

President, Master, Distinguished Governors, Graduates and Guests

I want to thank the College Orator for her amicable and exorbitant words today. Only she will know how well I know what this is like for both of us. For it is something of a tradition, you see, that an incoming orator can expect to be asked before very long to practise her arts upon the outgoing or expiring orator – it happened to me, and to my predecessor, and his before him. I have inflicted this ordeal of death by a thousand compliments on many others, possibly around 50 victims who have been placed in the Chair of Repentance while I heaped praise on them (I think I must be the Ryan Giggs of academic rhetoric). So I did have some inkling what it might be like. Given that my eminent assailant on this occasion is the author of a forthcoming history of pain, I feel lucky to have got off with as few lacerations as I have. It really could have been much worse. I don't think the Birkbeck orator has ever been required to speak in Latin, but the Oxford orator is, and I must admit to cribbing from their orations on the occasions when we have been welcoming to Birkbeck as a fellow somebody who has already been honoured in Oxford. It became clear to me, as I toiled through these effusions with my battered Cassell's Latin dictionary at my elbow, quarrying for inspiration, that the advantage of speaking in Latin is that you can say more or less what you like, about the subject's political views, their favourite football team, and their taste in clothes, without anyone being any the wiser.

It is part of my function to offer sage advice and I might just use this opportunity to pass on a hint to my successor that these ceremonies can bring out a skittish side in the Master. Once you are established in your role, you may find that he is starting to dream up interesting challenges for you as orator. I remember once, for example, when he rang me in the US where I was lecturing, and told me that he would like me to welcome as a fellow a very distinguished and very generous benefactor to the college, who had specified strictly that nothing at all about her or her life was to be mentioned in the oration. (How we laughed.)

If we needed any reminding, it would have been plain from the memorial service yesterday for Eric Hobsbawm, who joined us in 1947, that Birkbeck is a very hard place to leave, and even if you do manage to make a run for it, and get past the dogs and searchlights, it turns out that

it never relinquishes its hold on you. I spent 33 years here. When I first became a lecturer, I was 24, and consequently almost always the youngest person in the room. Motherly middle-aged ladies would come up to me after lectures and say things like 'I think you did very well'. By the time I left I felt that I was probably getting the hang of a few things, but Birkbeck students never let you take anything for granted. In Cambridge by contrast, I have encountered a strange kind of intoxication, that can overtake you at the end of a five-hour stint of supervision, as the young and trusting troop in to be instructed in various mysteries, when you begin to feel that you could give a class on anything, from fluid dynamics to Minoan vase-painting, with equal credibility and with as little chance of being rumbled. It was never like that at Birkbeck, where things matter too much to students for teachers ever to get away with anything. This is why teachers at Birkbeck never recover entirely from the Imposter Syndrome, that has even grizzled veterans of the seminar room waking up in the middle of the night clawing at the air in terror that they are about to be exposed as frauds and nincompoops. For that is the condition of real knowledge, and if you are absolutely sure of what you think you know, you can be sure you have not understood it.

So I am grateful to Birkbeck for the inextinguishable curiosity and unquashable bolshiness of its students. Birkbeck is a hotbed of yesbutism – which is manifest when, having laid out in a lecture what you think is a complete and unanswerable case about something, a hand goes up at the back, and its owner says, 'yes, but...' Yesbutism is thus the opposite of despotism. But I'm grateful too for the opportunity I had as orator to see the outcomes of the work that students did on occasions like this. Birkbeck students, who have knocked around and been knocked around quite a lot more than the tender young calves and colts who populate other universities, pride themselves rightly on being pretty worldly citizens, and therefore not likely to be knocked off-centre by the flummery of an occasion such as this. But I was warned by my predecessor, Michael Slater, that just reflecting on a day like this, on what you have given up, and what you have gained, against the odds, could produce unexpected ambushes of emotion even in the toughest nuts, so that I should prepare myself to look out on a sea of glistening eyes and heaving bosoms. He was, and is right. You may do more

important things than this in your life, but if you do, it's doing this that will probably have made them possible.

