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# From Here to There: The Odyssey of the Liberal Arts

Roger Barrus  
John Eastby  
J. Scott Lee

*Selected Proceedings from the  
Thirteenth Annual Conference of the  
Association for Core Texts and Courses  
Williamsburg, VA,  
March 29–April 1, 2007*

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**Edited by  
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# Introduction

The thirteenth annual conference of the Association for Core Texts and Course, sponsored by Hampden-Sydney College and cosponsored by Averett University, James Madison University, Lynchburg College, and Norfolk State University, was held in Williamsburg, VA, near the original point of debarkation for those who launched the English exploration and settlement of North America. The journey of those who left their homes in England for a new continent was inherently a journey of discovery and physical danger. Their legacy, we have come to see, has nested the morally ambiguous alongside the grandeur of America's hopes and achievements. This seemed to the conveners of the conference a material embodiment of the ancient tradition of the journey in literature and, more broadly, culture. No better presentation of that tradition can be found than that of the *Odyssey*, which has become synonymous with journeying itself. The *Odyssey* offers examples of grand hopes and great personal achievement with episodes of deeply ambiguous, if not to say outright immoral personal behavior. Is this not also metaphoric for the life of the mind itself? To explore, to understand, moral judgment needs temporary suspension. Questioning must be fearless. But, in the end, reconstitution is necessary. At some point the mind must come home to a hearth and a community. Something of this view lay behind the original call to papers for the conference, which we quote below.

The journey of the liberal arts and their core texts takes us from our homes to the world and back to our homes. Perhaps the *Odyssey* is both a quintessential core text and an icon for liberal arts education. In a liberal arts journey, each text is a station and we must have diverse arts to navigate the entire course. Each program, each text, represents a movement away from our home into the world and, then, a return. Moreover, at each of our institutions, though many of the stations may be common to others, the journey for professors and students is, still, uniquely institutional and programmatic. ACTC invites papers that can speak to the uniqueness of these journeys, to the discovery of liberal arts needed to undertake them, and to the core texts which mark the landings of each journey. Ultimately, ACTC seeks to learn what our faculty and students learn from their particular Odysseys through the liberal arts.



The conference, then, was conceived as a meditation on the perils and possibilities of an ultimately humanizing intellectual odyssey. The *Odyssey* begins in a community of warriors and ends in the community of home, but in between it is Odysseus's journey. This sequence mirrors our own embarkations (and the hopes we have for future pilgrims—our students) into the world of thought. We begin with our shared opinions (as disciplinary warriors or more generally), start our own investigations from those common views, and ultimately bring our newly discovered or newly reinforced conclusions back to the community to share. The ACTC Annual Conference offers such a home for sharing. The routes of discovery are diverse. They are individualized. But they find at the conference a suitable reception or welcome home.

We have grouped the papers in this volume to highlight four basic types of intellectual journey. These ways include “Odysseys in Poetry and Epic,” “Odysseys in Modern Creative Prose”—similar to but not perhaps the same journey as the study of poetry, “Odysseys in the Political World,” and “Odysseys in Theological/Philosophical Reflection.” The study of each category requires a different way of seeing and encountering the world. The journeys of the authors within each way may have been substantially different. They may have used different texts and techniques. But they began along a common way or path with the view that poetry and epic, or creative prose, or political life, or philosophy, science, and reflection on the divine constitute a special voyage of discovery. These types are not the only ways we think about or encounter the world. And they are not mutually exclusive. In our case, the papers themselves showed the commonality in the journeys taken by the authors. We thank the authors for sharing journeys with the conference. In particular we would like to thank those who shared their techniques for training a new generation of adventurers—whose papers are scattered through the proceedings. They show us how the highly personal *Odyssey* of the humanizing thinker perpetuates itself. They show us not only the ways we know but also the ways we share our journeys, our *Odysseys* with others—particularly those who are just beginning their own voyages of discovery.

The call for papers asked

what do we learn about our own programs by thinking about our students? What can we discover about ourselves as teachers and our programs when we think about our students and their futures? Who, then, are the new “crew” of students that are undertaking these journeys? Ought our programs to persuade students of the efficacy of the liberal arts journey or is that efficacy just “obvious”? Are there moments of “discovery” and “reversal” in our students' journeys which we ought to attend to because they shape our curricula or our selection of texts?

We believe the papers of this proceeding show the challenges of our individual *Odysseys* and the exciting possibilities open to us in sharing our journey with students.

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## **Odysseys in Poetry and Epic**



# Petrarch's *Triumphs*: An Introduction to Humanism and the Renaissance

*Ann Dunn*

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But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool  
And time, that takes survey of all the world,  
Must have a stop.

—Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part I, 5: 4.80–82

If we were to follow Dr. Kimball's advice in his plenary address, and take influence and exemplarity in a text's own time as criteria for inclusion in a core curriculum, we would read Petrarch's *Triumphs*, rather than his sonnets (chosen because of their influence on sixteenth-century English court sonneteers) or Dante, who became influential and exemplary for a later era, for that era's purposes. In Petrarch's own time and for centuries afterward, his Italian *Triumphs* were far more popular, more widely translated, and more often drawn upon in art, literature, music, philosophical discourse, and political practice than either his other poetry or Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The immediate and pervasive influence the *Triumphs* had on the development and spread of values associated with humanism and the Renaissance makes them useful to an understanding of the progress of those movements, on the ground, at the time. I will especially look at what I perceive as their impact on public art.

At every level of society, in most European countries, people resonated with this work and quickly became *Triumphs* crazy. Scenes from the poem sprang up on cassones, ceramics, stained glass windows, illuminated manuscripts, architectural embellishments, tapestries, playing cards, and paintings. For example, on the back

of Piero della Francesca's famous facing portraits of Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro, the artist painted the duchess riding in triumph with faith, hope, and love—pulled by the unicorns of Chastity. The duke rides in triumph with justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance—crowned by Fame. In a culture already competitive, the concept of “trumping” took instant hold, from the lowly game of Trumps (or Tarot) all the way up to the astutely political presentation to King Henry VIII of his first English translation of the *Triumphs* by Henry Parker, Lord Morley, at a moment when that monarch was attempting to trump Pope Clement VII in “the king's great matter.”

Written and rewritten over the course of Petrarch's long adult life, from 1340 to his death in 1374, the *Triumphs* look backward to medieval ideas (rejecting many—like Scholasticism), resurrect and fully embrace classical pagan ideas (Christianizing many—like those of Plato), and look forward to the vigorous new age he himself is self-consciously ushering in with his verse. In this one abundant poem, Petrarch employs Memory and Vision to give all humanity a violent but valorous history, a foolish but perfectible nature, and a tragic but hopeful future. He then places the individual human in this panorama, armed with “the will to see” (82), a new validation of personal experience (“I turned / To my heart, and asked . . .” [107]), and the potential to rise toward grace through merit (“Those who merited . . . possess / Immortal beauty and eternal fame” [112]). Thus, Petrarch's *Triumphs* are the launching pad for concepts that underpin European civilization during a key time in its evolution—ideas that will pass through many crucibles, not least Shakespeare, and reach complete, golden expression three hundred years later with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, these two texts can be taken as bookends of a remarkable time in world history. I wish my Milton students would read the *Triumphs* before reading the pageant of the future presented to Adam by Michael in Books 11 and 12 of *Paradise Lost*. Unlike Dante's hero, Petrarch's hero is not the fleshed-out, sophisticated descendent of Everyman but the raw, enthusiastic, curious, passionate ancestor of Milton's Adam.

I want to concentrate on the poem's exploration of the relationship between perspective and time, through the conceit of a procession. I am interested in looking at the ways meaning and the creation of meaning change as relationships shift among author, created object, and viewer. And I am making the thinly veiled suggestion that Petrarch's *Triumphs* may have influenced the *nature* of public art, not just its subject matter.

My connection of poetry and art is not random. The notion that a poem is a painting in words picked up currency during Petrarch's life, promoted by Petrarch himself. The *Triumphs* are a visual feast, a self-consciously written painting in motion. Petrarch essentially tells us this is his project when he puts himself in the same frame with Homer, whom he calls “He, first to paint men's ancient memories” (86). Clearly about the act of seeing, the *Triumphs* teem with versions of “I saw” and “With mine own eyes I beheld.”

Certainly the reverse—the concept of a painting as a narrative in visual imagery—began to appear during Petrarch's life in the storied frescoes that adorned Italian church walls.

Early medieval Christian art, like the Christian God, existed outside time and

perspective. There was no movement, no procession to watch or participate in. Authorial intent was clear and singular. The image “meant” one thing.

High medieval Gothic art begins to emphasize the God who became human and entered time, as well as important events in Christian history. “story.” It is here that we see “story” begin to appear. Still, each piece of the “story” has its own panel or frame or window. While the viewer must move through time to experience the whole story, each frame is a moment for still contemplation of a single subject or episode. There is a procession, but it is frozen into a string of events. Authorial intent becomes less singular. Each image still “means” one thing, but the image can now be read in the context of a larger “story.” Petrarch references the experience of viewing this art when he writes that he was “Like one beholding lengthy painted scenes, / Whose eyes look back, despite his hurried feet” (34). Giotto painted toward the end of this period, and I think of Dante as writing in this mode. Petrarch, by the way, loved art, owned a Giotto, and clearly intended in the *Triumphs* to imitate and improve upon Dante.

During Petrarch's era the barriers between pieces of a story begin to break down in art, and the viewer acquires more agency in meaning construction. Each frame contains a series of events (not always depicted sequentially) that the viewer moves through with the participants. Thus the still viewer's eyes move through “real” time as the painting moves through the time of the story. The painting becomes a procession that the viewer observes and interprets. If the viewer's perspective shifts, a different piece of the procession is emphasized, and the overall meaning of the image shifts. When linear perspective is introduced, the story acquires depth, so that the viewer's eye is pulled both across (by the force of narrative) and in (by the force of the spatial vortex). Tensions are introduced into the creative process that are endlessly fascinating for both author and reader. Authorial intent is not at all singular, often operating on many levels. A complex relationship, involving time and perspective, is established among author, created object, and observer, and meaning construction becomes far more subjective.

The Brancacci chapel frescoes are perfect examples of post-Petrarchan manipulation of narrative, perspective, and time in the process of meaning construction—by both author and viewer. Standing in the chapel is uncannily like reading Petrarch's *Triumphs*. I am reminded of the many times in the poem when the character Petrarch is struck motionless and dumb by the scene before him. As with the poem, the “reader” is placed in a unified architectural space, the walls of which are subdivided into individual spaces, each telling a piece of a larger story. Thus the reader is surrounded by and immersed in various narratives that are all linked.

Like the poem, the chapel is illustrated over time. There are vestiges of the medieval past in *Madonna of the People*. There are Gothic single-subject panels, like *St. Peter Heals the Sick with His Shadow*, but even here the human drama and the full reality of the human figure inherited from Giotto are newly magnified in the furrowed brow of Peter, the naked old man, and, above all, the brutally accurate rendition of the cripple. Finally, in the *Tributes*, three different moments of an episode are presented simultaneously in the same frame, read from the center, to the left, then to the right, in a circle revolving around Christ. The linear perspective of the city forces

the viewer's eye back into the center of the work just as the eye is about to exit the frame. In order to "read" the visual abundance of the Brancacci chapel, the eye must move back and forth across the space, and up and down the walls. The pre-historical scenes in Eden that come before time, for example, are placed on opposite walls and enclose the historical scenes from Peter's life. The unbearably tragic vision of *The Fall* leads directly to the *Tribute* and the promise of redemption through Peter's Church. To construct meaning from this vast text requires time and choices about perspective, requires moving across the whole and deep inside the individual works. As with Petrarch's *Triumphs*, the reader feels embedded in a living organism where meanings shift with different authorial and reader perspectives.

Now let me turn more specifically to the poem. Petrarch-the-author's perspective shifts in the course of the *Triumphs*, but there are some constants. By writing in the past tense, he sets himself at some future point, thus setting the reader at that future point as well. With occasional authorial asides, he indicates that his is a self-reflective stance. These intimate moments are like little, honest self-portraits, almost embarrassing. The reader seems to see too deeply into something too personal. In *Time* he gives his hero the comment, "But now with mine own eyes I see myself / As in a mirror, and my wanderings. . . / This morn I was a child, and now am old" (97). Finally, from beginning to end, the author sets himself, and therefore his audience, above the "errant crowd" (101). Author and reader are among those who seek truth, "for to the truth we owe / . . . a perfect trust" (100). But Petrarch does not suggest that he and his readers are an elite group. Because he writes the poem in the vernacular, Petrarch invites everyone into the fold of truth seekers. Furthermore, Petrarch makes it clear at the beginning of the poem that the way we come to truth is through looking. "And I, desirous evermore to learn, / Lifted my weary eyes, and gazed upon / This scene, so wondrous and so beautiful" (6). Anyone with the will to see can look.

In spite of these constants (or overlaid upon them), there are three distinct authorial perspectives. The poem was written during at least three quite different moments in Petrarch's life. In *Love and Chastity*, Petrarch writes as a still young, vigorously active, and already quite renowned man in the grip of passions, a man who has known suffering and triumph, is eager for the worldly crowns of love, fame, and knowledge, and is keenly aware of the swift passage of time. The guide often urges the character Petrarch that "time is short" (17) and they must "move on" (20). In *Death and Fame*, Petrarch writes from the stunned and disillusioned perspective of one who has been immersed in the devastations wrought by the Black Death and has lost many, including Laura, who are dear to him. "What profit have ye from your blind pursuits? / Ye all return to the great ancient mother: even the memory of your names is lost" (56). And in *Time and Eternity* Petrarch writes in reflective retirement, in a home he built himself, at the end of his life, surrounded by his daughter Francesca's family and visiting friends. He gives highest praise to "those who . . . / have been well content / to live without display in homely peace" (112). Petrarch clearly grasped the importance of these different perspectives to understanding the whole truth of the human journey, because, with all the tinkering he did on the *Triumphs* over the years, he left his original perspectives

intact. One result is that the poem does not feel didactic. The reader moves through the discoveries of a lifetime with the author and character.

Petrarch-the-character's perspective keeps an eager reader busy, trying to hang on. The outer context of the poem is the character's dream, which removes him from time. But within that quickly forgotten framework, the hero is all over the place: on a hill gazing down on the panorama, walking along with the procession among the other characters, detached, engaged, looking back at what has moved past him in the procession, looking forward at what is to come. Most importantly, his perspective is that of one who looks with a steady eye, sees and says straight, and believes that this keen and thorough gaze is a way to access truth. Further, the hero's stance implies a belief that he, as an individual, is capable of accessing truth through this process of seeing, then painting what is seen.

Naturally, one important perspective of author, character, and contemporary reader is as a Christian. However, the processional characters the hero sees and talks with come from every tradition that the voraciously inquisitive author had access to. There is an equal conflation of traditions under the steady gaze of the hero—based on merit. Worthy pagans are not dumped in the antechamber of a Christian hell. Further, the processional characters are not simply symbols for the hero. They are real people or mythological beings who did real things in their worlds. As with the effect of linear perspective in a painting, the reader forgets to stand outside the poem with its author and gets dragged deep into one visual field after another.

At the end of *Death*, we clearly see Petrarch negotiating time and perspective. The author, in the literal present, writes about a poet-character who, in some imaginary future time, describes a dream that happened in an imaginary past, in which a ghost from the character's even deeper past predicts the character's own long future life, from which perspective, the literal present, the author is composing the poem. Only Milton accomplished such deft acrobatics with time. Finally, in *Eternity*, all perspectives and times are conflated in the poet's eye. "Past, present, future: these I saw combined in a single term" (108). Petrarch creates, at the end of his crowded poem, a kind of *tabula rasa*. "Future and Past, like hills that hid our view, / Are leveled now, and nothing still remains / Whereupon hope or memory may lean" (110). And what does he paint on that blank canvas? Not simply a Christian heaven or a burst of blinding light. Rather, a single image of the beautiful earth and two real humans who loved and suffered upon it. "Beside a stream that rises in the Alps / Love gave to me for her a war so long / My heart still bears the memory thereof" (113).

If humanism has anything to do with the reclamation, reprocessing, and revaluing of Classical art, history, and thought; if humanism has anything to do with a shift in perspective from an allegorical worldview to a metaphysical one; if humanism has anything to do with a new centrality of the individual in the construction of meaning in life here in the realm of time; if humanism has anything to do with reveling in the nobility of human history, the abundant variety of earthly human experience, and an optimistic vision for human potential— then I propose Petrarch's *Triumphs* as a delightful read that helped usher in and proliferate those notions, and a terrific first adventure on that leg of the liberal arts odyssey known as the Italian Renaissance.



TEACHING THE RENAISSANCE THROUGH PETRARCH'S *TRIONFI*:  
THEMES TO LOOK FOR

*A Pedagogical Strategy for Approaching the Poem as a Gateway to Renaissance Concerns*

- Tension between the inconstant human world and God's ordered heavens
- Tension between the active and contemplative life
- Tension between reason and the passions
- Centrality of memory to understanding and creation (of text, individual, community)
- Conscious obliteration of the medieval era (ironic, in light of previous theme)
- Arguments about the relative merit of the visual and poetic arts
- Growing self-reflective nature of texts mirroring new centrality of the individual
- Destabilization of texts as morally edifying
- Destabilization of traditional hierarchies—or shifting of purpose through redefinition
- Eternizing power of poetry/art (poet/artist)
- Dissatisfaction with idealistic tidiness (in civic, religious, and personal life, i.e., “romantic love”)
- Neoplatonism and interest in nonlogical Aristotelian texts, as an alternative to Scholasticism
- Authority of individual—validity of personal, sensual, and reasoned experience
- Revelry in abundance of earthly life (the “spectacle” of the world)
- Pride in political edifice (nation or city-state) and its history
- Pride in vernacular language
- Competition
- *Sprezzatura*
- *Virtu*
- Imitate and surpass
- Perspective
- A tragic vision
- A sense of playful fun
- Consciousness of technique/craft and power of “author” (“sense drawn variously,” condemnation of oratory while using it, poetic devices, imagery)
- Conscious reclamation of (and selective redefinition of) the pagan and Christian historical and mythical past
- Transition from allegorical (archetypal/closed system) to metaphysical (paradoxical/open system in the study of the nature of being, the undermining of “Truth” claims through contradiction)
- Not *the* human, but an individual, particular human. Not the descendent of Everyman, but the ancestor of Hamlet and Milton's Adam.

## Notes

In this text, I assume familiarity with the *Triumphs*, Petrarch's long poem written in Italian *terza rima*, describing the triumphal processions of Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity, in which each trumps its predecessor. Chastity trumps Love, Fame trumps Death, etc.

All page numbers for quotes are from Francesco Petrarca Petrarch, *The Triumphs of Petrarch*, trans. Ernest Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).



# Shakespeare's Sonnet 73: Drama in Lyric Poetry

*Stephen Zelnick*  
*Temple University*

When Odysseus returns to Ithaca after twenty years (*Odyssey*, bk. 17), no one recognizes him, not even the nurse who raised him; but Argos, his dog, knows him by the sound of his voice.

The loss of voice in poetry is disabling and leads to fundamental misreadings. Hearing students read poetry aloud is discouraging, and professors' reading is often not much better.<sup>1</sup> We think even of lyric poetry as a verbal puzzle, a weaving of figures and allusions, confined within a closed cell of formal rules, and not as a script or score to be performed. Without the voice, we miss the experience of the poem entirely, as I show with one of our most frequently anthologized poems, Shakespeare's Sonnet 73.

## Sonnet 73

That time of year thou may'st in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,

Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
 In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,  
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
 Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceiv'st which makes thy love more strong,  
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Both Camille Paglia and Helen Vendler, bold readers who think freely about this sonnet, miss the poem's emotional force and drama because they bypass the rhetorical issues that a performative reading would require.<sup>2</sup> It would be difficult to perform the poem without attending to the following rhetorical issues.

### WHO SPEAKS?

Interpreters of the sonnets identify the speaker as Shakespeare himself, but this is difficult to maintain with Sonnet 73. The sonnets have been dated in the 1590s, when Shakespeare would have been, at most, in his mid-thirties.

The speaker in the poem refers to himself as in the late autumn/early winter of life, in the twilight of his days, and as on his deathbed.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, at that time, had not yet written most of his strongest plays. The sonnet's speaker does not fit with a man in his thirties and so ripe with creative powers.<sup>4</sup>

### TO WHOM ABOUT WHAT?

Many of Shakespeare's sonnets propose to defeat death by the permanence of the sonnet itself, inspired as it is by the poet's object of desire, the young man or woman who is the direct recipient of his verses. So in Sonnet 74, for example, the recipient is instructed to consider the death of his body as the passing only of a meaningless container while the spirit within continues to live in the lines he holds in his hands—"The worth of that is that which it contains/ And that is this, and this with thee remains." The poem carries the message directly, and the writing and sending of the sonnet to the beloved and the beloved's reading of the sonnet complete its limited dramatic scene.

Sonnet 73, however, is different from the start. The speaker urges his listener to look at him closely. He directs his listener to notice ("thou mayst in me behold") the physical signs of his aging; he tells his listener how to look and what to see ("In me thou see'st"); and, in line nine, what to imagine his eyes see. In the close of the poem, the speaker summarizes what his attentive listener has just seen ("This thou perceiv'st") in this process of discovery, even what the listener may be reluctant to admit he sees. The speaker is energetic, even aggressive, in urging his beloved to look closely. The speaker and listener share the scene and are present to each other and interacting directly.

In contrast, it would seem odd to imagine that the recipient of this written letter/poem is the intended listener. What can the recipient see, gazing at the printed page? You might say the speaker wants to be remembered, but that is too general an

abstraction and contradicts the pointed urgency with which the speaker requires to be seen. This sonnet, like all plays, provides a blueprint for realizing a scene, with characters and with vocal presentation that brings it to life.

### IN WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES?

The rhetorical framework directs the reader of Sonnet 73 to reconstruct a scene in which the speech belongs to a dying man. The speaker and listener are at two different levels of understanding. The speaker possesses wisdom and poise his young listener lacks. The youthful listener may be blinded by his wish to hope for the best, or by the polite wish not to notice what his eyes see. The speaker's intensely imagined verses teach his young friend how to see and what to feel.

### WITH WHAT OBJECTIVE?

The speaker notes that what he has directed his listener to see will "make thy love more strong." The dying man has told him something that will strengthen the listener's love. This may at first seem strange, since the poem emphasizes the speaker's loss of "glowing fire" and the song of the "sweet birds" of his youth. My students happily, and incorrectly, conclude that the old man is teaching his youthful listener to appreciate the vitality of his youth and fleeting gifts of time and nature.

### WITH WHAT SUCCESS?

But Sonnet 73 eludes this unremarkable message—treasure your youth! The speaker has something more important to teach his young listener who, without his help, cannot perceive and, most important, conceive what his eyes look upon. The speaker insists that his young listener see something remarkable. The dying man displays, in the face of death's sadness, a heroic poise and creativity and sympathy for another. Death has never been more certainly routed. The speaker—a magician, a Prospero—makes the youthful listener see and understand his strength of mind and spirit.

Although the speaker's youth is gone, he has not relinquished his love for song and the heat of passion. Indeed, these are more poignant now they are fading. Shaken by the palsy of aged weakness, the speaker conjures the sweet birds' song, even as the ruin he has become. He beckons to death, that black night in which all life is sealed up in eternal rest. But for all this, he urges his beloved listener to notice the ember of youthful fire that burns on, all but consumed yet persistently nourished. The stately procession of these quatrains, the poise and order of his thinking, the profusion and wit of metaphors, this superb balance of order, imagination, and emotion, are a gift to the beloved, a lesson in how to be a consummate man, even at the edge of the abyss.

The concluding couplet explains what has been accomplished. The dying man has managed by his performance to make "thy love more strong" and to help his listener to love well what he—in a surprising twist, not the dying man—"must leave ere long." The speaker asks for no pity. He wants instead to be listened to well so that his youthful beloved will appreciate the gift of his performance and carry it forward into his life. The listener leaves with the precious gift of intelligence, bravery, and sympathy—more than enough to make a man of him.

## READING ALOUD

Can you read poetry aloud without considering these rhetorical dimensions? You can, and most do. Just adopt the “Poetry Voice”; the voice that embraces each tiny flower in the springtime, the voice not uncomfortable with the word “wondrous”; the voice that can begin with “oh” without embarrassment. Once we reconstruct the poem rhetorically, however, we can hear the canny actor’s voice that Shakespeare requires in this scene. As readers, we have the task of making that voice work properly.

The appeal is performative. That is, the youthful listener is directed to experience the brilliant performance of the aged man on his deathbed, and remember him that way, as a man who maintains his poise and produces clear-headed images and metaphors, in stately order, even in the face of death. In this way, the performance belies the tendency of the argument. His song is not gone, the sun has not set, and the embers have not gone cold; in fact, he may never have sung so well and his fire never burnt so brightly—that’s what the beloved is compelled to notice, marvel at, and remember. The man is dying and has never been more alive. There are two separate celebrations going on here: first, the battle to the last breath to be alert and alive through the spirit and the imagination; and, second, the gift to the beloved visitor to prize above all the liveliness that the dying man offers him as a demonstration of how to live and how to die.

## Notes

1. Listen to professors reading at “Poets on Screen” at the Literature Online (LION) website. A discouraging sample would include the three poems that were originally included in this lecture: Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73; G. M. Hopkins’s “Felix Randall” (and any Hopkins poem included at LION); and Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “Oh, Oh, You Will Be Sorry for That Word.”

2. Camille Paglia (4) explores the first quatrain’s powerful tangle of figures that implicates yellow leaves, bare boughs, and ruined choirs in a remarkably original metaphor; the second quatrain’s comparison of the progress of life with the passing of a single day; and the third quatrain’s complex analysis of the lost fires of youth. Paglia describes also the sonnet’s three quatrains as scenes in a play and observes that each starts with “in me” operating “as a stage cue, prompting the entrance of each metaphor from the wings.” Paglia’s theater comparison, however, is merely metaphorical and fails to reconstruct the scene and central drama of Sonnet 73.

Helen Vendler (334–336), in her magisterial analysis of Shakespeare’s sonnets, notes the motif of seeing but decides that it indicates only a mirroring in which the listener observes what the speaker has to show.

3. *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1973) notes that “on the grounds of style and verbal correspondences with the plays and non-dramatic poems, the period of 1592 to 1595 or 1596, with the possibility of occasional later sonnets, would seem satisfactory” (1745).

4. Paglia refers to Shakespeare’s portrait in London’s National Gallery and suggests that the “scattered ‘yellow leaves’ clinging to the branches” express Shakespeare’s anxiety about his early baldness (5).

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# The *Mahabharata*

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“What is here may be elsewhere but what is not here is nowhere else,” says the *Mahabharata*, and this rather sweeping claim may not be so inaccurate. The *Mahabharata*, or “Great Narrative of the land of Bharat (India),” is about nine times the length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. History, myth, theology, philosophy, high poetry, even, some would have it, arcane astronomical, astrological, and mathematical wisdom, are layered and woven throughout the narrative’s eighteen books. (The *Mahabharata* often is called an “epic,” but “narrative” is closer to what the text calls itself, *itihasa*, or “thus it was said.”)

The *Mahabharata* as it has come down to us, in primarily classical Sanskrit, dates to around 250 BCE, possibly later. The critical edition was completed in the mid-twentieth century and has not as yet entirely been translated into English. A somewhat awkward nineteenth-century translation of a traditional version is all we have of a complete English text. Both the University of Chicago and New York University are releasing translations now, and within a few years both should be complete. Meanwhile, those of us who want to introduce students to the *Mahabharata* face the challenge of choosing which parts to read, and in which translations.

But the first and far greater challenge is determining just *how* to teach what is certainly the biggest and arguably the greatest of the Great Books. In a single course it is impossible to read more than a small part of it, and yet students should be encouraged to reflect upon it as a whole. In his *Aesthetics*, Aristotle describes a literary work as a living organism—“its parts,” he says, “should be so constructed that the displacement or removal of any one of them will disturb and disjoint the work’s wholeness” (ch. 8, 40). By Aristotelian criteria it is impossible to claim “wholeness” for the *Mahabharata*. Then is it, as one Western scholar famously declared, merely

“a monstrous mass of songs,” a veritable “jungle of poetry,” that philologists need to weed and classify (Winternitz, 309)? The late J. A. B. van Buitenen, the respected scholar and translator of the first five books of the *Mahabharata* and of the *Bhagavadgata*, claims that the text betrays three distinct “perimeters” or layers: first came the central story of about 24,000 Sanskrit couplets, written hundreds of years before the common era; that then was mythologized; lastly it was brahminized and “Hinduized” into the 75,000 or so couplets recognized in the Critical Edition (van Buitenen, *The Beginning*, xiii–xxiii). Such a historical, text-critical approach relegates any intelligent study of the *Mahabharata* to the realm of Sanskrit scholars.

However, I submit that it can be and ought to be viewed differently. Henry James once said of Flaubert’s narratives that their elements are “always so related and associated, so properly a part of something else that is in turn part of something other, part of a reference, a tone, a passage, or page, that the simple may enjoy it for the least bearing and the initiated for the greatest” (Ramanujan, 426, no ref. given). This, I suggest, may be said of the *Mahabharata*. Or, to use a more appropriately Indian reference, the *Mahabharata* is evoked in the metaphor of the net of Indra, king of the heavens, cast blazing across the sky. At each intersection of the net is a single brilliant jewel, and the facets of each reflect all the other jewels. The net is a thing of countless multiplicity encompassing an essential unity. In the complex unity of the *Mahabharata*, then, each segment, each of its vivid stories, reflects many others, yet is discrete in itself. The net of the *Mahabharata* is so large and complex that it is difficult to grasp it as a whole, but when we read a particular part of the narrative, we are meant to be hearing that part echoed in, seeing it reflected by, a number of other parts in a complex narrative web.

If we were to characterize the *Mahabharata*’s central concern, it would have to be *dharma*. The Sanskrit word *dharma* is all but impossible to translate. Often it is rendered as “law,” but that is too limiting. So is “right conduct,” for right and wrong, good and evil are fluid concepts in the *Mahabharata*. *Dharma* derives from the Sanskrit verb *dhi*, to hold, maintain, preserve. It is, then, something ordained, that upholds the order of an individual life and of the cosmos, something infinitely subtle with an incalculable web of consequences. The *Mahabharata* presents us with individuals and peoples faced with the impending slaughter and mayhem of a great internecine war. What is to be done? That questions reverberates in every chapter of the text. It is the question that Arjuna, one of the heroes of the narrative, poses to Kcuoa, his divine charioteer, in the *Bhagavadgata*. How, he asks, can it be right for me to kill enemies who are also my relatives and former gurus? Kcuoa tells Arjuna that his *dharma* as a warrior is to fight and to kill.

The *Bhagavadgata*’s very first syllables are *dharma—dharma-kuetra*, the *dharma*-field on which the great battle is to be fought. The *Gata* is but one relatively tiny portion of the *Mahabharata*, one splendid jewel within a vast narrative net—so splendid a jewel, in fact, that it has been excised from the whole and become a great book in its own right. Some believe that it *is* a separate scripture inserted at some date into the narrative. But if we examine the *Bhagavadgata* in the context of the whole, we find it resonating throughout in a most complex manner. A number of lesser *gatas*, as it were, shine in the net, each reflecting and in dialogue with the others. This

neglected multivocal discourse must greatly affect our understanding of the “Song” (*Gata*) of the “Supreme Lord” (Bhagavan). I will mention two of them.

The first comes early on in the story, at a point when the five brothers who are the *Mahabharata*’s central characters are compelled to spend a year in disguise. Virile Arjuna disguises himself as a eunuch in the court of a king and in one episode acts as charioteer for the prince of the realm in order to go after some cattle rustlers (these rustlers, in fact, are led by none other than Duryodhana, the cousin and chief enemy whom Arjuna will face later on the battlefield). The name Arjuna takes during his year of eunuch disguise is Bchannaoa, or “Big Reed,” a comically phallic epithet for a supposed eunuch who otherwise is quite a ladies’ man. When the timid prince sees the reality of the fight ahead, he is terrified, jumps down from the chariot, and tries to run away (as Arjuna in the *Gata* will throw down his bow and declare, “I will not fight”). Big Reed/Arjuna, his skirts and long braid flapping behind him, pursues the prince and forces him back into the chariot, reminding him—as Kcuoa will later remind Arjuna—that his *dharma*, his sacred duty as a warrior, is to fight. The eunuch now offers to do the fighting. Arjuna suddenly reveals his manly identity, dons his own armor, takes up his bow, and enters the fray with the prince now acting as charioteer. Arjuna’s encounter with the cattle rustlers is an irreverent parody of the opening scene of the *Bhagavadgata*.

Another, more poignant, *Gata* comes after the war has been fought. This *Anugata*—or “After Song”—is interesting particularly in the light of the circumstances in which it is sung. The battle is won, and Kcuoa announces his intention to return to his own kingdom. He and Arjuna ride out to the forest together, making their farewells and speaking about the past. At last Arjuna says to his dear friend: “At the approach of the battle, you showed me your greatness and your divine form as Lord of the universe. But what words you spoke to me then out of the goodness of your heart, Kcuoa, all of it, lion among men, has disappeared from my broken mind. I am curious to hear it again, before you leave.” Arjuna has forgotten the *Bhagavadgata*! Kcuoa is appalled. “I taught you then eternal truths and mysteries,” he chides. “It is extremely distressful to me that you are so stupid and of such bad faith that you have not grasped it. It is impossible for me to repeat all that I said. But I’ll tell you an old story” (*Mahabharata* 14.16.5–10). These are the melancholy circumstances of Kcuoa’s “After Song” to Arjuna. The *Anugata* does not, like the *Bhagavadgata*, advocate a whole-hearted embracing of *dharma*; rather, it preaches an ascetic renunciation of the world—an old story indeed, a dry philosophical tract strikingly inappropriate for Arjuna. The reader is forced to ask why the *Bhagavadgata* was taught to Arjuna in the first place if his mind was too “stupid,” or too “broken,” to retain it. What is the *Mahabharata* expressing here about the human condition and the possibility of discovering the truth of one’s *dharma*?

I do not mean to imply that the *Bhagavadgata* cannot be read and studied on its own. But I do suggest that our understanding of it may be impoverished if we neglect to recognize that the *Mahabharata* invites its audience to contemplate its myriad parts as they reflect and are reflected in one another. If that is granted (and not everyone may want to grant it), a syllabus for a course on the *Mahabharata* must strive to include as many *whole* sections, even entire books, as possible. In order to give stu-

dents a preliminary overview, one of the many brief retellings of the *Mahabharata* is useful, as is a viewing of Peter Brook's play "The Mahabharata," reconceived by the director for video—it's about six hours long. Both the book and the play introduce the main characters and trace the central narrative through to its enigmatic close. In any syllabus, the first book of the *Mahabharata*, "The Book of the Beginning," is essential; it gives a flavor of the whole in its disorienting blending of genres and its establishing of the complex structure of frames. The technique of framing used by the poets of the *Mahabharata* is an elaborate narrative device so important that to ignore it, to lift sections and stories out of their frames, can lead to overly simplistic readings or even misreadings. To give some flavor to the framing, in the opening verses we hear a narrator recounting what he says he heard a sage reciting during a months-long Vedic ritual. That recital was of the Great Bharata composed by the shadowy Vyasa—who will turn out to be a character in his own story. But our narrator soon narrates the sage narrating Vyasa narrating the stories told by others, who in turn recount the stories of others. . . . It is not unusual to be five or more frames deep, and readers need to be aware of and to wonder about these narrative depths, frames nested in one another like Chinese boxes. The conversation and action of the *Bhagavadgata*, for instance, are related to a king by his charioteer, who has been given the divine eyesight by which he can see and hear all that is going on during the great war. That itself is being related by the narrator, who is recounting Vyasa's poem as he heard it recited by another sage at the Vedic ritual.

The *Bhagavadgata* is but one example of how the *Mahabharata* weaves its net. The beauty of its jewels need not blind us to the fine structure of its narrative unity. Even the repetitions and discontinuities are, it seems, deliberate. If the question is how or why or when something occurred, well, there are multiple answers—none quite the same, all possible. Ask for a person's name and you hear a litany. Time is cyclical, after an age of darkness, Kcuoa will take birth again to usher in an age of Truth, and then the slide toward darkness will begin all over again. Nothing is exactly as it seems in itself because everything is connected. The reflections and refractions are endless. Indra's net is cast across time and space like the stars in the firmament. At some point—precisely why, when, and by whom we probably never will know for sure—this great *Bharata* was constructed in an attempt to express that world-view, in an attempt to include *everything* in its wholeness.

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# Hospitality Revisioned: Odysseus's Recognitions in Book 14

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If ignorance is bliss, knowledge brings pain—at least in the “fiction of knowledge” that writer Terence Cave says is the *Odyssey*. The very name Odysseus can mean “man of pain” and “sower of doom,” says George Dimock, and it will come as no surprise, therefore, that the pain and suffering that has marked Odysseus’s life and learning does not cease once he returns home to Ithaca in Book 14. In fact, in a series of recognition scenes—there is not just one in this complex epic plot—a reopening of old wounds seems a companion to such knowledge. Book 14 of the *Odyssey* presents the first of the many recognition scenes that will end with Penelope’s finally welcoming Odysseus back to her bed. Yet Book 14, in which Odysseus comes disguised as an old man to the faithful swineherd Eumaios’s hut, is pivotal to the dynamic of the *Odyssey* not only because it represents the beginning of Odysseus’s public self-disclosure (Odysseus being recognized), but because it initiates a series of recognitions that Odysseus himself makes. Here he re-visioned the hospitable way of life he long ago established and finally returns to make a painstaking restoration.

