

THE CAMPAIGN FOR ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE

A COLLEGE
UNIQUE AND
UNIVERSAL

EVA BRANN

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EVA BRANN has been a tutor at St. John's College in Annapolis since 1957, serving as dean from 1990-97. A Jewish immigrant from Berlin, Miss Brann went to Brooklyn College and later earned her master's in classics and a doctoral degree in archaeology at Yale University. At St. John's, she is one of the college's longest-serving and most respected tutors; she has been a mentor to students and tutors alike, and a model for the "examined life" the St. John's Program encourages. Miss Brann has written many books, including *Open Secrets / Inward Prospects: Reflections on World and Soul*; *Homeric Moments: Clues to Delight in Reading the Odyssey and the Iliad*; *The Music of the Republic: Essays on Socrates' Conversations and Plato's Writings*; *The World of the Imagination; What Then, Is Time?*; and *The Ways of Naysaying: No, Not, Nothing, and Nonbeing*. Miss Brann's many honors include her selection as a 2005 recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities' prestigious award, the National Humanities Medal.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID JOHNSON

CONTENTS

-
- I. Unique *and* universal? • PAGE 6
 2. We have one Program; do we have one expertise? • PAGE 13
 3. Is the "how" of our teaching connected to the "what"? • PAGE 16
 4. How do we choose and evaluate our tutors? • PAGE 26
 5. How do we select and monitor our students? What is their life like? • PAGE 31
 6. What are the relations between tutors and students? • PAGE 37
 7. What's wrong with us? • PAGE 40
 8. What kind of institution does our Program require? • PAGE 43
 9. What are the essential features of our Program? • PAGE 48
 10. What is the St. John's Seminar, the center of the Program? • PAGE 52
 11. What do we do in the tutorials? • PAGE 58
 - a. the Language Tutorial
 - b. the Mathematics Tutorial
 - c. the Music Tutorial
 12. How does the laboratory fit in? • PAGE 65
 13. What do we want from and for our students? • PAGE 67
 14. What do we wish for – and see in – our alumni? • PAGE 70
 15. Postscript: A small college and those that love it. • PAGE 72

INTRODUCTION

IN THIS ESSAY, THE COLLEGE’S LONGEST-SERVING TUTOR, EVA BRANN, EXPLAINS WHAT St. John’s College is and why what we do is important. She describes the college as, paradoxically, “unique and universal,” because St. John’s persists with its singular and distinctive academic program while holding to an ideal of education that is meant to apply to all humankind and has, in fact, resonated throughout the world.

In no way is the college perfect, Miss Brann acknowledges. Many aspects of the college, for instance, the breadth and depth of the reading list, represent both our greatest strengths and our most daunting challenges. And yet St. John’s continues to attract international attention, welcomes scores of visitors to its two campuses, and is called upon to offer seminars to many different groups outside our college. What we consider a very simple and natural way to teach – cultivating in an individual the ability to formulate questions and begin the search for answers – intrigues many who come to know St. John’s because of the intellectual honesty of our endeavor. We don’t pretend to be something we’re not. On the other hand, our ways are not easily adapted for just any college or university, nor do we have a “method” that can be defined in pedagogical terms.

In answering fourteen questions that get to the very heart of the college, Miss Brann explores issues that are interesting to both curious observers of the Program –

prospective students, inquiring teachers, and close friends, for example – and alumni. These are the same issues sometimes seized upon by critics of St. John’s: the choices on our reading list, our requirement that tutors teach across the curriculum, and a practice of not including in our classroom discussions the historical, cultural, and social background of the texts we read.

These questions grant us the opportunity to reflect upon the integrity and wholeness of the Program. We believe that the best way to learn is to confront the texts of the greatest minds of our civilization, with nothing between us and the work, not even tutors. Yet, we recognize how important it is to have tutors who bring both intellect and imagination to their discussions, and who understand how to frame a question that will open a world of ideas from a simple passage.

Our books and our program demand more of us than, in truth, we are capable of achieving. It is this stretch in our search for truth, however, that allows us, as a community of learners, tutors helping students, students helping each other, to achieve some measure of greatness. That all of us at the college continue to have faith in this endeavor is perhaps to be celebrated above all.

As we launch a campaign to strengthen and secure St. John’s College, we are thankful for this clear vision of what liberal education is.

CHRISTOPHER B. NELSON (SF70)
President, Annapolis

1. • *UNIQUE and UNIVERSAL?*

HOW CAN A COLLEGE BE ONE OF A KIND IN REALITY AND NONETHELESS A POSSIBLE model for higher education in its conception? – because that is how we at St. John’s do indeed think of ourselves. We are a distinctive community very much shaped by particular people and places, yet we have faith that our way is broadly applicable to other institutions of learning.

All small institutions – colleges particularly – rightly think of themselves as unique. All professors cherish their special qualifications along with their students’ budding individualities, and the far, dry winds of Kansas blow differently over a campus than the close, moist breezes of South Carolina. Uniqueness is, oddly enough, what they all have in common – from Chicago to Colorado Springs, from Poughkeepsie to Santa Cruz – all sixteen hundred or so, belonging to that distinctively American species, the small independent school. Each has its own variation on the standard university plan of departmental offerings, arranged broadly under humanities and sciences, from which students elect their courses.

St. John’s College is differently different. We too have our gallery of faculty characters; an English friend says that visiting the college is like stepping into an English novel. We even have two uniquely beautiful campuses under different skies. But we differ seriously from the conventional variations of other schools in having one single plan of education, our Program. Whereas other colleges’ uniqueness consists of their internal variety, ours derives from a coherent curriculum.

When people first hear of what we do they can scarcely believe their ears. We invite them to come and see. The campus is always swarming with prospective students and curious visitors. If they are familiar with other institutions of education, here are the main differences they will observe:

1. We go back behind the modern departmental division between humanities and sciences to an older ordering: authors and arts.
2. The Program is all-required and non-specialized; thus there are no departments at all and practically no electives.
3. Every faculty member teaches all or almost all the parts of the Program. Consequently, we are amateurs rather than professionals, and we mark this fact by calling ourselves “tutors” rather than “professors.”

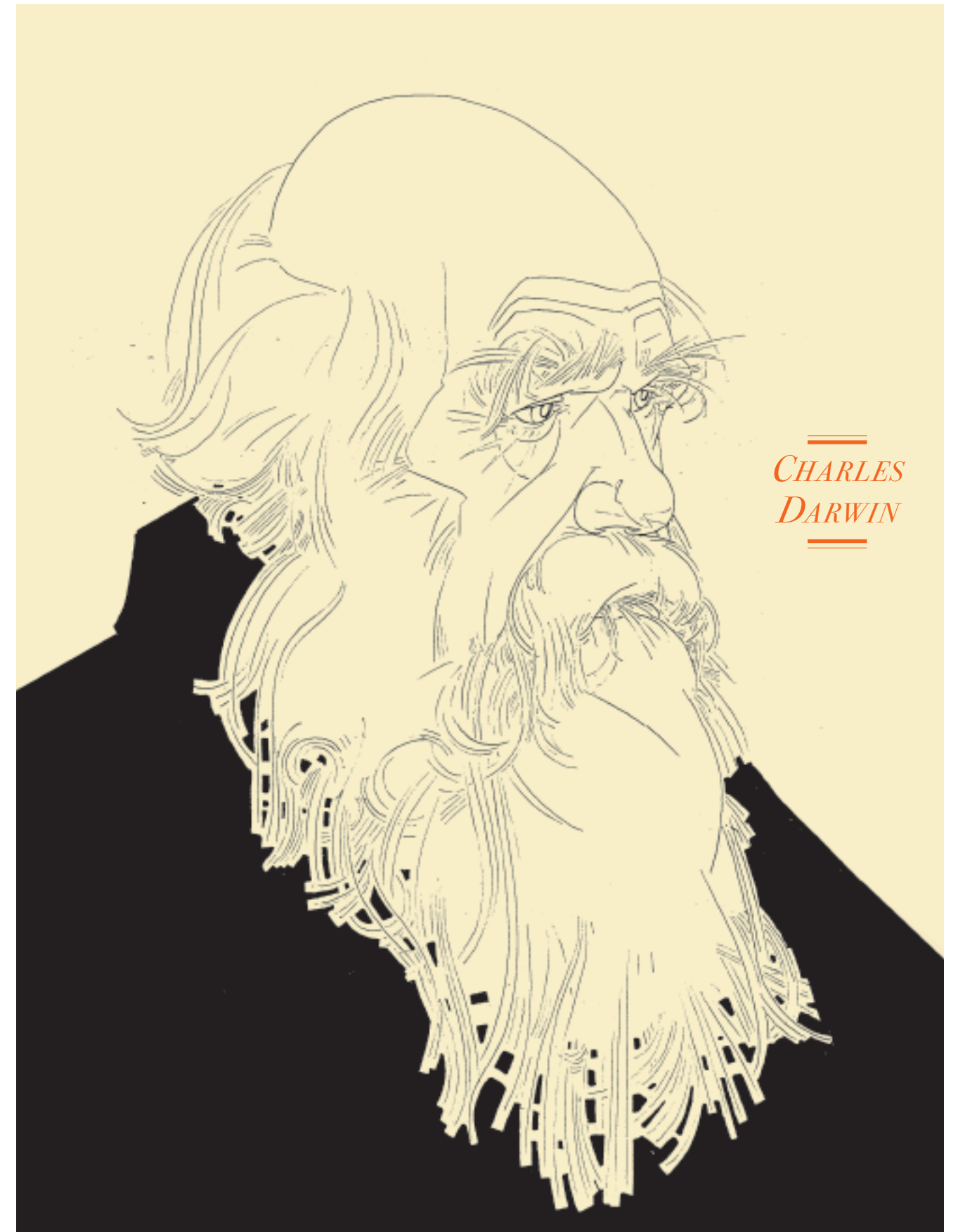
This country used to be a boiling pot of curricular reform and innovation. Most of the “alternative” curricula of the last century have come and gone. They were conceived as experiments with the possibility of failing – and they did fail.

The St. John’s Program was never thought of as experimental. Young souls are not meant to be the subjects of try-outs. From its founding in 1937, its teachers had faith in the Program as the best way known to them to educate young Americans in particular and all human beings in general; the Program was universal in conception. In fact it has resonated in the wide world. When I was dean I received inquiries and visitors from Madrid to Tbilisi and beyond. So rather than watch the curriculum fail with personal regret but intellectual equanimity, we would think that some central pivot of civilization had been lost, should the college disappear – and it won’t, now.

I have often wondered what we had that other remarkable schools didn't - Black Mountain College in North Carolina for instance, or the Experimental Program in Berkeley, California. I think what we had was the Program: Our community was from the first built not on assertive personalities and unstable curricular notions but on a strongly grounded plan of learning, pretty nearly the same that we still follow.

In an educational world in which commonality is regarded as oppressive, we are sometimes chided for having the confidence, not to say nerve, to submit ourselves and our students to a set study plan. But we think it is a faculty's responsibility to devise an integrated curriculum for its students' learning rather than to engage in turf battles in favor of departmental specialties. Moreover, anyone who has lived in a working community knows that it can't survive without some healthy egocentricity, some sense of being at the center of the world. Who would devote a life to anything less? Our more sober colleagues do continually warn against the notion that we are the world - and they are half-right, for there are many good things we are not, and many other places in this country about which the world also revolves.

The brute reality is that we have in fact remained one of a kind. There is, to my knowledge, only one other four-year college devoted to a Program in part modeled on ours, but with a significant difference: Thomas Aquinas College in California has a strongly Catholic integrated curriculum, while St. John's College has been from its chartering in 1784 (a wonderful date, the first year after the Revolution) a school not enforcing on its students "any religious or civil test, or urging their attendance upon any particular religious worship"; we are now in fact completely secular. And as Madison



so rightly predicted for freedom of religion, religious interest of every sort flourishes at the college. How we read religious books will be worth a paragraph (see p. 70).

