

EDUCATION OF FREE MEN IN DEMOCRACY: THE LIBERAL ARTS

I FEEL a positive delight in the present occasion. Nothing could be more inspiring than to remember St. Thomas at this time. You remember that in his day the German Emperor was trying to conquer the Pope, and that the brothers of St. Thomas were serving the Emperor against the Pope. Although many things dear to him were destroyed in those hateful wars, including the great Abbey of Monte Casino, the school of his youth, St. Thomas quietly persisted in his speculations, and nowhere mentions any of these blows against the civilization of which he was the most luminous figure. The arrogant barbarian galloping across Europe in the thirteenth century cuts a pitiable figure today beside the moral and intellectual stature of that quiet man. For St. Thomas defines in himself the answer to the barbarian that is without and also to the barbarian that is within each one of us. All men know the answer to the bogus pretensions of the barbarism of force; but St. Thomas can teach us the much harder answer to the barbarism of comfort and ease and slackness. When we are confronted by the bold fraud dreamt up by men whose confusion and spiritual frustration is the fruit of Satanic pride, the truth that is in us is made alive and lancing; but when a triumphant technology croons the sickly boasts of the advertising men, when the great vaults and vistas of the human soul are obscured by images of silken glamor, and when it is plain that man lives not by bread alone but by toothpaste also, then we need the answer of St. Thomas. It is the answer of moral and intellectual discipline and ardor.

St. Thomas does not invite us vaguely to the task of discipline. The disciplines which are proper to man as man, the disciplines which all free men eagerly assume in order that they may realize their own humanity, these serried and interwoven virtues he has defined with precision. Not all these disciplines can be achieved by all men, nor are all these disciplines simultaneously necessary in order that men should live as free men. But some of these disciplines are necessary to any good life; and I am to speak a few words about those arts or disciplines which have been called liberal or free because they are indispensable for the lives of free men. I am going to discuss in particular the art of speech, that art from which, as John of Salisbury said, men receive more benefits than all the other arts and sciences combined. It is also the art without whose intense cultivation

no man ever succeeded in acquiring the philosophical and scientific virtues in which St. Thomas excelled.

From the earliest Greek times until the time of Descartes the upholders of civilized life never tired of expressing the fact that man as man is distinguished from the brutes by the power of speech. Inseparable from his rational soul and indispensable to his social and political life is the need to utter himself. Eloquence was therefore cherished as the finest expression of man's excellence. This doctrine supported by the great doctrine of the Logos (*ratio et oratio*) inspired the ancient world to achieve and sustain those legal institutions which defined the *civis* and from which we have civilization. It is not necessary to speak of the veneration felt by the Fathers of the Church for the doctrine of the Logos and how the Divine Word Himself was interpreted thereby. It is, however, less commonly acknowledged that the preservation and cultivation of the ancient classics and the striving for excellent speech, manifest from St. Augustine and St. Jerome, through Alcuin, Charlemagne, Alfred, John of Salisbury, St. Thomas, Petrarch, and Erasmus, were carried on by reason of the conviction that excellence of speech in men could bring them into closer association with the supreme eloquence which is the Word of God. The cultivation of speech was imposed on man as a normal and political virtue and as a means to salvation. For without great discipline in language how were men to render themselves fit to read the Scriptures? Without ardent cultivation of eloquence, how were men to prepare themselves to preach the Word of God? Are not the Scriptures themselves models of the richest eloquence? These questions resound throughout the writings of the Fathers. The answer to these questions gave us the sermons of St. Bernard and *The Divine Comedy*.

Innumerable arguments from Christian revelation were thus brought to support the Greek and Roman conceptions of the great value of excellent speech. One of the most frequently expressed concerned Adam before the Fall. Adam possessed not only eloquence but great metaphysical knowledge, as evident in his first work, the imposition of names on all parts of creation. After the Fall man was permitted to recover some of his former excellence by the painful cultivation of the arts. Speech was the first which enabled men to rise from the brutishness in which they were sunk. The myth concerning Hercules that he tied all men together by the ears was interpreted in the light of Christian revelation to mean that speech was the first restorer of society just as excellent speech is the bond of good society at all times.

All Christian discussions of the arts were conducted against this background until the time of Francis Bacon, who was the last of the patristic encyclopedists. The statement of Vincent of Beauvais in the *Speculum Doctrinale* is as luminous as it is typical: "In order to gain wisdom, *Theorica* was devised; and *Practica* for the sake of Virtue; and for need's sake, *Mechanica*. *Theorica* driving out ignorance, illuminates Wisdom; *Practica* shutting out vice, strengthens Virtue; *Mechanica* providing against penury, tempers the infirmities of the present life. *Theorica*, in all that is and that is not, chooses to investigate the true. *Practica* determines the correct way of living

and the form of discipline, according to the institution of the virtues. *Mechanica*, occupied with fleeting things, strives to provide for the needs of the body. For the end and aim of all human actions and studies, which reason regulates, ought to look either to the reparation of the integrity of our nature or alleviating the needs to which life is subjected."

