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From Chiron to Charon: Crossing over to the Dark Side*

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ELECTION TO THE PRESIDENCY OF THE SOCIETY FOR CLASSICAL STUDIES WAS BOTH A great honor for me and quite a surprise. This year in fact held a number of surprises, stemming not so much from within the SCS as from the changing cultural context in which we find ourselves and public perceptions—or misperceptions—about Classics. The SCS, like other scholarly associations, exists primarily to serve the needs of our members. Increasingly, it seems, one of those needs is for a public voice, to speak on behalf of and even to advocate for our profession. It was during the tenure of my predecessor, Roger Bagnall, that the Society first developed a policy on public statements. And, as this year developed, we issued several public statements, some of them in concert with colleagues in other learned societies. Some issues of concern to us as scholars seem, unfortunately, to be perennials—such as threatened defunding of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). But little could I have imagined that I would issue a presidential letter in response to one of our members receiving death threats for publishing an article on the polychrome nature of classical sculpture. Nor did I anticipate the threat to

*I want to express my deep thanks to the members of the Society for electing me to the role of President. This has been an especially meaningful honor for me. I also want to call out my colleagues, who have been terrific sources of support this year: Helen Cullyer, our fabulous new Executive Director, and Roger Bagnall and Joe Farrell as, respectively, past president and incoming president. They—and others—have been tremendously helpful in offering wise counsel during a year that, I must say, was not exactly what I anticipated. This is a very lightly revised version of the presidential address as it was delivered.

the very existence of advanced study in our disciplines by a proposal to tax graduate student stipends.

These are not the kinds of issues that my own graduate training prepared me for. But they are quite familiar kinds of issues to a college president. And that brings me back to the honor of being elected president of this Society. I was completely surprised when the Nominating Committee contacted me. And even more shocked upon learning that I had been elected. The reason for my reactions—as you will guess—is related to the topic of this address.

We all know what the phrase, “crossing over to the dark side” means in the context of the academy. And, yes, when I told a colleague that I was leaving Brown to become assistant to the president of Princeton, he did immediately offer me condolences, since I’d obviously “crossed over to the dark side.” (This was not—I hasten to add—one of my colleagues in the Classics department.)

But the pattern is clear. One day you’re a faculty member, valued for your knowledge and teaching—perhaps even for a bit of wisdom. You’re a Chiron. But the next day, should you accept a role in managing and guiding an academic institution, you’re suddenly transformed. Like an unsavory denizen of the underworld, plying his necessary but distasteful work: you’re a Charon. For thirteen years, I was a full-time faculty member. But I have been an academic administrator for the last twenty-seven years, eleven of them as a college president. Hence my surprise in being elected to leadership of the SCS. In fact, I consulted the Oracle (at least, the Oracle on SCS and APA history), Ward Briggs, and Ward informed me that only two college presidents previously served as presidents of the APA: Arthur Stanley Pease in 1939 and, before him, Asahel Clark Kendrick in 1872. It’s been a while.

And that unusual collocation—of college presidency and the presidency of this society—means that this address may be a little unconventional. I am not offering, for example, the fruits of my latest research, because my latest research and writing hasn’t been on Vergil or Lucan or Tacitus. It’s been on innovation in liberal arts colleges. Instead, the presidency of the SCS has prompted me to reflect more on this strange, “under-worldly” role of being an administrator in academe. One of the better books on the topic is the memoir by William Chase entitled, *100 Semesters: My Adventures as Student, Professor, and University President, and What I Learned Along the Way*. Chase was an English professor at Stanford, who became president, first, of Wesleyan University and then of Emory. It’s no surprise that the chapter in which he describes first being tapped to become an associate dean at Stanford is entitled, “Why Join the Administration?” After all, he notes, “the work is reputed to be at once tedious and labor-intensive.” “And yet.” Chase continues: “Professors,

some of them, do become administrators and some of them for reasons not entirely embarrassing.”¹

