Liberal Arts, Multivalence, and Global Communication

In our era of supercharged communications technologies, we need the liberal arts more than ever.

By Jerry Harp

An article by Heidi Julavits in the April 2014 issue of Harper’s, “Diagnose This: How to Be Your Own Best Doctor,” describes the emerging field of narrative medicine and provides a brief for the liberal arts as part of the healing arts. This medical field emphasizes the efficacy of hearing a patient’s story, not merely checking off a list of symptoms, in coming to a diagnosis. Julavits quotes Rita Charon, founder of Columbia University’s Program in Narrative Medicine, as saying that the close study of literature, painting, or film prepares medical students to be “better perceivers of multivalent scenarios.” Fittingly for a story about medicine, the term “multivalent” is drawn from chemistry and refers to the ability of an atom to bond with other atoms by the sharing of electrons. A scenario is thus multivalent to the extent that it can connect to various modes and matrices of interpretation, each of which discloses its own meanings.

A feel for the world as multivalent works at the heart of the liberal arts tradition and brings to mind what I have come to know as relationism, a term I learned as a student decades ago from Father Walter Ong, a Jesuit priest and professor of English who specialized in Renaissance literature. Though he wrote his MA thesis (under Marshall McLuhan) on Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sprung rhythm and studied philosophy and theology (much of each in Latin), Father Ong was also a birdwatcher and amateur biologist who maintained a lifelong interest in pretty much everything. When I was attending Saint Louis University, where he taught, I encountered a graduate student in geophysics who, on learning I was a graduate student in English, asked if I knew Father Ong. “He even knows about my field,” he said. He seemed amazed.

Part of what Father Ong meant by relationism, as opposed to relativism, is that because everything is connected to everything else, there is no single thing to say about anything. One statement, no matter how true, raises further questions, which themselves call forth further insights, which raise further questions, on and on. In accordance with the title of one of his later essays, human investigation is “hermeneutic forever.” A corollary is that because every statement conceals at least as much as it reveals, any statement must be supplemented by further statements, observations, insights, and judgments. This emphasis does not run counter to specialization, though it does oppose a narrow specialization that would exclude engagement in a variety of discourses, of languages and styles of inquiry.

I’m reminded of the debate, in Thomas More’s Utopia, between Raphael Hythloday and the character “More” (the version of himself that More wrote into the text). Hythloday holds out for a singular language of truth, a kind of school philosophy that must be used at all times and in all places and without which one would violate the best of ethical standards, for any other language occludes the truth to be told. In response, the character “More” invokes what was among the most common of Renaissance commonplaces, the world as a stage (I’m quoting from the translation by Clarence Miller):

But there is another sort of philosophy better suited to public affairs. It knows its role and adapts to it, keeping to its part in the play at hand with harmony and decorum. This is the sort you should use. Otherwise, during a performance of a comedy by Plautus, when the slaves are joking around together, if you should come out onto the stage dressed like a philosopher and recite the passage from Octavia where Seneca argues with Nero, wouldn’t it have been better for you to have a nonspeaking part than to jumble together tragedy and comedy by reciting something inappropriate?

At first blush it may seem that “More” is speaking about nothing more than the art of persuasion, but it’s striking that he refers to this approach as a philosophy—philosophia in More’s Latin—meaning that this is not merely a mode of persuasion but also a way of negotiating truth. It better serves the truth, in other words, to speak as a slave among other slaves—playing variations on the joking at hand (such joking as may be both subversive and liberating)—than to dress up to play philosopher as if you’ve wandered in from another world. In such a case, it’s better not to be allotted any lines.

According to More’s relationist—one might call it a particular kind of pluralist—philosophy, we do well to approach a given question using a variety of languages of knowing, from biology to history to poetry, philosophy, physics, and beyond, not to mention the many language worlds...
within these fields of discourse. Of course, if a question is strictly one of chemistry, then we should defer to our chemist colleagues, but once the question becomes one of further significance to the human world at large, we can supplement our chemical knowledge with insights from poetry, psychology, and political science, just as political science, psychology, and poetry do well to interact with some biology, chemistry, and physics—it’s part of what keeps these discourses alive and on the move.

None of this is to say that there is no truth to be known. Were that the case, of course, we couldn’t know it. But this pluralist, relationist view highlights the complications of making meaningful knowledge claims. Even so, some absolute statements are well worth making: “The Holocaust was evil” is a statement both obviously true and not at all difficult to stand by. However, in the general run of human investigation and reflection, further questions are worth asking: What historical forces and events led to the Holocaust? What interventions could have succeeded in stopping the genocide? What do I have within that could be complicit with such evil? And what, after all, is evil? Many worthy thinkers have worried these questions—and the question of evil has been asked for centuries, as literary critic Terry Eagleton observes in his compelling 2010 book On Evil, which has insightful things to say about the permutations and eerie emptiness of evil, including the Nazis’ terrifyingly murderous self-negation. Nor have philosophers, theologians, and literary critics been alone in contributing to our understanding of evil. Many others have as well; Milton’s Paradise Lost comes most immediately to mind.

In our era of supercharged communications technologies, in which persons from all over the globe speak in each other’s virtual presence at once, we have to play more roles in a day than More might have had to play in his world. One purpose of the liberal arts is to help us develop our abilities to inhabit this great variety of language worlds with nuance, skill, and even sprezzatura. We need the many languages of the liberal arts more than ever as we continue to reflect on how we can best understand our world, where it is going, and how we can negotiate our way. We also need the flexibility of the liberal arts to respond to the proliferation of various styles of fundamentalism, which is not merely a religious phenomenon.

From the point of view of the foregoing reflections, we might understand fundamentalism as the taking of a singular language world, to the exclusion of others, as adequate to all inquiry. Even the most efficacious of languages becomes banal in isolation. As we need binocular vision to see depth, we need more than one style of discourse to understand the world. Although we need specialists, we also need the ability to inhabit multiple roles to think and live well.

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