



Winged Words in The Literary Speech

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Article History	Abstract
Received: 08 June 2023 Revised: 21 Sept 2023 Accepted: 10 Dec 2023	<i>Great books introduce us to ideas and to ways of looking at the world that are new to us. They provide a refreshing distance from the trends, fashions, tastes, opinions, and political correctness of our current culture. Great books invite us to put aside for a while our way of looking at the world and to enter someone else's perspective—a perspective that is much larger, deeper, and more thought out than our own.</i>
CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	Keywords: <i>Winged Words, Book, Reader, Method</i>

1. Introduction

Reading great books is vital for anyone who wishes to become a liberally educated human being. There is a great need these days—there has been for a long time now—for academic programs devoted to liberal education. Such programs are sprouting all over the nation, many of them at Christian colleges and universities. But an overwhelming trend toward the non-liberal persists. All too often we confuse education with professional training, genuine understanding with know-how, and learning with achievement on tests and with measurable results. The professions are, to be sure, necessary and noble—necessary because they minister to the demands, needs, and well-being of everyday life, noble because they inspire lives of achievement, service, and self-sacrifice. But human life is not co-extensive with professional life. There are also the lives we lead apart from our jobs and professions, the lives we lead in so far as we are human beings. It is this life, human life insofar as it is human, that liberal education seeks to cultivate and perfect. It is the life not of our business but of our leisure. It is the life we lead when, free of the burden of working for a living or striving for professional achievement, we are left to ourselves, to our families, and to our friends. It is the life that finds us, after a long day's work, huddled up in a cozy chair with a book, or listening to some of our favorite music, or enjoying conversation with friends. It is also the life of our moral action and activity as citizens.

2. Materials And Methods

Great books and authors are not always teachers who question us as though from another world. Sometimes, when we imaginatively inhabit the world of a great mind, it feels like a homecoming. It is as though we were talking with a close friend, someone who is familiar with our hearts and minds and who speaks to us with words that know how to hit their mark. Our favorite poets speak to us in this way. They seem to be writing just for us. Great books with a marked personal tone—Augustine's Confessions or Dante's Divine Comedy or Montaigne's Essays—especially tend to have this effect. There is a beautiful passage from one of Machiavelli's letters, in which the great Florentine speaks of the sort of homecoming and friendship I am talking about. His words are in reference to great men of the past, men of action, whose speeches and deeds appear in the great books of the ancient historians. Here is what he says: When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently clothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me. And for the space of four hours I feel no boredom, I forget every pain, I do not fear poverty, death does not frighten me. Perhaps this experience that Machiavelli so movingly describes is familiar to your experience of reading your favorite authors. For us, as for Machiavelli, a beloved great author is like a wise and great-souled friend who offers us an intellectual home, hospitality, honesty, and nourishment. And just as we get into tangles and arguments with our friends, so too our friendship

with a great author sometimes involves a certain amount of intellectual wrestling with his ideas. We wrestle with a beloved great author as though with a higher being who is nevertheless very close to us, as Jacob wrestled with an angel.

3. Results and Discussion

Plato's dialogues do a superb job of helping us to acquire this habit. They do so by portraying human beings suffering in speech the consequences of their unexamined opinions. By showing us how Socrates cross-examines and refutes his interlocutors, Plato offers us an opportunity to examine our own opinions and the reasons we hold them. But sometimes it is not an argument that most wakes us up. Sometimes it is an image, a story, or maybe just a single phrase or word from a great book. We have just witnessed in the analogy of the cave how an image can induce reflection and help us begin our journey away from the enthrallment to what *seems* toward the sunlight of what *is*.

This poetic aspect of Plato's dialogues signals an important feature of all great books. How these books are written plays a decisive role in their greatness and in their ability to liberate the reader by waking him up. To borrow an image from Homer, great books speak to us with precisely formed *winged words*. Homer's phrase refers to the spoken word. But I mean to extend the image of wingedness to the written word as well. Written words, like spoken words, have wings when they can fly into our souls and awaken us to an act of passionate and attentive thinking. The words of great books do not merely cause us to think: They inspire thinking.