My own experience is also mirrored in Chace’s rumination that, “Almost everyone who starts this process experiences anguish about leaving aside, even if temporarily, the work in the field in which they were trained. No truly good administrator ever departs from his or her discipline without some regret.”² In my case, this was certainly true. I actually called my dissertation director, Fred Ahl, before making my decision. I felt very deeply that if, indeed, I “crossed over,” I would be letting him down, letting the field down. I assure you this did not come from some arrogant—and unwarranted—sense of the contribution I might make to classical scholarship. Instead, I think my hesitation came from a sense of deep respect and gratitude for my teachers. They had illumined new worlds for me, and I felt a kind of humble obligation to them, to our discipline. Wasn’t it incumbent on me to carry the torch further? What I couldn’t know then is that there are many ways of carrying that torch, that teaching occurs in many more contexts than the classroom, and that Classics would always shape who I was and what I did.

When Bob Connor (another classicist/ administrator) became president of the Teagle Foundation, he began to bring people together for what he called, “Convenings.” These were opportunities for Bob to gain perspective on issues in higher education and hear different points of view, to determine where the Foundation might make a valuable contribution. I have never forgotten one of these early “Convenings”—which also occurred early in my administrative career. Bob was interested in the future of the academic disciplines as we know them. I recall there were about twelve or fifteen of us, sitting in a circle in a conference room in New York. We were all deans or provosts; perhaps there was even a president or two. Bob asked each of us in turn to name our academic discipline and then to reflect on whether our training in that discipline was valuable to us in the work we were currently doing. I don’t know what Bob expected or whether those reflections were helpful to him, but they were certainly eye-opening for me. Every one of us in that circle—whether an economist, historian, artist, physicist, *whatever* our field of study—every single one of us spoke up passionately about the way in which our disciplines informed our thinking and our administrative work every day. As a classicist, of course I feel the same way. The study of Classics is so wide-ranging—encompassing the fields of art, history, literature, philosophy, and more; in geographical areas stretching from Asia to Britain; over a time

¹ Chace 2006: 177.

² Chace 2006: 178.

period of more than a thousand years—that I believe a classical education can offer a virtually unparalleled intellectual flexibility and capaciousness of experience. As classicists, we are asked, on the one hand, to reconstruct from fragments and, on the other hand, to comprehend an entire, expansive, multi-cultural, multi-lingual society. *Humani nihil a me alienum...* Yet the stereotype of our philological profession is quite different. It's captured well in a few lines of William Butler Yeats' poem, "The Scholars":

*Bald heads forgetful of their sins,
Old, learned, respectable bald heads...
All shuffle there; all cough in ink;
All wear the carpet with their shoes;*³

Such "old, learned, respectable bald heads" would hardly seem well-suited to what Yeats called in another place, "management of men," i.e., the administration of institutions. I'm sure many of you are familiar with Bart Giamatti's dismissal of academic administration. He said, "Being president of a university is no way for an adult to make a living."⁴ (Of course, we have to weigh that in light of the fact that Giamatti left the presidency of Yale to become the commissioner of baseball.)

Still...some adults, some of us who are classicists, do choose to serve as administrators. And we find—as did all of those participants in Bob Connor's Convening—that our discipline informs all that we do: as a department chair, a dean, a provost, a president. I cannot speak for others, but as we conclude the gift giving season, I thought it might be of interest to offer some of the specific ways in which Classics has been, for me, a gift in trying to administer with honesty, integrity, and purpose. Even, with luck, a little bit of that wisdom of Chiron.

The first gift is philology, the love of language. I have often thought of etymology as a kind of X-ray or MRI of language—revealing the underlying structure in a way that can render our words more deeply and clearly meaningful. So, the classically trained administrator recognizes that "administer"—far from being about power—is about service, a close cousin to "minus" or "minor," and implying to serve or assist another. "Servant Leadership" may have come into the cultural consciousness with the publication of Robert Greenleaf's popular book of that name in the late '70's, but a classicist knows that the concept was always there in our language itself.⁵

³ From the *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, "The Scholars," 154, lines 1–2, 7–8.

⁴ Giamatti 1988: 17.

⁵ Greenleaf 1977.

