

Writing the Liberal Arts and Sciences

*Truth, Dialogue, and
Historical Consciousness*

*Edited by
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Mary Bouquet, Annemieke Meijer and Cornelus Sanders
Utrecht, 30 April 2021

Introduction: Writing the Liberal Arts and Sciences

Mary Bouquet, Annemieke Meijer and Cornelus Sanders

This book was written by authors from the fields of literary studies, criminology, physics, linguistics, political science, medicine, philosophy, clinical psychology, mathematics, art history, law, astrophysics, history, anthropology, and religious studies. It is the written outcome of a form of collegial storytelling among faculty members working in the liberal arts and sciences setting of University College Utrecht, the Netherlands. Weekly lunchtime gatherings brought together academics from these widely differing fields, with equally diverse personal journeys, to sample other fields of knowledge. There was a combined sense of curiosity about the content of these other fields and those in them; about different ways of approaching and understanding the world; and about the possibility of being able to ask questions outside one's comfort zone. This interest was fostered by working together in a multidisciplinary liberal arts and sciences college; sharing offices and other facilities with colleagues from completely different fields meant that we were used to having chats across disciplinary boundaries, probably more so than our colleagues in monodisciplinary departments. We wanted to see where these conversations would lead if channelled into written form. The willingness to think beyond the boundaries of a given field when approaching a particular phenomenon proved stimulating as a writing experiment: critical feedback on content and style from a diverse body of faculty members was unprecedented. We began to wonder whether we could write about some aspect of our respective fields of knowledge not just for ourselves but also for external audiences. We imagined our readers as potential liberal arts and sciences students, but also as interested peers and lay people. As we proceeded, the subjects we wrote about changed and evolved. The many-faceted process of transformation from the spoken to the written word reflects the effort of moving beyond disciplinary jargon. The interdisciplinary in this respect is a particular kind of scholarly attitude built upon curiosity and open-endedness: we did not know the outcome in advance, but allowed our voices to emerge *through* a process that stretched over several years.

The themes of truth, dialogue, and historical consciousness surfaced slowly – while contributors moved from storytelling mode to the written essay

format – and became a possible way of sequencing the texts. That said, each essay exceeds the category to which it was assigned, intersecting with the other two. A sense of history surely informs the quest for truth through language in the realm of philosophy. Truth can also be revealed through the language of fiction: novels, poems, and plays, written at various historical junctures, use various conventions that establish truths in fictional worlds that are nonetheless part of the world. Trials involve the deployment of evidence and argument by prosecution and defence, calling upon witnesses, requiring a jury to arrive at a truthful verdict, and presided over by a judge. Loaded questions that plant ideas in people's minds are a means of mystifying history and obscuring the truth by means of syntax. Language, as a dynamic interface between cognitive and environmental realities, each of which translates and shapes the other, entails that some meanings exceed grammatical relations. The material forms of sacred texts through history exercise particular kinds of agency through their liturgical and ceremonial uses, combining the Word with print and digital technologies that call into question assumptions about secularization and modernity.

Notions of the truth are conceptualized and approached quite differently in the respective domains of philosophy, literature, criminology, linguistics, and religious studies, due to their respective histories. Yet the contributions from these disciplines show that approach and the subject matter are not simply 'different', but that questions, conversations, and dialogue across those disciplinary boundaries opened up new perspectives and deepened the awareness of the position of each domain of knowledge with regard to the others. Growing awareness of the fragility of our world, and the damage inflicted by collective consumption patterns and engrained assumptions, has infiltrated many disciplines and was sharpened by the global Covid-19 pandemic that struck in 2019/2020. This biosocial crisis gave an impetus to our writing: writing *as* a form of social life, a search for truth and dialogue, when our professional lives took an unexpected turn: the transformation of the university into a digitalized cottage industry brought home the core value of writing projects. Amid the uncertainty wrought by a virus, writing became a way of engaging with and reflecting upon the world, a way of adding value to the fragmented world we found ourselves in. Writing became, quite literally, a moment of truth and sustenance at a moment of historical rupture.

Authors have recourse to several literary forms including dialogue, poetry, fiction, and the written assignment. These forms provide means of reconnoitring such matters as the archaic language of seventeenth-century philosophers, the eloquent silence of monuments, and the emergence of a

voice by means of a college assignment. An imagined dialogue between non-contemporary Western- and Eastern-schooled philosophers opens up new vistas on the central question of being in the world. Writing poetry offers law students a new entrée for reading political philosophy and making it their own. Case studies written as human stories offer new insights into the decisive conversations between medical practitioners and their patients which usually take place behind closed doors. Taking account of local healing systems in low-income countries by engaging trained paraprofessionals helps to bridge the gap in mental health care while changing the course of clinical psychology. The letters exchanged between historical scientists, who were also friends, elucidates how the broader intellectual setting can enrich or impoverish the development of knowledge in a particular field. Literalizing a metaphorical dialogue between two monuments is a way of exploring the agency of aesthetics, space, materials, and form, which can reinforce understanding while going beyond words.

The essays exemplify historical consciousness in equally varied ways. These include writing about paradigm shifts within specific disciplines, which is a classic way of introducing and contextualizing a more specific topic. The historical shift from quantifying concrete phenomena to characterizing and quantifying abstract categories, in the field of statistics, aptly illustrates this point. A related point concerns the impact of an increasing body of knowledge within a particular field: mathematics. Since it takes more of the student's lifetime to gain cognizance of the field of mathematics, the result is increasing specialization and the loss of a holistic vision of knowledge. Consciousness of the role of history in the present also impels the updating of national historical canons – where these exist. History is reconfigured when government calls upon specialists from the next generation to update the events, protagonists and phenomena featured in the canon in the light of current social issues and developments. This top-down version of history contrasts with the grassroots contestation and revision of a government-sanctioned version of the history of the energy sector by means of public art/ monuments. While visual representations of the self, led by the selfie, are ubiquitous, few are aware of the historical conditioning of the pose they adopt, the attire they don, and the attributes with which they surround themselves. The truth is that such portraits have been a matter of debate and censure for centuries: historical awareness here functions almost as a cautionary tale. The photographic portrait of the black hole at the other end of the universe, an event that happened lightyears ago, mesmerized public attention. The image was an outcome of dialogue and cooperation in the global scientific community of astrophysicists,

searching for something that is known but invisible. Faced with this sense of universal historical catastrophe, the practice of writing, of finding a voice, gains new élan.

Dear Reader, we wish you much pleasure in perusing our essays – in any order you wish – which we hope may inspire you to explore for yourself the joys of writing, and of the Liberal Arts.