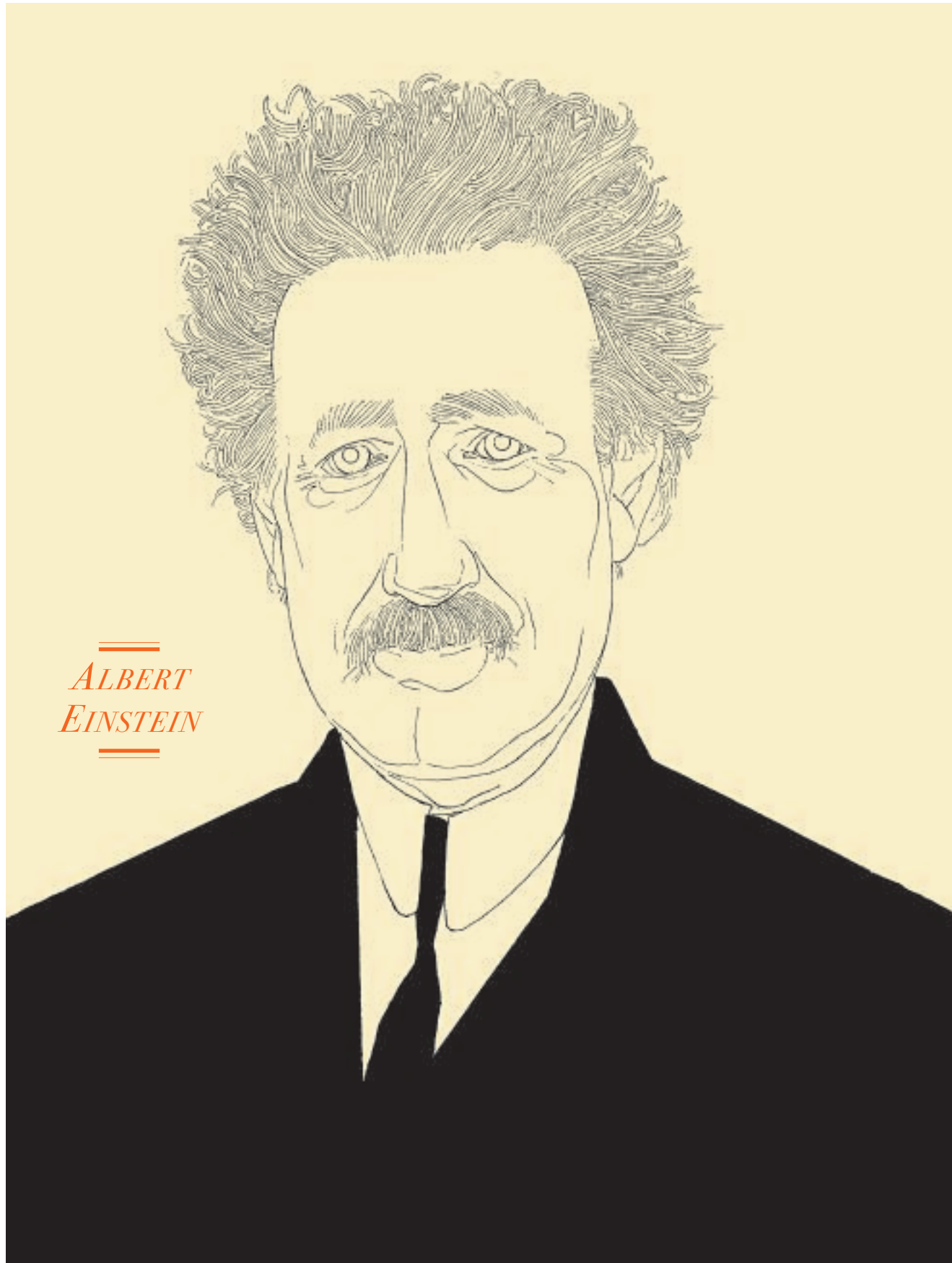
Why have we, who think of our Program as a model of liberal learning which is especially at home in America, remained all but unique in this country? The United States, as former dean Robert Goldwin has written, was the result of an almost miraculous confluence of streams of luck. This college, too, needed a lucky concurrence of events to come about: a pair of founders, one, Scott Buchanan, well versed in the whole liberal arts tradition, the other, Stringfellow Barr, possessed of administrative talent; a campus on offer; a general spirit of revival for liberal education as exemplified in Alexander Meiklejohn; and finally a European emigration which brought people like Jacob Klein, who fell in love with the intelligent naiveté of America's young and brought the learned depth with which to effect a second founding, placing under the inspiredly practical Program a philosophical grounding. There was, moreover, the opportune return of the World War II veterans, who were superbly serious students, and above all, a faculty willing to conform themselves to a plan, not the plan to themselves. And this Program they committed themselves to had an aim and an apex: the ardent pursuit of knowledge and truth, or as the Greeks say, *philosophia*, "the love of wisdom."

By now the "New Program" of this old college is itself quite venerable. At seventy years it and its faculty can be said to be mature. We fine-tune it continually, and sometimes even make what seem to us world-shaking changes, but viewed, as philosophers say, *sub specie aeternitatis*, "under the aspect of eternity," they look minuscule. Around the stable curriculum have developed zillions of traditions and practices, each

the product of long hours of faculty deliberation, all designed to protect the free engagement of our intellects and imaginations – and, of course, our hearts. The real motion, the real freshness, in this school comes not in doing new things but in doing the old things better. For our founding ways are inexhaustible in their possibilities.

Undoubtedly we are an establishment, an institution. An establishment of learning is something of a contradiction in terms, since real learning is a radically disestablishing activity. Strange as it may seem, it is that untrammelled inquiry we are trying to protect with our multitude of established practices. But in the course of maturing we have become more and more our unique self. So how can we serve as a model for other communities of learning, especially when in our hearts we believe that numbers are nothing and what really counts is that here and now one young (or old) soul should see something that makes life worth living?

Well, we have obligations to the country that allows us to function, and the public that supports us, and to our own two cities, Annapolis and Santa Fe. And we feel an obligation, born of our sense that we know something worth knowing about learning, to American education. So we engage in lots of outreach: give free access and help to visitors who want to see us at work, advise prospective founders of schools all over the world, help committees with curricular reforms, aid teachers with planning courses, send out reading lists and manuals, explain the Program to people writing dissertations and books, and go anywhere to lead all sorts of seminars: for high school students (though I once did one with four-year-olds, two of whom had crawled under the table whence they gave enchanting exegeses of a poem on sunflowers), for business



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and community leaders, and of course for our alumni, whose appetite for reading books together is lifelong. In fact, our principle is to do everything we can do without spreading our substance too thin.

2. WE HAVE ONE PROGRAM; DO WE HAVE ONE EXPERTISE?

IT IS A QUESTION WORTH ASKING BECAUSE, AS I WILL EXPLAIN, OUR WAY OF TEACHING requires that we be and remain, deliberately and purposefully, amateurs. (We keep in mind that the word means “lovers.”) As I said, we call ourselves “tutors”; it is our single academic rank and the title is meant to replace “professor,” which means a professional who has special expertise and the authority that comes with it. All of us arrive with graduate training, but we must let our particular interests go to learn the Program. (I myself, for example, was trained as a Greek archaeologist, yet I haven’t looked at an antiquity – pots were my specialty – in scholarly earnest for half a century.)

There is, however, something we all get to be good at, perhaps even specially good: asking questions. The questions we learn to ask – it is one criterion for being a tutor – are not so-called teacher’s questions, such as a pedagogue asks pupils to see if they’ve studied up: “What was Achilles’ mother’s name and where did she live?” – to which the meek answer is “Thetis, in the ocean,” but the spirited answer is: “Why ask

me, since you already know?” Nor are they information questions like “What time is it?” to which Yogi Berra’s immortal reply was “You mean now?” Nor “yes or no” questions, like “Tell me true, is there or is there not Truth and Beauty?,” which could be the ultimate conversation-stopper.

Our questions are the expression of a genuine desire to find something out by proposing it for a common inquiry, the kind of question tutors might ask themselves when they study by themselves. Such a question is a kind of empty envelope, a vacant grasp, the concave outside of the convex inside, an undeveloped negative, a receptive opening. All these metaphors circumscribe a good question, a searching question. In a dialogue by Plato called the *Meno*, which many of us regard as the scripture on question-asking, Meno poses the question of questions: How can we ask after truth? If we have it we needn’t ask, and if we don’t have it we won’t recognize it when it turns up. Meno means to stymie Socrates’ inquiry; Socrates has two defenses at once. One is: Never mind, just go ahead and search. The other is: Question-asking and answering is the most characteristically human activity there is, and we must continually consider not only how to do it well but also what in us makes it possible. Here is in germ what millennia later will come to dominate philosophy and cognitive science as “epistemology.”

This is the kind of problem tutors think about and the kind of questions – questions in search of truth – they are, I think it is not boastful to say, unusually good at asking; it is something like our local expertise.

Some of our friendly critics claim that we are too good at it – that our students come ignorant and leave confused. But it is not so. I don’t know any teacher who doesn’t

believe that the impetus behind the question is the hope of an answer, as a possible answer draws and shapes the question. In fact St. John’s differs from very nearly all secular schools in having a faculty that either believes in the real possibility of truth or in the pedagogical value of not foreclosing that possibility. Another way to put this is that you will find no easy relativism among us; our relativists are hard-thinking and fiercely honest.

It should go without saying that to believe in the possibility of truth-seeking is the very opposite of having the truth or propagating it. We never tell our students what to think. In fact, then it wouldn’t be thinking. We don’t even drive them to question their beliefs, for “questioning” in the aggressive sense isn’t question-asking. Our questions are intended to incite thought, which might result in putting stronger grounds under the faith students come with or indeed, sometimes, in exposing a belief as ill-grounded.

In the same spirit of non-coercive openness, there is frequent discussion among tutors about the kind of question that is best for a seminar discussion: Should it be based on a tutor’s interpretation of the book carefully worked out in private (with the perhaps not so unintended consequence of pushing students in that direction), or should it express a current perplexity on the tutor’s part (with the likely, perhaps even desirable, result that students will be a bit at sea)?

The central venue for questions is the seminar, of which more later (see p. 52).

3. IS THE “HOW” OF OUR TEACHING CONNECTED TO THE “WHAT”?

ST. JOHN’S DOES SEEM TO HAVE TWO ASPECTS: THE WAY WE TEACH AND LEARN, AND the matter we set out for ourselves and our students. Both of these are distinctive. Friendly explainers of the Program often refer to our use of the “Socratic method” and to our list of “Great Books.” Members of the community cringe a little on both counts. Here is why.

A. *How we teach:*

Whatever it is we do, it’s not according to any method. A method is, properly, a rule-governed process, and we adhere to none such. And it isn’t Socratic, not only because Socrates claimed to have been no one’s teacher but because the Socrates we know occasionally drives people into a corner with his questions – which we never do, at least not without feeling sorry. Yet he is in some respects our model: in rarely telling but often asking, in valuing acknowledged perplexity as the starting point of learning, in having utter faith in the possibility of truth.

The reason our teaching is not a method is that it’s just a bit of nature. We do what comes naturally: encourage thinking by asking (everyone here knows that you can’t “teach people to think”; such taught thinking is just that simulacrum of thought, rule-driven reason). By nature, people, if not corrupted, like to rouse themselves to communicative expression; by nature, people want to hear each other; by nature, they

want to talk together about what they’ve learned in private; by nature, the young, if not spoiled, like to grapple with what is hard but great.

Our business is to get out of the way without giving up our responsibility. Of course we teach; even Socrates is talking hyperbole, for his companions in fact think they’re being taught. But – I’m looking for the right word – we do it cannily and tactfully. We try to keep students focused and spontaneous, both. It’s tricky and absorbing. I think every tutor, even those who’ve taught here a half century, has stage fright before every class, largely because we’re not in complete control, and yet we’re completely responsible.

One obvious concomitant of our way is that we are very reticent with our opinions – at least in class. Outside of class I, for one, will pontificate if a student wants it. I recall, when I was dean, three woman students making an urgent appointment with me about an important matter. The matter turned out to be what I, personally, thought about God. We had a candid conversation – for me a real workout. Thus reticence expresses itself in being sparing with talk in class and conversationally open outside.

A number of ways to approach a book require lecturing. One is for the teacher to produce a critical theory into which the book is fitted. It is not entirely unfair to say that this is sometimes the art of making the difficult unintelligible, because academic theoretical language is often willfully abstruse. We don’t do that.

The other, more common, method is “backgrounding” or “contextualizing.” In this approach the teacher “introduces” the student to the book by telling how the book can be understood according to the author’s historical and social background.

We particularly don't do that, for at least two reasons. It does require lengthy lecturing, by the end of which the students' minds are so remote from the text that little a teacher says next can recall them, and to paint even a somewhat plausible historical setting requires enormous knowledge on the part of the professor - always supposing that the discovery of historical truth is a finite endeavor at all. But even if an author's epoch were accurately definable, how would it help to understand the book? Many of our writers are overtly or covertly embattled with current opinion and think with rebellious originality about the human condition. So talk of "Greek" or "Medieval" or "American" thought is grossly unilluminating: How can a people or an epoch think? Persons think.

I spent a part of my youth studying the Attic pottery of the late eighth and seventh century B.C., the richest evidence we have of Homer's time - and I have no non-speculative idea what it was that any or all of these people thought about anything at this generative time when the Western tradition was born. Abridged, not to say canned, introductions are mostly compendia of current preoccupations and brave attempts to bring a book closer to students by drawing it into their supposed circle of interest. But this is counterproductive: What arouses interest in students is not currency but authenticity - if it is allowed to reveal itself.

