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DOROTHY SAYERS ON "THE LOST TOOLS OF LEARNING"

Steven Alan Samson

I was first introduced to Dorothy Sayers's "The Lost Tools of Learning" more than a decade ago when it was brought to my attention by a fellow student who was taking a rhetoric course at the time. I frequently use it when I teach the senior seminars and have structured many of my courses along the lines suggested by the author. Another of my favorite pedagogical works is the last chapter of Jacques Barzun's The Teacher in America.

My personal studies have always crossed disciplinary frontiers. Although I do not oppose specialization, I believe that an education should be built upon a broad intellectual base. I take as one of my models the kind of "gentleman's education" admired by Jose Ortega y Gasset. Specialization has too often come to mean a professional commitment to one or another set of ideological blinders. The prevailing mindset today seems to be to pass the buck to the experts in Washington and, like Candide, cultivate our own garden.

As a teacher I have encountered all of the problems Miss Sayers discusses in the opening paragraphs. Our susceptibility to propaganda is one of the subtlest challenges we face today because of its invisibility. Yet the "mass propaganda" of which she complains is as pervasive as the air we breathe. We are very much a people of the word and now, even more, of the image. Journalism, which trades in both words and images, exemplifies the modern temper. Since the French Revolution, it has

identified itself as the Fourth Estate and the public tribune, deriving its professional ethos from its self-conceit as the voice of the people.

Another institution of our age is the public relations industry, which was born out of the marriage of marketing, political liberalism, and depth psychology in the 1920s and 1930s. But even as public opinion research increases in importance, the quality of public debate continues to decline. Thoughtless platitudes too often do service in the absence of a public philosophy. As with so much else, we leave the thinking to the experts and simply register our shifting attitudes through a host of media plebiscites. The principalities and powers of our day vie for public attention, which alone authenticates them.

I was a bewildered undergraduate political science major in the late 1960s at the height of the revolutionary theater that occupied the University of Colorado campus. Twelve years of a relatively good public education had not prepared me for what I encountered. From my first introduction to it in 1966 The Colorado Daily was the arbiter of student opinion on every subject. It is still a source of wonder to me that the issue of "political correctness" is only now getting some serious attention after all these years! Indiscriminate propaganda attacks on western civilization seem to be rousing as many liberals as conservatives from their complacency. The lines shift but the battle continues.

Yet it has not always been so! How different a place is the

campus of my experience from the campuses of an earlier day when Paul Elmer More could describe the Church and the University -- favorably -- as "reactionary" institutions.

Part of what troubles campuses today is the prevalence of an inbred liberalism that lacks a historical consciousness. Students are rarely confronted with genuine alternatives. As Roger Kimball and other critics have noted recently, our campuses are still populated and now largely run by many of the same "lost boys" of the New Left that Peter Collier and David Horowitz wrote about in Destructive Generation. Tenured radicals seem to regard themselves as campus missionaries whose calling is to bring light to hearts of darkness and fill every empty head until they are brimming over with politically correct sentiments. Their eyes glaze over! No wonder they come to be transfixed by every passing shadow of a notion. Those who eventually wake up from their dogmatic slumber -- like Collier and Horowitz -- are ostracized by their former comrades. But why should this surprise a student who has already wrestled with the great thinkers and can apply Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" to his personal experience?

The key to education, after all, is "learning how to learn." We must first stand on the shoulders of the giants who preceded us before we can reach far enough to loosen their embrace. A liberal arts education is to be liberating. But as Irving Babbitt noted, commenting on Edmund Burke, the basis of genuine liberty is an act of subordination or humility. We tend to

mistake the part for the whole and exalt our partial discoveries into idols.

Francis Schaeffer's comment that we tend to see "things in bits and pieces instead of totals" helps explain our general failure to develop a coherent picture of the world. It is the old problem of the one and the many. Early in the century, William Butler Yeats and Irving Babbitt both commented on the disappearance of an ethical center which alone can set limits to our will and appetites. Pitirim Sorokin attributed our eccentricity to the "chaotic syncretism" of a dying sensate culture. We have come to be guided by the pleasure principle. Appetite rules the heart and head. The result is nihilism. But the less we exercise control over ourselves, the more we depend on having it imposed from outside. We can scarcely govern our lives if we fail to integrate our fragmentary impressions and experiences with wisdom that may be gleaned from Scriptures and the artifacts of our collective human experience.

So what will deliver us from what Ronald Nash calls "the closing of the American heart?" Dorothy Sayers proposes a revival of the medieval Trivium. In our education we proceed from the poll parrot stage (grammar), which some people never seem to leave, to the pert (dialectic), and finally to the poetic (rhetoric) stages of development. This sequence suggests that the basic principles of developmental psychology must have been evident even in the day of Cassiodorus, who first outlined the seven liberal arts.

The last two of the three subjects, she notes, are methodological. The first, grammar, is simply "the medium in which thought is expressed." Where we go wrong is in failing to recognize that technical mastery which remains fixed at the grammar stage of creative thought is no substitute for what Burke called "the moral imagination." Invention springs from the cross-fertilization of previously unrelated ideas: what some have called "lateral thinking." English jurists institutionalized a uniting of the universal and the particular when they added a new equity jurisdiction along side the common law. Imaginative learning likewise involves a creative interpenetration of diverse ideas and experiences.

My master's thesis, entitled "The Methodical Conquest," examined the impact of the tools with which we restructure our world and their effects on our ability to control them. There is a common perception that our technical means have outstripped our ethical ends. But how could it be otherwise when we fail to acknowledge any ends beyond the momentary standards of the community?

The question that troubled the confusion and unbelief of my youth is where I might find the proper yardstick to measure myself. I knew I could not be the measure of all things. I turned to the existentialists, who seemed to raise the right questions but who still generally threw me back on my own inadequate resources. As in ancient times, our century has placed Whirl on the throne. Impressionism, cubism, nihilism, and

other modernist movements embody the fragmented vision of a radical nominalism. Ideas are simply seen as names we give our desires and fears. Ideology has been vested as the religion of the day, chirped for all to hear by what Edmund Burke called "the insects of the hour." Self-confidence -- mere whistling in the dark -- is substituted for a faith that passes all understanding.

The Church has largely failed to address the heart of the unbelief in its midst. It has lost much of its previous credibility. How many people can recognize an answer when it confronts them or hold fast to it in the midst of doubt? How can someone believe in earnest if he has trouble thinking coherently? Our anti-intellectualism is clearly part of the cultural problem of our day. Applying the cultural mandate in the form of Biblically-based core curriculum and learning how to learn are at least part of the answer.