

St. John's College Graduate Institute
Convocation Address
Fall 2014

On the Literature Segment

Welcome, new students, returning students, and tutors, to St. John's College, and to the Graduate Institute. Today each of you is beginning, or resuming, your membership in a community of learning, at a College that dedicates itself to inquiry: to asking fundamental questions, and to pursuing answers to these questions. As members of such a community, we must from time to time inquire into ourselves. On this occasion I mean to do so by examining the Literature segment.

The subject of this convocation address – the last of five, each treating one of the segments in the graduate Program – is informed by a claim that I made in an earlier address, delivered in Spring 2012, titled 'What is a Segment?' I said then that the program of the Graduate Institute is a homogeneous whole, and that its segments represent arbitrary divisions of that whole into parts. Accordingly, I claimed that the titles of these segments should be taken as compressed questions in need of answers, and as opportunities for wonder, rather than as names announcing that each segment treats a distinct subject matter. Now I hope to make good on these claims in detail. So what, then, are the wonderful questions raised by the segment title 'Literature'?

I pondered this question for a long time, in the dim cave of my office in the BBC, during the hot and muggy summer of 2014. And those of you who know me will understand the despair I was reduced to, because I could see no way forward. There is no ampersand in the segment title 'Literature' – so how was I to begin? My mind twisted and turned, trying to answer this

question, and my body twisted and turned too as a result: now sitting in my office chair, now standing to think, now throwing myself into one of my soft and easy chairs, fit only for soft and easy people. And then, late one Friday afternoon, while trying to figure out how to put my feet up on my desk without kicking my laptop, I kicked instead an open drawer of my desk. In a puff of dust, several folded sheets of paper fell loose from where they had been Scotch taped to the underside of the desk drawer. I took up these pages, and began to read.

“Fall 1985 Graduate Institute Convocation Address. On the Literature Segment.

“I went down from the dim cave of my office into the hot summer sun, to the new coffee shop on Maryland Avenue, alone with my thoughts, to purchase a cappuccino – because I needed some coffee, and because I heard they were making this new drink there for the first time. The coffee shop was crowded and noisy, and there was a line, so I purchased my cappuccino to go in a Styrofoam cup, and began to make for the door, the sun, and my office. But just then, someone took hold of my seersucker sleeve from behind and said, ‘Hey, you’re the Director of the Graduate Institute, right?’

“I turned to see a student seated at a table, hunched over a much-annotated copy of what looked like the *Iliad* while fixing me with an angry glare. ‘I am,’ I said, hesitating. ‘Mr...?’

“‘Ms.,’ she corrected, rolling her eyes. Then she pushed what was indeed the *Iliad* across the table, toward me, with both hands. ‘Why do we read this stuff?’

“I sat down in the vacant chair, setting my cappuccino on the table. ‘You mean the *Iliad*?’ I asked.

“All of it: Homer, the Greek tragedies and comedies, the *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare, poetry. *Literature*,’ she intoned, in a plummy Masterpiece Theatre accent. ‘I came here, to St. John’s, to study the greatest ideas in philosophy, in math and science, in politics. I came here to

study what's most true – not some stories made up by some dead Greek whose name may or may not have been Homer.'

"I glanced at the doorway, and the bright world beyond it. 'Aristotle says in the *Poetics* that poetry is more philosophic than history,' I ventured weakly, 'because it speaks about general rather than particular things, about what is likely or necessary rather than just about what happened. And by poetry he means making, in the sense of making things up. He's talking about everything we read in the Literature segment, in a book that we read in the Literature segment.'

"This earned me a derisive snort. 'Did Mr. Aristotle write the Graduate Institute curriculum? Is he available to answer my questions? And in any case, Mr. Director, you've missed my point. Let's grant that poetry is more philosophic than history. Are you or Mr. Aristotle able to say that it's more philosophic than *philosophy*? Besides, everybody knows that what we call history here in the Graduate Institute is really philosophy. And it's not even true that poetry speaks of general rather than particular things. Open Thucydides, and read that in such-and-such a year, Alcibiades got on a trireme and sailed to Sicily. Now open Chaucer, and read in the Franklin's Tale that Arveragus got on a boat and sailed to Brittany. The only thing missing is the date! Both history and literature are full of pointless details that only obscure the philosophic truth. At least the pointless details of history actually happened. Who cares that Niraëus, the second most beautiful Greek after Achilles, only brought three ships to Troy?'