So we tutors at St. John's believe - all of us most of the time - in directness and immediacy; we put nothing between ourselves and the reading and behave as if every one of our books was indeed an open book to our students. I call this the "a cat may look at a king" principle - these royal books were written for us, the willing laity.



I think that this way of ours works in many settings and for many subjects. It is, as the term goes, transferable – an approach we can tell about and demonstrate to teachers anywhere.

B. *What we teach:*

But this way of dealing directly and immediately with texts works most naturally for the so-called Great Books, well over a hundred of which we read with our students through their four years.

Some colleagues are embarrassed by that appellation; it sounds too pat. But in truth, Great Books lists have been labored over for millennia. Ours represents a kind of Western consensus of the ages. In Santa Fe’s Graduate Institute there is a Master’s degree program in which the Eastern Classics are studied, just as they ought to be – with serious language learning. With our undergraduates, however, we stay in our West: “One thing at a time” and “Know thyself” are the guiding principles, especially the latter; for knowing ourselves, how we came by the terms we live with, seems to be the first condition for a knowledgeable appreciation of other traditions.

This point of view, that to know ourselves we need to know our tradition, is, I hasten to say, different from “historicism,” the notion that we are the products of impersonal historical forces, the blindly determinist effects of a dead past. We want nothing to do with what is dead and bygone. When we speak of our “tradition” we mean individual works by thinking authors that have, to be sure, shaped contemporary life in ways of which we are largely unconscious. But we can bring these works back to life –

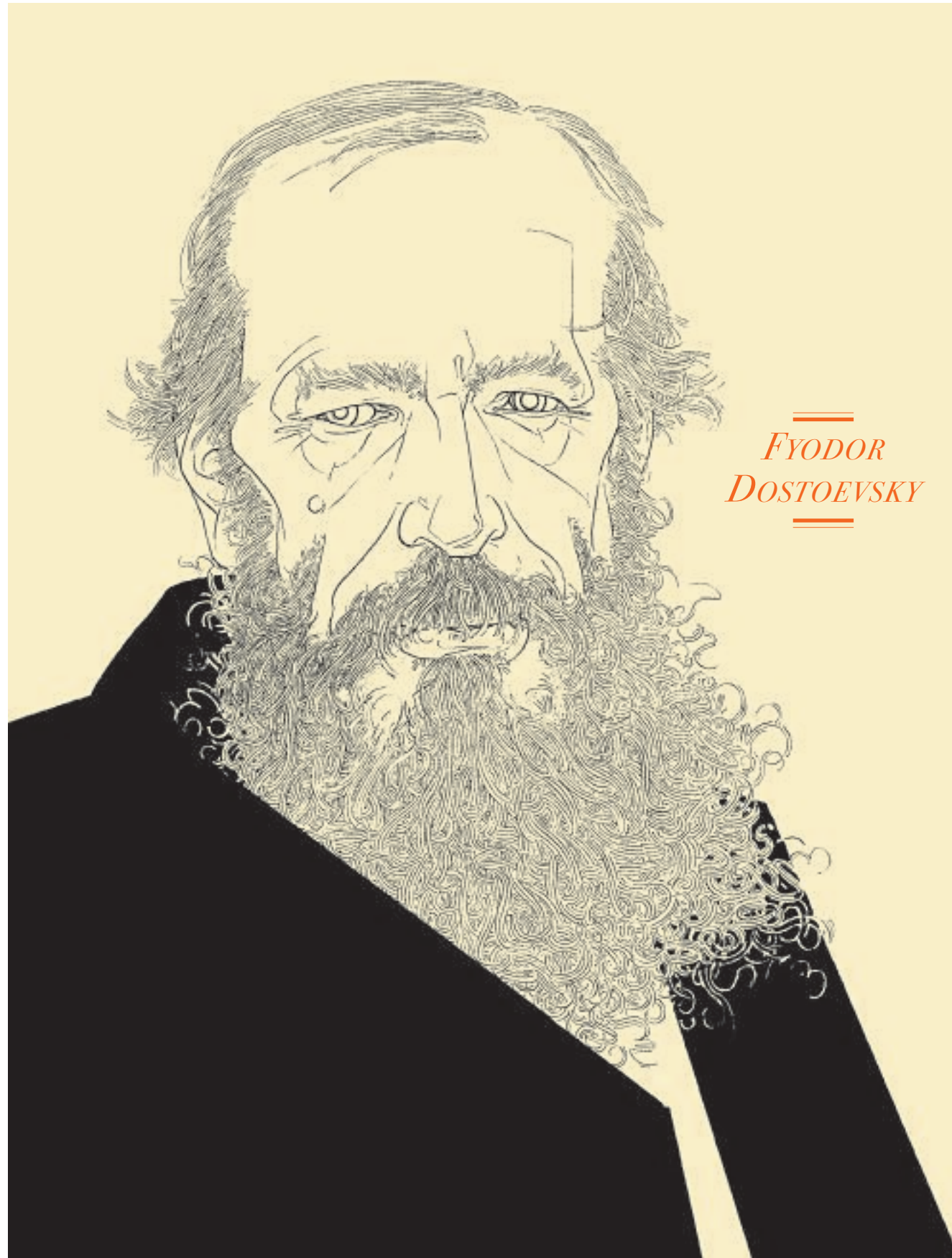
and ourselves to consciousness – by reading them not as historical documents but as living presences that made us who we are and taught us to talk as we do. We are convinced that these Great Books contain a live wisdom necessary for thinking out our current lives, for living awarely. Those who read these books – or study texts of symbols or scores of notes or canvases of paint – in our way often experience the disciplined magic of these revivals.

I think it is hard to get away from the Great Books designation for the simple reason that “greatness” has real significance for us. It is the criterion by which we have chosen our hundred-plus works – based in part on these millennia-old lists.

Here are some of these criteria: Greatness shows up as inexhaustibility. Some of us have read and reread our books for ourselves or in preparation for class over scores of years; there is always more to discover. A bored tutor is rare; a bored student is, more often than not, just prey to one of the endemic dis-eases of late adolescence, among which is complex sloth.

Second, these works are pretty self-sufficient. Writers of stature strive to be as context-independent as they can be. They tell you what you need to know to understand them. Good editions with pertinent notes will do the rest.

Third, and most telling, these books are original in two senses. They are often the earliest version of something new that will sweep the world, when it was still close to its roots in common experience and accessible to lay people. And they are original in the sense of being characteristic, of bearing the stamp of their author’s personality – not only their personal crotchets and idiosyncrasies, but their peculiar ways of reaching depths.



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Fourth, these works are infinitely artful, bold and subtle, beautiful by design or ugly on purpose. These authors are masters of the liberal arts that are a large part of our Program.

Fifth and finally for present purposes, the works, though their message may sometimes be dismal and dark, are not themselves dreary or depressing but grand and redemptive. We have a sense that this four-year gift of semi-adult freedom that parents make to their children should not be spent on mediocre documents of societal problems and their academic solutions – the world will soon teach all that – but on the deepest, most exhilarating exemplars of human achievement. The principle here is: First have acquaintance with the best, then face the worst.

In this adherence to Great Books we are somewhat out of sync with the universities – less so as the pendulum of opinion swings back. In the last part of the last century there arose a movement sometimes called the Canon wars. “Canon” with one n, *nota bene*; it is a Greek word meaning a rule or standard and now used most generally to refer to Great Books lists. An attack on the Canon was mounted for these reasons: that no work is to be privileged as great; all writings are essentially mere documents composed to confirm an elite in its dominance, be it one gender, one class, one continent. Moreover these screeds really have no individual author, being the product of their time, of history.

Those of us who followed this debate and had actually studied some of the canonical works were amazed. First of all, they seem to be highly individual products; secondly, they seem to be far more radical in their attacks on each other and their society than

these contemporary critics. But above all, our way of reading is naturally expressed in the question: What does the author intend? And I, for one, would not know how to address an authorless book, for how could I penetrate its words except on the assumption that they were written for me by a being I was like, in kind if not in degree?

St. John's was not much touched by these battles; we and our students were simply too much engaged in actual study, too much captivated by this miraculous inheritance. One might say that we conceded the elitism of the tradition and practiced the egalitarianism of its readers. But we did think harder about our commitments.

In particular, we needed to be clear about the feature, or non-feature, of the Program that both academic and lay visitors notice with surprise: the absence of any disciplinary fields – no history, sociology, anthropology, literary theory, history of philosophy, etc. Our students might incidentally gather some information on these fields (in the case of history of philosophy, of science, and of mathematics more than almost any other group of American undergraduates).

But generally we ask them to read individual books as unassigned to any discipline and to practice on them the basic skills of learning. Our reasons for circumventing academic fields are less theoretical than practical and pedagogical. (Our students do, in any case, go on to disciplinary studies in graduate school. And though they go there nearly completely unacquainted with the “isms,” concepts, methods, that their colleagues from other institutions have been trained in, they seem to find their footing pretty quickly – and sometimes to stand out for the freshness of their approach.) Here are some of these reasons.

First, it takes real mastery of facts and theories to teach these disciplines, and the teacher has naturally to assume the part of an authority. We could not be the perpetual amateurs we need to be to teach in the whole Program nor could our classes be consistently carried on by students if we taught academic disciplines. We could not fulfill our ideal of being exemplary learners rather than authoritative teachers.

Second, the academic disciplines are not elementary in the sense we require (most of these fields, about one hundred thirty of them, were, incidentally, inventoried by Francis Bacon as early as 1620, in his “Catalogue of Natural and Experimental Histories”, for example: “History of Venus, as a species of Touch”, that is, the physiology of sex). By “elementary” in this context I mean having the property of elements that are fairly natural beginnings, as language learning usually begins with the parts of speech, their syntax and vocabulary, the study of music begins with the mathematical construction of the diatonic scale by compounding interval ratios, and mathematics begins with definitions and axioms. Introductions to the field disciplines are usually brief outlines of a huge body of research results whose shape depends very much on the presenter's theories. It is hard to undertake such studies together in a way natural and accessible to all. Euclid's *Elements*, on the other hand, begins with the sentence: “A point is that which has no parts.” It is our model. Here our students start their four years of mathematics. You can't begin more minimally or more discussably: What – in the world or out – is an object that has no part?

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● HOW DO WE CHOOSE AND EVALUATE
OUR TUTORS?

I HAVE NEVER VISITED AN INSTITUTION WHOSE LIFE DEPENDED SO MUCH ON A FACULTY well fitted to its curriculum as St. John's. Nothing is more important to our internal well-being than our choice and assimilation of tutors.

It has always seemed remarkable to me that we - a school that prides itself on putting students' learning first - should have as our first criterion for permanent appointment not teaching but distinction of mind defined as excellence of intellect and imagination. Nor is teaching second, but rather competence in the Program and increasing understanding of the questions raised by its books. For us these are not simply formalisms but vivid conceptions against which tutors are appraised. Competence is not so hard to gauge, nor is good teaching in our spirit, the third criterion that we look to. The first demand, however, though crucial and not vague, is harder to apply: It describes a tutor who is able to open up large vistas in a small piece of text, who can see the whole through its parts and illuminate a detail by the entirety, who can put two and two together and on occasion get, gloriously and rightly, five. We think of good teaching as the natural fallout of these and similar abilities.

Thus this order of desirables fits our notion of the tutor as learner-in-chief, and as teaching more by example than by a technique. I think that if you are full of focused enthusiasm (a lovely Greek word, meaning "having the god within") you'll be with us all your life. To give an example: I recall the appointment interview of a present colleague

trained as a cartographer specializing in Chinese maps, who captivated us by showing on the blackboard how to draw large meaning from a little Chinese character, and who told us that he was preoccupied with the question whether Confucius' writing was applicable to American life. And he seemed to have far more in store than on display.

Our hope is that once appointed a tutor will stay with us. We do what we can - never enough - to help new tutors. In particular, beginning tutors' seminar partners are chosen from more experienced colleagues to serve as their helper, critiquer-in-chief and advocate. But there are many other kinds of help, as new tutors engage in the arduous task of working their way into the Program: phone calls requesting help to tutors who know the material, the regular weekly meetings, led by a more knowledgeable tutor, in which anything that pertains to a particular class is discussed, meetings with the dean, and above all, if there is time, sitting in on experienced colleagues' classes.

But just because we want tutors to stay, the review process, conducted by the dean and the Instruction Committee, is severe. Letters are written for each appointment up to tenure which are more specifically critical the greater our hopes for the tutor are. I recall all too well, on the other hand, what contortions of ominous vacuousness I had to engage in as dean to warn people - as tactfully as possible - that they fell short of the first criterion (distinction of mind). For while all the other standards could be met by willingness and trying, there isn't much to be done about natural endowments.

