

I. THE SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS

To give an educational curriculum a place in the Model of the universe may at first seem an absurdity; and it would be an absurdity if the medievals had felt about it as we feel about the 'subjects' in a syllabus today. But the syllabus was regarded as immutable;¹ the number seven is numinous; the Liberal Arts, by long prescription, had achieved a status not unlike that of nature herself. The Arts, no less than the Virtues and Vices, were personified. Grammar, with her birch, still sits looking down on the cloisters of Magdalen. Dante in the *Convivio* most carefully mortises the Arts into the cosmic framework. Rhetoric, for example, corresponds to Venus; for one reason, because she is 'the loveliest of all other disciplines', *soavissima di tutte le altre scienze*. Arithmetic is like Sol; for as he gives light to all the other stars so she gives light to all other sciences, and as our eyes are dazzled by his light so our intelligence is baffled by the infinity of numbers. And so of the rest (II, xiii).

Everyone knows that the Arts are Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy. And almost everyone has met the mnemonic couplet

Gram loquitur, Dia verba docet, Rhet verba colorat,
Mus canit, Ar numerat, Geo ponderat, Ast colit astra.

The first three constitute the *Trivium* or threefold way; the last four, the *Quadrivium*.

'Grammar talks', as the couplet says; or, as Isidore defines her, 'Grammar is the skill of speech' (I, i). That is, she teaches us Latin. But we must not imagine that to learn grammar merely corresponded to what we should now call having a 'classical' education, or even to becoming a 'Humanist' in the Renaissance sense. Latin was still the living Esperanto of the western world and great works were still being written in it. It was the language *par excellence*, so that the very word Latin—*læden* in Anglo-Saxon and *leden* in Middle English—came to mean *language*. Canace in the *Squire's Tale* by means of her magic ring

understood wel everything
That any foul may in his ledene seyn.

(F 435.)

Italian *Latino* is used by Petrarch in the same sense. An interpreter is a *Latiner*, whence the name Latimer. But while Grammar was thus restricted to a single tongue, in another way it sometimes extended far beyond the realm it claims today. It had done so for centuries. Quintilian suggests *literatura* as the proper translation of Greek *grammatike* (II, i), and *literatura*, though it does not mean 'literatur', included a good deal more than literacy. It included all that is required for 'making up' a 'set book': syntax, etymology, prosody, and the explanation of allusions. Isidore makes even history a department of Grammar (I, xli-xliv). He would have described the book I am now writing as a book of Grammar. *Scholarship* is perhaps our nearest equivalent. In popular usage *Grammatica* or *Grammaria* slid into the vague sense of learning in general; and since learning is usually an object both of respect and suspicion to the masses, grammar, in the form *grammary* comes to mean magic. Thus in the ballad of *King Estmere*, 'My mother was a western woman learned in grammarye'. And from *grammary*, by a familiar sound-change, comes *glamour*—a word whose associations with grammar and even with magic have now been annihilated by the beauty-specialists.

The invention of this art was traditionally ascribed to Carmente or Carmentis,² the daughter of King Evander. The real authorities were Aelius Donatus (fourth century) and Priscianus (fifth and sixth). One's well-thumbed manuscript of Donatus was one's *donat* or *donet*, which by an easy transference comes to mean the 'primer' or 'rudiments' of any subject whatever. Covetysse in *Piers Plowman* says 'ich drow me among drapers my donet to lerne'—my first steps in sharp practice (C VII, 215).

Dialectic in the couplet 'teaches words'; an obscure saying. What is really meant is that, having learned from grammar how to talk, we must learn from Dialectic how to talk sense, to argue, to prove and disprove. The medieval foundation of this art was at first an *Isagoge* or Introduction to Aristotle written by Porphyry and translated into Latin by Boethius. This is in intention merely a work on Logic. But everyone who has tried to teach mere Logic knows how difficult it is, especially with an intelligent pupil, to avoid raising questions which force us into metaphysics. Porphyry's little treatise raises them too and, in accordance with its limited purpose,

leaves them unsolved. This methodological limitation was mistaken for a state of doubt, and the doubt was then attributed not to Porphyry but to Boethius. Hence the rhyme:

Assidet Boethius stupens de hac lite,
Audiens quid hic et hic asserat perite,
Et quid cui faveat non discernit rite;
Non praesumit solvere litem definite.³

Two warnings may be useful to some; others, I hope, will pardon them.