Similarly, a classicist remembers that, at its heart, a college (con-lego) is a drawing together of people in a common bond. And that a university (uni-verso) is a turning wholly together in a single unity. This bedrock of the very language we use every day, language that emphasizes our coming together for shared purposes and the wholeness to which our institutions aspire, is a welcome, even necessary, touchstone when tempers fray, departmental conflicts flare, and the myriad different constituencies that make up a university threaten to fragment like a shattered amphora. For a classicist, so far from being “dead” languages, Latin and Greek are a constant, living presence in the words we speak. The “roots” of our contemporary languages are not simply items in a dictionary entry; they are echoes that we hear reverberate powerfully from the ancient civilizations we study to the world in which we live today.

The second gift I would name after philology is the significance of narrative and close reading—perhaps because my particular field of study is literature. One of the first lessons I learned as a new administrator was to seek the whole story. Some of you may remember the radio personality, Paul Harvey, and “the rest of the story.” There’s *always* a “rest of the story.” It’s easy to be captured by the first account you hear, the first scan of the spread sheet, the first proposal submitted. That’s easy, but it’s almost always a mistake. Those of us who are historians know only too well how important it is to dig deeper, to interrogate multiple sources, to collate and compare, even to maintain a healthy skepticism toward our sources. The picture, the narrative which then emerges, may be more complicated, even more conflicting or confusing than we might wish. But it will likely be more true.

Our panelists at the presidential panel spoke about how valuable they have found the skills in reading and writing that their Classics education fostered. Somewhat to my surprise, I discovered that in managing an office or an entire organization, close reading has proven to be an invaluable tool. The nature of our discipline often requires particularly careful reading—slow, because of the inflection of the languages and attentive because of the complexity of the thoughts. Few of us, I would warrant, skim Thucydides or speed-read Statius. The nature of Latin in particular, perhaps (because of its relatively small vocabulary and concomitant elasticity of connotation), attunes the reader to nuance. That kind of attention to nuance, as well as reading carefully between the lines, can be astonishingly helpful in considering a resume, an annual report, a prospectus, even a grievance.

I have to say, unfortunately, that I have found this practice of close reading particularly useful in detecting falsehood. It’s not uncommon for a colleague to ask me, when we’ve gotten to the bottom of some issue where things just didn’t jibe: “How were you able to figure that out?” Well, I’m not exactly

Sherlock Holmes. The answer is actually: I study literature. The practice of literary criticism brings together attentive reading and pattern recognition in the service of meaning-making. For the classicist, there is also always the need as well to recognize and account for the gaps. Not only in texts which are truly fragmentary like the lyrics of Sappho, but in fact for all of our texts, to the extent that we will never be able to hear the spoken language and, thereby, to understand how our authors are repeating, responding to, revising, or distorting it. In a sense, we read our texts through a scrim that time has interposed; sharpening our detective skills is a necessary skill. And one that proves very valuable to an administrator.

In addition to philology and narrative, the absolutely indispensable third gift of Classics to an administrator is a sense of the *longue durée*. I think most of us, by the nature of what we study—the simple fact of our texts, artifacts, and sites having existed for thousands of years—almost imperceptibly acquire a tendency to think *sub specie aeternitatis*: in the crazy quilt of meetings, memos, and crises *du jour* that forms the texture of administrative life, when the local TV news crew is headed to your campus, when a furious parent is on the phone, the chilled water plant has just shut down, and a faculty member's credentials turn out to be false, being able to view the cosmos *sub specie aeternitatis* is a beautiful and also extremely useful thing. Without it, the danger of being consumed by the tyranny of the immediate is very real. To be able to step back and, for example, contemplate the simplicity, serenity, and longevity of a Cycladic figure is to re-order the world in a saner and healthier way.

So those three are the largest, most over-arching gifts that, in my experience, Classics offers to an administrator: the love of language, an appreciation for narrative, and a sense of the *longue durée*. But there are countless other ways in which particular texts, characters, and myths inform my day-to-day work. Of course, some of you may think that, for the work of administration, the most relevant myth would be that of Hercules cleaning the Augean stables. And, yes, there are days like that.

But there are other narratives and characters that figure more prominently—and more often—in my thoughts. Of course, there is Socrates, with his multiple and ironic messages for us. For anyone in a position of power (real or perceived), the limitations of our own knowledge must be prominent. Perhaps it's not that we know nothing, but we certainly don't know enough. And yet, that "not enough" is all we have. As administrators, we have to act on that regrettably partial knowledge.

