Convocation Address – May 5, 2016
Church of the Incarnation, University of Dallas
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FULL FADOM

Full fadom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.1

I am deeply honored that you have asked me to present your convocation address today. Your giving me this opportunity to help send you off on behalf of Constantin College and the University feels like another warm embrace by this University, which you all of course may represent as well as I. And I ask your indulgence as I use the address partly to exorcise myself, I hope, of a phrase that has come to seem increasingly unfit.

When I arrived at UD nearly nine years ago, I sometimes acknowledged that I felt like “a square peg in a round hole.” Like many professors, I had been a well-rounded, reliably competent and approved-of, adventurous but all-in-all fairly risk-adverse youth; I liked getting to seem, as an adult, a bit mischievous and edgy. In some circles, even minimal angularity may count for a kind of street cred. In the decade of my birth, “square” was a disrespectful epithet for a cultural conservative. At UD, my non-die-hard squareness is almost the opposite and has much to do with my being socially liberal and religiously nondescript, a man of raw, mostly earth-bound and sounded faith.

But the appeal of the square-round distinction certainly also derives, most particularly, from my having read at a formative age Edwin Abbott’s Flatland, which answered my early hunger for the sublime more satisfactorily than the huge ice cream sundae my minister once served—I kid you not—for Communion.

The sublime is the avant garde of aesthetics, which has to do with feeling as an anesthetic has to do with feeling’s opposite, making numb. Whereas beauty comforts, the sublime unsettles. It is the departure from ditto at the heart of any tradition that evolves. It often involves appreciating what transcends experiential finitude, the awe one feels when awakened to intimations of something beyond one’s ken.

I imagine that most of you here today in this Church of the Incarnation were introduced to the sublime under the rubric of religion. A parent or pastoral guide acquainted you with the notion of God and, I hope, helped you not to reconcile this notion too readily with what you knew you knew. Most of the souls in this space were fostered to respect the miraculous un-understandability of there having been, roughly 2000 years ago, a boy born to a human mother, laid among hay in a manger, an accommodation foreshadowing the very idea of Eucharist, that some aspect of Him was meant to be mange, an infant whose blood, in the

words of Wallace Stevens, “commingling, virginal, / With heaven, brought such requital to desire / The very hinds”—that is, the shepherds near Bethlehem—“discerned it, in a star.”

At nine or ten, I discerned the requital of my desire in a Square. “I call our world Flatland, not because we call it so, but to make its nature clearer to you, my happy readers, who are privileged to live in Space”—so begins Abbott’s “Romance of Many Dimensions,” first published in 1884. A sphere passing through Flatland’s plane inducts the narrating Square into a faith in the third dimension by working wonders. He has for example as ready access to the insides as to the outsides of closed shapes. Sphere can remove Square’s accounting documents from the inside of his rectangular “safe”; he may and does touch Square’s inner organs without piercing his linear skin. They discuss that to see into volumetric Space, Square would have to have an eye on what the Sphere calls his “side” and the Square considers to be in-side him. (“An eye in my stomach!” the Square guffaws; “Your Lordship jests.” I’ll come back to that image later, slyly.) Eventually, Sphere lifts Square out of Flatland’s plane, allowing him also to look down into what had earlier seemed a sufficient, insuperable world, and thereby converts Square to an apostle doomed to difficulties spreading the good news of an Up that is not merely North.

Sharing this synopsis really is indulgent because I won’t now exfoliate an elegant analogy from it. I suppose my point at this point is that the man whom you have respected as your professor is a weird dude who maybe should have stuck it out as a math major. For the time being, please simply accept credit for accommodating my difference, and without evangelizing. You—students, colleagues—have welcomed me and demonstrated that I fit here—and quite snugly, no less.

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Of course, even as I continued to think of my local otherness in such geometric terms, I was continuing my education in that arguably most efficient and effective way: by teaching. And it has been with especial zeal that I have taught Dante. My next move will be to recommend that, even if you never get around to picking up Flatland, you return to the Commedia throughout your life. It is one of the wisest works of art ever made. I love it through and through. Given my geometric proclivities, however, I am especially enamored of that gorgeous metaphysical conceit at the end of its hundredth canto, in which, before the Pilgrim’s eyes, a sublime, alienatingly inhuman circle of light takes on the image of our likeness—“nostra effigie”—and thus squares the transcendent Logos with something like the foursquare humanism of Euclid’s rational logic. I shouldn’t say “thus.” For Dante struggles to make the two convene in his mind’s eye, and the very grammar of the poet’s quattuor analogy, neologism, and mismatched pronouns articulates its seemingly insuperable resistance to sense:

Like the geometer who fully applies himself to square the circle and, for all his thought, cannot discover the principle he lacks, such was I at that strange new sight.