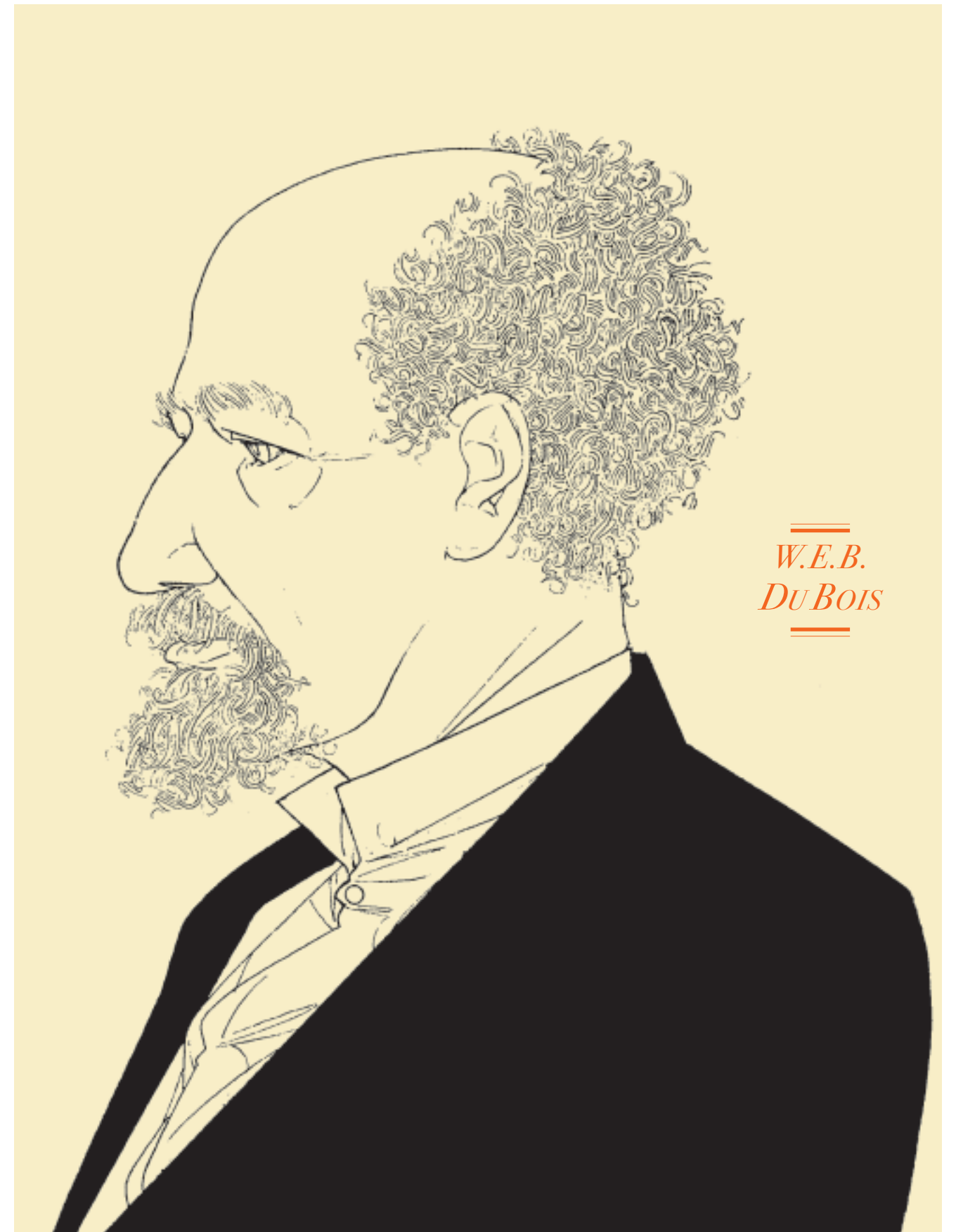
Two criteria for tenure prevalent through the whole academic world that we don't employ are publishing and classroom "performance." Some of us write books, but

more because we can't help it than because our careers require it. (In fact, no one at St. John's has a "career" since there are no academic ranks, and becoming dean is more an act of penitential love than a career move; besides, when our term is up we happily go back into the teaching community that has been our care.) Academic publishing depends largely on specialized disciplinary research, and tutors learning the Program don't have much time for it. You will not hear talk of "my own work" among tutors. We do each have our special pursuit, but it is no more our own than a great book is a private possession.

As for teaching as a performance, it doesn't fit us: Neither brilliant lecturers nor disciple-making gurus fit our way.

What's a tutor's life like? Jacob Klein, a former dean and one of our grand old men, used to outline with a gesture of his hand a wave with many crests, a roller-coaster track. It's an alternation of exhilaration and despair, as classes go well or ill, as we ourselves feel a sense of having gotten something or being confounded. That teacher's wave train is amplified by our aforementioned sense of responsibility without the power to compel by grades, by badgering, or by lectures.

A tutor's life is without question arduous; by spring when formal obligations mount up (all our classes last the whole year) some of my colleagues look like the walking dead. Two nights a week are given to evening seminars, Friday night lecture imposes a sort of obligation to be a model of attendance for students. Family life suffers some; spouses bear the brunt. Besides paper conferences, advising, committee obligations, there is the fact that, since we are usually teaching outside of our original training, we need a



lot of time for adequate preparation. Everything is always new or just begun – a boon insofar as we don’t often get jaded, a trouble insofar as we often get worn out.

It’s not that we work harder than anyone else in the professions or in business. It’s that to perform our mission well we are supposed to think things out, ruminate, meditate, talk at leisure. We and our students know that the very word “school” is derived from the Greek word for leisure, *scholé*, and that’s just what this school doesn’t have enough of, especially for newer and younger tutors. I recall that when years ago we were invited by our neighbor, the Naval Academy, to show some of their faculty, military and civilian, how we lead seminars, a brief discussion arose: Which of our two schools is more like permissive Athens, which more like martial Sparta? The wonderful conclusion was that in point of faculty discipline and student requirements we were taut Sparta and the Academy was liberal Athens – except for one aspect: The officers thought that the pressure of a tight pace was good for developing quick decision-making in future officers, while we were sure that continual busyness was bad for thoughtfulness in future citizens. The intellect continually in harness loses its spontaneous leaps, and the imagination continually pressed for time contracts its embracing visions.

I should add that there are now on both campuses numerous tutor study groups, funded and unfunded, that broaden our learning while drawing us together, animating both campuses all year long. Although they occupy time, they are nonetheless felt as a recreation.

5.

HOW DO WE SELECT AND MONITOR
OUR STUDENTS? WHAT IS THEIR LIFE LIKE?

WHAT KINDS OF STUDENTS DO WE WANT? SINCE IN RECENT YEARS OUR INCREASING applications actually allow us to be, as they say, “selective” – a badge of prestige – we have an important decision to work out, as we always do, by consultation and discussion. Our policy has been, within financial and timing constraints, to approve applications as they roll in, applying certain minimal criteria: Does this student read with fair facility, write with some literacy and possess a minimum of mathematical training – in sum, can the student be expected to cope with the Program? For the rest, we were as close to having a self-selected student body as a college can be. We took wild chances on a wild or rebellious or eccentric kid and sometimes lucked out and often lost.

At this point I’ll speak for myself, well knowing that my colleagues on the other side have arguments both principled and practical. I think that “selectivity,” far from being a school’s mark of excellence, is a sign of curricular and pedagogic failure. A good undergraduate educational plan should be inclusive in design and well enough taught to bring together future fellow citizens of all sorts of abilities. Wanting to be a member of that community of learning should be the main criterion of admission. Desire trumps brilliance any time when it comes to learning. At St. John’s, tutors must have some distinction of mind to be appointed; students should need none to be admitted. They may come undistinguished but they don’t leave that way.

Do we look for a representative student population? I think most of us know from

years of teaching that the distinctiveness of individuals being themselves is the ultimate diversity. Nonetheless, insofar as some of us have a sneaking conviction that this is the curriculum for all human beings who want to understand the roots of their modernity and for Americans in particular, we want very much to be teaching students of every describable kind.

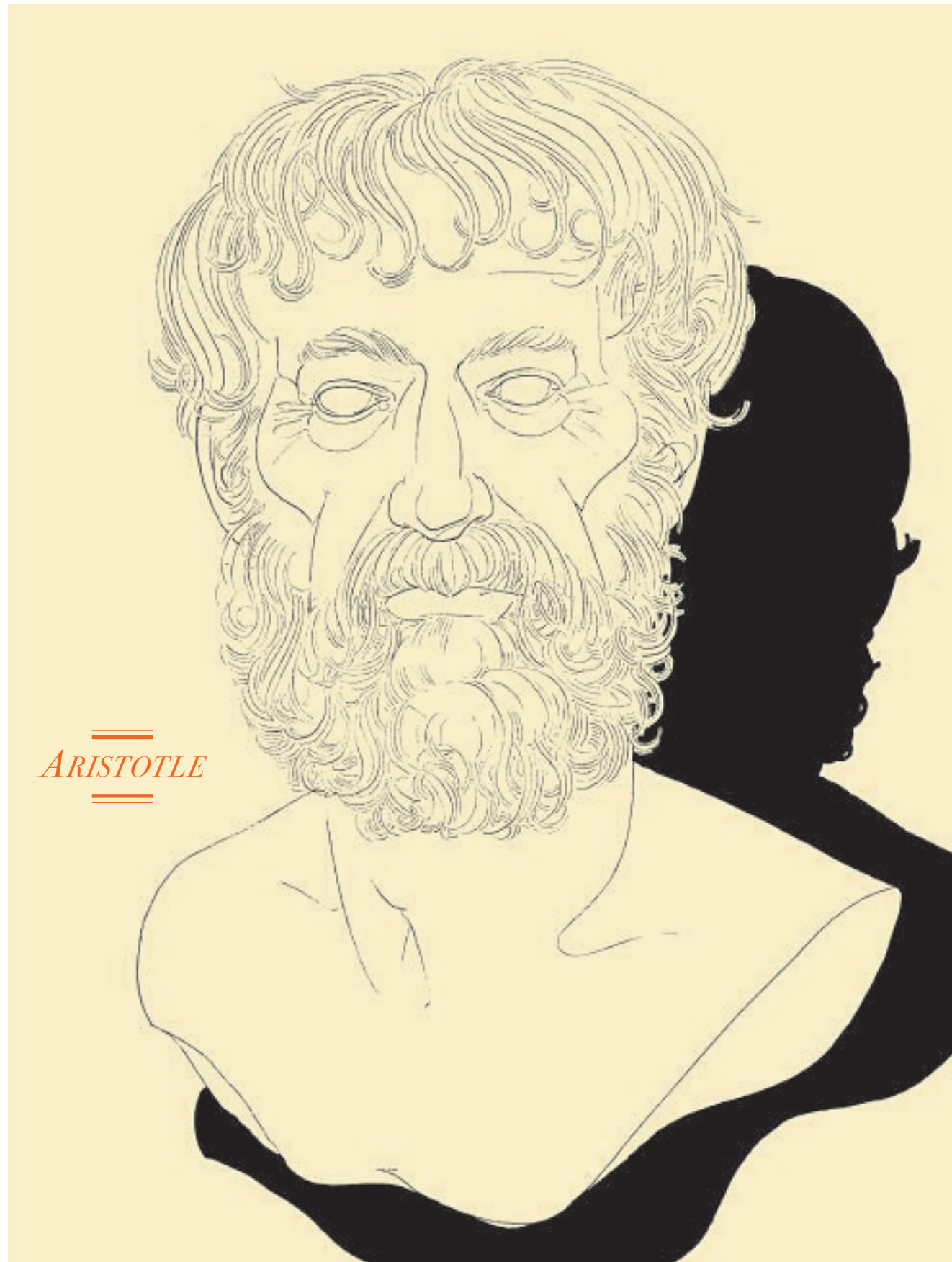
Our monitoring and evaluation of students has won public commendation, although it uses few of the conventional tools, such as essay or short-answer exams, quizzes, graded papers, frequent hands-up in class, absence records. To be sure, we too have an absence policy and a fairly fierce one, since there is no making up a lost conversation and since students' non-presence is a dereliction of duty not only toward themselves but also toward their classmates. When there is memory work to be done, especially in language, tutors do give diagnostic quizzes. But we have no official exam period. "Hitting the books" just before examinations is futile here, papers are never graded but critiqued, and hardly any Johnny is even capable of the short answer to a good question; these machine-graded tests are notoriously designed to be unforgiving of reflection.

Since we are with our classes all year long and since they are small and since class participation is demanded, we get to know our students well. Twice a year we report on their performance and their progress in the "don rag" (a whimsical term come down to us out of our hoary past from our founders' experience at an English university; the "dons," that is, masters, "rag," that is, torment, the students). All the students meet, one at a time, with all their current tutors together, who in the course of a quarter of

an hour take turns appraising their work; then the students take their turn to respond. Don rags should be candid and precise but not hurtful, though there is sometimes some weeping for the sins of the term or from sheer nervousness. Great pleasure is taken in praising a student precisely, and great pains are taken to give clear, accurate, concise reports, and helpful advice. The don rag is not the place for crypto-grading or psychologizing, though of course that happens. A written report of tutors' comments and the don rag committee's recommendation for the student's future goes to the dean.