"I thought about the slow cooling of my coffee, despite the Styrofoam. 'Maybe these details are useful ways of clothing philosophic truth,' I responded. 'Doesn't Lucretius say something in *De Rerum Natura* about doctors putting honey on cups of bitter wormwood, and about their patients being tricked but not betrayed? Maybe a beautiful story, full of imagined

details, makes it more pleasant to read about painful philosophic truths. For example, take that detail about Niraëus. Isn't that Homer's way of saying that beauty doesn't bring military might, and that Achilles doesn't have his fifty ships at Troy because he's the most beautiful? A literary form could also make it more pleasant for authors to write painful truths,' I added. 'In a philosophic treatise, everything an author writes is in his own name. In a literary work, he can put a painful truth in the mouth of one of his characters, and blame it on the character if he needs to.'

"The coffee shop had been noisy, but it suddenly went silent, and I felt a moment's shame for what I had just said – straining to make myself heard – too loudly. The student stared levelly at me for a moment. 'Lucretius is cool,' she said at last, 'and you get brownie points for using Latin. But don't you see that your esoteric argument is totally lame? First, if you can see through it, and I can see through it, then everyone can see through it. Lucretius even tells you that he's doing it – and he tells you twice, three books apart, like he thinks you'll forget. Second, if everybody sees through the beautiful clothing, then no one's going to buy it when an author blames something on one of his characters. You'll have to do a lot better than that, Mr. Director, to convince me that there's something to esotericism. Everybody knows that literature is seductive. Read the second preface to *Julie* – you know,' she responded to my raised eyebrow, 'by Rousseau. They knew it in the eighteenth century. There was a whole debate about whether too many people were reading novels, and about whether novels drive people mad. Novels were, like, the Walkmans of the eighteenth century. And no one was letting their authors off the hook.'

"I started to say something to this, but the student was on a roll, and interrupted me. 'And third, what's wrong with you? Every time you say something to me, you repeat something that you read in some book. You're like that guy Montaigne writes about, in "Of pedantry," who

won't say that he has an itchy backside until he looks up what itchy means and what a backside is. I ask you a question, and you give me great books. Well, I want great ideas. So tell me straight up, Mr. Director, because life is short. Why should I waste my time on literature?"

"The student had been speaking more and more angrily, and as she posed this last question she slammed her *Iliad* shut. The coffee shop fell silent again. I reached for my drink, snapped open the plastic lid, and drank deeply of cold foam and lukewarm, bitter coffee. Clearly this cappuccino fad was going nowhere. But as the stimulant raced through my veins and the fog cleared from my vision, I looked the student in the eye and asked, 'you've read *Julie*? That's not on the Graduate Institute reading list.'

"And then I saw what I did not expect to see: the student blushed. I glanced away, reflected for a moment, and then began again to speak.

"So you want a philosophic argument for why literature is as philosophically serious as philosophy?" I asked.

"The student nodded.

"Okay. Remember how in Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes between five intellectual virtues: art, science, prudence, wisdom, and intellect?

"Kind of,' she replied. 'What I remember is that art has to do with making things, science with knowing things that can't be otherwise, and prudence with acting in matters that can be otherwise. But I don't remember so much about wisdom or intellect.'

"You're on the right track,' I said. 'Wisdom has to do with knowing first principles, and Aristotle confusingly calls it a combination of science and intellect. This makes more sense when he says later that intellect is concerned with the ultimates in both directions: ultimate general principles, and ultimate particulars. It's a kind of perception.'

“‘Let’s see if I’m following you,’ the student ventured. “An example of art is writing, an example of science is physics, an example of prudence is tactics, and an example of both wisdom and intellect is... philosophy?’

“I reflected again, and then said, ‘Let’s leave wisdom out of it for now. I find it easier to think about single judgments, rather than bodies of knowledge. If we were to say that “avoid comma splices” is part of the art of writing, Newton’s second law part of the science of physics, and “Athens should not invade Sicily” is a judgment of prudence, then what would be a judgment of the intellect?’

“‘Well,’ the student replied, ‘if Aristotle is right that the intellect concerns the ultimates, both principles and particulars, then the principle of non-contradiction would have to be one of its judgments, and others ought to have the form “this is a comma,” or “this is force, this mass, and this acceleration,” or “this is Athens, and this Sicily.” These judgments would be a little like definitions, but also different: they wouldn’t say “a comma is a punctuation mark indicating a brief phrase,” or something like that, because that kind of definition is part of the art of writing. Instead, they would be like a cross between definitions and perceptions. The “this” part of “this is a comma” would indicate a sense perception, but the “is a comma” part would be a perception of the intellect.’

“‘Great,’ I said, starting to enjoy myself. Even my cappuccino was tasting better. ‘So let’s agree that we’ve got Aristotle’s meaning right, for the sake of argument. We might think differently if we were to look at the text, but we don’t want to fetch a book and run the risk of being called pedants, do we?’

