

**Department of English, Arizona State University, May 11, 2020**

Address by Jonathan Bate, Foundation Professor of Environmental Humanities

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT GRADUATION SPRING 2020

Let me begin with some words from Walt Whitman:

All the past we leave behind,  
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,  
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

You are pioneers. The pioneering class who are participating in the world's first Virtual Commencement. You did not want to graduate in this strange new way, and some kind of normality will return in which you can return and do the things that are traditionally done at graduations – hugging your friends, seeing your parents' pride, throwing academic caps in the air, looking your professors in the eye and saying thank you. But just because we are not physically present, the congratulations of all your professors are no less real, no less full: every year we say that you have done amazingly to stay the course, to finish the race; this year, we say that with redoubled strength because you have stayed the course and finished the race through the unprecedented upheaval of the spring semester of 2020.

Today is about you, but let me just take a moment to praise your teachers, the support staff in the department and everyone in the administration here at ASU. Because I am acutely conscious that this university has served you exceptionally well in this perilous time, has coped with the disruption of the abrupt cessation of on-campus teaching better than perhaps any other

university in the world. I know that because I have come here from a very old university called Oxford, where things move very slowly and where most of the professors had until now never heard of Zoom or Canvas, never contemplated the possibility that a virtual classroom can offer as real a teaching and learning experience as a dusty old lecture room. I can tell you for sure that they struggled greatly with the transition. ASU, by contrast, is a pioneer of online learning and indeed for many of you graduating today, via the online route, little will have changed in your learning experience even as your lives changed suddenly in March, bringing intense new challenges which you have met with great courage. But because we had the experience, the infrastructure and the willpower forged by the creation of ASU Online, we were able to transform our in-person classes with remarkable speed and effectiveness. I know you will want to join me in thanking everyone who made that possible, under the indefatigable and unflappable leadership of Kris Ratcliffe. Take a moment to hit that applause button.

But enough about us. Here a few words for you. To repeat but slightly adapt those of old Walt, grandfather of American poetry, addressing the pioneers who stepped westward, as many of you from the eastern states did when you made the choice to come to Arizona:

All the past you leave behind,  
You debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,  
Fresh and strong the world you seize, world of labor and the march,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

You are leaving behind your past as a student at ASU. But you are not saying goodbye to it. You are taking it with you, in a thousand memories and a

hundred friendships. Our past shapes our present and prepares us for our future: cherish the memories of ASU that will strengthen you; stay in touch, come back to see us and think about ways in which you can give back to your *alma mater* in order to help create opportunities for future generations to benefit in the way that you have benefited.

You are debouching upon a very new and mightily scary world. A world varied beyond all imagining from what it was at the start of your final year of study. Whitman's verb 'debouch', the Merriam-Webster dictionary tells us, 'is often used in military contexts to refer to the action of troops proceeding from a closed space to an open one'. In the poem 'Pioneers, O Pioneers', it was a brilliant word choice because of its evocation of the journey from the stuffily closed space of the east coast, which in the nineteenth century still felt shaped and constrained by old Europe, to the wide open spaces of the West, which are nowhere better embodied than in the Sonora desert that you have made your intellectual home. Now, though, you are debouching into a world that is temporarily closed, a world that does not seem fresh and strong, a world not 'of labor and the march', but of the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression and an unprecedented ban not only on marching but even on public gathering. But you are the ones who are 'fresh and strong', you are the pioneers who have weathered the storm, completing your degrees whilst under such extraordinary pressure and fear. So you will endure the challenge and find your way in the world.

And you will have been well equipped by your major in English. Whether your focus has been in rhetoric or literature or language or education or film or creative writing, or any combination of the above, you will have grown and flourished in two arts that you will discover to be of

immeasurable value in whatever walk of life you find yourself. The ancient Romans called them *ratio* and *oratio*. Reasoning and speaking. Or, as we would say, critical thinking and persuasive argument. For centuries, these skills have been the essence of a humanist education.

Last year I published a book called *How the Classics made Shakespeare*, in which I showed how Shakespeare learnt those arts of rhetoric in his high school, then used them to forge the most profound, varied and humane body of dramatic literature ever to have been created. Boys of Shakespeare's generation in sixteenth-century England were given a grammar school education so that they could become responsible citizens—government administrators, perhaps—but for Shakespeare and his brightest contemporaries such as Christopher Marlowe the old worlds opened up by their study of the stories and the poetry of antiquity inspired them to imagine something new: a public theatre in which every question of what it means to be human—to be a self, a member of a family, a lover, a friend, a neighbor, a part of the body politic—could be explored and tested, pushed to extremes of tragedy, celebrated in joyous comedy, written into history for the benefit of future generations.

