



INTEGRITAS

Wyoming Catholic College

COMMENCEMENT WEEK 2018

ISSUE 5.1

REFLECTING ON THE CLASS OF 2018

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(DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL PRESIDENT'S DINNER, HELD ON MAY 11, 2018)



When this year's graduating class first came to Wyoming Catholic College in the fall of 2014, they were already a vivid group. I remember them, fresh from the backcountry after their 21-day trip, when they came to Humanities class ready to talk about Hesiod and Homer. The girls were of course all proper and restrained, but the guys were a little like the whalers that Melville describes at the beginning of *Moby-Dick* when they burst into the first bar they find: "all bedarned and ragged, and their beards stiff with icicles, they seemed an eruption of bears from Labrador." I'm exaggerating, of course. That wasn't until after the winter trip.

I got to know these graduates best the next semester in the Trivium 102 course that has since fallen out of the curriculum. For a few weeks, we had time to think about poetry—how essential it was to understand meter, for example, and what the difference was between a good poem and a bad one. As we were reading Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, they began to see that the good poet never simply follows a predictable pattern—say, the sequence of unstressed and stressed syllables in an iambic pentameter line (daDUN-daDUN-daDUN-daDUN-daDUN)—or if the poet does follow it, it's for a good poetic reason.

Take Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, which starts out very regular: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang/Upon those boughs which shake against the cold." The point isn't the regularity itself, as though poetry were about the smooth fulfilment of expectations, but it's the way the regularity sets up the fourth line: the substitution of a gummy spondee at the beginning of the line creates the real

effect: “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.” Gummy—try pulling apart those syllables: *bare ruined choirs where*. He’s talking about bare branches; he’s talking about bad music as opposed to good; and he’s talking—Joseph Pearce would agree—about the monasteries ruined by Henry VIII.

But let’s stick with meter. Last night after the senior dinner, Isaac Owen reminded me of a Christopher Marlowe excerpt from “Hero and Leander” that we read in that class. I don’t remember why meter came up, but I think that excerpt was especially memorable as an illustration of metrical effects because it also happened to coincide with what the freshmen were learning in horsemanship. Here’s the passage in Marlowe:

For as a hot proud horse highly disdains
To have his head controlled, but breaks the reins,
Spits forth the ringled bit, and with his hooves
Checks the submissive ground; so he that loves,
The more he is restrained, the worse he fares.

Read those first two lines aloud, and at the word “highly,” you *feel* the “hot proud horse” violently wrenching his head; you feel it, even when you’re unaware of why you feel it, because it’s extremely unusual to have a trochee (DUNda) at that place in an iambic line. You also feel it because this poet knows horses: it’s the conjunction of reality and art, reined horse and metered line.

Thinking about meter opens up other meditations. We tend to imagine now that personal expression would flow with freedom and eloquence if only it were unfettered by tradition and authority and rules. Not so. It’s easy to understand why Robert Frost said that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net.

Real effectiveness does not come from discarding the rules. The rules don’t exist to squash creativity and enforce *conformity*, but to open up possibilities of beauty and subtlety the more they’re mastered. They are not *made to be broken*, which is our common truism and which is true

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only of speed limits between, say, Muddy Gap and Jeffrey City. Quite the contrary—rules are made to be mastered with energy and imagination. The rules guide everyone who follows them.

I'm reminded of a short poem W.B. Yeats wrote about the act of writing:

Hands, do what you're bid:
 Bring the balloon of the mind
 That bellies and drags in the wind
 Into its narrow shed.

For those with genius, like Yeats or Shakespeare or Marlowe, this act of bringing the mind into the rules of form liberates a new intensity that changes language itself. These graduating seniors have had to deal with more exacting rules than almost any of their fellow graduates from other colleges anywhere in America. I say *almost* because if I'm absolute about this assertion, someone will counter with an exception where students have to grow their own chickens to lay their own eggs before they can eat breakfast.

But let's be fair: these seniors have been forbidden cell phones, a prohibition that would instantly send most of their contemporaries into shock; they have lived with curfews; they have been made to hike long distances in the wilderness; they have made quinzhees of packed snow in sub-zero weather in the mountains; they have learned to control and ride very large animals; they have been granted no choices—not a single one—in their course selection over the past four years; they have delivered speeches according to traditional rhetorical forms, such as narrative, encomium, and ekphrasis; they have stood at the board to do props in Euclid; they have done semester-long projects in field science; they have thought through the hypostatic union. When they were freshmen, I even made them write sonnets. (By the way, after a little poking around, I discovered that I still *have* those sonnets. It strikes me that I have some leverage here when it comes to getting contributions to the College from these soon-to-be alumni.)

The discipline of these rules has not made this year's spirited seniors into standard "products"—that unfortunate metaphor—or rote ideologues. Each of them has been formed more fully into the person he or she is.

Each name—Tia Sardello or Nick Budke or Allie Renouard—is a distinct character in a complex narrative full of personality and interests. They are who they were as freshmen, only more so. I have evidence. Along with those sonnets (*expensive* sonnets, I should say), I found some of the personal essays those freshmen wrote as well. I hope that Ethan Floyd will forgive me for quoting his without permission. It's about language and how he first fell in love with it by studying Spanish on his own so he could speak to Hispanic customers in the grocery line at his job. Having learned some Spanish, he casually picked up a Latin textbook in his house, even though he had hated Latin before, and now it was a different experience. It was a second-year textbook, and he didn't understand it, so he went back to the first year and worked through the whole textbook on his own. I doubt that Magister would be surprised to hear it.

