

Memorial Service for Curtis Wilson  
September 30, 2012  
St. John's College, Annapolis  
Remarks by Tom May

It was my privilege to know Curtis Wilson as a colleague, an advisor, and a friend. I met Curtis and Becky in my first week here at the College, in an after-lecture gathering at Mrs. Klein's. This led to a dinner invitation soon afterwards, a typically gracious gesture that the Wilsons extended to new faculty, a practice they continued right up to the present.

My second year here found me teaching both sophomore seminar and freshman laboratory for the first time, and a change mid-year in the teaching slate made Curtis both my co-leader for seminar, and archon of the Freshman Laboratory. In both of these contexts, Curtis was a gentle, thoughtful, authoritative presence, with a marvelous sense of humor and deep sensitivity for what whatever we were reading. Both of us were morning people who found the lateness of seminar an additional challenge; I recall Curtis's saying to me one evening as we drove home together, "I fail to see why we should all have to be held hostage to Scot Buchanan's metabolism in perpetuity." In seminar, I recall particularly his love of Dante—he led an independent study group for anyone interested in reading Dante in Italian. I myself read the *Commedia* as a whole for the first time with him that year in that memorable seminar of "lively" students—that was Curtis's word. On the night of our second *Purgatorio* seminar, I came into our classroom to find Curtis feverishly completing a detailed schematic diagram of the great pageant in the Earthly Paradise that concludes the *cantica*, as intent on its accuracy and completeness as if he were demonstrating a proposition in Apollonius or Newton. Once class began, he opened our discussion by asking why Dante loses Virgil and is returned to Beatrice in such an elaborate setting. Both here and in our archon meetings for lab, he was attentive both to the details of the readings and to the difficulties that tutors and students might encounter in reading treatises by Archimedes, Pascal and Lavoisier for the first time, and he also wanted us to appreciate the bench work, how things were supposed to work in the *practica*, even if it meant the ruin of a beautiful plaid shirt one afternoon as, absorbed in a demonstration, he brought his sleeve too close to a Bunsen burner. "So you must learn, too, how that shower works," he said, pointing to the fixture on the other side of the room.

I subsequently learned that when Curtis came to St. Johns in 1948, Jacob Klein remarked to another colleague that now the College had a tutor who could really help us make sense of Newton's *Principia*, which he did for four decades—Newton and so much else besides! His coming here was initially a concealment of sorts from the larger academic world, though; Curtis had the reputation of being the outstanding graduate student and scholar when he was pursuing his graduate studies at Columbia, who had disappeared to what a fellow scholar who knew him there termed "a very interesting school in Maryland," which this Columbia professor recommended to another young man named Howard Zeiderman, who was then casting about as to where to go and what he should do. Curtis as tutor here would celebrate the conclusion of the Newton sequence in

Junior mathematics with a Nabisco fig newton party. Tutor Sam Kutler suggested to me in a conversation just this week that this initial interest and work on Newton initiated Curtis's abiding interest in celestial mechanics, leading him to his study of Galileo, Kepler, Horacks, and on up to his last book on the Hill-Brown theory of lunar motion—"He followed the moon and its difficulties right through to the end," he said. Shortly after the College received word of Curtis's death, Robin Dunn shared a story about this last book. It seems that one day, chatting with Curtis in the Bookstore, Robin pestered him to talk about his new tome. He replied, "Oh, you don't need to know about that; no-one's going to want to buy it!" When firmly pressed, he disclosed the publisher's name and one or two other details, then said he'd hate the bookstore to carry it, because that would just be throwing a ton of our money away—no one would ever buy it, and the College needed the money for better things. Robin insisted that as Bookstore manager he thought it his duty to support authors within our community, because even if no other store in the world sold the book, people should at least be able to count on US to have it on hand. Curtis seemed actually to blush at this. Certainly, he gave one of his modest chuckle-cum-twinkles. "Ah well, be it on your own head!" said he, on the way up the steps outside the store. Robin's anecdote reminded me of a conversation I had with Curtis in the summer of 2007, after he returned from an Euler conference in Europe, where he had delivered a paper. I asked him if the conference had gone well. "Pretty well," he replied hesitantly, appearing to hedge a bit. I pursued further: "Were there any interesting papers?" After a brief pause, with a smile and a playful glint in his eye, he said, "Yes; one." Through Curtis I met Michael Hoskin of Cambridge University, with whom he worked over a number of years both editing and contributing to the magisterial *General History of Astronomy* published by the Cambridge University Press. He asked me if we at St. John's had any notion of what a scholar and treasure we had in Curtis. I answered that I firmly believed that we did, and I asked him if he thought he knew the many other aspects of Curtis that we here are the beneficiaries of.

