

A BARBARIC PROFESSION

by Richard Campbell

In its classical sense, the term "barbarian" was synonymous with "foreigner." To an ancient Greek, a barbarian was anyone who did not speak Greek, who did not worship Greek gods, who did not follow Greek customs, and hence who was not civilized. To an ancient Roman, to be a barbarian was to be one who lived outside of the civilizing influence of the Empire, to be one who was outside of Roman law and tradition. Because this term was usually applied by the Romans to the rude wild Germanic, Gallic and British tribes of northern Europe, the term "barbarian" came to mean one who is savage. When we use the term "barbarian" today, we usually conjure images of rape, murder, and pillage, but that is not the primordial meaning of the term.

It is in the sense of "foreigner" that the notion of a barbarian interests us here. One who did not speak Greek, or who did not follow Greek customs, was cut off from the civilizing influence of a Homer or a Hippocrates, a Euclid, or an Aristotle, a Sophocles or an Apollonius. He could not benefit from Greek wisdom because as a foreigner he could not come to adequately understand it in its original sense. Similarly one who stood outside of the Roman Empire, who did not speak Latin, could not fully understand those values that rooted Roman civilization. When we consider that Greek and Roman civilization is the foundation for our own, and when we consider further that education is the main tool by which we teach those values that we inherit from classical Greece and Rome, it seems worthwhile to ask whether or not our present approach to education is consistent with

the classical ideal. Do the liberal arts, as they are presently taught at American universities, stand guard over the precious legacy of the best of Greek-Roman civilization, or do they reflect something foreign to that legacy, some new form of barbarism?

The term "liberal" has its root in the Latin term "liberalis," which means "pertaining to a free man." The emphasis in this definition is on the word "free". This notion carries over into the French "libre," and into the English "liberate" and "liberty." A "liberal" activity is one that helps us to become free men. It is an activity that liberates us from some state that is less than human, some state of slavery. In the original use of "liberal" in terms like "liberal arts" or "liberal sciences," one referred to those arts and sciences "that were considered worthy of a free man," as opposed to those activities that are merely servile or mechanical. Later, this notion was expanded, and the liberal arts and liberal sciences came to mean those activities directed to general intellectual enlargement and refinement to those activities that are not narrowly restricted to the requirements of technical or professional training. But before we can fully appreciate the original sense of the terms "liberal arts," we must examine the archetypal meaning of the term "art".

If we hear the term "art" today, we most frequently think of the fine arts - painting, music, dance, etc. That is not, however, that to which the word originally referred. The word "art" is rooted in the Latin "artem," which means "skill". Specifically art meant "skill in doing anything as a result of knowledge and practice." In this sense art could mean skill in building a house, in preparing a meal, or in planning a cathedral. What was important for an activity to be an art was that it be a form of excellence based on knowledge. It is not surprising, therefore, that Aristotle counts art as one of the intellectual virtues.

But the term "art" also has several other important senses that we fail to emphasize. When art meant "skill," it meant human skill as opposed to those forms of excellence that may happen in nature or by chance. It also meant the ability to apply the principles of a special science, that is, to apply the understanding one has of a kind of knowledge by displaying that knowledge in the excellence of some work or object. It is later, during the middle ages, that the "arts" begin to mean specifically a form of intellectual skill that is to be taught at universities. And it is only much later that it takes on the more common meaning of the fine arts. A better contemporary sense of art for what is important in this essay is the sense employed when speaking of an "artisan." Art, in that sense, means "craft," the skill in applying knowledge to the creation of an entity, even if it is not the Sistine Ceiling or Don Giovanni.

If we attempt to assess the original meaning of the "liberal arts," they would seem to be "those skills that help to make man free." But it makes little sense to speak of freedom without asking from what we are being freed. The obvious answer is that the liberal arts free us from forms of intellectual slavery. They are the arts that liberate us from dogmatism, from prejudice, from parochialism, in short, from all forms of ignorance. There are, however, many forms of ignorance, and one of them is blind orthodoxy. Such blindness is clearly the target of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in his Republic. Plato's theory of education, as expressed in that book and in other of his books, is consistent with the true meaning of those arts we call liberal. He argues that in our ordinary lives we all acquire, by accretion if not by direct education, opinions that we accept as true because we are too lazy or too stupid to inquire about them. Thus the philosophic life is nothing more than resolving to strug-

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