

WHAT WE DO

Convocation, as you can tell from the Latinate sound of the word and the somewhat incongruous sight of some of us in dark robes on what is becoming another hot day, is a ritual. But despite any incongruities we may be aware of, this ritual procession, and garb, and prayer, and speech, is a sensible practice, for it reminds us that we are an institution and that our association has a formal character. More than that, it reminds us that we march and stand as one, that, finally, we all share one task. Some ceremonial formality is appropriate at the time that we begin this task. The next such academic ceremony that will bring us together again will be graduation. You may say that we use a choral entrance and exit, with regalia and in costume, to frame the academic year. In between lies the play. What shall we call it? a tragi-comedy? It may often seem so, for it is like life itself, but with this difference, that life is tragic and comic. We come, however, only to play, to pretend. We take what we do very seriously, needless to say, but we know that our activity is, in an essential sense, playful, it is experimental, it is theoretical. And this is a luxury that life does not often permit.

These gowns, then, could be taken as symbols of our combination of the playful and the serious. One might almost call them antiques—not the persons in them, mind you—although that too may be the case, because I think we all aspire to be as old as what these costumes represent, namely, the ancient things. And of these things we hope to be, in some measure, the voices; voices, however, not simply of the ancient things, but of the ancient

things in the sense of the best things; therefore, first, of the best things, and then, if we have our wishes, of old things, because we presume that, with protection, the best things will be able to grow old, to flourish and to grow strong as they age. So, indeed, the gowns are symbolic of older voices that have spoken about the best things. Our aspiration is that all of you will soon join us in wearing these antique, playful, potent costumes. And— our wish, additionally, is that when you do, during some future — month of May, it will be cooler.

Now to the subject-- the only traditional and proper one on this day, that is to say, our task, what it is that we are about to do. So many speeches have been given about it. What is left to be said? Little that can be new. But if what is always said on these occasions has merit, it will bear repeating— for as long as it has merit. Why should we be afraid to imitate Socrates, who always said the same things about the same things? Therefore, many of you will recognize what I say. I needn't name the speakers. You have met them, or soon will.

Our task, as I wish to conceive of it today, I've already stated. It has to do with speech itself, with listening to those older voices, imitating them, learning to assess them, learning ourselves to speak anew. The traditional and proper subject, then, is speech about speech, and the proper academic approach to such a subject is to begin with a distinction, specifically, with a division of speech into two kinds. This will be a classical division, one might almost say the classical division, and because it is, let me use the Greek words. The division is of speech into mythos and logos. The first, mythos, literally, is a story, a tale,

a narrative, whence we derive our word "myth." The second, logos, in the usage I employ at the moment, means "argument" or "analysis" by means of speech, whence we derive our word "logic." As examples of each I need look no further than the works some of you were discussing last Thursday night: Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood and C.S. Lewis' The Abolition of Man. The first is a form of mythos, and the second of logos. In other words, the division I am talking about is between poetry, in a general sense, and philosophy, in a general sense; or, in rhetorical terms, between the figurative and the literal uses of language; or, in the terms I used earlier, between the playful and the serious.

I propose to employ both kinds in pursuit of our subject, and to do so by constructing a metaphor for what we do, and then by interpreting that metaphor; that is, by fashioning a figure and then encumbering it with footnotes. What metaphor? Should I say the only one? Certainly I can claim that it is a paradigmatic one, and again, that it is a classical one. Those of you who have read the Odyssey will perhaps already have guessed it (and those of you who haven't read it, soon will). The metaphor is that of going to sea. Let me construct it in four parts: First, the ship. Second, the action of the ship. Third, that which the ship acts upon, that is, the sea. Fourth, the destination. Rendered literal, in brief, the metaphor will be: First, the ship. She is of course the University of Dallas. Second, the action of the ship. This is the motion of her prow and keel through the water, that is to say, the action of knowing, or, at least, of inquiring. Third, the sea. The sea is the knowable. Fourth, the destination. This

is, let us say for the moment, our port of call, more specifically, our eventual "callings." ' .

