

The 461st Convocation

Address: “Yes, No, Perhaps: Teachings from the Dialectic of the Middle Ages”

By Anne W. Robinson

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I congratulate you on this defining moment and for all that this day represents for you and your families. Yes, the testimony of my colleagues assures me that you are thoroughly prepared and superbly qualified to receive your degrees; no, I personally shall require nothing more of you; although *perhaps* in the next few minutes I will succeed in urging you to contemplate one particular aspect of your Chicago experience.

In your time here you have learned how to look at issues from all sides. The very structure of your educational experience stressed this: the small classes, the seminars, the discussion groups, and the emphasis on a core of texts and methods that brought you into what we hope was fruitful dialogue with us and with your fellow students. This structure is one of the distinctive features of the University, perhaps the primary reason you chose to come to Chicago. Through the close give-and-take you had with teachers and peers, you have been encouraged to speak out, to formulate your opinions through questioning, even at times through direct confrontation. You tried your ideas in numerous forums outside the classroom, too—the workshops, the various colloquia series in your departments and schools—and we hope that the open boundaries within the University stimulated you to push across disciplinary lines. Some of you today have written dissertations, “original contributions to knowledge,” as they are defined, and we read their impressive titles in our programs. Many of you have just completed senior essays, others will have taken a battery of challenging exams. In all of these exercises, you were concerned in large measure with “knowing things,” with creating, finding, interpreting, adding to, building up, and tearing down “knowledge.” Whatever the pitfalls of the Chicago Plan in our College and of the Socratic method in the College, professional, and graduate schools, you have emerged more certain of how to establish the rightness of your own position and more willing or better able to understand other points of view. Good—that is what we hope we have given you; that is one of the things we believe is unique about the Chicago experience.

And although we like to think that we do this well, our commitment to helping you learn to produce knowledge through vigorous debate from different angles is hardly new, of course. In fact, the dialectical method received particular impetus in the Middle Ages, which is my period of study. The enigmatic Peter Abelard, in his treatise *Sic et Non (Yes and No)*, took the daring step of setting what were seemingly conflicting passages of Scripture side by side. He then went on to show how their contradictions could best be resolved through open discussion. He writes (and here, by the way, I quote from the still standard edition of his work, made and published at Chicago by our own late professor of philosophy Richard McKeon): “By doubting we come to inquiry and by inquiry we perceive the truth.”¹ In Abelard’s day, such bold thinking was not necessarily lauded, and, unlike the University of Chicago, his own home institution—the burgeoning University of Paris—was not always supportive. The dialectic that he passed down nonetheless flourished and forms the backbone both of the great summas of the late Middle Ages and of all subsequent logic and scientific inquiry, as you know from your familiarity with it in these and other guises.

In my own area of music history, the dialectical method has proven crucial time and again. In the early fourteenth century, for instance, a radically new kind of music (one with fast notes and—horror of horrors—duple meter, rather than the theologically sanctioned triple meter) was hotly debated by theorists who espoused positions for and against it. So, too, the birth of opera at the beginning of the seventeenth century sparked heated dialogue between persons on the one hand favoring and on the other hand denouncing the unabashed musical emotionalism of this genre. And on and on it goes throughout music history, as in all fields. It is no accident that the National Endowment for the Humanities, along with many other granting organizations, reserves a category of awards specifically for collaborative research projects; intense dialogue between two or more parties traditionally leads to scholarly and scientific breakthrough, new social ideas, and artistic innovation of all kinds.

But is this the sum total of your Chicago education—the “yes and no”? Did you simply learn to exercise impeccable reasoning here? I hope not. Remember what Abelard says: “By *doubting* we come to inquiry.” What about that initial process of “doubting”? Often it is messy—not at all the more controlled back-and-forth of the “inquiry” that follows. That is, sometimes we all but

flounder our way to the inquiry by which we perceive the truth. In your own experience, think about the papers you wrote in which you found it difficult even to conceptualize the problem; think of the questions you thought you would never answer, the ones with which you struggled just to get to the point where you could write that list of pros and cons.