4 Abbott, Flatland, 110.
5 Par. 33.131. Throughout Euclid’s Elements, “λόγος” means ratio.
Veder voleva come si convenne
l’image al cerchio e come vi s’indovava;

I tried to see how the image fit the circle
and how it found its where in it [or: how You (Christ) in-whered it];

but my wings had not sufficed for that. . .

Mathematically there is no principle whereby the circle may be squared, though in Dante’s day geometers continued to seek better and better approximations. Since the late nineteenth century—two years prior to the publication of Flatland, in fact—it has been proved impossible to construct with compass and straightedge a square that has exactly the same area as any given circle. Pi is transcendental, not to be precisely represented as a fraction or root of an algebraic equation. Its non-repeating decimal squirms between every rational lattice’s attempt to demark it.

[B]ut my wings had not sufficed for that
had not my mind been struck by a bolt
of lightning that granted what I asked.

So Christ, in granting such a reconciliation is not bending something as human-scaled as the Mosaic Law of Leviticus; if Dante’s analogy holds, He is bending the secular, universal law of mathematics. As the Pilgrim’s “desire and will” are moved, I, too, as I read, am carried out of my usual orbits and taken into the heavens’ harmonic circling “by / the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

The Commedia is so much more linguistically complex and psychologically informing than Flatland that it almost totally eclipses my former affection.

I could adduce many examples of writers wink-winking at this miraculous reconciliation of incommensurables: from John Donne’s cartographic “round world’s imagined corners” and the saucy aubade in which he taunts the rising sun, “This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere,” to Milton’s “mysteriously . . . meant” stairs that run “sometimes / Viewless” between the apparent “Quadrature” of his Heaven and the compass-created world pendant from near its gate, to those confections in Willy Wonka’s factory known as “SQUARE CANDIES THAT LOOK ROUND” by virtue of having eyes that follow the movements of their would-be eaters.

And when, on graduation day, you doff your mortarboard to repin your hair, or to toss the thing blithely in celebration, note that even there is figured our chronic quest to square the circle—to secure flat hat on orbicular noggin.

Let us not overlook, however, that Dante’s receptivity to the stunning, granted insight—his capacity to take it in, recognize its import, and commute into human language as much of the miraculous experience as he can—has been conditioned by every stage of his journey.

7 Par., trans. Hollander 33.139-4.
One understands when his mind is struck that he, before, had been a soul so bewildered that he didn’t recognize the guidance of this same face as it shone through the beauty of Beatrice’s. Had he not labored to realign his will and attuned his intellect over the preceding canto cantì, Dante could not have sustained that fulgore of grace any more than Semele sustained Zeus’s lightning in the lead-up to Euripides’ Bacchae, to which Dante alludes in the Sphere of Saturn.\(^{10}\) As Beatrice asserts toward the end of her speaking part in the poem:

\[
\text{I would not have you doubt, but have you know surely that there is merit in receiving grace, measured by the longing to receive it.}^{11}
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This occasions my second pointed request: Take credit for the work you have done and do to put yourself in the path of whatever you esteem as grace if only to habituate yourself to looking and longing for more of it. I have thanked you not so much for accommodating me despite my differences but for embracing my differences, and I encourage you now also to warmly embrace the less well-rounded person you were when you first entered the University of Dallas. Do that as a way of measuring what you must have longed for in the interim.

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Now: from mental gymnastics to actual movement. I don’t wish to turn this event into an ecclesiastical game of Twister or anything, but when I pause, please take a few moments to stand and reach as far as you can to both sides and thus, even as your blood flows more vigorously through your limbs again, take your bodily measure. To keep balanced, you might want to splay your legs like Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, standing both squared and circled—but, please, remained robed—and then be seated. [Pause.] That breadth is about how shallowly your body may some day be buried in our shared Earth’s mantle. Full fathom one thy body lies when it’s six feet under. Imagine how much farther and deeper the reasoning imagination may go, and reflect on the circuit, the vast orbit, of your compassion should you continue to exercise imagination empathically.

Many of you, I hope, will recall Prospero’s adieu-bidding plea to the audience at the end of The Tempest that their hands not only clap his ship back to the Italian mainland but might also be brought together in prayer for his salvation on the safe shore of a later crossing. Certainly the Spring Romers of 2014 should recall the role of that applause-and-prayer conceit in my convocational dubbing of their class as the Hands-On class. I want now to extend beyond that conceit and back to a phrase that I have already uttered, borrowing from one of Ariel’s songs to draw the fall and spring Romers and those who harbored in Irving within a single circle—to rechristen the lot of you, as it were, with a common name. And, no, not by coopting you all with that lamest of names, the “Common class.” No worries, Fall Romers, I will not hereby dilute the undilutable. Instead, I turn to Shakespeare by way of the recent Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who in the short, seldom anthologized poem “Polder” recalls, I expect to his wife Marie:

I hooped you with my arms

\(^{10}\) Par. 21.5-12.