Homer is the master of winged words. Instances of his wingedness are innumerable. One of my favorite examples is a simile Homer uses at one point in the *Iliad* to describe anger. Late in the story, the hero Achilles meditates, ruefully, on his anger. He calls it "that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside of a man's heart and becomes a thing sweeter to him by far than the dripping of honey" (*Iliad* 18.108-110). Of course, this sounds even more winged in the original. Homer's words, which in Greek are marvelously rhythmic, fly off the page and into our souls. As they take us above the realm of ordinary language, they also take us down into the human reality of anger. The simile is no mere ornamentation: It is a perfectly crafted perception of a truth about human experience captured in the form of a likeness. Achilles feels his anger as both bitter and sweet. That he knows this about himself makes the anger even more ominous. Something similar happens in Shakespeare's plays, when a character—Macbeth, for example—confronts and describes his own darkness of soul. The juxtaposition of heart and honey in Homer's simile makes us feel how precious our anger is to us, how it indeed seems to drip, honey-like, in our hearts. We sip it, relish it, and would not part with it for the world, even though it may bring destruction on our friends, our communities, and our very selves. Homer's winged words here are accurate—and terrifying. I cannot think of them without a shudder.

Dante, too, is a poet of winged words. In his *Divine Comedy*, words have an obvious connection with wingedness. They are the means by which Dante re-experiences his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise and takes us along with him. What reader can forget Dante's terrifying and beautiful images? Who can forget the lovebirds Paolo and Francesca, whipped around eternally in the storm of their illicit passion? Or the speech Francesca delivers about the tender feelings that were the source of her damnation? Most striking of all, given my theme, is that the occasion for the adulterous act was *the reading of a book*, the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, which, in Francesca's mind, seemed to ennoble and justify her yielding to passion. The wingedness of Dante's words in this part of the *Inferno* exerts a powerful effect on the reader. The poetic imagery doesn't just fly—it swoops. We feel sympathy for the damned lovers, even as we are called upon to judge them and to think through why they are in Hell. Dante's winged words make us feel the tension between our desires and our duties. There is no easy moralizing here, no "See, they got what they deserved!" Dante would have us believe that Hell is the work of divine justice. But he also wants his readers to see, and experience, the complex reasons why human beings deceive themselves, deify their passions, and abuse their free will—in short, how we come to lose "the good of intellect." His winged words inspire thought.

Wingedness is evident not only in poems and novels, but also in philosophic treatises and works in mathematics and science. Bertrand Russell found Euclid's *Elements* winged in its gorgeous display of propositions. These propositions are beautifully ordered and deal with perfectly formed things: triangles, circles, ratios, and numbers. Russell, a master of the sober sciences of modern logic and mathematics, compared his reading Euclid for the first time to falling in love. "I had not imagined," he said, "that there was anything so delicious in the world." To read Euclid's *Elements*, you have to work hard. But the thinking involved is not restricted to the hard work of analyzing ideas and solving problems. It includes imagination and, as Russell reminds us, a responsiveness to beauty.

Aristotle offers us a good example of how words can be winged without being poetic. The works of Aristotle are peculiar in this regard: They are written lectures rather than treatises and so, in a way that is very different from the Platonic dialogues, are indebted to the wingedness of the spoken word. Next to the overt wingedness of Homer and Plato, Aristotle may at first seem dry, colorless, and hopelessly earthbound. But he becomes less so when we think more deeply about what he has to tell us. A good example of Aristotle's wingedness is the definition of happiness we find in the first book of his [Nicomachean Ethics](#). Happiness, he says, is "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." These words of Aristotle fly into our souls and inspire thinking. The term "activity," the most important word in Aristotle's philosophic vocabulary, is the really winged thing here. "Happiness," we say to ourselves. "Isn't that the feeling we have when our desires have been gratified?" Aristotle avoids this familiar path. He prefers the path of active engagement or being-at-work. If we let his winged definition of happiness fly into our souls, then we might begin to question our familiar notions of happiness. We might return to our lives more attentive to how fulfilling it both seems and is to be engaged in our favorite activity. Borne aloft by Aristotle's definition, we might begin to take seriously the idea that we are most happy and "winged" when we are enjoying the activity in which we are most ourselves—when, like dancers, we are the activity.