The "enabling" procedure occurs at the end of the sophomore year. All the students' records are reviewed individually in a meeting of all the tutors who have taught them. Comments are made in the hearing of the dean and the Instruction Committee, who decide whether each student is able to continue. The chief factor in the decision is our judgment that the candidate is likely to continue to learn and to help others in their learning. Less than five percent are asked to leave and several of those return on appeal. Also, sometime earlier every student must have passed a test in the simple algebraic operations necessary to the mathematics and physics of the last two and a half years.

For the first three years students are orally examined by their seminar leaders on their reading in fall and on their annual essay in spring; at their best these are lively conversations. But the oral of orals is the culmination of each student's account-giving; it is the public examination all seniors undergo on their senior essay. It takes place in full academic regalia and consists of a searching, hour-long conversation on the essay between the student and three tutors. Friends and sometimes family are



present, and at the end they congregate around the now-candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Arts for congratulations. Just before graduation all the seniors' records are reviewed by the faculty, and seniors found sufficient are recommended to the Board for the degree.

We are a talking college, and these oral examinations fit us well, but there is also plenty of paper-writing and these papers, though not letter-graded, are evaluated. This is a well-monitored student body. Everyone knows who works hard and who goofs off, who's deeply serious and who's a smart-aleck. Certainly the students know it; what they don't always know is that we know it too.

What are our students' lives like? The Program is very demanding. Moreover we hope that the curriculum will expand and meld into extracurricular activity, that common study and casual conversation will continue classroom discussion - and the converse. The scores of activities that enliven the campuses, from Santa Fe's Search and Rescue team to Annapolis sailing and rowing crews, from fencing to photography, from the art studio to the gymnasium, all these teams and clubs stand more or less under the aegis of the Program. Our directors of athletics and student activities have known how to make our varied sports and outdoor activities support and express our learning; *Mens sana in corpore sano*, say the Romans, "A sound mind in a sound body", and in this school, at least, the body works out so that the mind may be better exercised. Well, at least in part - also for friendship and fun and for something else: In a community of learning that discourages competition in the classroom, athletics offers an outlet for energetic but regulated rivalry.

All over the campuses, in the coffee shops and unused classrooms, you will see students preparing for class together, sometimes in twosomes (they have the taste, lost in maturity, for dual-purpose togetherness, such as studying their electricity and magnetism manual while experiencing similar phenomena in a less formal mode), often in larger groups, or in lively conversation. This devotion sometimes, wonderfully, assumes the aspect of the higher kookiness: Last year two young gentleman in Annapolis invited me to tea (bags in mugs) to show me their beautiful new dormitory. They told me that they had continued a recent tradition of reading Homer's whole *Iliad* in one day; they decided that such a work must not be interrupted, so that when answering calls of nature they went together - one reciting, one not.

Students are in seminar Monday and Thursday night; they are supposed to be at lecture on Friday night. They have six tutorials and two or three laboratories a week during the day. Each class demands long and often challenging preparation. It would be doable, except that too many students work at jobs more hours than are officially permitted, in order to make money. When I was dean, students complaining of loss of zest for their studies and mild depression were often simply overworked - analogously to new tutors. That being said, by and large our students can be counted on to share our love for the work we do together. Only let, say, an unsympathetic visitor question their occupation and the wagons circle.

Some students are, nonetheless, insatiable: Throughout the year they form study groups, often with tutors, and mount "guerrilla seminars" on non-Program books. Twice a year the Student Committee on Instruction organizes the All-College

Seminars, when all the classes are mingled for seminars selected and led by students. The same committee also mounts forums on issues of student life, recently a series - remarkable for its searching seriousness, as it seemed to me - on the Student Handbook's requirements for conduct conducive to a community of learning.

6. WHAT ARE THE RELATIONS BETWEEN TUTORS AND STUDENTS?

OUR TUTORS' WAY OF TEACHING AND OUR STUDENTS' WAY OF LEARNING NATURALLY make for a strong bond between them. One might say that it is too close to be intimate. Put another way: Our common work is too serious for too personal an involvement. The fierce intellectuality and the common commitment to truth - as a goal, not a possession - help to ensure this closeness-with-proper-distance. (There are, it bears repeating, very few teaching faculties in this country today who will own up to truth as an aim of education. Our tutors do - at least as a pedagogical practice; of course some of my colleagues are deep-dyed skeptics, but for them too their conviction is a philosophy - a way of loving wisdom.)

The faculty has resolved that intimacies between tutors and students are wrong. This is, to be sure, what the law and professionalism require. But for us it is a consequence of our "tutorial" - literally, our "guardian" mode. We see ourselves as acting

within an old tradition first set out in a Platonic dialogue, the *Symposium*, where a young worshiper of Socrates reports that his offer of sexual favors was quietly and firmly rejected in favor of a finer possibility.

Although in seminar discussions we are expected to assume no seniority but to support our claims just like the students, we do, after all, evaluate them, and they are in that sense not our equals; our classroom equality involves a certain degree of benevolent hypocrisy. These are not the conditions of *bona fide* friendships. Those arise when in that sweet moment on commencement day, we, who have addressed them as Mr. or Ms. for four years, call our new-minted alumni by their first name for the first time. Then often a lifelong friendship is started. Yet we often have the devil of a ridiculous time trying to get graduates to break through their decorous distance and to be casual toward us: This faculty gets a touching lot of respect. But of course as we grow older together we get closer in age, and so we grow more intimate as well.

Mutual respect is the norm, and, in addition, though we don't generally speak of "my student," we do often grow closer to certain people who seek us out or who attract our fond interest. An example going way back to 1958 comes to mind. I was a freshman tutor then living in a room in one of the few seventeenth-century houses in Annapolis. Near midnight the phone rang and the agitated voice of one of my freshmen came through: "Oh, Miss Brann, I need help with *Eros*!" I was young enough then to need it myself, but I understood his particular requirements and got him started on his annual essay about the dialogue mentioned above. He's a lawyer now, deeply concerned with the service aspect of his profession, and we talk pretty regularly.



There are a few students – sad exceptions – who don’t establish special relationships with a tutor they particularly trust; opportunity is surely not lacking since each student has about twenty year-long tutors over four years, and it is part of our regular day to be available to all students – not just the ones we happen to have in class – for help, advice, or just conversation, beyond paper conferences and other required “contacts” (horrible word). You will see tutors and students deep in conversation in the dining room – we have a “take-a-tutor-to-lunch” plan – or in restaurants off-campus. It’s how we learn of the interests, particularly the curious kinds of connoisseurship our students pursue. How many fantasy books have I read because a student ingeniously proved to me that they were works of liberal art?

7. ● WHAT’S WRONG WITH US?

WELL, ALMOST EVERYTHING THAT’S RIGHT. SO DISTINCTIVE A COMMUNITY WILL PAY the penalty for being itself. Visitors do sometimes speak of us as an educational utopia – but recall that “utopia” is Greek for “no-place.” We have to remain plausible to ourselves and to others, and so an occasional inventory of flaws is in order.

I have already mentioned that we are perpetually time-starved with deleterious consequences to tutors and students.

Then there are the inherent limitations of the Program, the obverses of its strengths, which have to be acknowledged. The Program is a small island in the sea of our ignorance; to list all the worthwhile knowables our students don’t learn would be tantamount to producing almost all the catalogues of all the libraries in the world. Most things to be known are not known by us, and our students leave us vastly ignorant. Moreover, most tutors know less about any one subject than any particular professor at a university (where the universe of learning is indeed supposed to be collected), whose knowledge, in turn, covers only a tiny territory in the vast field of some specialty. The Program is a highly restricted plan of study that provides us with elemental skills of learning and exemplary cases of knowledge, no more.

Even so, it is largely beyond our capacities. Our books demand that we be linguistically acute, mathematically quick, and philosophically deep every day. Of course we aren’t up to it, although we help each other as best we can – tutors students and often students tutors. We give and take help with the solution of technical problems, with the construing of sentences, with the interpretation of a line of poetry.

Often we need to compromise, to read too quickly, to leave difficulties unresolved, to let ourselves and our students get away with less than satisfactory work – especially the students, who are after all, never allowed to play only to their own particular strengths. I recall vividly an example from the days of my deanship. A fine, well-respected student simply could not achieve the satisfactory grades we require – only in the senior year – for graduation. The failing class was our demanding senior laboratory, and her tutor came to see me. “Can’t you do something for her?” I asked. He said, “Do you want me to

prostitute myself?” “Yes, please,” I said, and he did, and he was right to do it.

There are darker things. Life here is so intense that it sometimes just falls apart. Students don’t prepare, classes go badly. There have been times in my life when I coasted and withdrew, as happens to most tutors from time to time. Students have to think about money too much; some carry a debt burden that constricts their future. They experience crises of faith and entanglements of love and other pressure-cooker effects. Here the possibility of escape to the other campus, Santa Fe or Annapolis, is a saving grace. Our students come from the world and bring its corruptions along, and whatever troubles American society has, we have, though, I think in a mitigated degree. Consequently our students aren’t exactly angels out of class – more the opposite, though there are times when the demons do turn into cherubs. A particular occasion for such a transformation comes at the end of the year, when the freshmen, who are all required to sing in the freshman chorus, give a concert. In Annapolis it’s in our Great Hall. We stand in the gallery listening to them sing Palestrina or Mozart and are in heaven with the angels – for the moment.

This section could be much longer, and actually it all needs to be said, at least among ourselves. Few things are as harmful to a community as terminal idealism.

8. WHAT KIND OF INSTITUTION DOES OUR PROGRAM REQUIRE?

THE PROGRAM HOLDS US TOGETHER INTELLECTUALLY, BUT OUR POLITY PROVIDES THE practical condition for a stable communal life. The role it plays within the college is similar to that of the Constitution in this country: We certainly don’t think of it all the time, but all our procedures follow from it.

The Polity gives us an institutional form, developed over many years of revision, a form that contains our educational purpose pretty adequately. Like the Program itself, the Polity is at once unusual and exemplary. I shall mention only the provisions that are particularly concerned with the Program, and these in broad strokes.

We are a truly national college – a rare thing – one college with campuses in Maryland and New Mexico. We have, with small local variations, the same Program, and the Polity protects both the expressions of local life and the unity of the Program. It first defines the responsibilities of the Board of Visitors and Governors (whose members, besides governing, do actually visit the campuses to familiarize themselves with their life). It then goes on to detail the functions of the faculty. What is vital here is that the two presidents of the campuses are listed as first among faculty members. Our presidents are officially tutors who often teach and always learn within the Program; their responsibilities reach deep into the community. There are two deans chosen from the faculty who – and this is unique as far as I know – sit on the Board *ex officio*, so the faculty in turn reaches into the Board. The deans chair their part of the



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Instruction Committee, with which the presidents in turn sit *ex officio*. This committee of faculty members, six each, elected on each campus, has, together with the deans, responsibility for the Program of Instruction, including the formulation of changes and recommendations of tutorial appointments to the respective president. One might say it was a powerful committee, but we avoid such language: It is a respected and responsible committee, and a hard-working one. To complete the picture of integration, it should be said that the associates, the professionals who run our administration, are also faculty members and sometimes teach. The deans, on the other hand, coming from the faculty, are just what they were as tutors: amateurs. In fact we avoid the administrative ambiance as best we can, and each dean ministers to the community in a new way. My own style was to try to be some version of a universal grandmother.

The Polity specifies scores of committees, charges, and procedures, but the aim is to have a structure as receptive as possible to the mission of the college, a form totally friendly to the function. The Polity represents a pretty successful attempt to overcome the paradoxical fact, already noted, that an “institution of learning” is a contradiction in terms. For nothing is less amenable to institutionalization than a young - or old - soul in development. And yet what is an intellectual paradox is a worldly necessity. In this attempt our governance structure reflects the Program: Both are full of prescriptions designed to protect freedom.

Here is the place to add that the students too have a Polity and a student government that disburses the quite considerable funds for student activities. One of this Polity's chief provisions is a sleep-study rule designed to keep the dorms safe for learning - a

rule not always effective because of a besetting student sin of tolerance for each other's disruptive habits. There is also the aforementioned Student Committee on Instruction which mounts discussions on the Program and whose recommendations the college's Instruction Committee take very seriously.

Most organizations have a double aspect: Some members are responsible for its existence, others for its essence. At St. John's, the Board and the presidents labor to keep us in being, while the deans, the Instruction Committee, and the whole faculty work to keep us being who we were meant to be. And both parties are well intertwined.

