The Exile of Rhetoric from the Liberal Arts

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For some time, I have been interested in the relationship of the humanities, as they are pursued in the academic world, to their larger political and social contexts. In particular, I have been intrigued with the function of rhetoric, as one of the humanities, in this relationship. I contend, first, that rhetoric has been central to the humanities and to education in Western civilization, and, second, that significant problems in the modern university have resulted from the absence of a mediating rhetoric establishing the relevance of the academic humanities to the outside world. The humanities—which I will consider as roughly equivalent to the traditional liberal arts and their modern descendants, the arts and sciences—were originally founded in a rhetorical environment and had political objectives. In fact, I will hazard the hypothesis that of the liberal arts—grammar (that is, literary study), rhetoric, and logic or dialectic—rhetoric was the bridge that linked the humanities to the real world of the populace. Literature and sciences can tend to be elitist, but rhetoric must always be practical and relevant to the polis. In this sense, rhetoric is the bridge of the humanities to the political and social context of the present-day university. It is such a bridge which I find missing today.

In order to examine these issues, I will discuss briefly the crucial role rhetoric has played historically in our concept of the "teacher" and in our university systems. Then I will explore several major consequences of the abandonment of rhetoric as a central shaping force in the academy.

Rhetoric From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century

Rhetoric was, of course, central to education in the civilized societies of Antiquity, and we can see this by examining the "model" teacher of the times. There are two fairly distinct views of the teacher in Antiquity. Naturally, if we speak of the teacher of Greece, we must think of Homer. It is true that Socrates denies that Homer was an educator or a legislator of Greece, and no city claims that he did them any good. But the general verdict of Greece disagrees with Plato and agrees with Shelley that he was the unacknowledged legislator and teacher of Greece.¹

Yet, while in an important sense Homer was the teacher of Greece, the exemplar of the professional teacher in Greek schools was undoubtedly the rhetorician. After the mid-fourth century BC, the required education of the ephebe, the young man approaching manhood and citizenship, was two years in the school of the gymnasium. And the major intellectual
subject of the *ephebia* was rhetoric. The *ephebia* spread throughout the entire Mediterranean world so that there were eventually hundreds of them, at least one in every so-called Greek city, autonomous city-states answerable only to the emperor in the Roman period. As Marrou says, speaking of Greece and of Isocrates as the exemplar of the professional teacher, "For the vast majority of students, higher education meant taking lessons from the rhetor, learning the art of eloquence from him . . . Rhetoric is the specific subject of Greek education and the highest Greek culture" (285).

This was not only true of Greece. Describing Roman studies, Marrou says, "In practice higher education was reduced to rhetoric, in the strictest sense of the word" (285). Indeed, it was true of Hellenistic culture generally: "For a thousand years—possibly two—from Demetrius Phalereus to Ennodius (later still in Byzantium), this was the standard type of teaching in all higher education" (287). Thus, the teacher for Western civilization in Antiquity was a curious combination of Homer and Isocrates. This model lasted until the decline of the Greek city-states in the fourth and fifth centuries AD.

As Homer was for the Greeks, Jesus of the gospels was the teacher for early Christianity. But the professional teacher of the schools of the period, the rhetoric schools clustered about the cathedrals and monasteries, was again the rhetor who prepared the student for a clerical and legal profession. Thus, rhetoric was the foundation of education throughout Antiquity, and the teacher, in important ways, was the rhetor.

The rhetor of the cathedral and monastery schools was the transitional figure into the early Middle Ages. With the founding of the universities in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the teacher model changed, but not radically. The student was the cleric and the teacher was the theologian, lawyer, philosopher, or medical doctor. Yet, three of these four were rhetoricians in important respects. And if a model might be given paralleling Isocrates in Antiquity, it might well be St. Thomas Aquinas, theologian, philosopher, and poet. For centuries he was called *doctor angelicus*, the teacher of the Middle Ages (they were much more aware of the root meaning of *doctor*—that is, "teacher"—than we presently are).

