

Today's Trivium: The Comeback of Classical Education

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It is a little known secret—though it should be no secret at all—that classical education has been making a comeback of late. In some circles, classical education needed no revival, for its life was never really in danger; for instance, at the undergraduate level, schools like St. John's College, Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Dallas have quietly continued, to greater or lesser degrees, to carry the torch of classical learning. The revival I speak of began in the 1980s, and it has been taking place chiefly at the primary and secondary levels. True to its name, today's classical movement has brought the liberal arts, particularly the "trivium" (the arts of grammar, logic and rhetoric), front and center. And while classical education has been growing within a variety of sub-groups—parochial schools, charter schools, and homeschools—in American education, it remained more or less on the fringes of the mainstream until fairly recently.

In 2010, however, this secret return of classical education went public with the *New York Times* op-ed by Stanley Fish titled "A Classical Education: Back to the Future."¹ Therein Fish, one of America's best known public intellectuals, tells the story of what he considers the finest school that he has experienced firsthand. He writes, "[A]lthough I have degrees from two Ivy league schools and have taught at U.C. Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, Columbia and Duke, Classical High School (in Providence, RI) is the best and

¹ Stanley Fish, "A Classical Education: Back to the Future," *NYTimes.com* (New York, NY), 07 June 2010, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/a-classical-education-back-to-the-future/>, retrieved 30 June 2017.



most demanding educational institution I have ever been associated with.”² The education he received there as a high school student—one that, to most of his readers, will sound “downright antediluvian, outmoded, narrow and elitist”³—propelled almost a hundred percent of its graduates to go on to attend college, even though many, like Fish, were the first within their families to earn a high school diploma. Fish goes on to cite three recent books, each one making the case for a return to an education that otherwise seems passé. The first of these books, *The Core: Teaching Your Child the Core of Classical Education*, is by the CAO of Classical Conversations, Leigh A. Bortins; the second is Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*; the third is Diane Ravitch’s *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. The fact that, as Fish notes, “[t]hree more different perspectives from three more different writers could hardly be imagined”⁴ highlights the various ways in which interest in classical schooling is being revived and suggests that it will continue to make waves in American education. But why was it abandoned in the first place? And what led to its recent revival?

I. The Beginning of the End of Classical Education

The tale of classical⁵ education and its decline in the United States is spun in various ways. One version traces its American demise to John Dewey (1859-1952), champion of a “progressive” education that attempted to replace more traditional educational forms of his day—forms that drew heavily and generally on the Western heritage—with a pedagogical model in favor of what lay ahead. Progressive education

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ As I am using the word here, *classical* refers broadly to the form of education in the liberal arts that today’s “classical” educators are attempting to revive. According to H. I. Marrou, “the ancient Mediterranean world knew only one classical education, only one coherent and clearly defined educational system”; it is in the Hellenistic era that it reached maturity. Henri Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), xiii. In what follows, I will use the term more narrowly, referring to that type of learning offered in today’s trivium-based schools.



sought to prepare students for democratic citizenship, self-consciously casting off the study of impractical disciplines such as philosophy, of “dead” languages like Latin and ancient Greek, and of particular literary texts that had long been part of the unquestioned canon. Another version of the turn away from these older forms of education looks to Horace Mann (1796-1859), who died the year that Dewey was born. Mann (himself a one-time tutor of Latin and Greek at Brown, his alma mater) is considered the “Father of the Common School Movement,” a movement that expanded public education first in Massachusetts and later throughout the nation. According to this interpretation, the contemporary impulses for standardization and enculturation begin with Mann. A third version of the story goes further back, pinning the rap on America’s founders, men like Thomas Jefferson, whose lives marked an ideological turn from the liberal to the practical arts. The concern for utilitarian education and the suspicion of book learning that shows up in the writings of men like Jefferson, even though his own formation was indubitably classical, is identified by Eva Brann as the beginning of the end, in the American context at least, for traditional learning.⁶

But, as far back as Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), the lament could be heard regarding the eclipse of an older style of learning that highlighted the study of the liberal arts. Writing in the early 1700s, Vico saw in his own time a departure away from the ancient classical tradition and toward the sciences. In *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (1709), Vico begins by pointing out the new vision Francis Bacon has offered in proposing, as Vico puts it, the “new arts and sciences [that] should be added to those we already possess” and the ways that “we may enlarge our stock of knowledge, . . . so that human wisdom may be brought to complete perfection.”⁷ Doubting that Bacon’s proposal will be able to deliver on its promise of achieving perfect wisdom, Vico

⁶ Eva T. H. Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 89.

⁷ Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of our Time*, trans. Elio Gianturco (1708; repr., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 4.



continues, asking, “Which study method is finer and better, ours or the Ancients?”⁸ He then goes on to suggest that, whereas the new arts and sciences offer a kind of precision, certainty, and clarity, the new study methods lack a place for what he finds to be just as valuable: common sense, imagination, ethics, philosophy, and eloquence.⁹ Concerning this newer sort of education, Vico maintains, “We devote all our efforts to the investigation of physical phenomena because their nature seems unambiguous; but we fail to inquire into human nature which, because of the freedom of man’s will, is difficult to determine.”¹⁰ For Vico, then, the study methods of the ancients might be said to be more modest, for they do not promise certainty; however, they also are more fundamental in that they take into account human purposes.

