

Keeping Faith:  
Persons, Tradition and Liberal Education

19 April, 2017

I have been acquainted (in various connections: as prospective student, student, alumnus, member of the faculty) with this community of learning for some 47 years, having first set foot in its precincts on (as I reckon it) April 1—yes, April Fool’s Day—of 1970, 7 months into my 17<sup>th</sup> year. A high school mentor, the drama instructor, George Cuyler, ’53, had proposed: “There’s a little Catholic school down in the Bay Area; it’s not for everyone, but I think you might be interested.” Mid-Easter-week, we drove down from the far North Valley together—he to renew his longstanding—what? I shall say “discipleship”—with Br. Sixtus Robert Smith, FSC; I was along—though I knew it not—to begin mine. George’s solicitous gesture was made possible owing to the College’s traditional Holy Week recess. Anderson Union High School, like nearly all schools of the time, recessed over Easter week; my parents, who might have tolerated an absence from classes in aid of an introduction to CAL or to USC, or even to UOP, would never have done in aid of an introduction to a *Catholic* school. Ah! Benign tradition!

What I have rather grandly called George Cuyler’s “discipleship” with Br. Robert went (so far as George was concerned) under a creed summed by the proclamation hanging over his desk: “Nobody ever *taught* anybody anything.” Br. Robert—a Laval-educated Thomist—would, no doubt, have interposed, “*Distinguo!*” Still, on the principle of charitable interpretation, George’s motto may be taken to

affirm—if too pungently—a signal principle which was certainly Br. Robert’s conviction and was embodied in his practice:

*of a liberal education, the student is the primary agent.*

I have called George’s gesture “solicitous.” That he thought an introduction to Br. Robert and to his work, the Integral Program, perhaps the best thing in his gift, I do not doubt. Still, he might simply have urged me to write or otherwise inquire; or he might have asked Mike Tonsing in Admissions to send me a College Bulletin or a brochure. George chose, instead, to introduce me in person, to make his gesture a personal benefaction—which, as things turned out, it was: and of a life-making sort.

Br. Robert, for his part, welcomed, encouraged, and—somehow—left me with the strong sense that the unveiling of thrilling mysteries was immediately afoot . . . in the language and mathematics tutorials, and in the seminar, that I (and a few others, prospective students) would shortly engage. He then turned me over directly to my second SMC acquaintance, one wild-eyed, wild-haired Ernest S. (I’m just a poor boy from Bakersfield) Pierucci who, for his part, launched an interrogation. For, Ernest had then, as now, no *polite* small talk . . . because he had *no* small talk at all: just what— he demanded, in effect—did my sensibilities, a whole seventeen years seven months in gestation, make of God, Humanity and the World? Well, I told him.

There are benefactions of a kind for which we can make a fitting return only by extending or multiplying them in imitation of our benefactor, so that gratitude stands as one mode by which *bonum diffusivum sui*, at any rate, when the good in

point must recruit human action. So, I suspect, did George's gesture of introduction on my behalf stand in the economy of his gratitude to Br. Robert.

"Nobody ever taught anybody anything"—in the *belief*, I suppose, that this *tradendum* of truth, must remain a received *agendum* at SMC (and, as I suspect Paul Giurlanda is even now whispering to someone, "no doubt also in the *certainty* that nobody ever taught *Cortright* anything")—George resolved to introduce me to Saint Mary's, to the Integral Program and to Br. Robert; consequently, also he caused my introduction to Ernest, and in due course, to Frank Ellis, to Theo Carlile, Fr. Owen Carroll, Albert Dragstedt, Mary Doyle and Norman Springer, Br. Mel, Br. Edmund, Br. Kenneth, Br. Myron, Br. L. Raphael, David Loomis, Alan Pollock . . . Joseph Lanigan . . . (In my text, ellipses are interspersed among the names to remind me how many more—Msgr. McCarren, Al Gelinas, Jane Sangwine-Yager, James Townsend, Diana Wu, Jim Ligouri . . .—must be included to constitute even a tithe of all the reasons-in-person I have to emulate George's example of gratitude—Kathy Roper, Steve Sloane, Jerry Brunetti . . .) Each has shown me—as all have shown many of you—something of wisdom and something of freedom—and all, as Joseph Lanigan would say, in secret complicity with the movement of the Spirit through Whom all things luminous descend from the Father of Lights.

