opportunity for reexamining what we mean by a liberal education, as Cicero in his day attempted, without our having to jettison or attenuate the classical foundation on which our founders constructed America's cumulative educational heritage. Since, in my judgment, the unexamined curriculum is no more worth teaching than "the unexamined life" in the Socratic dictum is "worth living", an honest hearing is in order. Rational discourse about new claims to inclusion in the liberal arts curriculum, for which Cicero was striving in his day, should lead to a judiciously balanced curriculum in a country that has been responsive in reshaping its perspectives without abandoning its roots in and allegiance to the liberal arts tradition.

Perhaps a few comments are in order on the meaning and classical connotations of the term "liberal arts", which receives so much lipservice these days as an educational desideratum. The crux of the matter is that, although popular etymology has moved the derivation of the term from studies that are worthy of the free person to the common definition as studies in those areas of knowledge that liberate the mind and free from ignorance, agreement on its nature and its content continues to elude and

divide academic professionals. I think most faculties would agree on what liberal education should not be — certainly that it not produce narrow technocrats or ideologues with closed minds or slaves to prejudice or parochial interests. However it is defined, advocacy of liberal education outside the academy, especially in the corporate world, has been as American as apple pie and has miraculously escaped unscathed from the perverted decline and unseemly distortion of the word "liberal" in the political rhetoric of our day. After all, even George Bush, who chose to campaign as "the education president", dramatically gave the nod to liberal education (if we read his lips which never actually uttered the pejorative "L" word), when he identified education as the nation's highest priority and especially, after his election, at a historic governors' conference proclaimed his view of the purposes of education in the following words: "there is more to learning than just our trade balance or the graying of our work force; it is broader than the important, but narrow, compass of economics and government". When he said that he was looking to the day "when every young American can know the life of the mind", he was explicitly, even if unconsciously, championing the cause of liberal education in the spirit of Cicero's *De Oratore.*

In conclusion, it would be remiss to ignore the decline of serious study of Cicero in American colleges, where he has long been confined to the specialized curriculum of the Latin major. Moreover, during my own lifetime, when I joined the Classics Department at Brooklyn College over forty years ago, some of Cicero's works in English translation were included in the general education program of every student, with the *De Senectute* and the *Somnium Scipionis* outliving the rest. In the fallout of the revolutionary late sixties, Cicero was swept away along with the required curriculum. Although the restoration of a common liberal arts core curriculum at Brooklyn College in 1980 has won national acclaim as an exemplary model, severe credit limitations for general education reduced the Roman presence to only Lucretius and Vergil in the otherwise Greek canon. While modesty is not usually considered a Ciceronian characteristic by his detractors, I believe that Cicero would vote for giving his Greek mentors priority, and he did have high praise for Lucretius' posthumously published *De rerum natura* (14). A similar fate seems to have befallen Cicero at Columbia University, where the only evidence of his survival as a contributor to western thought is to be found in the inscription on the frieze of Butler Library where his name is sculpted along with Vergil's amid a pantheon of great writers of classical Greece. But his liberal approach to learning as the

(14) *Ad Q. fratrem* 2,9,3: *Lucreti poemata, ut scribis, ita sunt, multi luminibus ingenii, multae tamen artis.*

most practical form of education and rejection of narrow specialization are forces still alive in the subconscious reaches of the American psyche, like the Roman psyche both practical and idealistic in nature. The fact that Americans still stand in admiration of and lament the rarity of the "Renaissance man" in their midst may owe something to the European source of our educational ideals, which source was itself nurtured by Cicero's works. In fact, it has been said that no other dialogue has had more permanent influence on the history of Graeco-Roman and European culture than the *De Oratore* (15). Undoubtedly, that impact owed something to the immeasurable influence Cicero's works had had on Petrarch's philosophy of education. Petrarch's supreme devotion to the study of Cicero and his admiration for his philosophy of education survived disillusionment with his mentor's political apologias in his letters (16). Even after the discovery of ancient Rome's masterwork on education written by an earlier admirer of Cicero a century after his death, Petrarch noted: "I had no taste for anything but Cicero, especially after I read the *Institutiones Oratoriae* of Quintilian" (17). For further corroboration of Petrarchian influence as a force in the sturdy *fortleben* of the *De Oratore* in the later European culture of America's forebears, I adduce a comment by the coordinator of this *Colloquium*, Maristella Lorch, from her recent essay, *Petrarch and Cicero* (18) to the effect that Renaissance Humanism drew from Cicero its "mission to transmit human values currently neglected from a glorious past to future generations".

In my view from the bridge spanning the past twenty centuries, Cicero has survived, if not as an actual presence on the reading list of the typical current canon, at least in his stated mission as transmitter of the values of *humanitas* inherent in the study of the *artes liberales*. It is in that sense that the spirit of Cicero can be said to have survived once again in America's irrepressible and consistent commitment to the ideal of liberal education for all citizens as an inalienable right of a democratic society.

(15) Gwynn, op. cit., 81.

(16) See D.R. Shackleton Bailey's *Cicero's Letters to Atticus*, Cambridge U. Press 1965-1968.

(17) *Letters from Petrarch*, edited and translated by Morris Bishop, Bloomington, Indiana 1966, 295.

(18) A. Rabil, *Italian Humanism*, 1989.