In this speech, Gregory contrasts the educational paths of the two brothers, and in turn both of their journeys away from home to new sites of learning away from their native Arianzus, in Cappadocia (in central Asia Minor/Turkey). In so doing he introduces some key terms for educational institutions and curricula around which I would like to focus my talk today.

If I may quote the passage in full, Gregory says (in my translation),

“We were reared (traphentes) in such morals and customs [ēthē, as learned from our saintly parents] and educated (paideuthentes) and well practiced in the lessons learned here— in which Caesarius, as no one would dispute, was greater than the bulk of people, due to his swift mind and wonderful nature (oh, how might I approach this memory without tears and not have my emotion convict me of being no philosopher in my bearing) !— But when it seemed to be the right time to go abroad, we were then separated from one another for the first time. I, out of love for rhetoric, went to the paideutēria situated in Palestine that were blooming up at that time, and he arrived at the city of Alexandria, a place that— both then and now—in reputation and in reality, is an ergastērion of manifold paideusis.

As Gregory tells it, both brothers set out from their home, where they had learned the virtues of their Christian parents, which he has been at pains to describe (one might note—in the presence of those parents at the graveside of his brother) and in elementary education in their homeland in the arts of literacy, which he terms, τὰ ἐνταῦθα μαθήματα (“lessons learned locally”). United in their moment of departure, each sought an institution in which to move on to advanced studies; Gregory chose a course of instruction in the art of rhetoric in a paideutērion, a “school of learning.” The Lampe Patristic Greek Lexicon unnecessarily adds the word “secular” to “schools of learning, grammatical, rhetorical, legal, and philosophical education.” In fact, this was what university education in the mid-fourth century
The distinction is crucial, because in the balance lie two completely different models of education: a workshop is a place where a craft is practiced, whereas a factory is a place where products are produced. The first generates a mental image of a workbench full of tools and redolent of sweat and patience joined with creativity and artistry; the second is an assembly-line, punching out prefabricated products, with human robots performing mindless repetitive moves on objects under a deafening din of machine noise.

Not so far from the time of my seminar (one year earlier, in fact), Professor Mark C. Taylor of Columbia University had published an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times entitled, "End the University as We Know It," that employed the assembly-line metaphor for graduate education in general, and for his own specialization, the academic study of religion, in particular. The opening salvo of that editorial, which was to receive an expanded treatment in a later book, Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities, (Knopf, 2010) is that,

"Graduate education is the Detroit of higher learning. Most graduate programs in American universities produce a product for which there is no market (candidates for teaching positions that do not exist) and develop skills for which there is diminishing demand (research in subfields within subfields and publication in journals read by no one other than a few like-minded colleagues), all at a rapidly rising cost (sometimes well over $100,000 in student loans).

Although I regard Professor Taylor as a valuable voice, and author of other pieces, such as the Op-Ed "Religious Correctness" in the Times some three years earlier, which I thought was in most ways spot-on in its analysis, reading these words over morning coffee, I was immediately troubled at the analogy with which he chose to enter the debate about the need to improve American higher education. My first reaction was visceral—deep offense at the way he chose to discuss the difference between translating εργατηριανον as "workshop" or as "factory," because they give two quite different resonances in English. The distinction is crucial, because in the balance lie two completely different models of education: a workshop is the place where a craft is practiced, whereas a factory is a place where products are produced. The first generates a mental image of a workbench full of tools and redolent of sweat and patience joined with creativity and artistry; the second is an assembly-line, punching out prefabricated products, with human robots performing mindless repetitive moves on objects under a deafening din of machine noise.

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it takes a University to train a scholar of religion...

...it is to itself and the faculty, is to ensure that in the future as now, and in reality as in reputation, the Divinity School remains a place where exacting standards of the craft of research in the academic study of religion are refined, taught, modeled and carried out. Each one of us has a role in that enterprise. We need to cultivate and insist on the highest levels of specialized skills in languages, historical and textual knowledge, theoretical sophistication and originality; we need to push each other to be better, to think more clearly, to work across areas, to engage various methods and traditions with proper humility, curiosity and intellectual integrity as well as appetite.

Now before I close I want to make two more points. The first is about what is nowadays customary called the “outcomes of education,” though I much prefer the University of Chicago trademark formulation of the “aims of education.” An assembly line is designed to issue forth in a predictable product, sent out to a targeted market of (themselves pre-packaged) consumers. Products that come down the belt that are not according to this design are deemed defective, unsellable, to be discarded. The workshop is designed to incite skills of a craft that—since originality and creativity are essential to it—must lead to unpredictable results. But the unpredictability is not only due to the researcher or to the ways in which the realities he or she studies are in flux, but to a rapidly changing world within which the meanings and significances of that craft are yet to be fully known or recognized.

Professor Taylor articulates a different view:

Each academic becomes the trustee not of a branch of the sciences, but of limited knowledge that all too often is irrelevant for genuinely important problems. A colleague recently boasted to me that his best student was doing his dissertation on how the medieval theologian Duns Scotus used citations. As an author who writes extensive footnotes (one of my books has a page which is just footnote and no text) and believes deeply in footnotes as requirement of civil conversation with the living and dead about what we study; and as a colleague to faculty in Swift Hall who are all friends of the footnote (most famously, perhaps, Bruce Lincoln’s book must that scholarship is “myth with footnotes”), when I read this example about the footnote in Duns Scotus that morning in the Times it had a reverse effect than Professor Taylor intended. Is it really so small or unworthy a subject? One might compare the double resonance of the rabbinic term animal; seasoned, spiced, exacting comparison of Talmudic texts as a positive thing, or the quintessentially negative “hair-splitting” “casuistry” for vanity and meager gain? Who should decide which version of animal one sees in any given moment of scholarship?

But even beyond the affront to the scholar of antiquity or the medieval world, there is a larger issue at stake in the presumption of this example. This was pinned down with characteristic acuity by another lover of the footnote (graduate of the University of Chicago), Anthony Grafton, who countered Taylor’s claim that “most scholarship is worthless,” with two simple questions. The first was: “How does he know? The second: “How could he know?”

This is not just a plea for learning for learning’s sake (though I would defend that vehemently), nor learning for potential commercial reception, but learning precisely because the future is unknown, and the significance of the citation in Duns Scotus or any of the other myriad things we study here is yet to be seen. In education we “aim” toward a future that, precisely because it is unpredictable, needs deep stores of knowledge and discerning habits of mind that are both rigorous and flexible.

Circling back to Gregory, I want to end where he began, with the moment of transition he and Caesarius made from “home schooling” to education in the metropolis. He lists three components of their earlier education: being “reared in the morals of their parents,” being educated in their lessons in literacy and culture (mathematike), and being practiced in the use of these tools. Now we might think that the first of these means simply that Gregory and Caesarius went out into the world already formed by the simple Christian faith of their parents, from the frying pan into the fire, so to speak (and indeed Gregory wants us to think that). But in fact we know that Gregory’s father (the elder Gregory) was not born a Christian, but was a Hypsistarian, a believer in the one highest God, who practiced
rituals connected with Jewish practice (such as Sabbath observance, though not circumcision) and perhaps some Persia...