In fact, Vico’s vision for the place of these new studies anticipates that of more recent thinkers, including Albert Einstein, who, more than two hundred years later, agreed that science furnishes only means, not ends:

What hopes and fears does the scientific method imply for mankind? I do not think that is the right way to put the question. Whatever this tool in the hands of man will produce depends entirely on the nature of the goals alive in this mankind. Once these goals exist, the scientific method furnishes means to realize them. Yet it cannot furnish the very goals. . . .

Perfection of means and confusion of goals seem—in my opinion—to characterize our age.¹¹

These remarks, written in 1941 during World War II, attempted to draw attention to the dependence of science upon the character of its users. That is to say, for Einstein *formation* is to be considered before *transformation*, or, to put it differently, the one who

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Ibid., 8-15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹¹ Albert Einstein, “The Common Language of Science,” in *Out of My Later Years* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 121.



wields technology must first be correctly molded before he or she begins to shape the world.

II. The Turn Back: World War II and the Call for Educational Reform

Einstein's questioning of the scientific impulse of his own day, an impulse that was not answerable to anything outside itself, only became more important as the atrocities of World War II slowly came to light. That great international conflict proved a critical moment to a number of thinkers, many of whom would later echo in various ways Einstein's concern for the aimless progressive tendency of the scientific and technical education being offered students. In 1943, while the war was still being fought beyond the borders of North America, *The Humanities after the War* was published,¹² a collection of essays discussing the role that the humanities might have in education when the war finally came to an end. That volume points out that the *inhumanities* faced in World War II—a war characterized by “an expert barbarism misusing science”¹³—exposed the importance of preserving goods that the humanities might singularly make possible. One particular contributor to that volume, Roscoe Pound, insisted that a distinction be made between subjects of study that are foundational and

¹² Three additional works are worth mentioning. *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, published in 1945, claims that “a society controlled wholly by specialists is not a wisely ordered society” (53) and proposes a revival of “general education,” for which “liberal education” is suggested as a rough equivalent (ix). Paul H. Buck, et al., *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), 53, ix. *The Rebirth of Liberal Education*, also published in 1945, calls for a revitalization of the humanities, which, “rather than the natural sciences or the social sciences, are concerned with values that may legitimately be called humane”; that work's author also suggests that even the natural and social sciences can be studied as a “legitimate part of the humanistic curriculum when . . . studied, not only scientifically but historically and philosophically.” Fred Benjamin Millett, *The Rebirth of Liberal Education* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1945), v, vi. A third important publication emerging during the post-World War II years was a collection of essays from Cornell's 1949 Symposium on “America's Freedom and Responsibility in the Contemporary Crisis.” Edgar Johnson, et al., *Freedom and the University: The Responsibility of the University for the Maintenance of Freedom in the American Way of Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950).

¹³ Norman Foerster, introduction to *The Humanities after the War*, ed. Norman Foerster (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), v.



those that are in the “superstructure” of education; while the former help to impart wisdom, the latter rely upon a previously acquired wisdom in order to operate (22).

To various thinkers, then, World War II offered a critical moment for the reconsideration of the place of education in forming students. In the 1948 publication of *The Impact of the War upon American Education*, one of a series of reports commissioned by the Committee on War Studies, I. L. Kandel concludes that the war revealed the important role education can play in shaping values and how that role had increasingly been ignored in times leading up to the war (189). Kandel writes,

The literature on college education, which began to appear as soon as the war broke out in Europe and which mounted in volume as the war progressed, attacked the absence of a sense of direction and purpose in education; and, in emphasizing the importance of liberal education in general and of the humanities in particular, sought to re-emphasize the urgent need of the guidance of values if education was to make its contribution to the preservation of the democratic ideal. (188)

That is to say, the war revealed that the goods and values of a civilization cannot merely be assumed or remain inherited capital; rather, they must be rediscovered and embraced anew by each generation, and education plays a unique role in that reappraisal.

In mentioning “the literature” being written on education, Kandel may have had in mind that produced by intellectual luminaries of the day, many of them temporarily turning from their areas of specialization to address the educational concerns of their historical moment. According to Alan Jacobs, the list of such figures included Mortimer Adler, W. H. Auden, C. S. Lewis, and Jacques Maritain, to name only a few.¹⁴ In 1942, C. S. Lewis delivered the first of three lectures in Newcastle that would evolve into *The*

¹⁴ Alan Jacobs, interview by Ken Myers, *Mars Hill Audio Journal*, 110, 2011.