Those arts of *ratio* and *oratio* are a golden thread running through the literary tradition, making possible everything from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Toni Morrison. They are skills that we hone whenever we read with thoughtfulness or look at a performance—on stage, on television or on film—with attention. They are not dependent on formal education: Toni Morrison was a university teacher, whereas Shakespeare didn't go to university, but was always a reader of genius; Whitman left school at the age of eleven, but schooled himself in the literary tradition. You, I know, will never stop reading, never cease to immerse yourselves in the diverse body of creative

endeavor that drew you to major in English in the first place. But by studying for a degree you have done something extra: you have made yourself into a scholar.

So what has scholarship taught you to know and to see? Another American pioneer, the New England philosopher of transcendentalism Ralph Waldo Emerson, had three answers in his great oration ‘The American Scholar’. If he were delivering this address today, he would say that you have become Man Thinking and Woman Thinking (in his time it was only Man—we have made at least some progress in the last two centuries). The three things that makes the Thinking person, says Emerson, are these:

The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. The scholar must needs stand wistful and admiring before this great spectacle. He must settle its value in his mind.

For us today, for you in the future, there is no more important question than that of nature. Of the future of the planet. ‘Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows’ said Emerson: but the ways in which the winds blow and the grass grow are now, in the age that we have come to call the Anthropocene, shaped by humankind and its toxic emissions in a way that Emerson could never have imagined. Our most urgent need is to settle the value of our planet in our minds. And that is something to which one strand of our work in the English department here at ASU—our courses and research in Environmental Humanities—is especially alert. It might seem presumptuous to suppose that mere humanists, as opposed to climate scientists and

politicians, have a contribution to make in this regard, but we do. So, for example, I have argued in a book to be published next week that one of the figures who has genuinely changed the world by making us think about nature in a new way, with the admiration of which Emerson speaks, was the poet William Wordsworth.

Emerson continued his meditation on the formation of the true scholar by saying

The next great influence into the spirit of the scholar is the mind of the Past,—in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. Books are the best type of the influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth,—learn the amount of this influence more conveniently,—by considering their value alone.

The wisdom of the mind of the past is now available to us in many forms as well as books. Television, film, above all the internet. And our sense of that mind is far more diverse than it was for Emerson: we have learnt to listen to the wisdom of indigenous peoples as well as that of the western tradition. But there remains a challenge that you will face, and for which your studies in English will have prepared you well: to know how to sort the mind from the mindlessness, the historic truths from the fake news.

And that is important, especially so in our fractured public realm, because you have a duty to put your skills in *ratio* and *oratio* to public use. This is Emerson's third point:

There goes in the world a notion that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian,—as unfit for any handiwork or public labor as a penknife for an axe. The so-called ‘practical men’ sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or *see*, they could do nothing. ... Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. ... Without it thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.

You have studied well. Now it is time, as Strether says in Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, to ‘Live all you can: it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t matter what you do in particular, so long as you have had your life. If you haven’t had that, what have you had?’ Stand up for what you believe. Believe it rationally and argue for it articulately. Be an activist, but a reasoned and a persuasive activist. Make it your business to make the world a better place.

Just now, that sounds like an impossible task. But the lockdown will come to an end. To revert to Whitman’s word *debouch*, often used in military contexts. You are debouching from ASU in the midst of our war, a world war against a debilitating virus that may just be nature’s way of sending us a warning about the way we live now. These months will be marked for ever as a significant moment in the history of the world. Never before in thousands of years have commerce, travel, religious gathering, any gathering, come to a halt all across the world. When the world begins again, you can lead us into the future. We have sought to give you the resources to

do so, above all the resilience that can come from comforting words. Let me end by renewing, on behalf of the English department, our congratulations to you—especially to our prizewinners, but to every one of you—and by quoting some words from another inspiring work of literature.

A few days ago, we remembered the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory in an old war: the defeat of Nazism in Europe. A man who did his bit for that victory was the French-Algerian novelist Albert Camus, who fought in the French Resistance. Shortly after the war, he wrote a novel called *La Peste*, the plague, in which he imagined a town under siege from an epidemic. So many details of the novel uncannily anticipate the place where we find ourselves today. But what comes through at the end is the endurance and the hope of the human spirit. I leave you with these words:

Amongst the heaps of corpses, the clanging bells of ambulances, the warnings of what goes by the name of Fate, amongst unremitting waves of fear and agonized revolt, the horror that such things could be, always a great voice had been ringing in the ears of these forlorn, panicked people, a voice calling them back to the land of their desire, a homeland. It lay outside the walls of the stifled, strangled town, in the fragrant brushwood of the hills, in the waves of the sea, under free skies, and in the custody of love.