Disenchantment and the Liberal Arts

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Presented at the **International Conference on the Liberal Arts**

September 30th – October 1st, 2010 at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick.

Abstract:

This paper explores liberal arts education as a process of disenchantment. How and why is it that the curricular objectives of liberal arts education effectively override the affirmative discourses (of devotion, honour, praise, worship, and joy) which liberal arts learners import when they are admitted to university?

Biography:

Robin Lathangue has taught religious studies and political philosophy at Wilfrid Laurier University and St. Thomas University. He has served in senior posts in university extension at the University of Alberta and the University of New Brunswick. His research interests include radical orthodoxy, political theology, and the theory and conceptualization of the university and of higher education. He has published numerous essays on the work of George Grant and Gillian Rose in Canada, Australia and the United States. He is presently Head of Colleges at Trent University.

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Introduction

In December, 2005, the Council of Ontario Universities formally endorsed "Guidelines for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations," a document in which the word "critical" appears six times - as a modifier, adjective or adverb – and each time indicating the capacity for discernment and the analytical evaluation of something.[1] In what follows I will argue that, depending on the milieu in which "critical thinking" is habituated, its meaning degrades into a theoretical orthodoxy and passive assent to established routines which are inevitably expressions of disapproval. I describe this trajectory as "disenchantment" within liberal arts teaching and learning, and what follows is intended to trace the validity of this tendency to its roots in representations of the intellectual as a distinctly secular creature, and in contemporary philosophical developments associated with political liberalism, both of which I claim are dominated by fear. I draw on recent Catholic "Communio" thought as a way to unveil the repressed theologies and hidden ontologies of liberal neutrality, but conclude with a brief examination of liberal arts scholarship that is increasingly open to various non-theistic models of enchantment. Above all, I am trying to find ways of re-enchanting the experience of learning, of celebrating the unpredictability of the liberally educated mind, and of surprising and subverting champions of a fiercely anti-religious arena of contemporary liberal arts.

Part 1

"No creature can learn that which his heart has no shape to hold," says the novelist Cormac McCarthy, reminding us that learning is a process of character. (1992: 111) The symmetry at work – the idea that what you know depends on who you are – means that becoming a member of a community of practice like a university involves developing a new,

social self. There is reciprocity here, however, and the social identity under development shapes what one comes to know, and how we assimilate knowledge and information. Jerome Bruner makes the distinction between learning about and learning to be. But even when we learn about, in Bruner's terms, the identity we are developing determines what we pay attention to and what we learn. (Brown and Duguid 2000: 128, 138)

By third or fourth year, some undergraduates in the liberal arts will feel sufficiently seasoned and confident enough in their identities as scholars to submit their work to an essay contest. At Trent University, where I work, students submit to a contest named in honour of the founding president, Professor Tom Symons. Here is an excerpt from a recent letter from one of the contest judges to colleagues in the Department of Canadian Studies:

> My experience of reading the undergraduate essays submitted last spring for Symons Prizes in Canadian Studies was exhilarating and at the same time disquieting. It is a joy to see how talented and intelligent and thoughtful and articulate our best students are. But if these are indeed the best papers, they are similar in a way that causes me concern. They come from a wide range of disciplines and instructors, but what struck me was how common, almost universal, is our approval of negativity. It seems clear from them that we as instructors must be validating and even valorizing the discourse of grievance, objection and complaint. I think we must actively or unconsciously be encouraging suspicion and antipathy in our students. We seem to have led them to believe that being conscious means objecting to something, as if we were stuck at the stage of antithetical thought. (Johnston: 2004)

Injustices and failures are all around us, and we must confront and engage them, correct them, and encourage students to do so as well. But how has critical thinking become synonymous with expressing disapproval? How have learners been brought to associate admiration with naïveté or treason? (Johnston: 2004) It seems as though the *disenchanting* aspects of the milieu in which new students develop their new social identities effectively

overrides whatever affirmative discourses of devotion, honour, praise and joy they may have imported when they were admitted. In Bottom's words to Titania, "…[R]eason and love keep little company together now-a-days; the more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them friends." [2]

Elaine Marks, first chair of the Women's Studies Research Center and chair of Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, relates a teaching experience in which both her choice of certain texts and the manner of reading them were contested by students. The text was *Dust on a Road* by Zora Neal Hurston, assigned in a women's studies course called "Writing Women's Li(v)es." What disturbed members of the all-female class (especially the white students) was that Hurston's story did not narrate the unrelieved oppression of a black woman growing up in the American south in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