But I shall take up just two such: Br. Robert himself and Joseph Lanigan, by my lights the freest and the wisest of my time in this community of learning. The freest? Br. Robert—also wise, indeed; but one who could make you *see* that wisdom *is* freedom. The wisest? Joseph Lanigan—also free, indeed; but one who could make you *see* that freedom *is* wisdom. Thus between them, Joseph and Br. Robert frame

liberal education, which is our coming to know—by our coming to live—the convertibility of wisdom with freedom, freedom with wisdom. So between them, they supply the local *dicta authentica* by which, if we keep faith with them—with these our preceptors and friends—we will preserve among us, and bestow upon others, a living and effective way of educating liberally—which, as Joseph would also remind us, is a cardinal work of spiritual mercy.

Let me begin with Br. Sixtus Robert Smith's observation from *New Venture in the Liberal Arts*, the so-called "Rosenberg Report," authored now 60 years ago, in 1957:

The problem of educating a student in the liberal arts is, in a certain sense, the same for all those who undertake that work at a given time in a given culture. In this sense it might be possible to imagine that all American colleges had a single task to perform. Students need to acquire certain basic linguistic, logical and mathematical skills; they need to be capable of performing certain kinds of scientific observations and experiments. Above all, their minds must be moved to pursuing the intellectual life by considering the questions which are its beginning. They must be encouraged and challenged by a study of the best available alternative answers. These, and more things like them, are more or less true always and everywhere.

Such considerations, however, are altogether inadequate to describe or account for the way in which any education [I read, *pari passu*, any liberal education] is or can be given. In fact, what is most essential to a genuine work of education [again, I read, *pari passu*, a genuine work of liberal education] is an association of teachers who are united by a common tradition and who together are striving to develop and preserve it. It is through such a tradition that they are linked to the alumni and the current generation of students. It is probably some vague apprehension of what this means that will lead new groups of young men or women to seek admission to a school . . .<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Keegan, Br. S. Robert, FSC *et alii*, *New Venture in the Liberal Arts*, Two-year Report, Saint Mary's College Curriculum Study, 1955–57 (Saint Mary's College, 1957); reprinted in S. A. Cortright, ed., *What Is It to Educate Liberally? Essays by Faculty and Friends of Saint Mary's College* (Saint Mary's College: Office of the President, 1996, 21.

From the pen of a Christian Brother, and in the context of 1957, “an *association of teachers* who are united by a common tradition and who together are striving to develop and preserve it,” could hardly fail to suggest the Institute itself as a primary or focal analogue among an array of undertakings, all more or less *in form* as associations of teachers committed to the preservation (by development) of distinct, transmissible ways of conducting educational works.

Nevertheless, what Br. Robert had explicitly in mind was not the Institute, but the late arising (1941–47) “liberal arts program” peculiar (among the Institute’s works worldwide) to Saint Mary’s College, to which (as he averred) “many alumni of the last ten years” and “some faculty” could be accounted “attached” (his term). This program, “a series of readings in Great Books, called the World Classics Program,” had come (by 1957) to constitute (he proposed) “*the symbol of the Saint Mary’s liberal arts school.*”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the considerations that Br. Robert finds “altogether inadequate” to account for how an education in the liberal arts “is or can be given”—the acquisition of skills (mathematical, linguistic, logical), attainment to capacities for intellectual performance (scientific observation and experimentation), appreciation of foundational questions and of principal essays at answering them (intellectual history?)—stand, all of them, in the character of proximate or final *ends*. Were these considerations indeed adequate to describe the *way or ways* in which the prescribed ends—and more like them—could be attained (and thereby, an education in the liberal arts attained *eo ipso*), then what (already in the late 1950’s)

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<sup>2</sup> *What Is It . . . ?*, 22.

was being called “the multiversity” would furnish—on some principle of selection, and through its disciplinary units—both the ends and assorted associations of teachers devoted to development and transmission of the apposite means.