Another of the privileges of being College orator has been being able to get to know in such detail the extraordinary thinking and inventing, and exploring and discovering that has been done at this place. Of the many Birkbeck colleagues whose work I have had the pleasure of celebrating, I want to single out just one, the crystallographer Alan Mackay. Alan was celebrated among many other things, for having discovered that fivefold symmetry, which is impossible in nature – you just try arranging pentagons without a gap on your kitchen floor and you'll see – actually isn't. I was coached intensively by another Birkbeck crystallographer on the circumstances in which crystals can exhibit fivefold symmetry, and so well, in fact, that I was able to retain this knowledge for almost the whole of the ten minutes required to explain it on this platform. But Alan was a poet as well as a scientist and deeply committed to the principle of what he called the Floating Republic of Knowledge, an idea that I think about almost every day. You are graduands, soon, once this is all over, to be graduates – from Latin *gradus*, a step (see, you're getting a bit of Latin after all). You have all *made the grade*. But, despite the fact that academic life can be so infatuated by grades and classes and degrees, the Floating Republic is characterised by a kind of terrifying egalitarianism. As in the Roman Republic, there are no grades or distinctions between citizens anywhere in this floating republic. Once you are in the Republic of Knowledge, whether in Bloomsbury or Bombay, Ithaca or Uttar Pradesh, you are absolutely in, and your vote and your responsibility is as great as that of a Nobel prize-winner. And you become a citizen by deciding that you would like to be, and opening a book, or asking a question, or saying 'yes, but...'

Birkbeck has had to fight hard to maintain its unique position in the university system. Birkbeck lives permanently on the brink of extinction, we find it invigorating. But I predict that we will look back at this historical moment and recognise that Birkbeck has in fact *already won*. I am wagering to you today that, within your lifetimes, if perhaps not in mine, every institution of higher education will have become a kind of Birkbeck. If you really think that human beings living for 91 years or 101 years are going to let the 21-year-olds continue to corner all the thinking

and learning for themselves, then all I can say is I have to admire your recklessness.

It is a very great honour and privilege to be able to accede today into the ancient privileges and prerogatives that attach to the position of Fellow of Birkbeck. I look forward, as tradition demands, to opening the bowling in the annual Fellows v. Freshers cricket match, and to at last being able to pasture my sheep legally in Russell Square.

Unlike many other Professors of English nowadays, I must confess to having very little interest in or respect for psychoanalysis. Still, I do have great admiration for particular psychoanalysts, among them the English psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion, who worked in London from the 1950s onwards, having begun his career before the War by spending a year and a half analysing the young Samuel Beckett, a job you wouldn't wish on a dog. Bion had been a tank commander in the First World War and was offered, but declined, a Military Cross for gallantry. I admire him, not so much for turning the medal down, as for the reason he gave. He said that almost all the people he had known who'd accepted a military decoration got themselves killed soon afterwards, trying to deserve it. I hope I won't have to go to such lengths to deserve this Fellowship, but you have my word I will try.

In fact we all have a lot to live up to. Completing a Birkbeck degree, you have all, as Philip Larkin once wrote, surprised in yourselves the hunger to be serious, and it's a hunger that it is hard to assuage. I wish I could say to you that you've done well, and that you can now put your feet up, potter in the garden, walk the dog, go to the pub and tell stories about how universities have gone to the dogs since your day. But, thinking and learning being such potent addictions, I fear the worst for you. I fear you may all find that henceforth you will only ever be able to be at best in remission from learning. And, when you do finally succumb to temptation, Birkbeck, like all good purveyors of addictive substances, will be waiting for you, with a dose of the hard stuff. Indeed, I hope that Birkbeck has each one of you as hopeless a case of addiction to thinking and learning as it has me, as I salute you as graduates of Birkbeck, and Citizens First Class of the Floating Republic.