Abolition of Man, a treatise on education that, as its title suggests, regards applied science cut off from universal values as the undoing of the human. W. H. Auden's 1943 Phi Beta Kappa address at Swarthmore College, a talk he titled "Vocation and Society," addressed similar concerns, and serves as the prosaic companion to his later and better known poetic work *The Age of Anxiety*, published in 1947. In "Vocation and Society," Auden urges students to approach their education not in terms of securing future creature comforts but rather in terms of falling in love or of making a vow; education, he suggests, is a matter of the soul waking to consciousness.¹⁵ Also in 1943, in the Terry Lectures at Yale University, Jacques Maritain evoked a similar theme, beginning his talks by saying that, although education naturally aims at the particular—"a particular child belonging to a given nation, a given social environment, a given historical age"¹⁶—the fact that a child is a human child must be the first educational consideration. Those talks took human nature as their theme, enabling Maritain to explore the ontological purpose of education over and against an education with no articulated or defined purpose whatsoever. In other words, Maritain was seeking to offer an alternative to a type of education that approaches the human solely with a scientific view.¹⁷ The title of the 1943 Terry Lectures was published as *Education at the Crossroads*, with, again, World War II serving for Maritain as the crucial event that demanded a radical reappraisal of the means and ends of education.¹⁸ Finally, Mortimer Adler was especially prolific during the first half of that decade,¹⁹ publishing no fewer

¹⁵ W. H. Auden, "Vocation and Society: Phi Beta Kappa Address, 1943," *Swarthmore.edu.*, accessed 13 July 2017. <http://www.swarthmore.edu/library/auden/documents/vs.pdf>.

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (1943; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Indeed, Maritain's final section, "The Educational Problems Raised by the Present World Crisis of Civilization," addresses the dehumanizing effects of education under Hitler and how a new vision of education might not only prepare students but also repair them; new students would be educated, a difficult enough task, but others—those psychologically damaged by the education they had received over the past ten years—would need rehabilitation, too.

¹⁹ Adler, the only American mentioned here, has become a major influence among contemporary classical educators.



than five books whose titles suggest their prompting by the second World War: *The Philosophy and Science of Man: A Collection of Texts as a Foundation for Ethics and Politics* (1940), *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (1940), *A Dialectic of Morals: Towards the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (1941), *How to Think About War and Peace* (1944), and *The Revolution in Education* (1944). These years, then, were a critical period in which various thinkers were considering the type of education needed after World War II, for it was a decade marked by similar, though apparently unassociated, impulses to revive a kind of education that was in danger of being abandoned. These diverse calls for educational reform, and for a revival of what may generally be called “classical education,” planted the seeds that would not bloom for nearly forty years.²⁰

While general calls for reform were issuing from a variety of scholars and artists, two non-Americans—one in England, at the height of her influence, and the other in Canada, at the outset of his own—happened upon the same rather specific educational concept, namely, that of the trivium (the language arts of grammar, dialectic or “logic,” and rhetoric). Those two writers were the English essayist, novelist, and Dante scholar Dorothy Sayers and the North American media theorist Marshall McLuhan. In 1943, McLuhan received his Ph.D. from Cambridge without being required, because of the dangers imposed by the War, to travel back to England for his oral defense.²¹ His dissertation, *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*, remained unpublished until 2006. Consequently, it would likely have been unknown to

²⁰ Why these calls for reform failed to materialize in the United States during the decades following World War II—decades which saw America, during the Nuclear Age and the Cold War, march ahead toward even greater scientific, technical, and progressive forms of education—is a question that must be addressed in another study. My hunch is that the sense of triumphalism that marked the end of the distinctly American experience in World War II silenced the concerns of many educational reformers and drowned out, for a time at least, those of the thinkers I have included here. Many scholars, such as Walter Kaufmann in *The Future of the Humanities* (170-72), point to Sputnik’s launch in 1957 as a critical moment when the humanities were more or less abandoned in favor of education in mathematics and the sciences.

²¹ Martha Watson, “The Place of Marshall McLuhan and Thomas Nashe in the Learning of Their Time,” *Explorations in Media Ecology* 6, no. 3 (2007): 207.



Sayers in 1947, when she delivered a talk dealing directly with a form of education patterned on the trivium. Addressing an audience at Oxford, Sayers delivered a lecture entitled “The Lost Tools of Learning,” later published as an essay by the same name. That address has arguably become more important to contemporary classical educators than any other single work, being taken up by education reformers in the final two decades of the twentieth century.

In “The Lost Tools of Learning,” Sayers explores an alternative to modern education, one that she finds in the trivium of the medieval world, a syllabus of learning that Sayers believes offers a more promising educational alternative in turning out informed students who think clearly and communicate effectively. Sayers takes up the three language arts of the trivium in an innovative—perhaps even unorthodox—way, seeing them as stages of developmental psychology that she nicknames “the Poll-Parrot, the Pert, and the Poetic,” respectively.²² The Poll-Parrot stage is that of the young child who memorizes easily, parroting back information but finding “critical thinking” difficult. The Pert stage corresponds roughly with the early teenage years, in which youngsters delight in arguing, possessing a black-and-white view of even complex issues. Students who pass to the Poetic stage become concerned with self-expression; they experience an awakening of the imagination that Sayers maintains is “usually dormant during the Pert age.”²³ She goes on to define grammar, logic, and rhetoric not as subjects but as “methods of dealing with subjects”; rather than curricular content to be learned, the three language arts become, as Sayers’s title suggests, the “tools of learning” necessary for the training of the mind. In this understanding, every subject studied would have its own inherent grammar (its basic content to be mastered), logic (its ordered relationships), and rhetoric (its effective expression). For Sayers, the arts of

²² Dorothy Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” in *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*, by Douglas Wilson (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 154.