In brief, were the *problem*—that is, the “thing thrown out before,” the obstruction to be overcome (πρόβλημα, *problēma*)—of educating a student in the liberal arts her studies’ *completeness*, it would be hard to credit Br. Robert’s demurral. The concern of the Rosenberg study’s managers, a concern raised to the study’s theme by Br. Robert, was not the completeness of the proposed curriculum, but its integration. The concern for integration drove the study in the initial “great ideas” form championed by James L. Hagerty; concern for integration continued to drive the study in its second year, after failing health had forced Hagerty’s retirement and had delivered the study’s management to Br. Robert, who characterized “the problem” as “to see what could be done to deepen and to make more effective the reading of the Great Books by integrating this reading with other freshman courses . . .”<sup>3</sup>

The conclusion of the two-year Rosenberg study, then, left the experimental curriculum, the nascent “Integrated [Integral] Curriculum,” on a trajectory for “integration” in the sense of “undertakings conspiring to a single *ostensible* end,” *viz.*: the *effective* reading of the great books.<sup>4</sup> Why should this end constitute the ostention—the definitive display—of (as Br. Robert put it) “a genuine work of liberal education”?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *What Is It . . .?*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Cf.*, *New Venture in the Liberal Arts*, “A Prospectus for the Later Years,” in *What Is It . . .?*, 27–28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, “The Revised Freshman Courses and Their Integration,” 21.

Though I know of no wholly adequate, I know of no better, *brief* articulation of the “reduction”—the *reductio*, the “leading back” (*not* “the boiling down”)—that equates the great books curriculum with a liberal education than Jacob Klein’s 1965 address, “On Liberal Education,” delivered at Saint Mary’s College, taken together with its forerunner and companion piece, “The Idea of Liberal Education” (1960).<sup>6</sup> (While not a founder of the St. John’s “New Program,” Jacob Klein was “the principal formulator of its intellectual presuppositions,”<sup>7</sup> and Br. Robert’s friend—who famously named him “the freest man I ever met.” After 30 some years at Saint Mary’s, Br. Robert joined the faculty of St. John’s, and spent a second career—another 30+ years—pursuing liberal education under the form proposed by Klein.)

That liberal education “leads up to” (*educare*) a life lived in human freedom—*viz.*: one attuned to the specifically human enjoyment of aesthetic and intellectual activity, and equal to—because not limited to, not “roofed,” so to speak, by—the challenges of *politeia*, of unqualified partnership in the comprehensive, temporal human good, is Klein’s classical starting point and that of what I shall call (and just once) liberal education through programmatic conversational inquiry into the great books. But the freedom promised by such a life, alike in antiquity and presently,

is endangered by the dominance of accepted opinions, the “idols of the market-place” in Baconian terminology. However “free” the free man

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<sup>6</sup> Jacob Klein, “On Liberal Education,” delivered 25 March, 1965, at the Colloquium, “The Liberal Arts Curriculum: Structure and Content” (Saint Mary’s College of California, 25–27 March, 1965); published in *The Bulletin of the Association of American Colleges*, 52: 2 (1966); reprinted in Jacob Klein, *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis, Maryland: St. John’s College Press, 1985), 261–268; reprinted in *What Is It to Educate Liberally?*, 30–36.

<sup>7</sup> Eva T. H. Brann, “Take No Thought for Tomorrow,” Keynote Address, Colloquium *Continuity and Change, The Liberal Arts Curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Saint Mary’s College, 8 November, 1990; reprinted in *What Is It to Educate Liberally?*, 128 – 133; cf. 132.

may be, he has thus still to free himself from the shackles of conventional views which pass for the truth of things. He has to cultivate pursuits in which the truth of things is truly made an attainable goal. These pursuits constitute the arts of freedom, the “liberal arts.” Liberal Education,” then, consists in the acquisition the liberal arts.<sup>8</sup>

Aboriginally, the acquisition and practice of the liberal arts is beset by difficulties of two orders, (i) one relating to their content, the other (ii) to their pursuit over time and through generations. The business of a liberal arts curriculum, a practical proposal for the fulfillment of liberal education, is to address and counteract these difficulties. They cannot be entirely resolved.