Indeed, Eumaios—who says almost immediately that his heart aches, “broken for *him*,” Odysseus, his lost king—does not at first recognize his master. George Dimock points out that Odysseus disarms Eumaios by initially allowing himself to be nearly killed by a pack of the slave Eumaios’s dogs. Apparently, Eumaios’s deep sympathy with Odysseus, here as an old beggar, “only comes with the consciousness of having saved someone else’s life” (Dimock 191). Eumaios is softened enough to welcome the beggar and extend the hospitality that comes first from Zeus (god of hospitality) and that Odysseus established as a way of life, a mode of being, more



than twenty years before. Odysseus recognizes that Eumaios “took best care of his livelihood,” as Homer puts it, that he has been a loyal servant to both his master Odysseus and to the god of guests, Zeus. A good host, Eumaios tells Odysseus of the pain of working only to give over the fruits of his labor to the suitors who beset Penelope and are consuming the vast wealth of the kingdom. Odysseus, then, recognizes in Eumaios’s behavior that it is not too late, that his economy, his *oikos*, has largely survived, and that the problem extends not to the entire kingdom but is, rather, localized—including only the suitors and a few traitors from within his kingdom. Dimock tells us that Eumaios longs for the return of his king that he might be freer: “Eumaios’ fate depends not on himself but on whether Odysseus succeeds or fails. This is what it is to be a slave” (190).

But Eumaios seems genuinely to love Odysseus and his ways. If Odysseus is the great builder of the home and all of its customs, he returns now to restore the home that is not a total loss, but that he can see has been built on a strong foundation—a recognition that will find resolution in the secret of his bed as a rooted tree, grounded and unmovable. Eumaios, too, is a builder, having constructed his hut and all the pigpens, and when Odysseus first approaches the hut, Eumaios can be seen fashioning sandals from oxskin. As Cave writes of recognition: “This is the way it works as knowledge, the way literature works as knowledge [we might say as a liberal art]: always to leave the universal in abeyance” (43). The slave retains a freedom by doing his particular work—one that is a reflection of love for king and gods—well. Odysseus and Eumaios have in common a caring for the specificity and presence of actual things.

All this is a great comfort to Odysseus, who receives a good meal, a cloak, the hospitality of his own world, and the satisfaction of knowing again something he once and forever knew. However, for Odysseus there is still the work of restoring and refounding to do. Even beyond the final recognition by Penelope, we know from Odysseus’s visit to the underworld in Book 11 that he will have to set forth again and make some reparations to Poseidon for his wounding of the Cyclops. But something that seems important is that there is a reason other than Odysseus’s cleverness that he is not recognized by Eumaios. A slave though he may be, Eumaios is free to have his opinions, and we discover that he believes that because Odysseus has been a city sacker—a destroyer of Troy—that he lost favor with the gods and will not likely ever return alive.

“My friend,” the great Odysseus, long in exile, answered,  
 “since you are dead certain, since you still insist  
 he’s never coming back, still the soul of denial,  
 I won’t simply say it—on my oath I swear Odysseus is on his way!”  
 (Fagles 306)

Sowing the seeds of doom here means that Odysseus recognizes that the only way he will ever be recognized is to open some old wounds. Eumaios’s hospitality finds its limit if the beggar insists on speaking of Odysseus: “The heart inside me breaks when anyone mentions my dear master. That oath of yours, we’ll let it pass.” Over the years, Eumaios says, vagabonds have come with claims of seeing Odysseus in the hopes of being better received. Eumaios says neither he, nor Penelope, nor

Telemachus will reward lies. Penelope has been too often hopeful, and Telemachus is too easily wrecked by word of his father and even now is off somewhere looking for him. Perhaps with a teacher's intent to guide his pupil, perhaps to repay Eumaios for his loyalty, and possibly to ensure his own identity—his ability to be seen *as Odysseus*—Odysseus decides to bring pain to Eumaios, to school him in the need to have an open mind. For what Odysseus recognizes here is that the hospitable Eumaios is not receptive and welcoming enough: he is deeply mistrustful of strangers, and more, his own wife and son are likely not to trust him. So Odysseus comes up with a lie to open up a space where the truth of his oath is a possibility and the future hospitality of his kingdom is momentarily glimpsed as something that has been seen before and will be seen again. In short, Odysseus sees that he must teach others to recognize him.

To change the subject, Eumaios asks to hear about the origins of the beggar, and Odysseus—a “man recovering origins,” according to John Finley—begins to tell a story that is not in fact true but is a fictional creation that is essentially true and supports the real truth. That Odysseus will return is a truth that has been stated but is not believable without the fictional retelling of his life, one in which he is a Cretan chieftain down on his luck. Born of a slave mother, he was something of a self-made man, rising to be a leader in Crete. Slavery threatened him again after the Trojan War—where he fought with Odysseus who (as will Eumaios later) lends his cloak. Though he thwarts a plot against him, he is reduced to his present rags, and it was during his latest trip that he heard Odysseus was still alive. Thus Odysseus gives a particular and detailed account to the appreciative Eumaios, who, though perhaps not convinced, is pleased with the story and says to Odysseus:

“Eat, my strange new friend . . . enjoy it now,  
it's all we have to offer. As for Father Zeus,  
one thing he will give and another he'll hold back,  
whatever his pleasure. All things are in his power.” (Fagles 315)

The god of hospitality, it turns out, perhaps has some favor left for even a city-sacker, and as Dimock notes, “At this stage Eumaios is not betting on his master's return, but he is not betting against it either” (198).

But Odysseus is once and for all welcomed by his servant. By recalling his master in a context, Odysseus may be creating what Aristotle calls “recognition by memory” where Odysseus succeeds in remembering himself before Eumaios. Odysseus uses a narrative to convince Eumaios of the possibility of return. “This is a kind of *mise en abyme*, where a disguised character convinces another character by means of plausible fiction (in which he appears at one remove)” (Cave 41). So we get a vision of the nature and structure of fiction itself—its potential to lie and tell the truth, to establish itself and yet make itself vulnerable.

At heart, suggests Cave, there is a fear held by Eumaios, Penelope, all of us that strangers claiming to be Odysseus will dupe us, that we will be tricked. Odysseus recognizes this fear at the beginning of his return to Ithaca, and he counters the fear of trickery with trickery. What takes place here, it seems, is that Odysseus recognizes that he will have to reveal himself gradually if he is to be recognized and remembered, and so begins a series that will include a dog, a scar, and finally a bed

as sign of marital fidelity—where the endpoint will be the beginning point, the first foundation for the home in which even a slave such as Eumaios can share in freedom and joy. The series of recognitions will reveal the “gradual shift from ignorance to knowledge about identity” (Cave 41). The poetic Odysseus makes a fiction in which he undoes the bold “I am Odysseus” of his Cyclops days, undercuts Poseidon’s curse, and curries favor with his god of choice: Odysseus is the guest/host who honors Zeus by freeing Eumaios to remember.

Cave tells us that what happens in recognition is “first of all the sense of a means of knowing which is different from rational cognition. It operates surreptitiously, randomly, elliptically, and often perversely, seizing on previously those details that from a rational point of view seem trivial.” More than a mere imitation, Odysseus’s story is the kind of making that sheds a “retrospective light” (Cave 43). In retrospect, Eumaios will know that he knew that Odysseus would return. For his part, Odysseus recognizes that the modes of behavior he established twenty years ago endure still; he is given a vision of both the fragility and the resilience of cultural institutions and memory. *The Odyssey* is a fiction of knowledge, and Odysseus both recognizes and initiates recognitions in others by schooling them with story. Narration is a way of always connecting himself to himself, to home, to his wanderings, and especially to the future. If identity is the question, Odysseus mostly lies about his identity once in Ithaca. The lies serve both to reassure and to reveal that the Odysseus who is welcomed will always be a stranger. Indeed, the pain of hospitality remains as paradox: the man Penelope welcomes back to her bed, Cave reminds us, is both Odysseus and stranger. Odysseus, then, recognizes that he is both recognized and beyond recognition.

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# The Homeric Question: Is the *Odyssey* a Great Book?

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The topic of my talk is the question: Is the *Odyssey* a Great Book? I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that my answer to the question is going to be: “No.” The good news is that I’m going to argue that *The Odyssey* is great; it’s just not a book. Although we normally study and teach *The Odyssey* in the form of a book, we need to remember that it originally grew out of an oral tradition and was recited long before it was written down. As a result, talking about the poem as a book may sometimes mislead us about its nature.

I want to use *The Odyssey* to illustrate a larger issue that is facing us today as teachers of the Great Books. What we teach continues to be great, but increasingly it may no longer take the form of a book. Classic motion pictures such as *Alexander Nevsky*, *Citizen Kane*, or *The Seventh Seal* are obvious examples of works that achieve greatness by customary standards of aesthetic evaluation but that are not books. But even the dramas that have always headed any list of Great Books—from the *Oresteia* to *King Lear* to *Faust*—need to be analyzed and discussed in terms of theatrical representation and do not simply constitute “bookish” experiences. A little thought will remind us that all along we have been teaching Great Works, not just Great Books. If the history of twentieth-century culture is any indication, the proportion of nonbooks to books in our teaching is only going to increase in the twenty-first century.

As we move into teaching Great Works more frequently, we do well to recall how useful and productive the model of the Great Book has been, which should make us hesitate to abandon it. A book has a solid and palpable integrity as an aes-

thetic object. We think of a book as having a single author, whose creative genius has in the best case shaped it into an artistic masterpiece. All its details fit perfectly together into an aesthetic whole—a unity ideally represented by the way a book fits neatly between its two covers, while we can flip back and forth easily among its pages to demonstrate its coherence. The single author creating the perfectly unified masterpiece is the paradigm of the Great Books movement and encourages us to read canonical works with the care they genuinely deserve. The act of reading a book page by page and cover to cover is an attempt to recapture the sense of artistic wholeness that the author originally sought to create and that informs every aspect of the text.

In this sense, *The Odyssey* appears to have everything we look for in a Great Book. It is grandly planned on a large scale, with a clear overarching structure that holds all its parts together, and each part repays reading and re-reading. *The Odyssey* is in many respects our archetype of a Great Book and appears in almost every Great Books curriculum worthy of its name. And yet we must grant that the historical evidence shows that at its origins *The Odyssey* cannot have been a book. The path-breaking scholarship of Milman Parry and Albert Lord (2000) confirmed what some Homeric investigators had long suspected and argued—that both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* somehow originate in an oral tradition.<sup>1</sup> The Homeric poems were initially composed orally, and for a good part of their history, they were transmitted orally. The very notion of “Homer” has become suspect as a fiction, albeit a convenient one. A single poet does not seem to be responsible for creating the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. As the product of an oral tradition, the poems were shaped by many voices over many centuries.

Modern Homeric scholarship thus presents us with a dilemma as interpreters of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The fiction of a single author of the poems has proved very useful in leading scholars to study them as the authentic masterpieces they appear to be. Already in antiquity, the mythical image of the blind bard Homer served to validate the reverence and awe with which *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were read and studied. Traditionalists may legitimately ask, Can we abandon our notion of a single author for the Homeric poems and still read them with the care they appear to demand? In our model, the notion of the Great Book seems inextricably bound up with the notion of the Great Author.

Here again *The Odyssey* can serve as a representative of a larger question facing the Great Books movement as it modulates into a Great Works movement. Like orally composed epics, motion pictures raise complicated questions of authorship and do not always, or even frequently, fit the single author model. Despite the gallant efforts of the French *auteur* theory of cinema, motion pictures generally appear to be the result of artistic collaboration, often of elaborate complexity. As we enter new teaching territories and find ourselves dealing in motion pictures with situations in which the single-author model no longer provides us with a secure guide, it is well to remember that in *The Odyssey* we may have already learned to deal with a Great Work that does not have a single author. As difficult as it may be to accept at first, we may be moving beyond not just the Great Book model, but the Great Author model as well. As we start dealing with motion pictures and other new media, we may find that we need new models of artistic creativity and interpretation, ones that allow for

multiple authorship. And, paradoxically, our oldest model of a Great Book may provide us with clues as to how we can interpret an artistic masterpiece without invoking the idea of a single author. Exemplifying that possibility may be the new importance of *The Odyssey* for the Great Books movement today.

Here I want to reassure my audience that I love books as much as the next guy—I own thousands of them. And I myself have long had major doubts about the oral-formulaic theory of the composition of the Homeric poems. To be frank, I always found the oral theory to be *demeaning* to the Homeric poems, a reductive way of looking at them. My distinct impression was that people who subscribe to the oral-formulaic theory do not read Homer carefully enough. Take the matter of the Homeric formulas that give the theory its name. The chief evidence Parry and Lord offer for the Homeric poems' being orally composed is the widespread use of formulas in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, set poetic phrases that fit the epic meter and recur again and again whenever it calls for them. Such formulas make the improvisatory art of the oral bard possible. They give him many of his poetic building blocks ready-made and allow him to plan out his next moves while marking time with memorized material.

Much to my disappointment, many oral theorists tend to treat the Homeric formulas as purely formulaic. Because they view the formulas as the result of an oral tradition, they generally do not see any form of individual artistic purpose behind them. These scholars are usually content to point to the many examples of verbal repetition in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as evidence for the oral theory and leave it at that. The repetitions in the Homeric poems thus appear as a precondition of their coming into existence, but not as part of their artistry. But if we look more carefully, can we find *artful* repetition in Homer?

One example of an extended passage that is repeated in the *Iliad* comes in Book 9, when Agamemnon gives detailed instructions to the ambassadors to Achilles concerning how to entice him back into battle. Agamemnon evidently thinks the matter is too important to trust anyone else in carrying it out, and so he tells the ambassadors exactly what to say. Accordingly, when Odysseus gets to Achilles' dwelling, and launches into his appeal, he repeats some forty lines from Agamemnon's speech virtually verbatim, with only a few necessary changes in pronouns. A reader might easily become bored by this repetition and begin to think: "This is the price we pay for oral poetry." But when we get to the end of Odysseus's version of Agamemnon's speech, we are suddenly jolted out of the mind-numbing repetition. Agamemnon wanted the speech to culminate in a proud threat to Achilles:

Let him submit to me! Only the god of death  
is so relentless, Death submits to no one—  
so mortals hate him most of all the gods.  
Let him bow down to me! I am the greater king,  
I am the elder-born, I claim—the greater man. (Fagles 9.11: 188–93)

At the corresponding point in Odysseus's seeming repetition, the wily hero suddenly changes his tune:

But if you hate the son of Atreus all the more,  
him and his troves of gifts, at least take pity  
on all our united forces mauled in battle here—

they will honor you, honor you like a god.  
Think of the glory you will gather in their eyes! (Fagles 11: 363–67)

Odysseus's radical departure from Agamemnon's set text is all the more striking because of the way he had been slavishly following it until this point. Homer appears to be up to something. In fact, this sequence teaches a subtle political lesson. Odysseus is much smarter than Agamemnon and knows when to disobey his instructions. Agamemnon's rhetorical strategy would never work with a man of Achilles' character. A proud hero would never yield to a veiled threat, especially when it comes from someone he regards as his inferior. Odysseus understands that Achilles will in fact never listen to any entreaty coming from Agamemnon, and so he cleverly couches his request in terms of Achilles rushing to the aid of his old comrades and accordingly receiving honors from them. This is how to appeal to a proud man. Agamemnon wanted to flatter himself in his speech, but Odysseus knows that the rhetorical task is to flatter Achilles. Without spelling anything out, Homer has managed in the space of a few lines to speak volumes about three of his main characters: Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Achilles. This is *artful* repetition indeed, just what we would expect from a single author working at the peak of his craft, which makes us want to speak of what "Homer" intends in these two passages.

Still, nothing in this example is incompatible with the theory of oral composition, and let us not forget the forty lines that are repeated and thus seem to be evidence for orality. But a traditionalist would say: "We are more likely to identify artful repetition in the Homeric poems if we are operating with the model of a single artist having composed them." As an empirical observation, I have found that oral theorists tend to have less to say about the artistry of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, given their understandable concern with establishing the oral character of the poems in the first place. I sensed that the oral theory was working to lower expectations about *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, serving in effect as an excuse in advance for any kind of apparent artlessness in the poems: "All that repetition is simply a feature of oral composition; you just have to learn to live with it; it comes with the territory."

More generally, my objection to oral theories of epic composition arose from the observation that most of them tended to be theories of decomposition or degeneration. The theories had their roots in German Romanticism and its ideal of the spirit or genius of the folk. An epic was thought to well up out of the soul of a primitive people, taking poetic form in the songs of its primeval bards. In the eyes of most nineteenth-century theorists of the epic, oral transmission generally involved a falling away and a falling off from the original poetic inspiration in the folk soul. Over time, as new voices added to the epic, it lost its pristine grandeur and became corrupted with inauthentic accretions. A good deal of nineteenth-century scholarship was dedicated to trying to strip away layers of historical additions to epics in an effort to get at their authentic and original cores, the Ur version as the Germans understood it. Although these were theories of multiple authorship, they actually rested on a Romantic ideal of single authorship, indeed of the solitary genius as the source of all genuine creativity. The primeval bard had created the great folk epic in the splendid isolation of the dim past; all that subsequent bards in the oral tradition could do was to mar his achievement, introducing discordant voices into his song, spoiling its in-



tegrity, and perhaps even corrupting its message. German critics were particularly interested in how in the Germanic epics like *Beowulf* or the *Nibelungenlied*, a pagan original had been contaminated by alien Christian elements in the course of transmission through medieval cultures.

I may be exaggerating the Romantic strain in these oral theories, but they do generally reflect a mentality of “too many cooks spoil the broth.” It becomes difficult to speak of artistic purpose in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* when analysts posit different authors working at cross-purposes in the poems’ development over time. Thus, although I felt forced to acknowledge the cogency of the arguments for the oral composition of the Homeric poems, deep in my heart I wished that they were untrue for the sake of preserving my image of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as artistic masterpieces. All this changed when I came across the work of the distinguished Harvard classicist Gregory Nagy and his new theory of oral composition. It is very technical and very controversial, and, because I barely know ancient Greek, I am in no position to evaluate it critically. All I can say is that I hope that Nagy is right, because he offers a model of the oral composition of the Homeric poems that is fully compatible with the idea that the poems are artistic masterpieces.

In a series of articles and books, Nagy has developed an *evolutionary* model of the genesis of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.<sup>2</sup> Thus he offers reasons for expecting the poems to have *improved* over time rather than degenerating, as many oral theories would lead us to believe. Nagy builds upon the pioneering efforts of Parry and Lord, especially their rejection of the earlier obsession with the original form of any oral epic. For Parry and Lord, it is pointless to search for the “original” of an orally composed epic. Their field studies of a living oral tradition in Yugoslavia in the 1930s convinced them that a genuine oral epic necessarily exists in multiple versions. As a product of improvisation, an oral epic will vary from one singer to another, and even a given singer will tell the same story differently at different times of performance. Parry and Lord insist that these performances are *not* variations on some hypothetical original of the epic that is to be given a privileged position. On the contrary, they argue that the different performances they recorded are all equally valid as representatives of the epic in question. In an oral tradition, multiple authorship simply results in multiple versions.

Doing away with the Romantic idea of the primacy of the Ur version of the epic frees us to consider for a change the advantages of multiple authorship. The proliferation of versions is no longer seen as a degeneration away from an ideal original form. The earliest version of an epic is not necessarily the best; later versions may produce improvements. Perhaps one version is poetically richer than another; perhaps one is better structured; different versions may develop individual episodes in greater detail or with greater skill; and so on. Instead of “too many cooks spoil the broth,” we have entered the realm of “let a hundred flowers bloom.” Thus an epic might actually improve over time as a result of different bards’ contributing to its development. More specifically, a wider and more developed range of options would be available when the crucial moment arrives for the epic to make the transition from oral to written form.

Whatever the origin and history of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* may be, the fact



is that today they do exist in the form of books, and as manuscripts they already did so in antiquity. Thus at some point they had to be written down as texts, even though we know very little about how or exactly when this happened. The moment of their being committed to writing offers a way of preserving and explaining our impression of their status as masterpieces. The scribe who wrote them down may have been the solitary genius of our critical imaginings. As some have theorized, perhaps this scribe consulted a variety of versions of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* that were circulating in oral form in the ancient world and crafted the masterpieces we know today out of them. He could have chosen the best versions of individual episodes he heard, imposed a uniform poetic style upon the whole, and perhaps displayed his genius most fully in giving shape to both poems out of material that initially was not entirely coherent. Here we may finally have a satisfactory answer to the Homeric question. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the form we have them were not composed by a single poet in the eighth century BCE. Perhaps the bulk of the credit for the poems as we have them should go to a scribe whose name is lost—it was he who transformed orally and perhaps crudely composed epics into the written masterpieces we know today.

Although this hypothetical account does come up with a single author for the poems at the moment of their being written down, it nevertheless grants an important role to multiple authorship in the poems' development up to that time. Instead of putting all our faith in a solitary genius, we would be acknowledging the power of a principle that works in many areas of human endeavor—the division of labor. Different people have different knowledge and talents, and often by pooling that knowledge and those talents they can produce something of greater value than any one of them could produce on his own. Perhaps an oral tradition is the aesthetic equivalent of the division of labor, reflecting the advantages of specialization and cooperation even in the lofty realm of artistic achievement.

Although Nagy does not use the term himself, he carries this idea of the division of labor in the creation of the Homeric poems even further, because he does not think that our hypothetical single scribe could have accomplished all that we are trying to credit him with. Nagy does not accept the common idea—found already in antiquity—that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were written down and took their definitive form in Athens roughly in the middle of the sixth century BCE, probably during the reign of the tyrant Peisistratos. Nagy pushes the fixing (although not the first creation) of the written Homeric texts up to the second century BCE and places it in Alexandria, but he does recognize the central importance of sixth-century Athens in the evolution of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. For Nagy, the most important moment was not the committing of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to writing but the fixing of the order of reciting the episodes by the rhapsodes who used to perform them in public, and some ancient records suggest that this did happen in sixth-century Athens. Nagy is more interested in how an oral tradition gets organized than in how a written text does so, because in his view, an oral tradition can accomplish more in the development of an epic than any attempt to commit it to writing. By comparison to a written tradition, an oral tradition is alive and fluid, and thus allows for the continuing evolution of epic poems. Therefore, contrary to many other theorists, Nagy thinks that the longer the Homeric poems remained oral in transmission, the better it was for their development.

As we know from ancient documents such as Plato's dialogue *Ion*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* circulated for centuries in the Greek-speaking world in the form of public recitations by performers called rhapsodes. These skilled professionals were the bearers of the oral tradition of the Homeric epics. In the absence of a definitive written text of the Homeric poems, these rhapsodes would, we imagine, have introduced wide variations in the versions of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* they performed, much as the Yugoslavian bards did with their epic poetry in their recitations for Parry and Lord. This is what it is to speak of a living and evolving oral tradition.

But Nagy points to one centralizing and therefore textually stabilizing element in the rhapsode system. Although they were itinerant performers from all over the Greek world, the rhapsodes did periodically gather for Homeric festivals at designated sites, the most important of which was evidently the Panathenaia in Athens. Some ancient records attest to the fact that in the middle of the sixth century BCE, Hipparkhos, a son of Peisistratos, determined the order in which the rhapsodes recited the episodes of what we know today as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. For Nagy, this is the moment when the Homeric poems basically took the shape we admire, even though they were not yet written down. Nagy views the institution of the Panathenaia as a crucial stage in the ongoing evolution of the Homeric poems in a living oral tradition. The festival was a contest, much like the dramatic competitions more familiar to us from the later days of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Competing with each other for prizes, the rhapsodes naturally sought to outdo each other, striving to perfect the episodes they performed. Perhaps one rhapsode excelled at telling the story of Odysseus and Polyphemus, while another was a master of reciting the battle between Achilles and Hector—thus showing the artistic benefits of specialization and the poetic division of labor.

The rhapsodes undoubtedly learned from each other, and being specially trained in the art of memory they could carry home with them from the festivals the best of the recitations of the various Homeric episodes they heard. Nagy thus offers an account of a rhapsode system in which we might expect the Homeric poems both to improve over time and to assume a standard shape and form. His theory includes centripetal and centrifugal forces in the evolution of the Homeric texts. By bringing together rhapsodes from all over the Greek world, the Panathenaia exerted a centralizing effect on the Homeric poems as they developed, allowing and, in fact, compelling the rhapsodes to compare notes, as it were, and pushing them toward a common text. But this model also allows for the diffusion of the text that was evolving to all corners of the Greek world when the rhapsodes dispersed and returned to their homelands. In short, Nagy explains how *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, even in the absence of being written down, could have evolved over time toward an ever improved and more unified text. In the spirit of competition, the rhapsodes would have worked on improving the individual episodes of the poems they performed, while at the same time they would have taken advantage of improvements made by their fellows in other episodes when they were called upon to perform the poems on their own back home. That is the way a unified version of the Homeric poems that basically evolved in Athens could have been gradually disseminated wherever Greek was spoken.

Nagy offers an evolutionary, not a "creationist" model of the genesis of *The Iliad*

and *The Odyssey*. For him the great poems do not come into being in a single act of divine creation. Rather they develop over time in a process that involves improvisation, trial and error, and feedback, with the rhapsodes learning from each other, even presumably from their mistakes. Like all evolution, the process involves variation and selection—indeed the rhapsode system encourages the production of variants of the Homeric episodes and then has provisions for selecting out the best of the variations. If all this is beginning to sound too Darwinian, I hasten to point out that this is *not* “natural selection.” We are not talking about the survival of the aesthetically fittest in some poetic jungle. Darwin’s theory of evolution explicitly rules out the role of a conscious mind in selecting the variations that survive. But Nagy is talking about a form of cultural, not biological evolution, and conscious choice comes into play in culture. The rhapsodes consciously come up with the variations they produce, and they consciously choose which ones to imitate and thereby promulgate. In a festival system, the public may also play a role in such choices. And Nagy emphasizes the central importance of the act of determining the order of the episodes the rhapsodes recited. This order had to be chosen by someone, perhaps Hipparkhos, as ancient records indicate.

The important point is that Nagy is not offering a mechanistic model of artistic production. The rhapsode system is not one in which conscious artistic choice is ruled out. Nagy is simply arguing that the decisions that eventually produced *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as we know them were not made all at once by a single author. Rather the choices were the result of an undetermined number of individuals interacting productively over time. To say that the Homeric poems are not the product of a single author is thus not to deny their artistic purposiveness. Rather it is to recognize that, given the nature of human society, there may be cases where purposes can be pooled in a social process that allows human beings to cooperate together over time in creating value, even aesthetic value. As the great medieval cathedrals attest, a masterwork does not have to come into being all at once or from the work of a single hand.

I repeat that I lack the expertise necessary to give a professional opinion as to whether Nagy’s theory is correct. But his view certainly sounds plausible to me—at least as plausible as any other theory of Homeric composition I have seen. The virtue of his theory is that it offers a way of accepting the oral-formulaic theory of epic composition and still understanding *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as authentic masterpieces. He shows that we do not need the idea of a single author of the poems in order to view them as unified and well organized. The very process of an oral tradition, when properly embodied in certain institutions, may exert a unifying influence on the evolution of a text, even if it remains orally transmitted. Nagy’s theory is made all the more plausible to me by its parallels to what I have observed in other media, especially in the realm of popular culture. If we look at the history of the serialized novel in Victorian England or at developments in the motion picture and the television industries, we see that the model of artistic creation as involving improvisation, trial and error, and feedback from an audience is more prevalent than we might at first suppose.

I have treated this subject elsewhere in detail in discussing the example of *Casa-*

*blanca*, almost universally regarded as a motion picture masterpiece.<sup>3</sup> It routinely appears on lists of the ten greatest movies of all time, and critics delight in talking about its cinematic perfection, the fact that each shot has a role to play in the work as a whole. But *Casablanca* is not the product of a single cinematic genius, one of the legendary *auteur* directors the French worship, such as John Ford, Orson Welles, or Alfred Hitchcock. *Casablanca* was helmed by a journeyman director named Michael Curtiz, a competent man behind the camera but hardly a genius, and no one has ever given him sole credit for the artistic achievement of the movie. Indeed it is impossible to credit the film's success to the visionary power of any single genius. Three writers received credit for the screenplay (Julius Epstein, Philip Epstein, and Howard Koch), but several others (including Casey Robinson and Aeneas MacKenzie) are known to have worked on it. Their efforts perfectly illustrate the principle of the division of labor. One writer was called in because of his skill at writing romantic scenes; others were hired for their expertise at snappy dialogue; and so on. But this "teamwork" was not in fact carefully orchestrated. The writers worked without a unified conception of the script, often at cross purposes, with many rewrites necessary. They tinkered with both the overall shape and the details of the plot throughout the production.

Above all, the famous concluding scene—perhaps the most celebrated ending in Hollywood history—was not planned in advance but was, instead, cobbled together in desperation at the last possible moment by two of the writers, the Epstein brothers. To make matters worse from the viewpoint of *auteur* theory, in the ultimate aesthetic sin, the producer, Hal Wallis, intervened in post-production and insisted on "tampering" with the ending. For some reason, he thought that the line "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship" had to be inserted into the final shot, and Humphrey Bogart had to be called back to do so in a voiceover. The rest, of course, is cinematic history. My point is that *Casablanca* was not the product of a single artistic genius planning the whole out carefully in advance and all at once. And yet the movie nevertheless ended up a cinematic masterpiece. Sometimes—not always—aesthetic objects are like sausages—we are better off not knowing how they are made.

*Casablanca* illustrates what is known as the genetic fallacy, and that is the main theme of my talk. Knowing the origin of a work tells us nothing about its quality. A well-ordered work may emerge out of a chaotic process. Even in the absence of a single author, *Casablanca* turned out to be a successfully unified work of art, partly because of sheer luck, partly because the production process itself imposed a kind of purposiveness on the end product (whatever the participants had in mind, they all were trying to produce a good movie in a certain genre). In this one respect, *Casablanca* may teach us something about the Homeric poems. Of course, I do not mean to claim that *Casablanca* deserves to be ranked with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Very few products of the human imagination belong in that exalted company. All I am saying is that one can see the same forces at work in the production of *Casablanca* that Nagy finds behind the evolution of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—improvisation, trial and error, feedback, the conscious selecting out of the best among variant possibilities. To be sure, in the frantic pace of a Hollywood studio, what may have taken centuries with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* had to be accomplished within months on

the set of *Casablanca*. But the evolutionary principles are the same. Evolutionary models provide a way to understand how ordered end products can emerge out of an initial chaos, and how they do so as a result of a process that occurs over time and not in a single moment of perfectly planned creation.

Let me stress in conclusion that by offering an evolutionary model of artistic creation, I am not denying the validity of the single-author model—only its universality. As I suggested from the beginning, there is still room for employing the single-author model in discussing Great Books that has served us so well over the years. Many of the greatest products of the human imagination are demonstrably the work of single authors and should be treated as such. But human creativity is a complicated and mysterious phenomenon, and we should be open to a variety of models. Above all, we should not reject multiple authorship models because we fear that they somehow rule out the possibility of artistic integrity. As we move further into the twenty-first century and continue to study artistic greatness, we are likely to find that the multiple-authorship model is more prevalent than ever before, if only as a result of technological developments. As troubled as I myself am by some of these developments, I take consolation in the fact that, as we enter what many regard as a post-literate era, we may be returning to some of the conditions of the pre-literate era and the oral traditions that produced some of our greatest masterpieces. Although the Great Book has long served as our central model, in fact in dealing with works like *The Odyssey* we have already come to terms with artistic greatness that does not take the form of a book with a single author. In that sense *The Odyssey* may prove to be a valuable guide as we enter the terra incognita of twenty-first-century culture.

## Notes

1. For a good introduction and overview of the Parry-Lord theory of the oral-formulaic character of the Homeric poems, see Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (2000).
2. For a sampling of Nagy's extensive writings on this subject, see his *Homeric Questions* (1996), *Poetry as Performance* (1996), and *Plato's Rhapsody and Homer's Music* (2002).
3. See Cantor, "As Time Goes By" (2005). For my further development of the idea of artistic creation as evolutionary, see Cantor, "The Poetics of Spontaneous Order" (2009), and Cantor, "Introduction: Spontaneous Order and Popular Culture" (2012), 1–22.

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# **Odysseys in Modern Creative Prose**





# “Good Surviving”: Heroes, Heroines, and Realism in Dickens’s Early Novels

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Dickens wrote in his preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist*, “I wished to shew [sic], in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last” (xxv). In varying ways and many characters, throughout his career Dickens pursued this desire to represent “Good surviving.” But he also wished to write realistic fiction. *Oliver Twist’s* preface continues, “[T]he stern and plain truth . . . was a part of the purpose of this book” (xxvii). Dickens has, he claims, presented the life of the London criminal underclass “in its unattractive and repulsive truth” (xxvii). He defends his portrait of the prostitute Nancy by writing, “It is true” (xxviii).

Can one create characters who embody “the principle of Good” and remain a realistic writer? Twenty years ago, Irving Howe argued that the answer is yes, on condition that the characters pay a price for their goodness; thus the heroine of Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* becomes plausible “not through the persuasiveness of a flaw, but through the realism of a price,” her price being “a sadly diminished sexuality” (32). And indeed, in Dickens’s work, goodness always involves a price—though in the early novels especially, the price may be realism itself. Thus in *Oliver Twist*, preserving the hero’s goodness demands the abandonment of any even slightly plausible treatment of plot. Nor is the character of Oliver in any way made more complex by the dual demands of verisimilitude and moral teaching. Eight years later, however, when Dickens wrote *Dombey and Son*, a new psychological realism is in evidence: Florence Dombey, suffering from her father’s anger and neglect, pays for her goodness

psychologically. Morally idealized, psychologically damaged, Florence prefigures Dickens's later, more complex, heroines, and *Dombey and Son* prefigures Dickens's later novels, in that it situates the tension between formal realism and moral teaching within its heroine. To compare the price that realism exacts in *Oliver Twist* with its price in *Dombey and Son*, and still later in *Bleak House* (1852–53) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), is to see striking evidence of Dickens's movement toward psychological realism. It also, more significantly, highlights a tension in Dickens's presentation of his morally exemplary characters, the way his moral assessment of those characters differs dramatically from the way he understands them psychologically.

I want to trace this change in Dickens's mode of portraying goodness by comparing to *Oliver Twist* a novel that falls in the middle of the eight-year period between that work and *Dombey: The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41). Little Nell, the novel's morally exemplary heroine, is in significant ways a female version of Oliver: both are impoverished children, betrayed by those who should protect them, undertaking arduous journeys in search of safe refuges. But Nell is a more complex, layered character than Oliver, and the two differ in other ways as well. He flees to London alone, escaping a brutal employer, while she flees to the country with her infirm and confused grandfather—the grandfather whose gambling addiction has bankrupted them. Through his story, Oliver struggles to preserve his own goodness, while Nell struggles to care for her grandfather and to prevent him from doing wrong. And while Oliver, through a series of startling coincidences, finally finds a happy home, Nell, whose plot involves almost as much improbability, instead suffers an early death. Unlike Oliver, then, Nell is not miraculously saved: she preserves her goodness, finally, at the price of her life, and she suffers most not from strangers but from the grandfather she sacrifices herself to save.

Why this difference in the fates of Oliver and Nell, and why is Nell a more complex, self-aware, conflicted character? One obvious answer is that for Dickens, as for Victorian writers generally, goodness is gendered. Oliver's masculine goodness can be expressed in self-assertion and concern for his own fate; he battles to defend his mother's name, flees physical and psychological abuse, and, while he worries that a benefactor may suspect him of dishonesty, he rarely blames himself for his situation. As Dickens finally protects Oliver materially, placing him in a most unlikely happy home, he also limits the psychological harm Oliver might experience by granting him no psychological depth.

How improbably *Oliver Twist*'s goodness survives, all readers of his novel know. Every time the fence Fagin involves Oliver in a robbery, the intended victim turns out to be closely connected to the child's parents; thus Fagin's plans to corrupt Oliver only succeed in uniting him with his natural protectors. Oliver's goodness survives, but realism is sacrificed; the plot, in a sense, pays the price.

More interesting is the fact that while this novel begins by invoking a causal model standard in literary realism, and insisting that environment shapes character, Oliver soon becomes exempt from such influence. He is originally presented as a representative workhouse child: as Dickens writes, "in a fair way of being reduced, for life, to a state of brutal stupidity and sullenness by the ill-usage he had received" (23). However, he soon undergoes a fairy-tale transformation, literally in a moment

becoming a different—incorruptible—character. From that point he is, as Fagin says, "not like other boys in the same circumstances" (163). Oliver is a radically simplified character, with no layers of self to be tempted against his better feelings, no possibilities of self-division.

Retiring Oliver to the country, Dickens finds a more effective way to treat his theme of "good surviving," as he sketches the moral awakening of the prostitute Nancy (Tracy 6). Nancy, unlike Oliver, is formed by her environment, but, as the narrator tells us, "There was something of the woman's original nature left in her still" (214). As Nancy's "woman's nature" struggles against her upbringing, she becomes a character of some complexity, who pays for her goodness first with moral conflict and later with her life. Significantly, she dies because she has tried to save not herself but another, and in so doing she reveals the form that female virtue will take throughout Dickens's novels. Thus we can trace as early as *Oliver Twist* Dickens's turn toward psychological realism and note that while he situates complexity in a female character, he creates complexity by relying on traditional notions of female nature.

We can see this pattern continued in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where the heroine Nell Trent combines qualities of Oliver and Nancy. She is, like Oliver, an improbably incorruptible child. Like Nancy's, her traditionally feminine version of goodness takes the form of self-sacrifice. And as with Nancy, her care for another causes her death.

Which is not to say that *The Old Curiosity Shop* in general represents a move toward greater formal realism; in its story lines, in its settings, and in its often grotesque characters, this novel follows the pattern of fairy tale. In his 1848 preface to the novel, Dickens wrote of his story's design, "I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of [Nell] with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed" (42). Dickens is as insistent here as in *Oliver Twist* on his protagonist's moral purity, but less insistent on his novel's realism: rather than claiming that Nell's companions are "real," he simply labels them "not impossible." Following Dickens's lead, the novel's first narrator, Master Humphrey, points to the exemplary nature of Nell's story: "she seemed to exist in a sort of allegory" (56).