> These angry students did not react with "surprise" at the discrepancy between their expectations and the words of the text but rather with hostility, in part because, through no fault of their own, they have had little or no training in the reading of a literary text. Like most readers, they tend to read uniquely for information, for historical or psychological "realism." Although the first text we had read together in that course was Nelly Furman's superb 1980 essay "Textual Feminism," which insists on the importance of words, language, and the signifier and attempts to show that literature has functions other than the referential, their habits of reading were not easily challenged. Indeed, these habits are often supported by ideological positions that students, in some of their classes, are taught to look for in all the texts they read. If the students do not find evidence of racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism, they tend to assume that either the writer or the teacher is guilty of a cover-up. (2005: 422-23)

The problem is particularly acute in the liberal arts and social sciences where "aggressive vocabularies of subversion, demystification, transgression, violence, fissure, de-centered subjects, fragmentation, and dismantling master narratives," are generating a "pervasive mindset" determined to wage a predictably antiestablishment ideological political struggle. (Patai and Corral 2005: 8-12) This approach invariably ends at the same point: "A denunciation of

authors for their limitations vis-à-vis the orthodoxies of the historical moment and its preferred 'voices,' or alternatively, a celebration of authors or texts for expressing the favoured politics or for merely embodying the requisite identity." (Patai and Corral 2005: 8)

Embedded in this world of ordained transgressions are certain assumptions about what a proper liberal education entails:

> [C]ontemporary academics see themselves as having merely four brief years in which to demystify students, and somehow to get them to look up . . . long enough to gaze upon the darker side of American and Western life. . . How can they make them understand, with only four years to do so, that capitalism and individualism have created cultures that are cruel, inefficient, racist, sexist, and homophobic, with oppressive caste systems, mental and behavioral? How, in such a brief period, can they enlighten 'minorities,' including women (the majority of students), about the 'internalization' of their oppression (today's equivalent of false consciousness)? How, in only eight semesters, might they use the classroom, curriculum, and university *in loco parentis* to create a radical leadership among what they see as the victim groups of our society? (Kors 2008)

Imagine if universities actually published a clear statement of their intention to reform, setting down on page one of their academic calendars and fund-raising letters:

> This University believes that your sons and daughters are the racist, sexist, homophobic, Eurocentric progeny or victims of an oppressive society from which most of them received unjust privilege. In return for tuition and massive taxpayer subsidy, we shall assign rights on a compensatory basis and undertake by coercion their moral and political enlightenment. (Kors 2008)

Of course, there are limits to parents' readiness to know, and this kind of calendar copy is "too much information." It will never see the light of day in university view-books because if it did the taxpayers involved would be very unhappy. It is more acceptable to say, with Edward Said, that "the purpose of the intellectual's activity is to advance human freedom and

knowledge.” (1994: 13) And yet, as literary exemplars Said offers the provocative figures of Bazarov and Stephen Dedalus from Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, and Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Bazarov’s is a deeply confrontational intellect, “not fit for domestication,” and precisely because he is an intellectual Dedalus “will not adjust to domesticity or to humdrum routine.” (1994: 12-13) So much for the trenches of day to day existence that make up much of adult life, and that generate the income which goes to pay tuition.

According to a recent essay in *Harper’s Magazine*, we should nurture and protect the liberal arts:

> Why? Because they complicate our vision, pull our most cherished notions out by the roots, flay our pieties. Because they grow uncertainty. Because they expand the reach of our understanding (and therefore our compassion), even as they force us to draw and redraw the borders of tolerance. Because out of all this work of self-building might emerge an individual capable of humility in the face of complexity; an individual formed through questioning and therefore not likely to cede that right; an individual resistant to coercion, to manipulation and demagoguery in all their forms. (Slouka 2009: 37)

We can hear in this statement the familiar justification for liberal arts education as the incubator of democratic citizenship. The point about flayed pieties should give us pause, however, as the following joke, told by David Foster Wallace in his 2005 Commencement speech at Kenyon College, attempts to show:

> There are these two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and the two are arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer. And the atheist says: “Look, it's not like I don't have actual reasons for not believing in God. It's not like I haven't ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn't see a thing, and it was 50 below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out 'Oh, God, if there is a God, I'm

> lost in this blizzard, and I'm gonna die if you don't help me.'" And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. "Well then you must believe now," he says, "After all, here you are, alive." The atheist just rolls his eyes. "No, man, all that was was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp."[3]

The atheism in this story is too eager to dismiss the possibility that the passing Inuit had anything to do with a prayer for help. Indeed, a truly critical thinker would reject "blind certainty," even in its atheistic mode, as "a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up."[4]