The university structure of the Middle Ages was a direct response to three social needs of the times and was based on providing students with a solid background in rhetoric. The dominant theocracy needed educated priests to preach to the populace and educated lawyers to handle the far-reaching and increasingly complex transactions of canon law. The faculties of theology and law were the answers to these needs. Between the fifth century and the founding of the universities, the liberal arts, as taught in the cathedral schools and the monastic schools, had attempted to meet these needs. These arts were incorporated into the new universities as the faculty of the arts, parallel to the faculties of law and theology. In addition, the Middle Ages desperately needed systematic medical training for health professionals, resulting in the fourth faculty.
Clearly, the medieval university was service-oriented to the society which founded it; and two of the faculties— theology and law—had strong rhetorical foundations in the medieval *artes praedicandi* for priests and *artes dictaminis* for lawyers. The liberal arts (dominated from the thirteenth century on by philosophy, which even, in many instances, became the name of the faculty and of the degree given by the faculty) were oriented to theology. Philosophy, even in the words of the best of its advocates, was the handmaiden to theology; in effect, it, too, was rhetorically oriented. Generally, therefore, the medieval university was service-oriented to a theocracy and was based on a strong rhetorical tradition. Additionally, the medieval university was teaching-rather than research-oriented. A "doctor" was a teacher primarily, who, as Deveze points out, transmitted "constituted truth" rather than investigated new truths.

With the nationalization of the universities in the Renaissance, the service function of the universities continued, except that the state, rather than solely the church, was the objective of many of the graduates. However, the faculties of theology and law continued to dominate the universities; and the arts were becoming more and more what they were to become in the eighteenth century: "remedial preparatory schools for those whose secondary education was not adequate for direct matriculation into the 'higher' professional faculties of theology, law, and medicine" (29). McClelland, whom I am quoting here, is speaking of universities in Germany, but the situation was comparable in England and France.²

The theologian/rhetorician continued to be the teaching exemplar of Europe well into the Renaissance. Melanchton, More, Erasmus, Vives—all fit comfortably into this pattern, with the rhetorician edging the theologian a bit. But the middle of the seventeenth century saw the rise of systematic scientific prose as a rival to the Ciceronian prose of the ordinary rhetorician. The hegemony of rhetoric in the liberal arts, and of the rhetorician as the archetypal teacher, slowly began to give way to the new model of the objective scientist, with the influence of the Royal Society, Newton, and Voltaire, as well as the inability of rhetorical canons to meet the new challenges of either science or the rising journalism. The transition took several centuries, and counterexamples in England in the eighteenth or nineteenth century—such as Adam Smith and Cardinal Newman—can easily be cited, but the general movement was irrevocable.

The Tum Away From Rhetoric

By the eighteenth century, however, the universities had deteriorated across most of Europe. Their service function to the church and state had been largely taken over by other institutions; and teaching was often grossly neglected, sometimes in favor of research but often in favor of a sinecure removed from any of the usual functions of the university.³ The universities were more oriented to preparing the aristocratic elite to become the gentleman in England, *l'honnête homme* in France, the corte­giano in Italy, and the possessor of courtly philosophy (*philosophia*
aulica) in Germany, as Devèze has well phrased it (18).

And it isn't too difficult to isolate a single individual in the early eighteenth century or the dying seventeenth century to personify the new model teacher. In many respects, Newton epitomized the new teacher; and, in many respects, too, this new kind of teacher was good for history, society, education, and the new prose of science and journalism. But Newton also exemplified the liabilities of the new teacher. Newton could see no use in poetry; nor could he see how mature persons could occupy their minds with such juvenile games. He also carefully separated his religious sentiments from the physical-mathematical world he helped evolve, which in Voltaire's and LaPlace's hands would be made the basis for deism—the idea of the absentee landlord no longer needed for the universe to run. And Newton's Optics paved the way for the objective and neutral scientist who measured the way to truth. Thus, Newton and the eighteenth century saw a turn away from rhetoric to newer values and ideals. Further, in many ways, Newton is the forerunner of the contemporary teacher model—a researcher as much as a teacher, a scientist, an empiricist or mathematician, an objective neutralist who lets his or her findings dictate conclusions, an ascetic intellectual whose politics, religion, and personal sentiments are irrelevant to scholarly research.