You have all experienced this frustration in one form or another, and I like to think that, in dealing with it, you engaged in another kind of dialectic. For the sake of giving my remarks a pithy title, I have used the word “perhaps” to indicate this “other dialectic.” And what I am referring to here is this: do we sometimes place too much emphasis on “knowing,” that is, on what we think should be the end product, arrived at through careful reasoning? Do we often fail to appreciate the initial, transitional, or even opposite, states that we occupy in our work before we get to the more disciplined process of “knowing”?

My own recent experience with the “perhaps,” rather than the “yes and no,” is, I imagine, fairly typical. I studied a group of confusing fourteenth-century French songs that inexplicably included Latin theological sayings. For a long time, it seemed impossible to reconcile these two conflicting registers, the one vernacular and the other sacred: how could I make any sense of them? Only when I was able to open my mind completely and imagine the previously unimaginable could I begin to understand these pieces for what they really were. This type of research I found to be, quite frankly, uncomfortable at first; for quite a while I could not rely on the trusty tools of reasoning that I normally use.

In the Middle Ages, in fact, mystic theologians made much of the direct *opposite* of “knowing” God, which they called “un-knowing,” or the “negative way” (the *via negativa*). You may have encountered that English mystic, anonymous to us now but nonetheless famous in his time, who wrote a treatise entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I think there is a lesson to be drawn from his work. That is, the way to “knowing” is sometimes to be found in the revelation that first comes from “unknowing.” As the author of *The Cloud* writes: “For when you first begin . . . all that you find is a darkness, a sort of cloud of unknowing; you cannot tell what it is, except that you experience in your will a simple reaching out. . . . This darkness and cloud is [*sic*] always [there].” And then he says something quite interesting: “So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as

you can.”²

Many of you have already sensed this state, I’m sure. And several of my colleagues have as well in dealing with the medieval mystics in their writings. Our own Dean in the Division of the Humanities, Janel Mueller, wrote the preface for Walter Hilton’s mystical treatise called *The Scale of Perfection*. Christina von Nolcken in the Department of English is working on Henry Suso’s *Hourglass of Wisdom*, and Michael Camille of the Department of Art has studied its fantastic illuminations. So, too, Bernard McGinn of the Divinity School is in the midst of a monumental, multi-volume study of the history of western mysticism, and he is equally active in bringing mystical treatises to light in modern editions. In rubbing shoulders with these and others of my colleagues, I hope that you’ve already gained an understanding of this state, and I also hope you’ve recognized and savored it. Perhaps it has even led you to new ways of looking at things. I, for instance, ultimately found that those hybrid fourteenth-century songs were in fact reflections of the standard mystical journey to the Divine, albeit written in the very opposite, earthy language of courtly love. And I even dare to think that my newest colleague in medieval studies might have experienced something of this condition. Faced with a musical notation that is, and forever will be, indecipherable to us, our own President Don Randel nonetheless unraveled, piece by piece, the musical repertories of eleventh-century Spain in his now classic study of the responsorial psalm tones for the Mozarabic office.

All of this, of course, is neo-Platonic philosophy at its most basic, and it has made its appearance many times since its formulation in the Middle Ages. I hope you will cherish the image of “unknowing,” both as a comfort (perhaps even when your future employer is annoyed because you do not “know” something) and as a challenge to experience this *tabula rasa*, this open-mindedness, this place in which intuition and insight are sometimes born. Yes, of course, I still urge you to seek the “yes and no,” to look for truth in all of your work, to remove doubt and uncertainty, to teach your students, build your portfolios, win your cases, treat disease and cure your patients, and address society’s ills. But at the same time, I exhort you to “know” through “not knowing”: revel a little in the question, shun the urge to grasp easy answers, linger from time to time in the cloud, dwell whenever you can in that place where deep wisdom often lies. I promise you that doing so will bring you benefits of the most wondrous kind.

But now we must descend from this stratospheric discussion. The present moment is hardly one of “perhaps.” Indeed, it is one of absolute clarity, as your steps across this floor in a few moments will attest. You have graduated, you have accomplished every task we have set before you. And with your families, I say *gaudeamus igitur*, and I extend to you, on behalf of my colleagues, very best wishes for everything that you will do.

Notes

1. Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non: A Critical Edition*, ed. Blanche B. Boyer and Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976–77), 103 (lines 338–9).
2. James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 120–21.

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