THE THREAD OF ARIADNE

A Collection of Essays
By the Faculty of the Cooperative
Research Center in the Humanities
Dominican College

Coordinated by Priscilla J. Umphrey

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Scholar, Mentor, Friend
The Thread of Ariadne
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Introduction

This volume is a *Festschrift* with a difference: a collection of essays written by colleagues to honor students—past, present, future—rather than an aged academic kindred spirit. The end-product of a “Great Conversation” which extended over two years (1985-1987), the volume contains ten essays by nine Dominican College faculty members.

Each essay has been developed in the context of inter-disciplinary discussions to which specialists in art history, history, literature, and philosophy contributed their knowledge and insights. Lest that statement suggest placid armchair soliloquies, let me quickly add that the discussions were frank and vigorous, and served to focus, refine, and sometimes change altogether the final topics of the essays.

These essays range in subject from a personal defense of piecemeal learning to instructions in how to read a specific stained-glass window above the north aisle of Chartres cathedral. In symbol and metaphor they range from seeing the world in a hazelnut to searching for wisdom in a computer. Geographically they range over Greece, the lands of the Old Testament, France, Ireland, England, the U.S.A. One way or another, all the essays are concerned with truth and the pursuit of truth; small wonder, since their authors are educators in the liberal arts tradition.

Implicitly or explicitly, the essays pose questions such as these: is a liberal arts curriculum meant to be primarily a storehouse or a workshop?
what is the appropriate relationship between student and teacher? how do our fundamental assumptions about human nature affect our relationships? do we tell the truth in words only? how do science and technology affect human observation in the search for truth? is truth another word for reality, and vice versa? how can we promote self-realization within a frame of social commitment?

The relationship between student and teacher meant to be served by this volume is that of companions on a journey. The book is a kind of vade mecum, each essay like an arch in Tennyson's "Ulysses," through which "Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades /Forever and forever when I move." The essays have been written in the spirit of "a place where the ultimate questions are honored as questions," and they rest on the basic assumption that learning can lead to the good life, is in some measure the good life.

Other responsibilities required me to absent myself from this group of colleagues just as the "Great Conversation" officially began. So it is both honor and pleasure for me to invite you now, on my colleagues' behalf, to pick up this book in the same spirit of discovery in which it was written; to trace in it the threads that lead us "back to the great storehouse of our cultural memory and to the mystery at the center"; to let it be for you a stimulus to your own great conversations.

Sister M. Samuel Conlan, O.P.
Professor of English
(on leave 1985-1988)
Note to our Students

As Sister Samuel has noted in her introductory comments, these essays were written by a group of Dominican College faculty members for a very specific audience—Dominican College students. Throughout the process of discussing, writing, and editing this companion text for our courses in classical, medieval, and Renaissance studies, our aim, as we stated it in the proposal for undertaking this project, was "to produce a collection of integrative essays . . . which will serve the students . . . in the difficult task of seeing connections among disciplines; as models of good writing and critical analysis; and as springboards for discussion in the classroom."

Since these essays were meant to serve as supplemental reading, we have, wherever possible, avoided repeating material that is the subject of classroom lectures and your primary texts. Since the essays are meant to stimulate discussion, we have striven to make them thought-provoking rather than comprehensive. We have, for the most part, been more interested in raising questions than in answering them—in arousing conjecture than in supplying information.

As even the most perfunctory skimming of these pages will show, we were also more concerned with exploring specific ideas which excited our curiosities and imaginations than with giving equal time to every era within our chosen time frame. We are well aware of the gaps—there is
much about Greece here, and little about Rome; much about the medieval and little about the Renaissance—and we hope someday to fill them. But if our choices seem whimsical or quixotic, remember that our approach to choosing topics for this volume was that of a student confronted with one of those frustratingly open-ended assignments: "write ___ number of pages about something we have studied this term." These essays were conceived, to quote again from the proposal, "not with the goal of advancing the frontiers of knowledge in humanistic studies (though that may result) but with the purpose of doing better what the humanities are supposed to do: offering a synthesized, integrated education, which illuminates and supports subsequent education and life experience."

We further determined that we wanted these essays to illustrate that one can write in a learned fashion without resorting to tortured academicism, and to use "distinctly individual" writing styles. This objective we embraced with delight, and you will find our distinctly individual voices piping out from every page of the volume. I would be extremely surprised, in fact, if someone acquainted with these writers could read more than a paragraph or two without identifying the author of any particular offering.

We also wanted to illustrate how one goes about what has come to be known as the "writing process," and so, since 1985, we have been carrying our own and each other's drafts, and revisions, and revisions of revisions, into the classroom to show our students that even those with academic titles do not find writing a simple task, and that an essay requiring research and critical thinking is not to be pounded out in one evening—or even in one grueling all-night session.

As observant readers, you will quickly notice that we have not been consistent, throughout the volume, in the matter of documentation. We felt it best for each author to remain faithful to the stylistic conventions of his or her own discipline: for instance, scholars of history turn to the latest edition of Turabian for advice about notes and bibliographies, while scholars of literature rely upon the most recent pronouncements of the Modern Language Association.

We chose the title of Sister Nicholas's essay, "The Thread of Ariadne," as the title for the volume as a whole because Ariadne's thread, as it brings to mind the labyrinth, seems to us, in Sister's words, "a positive figure" which exemplifies what learning and life are all about. "The path is convoluted but leads inevitably to the center. . . . It is a figure in which one finds one's way."

It is in that spirit of finding one's way and in the spirit of collegiality and of delight in exploring each other's special fields of study that we wrote these essays. Finding the path was not always easy, nor was following its convolutions, but the experience was gratifying, and we learned a great
deal from each other. We hope that you, after reading and discussing these essays, will be able to say the same.

Priscilla J. Umphrey
Department of English
1988