Even the scientific arguments and theories we find in some great books can be winged. A good example of this sort of winged speech appears in Darwin's [Origin of Species](#), which is one of the scientific works in your program. This most readable and engaging of all great scientific texts deserves to be called winged. Apart from whether we agree or disagree with Darwin's theory, we are amazed (or should be) at how Darwin draws on his staggering wealth of observation in order to construct what he calls "one long argument" and to write about his revolutionary theory with felicity and grace. We marvel at how, starting with the most familiar facts of breeding plants and animals, Darwin proceeds to investigate that "mystery of mysteries," as he calls it—the origin of species. He does so through argument and observation, of course, but he also throws in provocative metaphors along the way—metaphors like "the polity of nature" and "the face of nature." The most winged part of the book for me, the part that most inspires my thinking, is the chapter entitled "Difficulties on Theory." Here Darwin frankly acknowledges the huge obstacles that stand in the way of believing that species originate in "descent with modification." He struggles to overcome these obstacles, never forgetting that a struggle is necessary. This chapter, and indeed the book as a whole, gives us an opportunity to explore how a scientific theory is supported and defended in the absence of direct evidence and experiment—how a comprehensive theory of life that assaults long-ingrained beliefs, and that even seems counterintuitive at times, struggles to be persuasive.

At the beginning of my talk, I promised to talk about why it is better to approach great books through discussion rather than lecture. A partial answer has already emerged. The goal of liberal education is to cultivate human freedom by inspiring, nourishing, and guiding the individual student's thought. It is not to transform students into scholars but rather to inspire them to be life-long, self-sufficient learners. The proper soil of this habit of reflection is conversation. Conversation, the endangered species of modern life and, alas, of most places of higher learning, is an instance of winged speech. In conversation, speech flies from one human being to another, gathering momentum as it goes. And although it is a sequence of speeches by different individuals, once the conversation gets going it tends to develop a life of its own. Vital to the liberal goal of helping young people become fully human, conversation calls upon its participants to be friends rather than competitors—partners in learning. It can take us to places that are new to us and that arouse our wonder and inquiry, places to which we could not have flown on our own wings alone. Great books are winged things. But sometimes the wingedness is not apparent. Sometimes we need conversation with others if our learning is to take flight.

Conversation serves the ends of liberal learning in another important way: It prompts and refines the conversation we have with ourselves. In the dialogue [Theaetetus](#) Socrates tells us that thought itself is just this: "a conversation that the soul has with itself." It matters to our lives how we talk to ourselves. Often we do not talk to ourselves enough, or else when we do talk to ourselves, we say exactly the wrong things: We use inner discourse to lie to ourselves, justify rather than admit our faults, stir the embers of old resentments rather than to forgive and forget, or inflame rather than moderate our already overblown passions.

4. Conclusion

Let me now gather the threads of my talk about great books. Great books do the following: they initiate us into the founding texts and ideas of our civilization; they aid our self-knowledge and help us to cultivate our freedom by making us critically aware of alternatives to our accustomed opinions

and prejudices. Great books put our adult, professional lives in the context of human life as a whole and invite reflection on the limits of our professional knowledge. The winged words of great books fly into our souls and inspire imagination as well as critical thought regarding the deepest, most important questions of human life; they educate our feelings and desires and therefore have a powerful role to play in our moral education. In particular, they help to cultivate a taste and admiration for nobility—an intelligent appreciation of all things great, beautiful, rich in detail, and intelligently composed. Reading and discussing great books also prompts and refines our inner discourse, the conversation we have with ourselves. It thus shapes our character and our lives. And finally, some great books, the ones we most admire and love, are like ever-reliable friends who always have wise and wonderful things to say, and with whom we wrestle gladly and profitably. Thanks to these books especially, for several hours we feel no boredom, we forget every pain, and we fear neither poverty nor death

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