(1) 'Dialectic' in the modern Marxist sense is here a red herring—Hegelian in origin. It must be completely set aside when we speak of ancient or medieval Dialectic. This means simply the art of disputation. It has nothing to do with the dynamic of history.

(2) Dialectic is concerned with proving. In the Middle Ages there are three kinds of proof; from Reason, from Authority, and from Experience. We establish a geometrical truth by Reason; a historical truth, by Authority, by *auctours*. We learn by experience that oysters do or do not agree with us. But the words which Middle English uses to express this trichotomy might sometimes deceive us. Often they are clear enough, as when the Wife of Bath says

Experience, though noun auctoritee
Were in this world, were right ynough to me
To speke of wo that is in marriage.

(DI)

But unfortunately the word *experience* is not always used for the third type of proof. The variants are two. To learn by experience may be to *feel*; or, more misleading, knowledge by experience may be *preve* (that is, proof). Thus Chaucer opens his *Legend of Phillis* by saying that the maxim 'wikked frute cometh of a wikked tree' can be learned not only from authority but 'by preve'; that is, empirically. In the *Hous of Fame* the eagle says that the poet can 'fele' the theory of sound which he has just enunciated (826). In the *Knight's Tale* the line 'Ne who most felingly speketh of love' (A 2203) sounds very modern. But to 'speak feelingly' probably means to speak from first-hand experience. No doubt those who did so might also be expected to speak 'with most feeling' in our sense; but lexically, I question whether *felingly* in Middle English could mean 'emotionally'.

Everything that we should now call criticism belonged either to Grammar or to Rhetoric. The Grammarian explained a poet's metre and allusions: the Rhetorician dealt with structure and style. Neither had anything to say about the point of view or the individual sensibility, the majesty or piquancy or pathos or humour, which structure and style embody. Hence poets are nearly always praised on purely stylistic grounds. Virgil is for Dante the poet who taught him his *bello stilo* (*Inferno*, I, 86). Petrarch in the *Clerk's Prologue* is for Chaucer the man who illuminated all Italy with his 'rethoryke swete' (E 31). Chaucer in the *Book of Thebes* is for Lydgate the 'flour' of poets in Britain by his 'excellence in rethorike and in eloquence' (Prologue, 40). All Chaucer's medieval successors speak of him in this way. You could not discover from their eulogies that he had ever presented a lifelike character or told a merry tale.

The ancient teachers of Rhetoric addressed their precepts to orators in an age when public speaking was an indispensable skill for every public man—even for a general in the field—and for every private man if he got involved in litigation. Rhetoric was then not so much the loveliest (*soavissima*) as the most practical of the arts. By the Middle Ages it has become literary. Its precepts are addressed quite as much to poets as to advocates. There is no antithesis, indeed no distinction, between Rhetoric and Poetry. I think the Rhetoricians always have in view a pupil whose medium will be Latin, but their work also affected vernacular practice.

Chaucer's apostrophe to 'Gaufred, dere mayster souverain' in the *Nuns Priest's Tale* (B 4537) has kept alive the memory of Geoffrey de Vinsauf who 'flourished' about 1200 and wrote the *Nova Poetria*;⁴ a work whose value lies in its extreme naivety.

He divides *Ordo* (which some call *Dispositio*) into two kinds, Natural and Artificial.⁵ The Natural follows the King of Hearts' advice by beginning at the beginning. The Artificial is of three kinds. You can begin at the end (as in the *Oedipus Rex* or a play by Ibsen); or in the middle (like Virgil and Spenser); or with a *Sententia* or *Exemplum*. Chaucer begins with a *Sententia* or maxim in the *Parlement*, the *Hous of Fame*, the

Prologue to the Legend, the Legend of Phillis, and the Prioress's Tale. I cannot remember that he ever begins with an *Exemplum*, but no one needs to be reminded how frequent they are in his work. The *Franklin's Tale* is held up from line 1367 to line 1456 by a procession of them, and Troilus had good reason to say to Pandarus

What knowe I of the Quene Niobee?
Lat be thyne olde ensaumples I thee preye.