²³ *Ibid.*, 160-61.



the trivium are the arts of learning itself, and they line up neatly with a child's developmental growth.

Before mapping out a suggested syllabus for each of the three stages, Sayers acknowledges the near futility of her efforts to revisit the trivium as a model for education: "It is in the highest degree improbable that the reforms I propose will ever be carried into effect."²⁴ Today, however, it is "classical" education that has, by and large, taken up Sayers's gauntlet, while McLuhan's has yet to exert any influence on trivium-based education.²⁵

III. Today's Trivium

If there is a single identifiable moment that marks the recovery of Sayers's ideas, it must be the year 1981, the year that saw the opening of Logos School in Moscow, Idaho.²⁶ The founder of that school, Douglas Wilson, explains that he took up Sayers's challenge and started the private school so that his own children could have the type of education described in that 1947 Oxford address.²⁷ Ten years later Wilson published *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning* (1991), a book that sparked nationwide interest in Sayers's interpretation of trivium-based education. Today, the new brand of "classical" schools pepper the United States, growing in number every year and ranging from Protestant private schools to non-sectarian homeschool co-ops, and from Catholic schools revamping their curriculum in order to boost dwindling enrollment to public charter schools promising a radical educational alternative. The state of Texas alone, for

²⁴ Ibid., 145.

²⁵ Today's trivium-based education does not have media ecology as a major component, and some scholars are beginning to take notice. Lance Strate, who, in discussing McLuhan's dissertation, says that a "retrieval of the trivium, for grammar schools and universities alike" would likely "look a lot like what Postman (1970) referred to as media ecology education." Lance Strate, "War and Peace among Rhetoric, Grammar, and Dialectics: On Marshall McLuhan's *The Classical Trivium*," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 6, no. 3 (2007): 224.

²⁶ Logos School became a charter member of the Association of Classical and Christian Schools and now serves as a model for many young schools seeking to adopt a classical vision.

²⁷ Douglas Wilson, "A Review of Wisdom and Eloquence," *Classis* 14, no. 4 (2007): 1-4.
<http://1042.web11.elexioamp.com/filerequest/3685.pdf>. 1.



instance, has at least 68 private classical schools of various stripes and organizational structure²⁸ and has begun opening classical charter schools, as well. Furthermore, to cater to classical schools and to the growing demand for curriculum and teacher training, various presses and organizations have formed.²⁹

At the forefront of the movement in classical education is the Association of Classical and Christian Schools (ACCS), founded in 1994. The ACCS now has over 250 member schools and serves more than 40,000 students.³⁰ The ACCS website offers compelling statistics illustrating the academic performance of their students as compared to their public, religious, and independent school counterparts. For example, in the chart titled “SAT Performance Relative to College & Career Readiness Benchmark,” a combined score of 1550 is the benchmark for the three SAT tests. In results for 2015, public school students scored an average of 88 points below the benchmark, religious schools 46 points above, and independent schools 99 points above. ACCS schools exceeded the benchmark by 237 points. As for the ACT, average composite scores for the nation were 21.0 in the year 2015; ACCS schools earned an

²⁸ Doreen Howell, email message to author, 7 January 2017.

²⁹ Memoria Press, Veritas Press, Logos Press, and Classical Academic Press all specialize in classical curriculum, offering full curriculum guides as well as individual texts to be used within the classroom. The CiRCE Institute (Consulting and Integrated Resources in Classical Education) is another organization that has worked in tandem with the broader classical school movement since 1996, hosting an annual conference and offering school consulting and in-house teacher training, among other auxiliary activities. Started in the mid-1990s, The Society for Classical Learning (SCL) holds an annual summer conference and offers education retreats for classical teachers and administrators. Moreover, the classical education revival is beginning to produce something of a “trickle-up” effect, with higher education starting to evolve in order to meet the need for teachers of such primary and secondary schools: Grove City College and Hillsdale College, for example, have begun offering a minor in classical education. In 2016, the University of Dallas began a classical education graduate program. Houston Baptist University, which in 2008 committed to strengthening its own liberal arts curriculum as part of its “Ten Pillars” vision, in January of 2013 launched The Academy, which offers classical satellite courses for homeschoolers seeking college credit as well as dual enrollment options for schools. “The Academy,” *HBU.edu*, accessed 13 July 2017, <https://www.hbu.edu/the-academy/>.

³⁰ “Statistics at a Glance,” *Association of Classical Christian Schools*, accessed 11 January 2017, <https://classicalchristian.org/statistics-at-a-glance/>.



average of 26.2 that year.³¹ Inspired by the vision and the success of these mostly Protestant classical schools, the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education [ICLE] was formed in 1999, hosting its first conference in the summer of 2013.³² The ICLE website lists 88 Catholic schools³³ that now teach a classical curriculum reminiscent of the educational syllabus that flourished in cathedral schools during the medieval era.