In her allegorical function, Nell represents self-sacrificing goodness, and Dickens's portrait of her is thoroughly idealized. Even as a young child, she devotes herself entirely to caring for her grandfather, who, obsessed with winning a fortune for Nell, has gambled away all they own. But the narrator's description of Nell does incorporate a psychological perspective missing from the portrait of Oliver, and in this one sense the novel is more realistic than its predecessor. Nell, morally idealized, is at the same time an abused and exploited child, and her character has been shaped by that experience. She exhibits the abused child's watchfulness and the abused child's feelings of guilt. Her sense of responsibility is unremitting and inordinate, experienced as "a constant fear of committing or injuring the old man to whom she was so deeply attached" (119). She assumes responsibility not only for her grandfather's actions, but also for his state of mind, and therefore consciously pretends contentment and cheerfulness when in fact she is feeling "sadness, sorrow, gloom, loneliness, and

fear” (119). Throughout their hard travels, even when her grandfather has robbed her for gambling money, and knowing his intention to rob one of their benefactors, Nell accepts the blame for his actions. He remains “her dear old grandfather, in whose love for her this disease of the brain had been engendered” (303). Nell’s goodness, then, incorporates self-blame: as the narrator explains, “it was not the lightest part of her sorrow to know that [his theft of her money] was done for her” (305). Nell is, like Oliver, a simplified character, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* is eloquent on the subject of her goodness. But passing references to Nell’s emotions make clear the damage she suffers, her fear, “depression,” “anxiety” (119), and guilt.

What Nell’s story exemplifies, then, is not just “good surviving,” but also the price that goodness exacts. And, of course, while Nell’s goodness survives, she famously dies at the novel’s end. Indeed, she longs for death through much of the novel, perhaps because, having so completely put aside self, she can desire only not to be.

While this novel forecasts the situation of Dickens’s later, more complex heroines, it also suggests the primary strategy that Dickens will employ to reconcile the demands of formal realism and moral teaching in his later fictions, in the person of a morally idealized heroine who is also, and inevitably, psychologically damaged. This is not to say that Dickens’s novels contain no male moral paragons—*Great Expectations*’ Joe Gargery and *Little Dorrit*’s Arthur Clennam deserve their own discussion. But these early fictions, *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, do chart a direction that Dickens’s presentation of goodness will follow, as he also tries to create fictions that are “real.”

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# Mentorship in Soseki's *Kokoro*

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I teach in a core texts program that was called Great Ideas rather than Great Books with the explicit intention of avoiding ideological controversies over the “Western canon.” We are, in principle, open to the inclusion of important texts from any time or place, provided they speak in a profound way about the themes that form the skeleton of the program: justice, the good life, love and friendship, human nature and technology, and so on. Of course, since the only people at our university sympathetic to this kind of program have their training in fields such as Greek philosophy, medieval philosophy, Renaissance literature, or early modern political theory, our reading list looks pretty much like the typical Western canon. But we do at least *try* to transcend our own narrow training, appropriating texts from outside the canon that appear to have the potential to add something important to the ongoing conversation.

In this connection, we introduced Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* into last year's version of the course titled Love and Friendship. *Kokoro*, first published in 1914, is generally considered to be one of the greatest of all Japanese novels.<sup>1</sup> It seemed like a good candidate for the reading list because, while the central dramatic feature of the novel is a rather odd love triangle, the real substance of the book is the unusual friendship between the novel's protagonist and the unnamed young man who is its narrator. In other words, the novel is clearly about both love and friendship.

One of the interesting features of the central friendship in the story is that it is clearly a kind of teacher-pupil relationship. Indeed, the protagonist is never given a name; from the time of their very first meeting, the narrator thinks of him simply as *sensei*—the typical Japanese term for “teacher”—and that is what he is called throughout the rest of the book. This is not as strange in Japanese as it sounds in

English; the Japanese typically address a teacher by this title rather than by name. But it is odd to the extent that Sensei is not actually a teacher, and Sensei draws our attention to this fact (7).

The young narrator—who is basically a college student—is initially attracted to Sensei because Sensei seems so different. He is at the beach with a Westerner at a time when Westerners were quite unusual in Japan. The narrator is also struck by the fact that Sensei departs from the crowd of swimmers near shore and heads out into deeper waters on his own (4). Once the two get acquainted, the narrator becomes intensely curious about Sensei and his life. He even exclaims at one point that Sensei is—believe it or not—both more interesting and more intelligent than his university professors (28)! Sensei later speculates that the narrator’s strange interest in him is a function of the young man’s loneliness and that the interest is essentially a case of like being attracted to like. The observation seems correct, at least up to a point; for though the narrator is not the brooding type, it is noteworthy that he seems to have no real attachments to anyone except Sensei.

The more interesting question is what draws Sensei to the narrator. The two actually first make contact when Sensei has lost his glasses in the sand and the narrator finds them for him. The obvious suggestion implicit in this episode is that the narrator will somehow help Sensei to “see” things more clearly, that the teacher will come to learn something important either from his student or, at least, from his interaction with the student. Surprisingly, however, there is no indication in the rest of the novel that Sensei learns anything from his friendship with the young narrator. His interest in the young man turns out to have very different roots.

At first, Sensei gently rebuffs the narrator’s efforts to become more intimately acquainted. The turning point in the relationship comes when the two are on a walk outside the city. The narrator indicates that he seeks to “learn about life” from Sensei but complains that Sensei is often “a very unsatisfactory mentor” because he is so “purposefully evasive,” particularly about his own life (67–68). Sensei defends himself by drawing a distinction between abstract ideas and private experience: while he is happy to share whatever ideas he has, he thinks it inappropriate to talk about his personal history. The narrator responds as follows:

I do not agree with you. I value your opinions because they are the results of your experience. Your opinions would be worthless otherwise. They would be like soulless dolls. (67)

The young man’s eagerness to learn about life by learning about Sensei’s life is the crucial point. Sensei is actually quite keen to share the secrets of his past, but he has no friend with whom he can do that because he believes there is no one he can trust (68). He consents to become the narrator’s friend only because the young man adamantly believes that knowledge of the older man’s experiences will somehow make him wiser. This point is stated explicitly at the beginning of Sensei’s “testament,” a long suicide letter to the narrator:

Since my past was experienced only by me, I might be excused if I regarded it as my property, and mine alone. And is it not natural that I should want to give this thing, which is mine, to someone before I die? At least, that is how I feel. On the other hand, I would rather see it destroyed, with my life, than offer it to someone who does

not want it. In truth, if there had not been such a person as you, my past would never have become known, even indirectly, to anyone. To you alone, then, among the millions of Japanese, I wish to tell my past. For you are sincere; and because once you said in all sincerity that you wished to learn from life itself. (128)

What is the lesson or wisdom that Sensei wishes to pass on to his young friend? It emerges in the long suicide note, which recounts the story of a tragic love triangle. Sensei was actually the successful suitor, but he won only through an extremely cruel betrayal of his rival, who happened to be his closest friend. That friend, who is identified only by the letter K,<sup>2</sup> commits suicide. Sensei comes to realize that K's suicide was not caused by his romantic defeat (240), but it seems to have had at least some connection with Sensei's cruel attack on him. The rest of Sensei's life is ruined, because he finds it impossible to forgive himself for his grossly selfish behavior. Such selfishness is particularly shameful for Sensei. Having been cheated out of his inheritance by a wicked uncle, he retreated into a simplistic binary view of the world: most people are selfish, but a few (including himself) were somehow virtuous. Sensei's conduct toward his friend K had destroyed this worldview:

When I was cheated by my uncle, I felt very strongly the unreliableness of men. I learned to judge others harshly, but not myself. I thought that, in the midst of a corrupt world, I had managed to remain virtuous. Because of K, however, my self-confidence was shattered. With a shock, I realized that I was no better than my uncle. I became as disgusted with myself as I had been with the rest of the world. Action of any kind became impossible for me. (238)

The lesson that Sensei wishes to pass on to the young narrator, then, is simply this: that there is an evil selfishness lurking in the heart of all human beings, even those who have the deepest hatred of such selfishness. Sensei's wish is that the lessons that emerge from his experience will allow the narrator to have a more realistic assessment of his own soul and thus a better chance of keeping its evil tendencies in check.

Sensei's "teaching" may not be terribly original. What *is* intriguing, however, is the way that Soseki has framed its delivery. Sensei's own conduct as a mentor would seem, at first glance, to be a fine example of the selflessness he prizes. On reflection, however, it appears at least somewhat problematic.

To begin, we note that Sensei has not written this testament in order to help a friend. In causal terms, the relationship is precisely the reverse: he has taken on the young man as a friend only because he needed an audience for his testament.

Why is it so important for Sensei to be able to leave a testament? A large part of the reason seems to be a desire for immortality. Sensei and his wife have been unable to have children—something he takes to be divine punishment for his terrible treatment of K (17). The narrator seems to serve as a kind of substitute for offspring. In the final lines of the prologue to his testament, Sensei writes, "I shall be satisfied if, when my heart stops beating, a new life lodges itself in your breast" (129). The teacher's testament is thus his way of extending his mortality, of living after death.

Of course, the fact that Sensei's testament was not simply for the benefit of his young friend, but for his own purposes as well, does not necessarily undercut its value, either as an act of friendship or as an act of mentorship. Provided that the



testament benefits the young man, what matter if it also benefits Sensei? But this is where the novel becomes extremely interesting.

During the time when Sensei composes his testament, he is in Tokyo, but the narrator has returned to his home in the countryside to be with his ailing father. The testament arrives in the mail just as the narrator's father is about to die. In the desperate hope that Sensei has not yet actually killed himself, the narrator rushes off to Tokyo, thus deserting his dying father—a shocking act of filial impiety. One cannot help but speculate that the narrator, who was a lonely young man to begin with, will now carry a terrible burden of guilt throughout his life. In other words, he is likely to have exactly the same guilt-driven loneliness as his mentor, *precisely* due to Sensei's attempt to mentor him. Sensei, it seems, has succeeded in the mentor's quest of continuing his existence in the life of his student. Tragically, however, it seems that he has accidentally passed on the evil rather than the good. This is certainly a lesson that any serious teacher will want to consider carefully.

## Notes

1. Natsume Soseki, *Kokoro*, translated by Edwin McClellan (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1957). All citations are drawn from this edition.

2. With only one exception, no character in the novel has a name. My hunch is that Sensei's friend is referred to simply as "K" because it is from Sensei's betrayal of "K" that he learns the truth about his own heart (*kokoro*).

# Odyssey of Despair: Using Chiasmus to Examine the Domestic Sphere in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

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George Steiner observes that *Anna Karenina* deserves to be catalogued with the “Homeric epics” (71). What might that comparison entail? During the course of the *Odyssey*, it becomes necessary for Odysseus to put aside his violent warrior ethos and take on the characteristics of the domestic world represented by his marriage bed, which exists spiritually and literally rooted in the ground of Ithaca. The image of the marriage bed reveals the power that the domestic sphere exercises in keeping chaos—represented by the suitors—at bay. The domestic sphere frames the narrative of the poem and creates a crossing pattern in the storyline. As Odysseus travels toward Ithaca, his son who is beginning his own odyssey to adulthood journeys to find his father. Both journeys end with the hero reincorporated into a healthy and thriving domestic sphere. Readers can observe that the pattern of the two journeys takes on the characteristic crisscrossing structure of chiasmus.

In rhetoric, the term *chiasmus* indicates a crossing over of terms that creates “a natural internal dynamic” (Lanham 33). With this “internal dynamic” structure in mind, then, readers can employ the rhetorical strategy of chiasmus to investigate how Tolstoy calls attention to the importance of the domestic sphere as a mode of being. As Homer does in the *Odyssey*, Tolstoy constructs a double narrative in *Anna Karenina*—what Edward Wasiolek calls Tolstoy’s “two novels” (63). Rather than upstaging each other, however, the competing narratives hold each other in dynamic tension. Indeed, Victor Terras argues, “Anna’s tragedy and Levin’s searchings blend well”

(204). Tolstoy's technique of blending the two narrative strands functions, Robert Belknap asserts, "in order to exercise our moral faculties" (245).

Additionally, using chiasmus as a device for approaching the novel can help students understand the moral implications of the novel's dual narrative structure, specifically in understanding how the narrative threads concerning Levin and Anna relate to Tolstoy's ideal of home and family life. Indeed, even the famous opening line of the novel indicates both the chiasmus of the narrative structure and Tolstoy's ideal: "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1). Examining this crossing structure of the opening line, particularly in reference to the turmoil of the Oblonsky's home, reveals that Tolstoy employs his dual narrative to explore the moral dimension of the novel—a moral dimension concerning the choices that the characters make as they move through the various societies they inhabit.

Readers can analyze the chiasmatic structure of the novel as they observe Anna journeying toward despair while Levin struggles toward some degree of hopeful connection to society after his marriage to Kitty. However, consider Anna's case first. Barbara Lönnqvist points out that "symbols of iron" (89) manifest themselves around Anna and Vronsky. From the moment they meet at the train station until Anna throws herself under the wheels of the oncoming train, the hardness of iron dominates. Iron comes to symbolize the morally bankrupt adulterous relationship between Anna and Vronsky. For instance, when Vronsky meets Anna for the first time, he has been chatting with Stiva about "women of the demi-monde" (59). Sadly, as the novel progresses, we witness Anna's transformation from the gentle, natural woman of the opening to a bitter and hard woman just before her suicide—a change connected to her isolation as a woman of this same demi-monde. Andrew Wachtel demonstrates that "as [Anna] falls in love with Vronskii . . . this naturalness begins to disappear" (143). Anna becomes ensnared by the corrupt mores of St. Petersburg's society that approve of adultery as long as it is discreet, but she cannot accept her open avowal of passion for Vronsky.

The ball scene in Part 1, chapter 22, intensifies the corruption of St. Petersburg that has been initially represented by Stiva's lack of concern about his adulterous affair. When readers first encounter Anna, she is coming to mend the strife in the Oblonsky household that has erupted because of the affair with the French governess. We see Anna as a ministering angel who knows the exact words to foster peace in the Oblonsky household even though she has been forced into a loveless marriage with Karenin by her aunt.

Unfortunately, though, a different aspect of her character emerges at the ball. Along with the croquet parties and the steeplechase, the ball provides outlets for the decadent upper classes to meet and seduction to occur. Resplendent in black—a color that will come to represent her mourning and spiritual isolation—with her "willful ringlets" (78) escaping from her temples, Anna pilfers Vronsky from Kitty. At that moment, we see Anna in the first moments of corruption: "everything about her was enchanting, but there was something terrible and cruel in her charm" (82). Willis Konick points out that this metamorphosis reveals "the craving for power and control" (55) that will haunt Anna throughout the novel. This craving exiles Anna from

society, destroys her domestic world, and sets her story in narrative tension with the story of Levin.

Unlike Anna, who experiences an exile from any sense of a happy family, Levin finds a sense of emotional fulfillment in family life. Concerning his sense of fulfillment, Dona Gower points out that he “transcends the disintegration of both culture and human psyche” (282) that trap Anna and lead to her suicide. Levin’s success and Anna’s tragedy revolve around the rituals that they perform as members in society. While Anna has fallen into the deceptive life of St. Petersburg, Levin goes into the country to his estates. It is here that we see him engaging in the first great ritual he experiences: mowing with the peasants.

Although in his brilliant *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov argues that “the agrarian problems discussed in the book, especially in relation to Lyovin’s farming, are extremely tedious” (143), they strike me as integral to the conception of corrupt and natural life because we see Levin working with his workers in a family-like atmosphere. The mowing scenes with their lush description of the juiciness of the hay as it is cut reveal that Levin understands “that there must be a balance” (Blackmur 14). In other words, the mowing scenes provide the wholesome image of life—that of the happy family—that offsets the negative image of unhappy family life in St. Petersburg.

The country scenes also provide the setting for Kitty’s return. Levin watches her coach drive past, realizes that he still loves her, and decides to once again ask her to marry him. Thus, life in the country functions as the fulcrum on which the two parts of the novel balance. The country scenes set the stage for the wedding ritual in Part 5. Camaraderie exists between Levin and the peasants throughout the mowing scenes. We see people helping each other as well as encouraging each other. There is a healthy sense of community on the estate that is the opposite of the unhealthy community of St. Petersburg society.

This sense of healthy community is furthered during Kitty’s and Levin’s wedding at the opening of Part 5. Although doubts about the ritual and the Orthodox Church beset Levin, he goes through with the ceremony: “He could not believe in it, and yet was not firmly convinced that it was all false” (437). However, after the confession and marriage, even after realizing that marriage entails its own set of problems, Levin understands that life “has an unquestionable meaning of goodness with which [he has] the power to invest it” (811). His triumph is that he can accept himself as a flawed human being and still proceed with life, unlike Anna, who is left questioning herself and life. Just before jumping under the train, she wonders, “Where am I? What am I doing? Why?” (760). Anna’s suicide balances Levin’s acceptance of life.

The two characters, both of whom consider suicide and one who carries the act out, cross back and forth. The balance created by Levin and Anna and the fact that their lives run on parallel lines create an inner tension in the novel that underscores Tolstoy’s theme of the individual’s need to be united to society by the use of powerful rituals that create a strong domestic sphere. Throughout the novel Anna and Levin cross; as she seems to be in ascendance, he appears to be falling into despair. Ultimately, though, Levin finds transcendence, while Anna finds only hopelessness.

Using the rhetorical idea of chiasmus allows us to map the movement of the two characters and, more importantly, to explore Tolstoy's belief that a sound domestic world provides the main method of resisting the chaos that continually threatens to engulf society.

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# The Odyssey of Reading Proust

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“My great adventure was undoubtedly Proust. What is there left to write after that?”

— *Virginia Woolf* (in Michel-Thiriet 367)

When I first read Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* in an undergraduate seminar, it was best known in English under the title *Remembrance of Things Past* (as it may still be). Our class tackled only the “Combray” portion of *Swann’s Way*, which I think is still the most widely appreciated part of the novel. Many who have not read the book are familiar at least by report with the “Overture” (about 50 pages) to *In Search of Lost Time*, in which the narrator describes the process of awakening and being rescued by memory (see Proust, *In Search* 1), then recounts the psychological drama of the goodnight kiss, along with a few other recollections of childhood, before detailing his unexpected and almost miraculous recovery of the past, or rather its resurfacing in him, when he is aroused out of the fixation of his memory on the bedtime ritual by tasting the famous madeleine in the lime-flower tea. A delicate and profound sensation reopens the past to him with a new clarity, intensity, and delight and thus inaugurates the *recherche*.

Two things aside from the fascinating treatment of memory made a lasting impression on me. One was literary, the preciousness of Proust’s style—“with its cloudy, colloidal, honeyed consistency and extraordinarily aromatic sweetness” (Lunacharsky, para. 37). The other was anecdotal. On our coffee break, one of the instructors related the tale of a young woman who had decided, as I recall it, to make reading Proust (all of *In Search*) her pastime while she rode the Métro to and from her place of employ during a work-abroad year in Paris. The reading took almost the whole year. On the day she finished the book, right after she had closed it and sighed with

evident satisfaction, a fellow passenger interjected that he couldn't help noticing that she had been reading Proust. This prompted her to declare, perhaps proudly, and with a just and distinct sense of accomplishment, that she had in fact just got to the end, which to her, as to all readers, is overwhelming enough in its effect. To which the fellow replied, perhaps rudely, with the implicit challenge: "Ah, yes, I remember the way I felt also when I finished it—for the first time." The Proustian odyssey had therefore to be undertaken again, reread and relived.

Proust's style held its own allure for me. But something also of this tale—its dare, I suppose—must have prompted my subsequent decision not only to enroll in a Proust course when I went on to grad school, but then also to take up the outrageous scheme of including *In Search* as one of the texts for my dissertation, which required me to read it all again, and again; and then to agree to offer a course on Proust myself (which led me to plow through it once more, in translation, in the company of students who were all first-timers). I can attest that each reading has so far been qualitatively different, each a distinct journey, each offering a richer reward and a deeper understanding. In order to help my students to get hooked on the book and so to aid them to press on through the whole, I drew their attention to Proust's style, sharing with them also one of Proust's reflections on the topic, from a written reply to a question about style:

I do not "feel in the least bit sympathetic" (to use the same terms as your enquiry) to those writers who are "preoccupied by an originality of form." One's sole preoccupation should be for the impression or the idea being conveyed. One must look inward and force oneself to render with the greatest possible fidelity the interior model. Just one line added (to shine, or not to shine too much, to respond to a vain desire to amaze, or the childish wish to remain a "classic") is enough to compromise the success of the experience and the discovery of a law. It requires all one's strength to submit to reality, to succeed in giving the most apparently simple impression of the invisible world in the so different concrete world in which the inexpressible resolves itself in clear formulae. (Proust, *Enquiry on the Renewal of Style*)

This gets across the intent, though not so much the quality or effect, of Proust's literary style. Lunacharsky has noted that, as it works in practice, Proust's style is "the only medium fitted to induce tens of thousands of readers to join you enthusiastically in reliving your not particularly significant life, recognizing therein some peculiar significance and surrendering themselves to this long drawn out pleasure with undisguised delight" (para. 37). And I also told the story of the Métro, on the break; fortunately, they were amused and intrigued rather than deflated. I hope that they find, as I have, that rereading Proust is neither gratuitous nor indulgent, nor is it a simple repetition. Rather, an aesthetic excavation is made possible by rereading that is essential to appreciating the full value of this "lyrical epic" (Lunacharsky, para. 14). In search of lost time, no time is wasted.

At the conclusion of Proust's book, the protagonist returns to the beginning of the text, but now as narrator of his own story (or writer—an exemplary instance of Northrup Frye's notion of creative repetition). In accord with and alongside this, the text contains a sort of injunction to the reader to return to the beginning as a rereader. As I reread the book last year as the focal text for a senior seminar in contemporary

aesthetic theory and criticism, I felt privileged to be able to survey the developing responses of the students to the text. Not surprisingly, I sensed a distinction of levels of approaching and appreciating the text among them, and between them and me. While I felt generally oriented, setting out again on an already well-traveled route, they were embarking on a maiden voyage, wandering and drifting, at times feeling quite lost in the face of the text's strange and overwhelming attention to detail, its obsessive lingering over the smallest aspects of inner experience. For me, therefore, one of the difficult tasks was figuring out how to speak about (or around) patterns (layers, depths, resonances) in the text, which I seemed to be detecting though they did not, or at least not so readily or clearly.

Luckily, Marcel, the protagonist-narrator, raises a similar matter himself as he reflects on when and how one first hears a piece of music, indeed wondering whether and in what way there is a first hearing at all. This occurs as he is listening to Vinteuil's sonata (Proust, *In Search 2*: 139 ff., esp. 141–42). He suggests that there may be multiple first hearings, though of different aesthetic quality and value. This insight may be, perhaps even begs to be, applied reflexively to *In Search* itself. On this view, one becomes sensitive to—which is to say one experiences—the deeper and more meaningful elements of a musical, or literary, composition, which must proceed in and through and over time, only upon successive listenings, and this means that one is in some sense hearing the piece for the first time repeatedly. There was a first hearing, only relatively superficial and incomplete. The deeper and more difficult to discern patterns, overtones, and connections are recognized, and the more beautiful ones are beheld only on successive attempts, and their very detection seems to indicate a deeper, enriched appreciation. What my student readers found and responded to in Proust, from what I could gather, related in great measure to concerns that were already present to them, whether stemming from various personal and subjective experiences or owing to the way in which this vast and capacious text represented for them a kind of consummate test of, and resource for measuring the value of, critical theory, which they had been studying in other contemporary studies courses. Accordingly, they interrogated Proust's variations on a host of themes related to personal development and also on a whole range of philosophical, phenomenological, hermeneutic, and aesthetic questions. The combination of these two influences (subjective or personal and theoretical or scholarly) led to certain aspects of the text appearing in the foreground. But for every reader, in any case, there are bound to be more obvious beauties, salient images, and patterns that will be detected first and foremost. Only on rereading, when these things strike us as less interesting, may we see (or the text will disclose) its more secret and hidden treasures.

Reading a truly great book, like a liberal arts education, is a journey of self-discovery, combining suffering and joy in the expansion of the heart, soul or psyche. It is an encounter with a more or less complete, and more or less organic, representation of the circuit of human life. Proust's magnum opus is in its own way an odyssey (as I've already hinted), involving a "movement away from our home into the world and, then, a return" (see [www.coretexts.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/2007\\_ACTC\\_13th\\_Annual\\_Conference\\_Agenda.pdf](http://www.coretexts.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/2007_ACTC_13th_Annual_Conference_Agenda.pdf)) as Proust's hero undergoes the trials of experience and suffering in the world (seeking beauty, entering into a series of



love relationships and attempts to become a writer), passes through a period of lost time (a dead zone, a narrative ellipsis of about ten years) in *maisons de santé*, in the end to return first to society and then finally into himself in order to recreate his own life in the writing of it. The phases in the journey of Proust's hero can be understood according to a global schema of emotional experiences recollected in meditative moments and recomposed in literary form.

A comparison is in order (hopefully not odious). *The Odyssey* is a journey homeward across the sea, across the troubled deep, that ends with poetic justice and the hero's recovery of his lost kingdom, family, and identity. Odysseus achieves a kind of ease as he completes his cycle of suffering and is recognized for who he is and what he has done—he really is, finally, at home, in the present and eternally (though we do learn of the prophecy of his death in old age). The *Recherche* is an inward journey along the “path of the heart” (*chemin dans mon coeur*) that culminates with a series of uncanny—*unheimlichkeit*—moments of recognition, the *moments bienheureux* of which the madeleine episode is the paradigm. The protagonist-narrator is caught up in a flood of memories that restore to him the “kingdom of the expired past” (Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 39) and compel him ultimately to travel the path of life again, recreating it in writing, provided he can forestall death long enough in the meantime to accomplish the task, and provided he has the courage and stamina. These are uncanny moments for Marcel precisely because the past returns to him, from the depths of his own being, as “back there where it was” (Casey, cited in Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 39) and where it belongs. The result is a kind of “not-at-homeness”—*unheimlichkeit*—that nevertheless redeems experience through its revelations about the deep continuity of the self (in spite of a multitude of ruptures and the deaths of various selves along the way) and the possibility, which comes in the contemplation of the significance of these moments, that literature might after all be able to capture and to communicate something valuable of life. A reflection offered by the narrator serves to summarize his viewpoint:

Certainly, if he was thinking purely of the human heart, the poet was right when he spoke of the “mysterious threads” which are broken by life. But the truth, even more, is that life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to another, and that these threads are crossed and recrossed, doubled and redoubled to thicken the web, so that between any point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating path to choose from. (Proust, *In Search* 6: 504)

Each tale (the *Odyssey* and *In Search*) is essentially motivated by a kind of core emotional determination, involving an escape from heartache and paralysis, as well as a kind of rescue from potential oblivion. Athene's “heart breaks for Odysseus” (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 1, l. 59), who is stranded on Calypso's Isle, weeping and longing to return to his wife and kingdom. The goddess's concern for the mortal most like her is the impetus, and the action itself commences with divine intervention. Marcel is also saved from a kind of paralysis, his memory of childhood having been fixed on one event from the past—the bedtime drama, the goodnight kiss, the village of Combray, 7 p.m. A sensory-induced involuntary memory, the resurgence of the past that comes with tasting a piece of cake in tea, provides an experience of a

most intense emotion that opens up anew whole scenes from childhood and launches him on the meditative search for lost time, which will then be recomposed in literature. Like the *Odyssey* of Homer, Proust's *In Search* is the story of an adventure (a vocation), with temptations, deviations, frustrations, and detours of its own, and it demonstrates, in its own modernist fashion, the phenomenological fact of "life in quest of narrative," to recall an important phrase of Ricoeur's. Odysseus and Marcel both, in a strong sense, "live to tell the tale"—they live *in order to* tell the tale, not to mention *because* they tell the tale.

Readers of Proust's *In Search* are invited to step out of their own lives (their homes, their routines, their comfort zones) and into an oceanic text of psychological realism (and to explore its fictional world through the recollections and reflections of the narrator), to accompany the protagonist (hero) on his journey of self-discovery (on the way to becoming a writer), and, finally, to return to their lives transformed by this process in a host of ways, especially in respect of their sense of time and their sense of the depth of the inward life. Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative* and elsewhere, describes the process as being refigured (in relation to the self, the world and others) as a result of engagement with the configuration (of time, of emotional experience and so on) that is the literary text. Beyond this refiguration, Proust's readers are additionally encouraged to undertake the journey on their own—to attend with heightened awareness to the resurgence of lost time within, to respond hypersensitively to the world around them in the quest for beauty, and to create for themselves a literary identity by translating and giving expression to their own inner book. And this is in addition to the implicit injunction that they repeat the journey through *In Search* itself again, being now better equipped to decipher the resonances of the narrative's double-voicing (protagonist and narrator), many of which no doubt remained elusive on first reading.

The text is demanding, and its personality difficult, peculiar, but both are compelling. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote, in one of my favorite assessments of this challenging modern author, "the example of Proust shows clearly enough that psychophysiological disequilibrium signifies neither lack of power nor mediocrity" (*The Second Sex* 714). Anais Nin's reader response testifies nicely to the aesthetic qualities of the text at the same time as it affirms a principle of "connection" that she believes she has discovered in her reading of Proust:

[Proust] is more alive in his senses and his passion for the smallest of life's details than a thousand so-called realists, because it is a passion that recreates a flower, a leaf, a cathedral spire, a sunset, a meal. . . . Proust's life has flowed through me, has become part of my life. His thoughts, discoveries and visions visit me every year, bringing me ever more profound messages. There must be continuity. (Michel-Thiriet 366)

Proust's *Bildungsroman* is huge, demanding, a serious commitment, but it might justly claim a place as one among the many "textual 'episodes'"—a considerably vast, elaborate, and complicated, but still a "connected" one—"that make up the journey" of our programs.

Reading Proust is an aesthetic education and an endurance test that involves reckoning with a host of genuinely revealing expressions of important aspects of

human experience. This autobiographical novel gives a first-person account (double-voiced: character and narrator) of a developing literary (artistic) self. The narrator purports to have discovered and disclosed, through his attention to self and his observations of others (his famous x-rays), various general psychological laws—relating to habit, the vagaries of the soul, perception and expression, appearance and reality, desire and motivation, love and attachment, jealousy and possession, suspicion and deception, fascination and indifference, grief and mourning (the list is almost endless), in short, about “intermittences of the heart”—which implicate and involve readers in unique and peculiar ways. When the narrator declares, only toward the end, in the great meditation in the Guermantes’s library that he intends his book to allow his readers to become readers of themselves, the actual reader feels a certain shock, sensing the way in which the text has already, subtly, achieved just that.

As George Cattauri has written, echoing Proust’s own language, “Each page of Proust’s speaks to each one of us, and always at our own level. . . . In reading him, we become readers of ourselves” (Michel-Thiriet 364). When one begins Proust, it feels as though one has been launched on an ocean<sup>1</sup> (and many readers have to embark on the text repeatedly before getting through it).<sup>2</sup> One undergoes (alongside the hero) a sort of progressive attunement, made to hear the chords of the “inner violin,” as it is termed at one point. And at the finish, one remains adrift on the sea of life, Time’s castaway, but with an enhanced and enriched appreciation for the inward voyage and for the currents that circulate within the psyche, soul, and heart. Robert Kemp assesses Proust’s value as the ultimate companion (presumably more satisfying than Calypso):

Personally, I would live on a desert island with him. . . . With Stendhal? Perhaps. With Balzac, probably. But one can’t imitate Balzac. He introduces you into his people, his city; he presents you with his creatures. Proust awakens the gift of creation. Under his example, you rethink your own thoughts. (Michel-Thiriet 365)

Ernst Robert Curtius adds to the chorus:

He surpasses Flaubert in intelligence just as he surpasses Balzac in literary qualities and Stendhal in his understanding of life and beauty. . . . He has extended the domain of the human soul, and enriched the life of every one of us. (Ibid. 364)

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, storytelling has a kind of supernatural sanction. Odysseus himself takes after Athene; Demodocus the bard taps into the cosmic order when he sings in the center of a circle of dancers who appear to mime the actions (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 8, ll. 284 ff.). In Proust, all such sanctions are gone. Odysseus is rescued from Calypso’s Isle, where we see him first in tears, longing to return home. Athene initiates the action, her heart breaking for Odysseus in his plight, and he is tossed back, voluntarily, into the cycle of human suffering, in the end returning home to reclaim his rightful position, at which point the tale definitively ends (though only with the intervention again of Athene). The ancient epic of homecoming assures the reader of the solidity of human experience, the poetic nature of justice, and the importance of belonging and recognition. In Proust’s *In Search*, the hero is saved by involuntary memory, rescued from the dead zone (truly lost time) of the stays in

the sanatoria by “intimations” (*avertissements*) that revive his literary sensibilities. Following this resuscitation, he experiences a most intense moment of the return of a sort of home to him—living recollections of childhood—which he then must have the courage to explore and to recreate in writing. The result of this tale of becoming is just that—a forever-repeated cycle of becoming, as the protagonist-narrator, who has put himself to bed early forever, now forever also recreates his consciousness in the book. There is a sense of belonging here, but also a sense of homelessness, in that the reader is asked to accept certain conclusions about the aesthetic nature of life (life is literature; memory is metaphorically structured) that imply that one is always in a state of self-creation, or re-creation, and that identity is itself therefore a function of an imaginative process. Odysseus told his own tale, and was prone to deception, but the reader of Homer is not expected to receive Odysseus’s autobiographical account (Books 9–12) as a lie or simply as a deceptive aesthetic construct. In Proust, the fact of storytelling (of autobiography) is problematized by the interposition of the images of the magic lantern, the masquerade, and the kaleidoscope. What we are left with, in our efforts to articulate our own identities as we weave together our own stories from recovered memories, is a kind of “lucid illusion,” as critic Joshua Landy has recently put it. Proust himself wrote, in his early collection of essays and stories, *Pleasures and Days*: “It is better to dream one’s life than to live it, especially since to live it would be to dream it” (Michel-Thiriet 351).

As Proust’s readers come to sense the force of the protagonist’s “purely internal law of development,” they come to sense the possibility of a version of such in themselves. Indeed, the narrator’s phrasing encourages this complicity: “for those of us who follow a purely internal law of development.” Like Proust’s hero, moreover, they (or we) continue through life caught up in a constant negotiation between the uncertain flush of social experience (as well as catering to the ongoing demands of friendship), on the one hand, and the recollected tranquillity of more purely personal moments of self-composition (the inner darkroom in which the significance of experience becomes developed, as a photo-negative is developed in a darkroom), on the other. The text, which has brought the reader into the developing consciousness of another, returns him in the end to himself, with a special demand for expression—expression of truths about the emotional, psychological, even spiritual and ethical life, truths about which Wittgensteinians might suggest we either must or ought to remain silent. Proust’s meditative autobiography, through its metaphorical structures, including its grandest claim—that “true life . . . life truly lived, is literature”—seeks precisely to communicate from a moment of silence—the written text—something about the essence of human experience that is articulable only in this way. (Whereof we cannot speak, we might only write.)

## Notes

1. One of my students, whom I asked about the “odyssey” of reading Proust, related his experience in such terms.
2. E.g., see Mark Daniel Epstein’s discussion in his review essay, “Proust Regained.”

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# My Journey with James Joyce

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Notoriety deems it the most intimidating novel ever written. Although that is certainly not true, Joyce's *Ulysses* has earned the reputation of being the great novel that no one ever reads, and for this reason, as Voltaire maliciously quipped about *The Divine Comedy*, its reputation has only increased with time. It is one of those books one has always meant to get to. It is not reader-friendly. It demands the line of most resistance. The common reader shuns it, in consequence of which *Ulysses* has been abandoned to the experts, who over the years have made an industry out of it and converted what should be a living work into a cultic object.

Whenever I set out to explore its delights with my freshmen, worried colleagues react the way old Eurykleia does when Telemachus announces his plan to sail from home: "Why, my beloved child, has this intention come into your head?" (48). The apprehension convinces me all the more that any worthwhile odyssey necessarily involves fear, pain, and hardship, which are the concomitants of discovery and growth. The difficulties of *Ulysses* are its very virtues: the stylistic peculiarities by which Joyce renders the rich inner humanity of his characters, particularly Leopold Bloom, one of the greatest creations in literature. And so I usually begin by asking my students to point out what impediments resisted their best efforts to make sense of the book. Style is, after all, the enchanted key to the terra incognita of a work of art, especially a highly original work, which always instructs the patient and humble reader as to how it wants to be read. The problem is we always anticipate how a work of art is supposed to behave, and so we become vexed at the unprecedented practices of an original mind. There is nothing more stifling to our intellectual growth than to think that a work of art is contractually obliged to pander to our preconceptions rather than follow its own itinerary. That is why people commonly demand more of the same

from an artist whose first work appeals to them and why they feel cheated if he forsakes the sure and easy for new and unfamiliar paths. Yet if we wished to replicate on our travels the familiar comforts of home, why leave home in the first place?

Joyce's greatest stylistic innovation was to minimize the action of the story with a lavish indulgence of inner monologue and to devise linguistic means to create the illusion of the way our minds process the reality that impinges on our consciousness. He lacked the narrative facility one finds preeminently in a writer like Nabokov, just as Beethoven lacked the melodic facility of Schubert. But great artists like these possess the inestimable ability of knowing how to convert a liability into an advantage, Joyce by a compensatory linguistic gift, Beethoven by an architectural one. Though Joyce did not invent stream of consciousness—that honor, as far as I know, goes to Tolstoy, who, first in *Anna Karenina* and subsequently in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, used it with judicious precision for strictly local effect—Joyce inflated the device to over half the chapters in his novel, so brilliantly exhausting the effects achievable by it that he rendered it unfit for all but imitators. His own special brand of the device is distinguished by several things: sudden dips into the character's mind without tag formulas ("he thought," "he reflected"); associative meandering from one thought to another; the use of present tense (except when a past event is recalled); and the use of syntactic fragments rather than complete sentences—what you might call telegraphic language, "flashthoughts." Once this is clear, it is easy to follow the transitions, however subtle, between the narrator's descriptions and the character's prismatic cerebrations. In the process Joyce also refuses to contextualize Bloom's and Stephen's allusions; and readers ought to trust that Joyce does this not to be cruel and perverse but to mimic our cognitive operations. After all, no one explains to himself what he already knows. The chunky exposition, or even parenthetical clarifications, that are traditionally an author's concession to the reader are replaced by filamented strands of observed or recollected images that create a transparency of texture which, by accretion, provides all the expository context we need. This means we might have to wait hundreds of pages before an allusion is clarified.

