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The Pages of the Master

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JMJ

Dr. Andrew Moran

The Pages of the Master

Provost Sanford, Deans Hicks and Whapham, Associate Deans Andrews and Bell, Colleagues,
and Gentle Readers of the University of Dallas Class of 2018,

Let us celebrate today those to whom belongs the glory. The authors think it theirs. They—ink-stained, bleary-eyed, hunched over, pasty-faced—can only imagine others returning to Ithaca or founding Rome or poking spears into bladders, and so, *ressentiment*-laden, they compensate for their dull lives by droning on about literary immortality, about abiding fame through black ink shining bright. But the words of the poets, historians, and philosophers are just air, and the deeds of the heroes, kings, and generals fall into oblivion, without you, the gentle readers, and not-so-gentle readers, who have made it through so many of the books, the very long books, at the core of the Western intellectual tradition. Today, on the occasion of convocation, the glory, the *kleos*, is yours. Yours is a class of heroic readers, as I learned my first day with you, August 23rd, 2015, while on a Rome walking tour with student group GR through HO. Most of that group quickly figured out that, as it was a lovely day to take in the scenery, it was best to keep a distance of 15 yards or so from the professor suffering from the embarrassing condition Academic Tourette's, the compulsion to share factoids from textbooks, encyclopedias, and wikipedia. But two students for two hours marched with me stride for stride, the vivacious young woman listening to every word, the young man afflicted with an even worse case of Academic Tourette's than I have. I quickly realized that he knew more about republican and imperial Rome than I do and might call me out on one of the charming, made up anecdotes that I

can usually get away with. For the rest of the semester, on buses, the ferry to Greece, in hotel lobbies, I repeatedly saw those two reading for pleasure, reading books not for class. And yet they were at the center of social life. The young man, for example, maybe his imagination enlarged by his study of the deeds of the noble Romans, was one of the first, in Nafplion, of the forty, forty-five, fifty, to conceive that a convenience store, selling 18 oz. cans of Mythos, Alpha, and Fix—for one euro! (awesome)—because of the two plastic tables in front of it and the four plastic chairs, might ... possibly ... technically ... count as “a licensed establishment.”

In the spring came more heroic readers. Two in the sciences had especially keen eyes in class, and so I was delighted to see their names on my roster this January, as well as those of the Business, French, German, and Classics majors, and the English majors, all just wanting to read more Shakespeare. That spring too there was another heroic reader, an omnivorous one, so intent on doing justice to Caliban in a dramatic reading, that in the Aula Minore, at 8am, he left his classmates and me *paralyzed with fear* as we wondered at what point he would stop taking off his clothes.

I see a connection between bold personalities, keen eyes, vivacious faces, fervent talkers and the habit of reading. It may seem trite to turn a convocation address into a literacy campaign, but I want to reflect on reading, the reading you’ve done and the reading I hope you’ll do. While you’ve done a lot of reading these four years, UD is not the only demanding college of course, and we’re not unique in having students read so many of the great works of the Western intellectual tradition. But the curriculum, the structuring of the reading, is distinct, is excellent, in how it has had you read, and that curriculum has likely affected you. We spend more time on individual great books than do other Great Booksish schools, which encourages not just cultural literacy but the development of a philosophic disposition as there is the opportunity to puzzle

over problems and go beyond the obvious. In particular, half a semester spent freshman year on *The Republic* encourages that disposition. That very difficult thing, to acquire some detachment from the spirit of the age, to be able to identify slogans, catch-words, cant, ideology for what they are, is a little bit easier if one's introduction to philosophy is through Socrates' constant questioning of conventional thought. Likewise, freshman year a distinct character is given to the imagination. Rather than a grab-bag of books, or even the organization of books according to period, the Lit. Trad. sequence moves through genres, with almost the whole of freshman year devoted to the epic, which means the contemplation of the heroic and of the heroic *within the whole*. The different heroes stay with one—manslaughtering, fated, shining Achilles; Odysseus of the many ways; pious Aeneas; the Pilgrim on his way to the glory of God; Adam never to forget sin and grace—and these various images, especially in conjunction with a historical education, a knowledge of the best that has been done and said, open up the possibilities, make one aware that there is the opportunity for all sorts of great achievements. The world is suddenly bigger. The epic presents the hero within the big world, the big cosmos, stretching from Hades to Mount Olympus, from Hell to Heaven, but not as an autonomous individual lost within the immensity. Rather, he is part of some community, be it domestic, military, political, and because of his attendant obligations he must discern the right relationship between the parts of his life and the whole order of things.

Here is what strikes me as most remarkable, maybe most problematic, about a University of Dallas education, a sense of the parts as within a whole and from that a desire for coherence. The reading of the epic is only part of this. The first philosophy course moves from the Greeks onward, from *The Republic* to St. Thomas, and so too the second, from *The Symposium* to Descartes and Nietzsche, and the third, *The Metaphysics* to Heidegger, and so students keep

looping back but from new perspectives, with new terms and questions, but always the same search for understanding, through ethics, philosophical anthropology, metaphysics ... and epic ... and tragedy, and comedy, and history, and economics, and the sciences, and politics, through all the chief modes by which we know. All are part of “the circle of knowledge,” to use John Cardinal Newman’s phrase in the book that inspired UD’s founders, *The Idea of a University*. Newman writes,