I was, of course, thinking of his wide teaching throughout the program, his published lectures, his many study groups, his love of music, and, most especially, the truly formative legacy of his two deanships. At the end of his first deanship, in 1962, Curtis drafted a proposal that culminated in the establishment of preceptorials as an integral elective part of the St. John's Program. In it he wrote:

"Too infrequently does the program succeed in inducing a continuing process of independent investigation and thoughtful reflection leading outward from the student's natural and initial standpoint. The frustrations involved in confronting one after another, great or important works which are never adequately understood, and the unavoidable distress involved in finding oneself again and again on uncertain ground—these effects appear insufficiently balanced by a positive sense of achievement and of independent, ongoing inquiry."

(Preceptorial Proposal, March, 1962)

How aptly this describes the exhilaration and exhaustion that tutors and students here still feel at certain moments during the over-rich and relentless annual procession of greatness we encounter in our seminars and tutorials. How difficult and sometimes daunting it is to

strike a balance between breadth and depth. I can't help but think that Curtis wrote this impassioned and succinct characterization of our common experience because this was the enduring struggle for balance he regularly felt in his own work as a tutor and scholar. Years later when a colleague asked him how he had happened to focus on the history of science and astronomy in his own work, Curtis said, "I just got tired of banging my head against Being." This year we should also commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of preceptorials, even as we celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Program.

Yet this was not all. At the beginning of his second term as Dean, in 1973, Curtis noticed a surplus of \$1500 in a ledger budget line and conceived the idea of converting Mellon 202 into an art gallery, in a way that was reversible if need be. He asked Burton Blistein, who was just beginning his long term as Artist-in-Residence, to see to this, and Burt worked with Buildings and Grounds to make plywood exhibition walls, coming in under budget. This in turn allowed him the means to work with a graphic designer on announcements of the first show, which launched the St. John's College Art Gallery. Mellon 202 reverted to laboratory classroom status in Fall 1989 with the opening of the Elizabeth Myers Mitchell Art Gallery, which is now a fully accredited member of the American Association of Museums and has 10,000 visitors a year to its five exhibitions. Curtis also led two study groups on the place of the visual arts in the program, something he saw as an unanswered question posed by the original Program catalogue as proposed by Barr and Buchanan. The first was an unofficial study group, the second an official one with the support of the Dean and Instruction Committee. It remains a recurring question.

Finally, at the end of his second deanship, in Fall 1976, as chair of the Joint Instruction Committee, the question of the place of the sophomore music tutorial in the program was again addressed. The essence of the curriculum for the tutorial had been established in 1950, but the tutorial had languished as an additional demanding class in sophomore year for several decades. With the recommendation of the Joint Instruction Committee, the Sophomore Laboratory class was discontinued, its components divided up in a way that required the reconfiguration of the whole laboratory program, a challenge which continues up to the present. More recently, as Freshman Chorus took on a more vital role as part of the Music Program, and concerts by the class at the end of each semester became an institution, Curtis regularly attended these performances, and I would invariably find an appreciative note in campus mail the day following a performance. Many a colleague has told me finding such a note from Curtis after delivering a Friday night lecture or leading an extracurricular seminar. Such kindness, such support, such encouragement are what make us the community we wish to be, along with our books and our classes and our lectures and our conversations.

Curtis's involvement in special study groups here continued right up to this past summer, when he was part of the summer faculty study group reading John Maynard Keynes. Curtis and emeritus tutor Harvey Poe, a close friend, had come to Dean Kraus to urge that Keynes be put back onto the Senior Seminar reading list, and his own interest in Keynes grew out of his own concern for the growing inequalities of wealth in America. He said to David Townsend, the organizer of this summer's study group, over lunch one

afternoon, “David, I think that at some point the metrics of the extremities effectively become ideas which can then oppose each other either in politics or in revolution.”

#### EPIGRAPH

Aristotle in his *Parts of Animals* observes that:

The joy of a fleeting and powerful glimpse of those whom we love is greater than that of an accurate view of other things, no matter how numerous or how great they are. De Partibus animalium. 1.5.

Curtis, when anyone would pass him on campus and then ask how he was, would smile and say, “About the same.” May we say the same of the rich legacy he left us here.

Dear Becky, John and Topper, all of us share the sense of profound loss you feel and extend our heartfelt condolences to you and your family, even as we celebrate the memory of this wonderful, friend, colleague and scholar. “Gladly would he learn and gladly teach.”