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"As if the language suddenly, with ease"

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Henry Drummond was right! “It’s the loneliest feeling in the world—to find yourself standing up when everyone else is sitting down!” (*Inherit the Wind*)

The last speaker on this podium—at Founders’ Day—used images of flight to talk about human possibilities: she spoke of bumble bees who don’t know they’re too heavy to fly and aerodynamically shouldn’t be able to, so, unaware of their limitations, they fly anyway. And she used images of geese flying in each other’s wake, facilitating one another’s efforts by staying in formations that minimize the strain on others’ energies.

As I began to consider what to talk about with you today, it seemed as if I probably ought to talk in some way about teaching, and especially about those who join me in class week after week, semester after semester. But in what way? I thought perhaps it might be helpful to try to give you a sense of what my classes are like, and I kept coming back to images of flight as well, though these are somewhat different from those Dr. Rebie Kingston so eloquently proposed.

The first has to do with my home. When I first moved in, a young man came to the door one day looking for one of the previous occupants. When I explained that he no longer lived there, the visitor turned to leave, but before walking away, he asked in an unassuming manner, “So, have you had any dead birds on your porch yet?” He saw my look of surprise and quickly explained: “See all of these windows?”—and, indeed, one of the great features of my house is that it has enormous windows in the front and forming almost an entire wall of the side of the living room. “Well,” he said, “the birds don’t see them, and they crash into them and land on the porch.”

He left, and, true to his prediction, I have since heard the crashes and subsequently found the bodies of many birds on the front and side porches of my house. Sometimes, they’re dead, but sometimes, they’re just—“just!”—stunned, and after a little rest, if I can keep the local predators away, they fly off again and seem to be OK.

The analogy may not play out entirely, but it’s struck me over and over how much like those birds the students in my classes must feel! First there are the rumors about the class. . .word gets out about the bodies on the porch! Time passes, and most make it without any trouble. But the occasional “thump” is heard, and the occasional body shows up at the doorstep. Whether the windows are the texts or the professor, or some unforeseen and unforeseeable presence that defies and defines us both, the risks do seem real, even if the violent metaphor is a bit uncomfortable.

Then there's the other image of flight I think of, this one from a Far Side cartoon. The cartoon shows a man swinging a woman around a room, with a toy village strewn about them, a toy mountain conspicuous among the village markers. The caption reads, "On the next pass, however, Helen failed to clear the mountains." And, of course, I'd propose a number of variant readings of it. My students would probably see me as the person in control here, with themselves precariously poised to crash at any moment into the impenetrable mountain—whatever text we happened to be reading. I, on the other hand might see them in control, with the text again as that against which we define our mutual inevitable upsetting encounter. Or, perhaps the text is, after all, the one in control, with students and professor equally energized and endangered by our engagement with it! In any case, I would propose that what matters is the energy we invest; what matters is the risk we take in interpreting our world and the fictions we offer one another to define it.

As Wallace Stevens reminds us, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,"
From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (210)

This occasion is, indeed, one of those blazoned days—the first of several in which you will be honored. And while I want to join the folks on stage and in the audience in congratulating those of you who have managed to negotiate the past four years of your lives and still come out with academic honors of all sorts, I want to praise as well those of you whose names might or might not be called out today for special mention. Nor, of course, do I mean to suggest that the following groups and those with the official honors today are necessarily mutually exclusive. Of course they're not!

I want to pay tribute to those of you who risked the lower GPA—and maybe got it!—because you wanted to study in another country, to risk learning and loving another language and culture, or who spent time working for Habitat for Humanity, Amnesty International, or the Western Avenue Center; I want to praise those of you who were so weakened by anorexia or bulimia that it took every ounce of strength you had to get your work in at all; I want to honor those of you who have had to endure cruelty, especially that which is masqueraded as high-minded moralism, and who have, despite the outrages. . .perhaps because of them. . .persisted with the greater dignity and compassion. I want to recognize those of you who have had to negotiate private lives—and the lives of your friends—through the minefields of AIDS, family tragedies, and all of those other horrors which really did put the occasional O'Gorman exam in perspective. I want to congratulate those of you in the class of '96 who were willing to risk challenging your faculty—and your faculties!—to envision alternatives to whatever formulas or paradigms we proposed. I want especially to congratulate those whose imaginative engagements with the worlds we posited—whether through physics, art, literature, math, religion or music—were able to see—and

see through—the essential falsehood of the constructs through which we all seek to define our worlds. Many of you took that to heart, reveling in the pleasure of the intellect and the imagination in embracing what might be called the fiction of fictions. And, of course, some of you simply embraced one another, and somehow got through! Just don't let anyone dare to say to you now that you're going into the "real world." Isn't this as "real" as it gets, in lots of different ways?!

One of the ways in which this world is as real as it gets is because we confront what Wallace Stevens and others suggest: that language may be our Supreme Fiction. My intellectual passion is for language, for literature, for the study of the fictions we offer one another and the constructs through which we do so. We need to acknowledge the lure and finally the terror of any imaginative absolute.