In the process, one of Joyce's finest effects is the distinct individuation of character. Bloom walks the same Dublin streets as Stephen, yet their incongruent inventories of detail (what their respective minds notice), no less than the different rhythm of their minds, of their syntax, differentiate their personalities and the world they see. Nowhere is this difference as clear as in the penultimate "Ithaca" chapter. The two walk to Bloom's house through the quiet streets after midnight. Note how the impersonal tone of this so-called catechistic chapter (written in question-answer format) implies the action it refrains from describing and captures the casual, desultory discursiveness of a peripatetic talk.

Of what did the duumvirate deliberate during this itinerary?

Music, literature, Ireland, Dublin, Paris, friendship, woman, prostitution, diet, the influence of gaslight or the light of arc and glow-lamps on the growth of adjoining para-heliotropic trees, exposed corporation emergency dustbuckets, the Roman Catholic Church, careers, the study of medicine, the past day, the maleficent influence of the presabbath, Stephen's collapse. (554)

The discovery of common interests (music, literature) leads them to more



theoretical musings (friendship, woman); the discussion of woman leads the men to mention prostitution—and then the sudden appearance of “gaslight . . . on the growth of . . . trees” implies that the two men are drawn to make an abrupt, but casual, observation about where they have momentarily halted on the street during their talk, a probability confirmed, a moment later, by the “dustbuckets.” This magnificent chapter shifts the novel finally from subjective consciousness to a dispassionate objectivity that puts the experience of the two men in context of their respective life histories and the whole of those lives into an even larger cosmic context, where the minutest local actions are plotted on the graph of universal space and time. It is an extraordinary achievement.

Despite the similarities that range from the incidental to the essential, the meeting between Bloom and Stephen is a poignant failure, as sadly without issue as the legendary meeting of Joyce and Proust. True, both characters are dressed in black mourning; both recall an exotic dream; both set out from home without their keys; both regard their own rightful domestic positions as having been usurped, Stephen’s by an unwelcome English visitor, Bloom’s by his adulterous wife’s latest lover. In general both men feel isolated, and in each case the estrangement from fellow humans is mainly a function of a rich inner sensibility. Stephen feels fatherless, although strictly speaking he is not. Bloom, by virtue of his son’s early death, feels childless, Milly, his daughter, being, as he sadly reflects, more her mother’s child. We are teased with the expectation that Bloom might find a son in Stephen and Stephen a father in Bloom; but their differences are decisive. Besides minor facts (Stephen has an aversion to animals and water, Bloom loves both), Stephen is a renounced Catholic, Bloom a convert, as charmingly ignorant of its elaborate theology as Stephen is thoroughly grounded in it. Where Stephen’s knowledge is precise, Bloom’s is blurry around the edges, though redeemed by a wonderful curiosity and a tirelessly active imagination. At the funeral of chapter 6, his mind runs through all the thoughts people commonly ponder in relation to death, including bits of folk wisdom; and he dreams up all sorts of little inventions for the improvement of burial customs, not least of all a mechanism to release a red flag of distress in case the encased person is not really dead. In chapter 10 Lenehan, a minor character, catching sight of Bloom on the street, recalls to a friend a night in the past when he had been together with Bloom and wife Molly:

She’s a gamey mare and make no mistake. Bloom was pointing out all the stars and the comets in the heavens to Chris Callinan and the jarvey: the great bear and Hercules and the dragon and the whole jingbang lot. . . . He knows them all, faith. At last she spotted a weeny weeshy one miles away. *And what star is that, Poldy?* says she. By God, she had Bloom cornered. *That one, is it?* says Callinan, *sure that’s only what you might call a pinprick.* By God, he wasn’t wide of the mark. (193)

But Lenehan concludes, with real admiration: “He’s a cultured allroundman, Bloom is, . . . He’s not one of your common or garden . . . you know . . . There’s a touch of the artist about old Bloom.”

Joyce gives us continual samples of Bloom’s imagination; here is one from the catechistic chapter:



What special affinities appeared to him to exist between the moon and woman?

Her antiquity in preceding and surviving successive tellurian generations: her nocturnal predominance: her satellitic dependence: her luminary reflection: her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times, waxing and waning: the forced invariability of her aspect: her indeterminate response to inaffirmative interrogation: her potency over effluent and reflux waters: her power to enamour, to mortify, to invest with beauty, to render insane, to incite to and aid delinquency: the tranquil inscrutability of her visage: the terribility of her isolated dominant implacable resplendent propinquity: her omens of tempest and of calm: the stimulation of her light, her motion and her presence: the admonition of her craters, her arid seas, her silence: her splendour, when visible: her attraction, when invisible. (576)

Bloom is obviously visceral, a sensualist; Stephen is cerebral. He is as ascetic, cold, and hard as Bloom is kind, mellow, and humane. Even Joyce's syntax choreographs Bloom's exquisite sensitivity:

Did Bloom accept the invitation to dinner given then by the son and afterwards seconded by the father?

Very gratefully, with grateful appreciation, with sincere appreciative gratitude, in appreciatively grateful sincerity of regret, he declined. (556)

Even as they share a masculine bonding moment urinating under the constellated sky, the gulf between the two men is clear:

What different problems presented themselves to each concerning the invisible audible collateral organ of the other?

To Bloom: the problems of irritability, tumescence, rigidity, reactivity, dimension, sanitariness, pelosity. To Stephen: the problem of the sacerdotal integrity of Jesus circumcised. (557)

There is nothing here that mimics the Homeric likelihood that Telemachus may grow into his father or that Odysseus may once have been like his son. For all the cosmetic resemblances between Stephen and his creator as a young man (albeit Stephen is a stylized and simplified version of Joyce), it is Bloom that is the real hero of the novel. We follow both men in their trajectory through Dublin, but in the end it is only Bloom that we see return to his Ithaca. What has he learned in his eighteen-hour odyssey? He has reviewed his life. He returns to rethink his marital dissatisfaction. He thinks he will leave Molly. But not just yet: her warm proximity is too appealing, and he provides himself with half a dozen other reasons to justify his reluctance. In these moments before turning off the light of consciousness he performs something like a Pythagorean assessment at the close of his long and tiring day.

In its three-thousand-year history literature has moved to ever more refined nuances of perception. Not that it has in any sense "improved," like science, only that it is forever setting new tasks for itself, claiming, as it were, uncharted aspects of human experience. Joyce gives us the textured density of life's diurnal events, rendered with lucidity and simplicity, and possessing a Homeric dignity that needs no embarrassment or apology—not even the unprecedented scene of Bloom's tearing off a page from his magazine to wipe himself on the toilet. And no author has ever expended so large a stylistic arsenal to capture this complexity of life. I wish to mention, in quick passing,

that besides the stream of consciousness and its extreme opposite, the impersonal catchism, Joyce employs many other stylistic devices, among them two complementary types of syncopated action in contiguous chapters, 10 and 11 (“Wandering Rocks” and “Sirens”). The first, centrifugal in nature, charts the synchronous movements of fifty characters throughout the city, their momentary intersections and molecular coalescences. The other, centripetal by contrast, interweaves with fugal complexity sixty fragmented motifs, each associated with a particular person or action, to render the texture of simultaneous activity in one location, the Ormond Hotel Bar.

It is a pity that readers let its surface difficulties dishearten them from exploring the profound humanity of the book. As for the recondite allusions, they enrich our pleasure when known, but they do not impede our understanding when unknown. They are matter for subsequent readings. Which brings me finally to the most undervalued truth about books, and that is the necessity of rereading. If these literary excursions are odysseys, filled with strangeness, difficulty, discovery, I do not consider the landing points of the journey to be stages in any single reading of a book but rather stages in one’s growing appreciation of that work by virtue of multiple readings over time. We return to certain works at later stages of life, after life has continued to act on us. The first half of our life should be devoted to reading as extensively as possible, the second half to consolidating what we have learned. After midlife, for every new work that we read, we should reread a higher proportion of books that have become especially meaningful to us. It is the same as traveling: as our life tapers with increasing velocity to the vortex of death, we become less interested in playing the tourist than in revisiting places of special importance. I do not believe, any more than Tennyson did, that the best odysseys happen only once. Tennyson fused from Homer and Dante his own version of Ulysses, who after twenty years of enforced absence comes home to his wife and son only to discover that this singleminded objective that sustained him is, in the end, disappointing: he yearns to set out again. In a wildly revisionist move Tennyson even resurrects the old crew who in Homer are all drowned. It is not hard to see why he does so, instead of having his hero more reasonably muster a crew of muscular young hunks. With the geriatric crew the new departure becomes a voyage of nostalgic remembrance as well as discovery. For me the hardest task as I, by contrast, find myself bringing new students year after year to special books, is to remember that matters long familiar to me are pristine and marvelous to them. I watch them make discoveries for themselves, believing, as we all do, that no one has made these observations before. Scientists warn us that ontogeny does not replicate phylogeny, yet in psychological matters I think it does. Each of us is fated to experience what all individuals have, in their own time, experienced before us. But is that bad, after all? And if our later journeys, or our subsequent readings, correct the naïve misapprehension that our discoveries are unprecedented, they do so by enriching, not negating, the value of the first journey.

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# Creative Writing and the Classics: Contrapuntal Music

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Tobias Wolff, in his Vietnam War memoir *In Pharaoh's Army*, is eating fish soup in a little provincial town called My Tho. Rain is falling outside the café. A column of Vietnamese soldiers walks by along the street, their rifles slung upside down, the rain pouring off their helmets and ponchos. Beside Lieutenant Wolff sits an irascible Canadian surgeon who has volunteered to work in Vietnam. The two men begin arguing about the reason some people become prematurely white-haired. Wolff has just seen an American officer in an outlying village who is under incredible stress and whose hair has gone pure white in his early twenties. Wolff thinks the cause might be the stress; the doctor argues it's genes and only genes—that the only possible answer comes from scientific documentation. At that point the doctor leans over and adds, “More than anything else, sonny, I hate the condescension of ignorant sissies with all their *more things in heaven and earth Horatio* bullshit” (106).

Did that man just quote *Hamlet*? Yes, he did. And what happens when a reader spots such a quotation? It's like an unexpected meeting with an old friend. Coming from the mouth of a cantankerous doctor might affect our reception of the quotation, but it is still a fine thing, a pleasurable satisfaction to unexpectedly meet *Hamlet* in a café in South Vietnam. The actual words of Shakespeare's prince, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Then are dreamt of in your philosophy,” inform the story in their own right, in this case furthering the reader's previous understanding that the Canadian doctor is a crass materialist who believes “that at all times and in all places he [is] surrounded by fools” (Wolfe 99). But more than this, such references link both author and reader—much as a common friend introduces

two strangers. Prince Hamlet—our mutual friend—turns to Wolff, who then, as it were, shakes my hand with his words. Tobias Wolff expects me, the reader, to recognize this quotation, and I am granted the satisfaction of responding as he wishes. So here is a modern memoirist, novelist, and short-story writer whose work assumes a knowledge of at least this moment in Shakespeare's famous play.

Creative writers of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction do this all the time. It lends depth and meaning to their writing, and it creates this bond of mutual recognition between reader and author. Novelist and travel writer Bruce Chatwin includes an entire chapter of quotations in the middle of *The Songlines*, a book that ventures into the desolate outback of Australia in search of Aborigines' ancient "dreaming-tracks." In Chatwin's attempt to understand both Aboriginal culture and his own restlessness, he quotes Pascal, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, the Bible, Josephus, William Blake, Sumerian texts, Herodotus, and many others. All of these quotations serve as a direct commentary on the issue at hand: the nomadic and restless life of the constant traveler. All of them enhance and further illuminate Chatwin's text, but they also connect the reader psychologically to the author. If I have read Josephus, I am glad to see that Chatwin has, too. If I have not read Baudelaire, then I am moved to try him, and the community of reader and author is further enhanced.

Between the chapters of her book *The Writing Life*, Pulitzer Prize-winning essayist and poet Annie Dillard leaves us little gems: from Goethe, Emerson, Plato, and others. She writes,

Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed? . . . Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power? (72–73).

And how is this all possible without the wisdom and illuminations of the old writers? In the chaotic and noisy city of the spoken and written word today, they are the steady stars beyond the flashing urban lights.

It was T. S. Eliot, the *modernist* poet who championed the traditional, who held that the modern poet must acquire what Eliot calls "the historical sense." He argues that this knowledge of traditional literature is "nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year." He goes on to assert that "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (38). The writer needs the old poets in his bones. The epigraph of Eliot's first famous poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," begins with a quotation from Dante's *Inferno*, and its text refers to both "Lazarus, come from the dead" and Prince Hamlet. Eliot expects his readers to be familiar with Dante, with the New Testament, and with Shakespeare's tragedy. Of course, Eliot's ground-breaking poem *The Waste Land* requires a small book of notes to reference his historical sources.

But of course this need for a familiarity with past literature pertains not only to poetry but also to other forms of creative writing as well. William Faulkner famously

has one of his characters say, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (*Requiem for a Nun*). You see Faulkner’s reliance on that literary past in the very titles of his modernist novels: *Absalom, Absalom!*; *The Sound and the Fury*; *If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem*; *Go Down, Moses*. The titles, like struck bells, go resonating into the past, picking up reverberations from Shakespeare to the Torah. Other novelists and short-story writers strike the same bells: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Goodman Brown meets the ancient Serpent of Eden in his New England forest; Herman Melville finds Shakespeare on the high seas in *Moby-Dick*; John Updike writes a prequel to *Hamlet*, Nikos Kazantzakis writes a sequel to Homer’s *Odyssey*, Jane Smiley’s *Thousand Acres* adapts *King Lear*, and Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* assumes an audience who knows *Hamlet*. The list of such references and adaptations would be very long.

But of all the creative writers, the ones who reference the classics most must be the creative nonfiction writers. Montaigne, the French essayist who popularized the personal, self-reflective essay, is a constant quoter of the classics: Virgil and Horace, Catullus and Aesop, Lucretius and Lucan—the list of his quotations would be very long indeed. The British essayists who followed Montaigne took up his practice of alluding to the classics. Belloc sings of Roland and his horn; Beerbohm laughs with Falstaff; Hazlitt grumbles with Dante; Lamb follows the shepherd of the Psalms; Orwell mentions Milton; and Virginia Woolf hears hammers and chisels “chipping clear the ancient texts of Euripedes and Aeschylus” (262). They were all well read, and they all loved old books.

This is true not only of essayists of the nineteenth century, it is still true of many in the twentieth and even the twenty-first century: Gretel Erlich uses Conrad; John Graves quotes Milton, Cervantes, Job, and even the Pearl Poet’s *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Barry Lopez squats in the desert recalling “Hittite cavalry riding against the Syrians 3,500 years ago” (11); Joan Didion slouches toward Bethlehem; Eddy Harris says the river “is a strong brown god,” quoting T. S. Eliot; and Richard Rodriguez imagines St. Augustine writing “from his cope of dust that we are restless hearts” (757). Writers of creative nonfiction have, says essayist Scott Russell Sanders, “nowhere to hide” (416). They cannot, like novelists and playwrights, hide behind imaginary characters, or, like scholars and journalists, hide behind the opinions of experts. Memoirists and essayists must voice their own ideas, their own opinions. Perhaps for this reason, they often call upon the old ones for support, fetching a line from Ben Jonson or John Donne, recalling a word from the New Testament or a scene from *The Iliad*.

The ancient bells keep tolling across the literary landscape. Teachers and creative writers need to keep the bells ringing. Jump up and grab the well-worn ropes and pull down with your full weight. Only then will the new novelists and fresh poets and novice essayists scribbling away in lonely apartments, clacking their keyboards in barren suburban homes or on park benches or in coffee shops, look up and hear the sounds reverberating in the air: the old bells still ringing, the old bards still singing. But if the classics are to be heard in a new century, modern creative writers must catch their music themselves and transpose those melodies into modern counterpoint.

Good literature is often contrapuntal, combining various independent melodies

into a single harmonic texture. Sometimes this works like a fugue: two or more melodies interweaving as in Stoppard's play; sometimes like a quartet: four themes working together as in Eliot's *Four Quartets*; sometimes as simple harmonics when authors echo their own thoughts with similar sayings from the classics. But in each case, the classics add depth and vibrancy, richness and fullness, or a simple percussive emphasis. In the case of Tobias Wolff's memoir, amid the clinking of soup spoons, the voices of Vietnamese in the café, the sound of rain coming down in the dark street outside, the angry surgeon strikes a jarring but pleasing note that reverberates through the café and picks up a sound still ringing after four hundred years.

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# **Bronzeville Odyssey: The Literary Legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks**

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Gwendolyn Brooks is widely acknowledged as one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. Her poems about African Americans of all ages represent a major contribution to American literature. Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1917, she lived most of her life on Chicago's Southside, appropriately called Bronzeville because of its high concentration of black residents. During a career spanning more than half a century, Brooks embodied the riches of expression and the heightened political consciousness characteristic of the African-American poetic tradition.

Until her death in December 2000, Brooks pursued a career that reads like a heroic literary quest because of the phenomenal accomplishments early in her career and the literary honors that kept coming for five decades. Her winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 opened the gates for American writers of African descent to win other major literary awards. In 1968, when the Black Arts movement was gaining strength and followers, Brooks succeeded Carl Sandburg as poet laureate of Illinois. From this position she conducted writers' workshops for the Blackstone Rangers, inspired the activists of the Organization of Black American Culture, and became a major proponent of black publishers, namely Broadside Press and Third World Press. In the 1970s, when those in the feminist-womanist movement were looking for models, Brooks had a gallery of portraits of women that were anything but monolithic. Gwendolyn Brooks became the twenty-ninth, and final, consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress in 1985, and in 1989 she received the Poetry Society of America's Frost Medal. In the 1990s, with nearly thirty books to her credit, she was showered with numerous other awards, including the Jefferson Lectureship from the National En-



dowment for the Humanities, the National Book Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and the Furious Flower Lifetime Achievement Award.

However, there is a parallel journey that is worth mentioning; it involves the complexities of integration, marginalization, the presumption of cultural dominance, intellectual privilege, and academic responsibility. In 1971, the year that Gwendolyn Brooks was appointed the Distinguished Professor in the Arts by the City College of New York, I, armed with my master's degree, was a very green first-time instructor at Roosevelt University in Chicago. I sailed into the position on a wave of demands for Black Studies, which were launched by such writers as Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Marvin X, and Ed Bullins. In fact, the first course that I designed and taught at Roosevelt was "Revolutionary Self-Consciousness in Black Literature," and it included these writers, whose works I taught from mimeographed sheets and the newly released *Black Voices*. I was there just a month or so when I inquired about bringing in guest speakers. I was in Chicago with Gwendolyn Brooks, so naturally I wanted to invite her to read at the university. A colleague, whose name I can't remember, said rather matter-of-factly, "We almost succeeded in signing her on to teach two years ago." Then he added, "The faculty voted the proposal down."

I was stunned. I wondered what could have been the impediments to having such a distinguished writer teach at Roosevelt. She had been accredited by the nation. She had been awarded the highest national prize for writers two decades before, was the poet laureate of Illinois, and by that time had authored ten books, among them *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *Annie Allen* (1949), *The Bean Eaters* (1960), *Riot* (1969), and *Family Pictures* (1970). This experience crystallized for me the ironies of integration, the persistence of the marginalization of black literature and culture in the academy, and the errors committed in the name of academic credentialing. It was then that I made a promise to myself that I would invite Gwendolyn Brooks as a lecturer to every college or university at which I taught. This gesture, as you will see, was transformative for me.

Despite this slight from the academy, Gwendolyn Brooks never wavered in her determination to do what a good poet does: transpose feelings and ideas into poetic language. Her pursuit of her poetic voice involved what would become the touchstones of her literary legacy. They include mastery of craft, exploration of forms found in a rich vernacular tradition, chronicling history and her worldview through poetic portraiture, and using poetry as an agent of social change. For Brooks, mastery of the poetic form was of great importance. Critics, in assessing her poetry, have often used phrases such as "wordsmith," "word magician," and "technical wizardry." Several have also commented on what they saw as the "tension" of making a poet black and bidding her to sing. In the preface of *Report from Part One*, Haki Madhubuti set up the tension between Brooks's "conditioned" accommodation to the European forms, definitions, allusions, and images and her deep involvement in the black urban life of Chicago and her growing awareness of her American self (14). Houston A. Baker makes note of this tension in *Singers of Daybreak* by stating that Brooks writes "tense, complex, rhythmic verse that contains the metaphorical complexities of John Donne and the word magic of Apollinaire, Pound and Eliot." However, he explains that this modernist elegance is used "to explicate the condi-

tion of the black American trapped behind a veil that separates him from the white world." What one seems to have is "white" style and "black" content—two warring ideals in one dark body (43).

The issue becomes much more strained when the idea of universality enters the equation. Dan Jaffe, in "Gwendolyn Brooks: An Appreciation from the White Suburbs," writes, "the designation 'Black Poetry' seems to me an unfortunate one to attach to her works. The label veils her considerable achievements" (1996, 51). Later in the essay, Jaffe makes the point more emphatically: "The label 'Black Poetry' cheapens the achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks. It recommends that race matters more than artistic vocation or individual voice" (53). It is clear that Jaffe could not see a connection among the designation "black poetry," the creative act of crafting poetry, and the imaginative genius needed to envision it. In truth, her poetry simultaneously reifies and challenges the dictates of Anglo-American formal verse.

Gwendolyn Brooks never experienced such confusion about the value of her material. Gathering it from the vernacular tradition, she created memorable portraits in poems such as "DeWitt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery," "Mrs. Small," "Sadie and Maud," "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," "The Bean Eaters," and "The Life of Lincoln West." For Brooks, the vernacular tradition represents a matrix that is ceaselessly renewable in revealing the essence of African American culture. Vernacular black speech, music, storytelling, attitude, and style were afield as Gwendolyn Brooks grew her poems. She, like Sterling Brown, Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden, and Melvin B. Tolson, was a model for the younger poets as she absorbed the language, values, and culture in the loam of her poetic expression.

However, no less essential was Brooks's ability to distill from a turbulent atmosphere a sensitive reading of her time. In an explication of stanza seven of her poem "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath," she has one of the Freedom Riders say, in essence, "the terrors, the sufferings of my past have honed me into a better human being. I grind my raw sufferings into a refined glass that enables me to get a good look at man's GENERAL inhumanity. Inhumanity is rampant everywhere" (Brooks, *Report from Part One* 189). Brooks was clear about her purpose as a poet. Her poetry would be a lens through which we could see history and the gist of humanity.

Gwendolyn Brooks said in a 1967 interview that she got the material for much of her earlier and best-known poetry from witnessing "a good deal of life in the raw all about me" (*Report from Part One* 133). From her small second-floor corner apartment at 623 East 63rd Street on Chicago's Southside, she could look from one side to another and see life whole. For this is the essence of Brooks's genius: her ability to distill experience and create artful magic that double for life. Nowhere is this ability more apparent than in her forty-three-stanza poem "The Anniad," which appeared in *Blacks* (1992). Originally connected with the volume as a whole, "The Anniad" represents the portion of Annie's life in which she is seen flowering into womanhood. Yet, as the title suggests, the poet has in mind something larger, more elevated for a plebeian Annie than an ordinary story of a girl growing into womanhood. Brooks, in relating her intent behind the title during an interview with George Stavros (Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks) in *Contemporary Literature*, says, "Well, the girl's name was Annie, and it was my little pompous pleasure to

raise her to a height that she probably did not have, and I thought of the *Iliad* and said, I'll call this 'The Anniad.'"

Obviously, such a title is not the result of a random and unrelated selection but is the product of a complex network of feelings and ideas, illusions and images, ghosts of the past and flesh and bone of the present that come together to conjure up Annie in the poet's mind as fit material for epic making. Brooks, in raising Annie "to a height that she probably did not have," brings the young woman, simply by poetic declaration, into the illustrious company of epic figures. No Amazon woman of extraordinary strength or beauty, she does not conquer lands, found sprawling nations, fight glorious battles, or make voyages. Instead, her story is one of the futile strivings of a young woman to experience and sustain, despite the damaging forces of war and rejection, an eagerly awaited and cherished love. Annie's tracks, though, are not unique; here are the longings and sorrows of many women who enter starry-eyed into communion with a man, only to come out of it irrevocably sadder for their experience.

Brothers, in the opening stanza, commands us to consider a girl "of sweet and chocolate."

Think of sweet and chocolate  
 Left to folly or to fate  
 When the higher goods forgot,  
 Whom the lower gods berate;  
 Physical and underfed  
 Fancying on the featherbed  
 What was never and is not. (*Blacks*)

Brooks wastes no time getting us imaginatively involved with the fate of this lonely brown woman. She puts Annie in a universe bereft of celestial concern. Even the lower gods who preside over her circumstances have spurned her. Annie offends their standard of beauty, sense of propriety, and notion of cultural superiority. "Fancying on her featherbed," she has only the sovereignty of her dreams for protection.

However, creating this magical world and positing her hero in it is far less difficult than transforming the plainness that stares back at her from her mirror:

Think of thaumaturgic lass  
 Looking in her looking glass  
 At the unembroidered brown;  
 Printing bastard roses there;  
 Then emotionally aware  
 Of the black and boisterous hair  
 Taming all that anger down. (*Blacks*)

After this stunning image, we are impressed by the beauty of Brooks's highly original tetrameter seven-line stanza. In every stanza Brooks carefully and exquisitely chisels the images. As she admits, "every stanza in the poem was worked on, revised, tenderly cared for." She describes the poem as one "that's very interested in the mysteries and magic of technique" (Stavros 12). As Gloria Hull points out, part of this pleasure and the difficulty of experiencing Brooks's poetry are recognizing the elements of her compressed, elliptical style: a quaint and unusual diction, imperative

tone, personification, economical language, alliteration, and slyly satirical humor (“A Note on the Poetic Technique,” 281).

Since Brooks published “The Anniad” in 1949, her poetry has brought pleasure to generations of readers. As one who was mesmerized by her word magic, I never lost sight of my promise to make sure that my students got to hear her works. In 1976 I invited her to Lincoln University. In 1986 I invited her to James Madison University for the first time. In 1993, when I conceived the idea for a poetry conference as a tribute to her, I started making plans to bring her to JMU for the second time in 1994. Thus, the first Furious Flower Poetry Conference was born. The title for the conference comes from Brooks’s poem “The Second Sermon on the Warpland” (*Blacks*).

The time  
cracks into furious flower.  
Lifts its face all unashamed.  
And sways in wicked grace. (*Blacks* 456)

With these lines Gwendolyn Brooks thus created a metaphor that encapsulates the literary and cultural strivings of black poets as well as capturing her own spirit. As the embodiment of the furious flower, Brooks was responsive to the dynamism, complexity, and richness that compose African American culture. Her fierce dedication to craft; her close examination of the stylistic, linguistic, and imagistic qualities of language; her reverence of the expressive originality of the black masses and their folk traditions; and her embracing the black aesthetic and a newly energized black audience make her poetic career a touchstone for the exploration of poetry during the second half of the twentieth century. As Maria K. Mootry suggests in the introduction to the book *A Life Distilled*, there is a dual commitment everywhere in Brooks’s work:

In terms of art, she has never been wary of “the fascination of what’s difficult”; but in terms of social justice, she has always addressed a range of America’s social problems. In short, at the nexus of Brooks’s art lies a fundamental commitment to both the modernist aesthetics of art and the common ideal of social justice. (1)

Not only was Gwendolyn Brooks the embodiment of the “furious flower,” she also was part of a poetic tradition that expressed beautifully and ferociously the struggle for liberation. If I was to honor her meaningfully, the conference would have to be expansive, like her poetic genius, and embrace three generations of poetry that “swayed in wicked grace,” a poetry that in the final years of the twentieth century was again experiencing renewal.

In September 1994, when more than thirteen hundred people gathered in Wilson Hall on the James Madison University campus to celebrate her distinguished career and her legendary generosity, two generations had grown up nurtured and nourished by her poetry. Poet Michael S. Harper called Brooks a pioneer who had written beautiful sonnets and ballads and after carving out the territory had used the creative processes to work against the tradition to create poems such as “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” Dolores Kendrick, former poet laureate of the District of Columbia who sees poetry as a way to move people into a finer and truer recognition of themselves, said of Brooks’s

poems that they “take you into yourself and bring you out whole again.” Poet and academic Eugene B. Redmond acknowledged the continuing contribution of Gwendolyn Brooks and other poets who began writing in the 1940s and 1950s. He said in a conversation at the 1994 conference, “You can never fill their steps, you can never take their place, but you can stand there because you want their light” (conversation, Furious Flower Video Anthology, California Newsreel).

Well, the rest is history. Furious Flower is now a literary institution. Dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks in 1999, it has begun to make an impact in the promotion and appreciation of African American poetry through education, research, and publication.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you the last time I hosted Gwendolyn Brooks in Virginia. At the invitation of the University of Virginia Press and James Madison University, she had traveled from Chicago by train to Charlottesville to help launch my book, *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*. After spending time with Gwendolyn at a lovely dinner party at the home of the director of the Press, the next morning I went to pick her up at the Omni Hotel in downtown Charlottesville. We were to travel over the mountain to Harrisonburg, 60 miles away, where she was scheduled to do a ten o’clock reading at James Madison University. She was slow to come downstairs. I anxiously looked at my watch and was relieved to see that it was only 8:15 a.m. When Gwendolyn finally appeared, she was neatly dressed in a gray suit with a blue and gray plaid blouse. She wore a navy blue knit cap that encircled a leaner, yet still lively face. Her eyebrows arched to her question, “Do I look presentable?” “You look wonderful,” I said, as I guided her to my little Nissan and apologized that she would have to stoop so low to get into it.

On the way over Afton Mountain, I was relaxed; we were making good time. The fall foliage was at its peak of color. The morning fog, so common in the area, had already burned off to reveal an intensely blue sky. The conversation came easily. She told me about her morning ritual that involved taking the juice of a lemon and a lime with a little honey. She said it cleansed the system. She offered that it may help me with my own health regimen. We talked about Chicago, George Kent, the Chicago State University center in her name, her daughter, Nora, and her performance company called “Chocolate Chips.” I was so enjoying the conversation that I did not heed the flashing traffic sign that warned of a backup due to an accident near Exit 235 on Interstate 81. Before I could get off the highway, we were in a 10-mile backup caused by an overturned tractor-trailer.

My composure gone, my mind racing to come up with a solution to get us to campus on time, I fell silent. After inching along in traffic for more than forty-five minutes, we managed to get to a rest stop so I could make a call and let the waiting audience know that we would be delayed. I parked my car and hurried to the phone, leaving the door open. I was gone for several minutes as I made contingency plans. We would not make the ten o’clock reading. When I returned to the car, Gwendolyn Brooks said, in a way that startled and saddened me, “Joanne, don’t ever leave me again like that.” For the first time during the entire visit, I was aware of an eighty-two-year-old woman who felt very vulnerable. And I promised not to leave her.

When we finally arrived at JMU, the audience was waiting, and she gave a wonderful reading. We honored her with the dedication of the Furious Flower Cen-

ter. Afterward she took several of us to lunch at a local restaurant that specializes in desserts. She insisted we try at least two. We then got in the car and traveled back to Charlottesville for a reading at the University of Virginia that night. When Gwendolyn Brooks finally mounted the stage to the thunderous applause of eight hundred people crowded in Old Cabell Hall, I watched her steps, slower and more tentative than I remembered, and thought about strength and vulnerability, about infirmity and firmness of spirit, about aging and ageless grace. She ended her reading with a poem that had become one of her favorite finale poems, “Infirm”:

Everybody here  
is infirm.  
Everybody here is infirm.  
Oh. Mend me. Mend me. Lord.  
Today I  
say to them  
say to them  
say to them, Lord:  
look! I am beautiful, beautiful with  
my wing that is wounded  
my eye that is bonded  
or my ear not funded  
or my walk all a wobble.  
I'm enough to be beautiful.  
You are  
beautiful too. (*Blacks* 512)

Gwendolyn Brooks had filled us with the certainty that we were all beautiful. The magic of the evening continued until after midnight. She signed books and made a personal connection with every person waiting in the line that ran the length of the hall. Her magnanimous spirit of generosity and encouragement left a mark on all of us.

She was an inspiration to many who gathered in 1994 to celebrate her contribution to African-American poetry; she provided the touchstones of excellence in poetry that define and challenge our national literature. She taught us that we are all vulnerable and strong, and if we are fortunate, we can capture all of that in a poem.

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# **Odysseys in the Political World**





# “Family Values” in Livy’s Rome

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One of the challenges in teaching contemporary students to read and appreciate Livy is the apparent foreignness of his subject matter and approach. Despite the fact that we claim in some measure to be the heirs of a tradition that goes back to Greece and Rome, our contact with those roots is, to say the least, attenuated. While I can insist upon the importance of Rome for the American founding—calling attention, for example, to the Roman pseudonyms adopted by many in the founding generation—the public-spiritedness they attempted thereby to evoke remains more than a little alien to my very private-spirited students. Furthermore, with classes approaching or exceeding 60 percent female, there is some resistance to our sustained exploration of what appears to be largely a “man’s world.”

Fortunately, however, Livy offers materials to engage the students where they live, so to speak. By focusing on two decisive incidents in Livy’s account of the history of the Roman republic—the rape and suicide of Lucretia, which served as the occasion for the overthrow of the Tarquins and the founding of the republic; and the attempt by Appius Claudius to gain the maid Virginia for himself, which led to the overthrow of the decemvirs and the restoration of the republic—I can both “gender” Livy’s narrative and raise questions about how “family values” are intimately connected with his understanding of Roman freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Livy himself connects the two incidents in his history (3: 44), observing that “not only did the same end befall the decemvirs as befell the kings, but the same cause also deprived them of power.” In both cases, the violation (or attempted violation) of a woman’s honor by someone who thought that because of his position he could do so with impunity became a rallying point for those who wished to establish or restore republican freedom. While in both cases there were additional motives and

interests at work, the fact that the principal actors were able, so to speak, to exploit these “private” outrages for public ends indicates something about the importance of a certain vision of family and its connection with political or republican freedom, as Livy would have us understand it.

To sustain this argument, let us take up each of these incidents in turn.

We first encounter Lucretia, the wife of Tarquinius Collatinus (a cousin of the ruling Tarquin family), as a result of an apparently idle gentlemen’s dispute (1: 57), in which “each man praised his wife in extravagant terms.” Confident of his wife’s womanly virtue, Collatinus suggests that the dispute can be settled by all of them visiting each one’s wife in turn. When the young noblemen travel back to Rome from their camp outside Ardea, he is vindicated: while the other wives had been “whiling away their time at a luxurious banquet with their young friends,” Lucretia was at home, “busily spinning, surrounded by her maidservants who were working by lamplight.” As a result, “[t]he prize of honor in this contest about wives fell to Lucretia.” Here we immediately see two things. In the first place, the wife’s behavior reflects on the husband. His honor is intimately bound up with her honor. In the second place, her honor or virtue consists, first of all, in devotion to a certain domesticity, which is connected, as Livy notes, to chastity.

As a result, Sextus Tarquinius, the king’s son, “was seized by an evil desire to debauch Lucretia by force.” He was attracted to her beauty, but wished also to sully her honor. He was motivated by *eros*, *eris*, and envy. Shortly thereafter, he returned to Lucretia’s home, was graciously welcomed as a guest, and then broke into her bedroom when she was asleep. When pleading his love and threatening her life did not overcome her resistance, “he added the fear of disgrace to her fear: after killing her, he would murder a slave and place him naked by her side, as evidence that she had been killed as a result of adultery of the lowest kind” (1: 58). With no immediate means of protecting her honor, she relented; he “departed, exulting in his conquest of a woman’s honor.”

Afterward, she summoned her father and her husband, asking each to come with a companion. Having informed them of what had happened and resisting their efforts to console her, she killed herself, affirming: “Though I absolve myself of wrongdoing, I do not exempt myself from punishment. Nor henceforth shall any unchaste woman continue to live by citing the precedent of Lucretia.”<sup>22</sup> Her chastity and honor, of which she is surely inwardly convinced, cannot be publicly vindicated without this suicide.

For our purposes, however, what is most important is the charge she gave to her husband and father. Sextus Tarquinius’s act, she said, “has destroyed me—and him too, *if you are men*.”<sup>23</sup> The role of her husband and father—the two enforcers of an order in which her honor can be publicly vindicated—is to “determine . . . what is his due.” Of course, by charging them with the man’s role, as she understood it, she has already determined Sextus Tarquinius’s due.

While Lucretia’s husband and father were “absorbed in grief” (1: 59), Lucius Junius Brutus (also a cousin of the Tarquins, who had come as Collatinus’s companion) seized the moment, calling for the overthrow not only of the Tarquin monarchy but also of monarchy altogether. While it is tempting to say that he exploited this terrible

event for political ends, Livy has already introduced us to Brutus's analysis of their situation. Immediately before his account of the rape of Lucretia, he notes that Brutus had adopted a stupid and nonthreatening persona because he found himself "in a situation where justice offered little protection" (1: 56). What is required for a situation in which husbands and fathers can protect and vindicate the honor of their wives and daughters is the impartial rule of law. So long as a father—in this case, the king, Tarquinius Superbus—can be expected to overlook his sons' misdeeds—and in fact to join to them misdeeds of his own—other fathers and husbands cannot easily play the roles their wives and daughter expect of them. Brutus, in other words, recognizes that the manliness of men, in relation to their wives and daughters, is inconsistent with absolute monarchy. To be sure, husbands and fathers can always violently play the parts their wives and daughters expect of them, but this is ultimately a recipe for constant conflict rather than any sort of just and stable order. Furthermore, in such a situation, it is unlikely that husbands and fathers, having always to risk their lives, will be able effectively to protect all their dependents.

