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THE
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A MEDIEVAL GUIDE
TO THE ARTS

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES BY
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BOOK ONE.

Chapter One: Concerning the Origin of the Arts

Of all things to be sought, the first is that Wisdom in which the Form of the Perfect Good stands fixed.¹ Wisdom illuminates man so that he may recognize himself;² for man was like all the other animals when he did not understand that he had been created of a higher order than they.³ But his immortal mind, illuminated by Wisdom, beholds its own principle and recognizes how unfitting it is for it to seek anything outside itself when what it is in itself can be enough for it. It is written on the tripod of Apollo: γνῶθι σεαυτόν, that is, "Know thyself,"⁴ for surely, if man had not forgotten his origin, he would recognize that everything subject to change is nothing.⁵

An opinion approved among philosophers maintains that the soul is put together out of all the parts of nature. And Plato's *Timaeus*⁶ formed the entelechy⁷ out of substance which is "dividual" and "individual" and mixed of these two; and likewise out of nature which is "same" and "diverse" and a mixture of this pair, by which the universe is defined.⁸ For the entelechy grasps "not only the elements but all things that are made from them,"⁹ since, through its understanding, it comprehends the invisible causes of things and, through sense impressions, picks up the visible forms of actual objects. "Divided, it gathers movement into twin spheres"¹⁰ because, whether it goes out to sensible things through its senses or ascends to invisible things through its understanding, it circles about, drawing to itself the likenesses of things; and thus it is that one and the same mind, having the capacity for all things, is fitted together out of every substance and nature by the fact that it represents within itself their imaged likeness.

Now, it was a Pythagorean teaching that similars are comprehended by similars: so that, in a word, the rational soul

could by no means comprehend all things unless it were also composed of all of them; or, as a certain writer puts it:

Earth we grasp with the earthly, fire with flame,
Liquid with moisture, air with our breath.¹¹

But we ought not to suppose that men most familiar with all the natures of things thought that simple essence was in any way distended in quantitative parts.¹² Rather, in order to demonstrate the soul's marvelous power more clearly did they declare that it consists of all natures, "not as being physically composed of them, but as having an analogous type of composition."¹³ For it is not to be thought that this similitude to all things comes into the soul from elsewhere, or from without; on the contrary, the soul grasps the similitude in and of itself, out of a certain native capacity and proper power of its own. As Varro says in the *Periphyision*:¹⁴ Not all change comes upon things from without and in such a way that whatever changes necessarily either loses something it had or gains from the outside some other and different thing which it did not have before. We see how a wall receives a likeness when the form of some image or other is put upon it from the outside. But when a coiner imprints a figure upon metal, the metal, which itself is one thing, begins to represent a different thing, not just on the outside, but from its own power and its natural aptitude to do so. It is in this way that the mind, imprinted with the likenesses of all things, is said to *be* all things and to receive its composition from all things and to contain them not as actual components, or formally, but virtually and potentially.¹⁵

This, then, is that dignity of our nature which all naturally possess in equal measure,¹⁶ but which all do not equally understand. For the mind, stupefied by bodily sensations and enticed out of itself by sensuous forms, has forgotten what it was, and, because it does not remember that it was anything different, believes that it is nothing except what is seen. But we are restored through instruction, so that we may recognize our nature and learn not to seek outside ourselves what we can find within. "The highest curative in life,"¹⁷ therefore, is the pursuit of Wisdom: he who finds it is happy, and he who possesses it, blessed.¹⁸

Treating of an art is treating, for instance, of grammar; but treating by means of that art is treating some matter grammatically. Note the difference between these two—treating of grammar, and treating some matter grammatically. We treat of grammar when we set forth the rules given for words and the various precepts proper to this art; we treat grammatically when we speak or write according to rule. To treat of grammar, then, belongs only to certain books, like Priscian, Donatus, or Servius; but to treat grammatically belongs to all books.