How does it work in practice, particularly with respect to the two campuses? Santa Fe (founded in 1964) has long since outgrown its beginnings as an Annapolitan colony. One of the delights of visiting either campus, coming from the other, is that in the most different of settings – the spacious skies and mountains of the Southwest against the confined vistas and coastal waters of Annapolis – the conversations turn about the same universal questions; the coffee shop blackboard bears the same mangled Greek and the same lovingly drawn geometric diagrams. Of course where there's two of anything there will be inventively invidious comparisons: Annapolis is supposed to be teutonically earnest, Santa Fe fecklessly laid-back. But our students transfer back and forth in droves and are the better for it.

It is true that having to gain consent on both campuses for major Program changes (as required by the Polity) and preserving the possibility of student transfer acts as a brake on curricular innovations, college-wide or local. But I've sat through enough of those at other colleges to know that the Latin poet Horace might have meant curricu-

lar reform when he said: "The birthing mountains heaved and a ridiculous mouse was born." We're better off always first trying to do better what we're already doing.

The Polity includes our Graduate Institute, which I must not fail to mention although this account is mostly concerned with the undergraduate college. The Graduate Institute is meant to give people who have missed out on it a belated chance at the kind of liberal learning offered at St. John's. Its content is derived from the undergraduate Program but the ordering is by subject segments lasting a semester: Literature, Politics and Society, Mathematics and Natural Science, Philosophy and Theology, History. The completion of four of these leads to a Master's degree in liberal arts. In Santa Fe, the Graduate Institute also includes a program on the Eastern Classics; students tackle the Great Books of China, India, and Japan.

What the Graduate Institute students, who are generally older, might lack in the skills the undergraduates practice through four years and in the continuity of their reading, they make up in maturity and appreciativeness. Many tutors love to teach the same books to students fully engaged in practical life. Our G.I.'s, as they are called, in turn thrive when they realize that tutors will help but won't dominate their learning, that they are encouraged to reflect on their studies in the light of their experience.

9.

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF OUR PROGRAM?

IT'S TIME TO COME TO THE PROGRAM ITSELF. THE FIRST FEATURE THAT SURPRISES THE public is that it is almost entirely prescriptive and what is more, prescriptive not only for the students but also for the teachers: four years of non-elective, non-departmental, non-specialized study for students and tutors alike.

We really mean it. The same Program our students commit themselves to is learned and taught by us, though of course more slowly, over many years. After all, if they can learn all its parts so, presumably, can we.

What we lose by this perhaps startlingly unconventional approach is, as so often at the college, also what we gain. We are, as I said, perpetual amateurs and often ourselves at sea. But these deficiencies also make us better teachers – more sympathetic, fresher (no yellowed lecture notes for us), more alive to students' difficulties. Intellectual daring – the willingness to plunge into new material, unabashed candor – the willingness to admit ignorance, and bald directness – the readiness to do without scholarly camouflage – these are the virtues this approach requires, and we think that such non-authoritative teaching does our students good. Since advancing in the Program by teaching it is the main project of the tutor's life, especially in the first ten years, the dean, who is responsible for the teaching slate, contravenes the rules of seniority observed at most institutions. Newer tutors are more apt to get the classes they ask for as they plan their own learning schedule; the more experienced faculty is not favored.

What matters even more is that under this all-required Program, which comprises about sixteen year-long classes over the four years, all the students in the same year are doing the same thing. Hence they can – and do – talk to each other; a senior might be seen helping a freshman with an astronomical diagram. Nothing contributes more to making us into a working community than our common curriculum.

But the thought behind all others is that there are elemental skills and crucial books with which every inhabitant of modernity should have experience, and that it is a faculty's responsibility to establish these learning matters and to have faith in them. Students tend to have faith in their teachers' faith: Although our students are given to raising questions about everything, there is remarkably little resistance engendered by the Program, hard taskmaster though it be. (To be sure, our students chose this curriculum, but what student was ever prevented from complaining by that little fact?)

We find that the conventional elective system has too many pedagogically dubious aspects: How can a student make a knowledgeable educational choice before being educated? Should students really follow their bent or shouldn't they rather submit themselves to expansive diversity? Is it good for them to fill up on gut courses or unplanned alternatives when their preferred course is full? There is much to be said for giving up passing preferences in favor of a liberating experience, and capricious choice in favor of a coherent study plan. For we make every effort to keep the curriculum not only excellent in its matter but also coherent in its ordering.

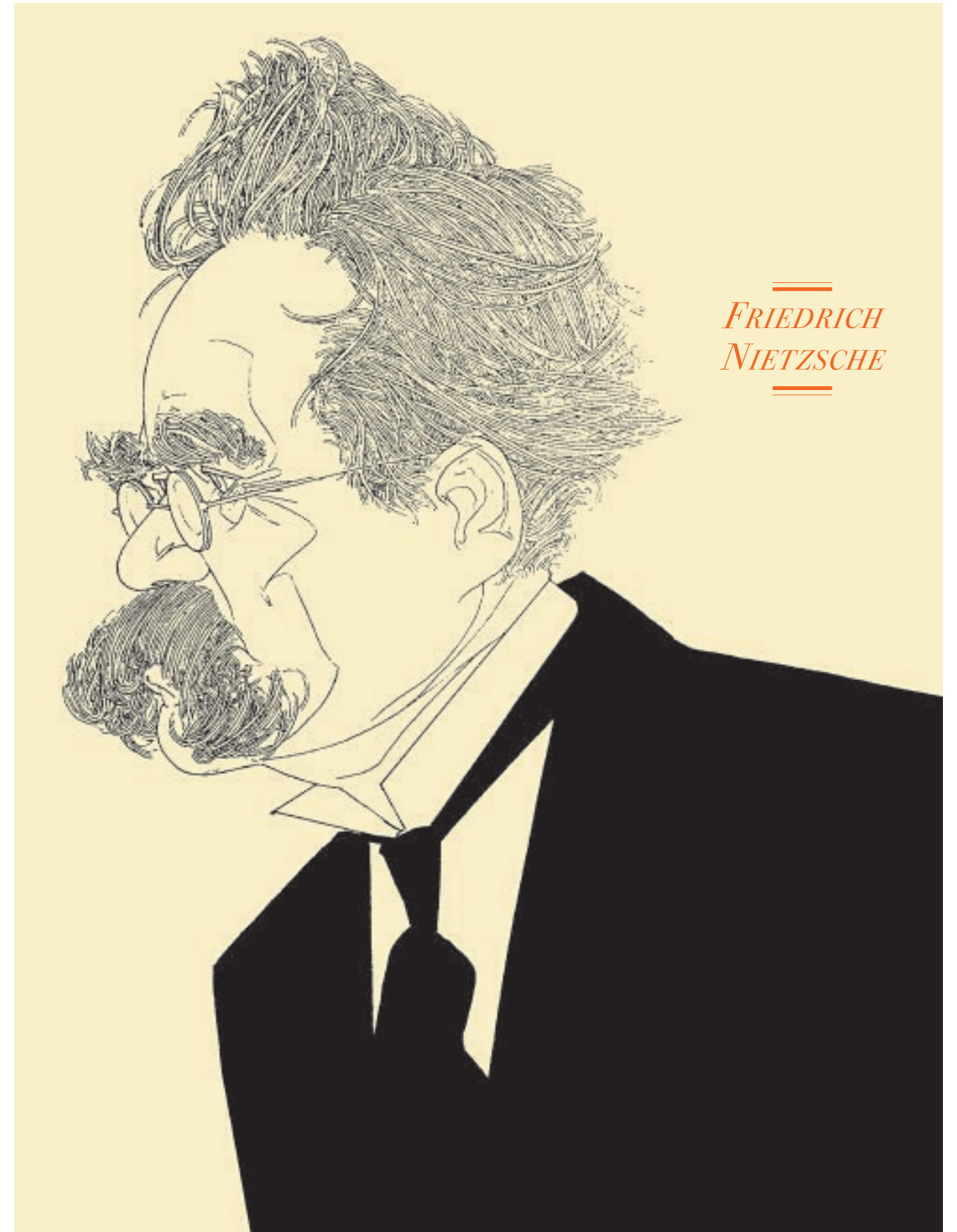
The first essential feature of the Program is, then, its prescriptiveness for students and tutors alike. An all-required program must, of practical necessity, be elementary.

No high levels of sophistication can be reached by non-specialists. We welcome the necessity because “elementary” need not mean “introductory” or “simple-minded.” To us it rather signifies “deep and radical,” in the sense of delving into the foundations of world and soul and asking questions that go to their roots. For us it is not a shame to be always at the beginning (which the Greeks called *arché*, the governing source of things) but rather the evidence of our ever-fresh wonder. Still, the Program is, albeit basic, pretty demanding.

The second feature is that there are three kinds of classes: seminars, tutorials, and laboratories. In a very old division of liberal learning into Authors and Arts, the seminar corresponds to Authors; the largest part of our Great Books list is assigned for the seminar and discussed there (see p. 52). The Liberal Arts, the arts of language, mathematics, and music, are practiced in the three tutorials (see p. 58). The laboratory updates the medieval liberal arts tradition; the idea that the inquiry into nature requires working on stuff with instruments – “laboratory” literally means “workplace” – is quintessentially modern; here students do bench work (see p. 65).

Our catalogue – its title is “Statement of the St. John’s Program” – gives an accurate overview of the study plan. It is not a repository for hopeful projects or defunct courses but a regularly revised, detailed description of the material studied and the approach used in these classes in each year. It is our primary document.

The third feature is negative: the absence of textbooks and secondary reading. Of course, tutors and students are free to seek help from whatever quarter they can; my own shelves are full of algebra and calculus and physics textbooks. But textbooks are



conveniently canned wisdom, and we prefer to use, wherever possible, original works, because they are usually closer to the foundational questions. Where we want to achieve some usable competence quickly we try to employ manuals written by tutors for the Program. They range from our Greek manual, which manages to teach introductory Greek in a reflective way, to a number of mathematics and physics manuals often containing annotations to accompanying original papers.

To my knowledge we never assign secondary literature (that is, scholarly treatments of a primary work) to students though we may recommend some to them and to each other. Annotations and commentaries explaining difficulties in texts are, I suppose, gratefully resorted to by all tutors as they prepare for class or engage in private study – which, of course, often comes to fruition in the community.

10.

WHAT IS THE ST. JOHN'S SEMINAR,
THE CENTER OF THE PROGRAM?

THE SEMINAR IS THE CENTER IN SO FAR AS ALL THE LIBERAL LEARNING OF THE PROGRAM is meant to come to fruition here. A seminar in our sense is just a conversation among a score or fewer people focused by – and mostly on – a book (or musical score or painting) that the members have read (or heard or looked at) beforehand. The regular seminars of the Program happen in the evening, on the hypothesis (truer, alas, for the

young than for their elders) that intelligent loquacity is at its peak at night. Some run way past the allotted two hours, but experience teaches, as has been said of a hanging, that a predictable cut-off time wonderfully concentrates the mind.

Seminar begins with a question posed by one of the seminar leaders, who sit at opposite sides of the oblong table. There are normally two tutors leading the seminar. The point is to prevent students from talking to the teacher, to inhibit a tutor's dominating the conversation, and, now and then, to treat students to a collegial difference of opinion. Newer tutors are, as I said, paired with more experienced ones, and this is often their most effective initiation into our ways of teaching. We find that this apparently profligate arrangement is of the essence; two-leader seminars really go better by our criteria: students talking and listening to each other.

There are, grossly speaking, two seminar styles. Some tutors, like spirits silently brooding upon the waters, utter hardly a word and make things go merely by their attentive presence. I've heard students say: "He's a wonderful leader, he's almost silent." In the same vein, when I was dean, I listened often to the complaint: "He dominates" – evidently a major tutorial transgression for students who take our promises seriously.

Other tutors regard themselves as full-fledged members of the conversation who will have their say, though, of course, on the same terms as the students. Both styles can work.

But the main duty of the leaders is to keep things moving, ask new questions, recall members from tangents – though some flights from the texts are too interesting

to rein in quickly. In any case, we are in seminar not only to attempt to understand what our author for the night is saying but also to decide for ourselves whether there is truth in the book and how it might affect our lives. Living engagement is the soul of the seminar, and often spurts of witty banter or gusts of delighted laughter are testimonial to the spontaneity of the conversation. Playfulness is the style of live as opposed to dead seriousness. But the bread-and-butter mood of the seminar is candor, straightforwardness, responsiveness, and the conciseness that comes from thinking before speaking – though we don’t want members to inhibit their contributions with too much circumspection.

Students who have been in seminar together become memorable to each other. An alumna of three decades will say: “Oh yes, Ms. X., she always used to...” (Our students are strictly held to formal address to preserve civility even in the heat of topics that touch them nearly.) We do, however, try to keep ourselves and our students from assuming hallmark positions, and we would like contributions to be at once impromptu and to the point. That’s the art of seminar participation in a nutshell.