“This earned me another eye roll.

“‘So now consider this,’ I continued. ‘Aristotle also tells us in the *Ethics* that the moral virtues come to us through habituation, but the intellectual virtues through teaching. This seems straightforward in the cases of art and science. If you want to learn the art of writing, you visit the writing assistant, or read a style manual, or best of all, read and emulate an excellent writer. If you want to learn the science of physics, then you take a physics class, or do experiments on your own, or read a textbook.’

“‘I can do the next one,’ my student broke in excitedly. ‘If you want to learn prudence, then you hang out with prudent people, or read histories about prudent people, if you can’t find any of them around.’

“‘Aristotle says as much in the *Ethics*,’ I agreed, after swallowing the last of my coffee. ‘But tell me this. How do we learn intellect? And I’m not thinking now of the ultimates in the sense of first principles, like the principle of non-contradiction – which is discussed in the *Metaphysics*. How do we learn the ultimate particulars, and get better at knowing them, so as to know better that we’re using them correctly in the judgments made by art, science, and prudence?’

“The student’s expression, which had been open and hopeful since we began talking about Aristotle, began to cloud over. After a pause, she said quietly, ‘I bet you’re going to tell me that the answer is’ – and she said the last word with the same accent – ‘Literature.’

“‘Why not?’ I pressed on. ‘We all probably get our first instruction in the ultimate particulars from the opinions of the people around us – this is a human being, that one is a hero, this one is a valet – but the particulars that we learn this way must be pretty narrow. And we can broaden them by reading history, sure, but the historian is expected to keep to what did happen. Only the poet in Aristotle’s sense can instead write about what could happen, or must have

happened. The poet can purify events so that every detail reflects the philosophic truth; he can write about the rare, extreme cases; and he can supply the internal details that no one has access to, but that must have happened – like the speeches in Thucydides. And by doing all this he can improve our intellects by enriching our sense of the ultimate particulars, to the benefit of all the other intellectual virtues. Maybe this is what people mean when they say – I mean no one says it now, but they’ll probably say it someday – that reading novels makes us more empathetic. Not just that novels make us better disposed toward others, though they can do that, but that they give us a richer sense of others’ inner lives, and make us more nuanced in our judgments about them. And maybe this is why Aristotle says that wisdom is a combination of science and intellect. It’s a combination of philosophy proper and literature.’

“I trailed off, and the student rewarded me with some brief, sardonic applause. ‘Not bad, Mr. Director. I won’t even hold it against you that you mostly talked about what Aristotle thinks. That’s the more dialectical way, isn’t it – to make use of what your opponent acknowledges? But there’s one problem you haven’t addressed, one question that you won’t be able to answer.’

This was the last line on the last page, and there were no more pages to be found. I kicked every other drawer in my desk, to no avail. Then, noting the lateness of the hour, I snatched up the pages that I did have, and went down, out of the cool dark cave of my office, into the hot Maryland sun.

There will be three Graduate Institute-hosted study groups this term: one on Homer’s *Iliad*, one on Schopenhauer’s *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* and *The World as Will and Representation*, and one on Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*. Schedules and meeting places for these groups will be circulated by email soon. Let me encourage you all to

attend the Dean's Lecture tomorrow night, on another work of literature, titled "Moments in Time: Reflections on Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*," at 8:00 in the FSK Auditorium. And let me also invite you all to take part in the refreshments provided at the back of the Great Hall, before going to class.

The fall 2014 term of the Graduate Institute is now in session. *Convocatum est*.

Jeff J.S. Black
Annapolis, Maryland
2 August 2014
Delivered on 21 August 2014

Note

For those philosophic souls who want to investigate what itchy means, and need to look up what a backside is, I offer the following guidance. For the meaning of going down and blushing, see Books 1 and 7 of Plato's *Republic*. Aristotle makes his claims about poetry and history at the beginning of Chapter 9 of his *Poetics*. For beautiful Nireus, see *Iliad* Book 2, lines 671-675. The honey and wormwood image is found in *On the Nature of Things*, Book 1, lines 934-948, and Book 4, lines 10-25. The full title of Rousseau's *Julie* is *Julie, or the New Héloïse, Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*. "Of pedantry" is the twenty-fifth essay in Book 1 of Montaigne's *Essays*. The discussion of art, science, prudence, wisdom and intellect may be found chiefly in Chapters 3 through 8 of Book 6 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle discusses the principle of non-contradiction in his *Metaphysics*, in Book 4, Chapters 3 through 8, and Book 11, Chapters 5 and 6. Finally, there is a coffee shop on Maryland Avenue. I first met my future wife there, and later her son, to both of whom I dedicate this address.