When, therefore, we treat of any art—and especially in teaching it, when everything must be reduced to outline and presented for easy understanding—we should be content to set forth the matter in hand as briefly and as clearly as possible, lest by excessively piling up extraneous considerations we distract the student more than we instruct him. We must not say everything we can, lest we say with less effect such things as need saying. Seek, therefore, in every art what stands established as belonging specifically to it. Later, when you have studied the arts and come to know by disputation and comparison what the proper concern of each of them is,⁴⁷ then, at this stage, it will be fitting for you to bring the principles of each to bear upon all the others, and, by a comparative and back-and-forth examination of the arts, to investigate the things in them which you did not well understand before. Do not strike into a lot of by-ways until you know the main roads: you will go along securely when you are not under the fear of going astray.⁴⁸

Chapter Six: What Is Necessary for Study

Three things are necessary for those who study: natural endowment, practice, and discipline.⁴⁹ By natural endowment is meant that they must be able to grasp easily what they hear and to retain firmly what they grasp; by practice is meant that they must cultivate by assiduous effort the natural endowment they have; and by discipline is meant that, by leading a praiseworthy life, they must combine moral behavior with their knowledge. Of these three in turn we shall now set forth a few remarks by way of introduction.

Chapter Seven: Concerning Aptitude as Related to Natural Endowment

Those who work at learning must be equipped at the same time with aptitude and with memory, for these two are so closely tied together in every study and discipline that if one of them is lacking, the other alone cannot lead anyone to perfection—just as earnings are useless if there is no saving of them, and storage equipment is useless if there is nothing to preserve. Aptitude gathers wisdom, memory preserves it.

Aptitude is a certain faculty naturally rooted in the mind and empowered from within.⁵⁰ It arises from nature, is improved by use, is blunted by excessive work, and is sharpened by temperate practice.⁵¹ As someone has very nicely said:

Please! Spare yourself for my sake—there's only drudgery in those papers! Go run in the open air!

Aptitude gets practice from two things—reading and meditation. Reading consists of forming our minds upon rules and precepts taken from books, and it is of three types: the teacher's, the learner's, and the independent reader's. For we say, "I am reading the book *to* him," "I am reading the book *under* him," and "I am reading the book."⁵² Order and method are what especially deserve attention in the matter of reading.

Chapter Eight: Concerning Order in Expounding a Text

One kind of order is observed in the disciplines, when I say, for instance, that grammar is more ancient than dialectic, or arithmetic comes before music; another kind in codices or anthologies, when I declare, for instance, that the Catilinarian orations are ahead of the *Jugurtha*; another kind in narration, which moves in continuous series; and another kind in the exposition of a text.

Order in the disciplines is arranged to follow nature. In books it is arranged according to the person of the author or the nature of the subject matter.⁵³ In narration it follows an arrangement which is of two kinds—either natural, as when deeds are recounted in the order of their occurrence, or artificial, as when a subsequent event is related first and a prior event is

told after it. In the exposition of a text, the order followed is adapted to inquiry.

Exposition includes three things: the letter, the sense, and the inner meaning. The letter is the fit arrangement of words, which we also call construction; the sense is a certain ready and obvious meaning which the letter presents on the surface; the inner meaning is the deeper understanding which can be found only through interpretation and commentary. Among these, the order of inquiry is first the letter, then the sense, and finally the inner meaning. And when this is done, the exposition is complete.⁵⁴

Chapter Nine: Concerning the Method of Expounding a Text⁵⁵

The method of expounding a text consists in analysis. Every analysis begins from things which are finite, or defined, and proceeds in the direction of things which are infinite, or undefined. Now every finite or defined matter is better known and able to be grasped by our knowledge; teaching, moreover, begins with those things which are better known and, by acquainting us with these, works its way to matters which lie hidden. Furthermore, we investigate with our reason (the proper function of which is to analyze) when, by analysis and investigation of the natures of individual things, we descend from universals to particulars. For every universal is more fully defined than its particulars: when we learn, therefore, we ought to begin with universals, which are better known and determined and inclusive; and then, by descending little by little from them and by distinguishing individuals through analysis, we ought to investigate the nature of the things those universals contain.