That the order Brutus envisions—one in which all (or almost all) husbands and fathers can protect the honor of their wives and daughters—is not without some cost to paternal feelings becomes clear almost immediately in Livy's narrative. One of the first challenges that Brutus—now a consul in the newly founded Roman republic—faces is the need to preside over the trial and punishment of his sons, who had conspired with the Tarquins to restore the monarchy (2: 3–4). He could have protected his sons, but the price would have been the reestablishment of absolute monarchy. All men can protect their families only if they are willing to discipline their family feelings in accordance with the impartial rule of law.

Livy also presents the roots of the Tarquins' absolute monarchy in familial and "gendered" terms. It is born of a conspiracy between Servius Tullius's younger daughter and her older sister's husband, Tarquinius Superbus, who, in the first place, murdered their spouses in order to clear the way for a marriage of kindred spirits.<sup>4</sup> For the younger Tullia, manliness consisted simply in "ambition and boldness" (1: 46), which would match her own "boldness":

She had not wanted a husband simply to be called his wife and endure slavery with him in silence. What she had lacked was a man who thought himself worthy to be a king. . . . "If you are the *man* that I think I married," she said, "I salute you both as husband and king. But if not, then the situation has changed for the worse, for crime is compounded by cowardice." (1: 47)<sup>5</sup>

We see here that aggressive political ambition is not solely a "manly" trait<sup>6</sup> and that it carries with it disorders all its own, not only for the state<sup>7</sup> but also for the family. Tarquinius Superbus and the younger Tullia could satisfy their ambitions only by deposing and killing her father. Indeed, Livy tells us that she went so far as to drive her carriage over her father's corpse (1: 48).

It is tempting to argue that a republican order can most successfully channel and check a man's ambition if and when he has a wife and children (especially daughters) about whom he cares and with whose honor he is concerned. Their vulnerability makes him concerned about defending them, which provides a salutary check on an ambition that might otherwise become excessive. As the paterfamilias or head of a

household, his domestic or defensive concerns color his engagement in the public arena, perhaps requiring him to accept mutual limits against which he would otherwise bridle. But these concerns only limit his ambition if they pull him in another direction. If, as in the cases of Tanaquil and the younger Tullia, the wives' ambitions at least match their husbands', it is not at all clear that a republican order can easily channel and contain them.

The importance of this difference is one theme that Livy treats in his account of Appius Claudius's attempt to gain the plebeian maid Virginia, betrothed to the former consul Icilius, for himself (3: 44–49). After Virginius killed his daughter rather than permit her to fall into the clutches of Appius Claudius, Livy presents the different responses of men and women to the spectacle:

[T]he matrons cried out, "Is this what it means to have children? Are these the rewards of chastity?"—and the rest of the pitiful complaints that women's grief drives them to utter in such a situation. . . . The men's talk, *especially that of Icilius*, was *entirely* about tribunician power, the right of appeal to the people that had been wrested from them, and the state's sense of outrage. (3: 48)<sup>8</sup>

These are clearly "gendered" responses, with the women privately focusing on their roles as mothers and as potential victims and the men publicly focusing on institutional mechanisms to prevent such outrages in the future. Icilius, who we do not see grieving for the fiancée that he lost, can seem to some to be calculating and heartless, more concerned with restoring the office he once held than with her death. In this respect, he somewhat resembles Brutus, who "coldly" or "calculatedly" "exploits" the death of Lucretia to overthrow the monarchy.

In another respect, however, Icilius's response points to a defect in the mere rule of law, without anything else. Appius Claudius had been exploiting and perverting the forms of lawfulness in order to gratify his desire, acting as a judge in a case in which he had an interest. Without something like "the right of appeal to the people," the only recourse left to a father such as Virginius is taking matters into his own hands. And the only act sure to save his daughter's honor—with the full force of authority apparently arrayed against him—is to kill her. This is the extreme to which the absence of any sort of appeal from the interested authority drives him. The apparently selfish Icilius is right to think about how other fathers (and husbands) can in the future avoid this sad necessity.

Furthermore, such an appeal would be made to people who are not altogether disinterested. The men who are its object are husbands and fathers, aware of both the private attachments and the vulnerabilities of their wives and daughters. Their outrage at an offense like that attempted by Appius Claudius is not private but public, not the immediate personal offense felt by Virginius but one that is cognate. They know that they, and their fellows, could be similarly situated. Because the honor of their wives and daughters is vulnerable, they are vulnerable. Because such an outrage could be visited on their wives and daughters, it could be visited upon them. Having family responsibilities makes these men care not just about upholding their personal honor by means of something like single combat, but also about a structure that enables them constantly, continuously, and effectively to uphold the honor of those who depend upon their protection. A republican order, with the rule of law and a salutary

check on its merely interested enforcement, comes about because it is not every man for himself but every man for his household.

With this suggestion, I bring the students back to their present concerns. The family is not merely a private arrangement but a public institution, one that checks and channels the desires and ambitions, especially, of men. Women, Livy's account implies, feel both their connections with others and their vulnerability in their bones, so to speak. But men are brought to care about others and to adopt a defensive, not merely aggressive and ambitious, approach to the public arena through the mechanism of the family.

While these considerations are surely not dispositive, they are sure to provoke a discussion of the relationship between family structures, gender roles, and political order. The personal may well lead to the political, but if it is to be more than merely an assertion of interests, if political life is to be more than merely a clash of interests, we are compelled to think about these matters in a fresh way, informed, perhaps, by an old book that seemed in the first instance to have little or nothing to say to today's students.

## Notes

1. All references in the text are to Livy, *The History of Rome*, bks. 1–5, trans. Valerie M. Warrior (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

2. I have written about this incident, in the context of Machiavelli's comedic treatment of it, in "Virtue, Honor, and Reputation: Machiavelli's Appropriation of Christianity in the Rape of Lucrezia," *Poets, Princes, and Private Citizens: Literary Alternatives to Postmodern Politics*, ed. Knippenberg and Peter A. Lawler (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 21–38.

3. Emphasis added.

4. Servius Tullius had "mismatched" his daughters with the sons of his predecessor so that in each case, the ambition of the one could be checked by the complaisance of the other. The murders defeated this design.

5. Emphasis mine.

6. See also 1: 34, where Livy notes that in the Etruscan city Tarquinii, the founder of the Tarquin line "married up" to Tanaquil, who was "[p]repared to disregard her natural love for her fatherland provided that she could see her husband in a position of honor."

7. It is beyond the scope of this paper fully to explore the role of manly political ambition, the channeling of which in the Roman republic Machiavelli makes a principal theme in his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*.

8. Emphasis added.

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# One Story: An Approach to Teaching the History of Political Philosophy in One Semester

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Most colleges use at least two (or three, or four) semesters to survey the great works and questions of political philosophy, so when I took a position in a very small department with one political philosophy course, I was certain I would be shortchanging my students. To my surprise, I have learned to love my one-semester introduction. In fact, now that our department is growing, I may soon have the freedom to offer two semesters of political philosophy, and I am inclined to keep my current thematic one-semester course more or less intact, supplementing it with a second thematic course—more on that below.

In this presentation, however, I want to focus on the design of my current one-semester course and some of the possibilities and perspectives that it has opened for both my students and me. In doing so, I hope I can share a model of core-texts teaching that will be useful to others in different fields with different courses that might be sharpened by orienting them around, while not limiting them to, a single core text.

I have built my one-semester introduction around Plato's *Republic*. I use a number of other great works of political thought with Plato's *Republic*, including all of *The Apology*, Machiavelli's *Prince*, Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, Rousseau's *First and Second Discourses*, and Heidegger's *Question Concerning Technology*. I introduce students to some sizable selections from Hobbes, Locke, Aristotle, and Bacon, and I also include some perhaps unorthodox supplementary texts, including Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and two plays of Aristophanes—*The Clouds* and *Ekklesiazusae*. With so many works in a single semester it would be very easy to lose students in the



type of “drive-by shooting” of the great works that makes their heads spin and leaves them alienated from the whole liberal arts enterprise rather than deeply engaged. However, I think that I have provided focus for the course by assuring them that the heart of what we are doing is undertaking a slow, cover-to-cover, and very careful reading of *The Republic* of Plato as a guiding conversation. The key to the method is inserting other great works and even some minor ones, into *The Republic*.

We start with *The Republic* Book 1 (“I went down to the Piraeus yesterday”), and we end with *The Republic* Book 10 (“And thus, Glaucon, a tale was saved and not lost”). Along the way, I import Locke, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Marx, and others into the conversation of *The Republic* to show students how these authors offer counter-readings of our experience of human political life. At crucial moments, I use these authors to provide broader, more challenging, and more theoretically developed versions of the opinions expressed by Socrates’ interlocutors. I want students to discover the surprising continuities in the history of political philosophy. They must grapple with the connections that animate our long history of political inquiry by learning how similar questions are raised repeatedly, how familiar possibilities are presented in surprising new lights, how the seemingly chaotic swirl of ideas moves over a ground that is more solid, consistent, and firm than we might believe. Obviously, a course designed on this principle runs the risk of being ahistorical (and I try to correct that when I can), but in my experience, students today are in much greater danger of dismissing the past as dead, gone, and irrelevant than they are likely to dangerously treat the present as if past examples are easily applied (and thus misapplied) to current issues.

In this essay, I discuss the construction of a one-semester survey of political philosophy. I have provided in an appendix the outline of all the readings, but in the introduction, I focus on how I construct the class discussion of the origins of the “City of Sows” in Book 2, showing how this section of the book can provide the basis for pulling out many divergent approaches to thinking about a variety of perspectives on the foundations and functions of political society. In conclusion, I also offer some brief thoughts on how we might construct a second course that would follow this one.

I begin, however, by discussing how I encourage my students to devote a semester of their lives to reading *The Republic* (beyond the blunt incentive that this course is required for all the political science and philosophy majors). In introducing students to *The Republic*, I set out to convince them of two propositions:

1. That this dialogue and this course are fundamentally *about the way one should live*. I insist that this course is about them and how they should live their lives. This is a daunting task, given how different the ancient Greek politics of the book appear from the politics around us, but I make the pitch that they must consider the possibility that political philosophy’s most original and most powerful claim is that it offers insight for thinking through our most consequential actions. This means we must recognize the commonality of our greatest actions with people long gone—they, too, had to debate the questions of war and peace, national and individual self-interest versus international moral responsibility for others, and the role of the dissident in a be-

leaguered and seemingly fragile political society. In opening conversations, I try to elicit their thoughts on the grandest and most important decisions that they participate in making and to direct their attention to how what we do is very like what others have done in different times and places. I want them to recognize our unique responsibility for the actions we ourselves take. Each of us causes certain disruptions in the flow of the world, and we must try to understand our actions as self-consciously as possible—we have to know what it is that we are doing. Behaving recklessly, without thinking through the causes and consequences of our actions, is the opposite of living deliberately. Not only is the ill-considered life perhaps not worth living, it is dangerous to ourselves, and dangerous to others. Our responsibility for *not* living dangerously is a recurrent theme in this course.

2. That *The Republic* is constructed in an unusual way that is perfectly adapted to the purpose of teaching us how to think through the obstacles that make it difficult for us to live the best life we can. Speaking very directly to the biographies of Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Polymarchus, I try to engage them in the idea that *The Republic* is a conversation with young people who are trying to decide how they can best embark on lives of public importance, eminence and distinction, and service to themselves as well as to their fellow citizens and fellow human beings. It is a conversation *about* young people like them, and it is written, in a very important sense, written *for* young people like them. I trick them, a little, by having them write journals about their greatest hopes for their futures (*Think Big—What Do You Want to Have Your Obituary Say About You?*), and I have them bring those reflections to the very first class. Given that our majors are pre-law, and often pre-political office, at least in their minds, few of them come back with narrow plans for domestic obscurity. (I have had more than one “I will be president of the United States” and sometimes more than one in a single class). I then confront them with the solipsistic character of their confidence that their experience is unique, that our position in the world is like that of no other, and that they will easily escape the tragedies and the traps that have snared generations of ambitious young people before them. I argue that we hold onto our uniqueness because it appears to be the only way that we can be free and special, but I point out that the study of political philosophy requires that we recognize that others have been through the same personal and political dilemmas before us. We are not alone, and even authors who lived millennia ago could foresee our ambitions and the crises that they sometimes create.

By stressing, albeit with some ahistorical oversimplification, the common position that our students share with Socrates’ most vocal interlocutors, I hope to invest them in the dramatic action of *The Republic*. I think that when students read *The Republic* in this way, they will best appreciate its centrality to the story of political philosophy and the relevance of that story to our own very modern lives.

Each of the major sections of the course begins with a very careful reading of one section of *The Republic* in which we focus on unraveling two key questions:

1. What is the essential *dramatic* problem raised in this section of the conversation? As I understand it, the *dramatic* problem is always ultimately grounded in what concessions to the common opinions of his young interlocutors Socrates must make in order to keep them “with him” in the conversation.
2. What is the essential *political* problem raised in this section of the dialogue?

I divide the syllabus by the statement of four “big questions” that correspond to major political problems that *The Republic* as well as other works of political philosophy try to answer. As we work through each section, the focus pulls back from the *dramatic* problem of Socrates’ attempts to win assent from and provide an education for his young interlocutors to a wider scale view of the *political* problems. We then compare the Socratic discussion of these political problems to the approaches taken by other thinkers in other works and time periods, thus accessing a variety of perspectives on these problems. In the end, I always try to draw the students back to the *commonalities* that link the dramatic problems with the political problems. As they no doubt tire of my saying, Socrates and his partners are *both* building a city in speech during the dialogue and forging a community, a city, with each other by coming together—as Aristotle would say—to engage in “the discussion of the advantageous and disadvantageous things, the just and the unjust things” that are characteristic of the city and the political animals who inhabit it.

In the next section, I briefly outline how this works by discussing the particulars of one section of the course. I will focus on the shortest one—covering only about seven pages (but what a seven pages!) of *The Republic*. The question that heads this section in the syllabus is reproduced below:

*SECOND QUESTION*—What is the origin and character of the political partnership among human beings? Are we political by nature or convention? Is it grounded in something called “justice” or some “common good,” or is it simply an instrument for the powerful to aggrandize themselves against the weak? Weeks 5–7, *Republic* 368c–375e.

In the second section of Book 2, immediately following the objections by Glaucon and Adeimantus to the shaky framework that Socrates used to silence Thrasymachus, Socrates attempts to enlist the young men in the search for justice by convincing them that they can “find” justice by “founding” a city. He transforms an essentially philosophic inquiry into the most noble political activity that his interlocutors can imagine and engages their imaginations in his project. The problematic character of the very dubious, if not outright ridiculous, opening proposition that “justice in a single human being’s character” is like the “justice in a city,” but easier to see because it is “larger,” escapes Glaucon and Adeimantus at first—and generally escapes my students as well. It is not the dramatic problem (yet) because ambitious students today are very much like Glaucon and Adeimantus. They take the Socratic bait, and it is not yet time for the switch.

The dramatic problem in this section is posed by Glaucon's objections to the first city on which Socrates and Adeimantus appear to find immediate common ground. Adeimantus—deeply conservative and a lover of poetry—can find beauty in the idyllic presentation of the small, stable, agricultural society that Socrates shows him—one in which justice is quickly identified as “the need these men have of one another”—a reciprocal need that is fair to all, requires minimal disproportionalities of power or coercive force, and little if any higher reasoning or finer arts. Glaucon, however, is scandalized and insists that these men will be miserable because “they have no relishes for their feasts.” The need for relishes and higher pleasures divides the city of speakers and requires a long answer to how we can (or whether we can) introduce disproportionate force into the city without destroying the sense of almost innate and reciprocal justice that had characterized the “city of sows.”

I set my students up for this division in the classroom by having them journal on their ideal society *before* we introduce this section of Book 2. Inevitably we have latter-day pastoral Rousseauians who devise something not unlike the city of sows—small, agricultural, stable, and peaceful—but we also have ambitious souls who long for a city that, like Glaucon's “feverish” one, would require great powers and would inevitably come into conflict with all others. As this division takes shape, I lead them into a discussion of how these views are elucidated and defended in three “outside” texts—selections of Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Locke's *Second Treatise* as well as the entirety of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*.

Hobbes is easy to introduce into the conversation. One need only point out the similarities between Hobbes and Glaucon in Glaucon's discussion of the origins of justice in his discourse on the benefits of forceful and successful injustice (358e–359b). We read Hobbes to open up a starkly different view of human nature—but one that is lurking in the objections to Plato's Socrates—in which *nothing* could be less possible than the idyllic city of Adeimantus's imagining. Hobbes argues that human beings are not political, and the “political community” is nothing but a self-defense mechanism grounded in survival. In no way is there any true “common good.” Each human being is a free agent, interested only in him- or herself and aiming not at any “higher” or “highest” good but only at the immediate goods before them, always turning to the next one when one “good” is achieved, driven by an inherent and ineradicable “restless pursuit for power after power ceasing only in death.” This is why the “state” must be founded on a “Leviathan” (“lord of the proud”) who will tame or punish the restless desires of the human individuals by confining them to those activities that do not threaten the lives of others. There can be no limits on the Leviathan's powers because political communities are fragile and must be propped up by all available force. It is true that a certain type of “common good”—prosperity—can be achieved when the government is grounded in the firm conviction that each human being is out for themselves, but these benefits accrue to individuals, and the Leviathan's interest in this prosperity is entirely self-serving—rich states are powerful ones. This “incentive” is effective in constraining the Leviathan only in the aggregate. It gives the sovereign a reason for not taking everyone's house but very little reason not to take this or that house that particularly strikes the fancy or short-term advantage. For Hobbes, the “just” is defined only by the “legal,” and in

well-constructed states the legal is stripped of all idealism and grounded in the advantage of the ruler (compare to Thrasymachus at 338e and Glaucon at 358e–359b). The law creates justice, and breaking the law—that is, contravening the will of the Leviathan—is injustice precisely because it threatens the fragile peace that stands between us and the state of nature, where the lives of all are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Locke appears almost unbidden. If I assign selections of the *Second Treatise* and then never mention his name, some member of the class will bring him up on her own, suggesting that Locke’s view is very different from Hobbes’s but is more compatible with our own modern sensibilities. At that point, it is up to me to guide them through discussion toward looking at all the ways that Locke agrees with Hobbes—each human is a free agent, concerned only with him- or herself, and the “political community” is founded simply for self-interested ends that are completely distinct from any illusory “common good.” It is only because conflict is not so intractable according to Locke that we can live together in a certain peace founded on the exchange of goods for prosperity and the exchange of powers for rights in the contract with our government. There is, it often appears in Locke, no necessary conflict. Thus, for Locke there is a standard outside of law that serves as the lodestone for “justice” and critiquing the law. It is the measure of the “freedom” and “equality” enjoyed in the state of nature and it is enforced by the “appeal to heaven” or “appeal to nature,” which is to say the overthrowing of the state to replace it with a more well-constructed and well-limited one. But some reading, even a little, from the last sections of the *Second Treatise* ultimately returns us to the question of whether Locke is *really* different from Hobbes. The importance of revolution in Locke suggests that we may not escape the state of nature as much as we first think; we each remain the “judges” of the continuing validity of our artificial bonds to our communities because we have the “right,” that is—, “the ability”—to engage in revolution.

Rousseau rejects Locke’s “peaceful” Hobbesianism as based on unjustified assumptions that Hobbesian human beings can be satisfied, but he rejects Hobbes as not understanding human nature. The “state,” far from calming our desires, inflames them through the development of amour-propre, and the argument that Rousseau might be right in insisting that our pride—illustrated starkly in *The Republic* by Glaucon’s demand for relishes at his feast—may be an unnatural and contingent misshaping of our true selves is the contentious point of discussion that drives this whole section of the course. Some students are inevitably drawn to Rousseau’s paradoxical insistence that in the state of nature we are wholly self-interested and no threat to our neighbor, but that in all existing states, we are constantly at war with our neighbors. We discuss the possibility that the states themselves are “partnerships” only in the cynical and self-serving rhetoric of elites. However, we also glimpse in the dedicatory letter to Geneva the remote possibility of a different type of community, a true community, based on making people *truly believe* the rhetoric of citizenship. If the human creature can be transformed by amour-propre once, it can happen again, this time deliberately to construct a partnership grounded in “justice,” a term used here to refer to the true dedication of citizens to the “public good,” the “good of all.” As in Hobbes, “justice” is the legal aspect, but as in Locke, it now has a normative, extra-legal component. Laws

may be judged to be in accord with “true justice” *if* they create a “true partnership” in which conflict between the citizens is erased and replaced with genuine common purpose. I spend a great deal of energy, some of it without much result, getting students to wrap their minds around Rousseau’s suggestion that some types of laws might provide a formal imitation of the Rousseauian state of nature if we each are ordered to do only what we wish to do. In their journals, I often detect students’ eagerness for the harmony that might be found if our desires and our duties became one with no painful conflict either with our neighbors or within ourselves.

With that recognition, we can make some deep sense of the separation between the ancient and modern modes of political thought that speak to students’ most personal desires. We have to deal with the thorny questions surrounding the malleability of human nature and the extreme measures that might be needed to (maybe) change it. Here they should be able to see (although they tend to forget it by the end of Book 3 and the unveiling of the “Noble Lie”) that Plato’s Socrates is both less idealistic and less activist than Rousseau or Hobbes, both of whom planned to manipulate and transform human nature by their projects. Plato’s Socrates’s “City of Sows” corresponds to the Rousseauian vision, *but* Plato’s Socrates abandons this notion of utopian harmony in that he never makes the argument that Glaucon’s “relish rebellion” or the other points of pride that might lead to the need for warriors and conflict is in some sense unnatural. The artisans could live a contented life, grounded in exchange and limited desires, but Glaucon (the ambitious man) will not settle for it. I want them to recognize the realism that dominates Socrates’s political science. How Glaucon came to be ambitious is, for Plato’s Socrates, simply beside the point. Glaucon is ambitious. Glaucon is here in this conversation. If the conversation is to continue, his desires—wherever they originate, however disruptive or even unjust they may be—must be accounted for. If the conversation is to lead to a picture of the just city, he must be persuaded (educated) to renounce these desires freely, or the desires must be accommodated. The city in speech must take account of the Glaucons in the world, but with his ambition, the simple account of justice—namely, that justice is “in some need these men have of each other,” i.e., in their common goods, and the lack of self-sufficiency of human animals—is no longer good enough.

This recognition then forces us to turn to the education of the Warriors and the Guardians that occupies the next long section of *The Republic* from the second half of Book 2 to the end of Book 7. Before the warriors, justice took care of itself in the simple exchange, each seeking their own good (simple version of Locke). With the warriors, we have a disproportion of force. They are powerful in the physical sense. The other citizens are weak and therefore vulnerable. Self-interest among the artisans did not undermine the common good and might even serve it. Self-interest among the warriors would destroy the common good. They would be created to protect the citizens’ lives and goods from outsiders but would in fact destroy the citizens and seize the goods themselves (375b–c). This leads us to the third question.

I hope this gives some sense of how I think the focus on the common points between the political questions that *The Republic* raises and the other answers offered in the canon of political philosophy can be grounded in a focus on the dramatic action of the *Republic*’s conversation.



I would say briefly in conclusion that my idea for the second semester would be to embed a new discussion of “Nature, Education, and History” in a careful reading of the *Emile* with connecting digressions into other supplemental texts. I welcome your thoughts on good candidates for inclusion in such a course and look forward to discussing it at a future ACTC conference.

#### APPENDIX: OUTLINE OF READINGS AND TOPICS

*FIRST QUESTION*—Should I choose to live a just life or an unjust life?

*Weeks 1–4, Republic 327a–369b*

*Weeks 1–2—Plato, Republic, Book 1 and beginning of Book 2 (through 368c)*

*Weeks 3–4—Plato, Republic, Book 1 and Book 2 to 368c (Review)*

—Machiavelli, *The Prince* (read chapter 15 first)

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

*SECOND QUESTION*—What is the origin and character of the political partnership among human beings? Are we political by nature or convention?

*Weeks 5–7, Republic, Book 2, 368c–375e.*

*Week 5—Plato, Republic, Book 2 (368c–375e)*

—Aristotle, *The Politics*, selections from Book 1

—Thomas Hobbes, selections from *Leviathan*

*Week 6—John Locke, selections from The Second Treatise*

*Week 7—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Second Discourse and selections from The Social Contract*

*THIRD QUESTION*—What is the relationship between knowledge and power? Should the wise rule, or is there a “true science” of the human and political things?

*Weeks 8–12, Republic 375e–541b*

*Week 8—Plato, Republic, Books 3–4*

*Week 9—Plato, Republic, Book 5 (up to 473e)*

—Aristophanes, *Ekklesiazusae*

—Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

*Week 10—Plato, Republic, Books 5–7 (472a–541b)*

—Aristophanes, *Clouds*

*Week 11—Plato, Republic, books 5–7, cont.*

—Plato, *Apology*

*Week 12—Plato, Republic, Books 6–7, cont.*

—Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration*

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First Discourse*

*Week 13—Plato, Republic, Book 7, cont.*

—Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*

*FOURTH QUESTION*—Does nature or history offer any hope for the realization of the “just city” or “the best regime”? Is there any city where the “good citizen” and the “good human being” are the same individual?

*Weeks 13–16, Republic 541b–621d ad finem*

*Week 14*—Plato, *Republic*, review 444e–449c, and read Book 8

—Aristotle, *The Politics*, selections from Book 3

*Week 15*—Plato, *The Republic*, Books 8–9

—Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

—Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 143–222

*Week 16*—Plato, *The Republic*, Books 9–10





# Ethics, Espionage, and War

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The ongoing war in Iraq has raised for citizens and scholars alike a variety of issues involving morality and warfare, both with respect to the reasons to go to war and the way the war is being conducted. Whereas most of those who wrote about just-war principles during the cold war grappled with the ethical problems posed by nuclear deterrence, the focus since then has shifted to questions of humanitarian intervention, promotion of democracy, and conducting a “global war on terror” (Walzer xi–xvi).

An important part of the discussion about the war concerns the accuracy and adequacy of the intelligence on which the case for the war was built. The report of the 9/11 commission focused as well on ways that the practices and structure of the United States “intelligence community” had failed to provide an adequate warning of the impending threat. As these recent examples show, war and intelligence gathering are clearly linked, yet much less has been written about morality and espionage than about morality and war.<sup>1</sup> If it is possible to make the case that war-making can or ought to be encompassed within some moral framework, as “just war” theorists have done, what about locating the practice of secret intelligence gathering within some similar set of principles? In both cases—war-making and espionage—practitioners are legally permitted and even encouraged to engage in activities normally regarded as immoral. Put bluntly, soldiers are trained to kill and intelligence officers are trained to lie, steal, and induce foreign nationals to betray their governments, perhaps harming those agents in the process and certainly putting them at risk.

To address the possibility of using just-war principles to discuss the morality of spying and covert action, I return to that section of St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* where he establishes what constitutes a just war. After suggesting ways

in which that framework might be applied to the activity of intelligence gathering, I conclude by offering some reservations about the ease of doing so.

Just as there are pacifists, who argue that war is immoral and therefore should not be entered into, so have there been those who insisted that espionage is wrong and therefore should not be practiced. In 1929, when Secretary of State Henry Stimson found out that the State Department had established a bureau nicknamed the “Black Chamber” to intercept and decrypt messages sent by foreign governments to their embassies in Washington, Stimson ordered the unit disbanded, because, as he put it, “gentlemen do not read other gentlemen’s mail” (Andrew 71–72).

On this view, personal and public morality are the same: states should be held to the same standards of conduct as individuals are. Just as it is wrong for private individuals to lie, cheat, steal, and engage in violence against others, so we should condemn such behavior on the part of nation-states. However, in the context of a world of competing nation-states and with terrorist groups organized and prepared to do harm to others, this perspective seems naïve and hopelessly idealistic. We expect governments to protect their citizens; to do so, they need to know what threats are out there and must make preparations to deal with them.

Such considerations lead some to conclude that for the sake of their survival and prosperity, governments should be allowed to do “whatever is necessary” to gather intelligence and defeat their enemies. On this view, usually associated with Machiavelli, governments are beyond ethics; ethical imperatives or restraints are simply irrelevant. A rather chilling expression of this view may be found in the 1954 report of the “Special Study Group on the Covert Activities of the Central Intelligence Agency” prepared for President Dwight Eisenhower by a committee chaired by Lt. Gen. J. H. Doolittle. According to its authors, the United States was

facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive, long-standing American concepts of “fair play” must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us. It may become necessary that the American people be made acquainted with, understand, and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy. (Leary 144)

In keeping with the Doolittle Report, the United States developed a robust technical intelligence capability to monitor, intercept, and decode communications and to provide photographic and other “signals intelligence” about the military, political, and industrial capacities and vulnerabilities of other countries. It also put substantial resources into “human intelligence” by sending officers to foreign countries to gather intelligence and to recruit foreign nationals to provide information their governments wanted kept secret. Obviously, these activities require lying, cheating, stealing, and harming others. Finally, the US government regularly chose to engage in covert action—secretly intervening in the affairs of other countries to promote American interests. In some cases, this meant financial or logistical support for a particular

political party; in others, covert action extended to assisting coup plotters or even undertaking assassinations.

If Hollywood movies or the “gut” responses of our students are any indication, it may seem as if public opinion has come to accept what the Doolittle report itself called the “fundamentally repugnant philosophy” of “whatever it takes” or basic Machiavellianism. However, from the point of view of just-war teaching articulated by St. Thomas and others who have written on war and morality, there are problems with such a view. First, officials persist in defending American foreign and military policies in moral terms; they may be cynical when they do so, but they do so nevertheless. This establishes an expectation that the country stands for certain principles; when the government fails to live up to those professed standards, it undermines its claims and its own legitimacy. Simply put: does it make sense to defend justice by acting in unjust ways? Reported abuses of detainees at Guantanamo or of prisoners at Abu Ghraib surely contributed to the erosion of popular support for the war in Iraq for this reason. Additionally, it is appropriate to ask what the effect of engaging in these activities has on practitioners. Soldiers and intelligence officers, as professionals, develop codes of conduct, in part, so they can live with what they are asked to do (Walzer 44–47). They, too, have a stake in locating their activities within some larger moral framework.

For St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine before him, ethical principles do apply in the relations of political communities, but they apply differently for countries compared with private individuals. Because governments have unique responsibilities for public safety and the maintenance of order, they may engage in activities not morally permissible for private individuals, provided that certain conditions are met and certain limitations are established.

Though Thomas wrote as a Catholic theologian, his teaching on the just war is not a religious teaching as such but, rather, may be regarded as part of a larger philosophical tradition accessible to non-Christians as well. In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas specified three conditions for the decision to go to war: the action must be ordered by the proper authority, the cause must be just, and the authority must have a right intention of promoting good or avoiding evil. Later authorities elaborated on these by adding three additional criteria: the action must be a last resort, there must be a reasonable chance of success, and the evil done by the war must be proportionate to the injury received.

In requiring that war be approved by the right authority, Thomas’s main concern was to distinguish public and private resort to the use of force. “It is not the business of a private person to declare war,” rather it is the business of those who have political authority to “have recourse to the material sword in defending the common weal against internal disturbances when they punish evil doers” and against external threats (St. Thomas Aquinas 88–89).

Quoting Augustine on what constitutes a just cause for war, Thomas observes, “Those wars are generally defined as just which avenge some wrong, when a nation or state is to be punished for having failed to make amends for a wrong done, or to restore what has been taken unjustly.” The substance of the cause must be of sufficient weight to overcome the presumption against killing, but in order to protect the

innocent from attack, to restore rights wrongly taken, and to reestablish a just order, the taking of human life may be justifiable (*ibid.*).

Thomas's stipulation that to be just a war must be pursued with "right intention" is meant to address the belligerent's motivation: war-makers should intend to advance the good and avoid evil. Motives of cruelty, bloodthirstiness, and "aggrandizement," even when war is declared by a legitimate authority and for a just cause, would make the war wrong. Enemies are to be treated as human beings with the respect that is their due. Right intention requires that the just war-maker keep in mind that the ultimate object of the war is a just and lasting peace. The crucial point is this: one's conduct in war will have an impact on the possibility of reconciliation when the time for peacemaking arrives (O'Brien 32–35).

How might these doctrines of just war, developed nearly 800 years ago, be extended to the practices of secret intelligence gathering and covert action? First, legitimate authority. As part of the congressional investigations in the mid-1970s into allegations of abuses of its authority by the Central Intelligence Agency, procedures were put in place to provide for oversight of intelligence gathering and covert activity. By law, the president must sign an order approving a covert action based on his finding that the operation is necessary to support clear foreign policy objectives of the United States and is important to national security. This finding must be conveyed to the House and Senate Intelligence Oversight Committees for their information, though not for their approval (Lowenthal 109–10).

Second, just cause. The major function of intelligence is to provide early and adequate warning of an attack by forces that threaten the nation. If, as just-war theory suggests, defending one's state, fellow citizens, and even citizens of other states is morally justifiable, it follows that intelligence gathering in support of those causes would also be considered justified. However, devoting intelligence-gathering resources to aid private business enterprises or on behalf of some personal vendetta would be a violation of this criterion.

Finally, right intention: Applied to intelligence, this criterion requires that intelligence agencies only seek information in which the government has a legitimate interest and that they seek it clandestinely only when it cannot be collected overtly or through national technical means. It also seems to follow that certain methods of acquiring information or of dealing with threats be ruled out in advance. Although one can produce scenarios involving torture and assassination where engaging in those practices to secure information or to deal with a grave threat to national security results in promoting the greater good at the expense of the few, the weight of just-war thinking is to establish limits on the use of force even if it means increasing the possibility of harm to oneself (Perry 221–47).

Much more could be said about each of these categories, but based on this brief review, it does seem that the moral framework provided by just-war theory can be applied to the practice of intelligence gathering. However, at least two difficulties stand out as potential problems for fully applying this framework. The first difficulty involves the secrecy that is inherent in spying and acting covertly. Because espionage is conducted secretly, there is practically no opportunity for public review of the appropriateness of a particular intelligence-gathering or covert mission. Even within an intelligence agency,

compartmentalization on a “need to know” basis means that intelligence officers have a great deal of discretion in deciding the right and proper course of action in particular cases. This makes the ethical training of intelligence officers centrally important, yet even that preparation is kept secret. The second difficulty is that the targets of intelligence gathering and covert action often are nation-states formally at peace. Engaging in espionage or covert action in such cases must typically be justified as preventive, whereas the language of Thomas’s just-war principles is that action comes about as a response to some injury. Just-war theory assumes a fairly sharp difference between a condition of war and one of peace, but the world that intelligence officers inhabit features elements of both existing simultaneously.

Neither of these difficulties necessarily discredits just-war theory as a moral framework for thinking about espionage, but they do show that the process of moral reasoning is not simply a matter of checking off points on a list. Indeed, the brevity of Aquinas’s treatment of the morality of war suggests that he understood that in political matters like these, knowledge of context and circumstance matter a great deal in making moral judgments.

## Note

1. An important exception is Jan Goldman’s edited volume of essays, *Ethics of Spying* (2006).

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## Using *The Good Woman of Setzuan* to Illuminate *The Communist Manifesto*

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Anyone teaching *The Communist Manifesto* in a first-year core or foundation course will encounter students who bring strongly held assumptions that create formidable barriers to engaging with the text. For example, many students will assume they already know what Marxist communism is: it looks exactly like the Stalinist Soviet Union. They often assume that communism means that everything is owned in common, no one has any personal belongings, and everyone earns the same wage regardless of effort. These assumptions may be dispelled by a close look at a few key passages in the *Manifesto*, such as the distinction between personal property and private property, or the definition of democracy. A brief discussion of the regulations on ownership that students already accept in the regulated capitalist systems of the West will also help.

The most challenging assumption cannot be so easily dispelled by a closer reading, however, because it arises from the text itself. That is the assumption that in describing capitalism, Marx and Engels are attributing the evils of capitalism to the greed of the bourgeoisie, that is, to individual morality, rather than to material causes, to the system of capitalism itself. If the *Manifesto* were being read in an upper-level course on modern European history, politics, or philosophy, comparative political and philosophical systems would make clear the differences among materialist and idealist understandings of history. Foundation courses, however, where the emphasis is on developing critical reading, writing, and analysis, must provide context solely through the sequence of core texts for the course. To help students understand its materialism, then, I propose that the *Manifesto* be followed by a reading of Ber-



tolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (more accurately translated as *The Good Person of Setzuan*). Not only does the play offer students an accessible, engaging, and provocative text in itself; it also invites them, in a very different way from the *Manifesto*, to think through the implications of a materialist explanation of history.

There is much in the *Manifesto* to encourage students to take a good-versus-evil approach to the class antagonisms Marx and Engels describe. The language of the *Manifesto* deliberately appeals to moral sentiments: oppressor and oppressed, exploitation of the many by the few, workers as slaves of the bourgeoisie, the existence of private property for the bourgeois few being due solely to its nonexistence for the proletarian many. Surely, this suggests a morally right and wrong side to be on: the bourgeois are bad and the proletarians are good. And since most students identify with property owners, Marx and Engels are saying they are bad. Defenses naturally go up.