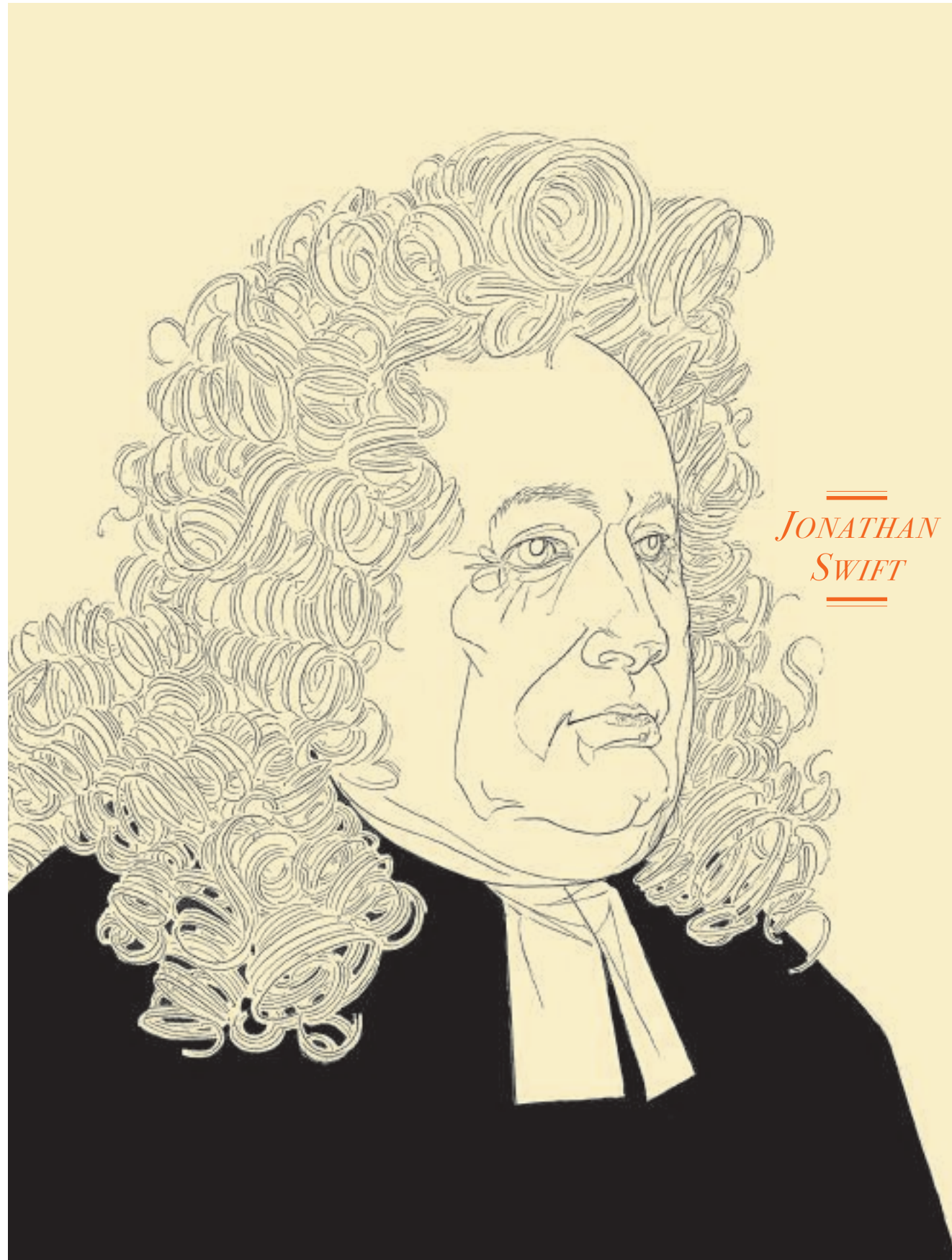
Students are expected to do their readings, which may vary from thirty to a hundred thirty pages, well ahead of time and twice if possible. When I see a student in the coffee shop late on Monday afternoon with the book open on page ten, I shudder.

Our set seminar list looks chronological. But we are not exemplifying a historical development; each book stands on its own. We read our authors largely in the order in which they wrote, because that is the null hypothesis which relieves us from imposing subject groupings or schools of thought on our assignments, and because these

writers frequently absorb or take issue with each other. Thus they form each other’s context and relieve us from fabricating introductions.

One way to put our approach to the Great Books is that we see in them not history but tradition, history being what has passed and is no longer, while tradition – literally “what has been handed over” to us – is what is ours, now. Many of us are history buffs privately, but no school was ever less interested in bygones than ours. Nonetheless, over the 256 seminars of their four years our students do accumulate some knowledge that might be called historical. But they remain blessedly ignorant of conventional classifications: epochs of history, schools of thought, academic subjects. You might, for example, ask a junior, who has just read it, what the subject of Newton’s *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* really was and receive a wondering answer: Theology? Philosophy? Mathematics? Mechanics? Dynamics? Astronomy? Cosmology?

Where does the seminar list come from? Such lists were made and kept being made from antiquity on. Our list came largely from the “best books” lists compiled for workmen’s education classes in England and for honors courses in America, beginning in the late nineteenth century. It is revised for titles and fine-tuned for selections regularly, but it is essentially stable; the judgment of the reading community diverges at the edges but unifies about the core. We know very well that every central book has about it a penumbra of fine authors and that these come front and center as they are discovered by enthusiastic advocates. Nonetheless I never cease to marvel at the palpable difference between great and good; the latter pass by, the former you live with



perpetually. Those are the ones we want our students to experience.

Associated with the seminar is the preceptorial, a two months' break in the junior and senior seminars during which the students study a chosen subject, book, or author, along with a tutor. The subject might be a text from within or beyond the Program, be it fiction or philosophy, poetry or music, or a theme, say thermodynamics or economics. These breaks are felt to be a kind of festival of the mind for students and tutors alike, for the classes are smaller, the pace of study is more leisurely and the penetration deeper.

The annual essay, a much longer piece than is required of students in tutorials, is written for and examined by the seminar leaders. For their writing of the senior essay, which is to be the fruit of their four years and which must be acceptable if they are to graduate, seniors are given a free month. This essay is not supposed to be a product of research but of disciplined, well-expressed reflection on a book or topic. It must be found acceptable by a committee of tutors formed for the purpose. Some essays are mediocre, but many are purely wonderful. The bond between essay-writing senior and essay-advising tutor often lasts a lifetime.

11

WHAT DO WE DO
● IN THE TUTORIALS?

IN THE TUTORIALS WE PLY THE LIBERAL ARTS, THE SKILLS OF THE INTELLECT. THE tutorials are recitation classes led by one tutor who directs the students' translations and demonstrations and helps them work out difficulties. The arts here practiced are not learned as bare rules or as processes privileged over products; they are not mere techniques. They have always had powerful matters of their own in which they are set out and exemplified, as a Euclidean proposition is at once a lesson in formal thinking and a piece of substantial geometry.

In fact our tutorials still follow the traditional list of the liberal arts. First come the arts of language, thinking and expression, the trivium or "three-way": grammar, logic, rhetoric. Then come the arts of formal structures in time and space, the quadrivium or "four-way": mathematics starting with the unit and the counting numbers of arithmetic and ascending dimensionally from the partless point to the plane and to the geometric solid, proceeding with the application of mathematics to visible nature in physics, particularly in astronomy, and culminating in passion-inducing sound in music, above all, the music of the spheres. (I am told that in the slightly overwrought early days of the Program, the books on natural science in our library were accordingly cataloged under "Music.") The rules, structures, and formalisms of these arts, together with their exemplary applications, form the matter of the tutorials. And of course, they are also the elements of and models

for the Great Books.

Thus we have a language, a mathematics and a music tutorial.

A. *The language tutorial* lasts through all four years. The language learned in the first two years is ancient Greek, in the last two French. Students sometimes refer to the "Greek" or "French" tutorial, but that is not our intention. In fact, except for a few students, the language competence isn't, mildly speaking, very high; our students come to us, after all, largely from average American high schools. These are *language* tutorials, and though we obviously can't talk about language without linguistic examples, a very moderate (laboriously acquired) knowledge of the elements will suffice for our purpose, which is to reflect on the ways of human speech: What are the "parts of speech" and how are they connected to thinking, that is, how is grammar related to logic? What does it take to say the same thing in two languages, that is, to translate? What makes some speech "rhetorical," that is, especially persuasive?

Why ancient Greek, a dead language? Well, it isn't dead to us and it's beautiful; it's the language in which most of our freshman books are written; it's philosophically fundamental and etymologically helpful to the semantics of English. And it's just sufficiently different in syntax from English to make comparisons possible and profitable. In my experience Greek is the least complained-of subject in the Program.

Why French? Many years ago there was a grand debate to decide between German and French. As I recall, French won primarily on the grounds of "sensibility": We didn't have enough sheer elegance in the Program. Perhaps it was also that French was

a little easier? In any case, our students read and translate, line by line, fine examples of the verbal arts, among them Greek and French plays and a lot of poetry. These serve as exercises in rhetorical analysis, to be sure, but also as enrichments of the imagination. There is, besides the study of the elementary grammars of both languages, also a sequence in logic. And rhetoric is practiced in a number of short papers, some of which are critiqued at paper conferences. We are of two minds here: whether, time being limited, to indulge our natural pleasure in carrying on a conversation about the student's intended content or to do our bounden duty to correct misplaced commas and skewed syntax while preaching the gospel of meaningful discourse.

B. *The mathematics tutorial*, which also runs through all four years, is generally agreed to be the easiest to teach. That's inherent in the Greek word "mathematics," which means "what pertains to learning." Our mathematics, to many a student's surprise, is most satisfyingly learnable, and, to exaggerate only a little, practically teaches itself. Hence we don't acknowledge mathematics blocks, and so we don't have any. Partly, of course, that follows from the fact that our students have chosen to study in this Program, but it is also because we regard mathematics not as a difficult impersonal technique but as a liberal humane art. We wish our students to be easy with the thought that mathematics might be close to the roots of human nature, for example, our root capacity for recognizing units and counting them and our mysterious ability to picture the inherently invisible such as points without parts, lines without breadth, solids without matter.

Our four years are elegantly framed by two kinds of geometry, Euclidean and non-Euclidean, studied in freshman and senior year respectively. One is the geometry of the natural imagination and the other is a geometry that, though logically consistent, is imaginable only on a model within our basic Euclidean world.

One reason mathematics is eminently learnable is that it has few, well-ordered elements: definitions, axioms, postulates (whereas language begins everywhere at once and has complex elements: morphology, syntax, vocabulary). These are the elements that Euclid organized in his classical compendium of that name, the book we study in the freshman year. It is a tiny change in one of his postulates that produces the mind-bogglingly strange new geometry of the senior year, which, for example, has no similar figures (figures, that is, of the same shape but of different size) and which we study from the work of its originator, Lobachevsky.

In between we study one mathematical revolution after another: the diagrams used by Ptolemy to "save the phenomena," that is, to give a rational foundation to the appearances of an earth-centered cosmos and their conversion by Copernicus to a sun-centered universe; the geometric conic sections of Apollonius and their transformation into the loci generated by algebraic equations (by some accounts the one single conceptual innovation most explanatory of modernity); the advance from the static mathematics of the ancients to a mathematics of motion as formalized in the calculus; the expansion of counting numbers to include zero, negatives, rationals, and finally irrationals as conceived by Dedekind; the turn of mind that allows us to think of infinity not as an indefinite progress but as an actual transfinite magnitude; and

Einstein's theory, which overturns our ingrained assurance that this moment here is the same "now" throughout space.

We ask our students to study these high moments in actual mathematical detail not simply as evidence of human progress, for at every turning point we ask also what was lost in dropping an earlier restraint. Nor do we study them as history of science, for we value each discovery for its intrinsic beauty (a word now proscribed by aestheticians but fully active among mathematicians). We do, however, want students to carry away not a secondhand but a direct knowledge of the intellectual effort that went into the making of their world.

c. *The music tutorial* happens in the sophomore year, just when most of our theology is read in the seminar - not by chance, for music is not only traditionally the apex of the liberal arts but, in Luther's words, "stands close to theology."

As a liberal art music has learnable elements out of which it is composed, a kind of qualitative mathematics: small number ratios which, when realized by plucking strings of various lengths stretched over a sounding board, produce the consonances and when compounded yield the diatonic scale, the circle of fifths which displays the keys, and so on to the traditional rules of meter, melody and harmony and their inspired breaching by composers. Perhaps in no other liberal art are the elements so immediately also the building blocks of its works.

Our students study these and then analyze musical compositions, score in hand. They pay attention, especially in sacred music, to the relation of words to notes; they



consider the relations of parts to wholes; they learn to hear subtleties and recognize large designs. In sum, they reflect on the phenomenon of incarnate, impassioned mathematics in general and on the new effects obtained by stylistic innovations in particular. There is, of course, a repertory of superlative examples.