Private schools are not alone in this revival of classical education. According to a 2012 survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 1.8 million children were homeschooled that year in the United States, a number that has steadily been on the rise.³⁴ Home educators, whose reasons for opting out of both public and private education,³⁵ often choose a classical curriculum, devising their own plan using such resources as *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*, first published in 1999. Now in its fourth edition with Norton, and with more than half a million copies sold, the book—a much revered “canonical” resource within classical circles—offers over 700 pages of curriculum guidance. Both families and schools draw heavily from the book, and one of its authors, Susan Wise Bauer, is a popular speaker at events hosted by homeschool and classical education groups, groups like Classical Conversations, which began in 1997. Classical Conversations works in tandem with homeschool families by offering weekly classes across the nation. In the United States,

³¹ Ibid.

³² At the conference, Executive Director Andrew T. Seeley remarked, “Non-Catholics in classical education ask me, ‘Where are the Catholics? This is your tradition.’ Now I can say, ‘Here we are!’”. “2013 Catholic Classical Schools Conference,” *The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education*, accessed 11 July 2017, <https://www.catholicliberaleducation.org/2013-info-slideshow.html>.

³³ “Catholic Classical Liberal Arts Schools Map,” *The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education*, accessed 11 July 2017, <https://www.catholicliberaleducation.org/map-of-schools.html>.

³⁴ Jeremy Redford, Danielle Battle, and Stacey Bielick, *Homeschooling in the United States: 2012*, (Washington: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016096rev.pdf>, 6.

³⁵ Ibid., 12. The reasons for choosing to homeschool vary: 22% cited religious or moral instruction as the most important reason; 25% cited school environment concerns (safety, drugs, negative peer pressure), and 19% claimed to be dissatisfied with academic instruction (“Parent and Family,” table 3). In 2007 the figure was 1.5 million, up from 1.1 million in 2003 and 850,000 in 1999 (“1.5 Million”).



approximately 105,000 students are currently being served by the 2,300 learning communities throughout the United States; to date, 189 of those communities are in the state of Texas alone.³⁶ Furthermore, “university-model” K-12 schools³⁷ are also on the rise, and many of them specialize in a classical curriculum; the National Association for University Model Schools now boasts 31 university-model affiliate schools in Texas alone.³⁸

Private schools and homeschooling families are two of the major players in classical education, but there is a third group emerging: classical charter schools. Great Hearts Academies, whose byline is “Classical Education, Revolutionary Schools,” began in 2004.³⁹ A network of 28 schools in Arizona and Texas, the Great Hearts Academies network served approximately 14,000 students in the 2016-17 school year.⁴⁰ These schools are nonreligious, no-cost public schools that accept students through a blind lottery system. Additionally, their academies receive much fewer tax dollars per child than traditional public schools,⁴¹ but their academic results surpass those of their public school counterparts.⁴² For example, the composite SAT average for graduating classes

³⁶ Christy Lynch, email message to author, 14 July 2017. Lynch is the Sales Manager for Classical Conversations in Texas.

³⁷ University-model schools partner with homeschooling families to offer classes which meet two or three days per week, enabling students to work from their homes, in their “satellite classrooms,” on the remaining days.

³⁸ Barbara Nicholson, “NAUMS Member School Directory,” *National Association of University-Model Schools*, accessed 12 July 2017. <http://docplayer.net/8292686-Naums-member-school-directory.html>. 7-10.

³⁹ Named for the “great-hearted” or “great-souled” ideal Greek citizen, the Great Hearts network’s mission is to “prepare its graduates for success in the most highly selective colleges and universities in the nation, and to be leaders in creating a more philosophical, humane, and just society.” “About Great Hearts,” *Great Hearts Academies*, accessed 12 July 2017.

<http://greatheartsaz.canopyhosting.com/about-us-mainmenu-26/mission-a-goals>.

⁴⁰ Great Hearts has begun opening new charter schools in major metropolitan areas of Texas, beginning in 2014 in the San Antonio area and in Dallas in 2015. Plans include more academies to follow in both areas as well as Houston and Austin.

⁴¹ In 2013, this figure was \$1,578 less per child. Ward Huseth, “Great Hearts Academies is delivering on the investment,” *Great Hearts: Classical Education, Revolutionary Schools*, Fall 2013, 50.

⁴² “Great Hearts Academies Quarterly Report,” *Great Hearts Academies*, last modified June 2014, <http://greatheartsaz.canopyhosting.com/downloads/QR%20June%202014.pdf>.