One of the most difficult aspects of the transition from the professoriate, in my view, is what Chace characterized as moving "from reflection to action." There is a degree of luxury in being able to read just a few more bibliographical

items, take just a few more weeks to write, run your manuscript by just a few more colleagues. In the presidential office, that luxury rarely exists. You must act, and you will virtually always be acting on imperfect, incomplete knowledge. The desire to amass more and better understanding—widely known as “analysis paralysis”—is disastrous for an administrator. So you must act. But, as with Socrates, your acts (however well-intentioned) may lead... well, if not exactly to hemlock, at least to hostility. Lincoln was certainly right about the impossibility of “pleasing all of the people all of the time.” Sometimes even the goal of pleasing *some* of the people *some* of the time seems beyond your grasp.

And if (or when) your decisions do meet with disagreement or even anger, the honest administrator will also be asking him- or herself, “Was that the right choice? Did I do the right thing?” At such times, Phaedra’s plaintive lines from the *Hippolytus* (Eur. *Hipp.* 428–30) come to mind: “Those who act badly are brought to light, sooner or later. Time holds up a mirror, as if to a young girl. May I never be seen among them.”

When you assume a leadership role, at any level, the choices are not easy, the answers are not clear. Perhaps no classical text is more timeless and illuminating on the conundrum of governance than Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Is Creon “right” in his confidence that the rule of law must prevail, in his inflexibility and self-righteousness? No. Is Antigone “right” in her equally adamant belief in the primacy of personal relationship, an unwritten law, and the virtue of self-sacrifice? No. No matter how many times we read or see this masterpiece, there is no way to resolve its puzzle. Justice remains contested and elusive.

And so, the final texts I’ll mention, that I find sustaining in the midst of the conflicts and uncertainties that are the constant companions of an administrator, are those of the Stoics. Marcus Aurelius, who saw clearly both the responsibilities and the pitfalls of leadership, and Epictetus, whose *Enchiridion* is rightly named. It should be *in the hands* of every one who seeks to govern institutions, as well as himself. Few lessons are more valuable than to discern those things that are within our power from those that are not. Dissipating our energies on what lies beyond our power is a waste of time. But neglecting to take action when it lies within our power is a waste of our capacities.

And so it happens that many members of this Society have in the past and are now taking on governance and leadership roles. You may have noted that, for the first time this year, we have a meeting of “Classicists in College and University Administration.” Word of mouth alone has gathered at least a dozen attendees. Perhaps they have discovered, as William Chace did, that, “They could exercise their minds and could also make a difference to the world in which they had found themselves.”⁶

⁶ Chace 2006: 182.

Yeats's lines about "The Scholars" are a stereotype—and a not very flattering one. The remote, out-of-touch scholars he describes shuffling across the carpet would be comfortably ensconced in an ivory tower. But the ivory tower—if it ever existed—certainly does not exist today. The world of reflection and that of action are not and cannot be so distinct. Budgets, space allocations, and committee work might once have been seen as concerns only for the administrative "Charons" who had "crossed over." But few faculty members in today's colleges and universities could pronounce themselves free of those concerns. And the larger issues of our society—issues of gender, race and class; immigration and asylum; the meaning and/or limits of free speech; environmental degradation; the violence of war or terrorism which destroys cultural artifacts as well as human victims—all of these issues attend our campuses.

When false understandings of the classical past are brought into service to justify current racism and violence, when death threats to scholars in our field are becoming a not un-common occurrence, when "expert" has become a term of abuse, when universities are viewed by many as detrimental to the nation, then these are times when we cannot be content to "wear the carpet with our shoes." Not all of us will choose academic administration, of course; some of us will write or organize or join a different profession or even run for office. But to build the kind of institutions we hope for, in the kind of democracy we believe in, we must find the path from reflection to action. Perhaps "crossing over" could take on a more positive connotation. Perhaps Chiron and Charon don't have to exist in separate worlds. We need not be grandiose about it. The simple fact is, as William Chace modestly characterized it, this work "seems honorable and useful."⁷

Thank you.

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⁷ See note above.