How has faith and theological reverence or devotion have in the liberally educated mind, come to be associated with blind conformity and unreflective adherence to old ways? The answer, for Said, is that the life of the mind is intrinsically non-theological: "the true intellectual is a secular being." (1994: 89). Said is well known as an advocate of that form of secularism that condemns religion while also relegating it to the private sphere. For Said, "In the secular world – our world, the historical and social world made by human effort – the intellectual has only secular means to work with; revelation and inspiration, while perfectly feasible as modes of understanding in private life, are disasters and even barbaric when put to use by theoretically minded men and women. Indeed, I would go so far as saying that the intellectual must be involved in a lifelong dispute with all the guardians of sacred vision or text, whose depredations are legion and whose heavy hand brooks no disagreement and certainly no diversity." (1994: 65) But there is a back story to Said's definition of intellectual activity in terms of secular criticism, the theme of which is political salvation and rescue from religious violence.

Part 2

The politically neutral “state,” namely a centralized power holding a monopoly on violence within a defined territory, first appeared during the conflict and anarchy that convulsed Western Europe throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (Weber 1946: 77-78) The standard account of these events and their relation to the rise of the modern nation-state identifies those conflicts as “wars of religion” and attributes to the modern state a redemptive significance. The liberal democratic state delivers us “from the bloodshed and brutality of religious disagreement.” (Bell 2004: 426) In the wake of the Reformation, as theological passion blended with political power, wars ensued and liberalism was born out of religious cruelty.

Trends within Reformation Christendom are in this regard emblematic of widely shared anxieties about violence in the relations between the religions today. The so-called “wars of religion” suggest that if Christians could treat each other so abominably, what hope is there for contemporary relations between believers of different faiths altogether? The debate is such that, at present, all the “quality press” in the academic study of religion and theology assumes that “religion is a prime (often *the* prime) source of violence, and the modern state and market the great bringer of peace.” (Milbank et al 1999: 14)

This state salvation story is rooted in modern liberal political philosophy and the search for a core morality on which people with different theological reasons for living can agree. Many theorists have cast their political principles in terms of a thoroughly detached relation to inherited and community-based forms of felt conviction and religious cultural traditions. This line of argument calls for a "philosophy of individualism” in support of the principle of neutrality: the idea that the state should not promote one controversial view of the good life at the expense of others. Theorists in the last forty years have therefore generated a new model of liberalism

conceived as a strictly *political* doctrine, as distinguished from a general philosophy of humanity or a comprehensive moral doctrine. Liberal political *structures*, it is argued, are not the same as liberal political *theory* or ideology, and this distinction supposedly provides a justification for neutrality "without having to take sides in the dispute about individualism and tradition." (Larmore 1996a: 132)

In this view, the norms of political liberalism, especially equal respect and rational dialogue, are ranked higher than theologically-based theories of what it means to be human as such. But if we venture to doubt the character of political liberalism revealed in this move we elicit a dire warning: To make of liberal neutrality yet another controversial and partisan vision of the good life is to disable it, and either modern experience dissolves in the light of "the one irresistible, all-encompassing Good," or our political future will be one "where ignorant armies clash by night." (Larmore 1996a: 151) As modern experience is not likely to dissolve into beneficent universalism, there comes into view from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" a fearful nightmare vision from which all educators, secular and religious, liberal or conservative, should like to awake.

Recent critics, however, have drawn attention to how arguments for neutrality like those furnished by political liberalism actually draw everyone into con game. In the (putatively) neutral and open market of religious worldviews, we also must accept terms hiddenly filled out with a liberal theory of religion - a theory, by the way, that liberal theory claims not to have. The argument here is that the appeal to liberal neutrality, as regards competing visions of the good life, actually hides its own definite truth about the nature of religion. If critics are right, then we are looking at a deceit that should be unacceptable, regardless of one's convictions regarding a transcendent order, because no matter what those convictions are, they are regarded with

complete indifference by this neutral party, political liberalism. As one commentator has recently noted, what appears tolerant because it values all differences on the other hand refuses to engage with differences because it judges all particularity as of equal value or as essentially the same. (Bretherton 2008: 171)

The refusal to engage appears at first as a strategic advance onto neutral common ground because it is supposed to maintain the peace when reasonable people disagree about religion. But it turns out to be finesse. The empty character of neutrality serves to prepare the ground for the delivery of a liberal anthropology. (Schindler 1996: 33-34) If we slow liberal theory down, we see that it actually imports both metaphysics *and* theology, which on the surface it claims not to do. This way of defending liberal neutrality soon collapses into a hidden atheistic dogmatism that cannot conceive of prayers being answered.