I have said that all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator. Hence it is that the [disciplines], into which our knowledge may be said to be cast, have multiplied bearings one on another, and an internal sympathy, and admit, or rather demand, comparison and adjustment. They complete, correct, balance each other. *Our curriculum* presupposes that the disciplines complete, correct, balance each other, and are all parts of an interconnected whole. Now there may be something terribly retrograde and naïve about this presupposition. It may give to a UD phenomenologist or Business major or Chemistry major a sensibility as pre-modern as that of a Thomistic Theology major. But oh what those medievals made! Think of a Gothic cathedral, Notre Dame or Chartres, and think about how the artisans have not just sculpted, glazed, and painted the Trinity, the Crucifixion, the Virgin, the apostles, martyrs, and saints, but also the grinning devils and the shrieking damned, as well as geometric shapes, the signs of the zodiac, the season cycle, and the trades by which men earn their daily bread. The builders of the cathedrals in representing everything, everything, were animated by the same belief that inspired Dante, that the glory of the One who moves all things permeates all creation, which Dante then in *his book*—which treats everything: theology, ethics, politics, psychology, physics, poetry, chemistry, metaphysics, biology—represents through the

metaphor of *a book*. In the Empyrean the Pilgrim sees in the Trinity all the scattered pages of the universe bound by love into a single volume. The core curriculum of the University of Dallas is not quite so comprehensive. All attempts at such representation will prove insufficient; every curriculum is missing pages. But it's the attempt at coherence that's so important, the blessed rage for curricular order. The idea of order in Irving, Texas, the assumption that there is a circle, maybe has changed forever your intellects and your imaginations.

And now you must leave. Go off into the big cosmos to do big things, maybe not always big as the world sees it, but you can have a bigger perspective than it does. The cosmos may not pay all that well at first, but you're not going to starve, and ultimately you'll do well for yourselves. Ahead of you is the opportunity to make, make a career for yourselves, make new friends, make vows and have a family, take vows and serve God, both glorious ways of making your way in the world. These first leaner years ahead of you, from one perspective the years of uncertainty, from another are the years of discovery, when you can open the pages of a new volume. But remember, some very good stories begin with the philosophical hero going down to the sketchy part of town, or with a near shipwreck, or in a dark wood. There is the inevitable sadness of your friends being scattered to the four winds, and the loss of the sociability of this campus may be at first the greatest hardship you'll face. The age in which you are first taking on adult responsibilities has, like all ages, its own particular weaknesses and pitfalls. One comes across a pervasive anxiety, a culture-destroying obsession with security and liability, and an exaggerated notion of human frailty which may undermine the confidence needed to accomplish great things. There's growing evidence that the new technologies are helping cause the increase in anxiety disorders in young people, and certainly they are making all of us more scattered in our minds. It seems to me too that many today are addicted to their daily injection of cloying

sentiment, as most every TV newscast offers the fix of someone tearing up for the camera while the reporter nods soulfully. Loneliness, anxiety, maudlin sentimentality can make hearts and minds small. Even those worthwhile responsibilities ahead, even blessed ones which can give strength, professional and family life, can be so demanding as to wear one down so that life becomes just one damn thing after another. The periods of weariness are inevitable, even in the best lives, especially those noble lives devoted to great duties. Always there is the danger of routine and weariness making the world small, which condition may be more painful for you than for others because your education on this small campus has likely awakened a sense that the world is not supposed to be small, that in a big universe one is supposed to do big things.

One ought not acquiesce to weariness and smallness without summoning Achillean ferocity and Odyssean circumspection. Let me suggest that even for the majority of you who have the good sense to steer clear of graduate school in the humanities, you consider how reading books for pleasure may be a part of your adult life, and so too those interested in graduate study and maybe called to teaching, whose workload may reduce reading to just a professional obligation. I am not trying to hound you into taking *Paradise Lost* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* to the beach with you this summer. But I am saying that in an increasingly post-literate age those who've had a bookish education such as you've had may have an advantage if they carve out time in their lives—not easy to do—to remain a bit bookish. Text messages, scores of daily e-mails, and the crawl at the bottom of the screen inevitably make for a scattered and anxious age, which none of us can fully escape, but the book allows for recollection, in the older sense of calmness of mind, in the literal sense of gathering things together again, bringing the parts into a greater whole. Be it returning with older eyes to the books that gave delight to one's youth, or discovering new authors, one's books can keep the

world interesting, keep before one's eyes that the created order and human works, deeds, and personality, are large things. For the large things now ahead of you, your heroic making, here may be inspiration. One short book to return to some day for inspiration, *The Tempest*, features the most bookish hero in the literary tradition. Prospero tells his daughter how he loved his books too much, how he neglected his dukedom because "my library / Was dukedom large enough." He forever honors the good Gonzalo because "knowing I loved my books, he furnished me / From mine own library with volumes that / I prize above my dukedom." Caliban tells Stephano, "possess his books, for without them / He's but a sot ... Burn but his books." When teaching Lit. Trad. III, I love to point out that the magician is a storyteller, a director, an educator, a politician, a scientist, a theologian, a psychologist, a philosopher, maybe even an entrepreneur, that we can find represented most all of the arts we study here in his magic. The magician makes wonders and makes them from his books, though the happy ending takes place not in his library, not in his cell, but in the magic circle inside which, out of friendship, he calls others.

At the beginning of your ten year reunion there will not be an eleven question reading quiz on *The Tempest*. Instead, then or whenever we meet, maybe we'll talk about books but definitely about your epic adventures and about all the glorious things going on at UD, which I hope you stay close to as alumni and through being in touch with professors and staff; we enjoy very much hearing from former students. I look forward to reminiscing with bold personalities, keen eyes, vivacious faces, and fervent talkers, especially remembering your hospitality, the great meals and forno parties to which I've been invited, the welcome I received in Rome and in Irving, by youth who seemed to have had a careful training in the service of generosity, as if they were the pages of the Master. Thank you and God bless you.