This rhetorical appeal to right and wrong, however, obscures the materialist explanation, at the heart of the *Manifesto*, for how things came to be the way they are and why they are bound to change. For Marx at this period, "the appeal to rights may help unite the proletariat as a class but rights have no moral significance" (Kain 98).<sup>1</sup> Morality is ideology and illusion, an epiphenomena that results from the relations of production: "man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life" (Marx and Engels 33, sec. 2). Freedom will result from communism not because individuals will be self-determining and therefore capable of moral choices, but because through cooperative, conscious control of production and distribution, they will be able to control the social processes whose laws had hitherto dominated them. "For Marx, freedom can only mean controlling these external constraints, not eliminating them entirely" (Kain 119). Material circumstances force the proletariat to become conscious of these systems and to take control. Theirs will be not a moral victory but the victory of historical material forces.

It will help to emphasize that the bourgeoisie as described in the *Manifesto* are as mystified and as subject to the workings of capitalism as are the proletarians. "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones" (17, sec. 1). Driven by competition, this revolutionizing of production and the periodic crises of overproduction force the bourgeoisie to become ruthless competitors or risk falling into the proletariat. They act ruthlessly not because they choose to be egotistical rather than selfless, but out of historical necessity. For the same reason, the victorious proletarians under communism will apparently act selflessly, but the principle that will motivate the individual then "will no more be the 'principle of love' or devotion than it will be egoism" (*German Ideology*, qtd. in Kain 103).

Whereas Marx and Engels offer an historical view of the struggle between classes, in *The Good Woman of Setzuan* Brecht dramatizes a similar struggle taking place not between classes but within a single individual. Shen Te, an extremely compassionate but destitute prostitute, in return for giving three wandering gods shelter for the night, is given a thousand silver dollars that she uses to buy a small tobacco shop.

She hopes becoming a shopkeeper will enable her to do more good, and the play is constructed around episodes manifesting her goodness—to her neighbors, to her lover, and to her expected child. Her goodness, however, forces her into successively more difficult financial troubles. She quickly feels compelled, in spite of herself, to put on the mask of a tough businessman, Shui Ta, whom she calls her “cousin.” Whereas at first she thinks this mask a one-time expedient necessitated by the pressures of a competitive business environment and her own generosity, Shen Te finds herself pressing Shui Ta into service for appearances of ever longer duration, and his actions become, however reluctantly for Shen Te, increasingly unsavory.

At the end, seven months pregnant and no longer able to hide behind the mask of Shui Ta (for psychological as well as physical reasons), Shen Te reveals herself to the gods and begs them to help her. The gods, however, cannot admit that she needs their intervention to be good. They have been counting on Shen Te, in all their wanderings the only good person they have been able to find, as their answer to the atheists’ claim that “The world must be changed because no one can *be* good and *stay* good” (7: Prologue). They refuse to accept that Shen Te must have Shui Ta to be bad so that she, Shen Te, can remain good. Seemingly helpless to intervene, the gods ascend from the stage in a reverse *deus ex machina*, abandoning Shen Te and her cries for help. The epilogue asks the audience, “How could a better ending be arranged?/Could one change people? Can the world be changed?/ . . . It is for you to find a way, my friends” (Brecht 107).

With this play Brecht clearly has intended a Marxist lesson: In Shen Te’s world, the gods’ “book of rules” and its accompanying system of rewards and punishments are completely inadequate to support her love and compassion. The fact that the first object of her compassion is a destitute family who used to have a tobacco shop themselves and who are now greedy, ungrateful beggars and thieves suggests what Shen Te is likely to become, a bourgeois fallen back into the proletariat and scrambling for survival. It is this family, in fact, who suggests the ruse of bringing in a “cousin” who can deal “rationally,” that is, without compassion or moral compunction, with creditors and hangers on. In his first brief appearance, Shui Ta’s actions do come as a relief—he drives a very hard bargain with a tradesman; he expels the lazy, greedy, and ungrateful homeless people whom Shen Te has invited to take up residence in her shop; and he convinces the police and the landlady of Shen Te’s rectitude. These actions seem relatively fair and certainly necessary to make the business viable. Paradoxically, however, the money that was to have enabled Shui Ta to reclaim herself from prostitution and to love others ends up alienating her from herself, from her lover, and from her future child (she vows her child will never meet Shui Ta).

What makes the play engaging and so useful in the context of the *Manifesto*, then, is the way it dramatizes that the good proletarian and the bad bourgeois inhabit the same breast. The impulse to be compassionate and put the needs of others before oneself, here associated with the woman Shen Te, and the impulse to use people and systems instrumentally—for self-preservation, to preserve one’s child, and to plan for the future—here associated with the man Shui Ta, are parts of the same “gute Mensch.” The material conditions provide an impossible situation for anyone to survive by abiding by traditional standards of morality and, we should add, by traditional expectations for gender.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, however, the play resists becoming doctrinaire because the question posed at the end of this open-ended play is, well, so open ended. As the epilogue asks, How *could* a better ending be arranged? Students at first are absorbed in trying to determine whether Shen Te/Shui Ta is good or bad. They emphasize the way the tobacco factory has been able to employ impoverished people, giving them an alternative to begging; they point to the source of all Shen Te's problems as her foolish choice of an abusive lover, something they believe can easily be remedied; and they take refuge in the belief that in an imperfect world, compromise is necessary. But they have to admit that it is hard to justify that Shui Ta steals from the homeless the tobacco that he uses to expand his business; that he reneges on a loan from a benevolent old couple, putting them out of business; that he agrees that Shen Te must marry for money rather than love, despite her dream to release herself from prostitution; that he appoints Shen Te's devious lover to drive the factory workers, including children, ever harder; and that he panders this lover to the landlady in return for necessary shop space. The bad actions weigh heavily on the scale, even for those nominally willing to accept bad means for good ends. Eventually, students take up the invitation of the Epilogue to ruminate on what would be required for a better ending.

The answers can go in several directions, but what will be clear is that focusing exclusively on individual morality will be insufficient to reach a better end, that economic systems—material conditions—must be taken into account. Students do not need prodding at this point to bring a materialist explanation of culture and morality into the discussion.

A bonus in using Brecht to illuminate the *Manifesto*, of course, is that the *Manifesto* will illuminate Brecht. Brecht's epic theater, rather than aiming to be emotionally transfixing, seeks to provoke an analytical, critical attitude. He relies on characters that are typical rather than psychologically nuanced and on actors who step outside their roles to comment on the action. His plots are episodic rather than climactic, often a parable, since for Brecht the parable can be, paradoxically, the most effective form of realism: "while abstracting it is nevertheless concrete since it opens our eyes to what is essential" (Brecht, qtd. in Subiotto 42). This critical and clarifying effect becomes especially accessible when reading *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in relation to *The Communist Manifesto*. Through the split of Shen Te/Shui Ta, Brecht's play concretizes and clarifies the abstraction of historical materialism at the heart of the *Manifesto*, and thereby helps students formulate questions about the relations among morality, freedom, and material necessity, while in getting to these questions, students are experiencing something of the aims and artistry of a great playwright.

## Notes

1. Kain identifies three stages in Marx's ethical theory: initially Marx formulated an ethics based on the concept of an essential human nature and of individuals as ends in themselves; in his middle stage, the stage during which he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, he abandons essence for historical materialism; finally, he formulates a dialectical socialist morality that allows for the *ideal* of individuals as ends in themselves.

2. For helpful, if opposed, perspectives on gender in this play, see Fuegi and Lug.

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# Actualizing Memory Nafisi's Way: Reading Homer in El Paso

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For academics and for teachers, the stations at which we meet our students are often bitter sweet. While we strive to excite our students about those elements that excite us, we must always confront the chasm between our own preferences and the narrower vision of a much younger generation not acquainted with our pursuits. As teachers we come from similar academic backgrounds, and at conferences and in seminars we sit face-to-face as we engage the Great Books, but we encounter our students in the regimented setting of the classroom far from their daily lives. Most of them lack the skills to comprehend the connecting elements between the texts they read and the different experiences they live. So we look into various bags of educational tricks and rummage about for new methods to interest, motivate, or engage the glassy-eyed students arranged before us. Unfortunately, in the process we often impose our own perceptions upon our pupils, perpetuating rote repetition of class lectures and very little long-term commitment. We need a new teaching model.

Let me propose an unexpected example of how to connect students with the texts we assign them to read, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. While it centers upon a classroom-like event, Nafisi's work actually documents a true example of the power of blending the reading experience with the moments in life. It is a student-centered experience, not a content presentation. This paper will discuss the blueprint for learning that Nafisi constructed, the discoveries that came to teacher and students who used her methods while reading Homer's *Iliad* in a core text course, and why Nafisi's work should be required reading for core text instructors and perhaps for their students as well.

I include Homer's *Iliad* in my class because I am convinced that his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* say everything that can be said about human motivation. I have been trying for twenty years in various ways to engage my students in Homer's dissection of the reasons men and women behave as they do. Yet all too often, my students see the *Iliad* as only the narration of a few days of bloody battle within a savage war perpetuated by glory-hungry soldiers of fortune. They seem to be unable to see that the Trojan War is merely the setting for discussions of the behaviors of human characters, not the subject of the book. More importantly, they see very little connection between Homer's tale and their own lives.

Nafisi, on the other hand, was very successful in blending the experience of reading great works of fiction with moments in her own life and the lives of her students to create a personal memoir of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran during the 1980s. She was living a personal dream to work privately with a dedicated group of hand-picked women focused upon literature. At the time, the fanaticism of the Islamic revolution physically expelled Americans, assaulted Iranians, and the country then endured more than eight years of suicidal warfare with Iraq. Nafisi and her students lived the revolution, and her memoir of the experience is powerful. At the same time, as Nafisi and her group of young Iranian women read and discussed various authors, they were able to experience just the right episodes of the novels at the precise moments when the group was most sensitive to reimagining the experiences of their lives and realizing the importance of each one.

Encountering the texts at the right moments of life was transformative. For Nafisi the joint experience was essential. Studying the text alone could not have done the same thing. It is a disservice to the text, she says, to try to turn a great work—in her case, great fiction—into a carbon copy of real life (Nafisi 3). But whether she realized it or not, Nafisi demonstrated that teaching literature to others entails picking the right text to fit the situation, not imposing the text upon the students—and then very wisely, as Nafisi did, to listen as the students react. Unfortunately, as with so many other experiences in teaching, Nafisi's activities were not always planned, and her results were not what she anticipated. She only realized the power of her methods as her teaching experience in the Islamic Republic grew. If Nafisi had planned her lessons with a more conscious eye to the situations her class was living, the outcomes might have been even more spectacular.

Nafisi and her students experienced their “epiphany of truth” (Nafisi 3) as they encountered the literary works of four great novelists: each encounter is one section of the book. Beginning *in medias res*, section 1 is entitled “Lolita” because it documents the epiphany that Nabokov's novel inspired in the group. In the first section, Nafisi narrates the reactions of her study group as they discovered “the tragic unreality” of their lives as young women living in the Islamic Republic. Nabokov used the same phrase to describe the fate of the heroine of *Lolita*, subject as she was to an existence at the mercy of the random behavior of her protagonist, Humbert Humbert.

To some degree Nafisi engineered her students' reactions to *Lolita*. However, even though she had hand-picked the members of the study group, the young women she chose were not her clones, and as a result their lives and reactions teach volumes about who students are and how they experience a great text. After reading *Lolita*, as

a group—a group of young women—they unanimously rejected the academic interpretations of the work, which either see the story as a great love affair or condemn the work as the glorification of a child's rape, which is how Humbert, the story's narrator, portrays the experience. These young Islamic women saw *Lolita* as the story of a helpless child who courageously works to establish some sort of worthwhile relationship with her tormentor (Nafisi 40). In Nafisi's words, "what linked us so closely [to Lolita's character] was this perverse intimacy of victim and jailer" (Nafisi 37).

Like most young people, Nafisi's students dreamt of an ideal life. But as Nafisi discovered, the fact that they accepted or rejected the goals of the Islamic Revolution was not the only factor that determined how her most memorable students chose to deal with life in the Islamic Republic. Nafisi herself was educated in the United States. She had demonstrated against the shah, but upon returning to Iran, she had found that the revolution had betrayed its promise to restore freedom—especially for women. She opposed and resisted Islamic rule. Her students demonstrated a wide spectrum of responses. Some accepted the status quo, others endured life in Islamic society, and still others actively promoted the Islamic Republic. For example, when Nafisi was teaching at the University of Tehran, she had her students stage a mock trial of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. An anti-American Islamist acted as the prosecutor, with one of the better female students—not an ardent opponent or supporter of the Islamic regime—playing the role of defense attorney. Nafisi poignantly records how the mock trial and the students negotiated the rhetoric and platitudes of the Islamic radicals to find—to Nafisi's amazement—clear and unexpected meanings and direction in *Gatsby* on all sides. As expected, to the radicals *Gatsby* was a clear example of American decadence. But to others he was also the tragic figure who responded to his better instincts only to be destroyed in the process. Of course—as a class—the young Iranian students found *Gatsby* wanting, but the novel also caused many of them—and the author as well—to consider how their own perceptions of life were also tragic and often lacking in several ways (Nafisi 35–55).

So what are Nafisi's lessons for those who teach core texts? First, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a powerful documentation of the impact of great texts upon the lives of a teacher and her students. It is a memoir of the real-life consequences of reading important literature. It is not the usual professorial anecdote of clever students repeating what their instructor wants to hear. And it is told with the self-conscious realization of how important the "teacher" was in shaping the experience. These are important considerations for every teacher. I experienced the pedagogical truth of Nafisi's experience in my own instructional life, when I reframed my approach to teaching Homer's *Iliad*, taking a more student-centered approach. As the horrors of the war in Iraq violently intruded upon my life and the lives of my students, I deliberately shifted focus away from the academically important sections to passages that blended my students' experiences with the voices of Homer.

*The Iliad* is a wonderful and entertaining adventure. I include it on my syllabus almost every semester. As Wolfgang Peterson's film version of the Trojan War shows, the story is replete with all sorts of beautiful, larger-than-life characters engaged in monumental struggles of every type, displaying multiple levels of human motivation. But perhaps it is not advisable for every class of students to read it,



which is not core text heresy. It is the realization that the decision to study the book is as dependent upon the students and their situations as it is upon the literary significance of the work itself. Not all of my classes have succeeded in realizing a personal truth in the episodes that I considered to be the most significant.

For instance, the selfishness and self-absorption of Achilles when he refuses to return to the battle despite the pleas of his fellow generals in *Iliad*, book 9, strikes students as petty and immature. His friends need help, and he lets them down. Of course, he pays the price for this when Patroklos is killed. So, what's new? This is just a repetition of the cliché of natural and logical consequences. Every college student learned that lesson the first time they refused to share with their brothers or sisters. If I choose this episode to excite them about Homer and *The Iliad*, most of the class will lose interest and tune out.

On the other hand, the encounter between Hektor and Andromache in book 6 is much more relevant. Hektor is the young soldier going off to war. Andromache, the young wife, must stay behind with her young son, who has had little chance to know his father. Neither looks forward to the separation, and both understand fully the terrible possibilities of battle. Nevertheless, the forces surrounding them and driving them forward make the war unavoidable, and they must come to terms with it, both loving and hating its necessity. In an army town, at a university where the Reserve Officer Training Corps is very strong and young military wives fill the classes, the fate of this young Trojan couple becomes real in a manner that formerly I could only imagine.

Prejudiced against the futility of war by my experiences protesting the Vietnam War, I see war as a terrible waste, perpetuated by misplaced loyalties. Homer eloquently reinforces that judgment for me. Both Hektor and Andromache recognize their own personal tragedies in fighting the Achaians. Andromache predicts her own enslavement to an Achaian master and the horrible death of her infant son (*Iliad* 24.725–45). Hektor acknowledges his fear for her fate, and yet his own sense of duty does not allow him to withdraw from the battle:

All these things are in my mind also, lady; yet I would feel deep shame  
before the Trojans, and the Trojan women with trailing garments,  
if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting;  
and the spirit will not let me, since I have learned to be valiant  
and to fight always among the foremost ranks of the Trojans,  
winning for my own self great glory, and for my father. (*Iliad* 6. 440–46)

So after reading Homer I expect reasonable, informed people to oppose the waste of Iraq.

I have found many students who do oppose the war, some more vehemently than others. But to my amazement, I have also encountered students who have accommodated themselves to the war. Their brothers, husbands, or wives have committed themselves to complete a task, and the war has a constant presence in their lives. Rejecting the war would be denying someone or something that is a part of their lives. So they accept the war—even support it—and accommodate their lives to it. And like the young Iranian women reading *Lolita*, they come to recognize a basic truth in their own lives when they read of Andromache “smiling in her tears” as she accepts the

reality of her husband returning to the fight (*Iliad* 6. 484). The most amazing thing for me is that by sharing my reading of Homer with these young military families, I have also experienced an epiphany of truth. Students should not be expected to adopt the views of their instructors. Truth for teacher and student are not always the same, and truth for each is not realized in every text or episode. Students who simply repeat the interpretations of the professor are not learning. No text is equally useful for every student. Real learning is internalizing the text in a way that causes teacher and student to realize a truth in their lives. So it is important to choose a classroom text very carefully and to consider the passages in the text with a careful eye to how they complement the experiences of the students involved.

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**Odysseys in Theological  
and Philosophical Reflection**

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# The Socratic Journey: Liberal Education as Demythologizing

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We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

—T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets*

Theological criticism and reinterpretation of religious mythology can provide an illuminating model for understanding the role a liberal education can play in personal and intellectual growth. I want to draw on the work of two major twentieth-century theologians, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, as providing useful perspectives on the dialectical process by which a liberal education can awaken the student and nurture her passage from uncritical acceptance of inherited traditions, through vigorous questioning and even rejection, to a mature, self-critical appreciation of those traditions. While Bultmann and Tillich were dealing specifically with religious myths, I’m applying their analyses to a much wider sense of “myths,” something like Nietzsche’s use of “idols,” to refer generally to the beliefs, ideas, values, and customs in which the individual in every society grows up insofar as she accepts them uncritically as truth—as simply the Way Things Are. My “core text” model for illustrating the process will be Socrates on religion in the *Euthyphro*.

Rudolf Bultmann, New Testament scholar and existentialist theologian, came to be identified with the method that he called “demythologizing” (*Entmythologisierung*). Contrary to a widespread popular misunderstanding, his purpose was not to eliminate the mythology of the New Testament but to provide a critical method by

which to interpret it in such a way as to “liberate” the message it contains and make it intelligible to modern humans. In his programmatic 1942 essay, “New Testament and Mythology,” he defined mythology as

the use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life. . . . For instance, divine transcendence is expressed as spatial distance. . . . Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically but . . . existentially. Myth speaks of the power or the powers which man supposes he experiences as the ground and limit of his world and of his own activity and suffering. (Bultmann 10–11)

Bultmann considered the first-century mythology in which the early Christian message was articulated incredible in the light of modern knowledge. The critical reinterpretation was to restate the Christian message in thoroughly existential terms, as a call to “a life based on unseen, intangible realities. . . . the abandonment of all self-contrived security. . . . faith that the unseen, intangible reality actually confronts us as love, opening up our future and signifying not death but life” (Bultmann 19).

Bultmann’s achievement, as a believer who was also a scholar committed to critical inquiry, was to subject the New Testament documents to the most rigorous historical scrutiny in the service of a creative reappropriation of the Christian proclamation that he believed rendered faith a live option for thoughtful moderns. Bultmann’s idea of “demythologizing,” suitably generalized, seems to me an illuminating way to think of what goes on, or can go on, in a liberal education: the skeptical exposure of the mythic character of the taken-for-granted world of childhood, as the necessary foundation for reappropriating and reinterpreting that world in a mature and self-critical way.

Paul Tillich, one of the most influential philosophers of religion and theologians of the twentieth century, developed a theory of symbols that included an account of the role of myth in religion. In his 1957 book *Dynamics of Faith* he distinguished between signs and symbols: both point beyond themselves to something else, but symbols are bound up with what they symbolize in an existential, “participatory” way and open up aspects of self and world that are otherwise inaccessible. Tillich defined myths as “symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters” (Tillich 49). Tillich maintained that what he called “demythologization” was essential to reflective faith, but that this means not the elimination of myth but “the necessity of recognizing a symbol as a symbol and a myth as a myth” (Tillich 50). He distinguished between the “unbroken” and the “broken” myth. The “unbroken myth” is a “natural literalism,” characterizing the “primitive” period of both individuals and groups, in which the mythical and the literal are indistinguishable. When critical questions and challenges arise, the natural literalist may respond with a “reactive literalism,” suppressing the questions and continuing to affirm the unbroken myth in the face of critical reason; or alternatively, I would add to Tillich’s account, completely rejecting the unbroken myth in various forms of skepticism. The way of mature, reflective faith is to recognize the “broken” or symbolic character of all myths and undertake a nonliteral reappropriation of the myths one had earlier believed literally. As Tillich remarks with emphasis: “Faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous!” (Tillich 52).

Tillich's discussion of demythologizing extends Bultmann's account in such a way as to make clearer the wider application of the idea to the role of liberal education in individual growth. The taken-for-granted social-cultural world out of which all of us come is initially the world of "unbroken myth," of "natural literalism." The process of e-ducation, of "leading out," is ideally that of breaking the spell of unbroken myths in such a way as to equip the student to reinterpret and appropriate them self-critically as "broken myths."

Socrates is, of course, the iconic teacher for the Western tradition, and he is a model of the "demythologizing" role of the liberal educator. His ceaseless questioning of his fellow Athenians about their beliefs and values is designed to liberate their minds from unreflective conventions for the sake of discovering truth through reasoned, self-critical thinking. Unlike many of the Sophists, Socrates challenges unexamined traditional beliefs about the gods, goodness, justice, ethics, beauty, and knowledge with the aim of achieving rationally well-grounded knowledge of those matters—constructive rather than simply destructive skepticism.

The innovation of the Greek philosophers generally was to introduce critical discussion of the prevailing mythological explanations of nature and human activities. They started with and built on the mythological traditions, but questioned them, discussed them, modified them, and offered new alternative explanations, thus inaugurating a new "critical tradition." We can see this clearly in Socrates's discussions of Greek religion. He doesn't reject the myths and rituals outright but examines them critically, testing them by reason and rational standards of morality. For Socrates, Greek religion was not simply irrational; aspects of it were defensible by reason or at least provided fruitful suggestions for philosophical thinking. Socrates is himself clearly religious in some recognizable sense, most famously in his invocation of his *daimonion*, his "inner voice," and he frequently acknowledges the gods. But he has developed his religious ideas, like all his ideas, not simply by accepting the prevailing beliefs and practices uncritically, but by investigating them and revising them in accordance with reason.

As an example of Socratic demythologizing, I want to look briefly at the discussion of piety in the *Euthyphro*. The *Euthyphro* forms a kind of prelude to the *Apology*, and both are early dialogues. Both feature Socrates dealing with religious questions. In his discussion of piety with Euthyphro, as they are both on their way to court, Socrates anticipates his self-defense in the *Apology* by bringing into the conversation Meletus's charge of impiety against him. Here I can mention only one theme from Socrates's subtle and finally inconclusive conversation with Euthyphro. In his relentless questioning of Euthyphro, the self-proclaimed expert on pious ritual and conduct, Socrates questions the conventional portrayals of the gods in Homer and Greek religion as quarrelsome, contradictory, and immoral. He hints that gods, as powerful and immortal dwellers in an ideal realm and lords of the human realm, must surely be conceived as better than mortals rather than "just like us only more so." This is demanded by a piety that thinks things through rather than simply accepting them because they've been handed down or because *hoi polloi* do.

By focusing on Socrates on religion, I'm making the obvious connection with the context out of which Bultmann's and Tillich's analyses of demythologizing



comes. However, Socrates's approach to the issue of piety and the gods is consonant with, for example, his discussions of ethics in *Meno*, of politics and justice in *The Republic*, and of love in his *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. I've offered one very small and bare example out of a wealth of Socratic topics and conversations. My passing reference to the patron saint of teaching and learning is simply a reminder that the idea of a liberal education as demythologizing—as critical and constructive myth-breaking—is quite literally grounded in the classical roots of that tradition.

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# Church-Related Colleges and the Core Values of the Liberal Tradition

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The fall syllabus for Paideia 1—Luther College’s common first-year course—included (for the first time) Richard Dawkins’s *Selfish Gene*. In a staff meeting after the term, one of my colleagues reported that a student had given a one-sentence reply to an essay question about Dawkins on the final exam. I don’t know what the question was, but the answer was something to the effect that Richard Dawkins was destined for hell because of his godless theorizing, along with those who follow him by so much as reading his work.

It is all too common to mention such incidents for the purpose of ridicule—that is not my intention at all. My own theological views are much closer to this student’s than to Dawkins’s, and I suspect that my religious commitments fall nearer the student’s than do those of most of the faculty in that staff meeting. I do think the student was mistaken; but the mistake is instructive and is, in fact, representative of a much wider prejudice, held not just by proponents of religion but also by its cultured despisers. What I have in mind is the notion that religion is at odds with academic inquiry.

Academic fashion in the twentieth century treated religion with suspicion, at best. There is good reason to suppose that (in the shifting winds of the post-Enlightenment academy) some of the theoretical grounds for resistance to religion in the academy have faded. This barely needs mentioning among scholars devoted to “core texts and courses”; much of the work that we do centers on texts in which academic reflection is deeply rooted in religious commitment, and through which those religious traditions encourage the life of the mind. But I will preach to the choir,

albeit briefly. The lingering effects of positivism, the culture of graduate programs that train faculty, and the background of our students (not to mention past abuses by religious institutions—including Christian institutions of higher education) make it worth our while to *articulate* how religious commitment can promote our highest academic aspirations. In light of our focus on *The Odyssey of the Liberal Arts*, I want to reflect on a couple of ways in which the Christian tradition supports liberal education, and to suggest that the core values of the liberal tradition should flourish at church-related colleges and universities. And maybe in the end what I'll want to say is that we should be reading Richard Dawkins at such places *because of*—not in spite of—their religious identity.

Let me begin with mention of academic freedom, since the issue so frequently comes to mind in this context. One reason it does is lamentable past abuses—circumstances in which church-related academic institutions have inappropriately restricted academic freedom. I suggest that this is tragic—not because free inquiry is more important than Christian commitment, but because the Christian tradition provides a rich and substantive *foundation* for this cardinal academic virtue. The argument for this is straightforward, and it centers on the notion of truth seeking.

In *The Idea of a University*, Cardinal Newman suggests that “Truth . . . is the main object of Religion” (in Discourse 2. 5). If, for present purposes, you will allow this phrase to stand in for an exposition of the significance of truth-seeking in the Christian tradition, the remainder of the argument can be taken from chapter 2 of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*. There Mill famously argues that truth is served by vigorous open inquiry—whether received opinion be false, partially true, or even entirely true. My view is that Christian institutions of higher learning should exemplify vigorous free inquiry because of the value that the tradition places on truth.

I don’t pretend that the preceding summary is an adequate argument, but I hope it suffices to indicate how I think such an argument proceeds. Before moving on, however, permit me two additional notes (again in the form of claims without detailed arguments). First of all, I think that there is a wide range of possible models for faithful church-related colleges and universities and that schools can restrict their faculty to scholars holding a specified range of theological views without inappropriately compromising academic freedom. (My college does not do this, but there are academically better colleges than mine that do.) This position, as you know, accords with the policy of the American Association of University Professors, though it is a matter of ongoing controversy. This leads to my second note. The AAUP’s defense of academic freedom rests on the argument that such freedom is necessary for truth-seeking, though this theoretical foundation is threatened by contemporary challenges to liberal theory. There is some irony in the notion that *Christian* commitment can come to the aid of the AAUP’s primary agenda. In any case, I suggest that church-related colleges and universities can and should exemplify and support the liberal tradition’s commitment to free and open inquiry.

In addition to outlining the field or arena of academic endeavor, free inquiry moves us to value a particular disposition, or virtue: the willingness to follow arguments wherever they lead. There are, of course, other intellectual virtues, many of which I believe are fostered by the Christian tradition. Probably foremost is *humility*.

I believe that the Christian doctrine of human finiteness has profound implications for our attitude toward certainty and toward the ongoing possibility that our views may require revision or the insight of those with whom we disagree. Need I suggest that in the give and take of such exchanges, our inquiry is served by charity in interpretation and honesty in acknowledgement, or that these virtues are surely (though not uniquely) Christian? I will not elaborate here on the work that others, such as Mark Schwehn and Richard Hughes, have done in this area. Suffice it to say that in addition to the particular skills and abilities that scholarship requires, scholarly work is enhanced by the virtues of humility, charity, and honesty. Learning communities that are substantively shaped by the Christian tradition are certainly not the only communities where these virtues are encouraged, but just as certainly these virtues ought to flourish at church-related colleges.

If there are individual virtues that (borrowing Hughes's phrase) sustain the life of the mind, might there be institutional virtues that do so as well? I think there are, and I would like to suggest one that is particularly important to the liberal arts: interdisciplinarity. Again, those of us who concern ourselves with "core" courses and texts are probably well versed in the evils of disciplinary fragmentation (I love Cary Nelson's phrase, "entrepreneurial disciplinarity"). I don't know how many people would say, as a matter of principle, that the disciplines have nothing to say to one another. But the fact is that day to day, in many institutions, the disciplines don't say much to each other. This trend is pernicious in liberal arts colleges; it threatens a central feature of their institutional identity. Core text programs involving faculty from across the disciplines provide a powerful counterbalance to this trend at the curricular and classroom level. Like others involved in such programs, I have sat around tables with psychologists, historians, political scientists, and poets this year—talking about *Inferno* and *Antigone*, about Marx, Richard Dawkins, Erasmus, Luther and so on. The only more vigorous and more interdisciplinary conversation with faculty I joined this year was a workshop with young faculty discussing what in the world it means to be a "college of the Church" (in our case the Lutheran Church). This illustrates the point I want to make about religious tradition and the institutional virtue of interdisciplinarity. The central claims and concerns of an affiliated religious tradition provide a set of questions about the nature of persons, society, and the world that cut across all of the disciplines. If these questions are taken seriously—meaning that everybody *asks* them, not that everybody answers them the same—they provoke and maintain substantive interdisciplinary dialogue.

I suppose that Richard Dawkins's *Selfish Gene* (just celebrating the 30th anniversary of publication) illustrates the interdisciplinary potential of core texts *and* some of the features I have suggested institutional religious commitment can bring to the liberal arts.

*The Selfish Gene* appeared a year after the publication of E. O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975). Sociobiology—suggesting that animal behavior, like animal physiology, can be explained by natural selection—was generating a swirl of controversy; advocates were accused of supporting a status quo of human aggression, discrimination, and sexism (a new Social Darwinism). Dawkins's book tackles two questions plaguing sociobiology:

1. How can altruistic behavior develop in a system whose governing explanatory principle is “survival of the fittest”? (How can altruism be selected for?)
2. What is the unit of natural selection?

Dawkins’s answer to the second question is in the title of the book: *The Selfish Gene*. He argues that the fittest genes are replicated in the next generation and that this is the central engine of biological development. The book title also provides a way to indicate Dawkins’s own response to the Social Darwinist objection. Dawkins says the right emphasis gives the right meaning. People suspect he’s talking about the *selfish* gene—that is, a genetic cause for selfishness (which would naturally get us off the hook for our selfish behavior). But Dawkins insists that it is the selfish *gene*, as indicated above. And, he argues, genes that provoke the organisms they shape to love and good deeds actually stand a better chance to replicate than genes that move their bearers to nastiness and selfishness. (This shows how altruism might evolve.)

The argument is, of course, complex, though Dawkins is rightly renowned for his ability to render extraordinarily difficult scientific concepts comprehensible with wit and a minimum of mathematics. In any case, I will not pursue any details of the argument now. I trust it is obvious how this book encourages—in fact, demands—substantive conversation between biologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and others. Granted, it is possible to see this text and others like it as not so much praising interdisciplinarity as declaring disciplinary war. But even in that worst case, it is intellectual war, and you have to think together and talk together to wage it.<sup>1</sup> And we don’t have the worst case. Biologists have something important to say about the meaning of life, as do philosophers, poets, and sociologists. Core texts (like *The Selfish Gene*) can push us to ask those kinds of big questions. But religious commitments nearly *always* push us to ask them—that is why religiously affiliated colleges ought to be havens for the liberal arts.

Can Church-related colleges use Dawkins’s book to do this well? Obviously I think so—the book was my idea. The student I mentioned at the outset doesn’t agree. What might be the reasons? That there is no benefit in reading books that challenge our commitments? That theology or ethics need not inquire of the sciences? That the assignment of a text in college means that students are expected to agree with the text? The liberal tradition in education denies all of these assumptions. I have tried to articulate one reading of the Christian tradition that denies them as well. I hope this student comes to see that, and to find faith strengthened by inquiry.

## Note

1. I can’t forbear to quote E.O. Wilson’s opening salvo: “self-knowledge is constrained and shaped by the emotional control centers in the hypothalamus and limbic system of the brain . . . . They evolved by natural selection. That simple biological statement must be pursued to explain ethics and ethical philosophers, if not epistemology and epistemologists, at all depths” (Wilson 3).

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# The *Nicomachean Ethics*: Foundation for an Education

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Aristotle, like his teacher, sought comprehensive knowledge. This quality immediately recommends their texts as appealing choices for founding liberal education, and the following recommends particularly Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as the foundation for a semester's study. Before anything else, several features of the *Ethics* and Aristotle's general methodology must be noted to govern such a study.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle also was very concerned to strictly demarcate the different sciences, and their respective inquiries, according to the proper object of each. As a result, in any of Aristotle's texts we can look only for knowledge that is comprehensive with respect to the proper subject of that text. Specifically, one cannot try to find in Aristotle's *Ethics*, a practical work, what comprehends first philosophy or physics, which are theoretical works, in a way that one might find Plato's *Republic* equally foundational to inquiries in metaphysics, politics, and ethics. Hence Aristotle's methodology immediately limits our semester's topics and reading such that any curriculum founded on the *Ethics* should be limited to the practical sphere. Hence I am here recommending the *Nicomachean Ethics* as the foundation for an education with respect to the city and the man. I take this to be a limitation of scope but not worth.

The reading list I envision following the *Ethics* is St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Regarding these choices I claim to defend the form, but not the matter, of this thesis. That is, I will defend the principle that the *Nicomachean Ethics* serves well as the foundation to a humanistic education in a semester's curriculum of core texts read in this historically "back to front" manner. However, beyond that I am merely recommending *one* way



to execute the plan. Texts other than those I have selected, and themes other than those I would emphasize within those works, could serve equally well.

Nevertheless, there are some significant and unique benefits to this particular reading list. Utilizing texts with which a student is likely to be familiar already offers several significant benefits. Previous familiarity may compensate for a depth of inquiry that might otherwise overwhelm, especially for first-year students. Moreover, approaching these texts through an initial study of Aristotle's *Ethics* is likely to make them less familiar, that is, may cast a new light that dispels the shadows of a quick or cursory engagement.

Next, while the proposed curriculum spans the Western tradition in having representatives from antiquity to modernity, nevertheless in approaching each text through the *Nicomachean Ethics*, certain pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment assumptions are maintained throughout: first, that things in the world have natures that can be known by human reason, and that humans in particular have a fixed nature; second, that teleology and functionality are foundational and provide a causal theory richer than mere matter in motion; and third, the rejection of fact and value as exclusive, or in other words, the rejection of the post-Enlightenment view that it is illicit to argue from what a thing is to what is good for it, from what it is to what it ought to do. I am not suggesting that each of the texts maintains these principles as does Aristotle. Rather, in choosing the *Ethics* as the foundation, even where these texts disagree explicitly with Aristotle—such as the Hobbesian look of nature and the human good in *Crusoe's* anthropology and development of virtue—Aristotle's assumptions still dictate the terms of engagement. I take this to be perhaps the first of likely objections to my thesis because so often the default position of contemporary inquiry interprets previous works by the assumed superiority of subsequent ones. In recommending the study of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as foundational to analysis of the rest, I am suggesting reading these texts historically back to front, so to speak, as if Aristotle were commenting on *them*, and on *our* reading of them, rather than the other way around.

Of course, St. Augustine's *Confessions* stands by itself and could serve very well as the foundation of a curriculum for humanist study. However, studying it in concert with Aristotle's *Ethics* also is instructive in many ways. Not the least of these is a comparison of their respective conclusions for the likelihood of attaining the good life. Augustine's account of his progression and ascent to God employs a *eudaimonism*, a happiness or flourishing view, along with a notion of final cause and human function, that seems quite consonant with the Greek's virtue theory. However, these principles newly placed within a Christian framework, especially including a notion of grace that is entirely foreign to the Greeks, gives Augustine's account an optimism and hope for overcoming deficient moral education or poor habituation that previously was quite unthinkable. Indeed Aristotle, like Plato before him, is very pessimistic about the likelihood of virtue and happiness, especially in a character of poor education and habituation. This pessimism is necessitated by the nature of virtue according to Aristotle's articulation, for virtue is an active condition of the soul that is informed by education, habituation, deliberation, and choice. Augustine generally agrees with this, and that continued habits harden into a compulsion of the will. For both, then, we get something of a conundrum for the person of deficient

moral education and bad habituation. However, for Augustine this determinative record on the soul can be overcome by grace through the sacrifice of Christ. Augustine agrees that the moral agent is quite unlikely to overthrow previously established conditions of the soul, but it is God, through Christ, that does the overthrowing in the contrite confessor. Hence in response to Greek pessimism, Augustine maintains hope in grace through confession.

Next, *The Merchant of Venice* could be approached through the *Nicomachean Ethics* in many ways. Certainly analysis of love and friendship in the play according to Aristotle's treatment of the three types of friendship is worthwhile. Does the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio satisfy the requirements of pleasure, utility, or highest friendship? Is that friendship reciprocal? If it is true friendship, then what does Bassanio give that satisfies reciprocity, that provides a proportional equity and compensates for their financial inequality? Also, it could be enlightening to evaluate the soul of any individual from the play according to Aristotle's mechanism for character analysis—pleasure and pain being a barometer of the soul's condition with respect to any virtue as the mean between excess and deficiency. Why is Antonio so pained in the opening speech? What does this reveal about the conditions of his soul, his virtues or vices? Is Shylock's sense of justice a mean, or is it a condition of soul that is excessive, excessively rigorous, toward distribution of goods according to merit, so that it is no longer equitable? How should one think of Shylock's usury in terms of this notion of distributive justice?