Truth to tell, not all tutors trust themselves to teach the music tutorial, which seems to be the only class requiring some special talent and prior training. I haven't myself, though I've attended it. And we do always seem to find people who have the daring to do it.

As I've mentioned, as freshmen all our students sing together. When the alumni return for Homecoming some of them again sing together, pieces from their freshmen chorus manual. Altogether, this school is full of music.

I might add here that a decade or so ago we had a great debate about the role that the visual arts, not traditionally included in the liberal arts, should play within the Program. On the Santa Fe campus a painting segment was tried out; it is gone now. My guess is that the visual arts - which are certainly vigorously plied extracurricularly in our studios and appreciated through exhibitions in our campus art galleries - don't quite fit into our Program because the teachable elements are hard to marshal into a common curriculum, and there is in them nothing quite equivalent to making music together; so music appears to be the art most in accord with a community of learning.

12.

HOW DOES THE
LABORATORY FIT IN?

THE LABORATORY IS, FINALLY, THE NEWCOMER TO THE LIBERAL ARTS, THOUGH THERE IS for us no question that it belongs with them. For what Francis Bacon calls - surely the allusion is intended - "the inquisition of nature," meant to force her secrets from her, is a human concern no less than any of the humanities as now understood: the human-centered studies such as, say, literature.

In the three-year laboratory, then, we subject the bodies and motions of nature to controlled conditions, from Galileo's inclined plane to Millikan's oil drop chamber, and apply instruments of observation and measurement to them. Although original accounts of discoveries are read and discussed and tutor-written manuals are studied, the main activity is hands-on benchwork, experimentation in the sense of subjecting stuff to procedures. Our laboratory equipment is not generally sophisticated, and we don't expect our students to make new discoveries. Instead we replicate numerous crucial experiments and get an elementary notion of the kind of ingenuity and patience required to make a science of nature's ways. I don't remember in my years of learning to be a laboratory tutor ever hearing the "scientific method" even mentioned; it never seemed that anything so jiggled as one scientific protocol could apply to all these great moments. Probably our students could nevertheless give a pretty good account of what it means to define a problem, to devise an experimental setup, to subject phenomena to measurement, to record data and gauge their value.

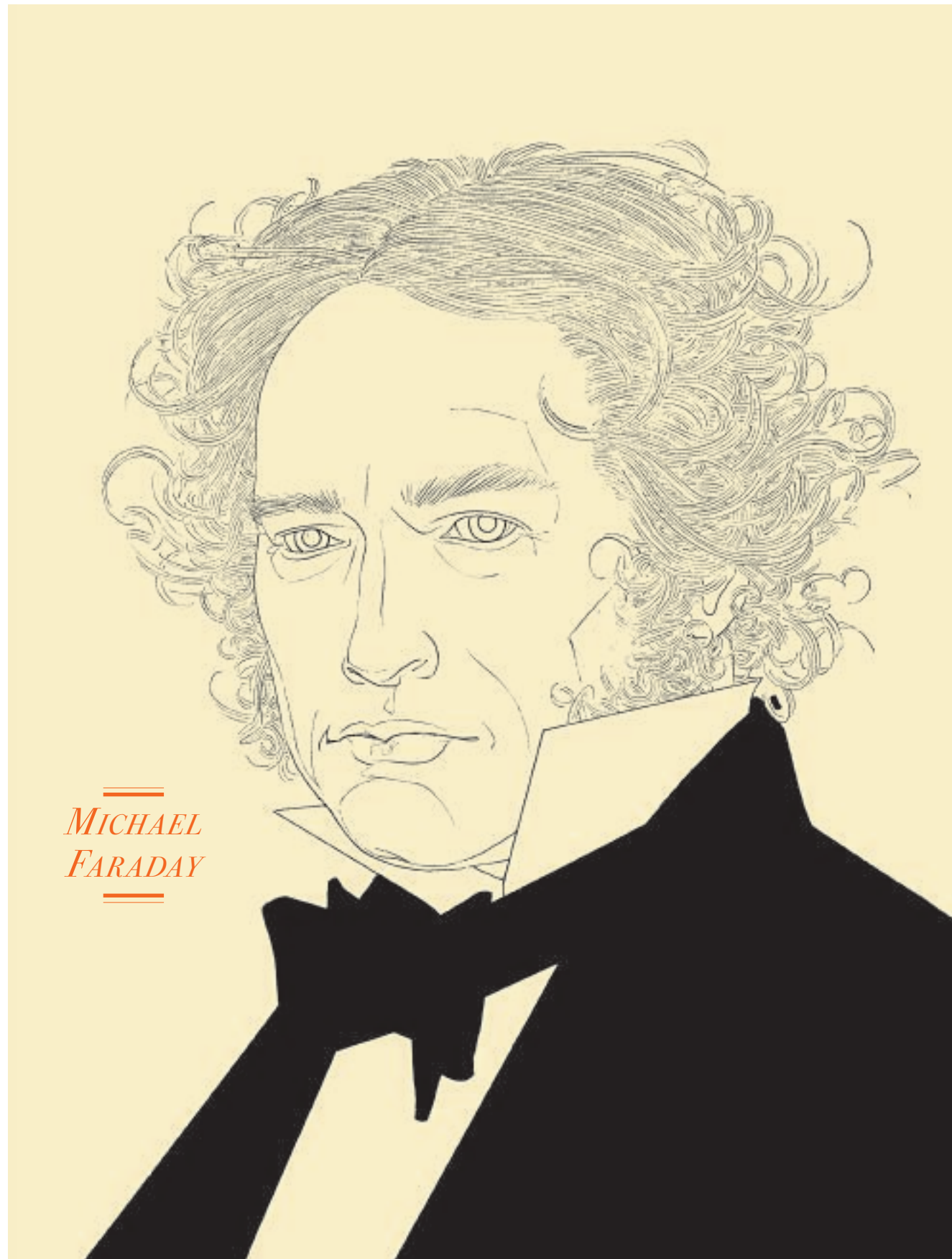
The freshman year begins with observational biology, with the tricky problem of classification: Is outside appearance or inside structure more revealing? The laboratory then takes up the problem of measurement and the atomic constitution of matter. The sophomore year is given over to music, but the laboratory resumes in the junior year with kinematics, mechanics, dynamics, optics, electricity and magnetism up to Maxwell's equations. Since by the middle of the year students know some calculus, the class isn't so different in content from that of a standard first-year physics course, except for the use of seminal papers, and in the hours given to reflecting on the meaning of physical quantities like matter, force, energy, fields - how they show themselves and how they came to be formulated. The senior year returns to biology, now on the sub-individual, that is, molecular level, but first takes up subatomic, that is, quantum, physics. At this point the laboratory becomes fairly demanding, not only mathematically but also conceptually. Recall that none of the students are science majors. Nonetheless, they study some early papers on radiant energy and think about the way nature becomes elusive on the subatomic level: the wave-particle duality (the theory that radiation and matter are in some respects wave-like and in others particle-like); probability (the theory that on a very small scale strict causality fails and the laws of nature are statistical); and uncertainty (the theory that the process of observation itself makes the simultaneous measurement of certain quantities in principle impossible). With these investigations our students are ready for their world, not only because they have some notion how science is developing far beyond our naïvely natural understanding of nature, but also because they can judge for themselves how

far the pervasive application to human affairs of these well-defined terms of physics - including, of course, relativity - is legitimate.

Once a week, on Friday night, there is a lecture, the only one in the Program for which attendance is obligatory - perhaps a rule more honored in the breach than the observance. But the students who generally profit most from the Program are present. After the lecture there is an intense, searching and sometimes interminable question period. Visiting lecturers, all spent though they may be, find these midnight revels exhilarating. Where have they ever been so well attended to?

13. WHAT DO WE WANT FROM AND FOR OUR STUDENTS?

WHAT WE EXPECT FROM OUR STUDENTS WHILE THEY ARE WITH US, WHAT IT TAKES TO DO well, is somewhat different from what in most schools is called "keeping your grades up." Steady preparation, faithful attendance, timely delivery of well-written papers - these virtues are only part of it. We want our students to extend themselves through the Program, even to the parts that don't come easily to them, and to be serious about their whole vocation as students. We want them to think of themselves as responsible members of the community of learning: The faults of "having stopped learning" and "not contributing to the class's learning" as judged by their tutors are



causes for being “disabled.”

What about morality, that swamp of uncertainty for America’s educational institutions? We are bound to enforce local and federal law on drinking, drugs and sexual conduct. But we are an institution of learning, devoted to the cultivation of the intellect and the imagination, and our first and peculiar care is for the intellectual virtues. There are certain kinds of behavior that we judge to be incompatible with our community of learning, and our Student Handbook states this clearly. In particular, the use of illegal mind-altering substances and the practice of intellectual dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism) are not tolerated when they come to our notice; these we investigate exceedingly carefully and punish quite uncompromisingly. This morality we confidently enforce for the sake of the college’s mission. You can’t work in our spirit if you’re not in your right mind, and you are doing less than nothing if your work is not your own. And though our students come to us from a dangerous world, I think, occasional paroxysms aside, that they lead remarkably good and sober lives. What we would really wish is that all their intoxications and ecstasies were those of the thinking soul.

This is what else we want for them: four years of minimally clouded thoughtfulness. For this we have managed to keep our classes remarkably free of a current scourge of higher education: politicization. The Program, whose works are full of religious doctrine and political opinion, requires something higher than tolerance; it requires appreciative openness to all the possibilities of the intellect and the passions. No tutor is entitled to wreck our conversation by introducing a personal ideology, and our students generally have the tact to veer off from politics in the narrow current sense

(the sure sign of which is getting hot under the collar; it marks the difference between politics and political philosophy, which remains relatively serene under opposition). We want students to feel safe in bringing all their experience to bear on the discussion of the books, but we hope they will learn to lever them into a large, universal mode.

This desideratum for our students is so close to the heart of our life that I will try saying it again: We want to give our students a classroom in which inciting books are talked about not as mere literature nor as historical documents, but boldly as they meant themselves to be taken: as the Word of God, or the insight of the intellect, or the wisdom of the world. And yet we want these same students to read subtly, not as believers, disciples, and partisans – that may happen privately – but receptively, with that most desirable of human dispositions, an open mind, one which hears appreciatively and responds judgingly, both at once.

14.

WHAT DO WE WISH FOR –
AND SEE – IN OUR ALUMNI?

“ALUMNI” IS A WORD OF AFFECTION – IT MEANS “NURSLINGS.” WHAT NOURISHMENT do we hope St. John’s has given its alumni to strengthen them for what is so curiously called “real life”? I can think of five headings:

I. *Community:* We hope that they will carry away a picture of a community of pur-

pose, and that they will themselves be the catalysts of such communities of two or of many members, for action or for contemplation: companions, families, firms, schools. And indeed our alumni are by preference founders and maintainers of small worlds.

2. *Courage:* We expect them to be full of boldness in approaching intellectual and practical problems, in complementing their liberal learning with expertise, in transmuting their four years’ study into life-long learning and reading. And indeed our alumni seem to learn and do practically anything, and they are, many of them, inveterate readers and seminar-goers.

3. *Decency:* The fallout of years of thoughtful reading about good and evil should be at least plain probity. Not to suppose so is to renounce faith in the moral effect of liberal learning. And in fact, the alumni I know well do seem to have very live consciences.

4. *Tradition:* Our alumni are in a singularly good position to live in appreciative tension with the Western tradition, to know how we came to be what we now are, namely moderns, to preserve our treasures and reform our faults, and to recover for themselves what we always were, human beings. And in fact, many of our alumni live as it seems to me we ought to live: half in, half out of our times.

5. *Self-knowledge:* Our alumni are as busy as anyone, but we hope that they will find time for that inner housekeeping, that coolly unclouded self-awareness they learned about in their freshman year under the Delphic injunction “Know thyself!” And that is the reality: One of the delights of seeing alumni, perhaps after decades of disappearance, is the ready candor with which they report on the state of their soul – for what would concern their former tutors more?

15.

POSTSCRIPT: A SMALL COLLEGE
AND THOSE THAT LOVE IT

I WANT TO END WITH THE PERORATION OF A SPEECH THAT DANIEL WEBSTER MADE IN behalf of his own school before the Supreme Court, Chief Justice Marshall presiding, a plea which won the case and resulted in making independent colleges like St. John's safe from at least one danger - public control (Dartmouth College Case, 1818). He concluded, and had the Chief Justice in tears:

Sir, you may destroy this little institution... but if you do..., you must extinguish, one after another, all those great lights of science, which, for more than a century have thrown their radiance over the land! It is, sir, as I said, a small college, and yet there are those that love it...

Well, St. John's has been here even longer than that, weathering other storms that have only made it stronger. And though it too is a small college, it is also a great college, so that those that love it, love it with good reason.



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