Now let us expand each of these four parts; let us add the footnotes. First, the ship. Each of us will have his own image of the University of Dallas, but mine is of a craft that is capacious enough to hold us all (those of you in the dorms may sometimes doubt this) without being so large that we become lost below deck. Anyone who is here probably does not doubt that big is not best. Some of us who have been on other, much larger, vessels may have had occasion during the 60's and 70's to wonder whether or not we were on the Titanic. The University of Dallas is surely not the Titanic. If we go down, it will not be because we don't know what we are doing. It will not be because we have run into an iceberg in the night. But the ultimate accident is not always predictable and cannot therefore always be avoided. Our ship, however, has all the strength that a ship of her size can, and she has this critical virtue, that she is small enough to ensure that within four years we shall all be friends of friends, perhaps occasionally even enemies of enemies, but at the least we'll not be strangers-- that is to say, her size is the right size to be, internally, like the strongest of states, a republic. And her construction is sound, built as she is with keel and frames of white oak, planks of mahogany, decks of teak, and spars of spruce--though someone, overly literal, in looking about, might say she has not been made of wood, but of ferro-cement. No matter. *I* see her as having fine lines, an easy entry at the bow, leaving a smooth quarter-wave behind her, with a sea-kindly motion in a swell, and in brisk winds able to stand up to all the canvas we can raise. For those days when the wind subsides--there

will be many of them—she has oars for all hands. And for every day, she is built close enough to the water, with open decks and rowing benches right at the rails, so that we can all keep our eyes on the water and feel the keen, cleansing air and the fresh salt spray of the sea.

We've made some headway now into the second and third parts of our metaphor, that is, into the action of the ship and the nature of what she is acting upon, that is, the action of the mind in its attempts to know, and the knowable. These parts and the questions they raise are obviously most difficult. For instance, to a great extent, these two questions must be asked in conjunction with each other, and one of the possible implications of their conjunction is that neither can be understood without the other and if that is so, how can one begin to understand either of them? Must one not first understand them both? But how can we understand both, if don't understand either? You see the problems. We may be in danger of foundering just a few yards offshore. So I shall make no effort to be comprehensive, even at the most general level, but only to single out some possibilities by way of developing the metaphor.

Let us look at the second part first, the action of the keel, and assume that in some respect the keel is like the ability that the mind has to see the differences between things, to divide, that is, to conduct discursive reasoning, which is what we did when we started, and what the Greeks call dianoia, the faculty of being logical, whether in speech, in number, or in any other set of signs. We recall our earlier remarks about logos. Dianoia exercises

itself through the use of logos.

To look now at the third part of the metaphor, what dianoia - operates upon is the sea. Let us call it the "sea of kinds," that is to say, the phenomena as knowable. For the phenomena become knowable insofar as they are divisible by speech into kinds of things. We presume then that there are natural articulations among the things themselves. To be knowable the things must have identities, they must belong to classes or kinds. Some such thought as this is responsible for the fact that we make efforts to mark off the sea into separate regions--which we call departments. For example, one can make a list of the principal kinds of things that we study. Here is such a list, a provisional one, in seven parts: number, matter, motion, God, the soul, the state, the noble. To the study of these correspond the departments of, in the case of number math; of matter chemistry and biology; of motion (and especially of matter in motion), physics; of God, theology; of the soul, psychology; of the state, politics; of the noble, let us say in the sense of the good, philosophy. This list is not exhaustive, of course. For example, history is missing. This is partly because history may be said to study all of these things. And least of all is this a list of members that are completely discrete from each other--no more than are the parts of the sea wholly separable. Not only does each of the disciplines partake of the others, that is, the methods of inquiry of one are related to those of all the others. But also the things studied by each of the disciplines must, in some final sense, be held in common by them all. For example, to link the first and last items in our list, number and the noble, number is as much a part of

theology or psychology or politics as the noble (in the sense now of the beautiful) is a part of math or chemistry and biology, or physics. The sea is the sea. That it is has generated in us the conviction that to be truly a mariner one must sail the sea as a whole. And this conviction is responsible for the unusual log of this particular ship. I am referring to her sailing instructions, otherwise known as the core curriculum. Our presumption is that this curriculum has a natural basis in the character of the knowable itself, such that coming closer to one part brings us closer to all. Not that there are not many difficulties, as those of you can see who have been thinking about the list. To take the last example, which concerned the items at either end, number (the province of math) and the noble (the province of philosophy as ethics). Clearly there is a problem regarding their relation to each other. We have to ask, and wonder what we mean when we ask, is there mathematical ethics? Is there ethical mathematics? Such questions give us pause... but they also bring us together as mariners on the sea of kinds.

Now, let us go back and pick up the notion of the action of the ship upon this sea, and make a brief trial run--say at the questions we were just posing about math and ethics.