Of course, one of the main themes of *The Merchant of Venice* is the necessity for mercy to temper justice in human affairs. Here we can follow an excellent line of inquiry that sets up a dialogue including Aristotle, Augustine, and Shakespeare. Certainly the mercy of *The Merchant of Venice* is found easily in *Confessions*, but while we can find in Aristotle a magnanimous man with the disposition for accepting something less than his full due, is this, or anything else in the Aristotelian soul, in the same category as mercy according to the Christian tradition? This is a nice springboard for a discussion of Jerusalem and Athens focused around the particular acts and disposition of mercy.

Finally, I recommend Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Of the many worthwhile themes that could be addressed, I find most compelling the contrast to Aristotle in Defoe's atomistic anthropology and the hostility of nature. Crusoe shows us a generally Hobbesian view of nature and a view of man and man's moral development that prefigures Rousseau's *Emile*. Here ungenerous and hostile nature is to be mastered and conquered, and the moral development of Crusoe seems to coincide with the developing ability to master nature, through artifact, to the end of his virtue and happiness. This provides a sharp contrast to Aristotle's political man, and nature as basically ordered and generous, wherein the increase in virtue and happiness of man in the polis coincides ever more with the order of nature rather than requiring its domination.

In particular, Defoe presents Crusoe's removal from society as a necessary condition for his virtue and happiness; while for Aristotle the man who can do without the polis is either more or less than a man. This provides as well a nice contrast of two different ways Christianity gets appropriated. In Augustine, Christianity is

taken in generally according to Hellenist first principles and virtue theory. In Crusoe we have the development of Christian virtue according to characteristically modern choices for political first principles.

I have presented these only as a few initial suggestions for a semester's reading and study. However, from the consideration of such a curriculum emerges the great worth of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as particularly suited for grounding a model of inquiry in which a dialogue, a running conversation, can be developed between all the texts. It provides a comprehensive lens through which the view in moving from one text to the next need not be a turning away but rather the dialectical addition of an interlocutor.

# Gadamer, the *Phaedrus*, and the Arts of Healing, Teaching, and Rhetoric

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The *Phaedrus* is acknowledged to be an unusual later dialogue for Plato, addressing many subjects that typically preoccupy an earlier period. While Eros is its main subject, it also deals with many other themes of the earlier period—rhetoric and dialectic, writing and speech, the nature of the soul, and the relation between Eros, madness, and inspiration. The dialogue is very playful and ironic, with, for example, Socrates offering a much kinder interpretation of Pericles here than he does in the *Gorgias*.

In this article, I focus on the passage where the art of rhetoric and the art of medicine are compared. Why is the art of medicine and not the art of the stonemason or any other of the artisan skills the specific art that is being compared with rhetoric? Does this comparison have implications for the liberal arts teacher? In ancient Athens, teaching and rhetoric are closely intertwined and the discussion of the rhetorician in the *Phaedrus* could easily be seen as a discussion of teaching. In many ways, the subtext of the dialogue is the education of Phaedrus. Is there something about the art of healing that makes it particularly appropriate as a metaphor for understanding the art of rhetoric? In what way does this comparison help with understanding the arts of teaching and rhetoric? To help with this investigation, I will draw on Gadamer's work in *The Enigma of Health* as he explicates the art of healing in terms of its difference from medical science.

## TECHNE AND THE ART OF HEALING

*Socrates*: It may be that the art of rhetoric follows the same methods, as does the art of medicine?

*Phaedrus*: How so?

*Socrates*: In both cases you must analyze a nature, in one that of the body, in the other that of the soul, if you are going to proceed scientifically, not merely by empirical routine, to apply medicine and diet to create health and strength in one case—while in the other to apply proper works and rules of conduct to communicate such convictions and virtues as you may desire. (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 61. 270–71)

This translation has Socrates using the term *scientific procedure* to characterize the correct approach, though it is put in contrast with empirical routine. By scientific, Socrates does not mean what is understood as modern science. Rather, for Socrates dialectic is the highest form of scientific analysis. Therefore Socrates is not so much referring to medical science as to the art of healing. To fully appreciate the case that he is making, we first need to develop a sense of what the art of healing means. Gadamer takes up the spirit of Socrates's injunction in his essay on that very topic in his book *The Enigma of Health*. I will develop his position here as a way of distinguishing the particular meaning of the art of rhetoric for Socrates.

Art and artfulness suggest a kind of knowledge that is being drawn on to bring about a specific result. When we talk about the art of a builder or the art of a potter, we refer to the skills needed to bring about a specific result, houses, or pottery. The ancient Greeks called this art *techne*, the etymological root of terms like technique, technical, and technology. As Gadamer says:

The discovery of the concept of *techne* and its application to medicine marked a first decisive commitment towards everything that essentially characterizes western civilization. The physician no longer appears as the kind of medicine man mysteriously shrouded with special powers that we find in other cultures, he is a man with a body of knowledge. . . . He knows the way a particular form of healing meets with success. (Gadamer 31)

This notion of *techne* is fundamentally distinct from the practical application of theoretical knowing that characterizes modern science. Rather, "*techne* is that knowledge which constitutes a specific and tried ability in the context of producing things. It is related from the very beginning to the sphere of productions, and it is from this sphere that it first arose" (Gadamer 32).

In the Platonic corpus, Socrates first acknowledges this relation between *techne* and knowledge in *The Apology*. When trying to work through the dilemma or contradiction in which the oracle placed him (stating that he is the wisest man, when he felt he was not wise), Socrates undertook an investigation to see if he could find a wise person. In the process of examining politicians, poets, sophists, and so on, none of them was found to have any knowledge worth knowing. "Finally, he says, I went to the artisans, for I knew very well that I possessed no knowledge at all worth speaking of, and I was sure that I should find that they know many fine things. And in that I was not mistaken. They knew what I did not know" (Plato, *Enthyphro, Apology* 25–27. viii–ix). Socrates found that the artisans have an art or a *techne* that grounds their claim to knowledge, though it did not validate them as liberal arts teachers, teachers who have some kind of knowledge regarding human virtue. In that regard, Socrates found them as wanting as the sophists and poets. However, he recognized

that with this particular kind of knowledge, this *techne*, it is possible for them to produce things like pottery, shoes, houses, statuary, and so on, in relation to their particular craft.

Like the other arts, the art of healing is also considered a *techne*, but unlike them, the art of healing occupies a paradoxical position. The art of healing does not produce an artificial object given over to the world to be used by others.

On the contrary, it belongs to the essence of the art of healing that its ability to produce is an ability to re-produce and re-establish something. This signifies a special modification of what “art” means and one which is unique to the knowledge and practice of the physician. (Gadamer 32)

The art of healing seeks to restore the person to health, to bring the person back to the normal healthy position. The person made well has not been “produced” by the doctor in the way that a builder produces the object that is the house. Instead of taking material from nature and adding a new artificial object, the art of healing seeks to restore the ill person to their natural state of health.

The healthy individual is not simply someone who has been “made” healthy. Thus it must always remain an open question just how much the successful restoration of health owes to the experienced treatment of the physician and how much nature itself has assisted in the process. (Gadamer 33)

In this sense, and unlike the *techne* involved in building a house, the art of healing is oriented to intervening to restore the person to a state they had before the medical encounter. The medical encounter is an interpretive encounter, where doctors bring their expertise to seek to restore the patients to their healthy state, and on each occasion they need to do interpretive work (however minimal) to see in what way their knowledge can be applied to this very particular individual who faces them. When a person is healed or even when healing fails, it often a matter of assessing the relation between the body’s natural ability to heal itself and the experienced intervention of the physician. In the case of failed treatment, we are left with the question “What part was played by the negligence of the physician, we may ask, or was it perhaps the omnipotent stroke of fate, which brought about the unlucky outcome?” (Gadamer 33)

The well-meaning physician in this case must engage in a process of self-examination to come to a judgment here, a self-examination that must come to terms with the limitations built into the art of healing. Physicians and health providers (which is now an ironic name) necessarily live in the gray zone of ambiguity with regard to the practice of their art, the gray zone between understanding the skill they have applied and the body’s natural healing processes. Even in the successful cases where it is clear that a prescription or a surgical procedure has “cured” or fixed an illness, the aim is to turn the person from a patient into a healthy member. Because of this,

Physicians cannot stand back from their work in the way any artists, artisans or fabricators can, in such a way that they might in some sense retain the product as their own. . . . The relationship between the doing and the deed, the making and the made, the effort and the success is here of a fundamentally different, more enigmatic and elusive character. (Gadamer 34)

## RHETORIC, TEACHING, AND HEALING

Here we see why the art of healing, rather than the more productive arts, is a better analog for the art of rhetoric. Neither physicians nor rhetoricians add objects to the world. The same can be said of the teacher. All three work with people and seek to move them to another state. As the doctor needs to be open to understanding the biochemical makeup of the patient in order to recognize what medication will work, the rhetorician needs to understand the predispositions of the listener to recognize what kind of speech is needed to move her closer to the virtuous life. Neither the rhetorician, nor the physician, nor the liberal arts teacher will be able to definitely differentiate in what way the changed state of the person is the result of the intervening art, or the predispositions of the subject, or some combination of both.<sup>1</sup>

All three arts (healing, rhetoric, teaching) are intrinsically bound up with the gray zone, with the fundamental ambiguity involved not only in the process but also in the result of their practice. All three require not just techniques but, more importantly, ongoing assessments and judgments. In our personal encounters with physicians, we can recognize expertise, and through the discussion on what is wrong, their work of judging and assessing. This puts it close to the art that Aristotle contrasted with *techne*, the art of *phronesis* or practical wisdom (Aristotle bk. 6). Because “deliberation in situations dealing with persons always involves normative issues, which cannot be known and settled by scientific research,” the physician-patient encounter is “a value laden activity since it involves the entire social and psychological dimension seeking health and not only his biology” (Svenaeus 54).

It is now clearer why Socrates would pick the art of medicine to help develop an understanding of the art of rhetoric. From the Socratic position, teaching, rhetoric, and medicine work in the same way. None of the practitioners is adding a product to the world, and as such, none can stand back and observe the outcome of her work as purely her product. At graduation, the teacher cannot easily say, “I made that person.” It will always be a question of what the student brought to the relationship and the particular teacher-student interaction that influenced the outcome. While all three seek to bring about a change, the changed person is not an external product. It is thus a professional fact of life that these practitioners have to live with the difficulty of assessing outcomes in terms of the gray zone between their intervention and the constitution of the person affected by the treatment, the speech, or the teaching, and this regardless of what measuring instruments are invented by science. Just as the metrics of medical science may marginalize the thinking a physician needs to do about the concerns of particular patients, so, too, can the formal measuring instruments of teaching (course evaluations, the science of education) marginalize the thinking the teacher needs to do about particular students and classes (Groopman; McHugh).

## ART AND DIALECTIC

In selecting the art of medicine, Socrates is himself using a rhetorical device to resist the narrow approach to *techne* displayed by the sophists. While the sophists (as teachers) claimed to be able to produce rhetoricians, they are really teaching mechanics rather than a skill based on knowledge. Socrates very clearly lays out the devices used by the sophists of his day (e.g., Gorgias, Polus, Thrasymachus, Protagoras) to



produce good speakers. Here skill is equated with producing effects such as being “clever at rousing a crowd to anger and again soothing its anger by his spells . . . in devising and in dissipating calumnies, whatever their source” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 57. 267) and so on. *Phaedrus* is an example of a young Greek who is clearly enthralled with the virtuoso abilities of these sophists, especially Lysis. In order to educate *Phaedrus*, Socrates draws on the art of medicine:

*Socrates*: Suppose someone were to go to your friend Eryximachus or his father Acumenus and say to them, “I know how to apply such and such to bodies so as to induce a fever or, if I wish, to lower a temperature. If the fancy takes me, I can make them vomit or, again, move their bowels, and so forth and so on. Since I have this knowledge I claim that I am a physician and can make the same of any other man to whom I communicate this knowledge.” What do you think they would reply?

*Phaedrus*: I imagine they would say that the fellow was crazy, that because he had read something in a book or come across some old nostrums, he fancied himself a physician, though he knew nothing of the art of healing. (Plato, *Phaedrus* 58. 268)

The arts of rhetoric, teaching, and medicine play parallel roles in relation to the objects they seek to affect—the listener, the student, or the body. What is central for the successful prosecution of their art is not having techniques that are guaranteed to produce effects, but rather having the dialectical understanding of the relation of the part and the whole. In all cases, the procedure is that of differentiation, the process of distinguishing between the various manifestations of an illness in order to identify its source. Once the source is identified, one must know what particular treatments work, distinguishing “between the particular constitution of the organism in question and what is actually compatible with that constitution” (Gadamer 40). (With regard to this, Gadamer goes on to say that the healing orientation goes beyond what “modern medical science recognizes as its methodological basis.”)

The parallel between the art of rhetoric and the art of medicine is . . . valid to the extent that the constitution of the body passes over into the constitution of the human being as a whole. The position of the human individual within the totality of being is a balancing position not merely in the sense of stably maintained health but also in a much more comprehensive sense. For sickness, and loss of equilibrium, do not merely represent a medical-biological state of affairs, but also a life-historical and social process. (Gadamer 41–42)

In Gadamer’s description of the interrelation between rhetoric and healing, we could easily switch the terms *teaching* and *teachers* without changing the meaning of what is said. As members of ACTC would recognize, a teaching aimed at influencing and changing a person, a teaching that is also cultivation, is also concerned with “the constitution of the human being as a whole” (Gadamer 42). Being educated in a liberal arts sense is more than possessing a certain amount of information (e.g., literacy) or even a certain skill set (e.g., critical thinking), but places us (teachers and students) in a dialectical relationship with our “life-historical and social” situation (Gadamer 42). It is in this sense that the *Phaedrus* speaks of the well-being of the body, the well-being of the soul, and the well-being of the whole in a single context as all inter-related (Gadamer 75). If this is true of the physician-patient relationship, how much more is this so for the teacher-student relationship in a liberal arts context?



The (Socratic) rhetorician/teacher must understand “the manifold nature of the soul in which it seeks to implant the proper convictions, and [be] familiar with the manifold kinds of discourse which are appropriate for the constitution of the particular soul in question.” When Socrates asks whether it is “possible to obtain a satisfactory knowledge of the nature of the soul without knowing the nature of the complete individual,” Phaedrus agrees and adds that “we can know nothing of the body’s nature, either, without following this same procedure” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 61. 270–71). Dialectic, a procedure grounded in an understanding developed through the to-and-fro between the part (the particular patient, student, listener) and the whole (health, knowledge, speaker) is central to all three arts.

If we accept this argument as true, it has implications for how teaching is organized. Physicians typically ply their art in a clinical encounter—the one-on-one dialogue that Socrates said was essential for teaching. That kind of tutoring is now a marginal activity in undergraduate teaching, though still the kind of mentoring expected for graduate teaching in the humanities and social sciences. If the era of individual undergraduate mentoring is becoming increasingly difficult, the formulation of rhetoric and dialectic as productively interrelated (*Phaedrus*) rather than in opposition to each other (*Gorgias*) can speak to the situation of the liberal arts teacher today. Unlike the contemporary physician but more like a conventional rhetorician, the teacher speaks to or teaches many students simultaneously. Thus one needs to have not just a psychological sense of the listener/student but also a sociological sense of their particular life-historical situation. While class sizes, rigid course outlines, information-oriented teaching all could be said to interfere with the art of teaching, this analogy teaches us that getting to know students again and again is possible and necessary. Each new cohort needs to be understood differently, as they have been differently shaped by their particular life-historical situation. A Socratic teaching has to be open to the ways different students hear what is being taught. In this sense, teaching needs to have a dialogic and ironic relation to texts that organize a course. The group of students that the teacher faces will of necessity influence how a text is taught and engaged. In this sense, teachers, rhetoricians, and physicians are all, at a deep level, students (Bonner 33).

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates, who understands that dialectic is the way to truth, recommends a particular relation to texts and writing. “The written word on any subject,” he says, “necessarily contains much that is playful, and that no work, whether in verse or in prose, has ever been written or recited that is worthy of serious attention” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 73. 277–78). This is a challenging claim for a group (like ACTC) dedicated to treating seriously great texts of many civilizations. Of course, Socrates does not say that writing is useless. Rather “the truth is that the best of these works merely serves to remind us of what we already know” (ibid. 73.278). Setting aside the challenge that this offers for an association like the ACTC, this seems to me to be a recommendation worth taking up in relation to the texts that teachers use, as well as any research done on texts (e.g., medical science).

## Note

1. In this sense, the deception behind the standard course evaluations is that they measure teaching as if it were a productive art rather than an enigmatic art.

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# Recovering from Amnesia in an Information Age

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A major reason why the rediscovery of the centrality of core texts in the university curriculum is imperative in our present situation is that we are living in a time when the sheer number of facts and ideas vying for our attention has led to the fatigue of “information saturation.” At the same time, a case of severe amnesia (if not just plain ignorance) has ensued with regard to our cultural and intellectual heritage. Textbooks have by and large taken the place of great texts in our universities, giving students a pale and anemic representation of the reality those great texts were written to convey. Many modern textbooks offer students an abundance of facts and ideas discussed in absolutely no depth at all. Great ideas no longer hold the kind of universal validity they once did. Instead of helping learners discover ways of connecting facts by means of critical thinking processes, ideas have often been demoted to a level that is synonymous with the level of mere fact.

In light of the sheer amount of information that bombards us every day from every direction, what roles should great texts play in guiding ourselves and our students how to think in significant ways about facts and ideas? First, because classical texts usually process information and ideas critically and subtly, they can teach us how to do so as well. Second, because great texts virtually always promote some claim that ideas possess universal validity, they can get us to start thinking about why and how truths come to be considered universally valid. Unfortunately, the critical processing of information and the universal validity of ideas no longer function as central aims of most modern textbooks. As a result, students are left with anemic representations of the original that fail to compel them to think.

One classical text that I believe can help facilitate critical-thinking processes, especially in today's context, is Plato's *Phaedrus*. If for no other reason, the entire text of this work deserves consideration because of its effect upon ways that the Western intellectual tradition has unfolded, but such an undertaking is not the objective here. What I do hope to show is the way this great text functions as the embodiment of great mentors of the past who take us step by step through the process of effectively applying theoretical information to real-life circumstances.

Much of Plato's *Phaedrus* is dedicated to the proper practice of the art of rhetoric, which, in order to be effective, necessitates an understanding of the proper relationship between Psyche and Eros (the soul and love). Thus it is in this text that Plato's famous analogy of the soul as a chariot drawn by two horses is to be found. Caught between the noble horse of reason and the hideous horse of desire is the charioteer of the spirit who must follow the horse of reason while bringing the horse of desire into submission (*Phaedrus* 246.25 B–C). Following upon this image is the discussion on rhetoric, for a good rhetorician must always first consider the unique types or classes of particular souls (*eidēnai psuche*) he/she is addressing before undertaking measures to address these souls in effective ways (*Phaedrus* 271.56. D). Second, the rhetorician must choose words and carefully craft them in such a way as to improve the nature and status of the particular soul he/she is addressing. One cannot progress to step two without first addressing step one. The producing of good rhetoric in this respect appears as much an art as a science.

To characterize the difference between good and bad rhetoric, Socrates presents medicine and music analogies. In the interest of space, I shall discuss only the way the medical analogy applies to rhetoric here. Step one, understood according to this medical analogy, involves what the medical field calls *diagnosis*. Step two, which follows from this, is concerned with proper *prescription* of pharmaceuticals to address the ailment and bring about the balance necessary to restore a patient's health. Here the physician not only must determine what medicines fit the patient's diagnosis, but he also must know when to give it and to what degree. "Tell me," says Socrates,

If anyone should go to your friend Eryximachus . . . and should say, "I know how to apply various drugs to people, so as to make them warm or, if I wish, cold, and I can make them vomit, if I like, or can make their bowels move, and all that sort of thing; and because of this knowledge I claim that I am a physician and can make any other man a physician, to whom do I impart the knowledge of these things," what do you think they would say?

*Phaedrus*. They would ask him, of course, whether he knew also whom he ought to cause to do these things, and when, and how much. (*Phaedrus* 268.52 B)<sup>1</sup>

*Phaedrus* concludes that such a person would be crazy, because having read something in a book or having stumbled upon a medicine, he imagined himself to be a physician when he possessed no real knowledge of the art (*Phaedrus* 268.52 C).

Students in the modern academy, faced with so many ideas resembling so many powerful pharmaceuticals on so many shelves, are perplexed as to how to determine the timing and the degree of treatment of human existential maladies. Instead of learning how to think subtly and critically about complex issues, students are often offered "one-pill-fits-all" ideologies as surefire remedies for the most complicated

sorts of human dilemmas. Ideologies function like those purer and more potent drugs that can easily poison the patient if given in excess. However, "If a little bit of a cure is good, a lot ought to be better" is never a good idea. What we in the academy need to ask ourselves is this: Have we who "profess" truth about subject matter and ideas become, at best, mere quacks or, at worst, "drug pushers" by failing to help our students understand the true potency as well as the danger of misapplied ideas? Have we, moreover, successfully taught them how to sift through ideas and apply them to the modern world's variety of complex situations and circumstances?

A further discussion in Plato's *Phaedrus*, which has to do with the Egyptian god Theuth's teaching of writing as an aid to memory, should be encouraging to us who aspire to be mentors to our students. Theuth, appearing before the god-king Ammon, claims that his invention of writing will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories (*Phaedrus* 274.59 E). Ammon replies that, though the invention of useful arts may belong to Theuth, the ability to judge their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another. Ammon warns that the invention of writing will have an effect opposite to that intended. That is, instead of improving memory or functioning as an elixir of memory, it will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, for writing will make them grow lazy in their practice of the art of memory.

This "laziness of memory" phenomenon is widespread today. Because technological revolutions of the twentieth century have facilitated the dispensing of vast amounts of information, the modern person is caught in the dilemma described by King Ammon in his confrontation with Theuth. The information explosion of the twentieth century, coupled with the Internet as an overwhelmingly effective and facile vehicle of the dissemination of information, has led to "information saturation." Because pulp publishing and the Internet have imprisoned the world in a labyrinth of jejune information, finding the Ariadne thread leading through the labyrinth has grown more difficult but at the same time more critical. The multitudinous voices of works in print, like a mad mob, drown out those truly needing to be heard. At the same time, the ready availability of information has steadily worked against the practice of memory and has given rise to a modern plague of illiteracy. This plague manifests itself not so much in an inability to read anything, for the popular consumption of pulp material proves otherwise. What is truly lacking today is the ability or even the willingness to read literature that has true depth of insight and understanding. This stands to reason. Why, after all, should one commit to memory what is so readily accessible?

The obvious answer is that the goal of learning should not merely be the knowing of many things. Rather, this goal should be the ability to make sense of the things one learns. In this vein, Socrates rebukes Phaedrus by pointing out that in simpler past times, persons were able to discern truth regardless of who spoke it, but that Phaedrus and his generation were not concerned with truth alone but also with just *who* the speaker of truth happens to be (*Phaedrus* 275.59 B). We are mistaken as educators if we think our roles should involve a mere feeding of facts to our students or to citing authorities without helping students to discern exactly why authorities should be considered authoritative.

In the *Phaedrus*, Theuth concludes that persons knowing many things may not truly know but may only seem to know. The suggestion here is that no amount of information can take the place of the teacher as a wise guide or mentor. Perhaps this is why Socrates never wrote anything down but relied on oral forms of communication. Plato wrote things down but was cautious, using dialogues as a means of bringing Socrates back to life so that he could lead future students step-by-step through the labyrinth of ideas. Aristotle's style of writing is not dialogical, but he does emphasize the role of the *phronimos* or mentor as the indispensable disseminator of prudence or practical wisdom to his/her students. There is no substitute for experience in the making of a *phronimos* who can aid his student in knowing how to use knowledge to assess the application of virtue through the use of the Golden Mean. The *phronimos*, by careful example and explanation, guides his students into the proper application of virtue amid the complex circumstances of life. He does not attempt an easy way out by spouting some ideology as a solution to every complex human problem.

In summation, I have argued that the reason Great Books are great is that they are the embodiments of great teachers and thinkers. They teach us not only the understanding of ideas, but also how artfully to apply them, when, and in what measure. By teaching us about our past, great texts cure ignorance and aid in our recovery from cultural and intellectual amnesia. These are the main reasons we study them, why we process them, and why we try to understand and emulate their strategies.

## Note

1. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 541.

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# Here, There, Anywhere, Nowhere: The Question of Odyssey in Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man"

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The centerpiece of Samford University's core curriculum is a two-semester, freshman-year Great Books sequence that runs, loosely, from the ancients to the existentialists. About three-fourths of the way through the fall semester sprint from Socrates to Shakespeare, I turn to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's 1486 "Oration on the Dignity of Man." Pico's oration is useful on many fronts. First—and most obviously—it's an excellent example of Renaissance humanism. Pico's eclectic syncretism gives students a firsthand look at how the recovery of classical learning in the late Middle Ages transformed the Western intellectual tradition and pushed conceptions of human dignity and freedom in new directions. As one of the many "ascent narratives" I use in the course, Pico's oration fits in nicely alongside of Plato's *Allegory*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Commedia*, and Petrarch's adventure up the slopes of Mount Ventoux. But in addition to its place within the particular intellectual tradition I explore in this class, the "Oration" also allows me to have, for lack of a more elegant way of putting it, a "meta-moment," a point in the semester when I can use a text to discuss the larger meaning of what we are doing in this course and, by extension, what my students are doing in college. To recast this moment in terms more closely allied to the theme of our conference, Pico's "Oration on the Dignity of Man"—in particular, one resonant passage from this oration—affords my students the opportunity to think more deeply about what it means to be on a journey, to reflect more



consciously about the “here” they now occupy and the “there” toward which they are now moving on this arduous, and very expensive, four-year odyssey. In this brief essay, I want to explain how I use Pico’s “Oration” for these ends, and then I want to conclude with a few questions for those of us who have been tasked, and who receive modest coin, to cast upon the seas these twenty-first-century children of Laertes.

Pico’s task in the “Oration” is to explore humankind’s position as “the highest wonder” (3) of nature, and to do this he begins at the beginning, opening his essay by recasting the Biblical creation story. According to Pico, when God was finished creating the heavens and the earth, he still “desired that there be someone . . . to wonder at its greatness” (4). Thus, he “lastly considered creating man.” But there was a problem. God had used up all of his “archetypes,” and “all things had been laid out in the highest, the lowest and the middle orders.” Essentially, God was out of essences. But God, being God, had a solution, for “the best of all workmen decided that that to which nothing of its very own could be given should be, in composite fashion, whatsoever had belonged individually to each and everything” (5). Therefore, God “took up man, a work of indeterminate form,” and spake thus to him:

We have given thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shall desire. . . . In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds: and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. . . . Thou . . . art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher nature which are divine. (5)

For Pico, these words of God represent the “great liberality of . . . the Father” and the “great and wonderful happiness of man,” for “It is given [unto man] to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills.” In fine humanist fashion, and as an even finer Christian neo-Platonist,” Pico calls for us to put this freedom to its best use, for “having been born in this state so that we may be what we will to be. . . . Let us spurn early things; let us struggle toward the heavenly. Let us put in the last place whatever is of the world; and let us fly beyond the chambers of the world near the most lofty divinity” (6). And the method for this, not surprisingly, is “moral science” and “dialectic,” or, as Pico puts it so poetically, “so as not to be hurled back [as profane and unclean] from the ladder [ascending to God], let us wash these hands and these feet in moral philosophy as in living water . . . until finally we come to rest in the bosom of that Father . . . and are consumed by a theological happiness” (6–7).

For the better part of the class, we talk about how Pico’s “Oration” embodies Renaissance humanism, and we are careful to trace out how his account of the human odyssey aligns itself with, and departs from, the ascent narratives of Plato, Augustine, Dante, and Petrarch. After we do this, however, I put Pico to a different use. I ask my students to go back to Pico’s creation story and, for the moment, treat it as a free-standing narrative, detached from Pico’s plea for human freedom to be turned toward the heavenly ascent of theological happiness. My students are thus faced with a creation story in which Adam is told that he has “no fixed seat, no form of his very own,” that he is “confined by no bounds” and is free “to sculpt himself into whatever

shape he prefers,” that he may grow downward or upward according to his pleasure, that he is unrestricted in the freedom to choose to be what he will.

Once we see this, I ask my students, “What is the purpose of Adam’s existence?” After the usual silence, the first student who speaks will invariably say, “To climb the ladder to the bosom of God?” But I must quickly remind them that we are trying to isolate Pico’s creation story from the ascent narrative that he has attached to it, that I am not interested in what Pico eventually says Adam’s purpose should be, but what Pico’s version of the creation story implies that Adam’s purpose is. Usually, then, I must rephrase the question this way, and here is how we move toward more fully addressing our conference theme: “What is Odysseus’s purpose?” After some pencil chewing, someone in the class will respond, “To go home to Ithaca.” The conversation then goes as follows: “Is it possible,” I ask, “for Odysseus to be doing something on his journey that is not fulfilling his purpose?” “Yes, when he’s not trying to get home.” “Good. Now, what is Aeneas’s purpose?” “To found Rome.” “Is it possible, then, for Aeneas to be doing something on his journey that is not fulfilling his purpose?” “Yes, when he’s not working his way toward Rome.” “Good. Now, what is Dante’s purpose?” Here, there’s a longer pause, followed by a variety of answers (“To follow Virgil,” “To see Beatrice,” “To get to Heaven”), but eventually we settle into some form of “To glorify God.” I then ask, “And is it possible for Dante to be doing something on his journey that is not fulfilling his purpose?” Some of the more clever students will say, “Not as long as he sticks with his guides,” but the better answer we are working toward is “Yes, when on his life’s journey he is not glorifying God but himself.”

At the end of all this I return to Pico’s Adam: “What, again, is Adam’s purpose?” Because we just put Pico’s Adamic-hero up against Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante, the first student to chime in will usually say, “He doesn’t seem to have one.” To which I then ask, “Why not?” And usually, that student will respond, “Because there’s nothing he is really supposed to be doing.” But it’s not very long before other students object, asserting, “Yes, he has a purpose. His purpose is to make himself into what he desires.” So, it may take a while, but I can usually get half the class believing that Pico’s Adam has no purpose and the other class saying that he does. All this helps to set up the big question: “Is it possible for Adam to be doing something on his journey that is not fulfilling his purpose?” Strangely enough, both groups of students—who disagree about whether Adam has a purpose—will eventually find themselves in agreement on this question. The answer for both groups must be the same: “No.” This puzzles them, but it begins to move us to the heart of the matter.

For the first group, Adam doesn’t have a purpose to begin with; however, they must confess, if he doesn’t have a purpose, then it’s also not possible for him to act in any way that could be clearly defined as running counter to his purpose. In this view, Adam is simply doing things. If he chooses to grow upward toward his higher nature, that’s not getting him any closer to his purpose: it’s just his choice; it’s not something he has to do. However, that choice is also not moving him away from his purpose, so it can’t be criticized as being counterproductive to his purpose. For the second group, the “no” answer is a little trickier and more disconcerting. For them, Adam’s purpose is to make himself according to his own desires; however, Adam is totally free to

follow his desires—remember, he is free to be the maker and molder of himself and set the limits of his own nature—but if he is totally free, whatever he does, whether it is moving up or down, must be in accordance to his desires. But if his purpose is to make himself according to his own desires, and he is always doing this anyway, then he is never acting in a way that is not fulfilling his purpose. But this is strange ground to be standing on: to say of one person that he has a purpose but can never act in any way that could be interpreted as running counter to his purpose. Moving up toward his higher nature or down toward his lower nature—while completely opposite kinds of actions—are both fulfillments of his purpose. Imagine saying that of Odysseus, Aeneas, or Dante—that no matter what they are doing or where they are going, they are fulfilling their purpose. In this light, Aeneas may stay with Dido, or he may not. Neither action would be counterpurposive if his purpose is to do as he wishes.

The big question—“Is it possible for Adam to be doing something on his journey that is not fulfilling his purpose?”—must now be followed with the final question: “Tell me, what kind of journey is Adam on?” Here’s how I tease this out with my students, only I’ll cast Adam’s situation in the language of this conference. Pico’s Adam starts at a particular “Here”—the midpoint of the world—but there’s no particular “There” to which he must go. Whether he is without a purpose or whether his purpose is to follow his desires and to possess whatever seat he wishes, he can go “anywhere.” But if one can go “anywhere,” this implies that any place is as good as any other, or at least not any worse. If any “anywhere” is as good as any other, then it’s not too hard to push to the following conclusion: there is “nowhere” that he should be or, worse yet, “nowhere” he needs to be. Adam may have a “here,” but he has no “there,” and because he is free to go “anywhere,” it is not too much of a stretch to say he’s going “nowhere.” At this point, Adam’s journey is starting to look more like a wandering, and faced with a roomful of very confused students, I have to close with one final question: “For next class, be ready to answer one question: What kind of journey are you on?”

This next class is always interesting. At issue, of course, is the question of purpose and the challenge of modernity. Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante are on journeys, but those journeys are governed by particular ends, and thus they—and we—can know when they are straying from those ends and are thus betraying their journeys. Although they may go wherever they wish, some “goings” are more in line with their purpose, other “goings” are not. On their journeys they have the power to choose, but there are right and wrong choices, the rightness and wrongness of which we can determine in relation to the ends toward which they should be moving. For our students, however, things are not as easy, and Pico’s “Oration” helps to show them why this is so.

More children of modernity than they are children of Laertes, our students are, in Sartre’s famous formulation, condemned to be free: free not only to choose, but also free of any end toward which they are obliged to direct their lives. Unlike Odysseus, Aeneas, or Dante, they are not asked to submit themselves to some purpose not of their own making and to see life as a journey toward that end. Rather, they are told that it is they who make their own ends and create their own purposes, and while this can be empowering, it can also raise serious questions about how to distinguish be-

tween better or lesser, higher or lower, ends. Or, worse yet, it makes such distinctions irrelevant. If Odysseus may sculpt himself into whatever shape he prefers—and thus do anything with his life that he chooses—then he can never make a wrong choice. Penelope or Calypso, Ithaca or Ogygia, Home or the High Seas: no “here” is more right than any “there.” Pico’s retelling of the creation story in the “Oration”—where God empowers the individual with total freedom, and not just of choice but of ends and purposes—can help students to think more deeply about the extent of their own freedom and how that freedom makes it very difficult for them to answer the question, “What kind of journey am I on?”

But let’s not end here. Instead, let’s push things forward and ask an uncomfortable question not of our students but of ourselves, the teachers. Here’s a challenge not too difficult for those in our profession: let us imagine ourselves as God, namely Pico’s God. It’s not really hard to do, because I believe that most of us at the beginning of the term sound strikingly like Pico’s Divine Creator. Do we not tell our students at the start of the semester that “the goal of this course is to get you to think for yourselves,” that we “are *not* teaching you *what* to think but *how* to think,” that it is “only by ‘daring to know’ that you can exercise your freedom to think critically and be makers and molders of your own thoughts and lives.” Now, what we don’t usually add to all this is the following: “Oh, by the way, if you think for yourselves and exercise your freedom, I’m pretty sure where you’ll end up: as good citizens who exercise your freedom in the service of higher ethical and moral values—you will ascend to these higher values because, even if I’m not explicitly telling you this, this is really the human purpose—the Ithaca, the Rome, the Beatific Vision—toward which you will soon discover that you should be heading.” Even if some of us do say this to our students—and I believe that most in our profession don’t say it, even if they believe it—I fear that our students hear only the command to take whatever shape they please without hearing any urging to ascend to a shape or place more fitting to the human purpose. If this is what they hear from us, then we are obliged not only to ask them to consider what kind of journey they are on but also to ask ourselves what kind of journey *we* have sent them on.

Homer’s Odysseus was “polytropos”—a man of many turnings—but he knew that some of those turnings took him farther from home and his purpose, other turnings closer. I fear that the young men and women we have cast upon the seas look nothing like this Odysseus, for they turn and turn and turn without any sense of what they should be turning toward as they go anywhere they please with nowhere in particular to go. And worse yet, I fear that, while our students may look nothing like Homer’s Odysseus, we professors may now—in this new light—look a little too much like Dante’s Ulysses. Inclined to characterize the student odyssey as a journey of self-making, but in no way willing to insist that some self-makings are of a better order than others, are we not “false councilors”? Dante, of course, knew what to do with such people, so perhaps the question we should be asking at this conference is not what kind of journey our students are on, but where we ourselves are heading. Homer’s Odysseus knew where home was, and he made it. Dante’s Ulysses didn’t, and he landed elsewhere.

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# Reading Darwin and Mendel: Paradoxes of Biology

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My essay reflects on many semesters' close reading of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Gregor Mendel's *Experiments in Plant Hybridization*, first with a freshman seminar and then with an upper-level general education course, both called Darwin and Mendel. I also use Darwin in an upper-level general education course, Green Politics, and incorporate Darwinian explanations in a freshman seminar, Animal and Human.

In these classes, we use explication as our main approach, examining the arguments presented with only limited reference to historical context. Gould describes this approach: "Truly great works also have an internal logic that invites analysis in its own terms—as a coherent argument contained within itself by the brilliance of vision and synthesis of careful construction" (17). Darwin and Mendel illuminate contemporary biology, because both were great synthesizers and anticipators. They were presenting novel views to skeptical readers, so they could not afford to take many points for granted in their arguments.

These two books reveal significant paradoxes in the study of biology. Paradoxes, as Palmer (*passim*) has pointed out, and as I use the term, are not simply contradictions to be avoided, but instead dilemmas that lie within life itself. Paradoxes arise when our notions about how the world works are too simple or when we adopt too narrow a point of view. I hope to show my students that when they recognize and face up to paradoxes, they discover larger truths that transcend the seeming contradictions.