Chapter Ten: Concerning Meditation⁵⁶

Meditation is sustained thought along planned lines: it prudently investigates the cause and the source, the manner and the utility of each thing. Meditation takes its start from reading but is bound by none of reading's rules or precepts. For it delights to range along open ground, where it fixes its free gaze upon the contemplation of truth, drawing together now these, now those causes of things, or now penetrating into profundities,

leaving nothing doubtful, nothing obscure. The start of learning, thus, lies in reading, but its consummation lies in meditation; which, if any man will learn to love it very intimately and will desire to be engaged very frequently upon it, renders his life pleasant indeed, and provides the greatest consolation to him in his trials. This especially it is which takes the soul away from the noise of earthly business and makes it have even in this life a kind of foretaste of the sweetness of the eternal quiet. And when, through the things which God has made, a man has learned to seek out and to understand him who has made them all, then does he equally instruct his mind with knowledge and fill it with joy. From this it follows that in meditation is to be found the greatest delight.

There are three kinds of meditation: one consists in a consideration of morals, the second in a scrutiny of the commandments, and the third in an investigation of the divine works. Morals are found in virtues and vices. The divine command either orders, or promises, or threatens.⁵⁷ The work of God comprises what his power creates, what his wisdom disposes, and what his grace co-effects. And the more a man knows how great is the admiration which all these things deserve, the more intently does he give himself to continual meditation upon the wonders of God.

Chapter Eleven: Concerning Memory

Concerning memory I do not think one should fail to say here that just as aptitude investigates and discovers through analysis, so memory retains through gathering. The things which we have analyzed in the course of learning and which we must commit to memory we ought, therefore, to gather. Now "gathering" is reducing to a brief and compendious outline things which have been written or discussed at some length.⁵⁸ The ancients called such an outline an "epilogue," that is, a short restatement, by headings, of things already said. Now every exposition has some principle upon which the entire truth of the matter and the force of its thought rest, and to this principle everything else is traced back. To look for and consider this principle is to "gather."

The fountainhead is one, but its derivative streams are many: why follow the windings of the latter? Lay hold upon the source and you have the whole thing. I say this because the memory of man is dull and likes brevity, and, if it is dissipated upon many things, it has less to bestow upon each of them. We ought, therefore, in all that we learn, to gather brief and dependable abstracts to be stored in the little chest of the memory, so that later on, when need arises, we can derive everything else from them. These one must often turn over in the mind and regurgitate from the stomach of one's memory to taste them, lest by long inattention to them, they disappear.⁵⁹

I charge you, then, my student, not to rejoice a great deal because you may have read many things, but because you have been able to retain them. Otherwise there is no profit in having read or understood much. And for this reason I call to mind again what I said earlier: those who devote themselves to study require both aptitude and memory.⁶⁰

Chapter Twelve: Concerning Discipline

A certain wise man, when asked concerning the method and form of study, declared:

A humble mind, eagerness to inquire, a quiet life,
Silent scrutiny, poverty, a foreign soil.
These, for many, unlock the hidden places of learning.⁶¹

He had heard, I should judge, the saying, "Morals equip learning."⁶² Therefore he joined rules for living to rules for study, in order that the student might know both the standard of his life and the nature of his study. Unpraiseworthy is learning stained by a shameless life. Therefore, let him who would seek learning take care above all that he not neglect discipline.

Chapter Thirteen: Concerning Humility

Now the beginning of discipline is humility. Although the lessons of humility are many, the three which follow are of especial importance for the student: first, that he hold no knowledge and no writing in contempt; second, that he blush

to learn from no man; and third, that when he has attained learning himself, he not look down upon everyone else.

Many are deceived by the desire to appear wise before their time. They therefore break out in a certain swollen importance and begin to simulate what they are not and to be ashamed of what they are; and they slip all the farther from wisdom in proportion as they think, not of being wise, but of being thought so. I have known many of this sort who, although they still lacked the very rudiments of learning, yet deigned to concern themselves only with the highest problems, and they supposed that they themselves were well on the road to greatness simply because they had read the writings or heard the words of great and wise men. "We," they say, "have seen them. We have studied under them. They often used to talk to us. Those great ones, those famous men, they know us." Ah, would that no one knew me and that I but knew all things! You glory in having seen, not in having understood, Plato. As a matter of fact, I should think it not good enough for you to listen to me. I am not Plato. I have not deserved to see him. Good for you! You have drunk at the very fount of philosophy—but would that you thirsted still! "The king, having drunk from a goblet of gold, drinks next from a cup of clay!"⁶³ Why are you blushing? You have heard Plato!—may you hear Chrysippus too! The proverb says, "What you do not know, maybe Ofellus knows."⁶⁴ There is no one to whom it is given to know all things, no one who has not received his special gift from nature. The wise student, therefore, gladly hears all, reads all, and looks down upon no writing, no person, no teaching. From all indifferently he seeks what he sees he lacks, and he considers not how much he knows, but of how much he is ignorant. For this reason men repeat Plato's saying: "I would rather learn with modesty what another man says than shamelessly push forward my own ideas."⁶⁵ Why do you blush to be taught, and yet not blush at your ignorance? The latter is a greater shame than the former. Or why should you affect the heights when you are still lying in the depths? Consider, rather, what your powers will at present permit: the man who proceeds stage by stage moves along best. Certain fellows, wishing to make a great leap of progress, sprawl headlong. Do