(i)

The classical liberal arts were, originally, the *mathemata*, the eminently intelligible, learnable, teachable studies—the “mathematics”: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—the pure and applied arts of discrete and continuous quantity, through which the welter of experience stands still, so to speak, for examination in thought. In addition, classical antiquity knew “unofficially, as it were, a fifth liberal preoccupation—the inquiry into nature (*hē peri phuseōs historia*), natural history.”<sup>9</sup> That later antiquity appended the *trivium* of linguistic arts—grammar, logic, rhetoric—to the *quadrivium* (or the “*quadrivium plus one*”), and laid the emphasis *there*, was owing to the inherent “questionability” of the former.

The ultimate foundations of the original four . . . or five liberal arts remained doubtful, becoming . . . the subject matter of philosophical reflection. The pursuit of truth in these arts, through which freedom was meant to find . . . its integrity, seemed to become truncated and encroached upon by definitions and hypotheses which lacked

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<sup>8</sup> “On Liberal Education” in *Lectures and Essays*, 261–262.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

certainty and persuasiveness and put limits to our understanding. This could not be said of the trivial arts.

Indeed, the trivial arts—open to all on the basis of native speech—were (and are) sufficient to frame philosophical reflection: they suffice for the formulation of genuine questions; but that is all. Hence,

integral knowledge was not achievable in any of the seven arts . . . [so] they preserved the name of “arts” (*technai*) in contradistinction to “knowledges” (*scientiae, epistēmai*). Philosophical wisdom was meant to supply what they were lacking.

Accordingly, the first rule—the first *ratio* or measure—of liberal education is that it “requires—for the learner as well as for the teacher—the practice of philosophical reflection and the awareness of its guiding role.”<sup>10</sup>

(ii)

The liberal arts are subject to the conditions that govern the perpetuation of all intellectual art among human beings. All intellectual art rests upon detached [disinterested] inquiry, and in the perspective of such inquiry, central terms lose the ambiguity—the “ranginess” or the “connected shades of meaning”—that characterize common speech. They acquire definite senses determined by the shape of the inquiry itself. If inquiry attains to science (*epistēmē*) or art (*technē*), then:

[T]he inquirer . . . turns, of necessity, into an “expert” who is able to pass his knowledge on to others . . . to become a teacher. [Here is the distinction between teaching and tradition: the *tradendum* is not mine; I may not alter it; it can be *traditum* if and only if I deliver it in tact to one who wishes to receive it in tact.] It is thus that words do indeed become “technical” and transcend the habitual and familiar. . . . And yet, the “technical” use of words tends, in turn, to become accepted and to win a familiarity of its own. The passing on of sciences, arts and skills, especially of intellectual ones, cannot quite avoid the danger of blurring the original understanding on which those disciplines are based. The terms which embody that

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<sup>10</sup> “On Liberal Education,” *Lectures and Essays*, 262.

understanding, the indispensable terms of art . . . the “technical” terms, acquire gradually a life of their own, severed from the original insights. In the process of perpetuating the art, those insights tend to approach the status of sediments, that is, of something understood derivatively and in a matter-of-course fashion. The technical terms begin to form a technical jargon spreading a thick veil over the primordial sources.

Accordingly, the second rule—the second *ratio* or measure—of liberal education is that it must “counteract this process of sedimentation and . . . find the proper ways of doing this.”<sup>11</sup>

These rules (again, *rationes* or measures) of liberal education, derived from reflection on its classical sources, are an answer to the question whether, under conditions of “the multiversity of our universities . . . genuine liberal education [can] remain a desirable goal?”

this will depend, I submit, on whether the two rules I have referred to will be observed in the process of learning . . . [whether] whatever the subject matter . . . [i] the learner is made to reflect on the assumptions underlying the way the subject matter is presented . . . and [ii] the technical notions governing the presentation are shown to arise from fundamental insights freed from their status of sedimentation.<sup>12</sup>

We must here stipulate that (i), the rule of philosophical reflection, must not be mistaken for the programmatic reading of philosophical works, and still less for the “application” of one or more philosophic methods. The rule is, rather, that the curriculum must persistently invite the formulation and pursuit of metastrophic questions:

We do . . . experience a kind of question which, as it were, tends to smash the bounds that limit us. We do occasionally stop altogether and face the familiar as if for the first time—anything: a person, the street, the sky, a fly. The overwhelming impression on these

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<sup>11</sup> Klein, “On Liberal Education,” in *Lectures and Essays*, 263.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 264.

occasions is the strangeness of the thing we contemplate. . . . We suddenly do not feel at home in this world of ours. We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We re-flect. Plato has a word for it: *metastrophē* or *periagogē*, a turnabout, a conversion. We detach ourselves from all that is familiar to us; we change the direction of our inquiry; we do not explore the unknown anymore; on the contrary, we convert the known into the unknown. We wonder. And we burst out with that inexorable question: Why is that so? . . . But this “why” . . . does not lead us to any discovery or recovery. It calls myself in question with all my questioning. It compels me to detach myself from myself, to transcend the limits of my horizon; that is, it educates me.<sup>13</sup>

There is a subject matter apt for the application of these rules, “material which would compel the learner to reflect and to get rid of the sediments in [the learner’s] thinking so as to enable [the learner] to reach the level of intellectual clarity,” material that is the standing occasion for *metastrophē*: “the great documents of . . . seeing, hearing, imagining and understanding,” that is to say, the “great books.”<sup>14</sup> These are the works of the past which—to borrow a choice phrase from Eva Brann—inform or constitute the “present of our present.”<sup>15</sup> They are *present* as Plato’s Socrates is present to his interlocutors: their originality indicts our conventionalities; their clarity persistently threatens our complacent vaguery. The task, then, is to read them by way of revivifying the insights from which they spring, appropriating the insights as objects of critical reflection. Like Plato’s Socrates, what the great books demand of us they first proffer.

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<sup>13</sup> Jacob Klein, “The Idea of Liberal Education” in *Lectures and Essays*, 162; cp., e.g., Josef Pieper, “The Philosophical Act” in *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 80f.

<sup>14</sup> Klein, “On Liberal Education,” in *Lectures and Essays*, 264–265.

<sup>15</sup> “Scraping away the sediments, clearing the foundation, uncovering the roots, is not a way of preserving the past but of gaining the present. . . . What we gain in appropriating the past as the present of our present, the time when what is routine to us was novel, what is given to us was first assumed, what is obvious to us was still strange—what we gain is the fullness, or the actuality of the now” (Eva T. H. Brann, “Take No Thought for the Tomorrow,” in *What Is It . . .?*, 132).

Again, like Plato's Socrates, the great books challenge not *belief* but *judgment*. We sometimes speak as if the Socratic *dictum*, "The unexamined life is not worth living," were equivalent to "The unexamined opinion is not worth holding." Nevertheless, Socrates' concern with opinion or belief seems to be purely instrumental. He is interested in penetrating belief or opinion to reach judgment; his eye is fixed on the persons of his interlocutors, and their persons are not revealed (as Socrates knows well) in the beliefs they entertain, but in the solemn judgments they are prepared to make. The least savory of Socrates' interlocutors—a Meno, a Gorgias, a Protagoras—impress with the horrifying suspicion of a void at their center, the suspicion that one could go on penetrating layer after layer of opinion without ever reaching a point at which what Meno says reveals who Meno is or what Gorgias will affirm establishes what Gorgias can love. While it is true, then, that Socrates knocks, as with a jeweler's hammer, upon Gorgias' and Protagoras' beliefs, they are Gorgias and Protagoras who ring hollow.

Yet again, like Plato's Socrates, these works are compositions—purposeful, crafty; they are, as it were, formal speeches that must be recast as conversations, if they are to be appropriated for judgment, that is, if they are to be understood. But, again like Plato's Socrates, they resist the approaches we have inherited together with the language of our day, "permeated by vagueness and sedimentation."<sup>16</sup> To address their content, their art, their purpose, we require programmatic help. This recognition moves Br. Robert's *desideratum*; it is the single source of the Integral Curriculum that, at length—over about 8 academic years—he and the first

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<sup>16</sup> Klein, "On Liberal Education," in *Lectures and Essays*, 265.

generation of SMC tutors teased from the results of the Rosenberg study: Language Tutorial, Mathematics Tutorial, Music Tutorial, Laboratory—each, and all together, ordered to the single aim of promoting conversational inquiry into the great books, the Seminar.