To quote Ethan, “Studying Latin sparked a flame in me, a flame that encouraged me to learn more languages and interact with more cultures and texts. I wanted to travel and learn these new languages and truly be a part of the people that use them, learning their culture and history. I saw the beauty in language that few people see and I wanted to discover more of it.”

Anyone who heard Ethan's Latin address last night knows that Wyoming Catholic College has not so much changed him as deepened the vital cultural and historical context for his love of language. It makes perfect sense that he'll be headed to Spain this fall. As Chaucer writes of the Clerk, “Gladly would he learn and gladly teach.”

Late last month, when the seniors gathered at White Pine Ski Resort near Pinedale for their senior retreat, I sent them a letter trying to explain how I saw the nature of the unique formation—intellectual, spiritual, and physical—that goes on at Wyoming Catholic College. I forgot to send them a copy, as I said I would, so let me repeat it now in this larger context:

The whole of what you have undergone [I wrote to them] is like the immense object that Aristotle describes in the *Poetics* —say, a play that lasts for seventeen hours or an epic poem 2500 pages long: it's too large to be apprehended in terms of its beauty, because you can hardly remember the beginning when you get to the end of it.

Nevertheless, what you've been through is a formation that *in recollection*, with some distance, begins to take on a great discernible shape, which is almost the shape of your own self-knowledge. In ways that it will take you years to recognize, the whole formation you have gained here will be put into act only when you leave here. You will take with you, not the specific details, but the habit of mind—the confidence to meet new situations, the readiness to respond and to lead.

The curriculum has a look particular to each one of you, because of the kinds of emphases that you have put into it, the memories that have pressed themselves most deeply into your own mind, and the freedom you have had and continue to have in incorporating it into the way you think. It moves me to imagine what it is going to happen when you enter the larger world. This education, worthy for its own sake, is also the source of action. The more consciously you draw upon it, the more it will allow you to see your circumstances in ways that are fruitful and imaginative.

I'm reminded, even as I read this letter to the graduates, of a passage in the *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill, one of the most brilliant men of the 19th century, who began learning Greek at the age of three. By the time he started learning Latin at eight—and I'm not saying this to rebuke Ethan for being a sluggard—he had already read all of Herodotus in Greek. But Mill was brought up by his very demanding father in a strictly utilitarian system of thought, much like the victims of Thomas Gradgrind in Dickens' novel *Hard Times*, and suddenly, at the age of most of our graduates—and I'm not saying that to rebuke Jason Kirstein—the whole point of everything he had learned evaporated, because his analytical and practical studies had dried up in him the sources of feeling.

Here's the passage:

I was thus, as I said to myself, left stranded at the commencement of my voyage, with a well-equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail; without any real desire for the ends which I had been so carefully fitted out to work for: no delight in virtue, or the general good, but also just as little in anything else.

He was perhaps the most brilliant man of his age in all of England, perhaps in the world; he was fully equipped to bring about practical innovations and serve the utilitarian aim, the greatest good for the greatest number, but he was, in his own description, dead in the water. He knew a great deal, but he had no faith to draw upon, no feeling to move him toward his ends. He was revived, interestingly, by poetry—by Wordsworth, as it happens, whose poetry I believe our students know.

Think how different the education here is from the one that left him with an unformed and ignorant heart. Still, I do not think anyone, regardless of how poetic or spiritual the education might be, entirely escapes those moments when the purpose of it all seems elusive.

But there is a huge difference, in those moments of misgiving, between looking back on a pragmatic training, which can never raise the sail and summon the winds, and looking back upon the whole power of the Western intellectual tradition. In the *gift* of this education, as Andrew Davidson described it last night, the worst moments of doubt and confusion lead directly into the heart of what the education is all about.

At the beginning of the *Commedia*, Dante finds himself in a dark wood, full of perplexity, the straight path lost, no idea how he got there. Exactly: that's it—so how do you recover the right path? Or remember Achilles mortally insulted, forced by his honor to withdraw from the arena of his excellence—or Odysseus weeping on the beach, admittedly in an island paradise with a goddess, but helpless to find his way home and resume his real life. Or Melville's Ishmael, pausing before coffin warehouses. And then there's Wordsworth himself.

“The world is too much with us. Late and soon, [students?]
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.
Little we see in nature that is ours.
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.”

The point is simple: we all need restoration, and we find it through memory. The tradition stretching back, not only to the Bible, but to the pagan Greeks and Romans, up through the Incarnation, the rise of the Church, and the history of the West, is our inheritance; it is the gift we paradoxi-

cally have to earn (as Lewis Hyde puts it) through the labor of gratitude. It is our restraint, our meter, our measure, our set of expectations—not restrictive but liberating. To reject the authority and greatness of the tradition, as so many have done, is to give up the very possibility of measuring our own creativity and innovation against the greatness of the past. To earn this tradition, as these graduates have certainly begun to do, is to become truly free, and it is that boisterous freedom I have no doubt they will take into the world.

Will the graduating seniors please rise?

May what you have learned here be a light for you whenever the world is too much with you and the way before you becomes tangled and uncertain. May you patiently endure whatever you must undergo to find your true homeland. Along the way, may you never trade your armor of gold for bronze. May the Lord Jesus Christ provide you, in those you love most, with guides and companions to true friendship in what is highest. May you be given, when you need them, a Virgil and a Beatrice and a St. Bernard. May you and your children and your children's children find your highest liberty in law, your greatness of soul in the wisdom of measure that the Church and the great tradition provide.

And may you always remember Wyoming Catholic College.

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