\(^{11}\) Par., trans. Mandelbaum 29.64-66.
and remembered that what could be contained
inside this caliper embrace

the Dutch called *bosom,* and *fathom*
what the extended arms took in.¹²

So to fathom is to take a human-scaled measure of one’s world and a bosom is what one finds there by more intimately conforming to it. Etymological dictionaries indicate, however, that the rectilinear sense of *fathom* as a measure of length or depth has become dominant only in the four centuries since Shakespeare’s death. In his day and earlier, both as noun and verb, the word *fathom*—or, as Ariel sings it, *fathom*—referred as readily to rounded embrace as to some two-yard stretch. *Bosom* embraces only the first sense, but *fathom* fathoms both.

One may come to terms with radical otherness more readily with words and feelings than geometrically with rulers and compasses—in large part because with the former there is opportunity for give on both sides. Reconciling with feeling in one word two senses, two essences—of the rigidly linear and forgivingly flexed, of quantity and quality, of judgmental gradings and merciful grace—I dub the lot of you graduating in this most foursquare year, the sixteenth of our still newly un-spiraling millennium—I dub you collectively the Full Fathom class.

With this blessing of sorts comes an obligation. For to live up to your new name, you will have to do yet more of, and more broadly, what I say you have done with me so well already. I ask you to continue to circle squares and square circles. But most importantly I ask you to remain cognizant of their difference, to feel the work of accommodation and of reshaping push-back.

For surely it is a shame to domesticate as familiarly beautiful what might otherwise be esteemed and learned from as the sublime. And surely some great opportunity is lost when one’s intellectual agility too swiftly clears the low hurdle of likening. While comforts come with familiarity, so, too, do presumptions. Premature satiety—that for which Dante’s Cato on the shore of Purgatory rebukes the “new-come company” and the Pilgrim and Virgil as they linger, rapt by Casella’s tuneful song.¹³ In a sense, I am issuing a warning even to you about those ice-cream Communiions. When Keats’s urn seems to say, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—[let’s leave it at that],” I encourage you to stop listening; ask yourself why you read all those dang books then, and refocus on how the *Cold Pastoral*’s “silent form . . . dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity” such that we must struggle a bit to regain secure purchase on reason’s shore.¹⁴

As Prospero observes his daughter and the Neapolitan prince falling in love at first sight, he says in aside: “but this swift business / I must uneasy make, lest too light winning / Make the prize light.”¹⁵ I say to you, as you go about your business, do not, in the cause of swiftness, make easy what is not. To do so is the way of Antonio. That usurper teases the aged counselor Gonzalo for too easily making a second Carthage on the site of Tunis, but he then shows himself to be far too easy on himself with respect to matters of conscience, that

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¹³ *Purg.* trans. Mandelbaum 2.130.
¹⁵ *Temp.* 1.2.451-53.
“deity in [the] bosom,” that inside eye—in one’s instinctive gut or stomach, as it were—giving on to an otherwise unseen, moral dimension.¹⁶

My concluding plea is this: I ask that in the broader, often less comforting world, you heed with respect those with whom you seem not to be congruent, those with whom you seem to disagree, even profoundly—that is, hear out and offer answers to your adversaries. Who in this regione disimilitudinis, this land of profoundly partisan ideological unlikelihood, is better equipped to bridge divides, to sculpt and graft connective tissue, to find a depth of field or fine-tune a frequency for articulation and exchange than you? Who better than you may look upon dark-woods Dante with the eyes of a blessed Beatrice or mollify with honors the ancient-yet-infantile Furies as wise Athena did? Fear not to be critical. Beatrice makes Dante cry before he enters the Lethe so that even the memory of wrongs may be washed clean. Athena, throwing her vote for the elective bonds of marriage and civic discourse, prompts the Furies to writhe and threaten before taking them into her city’s embrace.

Please recognize that even your neighbor, your sibling, your parent, your beloved, your child is in many ways a stranger. Do not encircle that unknown strangeness so swiftly that you fail to feel your own flexing. For that flexing is affection. If you reach around it too nimbly, accommodating the sublime into the beautiful automatically, you will not feel it. And not to feel affection is a dilute and calciferous mode of self-protection—an oyster’s doings, a drowning. Do not choose the way of pearl and coral. Give those you encounter outside our bubble the full-fathom treatment. Take their measure and your own measure among them. Then embrace what you have come to know and those from whose beyondness you have grown. Be vulnerable to the promise of sea-change into something truly rich and truly strange.

¹⁶ Temp. 2.1.90, 278.