2012-16 was 200 points above the national average.⁴³ A similar group of classical charter schools, a project of the Barney Charter School Initiative and Hillsdale College, have also started to open around the nation; their mission is to open fifty schools by 2022.⁴⁴ A final example of an open-enrollment charter school is Ridgeview Classical Schools in Fort Collins, Colorado.⁴⁵ The official ACT report for Ridgeview in 2014 was posted online, showing an average composite of 25.7 for Ridgeview Classical students on the ACT compared to an average composite of 20.6 for the state as a whole. English scores in particular were the most divergent, with Ridgeview averaging 27.2 compared to a Colorado state average of 19.9.⁴⁶

Each of the above groups—private schools, homeschool students, and public charter schools—adds a particular flavor to the “classical” education they offer. That is to say, private schools couple classical schooling with religious learning, the homeschool sector orients classical education around the character of each particular family, and public charter schools tend to promote classical education for the preparation of civic leadership. Whatever their differences, however, certain elements

⁴³ “Great Hearts Results,” *Great Hearts Academies*,

<http://www.greatheartamerica.org/great-hearts-life/results/>. Another example is in AIMS testing. The 10th grade passing rates for Arizona schools in reading and writing for the 2013-14 school year was 85% and 74% respectively. The Great Hearts Academies 10th grade students’ averages were 99% and 98% respectively.

⁴⁴ From 2012 to 2016, sixteen schools opened in Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas. The Barney Charter School Initiative website currently lists five more schools scheduled to open in either 2017 or 2018. “Affiliate Classical Charter Schools,” *Hillsdale.edu.*, accessed 13 July 2017,

<https://www.hillsdale.edu/educational-outreach/barney-charter-school-initiative/classical-charter-schools/>.

⁴⁵ From 2012 to 2016, sixteen schools opened in Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas. The Barney Charter School Initiative website currently lists five more schools scheduled to open in either 2017 or 2018. “Affiliate Classical Charter Schools,” *Hillsdale.edu.*, accessed 13 July 2017,

<https://www.hillsdale.edu/educational-outreach/barney-charter-school-initiative/classical-charter-schools/>.

⁴⁶ These scores, previously posted on the Ridgeview website, are no longer easily accessible but may be requested through the school’s home page.



remain generally consistent throughout the various branches. “Classical,” for these newer groups, could be said to mean four things. The first of these is, unsurprisingly, the study of “classical” languages—regularly Latin and occasionally Greek—and literature.⁴⁷ These studies almost always begin prior to high school, and in some institutions, may begin as early as prekindergarten. Because more than half of English vocabulary can be traced to Latin, the philosophical commitment to the teaching of a classical language means that these students have various practical advantages, as well: according to the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL), Latin students outperform all other students on the verbal portion of the SAT. The NCSSFL also notes that 75-80% of the vocabulary of Romance languages is derived from Latin;⁴⁸ thus, the study of Latin allows students to acquire third and fourth languages more easily, as well.

Second, “classical” generally suggests an attitude of respect for traditional texts, so-called “great books.” The reading of old books is nothing new for classical education; historian H. I. Marrou, for example, claims that the whole of Greek education pivoted on a single work: Homer’s *Iliad* (xiv).⁴⁹ Mortimer Adler, whose lifelong campaign was for the teaching of great books, has deeply influenced the leaders of the contemporary classical school movement. In fact, Adler’s 24-member Paideia Group of the 1980s proposed to reform the United States K-12 public schools in their entirety; their vision

⁴⁷ It should be noted that contemporary classical education includes the study of ancient languages and literature as only one of its trademarks. A distinction should be maintained between these schools and other long-established educational efforts in the field of classics, such as those sponsored by the American Classical League, founded in 1919, which runs the National Latin Exam and promotes the teaching of classical languages and classical civilization.

⁴⁸ “The Role of Latin In American Education: A Position Paper from the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages,” *The Classical Outlook* 80, no. 4 (2003): 147, accessed 20 July 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43939650>.

⁴⁹ There is a “canonizing tendency,” as Marrou calls it, within classical education. Because classical education rests “essentially upon the peaceful possession of an already acquired capital,” it looks backward—not with nostalgia but with confidence (161-62). In fact, Marrou defines a classical culture as “a unified collection of great masterpieces existing as the recognized basis of its scale of values” (161).



was that public school education at large would adopt a curriculum grounded in the classics, resulting in education that would be “general, not specialized; liberal, not vocational; humanistic, not technical.”⁵⁰ In Adler’s 1984 publication *The Paideia Program: An Educational Syllabus*,⁵¹ he offers an extensive list of recommended readings, which Geraldine Van Doren, a Paideia Group member, sees as the “backbone of a Paideia School.”⁵² Van Doren continues, arguing that the books included in the list “deserve to be called important, beautiful, difficult, and profound.”⁵³ Although Adler and his colleagues did not fulfill their vision to reform public schooling before the end of the twentieth century, Adler’s ideas on great books education are commonly referenced in the publications of today’s classical schools.⁵⁴

Third, classical schools have what would appear to be curricular oddities compared to a typical public school. Writing is often taught using various forms of *progymnasmata* exercises, hearkening back to Hermogenes’ rhetorical exercises; *imitation*—copying the style or structure of great literary or rhetorical works⁵⁵—is generally emphasized, rather than individual creativity on the part of the student. Reviving the rhetorical canon of memory, classical schools exercise students in copious memorization, such as poetry recitations and lists of dates, facts, and personages.