(l. 759.)

Here Geoffrey is dealing with a real problem, which we have all faced though few of us would pose it so bluntly. The Natural Order will not always serve. And the plan of beginning with a *Sententia*, or with something like it, is still an unlaidd ghost. It 'walks; in that fatal opening paragraph with which schoolboys are apparently taught to begin their essays.

On *Amplificatio*⁶ he is almost embarrassing. He calls the various methods of 'amplifying' your piece, quite frankly, *morae* (delays); as if the art of literature consisted in learning how to say much when you have little to say. That, I suspect, was how he really regarded it. But this means not that the *morae* he recommends are all necessarily bad but that he misunderstands—I do not profess to understand it fully myself—their real function.

One kind of *mora* is *Expolitio*. Its formula is 'Let the same thing be disguised by variety of form; be different yet the same'—

multiplice forma
Dissimulctur idem; varius sis et tanicn idem.

It sounds dreadful. But it is not so in the Psalms, nor in

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight
And burned is Apollo's laurel bough.

Less successful is

When clouds are seen wise men put on their cloaks;
When great leaves fall then winter is at hand;
When the sun sets who does not look for night?
Untimely storms make men expect a dearth.

(*Richard III*, II, iii, 32 sq.)

Another is *Circumlocutio*. 'In order to lengthen the work don't call things by their names' (*Longius ut sit opus ne ponas nomina rerum*). Thus Dante calls dawn 'Old Tithonus' bedfellow', *la concubina di Titone antico*, in the *Purgatorio* (IX, 1), or Chaucer at the opening of *Troilus*, III, instead of 'O Venus' writes

O blisful light of which the bemes clere
Adorneth at the thridde hevne faire,
O sonnes lief, O Joves daughter dere,
Pleasaunce of love, O goodly debonaire

But the most important of all the *morae*. is *Diversio* or Digression. Nearly all of us, when we first began reading medieval poetry, got the impression that the poets were unable to keep to the point. We may even have thought that they were drifting with the stream of consciousness. The revived study of medieval *Rhetoric*—a welcome novelty in twentieth-century medievalism—puts an end to that idea. For good or ill the digressiveness of the medieval writers is the product not of nature but of art. The second part of the *Romance of the Rose* depends on Digressions in the same degree, if not in the same way, as *Tristram Shandy*. It has even been suggested⁷ that the peculiar narrative technique of the romances and of their Renaissance successors, the

interwoven stories that so incessantly cross and interrupt one another, may be simply one more application of the digressive principle and an offshoot of Rhetoric.

This theory, which I do not myself fully accept, has at any rate the merit of replacing the Digressions recommended by Geoffrey in their proper context. They can be regarded as an expression of the same impulse we see at work in much medieval architecture and decoration. We may call it the love of the labyrinthine; the tendency to offer to the mind or the eye something that cannot be taken in at a glance, something that at first looks planless though all is planned. Everything leads to everything else, but by very intricate paths. At every point the question 'How did we get here?' arises, but there is always an answer. Professor Gunn⁸ has done much towards enabling us to recover the taste by which such a structure could be enjoyed in literature; which could feel that the main subject, in throwing off so many digressions, which themselves throw off subordinate digressions, showed the ramifying energy of a strong tree, glorious with plenitude.

The other *morae* are *Apostropha* and *Descriptio*, which call for no comment.

On *Ornatus*, stylistic ornament, Geoffrey has a remarkable piece of advice: 'Do not always let a word remain in its natural position' (*noli semper concedere verbo In proprio residere loco*). What lies behind this is the practice of authors like Apuleius; in an inflected language such as Latin there is hardly any limit to the possible dislocations of idiomatic word-order. Yet Chaucer can go a long way in English, and so skilfully that we may not always be aware of it:

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen
That was the King Priamus' sone of Troye,
In loving how his aventures fellen
Fro wo to wele and after out of ioye,
My purpose is....

(*Troths*, I, I sq).