Three paradoxes appear when we think about the living world. The first comes when we ask how living things came to be the way we find them. It concerns time

and arises because our personal experience is a minuscule fraction of the world's history. To face this problem, we must, paradoxically, find a way to make the past become present.

The second comes when we ask how living organisms produce offspring that resemble themselves. It concerns form and arises because the living world is deeply complex, while our understanding seeks simplicity. To face this problem, we must, paradoxically, reduce the intricate and invisible workings of organisms to simple forms.

The third comes when we try to define the ends of our inquiry into biology. It concerns scope and arises because the living world can be examined on many levels, from one molecule to the entire biosphere, from an individual to a society. Is any one of these the ultimate level of explanation? To face this problem, we must, paradoxically, unite radically different points of view.

### THE FIRST PARADOX: TIME

Darwin presents a resolution of the first paradox in his *Origin of Species*. In approaching this work, it helps to ask students to consider first how the paradox of time looks on the surface. Life is a process without any beginning or end, yet individual lives are short, and we can observe only a moment of the never-ending parade. Answers to the most obvious questions about life seem to lie beyond our experience. We have no eyewitness accounts, and only a little tangible evidence.

I ask students to consider their ancestors, looking backward, generation by generation. All are linked by the familiar process of begetting. The question is, how do our remote ancestors look? Like us, or like something else? Does the line join that of creatures besides humans? Do these lineages have a beginning? If so, what does it look like? The exercise in which I ask the students to create a pictorial album of their own, as they imagine it would look, contrasts evolution with other views and allows us to ask Darwin's key question, how has change occurred?

To give his reader a new point of view on the past, Darwin begins in chapter 1 by presenting an extended analogy. To understand it is to grasp his resolution of the paradox of time. Within the last few hundred years, he observes, selective breeding of plants and animals has produced obvious changes. Since the earliest domestications, even more change must have occurred to produce the many breeds of dogs, cattle, pigeons, and so on.

Darwin establishes that among domesticated organisms a process of change exists that can create entirely new varieties, act on minute individual differences, and operate unconsciously. He is prepared to tackle the paradox by establishing that a similar process occurs in nature.

Wild plants and animals show hereditary variation, just as domestic ones do (ch. 2), and there is a natural way individual organisms are "chosen" to be the parents of future generations: the struggle for existence (ch. 3). To the student who has carefully read and discussed the first three chapters, the direction of Darwin's argument will be clear: what human selection does to domestic stock, natural selection does to wild creatures.

Even after this discussion, many students still give Lamarckian explanations of evolution, based on organisms' need or desire to change, with changes acquired



during an individual's lifetime being passed down to its offspring. Citing Darwin's objection to this hypothesis (intro.), I ask, if plants are not conscious of their own needs, how can they adapt to changing conditions? We begin to discuss the idea that the fates of plants and all other organisms are governed by natural laws that shape the outcome of the struggle for existence.

Later, I raise the question, What is the meaning of the sentence that begins: "Throw up a handful of feathers"? (Darwin 124–26). He compares the falling feathers to the reforestation of an abandoned Indian mound. Over centuries, the struggle among thousands of plants and animals leads to a forest that closely resembles the undisturbed forests around it. Like the falling feathers, such complex processes are generally understood to follow natural laws, even though we cannot predict the exact outcome. In the long run, the struggle for existence proceeds in a lawful and, in some respects, predictable way. The fate of any one individual, however, is beyond our predictive power.

This part of the discussion is crucial to understanding *Origin of Species*: it brings the problem out of the realm of unknown creative forces and into that of causes that we can study. The continuity of causes from past to present makes the past comprehensible, and the paradox of time leads to the larger truth that we are part of a gradual process of organic change.

### THE SECOND PARADOX: FORM

The simplest living organism is, in structure and behavior, far more elaborate than anything created by humans. Moreover, this complexity goes deep, well below the limits of the best light microscopes. Superficially, it seems impossible to reduce this to a set of elements, simple forms that obey simple laws, or to find any mathematical regularity. Yet if we take chemistry and physics as examples of successful science, and if we want to know how organisms work, that is what we must do. A careful reading of Mendel's *Experiments in Plant Hybridization* shows how this can be done.

Mendel's experiments are described in most biology textbooks, but often the emphasis is on the way his results are viewed in light of later discoveries. I give here a brief (and greatly simplified) summary that tries to follow his original paper closely.

Mendel crossed parent plants that differed in one or more characters, producing hybrids, then allowed these hybrids to self-fertilize, or "self" for short. If the parents differed in a single character, the hybrids always looked like one of the two parents (the "dominant"). When these hybrids fertilized themselves, however, they produced offspring resembling each of the parent forms. The ratio of numbers of plants showing the dominant form and the "recessive" form ranged between 2.82 and 3.14 to 1. When these were averaged, the result was, according to Mendel, "2.98 to 1, or 3 to 1." Why did he say this? Is there any reason to believe that the real, true ratio is a small whole number and not an odd fraction like 2.98 to 1? We return to this question later in the discussion.

When the offspring of the hybrids were self-pollinated, the ones that showed the recessive character proved to be constant like the recessive parent. The offspring that showed the dominant trait fell into two groups: one-third constant like the dominant



parent, and the other two-thirds producing dominant and recessive offspring in the 3-to-1 ratio. Thus Mendel found that the hybrids actually produce *three* kinds of offspring: dominant (constant), hybrid, and recessive (constant) in a ratio of 1 to 2 to 1.

In the experiments involving two or more differing characters, a further important fact was revealed: the offspring of the hybrids formed a *combinatorial series*. A two-character experiment gave nine (*three times three*) forms, four of which were constant and exhibited all four possible *combinations* of the dominant and recessive characters.

Mendel was now prepared to state a hypothesis to account for all the phenomena observed. The hybrid peas produce eggs and pollen of as many kinds and of the same internal character as the constant *combination* forms found among their offspring. On average, each type is produced in the same number.

To test his hypothesis, he devised new experiments in which hybrids were crossed with constant forms, whose egg and pollen cells were presumably all of a single type. The outcomes agreed with his predictions based on the hypothesis, so it appeared that he had arrived at an explanation for his experimental crosses.

Mendel's crucial observation was the small, whole-number ratios among the offspring of his hybrids. Though I usually avoid historical explanations in class, I wonder whether Mendel's studies of chemistry and physics (Bowler 105; Huckabee 85–86; Olby 99) may have predisposed him to look for such ratios. Is an expectation that simple ratios would underlie living phenomena the reason he says that the dominants are to recessives as three is to one, even though the calculated value is 2.98:1?

One can speculate that he had his hypothesis partially worked out before he started. If so, he was following the hypothetico-deductive method, which he could have learned if, for instance, he had studied Ampere's work on electrodynamics (Williams 93). I suggest to students that this is one way to cope with the paradox of form: to find the simple elements within complex phenomena, they must guess what they are and then seek experiments to reveal them. If that is correct, then Mendel had an idea what kind of a law he was looking for (although probably not the exact mathematical form it would take [Kalmus 76]), even as he was selecting the plants for his experiments.

Some students are puzzled by Mendel's failure to mention genes. According to Olby (102) and Bowler (105), he probably did not imagine anything like genes. Mendel might even have thought of the things being transmitted as immaterial essences, of the kind discussed in Aristotelian philosophy (Kalmus 67). The issue within the reach of his experimental technique was the law that governed them.

Mendel grasped the paradox of form and found a law that can generate the required complexity by the endless combination of simple elements. Combinatorial mathematics demonstrates how individuality, even uniqueness, can arise from such elements. This in turn, suggests how life can be both unified in its basic workings and diverse in its individual manifestations.

Mendel's work points the way toward the scientific demonstration of Darwin's visionary conclusion of *The Origin*: "From so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved" (Darwin 460). I conclude my Darwin and Mendel class with a consideration of the "modern syn-

thesis” that began to apply Mendel’s mathematical and experimental approach to Darwin’s theory of natural selection.

### THE THIRD PARADOX: SCOPE

A third paradox becomes apparent when we compare Darwin’s and Mendel’s work. This is a paradox of scope, or point of view.

In biology there are so many levels at which one can consider living things that it is impossible to keep the whole in view at any one moment. If one looks deeply into the inner workings of organisms, as Mendel does, one can only look at a single kind of organism at a time. If one looks, as Darwin does, at the history of all living things, then the details are no longer easily kept in mind. Even though Darwin recognizes their importance in his later chapters, he knew the details of the biology of only a fraction of all species, living or extinct.

Today there is still little unity in biology, particularly if one studies the lives of individual organisms. Theories about how life, and particularly human life, actually changes over time remain among the most controversial. At that level, I think, students encounter the greatest difficulty in bringing insights together.

These issues are the focus of Green Politics, in which we read Darwin’s *Origin* along with works by political philosophers, and also of my current freshman seminar, *Animal and Human*, in which Darwin is included by references to his ideas in Jane Goodall’s *Through a Window* and Frans de Waal’s *Good Natured*. The issues here have to do with the application of natural selection to humankind, first in considering political societies and second in comparing our nature to that of our close cousins, the apes and monkeys. In Green Politics, we consider how the struggle for existence can shape cooperation as well as competition and foster expectations of fairness and aversion to inequity. In *Animal and Human*, we look at how the close bonds between mothers and offspring shape the entire life cycle of primates, including ourselves.

To resolve the paradox of scope, students must first recognize that studies at all levels are important. From the molecular to the cosmic, many events shape the living world, and no level of study can explain everything.

The second step in resolving the paradox of scope is to recall the insights that resolved the paradoxes of time and form: first, the continual process of change in accordance with natural laws, and second, the regular behavior of simple elements combining to produce complex wholes. Together, they lead to endless recombination, producing new forms out of familiar elements. And at every level, there occurs the occasional combination that produces a permanent change in the conditions for life.

This resolution encourages students to open their minds, to prepare for the unexpected, but to look for the underlying laws.

As technology advances, no expert can address all the issues raised by developments such as the release of genetically engineered organisms, the availability of artificial organs, or the extinction of thousands of species. As scientists and as citizens, we must face this paradox and build bridges between different levels of explanation, because no single view of life is ever complete, no matter how brilliant and illuminating it may be.

The odyssey I attempt to set my students on is essentially a search for ourselves, Loren Easley's "Immense Journey," from our origin as living beings to our future as social primates in a society of challenging complexity. I hope they take from these readings the insight that individuals are not explained away by Darwin or Mendel; personhood is not threatened by their theories. Rather, we are the products of a history of struggle and evolution, our individuality is unquestionable, and our own struggle, suffering, and success are meaningful.

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# Making the Examined Life Relevant: Great Books and “Great Books”

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In the sacred setting of Damien Commons, amidst the saints housed on the multiple stained-glass windows, the images of Ganesh and Confucius watching from the walls, first-year students seat themselves around the communal wooden table for their inaugural year of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota’s Lasallian Honors Program. Lasallian Honors, which involves its participants in one course per semester through their four-year Saint Mary’s career, was founded largely upon the Great Books seminar model while also incorporating service and curricular components that reflect the university’s Lasallian mission.

The second semester of that introductory year brings students into “The Classical World,” a course I have taught now for four years. Along with Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and a rotation of Greek playwrights, students in this course encounter Plato’s *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. The resistance to fixing meaning evidenced in *Euthyphro* becomes emblematic for the seminar participants of Lasallian Honors’ basic dialectic methodology. Implicitly and explicitly, most members of the program emerge from the first year wearing the badge of Socrates’s apologetic proclamation that the unexamined life is not worth living.

This mantra is a powerful claiming of identity, a breaking (less or more painful) with the prescriptive environmental forces of youth or, at least, to borrow a phrase from Whitman, a holding of “schools and creeds in abeyance.” The searching quality of this position is underscored by the IQR (Interpretive Question and Response), a short paper form that encourages students to pursue a question that can be considered sufficiently only from multiple perspectives. While students are invited to make a

case for which perspective is most compelling, open-ended responses are acceptable and even preferable. Honors students certainly have reason to proceed to their subsequent college years with a sense that the educational journey will turn upon a series of intellectual negotiations—i.e., with a sense that life lived worthily is examination.

At the other end of the four-year experience, I taught my first section of the senior Capstone course last semester. Capstone is standardized by the following criteria: the inclusion of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*; the organization of the course around the four themes of Work, Relationships, Citizenship, and Spirituality as they apply to modern American life; and approximately twenty hours of service (in this case involving placement in a Catholic Worker house and/or with Project Compass, a program that provides educational and recreational opportunities for people with a variety of disabilities). I took advantage of the latitude offered by the four generic themes to inject, respectively, Studs Terkel's *Working*, Andre Dubus's *In the Bedroom* (a collection of stories), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Diana Eck's *Encountering God* into the curriculum. These "great books" promised an opportunity to engage at an intellectual level the matters that we deal with at ground zero on a day-to-day basis: work, love, civic involvement (or lack thereof), and religious faith (or lack thereof).

When we began Studs Terkel's *Working*, perhaps the most conspicuous suspect in such an Honors experience, the students breathed a sigh of relief that we had moved out of Tocqueville's Great Book and into a world they saw as more tangible and relevant. As one seminar member wrote in a final reflection, "Most of the classes prior to LS405 have dealt with topics that seemed so far removed from my daily life." Simultaneously, students began to be unsettled about certain assumptions they held regarding their future work lives, as well as the implicit divide between their privileged careers and those of "the less fortunate."

Terkel sets out right away in *Working* to illuminate especially the career lives of the working class. In the preface "Who Built the Pyramids," we see a steelworker express his desire to have something to show for his work, "something to point to" (Terkel xxxii). This need for recognition is a theme that runs through the book, transcending distinctions of job and status. Students could articulate their own desire for some external sign of productivity in their careers. Furthermore, they deepened their questioning of the function of service work. Most came to realize that service was more satisfying when they *accomplished* something visible. The Catholic Worker houses in particular challenge them in this regard, as much of the "work" is relational (i.e., *simply sitting and talking* with guests in the houses). This was particularly disarming in terms of interaction with those less well off; how much are we willing to work in the service of others if we can't see how they benefit?

Terkel's *Working* opened up other universal themes that crossed boundaries of career, status, gender, and ethnicity. In a section of the book entitled "The Pecking Order," a prostitute reflects upon the relationship between sexual hustling as a career and hustling as a way of female life in America:

A hustler is any woman in American society. I was the kind of hustler who received money for favors granted rather than the type of hustler who signs a lifetime contract for her trick. . . . I learned it from society around me, just as a woman. We're

taught how to hustle, how to attract, hold a man, and give sexual favors in return. The language that you hear all the time, “Don’t sell yourself cheap.” “Hold out for the highest bidder.” “Is it proper to kiss a man good night on the first date?” The implication is it may not be proper on the first date, but if he takes you out to dinner on the second date, it’s proper. If he brings you a bottle of perfume on the third date, you should let him touch you above the waist. And go on from there. It’s a market place transaction. (Terkel 58)

The words of the prostitute here are echoed in different languages by the stewardess, the model, and the executive secretary in the same part of the book, but also by men in other sections. Despite the fact that *Working* was published in the early seventies, this basic principle involving how we *play* people in our work and other relationships spoke to the students’ perceptions of how career life, and life more generally in America, continues to function (e.g., among young men and women in bars).

The slight historical distance of the text encouraged a dual engagement. Seeing such notions as *recognition* and *role playing* fleshed out in the texts of actual lives from the period in which Terkel conducted his interviews helped to ground a sense of the universality of these concepts. Moreover, students gained a glimpse into the social constructivism operative in career and other personal circumstances. (It was interesting, in this regard, that we also read *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, since he discusses hustling as both a local way of life in pre-civil rights Harlem, and as a metaphor for exchange between black and white America.)

While these intellectual categories may seem apparent enough, they had not been readily accessible to the seminar participants, even as Honors seniors. *Working* and the other “great books” allowed the students new ways of articulating realities they had already experienced but which remained largely intuitive. More profound, though, was a growing awareness of the degree to which such notions permeate *actual* existence, by which I mean the lives of *real* people in various spectra. I could sense a growing restlessness with an academic culture that had remained too situated, intellectually and practically, among the very localized, middle-class arena of Saint Mary’s itself. Through the multiple perspectives of average people in a variety of career roles (as well as an assignment in which each student conducted a work interview in the style of Terkel), the seniors—on the brink of committing to post-baccalaureate career choices—came to recognize themselves as historically influenced and historically localized members of the larger human experience.

My language is not intended to suggest a sort of reverse romanticizing of the *average* person. Rather, I am documenting the seminar participants’ own acknowledgment and questioning of the dichotomy between themselves and others. For instance, one student wrote in a final reflection on his service work, which included helping an impoverished woman and her children move after an eviction,

I spent my whole life trying to pretend these people didn’t exist. There was disillusionment upon realizing that she couldn’t care less about philosophy, what Nietzsche says about beauty or Kant’s Transcendental Unity; the word existentialism doesn’t mean a thing to her because it’s only intellectuals who talk about existence: people just *live!*

Most experiences were not so dramatic, but many were equally frustrating. To

acknowledge with Dubus that love can lead us, perhaps legitimately, to behave in a host of morally questionable ways; to be challenged by Malcolm X to own one's responsibility in the complex historical racial picture of America; to be pushed by Eck to see that one's Christian worldview is just as alien as we may regard Hindu practice: this was too much for many students to bear on several occasions. To be sure, a few students left the course adamantly holding on to an intellectual and emotional construct that they would be too threatened to part with. By and large, though, the course served as a moment in the lives of several young women and men who came to see, on one hand, their privileged educational experience as something that had the potential to divide them (artificially) from others, and simultaneously as something that (consequent upon this recognition) could allow them to take an intentional place in relation to their local and global communities. One student wrote, "I believe I have grown the most during this semester of Honors." Another student wrote more pointedly of his prior Honors coursework in relation to that in Capstone, "Life [in the previous courses] had been examined but it wasn't my own. But in this semester we read and discussed a good amount of topics that did have an effect on me."

So, what of the Socratic claim about the unexamined life? I see the journey of this first class of students with whom I have worked at both ends of the Honors Program as having a dual Socratic awakening. Initially, seminar participants were destabilized in the first year as they came to an awareness of their own tenuously (and usually unconsciously) held views. The senior year brought them to a place where they realized that the intellectualism of a narrowly conceived Socratic stance was its own kind of too-tidy paradigm. This is not to say that they abandoned the value of this self-examination; quite the contrary, in fact. Rather, they came to understand that, as they go forth into the so-called "real world," they will not so much come to the Ithacan palace and Penelope, but instead enter again upon waters where they must navigate between Scylla and Charybdis. But they will travel with a clearer sense of relationship to the wider world, and perhaps better armed after a refacing of Socratic ignorance, as suggested by one participant's exiting remark: "Questions to me are not so scary as they once were, especially those without answers or those with multiple answers. They are a means to self discovery."

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# A Textual Odyssey Through the Liberal Arts

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My talk intends, fundamentally, to inquire into the *nature* of core texts in the liberal arts tradition by way of addressing the practical problem: *How does one identify the core texts in the history of the liberal arts?*

Over the past two decades, I have felt this practical problem very keenly. Since 1986, I have led a seminar on the history of the liberal arts that I have offered to faculty and administrators of various colleges and universities around the country, as well as to the graduate and undergraduate students at my own university. This seminar consists of reading and discussing selected primary texts, and thus constitutes a textual odyssey through the liberal arts.

As the seminar developed over the years, I began to edit the primary texts into a documentary history of the liberal arts tradition; and I am deeply grateful to Scott Lee and ACTC for recently embracing that project and helping to guide it toward publication both in print and on the website of ACTC.

At a very practical level, these two projects of teaching a seminar and editing a documentary history about the liberal arts tradition have forced me to confront the problem of identifying core texts in the tradition.

Faced with the practical question of “What do I assign for Monday in my seminar on the history of the liberal arts?” I have had to make specific, concrete decisions, however expedient or compromised.

At the same time, I have given some thought to the conceptual questions underlying the practical problem, and I wish to submit for your consideration some of my reflections and practical decisions in this regard.



In one respect, I believe this practical problem to be normative and philosophical because it leads to the questions What texts *ought* to be studied? What texts *ought* to be taught?

These questions clearly require philosophical investigation into the nature and purposes of education and the nature and purposes of being human.

Yet, in another respect, this problem is empirical and historical, because it leads to the questions What were the core texts of the liberal arts tradition? Indeed, what was the liberal arts tradition?

The normative-philosophical question and the empirical-historical question are closely related. Deciding what *ought* to be taught is certainly informed by knowing what has been taught. Philosophy is informed by history.

Conversely, those in the past who taught the liberal arts were guided by their own judgment of what ought to be taught, and the writing of history is shaped by the perspective of the historian. Hence, writing the history of the liberal arts relies upon normative judgments. Nevertheless, it has seemed helpful for a number of reasons to distinguish the two questions and to focus upon the empirical-historical question.

Accordingly, I have been led to consider how to identify the core texts in the liberal arts tradition: *How do we chart the textual odyssey of the liberal arts?* In designing the seminar and editing the documentary history, I have adopted two basic principles.

First, I have followed a historicist approach, by which I mean that the odyssey of the liberal arts follows the path of what was explicitly called “liberal arts” in any given period in the past. In considering the seventeenth century, I look not for what may be considered the *best* books of the seventeenth century, but for what was actually called the “liberal arts” in English or *artes liberales* in Latin in the seventeenth century. This historicism leaves me with a practical problem, nevertheless.

In a particular historical period, a great many possible texts may have been subsumed under the term “liberal arts.” How does one identify which of the texts is “core”? Here enters my second principle, which is to select the texts that are influential or exemplary. By influential, I mean texts that have been widely read or cited either contemporaneously or subsequently in the liberal arts tradition. By exemplary, I mean texts that, though they may not have been influential in themselves, represent certain influential genres or viewpoints or arguments in the liberal arts tradition.

Framed in this fashion, the criteria of influence or exemplarity can be assessed on the basis of evidence. With these two criteria in mind, I turn to discuss a few core texts that I have incorporated into my seminar and documentary history.

The first example is a brief selection from the eighth book of Aristotle’s *Politics* (Aristotle 1337a–1338b). The selection begins at the point at which Aristotle has demonstrated that “education should be regulated by law and should be an affair of the state.” The selection then begins with Aristotle announcing for his topic: the “questions which remain to be considered [are] what should be the character of this public education, and how should young persons be educated?”

However, before taking up these questions of curriculum and pedagogy—questions that he never actually answers—Aristotle takes a detour and presents a very compact argument on behalf of the proposition that “there is a sort of education in

which parents should train their [children], not as being useful or necessary, but because it is [fit for a free person].”

In these words, Aristotle employs the Greek adjective *eleutheros*, the direct antecedent of the Latin adjective *liberalis* and the English adjective “liberal,” so the historicist principle is clearly met. In addition, the influence of this core text is demonstrated by the explicit invocation of this selection by prominent subsequent writers on the liberal arts, including Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman, and Robert Hutchins.

Consequently, the selection satisfies the two principles, making it a candidate for the seminar or documentary history. Among such candidates, I choose to include this selection because I have found it works so well in stimulating thoughtful discussion about liberal education. The selection is very brief, only about 1,200 words. But we go through it line-by-line and can easily spend more than an hour on it in a seminar. Often I have to gavel discussion to a close.

For those in the seminar who have never read Aristotle, his commonsensical and humanistic approach is immediately appealing. For those who hate Aristotle based on a noxious encounter as an undergraduate or a supposed ideological disagreement or both, the text still engages them, if they approach it on its own terms, usually with the encouragement of the total newcomers.

The most challenging, and sometimes difficult, seminar participants, I find, are those who wrote their dissertation or a book on Aristotle and want to persuade everyone of the “true” reading of the text. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the method of reading this Aristotelian selection reflects its content, because Aristotle observes in the text that pursuing studies “in order to attain perfection” is an illiberal pursuit.

Translated into modern terms, I take Aristotle to be suggesting that PhD training is not a liberal education. Graduate education may be worthy or valuable on other grounds, but it is not the kind of pursuit that he is defining as “liberal” and analyzing in this particular text.

In my seminar and documentary history, this selection from Aristotle is followed by one from Cicero, in whose writings is found the first recorded use of the term *Artes liberales*. I use a brief selection from book 3 of Cicero’s masterwork *On the Orator*, which reappears prominently in the liberal arts tradition 1,500 years later in the writings of Italian humanists, as well as in the curriculum of the colonial colleges in North America. Consequently, this Ciceronian text meets the two criteria to be a candidate for inclusion; and the reading of Cicero in the ancient period is very helpful when the seminar arrives at those later periods where Cicero is being read. But the primary reason that I include Cicero is because he exemplifies the Roman liberal arts *and* presents a profound contrast with the selection from Aristotle.

In his selection, Aristotle has tried to persuade us that, when one is in a condition of freedom, or “leisure,” one has, by definition, no immediate ends in view because one’s immediate ends are satisfied. Furthermore, in such a condition in which one has no immediate ends in view, one is forced to ask about ultimate ends. Therefore, in a condition of Freedom, or “leisure,” one is led to consider the ultimate ends of being human. Consequently, education pursued in a condition of freedom or leisure—*that is, liberal education*—means preparing oneself to become fully human. And in Ar-

istotle's view, as I read him, those ultimate ends are intellectual and individual, notwithstanding his recognition of the political organization needed to permit this kind of liberal education.

Then comes Cicero, who launches a slightly veiled attack on Aristotle by criticizing those "*most learned* of men abounding in *excessive* leisure and wealth of intellect [who believe] that they [need] as objects of inquiry and investigation many more things than are really necessary [to study]" (Cicero III. 57). Instead, Cicero holds, liberal education is to prepare the senator, the general, the administrator of a world power. Such a leader needs broad, practical studies to prepare for the active life of civil and political engagement.

Cicero states: "Since the entirety of human life is, after all, his domain, [such leaders] must have examined, understood, read, discussed, treated and acted upon all the questions that are involved in it" (Cicero III. 54). In addition to general, practical studies, Cicero demands that the "genuine leader" learn virtues as part of the liberal education, but this ethical learning occurs not so much by personal reflection and analysis as it does by acquiring and internalizing the cultural tradition.

The juxtaposition of these selections from Aristotle and Cicero usually sparks strident debate about the nature of liberal education and its relationship to citizenship and politics and to the purposes of living. Those two selections are obviously essays written about the liberal arts, and most of the primary texts in my seminar and the documentary history are of that type.

But another genre consists of documents presenting the institutional organization and arrangement of liberal education. For example, I include selections from the statutes of the liberal arts faculty of the University of Paris in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and I ask the seminar to infer the nature of that liberal education from the practices either prescribed or proscribed in those statutes.

For instance, how do we understand and evaluate the repeated provision in the statutes: "No one shall be a scholar at Paris who has no definite master"? (University of Paris, 1215).

And how do we understand and evaluate the following graduation requirements in the arts faculty at the University of Paris in the statutes of 1252:

A bachelor coming up for the licentiate in [liberal] arts at Paris should be twenty years old or at least in his twentieth year, and of honorable life and laudable [behavior]. He should *not* have a cope without a hood of the same cloth, nor wear a mitre on his head in the classrooms while he is determining. Also before he is admitted to examination he shall give personal security that he has his own master under whom he seeks [the licentiate in liberal arts]. Further, [he shall avow] that he has attended lectures in arts for five years at Paris or elsewhere in a university of arts. Further, that he has heard the books of Aristotle . . . at least twice in ordinary lectures and once [extraordinarily]. . . . Also he shall give satisfaction that he has diligently attended the *disputations* of masters in a recognized university for two years and for the same length of time has answered as required concerning sophisms in class. (University of Paris, 1252)

The terms and practices described in such statutes require some explanation, of course. And I amplify them with supplementary selections providing deeper under-

standing. For example, the “lecture” was the standard pedagogy in the liberal arts at the medieval universities.

This method was described by a professor of the University of Bologna in the mid-thirteenth century, who wrote as follows:

First, I shall give you the summaries of each text. Second, I shall put forth well and distinctly and in the best terms I can the meaning of each text. Third, I shall read the text in order to correct it. Fourth, I shall briefly restate the meaning. Fifth, I shall solve conflicts, adding general matters and subtle and useful distinctions and questions with the solutions, so far as divine Providence shall assist me. And if any text is deserving of a review by reason of its fame or difficulty, I shall reserve it for an afternoon review. (Odofredus, c. 1250)

This method was employed in two settings: ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary lectures addressed the most important texts and were scheduled in the morning, the most popular time for the veteran masters. To illustrate the ordinary lecture, I have selected Thomas Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics of Aristotle* (ca. 1256). I do this because Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* was considered the most difficult text in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century liberal arts curriculum as it set forth the deductive syllogism. It was normally the capstone text for the course of liberal education. Consequently, in my seminar and the documentary history, I provide a 500-word excerpt from Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, in which he identifies the criteria required of premises in order for a deductive syllogism to yield “scientific” knowledge.

Then we read Aquinas’s 3,000-word lecture on the 500-word excerpt from Aristotle, in which Aquinas follows closely the method that the Bologna professor described: first, summarize; second, state the meaning; third, read the text; fourth, restate the meaning; fifth, identify and solve conflicts; finally, address other relevant issues, including “subtle and useful distinctions and questions with the solutions” (Aquinas, c. 1256, Lecture 4).

As you might imagine, this material is pretty dry and remote, but it does foster appreciation for the precision and thoroughness of the education, while prompting questions about the purposes of liberal education. For example, the goal of this liberal arts education was to develop in the student the capacity for rigorous deductive reasoning, which could then be applied in the formal disputation, which constituted the method of inquiry employed within the graduate faculties and by the scholastics in their own scholarship.

Is that, in fact, the goal of liberal education? To serve the graduate and professional faculties? Is that, in fact, the goal advanced by Aristotle, whom we read earlier and who, I believe, argued that specialized graduate training is illiberal?

The examples that I have offered thus far may leave the impression that my history of the liberal arts tradition amounts to selections from Aristotle. Far from it. The authors, the viewpoints, and the genres vary.

We read from Saint Augustine’s argument that pagan liberal arts are legitimate for Christians, drawn from his treatise entitled *On Christian Learning*, which he completed in 426 CE in the city of Hippo in northern Africa, and which became the book most read for the subsequent 800 years, next to the Bible.

We read from Pier Paolo Vergerio's treatise titled *On Noble Character and Liberal Studies of Youth*, which he wrote in 1402 and for the next century was the most widely read educational treatise written by a Renaissance humanist.

We read from the famous Yale Report of 1828, written by the Yale faculty and President Jeremiah Day, who presented a progressive defense for the required classical curriculum when it came under attack in the early nineteenth century. In so doing, the Yale Report established the theory of mental discipline as the predominant rationale for liberal arts education during the nineteenth century in the United States. This kind of faculty report, I might add, exemplifies the genre of reports and statements about liberal arts education that faculties have written over the course of American history at colleges and universities throughout the United States.

I understand that the ACTC has undertaken an effort to identify and collect such unpublished reports and statements, and I believe that this effort to preserve this untapped resource of reflection upon liberal education is extremely valuable not only historically but also normatively and conceptually. These reports and statements written by faculty committees and college leaders represent an enormous amount of intellectual work that could contribute to our collective understanding and discussion about the liberal arts.

Consequently, the selections that I have made of texts in the history of the liberal arts vary greatly, but all satisfy the two principles of historicism and either influence or exemplarity that I discussed earlier. Those two principles also fit certain writings of people marginalized or excluded from the liberal arts tradition.

In this regard, it is important to recognize that the two principles imply a value judgment or naturalistic fallacy, insofar as what has been influential or exemplary continues to be so. To be sure, the tradition grows and develops, but it is also sustained by a degree of inertia. Consequently, I have tried to include the voices of those who analyzed liberal arts education even as they were excluded by the predominant institutions.

These include, for example, Laura Cereta, who was born into an urban, upper-class family in Italy during the fifteenth century and pursued the humanistic studies of the liberal arts both with tutors in her home and as a visiting resident in a female monastery. These were the two avenues of liberal education open to upper-class Italian women at the time, and Laura wrote about her experience in letters that fortunately still exist.

Another example is the first treatise written by an Englishwoman arguing on behalf of extending liberal education to women. This treatise was published in 1673 by Bathsua Reginald Makin, who was apparently influenced by the contemporary example of Queen Elizabeth I. In her treatise, Makin stridently criticizes the "ornamental" studies to which women were confined at the time. She writes: "Merely to teach gentlewomen to frisk and dance, to paint their faces, to curl their hair, to put on a [scarf], to wear gay clothes is not truly to adorn but to adulterate their bodies, yea (what is worse) to defile their souls. This (like Circe's cup) turns them to beasts."

Then, Makin writes a statement that I find so charming I have chosen it as the epigraph for the documentary history. She writes:

As plants in gardens excel those that grow wild, or as brutes by due management . . .

are much altered, so [we] by liberal education are much bettered as to intellectuals and morals. Allow me to repeat: As plants in gardens excel those that grow wild, or as brutes by due management . . . are much altered, so [we] by liberal education are much bettered as to intellectuals and morals. (Makin 1673, 8)

Another text that I include is Emma Willard's treatise titled *Plan for Improving Female Education*, which she was inspired to write by observing all-male Middlebury College and which she completed in 1819 and submitted to the governor and legislature of the state of New York. Like Makin, Willard argues that it is better for women and for society if women are provided more than the ornamental studies that were conventionally offered at female academies.

In so doing, Willard appeals to the fundamental principles that she identifies in liberal education. She writes:

Education should seek to bring its subjects to the perfection of their moral, intellectual and physical nature in order that they may be of the greatest possible use to themselves and others or that they may be the means of the greatest possible happiness of which they are capable.

Those youth have the surest chance of enjoying and communicating happiness who are best qualified, both by internal dispositions and external habits.

Studies and employments should, therefore, be selected either because they are peculiarly fitted to improve the faculties or because they are such as the pupil will most probably have occasion to practice in future life.

These are the principles on which systems of male education are founded, but female education has not yet been systematized. (Willard 1819, 17–18)

What I find particularly interesting here is that Bathsua Makin mentions the *intrinsic* value of liberal education for women, but primarily argues in terms of the *instrumental* benefits that liberal education provides women in their role as mothers and teachers. On the other hand, Willard discusses that instrumental rationale, but she gives much greater attention than Makin to the intrinsic benefits of liberal education for women.

In regard to writings of people marginalized or excluded from the liberal arts tradition, I wish to conclude by highlighting the treatises titled the "Industrial Education for the Negro," by Booker T. Washington and "The Talented Tenth," by W. E. B. DuBois, both published in 1903. These selections raise interesting issues about the relationship of liberal arts education to advancing social justice and to developing the commonweal. In the past, whether or not commentators argued on behalf of intrinsic and individualistic purposes for liberal education, they generally agreed on its efficacy *also* for improving society and the polity. But the issue debated by Washington and DuBois is precisely the role and efficacy of the liberal arts in the uplift of an oppressed people.

Booker T. Washington has come to be portrayed as an unthoughtful and self-aggrandizing tool of the northern industrialists in their covert plan to maintain an efficient and docile workforce for their factories. Even in his day, many African-American leaders despised Washington's accommodating approach during the oppressive era of Jim Crow segregation, black codes, and lynchings. In the second half of the twentieth century, Washington's reputation continued to decline, becoming



portrayed as what one scholar has called “that Machiavellian prince of Negroes” (Harlan 1968, 8).

Those attending the seminar on the liberal arts tradition, therefore, usually arrive with a strong distaste for Washington and an affinity for DuBois, who did not accommodate to the white oppression and ultimately emigrated to the nation of Ghana. Yet the two selections often lead members to question how much substantive difference there was between the positions of Washington and DuBois, at least in their writings. Furthermore, some are repulsed by the uncompromising, intellectual elitism of DuBois, a graduate of Fiske University and Harvard College, while they are attracted by the humble, egalitarianism of Washington, the son of slaves.

In his selection, DuBois writes:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.

If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men.

Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life.

I am an earnest advocate of manual training and trade teaching for black boys, and for white boys, too. I believe that next to the founding of Negro colleges the most valuable addition to Negro education since the war has been industrial-training for black boys. Nevertheless, I insist that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters, it is to make carpenters men. (DuBois 1903, 33)

In his selection, Washington writes:

Many a mother and sister have worked and slaved, living upon scanty food, in order to give a son and brother [what is called] a “liberal education.”

And, in doing this, [they] have built up a barrier between the boy and the work he was fitted to do.

Let me say to you that all honest work is honorable work. If the labor is manual and seems common, you will have all the more chance to work out in your minds better and higher duties and ways by which you can help others as well as yourselves, and bring them up to your own higher level.

I would not by any means limit or circumscribe the mental development of the Negro student. No race can be lifted until its mind is awakened and strengthened.

But our knowledge must be harnessed to the things of real life.

I would encourage the Negro to secure all the mental strength, all the mental culture—whether gleaned from science, mathematics, history, language or literature—that his circumstances will allow, but I believe most earnestly that for years to come the education of the [masses] of my race should be directed upon the every-day practical things of life.

And just the same with the professional class which the race needs, I would say give the men and women of that class the training which will best fit them to perform the service which the race demands. (Washington 1903, 9)

The underlying question posed here by DuBois and Washington is about the relationship of the liberal arts to social justice, to social advancement, and to the commonweal. These points, too, are vital to consider in connection with the liberal arts tradition, however we may define its principles and purposes.

In my address, I have tried to identify and demonstrate the principles that have guided me in charting a textual odyssey through the liberal arts. Whether for the seminar or the documentary history, I have found that the two principles of historicism and influence or exemplarity provide a sufficient warrant for identifying core texts in the history of the liberal arts.

Furthermore, adhering closely to those principles does not unduly restrict inquiry into the topic. The liberal arts tradition, properly understood, comprehends a range of perspectives, arguments, and genres that provide a liberal education in themselves.

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# From Here to There: The Odyssey of the Liberal Arts

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