First of all, it is impossible to distinguish the formal constitutional structures (like a neutral forum of rational dialogue and equal respect, protected by the state) from liberal theory as such unless we first define religious freedom primarily in negative terms – as a protection *from* the coercion to confess only one set of convictions. But what if religious freedom, when defined in negative terms (as freedom *from*), "already presupposes a theory of religion different from one which would define religious freedom first in positive terms, in terms of the person's positive relation toward God?" (Schindler 1996: 50) While liberal neutrality may claim or intend a positive sense of openness to the transcendent, it is in fact a comprehensive silence about God, gods and the transcendent order. This silence, critics argue, "*is not yet, in and of itself, an indication of positive openness to God*," and it is not possible to have it both ways. (Schindler 1996: 63, italics in original) You cannot embrace a formal definition of political neutrality ("freedom from"), while implying a positive openness to the idea of God ("freedom for"). To

insist that “freedom from” carries a logical implication of “freedom for” is to abandon the claim of political neutrality.

Thus political liberalism, insofar as it is formal and procedural, already serves to dispose society logically toward an “indifferent” human nature and to deflect all talk of a nature positively oriented toward God. (Schindler 1996: 65) Here is one of the more influential pictures of that indifference:

> How recognizable, how familiar to us, is the man . . . who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background . . . this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy . . . He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal. (Murdoch 1986 [1970]: 80)

The “non-confessional state” as envisioned by political liberalism finds its correlation in precisely this anthropology: “rational, responsible, brave” and - in the end - paralyzed because it cannot finally avoid affirming a priority of *either* ‘freedom from’ faith *or* ‘freedom for’ faith, because both of these priorities imply a theology to which indifference cannot commit. (Schindler 1996: 83) As a result, the neutrality of political liberalism surreptitiously tilts toward the negative (freedom from) and changes what religious people understand as the self-evident meaning their convictions. A comprehensive vision of the good has now become modular: a fungible appendix that is “bolted on” to human nature:

> The non-triviality of this maneuver becomes especially clear when we note its implications with respect to any non-Western (or nonliberalized) religion – with respect to any country where a traditional (or non-dualistic) worldview still predominates. In

> countries, for example, where certain forms of Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Native American-Indian, or African religion still prevail, an invitation to adopt the juridical notion of religious freedom (freedom from) amounts to nothing less than an invitation to adopt the theological dualism of liberalism in the name of a purely formal commitment to the principle of freedom. (Schindler 1996: 66-67)

That which guarantees the required neutrality turns out to be a theoretical dualism that reorients identity. In the end, political liberalism distorts "the religiousness of religions." (McIntire 2007: 11) It does not leave traditional religion intact, but instead requires its re-alignment in terms acceptable to the dualism of Church and state. (Schindler 1996: 66) The significance of this point becomes clear when we recall Said's notion of religion as a fundamentally private disposition of the individual. According to political liberalism, the human act, in its basic structure, is understood for the purposes of the public realm to be silent towards, or at least empty of any meaningful connection to, God:

> But this means that, when religious people go on to fill this silence with speech, they must do so precisely by way of *addition* and in their capacity as *private* members of society. Non-theists, in contrast, have merely to *leave* the state's formally conceived human act as it is, namely in the emptiness which has already been accorded *official-public* status. (Schindler 1996: 69)

Believers may balk at the demands for public atheism and atheists may find themselves with unwarranted theoretical privileges in modern liberal democracies and their institutions of higher learning, but remember the consequences if we take liberalism to be only one more partisan ideal: Our future will be one "where ignorant armies clash by night."

Part 3

In Max Weber's widely acclaimed discussion of the term, disenchantment describes a world that has lost some of its allure and now seems lifeless in certain ways. But Weber was not nostalgic for the old world. He thought the process was inevitable and on the whole beneficial. (Sherry 2009: 369-370) To the extent that it is a loss, disenchantment is the desirable loss of error and illusion (a disarming of ignorant armies), but as a paradigm for liberal arts education and vocation of the intellectual it is or ought to be disintegrating. I hope I have been able to show how that might be brought about from the perspective of political theology but scholars outside of that discipline increasingly share and promote the criticisms that reveal how the modernist secular template is anything but neutral and blank. (McIntire 2007: 12) Some, for example, have argued that the long accepted mutually exclusive and "binary" approach to modernity and enchantment obscures tensions and contradictions intrinsic to the modern world: "[T]he seeming 'universal' distinctions championed by the Western metropole between modernity and tradition, or secularism and superstition, often do not hold up . . . when viewed from the 'periphery' of non-Western cultures negotiating processes of modernization in complex ways." (Landy and Saler 2009: 6) In addition, professors and students are increasingly appreciative of their own roles in the construction of knowledge of religion and willing to clarify how their own lived relationship with religion, or the absence of such, relates to their study of religion. (McIntire 2007: 12-13)

Looking farther afield, we encounter recent evidence that the problems of modernity and enchantment are eliciting responses that explore their compatibility. According this view, the contemporary world retains the power to enchant humans and we can cultivate ourselves so as to experience more of its effects: "Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it

is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies.” (Bennett 2001 :4) We can, in other words, put ourselves in the way of enchantment: I take as an example of one of these strategies the spectacle of modern sports events.