Words' signifying function—and all that function's ramifications—is, first, at stake. It is necessary, therefore, to arrange for sustained attention to the question, "How does thought attain embodiment in speech?" Preparation for, and the act of, translation—preferably translation from and into an emphatically foreign tongue, far removed from the conventions of the mother tongue—raises the elements of that question to urgency, together with their analytic key, grammar. A rich and apposite literature in the new tongue will add piquancy to urgency. The sequent trivial arts—logic (in the ample, mediaeval sense that embraces metaphor, analogy, allegory . . .) and rhetoric—can then be posed in their real character as refinements to practice. This is the work of the sequence of Language Tutorials.

Words unify sound and signification, but either can function autonomously. The "naked sign"—instanced classically in the Euclidean point and unit—yields the first "utterance" of mathematical language. But the first hint of "syntax"—any relation among points or units—converts them instantly to *metra*, "measures." So, the reflective study of mathematics is required, but required concomitantly is sustained attention to its "cosmic" side: motion and change, hanging on the "measures" of magnitude, multitude, weight . . . From Euclid and Nicomachus of Gerasa to Hilbert and Feynman, this is the work of the sequence of Mathematics Tutorials.

Sound emerges autonomous as tonality-in-time: the relevant *nomoi* produce the tonal art; that art returns to the word, raises it to lyric, or bursts out in “the Works,” the Opera. At the same time, the tonal art discloses a mysterious link between tonality and sequences of numeric ratios: here is, perhaps, liberal knowledge, indeed; we know not what to *do* with it, but can only celebrate it. This is the work of the Music Tutorial, seconded by the Freshman Laboratory’s practicals on tonality and Junior Language Tutorial’s investigations of poetic meter.

We have, Klein notes, in Baconian fashion, “transformed our habitat from a place of nurture into a place of experimentation,” and he asks—rhetorically—“Can liberal education ignore this tremendous change?”<sup>17</sup> Evidently not: it must apply itself to the practices of experimental science, and especially to those proper to physics and biology, which have transformed human relations to the macro- and to the microcosm, to bodies at large and to our own bodies. But the aim remains liberal, that is, reflective, broadly philosophic: “to gain insight into the possibility of such undertakings so as to understand how they come about and what cautions they demand.”<sup>18</sup> This is the work of the Laboratory sequence.

The form—the “look,” the idea—of liberal education, thus cast as the programmatic reading of great books, appears in the contrast Joseph Lanigan draws between the seminar and the undertakings ancillary to it—the permanent tutorials and laboratories, the occasional preceptorials.

The seminar stands typically to the other parts of the curriculum as whole to parts. In comparison with the tutorials, its intent is total and its accomplishment incomplete.

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<sup>17</sup>Klein, “On Liberal Education,” in *Lectures and Essays*, 266.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

In each part of the program, students are thinking and talking together and writing to each other about things. But the questioning in the seminar—typically, rather than invariably—would engage things not in this or that aspect (as observable and measurable, as diverse sorts of works of the mind) but in their roundness against the all and nothing of human life and being. And it would implicate the persons of the participants in their moral and theological depths rather than primarily as apprentices in the liberal arts. If the seminar is an arena for the exercise of the diverse liberal arts forming in the several tutorials, the liberal arts are here employed and directed by a sort of apprentice or journeyman wisdom. If the seminar is to the other parts of the curriculum as a whole, it is not as a sum to addends but, say, as a square to roots.