As we pull the ship through the water, the water divides into waves that pass on either side. We, as individuals, seated at our oars, on one side or the other, will at any one moment see only the part of the water that passes on our side. And this is quite like the action of logos, of the speaking, that is of the thinking, mind as it passes through a subject. Speech only permits us to

see half of the whole. To see the whole of the argument, we must remember that we have constantly been leaving half of it behind, and therefore, at some time, we must change sides and repeat it--either that, or take the same course in the opposite direction. Best would be to do both, and to do both often, that is, to trace and retrace our paths of discourse--especially those over the principal subjects. I've spoken metaphorically. We need also an example. We can find one by returning to the question of math and ethics. There is a very old argument that in some sense, in some way, they are the same. The form that this apparent paradox took is that knowledge and virtue are interdependent. If one knows, one is good; if one is not good, it is because one is ignorant. When one thinks of it, this is the issue that lies at the heart of liberal education. So let us assume that there is something to this paradox, and make some prow-like, discursive cuts through it in the form of questions--questions, however, to which we shall give only the very leanest of answers. Here are the questions:

Is knowledge only a necessary condition for full human virtue, or is it also the sufficient condition? If the latter, can it not be taught or can it be taught? If the latter, is this knowledge to be understood as comprehension, as wisdom, or as a limited technique, a skill? If the later, what is this skill? One answer is that it is the measurement of pleasures. Virtue is a calculus of present versus future pleasures with a view to picking the greater. It is a form of rational hedonism. But if virtue is to be understood in terms of pleasure, what are we to call courage in the face of death in battle? This is the objection that C.S. Lewis raises in The Abolition of Man, and it puts the argument in jeopardy.

From here, then, we can go back to see what was on the other side and has been left behind. This was the argument that we did not hear but knew was there: first, that knowledge was not sufficient for human virtue (perhaps one must add to it good habits); second, that virtue as knowledge was not simply teachable but also unteachable (perhaps it also requires a certain character or natural disposition in the learner) ; third, that it was not a specific technique, but a ministerial, comprehensive knowledge of the whole. If this should be so, then are only philosophers virtuous? If so, what are we to think of citizen virtue, especially courage, the virtue in citizens which protects the state and enables the philosopher in that state to practice his virtue? If philosophic virtue depends on citizen virtue, it would be incomplete, therefore not comprehensive. Again, on the issue of courage, the argument has been put in jeopardy. What then is the relation between knowledge and virtue? Aren't we back where we started? Indeed we are, but, had we made the trip in detail, instead of in outline, we would say that we are much better off than we were, because we would be more familiar with one of the main paths through the sea. And the means we used was discursive reasoning; in the terms of the metaphor, we got out the oars and pulled, a set of pairs, half on each side. If you are with me, at this point you might be saying that something is missing and that there must be an easier way. There is--on both counts. What is missing and the easier way is mythos, the story, lively fiction that will somehow put the divisions back together. Suppose that we had been successful in dividing and defining virtue, its parts, their relation to each other and to

knowledge. We still would need to see virtue in action to believe that she lives and moves. We can do that... through mythos, through poetry, through the department of literature. You didn't think that I would leave it out. I couldn't, because this is how virtue first becomes visible to us—through her imperfect embodiments in figures such as those of Achilles, Odysseus and Aeneas. These stories of heroes fill our sails, so that the arms and shoulders may rest for a while. But it would be a mistake to think of these stories as mere recreation—unless we think of recreation as the practical activity of making whole again, as a form of collection, of assimilation, that is, of making similitudes. If we do think of stories as having this power, then we are in a position to bring the two halves of speech, of understanding, together—mythos and logos. The first makes us aware of similarities among things that we might have thought were unrelated; the second enables us to discover the difference between things that we had thought were either the same or an indiscriminate mass. Just as the same and the different cannot be understood apart from each other, so mythos and logos, cannot produce full understanding without being complemented by each other. It would be careless to read the greatest literature without applying to it all our powers of analysis, just as it would be dangerous to think that physics does not require us to be alert to the component in it of the mythical. That is why our ship has both sails and oars.

What remains to be said is something (very little) about her destination. As I described it initially, this destination was our "callings", our work in life, our professions, many as they be. This is so true that I think I need say only one thing about it.

By design, as a matter of practical necessity, different departments point us toward different ports. And this design is not only necessary, but good, because even if one could think everything, one could not do everything; one must do some thing. Nonetheless, every port, by definition, lies on the edge of the sea. And, therefore, so long as we live in a port-town, we can go to sea, whether for a season or a day. When we no longer do so at all, perhaps we die. I recall the passage in Book 11 of the Odyssey when the seer Teiresias tells Odysseus that when Odysseus has reclaimed his kingdom by slaying the suitors, he must take his oar inland until he comes to a country where his oar is mistaken for a flail for winnowing grain. Then he must plant his oar in the ground and make sacrifice to Poseidon and return home where death will come to him.

I think it is some recognition of the truth that is in the story of Odysseus that has brought us all down to this shore today. By learning, we live. Therefore, in the spirit of the living Odysseus, those of us who have met here before say to each other, well met once again. To those of you who gather here for the first time, we say well-come. So then, with the tide of enthusiasm rising in our hearts, while the ship is at the very edge of the beach and before us lies the knowable, so dark and so brilliant, let us go now, together, to sea.