At a Stanford University colloquium in 1995, Pablo Morales, a three-time Olympic gold medalist in swimming, was quoted as saying it was the addictive qualities of “being lost in focused intensity” that had lured him out of retirement and back into competition. (As quoted by Gumbrecht 2009: 150)To some theorists this suggests that sport can become, for athletes and spectators, a strategy for re-enchantment. “Being lost” points metaphorically to the sacred, “as a realm whose fascination relies on being set apart from everyday worlds.” (Gumbrecht 2009: 150) “Being lost” refers to the distance and isolation an athlete feels during competition, so much so that from the perspective of mundane everyday life, athletic events are extra-ordinary. Second, what athletes and spectators focus on and follow in a game or competition belongs to the “realm of ephiphanies.”(Gumbrecht 2009: 150) Athletic epiphanies reveal the body in motion, and show moving bodies as “temporalized form.” The well-turned double play in baseball, for example, has in this reading a miraculously balletic quality, full of grace, strength and timing. A beautiful play in football “is an epiphany of form because it has its substance in the participating athletes’ bodies; because the form it produces is unlikely and thereby an event, achieved against the resistance against the other team’s defense; and finally and above all the beautiful play is an epiphany because it is a temporalized form, a form that begins to vanish in the very process of emergence.” (Gumbrecht 2009: 153) Thirdly, whenever hockey goalies or tennis players talk of “being in the zone” we might see “halos of intensity.” A player must be physically and mentally conditioned in order for this to occur, but conditioning alone is not enough: “What else needs to happen for a player to be in the zone will depend, as we would say today, on whether he is ‘on,’

whether a specific game is 'his' or not – it will depend on what the Greeks would have called divine inspiration." (Gumbrecht 2009: 152-153) Finally, there is the obvious comparison of stadiums to sacred spaces and their irresistible appeal for sports fans:

> Above all, stadiums as sacred spaces are spaces that require and trigger layers of ritualized behaviour during those comparatively short moments in which they are filled with action. Being in a stadium, both for athletes and spectators, is not primarily about inventing and showing individualized action. It is about inscribing oneself, physically, into a pre-existing order that only allows for narrow spaces of variation. Every event, every country, every moment in the history of sport develops its own rituals, poses, and gestures that open up a dimension for endless individual interpretation. (Gumbrecht 2009: 155)

Spectators, too, feel something special when they enter a soccer stadium shortly before kick-off: They see and are immediately attracted to the empty space, and wait in anticipation for the players to enter from the tunnels. Then, "it is through the utterly unsurprising and yet explosively exciting moment when the teams take the field that the spectators are conjured into their communal identity and agency." (Gumbrecht 2009: 155)

Conclusion

This analysis raises, I hope, some intriguing observations about the gratitude many sports fans feel toward their most admired heroes. Of course, it is unlikely that the heroes will ever be thankful for this gratitude and their fans hardly ever get to express it to their heroes directly in conversation. (Gumbrecht 2009: 158) So, in an age where so many have lost sight of the traditional religious horizons, this gratitude gets deflected towards the world that we have:

> Gratitude for great athletic moments turns into gratitude for those things that we approve of, like, enjoy, and appreciate in our everyday lives. Being thankful for what we have does not necessarily make us 'uncritical' and 'affirmative.' Although this exactly must be a fear that explains why so many intellectuals –

> even some intellectuals who love to watch or to practice sport –
> have such a hard time making peace with it. (2009: 158)

The academic world in which we live and work is steeped in the tradition of *sic et non,* of a dialectic originating in Aristotelian logic, of debating clubs in which you are only able to say something by confronting the opposition, and by taking an adversarial stance. What I have argued here is that *non* is swamping *sic* these days, that the problem at its core involves representations of the intellectual as a figure dominated by fear, that the negative discourse is consuming us, and not just in our classrooms. However, within our classrooms, the flaying of pieties is both a symptom of fear and its instillation. In the case of the liberal arts, we are afraid learners might feel at home in a world of wonders. They, in turn, may come to fear open discussion and being out of fashion.

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