Conversation within a tutorial, while it may be quite various and full of surprises, is bound to the demands of a subject matter and a formal object and method. Meetings of a tutorial are sequential and gradual. Each seminar, on the other hand, is an original venture at the all-together or the all-at-once and may best flourish in forgetfulness of any other seminar meeting, even of earlier meetings on the same book. The conversation, while it may concentrate on some small point which seems to hold the world, may go wherever the spirit blows in following the demands of the argument which arises out of the all and nothing of things and of these persons. To some extent the virtue of a tutorial is bound up with its temporality [I interpolate “temporal continuities”], but a good seminar is unprecedented.<sup>19</sup>

The questioning typical of the seminar conversation reflects, of course, the stature of the texts proposed to its members and the kind of reading—the reception—these texts tend to elicit from attentive readers. Attentive readers—like attentive listeners—will still all whisperings, all antecedent concerns, in favor of a welcoming, expectant, inward silence into which the text can speak clear. If the text is a great and good text, it will speak wonders; it will throw fresh light on things grown shopworn and familiar, revealing them as marvels and shaping in them the promise of unanticipated meaning. The text will stand on the footing of Event or

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<sup>19</sup> William A. Darkey, ed., *Three Dialogues on Liberal Education* [Annapolis, Maryland: St. John's College Press, 1979], 62 – 63; reprinted in *What Is It...?*, 109–110.

Encounter rather than of object—not something “come across,” but something “addressed to” and “personal for”: Voice—authorial, magisterial, pontifical . . . — Song, Word, Deed. Accordingly, such a text—a seminar text—will, like Emily Dickenson’s shaft of light, hint or blaze forth Difference where the meanings are, where things roundly meet the all or nothing of human life and of being, and persons *are* their unmasked personhood. [I remember Frank Ellis, looking up from the text of the *Gorgias*—Socrates having just handed down, from the ancients to Callicles, the Judgment (not the proposition, not the hypothesis), the *Judgment* of the Dead—to intone, “Your souls, too, are on the line.”]

The contrast proposed between the questioning typical of the seminar and that typical of the tutorial likewise reflects a contrast to tutorial texts and to the reception—the readings—they elicit. In tutorial, indeed, the measure is art and the receiver takes a reading of that measure wherewith to measure the receiver’s artistry: there are apprentice geometers, journeymen musicians—so-called according to steadiness and rightness of the makings of their minds.

But while “an apprentice or journeyman wisdom” may direct artful essays at managing the seminar Encounter, there are no apprentice or journeyman persons. Students may be “junior” in the arts, or relatively artless, but none is “junior” in the created image that makes Encounter and communion in Encounter part and parcel of their humanity.

Metastrophic questioning—the freeing, educative act—is in point, and the voice I am striving to catch and to echo is Joseph Lanigan’s.

As a curriculum in the original sense, namely, as a “race course,” a prescribed set of itineraries through which “runners” pass by way by of *becoming* something on their way to *attaining* something, “great books education” will be seen to display a deeply traditional, and so a deeply ambivalent character. It is “traditional” in the exact sense of the Latin *tradere/traditio*, which means at once “to hand down” or to “hand on” and “to hand over” or “to betray.” For the set of itineraries through which the reader-runners pass is a set of readings, a collection of books. And these are handed on to the student—betrayed, so to speak, to the student’s uses.

Nevertheless, so far as the liberal art is *art*—that is, “a method, a set course, whose pursuit has become a habit, a second nature, and whose aim is to do something and to do it efficiently” (St. Thomas, *ST IIa IIae* Q. 57, a. 3)—it can best be “handed down” or “handed on” as structured habituation, that is, by frank training. Because the liberal arts involve “the steady and right shapings of works achieved by the mind within itself (triangles and syllogisms), which are known in being made and made in being known,”<sup>20</sup> they reside in and as the self-possession of the mind. Their master-practitioners are, indisputably, experts who, so far as they advance the methods and terms of art, are also in a position to deny and displace superseded precedent, and so to precipitate sedimented cultures. Liberal educators must, then, be on guard against the effects that follow from established institutional forms.

Again, the equation of art with “habitual method” yields art in the Cartesian sense of “rules for the direction of the mind” or *binding precepts* (in Eva Brann’s

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Lanigan, “Catholicity and Saint Mary’s College” in Rev. Michael Carey, OP, ed. *Faculty Symposia, 1987 – 1988, The Essential Character of the College* (Saint Mary’s College: Office of the President, 1988), 69 – 77; cf. 71.

compact, telling formula),<sup>21</sup> so that more than the whiff of paradox may seem to attend the term “liberal arts”: how can arts—*binding* precepts—be also *freeing* arts; how can they *unbind*? Much of what goes on in the tutorials and laboratories cannot but involve habituation to method, and so proceed by problem-setting and problem-solving, by the posing of contrived—that is, of merely apparent—questions, sham questions, “drills.” Moreover, in tutorial settings it often makes sense to speak of “traditional problems”—both in the sense of problems of enduring use and in the sense of problems superseded and dismissed, and so of purely historical interest.