⁵⁰ Mortimer J. Adler, introduction to *The Paideia Program: An Educational Syllabus*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 6.

⁵¹ In the book, Mortimer Adler lays out three kinds of learning that line up well with Sayers’s account of the trivium; Adler, however, does not separate them into different ages, as do trivium-based schools today. An illustration of this parallel with Sayers can be found in a diagram on page 8 of *The Paideia Program*: therein, the “acquisition of organized knowledge” is the analogue to Sayers’s grammar stage; the “development of intellectual skills” and “exercising [of] critical judgment” is the analogue to Sayers’s logic stage; and the “enlarged understanding of ideas and values” is the analogue to Sayers’s rhetoric stage, when “things once coldly analyzed can now be brought together to form a new synthesis” (161).

⁵² Geraldine Van Doren, “English Language and Literature,” in *The Paideia Program: An Educational Syllabus*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 60.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁴ For instance, Adler’s ideas are cited in *An Introduction to Classical Education: A Guide for Parents, Norms and Nobility, Repairing the Ruins, Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning, Wisdom and Eloquence*, and *Classical Education: The Movement Sweeping America*.

⁵⁵ In classical schools, the same method is often used in the teaching of the fine arts, as well.



Another such curricular distinctive is the chronological teaching of history through its major eras.⁵⁶ It is typical, for example, that second graders in a classical school would spend an entire academic year studying a significant time and place in history—say, for example, ancient Egypt. Third graders may then focus on the study of Greece and Rome; fourth graders may move on to learn about the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; and fifth graders would complete the cycle by focusing on the modern and contemporary world. In many classical schools, that cycle would be repeated, with middle school and high school students returning to the same historical units/epochs, studying them a second time both in greater detail and in a way that corresponds to their respective developmental stages.

Teaching the trivium as developmental stages is perhaps the most unusual distinguishing characteristic of today's classical schools. Almost all contemporary classical schools take seriously Sayers's interpretation of the trivium in terms of developmental psychology; thus, their educators attempt to tailor pedagogy to a student's particular stage. For example, schools are often divided into "grammar school," "logic school," and "rhetoric school," divisions that correspond roughly to the elementary, junior high, and high school years. At each stage, teachers offer instruction in pedagogically distinct ways.⁵⁷ Besides boasting instruction in formal English grammar, a grammar school emphasizes rote memory, for instance, as well as narration, dictation, and the aforementioned imitation; logic schools will highlight debate in many of their classes (science, history, *et al.*), while offering separate courses in formal and informal logic; students in rhetoric schools study formal rhetoric,⁵⁸ of course, but they

⁵⁶ Classical education's emphasis on history as a story is further seen in Susan Wise Bauer's four-volume series *Story of the World*, which mixes fiction, fable, and history to present a sweeping narrative of history beginning with what she titles *Ancient Times* and ending in *The Modern Age*.

⁵⁷ Christopher Perrin notes, for example, "virtually every subject in the dialectic school will be taught 'dialectically'—students will be arguing, debating, and discussing" in all of their classes, regardless of the particular discipline. Christopher A. Perrin, *An Introduction to Classical Education: A Guide for Parents*, (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press), 2004. 20.

⁵⁸ Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* is a standard text in such courses.



are typically asked to apply their rhetorical training to their written compositions and oral presentations, often ending their studies with a lengthy thesis that must be publicly defended. The developmental interpretation of the trivium serves as the backbone in a number of books within these classical circles, such as Perrin's *An Introduction to Classical Education: A Guide for Parents*, Wise Bauer and Wise's *The Well-Trained Mind*, and Wilson's *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning*. Curriculum presses such as Veritas Press and Memoria Press also tend to divide their entire curriculum according to the three stages.

IV. A Third Wave?

In a 1981 treatise on classical education, David Hicks claims, "Classical education is not, preeminently, of a specific time or place; rather, it can be recognized by its distinct spirit and form."⁵⁹ In this quotation, Hicks identifies both a desire of contemporary classical educators and a potential contradiction that lies within their project as it is currently conceived. That tension, as it has developed, is the heavy dependence upon what has been dubbed the "Sayers Insight,"⁶⁰ the innovative developmental interpretation of the trivium's liberal arts as distinct stages of learning. But leaders in the classical revival are not unaware of this fact; Susan Wise Bauer, for example, recognizes that the type of education that is actually being offered today is not so much classical as it is "neo-classical education."⁶¹ In fact, the movement appears to be going through something of a second wave, as books like *Wisdom and Eloquence* (2006) and *The Liberal Arts Tradition* (2013) have questioned the trivium as a developmental model and offer suggestions for changes in the neo-classical curriculum. But the Sayers Insight still holds sway, and it is unlikely that things will change any time soon, for the

⁵⁹ David V. Hicks, *Norms & Nobility: A Treatise on Education*, (New York: Praeger Press, 1981.) 18.

⁶⁰ Douglas Wilson, "A Review of *Wisdom and Eloquence*," 3.