Not everyone will appreciate your enthusiasms. Not everyone has, mine!
From some of my course evaluations:

British Poetry, 1994: "I learned that I don't like poetry."

Modern British Literature, 1988: "I felt she could have had some more exciting vocal habits. Her voice stays in a 3-note range and it gets monotonous."

British Poetry, 1990: "I liked poetry until this class."

British Poetry, 1992: "Sorry, nothing to say—too tense to concentrate."

Theatre of the Absurd, 1993: "I think I could have done without most of the absurdist plays."

And, from a Seminar on James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "Liked the relaxed atmosphere—felt very comfortable looking stupid."

Then there were the advising triumphs, among which my work with one alum indeed distinguished itself. For his second semester senior year, I signed him up for advanced tap dancing and Physics 406—Electricity and Magnetism—at exactly the same times on exactly the same days of the week! When the registrar notified him of the schedule conflict, the student refused to drop either class! To his credit, he did an epic tap through both, appreciating, as few in either class alone ever could, the many and varied potentials of the interaction of matter with fields!

See why my sympathies pull so clearly in the direction of those whose triumphs are of the more qualified sort?! Or perhaps just of a different order?! Well, back to the triumphs.

As a character in Heinrich Boll's *The Clown* notes, and this is very slightly paraphrased, "'Was I good? Did you like me?' How we speak of ourselves in the language of prostitutes. And we half expect to hear, 'Would you please recommend me to your friends?'" (221-222) I wonder: What does that mean, "the language of prostitutes"? Within what crude representational economy of degradation do we implicate ourselves and one another when we ask questions like "Was I good? Did you like me?" And I recall Pynchon's wonderfully paranoid reminder in *Gravity's Rainbow*: "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers" (251). But here I am again back at the issue of language, the interrogation of questions, the stuff of classrooms!

Naomi Wolf alludes to the words of the poet Audre Lorde: "[Lorde had] been diagnosed with breast cancer, and wrote,

I was going to die, sooner or later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you. . . What are the words you do not yet have? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language."

Wolf goes on—this directed particularly to the women in her audience: "Only one thing is more frightening than speaking. . . And that is not speaking." As Italo Calvino notes, "No one respects the power of language more than a police state does."

But there is a difference between silence and being silenced. One of my favorite fictional characters, Beckett's Unnamable, puts it this way: "[O]ne has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps" (309).

One of my friends pointed out the other day that I seem to be attending a lot of speeches lately! Imagine with what dismay—not to mention hubris!—I sat in the Memorial Center a week and a half ago and heard Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould elaborate in great detail essentially the same point I had intended to take as axiomatic in this segment of my talk with you here today! Oh, he used a different vocabulary, perhaps—that of the paleontologist—but he emphasized the same notion—that of our radical insignificance—and he did so with some of my favorite slides! Still, as I'm sure Gould and others would admit, and as Samuel Beckett has noted, "There are many ways in which the thing that I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said."

As I listened to Stephen Jay Gould discuss in the perspective of geological time and cosmic space the relative positioning of humans, I thought, as I'm sure many of you would, of another Stephen—Stephen Dedalus, from James Joyce's

Ulysses, and his attempt in the “Ithaca” chapter of that text to make meaningful his own being in the world. The narrator says of Stephen Dedalus: “He affirmed his significance as a conscious rational animal proceeding syllogistically from the known to the unknown and a conscious rational reagent between a micro and a macrocosm ineluctably constructed upon the incertitude of the void” (572). My students and I routinely consider gestures like those of Stephen Dedalus: all mental constructs formulate a relation of meaning between mind and world by advancing conceptions of order, design, and coherence. Whatever form they take, whether of algebraic formulae or of poetry, these symbolic utterances of intelligent and imaginative relationship designate a fictive space in which mind can move; they create a structure in order to define meaning within that structure (and outside of which the same meaning does not exist). The act of imaginative perception seems at once to be a gesture of human vulnerability and human freedom made in the face of the inscrutability of the perceived and the ultimate inadequacy of the mode of perception. So beset and yet so powerful in its urge towards form, the mind searches interpretive space within which it can escape solitude and seem to transcend insignificance.

One of the ways in which it does so is through art—through literature, through language, imperfect and fugitive though they may be. The conspiracy of language tries, with insolent and seductive ease, to domesticate and possess what is not our own. Occupying a territory between the unspeakable and the ineffable, while at the same time defining that territory, the work of art leaves a silent legacy, respite from radical insignificance. That is not to say that we must meet that silence with a silence of our own. We must proceed “as if the language suddenly, with ease / Said things it had laboriously spoken” (Stevens).

I want to return—not very laboriously, I hope!—to that initial image of the cartoon characters negotiating successfully—or crashing into!—the mountain in terms of which they define their mutual energies. I would echo the words of Robert Gosheen, who probably wasn’t thinking of that cartoon, addressing a graduating class at Princeton. His words: “If you feel that you have both feet planted on level ground, then the university has failed you.”

In the paragraph that follows, I echo and elaborate on the kinds of tributes made by Naomi Wolf in her commencement address to students at Scripps College.