The universities were ripe for reform at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Reformers in Germany were led by Humboldt and Schleiermacher and in France by Napoleon. Humboldt's reform asserted the primacy of research in the university: "If ultimately in institutions of higher learning the principle of seeking knowledge [Wissenschaft] as such is dominant, then it is not necessary to worry individually about anything else" (Fallon 18). Humboldt did not neglect teaching but insisted on the unity of research and teaching. Structurally, the traditional faculty of philosophy was reorganized as the faculty of arts and sciences. Schleiermacher seems to have been the major motivating force behind this move. Both he and Humboldt intended to reverse the dominance of law and theology—and, thus, the role of rhetoric—in the university faculties. The Napoleonic imperial university structure took the same direction; it, too, emphasized research over teaching (Fallon 34, 30, 21).

Significantly, rhetoric—the original heart of the liberal arts—was not included in the new arts and sciences faculties. In Germany, rhetoric was in decline and eventually was despised by the vast majority of German scholars. In France, rhetoric had been under severe attacks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, finally coming to mean nothing more than "figural excellence." With the de-emphasis of service as a university function in both Germany and France and the disappearance of the rhetorical bridge linking the humanities to the polis, the stage was set for the problems that have beset France, Germany, and the United States in this century.
The Consequences of Rhetoric's Exile

The displacement of rhetoric as the shaping force within education has had far-reaching effects on the liberal arts and the university in general.

*Isolation from the Populace*

In the first place, the decline of rhetoric has affected the tradition of the liberal arts in a threatening way. Rhetoric, considered here (as it was in the humanist tradition) as the art of persuasion—to be distinguished from the poetic art of literature and the logical art of demonstration—was from the beginning of Western civilization the practical bridge linking the humanities to the ordinary citizen of the polis. Without the practical link of rhetoric, the liberal arts can be viewed as somewhat removed and esoteric. Especially in our day, science on the one hand and literature on the other hand can seem somewhat remote and irrelevant to the *terrible quotidianum* of the average person. This exile of rhetoric from the humanities may be the reason why the humanities now find themselves in disfavor in our society.

Without the cohesive force of rhetoric, the humanities—and the university itself—no longer seem to serve the populace. Much of the service of American universities is in the areas of science and technology. And these services are only too frequently oriented to the military-industrial complex, not to society at large. However, language departments, and English in particular, don't even participate in these services. Prior to the literacy crisis, English departments pursued a goal of literary study—historical or critical, depending on the season—which had little or nothing to do with service to the body politic, except, of course, the important service of educating a small number of university students in the appreciation of literature. I do not at all demean that function, but I am concerned that there was no outreach to the populace at large. This isolation was compounded by the type of publication encouraged by the academy. Instead of encouraging some popular dissemination of historical and critical research, with the aim of bringing the populace to a better appreciation of literature, scholarship has become more and more esoteric and removed from popular understanding.

The literacy crisis has changed this picture in some ways. The English department has usually, at least in state institutions, taken on the responsibility of the composition service course or courses (that is, it has partially returned to rhetoric), though it tried to slough it off in some places during the sixties. Declining scores in reading and writing have forced English departments to recognize that the study of composition and rhetoric is an important service function of the department. However, it has responded in much the same manner as the French universities did to increasing enrollments in the sixties, creating in many places a non-tenure-accruing class of teachers whose positions involve heavy teaching of composition courses. For example, at my institution, approximately seventy lecturers (we have radically changed the meaning of an honorable title, basically
because it does not involve tenure) historically have taught three composition courses and one lower-level literature course each semester. Nor is the lecture position limited to the English department. These lecturers are not allowed to vote in departmental debates, are denied many perquisites such as travel funds, are poorly paid, and can be terminated at any time without explanation. Thus, the professoriate is able to remain isolated from the body politic while relegating the service function to this "inferior" class of teachers.

Currently, an MLA committee is investigating the phenomenon of hiring non-tenure-track teachers for service courses across the country. The practice is as widespread in community colleges as it is in university circles. In my opinion, it strikes at the heart of the tenure issue—and, therefore, of the academic freedom issue. The situation is as critical in this country as it was in Germany and France. They attempted to reform, but we still have not faced up to our crisis.