⁶¹ Julia Duin, "Classical Schools Put Plato over iPad," *CNN's Schools of Thought* (blog), 21 June 2013 (6:10 p.m.), <http://schoolsofthought.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/21/classical-schools-put-plato-over-ipad/>.



three-stage approach seems to have proven itself an effective teaching strategy in many of the places where it has been adopted.

Nonetheless, this developmental model, while still predominant, is—from the perspective of the trivium’s very long history—the novelty. Other, older accounts of the trivium can serve as foils to Sayers’s developmental model, offering a fuller vision of how the liberal arts shaped education over the centuries prior to 1947. A helpful example of an alternate interpretation can be found in Sister Miriam Joseph’s book *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, first published in 1937. Joseph offers a version of the trivium as comprising three arts: the art of symbol (grammar), the art of thinking (logic), and the art of communicating (rhetoric).⁶² Notably, Joseph’s interpretation of the trivium as comprising three arts, rather than stages, predates Sayers’s developmental reading. Moreover, her interpretation falls more in line with the traditional conception of the trivium than does Sayers’s, revealing that it is Joseph’s conception of the trivium—as *arts*, not *stages*—that holds sway throughout much of its history, with the Sayers Insight being the latecomer.

But another important conception of the trivium lies unexplored. As mentioned earlier, Sayers and Marshall McLuhan happened upon the trivium in the same decade, and as her essay was sparking the current classical education resurgence, McLuhan’s dissertation remained unknown and unpublished until 2006. Within that dissertation—and in signature style—McLuhan takes an altogether original view of the three language arts, calling them “rival sisters.”⁶³ By this he means that grammar, logic (“dialectic”), and rhetoric are more than subjects of study; they are, rather, different perspectives on reality, each one jockeying for dominance within a given age. McLuhan,

⁶² Miriam Joseph, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric: Understanding the Nature and Function of Language*, (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2002), 3.

⁶³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2006), 123.



then, is able to offer an alternate—one critic calls it “postmodern”⁶⁴—reading of the history of the trivium. Little concerned with the structure of education in these periods, he seeks instead to determine which of the language arts can be identified as preeminent over the other two at a given historical moment. Strikingly, McLuhan collapses the Greeks and the Romans together, considering their era one in which rhetoric and grammar ruled over dialectic, hemming in the “middle” art of the trivium. Indeed, because of its groundless nature, dialectic requires the guidance of grammar and rhetoric in order to keep the trivium in balance. McLuhan, then, sets the abstracted means of knowing—dialectic—at odds with grammar and rhetoric, whose union he sees represented in Cicero.

McLuhan’s privileged mode is grammatical; he understands “grammar” not to be merely the study of parts of speech but rather as the art of making and interpreting symbol, an art which has been historically ignored in the more recognizable opposition between dialectic and rhetoric. That very rivalry is identified by Stanley Fish as a war between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, or between *homo rhetoricus* (“rhetorical man”) and *homo seriusus* (“serious man”),⁶⁵ terms he adapts from Richard Lanham’s *The Motives of Eloquence*. Indeed, from this perspective, Fish looks back upon the rhetorical tradition and sees the strains of rhetoric and dialectic at odds, with one alternately more prominent than the other. What Fish does not discuss, however, is a third possibility, that of *homo grammaticus* (“grammatical man”), and it is McLuhan’s insights into the nature of grammar, and the distinct forms of knowledge that it allows, that are most promising for the contemporary proponents of the trivium.

The comeback of classical education potentially has a third wave ahead, then, one that takes seriously the insight of McLuhan, whose construal of the language arts as

⁶⁴ Martha Watson, “The Place of Marshall McLuhan and Thomas Nashe in the Learning of Their Time,” *Explorations in Media Ecology* 6, no. 3 (2007): 211.

⁶⁵ Stanley Fish, “Rhetoric,” in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 1616.



rival personalities offers a new way of thinking about the trivium. That is, the three language arts may actually be unique kinds of knowing, each with an inherent potential to overpower her “sisters.” As contemporary classical education moves through what is being called its second wave, leaders in the movement might take the “McLuhan Insight” to heart, considering how the forms of trivium-based education being offered can be dominated by a particular art. That is, an education dominated by, say, dialectic can reinforce students’ commitment to foundational truths, but it can do so at the risk of raising up abstractionists; conversely, rhetorical education can prepare students to articulate and defend goodness in the world, but their desire to succeed in such efforts could come at the expense of a growing comfort with anti-foundationalism.⁶⁶ No doubt, the rich tradition awaits a fuller recovery. McLuhan’s contribution, then, allows one to look beyond the trivium as a developmental model. Instead, classical educators might ask an important question of their schools: Which rival sister of the trivium dominates the others?

⁶⁶ At the risk of overgeneralizing, it might be said that the early revival of classical education—for example, the first ACCS schools—possessed a distinctly dialectical bias. More recently there has been a shift toward rhetoric as the privileged art of the trivium; see, for example, *Wisdom and Eloquence* (2006) by Littlejohn and Evans. Classical schools with a grammatical bias beyond the primary years—that is, at the secondary level—are generally unrepresented.