Faced with her own implacable, many-sided formulation of the paradox, Dean Brann writes:

All formal study, perhaps even all purposeful conversation, must give up living thought to “formulations.” Nay more—evidently, Western tradition itself must needs progress along the road, which Nietzsche characterizes as leading from the *forms* of Plato to the *formulas* of algebra. I cannot resolve this, the problem of my lecture and the question in my mind. I hereby hand it over to you, without, of course, myself relinquishing it.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, we cannot “problematize” the central conversational inquiry of the Seminar: for, a problem is, *in fine, someone else’s question*, one handed on or handed down; but there are no “traditional” questions—none, that is, that are good, genuine, questions. Once more, Joseph Lanigan:

The quality of a seminar is in the manner of raising and sustaining of the question and this involves the manner in which the members of the seminar hold themselves in questioning and answering. The crux is not so much the character of the opening question and the succeeding questions, although that is certainly important, but the way the question is taken. A good question is one whose pursuit is

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<sup>21</sup> Eva T. H. Brann, “The Student’s Problem,” a lecture delivered at St. John’s College, Annapolis, Maryland, 12 September, 1967; reprinted in *What Is It . . .?*, 66 – 79; cf. 79.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

like opening a window rather than closing a door. This is not to say that the question cannot be answered, but that the answer—and this is true of a “definitive” answer as well as of a tentative one—does not close the questioning, but rather opens it up. The questions then regard being and nonbeing and the human good and evil, rather than legalisms and formulations. Of course, a question about the price of shoes may be taken as implicating everything and nothing and a question about the good can be taken as the solicitation of a recipe.

The prime threat to the seminar comes not from folly but from respectability. A question which the questioner does not really see as in question—e.g., one to which he feels he already has the answer—is probably a bad question. The questioner and his colleagues must believe in the question and in its rich possibilities of response. Indispensably they must trust each other; ideally, they should be friends. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are splendid seminarists, Hylas and Philonous are not.<sup>23</sup>

When Joseph writes:

The quality of a seminar is in the manner of the raising and sustaining of the question and this involves the manner in which the members of the seminar hold themselves in questioning and answering . . . The crux is . . . the way the question is taken,

I take Joseph to mean at least this: that freedom in inquiry must depend on how we take the question *as* a question. A question is the expressed desire for an answer. If so, the interrogative mood is rooted in another, desirous, mood, and it follows that the question is as its prompting desire. In the lecture I have already twice quoted, which stands as a classic—perhaps the classic—of its kind, “The Student’s Problem,” Eva T. H. Brann, sometime Dean of St. John’s College and long-time friend of Saint Mary’s, has also written:

[A] genuine question is the desire for an answer, and it does not dissolve when an answer is gained any more than love necessarily disappears because its object is won. A genuine question does not demand an answer on its own terms or on its own level, but seeks its

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<sup>23</sup> Darkey, ed., *Three Dialogues . . .*, *loc. cit.*

desire wherever it may hope to find it, remaining open to any intimation its object might give.<sup>24</sup>

As genuine desire—longing pursuit, erotic pursuit—of an answer and nothing else, a question is something we dwell, inseparably, *with* and *in* and *on*. Desire cannot be for *one* answer—for *one*, in the sense of a singular proposition or argument or thought—even if the proposition, argument, or thought should prove the completion of many. If desire is not to dissolve, “completion” must mean to “the pursuit of a question” what it means to “the pursuit of a *life*.” I think these readings are confirmed when Dr. Brann adds:

“[Q]uestions are the serious and final human business.”<sup>25</sup>

Nobody ever asked another’s question.

Nobody ever taught anybody anything.

Thank you, George. Thank you, Br. Robert. Thank you, Joseph. Thank you all.

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<sup>24</sup> “The Student’s Problem,” in *What Is It . . .?*, 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*