It goes down easily enough; but at no period of the English language would such a sentence have been possible in conversation. Nor was Chaucer the last poet to practise this nice derangement.

Two morals may possibly be drawn: (1) that the word-order in high medieval poetry can never, of itself, be evidence for that of the spoken language; and (2) that where a peculiarity, of the order looks to us like a desperate concession to the demands of metre, this may not always be so.

How to end your composition, as well as how to begin it, was a problem. Matthew of Vendôme in his *Ars Versificatoria*⁹ (late twelfth century) suggests five methods.¹⁰

One is *per epilogum*, that is *per recapitulationem sententiae*, by summing up the 'sentence' or moral of the whole. Chaucer thus ends the Tales of the Miller, the Reeve, and the Physician.

Another is by asking someone to amend your work; as Chaucer asks Gower at the end of *Troilus* (v, 1856).

The third is *per veniae petitionem*, by asking indulgence for your deficiencies. Gower uses this method in the *Confessio* (VIII, 3062, 1st version) and Hawes in the *Pastime of Pleasure* (5796).

The fourth is with a vaunt, *per ostensionem gloriae*. The classical precedent is Horace's *exegi monumentum*. Few, if any, medieval vernacular poets were bold enough to follow it.

Finally, you can end with the praise of God. Chaucer combines this with the second method in *Troilus* (v, 1863).

The Rhetorical precepts can be seen working at full blast in the *Physicien's Tale*. Here is the analysis.

1-4 Story
5-29 *Descriptio* interrupted by *Prosopopoea* of Nature
30-71 *Descriptio* resumed
72-92 *Apostropha* to governesses
93-104 *Apostropha* to parents
105-239 Story
240-244 *Exemplum* of Jeplithah's daughter
245-276 Story
277-286 Ending *per recapitulationem sententiae*

It works out at about ten lines of Amplification to every sixteen of narrative. The *Manciple's Tale* is equally rhetorical; in the *Pardoner's*, digression is used in a way that moderns find easier to enjoy.

The four Quadrivial Arts must here be summarily dismissed. Of Astronomy something has been said in an earlier chapter. On the vast and rewarding subject of medieval Music the reader must seek guides who are better qualified than I;¹¹ and Geometry, naturally, makes little impact on literature. It is, however, worth remembering that Arithmetic acquired during the Middle Ages an invaluable new tool—the so-called ‘Arabic’ numerals. The system is really of Indian origin and dates from the fifth century, but it reached the West through the work of the ninth-century mathematician Ben Musa, known as Al-Khowarazmi. A curious little eddy of errors and legends resulted. ‘Al-Khowarazmi’ (the man from Khawarazm) suggests an abstract noun *algorism*, later *augrim*, which means calculation. Hence ‘figures of augrim’ in the *Ancrene Wisse*. Then, to account for the word *algorism*, a mathematical sage Albus is invented, so that the *Roman de la Rose* speaks of

Albus, Euclidean, Tholomees.

(16,373.)

But in line 12,994 Albus had become Argus; in which form he slips into the *Book of the Duchess*—‘Argus the noble countour’.

¹The actual practice and history, of medieval education are a different matter. The relevant chapters of D. Knowles' *Evolution of Medieval Thought* (1962) are a good introduction.

² Isidore, I, iv; Gower, IV, 2637.

³ By them sits Boethius, lost in hesitation. Hearing upon either hand learn'd asseveration, Wondering which side to take in this disputation; So he durs'n't bring the case to a termination.

⁴ Ed. Faral, *Les Arts Poétiques du XII et du XIII Siècles*.

⁵ II, 100 sq.

⁶ III, A 220 sq.

⁷ See Vinaver, *Works of Malory*, vol. I, pp. xlviij sq.

⁸ *The Mirror of Love* (Lubbock, Texas, 1952).

⁹ See Faral, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ IV, xlix.

¹¹ See *New Oxford History of Music*, vols, II and III; G. Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1940) and *Music in the Renaissance* (New York, 1954); C. Parrish, *The Notation of Medieval Music* (1957); F. L. Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain* (1958).

Taken from *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, by C. S. Lewis. 1964. Cambridge University Press.

Printed with permission from Cambridge University Press.