Reform in our own university system should take into account the exploitation of lower-level teachers, especially in the general service courses such as freshman composition; and it should, more generally, recognize the service function of the university to the political body which supports it. This more general function, applicable to all departments of the university, should serve as a bridge between the more esoteric pursuits of the arts and sciences and the populace, not just self-serving funding agencies. Both of these concerns have to do with the role of rhetoric in a university, the first immediately and the second mediately. The modern university has not yet recovered from the exile of rhetoric from the arts and sciences.

**Loss of an Ethical Stance**

A second disturbing result, related to the first, followed in the wake of the decline of rhetoric. Once scientist/teachers no longer feel it their duty to address the populace in rhetorical genres, and once they are able to pursue scholarly pursuits untrammeled by the intervention of personal religious beliefs, it is but a step to make the further abstraction from their own moral convictions. They can do this as scientists. The chemist/teacher as chemist performs amorally in the laboratory. And the chemist/teacher as an individual teacher has no rhetorical obligation to the populace which will use or abuse his or her products. This is not an unfair description of a commonly held set of notions adhered to by some faculty in universities today. The rhetorical obligation may be passed off to other colleagues who will "condescend" to publish in popular media, or it may be passed off to intermediaries, political or journalistic, or it may be left to the conscience of the party that buys and markets the product.

In a word, with the notion of the rhetorician removed from the teacher exemplar, the teacher can become an amoral and apolitical abstraction. Indeed, many in our ranks claim truculently that such is and should be the posture of the university teacher today. Yet it does seem immoral for a
discipline as a whole to disavow responsibility for its creations. As a group, computer scientists, chemists, philosophers, journalists, and novelists have a social responsibility for the abuses to which society puts their products, just as they also have a right to the plaudits which follow on their successes. It is precisely chemists or computer scientists themselves who can most accurately foresee the beneficial and harmful uses to which their own inventions may be put. Each profession as a subculture has a rhetorical obligation to alert the culture as a whole to new benefits and also to new dangers. This informative and rhetorical function of a profession should be taught the practitioners of that métier. In a practical vein, this means that the politics, the ethics, and the rhetoric of a profession ought to be a part of the curriculum of every discipline. And the rhetoric of the discipline means the ability to address the populace in persuasive language which will be understood and listened to.

Consequently, it is not enough to teach the practitioners of a given craft how to communicate with each other in the esoteric jargon of their subculture. They must also be taught the common language of humanity in its full rhetorical scales. This means that all disciplines must incorporate training in the persuasive techniques of rhetoric. Thus, at least some physicists, some chemists, some pharmacists, some journalists, some political theorists, and so on, should engage in the impassioned and simple prose which affects the multitude. Training these future professionals to write only expository prose is training them to ignore their political and ethical responsibilities.

The wholesomeness of the teacher exemplar who was scholar and rhetorician, as well as esthete, is a wholesomeness we must return to. Fragmented scholars are irresponsible scholars, as capable of turning out iniquitous monsters as beneficent marvels.

Rhetoric should be reincorporated into the curriculum of the university student. Its exile has been costly.

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Notes

1 In fact, archaeological remains attest to this. Oldfather, classifying papyri in Greco-Roman Egypt, notes that half of all the remains were from the Iliad (315); the Odyssey was next with about one-eighth (80); the remainder were distributed among Demosthenes, Meander, Plato, Thucydides, Xenophon, Isocrates, Pindar, and others.

2 See Devèze (10).

3 See Cohen (7-9); Devèze (17-18); Westfall (185-90).

4 Goth chronicles its decline and eventual disfavor.

5 See Genette (103-26); also see Ricoeur (44-64).

6 One of the frequent complaints in Germany, especially from the Frankfurt Marxists, was that the German University did not serve the public weal (see Habermas), but the criticism was not limited to Marxists. In France, the same criticism was leveled at the
universities. See Deveze (25) and Cohen (136). Although the Humboldt reform in Germany and the Napoleonic reform in France performed wonders for the university, they also helped effect twentieth-century abuses: concentration of power among research professors and isolation of the university from the society it serves. In both countries—and in many others influenced by their systems—this valorization of research created a vacuum of teachers at lower levels, which was filled by assistant professors and teaching assistants holding positions with little or no provision for tenure, no governing power, and poor salaries. Student unrest in both countries has since precipitated legislative reform. However, some of the same abuses exist in the American university system today.

Works Cited