not hurry too much, therefore; in this way you will come more quickly to wisdom. Gladly learn from all what you do not know, for humility can make you a sharer in the special gift which natural endowment has given to every man. You will be wiser than all if you are willing to learn from all.

Finally, hold no learning in contempt, for all learning is good. Do not scorn at least to read a book, if you have the time. If you gain nothing from it, neither do you lose anything; especially since there is, in my judgment, no book which does not set forth something worth looking for, if that book is taken up at the right place and time; or which does not possess something even special to itself which the diligent scrutinizer of its contents, having found it nowhere else, seizes upon gladly in proportion as it is the more rare.

Nothing, however, is good if it eliminates a better thing. If you are not able to read everything, read those things which are more useful. Even if you should be able to read them all, however, you should not expend the same labor upon all. Some things are to be read that we may know them, but others that we may at least have heard of them, for sometimes we think that things of which we have not heard are of greater worth than they are, and we estimate more readily a thing whose fruit is known to us.

You can now see how necessary to you is that humility which will prompt you to hold no knowledge in contempt and to learn gladly from all. Similarly, it is fitting for you that when you have begun to know something, you not look down upon everyone else. For the vice of an inflated ego attacks some men because they pay too much fond attention to their own knowledge, and when they seem to themselves to have become something, they think that others whom they do not even know can neither be nor become as great. So it is that in our days certain peddlers of trifles come fuming forth; glorying in I know not what,⁶⁶ they accuse our forefathers of simplicity and suppose that wisdom, having been born with themselves, with themselves will die.⁶⁷ They say that the divine utterances have such a simple way of speaking that no one has to study them under masters, but can sufficiently penetrate to the hidden treasures of Truth by his own mental acumen. They wrinkle their noses and

purse their lips at lecturers in divinity and do not understand that they themselves give offense to God, whose words they preach—words simple to be sure in their verbal beauty, but lacking savor when given a distorted sense. It is not my advice that you imitate men of this kind.⁶⁸

The good student, then, ought to be humble and docile, free alike from vain cares and from sensual indulgences, diligent and zealous to learn willingly from all, to presume never upon his own knowledge, to shun the authors of perverse doctrine as if they were poison, to consider a matter thoroughly and at length before judging of it, to seek to *be* learned rather than merely to seem so, to love such words of the wise as he has grasped, and ever to hold those words before his gaze as the very mirror of his countenance. And if some things, by chance rather obscure, have not allowed him to understand them, let him not at once break out in angry condemnation and think that nothing is good but what he himself can understand. This is the humility proper to a student's discipline.

Chapter Fourteen: Concerning Eagerness to Inquire

Eagerness to inquire relates to practice and in it the student needs encouragement rather than instruction. Whoever wishes to inspect earnestly what the ancients in their love of wisdom have handed down to us, and how deserving of posterity's remembrance are the monuments which they left of their virtue, will see how inferior his own earnestness is to theirs. Some of them scorned honors, others cast aside riches, others rejoiced in injuries received, others despised hardships, and still others, deserting the meeting places of men for the farthest withdrawn spots and secret haunts of solitude, gave themselves over to philosophy alone, that they might have greater freedom for undisturbed contemplation insofar as they subjected their minds to none of the desires which usually obstruct the path of virtue. We read that the philosopher Parmenides dwelt on a rock in Egypt for fifteen years.⁶⁹ And Prometheus, for his unrestrained love of thinking, is recorded to have been exposed to the attacks of a vulture on Mount Caucasus. For they knew that the true good lies not in the esteem of men but is hidden in a pure