Doctor Korfmacher has discussed *Mechanica*. My province is *Practica*; for the art of speech is the most immediately practical concern of life, the acquisition of which is inseparably associated with the acquisition and exercise of moral and political virtue. It naturally looks to, and leads on to, the speculative virtues of Wisdom and Science. But nothing could be more expressive of the confusion of the orders of knowledge, nothing could be more disastrous for the moral and political welfare of free men than the view of eloquence and the cultivation of letters as ends in themselves, as a dilettante concern of impractical men, or the view that *Mechanica* or technology affords the key to practical knowledge.

Technology cannot bring in the century of the common man. It can merely reduce man to his lowest common denominator as a consuming animal. If technology is to minister to free men, men must struggle to acquire the practical disciplines related to speech as they have never struggled before. For in acquiring excellent speech men acquire the heritage of our entire civilization. They acquire the ability to act freely and critically and to recreate daily the social freedoms which reflect their rational natures. Yes, despite the fact that democracy, more than any other political form, requires intense cultivation of language, of the techniques of human association, it is literally true that never in the history of Western education has instruction in the art of understanding and employing human speech been so inadequate. Today people take refuge in music and in musical politics, for the language of our time is a universally discredited instrument. Men rise up to speak the thoughts and duties of freedom to free men, and their phrases, stale and fuzzy with inertia and imprecision, convey no conviction. Legislators try to frame laws with this instrument in the use of which they have no skill, and their laws prove abortive. The bankruptcy of speech is proclaimed by the multiplication of letters: N.R.A., W.P.A., O.C.D., etc. Demagogues rise up to speak the sickly and confused notions of their stunted spirits, and there are few to detect the fraud which they peddle. Age-old avarice hires high-priced intellectual renegades to camouflage gluttony for irresponsible power. It skulks behind the slick journalese of the hack who pilfers the armory of free speech to enslave the minds of free men. *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* are sinister portents which do not point to the Century of the Common Man.

Modern psychology and anthropology have in recent years shown us that the enormous respect felt for speech by our civilization prior to Descartes was fully justified. Psychiatry has revealed that words are no mere arbitrary counters, but reach down with spreading and tentacular roots into the deepest terrors and desires of the human soul. Intense and orderly training in the full resources of language is a major means of bringing order into the emotions, as well as the

thoughts, of man. It is discipline in the fullest sense, and one which is inseparable from moral training. Anthropology has demonstrated that speech is not only communal experience, the reservoir of the wisdom of the race, but is social action and social communion. Upon the degree of cultivation of speech depends the effectiveness of social action. That verdict is no less valuable because it is delivered by men who deny reason and free-will to man. It is the more valuable because it is based on the observation of savage societies. If speech is indispensable as a mode of social action to the Australian bushman, it is infinitely more so to us who inherit the eloquence of Plato and St. Ambrose.

Speech, whether we are prepared or not, is to play a decisive role at the next peace-conference. We have had recent bitter object-lessons of what language barriers can do to prevent the interplay of national good will. For whatever degree of understanding there exists between Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill, we can be grateful to a common speech. Everybody can see the frustration and miscarriage which result from the failure to know foreign peoples through their languages; but equally disastrous is the failure between men of the same language when they have not taken sufficient pains to achieve excellence in their own tongue. Imprecise speech expresses and also fosters moral confusion; but it is encouraging that a vivid recognition of this fact characterizes all the best educators of our time.

Here in this Jesuit university, it is pleasant and profitable to recall that for two centuries the Jesuits were the schoolmasters of Europe. This was in virtue of that noble training in language and literature by which they led the best minds of the day to the love of philosophical science and wisdom. It would be interesting to show how this work was undermined by the basic contempt for linguistic attainment fostered by Cartesian physics. There is no time to do this, and anyhow the positive fact of St. Thomas makes it possible for us to feel light-hearted about the errors of smaller men. As our age enters its dark night let us take hope from the fact that the luminous wisdom and clarity of St. Thomas will shine more brightly for us. The confusion and negation around us may encourage us to a more intimate and lively knowledge of his thought than we could ever have attained to in easier circumstances. And for the ultimate cause of civilization we need never despair so long as men anywhere can contemplate the order and clarity of his wisdom.

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ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY STUDIES

in honor of

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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